

VIETNAM

Early Childhood Care and Development

A pro-minority, multi-disciplinary approach impacts the ethnic poor in remote communities

The Japan Social Development Fund (JSDF) provided a US\$1.9 million grant to support a pilot project for early childhood care and development (ECCD) in Vietnam's three poorest provinces, where 90% of the population are socially and economically disadvantaged ethnic minorities.



“The innovative aspect of the project was that it began from a close socio-cultural analysis of how poverty was culturally patterned, and then worked backwards into the public policy and institutional design ... quite different from the Bank’s standard approach ... The JSDF allows the Task Team Leaders (TTLs) to begin from a more country specific starting point for the poverty work.”
— Scott Guggenheim Lead Social Development Specialist, World Bank

The JSDF Project was the first of its kind, aiming to effectively expand both the supply and demand for preschool education and services for the ethnic poor in rural Vietnam and raising societal awareness on the importance of early childhood development.

The Project sparked changes not only in the mindsets and practices of villagers, but also in policy and decision-making. Beginning in 2009, the Vietnamese government has made preschool education universal for all 5 year-

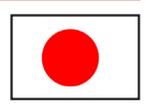
- olds. Key features of the Project were:
- **Empowering the community and parents** at the planning and execution stages as participants of a Project Management Board with technical support.
 - **Creating a holistic child development program** – education, nutrition, health, recreation and shelter, involving local government and parents.
 - **Creating demand for enrollment in pre-**

- schools** through community outreach activities and parental education.
- **Improving the quality of early child education** through teacher training and reformed curriculum adapted to local context and language for ethnic minority children.
- **Promoting ECCD activities carried out by teachers and community promoters**, including village governance and parent outreach.
- **Reforming government policy** to address the needs of underserved groups.

Increasing ECCD Supply & Demand

Vietnam is one of the most populous countries in Southeast Asia, averaging five to six children per family. The importance of early childhood development was not well recognized at the family and community levels until recent years. There had been previous efforts by some international NGOs to introduce the concept, but their work was small-scale and focused on limited geographic areas.

Preschool education was very limited with no government budget allocated. Unlike primary and secondary school teachers who enjoy stability as government employees, pre-school teachers were given no status



or support. Consequently, teacher shortages had become so chronic that existing preschools, though small in number, had to struggle to hire qualified staff. The situation was far worse in the poorest and most remote areas, such as Quang Tri, Yen Bai, and Dien Bien provinces.

The JSDF Project was targeted to these areas, specifically, 147 villages from 15 of the poorest communes belonging to five ethnic minorities. These five groups have distinct cultures and languages, but share common poverty challenges including isolation, limited access to schooling, low adult literacy, child malnutrition, and low primary education completion rate.

Participatory Project Design

The JSDF Project's aim was to assist Vietnam in establishing an enabling environment in its poorest communities, providing young children with opportunities to develop to their full potential. To that end, the Project focused on four components:

- **Supporting family and community** through the creation of community ECCD networking groups, and improved health services and facilities;
- **Strengthening local ECCD institutions**, specifically support to preschools and health programs;
- **Monitoring and evaluation** through a participatory process with data gathered in the field by ECCD promoters and Project Management Board (PMB) members; and
- **Sharing knowledge between communities** as well as among project management, government, and local authorities to learn from others' experiences and good practices.

A baseline survey was used to study the difficulties experienced by the target population. This included self-assessments by the communities of the constraints they face in providing for their children's needs. A midterm review and final independent evaluation were also carried out and used for feedback.

From the earliest stage, project support gained the attention and appreciation of local leaders and community members who had rarely seen NGOs or development agencies coming to their provincial areas. This facilitated open discussion and trust among stakeholders—villagers, local leaders, local government authorities, and project staff from the World Bank, Save the Children of Japan, UK, and US (hereafter, Save the Children Alliance).

Implementation Partnership

A tri-partite partnership was established for the implementation of the JSDF project, mainly the Save the Children Alliance, the Early Childhood Education Department of the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), and the district Education offices of the three provinces.

A highly participatory process was set in motion to involve communities in ECCD services and supplies and to meet the needs of individual communities. Key actors in the community, including health workers, school teachers, and members of grassroots organizations, such as the Women's Union, Youth Union, and Farmers' Association, were all invited to participate in project implementation as ECCD promoters.

At the commune and district levels, the Project Management Board was created and subsequently proceeded to play

an important role throughout implementation, planning, and monitoring, and supervising all activities and progress at the village and commune level. The National Steering Committee at the MOET also monitored the project and provided technical support.

The monitoring system was reviewed and refined in line with the Global Impact Monitoring tool developed by the Save the Children Alliance and was a very important tool to bridge project planning toward project objectives achievement.

Parental Education

The emphasis was put on adopting a holistic approach to early child-hood development and on increasing capacity through training and workshops. Parental education was initiated, along with ECCD media campaigns, which ran over 5,000 sessions in the next three years. During the project period, over 80,000 men and women attended the parental education sessions run by community ECCD networking groups. At the same time, the Project supported building preschool classrooms and services while providing basic equipment for Community Health Centers to improve their use by villagers.

Given prevalent child malnutrition, nutrition promotion was a focus for parent education, including food presentations, growth monitoring, and home visit counseling by ECCD promoters.

Teaching Materials Development

Based on Save the Children-UK Preschool Guidelines, 150 lesson plans were adapted to ethnic minorities and printed and distributed. Teachers reported success with the materials and appreciation for training on effective teaching methods.

Project Data
• Implementing Agency: <i>Save the Children Alliance</i>
• Grant (TF052939) Amount: <i>\$1.9 million</i>
• Implementation Period: <i>01/05/2005 to 04/30/2008</i>

Community Initiatives and Small Grants

In parallel with project activities, community initiatives were encouraged. These included mini-libraries, playgrounds, reading books for children, and children's festivals. Communities learned from each other, replicating others' programs. There was a clear and growing sense of community ownership of programs.

Communities were empowered to play a key role in their own development, designing activities that were subsequently supported with small grants. They acted as implementers while being beneficiaries. In-kind and monetary contributions from villagers covered about half the total cost of over 540 projects, that included classroom upgrading, school feeding, and other child-friendly community initiatives.

"School feeding was not only about providing food for the children, but encouraging households to be innovative and supplement their food and income by using small grants to start home garden plots and animal husbandry" reflected Binh Vu, Senior Education Specialist, who task-managed the Project. "The holistic approach made the difference."

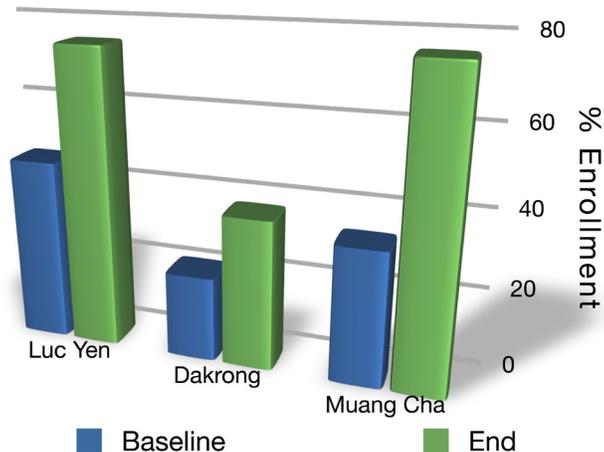
Government Buy-in

Government bought in early on. Local governments, in particular, began increasingly integrating ECCD into their development plans and implementing project activities with their own funds. Thanks to a government policy to pay salaries to preschool teachers, chronic teacher shortages were eliminated, even in remote communes.

Results and Outcomes

The JSDF Project resulted in the effective expansion of both supply and demand for preschool services in Vietnam, raising community and family awareness on the importance of early childhood

Enrollment Rates for Children 3-4 before and after the JSDF Project



development. It sparked changes in policy and villagers' perception and practices.

The Project increased preschool/kindergarten enrollments dramatically in all three areas in just three years. In the poorest Muong Cho district in Dien Bien province, the enrollment rate almost doubled from 34% to 76% for children aged 3 and 4 years. Other major results include:

- The **health status of the children in the project areas has improved significantly**. The percentage of underweight children under 5 years old declined from 39% to 19% over the project period, and the prevalence of diarrhea and fever also decreased.
- According to surveys the **attitude of parents improved significantly**. More parents (47%) supported preschool education for their children, compared to the baseline (25%), and about half (47%) of them were involved in school upgrading, cleaning and other activities in kindergartens where their children were enrolled.
- **Infrastructure for preschool education was visibly improved**. Fifty-six preschool classrooms or kindergartens were constructed and an additional ten were upgraded. Before the Project, most communes did not have separate preschools facilities for children under-six.
- **Capacity of local partners, including teachers, health workers, and ECCD local promoters, has improved**. They are well-trained and regularly supported through various innovative approaches.
- **A new 150 section curriculum was developed for ethnic minority children** and implemented in all project communes and districts.
- **Policies in support of ethnic minority children have improved**, as evidenced by a new government policy covering preschool teacher salaries and the adoption of a holistic multi-sector strategy for preschool education and child development.

The external final evaluation conducted in December 2008 concluded that the Project was very successful. The report highlighted the strong level of partnership that was developed between community and authorities, and the intensive training program and close follow-up of monitoring and supervision. The report also assessed that the Project has successfully impacted the policies and strategies adopted by national and local authorities.



Lessons Learned

The remarkable achievements and impact of the Vietnam ECCD Project, achieved in a relatively short period of just over three years, confirms the importance of engaging and empowering the community to effectively address its needs. Given the opportunity, communities can decide their own priorities and manage funds effectively.

“The participatory and dialogue-based approach undertaken with families and community members, to assess and define what is to be the most appropriate in their context, represents a very empowering process for the community,” reported the Project Completion Report. In fact, this process was found to speed up project implementation, not delay it as some might expect.

Similarly, investing in a program that specifically targets the issues faced by disadvantaged ethnic minorities has had extremely positive results that cannot easily be achieved through conventional programs.

Another innovative feature of the Project was a three-party partnership between Vietnam’s Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), the Save the Children Alliance, and the World Bank. Unlike a traditional vertical partnership, it was reported that this new model of partnership made it possible for each party to mutually influence the others’ policy and strategy while collaborating for common objectives.

The Save the Children Alliance coordinated with MOET and local government offices to provide learning materials and train ECCD promoters and other local partners. In turn, the local ECCD promoters and partners played a crucial role spreading the word to villagers and helping them take action in their own communities.

Expanding the Project Methodology

Successful elements of this ECCD program are now being applied at the primary and secondary school levels: community participation in mobilizing children to attend schools; parent supervision of implementation activities; and application of the bilingual model which was piloted at the preschool level is now being applied to primary schools. The World Bank is also preparing a large-scale ECCD project in Vietnam, funded at over US\$100 million from its own operational budget.

Key Resources

For more information on this Project, please contact Ms. Binh ThanhVu, Team Leader of the project (tvu@worldbank.org), and visit the JSDF website: <http://www.worldbank.org/jsdf>.

Testimonials from Beneficiaries

“Children today are different in appearance compared to before the project came. Mothers now know how to take better care of their children and spend more time to work with them, and their home environment is better too.”

— A mother from Dakrong district

“We are now quite confident in communicating with children. We appreciated the opportunity to learn from qualified instructors, particularly interactive teaching methods and creating a child-friendly environment. Now our approach to teaching is quite different.”

— A teacher from Muong Cha district

“Capacity in villages to carry out ECCD promotion and monitoring activities was very limited at first. But teachers have provided support and tools to village promoters who meet with parents and disseminate ECCD messages within their own ethnic group. This helped us improve our communication skills.”

— A participant in a Project Management Board Meeting in Dakrong district

The Japan Social Development Fund -- The JSDF is a partnership between the Government of Japan and the World Bank that supports innovative social programs in developing countries. JSDF grants are executed by NGOs/CSOs and local governments and implemented at the community level. JSDF projects meet four basic requirements: (i) they target and respond to the needs of poor, vulnerable, and disadvantaged groups, and aim to achieve rapid results, (ii) they are innovative and pilot alternative approaches or partnerships, (iv) they use participatory designs and stakeholder consultation to design inputs and as an integral part of monitoring and evaluation, (iii) they empower local communities, local governments, NGOs/CSOs through capacity building and rapid feedback of lessons learned, and (v) they focus on scale-up potential, replication and the sustainability of interventions.

