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### **Abstract**

Since the adoption of *Doi Moi* (reform) policy in 1986, local participation has attracted special attention in development projects in Vietnam. In particular, the questions of whether local participation in development projects should be promoted and whether it would be feasible became a major concern among development practitioners, as the debates on participation and project sustainability continued. While some argued that although socio-economic, cultural, ethnic and political obstacles were always present, many also believed that the promises of participation in development projects in Vietnam had been strengthened in recent times especially when the Government realised that its top-down approach in implementing development projects could only weaken local capacity. This article is an examination of how participatory approach was promoted in two villages in Daklak province, Vietnam, where a Danish-funded RWSS (Rural water supply and sanitation) project was implemented. It investigates how development was perceived differently by local people and other major stakeholders, and in turn, how participation was exercised. It also identifies the obstacles that emerged that hampered local participation and discusses how locals responded with appropriate solutions.

### **Background**

The term “participation” has been closely associated with development projects recently. Yet historically the participatory approach can be traced back to the 1940s. In practice, it was only in the 1960s that participation was given wide attention in development studies. However, despite its popularity and wider recognition, there is still not one single definition of participation that is universally accepted and various interpretations of what participation entails abound.

According to Pearse and Stiefe (1979), participation is concerned with efforts that aim to increase control and influence over available resources in given social contexts on the part of groups and movements of those hitherto excluded from such control. Paul (1987) defined

participation as a process by which intended beneficiaries have an influence over the direction and execution of a project with a view to enhancing their social-economic well-being. Similarly, Tikare et al. (1979) stated that participation is seen as a process through which all related stakeholders influence and share control over priority setting, policy-making, resource allocations and access to public goods and services. Implicit in these definitions is that there is no blueprint of participation as it is practiced in different contexts.

In Latin America, participation is considered beneficiaries’ voluntary contribution in projects, but they are not expected to take part in shaping, changing the projects or criticizing their designed contents (ECLA<sup>1</sup> 1973). Oakley (1991) argued that participation could be

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<sup>1</sup> Economic Commission for Latin America

approached from two angles. One is to regard participation as a means and the other as an end. As a means, participation is used as a vehicle to achieve a predetermined goal rather than participation itself. As an end, participation means placing its concentration more on capacity building and strengthening participants' confidence, believing that their own involvement will ensure developmental activities in their community to be more effective and sustainable. As a conclusion, he stresses that participation, whatever form it may take, cannot be simply seen as physical and tangible contributions from the community.

In Vietnam, participation is particularly referred to by the government as "people's participation", particularly since the promulgation of Doi Moi (reform) policy in 1986. The aim of the reform was to review the experiences of development in the past and learn from the serious shortcomings the country had encountered in its 21 years' experimentation of collectivisation and communisation of agricultural production in the North (1959 – 1980). It also aimed to examine the consequences of rapid collectivisation in the South after reunification in 1975 and mismanagement of the State (Boothroyd 2000), so that new efforts could be initiated to accelerate "economic growth linked closely with social progress and equity, cultural development and environmental protection" (Government of Vietnam 1991). Since 1986, participation has been further bolstered by foreign funded development projects in the country. These projects aimed to promote local participation, particularly regarding it as pre-requisite for the success and sustainability of the projects. In spite of its recent popularity, other than exclusive reports from NGOs<sup>2</sup> and personal anecdotes, participation has not been examined systematically and critically especially in terms of its relevance and acceptance by the intended beneficiaries in development projects. Whether participation could actually improve effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability of development projects, or whether it actually has further strengthened local ownership of the project, given extra incentive to its people for

mobilising their own resources and commitment to make decisions for its own future also remains uncertain. In this context, an empirical and critical examination of people's participation in development projects seems to be both timely and urgent.

Here, this article proposes to investigate a Danish funded project on RWSS in Daklak province in Vietnam with special focus on two villages in Nam Dong commune, Cu Jut district, one of the three pilot districts chosen to have such a project implemented. A critical study of the project hopefully demonstrates how participation has been practiced and perceived by different related stakeholders and the insights gained from such observations in the province may perhaps be most valuable in assessing participation and its contribution in other development projects elsewhere in the nation.

#### **Aim and objectives of the study**

This study examines how the concept of participation is being practiced in Vietnam, using a case study of the RWSS project in Daklak with special emphasis on investigating how the villagers in the study areas perceive, expect, and ultimately practice participation in the course of working with the project. Furthermore, it will highlight the degree of participation among the major stakeholders. This includes how they evaluate the effectiveness and relevance of participation in their project, particularly in terms of the benefits they consider to be most significant.

In this study, a set of research questions was prepared:

1. How is participation or the participatory approach understood and exercised by the personnel and stakeholders in the project?
2. How do local villagers in the project areas perceive and interpret the meaning of participation? What are their expectations?
3. How are people in the villages included in the process of participation? Specially, in what type of activity and at what stage of the project are they called to participate?
4. In what capacity do local villagers participate in the project? As informants or knowledge contributors or decision makers?

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<sup>2</sup> Non-governmental organization

How do local people evaluate their experience with participation? How do they assess the eventual outcomes?

## **Participation:**

### **A Literature Review**

#### **Meaning of Participation**

There is little doubt that “participation” has become a term entrenched in development studies. After continuous efforts in promoting the concept as a set of principles for planning and implementing inclusive development for more than a decade, participation is no longer considered something entirely novel to most development practitioners and beneficiaries in the Western world. However, its trajectories to common acceptance have not always been smooth.

Although development assistance was offered to Third World nations, it was not until the 1960s that planners considered it made sense to enable local villagers to have involvement with projects. However, what they meant by involvement was only encouraging a greater number of villagers to take part in a project that had already been designed for them. In other words, although participation was promoted, local people were still denied an opportunity to have their say in decisions that would affect their lives. Nor had they been offered the option to articulate their needs and priorities which they knew better than anyone else.

Since then, however, the concept of participation has been continuously moulded and remoulded. In 1973, ECLA, for example, considered participation as the outcome of the involvement of the targeted beneficiaries of a development project as well as the contributions they made. In this context, the targeted beneficiaries were not expected to have any role in shaping or defining the project objectives or its agenda and design. Participation at the time was only to make local people feel good, so that they would take part in the development activities already in place for them (Pateman 1970). Cohen and Uphoff (1977) argued that participation should include local members in the decision-making processes as well as in the evaluation of the outcomes of a project whereby

they not only could make contributions, but also be embraced by the project and empowered by it. In this regard, Pearse and Stiefel (1979) made it clear that participation should involve organising targeted beneficiaries of the development project to increase their control over resources from which they had hitherto been excluded. Richardson (1983) proposed that participation should be about the ways in which ordinary people should take part in the formulation and implementation of a social policy and decision. According to him, there are two forms of participation-direct and indirect. What characterised the former was the attempt made by locals to influence the course of government policy in a face-to-face manner. The latter, in contrast, involved no face-to-face interaction, nor any attempt to take action influencing government decisions. It is important that intended beneficiaries should be in an appropriate position to influence the direction and implementation of a development project with a view to enhancing their existing well-being particularly with regard to income, personal growth, self-reliance and/or other values that they cherished (Paul 1987). According to OECD (1994), it is important that partnership upon the basis of open dialogue among the various actors be built and local views and indigenous knowledge be deliberately sought and respected in development.

By far the most influential figure in pushing participation in a new direction was Illich (1983), who argued strongly that participation should be a process of de-professionalization in all domains of life. In his view, development practitioners should not be seen as the only people who were knowledgeable and that the locals were ignorant and incapable. He stressed that local knowledge and experience were even more important for the success and sustainability. For this reason, development practitioners should not consider local participation as a process of handing over the stakes to their target audiences, but as a process through which future beneficiaries can fully get involved in making plans, contribute to the design and more importantly to decision-making processes (Illich 1983 in Chamber 1997). In some ways, this coincided with the broader changes in the philosophy of

governance of the time. Specially, some researchers had argued that there was a strong connection between participation and decentralisation or empowerment. According to Rondinelli (1981), for example, decentralising administration from a single centre and conferring power to local government would encourage people's active participation in cultural, social, economic and political activities in their communities. Faguet (1997) agreed that decentralisation promoted political equality, accountability, responsiveness, a sense of ownership and, in turn, efficiency and effectiveness. Thus, decentralisation could become a renovated structure for improving democracy and participation.

### **Barriers to Participation**

Oakley's (1991) pointed out three main barriers that could heavily hinder participation: structural, administrative, and social obstacles. First and foremost, participation could be heavily influenced by the political environment within the country it was promoted. He further stressed that where the prevailing political ideology does not encourage openness for public consultation and prefers to maintain a highly centralised political system, it is more likely that participation would face serious obstacles as the political environment frustrates rather than encourages participation. He called these structural obstacles, which tend to maintain the status quo and prevent people from developing an awareness of their rights that they are entitled for participation. Structural barriers are more likely to be found in a centrally planned political environment as its planned goals are usually hard to change, and leave little room for the more spontaneous development initiatives that usually come from local communities. He further argued that barriers to participation are not limited to governments and administrative structures. They could also be found in people's mentality of dependence, especially in cases where people have become overly dependent on the government to make decisions for them, their own confidence in and capacity for making their own decisions, and organising and developing their own initiatives would also be weakened. There are, however, other social obstacles for participation, among which gender emerges as an important one. For a long time, the place of women was

traditionally defined to stay within the household, performing housework. This gender barrier obviously denies women any opportunity to participate in socio-economic development activities.

### **Advantages of participation**

Uphoff (1986b) pointed out a number of advantages associated with participation. First, one would gain more accurate information on the needs, priorities and capacities of the local community through their participation, and these elements could be essential for the success of projects. Second, participation could also provide more efficient ways to allocate limited resources to better meet local needs. Castillo (1983) insisted that top-down strategies have proved to make little impact upon poverty alleviation, whereas a participatory approach could be more helpful, especially community members were generally resourceful and knowledgeable rather than ignorant and apathetic as commonly stereotyped. Oakley (1991) concluded that participation could contribute most to five key aspects in development projects - efficiency, effectiveness, self-reliance, coverage and sustainability. He argued that participation not only allowed local people to be involved in determining the objectives and priorities of a project, but also in making plans and decisions. Through this process, indigenous knowledge, experience and resources could then be fully and effectively utilised. Therefore, participation would also provide local people with an opportunity to break away from their dependence on external assistance in providing solutions to their problems. As a result, they would also develop confidence in their own capacity and become self-reliant in the future. In turn, participation would further bring local community a greater sense of control of their own destiny as well as the pride of being independent, bringing an end to their feeling of being isolated and their possible mentality of dependence.

### **Principles of practicing participation**

In order to ensure the success of participation in development projects, Oakley (1991) proposed three major principles for practice - the primacy of people, people's knowledge, and inclusion of women. Specifically, he maintained that as development is more a humanising process, all

development projects must first be oriented to local people, their interests, needs and priorities. This means that the projects should not simply focus on people as objects of change, but rather as subjects of development. As objects of change, local people would remain passive actors in that they would only perform what they were told to do instead of taking their own initiatives for change. Sethi (1987, :52) rightly observed, “conventional modes of development, explicitly or implicitly, always treat local people as an object of change and the relation between the development agent and the people themselves often takes the form of a subject acting upon an object; the outcome is a delivery approach – that is, an attempt to bring development to people through deliveries of knowledge and resources from outside”. Further, it is recommended that the long-term objective of promoting local participation is to improve the locals’ capacity, leadership, organizational skills, a sense of ownership and responsibility in the projects. To do so, a number of principles should be borne in mind. The first principle is the *inclusion* of all people that will be affected by the decisions, policies or a project. Attention should also be given to ensure *equal partnership* among the participants. Recognition of indigenous knowledge, capacity and equal rights of every participant, regardless of their social backgrounds, will be important as it will help the projects explore and fully utilise local resources. This has been neglected in the past projects that promoted a top-down approach (Borda 1987). *Transparency* is another important principle. To achieve this, an environment conducive to open communication and building dialogue should be created. *Sharing power* combined with sharing responsibility is another important element. The purpose is to avoid possible conflicts that may occur among stakeholders as a result of uneven division of power and also to make sure that all stakeholders have equal responsibility for the decisions that are made and each should have a clear mandate for implementing those decisions. *Empowerment* is another important principle. The purpose is to promote mutual learning and empowerment. *Cooperation* is the last point that should attract due attention. It helps to share every participant’s strength and reduce their weaknesses (Sethi, 1987).

### **Women and Participation**

Historically, the struggle for gender equality can be traced to the early stages of the inception of the United Nations in 1945 when only 30 out of 51 member states, allowed “women’s equal voting rights with men or permitted them to hold public office”. At that time, not much progress was achieved. However, the struggle did not come to a deadlock but continued and led to a number of steps considered as important marks in achieving better gender equality as it had attracted special attention of many more nations. At this stage, international efforts were given to achieve codification of women’s legal and civic rights, acknowledging that law itself was not enough to ensure equal rights for women. This therefore led the struggle to the second phase with convening of the number of international congresses on gender equality in decision making e.g. the Open Dialogue in Mexico in 1975, the conference in Copenhagen in 1980, in Nairobi in 1985 and in Beijing in 1995 etc. Impressive progress has been achieved in recent decades (Kongolo and Bamgose 2002). As a result, social perception of women as merely a house lady has also gradually disappeared as a result of socio-economic developments as well as the increasing requirements of life quality between women and men (Bui. 2003 in Barry. 2003). This could be seen as an important step marking a sharp change in ideology. However, one can still see that today, women especially women in rural areas, remain consistently neglected and forgotten by policy and decision makers. Their inclusion in development projects is rare. This becomes rarer in such a society as Vietnam, where people were heavily influenced by Confucianism, which stated that men were always superior to women (Barry. K 1996) and women considered to belong to the weak side are not suitable for working outside. However, nowadays, this conception has changed. As a result, women have gained a greater representation in society. An increasing higher proportion of women’s representation at various levels is also seen. However, further improvements still need to be made, particularly in political systems, as presently women’s representation in political organisations remains very limited.

Although conditions of freedom, initiative and creativeness have been expanded for everyone in recent decades, women, particularly rural and ethnic minority women, are still marginalised. Part of the reason for the marginalisation is that they feel inadequately prepared and unable to catch up with increasing requirements and demands that society is posing. Further limitations in narrowing the gender gap still emerge. One of the limitations encountered is the social attitude, not only in men but also in the women themselves, toward women's role. To change this, there is a need for persistent efforts in education and affirmative activities, so that they can build self-confidence, the capacity and necessary skills to make better contributions to the development of their own communities.

At this point, it is appropriate to add that the Constitution of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam clearly states that "Male and female citizens have equal rights in all aspects of political, economic, cultural, social and family life". As an attempt to turn the constitutional stipulations into practice, in 2002 the

Government of Vietnam issued a National Gender Strategy and Action Plan for the Advancement of Women. In November 2003, a Gender Strategy in agriculture and rural development to the year 2010 was also published. The overall ideology of these strategies are to achieve gender equality and raise the status of rural women, thus achieving a higher level of agricultural and rural development in the period of industrialization and modernization of agriculture.

**The research site**

The research was conducted in Nam Dong commune of Cu Jut District in Daklak province in Vietnam. The commune had 13,990 people living in sixteen villages. It was the first commune in the district chosen to have the piped water schemes constructed under this project for its local characteristics such as high local need, a chronic scarcity of water, and diversity in ethnicity etc. However, due to limited resources, this research was only limited to Village one and Village two, where two piped schemes were already installed.

**Table 1: Basic information on research sites**

Village	Total household	Total population	Ethnicity	% of access to water and sanitation	Income (VND)/m	% of participation in water supply and sanitation
Village 1	184	920	30%	10	150.000 to 200.000	60%
Village 2	201	1005	56%	10	120,000-170,000	30%

Available reports indicated that only half of the households owned dug wells, which run dry six months of the year. It was common for many households to share one well.

As far as water quality was concerned, the reports showed that 60% to 70% of ground water was contaminated with pesticides and chemical fertilizers. Many were constructed too near to latrines or animal sheds. Furthermore, percentage of people affected with water borne and sanitation related diseases like diarrhoea, worms, and red eye has increased as a result of using poor quality water keep increasing. A greater concern was the incidence of reproductive and urinary tract infections among women. The reports also indicated that more

than two thirds of the households in these villages did not have access to hygienic latrines.

For local participation in the schemes, according to a project officer, most of the villagers had some reservations about the project as they fear that it might not be successful, and that they would lose money and time. Their fear was understandable because there had been several projects implemented in these communities without success. Additionally, many of the households could not

afford the contributions required to participate in the project.

### **Research design & sampling**

For this research, due to time and resource constraints, only 25 people from different social backgrounds were invited to participate as key informants who are categorised into three groups: group one consisted of ordinary villagers; group two consisted of project personnel; group three was made up of local authority leaders and project administrators. The researcher is aware that a small heterogeneous sample might not be able to reflect correctly the issue under study, as it would make it hard to generalise the eventual findings of the research (Patton, 1990). Still, the researcher believed that given the different backgrounds the informants had, they would be the most helpful in providing a general impression, if not a definitive generalisation of, the different views people had about participation in local communities in this part of Vietnam, which in turn would suffice in an exploratory study.

20 out of 25 key informants are direct beneficiaries of the piped schemes, one is a representative of Nam Dong PPC<sup>3</sup>, two are piped scheme managers and two are project personnel at the provincial level. The direct beneficiaries in this research were ordinary villagers of different ethnicities who took part in constructing work for the piped schemes. These twenty beneficiaries – ten from each village – were selected at random. Apart from these, a representative of the CPC<sup>4</sup>, piped scheme managers and villager leaders were invited to participate in the research as a key informant.

Of the selected informants, more than a half is women who are the most regular users of the scheme. The researcher believed that they had the most thorough of understanding about the scheme in terms of how they had been constructed and operated than other members in the family etc.

### **Method of data collection**

In this research, qualitative approach using in-depth interview was chosen as the major

information collecting method for its suitability for exploratory study. This method is usually adopted in exploratory researches where the researcher is attempting to gain understanding of the field of study and to develop theories rather than test them. For Taylor and Bogdan (1984, p.77), in-depth interviewing is “repeated face-to-face encounters between the researcher and informants directed toward understanding informants’ perspectives on their lives, experiences or situations as expressed in their own words”. For this research, note-taking combined with tape recording. For the former, an advantage was that it promoted the researcher to review and analyse his notes and interpretations as soon as the interview was completed when his impressions were still fresh. More importantly, he was also made to pay closer attention to non-verbal language and nuances of the informants during the interview. For the latter, many informants indicated some reluctance and uneasiness for fear that their responses might be used against them later.

### **Data analysis**

For this research, data collected was first reviewed before all interviews were grouped together to identify if themes and narratives emerged that would warrant closer analysis. The researcher then examined the collected raw data to search for themes that were closely associated with the foci of the research by going through all the interview questions and the responses. After this step, he analysed and interpreted the data by using the major themes/concepts that emerged.

### **Research findings**

#### **Main research questions and perceptions of key informants**

The information collected from a total of twenty-five informants reveal three main perceptions of the meaning of participation. Approximately two thirds of informants of group one in Village Two considered participation as physical contributions of target audiences in the construction of the schemes. As one male informant said:

Participation means participating in meetings, digging channels to prepare for installing the

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<sup>3</sup> Province People’s Committee

<sup>4</sup> Commune People’s Committee



pipes and contributing money to constructing the scheme.

Another female informant also shared the same view, saying:

Participation means participating in implementing project's activities that we are requested to, for example, digging the channels, attending meetings and contributing money to setting up the scheme.

In this context, it is clear that for this group participation was understood simply as a process through which prospective beneficiaries could make contributions to a project. This group did not see participation as a means to achieve democracy or sustainability, but merely as a means to gain a physical access to clean water for daily consumption. Furthermore, there was no clear link for these people between their participation and the democracy and sustainability of the scheme. As one informant said:

We do not care how much we participate in the project nor if we can make a decision for our own. What we care is when and how to access clean water at a reasonable price. We do not understand what is meant by sustainability, it is so vague to us.

Field observations showed two main reasons that this perception may have developed. The main reason was that the meaning of participation was not clearly communicated to this group. Consequently, members of this group were not equipped with necessary knowledge about participation, or its close link with the scheme's sustainability. Though the project organised a number of community consultations and short training courses which aimed to equip prospective users with information in relation to the project, and the approach it would introduce, the courses and consultations did not meet local needs. One informant said:

We were invited to consultations and training courses. We really liked it as there we could discuss the scheme and were taught about the approach. However, the courses were too short for us to understand everything in detail.

This indicates that the main cause of deficient understanding of the meaning of participation in

this group resulted from insufficient communication between the project and its target audiences. While IEC activities were almost entirely neglected, the project seemed to concentrate all of its resources on building a physical scheme as soon as possible. This was done so that the scheme could be duplicated in surrounding areas as soon as possible. In other words, the fact that the project focussed on setting up physical structures led to the neglect of IEC activities that were specifically intended to explain the project to the villagers. Consequently, the villagers were not sufficiently prepared to participate in the project. As a result, many of the users lost interest in the scheme. One of the main reasons, according to them, was that the scheme did not supply the quality of water they had expected. Moreover, the water tariff that was applied was not affordable. One said:

We initially thought that water would be used for free or at a very cheap price. Now it turned out that is so expensive and unaffordable to us.

This again indicates that members of this group did not have adequate knowledge about the project. In short, they were not given enough opportunities to discuss details relating to the scheme. Nor did they have the right to make a decision on their own, though they invested money in the scheme.

The field study also revealed that the project did not conduct an adequate assessment of its perspective users' financial capacity, or their willingness to pay for water, before setting up the scheme. Information contained in the project's PRA reports was not reflective of villager's financial status or their willingness to pay. It is necessary to add that the PRA reports were not conducted by professionals or experienced personnel. Furthermore, upon completion, these reports were not used as an important source of reference, but were shelved. It was not surprising then that the villagers were ignorant of the meaning of participation. It is also not surprising that the outcomes of the project turned out to be different to their initial expectations.

Another major issue with this project stems from a long tradition in Vietnam. That is the tendency of common people to leave it to

others, particularly the elite, to decide everything for them. They did this conscious of the fact that the decisions of others would affect their lives. One of the informants stated:

Well, let the Government decide everything and we will follow. We do not know what to do. It is better to let it be decided by the Government and let us know what we have to contribute.

On the other hand, the other one-third of the informants from this group described participation as the full involvement of locals in all stages of a project. One male informant, who was also a secondary school teacher, stated that:

Participation does not simply mean participating in carrying out activities in relation to the scheme, but also means that we, the prospective beneficiaries, have the right to discuss and make a decision on the scheme related issues.

This perception of participation is supported by Pateman (1970), who stated that participation should be considered as a process in which each individual member of the policy and decision-making body has equal power in the outcomes of the decision or policy. Another informant, who was a village motivator in the project, said:

Participation is more than making physical contribution. But it also gives us a chance to express our opinions freely. Our sense of responsibility and ownership is built and we will be the owners of the scheme later.

It was apparent that for these informants, participation really conveyed a different message. To these people participation was considered important in ensuring sustainability and democracy. Although democracy is a worthy goal of any project, it is extremely broad, and must be pursued separately (White 1981). The major reason behind such a difference in the perception of the meaning of participation between villagers in this group was the lack of clarity of information distributed by the project.

We have already seen how IEC activities in the project were not prioritised; this resulted in misunderstanding and misinterpretation of the approach among villagers in Village Two. The damage done by the lack of communication was

highlighted by the fact that the villagers who described participation more adequately had received more information and training from the project. The respondents from the third of the villagers who responded more adequately tended to come from organisations with whom the project worked, or from local schools, which had been a focus of project activities. It is apparent that the more information people received about the approach, the more they understood about its implications.

It was unfortunate that this project did not give sufficient attention to communication with the villagers. Even worse, locals were perceived as outsiders, and merely as recipients of the project's outcomes. Their local experience and knowledge were not utilised by the project. As one person from group two (project personnel) said:

Having local involvement is time consuming and it will slow down the project progress because they are not knowledgeable about the project and its approach. We'd better do everything.

The villagers' marginalisation in this project may have been because project personnel underestimated local capacity and knowledge. This kind of attitude toward local inputs is not new in development. White (1981) said that in practice a great change in the attitudes of participation practitioners in many fields toward the value of local knowledge and skills needed to be made. It needed to become generally accepted that local knowledge was a useful resource, and could be well adapted to local circumstances. However, local inputs are still disregarded in development projects. As a result, intended users, who were more knowledgeable about local conditions and priorities than anyone else, were not invited to participate in the project adequately. Nor were they given an opportunity to have a say in the decision making process. Consequently, many of the projects did not solve local problems or meet local demands. The project in Village Two is no exception. According to many villagers, the scheme did not function to their satisfaction financially, or in terms of water quality.

Respondents belonging to group one in Village One, where the scheme was installed after Village Two, had a more positive opinion of the project and of participation in general. One of the main reasons for this difference was the fact the experiences from Village Two were taken into account during the implementation of the project in Village One. Participation was perceived by respondents from Village One as more than merely physical contributions. (As many respondents from Village Two stated it was.) One of the informants said:

Participation gives us a chance to express our own ideas. We really feel happy about that. It is very democratic indeed. I assume that it is necessary because it is our own scheme.

In this context, participation was apparently understood as a required means, not as an end, to achieve sustainability and democracy in water supply. They also realised that there is a close link between participation, sustainability, and democracy. Another informant added that:

Previously, there have been some projects working in the community, for example the electricity and irrigation projects, but they did not work satisfactorily. The company sent their people down here and let them work without a close technical supervision. We were not invited to get engaged in any single stage of the project nor were we given a chance to contribute our local experience and ideas, but in this project we can raise our opinions, and more importantly we can decide things.

This highlights the fact that prospective users were always willing to participate and share their local knowledge and experience as long as they were given an appropriate opportunity.

Having a chance to express their own opinions, in their own words, meant a lot to local people. They felt that their voice was heard, and that their local knowledge was utilised in the project. More importantly, their ideas were seriously considered when decisions were made. By getting involved in decision-making, locals became more responsible for the project outcomes. This sense of responsibility helped to protect those outcomes later. White (1981) stated that when prospective users take an active part in project activities like planning and implementation, they collectively consider the

completed scheme as their own. Furthermore, they feel proud of the scheme and feel responsible for it. They therefore use it more, use it more carefully, and do their best to maintain it. One of the informants said, proudly, that:

We are very happy with the scheme now. The water quality is so good. We will not allow any damage to the scheme. We will protect it at all costs for our use.

This again points to the sense of ownership and responsibility that can only be formed when prospective users have input into decisions that will affect their lives. These informants also saw a close link between participation and sustainability. They also realised that their local experience and knowledge were important for the projects, as they understood more the local situation and needs better than anyone else.

One might wonder why there was such a big gap in the meaning of participation between villagers in the two villages. There are a number of possibilities. One widely recognised reason was that in Village One, attention was given to carrying out IEC activities. More community consultations and training courses were held. The prospective users were given the right to discuss, plan, and make decisions on whether or not to install the scheme, as well as how and where to install it. Another important point was that the administrator in this village was more active and educated than that in Village Two. Moreover, lessons learned from the implementation in Village Two were taken into account during the implementation of the project in Village One. That meant instead of just focusing on creating a tangible product, much of the project's attention was given to IEC activities. A noticeable difference in Village One was that IEC activities had been conducted long before the real implementation of the project. One extremely important component of the IEC activities was a careful assessment of local needs, the affordability of the scheme, as well as willingness to pay for water. This assessment was conducted with support from an international IEC specialist before construction was commenced.

In summary, data assembled showed that the scheme in Village Two was not implemented in

a participatory manner, as the users here merely got involved in assisting with the implementation of the program once decisions and plans had already been made. They were passive recipients of development services more than development initiators. This is despite the fact that they were called on to participate in a number of activities. Because of passive participation, many of them seemed to lose interest in the scheme and did not know how the scheme was constructed or operated.

The situation in Village One was different from Village Two, where data showed that the users were highly interested in the scheme, and that they considered it their own. It is clear to see that the scheme here was implemented in a totally participatory manner, as everything in relation to the scheme, from making plans, to discussing water tariffs, to physical construction, was discussed and decided by the users themselves. This process was accomplished with technical assistance and support from the project's technical staff. White (1981) considered this type of participation as the most usual situation encountered in practice.

Data revealed that there was a gap that needed to be bridged in terms of the understanding and interpretation of the meaning of the participatory approach among the project staff. There were many different opinions on the meaning of participation, including those of staff members who worked directly with the public. Some staff simply interpreted participation as informing the target audience of the project's plan. Furthermore, full promotion of participation was not done because the process required to develop participation was considered time too consuming and impractical. As one staff member said:

We are working in participatory manner as said in the strategy. The villagers are called for to participate in implementing the project's activities. We furthermore frequently keep them informed of the project's situation. It is hard to involve the locals in all activities, because many of them are incapable of taking initiatives and implementing activities without the project assistance. It would slow down the project progress.

It is clear that participation in this project was interpreted improperly not only by ordinary

villagers, but also by the staff themselves. This is particularly troubling because these same staff members considered themselves specialists. In some cases, participation was seen as an obstacle that prevented the project from progressing. This indicates that the project's main concern was how to keep progress up while paying little or no attention to the sustainability of the development. One of the primary ways to ensure sustainability is to build local capacity. Because local villagers were perceived to be ignorant and incapable, they were marginalised. This marginalisation led to a belief that their participation in the project would be a hindrance to the project. As a result, they did not participate in a meaningful way in the project. This meant that at the end of the project the villagers did not feel the scheme was theirs, or even feel particularly attached to it.

Another staff member revealed that the project was under pressure to deliver tangible products, even at the cost of non-tangible ones. Apparently the higher ups from the organisations involved in the project wanted to see as many tangible results as possible. This may have been why project staff proceeded without gaining local participation in favour of creating a tangible result quickly. That pressure may have also contributed to the feeling by some staff members that local participation would slow the project down too much. It is possible to believe that the upper levels of the organisation were demanding results in a time frame that was too short to foster any meaningful local participation.

### **Participatory approach exercised in the project**

Despite diversity in the understanding, definition, and interpretation of the participatory approach, a certain consensus has emerged among international development organisations. The participatory approach, according to this definition, should entail three main dimensions: the involvement of every individual member that will be affected by the decisions made in the planning process; the consequent implementation of those decisions; and the sharing of the benefits (or liabilities) resulting from those decisions (World Bank 1978). It may have been because of misinterpretation and inadequate understanding of the above

definition that many projects in Vietnam and elsewhere have failed to achieve or maintain their expected outcomes. The recognition of the importance of the participatory approach for future development activities that aim to achieve sustainability has pushed the Government of Vietnam to take action. It has prepared itself to ensure that its future investments in development projects, particularly in the field of RWSS, will not be a waste of resources. One of the actions it took was the approval by the Prime Minister of NRWSSS in 2000. This introduced a radical change in terms of the approaches to be adopted in all development projects and programs. That is, it was made explicit that a participatory was to replace heavy, top-down approaches. Under NRWSSS, local participation was described as seeking full local involvement from the initial planning stages and decision making, all the way to reaping the benefits of projects.

The RWSS project in Daklak province, which was the subject of this article, was an attempt to pilot the NRWSSS. The project was commenced in early 2001 and was expected to be complete by June 2006. However, after five years, much remains to be done to see the strategy implemented as designed. So far, it seems that the project has generally gone off track, despite some encouraging results in Village One and elsewhere.

Structurally, the implementation of the project generally followed the government's existing top-down structures. This means that implementation was undertaken through different administrative levels. It seems difficult to believe that the strategy was developed at a central level but that the provincial level officers were responsible for implementing it locally. This was despite the fact that the strategy's content was completely novel to the province. Moreover, provincial staff members were not adequately trained about the approach. As a result, a large gap in understanding the meaning of the approach emerged among project staff, stakeholders, and leaders. These gaps led to several issues for the project. One of the first and most obvious was the distribution of inconsistent information to ordinary villagers. Data also showed that the project was off track, as it had devoted all of its resources to

creating tangible structures. IEC activities were, for the most part, neglected. Apart from all of this, the donor's role was very limited. This lack of involvement meant that the influence of the donor was not strong enough to move the project back on track. For some reasons, the donor also seemed to prefer the setting up of physical structures to "soft building" projects. This may have been so that the donor could show its Danish visitors that the money it had spent was well invested. It is worthwhile to add that during the last five years, the project received visitors from the Danish Embassy and Ministry of Foreign Affairs on a regular basis.

Another problem with the program was the interference that using existing government channels created for local participation. Part of this interference was the fact that a concentration was placed on government staff rather than locals. Additionally, locals felt unable to express their opinions openly when government representatives were present.

Due to limited project resources, the project involved social organisations such as the WU, the Youth Union, and the Farmer's Association in the implementation of the strategy. This inclusion was considered to be an optimal solution as it was thought that these organisations would participate in the dissemination of project related information throughout the communities. However, in practice, the project received a poor response from these social organisations. The organisations usually claimed that they were busy implementing their own activities. Going a little deeper into this, one can see that the main reason for such a poor response was the lack of a real partnership between the project and these organisations. It is hardly fair to expect these organisations to devote their limited resources to an outside project without some kind of remuneration. The only way that it would be possible to induce social organisations to participate in external projects without some type of remuneration would be to create a situation whereby part of a social organisation's responsibility would include participation in government directed projects.

Again due to resource limitations, the project established an IEC network that was responsible, from the top down, for the

provincial, regional, and village level. Members of the network were selected from social organisations in the province. The objective of this network was to disseminate to villagers all information related to the project. This included training them on the approach. The TOT<sup>5</sup> model was applied, and was the key idea in the establishment of the network. However, due to the lack of continuous participation by members at the provincial level, the training of lower level staff was irregular and incomplete. Again, the core reason was the lack of an appropriate mechanism to stimulate these staff to work closely with the project in a regular manner. Consequently, staff members at the district, commune, and village levels were not adequately trained on the approach.

We have already seen how the project prioritised the establishment of physical structures while little attention was given to building “soft structures”. In this sense, the “soft structures” are those which are socially based, such as an understanding of participation, democratisation, and sustainability. It is critical to stress that this process was especially highlighted in the strategy. Despite the emphasis “soft structures” received in the strategy, there was strong evidence that it was taken lightly in practice. The neglect of “soft structures” led prospective users to a confused understanding of the project and the approach that it aimed to introduce.

The project held community consultations and training courses to help ordinary villagers gain an insight into the approach. However, due to internal factors like a large implementation area, and external factors like a shortage of specialised staff, political pressure for tangible products, and competitive environments between project sections, these kinds of activities were conducted in a perfunctory manner. Consequently, many of the villagers, especially in Village Two, lost interest in the scheme. Partially contributing to this loss of interest, and as a result of it was the fact that the final outcome of the project was very different than the villagers had expected. Some villagers, believing they had been cheated, expressed

anger and disappointment at the project’s outcomes.

Another major issue was the fact that villagers were not called upon to contribute to the construction of the project. This was because project staff feared that they would lose control of the project if villagers were given a role. The events that transpired in Village Two are an example that further illustrates this. Here, many of the activities like planning, design, selection of a construction contractor, construction, and supervision were not decided locally. Prospective users were simply called on to make physical contributions like digging channels and making monetary payment. Sadly, there were many other examples of situations where local participation was completely neglected or forgotten. Data revealed that this was, at least partly, because of the project personnel’s faulty understanding of the importance of local participation, and a concurrent failure to promote it. Additionally, the project considered success solely in terms of the number of physical schemes installed and the amount of money spent every year.

It is also important to add that the participatory approach was not only novel to the locals, but also to many of the project personnel, commune, and provincial leaders. Data indicated that many of the commune and provincial level personnel also interpreted local involvement simply as physical participation. It was therefore not surprising that the approach was not effectively implemented. If those who are responsible for implementing a project are ignorant of its aims, how could we expect anything different?

There is little doubt that many of the personnel, including IEC national specialists, understood inadequately, and interpreted incorrectly, the meaning of the approach. For these people, participation was simply understood as informing the target audience of the activities and plans of the project once they had been decided. In their view, the approach was sound in theory, but impractical in reality. In practice, it was difficult to implement; it took a long time and required a significant amount of additional resources. As this project worked under a very tight time frame, this may have been unrealistic. As one staff member said: “facilitating

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<sup>5</sup> Training of trainers

participation was difficult and time-consuming”.

Moreover, it is difficult to foster participation when the local political climate is resistant to participation. There were leaders and organisations that feared the erosion of their power and control if villagers were encouraged to take an active role in all the activities of the project. This is not a completely surprising phenomenon in a politically sensitive environment such as Vietnam. Openness and the desire for public consultation and feedback were still limited. In this regard, Oakley (1991) stated that where political ideologies did not encourage public participation, but maintained a highly centralised political system, it was likely that participation would face serious obstacles. Therefore, the fear that exercising the participatory approach in this project would slow it down was, at least, understandable.

One interesting fact was that the agreement between the three provinces indicated that if any of the annual budget allocated for a province was not spent, the balance would be transferred to the other two provinces at the end of the fiscal year. This was expected to put some pressure on each province to spend the project money. While it does do that, it also tends to encourage a situation where money must be spent, rather than allowing time to adequately determine needs and spend money to best effect.

Considering this project in a broader context, of the three selected provinces – Ha Tinh, Nghe An, and Daklak, Ha Tinh was generally considered the one in which the participatory approach was best implemented. It is worth mentioning though, that this province was frequently criticised for its slow progress in the development of physical schemes. However, the assessments of many national and international specialists revealed that this province was laying a solid foundation for future development because its efforts were concentrated on developing “soft” outcomes. In this province, physical structures were only established when the prospective users fully understood every detail about the project and how it related to them. Villagers then voluntarily took an active role in implementing the project. It is clear that villagers would not understand all the details of the scheme if they had not been fully involved

in the project, from initiation, to planning, to finalising decisions, to reaping benefits from the schemes (White 1981).

### **Obstacles to local participation in the project**

Data assembled revealed that the promotion of the participatory approach in this project encountered a number of obstacles. The first obstacle encountered in Village Two was due to the lack of clarity of information. Villagers were not sufficiently communicated about the project and its approach. They were also not communicated about the mechanisms that would be adopted. Data collected also revealed that administrators were not active enough to handle construction, or deal with problems occurring in relation to the scheme.

Secondly, low levels of literacy were an obstacle to promoting effective participation in this village. Higher proportions of illiteracy were seen among ethnic minority villagers. The project suffered from a combination of factors which made sharing information difficult. The project’s communication strategy was not well designed for the average villager. At the same time, low levels of literacy interfered with the ability of ordinary villagers to correctly interpret the information.

Thirdly and perhaps most obviously, was the project’s use of a top-down model in which attention was devoted to constructing physical structures with little concern for participation. Although project staff members were fully aware that the top-down method was not sustainable, they found it easier to adopt than the new one. This phenomenon existed not only in Village Two, but also elsewhere in the project areas. In Village Two, the project’s intention was, as quickly as possible, to establish a tangible structure to strengthen ordinary villager’s belief, and then to duplicate it in other areas later. This led to a neglect of communication with ordinary villagers.

The project personnel’s lack of specialised knowledge about the approach was also a major obstacle that hampered the effective promotion of participation in the community.

The fact that the provincial office was located away from the community was another obstacle to the general implementation of the project.

Although there was a "District Advisory Office" established at district level only three staff was based at this office. Furthermore, no clear mandate was in place to guide the work of these staff. Many people felt that the staff based at the district office were based there temporarily, and only until somewhere else could be found for them.

Besides the obstacles mentioned above, the project encountered a number of general obstacles. The cultural and the historical characteristics of the Vietnamese, who were colonised and dominated for a long period of time, and who were taught to listen more than to speak, were regarded as a limitation in promoting local involvement.

Moreover, the approach was not only novel to project personnel and stakeholders but also to ordinary villagers. Although it was developed and popular in Western World, it was virtually unknown in Vietnam.

The present political environment in Vietnam in general, and in the project areas in particular, was not supportive of local participation. We have already seen in the literature review how participation can be negatively influenced by the political environment in which a project is implemented. In this case, it is no surprise that local participation faced serious obstacles. Although ordinary villagers were invited to attend community consultations, they tended to be very quiet and reserved, particularly in the presence of representatives of the local authority.

Furthermore, due to a shortage of specialised staff and resources, these consultations and discussions were held in a perfunctory manner. Some staff argued that creating active participation in a development project was too hard and time consuming. This argument was at least partially true in this instance because of the political environment. Some also argued further that these obstacles were structural, and prevented local people from developing an awareness of the rights to which they were entitled. These barriers also made it difficult for people to access the services they deserved as well.

Despite encouraging socio-economic achievements in recent years, Vietnam remains

a centrally planned country. This is described as structural barrier. Centrally planned goals are usually hard to change, and leave a very little room for spontaneous development initiatives that can usually be achieved through local community participation (Oakley 1991). This description reflected the situation the project faced, where prospective users were mobilised to participate in carrying out plans already made by project. In many cases, the project left almost no room for the users to have a say in planning or decision-making. It is fair to say that this is, at least partially, a consequence of the centrally planned environment.

There were a number of other limitations to the promotion of local participation in this project. One of these was the locals' mentality of dependence. A villager from in Village Two said:

It is better to leave everything for the Government to decide. We cannot do anything. Once the decision is made, we will participate in implementing it.

Data collected revealed that the issue of a mentality of dependence not only existed among villagers in Village Two, but also in Village One and elsewhere. Their main fear was that they would not be capable to make decisions. A secondary fear was that even when they did make a decision, it might not be acceptable to the government. In their minds, it was better to let the government decide everything on their behalf. This proves the point that when people become overly dependent on the government to make decisions for them, their own confidence and capacity for decision-making of is weakened. In time, they become passive recipients. According to Oakley (1991), this is particularly commonplace in rural areas in a developing country like Vietnam, not only because they lack leadership and organizational skills, but also because they are made incapable of responding to the demands of participation in development projects.

Another limitation encountered in this project was related to gender issues. Although much progress in gender issues has been made in Vietnam since 1950s, particularly since 1986, much remains to be done. Special efforts need to be made to improve the roles of rural, particularly ethnic minority, women in



development projects. The Doi Moi policy has been an important step forward that the Government has taken in economic development. However, together with the user-pays principle, it has created economic competition which is particularly disadvantageous for women. Besides participating in new economic and social activities women are still expected to fulfil their traditional responsibilities such as childcare and household duties. Consequently, the equality of women in light of this situation has become a major issue.

In the project under review, the strategy highlighted the gender issues, paying particular attention to the role of women in project activities. Once again though, in practice, this issue was not given due attention. As a result, many women, especially those from ethnic minorities, were still disadvantaged. They were still perceived to be the weaker gender and were also seen as incapable of taking a role in decision-making or implementation. Their place was believed to be at home, doing the housework and caring for their children. A project staff stated:

Well, I do not think rural women here are good enough to implement activities that we would allot them. It is better to invite their husbands. Let them stay at home to do the housework.

It is clear that the notion that women's place is at home doing housework still exists. Because of this attitude towards their role, they were not encouraged to take an active part in project activities. Data revealed that this traditional gender ideology guides not only the men, but also the women. One woman said about the project implementation process: "I have to ask my husband, I do not know. I cannot decide." Many women were invited to community consultations. However, during these events many kept silent from beginning to the end, while others sitting in a far corner of the meeting room paid no attention, and were talking to each other about other things. This was observed particularly in consultations where men outnumbered women, and when local authority representatives were present. Women were also found to be very dependent on their husbands, particularly in decision-making. Data collected showed that none of the

interviewed women could make a decision without referring to their husbands.

In summary, apart from obstacles like low literacy, the neglect of IEC activities, a lack of specialised professionals to promote the strategy and approach, general obstacles related to cultural, political, and administrative characteristics hampered this project.

### **Solutions to better participation**

A number of basic problems must be solved before this project can create meaningful local participation. First and foremost, there is a need for continuous IEC activities in the target communities, particularly in villages where ordinary villagers are encountering difficulties resulting from a lack of clarity in communication materials. The IEC section of the project needs a thorough overhaul: IEC activities must become a priority of the project along with construction; staff members need to be trained to promote the strategy, and the approach it aims to introduce; some of the IEC messages need to be redesigned to be more locally appropriate; and the IEC network, particularly at the village level, needs to be strengthened and consolidated.

Special attention must be paid to establishing an open political environment because the present system is not conducive to local participation. On the contrary, it hinders local participation, making it difficult for local people to express their concerns openly. The centrally planned system needs to become more decentralised. Presently, the government maintains its tight control over planning and decision-making processes. Because government administrators have maintained their grip on planning, local people have remained passive recipients rather than active initiators of development projects. Efforts must be made to diminish cumbersome and difficult administrative procedures. A simpler and more accessible system should be put in place. Otherwise, all efforts made to promoting local participation will end in failure. This is because locals only take an active part in a project when they feel comfortable and free to express their opinions.

Efforts must also be made toward internal capacity building. In the context of this project, internal capacity is understood as a development

process where locals develop aspects of the project's core skills and capacities. These include management, specialised knowledge, and leadership. The development of local capacity enhances the project's effectiveness and sustainability. Local capacity building is also sometimes seen as a process that assists individuals or groups to identify and address issues while gaining insight, experience, and specialised knowledge. This process is normally facilitated through the provision of technical assistance and training. Unfortunately, in this project, there was very little increase in local capacity. One of the reasons for the failure in fostering participation in this project is attributable to the lack of capability of project implementers and stakeholders. As we have seen many project personnel and stakeholders did not possess a correct understanding of the approach they were trying to promote. The lack of specialised knowledge about the approach on the part of those responsible for implementing it meant that it fell off the rails relatively quickly. The process of improvement should be considered as continuous and required professional development. However, to fill the gaps in knowledge that still exist in the project the management must first see the importance of participation. Once they have realised the importance an effort can be made to address the shortcomings of staff, and of project activities. A separate budget should be allocated for building capacity of staff training, and should be included as an important element of the project strategy. Although data indicated that the project did allocate resources for staff development, this training did not address the core needs of staff development. The training courses were mostly short courses on technical issues.

At present, the project has five people in charge of promoting the approach. However, only two of them are quite knowledgeable about the approach. As we can see, staff members need to be knowledgeable about an approach to promote it effectively. Thus, it is critical that these staff members be trained adequately so they can promote the approach. With the present resources of the project, it is understandable why many local villagers, including project officers, did not understand the approach or its implementation in practice.

Efforts must also be made to correct the erroneous belief that the production of physical infrastructure is the sole criterion upon which success of the project can be judged. Project personnel and policy planners at the provincial and central level must understand that promoting the participatory approach is extremely important for the sustainability of the project outcomes. A serious review of past lesson is advisable; it might help explain why past projects failed. It might also demonstrate how important participation is in maintaining project results. It was clear that in this project, project management was under considerable pressure for tangible products from the upper levels. Because of this pressure attention was given primarily to the production of physical outcomes, and the national strategy was entirely neglected.

Despite remarkable improvements in gender equity achieved in recent years, more effort still needs to be made to increase women's roles in development. Efforts should be given to establishing a legal framework that regulates that women can, on one hand, still carry out their reproductive responsibilities and on the other, participate fully on an equal basis in political, economic, cultural and social activities, particularly once the nation has entered into a new phase of economic development, that is, in the industrialization and modernization process.

Without such a framework, women are easily marginalized, as they are unable to compete with men because the prime "reproductive responsibilities" are placed on them. As Barry (1996) said, social and family responsibilities constitute a heavy burden on their shoulders. They lack time to increase any of their capacities; of particular importance, women's cultural education and professional training have been stunted. It is precisely due to this state of affairs that although women are entering an era of change when conditions of freedom, initiative and creativeness are being expanded for everyone, women feel unprepared and unable to meet the new demands that the new society is posing.

In the context of this project, women were too busy, and too timid to properly participate in project activities. Data collected showed that

they were rarely invited to take part in activities in their communities. Their responsibilities were felt to be limited to reproduction and household work. It was their husbands that were regular participants in project activities because both men and women believed that women should stay at home and let their husbands go. For this reason, efforts must be made to bring an end to the traditional notion that a woman's place is at home with the children. On the contrary, the project should encourage them to equally participate in its activities, and also to participate in learning opportunities alongside men. It is likely that many women may initially feel uncomfortable due to fear, and a lack of confidence. However, as their confidence and capacity are gradually built and strengthened through these activities, a sense of comfort will emerge. Moreover, women should also be helped to realise that they are equally capable, and can thus make valuable contributions to the project if they participate. Furthermore, it should be explained that their participation means a lot to the sustainability of the project. Of course, to make sure that women would have enough time to take an active part in activities of the project, it is important that local men should be educated to share the housework, so that women can have more time to participate in the activities.

Last but not least, efforts must be made to bring an end to the mentality of dependence of the locals. It was generally hoped by local people that the Government would invest in the construction of a scheme for them, and what they would have to do is to use it. Local people must be helped to gain self-confidence, and improve their awareness, organisational skills, and leadership. This is very important, because without these things they cannot take an active part in activities of the project. Neither can they create initiatives in development for their communities after the project has finished. For this reason, locals should be encouraged to take an active role in the activities of projects in their communities. It is also necessary to stress though, that special attention should be given to creating a politically comfortable environment so locals feel able to discuss their concerns, needs, and ideas openly. Ideological interference from the project, as well as from political authority must be avoided at the local

level. An end must also be brought to the erroneous belief on the part of project staff members that local people are ignorant or incapable of making decisions.

In summary, the issue of how to promote better local participation in the project requires a great deal of effort from the project, the government, and from villagers themselves. Moreover, social, political, cultural and administrative barriers as mentioned above must be demolished. An open environment with simple administrative procedures needs to be established so that the villagers feel able to discuss openly without the fear of political consequences later. The project itself might need to reconsider whether a reorientation of its strategy and goals is needed, as presently its top priorities were given to set up as many physical structures as possible with very little attention being given to building local capacity, self-confidence, organisational skills, and leadership. This is very risky, as evidence has shown that sustainability has become an issue in schemes where local participation has not occurred.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Consistent with the literature review given in this article, eventual findings of the research in this article pointed out that local participation involves more than just physical contributions or the presence of intended beneficiaries in activities of development projects. More important than simple participation is the involvement of future beneficiaries in planning and decision making processes. The findings also revealed that simple participation itself does not exist in society as a social reality, but is a process through which reconstruction by all stakeholders involved can be made (Nguyen 2003). Past projects in Vietnam and elsewhere indicated that promoting intended beneficiaries' participation was a good mechanism to help ensure the sustainability. However, its implementation in practice is not always smooth, and it often encounters a great number of invisible obstacles. Furthermore, it requires a lot of additional resources. Above all, it requires strong commitment from the local environment within which it is promoted.

This section is devoted to a summary of the major findings and observations of this research. It demonstrates outcomes brought about by the approach and highlights lessons learned from the promotion of local participation in the project under study. It is devoted to a discussion of the practical and theoretical implications of this research.

### **Summary of research findings**

The focus of this research was an examination of the perceptions of local villagers and other stakeholders of the participatory approach in a Danish funded RWSS project in the Daklak province in Vietnam. Special attention is also given to offering an account of how the approach is implemented, and obstacles that may hamper the approach.

### **Local situation**

As mentioned previously, the project was implemented in three rural districts in the Daklak province where there is diversity of culture, ethnicity, economics, and socio-political features. This research, however, is limited to two villages in one single district - Cu Jut district.

The culture of this area is characterised by a rich variance, made up of more than forty different ethnic groups, each with its own distinctive identity. In terms of ethnicity, all the groups, including the Kinh majority, live in harmony together. However, one can find differences between ethnic groups in their relationships, particularly with the local government. The ethnic minorities are still facing marginalisation. This is despite the fact that they have been given special priority by the government in recent years. Their involvement in the projects in general, and in this project in particular, has increased. There is still some complexity to be seen in social interaction among the ethnic groups, particularly with the Kinh. There are groups that are more vulnerable than others. A special feature possessed by these ethnic groups is their strong cohesion and high level of homogeneity.

With regard to economic development, the communities are primarily dependent upon agriculture. Short-term crops such as wet rice, beans, and maize are the main income source.

The findings indicated that the communities are heavily dependent upon the government in terms of policy-making and resource allocation. It is fair to say that the political environment is not conducive to local participation. Local initiative for development within communities is not highly encouraged, but is heavily influenced by local stakeholders, including the local authority. It is understandable in this case why these communities lack capacity and the skills to turn their initiative into practice. It is unfair to conclude that the shortage of community capacity and skills results solely from marginalisation. There are other reasons, one of which is a high level of illiteracy, including the lack of proficiency of the national language. Another reason is the lack openness of the local government and its cumbersome administrative procedures.

Solutions that create a better relationship between local communities and the government must be worked out to ensure that local participation is effectively promoted. A more open political environment, including the abolishment of current cumbersome administrative procedures, and establishment of new ones that are simpler and more accessible, should be in place to stimulate local initiatives. Furthermore, local capacity must be built to ensure that there is sufficient local capability to turn initiatives into practice. All of these issues have significant implications for promoting participation within the project.

### **Perceptions of participation**

As described previously, participation is perceived quite differently among the people participating in the project. In general, it can be concluded that participation is perceived simply as physical contributions from intended beneficiaries to the project. These physical contributions take place without any input in the decisions involved in the formulation of the project, how the project will be implemented, or by whom. The intended beneficiaries were frequently denied the opportunity to express their opinions, needs, and priorities even though community consultations were held.

Only a very small number of people interviewed believed that participation involved more than just physical contributions. To these people, it

involved local participation in discussion and decision-making processes. This notion is supported by Cohen and Uphoff (1977), who defined participation as the inclusion of community members in planning and decision-making processes.

The reasons leading to such differences in the perceptions of the meaning of participation among informants in the project is rooted in the objectives of the project. The objective was to try to achieve as many tangible products as possible with little or no regard to the promotion of local participation. Furthermore, project personnel perceived local participation simply as a process through which the target audiences are communicated about the project. In other words, these people defined participation as involving the audiences in carrying out activities that were already planned by the project. It is apparent that participation, in this sense, is a means for the project to achieve its target. In this regard, Oakley (1991) stated that when participation is considered a means, it could only be seen as a vehicle for achieving an already designed socio-economic objective. This limitation results in a situation where local people's capacity and skills are not consolidated or built. He further argued that capacity and skills can only be built when participation is considered as an end of the project in and of itself.

Some respondents felt that the project was short of staff that had specialised knowledge about the approach. Though they were assisted by Danish specialists, there was limited implementation of the approach introduced in the national strategy as it was believed to be too time intensive and hard to implement.

### **Project outcomes**

Despite a number of issues that still require further action to ensure that the project is targeting sustainable development, the project has brought about a number of significant changes for local people, at least within the research areas.

For infrastructure, one success of the project is that it has established a number of piped water schemes that supply clean water for ordinary villager's everyday consumption, putting an end to the utilisation of contaminated water. The use

of contaminated water has been identified as the main cause of common disease in the communities.

The availability of water schemes has led to other positive physical changes among the households. For example, it was observed that many households upgraded or constructed new bathrooms and latrines using piped water.

Regarding behavioural changes, although the project was limited in several ways, the project has introduced villagers and local leaders to a completely new approach which proves to be more effective than the existing one. An advantage of this approach is that it allows villagers to have active participation in planning and decision making processes. Though the implementation of the approach in this project was not always smooth, a new air has been blown in the community. For the stakeholders and local leaders, the approach urged them to rethink their traditional attitudes toward development and local input. It pointed out to them that local input is an important resource for the success of a project. It also pointed out that sustainability could hardly be achieved without active local participation.

For the villagers, the approach signified the beginning of the end of a long period where the mentality of dependence reigned. To some extent, the traditional notion that it is the government's responsibility to establish schemes for local projects has changed among the villagers. Many of the locals have created development initiatives, though not all of them have been feasible or supported. Despite this, it is an important step in the process that brings an end to the mentality of dependence.

The approach created an opportunity for villagers to discuss, express their feelings, and exchange opinions about development freely. It also helped them change their awareness and behaviour: marginalisation, particularly of women, the poor, and of ethnic minorities was reduced.

Moreover, with the water schemes coming into existence, the incidence of waterborne and sanitation related disease was significantly reduced. This meant that villagers could save

more money to purchase more sophisticated means of production, to improve productivity of crops, or purchase labour saving devices like washing machines.

### **Lessons learned from the promotion of participatory approach in the project**

Although there are a number of definitions and interpretations of participation, its progress toward common acceptance has not always been smooth. (Please see chapter 2 of this article.) Although generalisation is problematic, it is useful to measure and judge participation in specific social, economic, cultural, and political contexts. The results of this article also reveal that the term “participation” connotes a wide range of meanings and practices.

First, local participation was identified as a central principle for the implementation of the Daklak rural water supply and sanitation project. Yet, its implementation in practice has not been as effective as had been intended. This is because of varying perceptions of the meaning of participation among project personnel and stakeholders. Moreover, the project lacked an appropriate mechanism to promote it. Data collected revealed that the project lacked determination in promoting the approach. Furthermore, it lacked an appropriate mechanism to attract the involvement of all levels of the government in promoting participation.

Secondly, it is important to increase donors’ roles, particularly in terms of piloting the strategy and approach. As it happened, the donor’s role in this project was diminished. Donor participation is considered necessary, especially once the project is on track. This is particularly true when local participation is promoted in a political environment which does not generally promote participation. In this case, the involvement of the donor was not strong enough to promote participation.

Thirdly, local participation is critical because data collected showed that the sustainability of schemes is closely associated with the degree of local participation. The more attention is given to IEC activities, the more sustainable the projects will be.

Fourth, the promotion of local participation must be locally sensitive and appropriate. That is, socio-economic, cultural, ethnic and political contexts must be considered. Moreover, factors like local capacity, literacy, language, and other social relations need to be considered carefully. The experience of this project revealed that the success of the project in general was largely dependent upon how carefully these factors were taken into consideration.

Fifth, cumbersome administrative procedures, and a style of administration that is autocratic and hierarchical, creates few incentives for local participation. It does however frustrate efforts to promote participation.

Last but not least, in areas with a high incidence of poverty and a need for clean water, it is completely understandable why villagers were interested mainly in immediate benefits that could help alleviate their most urgent needs. Therefore, it is important that long-term strategies be reinforced by tangible, short-term objectives (Nguyen 2003).

The conclusions of this article are primarily formulated on the basis of field observations, project documents, and the experiences of the researcher after three years working for the project. It is therefore important that these lessons should be viewed with some caution, as they are not entirely reflective of the overall situation of the project. This is due to certain constraints encountered in the course of executing the research. It is also necessary to verify the reliability of observations by a review documented in the project documents.

### **Implications for practice**

Due to constraints as described in previous parts, the eventual findings of this research cannot be generalised to conclude what should be done in all cases to promote a participatory approach in a development project. Also, it cannot indicate best practices or specific procedures that should be followed in all cases. Nonetheless, a number of useful recommendations do emerge from the research. These recommendations can be used as resources by development projects that aim to promote the participatory approach as a part of their major implementation strategies.

First and foremost, development practitioners need to clarify what the participatory approach actually means in their projects (Nguyen 2003). Without this clarity they cannot set up SMART<sup>6</sup> objectives. Owen and Rogers (1999) stated that the “SMARTER” the objective, the easier it will be achieved. In other words, these practitioners need to identify whether participation as envisioned by their projects simply means the physical contributions of the target audience. Or, is it envisioned as a process of informing and consulting the public? Or, is it something else all together? Once the objectives are clarified, a specific set of procedures by which the approach will be promoted, needs to be formulated. This is very important; without a clear procedure, the promotion of local participation will likely fail because of a lack of direction and information.

Another consideration is the fact that the promotion of the participatory approach is difficult to achieve through existing social organisations and administrative systems. Social organizations and the current administrative system are not conducive to local participation. Consequently, vulnerable individuals and groups are easily marginalised. To avoid this, appropriate mechanisms and environments must be established to promote participation apart from focusing on building local capacity.

The promotion of local participation depends greatly on specific local context, which varies from place to place. Certain approaches that may increase local participation in one area may not be successful in another due to different social, cultural, ethnic, and political contexts. To maximise local participation it is important that program staff make necessary adjustments to procedures to make sure they are culturally appropriate and sensitive.

Specialised staff is required to develop and implement programs that enhance local participation. These staff must be locally knowledgeable, particularly in terms of culture and indigenous language. The latter is particularly important when the project takes place in indigenous communities where the

national language (the Kinh’s language) may not be spoken by most people.

Last but not least, there remains room for further efforts to narrow the gap in the partnership between international donors and the local governments. Presently, these partners still participate in the project as normal stakeholders. An expanded view of the donor and local government must emerge. The donor must maintain impact throughout the project, not just in the early stages. Attention was not sufficiently paid to the relationship between the community and local government in this project. Communities need support from the local government to increase local participation in projects. They also need short-term, tangible outcomes which provide incentive. Local government can either aid this process, or, it can severely diminish it. Without the effective co-operation of the local community, local government, and the international donor, no meaningful increase in participation can occur.

As argued in the literature review, the promotion of local participation remains a controversial topic, particularly in the field of development. Some authors considered that the promotion of participation is important in development projects, while others showed reservations. Despite the differences in opinion that exist, data presented in this article demonstrates that the promotion of local participation is necessary and important as it has a close association with the success and sustainability of a project. Furthermore, it appears to be the best way to create a sense of responsibility and ownership among target audiences. Therefore, we should not question whether or not local participation should be promoted in development projects, but rather we should question how to promote it in the most effective way in different communities. Nor should we consider the obstacles to the promotion of local participation, or challenges to the adoption of changes by local and international stakeholders as a basis to question or dismiss local participation (Nguyen 2003).

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<sup>6</sup> Specific, manageable, achievable, realistic and time limited

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