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Education in Contemporary Rural Vietnam: Problems and Possible Reforms

Introduction

In 1987, due to international isolation and appalling economic conditions, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) committed to a renovation policy (*doi moi*). Changes in domestic and foreign policies and economic reforms have produced impressive results. In rural areas, however, 33.3 million of the 37.6 million people live in absolute poverty.¹ Therefore, a consistent strategy for rapid and sustained development of rural areas is needed. Education plays a crucial role in such a strategy, in terms of improving the human resources and of empowering the people to make decisions on and participate in the development process.

To date, massive investment in formal and standardised education increased the national literacy rate to 89% (1992) and expanded participation in education considerably. Nevertheless, rural areas lag far behind the cities and their surrounding areas. Literacy rates in Northern and central Vietnam are often below 50%.² School drop-out rates in some areas amount to 40%.³

A first step is to remove the various physical, economic and social barriers which hinder access to education in rural areas. The full potential of education, however, can only unfold if two essential aspects are respected: the consistency of education with the general development strategy and the quality of education. Consequently, education policies for rural areas should be planned in tandem with policies concerning the rural diversification. Educational planning needs to focus on quality issues such as curriculum reforms, improved teacher training and educational research.

Experience in the People's Republic of China which began its reform-programme more than a decade ago and which is in *some respects* comparable to the SRV, indicates that the reform of rural education is a necessary (albeit not sufficient) condition for the development of rural areas which in turn stimulates the acceptance of education:

"... The future of rural education is quite promising because political and economic reforms ... stress the need for expertise and knowledge. With

1 UNDP 1994, p. 133.

2 CCSC 1989, p. 52.

3 UNICEF 1990, p. 3.

the better jobs, including factory jobs and managerial positions in the countryside, now requiring higher levels of education, families are eager to educate their children.⁴

Limitations

To date, the available literature on Vietnamese reform policy focuses to a great extent on the political and economic aspects of *doi moi*, whereas the social implications, especially as far as the rural population is concerned, have been largely neglected. For this reason, this article draws mainly on publications from the Government of the SRV and from UNESCO, UNICEF and UNDP. Apart from the two UNICEF-reports on children/women and the country situation (UNICEF 1990 and UNICEF 1992) and the Demographic and Health Survey (NCPFP 1988) respectively which I received from a UNICEF-volunteer in Vietnam, the publications are available in Austria (ÖFSE documentation centre), Germany (UNESCO Institute for Education, Hamburg) and the UK. However, the supplied statistical data from Vietnamese sources should be regarded with caution, since no informations on the sources of origin or on the date of compilation were available. Although a comparison of the state of education before and after the beginning of *doi moi* would be highly desirable, due to the lack of accurate figures and relevant literature, this article is confined to the present situation.

1. Renovation Policy and the Situation in Rural Areas

1.1. Doi moi (renovation) Policy

In 1987, the Government of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) announced its renovation policy (*doi moi*) which implied major political and economic changes.

The withdrawal of Vietnamese troops from Cambodia in 1991 opened the way to the regional acceptance of the SRV and its integration into the ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations). Relations with the US have been normalised step by step. Both US vetoes on multilateral aid and on bilateral trade were removed in 1993 and 1994 respectively. Consequently, international aid was reinstated and amounted to an estimated US \$ 700 million in 1994.⁵ Hand in hand with political reforms, Vietnam began to restructure its economy. The reform programme centres on five main objectives: macro-

⁴ Ogden 1989, p. 334.

⁵ FEER 25.11.1993.

economic stability, rapid transition to a market system, improvement of basic infrastructure, alleviation of poverty, reduction of regional inequalities and preservation of natural resources.

Important macroeconomic adjustments included the devaluation and managed floating of the currency dong, rising interest rates to reduce inflation and mobilise saving, and the liberalisation of prices. The tax system was reorganised, private enterprises were legalised and controls on domestic trade released. The economy was opened to international trade and foreign investors, mainly from Hongkong, Taiwan, South Korea, Australia and Japan. So far, the cities and their surrounding areas have received the lion's share of investment while, as outlined in the following chapter, rural areas are in desperate need of more resources to finance urgently needed reforms.

1.2. Rural Areas⁶

Agricultural reforms began in 1988 with the removal of delivery quotas of rice to the state and the permission of private farming. Long term land use rights for peasants have recently been introduced and been backed up by a new tenure law.⁷ As a result, farm output rose steadily, and rice production increased by 40% from 1988 to 1992.⁸ In 1993, the SRV's rice export earned US \$ 350 million and the country advanced to the world's third largest rice exporter.

However, rural Vietnam, where 80% of the 70.9 million Vietnamese live, faces enormous problems. 33.4 million of the 37.6 million people in absolute poverty⁹ live in the rural areas.¹⁰ In many Northern and central regions people suffer from malnutrition. Only 21% of the rural population has access to clean water (47% in urban areas) and 13% to sanitation (34%). Fertility rates are

⁶ Defined as areas where employment is mainly in the agricultural sector, including unpaid family work. According to UNDP (1994, p. 169) 67% of the Vietnamese population are working in this sector. 80% of the population is considered to be rural (UNDP 1994, p. 175). Due to increasingly insecure income from agricultural activities, many households draw on incomes from two or three sectors. Approx. 13% of the rural population are employed in the industrial and service sector.

⁷ FEER 29.7.1993.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Todaro 1989, pp. 30 – 31: Absolute poverty: a concept which is based on "a specific minimum level of income needed to satisfy the basic physical need of food, clothing, and shelter in order to assure continued survival". This includes both the *chronic poor* who constantly suffer extreme deprivation and the *borderline poor* who undergo periods of poverty e.g. due to seasonal unemployment, as well as the *newly poor* who are victims of structural adjustment programmes (UNDP 1990, p. 22). For further discussion of concepts of poverty see UNDP 1990, pp. 106 – 108.

¹⁰ UNDP 1994, p. 133.

twice as high as in urban areas and health standards considerably lower.¹¹ School drop-out rates in remote areas range from 20% to 40%.¹²

In overcrowded areas, farming on far too small plots of land is highly uneconomic. Poor farmers were hit by the removal of subsidies for fertiliser and slumping food prices, which in 1992 fell by 15% while non-food items went up by 20%.¹³ They are forced to take up additional, mostly unskilled work in urban areas. This exacerbates the already tense situation in cities where the unemployment rate is 20%.¹⁴ In many cases, women are left with the entire responsibility for field work, sale of agricultural products, house work and education of children.¹⁵

Rural development should therefore be one of the central aspects of renovation policy, considering not only the importance of improving the lot of nearly eight tenth of the Vietnamese population but also the crucial role of balanced and sustainable growth of rural production and consumption for the development of the whole economy. Increased and more diversified food production improves nutritional standards. Agricultural raw products are important for local enterprises and industries which can serve rural as well as urban and, to some extent, international markets. They could also absorb the rural under- or unemployed which in turn eases the pressures on urban areas and contributes to diversification of the rural economy, thus reducing risks from sole dependence on farm incomes.

In this process, education plays a crucial role. The transformation of an agricultural subsistence economy to a diversified, specialised and integrated rural economy needs people with many different skills and abilities. Literacy and numeracy, technical management and communication skills, awareness for health issues and family planning, motivation, adaptability and responsibility are but a few abilities and attitudes which can be obtained through or shaped by education. But not only in terms of enhancing the quality of the human resources education "has a great variety of interactions with the development process at all scales".¹⁶ Education also contributes to the empowerment of the people who are to determine the path of development. The interrelations between education and development shall be briefly discussed before we turn to the concept of rural education.

2. Education and Development

2.1. The Need for Integration

Two main functions of education in the development process can be identified. By expanding mental and physical abilities and providing concrete knowledge and skills, education can contribute to individuals' and societies' material and spiritual welfare. In a more indirect way, education is able to alter attitudes and values and to stimulate changes in social and economic behaviour.

Assuming a direct and merely positive relationship between education and development, it was widely believed that the "rapid quantitative expansion of educational opportunities ... holds the key to national development"¹⁷ – which often was, and still is, synonymous to rapid economic growth by means of uncontrolled market forces.¹⁸ As in many other developing countries, Vietnam regarded education as a vital element of its development strategy and invested ample shares of its budget in formal and standardised education, resulting in impressive enrolment and literacy rates.¹⁹ But the claims that massive investment in education

"would accelerate economic growth ..., raise levels of living ... [and] generate widespread and equal employment opportunities ... have been shown to be greatly exaggerated and, in many instances, to be simply false."²⁰

Nevertheless, education plays a major role in the development process, especially if development is not purely seen as economic growth, but as a

"... process whereby a population requires and uses its local resources, in conformity with its cultural values, to solve individual and collective problems by generating step by step over a long period of time a new lifestyle ..."²¹

Hitherto, three essential aspects had largely been neglected: the consistency of educational needs with the general development strategy, the improvement of the quality of education and the integration of education in the familiar local and social context.

To unfold its full potential, education is to be embedded in and synchronised with an overall consistent development strategy.²² A literate and

17 Todaro 1989, p. 331.

18 The prospect of entering the prestigious economic Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) has probably contributed to an almost exclusive concentration on economic growth. See LMD 7/1995.

19 89% of the Vietnamese population is literate. (1989); UNICEF 1990, p. 136.

20 Todaro 1989, p. 331.

21 Diong and Allard 1994, p. 25.

22 Hallak 1990, p. 51.

11 NCPFP 1988, p. 28.

12 UNICEF 1992, p. 3.

13 FEER 27.5.1993.

14 Ibid.

15 FEER 7.9.1995.

16 Gould 1993, p. 202.

numerate farmer cannot improve his situation, if prices for farm products remain low, if markets are distant and reasonable credit facilities not available. Rural parents will consider education for their children irrelevant, if school fees are high, wages low and employment opportunities rare. Vice versa, the purposes and strategies of development have major implications for the education sector. Following the introduction of individual farming in Vietnam, for example, many peasants need training in budgeting and marketing, which has so far been carried out by the socialist cooperatives. Therefore, efficient communication and cooperation between institutions at all levels concerned with development planning are vitally important. Or, as the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) puts it:

"The need is anticipated for a mechanism to allow education and training to react and adapt to the rapid pace of change and to reconceptualize their role in support of economic growth and social development on a continuing basis."²³

Efforts to improve the quality of education, especially in the field of primary education, are also necessary:

"Primary education of poor quality impedes the human resource development at all levels; it discourages demand for schools, lowers efficiency and contributes to wastages of resources ... Job opportunities of schools leavers and graduates closely correlate with the quality of instruction."²⁴

Finally, education should to a much larger extent be rooted in the familiar local and social context. If development is understood as a process where existing local resources are to be mobilised, "knowledge about these resources obviously needs to be nurtured and supported".²⁵ This concept refers to a specific approach to education in rural areas.

2.2. Particularities of Rural Education

Education has often been criticised as being contraproductive to rural development. By activating social and economic mobility it seemed to be directly related to rural out-migration, thus depriving rural communities of important human resources. In most societies it is indeed the case that

"... the further they [the students] progress in education the more they acquire skills and knowledge which seems to fit them for the urban commercial economy ... There can be no denying that the educated are disproportionately more likely than those with less education to seek employment outside the rural community ..."²⁶

²³ MOET 1993, p. 29.

²⁴ Hallak 1990, p. 52.

²⁵ Norberg-Hodge 1991, p. 164.

²⁶ Gould 1993, p. 117.

This attraction to urban centres with their wider range of employment and career opportunities is to a large extent rooted in the nature of the more diversified urban economy, which also reflects the persistent dominance of urban attitudes towards prestige and reward. In many cases, cities and towns provide at least casual or temporary employment for rural labour, which increases the economic security of rural households. However, in a long term perspective it will be necessary to focus on a balanced development of both urban and rural areas:

"Urban economies cannot absorb all the rural poor. The persistent problem is that attempts to tackle urban poverty directly – by creating jobs and providing public services unavailable in rural areas – simply attracts more of the rural poor, and their migration wipes out any gains."²⁷

Consequently, higher priority has to be given to rural development towards more diversification and thus a broader spectrum of employment opportunities. Within a consistent rural development strategy, education must take account of the specific requirements of a diversifying rural economy, characteristic local life and work patterns and the difficulties particular to rural areas, such as higher illiteracy rates, wide dispersion of schools, low compatibility of school and work and lack of teachers.

Indigenous knowledge and the local environment need to be integrated in the educational process as a field for experiments and observations:

"Instead of memorising a standardised universal knowledge, children need to be given the tools to understand their own environment. In the process, the narrow specialisation and urban orientation of western style education would give way to a broader, more contextual and ecological perspective. Location-specific knowledge of this kind would be holistic and specific at the same time. Such an approach would seek to perpetuate and rediscover traditional knowledge. It would build on centuries of empathetic interaction and experience with the web of life in a particular place."²⁸

3. Problems of Education in Rural Vietnam

3.1. Education System

The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), formed in 1990, is in charge of policy making, guidance, supervision of education and training, development of curricula, production of textbooks and teaching aids as well as of the administration of teachers salary scales. It is responsible for the university system and through several departments and related agencies it administers the entire education sector. Despite this strong central power, national

²⁷ UNDP 1990, p. 86.

²⁸ Norberg-Hodge 1991, p. 164.

education norms are considerably influenced by local conditions. Mainly as a result of tight national funds, financial and administrative responsibilities have been given to provincial, district and communal level.²⁹

The present education system was established after unification in 1976.³⁰ It comprises preschool (age 1 to 5 years) and general education, the latter consisting of primary education (five grades, starting at the age of 6), lower secondary (4 years) and upper secondary (3 years). Primary and lower secondary schools are provided in each commune and upper secondaries in each district. Technical and vocational education (three-year courses, either in national or provincial institutions) is offered to graduates from lower and upper secondary schools. Additionally, other ministries (e.g. the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs) and provincial governments provide vocational training courses. Complementary education offers formal and nonformal adult education, training and promotion courses as well as special programmes for school drop-outs and courses in Vietnamese for minorities. Upper secondary graduates who have successfully completed entrance-examinations have access to university/college education which offers, depending on the subject, three- to five-year courses.

3.2. School Attendance Rates in Rural Vietnam

Three mass campaigns to promote literacy have achieved impressive results. In 1989, the urban literacy rate was 94% and the rural rate 87%.³¹ However, more than 6.5 million people, most of them in rural areas, are illiterate and due to a discouraging environment even more are threatened to lap back into illiteracy.³²

Table 1 shows that rural children are disadvantaged right from the beginning. The almost exclusive source of formal education for them is the primary school. In 1989, the primary school was attended by 79.4% of the rural pupils, but completed by only 23.3%. In rural areas, the proportion of people who never attended school is more than twice as high as in urban areas. The higher the educational level, the larger the gap between urban and rural standards. Only a tiny proportion of rural students (4.2%) continue to secondary school or vocational school (1.4%), and less than 1% go to colleges and universities. The situation for girls is even worse. Over 70% did not attend or complete primary school and only 0.5% entered tertiary

education. More than twice as many girls than boys (18.8% versus 9.1%) did not attend school at all.

	Never attended school	Not finished primary school	Finished primary school	Finished secondary school	Vocational school	College universities
Urban areas						
total	6.3	46.4	24.8	12.6	5.4	4.5
male	3.3	44.6	27.5	14.1	4.5	5.6
female	9.0	48.0	22.4	11.8	6.2	3.1
Rural areas						
total	14.3	56.1	23.3	4.2	1.4	0.7
male	9.1	57.0	25.8	5.2	2.0	1.0
female	18.8	54.4	21.0	3.3	0.9	0.5

Table 1: Urban and Rural Population aged 10 and over, by Educational Level, 1989 (percentages)

Source: CCSC 1989, p. 55.

Unfortunately, there are no statistics available on both vocational and complementary education. UNICEF estimated that only 200,000 adults were enrolled in complementary education in 1989.³³ Considering the general urban bias, probably only a tiny proportion of the rural population participated.

Age group	Attending school	Attended school	Never attended	Not stated
Urban areas				
total				
5 - 9	73.2	0.8	25.0	1.0
10 - 14	86.6	10.5	2.7	0.2
male				
5 - 9	73.1	0.8	25.2	1.0
10 - 14	87.4	9.8	2.6	0.2
female				
5 - 9	73.2	0.9	2.8	0.9
10 - 14	85.8	11.2	2.8	0.2
Rural areas				
total				
5 - 9	61.4	1.0	36.5	1.1
10 - 14	74.5	17.3	8.0	0.3
male				
5 - 9	61.8	1.0	36.2	1.0
10 - 14	77.8	14.5	7.5	0.3
female				
5 - 9	61.1	1.1	36.8	1.1
10 - 14	70.9	20.3	8.5	0.3

Table 2 School Status by Age and Sex (percentages)

Source: CCSC 1989, p. 57.

33 UNICEF 1990, p. 139.

29 25% of the costs for primary and secondary schooling, for instance, have to be paid by the communities; UNICEF 1990, p. 144.

30 The following description is based on UNICEF 1990, p. 137; Vietnamese Professional Society 1995 (soft document) and MOET 1992, pp. 9 - 11.

31 CCSC 1989, p. 50.

32 UNICEF 1990, p. 145.

Rural areas in Vietnam are characterised by lower primary enrolment rates, higher drop-out rates and, consequently, higher illiteracy rates. Table 2 shows that in the urban age group 10 – 14, 10.5% drop out of primary or lower secondary school, compared to 17.3% in rural areas. One fifth of rural girls of this age leaves school before completing primary or lower secondary, nearly twice as many as in urban areas (11.2%).

Since 1988/89 families have to pay tuition for grade 4 and 5 at primary school as well as for lower and upper secondary school. Monthly fees for primary schooling were approximately worth 1.5 to 2 kg of rice for each child. Tuition for lower and upper secondary costed about 3 kg of rice per month and student. Parents have to pay for paper, pens, books, school uniform and food as well as to contribute a certain percentage to the board of school directors and to the parents-teacher association.³⁴ Schooling therefore is a heavy burden on the monthly budget of many parents. Consequently, most poor families cannot prevent that children drop out of school.

Table 3 illustrates drop out rates in selected remote rural areas which are far above national average.

	Vietnam total	Mountainous areas	Central plateau	Mekong delta
Grade 1	14.4	23.1	15.6	20.9
Grade 2	11.4	16.7	16.0	15.1
Grade 3	7.8	11.3	9.0	11.7
Grade 4	9.1	9.9	7.7	14.8
Grade 5	3.5	10.2	9.9	14.8

Table 3 Primary School Drop-out Rates in Selected Rural Areas (percentages)
Source: UNICEF 1990, p. 141.

Thus, there is a striking difference between average years of schooling and literacy rates in rural and urban regions. 1989 census results show that northern and central provinces such as Lai Chau (47.6%), So'n La (58.2%), Gia Lai-Kon Tum (59.6%), Hoang Lien So'n (67.2%) Cao Bang (68.2%) and Ha Tuyen (68.4%) have literacy rates far below the national average of 88%.³⁵ There, the average number of years of school attendance range from 2.5. in Lai Chau to 3.8 years in Cao Bang and Ha Tuyen, as opposed to 5.9 years in Hanoi and 5.2. years in Ho Chih Minh City.³⁶

The sheer number of vocational schools (500) in Vietnam seems to be quite impressive. However, their impact on rural areas is of very low significance. The total numbers of students enrolling for vocational training has decreased by more than 50% over the last ten years. While 244,100 students

were attending vocational training in 1981/82, only 109,718 students were enrolled in the academic year 1991/92.³⁷ The numbers of students attending training in the professional and technical school also decreased between 1985/85 and 1991/92, from 147,200 to 104,43.³⁸

3.3. Issues of Quality

The rural population could benefit from primary education to a much greater extent if it was more suited to the needs of rural people. Inappropriate primary curricula which still emphasise formal textbook education in Vietnamese and mathematics³⁹ suffer of overloading and contribute to repetition and drop out. Book-orientated education and the use of too many books (there are, for example, ten books for grade one alone) often put rural primary schools at a disadvantage since they typically lack funds to purchase books and to finance a borrowing system for children who cannot afford to buy books. Moreover, based on urban life and values, most schoolbooks do not reflect the familiar setting of the rural life and may even contradict authentic experiences.

The stimulation of independent, more 'scientific' reasoning and thinking through children's own observations of and experiments in their local environment is largely neglected, and so are systematic methods of how to learn and to transfer knowledge which is the very basis for further specific training and studies. Learning becomes thus a highly mechanised activity, especially if success is only measured in terms of mastering examinations. In the light of increasing unemployment, rural people perceive education as ill-tuned to their economic needs, which may further discourage parents and pupils from education and training. The Vietnamese education minister Tran Huang Quan described the problems as following:

"We're entering a market economy ... so many families want their children to work at an early age. Our education system does not provide work skills, so when students reach secondary and high school, people don't see the benefit of studying."⁴⁰

The general urban bias, the low absolute number of students enrolled in vocational training as well as the concentration of vocational institutions in North-Vietnam and around Hanoi⁴¹ indicate that vocational training is of almost no relevance for rural areas. There are, however, vocational schools

37 Vietnamese Professional Society 1995 (soft document).

38 Ibid.

39 UNICEF 1990, p. 37.

40 FEER 19.9.1991.

41 Vietnamese Professional Society 1995 (soft document).

34 Vietnamese Professional Society 1995 (soft document).

35 CCSC 1989, p. 52.

36 Ibid.

in rural towns and in the countryside which offer training in handicraft, small business and local occupations. The courses typically run for less than six months.⁴² Unfortunately, these institutions are not mentioned in the official statistics on education which may indicate that they are relatively insignificant for most of the rural regions.

Hitherto, complementary education focused mainly on formal part-time education for cadres and future officials.⁴³ First level adult (i. e. literacy) education and 'specific topic courses' (primarily nonformal training for farmers), language classes for minorities and evening classes for dropped out children played only a minor role. This priority is understandable, considering Vietnam's recent history, the need for national integration and its low economic development. Nevertheless, in the light of recent reforms and the above mentioned problems, the emphasis has to shift to the previously neglected areas and new approaches are necessary within these areas.

3.4. Access to Schools

Both urban and rural areas have to cope with a very low budget for education. Although the government increased educational spending from 6% in 1989 to 13% of the national budget in 1990⁴⁴, due to population growth and inflation, spending per student has actually decreased.⁴⁵ Scarce allocations from the national fund especially hit the economically weak rural communities. They are not able to finance the costs for maintenance and building or the subsidies for teacher salaries and school fees. Consequently, rural areas lack an adequate supply of schools or have only poor educational facilities. In the Mekong delta and many mountainous areas, for example, communities build so-called temporary schools: unstable buildings made from material such as palm leaves, bamboo and mud which are easily destroyed or washed away in the rainy season.⁴⁶ In remote and sparsely inhabited regions schools are widely dispersed and schooling involves long and tedious journeys. In more densely populated areas, large catchment areas of schools imply large pupil-teacher ratios.

Long distances between home and school are often beyond the physical capability of children, especially if they are younger. Parents may consider long journey times as intolerable opportunity costs as the loss of labour contributions of their children seems not to be outweighed by the benefits of

education. Long and exhausting journeys like in the highland region of Vietnam also affect children's performance in school. Already tired and hungry when they arrive, they lack concentration and receptivity. Large and overcrowded classes further aggravate this problem. Ranges and distribution of schools are therefore an essential issue in educational planning, since they are closely linked to two main objectives of educational planning: school attendance and educational achievement.⁴⁷

Not only spatial inequalities in the distribution of schools but also economic and social barriers prevent many rural pupils from participating in education. Standardised tuition fees discriminate against poorer families. Undernutrition and poor physical condition (for example in northern and central areas where daily intake of calories is 800 below the WHO-recommended intake of 2300 calories)⁴⁸ seriously impair concentration and receptivity at school.

So far, most of Vietnam's 53 ethnic minorities could not be attracted to education since many groups live in mountainous areas where difficult access to schools is aggravated by low acceptance of educational institutions, which do not sufficiently integrate the specific cultural settings. Therefore, general efforts to improve the supply of education need to be complemented by measures which take account of the different cultural background of the minorities.

Equal access to education therefore encompasses more than the general commitment to education for all. Particularly considering primary education, additional measures must be taken to work towards equal *opportunities* for access to schools.

3.5. The Situation of Teachers

One of the most pressing problems of education in rural Vietnam is that of teachers. Although teacher salaries account for 75% of the allocations from the national budget for education⁴⁹, teachers earn about 0.8 to 1.2 times the per capita GNP, compared to 2.6 times in other Asian countries.⁵⁰ Teaching is therefore highly unattractive, especially in rural areas where additional income from private tuition, sales jobs or handicraft is rare and the standard of living low. Not only are qualified and competent teachers discouraged from entering the teaching profession, currently employed teachers also seek additional employment in other areas, which seriously impairs their teach-

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Le Son 1986, p. 255.

⁴⁴ UNICEF 1990, p. 144.

⁴⁵ FEER 19.9.1991.

⁴⁶ MOET 1993, p. 51.

⁴⁷ Gould 1993, p. 98.

⁴⁸ FEER 29.7.1993.

⁴⁹ FEER 19.9.1991.

⁵⁰ World Bank 1993 (Internal Document).

ing.⁵¹ The rapid expansion of the primary education system and literacy programmes in North Vietnam, and after unification in 1976 in the whole country, made it inevitable to employ a large number of not sufficiently trained instructors. Poor salaries, the low social status especially of primary teachers, and the resulting shortage of teachers still force schools to resort to underqualified and incompetent teachers. MOET estimated that only 42% of the primary teachers and 48% of the lower secondary teachers received full-time preservice teacher training.⁵²

Only upper secondary teachers enjoy 4 years of training on university level. Elementary teachers' training is restricted to two years either in one of the 8 national pedagogical colleges or, more probably, in one of the regional or local pedagogical high schools for which entrants are qualified after completion of upper secondary education.⁵³

A further problem of rural education is the social incompetence of many (urban) teachers who were posted from outside the rural communities. The latter often regard the teachers and "their" school as not fitting into the social context. Hence, education is perceived as not matching the specific needs of the rural communities. The liberalised economy and the general tendency to individualism also undermine the formerly strong communal sense and willingness to do voluntary work⁵⁴ upon which particularly literacy programmes and complementary education have so far relied.

4. Possible Reforms in Education Policy

A recent World Bank report emphasised the importance of education for Vietnam's development.⁵⁵ Fortunately, some important measures have already been taken. In 1990, the Ministry of Education began a major restructuring programme, aimed at strengthening school-management and cutting back school-operation costs.⁵⁶ UNICEF, UNDP and the World Bank support Vietnam in expanding and improving its primary education.

However, more emphasis needs to be given to education in rural areas within a consistent framework of rural and overall development. A large-scale project like the expansion of primary schooling which has been negotiated with the World Bank cannot contribute to rural development, if investment in rural infrastructure and support for the agricultural sector are still being

51 MOET 1993, p. 26.

52 MOET 1993, p. 102.

53 Vietnamese Professional Society 1995 (soft document).

54 UNICEF 1990, p. 145.

55 World Bank (1993): Staff Appraisal Report Socialist Republic of Vietnam Primary Education Project, Washington D.C. (Internal Document).

56 UNICEF 1990, p. 146.

neglected, as an aid conference in 1993 indicated. Vietnam requested over US \$ 9 billion for aid projects of which only US \$ 19 million was to be allocated to agricultural improvements.⁵⁷ At the second conference of the association of Vietnamese farmers, the secretary of the central committee, Do Muoi, argued for integrated strategies to improve rural infrastructure, education and standards of living.⁵⁸

Keeping this in mind as well as the paucity of financial resources arising from a rapidly growing population and the need of parallel reforms in many sectors of the economy, some concepts for an improved rural education will be discussed.

To improve education in rural areas one should first concentrate on expanding and upgrading primary schooling and complementary education. Primary schooling yields the highest returns to investment with regards to improvement in production techniques and responsiveness to health and family planning issues. Studies in Asian countries (Nepal, Thailand) also provided evidence for the close interrelation between educational achievement, farmers' incomes and nutritional status.⁵⁹ Therefore, much more emphasis should be given to complementary education with its large potential to improve the knowledge and skills of people already involved in economic activities which is important for their role as citizens, parents, educators and producers of goods and services.

Within this framework, reforms need to be carried out in the following areas: the pattern of resource allocations, curricula for primary and complementary education, educational research, distribution of and access to schools, quality of teachers and institutional links. Some reforms are already under way to which will be referred in respective chapters.

4.1. Altered Resource Allocation

Funds allocated to basic general education, 25% for primary and 5% for adult literacy education, are inadequate.⁶⁰ Since the national education budget is small and foreign assistance limited, resources have to be freed by higher efficiency and altering allocation patterns within the education sector.

Universities could cut costs by reducing the range of courses to the most needed ones while sending highly specialised students abroad. The exchange and sharing of regional educational and training institutions, as proposed at a recent conference of SEAMEO (South East Asian Ministers

57 Ibid.

58 SOA 1/1994, p. 41.

59 Gould 1993, p. 114.

60 UNICEF 1990, p. 144.

of Education Organisation), could further contribute to reducing expenses in higher education.⁶¹ Correspondence courses similar to the British Open University save expenditure for teachers and buildings in tertiary and complementary education. Progressive fees in relation to parents' income and loan schemes for upper secondary and tertiary education could bring in additional funds. To avoid the disappointing experiences of many countries with low interest rates, high default rates and high administrative costs, however, loan schemes should be made financially sustainable by a system of private (i.e. bank) lending and risk sharing by the bank and the state.⁶²

The government has already signalled a stronger commitment to education by a substantial increase of its allocations to the education.⁶³ A considerable amount of the funds should be used to support poor rural communities, which at the moment are not even able to sustain the modest achievements they have made so far.

4.2. Curriculum Reforms

As pointed out above, the curricula for primary schools and complementary education need to be reformed in order to take account of the specific requirements in rural communities. Teaching at primary level has to find the difficult balance between providing essential general knowledge and developing capacities for further independent learning, transferring and thinking which is not to be misunderstood as mere work or employment orientated education. It rather emphasises the importance of observations and practical experience in the local environment, since new structures and items of knowledge are much easier to understand, if rooted in a familiar context.⁶⁴ The following teaching unit on the local market demonstrates how this could be put into practise.

Item	Observation	Work to be done
The market	Detailed study of layout to discover patterns; Fees paid by stallholders;	Scale map with description Interviews; calculation of revenue and expenditure
Goods on sale	Administration Local and regional goods Imported goods	Detailed lists by categories; sources of goods with map, estimation of income of vendors over a period Detailed lists by categories; sources of goods leading to study of manufacturing countries (e.g. canned goods, textiles)

61 HEAD 6/1995.

62 This is discussed in a recent paper of the World Bank on "Priorities and Strategies for Education" (June 1995); HEAD 6/1995.

63 World Bank 1993 (Internal Paper).

64 UNESCO 1980, pp. 30 – 31.

Item	Observation	Work to be done
Transport	Local and imported goods	Means of transport; map of roads, railways; transportation costs; census of lorries
People	Number of buyers and sellers	Graphical presentation to show variation according to season

Table 4 Teaching Plan: the Market

Source: UNESCO 1980, p. 33.

The adaptation of the curriculum to rural needs includes also the renovation and diversification of teaching materials and manuals "in a direction of forging a close link between learners' needs and conditions so that they can see the benefit of their study".⁶⁵ Additional finances, workshops, competitions and exhibitions should encourage Vietnamese teachers to revive the tradition of producing their own textbooks and teaching aids. This could partly ease the problem of lacking textbooks and improve the quality of locally produced textbooks.⁶⁶

To date, complementary education in terms of quantity and content has largely been neglected. Literacy and literacy follow-up programmes as well as formal and nonformal training for the dominant activities, of the respective rural community should be at the core of complementary education. In the light of recent economic reforms, the latter is particularly important. Berstecher focused on the following areas of skill training:

- (i) Agriculture and food production: skills related to various aspects of agricultural production, including storage, processing, marketing, farm management;
- (ii) Crafts and technology: skills which can be applied commercially and at household level; skills which support self-employment, small-scale agro-based industries, maintenance and repair;
- (iii) Health care (including family planning); home economics;
- (iv) Community organisation: skills which enable rural people to make proper use of and take part in community services such as banks and advice bureaus.⁶⁷

More and better training in off-farm skills should be provided. Women who are often entirely responsible for the farm, household and the marketing of agricultural products, need special courses.⁶⁸

It should further be stressed that a successful development of curricula for rural complementary education will also depend on a more direct partici-

65 MOET 1993, p. 54.

66 Within its primary education project in Vietnam, the World Bank supports this practise World Bank 1993 (Internal Paper).

67 Berstecher 1985, pp. 60 – 61.

68 UNICEF 1990, p. 170.

pation of instructors and the population concerned. So far, mainly the administrative personnel on the national or provincial level decided on national curricula. These plans neither reflect different requirements in different socio-economic and cultural settings nor are they based on analyses of realistic feedback between schools and administration. However, in the recent workshop-programm on "Literacy-Follow-up Material on Agricultural Vocational Training for Adults in Rural Areas", jointly organised by MOET and UNESCO, important measures have been taken to integrate rural communities in the process of improving teaching methods and materials and adapting them to the respective local conditions.⁶⁹

Quite often, useful information (e.g. enrolment rates, educational achievements, attendance rates) is not forwarded to the authorities concerned but remains at a lower level.⁷⁰ Being aware of this pressing problem, MOET calls for improvements in data collection and processing at all levels as well as their better utilisation for planning.⁷¹

4.3. Quality of Teachers

The lack of qualified teachers is one of the most serious problems in rural education. Low payment and status of teachers make it difficult to attract staff. In the long run this can only be offset by offering various incentives such as higher remuneration, special rural allowances, granted accelerated promotion, regular high quality staff training and, perhaps, rotation systems, which give teachers the opportunity to work in different backgrounds. By introducing a progressive wage scale, more teachers would be encouraged to stay in their profession. Flexible and accelerated schemes which, for instance, offer the opportunity to work in the areas of curriculum development, teacher training or educational administration may also act as an important incentive.

The most crucial point, however, is to improve teacher training. Primary teachers have only two years of training and often start teaching at the age of 20. "The emphasis in teacher training institutions is on theory rather than on professional skills."⁷² Methodical and didactic issues such as class management, teaching of first generation learners, multigrade and bilingual teaching or awareness for the child's social context are largely neglected, resulting in education which is not child- but curriculum-centred.

69 ACCU, MOET, UNESCO Vietnam, PROAP (1993): Development of Literacy Follow-up Materials on Agricultural Vocational Training (Horticulture and Animal Raising).

70 Personal information (interview).

71 MOET 1993, p. 28.

72 MOET 1993, p. 102.

This as well as the young age of the recruits and the difficult environment they have to cope with inevitably call for a longer teacher training period. Nearly two thirds of elementary teachers and more than half of secondary teachers were not properly trained.⁷³ Efforts to improve their quality through in-service training must be intensified.

To ensure maximal integration of teachers in rural communities they should ideally be encouraged to return to their towns and villages. Here again, the need for a consistent development strategy is obvious, since it is the lack of employment and career opportunities as well as of economic perspectives which deprives rural areas of their human resources. To raise awareness for different problems in different teaching environments, teacher training has to incorporate long term practical training in various social contexts.

4.4. Educational Research

After unification in 1976, education at all levels – especially in the just 'liberated' South – served as an important medium for political propaganda. Consequently, educational research and planning was centrally organised and concentrated on the development of national curricula with educational research to be conducted along these lines. Independent research at university level, for which the impetus should not only come from the state level (i.e. the Ministry of Education which directs two national research institutes) but from people concerned with education at the local level, is vital to a long term improvement of teachers and curricula. To use research resources most efficiently by translating them into educational policies, however, close communication and cooperation at various levels between university and government bodies are required. Inevitably, this will challenge traditional patterns of top-down communication and consequently the definition of state institutions. Thus, institutional reforms have to go hand in hand with educational reforms in many respects.

4.5. Access to Schools

Schooling of rural children is very often severely limited because of poor conditions or the lack of educational facilities, spatial inequalities in the distribution of schools and economic and social barriers. Construction, repair and maintenance of educational infrastructure are a prerequisite for all other

73 Vietnamese Professional Society 1995 (soft document).

attempts to ensure educational participation. Typically, the relatively large population threshold for the distribution of educational facilities puts remote areas at a disadvantage. In North-West Vietnam, in the highland region and central Vietnam (Trung Bo – the former Annam), for example, where 40% of the Vietnamese territory is inhabited by only 25% of the population, access to school is hampered by the wide dispersion of schools. There, the density of primary schools has to be increased. Lower population thresholds and more small schools reduce journey times and thus the opportunity costs of sending working children to school. Biennial intakes, sharing teachers between relatively nearby schools⁷⁴ or multigrade teaching cut running costs for schools in sparsely inhabited areas. The unpopularity of multigrade teaching could be partly offset by intensified teacher training with stronger emphasis on practical issues such as multi-class-management, group teaching and project work in mixed age groups.

Other barriers need to be removed as well. Tuition for primary schooling should be abolished altogether since it discriminates against the poorer population. The administration of a progressive primary tuition system (i.e. according to parents' income) would be far too costly. Improvements in health and nutrition of children could also contribute to higher school attendance rates. To ensure participation of working children, the school year should be organised according to the demands of the agricultural/rural calendar.

All these measures aim at improving the physical access to schools. Parents, however, do not only choose the school on the basis of distance criteria but also – if there is a choice at all – by the perceived and real quality of schools (as, for instance, indicated by the school's exam results). Therefore, the expansion of educational facilities has to go hand in hand with improving the quality of schools. Nevertheless, ensuring physical access to schools is already an important step forward in most rural areas.

4.6. Institutional Links

To date, the central government has been entirely responsible for planning, organising and providing education in all its sectors. However, as far as finances and administration are concerned, provincial and district authorities execute considerable power. This decentralisation is a good basis upon which further changes of the role of the state towards one of regulator and setter of standards could be realised, especially as costs increase and educational needs diversify with the development of the economy. Institutional links and close cooperation both between educational and noneduca-

tional bodies at all levels, in terms of information sharing, data exchange and coordinated planning nevertheless need to be strengthened, ensuring the integration of educational and noneducational sectors. In respect of local requirements and the trend towards more financial responsibility of communities, the already existing local influence on educational issues should be further encouraged.

5. Conclusion

Education policy of the SRV faces financial constraints and needs clearly defined goals for the close future. According to the Vietnamese general development strategy, in various reports on education the Vietnamese Government⁷⁵ emphasised primary education and the elimination of illiteracy. However, the scale of misery in rural areas and the prominent role of rural diversification for the development process of the whole economy clearly require a stronger commitment to rural development and the expansion and enhancement of rural education as an integrated part of it. High priority should not only be given to primary but also to complementary education as they both render high returns to investment in education.

Most of the proposed measures to improve education are costly, and all of them need a long time to be implemented. It is therefore clear that large-scale foreign assistance in the form of finances and know-how transfer is necessary. Equally important, however, is the Vietnamese commitment to a more balanced development of both urban and rural areas.

Abstracts

Der hohe Anteil der armen Bevölkerung in den ländlichen Gebieten der Sozialistischen Republik Vietnam, aber auch der herausragende Stellenwert, den die Diversifizierung der ländlichen Wirtschaft für die Gesamtökonomie einnimmt, erfordern eine konsequente Strategie für eine rasche und nachhaltige ländliche Entwicklung.

Im Hinblick darauf wird die Rolle der Bildung für den Entwicklungsprozeß sowie die derzeitige Bildungssituation im ländlichen Vietnam untersucht. Die angespannte Finanzlage erfordert ein zweigleisiges Reformprogramm. Neben der Verbesserung der institutionellen und finanziellen Rahmenbedingungen sind Reformen bei der Curriculumplanung, der Bildungsforschung und der LehrerInnenausbildung anzustreben.

⁷⁵ For example: MOE 1990; MOET 1992; 1993; 1994.

⁷⁴ Gould 1993, p. 104.

High poverty rates in rural areas of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam and the important function of rural diversification for the whole economy require a consistent programme for rapid and sustained rural development. Against this background, this article analyses the role of education in the process of development and the present situation of education in rural Vietnam. In the light of limited resources a twofold strategy for improved rural education is discussed. Reforms of the financial and institutional framework need to be carried out in tandem with curriculum reforms, new approaches to educational research and teacher training.

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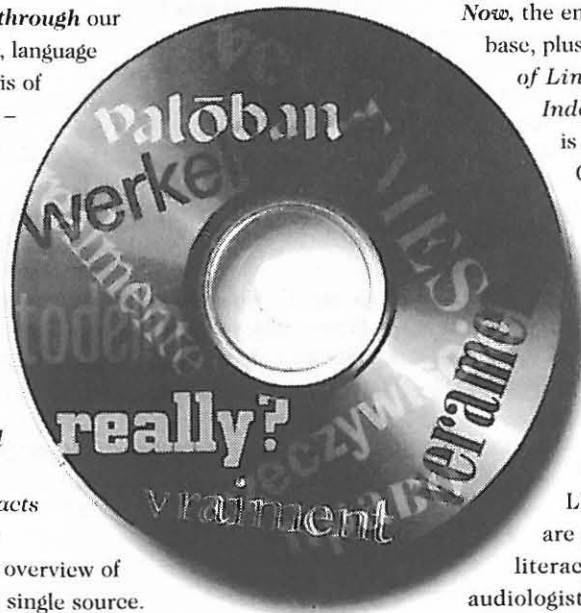
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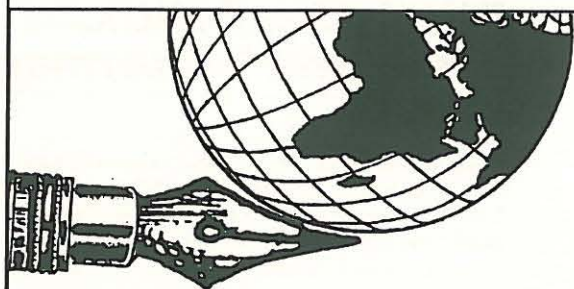
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