

# WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION IN VIETNAM: SOME EXPERIENCE AND LESSONS FROM THE SIDA ENVIRONMENTAL FUND PROJECTS.

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## **Abstract**

The author would like to give an overview of Vietnamese women's participation in natural resources management and environmental protection. It is interesting to note that women in Vietnam are very active in natural resources management and environmental protection. They are involved in the state management at central level (ministry, agencies, and institutes) as well as in various activities in the field. At grass-root level, women are not only working in urban environmental companies, but also they are authors of many useful practice and initiatives. Women are also very active in education and research areas.

Experiences from the Sida Environmental Fund supporting local initiatives by grass root people and Egos in Vietnam since 1997, show that supporting active women would resulted in strong impacts on public awareness on environmental issues as well as environmental education. This paper describes some good examples of women's participation in different parts of Vietnam in environmental movement.

This experience can be applied in other areas for community's participation in environmental protection and awareness rising for the public. To keep our country clean, green and beautiful, it is essential that women are actively involving in these activities. To solve crucial environmental issues and to support country toward sustainable development, it is a need for their active participation.

## **GENDER IN VIETNAM**

Women in Vietnam enjoys the equality with the men, as it is expressed the Constitution that women are equal to men in all respects. Besides, the decades of war and the achievement of socialism have resulted in a society where women are relatively empowered, well educated and whose position is protected and promoted by impressive legislation and organisation. Women participated in all the activities while the men were in the war. Women have been well represented politically during the war, after the war and in the "Doi moi" era. In 1975, women represent 32.3% at National Assembly, in 1976- 26.7% and in 2002- 27.3 %. However, the number of female -ministers, vice-ministers, chiefs of department and directors is still modest. Besides, this number is less than that in the wartime. In general, if compared with the male representative, the numbers of females in the administrative structure are higher at the commune levels and lower at central levels.

## **THE VIETNAM WOMEN'S UNION**

The Vietnam Women's Union (VWU) is a non-government organisation established in 1946. The Union is one of several mass organisations and has 11 million members. With the introduction of the Doi moi policies in the mid-1980's, the objectives of the VWU have shifted to addressing gender issues and meeting the interests of women at the grass root level. The overall objective of VWU is to promote and protect the legitimate and legal rights and interests of women, and to create conditions for women to achieve equality and development. The priority of VWU is to create conditions for women to take part in national development through integration of gender issues in all areas of macro-economic policy. Despite of close tie with the Government, the Union's activities are like those of an NGO such as income generation and credit schemes, and maternal and child health programmes. The Union has offices at different levels- from central to the grass root level; therefore, the Union is effective organisation for working with women at all levels throughout the country.

### **WOMEN IN ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AND NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT**

In Vietnam, women are very actively participating in environmental management. Women are among the decision-makers, managers, planners, and scientists, communicators and monitors in the field of environmental protection and sustainable development. The Government of Vietnam encourages women's involvement in different activities in order to promote women's role.

Women, despite actively involved in business sector and social sector, are play an important role in housework (cooking, taking care of children and all family members, garden and vegetable grow, husbandry...). Women and children are more vulnerable with environmental problems. The air, water pollution affect on people health, especially children and women, therefore, women are more concerned on pollution.

Women take care of solid waste disposal in the households and in the society. Women go to market for foods and products, therefore, they are very important to be educated on consumption behaviour. In consequence, it is very important for pollution prevention that women aware of the issues. Women then may select green labelling and environmental friendly products, which would benefit for the environmental protection. Since women take care of the family and children, they are interested in protecting their family members from health problems causing by pollution. They also care on the quantity and quality of water for the family. Therefore, women actively participate in health care programme as well as in the programmes for improving the environmental sanitation, safe water supply, latrines, solid waste and hazardous waste disposal, integrated pest management, food safety.

Women play an important role in education. At home, women educate their children and grand children. In the schools, women are majority of teachers (67%) to take care of

pupils. Hence, women transfer knowledge and experience to children, among other knowledge, the environmental awareness, and love to the nature. Women represent of 64% of health care and social services, 48% in tourism and 46% in communication, which are important forces for environmental protection. Women in leadership of central (Ministries, National Assembly, Committees), at provincial and local level of environmental and natural resources management, business sector, university, research centres and schools. Statistics provided by the Vietnam Environmental Protection Agency showed that about women consist of about 25% of environmental management and environmental education staff, however, only 6% of directors of institutions working with environmental issues are women.

Moreover, women in Vietnam actively participate in water and sanitation week (April-May), environmental week (the World Environmental Day) and in campaign “keep our country clean, green and beautiful”.

### **The Sida Environmental Fund and women participation in environmental protection and natural resource conservation**

It was decided by the Embassy of Sweden, Hanoi to set up an independent fund (Sida Environmental Fund- SEF) for promotion of local initiatives in environmental protection and resource conservation in August 1997 to response to local initiatives in environmental protection. Objectives of the Fund is to promote public awareness of and contribution by grass-root people to environmental protection and resource conservation, and to strengthen the capacity of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and local institutions working with environmental issues.

Independent organisations working in environmental project could be a group that does not get other government funding but could linkages with or include members of mass organisations such as Women Union, the Youth Union, Associations for technical and environmental protection, Farmers Union, and schools teachers. The participating local groups and people are dedicated and have generally achieved impressive results with relatively limited budget. Target groups are such groups whose initiatives support environment conservation and sustainable development.

Over the past 5 years, SEF has proved to have a positive impact on implementation of environmental protection policies in the country. Although SEF projects have been small-scale (< 6,000 USD) and have had short duration (one year), SEF has brought new characteristics to the general picture of environmental protection in Vietnam. SEF has received active responses from local communities and support from organisations and individuals. SEF projects include raising awareness by training and carrying out different pilot project activities. Training courses usually involved several hundred participants receiving information about environmental protection or transfer of technical skill on sustainable farming and environmental sanitation. SEF projects support people at grass-root level, in communities in rural and remote areas in different ways from other national programmes. The bottom-up approach and participatory method with openness and

transparency that SEF brings to communities contributes to strengthen the development of civil society.

Local women unions are actively involved in SEF projects in environmental awareness raising and in income generation combining with improving sanitation and protecting of the environment. This has been reflected through the fact that the number of SEF funded projects, managed by women's associations accounts for 25% of the total approved projects. These projects were varied in forms, but have common component as training course for women in environmental protection and environmental sanitation. These projects distributed around the country, in different provinces, in small town, in rural area, in coastal zone and in central highland, and in mountainous areas- in the north, in the south and in the centre of Vietnam. In addition to provision of environmental knowledge, these projects carried out activities such as classification of domestic wastes for easier recycling and treatment processes, using biogas for animal waste treatment and for energy generation, sanitary solid waste disposal, building latrines and bathroom, water well and energy economic and smokeless stove, planning of tree and nursery, volunteer club and information dissemination, using revolving fund for husbandry and environmental sanitation facilities...

### **SOME EXAMPLE OF THE SEF PROJECTS LEADED BY WOMEN AROUND THE COUNTRY**

1. Raising awareness on environmental sanitation and application of the pilot model to collect and separate of solid waste for recycling in Ninh Binh town, Ninh Binh province

Objectives of the project were (1) to promote environmental awareness through women union's activities. The women carried out campaign on for green, clean and beautiful Ninh Binh town, women and Ninh Binh people do not litter; (2) to apply pilot model of domestic waste separation in 500 households to minimise the solid waste.

Activities were carried out by women are:

- Separate solid wastes into different categories: organic, landfill and to be recycled as plastic, metal and glass.
- Training courses for 386 women in environmental sanitation and environmental protection
- Compiling and signing of commitment on environmental sanitation
- Information dissemination: booklet and calendar with environmental issues

Results: Ninh Binh women union has mobilised women and the population to participate in environmental protection, to keep Ninh Binh town clean, green and beautiful.

2. Raising awareness for the San Dziu (ethnic minority) people on conservation and environmental protection in slope areas in the buffer zone of Tam Dao National Park, at Ho Son Commune, Tam Duong district, Vinh Phuc province

Objectives of the project were (1) to promote environmental awareness through women union's activities and environmental club; and (2) to use revolving funds for women to apply VACR (Garden, pond, livestock and forest ) model, e.g. to raise livestock and to plant fruit trees in slope hills.

Activities:

- Training for women on environmental protection and natural resource conservation.
- Radio transmission on San Dziu language on environmental problem and activities
- Collecting pesticides containers
- Environmental club
- Using revolving funds for income generation activities combining with environmental protection.

Results: The project has been well managed and women union is confident that the activities will continue even after termination thanks to well-managed revolving funds.

3. Raising awareness on environmental protection and sanitation, forest protection in watershed areas (Nung and H'Mong people) at Chien Pho communes, Hoang Su Phi district, Ha Giang province

Objectives of the project were (1) to promote environmental awareness through women union's activities and school education; and (2) to improve environmental sanitation in the area by building of latrines and water well.

Activities:

- Training courses on environmental protection in Nung and H'Mong languages for Women in two villages
- Training for school pupils on environmental protection and tree planting
- Construction of water well/tank, latrines...

Result: Women were able to participate in the training and conducting the activities of the project to enhance their environmental sanitation. Local people proud to successful carried out the project. The women union has been strengthened capacity in environmental protection and project management.

4. Enhancement of community awareness and capacity in implementation of environmental sanitation activities in Xuan Dam commune (on island), Cat Hai district, Hai Phong province.

Objectives: (1) to promote awareness for the community on environmental protection and environmental sanitation. (2) to create environmental rules and improve water wells in order to provide safe water for part of village.

Activities:

- Various training courses for women and villagers on environmental protection, hygiene and environmental sanitation;
- Construction of energy saving stoves
- Construction of safe water wells, latrines
- Bee keeping

Results:- Local environment has been improved

- Participation of the women and villagers
- Strengthening of capacity of the Women's Union in management of the project activities and on environmental protection, environmental sanitation.

5. Raising understanding of Tai people on environmental hygiene to organize their life with orientation of household economy and civilised community, in Muong Chanh commune, Maison district, Son La province

Objectives: to promote environmental awareness for Tai people in the village Nong Ten and to carry out some activities to improve environmental sanitation in the village and in households.

Activities:

- Training courses for women and villagers on tree planting, on environmental sanitation (water supply, latrines, hygiene)
- Demonstration activities on forest- garden, rice field- garden and fruit tree garden
- Clean water dam for 50 households
- Cleaning up campaign (solid waste disposal, sewage, composting and clean village)

Results: People, especially women gained awareness on environmental issues. Women actively involved in the project activities. Villagers (32 households) have been following regulation on environmental sanitation to construct hygiene facilities. School pupils have been involved in keep school and village clean. Other villages in the commune have followed the example of Nong Ten village to improve environmental sanitation by carrying out cleaning up campaign.

6. Cooperation plan between women union, farmer union and youth union in Tri Ton district, An Giang province in environmental protection activities

Objectives: to promote environmental awareness for women and farmers (46 % are Khmer ethnic people) in Tri Ton district and to close cooperation between women union, farmer union and youth union in environmental protection

Activities: Training in environmental sanitation for farmer union ( 450 members) and 4343 farmers, about 80% of households committed to improve their sanitation condition (latrine, toilets, solid waste disposal, safe water wells, clean house and kitchen. Launch a

water week and world environmental day to mobilise school pupils to cleaning up campaign.

Results: provided partly financing for 45 households to improve the sanitation facilities. District People Committee and women union facilitate and provide funds for the poor households in remote commune to improve environmental sanitation. Farmer union, women union and youth union closely cooperated.

#### 7. Raising public environmental awareness and treatment of wastes from pig husbandry in Binh Kien commune, Tuy Hoa district, Phu Yen province

Objectives: (1) raising public environmental awareness and (2) treatment of wastes from pig husbandry by Biogas to improve environmental sanitation

- Activities: - Training, workshop on environmental issues
- Organise of green women groups (volunteers)
  - Training course on biogas and waste composting tanks
  - Building of biogas and waste composting
  - Dissemination of information
  - Competition on good community environmental initiatives
  - Environmental campaign on Tet (New Year) holidays
  - Tree planting

Results: The project supported initiative of using biogas for waste treatment. The local people gradually understand the benefits they can get from protecting environment. Bottom up approach and actively participation were new characteristics. The project promises sustainability since the local people and young expert are enthusiastically supported. Good co-ordination and management by local authority and media and school. Changing from firewood to biogas for cooking has positive affect on natural forest protection in a coastal watershed area.

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In general, the projects activities also covered the development of environmentally friendly production models such as planting of fruit trees, safe vegetable, using integrated pest management, VAC- Garden, pond and livestock. These activities, in one hand, helped the poor women to improve their livelihood, on the other hand, make environmental protection as responsibility of the whole society. Women are highly appreciated the SEF providing them opportunity to participate in environmental protection, giving them a chance to solve environmental issues at grass root level and to the areas often not reached by foreign support. The other SEF projects, beneficiaries are women too though leaded by farmer unions, youth union and school, or mass media.

Experience from the SEF projects showed that women are important forces in environmental protection and natural resource conservation. There is a need for closer co-operation and good co-ordination between women union, local authorities (commune,

village and district, province), local experts (expert at local institutions related to environmental protection, agriculture, rural development, forestry, health care and education) and local communities.

This experience can be applied in other areas for community's participation in environmental protection and environmental awareness raising for the public. In order to promote environmental awareness for the public and mobilise women in environmental protection, it is essential to involve women union at local levels. Special attention is needed to be addressed to the women unions in rural and mountainous areas.

To keep our country clean, green and beautiful, it is essential that women are actively involving in activities. To solve crucial environmental issues, it is need for active participation by women. Women need to be involved in the decision making process regarding environmental protection and sustainable development, to keep our natural resources and environment for our next generations.

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