



CASE STUDY

Vietnam: Scaling up rural sanitation – political economy constraints and opportunities



Summary

Water supply and sanitation policy in Vietnam is regulated through policy and a regulatory framework. However, the rural sanitation sector has had limited success and management has failed to be scaled up. To address these issues the Problem-Driven Governance and Political Economy Analysis Good Practice Framework was used to analyse the poor performance. The most important lesson is that not all policies are appropriate for scaling up.

Background

Policy-making in Vietnam, including Water Supply and Sanitation (WSS) policy, is dependent on the production of a significant amount and variety of policy documents to guide action at lower administrative levels. The policy framework largely responsible for ensuring the provision of rural sanitation is provided by the National Target Program in Rural WSS (NTP-RWSS).

Limited efforts have been made in the rural sanitation subsector in Vietnam characterized by a poorly financed, top down, supply-driven approach. For much of the last two decades, key government policies in Vietnam, whether for poverty reduction or those designed to address other policy challenges, have often taken the form of national target programmes. This approach failed to achieve widespread coverage and failed to trigger sustained behaviour change in households.

Two problems are identified in addressing these issues. Firstly, the persistently poor performance observed in the rural sanitation subsector under the current policy paradigm, and secondly, the failure of a broad range of actors to scale up innovative approaches that

have been piloted with donor support, aimed at redressing the disappointing outcomes in Vietnam.

This is particularly salient given the country's overall development achievements and specifically given achievements within the sector in increasing access to urban sanitation and rural and urban water supply.

Actions taken

A country case study on rural sanitation in Vietnam was set out to answer the conundrum of poor performance within the rural sanitation subsector and the incapacity to scale up rural sanitation in the presence of seemingly effective innovative approaches.

The Problem-Driven Governance and Political Economy Analysis Good Practice Framework (PGPE) was used as analytical framework in the research project and in the paper, and the research process was divided into the four following steps:

1. Problem identification.
2. Outlining of the institutional and governance arrangements that provide the context for action in the sector.
3. Identification of the incentives of actors involved, and developing an understanding of how they did or did not support scaling up of innovative approaches to rural household sanitation.
4. Suggestion of a set of implications for donor programming based on the analysis.

The top-down, supply-side approach to increasing access to sanitation has remained the norm since the 1980s, when, following reunification, Vietnam initiated a rural development programme with assistance from UNICEF. Current subsidies for sanitation include a direct subsidy for households (VND 800,000-1,000,000⁴) and, since 2004, access to subsidised credit from the Vietnamese Bank for Social Policy (VBSP) through which households may borrow up to VND 4,000,000 for sanitation (and a similar amount for household water-supply improvements).

Outcomes

Water supply and sanitation are important features in water resources management and the case discusses the issues and possibilities of up-scaling rural sanitation through applying innovative approaches to improve performance in the rural sanitation subsector, given the prevailing political economy. With respect to the underlying problem of persistently poor performance in the rural sanitation sub-sector, we have suggested that poor sector performance is the result, at least in significant part, of a set of incentive problems that have resulted in the general neglect of the subsector relative to other WSS priorities, namely water supply, within the programmatic framework provided by the first two iterations of the NTP-RWSS. Yet in a context in which action at scale is limited to a small subset of actors, that are either government actors or closely tied thereto, this understanding of the roots of the general public-sector neglect of the sub-sector is also clearly relevant in understanding the presence, to date, of a second, more narrowly defined problem: the failure of a broad range of actors to scale up 'innovative approaches' aimed at redressing these disappointing outcomes in Vietnam.

Lessons Learned

Scaling up innovative approaches depends not only on funds becoming available for sanitation, but also on whether or not innovative approaches are well-suited for implementation at scale in Vietnam, given the prevailing political economy of the subsector.

To pursue strategies for the rural sanitation sector requires a number of institutional reforms at the central level to create the necessary enabling environment.

It is necessary to adopt and promote strategies that have proven critical in producing better sanitation outcomes.

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