

5 Lessons Learned

The following chapter reviews the lessons learned, both positive and negative, in completing the VCIT project. The lessons learned that are more fully described in this chapter, can be summarized as:

- VCIT success can be partly attributed to organizing the project into component parts that fit with Vietnam's existing planning processes.
- Some of the project implementation difficulties could have been reduced through the active participation in the annual plans of all the affected agencies.
- Further understanding of project expectations, from high-level outputs, to financial inputs, to use of documentation such as MOUs, to choosing project activities, is needed. This understanding needs to be among a cross-section of likely project participants to improve project focus and concentrate efforts.
- In the case of VCIT, developing an understanding that dialogue and planning on multiple levels (society, management and infrastructure) promotes good policy took time.
- Limited resources might be better spent on disseminating the implications of applications projects in existence rather than trying to identify potential new projects.
- Understanding the context of activities needs to be fully understood or little progress will happen. This was the case with IP, where the underlying legal framework presented a complex, and for the project, insurmountable obstacle.
- Direct relationships with key agencies may be necessary to avoid "gate-keeping" as happened with gender activities.
- Well-chosen pilot projects with demonstrable potential for learning-by-doing and spin-off benefits are effective in increasing experience in application development and project coordination.
- Two-management level Canadians are required in-country for a project of the scope and size of VCIT.
- Project administration skills provide a unique opportunity to transfer management capacity.
- Protocol issues related to "official" invitations and per diems for workshops, although not common in North America, are required.

5.1 Planning

Support of NPIT was always viewed by the Vietnamese as a means to the end of achieving developmental results at all levels. The Canadians assumed that a dynamic approach to planning was understood to be essential in achieving that end. As referenced in the previous chapter, the five-year planning cycle is the primary determinant of activities.

It is a truism of public policy formulation that, “Only by changes in rules [can] changes in patterns of outcomes be predicted to emerge.”¹³ VCIT had an impact on changing the rules by which policy is made. Taking that step required transcending the inception mission defined project design that was mechanistic and characteristic of industrial economy planning. It unpacked a solid concept “IT policy” into constituent parts, essentially IT strategies by sectors. Then it worked on the parts or “outputs” level, expecting that the sum of developmental results at that level would add up to results at the level of desired outcomes. In doing this, it was compatible with strategic planning in Vietnam that was also mechanistic. Strategies were developed in parallel at many levels. Then they were re-drafted in several steps, as the content of higher level drafts became visible to policy planners. Horizontal and vertical consistency begins to emerge near the end of the drafting process, when the rules from above grow congruent with the rules from below.

5.1.1 Managing Expectations

Vietnam’s approach to IT and its’ use is not synchronized with the rest of the world but is none-the-less rapid. As a result in VCIT a lot happened in a hurry. A better way to reduce surprises and subsequent confrontations would have been to increase participation of the VCIT agencies in the annual planning stages of the project, rather than in the monitoring processes when it was too late.

For example, there was never any conclusive agreement among the key VCIT agencies on methods to refine the definitions used to classify expenditures. There was an understanding between CIDA and GAIA that output should be the focus of any such method, and there was some movement toward finding ways to do that.

This caused the VEA to experience huge “credibility” problems with third parties in other Ministries in circumstances where a Canadian sense of expediency in strategic planning caused previously agreed work plan “commitments” to alter. Since the CEA was unaware of these commitments, they were equally unaware of any negative implications for the VEA. This could then result in the stalling, or halting, of other activities.

In any subsequent project, planning would draw in a broader constituency of participants and achieve a broader consensus about project expectations. To accomplish this in the annual planning process, project designers should consider:

- Refining the definitions used to classify expenditures towards better measurement of output rather than input costs.
- Stepping up the participation in cost forecasting in the community of Vietnam’s IT policy practitioners.
- Bringing in outside experts (i.e. the monitor) to review the methods of deciding on the inputs to ensure that the project is steadily becoming more responsive to opportunities to increase capacity.

¹³ James M. Buchanan and Richard A. Musgrave. Public finance and public choice: two contrasting views of the state. The MIT Press, 1999, 18.

There is limited appreciation in Vietnam for the consulting services for the larger, broader, strategic issues as is required for a capacity building project. Their focus was primarily on “tangible” deliverables such as the acquisition of equipment, training on basic IT elements, the hosting of study tours, and any directly related technical assistance. Accordingly it became necessary to lever the acquisition of tangibles to the acceptance of consulting services. This, for example, is seen in the heavy concentration of study tours in the first half of the project.

The desire for tangible deliverables may pressure the recipient organization to agree, at least verbally, to terms and conditions to which they are not committed. This is the probable cause for the stalling and/or lack of progress on the MOET IT Master Plan and the Hanoi University of Technology IT education pilot project. As we discovered mid-way through the project, it is desirable to obtain at least a signed MOU, along with any other possible tangible evidence, to indicate true intent.

5.1.2 Project Decision Processes

Even after five years of CEA experience, the complete decision-making process within GoV is not well understood. In particular involving ministries other than OSC or MOSTE into the negotiation of project annual work plans. There was an obvious preliminary setting of priorities, based in part on the Vietnamese sense of tangible results and involving trade-offs among requests received from various Ministries. The final list of needs identified was far from a wish list and it came to the budget-negotiating table bearing a substantial burden of inherent commitments to third parties.

Within VCIT, on both the Canada and Vietnam sides, deciding jointly on the final mix of pilots was a process learned more through trial and error than through planning.

In all cases the personal relationships of those involved was a key and determining factor in reaching successful conclusions.

5.1.3 Participatory Approach to Information System Design

Becoming better informed about the choices people and organizations can make increases the possibilities they have for improving their operations and daily living on their own. If they are not involved in defining the problem and the approach, the sustainability of the solution is jeopardized. In retrospect VietRice would have benefited from this approach.

The design of an agricultural information network for farmers (of which VietRice was just a part) should begin with an essential first step - an “information system” analysis stage. This would include the classic methods of community based or participatory rural development approach. This would lead to an application that may or may not use the latest technology, but would be sustainable and survive the withdrawing of support from the funding agency.

Another case is the readiness and capability of the recipient organization to benefit from the assistance provided. In many cases the level of technical knowledge of the subject

was high (such as for the national databases) but the structural, architectural, and system knowledge (capacity building issues) was very weak. In all cases the recipient organization believed they had the right level of expertise to absorb the transfer of knowledge, unfortunately they did not have the capacity to make that assessment. The end effect was that the transfer of capacity building knowledge was limited.

5.2 IT Policy Discussions

Many Canadian IT experts had, at the start of the project, expected that IT policy capacity building in Vietnam would involve them in a familiar way in open conversations¹⁴ about the content of IT policy issues. However, for a variety of reasons including cultural norms which characterize “questioning experts” as being disrespectful, there were not enough instances in the VCIT project where meaningful discussion occurred.

The policy application pilot demonstrated and strengthened the increased depth and breadth of capacity within ministries to discuss ICT policy. For example, the workshop on Canada’s approach to formulating electronic commerce policy, January 2000, inspired effective discussion. In that instance, the audience contained a high percent of relatively young people with graduate degrees from external universities. The increased depth and breadth of this involvement continued throughout the consultation seminars and strengthened the resulting framework.

In the case of VCIT, developing an understanding that dialogue promotes good policy took time and use of a variety of workshop techniques to promote meaningful discussion.

5.2.1 Indigenous IT Capacity

VCIT has supported ICT strategies on many levels of the Government of Vietnam and in many sectors of the economy. All of them identified education and training, of new and scarce skills, as a matter of the highest priority. The best of the education and training plans are stating that the new skills training needs to be planned on three levels:

- The use of ICTs in daily life (the society level)
- The use of ICTs in working life (the management level)
- The creation and management of the ICT infrastructure itself

It is through the development of skills at all three levels that the capacity to engage in effective policy choices will be enhanced. Although this is a recognized approach in a

¹⁴ Note that this is a Canadian perspective on transparency. In both Canada and Vietnam, words have consequences and you are responsible for what you say. But there are major cultural differences in the role and practices of discourse. From a Vietnamese perspective, there were many workshops organized later in the project that provided “open participation of Canadian and local experts” to an unprecedented degree. These included IT 2020 Vision, software development proposal, IT Master Plan 2001-5, Gender Action Plan, CIO titles establishment, NII studies and others. The changing nature of “dialogue” in these was indeed positive movement toward openness. But there is still a great distance to travel before the type of give and take that characterizes public discourse in an information society and knowledge based economy become common practice in Vietnam.

Canadian context it was only near the end of the project that it was fully understood by the Vietnamese.

5.2.2 Coordination of Pilots and Policy Development

It was a basic axiom of VCIT planning that well selected pilot projects would build capacity at many levels. It would build local industry implementation capacity, capacity to plan and manage IT projects (see section 5.3), and capacity to uncover and discuss the policy issues that need to be defined. It was only near the end of the VCIT project that all parts of the axiom were starting to be demonstrated. Only through studying the impact of many more new applications over longer time than available to VCIT would it become clear how development and coordination experience would affect IT policy formulation.

This suggests that limited resources might be better spent on studying and disseminating the broader implications of existing applications projects, rather than slowly attempting to identify perfect projects with demonstration potential.

5.2.3 Intellectual Property

Vietnamese copyright officials have characterized their experience of working with international copyright agencies to date, such as WIPO, in a particular way. “They get experts from one country to comment on problems of another country, and the result may not fit.” This is, of course, a variation on the exact difficulty expressed with utilizing all foreign expertise, including VCIT’s. The need for context to inform the negotiation of mutual interests always remains underestimated. This makes the issue of protection of intellectual property rights one more example where expectations about understanding mutual contexts and negotiating agreement on joint action needs further work. For example, WIPO has special skills in training and the European Community has interests in assisting institutional building for the establishment of collective associations. However the means of utilizing their resources to address copyright issues requires an internal and international framework for working together that is still not present.

As it is in most sectors in Vietnam, the regulatory environment affecting the uses of IT for development is so complex and contradictory that it acts as an obstacle to change. Accordingly the IT Master Plan Task Force views rationalization of the legal framework of support as the first step in creating an enabling environment in which regulatory instruments, such as copyright and standards can then begin to emerge.

5.2.4 Gender Lessons

Overall in VCIT, MOSTE’s need to demonstrate a horizontal capacity for addressing the “state management of IT” across the entire Government of Vietnam served VCIT’s purposes well. However, in the specific case of gender issues which is an instance of IT use as a social policy question, not a question of IT development, there was never any apparent will to make this a priority.

Given the degree of donor involvement in coordination of Women in Development programs and the effectiveness of such agencies as NCFW and the VWU, in theory it should have been easy to use gender and IT issues to positively affect the VCIT project’s

intended impact on beneficial socio-economic policies. In fact, the Awards activities also contained that central message and there was an audience that received and understood it. In reality, science policy technocrats dominate the processes for drafting IT strategies. Their apparent indifference to any such possibility blocked moving forward from concept to action.

The will and capacity that was lacking in MOSTE was, however, clearly present in NCFAW. The lesson learned is that to implement any gender strategy it is necessary to maintain a direct working relationship with NCFAW.

5.3 IT Project Planning Capacity

As planning progressed, some proposals were found to be too large for VCIT's resources. Because of the lack of IT management skills in GoV, there were huge difficulties encountered in gaining concrete benefits from what was a major capital investment for a very poor country. Some proposals were supported by institutions that did not have the capacity or readiness to proceed. As well, we were later hindered from pursuing some of our initial efforts by the dissolution and redistribution of responsibilities of the SC-NPIT.

One of the lessons learned was that GoV became aware of its lack of capacity to quickly and effectively design and plan major databases¹⁵. They were taking a bottom up approach to their development. VCIT intervention started to give them the capacity to balance that with a top down approach. This increased capacity also enabled them to critically review the operations of SC-NPIT and define how to reorganize it to better meet their needs. The increased ability to design and plan the major databases made them aware of the increased development time line, the need to coordinate policy for implementation, and the need for additional resources.

The project sponsored Ministry of Industry and Hai Duong database pilots and computerization of state management efforts sound very basic. It is important to realize that support of these two activities by the OSC and VCIT represented pioneering efforts in the computerization of public administration in Vietnam. These were "firsts" in the implementing agencies and this challenged the staffs involved with steep learning curves. Capacity was developed to scope out projects and subject proponents to rigorous competitive evaluations. This fact was commented on repeatedly by all involved.

In summary, it does appear that well-chosen pilot applications, with demonstrable potential for learning-by-doing and downstream spin-offs, are quite useful in increasing the level of experience in applications development and project coordination.

¹⁵ VCIT and NPIT were always expected to fully support the planning, development, and implementation of six high priority national databases.

5.4 Management

A key factor in the successful implementation of the project was the flexibility of the working relationships between the CEA and the VEA. This relationship was formalized through regular meetings between the key members of each group throughout the five years.

The internal structure of the CEA started with an infield Implementation Manager supported by the Project Director and three Strategic Thrust Directors located in Canada. The first Implementation Manager had limited depth in IT management and policy. To offset this lack of experience she was to be supported by each of the four directors, who were supposed to take rotating three-month tours in Vietnam. This proved to be impractical.

The two subsequent field Directors had more IT management experience. However, even with these key areas of knowledge in the field, the director required constant input from the CEA team. VCIT was broad in scope and crossed many disciplines from project management to issue-specific expertise. Input was required for technical areas, conceptual issues and more important, as a sounding board for the Director's perceptions. In addition, it was difficult for the Director to participate in relevant events in the policy and development community being the sole Canadian manager in the field. The CEA always expressed the view that to minimize the number of activities with no discernable outputs in a policy capacity building project it is necessary to field two Canadians in the field at all times. The repeated requests to allow this were rejected by CIDA. In a project of this size and scope at least two management level Canadians should be resident in-country. Ideally one should have qualifications and experience in strategic planning, while the other is more grounded in project management.

5.4.1 Teaching capacity inherent in administrative systems

The Project's administrative systems had a hands-on potential to teach capacity. For example, VCIT was one of the first government agencies in Vietnam to do on-line banking. The project's methods of banking became an informal demonstration site for administrators in other Ministries participating in VCIT activities. Project design can and should allow for several face-to-face meetings over the full period of project implementation where the Canadian and Vietnamese financial administrators can:

- Improve transparency in administrative practices
- Reconcile accounts
- Agree on methods for coordination of cash flow estimates and reporting
- Seek improvements in administrative routines
- Learn and document how they are acting as a team in online project administration

Ministers, not the Party, have responsibility and accountability for implementation. For example, the banking sector does not care if an agency exists for achieving cross-sectoral benefits from ICT use. The responsible Minister will move ahead with action on online

banking regardless of the policy context. They would like supportive policies, but they will not wait.

5.4.2 Logistics

Some of the key elements in this project were the need to meet with key individuals in the public and private sector and the hosting of workshops, conferences and training sessions. In all cases a certain protocol was followed. For conferences and workshops there was a formal determination of the list of attendees and the issue of invitations. In many cases small per diems and/or lunch was provided to the attendees. For interviews it was expedient and effective to send the rationale for the meeting with sample questions and to have a proper letter of introduction, signed and sealed by an official.

This level of protocol and the need for financial incentives to attend is not common in Canada.