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## **Innovative High Risk Perma Projects with Ethnic People in Viet Nam**

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*[Submitted Paper]*

### **Background**

This three-part project was designed at a Project-writing workshop for selected VACVINA staff, sponsored by QSA and funded by AIDAB in May-June 1993. It was designed to assist some of the very poorest people in Viet Nam. One major reason for poverty in many places in the world is simply that of 'remoteness'.

When people are a long way from capital cities and large centres, and the roads are hard and dangerous, then health, education, food, housing and other resources seem to run out.

In the case of ethnic people in Viet Nam, life is particularly hard. Forests which were traditionally sources of food security have been destroyed by the cities' needs for timber. Ethnic people also suffered dreadfully during the long wars because, often, each side saw them as collaborators. Today, many lack access to knowledge as simple as literacy, family planning and gardening for food, and to resources as basic as dental services, midwives and polio vaccine. Sometimes they are regarded as being of low status by other peoples and by Government officials.

UNICEF has evaluated VACVINA and made two main criticisms. The first is that they were not reaching the most impoverished people in remote areas (who are often, but not always, ethnic minorities), and secondly, that their teaching and training was of uncertain quality.

This project was designed to assist with the two above areas whilst simultaneously substantially assisting ethnic people to have a better quality of life, which means, primarily, some security of food supply, less physical hardship, better health, possibility of generating income, and, indirectly, to confirm their importance as ethnic groups with something to offer.

Three ethnic groups were nominated: the H'Mong from the high mountains of Hoa Binh whose opium fields had recently been destroyed; the Muong, who are the original indigenous people of Viet Nam and who have suffered terribly in the French war

and the American War of Invasion; and the Nung/Tay people up in the mountains on the border of Viet Nam and China.

In 1992 the Dao ethnic project had already been funded by QSA for a VAC Ha Noi Project. There are many Dao people in Viet Nam, however this group of 1024 people was somehow isolated on Bavi mountain. They had earlier come to VACVINA to ask how they could make gardens, since the government had resettled the lower slopes of the mountain, and it was difficult to establish themselves. This was my fourth visit and they had now completed their first training courses and started their gardens.

On this occasion, I visited all of the four ethnic groups, and it is important to see the Dao as part of the project, although not under the same budget. They provide an important starting point for ethnic VAC projects.

The Dao project, once begun, showed some striking changes in people's ability and status. The Dao have changed from being fairly taciturn and lacking in knowledge and confidence to people who are talkative, participatory and positive.

There seem to be a few steps on the road to confidence. When a food and self-sufficiency project is introduced, the people are usually silent and passive. On the next visit, many people, after some training courses, are becoming hopeful, as measured by smiles and talking about their hopes to have enough food. The third stage is when they push aside the extension VACVINA officer and want to 'own' the project by doing all the talking to the project monitors, and by demonstrating their technical achievements and requesting small additions to the project where they feel there are gaps in their knowledge, and by saying what they will carry out in the future even with no further physical inputs.

Using this progress as a model of empowerment, this report discusses where each of the other three ethnic groups appears to be. For reasons of floods, droughts and rice harvests, most work has occurred first with the Muong people, then the Nung/Tay and finally the H'Mong.

The Muong people are very familiar with the project and highly motivated. They have completed their first training courses and are looking critically at their land to see what they can do with it. The Nung/Tay group show good knowledge of the project theory, and some people are very hopeful, especially the management team, but many participants seem not quite so confident. The H'Mong are still very silent, very depressed and are an inert sort of people – showing all the signs of disempowerment and poverty. However, they are willing to try and see if they can get 'independent.' They are also less willing at the moment for women to participate equally in the courses as the other ethnic groups have done.

In the Dao project, the whole 1024 people in 240 families participated in the project. This total participation was a fairly important factor in the success of the project. By this visit, they were very motivated, showed an increase in confidence and abilities, and were hopeful for their future. And, VACVINA was learning better techniques for working with ethnic peoples. For example:

1. A food bank which feeds people while permitting them to establish food gardens may be more important than per diems. Or supplying lunches during training courses more important than giving an allowance.
2. People never stick to the project numbers, so a class of, say 40 nominated people, quickly swells to about 80 or 100 people, with the additional people called 'listeners' sitting in the doorways, windows and aisles.
3. People want to learn in their own languages and these are often not written down, or if so, only a few are literate.
4. Materials need to be more visual, with posters and so on, developed to suit each group. Some of this has been done.
5. People want to teach others of their same ethnic group in different regions. So the Dao would like to teach other Dao in other Provinces, and so on for the Muong and H'Mong.
6. Courses need to extend beyond food gardens and orchards to animal health and useful forestry techniques, whether for larger areas of land or for the trees in garden fences.

## **Impact**

In Lang Son, and in Hoa Binh Provinces, we met the Provincial People's Committees, and they all expressed interest in the projects. An interesting side effect (much like Amnesty International) is that once QSA focuses on a formerly neglected ethnic group, then the provincial and local Government authorities start to put in some resources.

For example, the Muong people reported that the People's Committee had provided paint for the Clinic: in the project proposal, this is to have a VAC garden around it. In Hoa Binh, Mr. Son, the Vice Chair of the Provincial People's Committee, and a VAC member and agriculturist reported that the central Viet Nam Government is watching the project with interest as a model for other ethnic groups.

It also appears that finally, some of the compensation to be paid to the H'Mong for loss of opium had got through and appeared as a few plum trees and a new school (also to get a garden under the VAC-QSA project).

No ethnic group was aware that it was the International Year for Ethnic People, even the Muong, who are the indigenous people of Viet Nam. They were very interested when we talked about it.

All the groups were concerned for their mountains and forests and wanted more help with these. The people I talked with appeared to favour 'food banks' which have an on-going impact of security for the whole community, more than food allowances.

There appear to be key people within each group. They seem to be the ones who decide about women's participation. With the Muong people, women are now well and truly prominent in the project. Among the Nung/Tay community, the women anticipate going to classes in quite large numbers, and among the H'Mong there

were still doubts which I addressed in subsequent discussions with the H'Mong leader.

On our PCC (Project Co-ordinating Committee) visit we took the chief H'Mong man, Mr. Lu, to the meeting which was held in the Muong village, and then on to Ha Noi where he stayed with Mr. Ha. He was very pleased to talk to the Muong, and the surprise at Ha Noi was to find the Nung/Tay people had arrived to talk also. VACVINA had taken the initiative to bring people from the three parts of the project together. Well done, VACVINA!

The H'Mong project started its teaching programme late because people were fully taken up with the rice harvest, and this turned out to be fortuitous because more time was spent in making sure that the people really understood the project and its objectives. The groundwork will pay off, I am sure, and will make the implementation more peaceful. For example, everyone I spoke to had a clear idea of criteria for families chosen to participate in training, or to be model farms, and they approved the selection criteria.

Mr. Ha of VACVINA is excellent in giving clear details about how the local Management Committees are to be organised, and discussed these points in detail and then wrote them down, for example:

- Map of the village to be drawn showing all demonstration centres/nursery and beneficiaries.
- List to be kept of selected families, of numbers, land design for each one, etc.
- Review of selection criteria for families.
- Discussion of the demonstration centres which are owned by VAC but with family contracts as to provide for the project afterwards with species, quality and quantity specified by VACVINA.
- Set out budget, receipts and bookkeeping procedures to be followed.

## **Summary**

I feel these are fascinating projects and are very important for future work with ethnic peoples. Viet Nam appears to have a quite dated view of mixed cultures. It tends to favour assimilation and seems not to be aware of multi-culturalism. For example, it is a policy that all children are taught in the Vietnamese language from the first day of school, even if the teacher is an ethnic person and can speak their language.

Also, resettlement projects to 'protect' the land from further deforestation are rather harsh, with people being moved arbitrarily.

## **Recommendations**

1. QSA-AIDAB assist with small funds for further short courses to consolidate the present project and experience.
2. QSA-AIDAB continue to accept Ethnic projects to consolidate the learning in this field of VACVINA, and of QSA, because the impact on turning around

poverty and empowering people is so remarkable. In particular, those ethnic peoples who wish to teach others of their same ethnicity.

3. QSA-AIDAB assist with a general exchange of experiences among all the groups in about 18 months time.
4. VACVINA receive some specialist training in teaching adult ethnic groups and illiterate people (see TRAINING PROJECT 1993-4).
5. VACVINA teachers to have a special intensive course in modern forestry thinking, techniques and bush regeneration. For example, forestry as food security, not just cubic metres of timber; techniques in reforestation according to succession principles, and Australian bush regeneration techniques.

Each project area is further reported separately in the supporting documents.