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Key points

- Viet Nam's National Targeted Programme for Poverty Reduction has helped to address some practical needs for women, but has neglected broad gender inequalities
- The programme needs to reflect more understanding of the different vulnerabilities of men and women, boys and girls
- This needs to be backed by gender-disaggregated data and evaluation indicators, proper resources and capacity strengthening

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A gender lens for Viet Nam's flagship poverty reduction programme

Nicola Jones and Tran Thi Van Anh

Viet Nam has made great strides in reducing poverty since the introduction of its *Doi Moi* (Renovations) policy reform programme in the 1980s, with the proportion of people living below the national poverty line falling from 58% in 1993 to 16% in 2006. *Doi Moi* has promoted greater reliance on market mechanisms coupled with financing the participation of the poor in mainstream development programmes (Joint Donor Group, 2007). However, significant pockets of poverty and vulnerability remain, including food insecurity and nutritional deprivations (Box 1). As a result, there has been growing policy momentum around social protection issues over the past five years, motivated by a desire to reduce residual poverty and vulnerability, as emphasised in the country's first and second phase national development plans, the Socio-Economic Development Plans (SEDP 2001-2005 and SEDP 2006-2010). Viet Nam now has an array of social protection programmes in place (Table 1) including the flagship National Targeted Programme for Poverty Reduction (NTPPR).

While there is a growing body of evidence on the gendered patterning of vulnerabilities in Viet Nam, gender inequalities tend to be overlooked in the country's social protection policies and programmes in general, and in the NTPPR in particular. There is little recognition, for example, of the gendered aspects of human capital development and income generating opportunities. This Project Briefing synthesises research findings from the first stage of a three-year AusAID-funded study by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and Viet Nam's Institute of Family and Gender Studies (IFGS), which aims to plug this gap by exploring the linkages between gender, food security and social protection effectiveness.

Table 1: Selected social protection instruments in Viet Nam

Type of social protection instrument	Programme example
Social assistance programmes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• National Targeted Programme for Poverty Reduction, an integrated poverty reduction programme involving fee exemptions for education, vocational training, health and legal aid services; access to micro-credit; agricultural extension services; housing loans.• Programme 135, an initiative to improve infrastructure in impoverished ethnic minority communities;• Pensions for the elderly
Social insurance schemes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Health insurance programme covering all children under the age of six as well as all households below the poverty line;• Various commercial and non-profit micro-insurance schemes
Social welfare services	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Programmes targeted at child protection and gender-based violence
Social equity measures	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• 2007 Gender Equality Law;• 2007 Law on Domestic Violence

Gendered risks and vulnerabilities

The importance of social protection has been underscored in the wake of the recent food price and global economic crises, but there has been limited attention to the role that gender plays in the implementation and effectiveness of social protection programmes. It is often assumed that gender is already being addressed in social protection initiatives because cash or asset transfer programmes and public works schemes frequently target women, drawing on evidence that women are more likely to invest

Box 1: Tackling food insecurity and nutritional disparities in Viet Nam

Much progress has been made in improving food security over the last 20 years in Viet Nam but important disparities still exist. In many households, foods that are rich in micronutrients, such as fruit, vegetables, fish and meat, have replaced or supplemented foods low in micronutrients, but poor households continue to face nutritional deficits. In 2009, the Ministry of Health reported that 18.9% of children under the age of five were underweight – down from 38.7% less than 10 years ago. The rate of stunting is also declining; the current rate of 32.6% represents a 10% point drop since 2000. However, this laudable progress hides marked regional differences, the costs of which are particularly borne by ethnic minorities. The Central Highlands, for example, face malnutrition rates of nearly 30%, compared to only 16% in the south-eastern region. Similarly, children in urban areas are half as likely to be underweight or stunted as children in rural areas. From 1990-2004, the rate of underweight children in urban areas declined nearly 50%; the rate of decline in mountainous areas, however, was only 25%.

Some analysts argue that the government's current rapid growth and agricultural commercialisation strategy is unable to meet the needs of marginalised groups (primarily ethnic minorities) in remote highland areas. 'Inducing pro-poor growth in these areas that are still largely characterised by subsistence agriculture may depend critically on tackling the cause of low food productivity [but this perspective] is not fully appreciated in policy circles' (Pandey et al., 2006: 2). The poor remain constrained by inadequate market institutions, lack of infrastructure and appropriate technology, and weak communal safety nets, all of which limit farmers' cropping choices and income growth potential. Moreover, most recently the global food price crisis has threatened to stymie or reverse earlier progress as household purchasing power declines. Women and children are particularly at risk given their already precarious nutritional status.

Sources: Pandey et al. (2006); UN-Viet Nam (2008).

additional income in family well-being. The role of gender relations in social protection effectiveness is, however, likely to be more complex. Gender norms and dynamics may affect the type of risk that is tackled, the choice of social protection instrument, awareness-raising approaches, public buy-in to social safety net programmes and, most importantly, programme outcomes at the individual, intra-household and community levels.

Economic risks (including the economic impact of environmental and natural risks) and social risks are influenced by gender dynamics and may have important differential impacts on men and women, boys and girls.

On the one hand, there has been considerable progress in terms of enhancing gender equality in recent years in Viet Nam. Women are more economically active than most of their counterparts in the region (with over 80% in paid work) and the gender pay gap is comparatively low: women's earnings are approximately 71% of men's, which compares favourably with 44% in Japan and 36% in Malaysia. Furthermore, boys' and girls' school enrolment rates, as well as adult literacy rates, are comparable, and maternal mortality rates are gradually falling (from 85 per 100,000 live births in 2002 to 80 in 2005) (Joint Donor Group, 2007).

On the other hand, women and girls, especially among ethnic minority groups, face considerable disadvantages in terms of the nature and quality of opportunities and resources available to them.

Although Viet Nam's progress towards educational equity has been laudable, girls from ethnic minorities remain significantly disadvantaged compared to boys. Up to one-fifth of young women from ethnic minorities have never attended school (World Bank et al., 2006). They also lag 10 percentage points behind their Kinh (majority ethnic group) and Chinese counterparts in secondary school enrolment, while there is no variation by ethnicity for boys.

Women are over-represented in economic sectors that are particularly vulnerable in times of economic downturn, including in the informal sector. They still lack equal access to land tenure (holding just 19% of Land Tenure Certificates) and equal access to agricultural credit and technologies, meaning that they tend to bear the brunt of the negative impacts of trade liberalisation and have seen few of the benefits. Intra-household gender relations also remain inequitable on a number of levels, including access to resources, decision-making power, and time use (Box 2). Women, for example, still spend a disproportionate amount of time on household work compared to their male counterparts (an average of 7.5 hours compared to 30 minutes in rural areas, and 6 hours compared to 90 minutes in urban areas (Le Anh, 2006)).

Social protection responses to gender vulnerabilities

The NTPPR seeks to address a range of deprivations experienced by poor households and communities and to improve their productive capacities through a comprehensive package of support. Access to credit, basic services, agricultural extension services, land holdings and legal aid, is coupled closely with human capital development programmes, such as school fee exemptions, vocational training, loans for tertiary education, investments in health and sanitation, and improvements in community infrastructure. However, apart from the targeting of female-headed households and a general mention of the need for gender-sensitive programming, it contains no gender-specific targets or measurable outcomes, nor any specific provisions for gender training for programme implementers to support their ability to respond to gender vulnerabilities. The 2009 mid-term evaluation of the NTPPR was relatively weak in its attention to gender issues and outcomes, but did recommend that going forward the NTPPR develop a more gender-sensitive approach in line with a multi-dimensional understanding of poverty and vulnerability as reflected in Viet Nam's Development Goals (MOLISA and UNDP, 2009).

Programme impacts

Despite a lack of gendered targets, the ODI/IFGS findings suggest that the NTPPR is meeting some important practical gender needs. Focus group discussions revealed that for many programme partici-

pants the health insurance card is extremely valuable, enabling them to conserve scarce resources. It has also increased preventive health-seeking behaviour, which reduces the amount of time women need to be absent from paid work to tend to ill children. The NTPPR also makes it easier for women to seek advice from health professionals on reproductive health issues. The school fee exemption scheme was similarly important, allowing many children to remain in school for longer, although the poorest households continued to face other barriers to education, such as the costs of clothing, transportation, and the loss of children's labour. These improvements have also benefited from investments in roads and electricity, which have improved community access to health clinics, schools and markets.

Access to credit emerged as another key programme impact, with the Viet Nam Women's Union stepping in as an intermediary for poor women. Positive impacts of credit were seen not only in terms of economic empowerment, but in enhancing women's domestic decision-making power in some cases.

However, the NTPPR has had less impact on food security, especially the pockets of food insecurity and malnutrition found in highland communities, in part because the programme lacks a dedicated nutrition component. Gendered social risks, such as the language barriers ethnic minority women encounter in accessing markets, training and community participation opportunities, have also not been tackled in any systematic manner, and positive spill-over effects on intra-household violence appear to have been minimal.

Political economy challenges

A number of politico-institutional and socio-cultural challenges have hampered the implementation of the NTPPR, including its gender dimensions. The programme's recognition of the multi-dimensional nature of poverty calls for a level of coordination between line ministries that has yet to be realised, as seen in considerable programme fragmentation and implementation overlap. Despite the recent passage of comprehensive gender equality legislation, the department in the Ministry of Labour, Invalid and Social Affairs that is mandated to address gender inequalities is under-resourced and lacks the institutional positioning to ensure the integration of gender across sectors, including social protection. A national focus on human capital development and reaching middle-income status also means less focus on households and communities still vulnerable to food insecurity and hunger, despite important pockets of nutritional deprivation. Furthermore, funding, particularly for monitoring and evaluation, is limited.

These institutional challenges seem exacerbated in the case of efforts to mainstream gender. They are reflected in a dearth of gender disaggregated

data, a lack of practical training on gender mainstreaming, inadequate or insufficient accountability mechanisms (especially binding executive decrees), and under-recognition by line ministries and senior political leaders of the potential for gender equality to contribute to the realisation of developmental and poverty reduction goals. Language and cultural barriers also prevent women from being adequately

Box 2: Gender vulnerabilities at the intra-household level

Vietnamese girls and women face a range of gender-specific vulnerabilities. Beginning in childhood, girls are more likely to drop out of school as a result of care work and domestic work demands, as the following voices highlight:

'Girls have to look after their younger siblings, glean rice, sell lottery tickets. They are more likely to drop out of school than are boys' (DOLISA official, An Giang, 2009).

'Our family is poor so I asked my 14-year-old daughter to give up studying when she was in Grade 6 to take care of the housework' (Married man, Co To, 2009).

'Girls only finish Grade 6 and then they get married ... Only girls whose parents do something big in the commune or district go to high school. Girls don't like learning. They like getting married. Boys like learning ... I will marry an elementary school girl so that she can stay at home to help my mother' (Male adolescent, Pac Ngam, 2009).

Intra-household decision-making power is also highly gendered and shapes the opportunities of girls and women in terms of human capital development, income generation and in some cases, even basic physical integrity:

'I ask my wife's opinion before I do things, but I have studied more, so I make the final decisions' (Married man, To An, 2009).

'I decide everything, and whatever she does she will ask me first. She won't do anything unless I tell her to' (Married man, Co To, 2009).

'Husbands are the ones who take care of great matters [such as loans], so I can't say much ... He didn't tell me anything about the loan. He thinks a wife knows nothing. I didn't talk to him about the [loan repayment] deadline or the interest because it would make my husband's family worry too, and I was afraid it would upset him. He says I don't know anything so I couldn't ask. I was too afraid to ask him' (Married woman, Coc Cot, 19 years, 2009).

'My married life was tough. My husband was a jealous type. He didn't want me to go out, even to go to work. He beat me around my head and face, and tried to choke me ... My sister came to see me and she took me to hospital. My husband came to hospital to take me home. He said he would never beat me anymore. But he continued ... My eldest child was nine years old when he passed away. My husband beat him so hard ... People said that my husband's beating led to the problems with his liver and heart ... My husband was unbearable. I thought he would feel sorry after beating our child to death ... But he continued beating me seriously. I lived with him for nine years and this period of time was like living in prison. No one helped me – they were too afraid of my husband and what he would do' (Married woman, Che Qua, 2009).

'When the Muong people let a daughter get married, it means that they have lost a person to help. Then they are sad. By contrast, mothers have to pay a lot of money to get a daughter-in-law, so she cannot be happy. Women work much harder than men, they have to raise children and work. Men do not do housework' (Widow, Ngan Chai, 2009).

served by programmes and result in their effective exclusion from community discussions. Finally, while the National Assembly's Social Affairs Committee and donors are calling increasingly for gender considerations to be included in programme development, a relatively weak civil society is a challenge to civic oversight.

Conclusions and policy implications

Overall, the NTPPR appears to have made a useful contribution to a number of women's practical needs, especially in reducing the costs of accessing basic health and education services for their families and themselves. The programme has also contributed to infrastructure development, and improvements in women's access to credit and community participation. Despite this, however, there remains scope for improvements in tackling gender inequalities and overall programme effectiveness, especially in reaching the most marginalised social groups, at both the programme design and implementation levels as follows:

- An evidence-based understanding of the different vulnerabilities experienced by men and women, boys and girls, in both male- and female-headed households, and the ways in which gender differences in economic and social risks intersect with ethnicity, needs to be reflected not only in the design of the next phase of the NTPPR, but also in Viet Nam's broader National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS), which is being drafted. Gendered vulnerabilities that require particular attention include overcoming the

language barriers hindering the effective uptake of service provision, training and market opportunities by ethnic minority women, and the time use inequalities that prevent women's effective community participation. An important first step would be to complement the recent mid-term evaluation of the NTPPR with a national-level assessment of the gendered impacts of the programme to date and to feed the findings into the new NSPS.

- Gender-disaggregated data needs to be used routinely in poverty reduction and social protection programme reporting, and a budget commitment to support this process and related capacity strengthening for policy and programme implementing staff should be made.
- Social protection policies and programmes should ensure that food security and agricultural productivity remain core objectives of poverty reduction approaches, to effectively eradicate pockets of vulnerability to hunger and malnutrition, to which women and girls are likely to be especially at risk.
- It will also be important to identify a lead agency to take responsibility for ensuring that gender is adequately integrated across all programme components and the potential for synergies maximised.

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Project Information:

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