

Primary Education for and with Indigenous Peoples. Impressions from Viet Nam ^{1/}

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The formal supervision mission of the Viet Nam Primary Education Project was over, I had left the bureaucracy and paper work in Hanoi behind, and here I was, eager to explore Son La Province, a mountainous region in the north bordering Laos.

And exactly where was I, that memorable morning in October 1994? Crawling up a slippery mud track along what seemed like an endless hillside at 45 degrees angle and thinking about James Taylor's song "Mud Slide Slim." The rainy season was over – or so my guidebook would have me believe. I finally did make it to the top, and in front of me, along a ridge overlooking a sea of mist that covered the valley floor, lay a beautiful Hmong village. I decided for the time being not to think about the nocturnal return expedition.

Some days later, putting the ability and durability of a 4wd Toyota Landcruiser to an extreme test (it got hopelessly stuck in the red mud twice and we were dependent upon local people to dig us out), I finally reached a remote village inhabited by Kho Mu and La Ha peoples.

Hmong, Kho Mu, and La Ha are among the 11 different indigenous peoples that live in Son La Province. I spent a week traveling throughout the province, meeting many of the indigenous village leaders, parents and teachers, and discussing at length the problems they faced in bringing primary education to their children. Meeting with Hmong, Kho Mu, La Ha and other indigenous children was, as always with children, a rewarding experience. Children are different all over the world -- and yet so uniquely similar in their way of being, their inherent potentials, and in their parents' plans and hopes for their future.

Indigenous Peoples in Viet Nam

In Viet Nam, ethnic Vietnamese (also called Kinh) constitute the bulk of the population. There are, however, in addition 53 different indigenous peoples that live mostly in the mountain areas. They range in size from more than one million down to 200 persons. Culturally speaking this is an extremely heterogeneous category. In terms of economic standing and relation with the Kinh, some of the larger groups are relatively speaking well off and are to a large extent integrated in the nation-state, while the several of the smaller groups are poor and marginalized.

Education for Indigenous Peoples

A language facilitates communication between its speakers, and culturally-based intellectual, moral and social values give purpose to the quest for survival, and furthermore establish and maintain group identity, define roles, and create links of solidarity. The use of vernacular languages is important, both to understand the nature of local social structures and cultural norms and to ensure the informed participation of local peoples.

The reference to language and social structures raises an even more fundamental issue about the role of culture and communication in indigenous societies. Indigenous peoples spend large amounts of time transmitting to their traditional values through myths,

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stories, legends, folk tales, proverbs, art and other symbolic media. The oral transmission of culture (what might be called the “inherited wisdom” of the ancestors) is one of the defining characteristics of indigenous cultures and, in great measure, distinguishes it from the sorts of cultures which are transmitted through the printed word and electronic media. Culture, for these people, is a form of capital which is invested for the benefit of future generations.

Participatory development strategies should be based upon these cultural means of transmitting knowledge and values. This is not to say that indigenous peoples are not interested in obtaining more formal means of education, such as Western-style literacy and schooling. However, there is a large amount of research which demonstrates that such schooling is more effective when it includes instruction in both vernacular and national languages and when it has a bi-cultural or multi-cultural content.

In many countries, the indigenous peoples are among the poorest and most marginalized. One crucial causal factor for this is connected with the fact that indigenous peoples have least formal education. Thus, from the point of view of the Bank’s emphasis on poverty alleviation, it makes good social as well as economic sense to invest in primary education.

The Primary Education Project

The Primary Education Project aims at supporting the education sector in Viet Nam, and a special Ethnic Minorities Education Component deals specifically with indigenous peoples.

The component provides a comprehensive package of educational inputs to children in selected indigenous peoples consisting of policy measures, pedagogical activities, provision for physical facilities and institution building. The Bank’s involvement in this component is premised upon the intimate and crucial relationship between language and ethnic identity. In terms of participatory activities the informed participation of indigenous peoples in development activities should be based on the indigenous language. Implementation of the Primary Education Project has just begun, and it is too early to draw any conclusions.

Participatory Approaches to Primary Education

At the local level, where there are schools, keeping the school running is of paramount concern to parents and village leaders alike. In every village there are Parent’s Associations, and the People’s Committee will also be actively involved. The project aims at building upon these existing structures and organizations, and strengthens them in various ways. The exact ways and means of doing, emphasizing participatory strategies of consulting with and involving the indigenous peoples in question, this will begin now as part of the preparation for the next supervision mission in early 1995. Social assessment, which support participation and is a tool for incorporating social analysis into project work, may be used in this work.

Social assessment analysis is fundamental to understanding the local institutions and networks of social relationships upon which participatory development strategies can be based. Indigenous peoples should participate in such social assessments, not as “informants” in the classical anthropological sense, but as equal partners in an attempt to adapt traditional or existing institutions to new development realities.

Conclusion

The distance between Hmong, Kho Mu and La Ha on the one hand, and Hanoi on the other hand, is large, partly in terms of geography, but mostly because of the constraints and limitations that the political-economic structure places on cultural interaction between the ethnic groups in the country, and there are accordingly clear limits to direct interaction.

The Viet Nam Primary Education Project is an instructive example of the large potential of education projects in brokering cultural interaction, and bringing primary education to indigenous peoples as a precondition for developing ethnic equality and culturally sensitive national integration.

I look forward to go back and climb more steep hillsides.

Photo Appendices:

Photo 1 (of child being carried):

Text: Today being provided for, tomorrow self a provider. *Hmong* girl and her father

Photo 2 (of children in front of school):

Text: Have school, need local language teacher. *Kho Mu* and *La Ha* children in front of their school