
SITE VISIT: Micro-enterprise and ECCD in Viet Nam

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Viet Nam is a country with a population of 73 million. There are 53 provinces, 520 districts, and 53 ethnic minorities. There are 10 million children 0-5 years of age. 2.2 million are in some form of an ECCD programme: 7.76% of the 0-3 age group is in child care and 32.9% of the 3-5 year-olds (65% of five-year-olds) are in kindergarten.

In 1989, Viet Nam's government began a shift to a market economy and began phasing out government subsidies. Since then Viet Nam has achieved remarkable macro-economic growth, and many state services have been privatized, including day care. As a result, many services once accessible to all families are no longer within the means of poor families. One problem facing poor families is appropriate day care.

Viet Nam is moving toward a decentralised administrative structure. There are administrative offices and People's Committees at the central, provincial, district, and commune levels. The District Level Management Committee is responsible for education at the commune level. There is a Commune Management Committee that is responsible for the home-based and centre-based day care programmes and for kindergartens.

Kindergartens can be found in primary schools; some are institution-based and some are community-based. The kindergartens are used as the base for the support and training of day care childminders. At the present time the Government is focussing on the five-year-old group in an attempt to prepare them for school. (Ten percent of the government education budget is devoted to ECCD.)

In UNICEF's programme they are supporting the development of:

- Community- and home-based ECCD programmes
- Primary education—non-formal and formal
- Innovative programs such as credit schemes
- The Viet Nam National Committee for the Protection of Children

Home Based Day Care Centres (HBDCC)

In early 1994 UNICEF began to support a local credit scheme that was developed in conjunction with home-based day care centres. The programme is being implemented in minority communities in two of Viet Nam's poorest provinces. The project involves the Viet Nam Women's Union at the local level and the Early Childhood Development Department of the Ministry of Education and Training for training and supervision. In 1995 the project covered 1800 families with 730 children under the age of 3 being served in six communes.

The Viet Nam Women's Union (VWU) motivates and selects women to be the day care mother (childminder). Those selected are VWU members who are in good health, show enthusiasm and love for children, and are willing to take on the task. They may be literate or not. They are trained by day care or kindergarten teachers in the same commune. They are provided with cloth charts with health and nutrition messages that they display in their >centre<, which is usually their home. (The cloth charts are durable and can be washed!) One childminder looks after 4-10 children. Centres are generally open from 7-11 A.M. and again from 2-5 P.M., although the schedules may differ from village to village depending on the needs of the mothers.

Parents bring cooked food to the centres for the children's meal. Every parent contributes 20 kg of *paddy* per year, and the community pays the childminder 50,000 VN Dong (about US \$5.00) per year for running the HBDCC. (The estimated annual costs for one HBDCC serving 10 children is US \$37.)

The programme encourages family-based food production systems, based on traditional uses of foods. This can include a vegetable garden, fish ponds, and/or the raising of livestock—primarily pigs. The Women's Union encourages its members to provide fruits for the children; oranges are abundant in the area. The motto is, "One fruit tree and one animal for the children."

One of the unique features of this programme is the credit scheme with which it is connected. All the mothers of the children in the HBDCC, as well as the childminders, are members of the credit scheme. On a rotating basis, they receive US \$30 to develop income-generating activities within the family. (These generally are linked to the food production activities listed above.)

Women are eligible for the credit scheme if:

- they have children under the age of five who are malnourished and attending the day care centre;
- they are pregnant;
- they have children who have dropped out of school;
- they are illiterate; or
- they are childminders or health workers.

There are 10 women in each savings group. Only 8 of the 10 women in the group have a loan at a given point in time. Thus there is considerable pressure on the women with loans to pay back their loans so that other women in the group can take out a loan. The loans have to be paid back in 6 months. Each month the woman pays back part of the principle plus 2% interest, plus she makes a contribution to the savings fund. (The interest is used to cover costs of inflation (15%), risk (10%), administration (25%), incentives (40%) and social welfare (10%).) Women are able to receive three cycles of loans (for \$30, \$40, and then \$50). Their eligibility depends on their ability to pay back previous loans. After the third loan it is assumed they will be able to continue their income-generating activities without support. If women are unable to pay back their loans on schedule, other women in the group help them out. There is also a range of contingencies, when animals die, etc.

The savings groups are organized into Clusters, with 5-10 groups in a Cluster. The Clusters are overseen by the Steering Committee, which consist of 7 members. The Chair is the Chair of the Women's Union. The other members are selected by the Women's Union and usually include one ECCD teacher.

Once a month the members of the credit scheme meet together. The meeting includes health workers, teachers, and managers of the credit scheme who provide information on child care, nutrition, safe motherhood and family planning, and management of the credit scheme. The monthly meeting is also the time for collecting capital and interest and savings connected with the loans. In addition, a literacy programme has also been introduced.

To date loans had been provided to 232 women by UNICEF. In 1995 the groups were able to provide an additional 154 loans from the savings already generated by the project. Thus a total of 386 women have received loans. The project has gone from 3 communes involved in the scheme to 29.

In the past the cooperatives owned everything. However, individuals are now able to own plots of land and it is their responsibility to maintain them. People are learning that if they do more they get more. The credit scheme provides women with their own money for the first time in their lives. It is also the first time that people have had to pay for services. Instead of having child care as a free service, parents are now required to pay, and most are willing to do so.

Community reaction to the project has been positive. The enrolment of children and the use of the day care services has resulted in the creation of effective linkages between education, family and community. Local teaching staff now have relationships with families to such an extent that they consider themselves members of the children's families and feel free to discuss issues of child care, nutrition, and attitudes with mothers. Community leaders are aware of the importance of early child care and development and are supportive of the centres. Mothers are happy that their children are well looked after. Women are provided with an opportunity to meet, to actively participate in group discussions, to talk and learn from one another. Girls are freed from taking care of younger siblings; they can go to school and help to improve their family's quality of life.

An evaluation of one commune after a year of being involved in the programme showed the following results:

- The commune went from having no home-based day care centres to having eight.
- An increase from two to three kindergartens.
- A significant improvement in women's health. Before the programme, only 64 out of 300 women were healthy; at the end of the year 215 were healthy.
- Improved health status of children. At the beginning there were 145 healthy children among the 308; after one year this number increased to 215 out of 308.
- The percentage of families without sufficient food for a month decreased from 96% to 51.5%.
- 182 women achieved literacy.

Not all these improvements are the direct result of the HBDCC programme as there are other UNICEF initiatives in the same communes, such as integrated health, nutrition, and water and sanitation projects. However this is a good example of how an integrated approach to family support can help create positive outcomes for both children and the community.

For more information about the activities of UNICEF in Viet Nam and this programme, contact:

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Early Childhood Counts: Programming Resources for Early Childhood Care and Development.
CD-ROM. The Consultative Group on ECCD. Washington D.C.: World Bank, 1999.