

Critical Steps in Irrigation Management Transfer in Vietnam

Nguyen Minh Cuong

(with assistance from: Dr. Nguyen Van Huan, Tonie Nooyens, John Humphreys and Scott Fritzen.)

OXFAM UK/IRELAND IN VIETNAM

VIETNAM IS GOING through a period of profound change affecting all levels of society, from street peddlers in Hanoi to ethnic minorities in the highlands. The government's policy of "renovation" or *doi moi*, now in its eighth year, has brought particularly tumultuous changes to the countryside. Collectives have been disbanded, and the unit of production is now the household. State support for private land use rights has been written into the new constitution. The process of land allocation to households is proceeding rapidly. While complete in many areas, it is contested in others. The productive response has been astonishing: once a net importer, Vietnam is now the world's third largest exporter of rice.

But these changes have also brought confusion to the conventional institutional arrangements for irrigation management. Control over irrigation, so vital to densely populated Vietnam, is contested in thousands of communities. The question confronting Vietnam's farmers and administrators is whether a new structure for irrigation management can replace the discredited old system. Any such structure must be based on an appreciation of the challenges and constraints of the Vietnamese context. This paper sketches out three such constraints: 1) the historical legacy of top-down management; 2) the absence of a legal framework supporting local management; and 3) the bureaucratic inertia and administrative complexity at the community level.

One theme of this paper is that any new management structure, to serve its users well, must be both *efficient* and *empowering*. Local management should become efficient by reducing the costs of coordination, which were so high under centralized planning. Yet local management should also empower people by returning to their control an activity which is vital to their own livelihoods. That means including the very poor and women. The very poor often farm subsistence crops in marginalized, tail-end fields; and women generally have a greater share than men in agricultural responsibilities. Heightened NGO awareness is a starting point, but the structural transformation these concerns demand must reach into the farmers' self-perception and into the administrative culture at all levels.

LEGACY OF PLANNING: MANAGEMENT FOR (NOT BY), THE PEOPLE

Even with the rapid urbanization Vietnam is experiencing, almost 80 percent of its population is still rural. Rural development planning has thus played an integral role within the country's overall development strategy. For socialist Vietnam, this meant one thing: [collectivization.] In the north, where communist control was consolidated early, collectivization began in 1956. The decision to collectivize agriculture in the South, with its dispersed pattern of more prosperous farms, was taken in 1979, but was widely resisted and largely unsuccessful.

Collectivization failed to boost production and rationalize the use of scarce inputs, such as water for irrigation. Food production stagnated. The problem went beyond the predictable inefficiencies and coordination problems of a top-down style of planning in diverse, local conditions. At least as important was the perception of *ownership*, of both the land and its produce. Because they owned neither the land nor the inputs they used to farm it, individual farmers lacked the incentive to use these resources in the most co-efficient, productive manner possible.

In both irrigation development and management, these problems of coordination and, especially, of a total absence of any feeling of "ownership" on the part of users were important. The State heavily subsidized the *development* of capital-intensive, large-scale irrigation canals geared towards boosting food and industrial crop production. Farmers saw the resulting irrigation infrastructure as belonging to the State, quite literally. And *management* responsibility rested with specialized units within specialized work brigades, making the distinction between the water user and manager complete.

This attitude--"We don't own these canals; the State does, and it's the State's responsibility to operate and manage them"--forms the first major constraint to irrigation management transfer in Vietnam. Though intangible, it may be one of the most lasting legacies of top-down planning in Vietnam.

An anecdote may help clarify the point. An NGO project officer was recently discussing with three farmers the impediments to agricultural productivity in the region. All three stressed unclear irrigation management structures and a lack of cooperation as the primary constraints. Yet as the project officer left, the three farmers said in unison, "So, can your organization give us money?" Consensus on the problem is clear, but old habits die hard.

ABSENCE OF A LEGAL FRAMEWORK

As many hydrologists have noted, policymakers often attempt to build a new structure for decentralized irrigation management before a legal or institutional framework exists. Vietnam clearly lacks a legal framework for the promotion of irrigation management transfer. Such a framework is vital for a number of reasons:

- * Like other socialist countries in transition, the rights and responsibilities underlying property regimes are unfamiliar as a concept to many people, and unspecified in detail.
- * The administrative units of local government, from which user groups must receive cooperation and approval, are in flux due to the disbanding of cooperatives.
- * As an immediate problem, the end of the specialized work-unit system within the cooperatives means that in thousands of localities, management structures are undefined, contested and precarious.

The government has displayed considerable foresight in moving quickly to promote a favorable legal environment for foreign business. The same urgency is demanded in clarifying the legal context of irrigation management, with its direct effects on the productivity of the rural economy and on farmers' livelihoods.

What would the right level framework for encouraging *efficient* and *empowering* management transfer look like? First, it must be flexible. This means that management structures themselves should not be dictated by the law. Second, the framework should offer *competent legal status* to any local management structure which fulfills certain minimum requirements. In practice, this status will grant to user groups the right to borrow money, open bank accounts and collect fees. It will also ensure that groups retain financial responsibility for their actions, a prerequisite for both efficient use of funds and a sense of group ownership.

Third, the legal framework should clarify the supporting role which higher administrative units should play. User groups need technical, and sometimes financial support. When conflicts arise, they also need effective mechanisms for the resolution of disputes. These kinds of functions should be usefully stipulated.

BUREAUCRATIC INERTIA AND THE COMPLEXITY OF LOCAL CONDITIONS

From the last point emerges a key issue. Administrators at all levels of government must forget ingrained habits of hierarchical, rigid administrative culture, in order to provide appropriate support to local management groups. Efficient and empowering irrigation management is unthinkable without administrative tolerance of, and support for, voluntary, small-scale groups of water users.

Bureaucratic culture in Vietnam is heavily stacked against such tolerance and support. Faith is the one and only *rational* model for economic and social relations, to be articulated from the center and applied uniformly, is a fundamental element in developing planning in Vietnam. Local farmers, suggests anthropologist Neil Jamieson, do not even speak the same conceptual language as their government managers; "Local knowledge and the preferred development strategies of particular farmers in particular circumstances usually [do not articulate with,] they do not make sense in terms of the dominant vocabularies of state planners." Using conventional science as a proxy for *scientific* planning, he adds that:

"... in a world of great ecological and cultural diversity characterized by complexity and rapid change, conventional science cannot possibly cope with the variability that confronts and confounds development programs in contemporary Vietnam. Elsewhere recognition of this condition... has gradually led to a variety of new approaches ... Each acknowledges the complexity of, and variability within and between, rural areas. Each places a premium on the acquisition and use of local knowledge, and increased cooperation and communication among social and natural scientists, government officials, and local people."

This, then, is the way forward in Vietnam. The necessity of such decentralized, collaborative management structures is reinforced by the complexity of local conditions in the countryside. Administrative jurisdiction over irrigation rarely corresponds to hydrologic boundaries. Rather, it tends to be based on the remnants of antiquated work brigade structures. Where responsible management is lacking entirely, jurisdictional conflicts are common and disruptive. Users and administrators, villages and communes, communes and districts, are simply not cooperating effectively.

In an ongoing Oxfam Irrigation Project, water resources run through two villages, though only one of them farms the irrigation fields. When disputes arise over access, there is no administrative body which acknowledges responsibility

for resolving the issues. Relations are already tense, and would become worse given a spell of bad weather. It is the tail-end farmers adjacent to secondary canals who suffer the most, accentuating income differentials in the village. The costs of this failure to cooperate are, for these farmers, high indeed.

Moreover, even where management transfer has been emphasized in the design of NGO-supported projects, implementation has been difficult. In that same Oxfam Project, the establishment of a participatory user group was an explicit term of reference for the local project coordinator. Yet after one year, no such group existed, though the local partner was pleased that a few farmers had attended one meeting. This experience has taught Oxfam that project outcomes will be disappointing when extensive training in participatory management is not provided.

Adding to Vietnam's administrative complexity is the presence of ethnic minorities, who constitute about 13 percent of its population, and a disproportionate number of its poor. Several different minority groups, each with distinct traditions regarding land use and allocation, often live in close quarters. The use of customary law (ly) in minority areas is still quite strong, and in practice can overshadow the government-decreed legal system. Where the customary laws of different minority groups using one irrigation system contradict each other, conflicts are even more likely to occur. Oxfam has found the coordination of water use exceedingly difficult in such circumstances.

CONCLUSION

Local management transfer in Vietnam thus has a long road to travel, at least if it is to be efficient and empowering. Somewhat different from the experience of other countries, management transfer in Vietnam has not been avidly pursued as a cost-cutting measure. Rather, it has devolved in haphazard ways upon various actors as a side-effect of the thorough reorganization of rural production. In this context, setting such high goals as efficiency and empowerment is not to engage in futile idealism, but to put the priorities of farmers themselves at the center of the development agenda.