



Supporting the Poorest: Vietnam's Early Childhood Policy

In 2002, the Vietnamese Government announced Decision No. 161 on Preschool Education Development (referred to hereafter as the Decision), which, among other measures, specified target groups for government investment in early childhood. A national meeting held in March 2005 to review progress in the implementation of the Decision demonstrated its effectiveness in expanding access in the most disadvantaged areas. To learn more about the Decision's pro-poor policy, an interview was arranged in Hanoi, Vietnam, with Dr. Le Thi Anh Tuyet, Director of the Department of Early Childhood Education of the Ministry of Education and Training of Vietnam. The interview was conducted by Soo-Hyang Choi of UNESCO, Paris, who prepared the following excerpts.¹

In Vietnam, the area of early childhood concerns children ages 0–5 years.² Children enter primary school at the age of 6. Services for 0–2-year-olds are called Crèches; those for 3–5-year-olds Kindergartens; and pre-primary education for 5-year-olds Preschool Education, a term also used to refer to the entire area of early childhood care and education. Services are categorised into four types: state, semi-state, people-founded and private services.³ Since 1986, the Ministry of Education and Training is responsible for the entire early childhood age group. The gross enrolment ratio in pre-primary education was 43% in 2001. About 70% (net enrolment) of 5-year-olds are in Kindergartens (2002/03).

Choi: I understand that the Decision is characterised by its pro-poor policy. How exactly is it pro-poor?

Tuyet: The Decision stipulated that state investment to build new early childhood services including both Crèches and Kindergartens would be concentrated mainly on the poorest communes.⁴

C: Is state investment limited to those in extreme poverty?

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² Age digits refer to birthdays: e.g., 1-3 years cover young children from their 1st birthday (12 months) to their 3rd birthday (36 months); 3-6-year-old children mean children from their 3rd (36 months) to their 6th birthday (72 months).

³ Semi-state services are community-based services, while people-founded services are those set up, funded and managed by NGOs or civil society organisations. Private services refer to for-profit services operated by individuals. Semi-state services and people-founded services are categorised as non-public services, and they are both fee-paying.

⁴ The 2,380 most disadvantaged communes have been identified as the target of the country's *Programme 135 of the Government*, a socio-economic programme aimed at reducing poverty among the most disadvantaged populations. These communes are uniformly considered the priority target population of the government's poverty reduction measures and policies. Their eligibility is based on several criteria including living standard (more than 60% under poverty line), literacy rate, and infrastructure availability (Centre for International Economics, 2002). About 30% of children ages 0-4 years belong to the poorest 20%.

T: No, state investment also goes to the communes that are less poor, but poor nevertheless. For this group, the Government has promoted semi-state services, funded by both the central and local governments and communities. These semi-state services account for 48% of the total (2004).

C: As the state services already account for about 42% (2004), about 90% of the total early childhood services receive some form of support from the central Government.

T: That is right, but we distinguish semi-state services for the poor and state services for the poorest.⁵

C: On the subject of this differentiated support, I understand that for the actual implementation, even in state services, local governments and communities are still solicited for contributions. What is then the difference between semi-state services and state services?

T: In the state services, there are no fees, whereas semi-state services are fee-paying. Waiver of fees in state services thus provides extra assistance to the poorest children.

C: Is the Government not involved in the care and education of children in advantaged areas at all?

T: Our policy is to support them through people-founded and private services whose owners are non-public actors. The Government does not provide funding for these services, but it sets standards for them to follow for the building of infrastructure, staffing and pedagogy; and is involved in the monitoring and evaluation of these services.

C: How effective has the Decision been in supporting the poorest? The proportion of state services decreased from 43% in 2003 to 42% in 2004. Though the change is not significant, should this be interpreted as a sign that the Decision is not being successfully implemented?

T: No. Although it may seem ironic, the decreased percentage of state services is in fact a clear sign of the active implementation of the Government's pro-poor policy. In an effort to concentrate state services mainly in the poorest areas, the Government has transformed state services in advantaged areas into semi-state services. This is what caused the decrease in the overall proportion of state services. In 2004, a total of 197 state services became semi-state services. Fifty-two percent of this transformation took place in the five most advantaged communes in the Red River Delta and Central Coastal Regions.

⁵ The Revised Education Law, to take effect in January 2006, stipulates that there will be state, people-founded and private services only.

C: Do you have some more direct evidence of increased early childhood services in the poorest areas?

T: At the national level, the number of communes with at least one early childhood service increased by 5% between 2003 and 2004. During the same period, in the Mekong River Delta region, one of the poorest regions, the number increased by about 17%. Also, at the national level, the number of total early childhood services increased by 8% between 2003 and 2004, whereas the increase in the extremely difficult communes was 28%.

C: Some of these improvements may not be directly attributable to the Decision, as many other policy programmes are being implemented.

T: That is true, but the conversion of state services into semi-state services in advantaged areas and the increased number of communes with at least one early childhood service are changes that are specifically attributed to the Decision, as these results would not have been achieved without the Decision's specific instructions to further the equity policy objective.

C: How is Government support for state services allocated after the initial setting up of the services?

T: Government funding pays for management and teaching staff. In semi-state services, only management staff is on the state payroll.⁶ Provision of a state-paid teacher to state services is an extra measure designed to favour the poorest.

C: Are the poorest areas receiving more state-paid teachers?

T: In 2004, a total of 3,215 new state-paid teachers were recruited. Forty-seven percent of the total are located in the poorest North Eastern and Mekong River Delta regions. The most advantaged Red River Delta and Northern Central regions received only 10% of the cohort.

C: How are teachers in semi-state services paid?

T: They will be under contract to receive wages, pensions and insurance benefits similar to those of state teachers; but the costs are borne by the parents, as there is no teaching staff support from the Government in semi-state services.

C: Can semi-state services, which are likely to be attended by relatively poor children, cover the teaching staff costs?

T: If the service is short of funds, it can apply for state assistance; the state will help make up 75% of the shortfall.

C: Does the Decision say anything about teachers in people-founded and private services?

T: They have contracts of which salaries and insurance benefits may differ from those of teachers working for semi-state or state services, but the Decision stipulates that they, too, must enjoy basic job security.

C: Is there a reason why the Government attaches so much importance to teachers' job security?

T: We believe that regardless of the type of services children are in, they have the right to receive services of the same quality; and teachers are among the most important factors determining the quality of services. The Decision intends to ensure minimum job security for all teachers, regardless of the services in which they work.

C: How effective has the Decision been in ensuring job security?

T: Between 2003 and 2004, the number of teachers with social insurance increased by 51%; those with health insurance are much higher. This is substantial progress, and it is specifically attributable to the Decision.

C: There was a 12% increase in the Government budget for early childhood. But I guess the Government is still short of funds to meet the entire demand. Have you considered the option of making early childhood attendance compulsory as a strategy for securing funding within the education sector?

T: No, and it is not an option being explored by the Government, though at the provincial level it has been announced as a policy, helping local authorities boost political and investment commitments. But I personally do not think attendance in early childhood services should be made compulsory simply as a strategy for raising funds. In Vietnam, state budgets are to be spent strictly on the poorest. So the availability of resources will depend heavily on the Government's commitment to eradicating poverty, not so much on its duty regarding universal provision as such.

C: Finally, although many challenges remain, Vietnam seems to have been successful in developing and implementing concrete pro-poor early childhood policy measures. What would you single out as the success factors?

T: In Vietnam, the Ministry of Education and Training is responsible for the entire early childhood age group, and is the lead sector for early childhood. This makes it easier to develop and implement policies and monitor progress. We do not have to waste effort on coordinating different initiatives by different sectors. More important, the state has always been committed to investing in early childhood. This has made it possible to cater for the early childhood needs of the poorest. Without state investment, the equity issue cannot be tackled efficiently.

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⁶ Some state services have been converted into semi-state services. In these semi-state services, teachers are still on the state payroll. Meanwhile, some people-founded services have been converted into semi-state services. In this latter type of semi-state services, the Government is trying to provide state-paid principals and vice principals. Currently, about 60% of semi-state services benefit from such central Government support.

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