

Working from strengths: Plan and SNV integrate gender into community- led sanitation and hygiene approaches in Vietnam

Gender
Poorest of the Poor

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Towards Inclusive WASH Sharing evidence and experience from the field



"Before the training course I was an assistant mason and when I stood on the scaffold people would stare. Now I feel confident."

Nguyen Hong Toan

Background

Approaching gender from a constructive, strengths-based perspective has the potential to influence practice in water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) programs towards positive gender outcomes. Plan International Vietnam and SNV Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV) introduced community-led total sanitation (CLTS) as part of their WASH programs in Vietnam. SNV has also integrated supply chain development within their WASH programming. As part of these programs, both agencies introduced strategies informed by a focus on strengths-based thinking and have used their programs to expand their understanding of the links between gender and WASH. Through adoption of four principles developed in recent research on gender and WASH in the Pacific,¹ the two agencies explored how community-led approaches and partnership with women's organisations can be used to open up dialogue about gender roles, to build capacity of staff and partners to address gender equality, and to work towards strengthened gender outcomes.

Location

» Dien Bien Province, Vietnam



Situation analysis

The benefits and opportunities associated with making gender a focus of WASH programs have been well established, including more effective and sustainable WASH initiatives and advancements in gender equality.² However, gender is not always incorporated as an integral part of approaches developed in the WASH sector.

Globally, community-led approaches such as CLTS have been successful in increasing demand for sanitation amongst rural households. In addition, strengthening of sanitation supply chains has provided opportunities to expand access to sanitation products and employment opportunities at the community level. SNV and Plan International's WASH programs incorporate elements of both CLTS and sanitation marketing throughout their work in Africa and Asia. However, both agencies recognised the need to further investigate how these approaches could be used to enable improved gender outcomes.

SNV's Sustainable Sanitation and Hygiene for All program is part of Vietnam's National Target Program and provides capacity building support to local partners from the public, private and non-government organisation (NGO) sectors, with the objective of increasing sustainable and equitable access to sanitation and hygiene in rural areas. SNV's program focuses on three northwest provinces that are among the poorest districts in the country. Working in an area of Vietnam with high ethnic diversity, low literacy and poverty levels reported as high as 47.5 per cent, the program also sought to mobilise women within communities. One important benefit of promoting and supporting women's roles is improving sanitation outcomes as part of a process of scaling up throughout one district in the province of Dien Bien.

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¹ Halcrow G, Rowland C, Willetts J, Crawford J and Carrard N (2010) *Resource Guide: Working effectively with women and men in water, sanitation and hygiene programs*

² For examples see: Fisher, J (2010) 'Women in water supply, sanitation and hygiene programmes', *Proceedings Of the Institution Of Civil Engineers Municipal Engineer*, pp. 223-229; Willetts J, Halcrow G, Carrard N, Rowland C and Crawford J (2010) 'Addressing two critical MDGs together: gender in water, sanitation and hygiene initiatives', *Pacific Economic Bulletin*, vol. 25, no. 1, pp. 162-176.

Plan International Vietnam (PIV) currently implements a WASH program in five provinces in north and central Vietnam and will expand into a further three provinces in 2012-13. The WASH program operates within PIV's Early Childhood Care and Development initiative and works through government to promote WASH behaviour change and access to services using non-subsidy approaches. In designing their intervention, PIV drew from experience integrating gender in their earlier program (the AusAID-funded Sanitation, Hygiene and Water Improvement project (SHWIP) in central Vietnam) and put emphasis on the equal participation of women and men in CLTS-triggering activities and monitoring structures, and developed a monitoring tool to track gender outcomes. Two of the authors³ worked collaboratively to develop a gender equality-monitoring tool for Plan's WASH program.

SNV in Vietnam identified the need to improve women's involvement in community engagement processes and to ensure opportunities for the participation of women in supply chain components. PIV had incorporated gender aims into project goals and allocated considerable effort and expertise towards pursuing gender equality in the SHWIP program. PIV had however identified the need to collect information about if and how their activities were actually improving gender equality at the community level.

Approaches to integrate gender considerations into WASH or other development programs are often undertaken through provision of expert advice and the development of gender action plans and strategies. However, mainstreaming these strategies into project implementation and monitoring continues to remain a challenge for many agencies. The principles developed in the Pacific (described below) were adopted as a pragmatic, constructive framework to guide integration of gender elements directly into SNV and PIV's

work, and their use by these two agencies demonstrates the breadth of ways in which the principles might be applied.

What we did

Research in the Pacific in 2009-10 explored the potential of strengths-based techniques to assess gender outcomes associated with WASH initiatives, based on a participatory methodology informed by appreciative inquiry. The process revealed a number of benefits associated with use of strengths-based thinking in addressing and investigating gender equality,⁴ and findings formed the basis for developing guidance material for WASH practitioners.⁵ This guidance material is underpinned by four principles (see Box 1).

SNV and PIV based the approaches to gender described in this paper on these four principles, and in doing so also sought to incorporate strengths-based elements into their application of the principles.

BOX 1 The Pacific strengths-based principle framework

Principle 1: Facilitate participation and inclusion

Focus on ways of working that enable women, men, girls and boys to be actively involved in improving their water, sanitation and hygiene situation.

Principle 2: Focus on how decisions are made

Use decision-making processes that enable women's and men's active involvement, within the project and in activities.

Principle 3: See and value differences

See, understand and value the different work, skills and concerns of women and men related to water, sanitation and hygiene.

Principle 4: Create opportunities

Provide space and support for women and men to experience and share new roles and responsibilities.

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³ Claire Rowland and Matthew Bond

⁴ Willetts, J. et al (2012; in preparation) Working from Strengths to Assess Changes in Gender Equality, Development in Practice

⁵ Halcrow G, Rowland C, Willetts J, Crawford J and Carrard N (2010), Resource Guide: Working effectively with women and men in water, sanitation and hygiene programs



Figure 1
Women's union members have played an active role in promoting safe sanitation and hygiene in Dien Bien

Aiden Dockery, SNV



Figure 2
Building confidence, building skills – female masons at work in Vietnam

Aiden Dockery, SNV

SNV incorporated the principles using a range of strategies. Firstly, to increase women's participation specifically (Principle 1), SNV extended its partnership with the Provincial Department of Health to include the Dien Bien Women's Union (WU).⁶ This built momentum for improved sanitation and hygiene and increased recognition for the role of women in sanitation improvement (Principle 3). Members of the WU were trained as CLTS facilitators, and they mobilised women from the province, district, commune and village levels. The large membership of the Dien Bien WU (74,000 women, representing some 70 per cent of women), and their existing network, communication skills and interest in sanitation were significant strengths and skills on which the program built (Figure 1). The four principles were also incorporated into training for facilitators in the post-triggering follow-up activities to strengthen gender integration.

Participation and influence in decision-making (Principles 1 and 2) of women in households living in poverty and socially excluded groups (primarily H'mong ethnic group) was monitored by the WU in a sample of villages throughout the district using a simple qualitative monitoring tool.

The participatory tool was used at three points within the process: at CLTS triggering, post triggering events and at community meetings and at district level meetings. The findings were reported back to the district and province government agencies to guide areas in which more intensive efforts would be needed for follow-up to improve gender and inclusion outcomes.

In terms of creating new opportunities (Principle 4) and valuing the different skills and contributions (Principle 3), 12 unskilled female masons were mentored and trained in 2011 for the first time in the province along with male participants (Figure 2). This was inspired by a similar approach in Kerala shared by the International Water and Sanitation Centre.⁷ Women were already involved in the sector (albeit as unskilled labour or assistant masons), and this was seen as a strength to build upon rather than a reason for them not to be selected in preference of the more skilled, male masons. Gender strategies were used, specifically sensitising the government partners, and identified candidates were provided with mentoring and support in follow-up to the training.

Prior to learning of the Pacific principles, PIV's CLTS program already worked through

⁶ The Dien Bien Women's Union is the Provincial level of the Vietnam Women's Union. The Vietnam Women's Union is a mass organisation with an estimated 13 million members predominantly in the rural areas. As a women's social-political and developmental organisation, it is mandated to protect women's legitimate rights and strive for gender equality. Further information is available at <http://hoilhpn.org.vn/>

⁷ Further information on the Kerala approach is available at <http://www.irc.nl/page/8287>

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Figure 3
Women in Quang Tri province
discuss decision-making in
their households

Plan International Vietnam

Figure 4
Young women from Quang
Ngai analyse WASH decision-
making in their households

Plan International Vietnam



implementing agencies with strong women's representation, including the Vietnam WU and the Ministry of Health. This resulted in high levels of women's participation in facilitation and monitoring roles. PIV also has a minimum representation of 50 per cent women in Project Implementation Committees (PIC) and encourages equal participation of women and men during triggering processes. These measures equate to Principles 1 and 3 within the Pacific principle framework (Box 1).

In 2011, PIV used the Pacific strengths-based gender principles as a framework for developing a monitoring tool to track changes in gender equality within the WASH program. It will be applied at six monthly whole-of-community meetings involving 40 to 60 representatives from a cross-section of households, with approximately equal numbers of women and men ranging from adolescents to the elderly. Working in small groups and in plenary, participants are facilitated to work through three steps. Step 1 identifies what work women and men undertake to improve household and community WASH, how much time they spend on these tasks and which roles, if any, represent new opportunities (Principles 1, 3 and 4). Step 2 examines household-level decision-making (Principle 2) and analyses which household members have access to WASH decision-making information and who influences and makes decisions. The final step invites participants to consider the way WASH roles and responsibilities are shared between women and men now and envisage how they would like them to be shared in

the future (Principles 1, 2 and 4). All steps in the tool generate monitoring data (about women's and men's perceptions regarding each issue) and also create opportunities for dialogue that explicitly addresses gender relations (Figures 3 and 4).

The tool was developed with three objectives in mind. Firstly its design centred on the idea that engaging with communities to investigate gender need not just involve monitoring and measuring but can in and of itself be a significant intervention to promote gender equity. The tool creates opportunities for women and men to discuss their WASH interactions, contributions and relationships (Figures 5 and 6). In this sense, the monitoring tool serves to raise awareness within communities of gender differences and promote shared aspirations for greater equality.

Secondly, the tool was designed to be run by communities themselves using simple, participatory exercises that can be facilitated by the commune-level government officials who oversee the CLTS processes. A deliberate decision was taken to keep the tool as simple as possible. The monitoring exercises draw upon the participants' own experiences and highlight differences and similarities between women's and men's experiences in a way that makes it easy to facilitate discussion. Whilst some training is required for facilitators, using the tool does not require specialist gender skills.

Thirdly, the approach recognises that the simplicity of the CLTS triggering process is

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Figure 5
Men discuss the division
of WASH work in the
household in Quang Ngai

Plan International Vietnam



Figure 6
Women in Quang Tri
discussing desired gender
roles in their community

Plan International Vietnam

fundamental to its success. Consequently, the tool was designed to operate as a complementary, stand-alone process during CLTS follow-up rather than attempting to incorporate any additional steps into the CLTS triggering process.

After

The integration of gender using the principles delivered benefits for both agencies. The success of SNV's approach has been recognised by local government partners, the WU, trainees involved in the program and by AusAID (who supported the program). The role of the WU has been an important factor in leading change towards gender equality and empowering women

to shift the priority towards sanitation. To build on this, a new partnership has been formed at the national level with the WU which has seen engagement with a further eight provinces with the intention to scale-up the successful approach. Within the project location, local government partners have recognised the direct contribution of the WU. This contribution includes: increasing the momentum of the sanitation program (coverage has doubled in the past six months); achieving more equitable participation of women in activities; adoption of strategies that respond to the different needs and perspectives of women and men; and mobilising women to convince their husbands about the importance of

Figure 7
Nguyen Hong Toan,
a successful female
mason in Dien Bien

SNV Vietnam



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Figure 8
Female mason teams
constructing toilets in
Muong Ang District
 Aiden Dockery, SNV



sanitation. WU members are now consulted on things such as sanitation designs, financing and the recruitment of further female masons. The female masons report enhanced confidence and the desire to promote sanitation to women in their own villages. In the words of Nguyen Hong Toan (Figure 7):

Before the training course I was an assistant mason and when I stood on the scaffold people would stare. Now I feel confident.

Currently, in the program area, Toan is completing three orders to construct toilets, which she has received since completing the training. She has a strong vision of how she can work as a skilled mason, seeing the potential market for constructing latrines for the rural Tay people. In the future she could receive orders and lead her own team. The income of the female masons overall has increased by a reported 15-25 per cent. The provincial WU in Dien Bien has supported the establishment of a professional female mason team in Muong Ang District that specialises in sanitary latrine construction and provides technical advice on low-cost sanitary latrine options. At the provincial level WU representatives commented that this story and that of the other 11 female masons is very promising and brings a 'good image to address strong prejudices about women's roles.' PIV's approach of working through and strengthening the capacity of women-

centred agencies has led to the increased skills, knowledge and confidence of women staff to fulfil their roles and achieve community outcomes, with implications for their status at the village, district and commune level. In the words of a woman PIC member at the commune level:

The biggest change for us is that now we are trained; we have knowledge and we know how to persuade and convince villages and the community to change. Before Plan, we tried motivating the people to use toilets but were not very successful. Since they came, we have gained knowledge and skills through training.

Responsibilities for monitoring the quality of toilet construction also represent a new role for women in a cultural context where construction roles are the domain of men (Figure 8).

In 2011, PIV together with Plan International Australia trialled an initial version of the gender monitoring tool in four communities with the intention of implementing the tool across the program in 2012. During the trial, small group and plenary exercises proved effective in generating discussion about how women and men engage differently in WASH activities. Participants of both sexes were able to talk about their contributions and responsibilities in a positive light, but they were also able to highlight inequalities and to envisage a more equitable future.

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This strengths-based approach was well-suited to the skills and abilities of the facilitators, none of whom were gender experts and who were typical of the staff likely to be facilitating the tool when applied at scale. A set of picture cards has now been created showing different types of community members engaging in a range of WASH activities. These will assist staff in overcoming language and literacy issues when conducting the participatory exercises. A final trial of the tool, commencing with training of trainers, has been scheduled for mid-2012. PIV intends that it will be used in every CLTS community on an annual basis.

What we learnt

For both organisations, application of the principles and use of monitoring processes informed by strengths-based thinking resulted in considerable successes in constructively building gender equality in and through their WASH initiatives. A number of factors made these achievements possible.

For SNV, the fostering of collaboration between two partners was fundamental to success. The program provided an opportunity for the Department of Health and Vietnam WU to work together, and both were appreciative of the role played by the other. The Centre for Preventative Medicine within the Department of Health reported:

We were very lucky to bring in the WU.
Without them, we could not have done it alone.

Reflections from SNV also note the need for provision of gender sensitisation and support when promoting initiatives that may challenge assumptions about gender roles held by some members of communities. Each of SNV's programs in Asia sought to promote the role of women in supply chain activities but to varying degrees of success. The specific success in Vietnam, which has since been shared regionally, came from the attention to preparation and mentoring and by selecting candidates already active in the field.

Another lesson was that integrating the principles into the train-the-trainer for CLTS

facilitators for post triggering required several trials. The initial tendency for the facilitator was for the parts related to gender to be facilitated as separate gender sessions, which proved overly theoretical and abstract for the participants to engage with. With the revisions, the process was simplified and the focus shifted to integration as practical principles and steps within each of the sessions. How this continues to be translated in practice will need to be further monitored.

For PIV, two strengths-based aspects of the monitoring tool were seen as important to the tool's successful trial. Firstly, the participatory exercises allowed community members to share and reflect on their own experiences within their own cultural context, and build constructively on their own understanding of their own situation. Secondly, the participatory exercises worked to create a shared vision of gendered WASH roles, focusing on the potential for shared future success rather than setting up opposition between women and men.

The trialling process enabled PIV to overcome several challenges including: the need to develop methods that could be used by generalist facilitators, who were not gender specialists; and to ensure objectives for data collection and empowering discussions could be effectively met within a two-hour timeframe. The trial also reinforced that concepts had to be kept simple, so they could be easily translated into the range of languages used by different ethnic groups with whom PIV works. The pictorial aids will also assist in addressing language and literacy barriers.

In a feedback workshop at the end of PIV's trial process, staff members from across a range of programs engaged in discussion and debate on their different experiences in the three field trial locations. None of the staff present had specialist skills in gender equality programming, however, many felt they had gained confidence in community-based processes to both promote and track gender equality outcomes. Their interest and commitment to the process was evident in the vigorous discussions held on the best

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ways these tools could be applied in other PIV programs and across different ethnic groups.

For both SNV and PIV, the four principles offered a guiding framework suitable for the development of program implementation approaches or for monitoring purposes. The simplicity of the principles meant that they provide an easily explained, readily understood framework that may be useful for adoption more widely in the sector to support integration of gender within WASH programs.

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- » Willetts, J et al (2012; in preparation) *Working from Strengths to Assess Changes in Gender Equality*, Development in Practice

Supporting Resources

- » Halcrow G, Rowland C, Willetts J, Crawford J and Carrard N (2010) *Resource Guide: Working effectively with women and men in water, sanitation and hygiene program*, International Women's Development Agency and Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney, Australia.
- » Researching gender outcomes in Pacific WASH Programs at <http://genderinpacificwash.info/>

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