Implementation of Community-Based Poverty Monitoring Survey in Ha Tay Province, Viet Nam

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Ha Tay used to be a province in the Red River Delta. On August 1, 2008, it was merged with Hanoi, the capital city of Viet Nam. Ha Tay has 2.5 million inhabitants in 14 districts and towns, and 323 rural communes and urban wards.

Unlike other provinces in the delta region, Ha Tay has many hills and mountainous areas. There are 9 mountainous communes, 26 urban wards and townlets, and 288 rural communes.

Ha Tay is top among provinces in the Red River Delta in terms of economic development. Its average per capita income is half that of Hanoi and is the fourth highest among 11 provinces in the region.

The poverty rate in Ha Tay was 12.4 percent in 2006 and 11.7 percent in 2007, the fifth highest in the region.†

Poverty monitoring has been conducted in Ha Tay since the 1990s and guided by indicators and procedures defined by the Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA). Following the administrative decentralization, the administration authorities at communes has been responsible for identifying poor households and reporting to higher administrative levels. District and provincial authorities report on the number and list of poor households, allocate budget for poverty reduction activities, and implement supporting policies for the poor based on poverty information. Poor households are generally identified based on their incomes. The Poverty Reduction

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† GSO, Statistical Yearbook 2007
Council of a commune, which consists of representatives of the commune government and major social organizations, collects data of low-income households and compares them with MOLISA’s poverty line. Data on household income is collected by using questionnaires. Heads of villages and officials of communes and social organizations conduct the surveys. After data collection and a quick processing, a list of poor households in each village is drafted. This list is presented to villagers for comments and finally approved at a village meeting attended by representatives of all households in the village.

In principle, identification of the poor is a community-based census of low-income households. This census is completed not every year, but only at times when the poverty line is updated, for example in 2001 and 2005. Every year, village heads have to review the list of poor households, organize village meetings to exclude from the list households that have overcome poverty, and include some that have fallen into poverty during the year.

This current system of poverty monitoring has some weaknesses, as follows:

- Information on poverty that is collected based on income has its weaknesses. Many other aspects of human life, as well as the effects of implementing poverty reduction policies and activities, are not collected. In 2005, MOLISA has piloted a poverty survey in which the household survey questionnaire included information on age, sex, occupation, education of household members, income, expenditure, property, and others. However, only income data were processed manually and quickly by village heads for identifying poor households. The rest of the collected data were not used. For the whole Ha Tay province, more than 80,000 low-income households were surveyed, and 77,328 households were identified as of poor status.

- The collected information is not processed according to strict procedures. Processing is mainly done by cadres of villages and communes, and therefore cannot be considered as very accurate.
Being subjective in identifying poor households is unavoidable. There is no existing control and audit mechanism on local reports. Therefore, the poverty rate is sometimes viewed with reservation or doubt.

In 2006–2007 the Community-Based Monitoring Survey (CBMS)-Viet Nam project cooperated with the DOLISA of Ha Tay province to conduct two annual CBMS surveys in 10 selected communes. The project’s objective is to evaluate the results of the identification of poor households conducted by the communes. In addition, the project has to collect additional data to assess the living standards of people. Ten communes were selected in 10 different districts in the province. The criteria for commune selection are: (1) they must represent the typical, major types of communities (plains, hills, mountains, and urban centers), and (2) they must represent the districts in the province.

Among the 10 selected communities, 6 communes were in the plain area, 1 in the hill area, 2 in mountainous area, and 1 district town. The survey covered 8,020 households, which account for 1.39 percent of the total number of households in the province.

Census of households in the selected communes allowed not only for analysis of low-income household groups but also for getting a general picture of the structure of the community in terms of income stratification. The collected data helped to evaluate results of the survey of low-income households which was done earlier.

The main tool of the CBMS survey is the household questionnaire containing the following information:

1. Accounting of household members in vulnerable groups that need support from the government, particularly the invalids, the blind, orphans, single old people, and others.
2. Information on family members, such as educational level, occupation, and demographic characteristics. Analysis, for example, of educational level showed knowledge poverty (e.g., rate of adult illiteracy, number of school dropouts among children, and others).
3. Information on property ownership (land, durable productive and consumer goods, and others). This information showed, in particular, productive property poverty (lack of land, lack of productive machines), information poverty
(non-ownership of audio-video equipment) and communication poverty (non-ownership of transport means).

4. Information on housing conditions (shelter, types of drinking and washing water, toilet facility). This information reflected housing poverty and health poverty.

5. Income reflected living standards of households. Comparing this data with poverty lines, one could see food poverty and overall poverty.


7. Support received by households from the state and communities. This information reflected efforts of the government and communities in reducing poverty, and helped in analyzing impacts of poverty reduction programs for the poor.

Data collected from the 8,020 households were processed both manually by villagers and through computers by the provincial Section of Social Protection. The raw data and the results of processing have been stored by the Section of Social Protection. Lists of poor households and their socioeconomic characteristics were used by DOLISA in its poverty reduction activities.

In brief, the implementation of CBMS in Ha Tay province has the following remarkable characteristics:

1. Methodology: The main principles of CBMS are similar to the methods of MOLISA in the identification of poor households. Villages already experienced doing household surveys. With a short questionnaire (4 pages) and simple and easily understandable indicators, the implementation of CBMS is fully feasible at grassroots level. The training of local people who will undertake the survey on the survey methods takes only a short time (half day).

2. Use of collected data: Besides income, CBMS has collected information for computing other indicators, which reflect many dimensions of poverty. Local governments and social organizations are supplied with more tools for policymaking and actions. In 2008, the CBMS questionnaire was implemented extensively in the census.
of all low-income households in the province. Data on more than 8,000 households have been stored as database in computers and used for daily operations at the Section of Social Protection.

Despite the high usefulness of CBMS, its implementation in localities faces some constraints:

1. Conducting a census of all households in the province or districts requires huge amount of financial and human resources. Currently, Ha Tay province has 654,000 households. Despite the low cost spent for survey work done by local people, the survey expense per household is about US$1 (including printing of questionnaire forms, travel costs, and data entry). It is estimated that a census for the whole province would cost at least US$0.7 million annually. The current budget of the province and districts could not cover this cost. There is also no specific line of budget for poverty monitoring in the list of budget items defined by the State Budget Law.

3. Due to limitations in available resources, a census of low-income households in the province can only be conducted in a five-year cycle. The scope of this census accounts for 12 percent–15 percent of the total number of households in the province. Therefore, a CBMS census can be done only on a small number of selected communes.

4. At the commune and even district levels, available computer units and qualified technical staff are not enough for the processing of survey data. Up to now, encoding and processing of data have been done by the provincial staff. In addition, the time needed for data encoding and entry is relatively long in large-scale surveys. The results of survey analysis are therefore, delayed and not released on time.

Given the above pros and cons, CBMS becomes a useful tool for evaluating annual poverty monitoring surveys, and for analyzing poverty in particular and the living standards of population in general.
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