



Executive summary

Support for Responsive Accountable Local Governance in the Provinces Nghe An, Kon Tum and Ha Tinh (RALG)

VIETNAM

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1 Presentation of the evaluation

1.1 Intervention description

The Support for Responsive Accountable Local Governance (RALG) intervention was the last in this series; bi-lateral cooperation with Vietnam will end in June 2019. RALG was implemented in three provinces – Nghe An, Kon Tum and Ha Tinh – over the period October 2017 until June 2019. Each province implemented its own project, with similar objectives, but variations in context and project set-up. The end-term evaluation took place in May 2019. RALG was conceived as a support to the country's public administration reform (PAR) aiming at improved government-citizen interaction and contributing to better government service delivery and citizen satisfaction. The projects were operationalised using 5 results:

1. Provide more citizen friendly information, also to minority groups
2. More effective dialogue facilitation by mass organisations
3. Better functioning of the One Stop Shop (OSS) and Citizen Reception Offices
4. Better use of citizen feedback in the planning of PAR
5. Share lessons learned among provinces and national level

Because of various delays, the projects' implementation period was reduced to roughly 1.5 years, implicating a less ambitious in results achievement; RALG focussed on generating good practice pilots, after which the projects could be scaled up for provincial use and national level discussions. The main focus was on the improvement of the interaction between government and citizens, see Figure below, where three types of dialogue are differentiated. A more transparent, accountable and responsive local governance is seen by political leaders as a crucial part of PAR, requiring 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 legal environment for PAR in general, and for citizen engagement in particular, is well covered in Vietnam through various laws, decrees and ordinances.

The projects worked mainly at commune level – with linkages to district and province – and in two areas:

- Improve the one-way communication practices. The existing arrangements, and the manner in which public servants tend to implement them, often resulted in the dissemination of information which is difficult for citizens to understand and is perceived to be of questionable relevance
- Improve the currently imbalanced two-way dialogue system of government-citizen interaction, and effectively strengthen the mass organisations' (MO) facilitating role in this interaction. MOs are represented at all levels and comprise of the umbrella organisation Vietnam Fatherland Front (VFF), The Vietnam Women's Union (VWU), The Vietnam Youth Union (VYU) and the Farmers' Association, among others. The MOs are perceived to be closer to the citizens which make them a suitable facilitator of the government-citizen interaction.

The interventions used by the projects to work towards improved government-citizen interaction are divided in training and events, production of supporting materials and equipment.

1.2 Evaluation's scope, objectives and methodology

The field mission of this end-term review (ETR) took place from 7 to 24 May 2019. During this period a total of five days was spent on assisting the Enabel HQ governance expert in formulating a stocktaking note for Enabel's future external communication.

Even though RALG comprises of three separate projects, this ETR aims at providing a single view on progress and achievements. Since the implementation period was rather short, there was no mid-term review planned.

The ETR had three main objectives:

- Assess performance according to the five OECD/DAC evaluation criteria
- Four specific evaluation questions corresponding to the RALG result areas
- Assist in the formulation of a stocktaking report, to be published in a separate document. Enabel's HQ government expert joined the ETR team for one week to work on this additional document.

The mission comprised of the following activities and approach:

- Document study.
- Briefing session at Enabel headquarters on 23 April 2019.
- Briefing sessions at Enabel Hanoi at the start of the field mission
- Stakeholder interviews: *In all three provinces, representatives from government and MOs at Provincial, District and Commune level were interviewed. Ministry of Home Affairs (MOHA) and relevant other national agencies were not available for an interview.*
- Group approach: *Almost all interview sessions were group sessions. These were mostly open discussion sessions that provided an opportunity to acquire practical information and to jointly analyse activities and conditions for success.*
- De-briefing meeting at Enabel Hanoi on 24 May 2019
- Formulating the draft ETR report.

The depth of this ETR had its **limitations**. First of all, the mission was not able to meet government representatives at national level, mainly because of bureaucratic reasons, limiting the assessment of result 5 that partly relates to Province-National linkages. Secondly, the total time period for this mission was rather limited; for each province, there were roughly 3 days to acquire information from Provincial, District and Commune level. Necessarily, in most meetings, the District and Commune levels were combined, leaving little time to analyse per level and triangulate information. In addition, there was no time to talk with citizens, the final beneficiaries of these projects. The time constraints were highest in Nghe An Province where the distances between interview locations were relatively large. And thirdly, because of the short RALG implementation period, the ETR was not able to find sufficient evidence for results achievement, only progress indications.

2 Results and conclusions

Combining these three types of interventions (training and events, supporting materials and equipment) into a comprehensive provincial development initiative was a challenge for a project of such short duration.

Kon Tum was most successful in this endeavour because the Kon Tum PMU was headed by the Department of Home Affairs (DoHA), the responsible agency for PAR coordination. The other two PMUs have a different set-up.

In the end, all provinces came up with a substantial number of good practices for scaling up. The report provides a number of cases on improving the government-citizen dialogue.

2.1 Performance criteria

The mission used the standard evaluation criteria as its main guideline. In Summary:

- **Relevance:** The projects were a relevant contribution to the Vietnamese policy direction on PAR and citizen engagement. They also comply with the ICP and Belgian focus on democratisation. RALG is in a position to provide policy advice on a number of PAR related issues:
 - Citizen engagement and PAR planning as conditions for improved Commune SEDP planning and implementation
 - The role of MOs in strengthening government-citizen interaction
 - Engaging minority groups in PAR
 - Working on mind-set changes at various levels of service provision
 - Ideas on a regulatory framework for PAR at Provincial and National level
- **Efficiency:** When linking budget spent to programme outcomes (improved service delivery) – and taking into account the relatively short implementation period – the mission believes that the Kon Tum project has had more chances of strategically linking commune, district and provincial level towards ideas for provincial level improvements. The other two wisely spent their budget, but had less chances to create these linkages.
- **Effectiveness:** The projects have generated a series of experiences that are useful for the provincial level PAR agenda, and possibly also for wider application. These activities relate to three types of dialogue improvement:
 - *Government – citizen dialogue:* a more responsive commune government. Citizens have become more vocal. An important reason for this effect is that the Commune plans were made bottom-up; commune staff are acting in the interests of their citizens.
 - *Mass organisations – citizen dialogue:* the MOs' role is more than just providing government propaganda. They are becoming more service oriented, both to their members and as facilitator in the government-citizen dialogue. Citizens recognise their added value and see that the organisations are close to their interests.
 - *Government – mass organisations dialogue:* through their role as facilitator and cooperation partner there is increased acceptance by government of MOs as a separate stakeholder. MOs are also taking up their role in following up and monitoring decisions made in joint meetings. These initiating role from the side of the MOs has been an important feature of the project, especially in Kon Tum where they were also actively participating in manual design.
- **Impact:** Too early to say; the project had a shortened duration, partly because of the decision to exit bi-lateral cooperation. Still, since RALG has been closely aligned with PAR directives at national and provincial level, it is safe to say that the individual and organisational capacity development support will likely have a lasting effect. Activities with potential long-term effect have started.

- **Sustainability:** The ETR organised a ‘future directions’ meeting in each province where practical ideas were developed for the continuation of the pilots started by RALG. Two action areas will need attention:
 - Institutional set-up. RALG has supported interventions in a limited number of Communes, in only three Districts per Province, and with a selection of Provincial Departments and agencies; whereas in practice, PAR is a change plan that affects all units, be it government, party bodies or MOs. Scaling up will require Provincial and national level attention. And increased vertical integration, in which higher levels support the PAR process at the level below.
 - Mind-set changes. Those who understand the directions for PAR change say: “we need to change from *administration* to *service*”. This report provides a few examples in which this shift becomes noticeable, but sustainably changing engrained habits will take longer term efforts. RALG supported these changes and found out a few conditions to make it really stick. First of all, guidance from the top is needed so that the levels below see the importance of change and that those who are already willing to change, can start working in a more client-oriented fashion. However, there is not yet agreement on this change, e.g. on using IT for citizen feedback, increasing the budget for two-way approaches and employing a more participatory training methodology. Secondly, there is no performance evaluation system rewarding the service-oriented approach. Staff will be more inclined to change their attitude if they find out it is beneficial to them. And thirdly, the mechanisms – hardware, software and equipment – is insufficiently available. Working on these three conditions will make PAR improvements more feasible.

In conclusion, RALG has, even in its short implementation period, offered a substantial contribution to the PAR process in three provinces. Effective pilot experiences can be scaled up to the provincial level and deserve wider discussions at regional and national level. As a project it has shown that working with a bottom-up approach, the government-citizen interactions can become more meaningful and effective.

3 Recommendations and lessons learned

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3.1 For the 3 partner provinces

The ETR’s main recommendations are the following:

- *Towards an institutional framework:* the three provinces should translate the RALG achievements into a continuous process of PAR improvements, working towards an institutional framework at provincial level. Elements for this future institutional framework for PAR are listed in the report.
- *Hold a national conference:* RALG is preparing a closing conference for the projects, also inviting relevant national agencies. We would support this idea. During the ETR, provincial meetings participants mentioned the need for continued attention to PAR, if not by external support projects, then by own means. Since these means are available but need to

be prioritised by the provincial and national authorities, a closing conference may create the necessary environment to put PAR higher on the agenda. The conclusions and recommendations of this ETR may also be addressed in this conference.

- Citizen engagement and PAR planning could become conditions for improved Commune SEDP planning and implementation
- Enforce the role of MOs in strengthening government-citizen interaction
- Engage minority groups in PAR
- Work on mind-set changes at various levels of service provision
- Develop ideas on a regulatory framework for PAR at Provincial and National level

3.2 For Enabel

The ETR has two main recommendations:

- Extend the political-economy analysis to the entire implementation period, not only the formulation phase. Political and institutional changes cannot be foreseen but do influence project performance, especially in governance support projects that are close to political realities. Assessing the importance of these changes for project steering need to be on the agenda during implementation. Taking these changing contexts seriously also implies a more adaptive project management approach, creating opportunities for intermediate adjustments in priorities and project strategies.
- Use senior level process consultants. In supporting the complex multi-level PAR process like the case in RALG, the national and international TA are not only selected because of their knowledge about administrative procedures. Their role as process facilitator proved extremely useful. These kinds of governance support projects need a flexible management approach and senior level facilitators who understand these complex multi-stakeholder processes.