

## Young People and Vietnam's 5-Year Development Plan

Vietnam's Social Economic Development Plan 2006-2010 (SEDP) is set to shape the country's development priorities for the coming five years. While previous planning documents were top-down and designed entirely by the government, the SEDP 2006-2010 has been prepared in consultation with communities, the private sector, mass organisations, civil society and the international community. It is regarded as a very important innovation in Vietnam's planning process.

In response to a request from the Ministry of Planning and Investment, the Young Lives<sup>1</sup> team at Save the Children UK Vietnam Programme facilitated grassroots consultations on the SEDP in four locations: Ben Tre in southern Vietnam's Mekong delta; Da Nang, a rapidly expanding central coastal city; Lao Cai, a mountainous province on Vietnam's northern border and Hung Yen, an industrial city in Vietnam's Red River delta. Interviews and discussions were conducted with a representative sample of occupation groups, young people, migrants and women's groups in those provinces. Vietnam has a young population accounting for almost half of the total population<sup>2</sup>, and in each area at least eight groups of children and youth were asked their views on the SEDP. Having never been asked their opinions on questions of national development in the past, respondents were enthusiastic, open and welcomed an opportunity to help ensure that government policy is more responsive to communities.

Young people were asked to reflect on how the current education system has prepared them for future employment and the obstacles confronting them. While they broadly agreed with the SEDP's aims, they are concerned that:

- Textbooks are in short supply: obtaining them is a particular burden in rural areas
- There is a shortage of libraries, laboratories and equipment
- While most schools in cities such as Da Nang are modern, well built and well equipped, there are few such schools in highland areas where schools are widely dispersed geographically.
- Newly constructed classrooms are sometimes located in inaccessible areas far from where people live.

---

<sup>1</sup> Young Lives: An International Study of Childhood Poverty is a 15-year longitudinal policy research project being conducted in four countries: Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam. It is funded by the UK Department for International Development.

<sup>2</sup> The number of children in Vietnam under 18 is about 36% of the population and about 50% of the population is under 25 years of age.

- Teachers recruited from other provinces are often forced to live in makeshift accommodation, reducing their morale and motivation.
- The curriculum is of limited relevance and too theoretical: academic knowledge is privileged at the expense of vocational and social skills,
- Already overburdened students are often pressured to take extra classes.
- Education is becoming “commercialized”: children whose parents pay for classes or give gifts to teachers, receive better attention.
- Teachers are so concerned with good exam performance that they ignore students who are less likely to perform well.

***The burden of private tuition classes***

*Young Lives* research found that almost half of the children sampled have a private tutor. Among the privately tutored, there is not a major difference between children from rural and urban areas, but the difference between Kinh (ethnic majority) and non-Kinh (ethnic minority) children was marked (2.6 per cent vs. 49.7 per cent).

<b>Variation</b>	<b>Study sample</b>	<b>Estimate of national population</b>
Rural/Urban variation		
Rural	54.6	56
Urban	61.5	58
Ethnicity variation		
Non-Kinh	2.6	3.4
Kinh	49.7	50

Disturbingly, YL results found that extra classes did not significantly increase eight-year-old children’s writing and multiplication abilities. Instead, children’s psycho-social well-being<sup>1</sup> and household wealth were more significant determinants of success. Children with poor scores on an index of their psycho-social well-being are 42-58 percent less likely to perform literacy and numeracy tasks correctly. Household wealth also has a significant impact on reading and numeracy skills, with children from wealthier families more likely to read and multiply correctly.

***Low quality of education***

The quality of education is variable and can be alarmingly poor. Despite taking extra-classes, knowledge is not improved. For example, serious spelling mistakes are made even by sixth-grade children. One parent in Da Nang expressed concern that “the current teaching and learning methods might create a generation without basic social skills”. Lack of facilities makes it next to impossible to develop vocational skills. Opportunities are not taken to teach students about their local environment or prepare them to take advantage of likely local employment opportunities. In Da Nang, for example, children learn nothing about tourism or marine biology and are not even taught how to swim yet it is a coastal city that relies on tourism and maritime industries.

### ***Low basic skills acquisition***

In *Young Lives* research, of 1,000 eight-year-old children who took basic literacy and numeracy tests, 88 per cent could read a basic sentence, 75 per cent could write a basic sentence without errors or difficulties and 86 per cent could successfully answer a simple numeracy test. However, there was significant variation by location and socio-economic level. Rural children performed poorer than urban children in all three tests (95 per cent, 85 per cent and 92 per cent of urban children could successfully answer the reading, writing, and numeracy tests compared with 86 per cent, 72 per cent and 84 per cent of rural children).

There is also a significant difference between Kinh (the Vietnamese-speaking ethnic majority) and non-Kinh children particularly in literacy skills. Kinh children were three times more likely to read correctly than non-Kinh children, which may be explained by the fact that school reading materials are in Vietnamese and not in their mother tongue. As children were requested to use Vietnamese to do the survey test, ethnic minority children participants were at a clear disadvantage because many do not have access to education in their mother tongue and are frequently not fluent in Vietnamese.

### ***Limited perceptions about education of both parents and children***

In urban areas like Da Nang most parents assume that completion of tertiary education is required to obtain a good job and are keen for their children to obtain civil service positions. As parents push children towards academic achievement in order to progress to higher education life skills can be neglected. Parents feel pressured towards preparing their children for government service and are not given an opportunity to consider alternative private sector employment.

By contrast, in highland regions such as Lao Cai, many think that the current education system provides a poor foundation for independent adulthood. A girl noted: “We are trying to learn, but some boys and girls in my village could not find a job for a long time after finishing school, college and even university. My family is so poor that there is no money to find a job. Therefore, we don’t want to continue learning”. In remote rural areas such as Ben Tre, few are aware of the importance of education or the need to encourage children to achieve. The high cost of schooling prevents many students from continuing their studies. A twelfth-grade girl told researchers: “My father is a motorbike driver and my mother sells vegetable in the market. It costs about 600,000 dong (approximately \$38) per month for my younger sister’s and my education. I want to stop learning and go to work to assist my parents”.

### ***Limited employment opportunities***

In underdeveloped provinces, and where there is dependence on intensive agriculture, job opportunities are scarce and unemployment is rising. In such areas soil degradation, water shortages – and failure to promote water conservation – and lack of familiarity with high-yielding crop varieties have created stagnating economies with no place for young people. In search of unskilled and labouring jobs young people leave for the cities. This is very common in both Hung Yen and Ben Tre rural provinces where the consultation was undertaken. Despite rapid industrialisation, it is not often easy for youth to find jobs. Some enterprises in Hung Yen, for example, commit to recruit local labourers in order to get approval from local authorities for their businesses. However, they then break these promises after having obtained approval because they need skilled labour that could not be supplied by local labour force.

In some provinces, labour export activities are implemented by enterprises. While those activities have been seen as an important livelihood strategy for rural farmers, concerns were also raised. Due to loose government management and limited information about labour exporting agents, there have been some cases of fraud and a loss of trust in labour exporting agents. Besides, Vietnam's labour export activities are only active in low wage markets such as Taiwan or Malaysia. Access to high wage markets such as South Korea or Germany is still very difficult due to high application costs that can not be afforded by many people.

### ***Education in school does not match labour market requirements***

The employment opportunities for many high school graduates are only in fields which require unskillful and seasonal /periodic labour, and sometimes in harmful environments. An eighteen-year-old girl in Da Nang complained: "I am now working for a local food processing company. I work two weeks a month on average. My work is shelling shrimps. During idle times I stay home and assist my parents in doing housework. My income is only about 300,000 dong (\$19) per month on average". Vocational training offered in schools is monotonous and offers little variety. "I wanted to learn agricultural techniques to prepare for farming work later in case I will not be able to take further training later, but only basic skills of electrical profession and forestation are offered", a girl in Lao Cai complained.

### ***Sources of vocational training support***

Through out the consultation in different sites, it has become clear that the current support resources that youth can rely on to improve their employment prospects are from their families, the vocational training system, mass organisations (government-affiliated organisations such as the Youth Union, or the Women's Union) and the private sector. Although most parents are willing to invest money for their children to learn more skills and knowledge to enable them to start their own life, existing support is neither systematic nor adequate. Many are still worried about lack of opportunities to work after training.

Youth vocational training centres have been set up in most provinces but there are not enough. In some districts where the Young Lives team carried out consultations there are none at all. Centres do not tailor training to the current demands of local job markets or to

likely future demands. Young people are thus discouraged from attending vocational training courses. In Hung Yen several complained they had finished training courses in leather processing and motorbike assembling and had had to pay tuition fees of over 4m dong (\$250 which is equivalent to an average annual income per capita of local population) but were then unable to find employment. There is no “career guidance centre”, so according to a youth group in a consultation in a mountainous commune some young people were cheated when they tried to find jobs in Southern provinces. In mountainous and remote areas vocational training is developed slowly, ineffectively, and improperly. It seems to be led by a formality and fashion rather than a strategic investment in employment orientation.

Job creation services have also been delivered by mass organisations, mainly by the youth union. Some services are provided by special centres under the management of the people’s committee. The target group is young people who complete secondary school but have no further training opportunities. However, most of those services were not effective because they are run under the management of government agencies which lack strong customer care or customer orientation skills. In addition, they don’t have a long term operation strategy, and thus there is a poor linkage between supply and demand sides.

### **Recommendations and policy implications**

Key recommendations emerging from consultations with young people are that:

- The government must raise learning and teaching quality and invest more in school facilities such as laboratories or libraries.
- Teacher training should encourage teachers to try to link theory and real life and reduce the learning burden on children.
- Learning programmes should be relevant to each child’s age and ability.
- Frequent changes in textbooks need to be reduced.
- Facilities for teaching and practicing such as labs, libraries and vocational training tools need be comprehensively resourced and effectively managed.
- The current philosophy of “racing to improve performance” and encouragement of extra-classes needs to be questioned and a more holistic approach to education that also teaches social and life skills adopted.
- Teachers need to receive more encouragement to continue learning and should receive ongoing in-service training.
- Vocational training needs to be drastically overhauled, better resourced and geared towards the local labour market: young people must be given opportunities to learn about relevant industrial and agricultural technology.
- The government needs to offer greater support to provincial small and medium enterprises, in order to try to reduce the current high levels of migration.

*[Report prepared by Falguni Patel, 16 August 2006]*