

### **A Stitch in Time: Local road program looks to future**

Planning ahead for the challenges that lay ahead down the road is one way to ensure a project's sustainability, and sometimes this means putting in a little extra at the planning stage. In the case of a new initiative to bring rural transport out of the dark and into the light, something extra is being done now - instead of later.

The old British adage - "a stitch in time saves nine" - could well apply to the Ministry of Agriculture and Development (MARD), Ministry of Transport (MoT)'s and South East Asian Community Access Program (SEACAP) effort - which takes in a long term picture from the outset.

"Construction is a small piece of the life cycle of a road - maybe 6 months or a year long but maintenance goes on for 20-50 years," says Tran Xuan Ho of MARD. "It is easy to see what you need to really plan for."

As part of the planning, MARD representatives are currently in discussions with counterparts at the Ministry of Transport (MoT) over DF-55. The SEACAP-funded project, will see engineers from both ministries trained on research findings into rural road surfacing techniques, before venturing out to train 90 provincial department counterparts.

MoT had worked with SEACAP previously and it's considered a successful partnership. In 2003, MoT, the World Bank and the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) through SEACAP, conducted research on the most sustainable and cost-effective ways to deliver rural road surfacing in Vietnam.

The main element of the Rural Road Surfacing Research program so far has been the Rural Road Surfacing Trial, in which a range of alternative surfacing and paving options have been identified, designed and incorporated into extensive trials.

The MoT's secretary for the Trials steering committee, Tran Tien Son, says DF55 has emerged as a unique case of Vietnam government ministries working closely together.

"Too often there's wasteful overlapping of responsibilities by government agencies in infrastructure projects," says Tien. E2809CThere's an expectation that once trained here, engineers here will go and train communal personnel.E2809D

"This project will serve as a bridge for this new (inter-ministry) cooperation to take place," says Nguyen Tien Dung, the vice-director of Finance and Administration for MARD. "It's very important that the provinces themselves, which are now responsible for rural transport, get up to speed on these new concepts and methods."

The government is keen for SEACAP funding to continue and has been petitioning the UK government to this effect. Currently, transportation funding makes up over 23 per cent of all loans and aid to Vietnam.

However, transportation is one of the biggest alleviators of poverty worldwide. It's hard to deny that improving rural transport links means that those rural people - who are over-represented in poverty statistics - would have improved access to markets, schools, and business and social opportunities.

SEACAP has expanded its reach to 30 research programs in Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam which look to support national transport strategies. MoT unveiled its National Rural Transport Strategy (RTS) in early 2007, which called for greater cooperation between ministries and line agencies, while MARD is currently designing the Integrated Rural Development Sector Project for Central Provinces (IRDSPCP).

IRDSPCP is a USD 168 million dollar infrastructure project for the country's impoverished central provinces. Close to half of the set-aside funds are to be used on rural road maintenance and upgrades.

The project follows on from the Asian Development Bank according the provinces a high development priority. This clearly recognises the high levels of poverty prevailing in an environment with relatively low levels of public and private sector investment. There's nothing like a little proverbial kick in the rear from outside your backyard to kickstart co-ordination between government and the sectors across the provinces.

DF55 is receiving plaudits from figures in the ministries for utilising international expertise and knowledge at a local level. All SEACAP programs are conditional on being able to utilise locally accessible materials and labour for road construction and maintenance.

There's the hope that after being awarded certification on the training course, provincial engineers will not only be armed with greater options when dealing with rural road building and maintenance, but also cognoscente of the need to tap into local resources.

"This will give provincial engineers more options on surfaces, maintenance, standards and land slide protection," says Tran Xuan Ho, adding that the exploration of local labour use and materials sets the program apart.

SEACAP manager, David Salter, highlighted the need for more road research programs in developing countries in order to reduce waste and fuel continued economic growth.

"Developing countries are going into debt by spending billions of dollars on roads they can't afford to maintain. If you build a road and have to rebuild it again five years later, what's the point?" said Salter.

"That's why this commitment and the sustained contributions by the two ministries to work together are so good to see. We all know the importance of good practice and taking proven

technologies from theory to use. But it is the discovery of local methods to deliver what we need, is how we can get there sustainably."

For instance the particular humidity of Southeast Asia means certain road surfaces buckle before their time. Often the gradient of the slope on a busy motorway corner becomes damaged due to the poor irrigation on the surrounding soil. The result may not just be more work for the engineers down the track, but increases the likelihood of accidents and motorists being killed on the roads. These are things that appropriate planning by trained engineers can account for or mitigate.

Vietnam is not alone in seeing improved rural transportation as a way to reduce poverty and foster economic growth. Many countries in Asia and neighbouring Pacific regions are gearing their policies around the idea: Without access, people are not able to utilise the basic social tools that urban dwellers take for granted, such as health, education and economic opportunities. Without access, people cannot get their product to the seller, another process all too often taken for granted by the urbanites and leaders of developing countries.

"Rural transport is vitally, vitally important for poverty alleviation," said Hoang Cong Quy, head of Rural Transport Unit under MoT. "It's simple really, when there are no roads, goods can't be sold. If they are sold, they are much more expensive due to the hassle in getting them there. Roads bring down costs for everything,"

Planning ahead is a vital cog in the wheel that is progress and something that Vietnam's rural transportation strategy is taking into account. If it's done right and the program continues, it should go a long way down that road to alleviating poverty.