The politics of gender and social protection in Viet Nam

Opportunities and challenges for a transformative approach

Full Report

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Abbreviations

ADB	Asian Development Bank
AIDS	Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
CAF	Centre for Analysis and Forecast
CEMA	Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs
CPRC	Chronic Poverty Research Centre
CSAGA	Centre for Studies and Applied Sciences in Gender, Family, Women and Adolescents
DEM	Department for Ethnic Minorities
DOET	Department of Education and Training
DOLISA	Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs
DPI	Department of Planning and Investment
FAO	Food and Agricultural Organization
GDI	Gender-related Development Index
GSO	General Statistics Office
HDI	Human Development Index
HIV	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
IFGS	Institute of Family and Gender Studies
M&E	Monitoring and Evaluation
MARD	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MICS	Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey
MOCST	Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism
MOLISA	Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
MPI	Multidimensional Poverty Indicator
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
NIN	National Institute of Nutrition
NTPPR	National Targeted Programme for Poverty Reduction
ODI	Overseas Development Institute
P-134	Programme to Support Land, Housing and Access to Water
P-135	Socio-Economic Programme for Extremely Difficult Communes in Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas
PPC	Provincial People's Committee
SRVN	Socialist Republic of Viet Nam
VLSS	Viet Nam Living Standards Survey
UNCRC	UN Convention on the Rights of the Child
UNDP	UN Development Programme
UNICEF	UN Children's Fund
VERN	Viet Nam Economic Research Network
VWU	Viet Nam Women's Union
WHO	World Health Organization

Executive summary

Background and report objectives

Viet Nam has undergone a far-reaching economic and social transformation since the mid-1980s. This has been manifested in rapid improvements in income poverty and a major economic structural shift from agriculture to industry and services, alongside greater integration into the global economy and increased literacy and education rates and telecommunications connectivity, among other things. Yet, despite impressive strides in the reduction of multidimensional poverty—as highlighted by the country being on track to achieve most of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—significant pockets of poverty and vulnerability remain.

Overall, ethnicity is a key signifier of poverty and vulnerability, with ethnic minority households comprising a disproportionate percentage of those living below the poverty line and the food poverty threshold. Gender also plays a significant role in perpetuating poverty and vulnerability. On the one hand, the country has made remarkable progress in reducing gender disparities in education, employment and health. On the other, significant challenges remain, especially with regard to the wage gap between men and women, women's access to formal employment opportunities and in turn their direct access to formal social protection, land certification and interventions to combat time poverty and gender-based violence.

Over the past decade, policy momentum around social protection has grown, motivated by a concern to reduce residual poverty and vulnerability, and as emphasised in the country's Socio-Economic Development Plans. Viet Nam now has an array of social protection programmes in place, including social assistance, social insurance and a range of social services and social equity measures.

However, as the country moves towards consolidating its middle-income status, there is an urgent need to overhaul the country's social protection framework. Existing programmes tend to be poorly coordinated across sectors and levels of government, face a number of targeting errors and are generally poorly equipped to deal with both longstanding and more sudden onset disparities, including gendered risks and vulnerabilities. Moreover, the recent global food price, fuel and financial crisis underscored the inadequacy of Viet Nam's existing social protection infrastructure to effectively cushion the poor and vulnerable from the economic and social fallout of significant macro-level shocks.

This report reviews the extent to which social protection strategies and programmes are effectively addressing gender inequities, with a particular focus on the political economy dynamics of implementation at the sub-national level. It draws on findings from an Australian Development Research Award policy research project undertaken by the Institute of Family and Gender Studies (IFGS), Hanoi, and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), London, including a primary research component in Ha Giang and An Giang provinces.

The politics of mainstreaming gender into social protection: a conceptual framework

Effectively mainstreaming gender into social protection requires careful consideration of the politics that underpin diverse social protection strategy and programme approaches across country contexts. The steps involved in embedding a gender-sensitive approach in social protection policy and programming are relatively straightforward. Gender mainstreaming in any policy sector, however, is as much a political issue as it is a technical one. Discussions on social safety nets have been and remain underpinned by often highly polarised views on gender roles and responsibilities the world over. In the case of social protection in the developing world, there is a growing body of work looking at the politics of social protection, including the ways in which programme choices are shaped in response to elite and public buy-in, as well as the reasons underlying variable implementation practices at the grassroots level. However, interest in the gender dynamics of social protection in general and in political economy dimensions in particular is more recent. In order to explore the political economy of

gender and social protection in Viet Nam, we draw on a framework which explores the effect of gender relations on shaping the institutions, interests and ideas behind social protection policy and programming in developing countries.

The three Is of gender and social protection in decentralising Viet Nam

Viet Nam's gender policy infrastructure is relatively comprehensive, including recognition in the 2007 Gender Equality Law of the importance of integrating gender into key poverty reduction and social protection instruments. There is, however, a considerable disconnect between these policy frameworks and their implementation at the provincial, district and commune levels. Drawing on 32 key informant interviews and 4 participatory workshops with sub-national officials, our research identifies a number of key challenges that need to be reflected and addressed in social protection strategy documents and their rollout. We discuss these here, clustered according to our 3Is.

Institutional challenges

First, although political decentralisation has increased significantly in recent years, it is still limited and has significant implications in terms of constraining the capacity of programme implementers to effectively tailor programmes to address locale-specific vulnerabilities. While key informants recognise that this top-down approach is in part driven by recognition of the relatively weak capacities of lower governance structures, especially at the commune level, more recent capacity improvements appear not to have been met with corresponding increases in decision-making scope. These decision-making constraints are compounded by limited fiscal decentralisation and budget autonomy.

A second key institutional challenge concerns limited coordination mechanisms between government agencies. Social protection and gender equality are both in essence cross-cutting policy issues, rendering inter-sectoral coordination especially important. In practice, though, despite clear guidance in the form of Decree 70 ND-CP/ 2008 as to the responsibility of the Provincial People's Committees (PPCs) for integrating gender into local socioeconomic development strategy design and implementation, government agencies engaged in social protection programming remain highly siloed, including in the government's flagship National Targeted Programme for Poverty Reduction (NTPPR). Underpinning this problem is the fact that the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) has considerable financial and in turn decision-making clout, whereas actual expertise in the area of social protection resides with the considerably weaker Ministry of Labor, Invalid and Social Affairs (MOLISA).

Greater investments in effective coordination are further undermined by limited human and budget resources for social protection programming. Capacity-strengthening initiatives in terms of supporting the integration of gender—and especially its intersection with vulnerabilities based on ethnic minority status—into social protection programming are also of limited quality (often tokenistic and generic rather than tailored to specific policy needs) but urgently needed. Finally, in the case of addressing the specific vulnerabilities of ethnic minority women, who often remain isolated from income-generating and public decision-making opportunities owing to linguistic and cultural barriers, the challenges are still more multilayered. Even when such barriers are recognised by policy actors, they are often addressed in a top-down way.

Challenges relating to actor interests and incentives

A second set of political economy challenges relates to actor interests and incentive structures. Perhaps of most concern is the at best mixed level of commitment to promoting gender-sensitive social protection among political leaders. Some key informants noted that there had been some improvement in terms of acknowledging the role of gender in shaping development outcomes, as reflected in more gender-disaggregated development targets. However, many leaders have limited gender awareness and still more limited access to gender expertise, which is of concern given the generally hierarchical nature of both formal and informal politics in Viet Nam.

This limited interest is perpetuated by a general perception that 'women's issues' are dealt with by the Viet Nam Women's Union (VWU) and are thus not the professional responsibility of other government agencies. In order to address this quasi-ghettoization of gender issues, key informants emphasised the importance of clear, detailed and tailored guidance at all levels—beyond top-line national legislation and policies. This should be complemented by the construction of clear and feasible performance targets, as the achievability of gender equality targets emerged as a common concern among a number of key informants.

Challenges in terms of ideas

The third set of challenges that needs to be tackled if social protection policies and programmes are to effectively address economic and social vulnerabilities and risks experienced by men and women, boys and girls involves an understanding of and engagement with the dominant set of discourses of ideas underpinning policy debates about vulnerability, risk and social protection. On the positive side, there does seem to be a general openness to the interlinked nature of gender equality and sustainable development. However, this top-line support is arguably undermined by a relatively common misperception that addressing gender inequalities would result in gender bias and even neglect of other vulnerable social groups. Widespread concerns—including among officials working for the Departments of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (DOLISA) and Ethnic Minority Affairs (DEMA)—about the risk of state support fostering dependency among the poor pose further obstacles to more substantial investments in social protection.

Conclusions and policy implications

Overall, our analysis suggests that Viet Nam's national social protection system is playing at best a limited role in addressing gendered risks and vulnerabilities, and that the political economy dynamics of decentralised policy and programme implementation need to be urgently and systematically tackled if scarce resources are to be effectively harnessed for the well-being of all citizens. Our findings point to the importance of the following:

1 Given the multiple institutional actors involved in social protection, **promote strong leadership and improved coordination mechanisms**, including among actors involved in the rollout of gender equality legislation, so as to avoid delays, duplication and compromised results.
2 **Promote more decentralised models of social protection programming and budgeting processes**, with adequate feedback loops from the grassroots level as to key vulnerabilities and demands for support.
3 **Invest in improved quantity and quality of human resources deployed to tackle poverty and vulnerability**, including attention to regular, adequately tailored and concrete capacity strengthening on gender equity issues—and especially the intersection between gender and ethnicity-related vulnerabilities—for staff at all levels.
4 **Support the development of clear and tailored implementation directives and guidelines** at all levels, and work towards the development of corresponding performance targets for staff in relevant departments.
5 **Strengthen information management and monitoring and evaluation systems** as well as developing gender-sensitive indicators in order to identify problematic areas, especially at the provincial, district and commune levels.

1 Introduction

Viet Nam has undergone far-reaching economic and social transformation since the mid-1980s. This can be seen in the country's rapid progress on income poverty, with the average income rising from just $200 a year in 1989 to more than $1,000 in 2009, pushing Viet Nam above the middle-income country threshold. The country has engineered a major economic structural shift from agriculture to industry and services alongside greater integration into the global economy. It has also significantly increased its literacy and education rates and telecommunications connectivity, and is on track or has already achieved most of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Yet, despite this impressive progress, significant pockets of poverty and vulnerability remain.

Overall, ethnicity is a key signifier of poverty and vulnerability. While ethnic minority households account for just 15% of the national population, some 55% are in the poorest quintile, compared with just 12% of the Kinh and Chinese population, and an estimated 29% of ethnic minority households in rural areas are classified as food poor, versus just 9% of rural households overall (Joint Donor Group, 2007).[1] Similarly, 2008 VLSS data found that non-Kinh-Hoa ethnic groups accounted for 51.3% of the poor among male-headed households, and 41% among female-headed households (GSO, 2008).

Gender also plays an important role in the perpetuation of poverty and vulnerability. On the one hand, the country has made remarkable progress in reducing gender disparities in education, employment and health, as reflected in its improvement in rating on the UN Development Programme (UNDP) Gender Inequality Index, from the low-middle rank group in 1999 to the upper-middle rank group in 2008. On the other hand, significant challenges remain, as highlighted in the World Bank's 2011 Country Gender Assessment, especially with regard to the wage gap between men and women and women's more limited direct access to formal employment opportunities and in turn to formal social protection. Lower land certification rates, high time poverty for women and gender-based violence are also key concerns (Table 1).

Table 1: Overview of key gendered economic and social vulnerabilities in Viet Nam

Gender and economic vulnerability	Gender and social vulnerability
Wage rates: Women's wages are approximately 75% of men's (2009). While the gender wage gap is about 12% nationally, it rises to around 50% in the informal sector (UNDP, 2011). In the case of migrant workers, although working hours and days are very similar for men and women, female migrants earn about VND22 million a year ($1,128), whereas male migrants make VND32 million (S1,644). These differences remain even after factors such as age, education and occupation are taken into account.	**Access to direct formal social protection:** Because of lower formal sector employment rates, women have lower coverage in social protection programmes. For example, 58% of women have health insurance vs. 62% of men. While informal workers can buy voluntary health insurance, few do so unless they are sick (UNDP, 2011). Non-permanent and unregistered migrants typically lack access to social services and social protection. They are also concentrated in vulnerable employment, with low wages and often no formal labour contract (especially in the case of women) and therefore typically lack access to labour protection.
Employment opportunities: Women have more vulnerable jobs (self-employed, unpaid family labour), which increased during the recent global economic crisis (11.7% for men vs. 13.9% women in 2007, remaining static for men but 22.2% for women in 2009). 42.9% of women are classified as unskilled workers vs. 36.2% of men.	**Maternal mortality:** Considerable progress has been made on maternal mortality in recent decades—the ratio declined from 233 deaths per 100,000 live births in 1990 to 69 in 2009.

1 Epprecht et al. (2009) found that, although geographic remoteness accounts for a great deal of minority vulnerability, ethnicity accounts for even more. Language barriers are certainly key to this, but factors such as age of household head (five years lower for ethnic minority families), access to education (only four in five primary-aged minority children are enrolled in school (UNICEF, 2010)) and a greater dependency burden (owing to larger family size) are also important (Imai and Gaiha, 2007).

Gender and economic vulnerability	Gender and social vulnerability
Technical and vocational training and education: Gender gaps in access to technical education within the labour force are significant: 70.9% of women workers had no technical education in 2007, compared with 60% of men, putting women at a significant disadvantage in the labour market, especially in terms of their ability to access newly created jobs in higher-tech industries that demand scientific, engineering and technical skills. Existing vocational training also tends to favour male-dominated areas of the labour market.	**Gender-based violence:** The National Study on the Family conducted in 2006 found that 21% of couples had experienced at least one type of domestic violence in the preceding 12 months (including verbal, emotional, sexual and physical violence). The 2006 Viet Nam Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) found that 64% of women aged 15–49 accepted violent treatment from husbands as normal. A 2010 General Statistics Office (GSO) study using the global World Health Organization (WHO) methodology on domestic violence found that 31.5% of women had experienced physical violence at some time, but more than 50% had experienced emotional violence.
Time spent on unpaid domestic work: Women spend approximately half as much time again as men a week on housework. 2008 VLSS data revealed that urban women spent on average 17.5 hours a week compared with 11.2 hours in the case of men; rural women spent on average 15.4 hours compared with men's 10.2 hours. The same survey also found that 44% of men did not contribute to housework at all compared with just 21% of women. Gender differences start early: 58% of boys aged 11–14 do not contribute vs. 41% of girls.	**Sex ratio at birth:** 111 males are born for every 100 females as of 2009, up from 106 male births for every 100 female births in 1999—the result of a culturally based preference for boys.
Land certification: Despite the 2003 Land Law, most land tenure certificates as of 2008 did not include women's names. The percentage of male-only holders has fallen from 66% to 62%, and the percentage of female-only holders and joint holders has increased from 19% to 20% and 15% to 18%, respectively.	**Educational attainment:** More girls than boys attend secondary school among the Kinh group (82.6% vs. 80%), whereas fewer ethnic minority girls than boys attend school (61.6% vs. 67.8%). (UNICEF and SRVN, 2010).
	Health seeking behaviour (i.e. breastfeeding, immunisation, visits to health providers, etc.): Health-seeking behaviour for girls vs. boys is mixed. The immunisation rate for girls is a little higher than for boys (68% vs. 64%) but boys are more likely to be exclusively breastfed until the age of six months. Boys also access health services at twice the rate of girls, partly because of their greater susceptibility to injury.
	Access to adequate care: More girls (20%) than boys (17%) are left with inadequate care; and more children in rural areas (22%) than in urban areas (10%).
	Participation in public life: There is significant resistance to women taking up leadership positions in public life. On the positive side, there has been steady improvement in the case of representation of women in sub-national legislative bodies (People's Councils)—from approximately 12–13% at provincial, district and commune levels in the 1989–94 period to between 22% and 25% period (SRVN, 2009; 2011). Progress has been less consistent, however, in the case of Communist Party Executive Committees (e.g. 8.6% at central level in 2001–6 and 8.13% in 2006–10; 11.32% and 11.75%, respectively, at provincial level; and 11.88% and 15.08% at commune level).

Source: Data from World Bank (2011), unless noted.

Policy momentum around social protection has grown over the past decade, motivated by a desire to reduce residual poverty and vulnerability, and as emphasised in the country's Socio-Economic Development Plans (2001–5, 2006–10, 2011–15). Viet Nam now has an array of social protection programmes in place (Table 2), including social assistance, social insurance and a range of social services and social equity measures.

However, as the country starts to consolidate its middle-income status, there is an urgent need to overhaul its social protection framework. Existing programmes tend to be poorly coordinated across sectors and levels of government, face a number of targeting errors and are, in general, poorly equipped to deal with both longstanding and sudden disparities (Joint Donor Group, 2007), including the gendered risks and vulnerabilities identified in Table 1. In addition, the recent global food price, fuel and financial crisis underscored the inadequacy of

Viet Nam's existing social protection infrastructure in cushioning the poor and vulnerable from the economic and social fallout of significant macro-level shocks (CAF and VERN, 2009; Nguyen et al., 2009).

This paper reviews the extent to which Viet Nam's social protection strategies and programmes are addressing gender inequities, with a particular focus on the political economy dynamics of implementation at the sub-national level. It draws on findings from an Australian Development Research Award-funded policy research project by the Institute of Family and Gender Studies (IFGS), Hanoi, and the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), London. It included primary research in Ha Giang province in the impoverished Northeast Highlands of the country and in An Giang province in the Mekong River Delta region of southern Viet Nam.

Table 2: Selected social protection instruments in Viet Nam

Type of social protection instrument	Programme examples	Programme details
Social assistance programmes (offering regular transfers in cash or in kind, including fee waivers)	National Targeted Programme for Poverty Reduction (NTPPR)	The NTPPR started in 2006 with the aim of halving poverty between 2005 and 2010. Its new targeting approach has moved beyond the official poverty line to identify households that are 'certainly poor', those that are 'certainly non-poor' and those that need to be means-tested, using a combination of surveys and community discussions. Overall, the programme targets the poor, poor households, poor communes and extremely disadvantaged communes, with priority given to specific types of households such as female-headed households, ethnic minority households, those with elderly or disabled members and those with children 'with special circumstances'. The NTPPR has nationwide coverage and offers access to credit and concessional loans; access to basic services, such as housing, water supply, health care, education, vocational training and legal aid; poverty reduction capacity building; and infrastructure development, such as hospitals, health clinics and schools. Over a five-year period, VND43.5 trillion has been allocated to the programme, with 60% earmarked for 'preferential credit'. Most of the resources have come from existing programmes managed by several ministries, such as the Ministry of Health (responsible for the provision of free health insurance cards) and the Ministry of Education and Training (responsible for exemptions and reductions of education fees).
	Socio-Economic Programme for Extremely Difficult Communes in Ethnic Minority and Mountainous Areas (P-135)	P-135 started in 1998 and, using geographic targeting, allocated during its first phase VN700 million per year to 2,362 disadvantaged communes for infrastructure development and livelihood support. In its second phase (2006–10), in an effort to improve its targeting criteria and reach the poorest villages, it required the inclusion of both poorer villages within the poorest zone (Zone III) communes and the poorest villages in the less poor zone (Zone II) communes. With around $1 billion for disbursement before 2010, the programme has included activities in four main areas: production development support; infrastructure development (roads, bridges, irrigation systems, schools and health clinics); capacity building for village officials; and community, service and legal support
	Rapid and Sustainable Poverty Reduction Programme for the 62 Poorest Districts (62 Districts)	This programme started in 2009 with the aim of reducing regional average poverty by 2020. It targets the poorest 62 districts, with 2.4 million people, most of them from ethnic minorities. It offers complete housing support, cash and tuition fees exemption, vocational training opportunities for the poor, forestry protection support, family planning support and infrastructure development (irrigation systems, schools, hospitals and health clinics).
	Programme to Support Land, Housing and Access to Water (P-134)	This programme started in 2004 and targeted poor ethnic minority households involved in agriculture, but without land and access to adequate housing and water services. P-134 supports land provision for production, housing construction and access to safe water supplies. It is considered to be the most comprehensive programme, offering poor ethnic minority people financial support to access land as well as loans to build or renovate their homes.
	Policy on Housing Assistance for the Poor (Decision 167/2008/QD-TTg)	Programme 167/2008 provides VND6 million/household (VND7 million to households living in hardship areas according to Programme 30/2007). Households can also borrow up to VND8 million from the Bank for Social Policies to build their house. An estimated 500,000 households are benefiting from the programme.

Type of social protection instrument	Programme examples	Programme details
	Support for boarding schools for ethnic minority students, 2009	These programmes target ethnic minority students in boarding schools and kindergartens and offer them support for food, textbooks and notebooks of up to VND140,000/month.
	Scholarship and social aid for ethnic minority students, 2007	
	Resolution. 80/ND-CP, Orientation on Sustainable Poverty Reduction 2011–20	Resolution 80 (2011) is part of the Vietnamese government's latest efforts to achieve rapid and sustainable poverty reduction by 2020. Its particular targets are the poor, poor households, ethnic minorities, the elderly, the disabled, women and children living in poor districts, or in poor communes in disadvantaged ethnic minority and mountainous areas, border areas, difficult coastal areas and islands, or in ethnic minority mountainous hamlets. Poverty reduction policies are organised into six main areas: production, vocational training, job creation and improved incomes for the poor; education and training; health and nutrition; housing; access for the poor to legal aid services; and access for the poor to information and cultural programmes. The Resolution actually introduces a comprehensive approach to poverty reduction by bringing together all ministries and committees involved to improve the effectiveness of current poverty reduction programmes and channel resources efficiently to the neediest communes and households.
Social insurance schemes (aiming to protect people's health, livelihoods and well-being against risks and shocks)	Social health insurance	The Health Care Fund for the Poor was created in 2003 with the aim of providing health care to the poor, ethnic minorities and the disadvantaged. In 2005, free health services in public facilities were offered to all children under six. In accordance with the new National Health Insurance Law in 2008, all these services have been incorporated into the social health insurance scheme. This offers free or subsidised health insurance to specific groups, such as all children under six, poor people, pensioners and veterans. 2008 VHLSS data show that only 21% received free health insurance.
	Voluntary health insurance	The voluntary health insurance scheme was first introduced in 1992 and now covers those who are not eligible for the previous two programmes, such as farmers, informal workers and students. Most of those with this type of insurance are students. Payments are on a flat rate, and the current cost of voluntary insurance is 4.5–6% of the minimum wage. Financial incentives are offered to the near poor to join. Yet coverage is still limited: according to 2008 VHLSS data, only 16% of those with health insurance are covered by student insurance and 6% by voluntary insurance.
	Compulsory social insurance	The compulsory insurance scheme was first introduced in 1992 and mainly covers civil servants, workers in state-owned enterprises and those in the private sector. The contribution rate is low, set at 3% of the salary, with 2% paid by the employer; the package offered is generous, with maternity and sickness benefits, workplace accident and disability insurance and unemployment and pension benefits; yet it does not offer coverage for dependants. 2008 VHLSS data show that only 10% of those with health insurance are covered by compulsory insurance.
	Voluntary social insurance	Voluntary insurance is for workers with labour contracts under three months in duration, unpaid family workers and self-employed business heads in the informal or agriculture sector. Documents include Degree 190/2007/NĐ-CP dated 28 December 2007 of the Prime Minister (providing guidance on implementation of the Social Insurance Law) and Circular 02/2008/TT-BLĐTBXH dated 31 January 2008 of the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) (providing guidance on the implementation of Decree 190/2007/NĐ-CP).
	Unemployment insurance	In 2011, nearly 7.6 million people participated in unemployment insurance.[2]

[2] See http://baodientu.chinhphu.vn/Home/Chi-tra-kham-chua-benh-cho-hon-100-trieu-luot-nguoi/20122/127385.vgp (government news, in Vietnamese).

Type of social protection instrument	Programme examples	Programme details
Social welfare services (targeting members of marginalised groups in need of special care or those who would otherwise be denied access to basic services owing to their particular social characteristics)	Initiatives and services for children and women who are victims of trafficking, domestic violence and abuse	The National Legal Aid Agency has carried out several projects to improve the capacity of legal aid providers and access to legal aid for victims of such violence. With international assistance, counselling centres have been established at health facilities with projects supporting domestic violence victims; there are also a few counselling centres at community level; counselling is also offered through self-help groups consisting of domestic violence victims, migrants and trafficked women. There are only a few shelters for victims: in 2010, Viet Nam Women's Union (VWU) operated eight shelters for trafficked women, and there were two other 'clubs' specifically for children and victims of domestic violence, run by a local non-governmental organisation (NGO).
	Construction of boarding accommodation near schools for ethnic minority students or students from remote areas	Given that not all communes have schools, there are some programmes, as part of education support policies, for the construction of the much-needed accommodation facilities for students studying away from home.
Social equity measures (legal and policy measures aiming to protect people against social risks such as discrimination and abuse by offering them access to property, credit or services along with affirmative action measures to redress past patterns of discrimination)	Law on the Protection, Care and Education of Children 2004	This law incorporates the basic principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and aims to protect child rights and inform best policies; it also includes the child's obligations in accordance with Vietnamese culture and in order to promote child responsible behaviour.
	National Plan of Action against Trafficking of Women and Children 2004–10	This national action plan aimed to prevent and combat trafficking through action against traffickers, border control, strengthening of the legal framework, advocacy and education, particularly at community level, and support services for victims.
	Law on Anti-Trafficking 2012	
	Law on Gender Equality 2006	This law aims to ensure gender equality in all fields, to protect and support mothers, to abolish customs impeding gender equality and to support activities promoting gender equality in remote and ethnic minority areas with difficult socioeconomic conditions. It calls for gender mainstreaming in all areas, sets targets and suggests measures to facilitate implementation.
	Law on Legal Aid 2006	According to this law, the poor, ethnic minorities, the single elderly, the disabled, children with no form of support and people with 'meritorious services to the Revolution' are eligible for legal aid, yet it does not explicitly include gender-based violence victims.
	Law on Prevention and Control of HIV/AIDS 2006	This law aims to offer HIV/AIDS prevention and control measures, arrange for the treatment and support of infected people and enable the effective implementation of these measures; gender issues are not adequately included, let alone addressed.
	Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control 2007	This law aims to provide the main framework for state policies and strategies for the prevention and control of domestic violence, and for the protection of its victims. It provides a broad definition of domestic violence, which includes all acts causing physical, spiritual and financial damage.
	Plan of Action on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control 2008–15	Led by the Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MOCST), this plan of action aims to strengthen and promote the effective implementation of the 2007 Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control.
	National Strategy for Gender Equality 2011–20.	This strategy aims to narrow the gender gap in all areas as part of national efforts towards economic growth and sustainable development. It particularly aims to increase female participation in politics and leadership positions; promote poor rural and ethnic minority women's access to economic resources and labour markets; improve women's education and training opportunities; ensure gender equality in health care; promote gender equality in culture; ensure gender equality in family and eliminate domestic violence; and promote government involvement in managing issues of gender equality.

Sources: Joint Donor Group (2007); UNICEF (2010); UNDP (2011).; UNDP Viet Nam (2009; 2010).

2 The politics of mainstreaming gender into social protection: a conceptual framework

The effective mainstreaming of gender into social protection requires careful consideration of the politics that underpin diverse social protection strategy and programme approaches across country contexts. The steps involved in embedding a gender-sensitive approach in social protection policy and programming are relatively straightforward (on Viet Nam, see, e.g., Jones and Tran, 2010; Jones, Tran and Stavropolou 2011). But mainstreaming gender into any policy sector is as much a political issue as it is a technical one. This is perhaps particularly the case with social protection, as discussions on social safety nets are very often underpinned by polarised views on gender roles and responsibilities the world over—as highlighted by, for example, debates about the 'nanny state', a 'family wage' and 'the costs of care' (Folbre, 2008).

When it comes to social protection in the developing world, there is a growing body of work that looks at the politics of social protection, including the ways in which programme choices are shaped in response to elite and public buy-in, as well as the reasons that underlie varying implementation practices at the grassroots level (de Britto, 2008; Hickey, 2007; Zucco, 2008). Interest in the gender dynamics of social protection in general (e.g. Kabeer, 2010; Molyneux, 2006) and in political economy dimensions in particular is more recent (Jones and Holmes, 2011). To explore the political economy of gender and social protection in Viet Nam, we draw on a framework developed by Holmes and Jones (2012, forthcoming) that explores the effect of gender relations on shaping the institutions, interests and ideas behind social protection policy and programming in developing countries.

Although increasingly at risk of becoming a catch-all phrase adopted by a wide variety of actors and disciplines, the concept 'political economy' generally refers to an analytical approach whereby development policy and programme outcomes involve a process of bargaining between state and society actors, mediated by interactions between formal and informal institutions (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004). Importantly, it differs markedly from an approach based on the external imposition of normative ideals about 'good governance', and instead seeks to assess and engage with existing power structures and ways of working (Booth, 2011; Grindle, 2011). Accordingly, our research focuses on what Rosendorff (2005) dubs the '3 Is' of political economy and their role in shaping social protection policies and programmes.

1 **Institutions:** institutional arenas (such as elections and party politics, the legislature, policy frameworks on decentralisation and informal politics) and the opportunities or constraints they present for negotiation on the development of social protection policies and programmes.
2 **Interests** of the key actors who are likely to win or lose as a result of policy shifts (e.g. political elites, bureaucratic agencies, donors and civil society champions) and the relative balance of power between them (e.g. power imbalances between ministries of finance/economics and ministries of social welfare).
3 **Ideas** held by political elites and the public on poverty, vulnerability, inequity and its causes, the nature of the social contract between state and citizens and the merits of particular forms of state support. These may include, for instance, notions of the 'deserving poor', concerns about 'dependency' and entrenched attitudes towards inequality.

Integrating a gender lens into this framework adds another layer of complexity. A gendered political economy approach explores how 'households, markets and states as gendered institutions are created and regulated in part by socially constructed norms at local, national and international levels' (Roberts and Waylen, 1998: 184).

At the **micro level**, it requires an understanding of the way in which an individual's preferences are socially constructed, and the importance of factoring in women's care and domestic work roles and responsibilities and their impact on women's time, economic and capacity-strengthening opportunities and self-identity.

At the **meso level**, a gendered political economy approach re-conceptualises and re-values the divide between the public and the private. It recognises the critical role of the domestic sector, which, as Elson maintains, 'plays a foundational role in the production of people who possess not only the capacity to work but also to acquire other more intangible social assets—a sense of ethical behaviour, a sense of citizenship, a sense of what it is to communicate—all of which permit the forming and sustaining of social norms' (Elson, 1998: 197).

And at the **macro level**, a gendered political economy approach seeks to unpack what Connell (1987) refers to as the broader *gender regime*—the state of play in gender relations in a given institution' (e.g. school, family, state)—and *gender order*—the gender patterns in a society at a specific point in history. These concepts have been applied widely to gender analyses of institutions and to understandings of nation-building projects and state modernisation. For example, Besse (1996) looks at the way industrialisation and intensification of mercantile relations in Brazil in the Vargas era (1914–30) created new opportunities for middle-class and elite women to gain an education, have a career and postpone marriage. State policymakers and the Catholic Church, worried that this shift was challenging the foundations of Brazilian society, attempted to influence the situation through policies such as new 'scientific' forms of child rearing and special women's education to provide 'the modern Brazilian woman' with a sense of fulfilment and at the same time bolster the family. However, although gender roles were modernised, the changes were not transformative: they simply restructured male domination.

Similarly, Hossain (2007)'s work highlights that the Bangladeshi state has been strongly supportive of social programmes to support poor women on account of a deeply embedded ideology of 'political motherhood' which views destitute mothers as the 'deserving poor', particularly given a history of rape of tens of thousands of women during the liberation war. In other words, gender relations often constitute a key pillar of governance interventions, and understanding these dynamics as well as the key historical junctures that underpin them can be critical in addressing bottlenecks in policy and programming.

3   Methodology and data processing

Our primary research consisted of 32 key informant interviews and 4 participatory workshops with officials and programme implementers conducted in late 2011/early 2012 in two provinces: Ha Giang in the impoverished Northeast Highlands of Viet Nam and An Giang in the Mekong River Delta region in the south of the country. Interviews aimed to explore issues around the effectiveness of institutions focusing on poverty and vulnerability reduction and the implementation of specific social protection programmes, as well as individual decision logics. In other words, they explored the interplay of institutional dynamics, actor interests and ideas over time in response to broader politico-economic change. A small number of interviews were conducted at the central level, with the majority carried out at the provincial and commune levels. Appendix 1 provides further details of key informant interviews and workshop participants.

Key informant interview questions were structured around the following thematic areas:

- Type 1 (officials): formal institutions, informal power, civil participation, accountability, donor influence, capacity, coordination, monitoring and evaluation (M&E), linkages, gender provisions;
- Type 2 (district/provincial decision makers): social protection, sectors, traditional authorities/informal leaders, civil society, citizens and different categories of the poor;
- Type 3 (key informants with a macro-level viewpoint): how political leaders think about poverty and inequality, their underlying causes and the government's role in tackling them, including through social protection instruments.

The participatory workshops with officials and programme implementers at provincial and commune level sought to bring together people working on various aspects of social protection and gender to promote dialogue and joint problem solving among actors who traditionally have limited interaction owing to institutional silo-ing and limited incentive structures. Methodologically, these workshops utilised participatory approaches informed by a 'drivers of change' analysis and participatory rapid appraisal techniques, including problem tree analysis and scenario exercises (see UNDP 2007; 2009b and Appendix 2 for details). The goal was to solicit different points of view to those typically exchanged during one-to-one interviews and thereby enrich the analysis. Thematically, the workshops focused on three steps of integrating key gender objectives in poverty reduction programmes: defining gender objectives; the opportunities and challenges in including gender in poverty reduction and social protection programming; and obstacles to implementing gender objectives regarding the three Is.

In terms of data processing, key informant interviews and the workshop transcripts and relevant materials were first recorded and then translated to English. Using MAXQDA,[3] all the interviews were coded by a team of three researchers and later subjected to in-depth reading, during which key issues and patterns were identified (see Appendix 3).[4] Content analysis of all the recorded interviews followed a thematic analysis approach, involving identifying salient issues, key trends and patterns emerging from the data.

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3 Software designed for systematic content analysis.
4 See coding scheme in Appendix 2.

Box 1: Differences between Ha Giang and An Giang provinces

Viet Nam is a very diverse country and its demographic characteristics, proportions of ethnic minority population, poverty rates and overall human development vary significantly depending on the particular region. The two provinces in which the primary research for this report were carried out illustrate some of this diversity.

Ha Giang province in the Northeast highlands of the country is one of the poorest provinces in Viet Nam (UNDP, 2011). Although between 1999 and 2008 Ha Giang made more rapid progress than some better-off provinces and achieved a significant growth rate (nearly 20%), it is still lagging behind wealthier regions. In 2008, Ha Giang's Human Development Index (HDI) value was estimated at 0.570, one of the lowest in the country (ibid.). Ha Giang was also one of the bottom-ranked provinces on the Gender-related Development Index (GDI 0.566), which seems to be closely correlated with high poverty rates. Disparities are especially visible with regard to the gender gap in education and female literacy rates (62.7% compared with 84.1% for men). Ha Giang is a predominantly mountainous area, which poses difficulties for productive farming and travel. Although infrastructure has been improving, roads and public services in Ha Giang remain underdeveloped compared with in other provinces in Viet Nam (ADB, 2011). The province is also one of the least populated provinces in the Northeast Jighlands and the majority of people belong to various ethnic minority groups, such as Hmong, Tay or Dao (GSO, 2008).

An Giang province in the Mekong River Delta region of southern Viet Nam presents a somewhat different picture. It is positioned in the upper Mekong Delta with fairly flat terrain suitable for agriculture. The province has relatively high income values and overall is more developed than Ha Giang. However, life expectancy and education levels are lower compared with other provinces with a similar economic status (UNDP, 2011). In 2008, while An Giang's HDI value was 0.707, which ranked the province approximately in the middle in relation to other regions, its Multidimensional Poverty Indicator (MPI) was estimated to be 0.189, which ranked it closer to the bottom of the list. In addition, despite the rise in economic growth, gender disparities persist (in 2008 its GDI value was 0.705) and between 1999 and 2008 the gender gap even widened. Although in An Giang ethnic minorities constitute a smaller proportion of the population than they do in Ha Giang, Khmer, Cham and Hoa minorities are noticeable groups in the province (Jones and Tran, 2010).

4   Setting the stage: decentralised Vietnam

Decentralisation in Vietnam is both an ongoing process, slowly unfolding since 1986's 'doi moi' reforms, and a product that has been sculpted deliberately through policy reform over the past decade (Painter, 2008). With broad impacts on all arenas—fiscal, administrative and political—the country's decentralisation has been driven by its transition to a market economy (Painter, 2005; 2008). 'Fence breaking', a term traditionally used to describe violations by state-owned enterprises against the central government, was behind many earlier forays, starting in the 1970s, into sub-national decision making. Provincial experimentation, fuelled by economic expansion, led to many of the *de jure* changes later introduced by the central government (Malesky, 2004; Ninh, 2003).

More recently, there has been a concerted attempt by the centre to deliberately invest lower-level governments with authority (Gainsborough, 2004; Malesky, 2004; Painter, 2005; 2008). While there is undoubtedly a 'fundamental paradox in the idea of decentralization "policy"' (Painter, 2008), the process itself is increasingly planned, and tries to steer a middle group between centralising and decentralising forces. On the one hand, the expansion of the private sector, the increasing ease with which citizens can access information and urbanisation are pulling the country towards devolution of power. On the other hand, Viet Nam remains a unitary state with a powerful executive branch and weak inter-sectoral coordination (ibid.). Furthermore, remaining regional, ethnic and gender inequalities call for the central state to remain strong, in order to ensure the disadvantaged have access to funds, programmes and legal protection (Bjornstad, 2009; Fritizen, 2006). As Painter (2003) framed it, a strong centre protects against "islands of excellence".

4.1   Governmental structure

There are four layers of government in Vietnam: central, provincial, district and commune—each with both an executive and a legislative branch (Nguyen-Hoang, 2008). There are currently 63 recognised provinces in the country (and also five cities at this level); these subsume nearly 700 districts and over 10,000 communes (ibid.). Nguyen-Hoang and Schroeder (2008) note that, while the Communist Party has the overall leadership role at all levels, the party itself is 'functionally pluralist', which offers more space for decentralisation than may be immediately obvious.

4.2   State reform

The VIth Party Congress's 'doi moi' reforms, introduced in 1986, started the ball rolling towards decentralisation in Viet Nam (Malesky, 2008). The goal of these reforms was to create a socialist-oriented market economy (ibid.). Public administration reform, initiated in the 1990s, represented another early component which has ultimately encouraged the country's decentralisation trajectory (Fritzen, 2006; World Bank, 2005). A top-down policy, this called for rationalising government and strengthening the judicial and legislative branches, both of which have ultimately strengthened sub-national governments (Fritzen, 2006).

State reforms can be loosely broken into three categories: political, administrative and fiscal. In Viet Nam, the former has seen the least movement and the latter the most.

Box 2: Timeline of reform in Viet Nam

1994	Resolution 138-HDBT recognises sub-national budgets
1986	'Doi moi' economic reforms
1990	Resolution 186 stipulates two budget layers, central and provincial
1992	Constitution reiterates central supremacy
1994	Law on Organisation
1995	Public administration reform—a cluster of laws and ordinances strengthening legislative branch and rationalising government
1996	Ordinance on Concrete Tasks assigns functions to provinces and districts
1996	Budget Law creates four-level budgeting hierarchy with 'stability periods'
1998	Grassroots Democracy Decree
1998	Amendments to 1996 Budget Law
2001/02	Decision 192 and Decree 10 delegate fiscal authority to administrative units
2002	Budget Law strengthening provincial role via allocation of block grants to better account for local needs
2007	Ordinance amending the 1998 Grassroots Democracy Decree

Political decentralisation entails 'transferring powers to legally constituted local governments that have autonomous spheres of authority' (Fritzen 2006, p. 7). In Viet Nam, some recent shifts have opened up more political space. The 2002 State Budget Law, for example, has joined public administration reform in seeking to ensure more legislative authority. Furthermore, 'grassroots democracy' has been building respect for procedural democracy and local participation (Wells-Dang, 2010). The ordinance specifies three levels of local involvement: 1) that which the people have a right to know, such as central policy; 2) that which the people have a right to discuss, such as local infrastructure; and 3) that which the people have a right to decide, such as local implementation (SRVN, 2007, cited in Wells-Dang, 2010). While these steps are limited, and subsumed in the notion of a single-party state, they are edging towards a more democratic political process.

Administrative decentralisation is driven by a need for greater efficiency; it is 'broadly defined as the transfer of responsibilities to lower administrative levels at the discretion of upper levels in order to facilitate more effective implementation' (Fritzen, 2006). In Viet Nam, the 1994 Law on Organisation and the 1996 Ordinance on Concrete Tasks both specifically allocate functions to districts and provinces. Decision 192 (2001) and Decree 10 (2002) both 'delegate administrative and fiscal authority' (ibid.). Much of this decentralisation grew out early fence breaking (Fritzen, 2006; Malesky, 2004). Provinces throughout the country took the initiative on policies ranging from land reform to home sales and administrative codes, attempting to respond to the rapidly changing economic landscape (Malesky, 2004). This experimentation resulted in a substantial increase in provincial authority, but did little to mitigate the already disadvantaged position of poorer provinces. Without adequate funding, even with authority these provinces could not maximise their new administrative positions.

Fiscal decentralisation refers to the ability of sub-national governments to raise and spend a growing share of the state budget. Much of the central policy change is most evident in budget policy, as the central government, beginning in the mid-1990s, has ceded more and more fiscal control to sub-national levels (Bjornstad, 2009; Fritzen, 2006; Nguyen-Hoang and Schroeder, 2008). Almost half of all budget expenditures in Viet Nam are channelled through local governments (Martinez-Vazquez and Gomez, 2006; Painter, 2008). In 1984, Resolution 138-HDBT granted official legitimacy to sub-national budgets (Nguyen-Hoang and Schroeder, 2008). In 1990, Resolution 186, Fiscal Decentralisation to Local Governments, not only stipulated separate budget layers for the central and provincial governments, but also called

for provincial governments to keep 100% of savings from their allocated expenditures (Bjornstad, 2009; Nguyen-Hoang, 2008). The 1996 Budget Law, and its 1998 amendments, further decentralised the budget: it called for four layers of budgeting hierarchy, expanded the fiscal authority granted to provincial governments and created a stable framework for revenue sharing (Nguyen-Hoang, 2008). The 2002 Budget Law went still further; provinces are now given block grants to spend as they will. These new 'provisions are vague enough to allow for important geographical variation in sub provincial assignments of expenditure responsibilities' (Martinez-Vazquez and Gomez, 2006).

However, while expenditures have been considerably decentralised, largely because of the increasing devolution of service delivery, sub-national governments lack the capacity to create or alter taxes, leaving them with user fees as the only potential source of fundraising. This has implications for whether services at the local level become regressively funded (Beresford, 2008; Nguyen-Hoang, 2008). Indeed, Bjornstad (2009) concludes that, while fiscal decentralisation may help achieve pro-poor outcomes, it is not in and of itself a pro-poor policy. In fact, Nguyen-Hoang (2008) finds that, in the absence of specific policy mandating that local governments adopt 'pro-poor allocation norms', the increases in provincial autonomy brought about by the 2002 Budget Law have had a negative impact on the incomes of the poor.

Viet Nam's elaborate tax-sharing system works to mitigate this impact; it serves not only to collect revenue but also to redistribute it across provinces in order to reduce inequality and achieve centrally mandated pro-poor outcomes (Bjornstad, 2009; Vo, 2009). There are three types of taxes in Vietnam: those that are earmarked for central use only, those that are earmarked for local use only and those that are shared between national and sub-national governments (Vo, 2009). This last category represents two-thirds of all revenue in the country (ibid.). The sharing rate, which is centrally determined, is based on a wide variety of demographic and development indicators, ranging from population to the poverty rate and geography (see Table 3). Poorer provinces are allowed to keep a greater share of shared revenue than are richer provinces (Bjornstad, 2009; Nguyen-Hoang-2008). The sharing rate is renegotiated every three to five years, allowing for 'budget stability periods' that enable sub-national governments to make longer-range plans in an atmosphere of reduced uncertainty (Bjornstad, 2009; Nguyen-Hoang, 2008).

Table 3: Factors impacting the sharing rate in Viet Nam

Population	Total School-aged children Ethnic minorities School-aged children in P135 communes
Development	Poverty rate Local revenue Revenue transferred to state budget Industrial output
Geography	Total surface Disadvantaged location Growth pole
Administration	Administrative units at district level Districts in disadvantaged locations Civil servants

Source: Adapted from Bjornstad (2009).

In short, decentralisation in Viet Nam is an ongoing process. Never as centralised as it looked from the outside, the country is making a number of efforts to balance the needs of local areas for more autonomy with the needs of the disadvantaged for more centralised redistribution. Primarily driven by economic reform, and most clearly implemented in the fiscal arena, making decentralisation work in the Vietnamese context may mean implementing an 'asymmetrical approach […] that tailors central government transfers and capacity building support to the different requirement of regions' (Fritzen, 2006) .

5 The three 'Is' of gender and social protection in decentralising Viet Nam

As shown in Table 1, Viet Nam's gender policy infrastructure is relatively comprehensive, including recognition in the 2007 Gender Equality Law of the importance of integrating gender into key poverty reduction and social protection instruments. There is, however, a considerable disconnect between these policy frameworks and their implementation at the provincial, district and commune levels. Drawing on 32 key informant interviews and four participatory workshops with sub-national officials, our research identified a number of key challenges that need to be reflected and addressed in social protection strategy documents and their rollout. We discuss these here, clustered according to the three Is.

5.1 Institutions

Limited policy decentralisation

First, although Viet Nam has seen significant political decentralisation in recent years (see preceding section), it is still limited. Thayer notes that 'pressures from below could prompt some Party elites to initiate further political change' in coming years, but that Viet Nam still remains a primarily 'top down', mono-organisational political system for the foreseeable future (Thayer, 2009: 22). Diversification of authority in key decision-making processes remains limited, and although civil society is expanding at the community level, government-affiliated mass organisations remain dominant players, especially in terms of supporting service delivery (Fford, 2011). While a strong state has clearly played an important role in shaping rapid poverty reduction in recent years (e.g. CPRC, 2008), limited political decentralisation constrains the capacity of programme implementers to effectively tailor programmes to address locale-specific vulnerabilities, as the following key informant reflections illustrate:

> 'The central government has defined the criteria of "poor" and "near poor" households, we only follow' (Vice-chair, Provincial People's Committee (PPC), Co To commune, An Giang).

> 'Policies on social support and poverty reduction are built from the central level and then moved to the provincial level. The province leads other agencies in development and implementation' (Vice-director, Department of Planning and Investment (DPI), Ha Giang).

Key informants recognise that this top-down approach is, in part, driven by recognition of the relatively weak capacities of lower governance structures (especially at the commune level) and a desire to meet ambitious poverty reduction targets, especially in poorer provinces such as Ha Giang:

> Q: 'Is it better if all of the projects on poverty reduction are gathered, managed and decided by the commune rather than some being managed by the province and some by the district?' A: 'It depends. If the implementation steps are complicated in term of professional skills, the provincial and district levels should help. Present ability does not allow commune officers to take over all of the things. I think the present [level of] decentralisation is fine' (Chair, PPC, Lao Va Chai commune, Ha Giang).

Even so, more recent capacity improvements do not appear to have been met with corresponding increases in the scope for decision making.

Limited fiscal decentralisation and budget autonomy

These decision-making constraints are, in turn, compounded by limited fiscal decentralisation and budget autonomy. The majority of key informants in both An Giang and Ha Giang

expressed some concerns over the effectiveness of budgeting mechanisms, and the role this played in hindering a more organic inclusion of gender-related concerns:

'Provinces should be decentralised to have the power to adjust and transfer [money] from item to item without asking for approval. [Now] it's complicated in terms of procedures and time consuming […] In terms of gender equality, we have considerable and varied programming needs, whereas the scope of central government planning is much more limited. If we were to get a block grant, we could take the initiative and balance competing priorities better' (Vice-head, Social Division, DPI, An Giang).

'The grassroots level is responsible for certifying poor households. We just instruct, manage and supervise. All budget allocated to projects and programmes is delivered to the Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs [DOLISA] which will make a plan of allocation to grassroots agencies' (Head, Social Protection Division, DOLISA, An Giang).

'In order to mainstream the issue [gender equality], first of all you need projects and concrete activities. What can you do if people and officials are unaware? This should be put in an annual plan of communication and training to improve cadres' capacity […] Only regular training can change the behaviour of the cadres and help the leaders to know about gender equality. Women should pay attention to this issue, otherwise men won't pay attention to it. A project is needed to raise awareness for the poor' (Head, Social Protection Division, DOLISA, An Giang).

'To have an efficient policy, the starting point is the grassroots level, then the central government will issue a comprehensive policy. It is inefficient if you just sit at the central level and map out a policy' (Head of Office, Department of Education and Training (DOET), Ha Giang).

The interviews also suggest that funding provided by international donors is perceived to allow for more flexibility in managing funds. Programmes sponsored by donors have more flexible criteria for beneficiary selection, and therefore allow agencies to better respond to the needs of different programme participants.

'The other one [programme sponsored by the government] also has diverse beneficiaries, but compulsory criteria make it difficult to implement. The applicants should be truly poor. For the [donor-sponsored] projects, poor people are classified by groups of beneficiaries, for example people with HIV, trafficked women, Khmer women [which results in] better meeting the need of each group of beneficiaries' (Head, VWU, An Giang).

It was indicated that, if funding were more flexible, it would most likely be spent on increasing the resources of programme staff at the local level:

'The proposals forwarded from the localities are yet to be adjusted. We have requested the government increase support for commune staff several times but haven't got a response. Therefore, poverty reduction staff often quit their jobs' (Vice-head, Social Division, DPI, An Giang).

This said, there has been some progress in recent years, especially in terms of addressing ethnic minority community needs in a more tailored manner. Respondents at the provincial level mentioned that the central government specified precisely how much money should be spent on different programmes, but poverty reduction needs are assessed by DOLISA, DPI and—more recently—the Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs (CEMA). Inclusion of the latter seems to reflect recognition of the fact that districts with the highest level of poverty are the ones with significant numbers of ethnic minority households:

'Three or four years ago, Decision 09 by the province was made to implement a sustainable poverty reduction programme for different areas. In border and ethnic

minority areas, the provincial authority has specific policies to meet their specific needs' (Chair, VWU, Ha Giang).

'The local authorities pay much attention to students in difficult and ethnic minority areas. They communicate and create all favourable conditions for children to go to school, so many children, both boys and girls go to school' (Deputy Director, DOET, An Giang).

Limited coordination mechanisms

A second key and related institutional challenge concerns limited coordination mechanisms between government agencies. Social protection and gender equality are, in essence, cross-cutting policy issues, which makes inter-sectoral coordination especially important. Government officials and departments have a key role to play in terms of providing coordination and institutional linkages at the national and sub-national levels with regard to, for example, tackling malnutrition issues (see Box 3).

Box 3: Tackling nutrition and food security vulnerabilities—institutional coordination challenges

From the late 1990s, Viet Nam made a significant progress in reducing food insecurity and improving nutrition. However, although malnutrition as a whole has been in decline, the prevalence varies significantly (Nakamori et al., 2010). The Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) estimates that, between 2006 and 2008, 11% of the population in Viet Nam suffered from undernourishment, which amounts to nearly 10 million people food deprived (FAO, 2010). Ethnicity in Viet Nam is closely related to nutrition standards, as the vast majority of ethnic minority communities live in remote areas and account for approximately 60% of the country's hungry. In addition, women are especially vulnerable to malnutrition owing to discriminatory gender norms and power dynamics.

Our research (Jones and Tran, 2011) suggests that coordination mechanisms needed to tackle this pressing problem are underdeveloped in the Vietnamese context. The Lancet (2008) argues that a critical challenge in addressing malnutrition is to ensure nutrition is prioritised on the national agenda, as national targets receive more attention and resources compared with sectoral priorities. In Viet Nam, however, the country's focus on becoming a middle-income country has resulted in attention to human capital development and education, at the expense of food security and malnutrition concerns.

At the national level, nutritional programming remains very siloed, with programmes of various ministries often running in parallel rather than being informed by an integrated strategy and capitalising on synergies. More specifically, the National Institute of Nutrition has limited linkages between the Ministry of Health's Food Administration and Health and Environmental Departments (the latter dealing with water and sanitation issues) and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development's (MARD's) Food Security Department. Moreover, while MOLISA is involved in some dimensions of nutritional work (e.g. supporting exclusive breastfeeding practices by promoting maternity leave), Ministry of Health officials mandated with nutrition-related responsibilities and NIN have at best very limited dialogue with officials in MOLISA responsible for social protection policy and programme development and implementation.

Similarly, linkages to MOLISA's Gender Equality Unit appear to be non-existent, despite the importance of gender as a driver of nutritional outcomes. NIN staff have undergone some gender mainstreaming training, but this has been limited in scope and there are no budget provisions to roll out gender training more widely, resulting in a very piecemeal approach. Furthermore, the Law on Gender Equality has had very little impact as to how nutritional issues are approached. The discourse employed by officials in the Department of Food Administration, for instance, is that there are 'so many laws,' 'it takes time' and, until 'specific guidance' is provided, departments cannot be expected to take the initiative themselves. Accordingly, existing social protection programmes have been restricted to a focus on women's role in food preparation at the household level, rather than overcoming broader socio-cultural and economic challenges to support food security, such as reducing women's time poverty, supporting women's decision-making power in the household, improving women's access to and control over productive resources and addressing wage inequalities and job opportunities.

At the international agency level, efforts at stronger coordination have been prioritised in recent years, facilitated by the development of an inter-institutional nutrition working group. Key players include the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, the Asian Development Bank (ADB), FAO, WHO, the Spanish government as part of its MDG 5 focus, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and Alive and Thrive, a Gates-funded initiative focused on stunting prevention and exclusive breastfeeding. While this group has not been especially active in broader social protection debates, the recent appointment of a nutrition expert

at UNICEF is helping to drive forward discussions and promote linkages with broader development and social protection initiatives, buoyed by UNICEF's new global focus on equity and support for the poorest and most vulnerable. The group is also seeking to strengthen the integration of gender dimensions into nutrition strategy development and planning through the development of guidelines, and to foster greater cross-ministerial linkages.

At the provincial level, both coordination and capacity constraints are even more pressing than at the national level. One major concern is that, while there are staff with technical nutritional knowledge, this is largely not matched with skills in terms of planning and advocacy. So, while there is recognition of nutritional challenges, and while the new national surveillance data should help, coordinated strategies to tackle these problems are lacking, as reflected by poor integration to date into provincial-level development plans.

Sources: Holmes and Jones (2010), unless stated otherwise.

In practice, however, despite clear guidance in the form of Decree 70 ND-CP/2008 on the responsibility of the PPCs to integrate gender into local socioeconomic development strategy design and implementation, government agencies engaged in social protection programming remain highly siloed, including the government's flagship NTPPR. Underpinning this problem is the fact that the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) has considerable financial and, by extension, decision-making clout, whereas actual expertise in the area of social protection lies with the considerably weaker MOLISA and also DEMA.

> 'DPI decides the allocation of capital. Other agencies can contribute their opinion but DPI is the only one that can make decisions' (Vice-director, DEMA, Ha Giang).

Greater investments in effective coordination are further undermined by limited human and budget resources for social protection programming. Interviews suggest that, although respondents working in gender-related fields acknowledge the importance of efficient coordination between different departments, they have few tools or mechanisms at their disposal to promote such cooperation (see Box 3), as highlighted vividly by the following key informant comments:

> 'My main challenge is overwork and loss of concentration […] If I had time, I would study more [to familiarise myself with] gender equality targets and consider how I could promote these. But as it is, I only deal with such targets when I am asked to, I can't be active' (Head, Child Care Division, DOLISA, An Giang).

> 'We have requested the government increase support for commune-level programme staff several times but haven't got a response. Therefore, poverty reduction staff often quit their jobs. As a result, poverty reduction work is not implemented continuously' (Vice-head, Social Division, DPI, An Giang).

> 'Because coordination is not good enough in some agencies, and some agencies have yet to see the significance of this issue [gender provisions], it fails to reach expectations' (Deputy Head, Division of Cultural and Social Affairs, DPI, An Giang).

Programme staff also declared that, although they are not intrinsically motivated to do so, they would be willing to cooperate with other agencies if it were required. For example, a poverty reduction officer at the commune level declared that, if asked by his superiors, he would coordinate his actions with the appropriate department:

> 'If there are such issues which the leaders are interested in, I will work with the Women's Union because it is their specialisation' (Poverty Reduction Staff Member, Co To commune, An Giang).

Inadequate capacity building

Capacity strengthening initiatives to support the integration of gender—and its intersection with the vulnerabilities of ethnic minorities—into social protection programming are also of poor quality. While urgently needed, existing initiatives tend to be tokenistic and generic rather than tailored to specific policy needs:

> 'Our cadres don't know how to include gender in poverty reduction planning. For me at the moment, for example, it is difficult to get information about gender inequality and gender bias or how to identify gender inequality and gender bias in a certain case. Training is needed, so we know how to identify gender inequality and gender bias and how to mainstream gender' (Head, Child Care Division, DOLISA, An Giang).

> 'If the leader knows it [gender mainstreaming], he will convey his rough understanding to the cadres and tell the cadres to communicate with people. You don't have enough budget to train all of them. Otherwise, if all leaders are sent to be trained, then who will be at work?' (Agriculture Officer, To Co commune, An Giang).

> Q: 'Was there a discussion session in the training course on gender?' A: 'The training ended without discussion, we only did a test, because there were too many participants, more than 50 people. The time was short, it was only one day' (Head, Health Station, An Giang).

And, as highlighted by a recent evaluation of the UN Joint Programme on Gender Equality's efforts to support capacity strengthening around the implementation of relevant gender equality legislation, the complexity and resourcing required to adequately addressing gender capacity development needs is considerable. This will also necessitate a strong strategy, shared vision and long-term (estimates suggest at least 10–15-year) action plan (Beck, 2011).

In addition, workshops at the provincial level indicated that commune poverty reduction staff are generally underinvested in, and are often transferred from one office to the other. Training in gender equality for poverty reduction staff was identified as one of top needs in provincial poverty reduction planning.

> 'I grasp the knowledge which is useful for my communication work. But I don't have funds to hold training for the people' (Head, Health Station, Ha Giang).

> 'The budget for training for poverty reduction staff is very limited. There is no training for poverty reduction persons-in-charge' (Statistics Staff Member, Ha Giang).

The challenges are even more complex and multilayered when it comes to addressing the specific vulnerabilities of ethnic minority women, who often remain isolated from income-generating and public decision-making opportunities as a result of linguistic and cultural barriers. Indeed, even when such barriers are recognised by policy actors, they are often addressed in a top-down way, as the following quote highlights:

> 'Training is needed for almost all aspects so that the officers have the skills and solutions to organise their work […] At least they must know the usage, customs and language of the ethnic minority. With these skills, they can make the local people understand clearer and faster' (Chair, PCC, Lao Va Chai commune, Ha Giang).

> '[H'mong women] are disadvantaged because they can't speak Vietnamese. They can't address their needs [at meetings] and have to lean on the local officials' (Chair, PPC, Lao Va Chai commune, Ha Giang).

> Q: 'What is the difficulty in terms of human resources in implementing poverty reduction inclusive of gender?' A: 'Poverty reduction cadres make up 30% of the commune staff. The majority of them are Kinh ethnics who are unable to communicate well in Khmer, so they encounter many difficulties in surveying and understanding women's needs and inner wishes' (Vice-chair, PPC, To Co commune, An Giang).

As a result, women living in mountainous areas of Ha Giang tend not to be informed of and are inadequately consulted regarding poverty reduction programmes, and their chances of

improving their livelihoods are significantly lower. They also need to rely on their husbands or local officials to translate programme materials:

'Most poor rural women don't know Vietnamese. They cannot listen to and read Vietnamese. When we disseminate information, we have to ask the hamlet mayors for interpretation' (Labour and Social Affairs Staff Members, Ha Giang).

Lack of physical access to remotely located villages, as well as limited capacity of programme implementers, hinders programme implementation in particular:

'Despite policies being put in place, it is still difficult [to reach beneficiaries] because the terrain hinders travelling and communication is not deep and wide enough, making people's understanding limited. Sectors such as labour, health care and insurance do coordinate, but the coordination is not very close, leading to redundancy and insufficiency. It is difficult to find who to blame. If anyone is to be blamed, it should be the grassroots level which is closest to the people but doesn't identify all the beneficiaries' (Vice-director, DEMA, Ha Giang).

Weak monitoring and evaluation practices

Finally, these issues are compounded by broader governance and public administration capacity deficits, as highlighted by citizen responses reflected in the 2010 Viet Nam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index (UNDP et al., 2010). This identifies ongoing gaps in transparency, vertical accountability and public service delivery, as well as the fact that many Vietnamese citizens remain unaware, for instance, of community accountability mechanisms such as People's Inspection Boards and Community Investment Supervision Boards. Indeed, our research findings underscore the urgent need for more effective M&E mechanisms vis-à-vis social protection programmes more specifically. Despite declared capacity to disaggregate programme data at the local level, collecting data disaggregated by gender is not common. In both provinces, M&E is weak, particularly in the case of gender-disaggregated data, and does not seem to be encouraged by decision makers:

'We do it ourselves [collect data on women] without any request, so that when the provincial or district authority asks, we have data in hand for reporting' (Head, VWU, Ha Giang).

As a result, limited availability and collection of gender-disaggregated data hinders both the design and the implementation of gender-sensitive policies:

Q: 'Is it feasible to mainstream [gender equality] in the social economic development report?' A: 'It is only a formality. The social economic development report only says "pay attention to [gender equality]", without any specific targets for evaluation. It also mentions little about gender inequality in some industries or professions. It is impossible to evaluate or punish anyone for failure to achieve'. Q: 'What guidance do you think is needed to change this?' A: 'I think that guidance should be concrete' (Head, Child Care Division, DOLISA, An Giang).

While some respondents were aware of the importance of gender-disaggregated data, and even collected it of their own accord, others were convinced that disaggregating data by gender would result in the neglect of other social groups. It might be noted that very few informants have been sensitised as to the merits of gender-disaggregated data collection and analysis:

'[The approach] is not disaggregated all over the health care sector. If it was, we would care only for women not men or care for children not the elderly. In the health care sector, men and women, old and young are equal. […] The province has a board specialising in care for women so we won't do it, to avoid overlapping, wasting time and ineffectiveness. In health care, all patients should be paid attention' (Officer, Department of Health, An Giang).

This seems to be the result of a conviction that all men and women are equal, and therefore poverty reduction programming should not benefit any group more than any other:

> Q: 'Are female members in poor families paid more attention?' A: 'They are as equal as men' (Statistics Officer, An Giang).

In addition, an interview with the DEMA Vice-director from Ha Giang indicates that policymakers in Viet Nam do not rely enough on evidence when designing new policies and programme implementation strategies:

> 'Viet Nam has a weakness in that research findings and studies are various but their impact on policy implementation is very small' (Vice-director, DEMA, Ha Giang).

However, international donors were said to have positively affected local authorities' management and supervision skills in Ha Giang. These actors have robust M&E practices, whereas government programmes lack resources for evaluation purposes:

> 'We also have audit and inspection teams but we don't have enough conditions and human resources to follow up tightly' (Vice-director, DPI, Ha Giang).

5.2 Interests

Mixed levels of commitment from leadership and limited gender expertise

A second set of political economy challenges relates to the interests and incentive structures of key actors. Perhaps of most concern is the at best mixed level of commitment to the promotion of gender-sensitive social protection among political leaders. Some key informants noted some improvement in terms of at least acknowledging the role of gender in shaping development outcomes, as reflected in more gender-disaggregated development targets. However, they also emphasised that many leaders had limited gender awareness and still more limited access to gender expertise.

> 'The first difficulty is the awareness of the leader. It stands first because, in Viet Nam, the leader decides everything. If he doesn't agree, all the stuff of mainstreaming or implementation will never succeed. Let's change the awareness of the leader and let him know the issue' (Head, Social Protection Division, DOLISA, An Giang).

> 'Training may be good, but it can't ensure that the issue will be put into action. If the leader doesn't allow it to be included, it will fail. So it is very difficult' (Head, Social Protection Division, DOLISA, An Giang).

> 'Gender issues should be strengthened in state management. Specialists should help the PPC and DOLISA in proposing gender policies in state management or put gender policies into life' (Vice-director, DEMA, Ha Giang).

These limitations are reinforced by the generally hierarchical nature of both formal and informal politics in Viet Nam. Despite the rapid growth of Vietnamese civil society, the country's political system remains largely dominated by the Vietnamese Communist Party and, as Gainsborough (2006: 37) notes,

> The idea of an oppositional sphere simply does not fit with the philosophical underpinnings in which the Communist Party of Vietnam is rooted and still draws […] Given Vietnam's extensive engagement with the outside world over the last twenty years, it is testament to the deep-rooted nature of such ideas that they have remained largely unchanged [since Doi Moi].'

Limited incentives structures to include gender

Limited interest in tackling gender inequalities is further perpetuated by a general perception that 'women's issues' are dealt with by the VWU and are not, therefore, the professional

responsibility of other government agencies. In order to address this quasi-ghettoisation of gender issues, key informants emphasised the importance of clear, detailed and tailored guidance at all levels—beyond top-line national legislation and policies.

> *'Gender equality needs to be inserted into every poverty reduction programme and every national target programme' (Vice-director, DEMA, Ha Giang).*

> *'I want the PPC to issue a directive. This is a basis to plan implementation or to make a work plan for gender equality cadres. It is the starting point for influencing the People's Council to issue a directive, assign a gender equality cadre or establish a gender equality division. The division will dispatch gender equality cadres to the districts. The cadres are based in the districts and the division is based in the province' (Head, Child Care Division, DOLISA, An Giang).*

Gender-related tasks are not included in the regular responsibilities of poverty reduction staff. As a result, the gender dimension in programmes that originate from other areas than poverty reduction is often ignored and not accounted for—especially with regard to provision of complementary services, such as health:

> *Q: 'Does the provincial health sector have any special regulation to promote gender equality?' A: 'I don't know. It seems that there is no document. It seems that there is no regulation about this matter' (Planning and Finance Division, Department of Health, Ha Giang).*

Concerns about targets and achievability of gender-related targets

There was also some anxiety about the achievability of gender equality targets and a real concern that the mainstreaming of gender should be complemented by the construction of concrete and feasible performance targets:

> *'The social economic development report only mentions "pay attention to [gender equality]" without any specific targets for evaluation. It is only a formality. It is impossible to evaluate or punish anyone for failure to achieve […] I think that guidance should be concrete' (Head, Child Care Division, DOLISA, An Giang).*

> *Q: 'Is gender-inclusive poverty reduction possible in your commune?' A: 'It is possible. If specific targets are set, the commune will concentrate its resources to reach these. If the targets are general, they will be implemented without attention to women. If specific targets are set, attention will be higher, especially among female cadres and relevant sectors' (Vice-chair, PPC, Co To commune, An Giang).*

> *'Gender may create fluctuation in the implementing process. Gender, if included in quantitative targets, may pose the risk of unachievability by year-end. If you set a target of including 100% of households headed by women, and in fact a vast number of poor households also need funds for economic development, you are unable to select poor households headed by women as you have to distribute funds evenly. So the target is unachievable' (Vice-chair, PPC, Co To commune, An Giang).*

Part of the challenge also seems to lie in teasing out and learning lessons from the arguably more effective experience of programme implementation in areas with clear goals involving women's 'practical gender needs' (to borrow Molyneux's (1985) terminology), such as those undertaken by the VWU, including microcredit, vocational training and household sanitation and nutrition improvements. In this case, not only are the programme goals generally in full alignment with the VWU's institutional remit, but also development projects help to mobilise members by meeting their practical needs and, through this, to raise the profile and prestige of the VWU within the broader political system (Deputy Chair, VWU, 2009 interview, cited in Jones and Tran, 2010). However, this neat alignment of institutional interests is much less evident in the case of poverty reduction and social protection programming where gender equality-related activities are often time- and energy-intensive, seen as secondary to sector-specific goals and indeed often not appreciated by senior managers (Jones and Tran, 2010). In order to address this disconnect, it would appear that not only is there an urgent need for

implementation guidelines from the central government twinned with grassroots monitoring mechanisms and supported by specific budget lines for gender activities within poverty reduction programmes, but also that sub-national leaders need to be persuaded of the close relationship between tackling gender inequalities and achieving socioeconomic development gains. It is to a discussion of the importance of ideas and attitudinal change that we now turn.

Limited meaningful civil society participation mechanisms

The role of civil society in shaping social protection policies and programmes in Viet Nam is relatively weak, and many respondents indicated that mechanisms strengthening civil participation were urgently needed. Although local women can express their opinions through the VWU, which is responsible for collecting opinions at the local level and sending them to province officials, the effects of these mechanisms seems to be limited.

> *'We hold people's meetings for consultation where we mention some key issues to be implemented by the province and ask people to comment, then we summarise this. The most urgent needs will be sent to the provincial authorities who assign them to a certain level to deal with' (Head, VWU, An Giang).*

In addition, interviews indicated that, in mountainous areas of Ha Giang, representation of women's voice in community meetings was very limited:

> *'Each household sends a representative, usually the household head. In mountainous areas, few household heads are female, so the female proportion in such meetings is low. It is a common matter' (Vice-director, DEMA, Ha Giang).*

Some respondents expressed reluctance and a lack of conviction in terms of the importance of civil participation mechanisms. They pointed to limited education and awareness among local people, which limits the quality of their input. As a result, some respondents at the provincial level are discouraged from organising field visits:

> *'The quality of such meetings is not high because the participants don't have enough understanding to make suggestions. The length of the meetings is not enough either. The meetings end before the participants can understand their content' (Vice-director, DOLISA, Ha Giang).*

> *'The awareness of local people is limited so they can't give ideas. Sometimes, our staff are not eager to go to the field to collect opinions' (Head, Social Protection Division, DOLISA, An Giang).*

Nevertheless, despite difficulties in gathering opinions at the grassroots level, there seems to be a need for greater inclusion of local people in policy formulation, as specifically expressed by programme implementers:

> *'I would like to suggest that the central government ask for opinions widely at grassroots level before issuing a policy. The government should also consider the opinions proposed and give its ideas about these. Sometimes, opinions forwarded to the higher level are ignored' (Head, Social Protection Division, DOLISA, An Giang).*

Interviews suggest that, although social protection programmes include some gender provisions, such as vocational training for women, giving priority to female-headed households or microcredit programmes targeting women, these measures are designed to address some of women's practical needs and do not attempt to challenge power relations within households and achieve more strategic changes:

> *'Most women enjoy favourable conditions. They may benefit more or at least equally. For example, women can participate in many training classes such as on knitting, sewing and embroidery; meanwhile, men only participate in cow husbandry. Women are not only trained vocationally, they are also supported with a*

subsidy for transportation and daily meals' (Statistics Officer, Co To commune, An Giang).

In spite of limited effects, respondents from both provinces seem to be convinced that social protection policies have generally improved poor women's agency and encouraged them to voice their opinions. The VWU is especially active in proposing new policies and raising funds for women's specific projects:

'Women's voice has been improved. Women at the grassroots level know their local needs and understand the province's social protection policies and then are bold enough to make proposals which work well. That's why the PPC approved the establishment of a social development fund—thanks to women's voice. Women have both their funds and the trust of local leadership' (Head, VWU, An Giang).

'Women used to be shy and it [was reflected] in their access to loans. They didn't dare to apply for a loan even [when] we encouraged them because they were afraid they didn't know how to use the loan, [so] they can't repay it. Some households got loans and didn't do anything with it. They just put it at home and then paid it back. Now women are more active. Many of them have applied for loans' (Head, VWU, Ha Giang).

Additional lessons may be learnt from the experience of civil society organisations involved in addressing gender-based violence, which have sought to combine national-level policy advocacy to promote legislative change with grassroots behavioural change communication initiatives. Organisations such as the Centre for Studies and Applied Sciences in Gender, Family, Women and Adolescents (CSAGA) have recognised that tackling social vulnerabilities such as intra-household violence involves not only material support and better services but also community-wide attitudinal changes (see Box 4).

Box 4: Tackling social vulnerabilities holistically—the importance of complementary awareness-raising activities in social protection interventions

The situation of Vietnamese NGOs is quite different from that of their Western counterparts, with most perceiving themselves as partners of the state working on development projects in accordance with existing government programmes (Thayer, 2009). However, in the case of organisations working on gender-based violence, it seems that civil society is relatively well organised and that NGOs openly voice their concern about the current approach to violence prevention and redress programmes.

Key informant interviews suggest that, while civil society approaches to addressing gender-based violence are quite innovative and are underpinned by the promotion of rights of women and children who are vulnerable to violence and discrimination, government-led responses are more conservative and focus mainly on preservation of the family unit. For instance, reconciliation committees (intended to resolve intra-household tensions at the community level) focus on mediation and persuasion as their main tools to address cases of domestic violence, rather than offering broader support to survivors. Assailants are often simply asked to stop their behaviour by the reconciliation team—often comprising local officials who lack the requisite training and expertise to deal with such dynamics. An interview with a MOCST official confirmed that the ultimate aim of any intervention is the 'family well-being', and that marriage break-ups should be discouraged.

Q: 'How much are the Fatherland and Farmers' Union interested in gender issues? Has there been any change in recent years?' A: 'They are more interested. They go to hamlets to persuade wine drinkers or wife assailants to change their behaviour.' Q: 'Who goes to persuade them?' A: 'There are 16 hamlets which are delegated to 16 people. Women also do the communication work to both men and women. The Farmers' Union and Fatherland representatives take charge of some hamlets' (Head, VWU, Lao Va Chai commune, Ha Giang).

In contrast, NGOs such as members of the Domestic Violence Prevention Network in Vietnam often adopt a more transformative approach, which aims at empowering victims through the provision of knowledge and skills so they can exit violent relations more sustainably.

5.3   Ideas

The third set of challenges that a political economy approach is concerned with relates to the dominant set of discourses of ideas that underpin policy debates about vulnerability, risk and social protection, and the role of the state in addressing these. Unpacking and engaging with such ideas—which are typically multiple and shaped by specific sectoral and disciplinary perspectives—is critical if social protection policies and programmes are to address the economic and social vulnerabilities and risks experienced by men and women, boys and girls in an effective and sustainable way.

General recognition of the relevance of gender to development and poverty reduction

In the case of our focus on gender and social protection, the good news is that there does seem to be a general openness about the interlinked nature of gender equality and sustainable development. The links between power dynamics combined with traditional gender roles and the level of gender-based violence are also recognised, particularly by civil society actors.

'Due attention must be paid to gender quality because all activities must have the participation of both men and women so they will last for a long time. If an activity is attended by either men or women, it is decided by just half of the world. [When] both men and women participate we can promote equality […] We wanted to [hold] a meeting attended by local people, for instance 20 people including 10 men and 10 women so that we can get ideas from both sexes. So, for example, men may want to get loans for doing business, such as purchasing a motorbike and becoming a motorbike taxi drvier but women may have different needs, such as raising domestic animals' (Poverty Reduction Officer, Lao Va Chai commune, Ha Giang).

'All poverty reduction programmes are interrelated, for example employment should be created for both men and women; health care issues should be addressed to achieve sustainable poverty reduction. Reproductive health care for women is an important issue as well. The first priority should be given to education, ensuring children, especially girls, go to school. We need to make efforts to universalise lower secondary school. It is a requirement for women to participate in middle vocational training which accepts ninth graders or higher. All sectors need female workers' (Vice-chair, PPC, Co To commune, An Giang).

Confusion between gender-sensitive and women-targeted approaches and concerns about the dependency of the poor

However, our key informant interviews suggest that this top-line support may be undermined by a relatively common misperception: that addressing gender inequalities leads to gender bias and even the neglect of other vulnerable social groups:

'If [the programming approach] were disaggregated, we would care only for women not men or care for children not the elderly. In the health care sector, men and women, old and young are equal. […] The province has a board specialising in care for women so we won't do it, to avoid overlapping, wasting time and ineffectiveness. In health care, all patients should be paid attention' (Officer, Department of Health, An Giang).

Widespread concerns—including among officials from DOLISA and DEMA—that state support fosters dependency among the poor pose further obstacles to substantial investments in social protection.

'Providing the poor with a subsidy is like giving them a fish. After they eat, they have nothing. Support in materials might make the poor become dependent and poverty reduction activities more difficult. It discourages those who try their best. Hardworking people don't have any support while lazy people do. So, the fish-like subsidy should be removed. The common trend is to show the poor how to do it. Now, officers come and instruct them in detail' (Vice-director, DEMA, Ha Giang).

'Many people want to join the poor list in order to get support. […] In fact, it is impossible to hasten the process of poverty reduction and hunger elimination. The improvement of education standards may help […] The system of policies always has two sides and what we should do is to enhance the positive side and restrain the negative side' (Vice-director, DOLISA, Ha Giang).

'The PPC thinks we shouldn't pay them an allowance. If the programme pays them once, then all participants in the future will ask for money. The scenario should be avoided. Let people understand they learn for knowledge, not for money' (Vice-chair, PPC, Co To commune, An Giang).

Given the strength of these attitudes about the 'deserving poor' and the role of the state in addressing poverty, it is worth reflecting on how they intersect with broader ideas in the doi moi era about appropriate gender roles. Werner (2002), for instance, notes that the doi moi transformation has been highly gendered. In contrast with the idealised 'socialist woman' and 'socialist man' during the War of Resistance, the doi moi approach was premised on a conceptualisation of the household as the primary economic unit, with household members' primary role being to contribute to familial prosperity and in turn broader national development. Development of the household economy is in turn underpinned by an emphasis on the 'greater and more efficient utilisation of women's labour' (33), in terms of both production and reproduction, twinned with a gendered division of labour whereby men are assumed to be the heads of households and women to sacrifice their individual interests in the interests of family advancement.

Indeed, in the 2006 national Family Survey, most respondents equated family headship—typically male—with effective leadership: household heads 'act responsible and as an example' (89.1%) and 'are able to make decisions' (78.5%) (MOCST et al., 2008). The same survey revealed that decision-making patterns within the family are highly gender segregated. Wives tend to make decisions on daily routine life-related expenditures involving small amounts of money, whereas husbands tend to make decisions about more major things, including buying or repairing the house or land, purchasing expensive household goods and taking out loans. In short then, in the context of a return to more traditional gender roles under doi moi and the simultaneous shrinking of the state from public sphere provision, this suggests that gendered poverty and vulnerability tends not to be viewed as a core concern of the state but rather normalised as part of 'modern family' life (Werner, 2002).[5]

That said, there is buy-in to investment in girls' and women's human capital, and perhaps this constitutes a key entry point for future social protection initiatives. Key informants generally subscribed to the view that the most efficient way to address poverty was through the provision of skills that would allow programme beneficiaries to become self-sufficient and essentially more employable. Workshops at the provincial level in both An Giang and Ha Giang confirmed that access to education and provision of vocational skills and credit are considered a priority for gendered poverty reduction.

Q: 'Could you suggest three priorities in gender-inclusive poverty reduction?' A: 'Education, vocational training and employment, health care for women' (Vice-chair, PPC, Co To commune, An Giang).

'We should focus on the improvement of women's and girls' education so things can be changed. Parents play an important role. They have inadequate education and still follow backward usages and customs. In economic terms, if you assess the household economy only, it is possible for you to reach the target in a certain phase of poverty reduction' (Chair, PPC, Lao Va Chai commune, Ha Giang).

'When there is support for reducing poverty available to them, they will get loans to develop the economy, and thus their role and position in the family will improve.

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5 Werner (2002) notes that this normalisation process is manifested in ubiquitous public billboards depicting the nuclear family of Husband, Wife, Son, Daughter in service of the nation.

Second, their capacity will improve as well, they will become bolder' (Head, Social and Family Division, VWU, Ha Giang).

6 Conclusions and policy and practice implications

Overall, our analysis suggests that Viet Nam's national social protection system plays at best a limited role in addressing gendered risks and vulnerabilities. On the one hand, key strategy and policy frameworks are in place—including the Gender Equality Law, the new NTPPR, Resolution 80/NQ-CP on Sustainable Poverty Reduction (2011–20) and a new Master Plan on Social Protection—which together have considerable potential to promote more gender-sensitive social protection interventions. On the other hand, the political economy dynamics of decentralised policy and programme implementation need to be tackled urgently and systematically if scarce resources are to be harnessed effectively for the well-being of all citizens. Action needs to be informed by an understanding of the institutional blockages; actor interests and incentive structures; and political cultural ideas underpinning current approaches to poverty reduction and social protection, and the ways in which gender power relations permeate each of these domains.

While many of these dynamics emerged as common to both An Giang and Ha Giang provinces, where our primary research was conducted, the challenges were more multilayered in Ha Giang. Ha Giang's geographical position, with many remote mountainous areas, hinders the delivery of programmes and essential services, which is especially important in light of the province's substantial ethnic minority population and its significant proportion of illiterate women. Institutional and human resource capacities also appear to be visibly weaker in Ha Giang, especially at the commune level, and language barriers pose considerable obstacles to effective programme implementation. This is exacerbated by a top-down and siloed approach to policy formulation twinned with an underinvestment in social protection programming human resources at the grassroots level. An Giang province appears to have stronger institutional and human resource capacities. Efforts to coordinate social protection programmes at the provincial level and local mobilisation of financial resources are relative strengths here, and have made for more effective programme implementation.

Our findings therefore point to the importance of the following policy and practice implications:

1 Given the multiple national institutional actors involved in social protection, **promote strong leadership and improved coordination mechanisms**, including among those involved in the rollout of gender equality legislation. Here, it will be critical for government agencies and development partners to discuss feasible options as the new Master Plan on Social Protection is rolled out. Experience to date indicates that achieving a more joined-up approach will require no less than supra-ministerial leadership, potentially at the Deputy Prime Minister level. This is especially the case in light of ongoing tensions and differing institutional motivations among key ministries involved in these areas, and the inadequate results of Decree 70/2008/ND-CP detailing the implementation of some articles of the Gender Equality Law in terms of responsibilities for the integration of gender into sub-national socio-economic development plans and programmes. A similar focus on **strategic, streamlined and well-resourced gender capacity strengthening support on the part of the UN and other development partners** is needed to complement such mechanisms (see Beck, 2011). Here, building on the work of the Gender Action Partnership—a quadripartite policy forum on gender supported by the Joint Programme on Gender Equality—could be a useful starting point.

2 **Foster more decentralised models of social protection programming and budgeting processes**, with adequate feedback loops from the grassroots level on key vulnerabilities and demands for support, to more effectively tailor social protection

interventions to the most vulnerable. Given its community reach and relevant institutional goals, the VWU could be mandated with playing a larger role in vulnerability assessments and programme rollout, but its involvement would need to be adequately funded and carefully designed so as to promote inter-sectoral partnerships rather than reinforcing existing siloed ways of working.

3   **Invest in improved quantity and quality of human resources deployed to tackle poverty and vulnerability**, including a focus on regular, adequately tailored and sufficiently detailed capacity strengthening on gender equity issues for staff at all levels (from central government to the commune level). In this regard, given the growing number of gender equality-focused civil society organisations, partnerships could be explored to better harness existing gender expertise in the development and rollout of more institutionalised and carefully sequenced capacity-strengthening interventions. Particular attention should be paid to supporting capacity development for officials and programme implementers involved in tackling the intersection between gender and ethnicity-related vulnerabilities—an area which remains very under-resourced.

4   **Support the development of clear and tailored implementation directives and guidelines** at all levels. This should include working towards the development of corresponding and achievable performance targets for staff in relevant departments for the longer-term institutionalisation of gender mainstreaming within social protection strategies and programming.

5   **Strengthen information management and M&E systems** as well as the development of gender-sensitive indicators to identify problem areas, especially at the provincial, district and commune levels. In this regard, the new national system of gender indicators being developed by the GSO and issued by Prime Minister's Decision 56/2011/QD-TTg is a welcome step. This initiative should be supported by carefully tailored capacity-building support to the GSO so it can develop appropriate instruments and related data analysis plans to capture the way in which gender affects the experience of poverty and vulnerability, as well as access to and outcomes of social protection programming. Data collection and reporting approaches could be further strengthened by the introduction and adaptation of social audit methodologies that have been piloted recently by MPI and UNICEF to promote adequate citizen feedback mechanisms.

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Appendix 1: Key informants and workshop participants

List of key informants

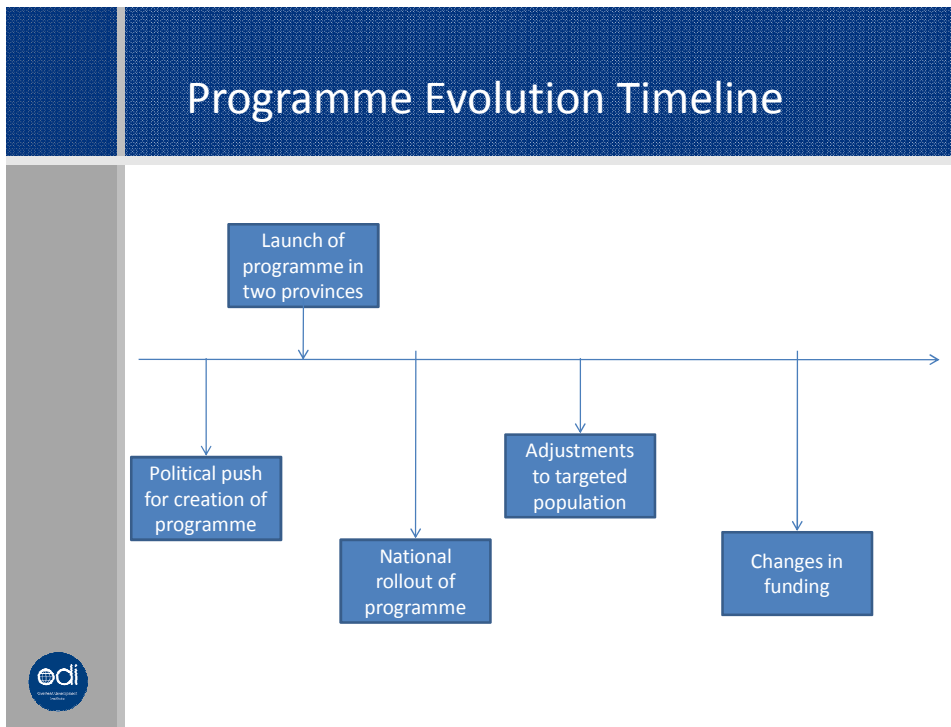|		Name	Position and office
1	**Central level**	Ms Than Thi Thien Huong	Senior Official, DFID
2		Mr Mai Quynh Nam	Senior Researcher, IOS
3		Ms Nguyen Thi Bich Thuy	Director of Institute on Female Labours, ILSSA, MOLISA
	An Giang		
4	**Provincial level**	Ms Lam Tuyet Mai	Vice-director, DEMA
5		Mr Le Thanh Son	Head, Social Protection Division, DOLISA
6		Ms Truong Cam Tu	Vice-head, Social Division, DPI
7		Ms Nguyen Thuy Phuong	Officer, DOH
8		Ms Nguyen Thi Hai	Head, VWU
9		Mr La Cong Tam	Vice-director, DOET
10		Mr Nguyen Van Dat	Head, Gender and Child Protection Division, DOLISA
	Co To commune		
11		Mr Bui Van Tuoi	Poverty Reduction Officer
12		Mr Tieu Phu Long	Vice-chair, PPC
13		Ms Le Ho Bich Hang	Head, VWU
14		Ms Nguyen Van Huu	Head, Health Station
15		Mr Tran Hai Tung	Rector, Lower Secondary School
16		Mr Vo Van Dinh	Statistics Staff Member
17		Ms Ha Thi Ngoc Mai	Vice-chair, PPC
18		Mr Pham Van Hieu	Agricultural Official
	Ha Giang		
19	**Provincial level**	Mr Mai Van Huong	Vice-director, DEMA
20		Mr Pham Ngoc Dung	Vice-director, DOLISA
21		Mr Hoang Van Mau	Vice-director, DPI
22		Mr Hoang Hong Tu	Vice-head, Planning and Finance Division, DOH
23		Ms Hoang Thi Van	Head, Social and Family Division, VWU
24		Mr Nguyen Manh Ha	Head of Office, DOET
25		Ms Chu Thi Huyen	DOLISA Office Staff Member
26		Mr Tran Quoc Khanh	Vice-head, DOLISA
	Lao Va Chai commune		
27		Ms Leng Thi Liem	Labour and Social Affairs Officer
28		Mr Nguyen Van Nghia	Chair, PPC
29		Ms Vang Thi My	Head, VWU
30		Ms Nguyen Thi Luong	Head, Health Station
31		Ms Nguyen Thi Canh	Rector, Lower Secondary School
32		Mr Tran Xuan Phong	Statistics Staff Member

List of workshop participants

		Name	Position and office
	An Giang		
1	**Provincial level**	Nguyen Kim Phuong	Head of Policy and Legal issues, VWU
2		Tran Thanh Tu	Staff Member, DPI
3		Tran Duy Hieu	Vice-head, Labour and Social Affairs Division, Tri Ton district
4		Tran Van Loi	Labour and Social Affair Official, Chau Phu district
5		Nguyen Minh Tuan	Vice-head, Labour and Social Affairs Division, Chau Thanh district
6		Nguyen Tuyet Giang	Vice-head, Labour and Social Affairs Division, Phu Tan district
7		Nguyen Thi Nga	Head, DOET
8		Nguyen Tuan Kiet	Labour and Social Affairs Official, Tan Chau district
9		Nguyen Van Thai	Labour and Social Affairs Official, Cho Moi district
10		Nguyen Minh Hai	Head, Labour and Social Affairs Division, An Phu district
11		Tran Thien Phap	Vice-head, Labour and Social Affairs Division, Thoai Sơn district
12		Huynh Thi Hue	Vice-head, Labour and Social Affairs Division, Chau Doc district
13		Lam Tuyet Mai	Vice-director, DEMA
14		Le Van Vinh	Staff Member, DOLISA
15		Le Thanh Son	Head, Social Protection Division, DOLISA
16		Nguyen Quang Minh Đuc	Staff Member, DOLISA
17		Nguyen Tuyet Thu	Staff Member, DOLISA

		Name	Position and office
18		Nguyen Thi Thanh Hang	Staff, Fatherland Front
19		Nguyen Thi My Linh	Staff Member, DOLISA
20		Vo Thi Cam Hương	Staff Member, DOLISA
21		Nguyen Van Dat	Head. Gender and Child Protection Division, DOLISA
22		Nguyen Thi Hương	Vice-head, Labour and Social Affairs Division, Tinh Bien district
	Co To commune		
1		Ha Thị Ngọc Mai	Vice-chair, PPC
2		Tran Hai Tung	Rector, Lower Secondary School
3		Nguyen Thach Liem	Staff Member, Party Committee
4		Vo Van Dinh	Statistics Staff Member
5		Le Ho Bich Hang	Head, VWU
6		Nguyen Van Hanh	Vice-head, Fatherland Front
7		Vo Thi Hien	Legal Official
8		Pham Van Hieu	Agricultural Official
9		Neang Thi Quyen	Family and Child Staff Member
10		Bui Van Tuoi	Poverty Staff Member
	Ha Giang		
1	Provincial level	Pham Ngoc Dung	Vice-director, DOLISA
2		Nguyen Manh Ha	Head of Office, DOET
3		Phung Thi Giang	Head, Child Care and Protection Division, DOLISA
4		Chu Thi Huyên	Office Staff Member, DOLISA
5		Tran Quoc Khanh	Vice-head of Office, DOLISA
6		Nguyen Dinh Du	Head, DOH
7		Ma Cong Mach	Staff Member, DEMA
8		Vu Thi Lan	Vice-head, Culture and Social Division, DPI
9		Nguyen Tien Dung	Staff Member, Social Protection Division, DOLISA
10		Đinh Thi Hai	Vice-head, Family Division, VWU
	Lao Va Chai commune		
1		Nguyen Van Nghia	Head, PPC
2		Sung Mi Thao	Head, People's Council
3		Ly Van Tuyen	Vice-head, PPC
4		San Thi Tang	Labour and Social Affairs Official
5		Leng Thi Liem	Labour and Social Affairs Staff Member
6		Vang Thi My	Head, VWU
7		Nguyen Thi Luong	Head, Health Station
8		Nguyen Thi Canh	Rector, Lower Secondary School
9		Tran Xuan Phong	Statistics Staff Member

Appendix 2: Workshop instruments

Programme Evolution Timeline

Gender-sensitive SWOT analysis on social protection programme implementation
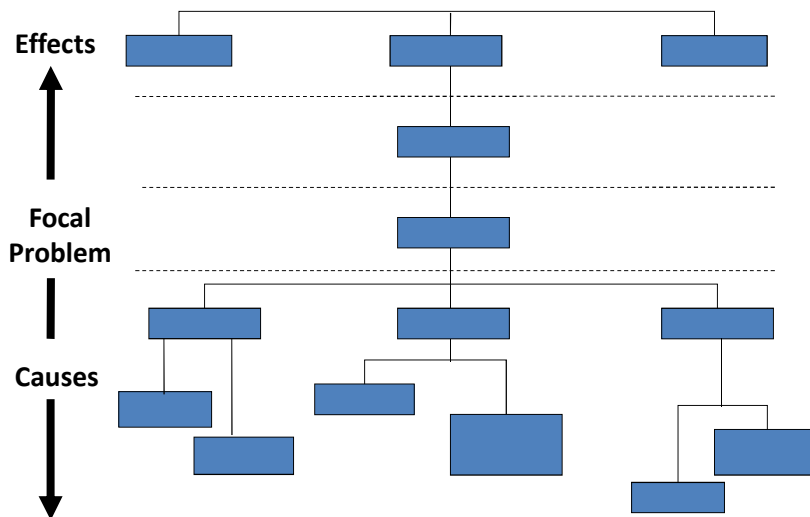
STRENGTHS	WEAKNESSES
OPPORTUNITIES	CHALLENGES

Problem tree approach

- Problem tree – to explore political economy dynamics behind programme decision making and implementation
- Scenario exercise

Problem tree analysis

Scenario exercises to identify key barriers to and opportunities for change

Three scenarios:

1. Sub-national-level attitudes to gender in social protection

2. Sectoral patterning improvements as a result of movements in the field of social protection

3. A logjam but possibility for space through third-party interventions

Scenario exercise

- a) 'If funding for social protection for vulnerable people in your locality were to double, would this improve the ability to ensure that men, women, girls and boys benefit equitably? How?'

- b) 'If gender equality legislation provisions to report on gender-specific benefits of all policies and programmes were compulsory and monitored by the president/ Prime Minister, what if anything would you do differently regarding the implementation of the NTPPR?'

- c) 'If performance incentives (e.g. pay, promotions) for government officials were linked to demonstrating improvements in gender-specific vulnerabilities (e.g. women's time poverty, women's access to vocational training, literacy, safety from inter-personal violence) would this make a difference in how the NTPPR is implemented? If so what?'

Appendix 3: Coding scheme for key informant interviews

Demographic data		
Ethnicity		
Gender		
	Male	
	Female	
Locality		
	Central	
	An Giang	
		Province level
		Co To commune
	Ha Giang	
		Province level
		Lao Va Chai commune
Occupation		
Institutions focusing on poverty/vulnerability reduction		
Formal institutions		
	Level at which decision making takes place	
	Budgeting mechanisms	
	Changes over time	
	Cooperation between agencies	
	Differences in decision making between districts/provinces	
	Representation of social groups	
	Sub-national agencies' influence in shaping national policies	
	Agencies with influence over funding/implementation	
		Source of influence
		Degree of influence
	Mechanisms for gender equality promotion	
		Effectiveness of these mechanisms
Informal power		
	Informal factors influencing decision making	
	Informal power challenges to policy reform	
	Interest in promoting gender equality	
	Opposition to addressing gender issues	
Civic participation		
	Mechanisms for strengthening poor people's participation	
		Inclusion of different social groups
Accountability in delivering programmes		
	Follow rules. Why?	
	Depart from rules. Why?	
Donor influence		
Implementation efficiency		
Difficulties with programme implementation		
Capacity building		
	Types of training that would be useful	
	Capacity building for social protection	
		Budget availability for training
		Who receives the training
		Who conducts the training
		Training content
		Effectiveness of training
		Incentives to attend training

	Training in gender-sensitive programme implementation	
		Budget availability for training
		Who receives the training
		Who conducts the training
		Training content
		Effectiveness of training
		Incentives to attend training
Coordination		
	Challenges related to coordination	
	How cooperation could be improved	
	Decision making on implementation	
		Obstacles
	Availability of gender experts	
		Among programme staff
		NGOs, academics, women activists
	Consultation with other ministries	
		Availability and use of programme data (officials)
		Requirement to collect data (implementers)
		Sharing data with other departments/NGOs, etc.
M&E		
	Type of data gathered	
		Disaggregation by gender
		Disaggregation by age
	Gathered data utilisation	
	Type of data it would be useful to collect	
	Awareness of M&E purpose (implementers)	
	Time spent on data M&E activities (implementers)	
Linkages to complementary services/programmes		
	Type of complementary programme	
	Who runs complementary programmes	
		Government agencies
		NGOs, etc.
	Awareness among programme participants	
		Awareness of entitlements to other programmes
		Awareness-raising initiatives
	Lack of linkages to other programmes	
	Additional linkages desired	
Programme impact		
Description		
Success		
Most significant impact		
Ineffectiveness		
Language barriers with ethnic minorities		
Challenges		
Gender provisions		
	Awareness raising about gender issues	
		Budget for awareness raising
	Proportion of male/female participants	
	Female-headed households	
	Impacts on poor women/girls	
Other		
Respondent suggestions		
Ideas/opinions about poverty/social protection		
Opinions/attitudes towards decentralisation		

Appendix 4: Key informant questions

Questions for officials

	Questions	Who?
Institutions focusing on poverty and vulnerability reduction:		
Formal institutions	• How are policy decisions made at the provincial/district level? (Probe: at the provincial level who makes decisions about policy change?) • Which branch (e.g. legislative/executive) or government/ agency/ies make(s) decisions about what programmes are funded and implemented? Which agency sets the policy agenda? If there are different views among agencies, which agency has greater influence and why? Is this the same in all provinces/districts or unique to your province and why?	DPI
	• What mechanisms are in place to promote gender equality within the policymaking and implementing process? (Probe: mechanisms to ensure representation in governance, reflection in content.) For example, is there any gender focal point at the district/province level? Is there a gender quota? How effective are these mechanisms in ensuring gender is mainstreamed into social protection programming at the local level? (Are these measures tokenistic or meaningful? Why?)	
	• Do sub-national agencies have any opportunity to shape central government social protection policy/programming? Under what circumstances is there space for negotiation? (e.g. attention to specific challenges and vulnerabilities).	
	• Are different social groups represented equally within the policymaking and implementation process? (women and men, majority and minority ethnic groups, majority and minority religious groups, civil society groups, etc.)? Is there a consideration in the decision-making process about how the characteristics of these groups? Why/why not?	
	• In the most influential agencies, which officers have the greatest influence? What is the source of their influence (e.g. networks, mandate, personal motivation, access to funding, etc.).	
Informal power	• Do informal factors also influence decision-making processes? (e.g. money politics, party politics, religion, nepotism/ progressive activists or leaders). Would it be difficult to change any process you are not in agreement with? (e.g. lack of support from superiors or colleagues; internal politics).	
	• Is there an interest in promoting gender equality? Are you aware of decision makers who actively promote gender issues? (provide examples). • Is there overt opposition to considering gender issues in decision-making processes? Are you aware of decision makers who actively oppose gender issues (provide examples).	
Civic participation	• Are there mechanisms for strengthening poor people's participation in and influence on decision making? Are people aware of them? Are they used? Are the channels for participation effective?	
	• Do these mechanisms generate spaces for a variety of groups to participate (women/men/ethnic minority groups, etc.)? (e.g. time of day meetings are organised, etc.).	
	• If there are no mechanisms or if these don't work, what do people do to express their opinions? (media, complaint mechanisms).	
Accountability	• Do officials/decision makers follow the rules in delivering programmes? Why/why not? (cultural hierarchies, adequate information flows, dialogue mechanisms, monitoring systems, reward/incentive mechanisms).	
Donor influence	• To what degree are provincial governments financially (and politically) influenced by donors? Has this influence changed over time? Has this influence been positive, negative or neutral?	

	Questions	
Implementation efficiency:		
Capacity	• Do you receive any type of capacity building to implement social protection? If yes, did it have any module on gender? Was it useful? Why? If not, do you think it would be valuable? How would it help you? Is there a funding pot available for capacity building that could be used for this purpose?	
Coordination	• Do you discuss social protection programme implementation, impacts, etc. with departments (NIN, MARD, MOH, MOLISA, etc.) or local officials? Is this through a regular reporting mechanism or sporadic? Do you receive programme data? Why/why not?	
	• Are there gender experts in your office or do you have access to gender expertise? Do they coordinate with others in the bureaucracy and other departments, particularly implementers?	
	• What are the biggest problems related to coordination? How might you improve the situation?	
M&E	• Do you gather administrative data/information about the social protection programme in your sectoral area? (e.g. number of beneficiaries). Are the data you gather disaggregated by gender/age? Do you use them for improving programme design? How? What type of data would need to improve programme design/implementation?	
Linkages	• Is the programme designed with links to complementary services and programmes (e.g. if it is a cash transfer programme, are there links to subsidized health insurance? Or referrals to an NGO-run domestic violence programme?) If so, please provide details. If not, do you think it would be useful to promote such linkages?	
	• Are complementary programmes run by NGOs or government agencies? If there are no linkages with other programmes, how do you think it might be possible? What might make it hard?	
Gender provisions, etc.	• What impacts have programmes had on poor women? (e.g. human capital development, economic empowerment, intra-household dynamics, social capital). What impacts have been most significant and why? What areas need the most attention still?	

Questions for implementers/service providers

	Questions	
Implementation efficiency:		**_Who?_**
Coordination	• How do you make decisions on the implementation of the programme—what is the process (e.g. individual decision, decision-making meetings, etc.?) Once made, are decisions implemented? Why/why not? (obstacles). • Do you/your superiors discuss the programme, implementation, impacts, etc. with other departments (NIN, MOA, MOH, MOLISA, etc.) or local representatives? Are you required to collect data on the programme? If so, do you give programme data to people working in other departments, or with the local bureaucracy? What about civil society groups or international agencies? • Are there gender experts among programme staff? If so, do they coordinate with other programme implementers and local officials in other departments? If not, do you have access to other sources of gender expertise? (e.g. NGOs, academics, women activists, etc.). • Given that poverty and vulnerability are complex issues that require attention across a number of sector areas, how do you work with your colleagues in other relevant departments to ensure targeted men and women benefit from the programme? Could this interaction be strengthened? How?	Service provider (village) and district coordinator
Capacity	• Are there budget provisions for capacity training of implementers or others on how to make programme implementation gender sensitive? Who has received this type of training? By whom? Have you been trained? What were the main issues that the training discussed? What other training has been done? (implementation, etc.). Were participants actively involved in this training? • Was the training useful? If so, how have you implemented lessons from training into practice? If not, please explain. (Probe: what type of method do you think works best for training local implementers/government officials?)	

		Questions	
		• What types of incentives are to ensure relevant participants attend trainings?	
M&E		• How much time and energy do you dedicate to M&E in relation to other aspects of your job? Why? • Do you gather administrative data/information about the social protection programme in your sectoral area? (e.g. number of beneficiaries). Are the data you gather disaggregated by gender/age? • Do you know what the data/information is used for?	
Linkages to complementary services and programmes		• Have men, women, girls or boys involved in the programme accessed complementary services or programmes? (e.g. if it is a cash transfer programme, are there links to subsidised health insurance? Or referrals to an NGO-run domestic violence programme?) • Have women participants gained knowledge about their entitlements to other poverty reduction and social protection programmes? • Have there been any awareness-raising initiatives about how gender differences can contribute to poverty/vulnerability/food insecurity? Please give an example. • If complementary programmes are available, are they run by NGOs or government agencies? If there are no linkages with other programmes, how do you think it might be possible–and why might it be a good idea?	
Programme impact:			
Gender provisions etc.		• What proportion of participants are men/women? How many female-headed households? • Are there budget provisions for community awareness raising about gender issues? • How do you address language barriers with ethnic minority women? • What impacts have programmes had on poor women? (e.g. human capital development, economic empowerment, intra-household dynamics, social capital). What impacts have been most significant and why? What areas need the most attention still?	

Questions for provincial/district-level decision makers

Theme	Decision logics: interplay of interests and ideas over time in response to change	Who?
Social protection	• What are your views/attitudes about the drivers of poverty and vulnerability? How do you think the government can help poor people exit poverty and/or vulnerability? Are your views similar or different from those of others? • Should all the poor benefit equally or some more than others? Why? • What role do you think different social protection programmes can play in people exiting poverty? Please provide examples (probe providing one or two examples of relevant social protection programmes). Have these thoughts changed over time? If so, what do you think has triggered this change? • As part of social protection, do you consider it important to look at community and intra-household relationships that might affect men and women differently? What about looking at the specific vulnerabilities of women and girls? (please explain). How do you think these gender dynamics issues can be addressed through the implementation of social protection programmes? • To what degree are policy recommendations based on research evidence? What type of evidence? (academic research, NGO research, local data collection).	
Sectors	• How have interactions and communication patterns between departments involved in social protection programming changed over the past 10 years and why? • Are there any gender champions within the different sectors? What role have these champions played?	

Theme	Decision logics: interplay of interests and ideas over time in response to change	Who?
Traditional authorities/ informal leaders	• How do traditional authorities view poverty and vulnerability? • Are local traditional authorities aware of differences between men and women in relation to poverty and vulnerability? • How much influence do traditional authorities have over the implementation of local-level programmes?	
Political leaders (elected/ appointed officials/ leaders of political party)	• How do (different) political leaders think about poverty and inequality and the government's role in tackling them? (e.g. is there a perception that assistance create dependency or negative incentives?) • is there a perception that everyone should benefit from assistance equally or some more than others? • What is the balance between central/local authorities in service provision? Is there coordination? Do departments interact with parties, bureaucracy, legislature, etc.?	
Media	• To what extent does the media shape popular views on poverty and vulnerability and the role of social protection programmes?	
Civil society	• How do different interest groups (private sector, NGOs, the media) seek to influence policy at the local level? What are the main interest lobbies? Has this changed over time? In response to what? • Are there gender equality organisations/activists who are prominent in the public arena and in social protection more particularly? Has this changed over time? In response to what?	
Citizens and different categories of the poor	• What channels could facilitate the more effective reflection of poor men and women's interests in social protection programming? (e.g. participation in public forums, analysis of complaints mechanisms to improve programme performance, etc.).	

Appendix 5: Responsibility for gender mainstreaming by level of government

Regarding the responsibilities of sectors and levels in the execution of and ensuring gender equality, Decree 70/2008/ND-CP: Detailed Regulations on the Implementation of Some Articles of the Law on Gender Equality, dated 4 June 2008, assigned key responsibilities to ministerial agencies including (1) integrating gender equality into the development and implementation of sector programmes and plans; (2) directing and instructing gender equality integration; and (3) organising consolidation of and regular reporting on the progress of gender equality implementation within designated areas.

People's Committees at all levels are responsible for carrying out gender equality integration into the development and implementation of local socioeconomic development strategies, plans and projects.

Areas of key responsibility on state management on gender equality by level

Areas of responsibility	Province	District	Commune
1. Formulation and organisation of the implementation of policy			
1.1 To formulate, promulgate and organise the implementation of *local policies, programmes and plans* on gender equality	x	x	x
1.2 To elaborate and submit to People's Councils for promulgation (or promulgate) and organise the implementation of *legal documents* on gender equality in their localities	x		
2. Integration of gender issues			
2.1 To organise the integration of gender issues into formulation and the implementation of local socioeconomic development strategy and plans	x		
3. Affirmative measures			
3.1 To direct and organise the implementation of measures for promoting gender equality in conformity with local socioeconomic conditions	x	x	x
4. Information, education and communication and capacity building			
4.1 To organise and direct dissemination and education on gender and gender equality policy and law to local people	x	x	x
4.2 To organise and build capacity of gender equality staff and activists and develop mechanisms for mobilising resources for gender equality implementation	x		
5. Information, reporting and supervision			
5.1 To collect and process information and data on gender equality in localities; to conduct review, report and annual assessments on the implementation of gender equality	x	x	x
5.2 To supervise and inspect the implementation of gender equality policies and law	x	x	x