

Impacts of WOBA for marginalized households in rural Viet Nam

Lessons learnt from the Mid-Term Review of WOBA Viet Nam

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Introduction

WOBA Vietnam is a project designed and implemented by Thrive Networks /East Meets West Foundation aimed to bring equitable water and sanitation services and hygiene practices to marginalized households in five rural provinces of Vietnam (Hoa Binh, Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, Ha Tinh and Ben Tre) and to improve women's empowerment in the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) sector. It is funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) through the Water for Women Fund over 4.5 years (June 2018 to December 2022).

One of the objectives of WOBA is to increase access to equitable WASH services for the poor and marginalized (gender and social inclusion) communities in rural Vietnam. The targets on water and sanitation in project are:

- WATER: 6,500 poor/GESI¹ households connected to piped water schemes with connections co-financed through a competitive output-based subsidy fund.
- SANITATION: Improved access to hygienic sanitation in rural communities, with latrines constructed by 3,000 poor and

- GESI households, 15,000 poor households and 2,000 non-poor households.

By June 2021, WOBA achieved 12,767 latrine constructions, representing 64% of the project target for latrine uptake. 3,445 GESI households completed latrine, of which 1,994 households had persons with disabilities. The water connection output is slower with about 45% of water connection targets achieved.

A Mid-term Review (MTR) of WOBA was conducted from March to July 2021 in three provinces (Ben Tre, Thanh Hoa, Nghe An) to evaluate the effectiveness/efficiency and initial impact of the project approach and interventions.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with WOBA's beneficiaries, WU members, private sector WASH suppliers. In addition, focus groups with WOBA partners at the national level, provincial and district levels were conducted.

This learning note is based on the findings from this MTR, to share the knowledge and lessons learned about the beneficiaries' WASH needs and the intended/unintended impacts of the WOBA project for the beneficiaries who are the marginalized households in the rural Vietnam.

WASH needs

According to all project partners in the focus group discussions (FGD) at the national, provincial and district levels, there is a significant demand for

¹ WOBA uses the GESI categorization used by Vietnam's Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs. While some government categorizations are quite narrow, implementing through government systems is more efficient, and provides a pathway for scale if this targeted GESI support is successful. There are six GESI categories: (i)

children under 16 without parental or foster care; (ii) People aged 16-22 currently enrolled in secondary schools, vocational schools, colleges or universities (who also meet criteria (i)); (iii) HIV-positive people from poor households; (iv) poor single parents with custody of children; (v) the elderly; and (vi) people with a disability. WOBA Vietnam specifically target people with disabilities and elderly people.

WASH, especially for the poor, near poor and GESI in Viet Nam. Approximately 20% of households (HHs) are without hygienic latrine according to the participants in the FGD at national level. This percentage is higher in the rural area, especially in the mountainous area.

“According to the government's data, there are still 20% of HHs who do not have latrines, and we also go to the border communes, 60% - 70% of HHs do not have latrines and the demand for latrines is large.” (Participant in National FGD)

“The biggest demand for WASH in Nghe An is in mountainous and rural areas with low access to latrines. WOBA focus on the poor, near poor, people with disabilities whose demand for building latrine is high, but their economic conditions and awareness may be limited, and they have limited access to water and sanitation. When we surveyed Quy Hop district, there were many unhygienic latrines. About 60% of households have latrines, 40% are defecation indiscriminately, do not use the latrine.” (Participant in Nghe An FGD, Sanitation)

In relation to sanitation conditions, some households use dug latrines in their gardens, or their neighbors' latrines. Others use double vault latrines, which is more popular in Thanh Hoa and Nghe An, or fish-pond latrines (“cau ca”) which is common practice in Ben Tre. Habits and economic factors are the main reasons that make many households in Ben Tre still use temporary fish-pond latrines. The lack of hygienic sanitation facilities creates an unhealthy environment contaminated by human waste, increasing the risk of infection for other households.

Septic tank latrines were considered the most luxury latrine by the households interviewed in the MTR, especially for poor, near-poor households and vulnerable groups. Almost all beneficiaries interviewed wanted to build the septic tank latrines, but could not afford it so they built double vault latrine,

“In general, it is difficult to build septic latrines so they are still using two compartment-latrines which are inconvenient and unhygienic for children but we have to accept it. We wanted to build septic toilets; but we couldn't pay the cost which is about VND 50 million to be built one toilet with bathroom.” (Beneficiary, Nghe An)

Households were using piped water as well as other water sources such as drilled or dug well water, stormwater. Interviews with beneficiaries found that they mainly used rainwater for cooking and drinking. When rainwater ran out, they bought bottled water for cooking and drinking. Other water sources were used for bathing and other daily living.

Beneficiaries acknowledged that the quality of the water sources is not good especially water from dug wells or drilled wells in the geological conditions of the provinces. According to beneficiaries in Nghe An and Thanh Hoa, the well's water color was yellow or brick color and contains limescale. In Ben Tre, the water was often salty. They were also concerned that the water they are using causes diseases like kidney stones or cancer.

The WASH needs are further impacted by climate change that affect the quality and quantity of water sources. Thanh Hoa and Nghe An are extremely affected by drought and flooding, while Ben Tre suffers from salinity intrusion, tides, erosion, subsidence. All of these factors are affecting their WASH needs and quality of living. Many households felt that these incidents have been occurring more frequently for five recent years, and destruction of natural resources is also one of the causes of climate change. Many spoke about the shortage of water due to the climate change and an increasing need in the communities for improved water access,

“We are affected by climate change. Many areas in Ben Tre are becoming saline area. Therefore, the demand for piped water and fresh water is very large. The pipeline is not completely covered. The demand is great, but

it is difficult to achieve the targets.”

(Beneficiary, Ben Tre)

The issue of water security is challenging for people with disabilities whose population has increased in the GESI communities. Households coped with depleted water and saline issues by sharing the water with the neighbours, shifting to other sources which could be worse water sources, buying bottled water to drink, or buying drilled-well water tank.

“Last year the water here was too salty, so people had to ‘exchange water’ with well water in Thuan An area which is a bit better. I had to pay VND 80,000/1 truck/2m3. In the peak months, we took 2 trucks each month”

(Beneficiary, Ben Tre).

These adaptation measures have increased the basic living costs for these households, who already lack financial means to pay for sanitation facilities and clean water services.

Intended impacts on the target beneficiaries from WOBA

Access to hygienic latrines and clean water through WOBA subsidy schemes has certainly addressed the WASH needs of marginalized households. All of the beneficiaries interviewed thought that their WASH conditions have improved as a result of connecting to water or building latrine.

WOBA has enabled the households’ understanding about the importance of having and using hygienic latrine and piped water. Through WOBA subsidies, which all believed was provided by the state, they have learnt that WASH take up is the household and community responsibility, with the government playing a role (through financial support) to incentivize households to access the WASH services. For this reason, the OBA model was supported by households, WU members, and all partners as a “rewards” model to deliver WASH services as a public good.

Through WOBA, the WU and local authorities have become more aware of the concerns of these

marginalized households. The WU staff have gained more knowledge about the WASH demand of the community and the capacity of households to access WASH services. Consequently, the WU members have improved their capacity in mobilization or seeking resources to support vulnerable families.

Unintended impacts on the target beneficiaries from WOBA

There are some unintended impacts from the project. First, some households felt that subsidy (especially with those that were provided the full latrine and water connection) comes from the government, which make them believe that WASH services is the responsibility of the government. This perception may create contrary intention of OBA as a mechanism for creating market demand for WASH services to attract private sector engagement.

Second, WOBA uses the list of poor/near poor and GESI households provided by the local authorities to identify target beneficiaries. However, some eligible households have also been removed from the list to meet the New Rural Development Program targets of reduced number of poor households. Many of the beneficiaries, WU and partners involved in this evaluation felt that WOBA has excluded very difficult households who actually have WASH needs and desire to receive WASH services.

Third, building latrine has led to some households who are already poor to incur additional debts. This is visible in the households who build houses in combination with toilets or build latrines combined with the bathroom.

The negative impact of Covid-19 on vulnerable households has been more severe. Income reduction due to unemployment or irregular employment affect their affordability to build hygienic latrines and connecting to piped water.

“The project is also impacted by Covid-19 pandemic. In Nghe An, parents often rely on their children. Like this last New Year, most of the children who live and work far away from

home don't come back, so they send money to their parents for Tet. Without the children, the parents don't dare to buy anything (for Tet), so trading activities also decrease. In this pandemic situation, the children's income reduces, so the support for their parents also decreases. This causes a lot of negative impacts on their ability to build latrine.” (Participant in Nghe An FGD, Sanitation)

Affordability affects beneficiaries' consumption of clean water to save tariff payment. This is also caused by the limited understanding and trust on benefits of tap water. This has affected water providers' revenue source and counter their desire and effort to increase revenue.

Similarly, some households who built latrines under WOBA are still using fishpond latrine or the old unhygienic latrine and the new hygienic latrine in parallel due to habit and cost of buying toilet paper to use with the new hygienic latrine.

Another issue is limited awareness and behaviors of beneficiaries, which has resulted in lack of use of hygienic latrine or not maintaining the latrine which impacts take up of latrine; benefits of improved hygiene and health; rapid degradation of the latrine especially the septic tank latrines. The lack of maintenance of latrines is mainly due to lack of understanding or lack of financial resources to buy right sanitation materials lead to. This could be because of lack of information provided to households at the time of latrine construction, mobilization, verification and post verification.

Recommendations

Both positive and negative impacts from the project should be anticipated continuously from the project design, during implementation, and post verification by partners and stakeholders. The different stakeholders (EMW, PCs at different levels, project partners, WU from central to village levels and beneficiaries) should be encouraged to participate in identifying the risks and the mitigation measures and adjust implementation activities promptly to avoid the unintended

negative impacts and enhance the intended positive.

Appropriate and regular communication activities to households after building latrine or connect to water supply system is very important to maintain the effectiveness of access to these WASH services.

The WU staff at commune and village level should be trained and provided information/materials (such as leaflets, flip chart) to implement the communication activities.

The information package should be developed on how to maintain latrine and use of piped water for the WU members to educate households that have built latrine and water connections.

The appropriate style and content in the information package that is tailored to female, elderly people, persons with disabilities, and illiterate people (e.g. animations, drawings, videos, pictures or visual materials) should be used for each specific target group.

Given the climate impacts, WOBA could promote appropriate designs and construction options for latrines in challenging environments with appropriate prices supported by subsidies and other resources.

The feedback of beneficiaries about quality of service and products, and experience of WOBA should be incorporated in the verification surveys with households. These feedbacks should be used to improve and adapt the implementation processes.

The negative impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the marginalized HH should be considered carefully with each project area to design and adjust the appropriate target settings, and possibly levels of subsidies provided.

For the full report of the Mid-Term Review, please email Dr Lien Pham at lien.pham@eastmeetswest.org.au

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