

**Fostering the right to participation**  
*Children's involvement in Vietnam's poverty reduction policy process*

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## Introduction

The importance of community participation in development policy decisions has gained increasing international recognition in the last decade.<sup>2</sup> Most notably, participation is now included as a core assessment criterion in the World Bank and IMF-led Poverty Reduction Strategy process to which all low-income countries are party. During the same period, the value of children's participation in decisions that impact on their lives and that of their communities has also gained more attention. The UN General Assembly's Special Session on Children in 2002 (including the national and regional processes leading up to the final meeting) highlighted children's right to voice their views and be heard as enshrined in article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

However, while a growing body of analysis has emerged assessing children's involvement in, for example, school governance, child workers' movements, and children's clubs and networks, to date there have been relatively few systematic assessments of the impact of children's participation on policy change.<sup>3</sup> There is still a dearth of knowledge about the factors that facilitate or hinder the translation of children's voices into not only improved discursive practices, but more child-sensitive policy and decision-making and programme implementation, in different political and economic contexts. In order to contribute to this important debate, this paper focuses on initiatives to promote children's participation at various points in Vietnam's national poverty reduction policy process.

Vietnam is an interesting case for several reasons: since the initiation of economic reform (*Doi Moi*) in the mid-1980s, the government has been praised for its successful poverty reduction achievements and rewarded with strong donor support. Moreover, Communist Party official documents and national laws alike are committed to the fulfillment of children's rights. Although national leaders have rejected pressures to move towards a Western liberal model of party democracy, in 2005 an ambitious nationwide consultation process around the governments overarching Socio-Economic Development Plan (2006-2010) was launched from the grassroots level upwards to collate views about the government's planned policy direction. Young Lives, an international policy research project on childhood poverty<sup>4</sup> in Vietnam, was involved in this process as part of the INGO coalition that implemented the consultation in tandem with the Ministry of Planning and Investment and local government authorities. This paper's central objective is to reflect on the nature and impact of children's participation in this new political space. It pays particular attention to the contribution that children's involvement can have in breaking poverty cycles (both life-course and inter-generational poverty transmissions).

Section 1 begins with a discussion on some theoretical literature on participation, poverty and rights, as well as international experiences of children's participation in policy processes. It pays particular attention to the challenges that have been identified in ensuring children's meaningful and sustainable participation. Section 2 uses this framework to discuss Young Lives' multi-pronged strategy to involve Vietnamese children in poverty reduction debates and processes. The final section concludes with

lessons learned and recommended future steps in Vietnam. It also includes more general reflections on the potential of children's right to participation to shape broader state-civil society interactions and remould definitions and practices of citizenship.

## **Part 1: Children's participation in policy processes**

The school of participatory research stresses that the right to be involved in decisions affecting one's life is indivisibly linked to improved social and economic wellbeing. The active participation of project beneficiaries leads to better development decisions, a better development process and more sustained results (CPU, CIDA, 2003). However, even more than adults, children have typically been viewed as "passive targets" rather than "active participants" in the development process. Indeed, the principle of children's participation challenges traditional paternalistic models of addressing children's needs, and recognizes that as subjects of rights, children need to be provided with opportunities to not only articulate their views but also to be heard.

*'Children...are social actors in their own social, economic and cultural contributions to society. A child-centered approach builds on children's potential, capacity and capability and seeks to actively involve children in research, implementation, awareness raising and advocacy work' (Theis, 1996).*

Concerned that participation will not be merely tokenistic or manipulated to serve adult agendas, recent analyses have discussed the strengths and weaknesses of various forms of participation.<sup>5</sup> Broadly speaking, there are two major dimensions for assessing children's participation: the degree to which participatory initiatives are child-led and directed and the extent to which participation is sustained over time.

The second dimension is not only temporal but also relates to sustainability. Considerable attention has been given to children's involvement in one-off events or consultations (eg special forums or taskforces on children's rights); while such events have generated considerable media attention, they have generally not resulted in lasting changes in decision-making practices (eg Williams, 2004). By contrast, children's participation in clubs, councils or parliaments are all mechanisms that have facilitated more regular inputs into sector-specific policy processes. Successful examples have included children's workers' movements in both South Asia and Latin America. For example, children's networks in Colombia focus on conflict experiences and solutions, while children's *Makkala Panchayats* (village councils) in Karnataka, India, have focused on child labour issues. The advantage of children's councils and children's parliaments (which typically provide opportunities for children's voices to be heard at the state or national level) provide not only a more formal channel through which children can articulate their views, but also foster children's familiarity with policy processes and effective interactions with decision-makers. The Brazilian programme "Citizenship without size" — which provided opportunities for children and young people to become involved in decision-making about a portion of the municipal budget — is an excellent example of an initiative designed with this explicit aim. Participants developed key citizenship skills best developed through experiential knowledge unavailable in regular

school curricula, and adult authorities over time also came to recognize that, given the right opportunities and information, children can become actively and effectively involved in community decision-making, even around as issue as potentially complex as budgets.

### **Children's rights and poverty policy**

Notwithstanding a recent increase in initiatives to encourage children's participation in policy processes, children's involvement has tended to focus on particular sectors, particularly education and work. Integrating children's views into debates on broader poverty reduction and development debates is still at a fledgling stage (eg O'Malley, 2004; Massesa, 2004; Heidel, 2005). However, rights-based approaches to poverty and development prioritise the inclusion of accountability, empowerment, participation, non-discrimination and attention to vulnerable groups.<sup>6</sup> Of relevance to this paper, this suggests that children's active involvement in policy dialogues is critical if lifecourse and inter-generational poverty — which stem from deprivations suffered during childhood — are to be broken.

The reasons are twofold. First, the ability of families, local and national governments to fulfil children's rights to survival, development and protection will be enhanced if decision-making processes are informed by a first-hand assessment of children's needs and aspirations. Second, by including children in the crafting of poverty reduction and development strategies, it is more likely that children and young people will feel a sense of ownership of these strategies and policy plans and work towards their fulfilment as children and later, as adults. It also has the potential to enhance their understanding of citizenship. Increasingly, governments are realizing that when the concerns of marginalized groups are not adequately tackled, the resulting social malaise is more difficult to uproot. Thus, it is particularly important that children and young people's voices are listened to not as a monolithic bloc, but that particular attention is paid to differences in opinions between boys and girls, racial/ethnic majority and minority groups, and children with different religions, disabilities, sexual orientation and socio-economic status.

At the international level, support for children's involvement in poverty reduction processes gained momentum with the launch of the Global Movement for Children World Fit for Children Campaign<sup>7</sup> during the UN Special Session for Children in 2002. Backed by 94 million supporters and the broader Global Call to Action Against Poverty alliance, this Campaign developed child rights-focused Millennium Development Goals to ensure that children remain at the centre of this international compact and that current poverty reduction and development changes are framed as rights deprivations (see Figure 1 below). Moreover, it demanded to '[i]nstitutionalise, through legislation if necessary, the participation of children and young people in the making and implementation of policies that will affect them, including poverty reduction strategies'.

<b>FIGURE 1: Millennium Development Goals</b>	<b>A World Fit for Children</b>
Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger	Fight Poverty: Invest in Children
Achieve universal primary education	Educate every child
Promote gender equality and empower women	Leave no child out
Reduce child mortality	Care for every child
Improve maternal health	Care for every child / educate every child
Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases	Fight HIV/AIDS /
Ensure environmental sustainability	Protect the earth for children

Most concretely, this spotlight on childhood poverty has prompted the development of child poverty taskforces and related consultation processes in the developed world (eg the Taskforce on Child Poverty in Wales)<sup>8</sup>, and consultations with children and young people in the development of PRSPs in a number of developing countries. In the latter contexts, children's involvement has included contributions to policy dialogue at the community, regional and/or national levels, involvement in the implementation of community-level programmes, and monitoring and evaluating of impacts of poverty reduction policies at the grassroots level. In some cases, such as Kenya, although children were consulted from across the country, the resulting PRSP document integrated only a limited number of these insights and did not embrace a holistic, child-rights informed approach to poverty reduction (Jones *et al.*, 2005). In other cases, however, children's active involvement in the debates around the PRSP document drafting process saw children's demands more firmly anchored in the country's policy framework and provided solid leverage for future advocacy work (O'Malley, 2004; Massessa, 2004). It should be emphasized that in two examples of good practice (Tanzania and Honduras), initiatives were multi-pronged and included the development of a child-friendly PRSP, the employment of creative methodologies to explain core concepts and policy processes to children at the community level (eg role play, art, puppetry, mock debates), as well as representation in national level civil society fora and policy dialogues.

Although divergent in scale and methodologies, both developed and developing world consultative initiatives have highlighted the value of listening to children's perceptions and experiences of poverty. Broadly speaking, children have tended not to focus on poverty itself, but rather on some of the causes or consequences, such as child labour, the impacts of alcohol and drug abuse on family conflict, gangs, poor self-esteem and stigmatization in schools and neighbourhoods. While all of these are heavily researched areas, if adults control the research foci, methods, interpretation and articulation of the findings, we are likely to miss out on important dimensions of these complex phenomena (The Routes Project Team, 2001). Children's testimonies have also underscored the differential intra-household impacts of various policy initiatives aimed at household poverty alleviation, as well as resulted in concrete child/youth-friendly policy recommendations. The latter have included improving conditions for domestic workers,

facilitating access to credit for young people, enhancing the quality of teachers and ending corporal punishment in schools, and improving the dissemination of information of child/youth-related government services.

In short, in some countries, children's active involvement in poverty policy processes has broken new ground by lending legitimacy to children and young people's experiences and their ability to provide valuable insights to inform policy-making on poverty reduction. However, assessments of these processes have also highlighted some key challenges to ensure that child participation is embedded in a meaningful way throughout the policy cycle, ie from agenda-setting and policy design through to policy implementation, monitoring and evaluation. Critiques of processes to date have included the fact that consultations are often too short (especially given the complexity of the issues involved) and lack depth; that national level consultations have been prioritized at the expense of sub-national and community consultations, thus privileging some children's voices over others; and that there has been a dearth of consultation with children and young people during the policy implementation and evaluation stages.

The paper now turns to focus on the case of Vietnam, where initiatives led by Young Lives have sought to incorporate an awareness of shortcomings in previous consultation processes (both internationally and in Vietnam<sup>9</sup>) into the design of interventions in 2005-6.

## **Part 2: Mainstreaming Children / Young People into Vietnam's Poverty Policy Processes**

### **2.1 Political context**

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam stands out for a number of reasons among developing countries. First, although it was one of the world's poorest countries in the 1970s, Vietnam's economic reform process (*Doi Moi*) has led to its emergence as one of the world's most rapidly developing economies. Significantly, not only has the percentage of people living below the poverty line over the last decade halved<sup>10</sup> (from 58 per cent to 28 per cent), but due largely to the government's pro-poor orientation, Vietnam was singled out for its achievements in human development — including a rapid reduction in child mortality, and improved literacy and life expectancy rates — relative to its average income in the UN's 2005 Human Development Report.<sup>11</sup> However, while substantial progress has clearly been made in terms of citizens' economic and social rights, political and civic rights are only partially fulfilled.<sup>12</sup>

Vietnam's Communist Party leadership openly reject pressures to move towards Western-style liberal democracy, and an independent civil society remains nascent at best. To date, donor support has been substantial, rewarding the government's pro-poor policy choices. But recent moves by the government to encourage greater civil society participation in policy decision-making is perhaps best interpreted as a combination of donor and INGO promotion of civil society participation on the one hand, and government recognition of the need to ensure greater civic ownership of a process of such

rapid social, economic and cultural change. In other words, although concepts of rights and citizenship are clearly very differently defined in Vietnam's social/cultural/political context, the relationship between the state and citizens is currently undergoing significant changes. These have been embodied in the 2003 Grassroots Democracy Decree which promoted greater community involvement in policy decision-making and the Prime Minister's 2004 Directive 33 which sought to move away from the old "command and control" planning approach towards a more open and strategic one.

As a result, the defining concepts of the second phase of the country's umbrella development policy framework, the 2006-10 Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP), are not only "pro-poor development" and "growth with equity", but equally importantly are "partnership" and "participation". This new focus is being promoted through the establishment of the "Poverty Task Force" — a collaborative forum of government agencies, donors, NGOs and mass organizations — as well as the country's most extensive grassroots consultation process to date around the SEDP II.<sup>13</sup> These changes signal an implicit recognition that the state is no longer the sole provider of economic and social goods and opportunities, but that the citizenry is being encouraged to become more actively involved in overcoming poverty. In particular, citizens are now being provided with opportunities to participate in commune level budget decision-making and local level policy monitoring. (It should be noted, however, that the efficacy of these new initiatives has yet to be systematically evaluated).

## **2.2 Children's participation in Vietnam**

While the Vietnamese government has made some impressive inroads in improving the fulfillment of children's rights to survival and development, until very recently, little government resources have been devoted to children's right to participate in policy processes.<sup>14</sup> This can be partially explained by:

- a dearth of understanding about the importance of children's participation among rank and file officials,
- the traditional attitude of shaping child-related policies based on adults' experiences,
- limited skills among child rights advocates as to how to work effectively with children,
- a lack of experience among children about how to articulate their concerns, particularly in a context where age and status hierarchies powerfully shape social interactions.
- This is not to overlook some important early initiatives, but instead to highlight the difference in quality of participation in the recent consultation process and policy dialogues with children and young people. For example, children have historically been organized in the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union and the Ho Chi Minh Young Pioneer Organization — where the primary aim was to foster understanding and support of Communist Party principles and practices among youth. Following ratification of the UNCRC in the early 1990s — Vietnam was the first Asian country and the second country internationally to do so — children's television and radio

programmes, as well as young journalists' clubs and children's rights clubs, have been established by government agencies to provide spaces for children to not simply passively receive information, but also express their own views.<sup>15</sup> Most recently, the governmental Committee on Population, Family and Children has been working in partnership with Save the Children Alliance, Care and Plan to organize Children's Forums on the draft National Plan of Action for Children, and thematic issues of concern, including HIV/AIDS, education and the first PRSP (in Ho Chi Minh City).<sup>16</sup> These forums have encouraged children to articulate their views, synthesize their ideas and present them, using creative methods (eg drama, song, art, fashion shows), to provincial leaders and government authorities.

### **2.3 Young Lives Vietnam's Strategy to Mainstream Children's Rights into Poverty Reduction Policies**

Young Lives Vietnam — part of a 15-year longitudinal international policy research project on childhood poverty — has been implementing a multi-faceted strategy aimed at ensuring that children's views and rights are effectively incorporated into mainstream poverty reduction policies and programmes. Mindful of Boyden's (1997) cautionary point that the meaning of participation can be diverse across different contexts, Young Lives activities have been designed that take into account typical patterns of interaction between adults and children in the Vietnamese context, as well as the specificities of policy decision-making (especially in the context of increasing decentralization of power). More specifically, a series of child participation modalities including Young Journalist Clubs, Children Forums on poverty, children's participation in qualitative research<sup>17</sup>, children's research and advocacy groups, and children's policy dialogues with members of parliament have been initiated and implemented in five diverse provinces.<sup>18</sup> Although different modalities involve particular participation levels in the ladder of participation,<sup>19</sup> they are all complementary and mutually reinforcing<sup>20</sup>, and strive to provide opportunities where children can express their concerns in their own way, without being blocked or misrepresented by adults (Boyden and Ennew, 1997). This work is also informed by an interactive model of communication which is premised on the view that successful communication involves more than sending a message and assuming the recipient will understand it. "Rather, communication is a more demanding process where the sender needs to communicate the message, then find ways of checking with the recipients how the message has been interpreted, and based on the feedback, re-communicate the message" (Court *et al.*, 2005). Given that Young Lives' overarching aim is to bring about a reduction in childhood poverty by working with diverse target audiences — academics, donors, government officials, community and children — it is critical that we find ways of facilitating the communication of messages from and to our primary stakeholders — children. In other words, we want children to benefit from the findings of our research and policy recommendations, but we also want to utilize marginalized knowledge and the views of children to inform these processes.



## 2.4 Grassroots consultations with children and youth

In view of the fact that the SEDP maps out the government's main guidelines and action plans for both sectoral and macro-economic development and seeks to harmonize domestic and foreign investment, including overseas development aid, Young Lives focused its advocacy initiatives in 2005-6 in shaping the SEDP II.<sup>21</sup> Whereas the Comprehensive Poverty Reduction and Growth Strategy (CPRGS) had only necessitated the Prime Minister's approval, the SEDP had to be passed and ratified by the National Assembly, resulting in greater publicity, media attention and discussion. Shaping the content for the SEDP itself was viewed as an important objective, but also the beginning of a longer-term process of advocacy around subsequent national and provincial socio-economic and poverty reduction policy implementation processes.

The 2005-6 consultation process was the first time that the participatory planning approach (PPA) had been applied widely in Vietnam. The Ministry of Planning and Investment oversaw the process, but the consultations were implemented by a broad alliance of INGOs<sup>22</sup> and national and local government agencies. Community participants and governmental officials at the commune and district levels alike appreciated the breadth of the exercise and the opportunity to voice and hear opinions from such a diverse range of citizens. As a Da Nang Province Department of Planning and Investment official remarked: "This is the first time that national planning strategies have been opened to the people. This will allow government officials, especially at the national level, to better understand the needs and living circumstances at the commune level". In other words, it was a valuable opportunity not only for citizens to have a say about the country's next 5-year development roadmap, but also for local government officials to have a formalized process to channel (particularly critical) information upwards to higher tiers of government.

The first step undertaken (by the Young Lives team in SC-UK and UNICEF) was to advocate for children and young people's issues to be integrated into the consultation process as a cross-cutting issue alongside gender and ethnic minority concerns. Although there was initial resistance on the part of the consultation committee to including issues such as the impacts of national economic integration on children and children's participation in local decision-making (as per the Grassroots Democracy Decree), eventually through discussions among donor, governmental and INGO participants, a consensus was reached to include children as a cross-cutting theme.<sup>23</sup>

Drawing on a combination of findings from Children's Fora on Poverty that had been organized in 2004-5 to promote a dialogue among children and provincial leaders on children's experiences of poverty, as well as results from the Young Lives 2002 survey with 3000 households across the country, Young Lives also contributed to a joint submission by child rights' organizations on the first SEDP. In particular, the submission sought to highlight the impacts on children (especially in terms of the growing demand for child labour and/or reduced caring time from parents) due to the following:

- growing environmental pollution, landlessness and restructuring from a rice plantation to an agri-business economy (eg shrimp farming) in Ben Tre province;

- the negative dimensions of urbanization in Hung Yen and Da Nang provinces such as land loss, labour migration especially of adult males and a corresponding labour burden for women and children in agricultural areas, and unsuitable vocational training in the face of a rapidly changing labour market; and
- growing boarder trade and related social problems (including labour and sexual exploitation of children) in Lao Cai province.

A third and related advocacy success was the inclusion of children (aged 12-16 years) in the grassroots focus group consultations. The Young Lives SC-UK team undertook consultations in four provinces: Ben Tre in southern Vietnam's Mekong delta; Da Nang, a rapidly expanding central coastal city<sup>24</sup>; Lao Cai, a mountainous province on Vietnam's northern border and Hung Yen, an industrial city in Vietnam's Red River Delta. Thus, due to space and data constraints, the following discussion will focus on these experiences, although children from approximately 20 provinces were consulted.<sup>25</sup>

### ***Methodology***

In each province, the SEDP consultation was conducted in 8 hamlets (of varying socio-economic levels), belonging to 4 communes from 2 districts (one developed, the other less developed). The consultation delegation spent a half-day in each hamlet, and met with randomly selected community groups of women, children and migrant workers, in order to collect as diverse a range of viewpoints as possible.<sup>26</sup> Facilitators began by outlining the purpose and significance of the consultation, including providing participants with an overview of the main agenda of the Five Year SEDP 2006–2010.<sup>27</sup> The discussion then focused on local problems, needs and demands for the next five years, and compared these to the poverty reduction solutions proposed by the Government in the draft SEDP. All information collected at the community level was presented in consultations with local authorities - leaders of communes, districts and the province, facilitating an open information-sharing mechanism.

Participatory methods were employed to encourage children to freely express their opinions, including the use of open questions, priority ranking, brainstorming and problem trees to analyse solutions. Given more hierarchical patterns of interaction in schools, facilitators were at pains to emphasize that there were no true-false answers and that all opinions would be valued. Children tended to focus on observations from their own or their community's experiences and facilitators then sought to determine how widespread these experiences were and to probe the underlying causes with the group. In this regard, facilitators played an important role in analyzing and synthesizing children's observations and opinions into a format that could be succinctly expressed to authorities.

### ***Importance of partnership***

The importance of partnership with local government officials in this process cannot be over-estimated. INGO consultants worked together with the Department of Planning and Investment (DPI) Officials in conducting the focus groups, thus providing DPI with important capacity training in how to work effectively with children. This collaboration also played a critical role in lending credibility to children's viewpoints. Although Save the Children UK's consultations with children in Ho Chi Minh City in 2000 provided

valuable information for the first PRSP process, especially with regard to the experiences of children from migrant households, there was considerable resistance to these findings from officials. The government claimed that the research had failed to recognise the success of its poverty alleviation programme, and that children's inputs were "simple-minded", "incorrect" and based on a lack of knowledge (O'Malley, 2004).

However, in this second round of consultations, Young Lives staff worked closely with DPI and other government officials — including daily debriefings after the focus group discussions (FGDs) to identify lessons learned and ways to improve the process with children — to ensure buy-in to the research exercise from the outset. Indeed, this experience confirmed van Beers' (2002) conclusion that adult resistance to child participation tends to be over-stated: "Once adults have been sensitised to the process and once they have seen the results of a positive participatory process with children, they become more supportive". But it is vital to invest time in working with adults in power to overcome these barriers.

## **2.5 Children's key concerns**

The consultations with children focused on five key areas: education, work and employment training, health, environment, and care and protection. The following section outlines the key policy messages that were distilled from the grassroots consultations, but where possible, provides examples of children's own voices.

### ***Children's rights***

As children account for almost 40 per cent of the national population and play important roles in socio-economic development, the draft SEDP should pay more explicit attention to the education, care and protection of children. Children's rights to survival, development, protection and participation as enshrined in the UNCRC and the 2004 Law on Protection, Care and Education for Children should be clearly mentioned in a specific section, rather than subsumed into a more generic section on gender and youth issues. In particular, while the SEDP's situational analysis includes health, education, vocational training and the needs of disadvantaged children, it does not mention the right of children to participate in the development process. There was a general consensus that co-operation and co-ordination among relevant agencies (governmental and non-governmental) working with children should be strengthened in order to more effectively plan, budget for and implement policies and strategies for the advancement of children. Given the diversity of children's experiences and needs, more nuanced policy measures are required to address the rights of poor children, migrant children, street children, children with disabilities, HIV/AIDS infected children, children who were victims of abuse, exploitation and ill-treatment than are provided for in the SEDP's generic discussion of "children in difficult circumstances".

## ***Education***

Not surprisingly, education featured as a priority issue in the focus group discussions with children and youth. Key concerns related to the quality and relevance of the education curriculum, a narrow emphasis on exam performance, the burden of educational expenses (including extra-tuition classes) on households, and the particular disadvantages faced by rural and ethnic minority students.

### *Quality and relevance of education*

In general, the consultations suggested that the expansion of education coverage urgently needs to be matched by quality improvements. Of the measures set out in the draft SEDP, an overwhelming number of respondents stressed the importance of the proposed measure to “Strengthen the disciplines and transparency in teaching and learning” and to address the ‘performance-driven disease’ — a narrow focus on education performance rather than quality interactive learning. According to participants in Lao Cai, a province with large numbers of ethnic minority households, “low attention to education quality and implementation of universal standards at any price underlie consistently poor student achievement at all levels”. There was a general call among parents and children alike for more frequent monitoring and assessment of teaching quality and the need for more child-centred learning approaches at all levels. Children pointed out there was an emphasis on theory and mechanical note-taking at the expense of practical or experiential learning. For example, foreign language teaching focused on grammar only while chemistry and physics classes lacked laboratory work and was confined to textbooks and rote learning. The narrow focus on student assessment via examination and excessively competitive entrance exams to enter public provincial high schools also led to cheating among some students. Other concerns related to the lack of relevance of the curriculum to children’s daily lives. There was a general consensus that academic knowledge is privileged at the expense of vocational and social skills. For instance, an eleventh-grade girl in Da Nang said: “In fact, we were scarcely taught about life skills, even sex education”.

### *Affordability of education*

While primary education is ostensibly free of charge in Vietnam, expenses related to school attendance are burdensome for many poor households, even in cases where children are exempted from fees and textbook costs. A minority ethnic girl complained “At the beginning of the school year, each student has to pay nearly VND 150,000 (around US\$9). But our entire family’s monthly income is less than VND 150,000”. In some cases, children have to assist their parents in contributing to household economic survival, resulting in school dropouts. This is particularly the case in rural communes where there is often less understanding among parents about the value of education, but urban children are also cognizant of these financial pressures. For example, a twelfth-grade girl in Da Nang explained that: “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, and I know it is a burden in comparison to my parents’ monthly income. I want to stop learning and go to work to assist my parents, but my parents did not allow me to do so”. Another dimension of education’s financial

burden relates to extra-tuition classes, which have burgeoned as families seek to ensure their children have an edge in entrance exams. Children and parents complained that education is becoming “commercialized”: children whose parents pay for classes or give gifts to teachers, receive better attention. A boy in Da Nang city said “I don’t want my teacher to give me much attention because my parents are better off and have given some gifts to her. It gradually led to me being isolated from other students in my class”.

#### *Disadvantages faced by rural, urban poor and minority children*

Consultations suggested that narrowing disparities among regions and between Kinh and non-Kinh (ethnic minority) children in particular would require more efforts and resources. While Hung Yen province has officially reached universal completion of lower secondary education in 2005 (five years earlier than the national goal), some communes where marine activities are the dominant livelihood source (such as Binh Dai, Ben Tre province) experienced a high drop-out rate of up to 30 per cent at the lower secondary education level. At 13-14 years of age, boys are usually required to join their fathers fishing, while girls support their mothers in fish processing-related activities and/or get married very early. Similarly, in Lao Cai, those consulted believed that the SEDP goal of achieving universal lower secondary education by 2010 would be unfeasible in mountainous areas. “Children in remote and mountainous areas are facing with many difficulties in studying in higher education levels even if they can pass in the entry exam as they have never learnt many subjects such as foreign languages and IT.”<sup>28</sup> Drop-out problems were particularly acute among the Nung, H’Mong, Tay and Dao ethnic minority groups in Lao Cai due to poverty, and also among the K’Tu group in Da Nang, despite the region’s status as one of the most developed in the country.

In poor urban areas, children were facing different challenges. Some poor households in Nai Hien Dong forced their children to drop out of school after losing land and jobs. According to the children in Son Tra District, infrastructure and conditions of the temporarily established schools in resettlement areas were very poor. The situation has lasted for 3-4 years and had a significantly negative impact on their learning, especially because of the severe climate of the Central Highlands region. At home, they had to study in temporary and small houses: “We don’t have a separate learning corner as houses for resettlement families are very small. We have to study under the noisy circumstances of discussion and TV.”

In order to better address the needs of poor, migrant and ethnic minority children, possible solutions suggested in the consultation process included the need to introduce more flexible education systems, including non-formal basic education programmes and community-based boarding schools, and to develop awareness raising programmes about the importance of education among ethnic minority communities.

#### ***Work and vocational training***

Many young people emphasized the importance of investing in better and more relevant tertiary education and vocational training programmes. While the SEDP’s vision of future national economic development is premised on a highly skilled workforce, current vocational education does not correspond closely with labour market realities. For

example, in maritime areas, job opportunities were most likely to be found in fishing, aquaculture and tourism, but such training possibilities were either not available or very limited. As Hong, a pupil in Ward 13, Nai Hien Dong district, Da Nang Province said:

*“We, the youth, will enter life with very limited practical and social knowledge. If we cannot pass entrance exams to universities and colleges, it will be very difficult for us to look for a job and earn money. We will have to continuously depend on our parents. In addition, adults’ preference of working for state-owned sectors puts a lot of pressure on my friends and me. Most parents focus on supporting their children to get a government job rather than helping them to find stable employment in the private sector suitable to youths’ individual capacities and interests.”*

Although vocational training programmes organized by the government-affiliated Youth Union and local authorities already exist in some urban areas, they seemed to be poorly linked to private sector demand. Youth unemployment remained a significant problem in the districts consulted: for example, in Da Nang, 9 per cent of 16 to 25 year-olds were without work in Hoa Phu District, 10 per cent in Hoa Tien District and 12 per cent in Nai Hien Dong District.

### ***Health Care***

Although not specifically child-focused, discussions with children and young people revealed that healthcare is an issue that affects the whole household. Although the introduction of user fees had increased access to, and quality of, care in some areas, major concerns included limited access to medical facilities in rural areas, the burden of healthcare costs for poor households and the insensitive attitudes of health professionals. In the four provinces where Young Lives led the consultation process, Lao Cai respondents were the most concerned about poor infrastructure (including sub-standard sanitary conditions, and a dearth of equipment and medicines) and a lack of doctors at the town/commune levels. A man in Lang Trung town, Tri Quang commune, Bao Thang district said: “Lang Trung commune has 65 households and 296 inhabitants living across a vast region but there is only one nurse, who receives VND 25,000 (USD 1.5) allowance per month.” As a result of poor salaries and resources, health workers remain in isolated rural areas for a short time only, without any real commitment to the area.

Other problems related to a dearth of information about public health services and excessive red tape involved in accessing fee exemptions. For example, although the free healthcare for children under-6 was recognized as a good policy with positive impacts, particularly for large families, in Ba Tri, Ben Tre Province, local families had only just heard about the service in October 2005 when the consultation was conducted. In Da Nang, large numbers of children, particularly in remote areas, were not receiving the benefits of the programme, largely due to red tape and complicated financial and insurance procedures.

Interestingly, however, children complained most passionately about the attitudes of doctors. The discussion among children in Hoa Phu, Da Nang, was particularly animated about this problem. A K’Tu child, in Phu Tuc town, Hoa Phu District said:

*“We are taught to respect our elders. However, in the hospital, many adult doctors and nurses do not respect poor patients, especially those coming to health care units with a health insurance card. When my family brought my grandmother to hospital and submitted the health insurance card, the doctor was very disrespectful towards my mother and grandmother. I also witnessed many bad things during one week in hospital caring for my grandmother.”*

### ***Environment***

The focus group discussions all agreed that environmental pollution was becoming increasingly alarming. However, whereas the SEDP draft focused primarily on urban pollution (industrial waste leading to air and water pollution), grassroots consultations also highlighted serious forms of rural pollution. These included the overuse of chemical fertilizers and pesticides which were polluting water sources and deforestation. In the case of children living in mountainous areas, deforestation emerged as a particular concern. A K'tu girl living in a mountainous area in Da Nang province complained that:

*“Adults teach us to protect forestry, but the adults.... Every nights I heard echo of heavy trucks conveying illegal exploited woods through my village. If they had exploited these woods legally, they would not have transported them at night. Every day on the way to school, I saw a lot of illegally exploited woods which had been seized at the forestry management booth”.*

Other children living in rural areas talked about environmental pollution in their villages and surrounding fields. For instance, a children's focus group in Van Nhue commune, Hung Yen, pointed out that “many people still littered freely on roads, ponds, lakes, rivers, etc. polluting the environment and affecting other people's health”.

In newly urbanizing areas, children raised concerns about incomplete sewage systems and the associated stench. In these new resettlement areas, transport was also an issue as roads were incomplete and children wanted policy-makers to complete the master plan of the city quickly in order to accelerate the development of new urban zones.

### ***Entertainment***

The need for more entertainment facilities was raised as a common demand among almost all children's focus groups. In Da Nang, for example, children lamented that: “there used to be a clear site to play football and badminton before. However, after they built a market here, we no longer have any space to play”. Children called for policy-makers to set aside specific areas for children's playgrounds and to respect children's right to play. Children living in the remote, mountainous, and rural areas also wanted to have “real” information and “culture houses” (youth centres) in communes. During the discussion, they explained: “the information and culture house has been built, but is just a shell. There were not enough books, papers inside”.

By contrast, among urban children one of the key topics related to the internet and the influence of online games and chat facilities on children's lives. Children pointed out that increasing numbers of their peers were playing truant in order to engage in these activities and were being exposed to inappropriate behaviours. In this context, the need

for more guidelines about the benefits but also dangers of the internet for children and young people were identified.

### **Part 3: Impacts and next steps**

This final section assesses the impact of children's involvement in Vietnam's poverty reduction policy process to date, and outlines a number of future steps in order to maximize the new political space that the recent SEDP consultation process has opened for addressing children's rights in Vietnam's poverty reduction and development strategies. Involving children as active players in the SEDP grassroots consultations has had an impact on the children, government officials and civil society partners involved in the consultation process, a limited impact on the SEDP strategy document, and opened up new spaces for child-focused policy advocacy.

First, for many of the children and young people, it was the first time that they had been consulted about policy matters. It was thus an important opportunity to not only become familiar with the 5-year Development Plan, but also to articulate their views about their current quality of life and future aspirations to policy decision-makers. In many of the focus groups, children contributed actively to the discussion and appeared to enjoy the non-hierarchical forum of interaction. In those cases where children were less forthcoming, it suggests the need for capacity building around both how to participate in group discussions, and also, as discussed further below, about the importance of enhancing the skills of the adult facilitators involved.

Children's inclusion as a key community group had an equally important effect on the INGO/donor and government partners who carried out the civic consultations. Initial resistance notwithstanding, over the course of the consultation period, adult participants, particularly those at the provincial level where working with children was a novel experience, came to appreciate the importance of children's citizenship and also gained important skills in working with children in a collaborative (rather than hierarchical) manner.

In terms of the impact of the findings of the consultations with children and young people on the final version of the SEDP, the most recent draft suggests that the impact has been relatively limited. On the one hand, there is a clear recognition of the importance of achieving the MDGs and of using a participatory approach in provincial SEDP implementation plans; these are important advances (Pham, 2006 personal correspondence). However, disappointingly, there is no specific section on children or children's rights, nor is childhood poverty mentioned as a particular concern necessitating specific measures that go beyond policy interventions to address aggregate household poverty. In addition, it should also be noted that in order to comprehensively address the potential impacts of broader macro-economic policies the child-focused submission co-ordinated by UNICEF needed to go beyond the content of the grassroots consultations. For example, this document sought to contextualize children's experiences in a broader policy framework. It highlighted the need for social protection measures to



counter the potentially negative spill-over impacts of trade liberalization as Vietnam accedes to the WTO in 2006, and to initiate child-focused budget monitoring to assess resource allocations for child-related policies and programmes.

These limitations aside, the insights shared by children and young people have been invaluable in making local and national leaders as well as donors and child rights advocates aware of the diverse and context-specific issues faced by children. These have been carefully recorded and presented to officials in charge of planning and development, as well as sectors such as health, education, environment, labour and social welfare. Equally importantly, they have sparked an enthusiasm among provincial officials to take part in future capacity building initiatives around participatory planning and budgeting.

The consultation process has also been helpful in identifying future steps necessary to ensure that children's rights are effectively embedded in poverty policy decision-making processes. Although some officials from the Youth Union and the Committee on Population, Family and Children were already familiar with child-friendly ways of working, it will be important to provide further capacity building opportunities for commune, district and provincial leaders if they are to learn from, and effectively listen to, children and young people's perspectives. In particular, whereas the methods used during the consultation process focused predominantly on consensus-building, going forward it will be important to tease out differences among children in greater depth. One possible method could involve children's participation in policy and evaluation processes, such as the best practices of Brazil and Karnataka, India, as this would provide an opportunity for learning-by-doing for adults and children alike. It would also provide a compelling and meaningful way to feed back to children the "results" of their participation in the grassroots consultations.

The SEDP consultation marked a major stepping stone for not only improving child participation capacity, but also achieving a long-term, ultimate goal of facilitating children's role as policy entrepreneurs in shaping macro-development policies. After the SEDP is finalized, the next phase in this process will involve facilitating children's involvement in the rolling out and monitoring of the SEDP's implementation over the next five years. It is worth noting that as a result of Young Lives Vietnam's participation in this process, provincial authorities have already sought to work with Young Lives staff on developing pro-poor, child-focused policy and budget plans using PPA methodologies.

Given that many of the issues raised by children in the grassroots consultation process concerned their home environment,<sup>29</sup> it seems important for parents to also be brought into future dialogues between children and policy-makers. Surprisingly, there is little discussion about parental roles in the child participation literature. The UNCRC, however, emphasises the critical shift that children's right to participation implies for child-parent relationships. As Pais (2000: 2) argues: "parents, teachers, care givers and others interacting with children evolve from mere providers, protectors or advocates to negotiators and facilitators. They are expected to create spaces and promote processes designed to enable and empower children to express views, to be consulted, to influence

decisions". In the Young Lives-led grassroots consultation process in Vietnam, parents were excluded because of fears that children may experience parental presence as disempowering. But our findings suggest that the creative involvement of parents in future processes may promote a better understanding of children's rights, needs and ambitions among adults who have the decision-making power and resources to help shape children's wellbeing and futures. To date, Young Lives discussions with parents have been on an informal basis only, but organizing, for instance, focus group discussions with parents and triangulating these findings with children's views would provide a richer and more comprehensive picture upon which policy reforms could be built. Moreover, providing feedback to parents about children's viewpoints could not only promote a more open exchange of views within the household, but also facilitate parental support for children's participation in policy dialogues and in turn enhance the likelihood of sustaining and scaling up these initiatives.

Lastly, in terms of contributing to the realization of the ideals of the grassroots democracy decree which calls for greater community participation in policy decision-making, further participatory opportunities for the children and young people who took part in this consultation process need to be identified and advertised. Possible spaces include the Children's Forums, Policy Dialogues and Young Journalist Clubs that Young Lives has been organizing, all of which focus on developing constructive, rather than threatening, modalities of citizenship and interactions with government agencies. Attention should be paid, however, to ensuring sustainability as children grow older. Although spaces to articulate concerns about community or policy issues have been introduced as part of the grassroots democracy approach, the challenge will be to ensure that these viewpoints are listened to and actively integrated into new policies and programmes. In particular, it will be important to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the SEDP 2006-2010 not only at central and sectoral levels, but also at the district and commune levels. One interesting question will be to compare how child-friendly are the programmes in areas with active child participation versus those where children are not involved.

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<sup>1</sup> The authors of this paper are part of the *Young Lives Project*. For further information and to download all our publications, visit [www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk). In Ethiopia, the project has received financial support from the UK Department for International Development and the Canadian International Development Research Centre. This support is gratefully acknowledged.

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- <sup>2</sup> The World Bank's *Voices of the Poor* study conducted in the late 1990s and the release of the 2000/1 World Development Report on *Attacking Poverty* played an important role in raising the profile of participatory approaches.
- <sup>3</sup> Important exceptions include Williams (2003); Heidel (2005) and O'Malley (2004).
- <sup>4</sup> Young Lives is a DfID-funded partnership project between Save the Children UK and a research consortium. In Vietnam, the research partner is the Centre for Analysis and Forecast, housed within the government-affiliated Vietnamese Academy of Social Sciences.
- <sup>5</sup> See Williams (2003), p.7 for a discussion of a child-specific ladder of participation moving from non-participation through to child-initiated and directed participatory initiatives.
- <sup>6</sup> See <http://www.unhchr.ch/development/approaches-04.html>.  
See Global Movement for Children, *Building a World Fit for Children*, at <http://www.gmfc.org/index.php/gmc6/content/view/full/534>
- <sup>8</sup> See further details at [www.funkydragon.org](http://www.funkydragon.org)
- <sup>9</sup> See O'Malley (2004) for further details.
- <sup>10</sup> It should be noted, however, that Vietnam's Gini co-efficient is becoming more unequal over time: while it was 0.35 in 1995, it was 0.41 in 2002 (Tran, 2002).
- <sup>11</sup> Vietnam's HDI index rank is 108<sup>th</sup> compared to Guatemala with double the income in 117<sup>th</sup> place; significant improvements in infant mortality. It is 16<sup>th</sup> place in HDI rankings.
- <sup>12</sup> Since the last National Assembly cycle, one third of parliamentarians must be from outside the Communist Party.
- <sup>13</sup> Whereas the SEDP I was implemented in tandem with Vietnam's PRSP, the CPRGS, this second 5-year phase has sought to integrate some of the key principles of the PRSP process but focus all government, donor, private sector and civil society energies into a single process — that of SEDP II.
- <sup>14</sup> Children's right to participate was first enshrined in national legislation in the 2004 National Law of Protection, Care and Education for children. Accordingly, children have rights to access suitable information, rights to freely express opinions and expectations on issues relating to their lives, and rights to participation in social activities suitable with children's demand and capacity.
- <sup>15</sup> There are some national newspapers for children and young people such as Thanh Nien (Youth), Thieu Nien Tien Phong (Young Pioneer), Nhi Dong (Young Child), and Vi Tre Tho (For Children). Children do not only passively receive information from, but also express their voices on these newspapers. Provincial and national radio and television have programmes for children which provide some opportunities for children's participation. Besides, CPFC also co-operates with UNICEF, Plan, Save the Children UK in establishing a number of young journalist clubs to provide opportunities for children to air their concerns and opinions about poverty, environment, and ordinary life round them. Today, there are 21 provinces where 41 clubs with 2,500 members are established.
- <sup>16</sup> The three participatory poverty assessments involved setting up discussion groups, interviews and participatory workshops with 465 children and young people ranged between the ages of 6 and 18 in the poor districts of the city, with a high proportion of migrants from rural areas. The children and young people's inputs ran alongside consultations with a wide range of adult community members. The first consultation in 1999, before PRSP, was to inform national development planning and the World Bank's Vietnam Development Report on poverty. The second consultation in 2001 got feedback on the interim PRSP and policy for the PRSP. The third consultation in 2003 was part of a review of progress on the implementation of the country's first PRSP (O'Malley 2004).
- <sup>17</sup> In 2005, approximately 80 children were interviewed in a Young Lives' qualitative research, namely 'Livelihood diversification and Impacts of trade liberalization on child wellbeing', conducted in Hung Yen, Phu Yen and Ben Tre provinces.
- <sup>18</sup> See *Young Lives Preliminary Country Report: Vietnam* at [www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk) for further details.
- <sup>19</sup> Ladder of Participation in Matters concerning children includes ten steps: 0. No Consideration, 1. Adult Rules, 2. Adult Rules Kindly, 3. Manipulation, 4. Decoration, 5. Tokenism, 6. Invitation, 7. Consultation, 8. Joint Decision, 9. Children Lead Adults Help, 10 Children in charge.

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- <sup>20</sup> For example, the high dropout situation at secondary school level in marine areas and environment pollution raised in Ben Tre children's forum were highlighted in the grassroots consultation of Social Economic Development Plan (SEDP) 2006-2010 in this province and the livelihoods qualitative research.
- <sup>21</sup> Vietnam is also among five countries in the process of introducing their first Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) to improve budget alignment with PRSPs. The MTEF will be piloted first in the four sectors of education, health, agriculture and transport. It was hoped that "strengthening the links between the PRS and the budget process is essential for institutionalizing the PRS approach, ensuring that it is adapted to local circumstances, and helping countries better prioritize their strategies" and "linking the PRs to the budget and MTEF has also been more successful where planning processes already existed and budget reforms were underway" (WB, 2005). However, in Vietnam, the process would need big improvements in the coordination among Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI), Ministry of Finance (MOF) and line ministries and even stronger cooperation within the departments of each ministry.
- <sup>22</sup> Participating agencies included: officials from WB, ADB, SCUK, Oxfam GB, Action Aid, Institute of Sociology, Vietnam Economic Institute, Poverty Reduction Project, National Academics of Public Administration, Financial and Banking Institute, Consulting Firms.
- <sup>23</sup> Marcus (2002: 3) suggests "potential impact of PRSPs on children lies in the implications of general development policies for family livelihoods and social services." Like CPRGS, the draft SEDP 2006-2010 emphasizes the importance of economic growth and considered it as a tool for overcoming poverty. There was, however, no mention in the document that economic growth would not definitely lead to poverty reduction or reducing income disparity gaps among groups and regions. Overall, as the SEDP is a plan for both economic and social development, pro-poor policies were usually mainstreamed into social policies such as education, health care, poverty alleviation rather than mentioned in macro-economic or trade policy. In addition, although the words "poverty" and "children" were mentioned 91 and 69 times, respectively, in the draft SEDP, childhood poverty was not referred to as a distinct issue to be addressed. The draft only mentioned poor regions, poor communes, poor households and poor workers.
- <sup>24</sup> The Young Lives consultation in Da Nang also included a significant number of KTU ethnic minority children.
- <sup>25</sup> Between 60 and 80 children participated in each province. It should be noted, however, that even though this approach was endorsed by the MPI, the extent to which children and young people's issues were prioritised during the actual consultations still has to be evaluated due to the different priorities of donors, limited time and human resources and the wide scope of the SEDP.
- <sup>26</sup> Except for the women only focus groups, the consultations sought to ensure a gender balance among the participants.
- <sup>27</sup> For this purpose, the SEDP contents were grouped into nine major components: Macro-economics policies, Agriculture, Industry, Labour-Employment-Immigration, Social Services (Education, Health and Culture), Poverty Reduction and Safety Nets, Environment, Governance, Business and Entrepreneurship. Interestingly, children' opinions in all provinces turned out to be very consistent with what was suggested by the advisory group at the beginning. The themes were usually education, health, culture, poverty reduction, social safety nets, and the environment.
- <sup>28</sup> Finding from mixed group discussion, town Tri Thuong 1, Tri Quang commune, Bao Thang district, conducted 26 February 2006.
- <sup>29</sup> Examples included lack of parental support for education and/or varied occupational paths; pressures to work and support the family income; and inadequate guidance on how to interact with new technologies (internet).