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Context of citizen engagement and participation for development (literature review)

Growing dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of elections as the main channel for citizen voice and engagement has led to increased reliance on other, perhaps more interactive mechanisms of engagement, based on increased dialogue, collaboration and participatory decision-making among various stakeholders within civil society and the state.

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen has argued strongly that citizen engagement is intrinsically valuable, as it represents a key component of human capability. For Sen, participating in one’s development through open and non-discriminatory processes, having a say without fear, and speaking up against perceived injustices and wrongs are fundamental freedoms that are integral to one’s wellbeing and quality of life.

For others, citizen engagement is significant in terms of its instrumental value; it is seen as a means to achieve a variety of development goals — ranging from better poverty targeting, to improved public service delivery, to better and maintained infrastructure, to social cohesion, to improved government accountability.

For example, having communities involved in the management and monitoring of services can help meeting those communities’ needs more effectively, and that local problems or gaps are more efficiently identified and dealt with.

A central challenge for governments and donor community is how to move from innovative efforts of citizen engagement that can be quite effective but are still quite scattered and small-scale, towards efforts that are larger in scope and can have greater socio-economic impact.

Supporting a two-way flow of information, not only for citizens, projects, project managers and implementers, but also for governments, service providers, and civil society organization (CSOs), would foster more substantive citizen involvement, reduce information asymmetries and facilitate recurring interaction throughout the development process.

From that perspective, understanding what difference citizen participation and engagement make to development and to more accountable and responsive governance has become a key preoccupation in the development field. So what difference does it make? Literature offers four main insights:

1 | Amartya Sen, Development as Freedom, September 2000.
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- Citizen engagement and the construction of citizenship: Most theories of citizenship and democracy discuss the importance of an informed and aware citizenry who can participate in democratic life, hold the state to account, and exercise their rights and responsibilities effectively. For many democratic theorists, one important function of citizen participation is that it helps to create “better citizens”.

- Citizen engagement and the practice of participation: Having a sense of citizenship is one issue; translating it into effective and sustaining change is another. Participation and democratic theorists have long argued that engagement has the potential for strengthening the efficacy of citizen action, both individually and collectively.

- Citizen engagement and building responsive states: Even with evidence of how citizen engagement contributes to the construction of citizenship and the strengthening of more effective citizenship practices, the question still remains: what difference does this make to longer-term development and democracy outcomes?

- Citizen engagement and inclusive and cohesive societies: In the broader literature, there are numerous arguments for the importance of citizen participation and engagement in terms of building inclusive and cohesive societies (Mohanty & Tandon, 2006; Young, 2000). In our work, a common theme is the importance not only of the realization of services, rights, and accountability, but with it, a sense of recognition, social identity, and dignity important for a sense of inclusion.

In conclusion, literature review reveals strong evidence to support claims of the contributions of citizen engagement to both developmental and democracy-building outcomes. Engagement in itself is a way of strengthening a sense of citizenship. It can also strengthen the practice and efficacy of participation, the transfer of skills across issues and arenas, and the thickening of alliances and networks. In turn, more aware citizenship, coupled with stronger citizenship practices, help to contribute to building responsive states, which deliver services, protect and extend rights, and foster a culture of accountability. They also contribute to a broader sense of inclusion of previously marginalized groups within society and have the potential to increase social cohesion across groups.

Context and trends of citizen engagements in Vietnam

Vietnam has become a middle-income country. As Vietnam and its citizens become wealthier, the pressure to further improve public services clearly increases. People want a more transparent government, less corruption, and a more service-oriented public administration. Accordingly, Vietnam has been piloting many different mechanisms of downward accountability and citizens’ participation, mainly at the grassroots and commune level, while most of the devolution has gone to the province. The Public Administration Reform (PAR) Programme is the main government vehicle to improve administrative services and engage citizens. In the PAR Master programme 2011-2020 (PAR-MP) the institutional reforms are a key reform pillar, with focus on making rules on the relationships between state and the people, on public consultation before making regulatory decisions, and on the people’s right to oversee activities of authorities. A second PAR pillar, on administrative procedures reform, requires state agencies to collect and handle people’s reports and suggestions on administrative regulations for better quality of administrative public services. The PAR-MP 2011-2020 sets the target of people’s satisfaction with services provided by state administrative agencies at over 80% by 2020.

Since 2013, the Government of Vietnam emphasises transparency and accountability as a focus area in PAR, requiring government agencies at all levels to ensure various channels for public access to information and for communication, promoting the role of the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF) and other socio-political organizations in providing information for people and communication between the government and people. Vietnam’s Sustainable Development Strategy for 2011-2020 promotes an enhanced public governance with strengthened transparency and anti-corruption, increased effectiveness of public management, accelerated PAR and involvement of stakeholders. In 2016, the new Prime Minister and the Communist Party increased the pressure on PAR implementation. Combined with increased public pressure for more government transparency, efficiency and fighting corruption, PAR was re-prioritised within the GoV programmes.

Government-citizen interaction is stated in many laws enacted over the last decade. The Ordinance on Democracy in communes, wards, and townships 2007, the Constitution 2013, Law on Receiving citizens 2013, Law on Public investment 2014, the Law on Organization of Local Government 2015, Law on Promulgation of legal normative documents 2015, Inter-agency Resolution between the National Assembly Standing Committee, the Government, the Delegation of VFF Chair-people 2017 all emphasized public engagement in public governance and the role of socio-political organisations in promoting public engagement.

Local governance in Vietnam is currently measured by using indexes such as the Public Administration Reform (PAR) Index and the Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (PAPI). The PAR Index is an internal government tool and measures provincial
efforts in realising of the Master PAR programme 2011-2020. Government–citizen interaction is reflected in the indicators of communication of PAR, these are: information of administrative services and results of these service applications processing, including posting at one stop shops (OSS) and on the authorities' websites; administrative service delivery at OSS and online; collection of /and response to people’s reports and proposals; satisfaction index of public administration services (SIPAS).

The PAPI index is a public tool and generates information for the improvement of local government’s performance in meeting their citizens’ needs by:

• enabling citizens to benchmark their local government’s performance and advocate for improvement; and
• promoting self-reflections for improvement, creating constructive competition, and promoting learning among local authorities. Citizens are at the heart of Vietnam’s development. As “end users” of public administration and public services, they are fully capable of assessing the performance of central and local authorities and of supporting the establishment of a state “of the people, by the people and for the people.”

PAPI contains 8 dimensions, 28 sub-dimensions, more than 120 indicators, and more than 550 questions about Vietnam’s policy matters. The 8 dimensions cover:

• Participation at Local levels
• Transparency in Local Decision-making
• Vertical Accountability Towards Citizens
• Control of corruption in the public sector
• Public Administrative Procedures
• Public Service Delivery
• Environmental Governance
• E-Governance.

The most relevant dimensions for the RALG programme are Participation at local level (Civic Knowledge, Opportunities for Participation, Quality of Elections, Contributions) and Public Administrative Procedures (Certification Procedures, Construction Permit, Land Procedures, Personnel Procedures). The table below extracts the PAPI data on these two dimensions for the three RALG supported provinces in 2014 (project preparation) and 2018 (latest available data at the time of the preparation of this note) and shows the variations.

What were RALG’s ambitions towards change?

For political leaders at all levels, PAR is a priority that creates social, economic and administrative service delivery and subsequently increases citizen satisfaction. A more transparent, accountable and responsive local governance is seen as a necessary condition for the successful implementation of the National Sustainable Development Strategy (SDS) 2011-2020. This requires on-going, two-way government-citizen dialogue so that areas of performance shortfall can be identified and addressed, and the adequacy of policies can be critically assessed and refined as necessary.

The three project provinces had relatively low levels of citizen satisfaction with local government performance as assessed through citizen surveys including the PAPI Index in 2014. This contrasted with the higher levels of citizen satisfaction suggested through the citizen feedback mechanisms administered by the bureaucracy.

There were comprehensive arrangements in place for the dissemination of information to citizens and citizen engagement. These arrangements, and the manner in which public servants tend to implement them, often resulted in information difficult to understand for citizens and perceived to be of questionable relevance. Furthermore, citizens often considered arrangements for engagement with government to be rather rigid and formalistic and not oriented towards the promotion of sustained two-way dialogue.

VFF, the umbrella Mass Organisation – and its member organizations Vietnam Women Union (VWU), the Youth Union (YU) – have an important and expanding role to play in facilitating dialogue between government and citizens. The capacity to implement their role varies and is limited in the context of their national to commune level mandate and the technical skills and competencies required. As a result, the effectiveness of Mass Organisations in fulfilling their envisioned roles as brokers and facilitators of citizen-government dialogue and collaboration is limited.

From this perspective, RALG’s change objective was formulated as contributing to the improvement of local social, economic and administrative service delivery and increasing citizen satisfaction with local government performance. RALG would focus on two main strategic areas:

• increasing citizen feedback and engagement on policies and local government performance at all levels; and
• increasing local government capacities, at all levels, to access, analyse and utilise citizen feedback.

Through enhancing citizen’s voice at all levels as well as the capacities of local government to use this voice effectively, improved service delivery and more transparent and accountable local governance can be expected.
How were the changes in citizen engagement and increasing government capacities made operational?

**The project as an intervention to assist reform**
In each Province the project worked in three Districts and in each District in a number of Communes/Wards. The three Provinces were not equally ready to adopt an innovative approach to citizen engagement. Kon Tum was more enthusiastic to change, they also had a more appropriate implementing agency in the form of Department of Home Affairs (DOHA), the agency responsible to coordinate PAR. In the other two provinces citizen feedback was approached with reservation from the policy level because of recent government-citizen conflicts on environmental pollution and land issues. Nevertheless, in all three provinces innovative government-citizen engagements were initiated.

This chapter describes how the project supported the PAR, providing opportunities to find out what works and what not. First the project’s approach to ownership and dialogue is presented. The approach had two main components: firstly, the direct involvement of government agencies in their communication to citizens, and secondly the intermediary role that the mass organisations play to improve government-citizen communication.

**Ownership of dialogue improvement**
Ample attention was given to creating local ownership of change efforts at all levels, especially in Kon Tum Province. Even though project leadership was located at Provincial level, it started with a kick-off conference in which Communes and Districts formulated their commitments. Initial activities were planned, with different action plans in different Districts. Agreement was reached among government and mass organisations, and additional activities were added as the project evolved. The main focus of the interventions was to improve the dialogues.

As shown in the figure below, three types of dialogue improvements were addressed: Between Government and Citizens (G-C), Government and Mass Organisations (G-MO) and Mass Organisations and Citizens (MO-C).

The intermediary role the Mass Organisations play in the dialogue is twofold: being the representative or ‘bridge’ between government and citizens concerning information flows, and being the facilitator of the G-C dialogue.

**Government – Citizen dialogue**
The policy environment for the G-C dialogue is set, mechanisms are prescribed and the dialogue events are organised, also in the Communes, see chapter 2. These events are often opportunities for the government to disseminate information with less emphasis on providing a platform for the citizens to air their opinions and requests; these events may remain one-way, as a two-way approach is not specifically prescribed in the regulatory framework. For example, the Department of Justice (DOJ) of Ha Tinh Province has implemented an effective activity to disseminate legal information to the citizens by providing professional leaflets, preparing TV programmes and other communication materials on rights and obligations of citizens on land issues and conflict resolution. In addition, a number of local conciliators (mediators) were trained. The result of this series of one-way activities was that the number of conflicts that had to go up to the police or even higher government level was considerably reduced. Citizens now have the opportunity to put questions and requests on the DOJ website; it is not yet organised however how these inputs are processed and how a future discussion platform takes shape and develops into a two-way dialogue.

The G-C dialogue aims at reducing the communication gap between the two, acquire information on how to improve government services and ultimately increase citizen satisfaction on public services. Increasing this satisfaction has been the aim of a recent initiative by the Commune of Son Tay in Huong Son District, Ha Tinh Province through setting up a results-based PAR plan, see Case 1. It is a good example of how PAR can be integrated in the institutional mechanism of overall Commune Socio-Economic Development Planning (C-SED).  

Attention from the government side to organise effective platforms for citizen feedback are now being set up in the Provinces, and use the regulations of the 4-party coordination mechanism and Citizen Reception Office as the tool for creating a two-way dialogue. Direct dialogue between the government and citizens is an instrument to grasp citizens’ needs and expectation. Its pur pose is to quickly address citizens’ legitimate rights and interests and build up mutual trust. The biggest advantage of the direct dialogue is generation of comments, feedback and solutions from both sides. Therefore, the Vietnamese government has long requested the three power-holding agencies – Party Bureau, People’s Council (legislative body) and People’s Committee (executive body) – to conduct direct and regular dialogues with citizens and organisations.

However, conducting a direct and open dialogue session appeared not to be easy. It requires knowledge, skills and bravery of the heads of agencies, and a thorough understanding on citizen issues. They need listening skills, commitment and the power to initiate an effective response to people’s complaints and proposals. In a hearing session, citizens may raise headache issues, which cannot immediately

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**Feedback and dialogue at Commune level**

5 | The Party structure is, for simplicity purposes, assumed as part of the government structure.
Case 1: Results-based PAR planning

In Son Tay, a remote Commune in Ha Tinh Province, economic developments and an increase in small enterprises has raised the demand for administrative services, mainly business registrations, residential registrations, land use right certificates and social welfare allowances.

When RALG support started, the Commune took the initiative to use their participatory SEDP approach to the PAR plan as well. The implication would be that the services provided in the Commune One Stop Shop (OSS) are linked to targets, resources and monitoring requirements.

To start PAR planning process, the Commune People’s Committee (CPC) Administrator conducted a review on the current administration system, and identified its strengths and weaknesses. After plenary discussion sessions with all staff members, the CPC set out the overall objective of the PAR plan and specific targets for each of six PAR dimensions. The overall objectives focused on (i) higher citizens’ satisfaction rate on administrative services delivered in the OSS and (ii) higher percentage of staff members getting at least the level of good performance in the regular year-end staff evaluation. The specific PAR objectives focused on meeting the indicators of the commune PAR index, lowering unsolved workload and decreasing the misuse of public funds. Finally, the members of the planning team were assigned to translate the set of objectives into a proposed list of activities in each PAR dimension. RALG contributed at the start of this process via communication training of OSS staff and providing a computer to assist in the registration of citizen feedback.

To enforce the PAR plan implementation, a monitoring system was set up. The CPC Administrator was assigned to survey citizens’ satisfaction feedback. Survey results were aggregated, analysed and added to the year-end M&E system. The extent that assigned tasks in the annual PAR plan were fulfilled was the performance indicator for staff performance evaluation.

By adopting the results-based approach in PAR planning, Son Tay commune has made PAR a useful process, not only for commune leaders in their daily execution, but also for citizens who can now oversee the government’s commitment to better services.

"Our PAR plan is professional and enforced. I can use it to monitor progress of our PAR, to evaluate my staff performance in a transparent and precise manner. But much more than that, quality of our services to citizens has been improved. Currently, 100% of citizens’ requests in the OSS have been solved and returned on time or even before the deadline."

Cao Van Duc
Vice Chairman of Son Tay Commune People’s Committee

be answered by the officials. They risk losing credibility and trust. Furthermore, the risk of public confrontations makes the three involved agencies reluctant to work together. From the citizens’ side, they may be happy to finally air their concerns, sometimes in a forceful manner. As a result, the dialogue atmosphere may turn stressful and both sides become frustrated when agreement or solutions are not reached immediately. To keep matters in hand, the hearing sessions often turn out to be one-way communication events led by government agencies. As a resolution to this situation, intermediary agencies are suggested to facilitate the dialogue. This task has been officially assigned to a fourth party: the Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF). The regulatory environment was set.
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But often, the four parties⁶ do not sit together in the same public hearing; they have separate meetings with citizens and later have a separate meeting among themselves to discuss feedback and comments. Consequently, citizens feel that their leaders are playing pingpong with their concerns. In all three provinces actions were taken to arrive at a better way of organising the 4-Party coordination, see case 2. This case shows that the regulatory environment alone is not sufficient to have an effective dialogue; political confidence and facilitation skills are as important.

Through this dialogue mechanism, the government is keen to gather feedback from citizens, e.g. in the case of service feedback from the OSS, but feedback in itself is not

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⁶ | People’s Committee, Party Bureau, People’s Council and Vietnam Fatherland Front.
Case 3: The Mass Organisation as bridge between people and government

By law, the Youth Union has three roles: (i) being the right hand of the government; (ii) provide audience-oriented training to young people; and (iii) protect their legitimate rights and interests. To provide stable jobs for young people, the Kon Tum Provincial Youth Union (PYU) signed a Cooperation Memorandum with DOLISA to promote employment opportunities; it is a province with a relatively large youth unemployment.

In 2018, supported by the RALG project, Commune YUs and the CES changed their cooperation model and the CYU became a service provider to the CES. A Training of Trainers and manual were jointly developed capacitating the CYUs to serve young job seekers and start-ups preparing them for the opportunities in the job market and promoting themselves as capable applicants. CYU leaders soon figured out their new role and added value for their members and – with concrete assignments – stimulated active citizen involvement. In turn, the CES got access to young people’s professional aspirations. CES started providing job offers and start-up help tailored to their demand and started cooperation with the CESs in other provinces, assessing employment opportunities.

The CES’s performance has been significantly improved. Especially finding jobs for young people in the neighbouring province of Binh Duong, an industry hub, has been quite effective.

"Our operation is flourishing. In the past, it was so hard to organise a job counselling or job opportunity exchange event in communes. But things changed. Now the district leaders are aware of the importance of job generation for youths, so they actively invite us to come and introduce job opportunities. The PYU is also happy and wishes to scale up this model to other districts and communes." – Nguyen Thi Nga, the CES Director, Kon Tum province.

Providing out-of-province job opportunities generates new tasks for the Centre staff such as pre-departure orientation sessions for the newcomers who get out of their villages for the first time.

The CES secures accommodation, canteen, kindergarten, fast advance payment and a hotline with CES Kon Tum.

"Previously, it was very hard for me to make them attend the CYU meetings. They told me that they did not see anything new in such meetings and the topics were not their concern. Now they are more active in my meetings. Or I can call the CES. In short, I feel myself as a professional job counsellor." – U Hre

Leader of Đăk Long CYU, Kon Plong District

yet sufficient to create a proper dialogue; the next step is processing the feedback and providing citizen-focussed responses. For example, in Ha Tinh the feedback on the performance of the OSS was used only in a statistical way, acquiring information on satisfaction of procedures. Feedback on government services that go further than procedures – like proposals for change, criticism, reporting the misuse of state funds – is not yet fully part of the dialogue. The project had difficulties in getting this type of feedback started. In Kon Tum there were a few initiatives where it did work; once a few positive experiences have taken place in which government and citizens come closer together, more longer-term mechanisms are being discussed.
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Case 4: The Vietnam Women’s Union as the facilitator of PAR improvements

Women’s role in criticising and commenting on government policies and overseeing their implementation is regulated in a government decree. Government agencies must create an enabling environment to engage women’s participation. People’s Committees at all levels must invite women to participate in formulating and revising policies and programmes, mechanisms and SEDPs to protect women’s and children’s rights and ensure gender equality. The VWU should have an official seat in any advisory commission, steering committee or supervisory taskforce. In short, VWU plays both the bridging and facilitating functions in the government–citizen relationship.

In many cases, this is still theory; in practice, VWU’s role has been perceived in much more narrow terms, because of both formal and informal institution settings. Current regulations emphasise women’s engagement in social affairs of women empowerment and children rights. The local governments tend to interpret this narrowly, excluding women’s voices from criticism of public administration; they are surprised when the VWU asks for more active involvement in PAR-related dialogues between government and citizens. By social norms and customs, the female role has been perceived as taking care of family, children and household. Women often are not aware of their real role in social life. Many do not possess sufficient knowledge and skills to live their extended social role.

RALG organised a series of awareness raising workshops to eliminate the misperception of women’s roles. Women are the family members who are most exposed to C-OSS administrative services. Women are handling administrative procedures for their families, such as birth certificates, business registration for household businesses, receipt of social welfare allowances, payment for public services and school fees. Getting feedback from women therefore is getting it from the most relevant users of public services.

Training for C-VWU leaders on event-organisation skills, information collection techniques, facilitation skills, etc., helped to establish the more prominent role of women in society.

The provincial VWU has piloted new approaches to collect women’s feedback via the C-VWU meetings, IT applications, direct dialogues between the commune leaders and female citizens. Female citizens are now more confident and knowledgeable to participate in dialogues in a more effective manner. Government agencies understand better women’s role in social affairs in general and in PAR in particular. The “Women involvement in PAR” model of Kon Tum was shared in a national conference, and the Kon Tum VWU received high appreciation from the Central Committee of VWU, who recommended the model for mainstreaming in other provinces.

Encouraged by the initial success, the provincial VWU has expanded the effort to collect female feedback on government services province-wide. Feedback information will be shared with government agencies and consolidated in VWU’s reports for more strategic policy discussions.

The role of the mass organisations in dialogue improvement

The mass organisations have a representation and a facilitation role, see above. Until the recent past they functioned mainly as the presenter of government information or propaganda; now they are increasingly taking information back from citizens towards government, creating a two-way flow of information and discussion. An example of this bridge function is the Youth Union working together with the Centre of Employment Services (CES) from the Department of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (DOLISA) in generating youth employment, see case 3. The Youth Union enthusiastically represented its members and are now well respected as a service organisation, not just an agency for government information. They are now expanding their services to other parts of the Province creating even more employment opportunities.
The facilitating role of the mass organisations in promoting the dialogue between government and citizens is laid down in policy directives, e.g. the VFF facilitating the four-party dialogue. But in many cases the VFF is still only a member of this dialogue, the People’s Committee taking over the role of chairman. This set-up is less preferred by citizens because the PC is not perceived as sufficiently neutral. The VFF can also expand its facilitating role beyond the formal arrangements like voter meetings and reception offices. In Dak Ha District of Kon Tum they successfully managed a series of 8 government-citizen open dialogues at Commune level.

The Provincial authorities have reacted positively to these initial experiences and are ready to expand to other districts. Important conditions for making these meetings work are the proper preparation of government managers – they are often reluctant to be publicly exposed to questions that they may not be able to handle – and a thorough training of the VFF in facilitation and communication skills.

The Vietnam Women Union has also proved itself as an effective dialogue facilitator. Women are a crucial group for acquiring feedback and improve public administration; they are the ones taking care of most of the certificates and public services a family needs. RALG introduced a separate programme to support the VWU at commune level, see case 4. This case shows the opportunities the government has by interacting with this category of citizens and how the supporting mass organisation can play its representation role well.

Lessons to be learned

While the RALG has generated positive results which can contribute to further citizen engagement and participation in Vietnam, this section looks at what can be learned from project support to citizen engagement.

The political economy context changes and influences project performance.

Complex and sensitive changes such as citizen engagement requires a conducive political environment and change champions to have a chance of success.

At the project inception phase, Ha Tinh and Nghe An were perceived as having more conducive environment for project success. Ha Tinh was a PAPI good performer and portrait strong political leadership for further citizen engagement. On the contrary, KonTum was a PAPI lower ranking province with limited ODA experience, citizen engagement and political drive.

Implementation proves this assumption wrong as Kon Tum ended up being a better performer. Several elements can explain that change. Primarily, the Formosa marine environment incident which hit Ha Tinh in April 2016 (a Taiwanese steel plant discharged toxic industrial waste illegally into the ocean through drainage pipes creating a marine life ecological disaster) triggered serious citizen protests and political tensions. This made the provincial authorities far more prudent and less open for citizen engagement. The relocation of the project under a PPC umbrella, a civic and industrial investment PMU, did not facilitate the project support.

For Kontum province, the RALG came at the right time, matching the leaders’ aspirations and plans for PAR, which were set to accelerate socio-economic development. The set objective of the PC Kontum was to gain wide exceptance for government policies through encouraging people to engage with the shaping of policies in their communes and districts.

A more elaborate political economy analysis during the formulation could already have hinted the formulation team of the changing wind in Ha Tinh.

Knowledge is within the system but you need to wake it up

The project mainly used local expertise to bring about the changes it aimed at. Most of the expertise to strengthen capacity of various actors in citizen engagement is available in Vietnam, often also in the province itself. Likewise, most of the trainers used in the numerous training activities supported by the project were locals. This is common practise in Vietnam where national expertise is widely available and international expertise is less efficient due to language and culture barriers. International expertise is however useful to bring new ideas, new ways of doing things, new examples, exposures, etc. These international inputs have been valued and appreciated by the partners. The project strategy to offer multiple, complementary international and national technical assistance modalities proved to work well.

Exposure remains a relevant trigger to foster changes and realistic planning

Institutional changes are not easy in a highly risk averse context like Vietnam, all the more when it means opening up to citizens. However, horizontal emulation and mimicry attitudes between provinces remain an effective way to trigger and foster changes. The project strategy to start with study tours to other provinces during the start-up phase appeared to be a suitable approach to facilitate initiatives for changes in project provinces. Observing other provinces’ initiatives seem to be a source of inspiration and unleash capabilities to initiate similar activities. Similarly, the peer driven programming process appeared useful as provinces are keen to imitate other provinces’ innovations and initiatives.

The institutionalisation framework matters

It would appear that the involvement of DOHA in the project execution in Kon Tum facilitated the smoother execution of the programme. In Ha Tinh, the project was executed by a mainly public investment and infrastructures PMU, less at ease with public administration related activities. In Nghe An, the project was managed by a PMU under the Department of Planning Investment (DPI). In both provinces, DOHA was only involved via the Steering Committee meetings and as a beneficiary, not as an agency that (co-) drives implementation.
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This made it more difficult for the project to be linked to and aligned with the PAR plan at the provincial level.

Horizontal programmes such as SEDP and PAR require going beyond the single agency management structure; joint management from the start is crucial. The silo approach in public administration of vertical policy and programme management remains strong in Vietnam: PAR is managed by DOHA, SEDP by DPI, etc. Larger horizontal involvement and integration increases the understanding and the ownership of the reforms such as PAR. Better working relations between DOHA and DPI in Kon Tum have contribute to their better performance.

**Process facilitation oriented N/ITA that can handle complex environment is required**

Institutional change projects such as RALG require TA with good facilitation skills that can adapt to changing political settings. A rigid log frame implementation approach would not have enabled the project to adapt to the changing context and gradually expanding awareness of needs of the provinces. In Ha Tinh the project wisely facilitated activity planning at commune level. This enabled the project to support grassroots, close to citizens and service-oriented activities that could then be presented at higher level for replication.

This however implies an unbalanced implementation rate of the various results. The fact that the project design only determined suggested activities for each of the results areas left the necessary room for manoeuvre for the project management and TA to adapt. Managing changes in complex institutional environments such as the RALG requires facilitation oriented TA profiles.

**‘Structured flexibility’ for iterative project management**

The project adopted a flexible and iterative project management approach that appeared important during implementation. Indeed, this allowed the project to initiate a bottom-up, participatory process in the activities’ planning exercises. It appeared a valuable inception activity that facilitated better understanding and ownership of the project objectives by the local stakeholders.

This approach was all the more important because the project experienced delays and unexpected institutional and political changes requiring a flexible adaptation of the project strategy to the evolving context.

**Stay engaged long enough**

Organisational and institutional changes take time, all the more in the politically complex and sensitive environment of Vietnam where policy reforms usually follow a logic sequential pilots – lessons learned approach before potential institutionalisation. From that perspective, the RALG implementation period was much too short to be able to trigger substantive and lasting changes.