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**An Independent Gender Review
and Impact Assessment of the National Target
Programme on New Rural Development
(NTP NRD) for the period of 2010-2020**

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Final Report An Independent Gender Review and Impact Assessment of the National Target Programme on New Rural Development (NTP NRD) for the period of 2010-2020

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Final Report

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Acronyms and Abbreviations

ARD	Agricultural Research and Development
BTAP	Budget Transparency, Accountability and Participation
CBO	Community Based Organizations
CHC	Commune Health Center
CPC	Commune People's Committee
DOLISA	Department of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs
DP	Development Partners
DPI	Department of Planning and Investment
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GBV	Gender-Based Violence
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GoVN	Government of Viet Nam
GRB	Gender Responsive Budgeting
GSO	General Statistical Office
GTA	Gender Transformative Approaches
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
IFC	International Finance Corporation
INGO	International Non-governmental organization
IPSARD	Institute of Policy and Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development
MARD	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
MOC	Ministry of Construction
MOCST	Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism
MOF	Ministry of Finance

MOH	Ministry of Health
MOIT	Ministry of Industry and Trade
MOLISA	Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
NCO	National Coordination Office
NGO	Non-governmental organization
NSGE	National Strategy on Gender Equality
NTP EM	National Target Programme on Ethnic Minority Development
NTP NRD	National Target Programme on New Rural Development
NTP SPR	National Target Programme on Sustainable Poverty Reduction
SEDP	Socio-Economic Development Plan
SHI	Social Health Insurance
SNV	Netherlands Development Organization
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics
TVET	Technical, Vocational Education and Training
UNDP	United Nation Development Programme
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women
VBARD	Vietnam Bank for Agricultural and Rural Development
VBSP	Vietnam Bank for Social Policies
VND	Vietnam Dong
VWU	Vietnam Women's Union
WEE	Women's Economic Empowerment

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Executive Summary

Photo: UN Women/ shutterstock.com

INTRODUCTION

Ten-year implementation of the NTP NRD.

The Government of Viet Nam (GoVN) has implemented a National Target Programme on New Rural Development (NTP NRD) for two phases, the period of 2010-2015 and the current period of 2016-2020. This NTP NRD is arguably the most important initiative of Vietnam in agriculture and rural development. As the NTP NRD is approaching its 10-year implementation and the final year of the current NTP NRD 2016-2020, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) has conducted a review of the NTP NRD 2010-2020, in order to prepare for the upcoming new phase of the NTP NRD 2021-2030.

Background of the assessment. In this context, UN Women (UNW) in collaboration with the Institute of Agriculture and Rural Development (IPSARD) and Viet Nam Women's Union (VWU) have commissioned a gender assessment to examine to what extent women's empowerment and gender equality have been implemented in the NTP NRD (2010-2020),¹ and based on this assessment, to make recommendations for gender mainstreaming in the next programming of the NTP NRD. This assessment was made using secondary data sources available from the reviews of MARD and previous studies on the NTP NRD. In addition, the study was based on a qualitative assessment with relevant stakeholders in 5 selected provinces (Hà Nội, Hà Tĩnh, Quảng Nam, Lâm Đồng, and Long An), 10 districts, 21 communes, and 21 villages between September and December 2019.²

Scope and Main content. Assessing gender in a comprehensive NTP NRD, covering all aspects of rural areas of Vietnam was neither feasible nor within the scope of this

assessment. Instead, the study investigates some specific content of the NTP NRD where gender issues could be analyzed within the timeframe and resources available. The study examines how gender is reflected in the design of the NTP NRD in the next section. Section 3 provides insights into the ways in which gender has been signified in the implementation of the NTP NRD. Section 4 explores the obstacles for the implementation of gender equality in the NTP NRD. Section 5 suggests some priorities and recommendations to enhance gender dimensions in the next phase of the NTP NRD.

GENDER DIMENSIONS IN THE DESIGN OF THE NTP NRD

Gender equality was addressed as a thematic issue in the 'foundation' of NRD.

The Resolution 26-NQ/TW of the Communist Party of Vietnam on agriculture, rural areas, and farmers (i.e. 'nông nghiệp, nông thôn, và nông dân') provides the 'background' for the NRD. The Resolution sets the targets for agriculture and rural development to be achieved by 2020 and details eight main solutions. Out of these solutions, the promotion of gender equality was briefly mentioned as a theme under solution 3 on improving the living standards of the rural population.

Design of the NTP NRD 2010-2020 as per Decision 800/2010 and Decision 1600/2016 did not mainstream gender equality.

While clearly stated in Resolution 26-NQ/TW, gender equality failed to be mentioned in the Decision 800/2010 on the approval of the NTP NRD 2010-2020. Gender was not covered in the Decision 695/2012 made by the Prime Minister to amend the Decision 800/2010. Similarly, gender was not mentioned in Decision 1600/2016 to approve the NTP NRD 2016-2020. It is observed that the NRD criteria for the period 2010-2015 did not include gender and therefore, it is reasonable to argue that gender was also left out in the design of the NTP NRD in the first phase 2010-2015.³ Consequently, in all phases of the NTP NRD

1 It should be noted that the assessment is set within the confines of the activities pertinent to the NTP NRD (2010-2020) and is not expected to serve as a panacea for all gender related issues in the rural Viet Nam.

2 In total, the study team consulted 50 stakeholders at the provincial level, 39 at the district level, 66 at the commune level, and 126 at the village and household levels (of which 54.1 percent are female), making a total of 281 persons in the sample of this assessment.

3 World Bank and UN Women (2015). Gender analysis of New Rural Areas National Targeted Programme.

planning and implementation gender has been conspicuously absent.

Gender equality was incorporated into the NTP NRD by Decision 1980/2016 as a sub-thematic issue.

Accordingly, the indicator 18.6 on “Ensuring gender quality and domestic violence prevention and control; protecting and supporting vulnerable people in the sphere of family and social life” was introduced as one of 49 indicators under the 19 commune-level NRD criteria. This indicator 18.6 is among six indicators under the NRD criterion 18 on “Political system and legal access”. Having gender equality integrated as a sub-thematic indicator, this reflects a ‘partial’ and women-focused approach⁴ toward gender equality. Consequently, gender concerns have not been taken in consideration in the remaining NRD criteria such as socio-economic infrastructure, economy and production, access to public services (education and healthcare), or environmental protection. Notably, this is inconsistent with the Law on Gender Equality (e.g. Article 12 to Article 18 address gender equality as a cross-cutting issue).

The two sets of ‘Advanced’ or ‘Model’ NRD criteria have been recently introduced to enhance the NRD process, but gender equality has not been promoted further.

In addition to the NRD criteria regulated by Decision 1980/2016 – which are now called the ‘basic’ NRD, the two sets of ‘advanced’ (‘nâng cao’) NRD criteria and ‘model’ (‘kiểu mẫu’) NRD criteria have been introduced by Document 1345/2018 of MARD and Decision 691/2018 of the Prime Minister, respectively. However, these ‘advanced’ and ‘model’ NRD criteria fail to address gender equality. It makes an impression that gender equality has been sufficiently covered in the sub-thematic indicator 18.6.

Limited reflections on gender in the implementation arrangements of the NTP NRD.

As merely one of 49 indicators for the commune-level NRD criteria, it is understandable that gender is not of central concern in the implementation arrangements for the NTP NRD. Decision 69/2017 on detailed guidance of assessing the NRD criteria and indicators is probably the most widely used guidance for its implementation. With the exception of the conditions to assess the gender equality indicator 18.6, gender was not referred to in any other requirements to achieve NRD criteria and indicators. Decision 69/2017 also refers to several other implementation arrangements developed by line ministries. An overview of these documents also indicate that any mention of gender is absent. Circular 05/2017 of MARD being another key implementation document for the NTP-NRD is not an exception.

Limited gender considerations in the organizational structure of the NTP NRD management.

Decision 1920/2016 of the Prime Minister provides background for the organizational structure of NRD Coordination Offices at different levels. At the central level, the organizational structure of the NRD National Coordination Office (NCO) was regulated in the Decision 1428/2018 of the MARD Minister (for period 2016-2020) and Decision 2501/2010 (for period 2010-2015). Gender and social inclusion are not a part of the management function of the NRD NCO. At the sub-national level, an overview of the NRD Coordination Offices at the provincial level also indicates that the issues of gender and social inclusion do not constitute a management function. In fact, the implementation of the indicator 18.6 is assigned to MoLISA and its provincial affiliates and is therefore not under the oversight of the NRD Coordination Offices.

4 The gender equality discourse in Vietnam’s agriculture and rural development sector is largely articulated through women-focused narratives that depict women’s situation in particular ways. For further discussion, see Huong Thu Nguyen, Helle Rydstrom (forthcoming). *Feminism in Vietnam: Women’s Studies, Gender Research, and Intersections*. In Jonathan London (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Vietnam*. London: Routledge.

GENDER ASSESSMENT IN THE NTP NRD IMPLEMENTATION

Gender considerations in NRD planning

NRD planning refers to the master plan and annual planning for NRD elements. The extent to which women have been involved in these two planning activities is an important aspect of implementation gender equality in the NTP NRD. The study indicates that women's participation in the planning process was limited.

Master plans were mainly produced by the professionals.

Having a commune directed master plan remains the first commune-level NRD criterion since the early stage of the NTP NRD 2010-2015. The procedure for rural commune master planning was stipulated by the Ministry of Construction.⁵ Due to complexity of this process, rural commune master plans were drawn up by the professionals. This was amongst the NRD criteria that were achieved soonest in all NRD communes. Whereas the Circular 09/2010/TT-BXD stipulates a need for consultative meetings with local residents about the provisional master plans, there is no mention or acknowledgement of the need for women's participation. Qualitative findings show that some villager respondents were aware of the commune master plans publicly posted at the Commune People's Committee Hall but their eventual participation in the process was neither observed nor could be recalled.

Participatory annual planning was

institutionalized in NTPs. This planning process is to prioritize annual activities for the NTP NRD. According to Decision 41/2015 of the Prime Minister, annual planning of NTPs needs to be conducted in a participatory manner and as an integral part of the local socio-economic development planning (SEDP). Circular No. 01/2017 of MPI provides guidance for making annual investment plans of NTPs as part of the

commune-level SEDP. It stipulates that women must constitute at least 30 percent of the total participants in the participatory planning meetings related to NTPs. This represents a major mechanism in place to empower women's voices in the decision-making process on the priorities for NTP NRD implementation.⁶

Women's participation in actual planning was limited.

The previous gender assessment of NTP NRD 2011-2015 revealed an absence of gender references in the Programme policies and criteria,⁷ and therefore gender was not a matter of concern for planning. With the addition of indicator 18.6 to the commune-level NRD criteria for 2016-2020, the NTP NRD has turned out to be gender sensitive. Nevertheless, from a participatory perspective, it is observed that the voices of women, the poor and other vulnerable groups have not been given adequate attention in the planning process.⁸ At the five visited provinces there was evidence that participatory meetings were organized at village or commune levels on the implementation of activities,⁹ rather than for the purpose of identifying priorities with respect to the activities. In reality the NRD criteria is usually fixed and, as a result, the prioritizing process is mainly concerned with the resources available and the timing required to achieve each of the NRD criteria. This restricts the space for participatory planning on prioritizing the activities that are most appropriate and desirable for each community

5 Circular 09/2010/TT-BXD dated 04/8/2010 on the procedure for master planning of new rural commune for the NTP NRD 2010-2015 and Circular 02/2017/TT-BXD dated 01/03/2017 for master planning of NRD commune for the NTP NRD 2016-2020.

6 Circular No. 01/2017 of MPI stipulates that women must constitute at least 30 percent of the participants in the participatory planning meetings for NTPs.

7 World Bank and UN Women (2015), *ibid*.

8 Budget Transparency, Accountability and Participation (2018). *Voice of local people and officials on the National Programme on New Rural Development in 2016-2020 period: The case of Hoa Binh and Quang Tri provinces*.

9 In some places, the percentage of women's participation in these hamlet meetings for implementation of the NRD activities (mainly road access) was found to be relatively high. However, quality of participation, measured by the extent to which their voices were considered, remains low.

GENDER CONSIDERATIONS IN IMPLEMENTATION OF NTP NRD ACTIVITIES

Given the broad range of NTP NRD activities, to keep the scope of this assessment manageable, the study has focused on elements of the programme for which gender concerns were indicated. The assessment in this section therefore focuses on how gender is reflected in the implementation of particular socio-economic infrastructures (e.g. road networks, irrigation and water supply and village halls); the organisation of the economy and production (production support activities), and culture, society, and environmental protection (concentrating on the 'Five No, Three Clean' campaigns and skills training for rural labour); and implementation of the indicator 18.6 on gender equality.

GENDER ASPECTS IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC INFRASTRUCTURE DEVELOPMENT

A 'gender neutral' approach was adopted in the development of socio-economic infrastructure. Due to a 'gender neutral' approach in infrastructure development aiming to serve the most common community needs, these elements have not yet been gender-responsive. There is a perception that basic infrastructure criteria aim to serve the needs of the whole community, 'gender inclusive', and as such the prioritisation of women was not believed to be necessary. Infrastructure interventions have not paid sufficient attention to the different ways in which women and men will be affected (and therefore benefit from) infrastructure interventions. In addition, there was some limited evidence showing that the benefit to women is a prioritized criterion in the review and approval process of infrastructure constructions. However, significant benefits for women were observed from some infrastructural development under

the NTP NRD (as below). This might reflect the nature of rural infrastructures being public good or women's productive activities in the community find them using certain infrastructure more than men

Significant benefits generated for women by road investments. The NTP NRD has brought significant changes to the village landscape, especially on the rural transport system. As of June 2019, there are 8,927 communes with established roads connected to the District People's Committee, reaching 99.4 percent of the community.¹⁰ Although women's voices were not taken into account in the prioritization process for selecting infrastructural subprojects, the investment in the rural road network has helped improve women's public security, safety and mobility, including their access to labour market opportunities, albeit to a lesser extent than their male counterparts. It is important to note that access to non-farm employment opportunities (especially wage employment) has become the main driver of rural transformation and poverty reduction. This is also upheld even in the remote and ethnic minorities areas. In this regard, improved physical accessibility through rural road investments has contributed significantly to this labour mobility.

Women's public safety was also enhanced by the road lighting systems. Alongside the rural road network, the installation of electricity reached 100 percent of communes in most rural areas. The Northern Midlands and Mountainous area have the lowest percentage of rural areas with electricity, but it still stands at 94.5 percent.¹¹ The improved road lighting systems in communes and villages allow women to participate in hamlet meetings. At places, the Women's Union activities usually takes place after 8 o'clock in the evening (once women have finished dinner preparation and other household chores) and many village meetings were organized in the evening (to avoid interruptions to the work days of villagers). Availability of the road light system makes it safer for women to participate in these

10 IPSARD (2019). *Agricultural and rural development strategy for the period of 2021-2025*. Draft

11 IPSARD (2019), *ibid*.

village meetings, activities of the Women's Union, and other community activities.

Significant benefits from water supply and irrigation, though benefits are disproportionate to remoteness even in the same NRD commune.

As a result of the NTP NRD, the percentage of the rural population with access to safe drinking water has increased by two percentage points annually during 2008-2017, and up to 88.5%.¹² Access to irrigation was also substantially improved and has helped save labour costs and time.¹³ Women have benefited from the NTP NRD investments in water supply and irrigation as they are often the primary users of domestic water and irrigation for subsistence agriculture. Nevertheless, access to safe drinking water and irrigation remains challenging in the upland and remote locations. The results of focus group discussions with Cơ Tu (Quảng Nam) and K'ho (Lâm Đồng) women indicate that even though their communes have achieved NRD, a number of households located at higher upland elevations has not had access to a water supply and irrigation. Consequently, female members of these households had to go farther to fetch water for family use, and therefore were more likely to face time constraints that kept them from investing time in income-generating activities.

Village halls contributed to the facilitation of women's participation, but gender responsiveness is not yet fully embraced

Another example of socio-economic infrastructure development under NTP NRD is the construction of village halls. The proportion of communes with cultural houses increased from 30.6 percent in 2006 to 58.6 percent in 2016. With the newly built or upgraded village halls, many women were encouraged to be able to participate in cultural, sports activities, and village meetings. Observations from some villages in the communes with NRD achievement however indicated that even the communes have reached 'the finish line', gender responsiveness in these village halls is not necessarily guaranteed. For example, restrooms of the village halls do not have a

hand-washing area, soap, trash can, toilet, and some have 'loose' doors to separate male and female restrooms. This could be attributed to the limited consultation with local residents on gender-responsive dimensions of the development.

GENDER ASPECTS IN ECONOMY AND PRODUCTION ORGANIZATION

Production support under the NTP NRD.

The NTP NRD activities under the areas of 'economy and production organization' focus on production support to achieve the criteria set on average income, poverty rate, and production organization (i.e. *tổ chức sản xuất*, which are reflected in having cooperative and production model with market linkages on key agricultural products). According to Circular 05/2017/TT-BNN of MARD, production support under the NTP NRD consists of three main activities, including: (i) production through value chains; (ii) the development of cooperatives, and (iii) the development of rural occupations according to Decree 66/2006/ND-CP. In practice, the NTP NRD has mainly focused on the first two main activities. The implementation arrangements for these two activities consist of a Production Support Manual, which was issued by Decision 4781/QĐ-BNN-VPĐP in November 2017 to guide the production support through value chains, and the new Cooperative Law 2012 (and Decree 193/2013/ND-CP providing details for implementation of the Cooperative Law). Scrutiny of these documents indicates that gender was not considered. Even the principle of 'prioritizing women' in benefiting from the production support available in other programmes and policies (such as the NTP SPR) was not mentioned. In other words, the production support of the NTP NRD appears to be 'gender-neutral' or 'gender averse'.

An important role of the local Women's Union in production initiatives aiming to promote women's economic empowerment. The local Women's Union

¹² IPSARD (2019), *ibid*.

¹³ UN Women and IFGS (2015), *ibid*.

plays a crucial role in advocating for women-led production models and cooperatives under the of NTP NRD as well as other resources (such as the preferential loan schemes of the Vietnam Bank for Social Policy (VBSP), existing resources to support women's start-up and business initiatives, and others). However, sustainability of these production support initiatives remains a challenge. The findings from stakeholder interviews at all visited sites show that these women-led production models or cooperatives were generally untenable in the long term and revolved heavily around 'achievement goals' (*chạy thành tích*). Many of the production models established by women or led by women (mostly in the fields of animal husbandry, gardening, and small-scale businesses) only lasted for a short period of time and discontinued after the first production cycle. Market linkages were only at the early stages.

Women's active participation in production support activities in the absence of gender responsiveness. At certain locations, women were found to be active in the implementation of the NRD production support activities, especially when the support had occurred within producer groups. However, this active participation might eventually result in a 'double' burden. This is explained by a customary gender-ascribed division of labour within households and the community, in which women are associated with small-scale agricultural production activities, unpaid care and domestic work.¹⁴ Meanwhile, men tend to be more involved in non-agricultural activities, especially as hired labour. More importantly, they will often migrate to seek wage employment and this is widespread across almost all rural communes and it is not uncommon to find rural women, especially those who are married and middle-aged, left in charge of agriculture while their spouses commute or migrate for non-farm wage employment. Therefore, women's active participation in these productive development activities, may eventually result in a 'double' burden for them. Within this context, if activities to support the development of production do

14 UN Women (2016), *Discussion Paper: Unpaid care and domestic work issues and suggestions for Vietnam*.

not have the necessary gender responsiveness, then they could become the long arm of gender inequalities in the intra-household gender division of labour as well as that in the community.

GENDER ASPECTS IN CULTURE, SOCIETY AND ENVIRONMENT

With respect to the 'culture, society, and environment' sphere, this section looks specifically into the "Five No, Three Clean" campaigns, and vocational training for the rural labour forces.¹⁵

Regarding the vocational training for the rural labour force, **women benefited from vocational training under the NTP NRD with a focus on agriculture.** Promotion of technical and vocational training (TVET) has been a policy of Vietnam under the Project 1956, which has become an integral component of the NTP NRD since 2016. Since then vocational training in agriculture is the content set under the NTP NRD while non-agricultural technical training is structured into the NTP SPR.¹⁶ Therefore, vocational training on agriculture under the NTP NRD mainly aims at agricultural skills development rather than preparing the rural labour forces for non-farm employment. Under these policies there are district-level centers that provide vocational training, free of charge.¹⁷ At the provinces

15 *Vocational training for the labour force should be best discussed as part of the 'economy and production organization' sphere in the NTP NRD as it directly relates to production and income generation. However, the issue of vocational training is currently named under indicator 14.3 under the education criteria and therefore analyzed under 'culture, society, and environment'.*

16 *It is noted that the Decision 1600/2016 of the Prime Minister on the approval of the NTP NRD 2016-2020 incorporated the NTP SPR under the content on poverty reduction and social protection. However, in actual implementation, the two NTPs were managed and implemented separately.*

17 *IPSARD (2019) indicated that proportion of trained rural labour (including the number of labourers who have been trained but without a diploma, certificate) increased from 15.45 percent in 2011 to 34.14 percent in 2016.*

visited in this assessment, it was observed that women make up the majority of participants in these vocational training activities on agriculture supported by the NTP NRD. This tendency can be explained by the changing intra-household gender dynamics in which women (especially the married and middle aged) are more involved in small scale and home-based agricultural activities, while men are more likely to engage in non-farm wage employment.

Lack of gender responsiveness in the implementation of this vocational training.

The content of vocational training was developed from the framework curriculum stipulated as part of the Project 1956. In the visited areas, there was no evidence of the development of training content with the participation of community and grassroots cadres or the target beneficiaries. In fact, it was the commune authorities which proposed the content, frequently based on a self-perceived assessment of the local livelihood potential, to the district authorities for their approval and allocation of required funding. Therefore, these vocational training courses were not demand driven (certainly not when seen from the perspective of the trainee beneficiaries. This undermined the quality and effectiveness of these vocational training activities.

The significant role of Women's Union and women residents in the 'Five No, Three Clean' community campaign.

Regarding "Five No" campaign, it has been a good practice to ensure the campaign is responsive to the local context as the provincial Women's Union can only choose "two No" as major criteria while other "three No" are left for the district Women's Union to select.¹⁸ This direction is said to be more flexible and creates favourable conditions for all levels of the Union to select relevant issues to the local context, then set up plans and request for the government funding.

18 For example, Quảng Nam Provincial Women's Union has selected "Three NO" depending on the specific circumstances of their locations. For highland and mountainous areas, it would be "NO child marriages" (*Không tảo hôn*). For lowland districts like Núi Thành, it would be "NO selling un-sanitized food" (*Không bán thực phẩm bẩn*); for Đại Lộc it would be "NO usury" (*Không tín dụng đen*); for Điện Bàn it would be "NO traffic violations" (*Không vi phạm giao thông*)

As regards "Three Clean", village cleaning is assigned to four mass organizations (Women's Union, Farmers' Union, Veterans' Association, and Youth Union) to alternately manage. Nonetheless, women always make up the majority of participants. This is because women are also members of the Farmers' Union. Even though the majority of members within the Veterans' Association is male, but according to local people, they often ask for sick leaves and send their wives to 'represent' them; the Youth Union is in fact the 'thinnest' force in the research sites, because most of their members are either in school or out-migrated for work, so eventually, it is still their mothers and older sisters who fill in the place.

Gender stereotypes associate women and the Women's Union with certain tasks that are perceived as appropriate for them.

Pervasive gender stereotypes persist with respect to certain tasks that are deemed 'suitable' for women and this was observed across all the visited provinces. Accordingly, women and the Women's Union are usually considered to be 'suitable' for the non-essential and peripheral tasks of the NTP NRD, such as taking care of 'roadside flower beds', 'cleaning the village', 'cleaning the laneways', or 'cleaning the home'. This gender stereotype tends to undermine women from being assigned important tasks. In addition, there is a stereotypical notion about the so-called 'secondary', rather than the primary, role of women in income generation activities – whereby women are usually engaged more in small-scale agricultural activities while men are involved in 'primary' non-farm income generating activities. This stereotype seems to also apply to the 'secondary' role of the Women's Union – as a mass organization which supports or supplements the implementation of 'primary' activities which are assigned to other stakeholders. Therefore, the active role of women and the Women's Union in the "Five No, Three Clean" campaigns certainly underwrites such gender stereotypes that tend to confine the Union and women to more 'peripheral' roles in NRD as well as other socio-economic developmental tasks.

IMPLEMENTATION OF GENDER EQUALITY INDICATOR 18.6

Gender equality is addressed in the NTP NRD explicitly and solely in the indicator 18.6 on “Ensuring gender quality and domestic violence prevention and control, protecting and supporting vulnerable people in the sphere of family and social life”. The implementation of this indicator is reflected in raising gender equality awareness; promoting women’s political participation; domestic violence prevention and control; and ensuring women’s access to financial services. It is noted that the scope of this 18.6 criteria covers only certain aspects of gender equality.

Significant increase in community awareness about gender equality. The study observed certain changes and positive transformations in the local perceptions of gender roles and the household division of labour. At ‘NRD qualified’ and ‘NRD advance’ communes, male respondents (mainly middle-aged and the elder men) stated that the majority of male residents had been informed and acquired a general knowledge about gender equality, through newspapers, television and community advocacy activities of local mass organizations. They voluntarily share house chores and childcare responsibilities with their spouses. Notably, these male respondents reportedly felt happy and confident doing household work, without any hesitation or fears of losing ‘face’ to the other men.

Women’s political participation has been enhanced, especially at the grassroots. At both NRD ‘qualified’ and ‘unqualified’ communes, the majority have at least 15 percent of female members on the Commune People’s Committee, but there was only one female leader across the visited communes.¹⁹ Notably, all male respondents admitted their

support for women’s leadership roles but in fact women are less likely to be promoted at higher administrative levels. In the education and healthcare sectors, women constitute a large share of staffing but their representation in leadership positions is relatively low. It is important to note that women’s participation in the Communist Party system from the provincial to the village level is also limited.²⁰ There are multiple factors affecting women’s participation in leadership. While there is substantive evidence that female leaders need to have support and encouragement from their family, especially their spouses, the arrangement of human resources depends heavily on the mobilization of the Party Committees at different levels. The study findings indicate that to this Party body, women’s voices have not yet been promoted to a position where they might exercise influence.

Multiple barriers to women’s political participation remain. When it comes to women’s participation in leadership, an oft-cited reason is the shortage of female officials who are able to meet the required criteria on professional qualifications and political membership. For female employees who are not yet qualified in terms of their degrees or qualifications, it seems evident from the study that the unequal gender distribution of unpaid care work limits their opportunities for capacity development, political participation as well as other forms of social and educational engagement. This situation is reinforced by a still widespread ‘internalization’ among women that having more time for their family should be their utmost priority. Adding further to misconceptions about women’s political abilities is the organizational culture that is deemed not familiar yet with female leadership. Therefore, it is not uncommon for female candidates to receive insufficient votes, and thus not qualify to be appointed to leadership positions. Besides, it is noted that some young, qualified females may not be keen to apply for local civil service positions because of the low salary and high complexity compared to other

¹⁹ Including the following positions: Secretary of the Commune Party Committee, Deputy Secretary of the Commune Party Committee, Chairman of Commune People’s Committee, Vice Chairman of Commune People’s Committee, Chairman of Commune People’s Council, and Vice Chairman of Commune People’s Council.

²⁰ Women constitute only 18.3 percent of Party leadership at the commune level, 14.2 percent at the district level, and 11.3 percent at the province level. UNDP (2013). *Women’s Leadership in Viet Nam: Leveraging a Resource Untapped*. Hanoi: UNDP.

jobs in the private sector available to them.

With regard to domestic violence prevention, 'voluntary' private residences are usually mobilized for the function of a 'reliable' address for 'temporary shelter'.

In the visited provinces under this assessment, all communes were reported to have no difficulty in meeting the required indicator of 'having a reliable address (*địa chỉ tin cậy*) and temporary shelter (*nhà tạm lánh*)'. However, at both 'unqualified' and 'qualified' communes, the private houses of selected core cadres, such as the village head, chairwoman of the local Women's Union or chief of police, are mobilized to operate as a 'reliable address' or temporary facility for domestic violence survivors. Using these 'voluntary' private residences raises a number of concerns such as insufficient, inappropriate first-aid to be provided to the survivors, possible inconvenience for other residents in the houses, and potential safety risks for the house owner's and other family members.

Existing public facilities are also utilized for the purpose of "reliable addresses".

The Commune Health Centers (CHC) are also used as a 'reliable address' instead of private addresses to eliminate barriers to domestic violence survivors in accessing support services. Some interviewed officials suggested that a better option is the People's Committee Hall or the Police Station where the waiting room can be used as temporary place for domestic violence survivors. It is observed that these two suggested governmental facilities house the most powerful public authorities (at the grassroots level) underpinning a dominant perception that survivors may need the strong arm of the local authorities to help them get out of abusive or violent situations. Seen from a woman's perspective, she would prefer to seek shelter at other women's homes rather than going to the People's Committee or Police Station. Even when they were assaulted and wanted to take the issue to court, they still preferred to turn to other women for sharing and solace.²¹

21 General Statistics Office & United Nations (2010). *Results from the national study on domestic violence against women in Vietnam 2010*. Hanoi: General Statistics Office.

Budget constraints and the social conspiracy of silence on domestic violence prevalence.

In all the visited provinces, there was a shared opinion that the local authorities do not have the necessary resources to invest in a standardized model of temporary shelter. In addition, there is a conspiracy of silence with respect to the prevalence of domestic violence in visited sites, and this contributed to the absence of standardized temporary shelters. All male officials and residents justified the absence by emphasising that physical violence 'rarely occurs', so there are no victims arriving at these 'reliable addresses' for support or intervention. The common perception of domestic violence refers only to physical violence, and most of the time it ignores other forms of domestic violence, such as mental, financial, and sexual violence. In the local cultural context which places a high value on 'family reputation' and the responsibility of women to 'maintain family harmony', women survivors are not likely to speak out, except in serious cases involving severe or life-threatening injury. The silence with respect to domestic violence makes a proposal for temporary shelters unjustified within the prioritization of the NTP NRD activities.

Significant improvement in access for women to preferential loans, though loan appraisal procedures remain a constraint.

Preferential loans for women are mainly from the VBSP trust loans schemes that operate through the mass organizations and, to some extent, the Vietnam Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (VBARD), Credit Support Funds, as well as some micro finance initiatives. A report by IPSARD indicates that nearly 3 million women from poor households and female-headed households have had access to loans worth more than VND 75.000 billion.²² However, some loan appraisal procedures were perceived as constraints to this improved access. According to female respondents, the authority certification procedure does not provide favourable conditions to facilitate access to loans for women who need them. Despite the fact that the VBSP only requires confirmation from the village head in a letter of authorization, once it is given to the People's Committee for authentication, the commune

22 IPSARD (2019), *ibid*.

legal officer relies upon regulations in the Law on Notarization which require that all family members be present alongside the loan applicant. Many people, from the study sites, think that this procedure is overwhelmingly complicated, so some of them opted not to apply for a loan from the VBSP. With regard to VBARD, the loan size could be higher than that of VBSP but it requires a land certificate and specific conditions such as having a business plan and a good financial performance during the past three years. This appears to be complicated for most rural informal business owners, and especially for women entrepreneurs.

A gap between the financial need of women-owned businesses and credit availability. In all the provinces visited in this study, both local cadre and resident respondents point out that rural household-based business, and especially women-owned enterprises continue to be held back due to a significant gap between their financing needs and available supply.²³ It appears that women who have no immediate access to a guarantor (a husband or other family member) or have no regular income face more issues in accessing loans and encounter additional constraints to grow their businesses. Worthy of note is the fact that the larger loans are mostly provided to men. An important reason mentioned in a recent study on financial services for women in Vietnam is that men are able to focus more on highly profitable businesses because they are willing to take higher risks.²⁴

OBSTACLES FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF GENDER DIMENSIONS IN THE NTP NRD

Insufficient gender mainstreaming represents a key constraint for gender equality in the NTP NRD. Gender equality is not an objective of the NTP NRD. Gender equality was not even mentioned in the approval decisions of the NTP NRD. Instead, gender equality is limited to one sub-thematic NRD indicator 18.6 and this leaves little room to manoeuvre with respect to meaningful strategies and approaches toward gender mainstreaming. With merely one sub-thematic indicator on gender equality in place, there is a tendency to believe that gender is not of primary concern to NRD. As a result, implementation arrangements for gender equality in the NTP NRD were found to be very limited because only the guidance of indicator 18.6 is required and made available in practice. Without having any gender specific dimensions reflected in the NRD criteria, the implementation arrangements for other specific content of NRD appears to be 'gender neutral'; thus, gender is apparently left out in most of the implementation arrangements and guidance for NRD.

Women's limited participation in planning the NTP NRD. Planning for the NTP NRD is regulated by Decision 41/2015 of the Prime Minister and accordingly, the annual planning of NTPs needs to be carried out in a participatory manner as a part of the local socio-economic development planning (SEDP). However, NRD is based on a pre-determined set of indicators and meeting NRD criteria is the only way to become 'NRD'. Therefore, NRD planning is to review what indicators are under-achieved and what is the level of resources available. In practice, the NRD annual plan is usually a top-down process operating from the provincial or district level to the commune based on reviewing the NRD indicators. This basically disables the opportunity for women to have their voices reflected in the annual NRD planning process.

23 International Finance Corporation (2017). *Women-owned enterprises in Vietnam: Perceptions and Potential*. World Bank Group.

24 NpM, Platform for Inclusive Finance (2018). *Financial services for women: agri-finance products for female farmers in Vietnam*.

To what extent gender could be addressed in other criteria or indicators (rather than 18.6) remains a grey area

in the implementation of the NTP NRD. One possible area for gender integration is the indicator 14.3 (e.g. percentage of trained labour out of those who are having jobs). Consultation with the local cadres indicated that priorities could be placed on women to enhance their skills, and hence their access to wage employment opportunities. However, in order to do that, the local cadres need to be provided with clear guidance on whether prioritizing women in vocational training is justifiable, especially in terms of budgeting, which is not yet available. Another important NRD activity is to provide production support for income generation. Some local cadres, consulted during the field work, indicated that they have already given thought to whether and how women could be prioritized in the production support activities. However, such arrangements are not in place. Without implementation arrangements in place, the operation of most of the NTP NRD activities would not be gender inclusive.

Absence of gender-responsive budgeting in the NTP NRD.

Gender-responsive budgeting is not applied in the NTP NRD.²⁵ As a consequence, gender is not a concern in the budgeting (and planning) of the NTP NRD. The only budget line available for gender issues in the NTP NRD is the budget allocated to the Women's Union to implement the "Five No, Three Clean" campaign. There was no separate budget line for the implementation of the gender equality indicator 18.6 (which was supposed to be implemented using the 'integrated' budget for other activities ('*lồng ghép ngân sách*'). Discussions held at the visited provinces indicated that the limited budget allocated to the Provincial Committee for the Advancement of Women was the only public budget line related to gender equality in the annual budget planning. At the district or commune level, the financial resources for gender equality-related activities depended primarily on the goodwill and support that the

local authorities gave to the Women's Union operations.

Lack of adequate capacity for gender mainstreaming in the NTP NRD.

While general gender awareness was observed in most of the locations visited in this assessment, there is a lack of capacity for implementing gender mainstreaming in the NTP NRD and other policies and programmes in general.²⁶ There is a misleading impression that capacity development activities are sufficient. Qualitative findings indicate that gender was not a primary subject in capacity development activities in the NTP NRD.²⁷ Instead, gender is implicitly understood to be 'integrated' in some other capacity development activities once again underlining their nascent 'gender neutral' positioning. Furthermore, these training activities tend to target the officials whose mandate is perceivably on women related matters.²⁸

Limitations of capacity development approaches.

A common misconception observed in many places is that gender is solely *about* women, *for* women, and *by* women, and thus far too often by peppering the words 'women' and/or 'gender equality' across a programme document or a law proposal somehow means that the respective programme can be considered gender responsive.²⁹ Evidence reveals that the content of these training courses (e.g. provided under the NTP SPR) is merely to replicate the existing legal frameworks on gender equality and domestic violence

25 Decision 12/2017/QĐ-TTg on 22nd April 2017 Promulgation on the principle, criteria and distribution norm for central budget and the counterpart fund ratio of local budget in implementing the National Target Programme on NRD for 2016-2020 period had no mention gender-responsive budgeting.

26 CARE, Oxfam, and SNV (2019). *Gender assessment in the National Target Programme on Sustainable Poverty Reduction*.

27 In Document 5842/BNN-VPĐP on 18th July 2017 issuing training topics, fostering multi-level officials for building new rural development for the 2016-2020 period there were no requirements of gender equality and gender mainstreaming in the Training Programme.

28 The World Bank and CEMA (2019). *Research Report on Drivers of Socio-Economic Development of Ethnic Minority Groups in Vietnam*. Hanoi: NXB Tri Thuc.

29 Reggers and Nguyen (2019). *UN Women's WEE Scoping Review: Mapping on women's economic empowerment initiatives in Viet Nam between 2013-2018 and recommendations for UN Women*. Hanoi: UN Women.

prevention and control.³⁰ This is linked to the outdated capacity development activities which are mainly focused on an elaboration of the policy and programs, the implementation mechanisms and organized in a one-off manner. Not to mention the tendency of sending female staff to attend capacity development activities related to gender issues. These limitations in capacity development approaches coupled with little or no capacity for gender mainstreaming (as above), revealed the misconceptions relative to gender mainstreaming held by many officials consulted in this study. Worthy of note is the tendency to adopt a woman-focused approach to address gender issues.

Gender equality is not an issue in the overall architecture and human resource of the NRD management structure.

Compared to the existing programs (such as the NTP SPR) and other policies, the NTP NRD is arguably the one which has developed the most comprehensive management structure from the central to the local level with the models of NRD coordination offices at the national and sub-national levels. How gender equality and other forms of social inclusion are reflected in the actual implementation of the NTP NRD largely depends on the awareness and capacity of staff in this management structure. The preliminary findings from the field visits indicate that gender is not an issue in the overall architecture and human resource of this management structure.

Gender stereotypes of the roles of women and the Women's Union persist.

As discussed in para 26 the active roles of women and Women's Union in "Five No, Three Clean" campaign indicates that the misconception that unpaid care and domestic work are women's 'given' responsibilities persists. In this way it reinforces a 'secondary' position of female members (i.e. in terms of the accessibility to activities that will generate income for the family, especially in the non-agricultural sector), and the Union's role being limited to its social advocacy and other non-essential, 'peripheral' tasks. These stereotypes implicitly serve as barriers to women and the Women's Union in their pursuit of important

roles in the implementation of the NTP NRD as well as other development initiatives.

Lack of mechanisms for the Women's Union to participate in the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of the NTP NRD.

Limited interest in tackling gender inequalities is further perpetuated by a general perception that 'women's issues' are dealt with solely by the Women's Union, and are not, therefore, the professional responsibility of other government agencies. Specifically, the Women's Union does not have the resources, capacity or authority to interact with other stakeholders in the implementation of the NTP NRD (and many other programmes and policies such as the NTP SPR). In-depth interviews with Women's Union representatives at different levels reveal that cadres at the grassroots level have very limited opportunities for capacity development, given that most of them are engaged in community campaign activities.

Lack of gender-responsive monitoring and evaluation (M&E) arrangements in NTP NRD.

It is recognized that the lack of data/information, and gender analysis for the identification of gender issues has been a weakness of the planning process in Vietnam. Gender-disaggregated indicators for monitoring and evaluation purposes were observed in most of the donor-supported development projects in the country but this practice has not yet been institutionalized in the GoVN-led programs. Under NRD, there are often disaggregated targets on vocational training, specifying the percentage of women receiving vocational training. At the visited districts and communes, the entire data set collected for the 10-year implementation of NRD is not disaggregated by gender (e.g. male, female).

³⁰ CARE, Oxfam, SNV (2019), *ibid*.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN THE NEXT PHASE OF THE NTP NRD

Economic benefits of gender mainstreaming.

At global level, there is recent evidence on the 'smart economics' of gender mainstreaming. For instance, by increasing women's labour force participation in quality jobs and their representation in entrepreneurship and business leadership, the economies of the Asia Pacific could boost their collective GDP by USD 4.5 trillion a year by 2025, a 12 percent increase over the business-as-usual GDP.³¹ It has been estimated that if women had equal access to economic opportunities, agricultural output could increase by 20 to 30%, reducing between 12 to 17% the number of people experiencing hunger in the world.³² It was also reported that the estimated cost of domestic violence could be around 1.4% GDP and the loss in labour productivity approximately 1.78% GDP.³³ Thus, narrowing the gender gap in the economic, labour and employment domains. Moreover, the focus should be on increasing the access of rural poor and ethnic minority women to economic resources and the labour market, which is the second objective of the National Gender Equality Strategy 2011-2020. Against this background, recommendations for gender mainstreaming in the next phase of the NTP NRD are cited below.

Making gender equality as one objective of the NTP NRD.

Mainstreaming gender into the NTP NRD is a requirement mandated by the Law on Gender Equality. There have been some recent improvements in gender mainstreaming in socio-economic development policies as required by the law, however, as pointed

out in a report of the Government to the National Assembly, gender mainstreaming remains a 'protocol' to meet the requirement of the law but the actual inclusion of gender mainstreaming was in fact limited.³⁴ Gender mainstreaming in the next phase of the NTP NRD should be enforced. The previous stages of the NTP NRD have not specified gender equality as one objective to be pursued and this has kept gender equality out of the main focuses of the NTPs. It is therefore recommended that the next phase of NTP NRD should include gender equality in its overall objectives.

Making gender a cross-cutting issue in the NTP NRD.

Having gender equality as a thematic issue confined to one indicator is probably the root cause of limited gender reflection and inclusion in the implementation of the previous phases of the NTP NRD. It is strongly recommended that gender should be addressed as a cross-cutting socio-economic variable in the next phase of the NTP NRD. Accordingly, gender should be reflected in other contents of the NTP NRD and NRD criteria, whenever appropriate and relevant. Consequently, the implementation of the NTP NRD will become gender sensitive in the sense that it encompasses difference in the needs of women and men, active gender norms and roles to be considered in the planning and implementation of the NTP NRD activities.

Adding gender dimensions to other NRD criteria.

Making gender a cross-cutting issue in the NTP NRD would imply that specific gender dimensions should be added to the NRD criteria, rather than confined to one indicator 18.6 as has been the case in the current NTP NRD 2016-2020. In the first instance, there should be a minimum rate of female participation in the participatory planning meetings to identify priorities under the NTP NRD. With regards to socio-economic infrastructure, the sequence and design of infrastructure schemes should consider how these infrastructures would best benefit women. Regarding the organisation of the economy and production, the promotion of

31 McKinsey and Company (2018). *McKinsey Global Institute. The Power of Parity: Advancing Women's Equality in Asia Pacific.*

32 FAO (2011). *The State of Food and Agriculture: Women in agriculture: closing the gender gap for development.* Rome, Italy.

33 UN Women (2012). *Estimating the costs of violence against women in Viet Nam.* Ha Noi

34 Government of Vietnam (2020), *Report 362/BC-CP on implementation of the national gender equality 2019 and for the period 2011-2020.*

women's economic empowerment by through 'affirmative action' in the presence of women in production support activities. For education and healthcare, the criteria should be revised to make sure that the achievement rates of women and girls are not lower than those of men and boys. In addition, gender equality should also be strengthened in the criteria for Model and Advanced NRD criteria.

Extending the intent of the criteria 18.6.

The existing guidance on the criteria covers reveals the limited intent of gender equality. This includes women's participation in political leadership, access for women to preferential loans, control of child marriage and forced marriage, having a broadcasting programme on gender equality, and a "reliable address" for domestic violence prevention and control. This articulation of gender equality criterion covers only some aspects of gender equality. As a result, even a commune is classified as achieving criteria 18.6, and as such does not represent a significant improvement in gender equality. It is therefore important to consider options to expand the intent of gender equality in the criteria 18.6 in the next phase of the NTP NRD.

Adopting gender-responsive budgeting in the NTP NRD. The gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) principle has been incorporated in the Budget Law 2015. However, instructions on how to operationalize this principle in actual budgeting processes. In this context, it is recommended that there should be a budget line allocated for carrying out activities for the advancement of women in the estimated, regular budget of the implementing agencies of the NTP NRD. Critically, it will ensure that whenever there are gender-related activities or targets, there should be a budget provision precisely for those activities or targets, instead of 'integrating' them into a broad budget line. A good example of the application of GRB is reflected in the UN Women and CEMA (2019) Programme 135 – being a component project of the NTP SPR 2016-2020.³⁵ A similar application is feasible for the next phase of the NTP NRD.

³⁵ UN Women, Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs (2019). *Guidelines for the promotion and implementation of Responsible Budgets Gender responsibility - Applied to the Socio-economic Development Program in extremely difficult communes ethnic minority and mountainous areas (Program 135) for the period 2016-2020.*

Strengthening women's voices and participation in the planning procedures for the NTP NRD.

Participatory planning is probably the most important tool to enable women to raise their voices and needs in the prioritization process for a development initiative. This participatory planning was partly institutionalized in NTPs but enforcement remains limited. It is recommended that a participatory planning procedure should be developed and fully institutionalized for the next phase of the NTP NRD. In that procedure, there needs to be an integral mechanism and specific regulations to ensure the quality of the participation of women and other vulnerable groups, by identifying the role of the Women's Union in the procedure and ways in which the voices of women might be promoted and supported in the planning meetings at hamlet level.

Setting up operation arrangements and guidance for gender mainstreaming.

Having gender reflected in the NRD criteria and the activities of the NTP NRD is a prerequisite for gender mainstreaming. It is equally important that there are operational arrangements, in the sense of how these gender-related criteria and activities should be implemented, and guidelines available to the implementing agencies and officials at various levels of the NTP NRD administration. In these implementation guidelines, 'affirmative action' should be in place, where relevant and appropriate, in order to provide concrete references for implementation. For instance, one form of affirmative action could be to ensure a certain % of women benefitting from production support activities.

Enhancing capacity for gender mainstreaming in the NTP NRD. The integral inclusion of gender equality and gender mainstreaming topics should be made to the training topics, fostering multi-level officials for creating a new form of rural development in the next period. The capacity development component of the next phase of NTP NRD should be specifically focused on increasing the ability of individuals, organizations and institutions to perform their functions, fulfil their mandates and achieve their goals by integrating gender and women's economic empowerment perspectives into their inputs,

strategies, processes, and systems. A further priority is to support capacity development for the Vietnam Women's Union cadres on women's economic empowerment in the NTP NRD.

Advancing the role of Women's Union

in the NTP NRD. There are two roles of the Women's Union in the current NTP NRD, which are an 'implementing' role and an 'advocacy' or supporting role. Regarding the former, the role of the Women's Union was confined to the "Five No, Three Clean" campaign. For the latter, the Women's Union is supposed to play an advocacy role (which is not clearly prescribed) to support other implementing agencies of the NTP NRD. For the next phase of the NTP NRD, the implementing role of the Women's Union should be expanded to the activities that are directly managed by the Women's Union. In addition, a supervisory role should be added so that the Women's Union would become a 'monitor' of how the gender-related criteria and activities are implemented in practice, and more importantly, the outcomes of these activities.

Monitoring gender mainstreaming in the next phase of the NTP NRD.

Last but not least, once gender is reflected in the NRD criteria and activities of the NTP NRD, it is important to ensure that there will be a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system in the next phase that could collect gender disaggregated data to inform the progresses and outcomes of the gender-related NRD criteria and activities. This will require clear guidance on the set of indicators that need to be gender disaggregated, data collection arrangements which will inform these indicators, and more importantly, how this gender-disaggregated data should be used to improve the performance and outcomes of the NTP NRD in terms of gender responsiveness.





Introduction

Photo: UN Women/ tzido

Introduction

While Viet Nam has now reached lower middle-income country status, agriculture remains the predominant production activity in almost all rural areas. Agriculture contributes 14.6 percent (as of 2018) to the GDP of the whole economy, accounting for 40.1 percent of labour force.³⁶ From a gender perspective, agricultural production in Viet Nam relies largely on female workers, with 63.4 percent of women working in agriculture sector against 57.5 percent of men - an increasing trend towards what has been termed as the feminization of agriculture.³⁷ The intensification of women's household responsibilities and agricultural workload is related to the increase in male out-migration. While women contribute more hours of productive labour to cultivation, livestock raising, agricultural processing, and marketing of agricultural goods, they also frequently own small agricultural plots and cultivate subsistence crops for family consumption. Research evidence points to other disadvantages for women in accessing small-scale credit, technology, training and agricultural extension services in rural areas. In addition, the burden of unpaid housework places constraints on their contribution to income generation activities. These factors limit women's contribution to the inclusive growth of the country.³⁸

In this context, the Government of Viet Nam

(GoVN) has implemented a National Target Programme on New Rural Development (NTP NRD) for two phases, in the period of 2010-2015 and the current period of 2016-2020. This NTP NRD is arguably the most important initiative of the GoVN in agriculture and rural development. With the estimated budget (according to the design) of the current phase 2016-2020 was around VND 1,567,091 billion (around USD 68 billion),³⁹ the implementation of the NTP NRD has certainly transformed the "face" of rural Viet Nam, especially in terms of its physical infrastructure. As the NTP NRD 2016-2020 is approaching its final year of implementation and this also marks ten years of NRD implementation, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) was authorised by the National Steering Committee on NTPs to review ten years of NRD investments in order to propose a framework for the period after 2020.

With a view to supporting women's economic empowerment, UN Women understands the need for Vietnamese women to not only fully participate in this economic growth but also benefit equally from it, so that *no one is left behind*, which is a key principle of the SDGs.⁴⁰ It is therefore crucial to review the NTP NRD 2010-2020 from gender perspectives to examine to what extent women's empowerment and gender equality have been positioned in the NTP NRD over the past ten years. In 2019, UN Women in collaboration

36 Ban Chủ nhiệm Chương trình KHCN phục vụ xây dựng NTM (Advisory Board of the Programme on Scientific and Technological Application in the NRD) (2019). *Nhận diện vấn đề và đề xuất định hướng cho xây dựng Nông thôn mới ở Việt Nam* (Identifying problems and making recommendations for NRD in Viet Nam).

37 UN Women and Institute for Family and Gender Studies (2016). *Female farmers and Inclusive Growth in Vietnam*. Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers.

38 UN Women and IFGS (2016), *ibid*.

39 MARD. 2019. *Report of the Science Programme of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development on Reviewing the New Rural Development*. A report presented by the NRD NCO at the National Workshop on 10-Year Implementation of NRD, Oct 2019. MARD: Hanoi.

40 Reggers, Amy and Nguyễn Thu Hương (2019). *UN Women's scoping review: Mapping on women's economic empowerment initiatives in Viet Nam between 2013-2018 and recommendations for UN Women*.

with the Institute of Policy and Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development (IPSARD) and Viet Nam Women's Union (VWU) have commissioned this independent gender review and impact assessment of the NTP NRD (2010-2020).⁴¹ The purpose of this assignment is to assess how the NTP NRD 2010-2020 has addressed gender equality and, on that basis, to make recommendations for building a gender responsive NTP NRD for the new phase from 2021 to 2025 that would create an enabling environment to efficiently and sustainably develop agriculture and rural areas. At the outset we should mention that this study does not aim to deal with the vast range of gender issues facing the rural populations of Viet Nam. It is an assessment of how gender issues have been mainstreamed in the NTP NRD and how this has been carried out in practice. The assessment is therefore confined to those gender related activities pertinent to the NTP NRD 2010-2020 with concrete indicators of the relevant criteria. Given the exhaustive list of NTP NRD criteria covering almost all aspects of rural development, this assessment is necessarily limited in scope and its findings are not expected to serve as a panacea for all gender related issues facing rural populations in Viet Nam.⁴²

The Study Report is composed of the following: Section 1 justifies the rationale for undertaking the assessment, sets out the background

41 In fact, the Decision No. 800/2010/QĐ-TTg on the approval of the NTP NRD was for the period 2010-2020. However, there was the Decision No. 1600/2016/QĐ-TTg on the approval of the NTP NRD for the period 2016-2020. It means that since 2016 the NTP NRD has been implemented under the Decision No. 1600/2016/QĐ-TTg. For that reason, it is more practical to refer to the Decision No. 800/2010 as the NTP NRD 2010-2015 and the Decision No. 1600/2016 as the NTP NRD 2016-2020.

42 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (2019). *Country gender assessment of agriculture and the rural sector in Viet Nam*.

information regarding analytical frameworks and methods applied in the study. Section 2 investigates how gender specific dimensions are reflected and integrated in the design of the NTP NRD. The primary data gathered from the qualitative study is presented in Section 3 providing insights into the outcomes or impact on rural women. Section 4 examines the obstacles for the implementation of gender equality in the Programme. Recommendations to enhance gender dimensions in the next phase of the NTP NRD are provided in the final section of this report.

1.1. Objective of the gender assessment

The purpose of this assignment is to advocate for gender responsiveness of the National Target Programme on New Rural Development (NTP-NRD) for the new phase from 2021 to 2025. It focuses on how gender equality has been mainstreamed in the NTP NRD 2010-2020 and the Programme effects on gender relations. Therefore, this assessment will strive to address the following key questions:

- How has gender equality been mainstreamed in the design and implementation arrangements (both at national and sub-national levels) of the NTP NRD 2010-2020 (two phases)?
- How these design features and implementation arrangements have been pursued in practice? What are the enabling factors and obstacles for the implementation process?

- Is there sufficient capacity, both institutional and individual, in place to pursue these arrangements? What are the capacity constraints that might cause differences between the design and actual implementation of mechanisms and priorities related to gender equality?
- What kind of support or benefits have women received from the NTP NRD, how has such access generated any change in their income and eventuated in women having greater input and influence in household decision making as well as their participation in community activities?
- What recommendations could be made at various levels to enhance the gender specific parameters in the remaining half of the NTP NRD, in particular, with respect to the poverty reduction policy framework (after 2020)?

To address the above-mentioned objectives, data collection was primarily undertaken in the form of qualitative stakeholder interviews in selected provinces across the country by the assessment team between September and December 2019. Primary data has been supplemented with a desk review of secondary source material (laws, public policies, initiatives on integrating gender in agricultural and rural development). The following section fleshes out the analytical framework applied in the current gender assessment.

1.2. Analytical framework

The gender equality discourse in Viet Nam's agriculture and rural development sector is largely articulated through women-focused narratives that depict women's situation in particular ways and inhibit the achievement of gender equality goals. There are three women-focused narratives that permeate policy and development action in the agriculture and rural development sector. The first depicts women's situation through a "vulnerability" lens, which results from women's limited

access to productive resources, limited participation in decision making, and their "invisibility" in development policy and action. A second narrative depicts women as key "contributors" to agricultural production and rural development. Such contributions are primarily based on women's inputs to the agricultural labour force through time spent on agricultural activities, their role in food production, as managers of livestock and through participation in the rural labour markets. A third narrative depicts women as "agents of change", who through access to opportunities can affect transformations in decision-making, leadership, and gender relations. All three narratives support a women-targeted approach to agriculture and rural development. Such narratives are underpinned by systematic barriers and patriarchal norms, a donor and NGO-driven agenda, and a strong commodity focus to agricultural development all of which combine to promote the view that gender equality and women's empowerment are a *means* (italics for emphasis) to achieving economic growth, rather than as *ends* in themselves.⁴³ For instance, narrowing the gender gap in the economic, labour and employment domains, with a focus on increasing the access of rural poor women and ethnic minority women to economic resources and the labour market, is the second objective of the National Strategy on Gender Equality 2011-2020. Yet, the use of prescriptive analytical and intervention approaches that target women in development is commonplace in project documents and other related literature in Viet Nam's agriculture and rural development sector.⁴⁴

To allow for a nuanced analysis of gender integration in agriculture and rural development, this gender assessment adopts Gender Transformative Approaches (GTA) as the main framing. GTAs focus on social institutions and the formal and informal rules of

⁴³ See also Huong Thu Nguyen, Helle Rydstrom (forthcoming). *Feminism in Vietnam: Women's Studies, Gender Research, and Intersections*. In Jonathan London (ed.) *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Vietnam*. London: Routledge.

⁴⁴ Gurung, Barun (2020). *Ten Years Striving for Gender Equality in Agriculture and Rural Development and the Ways Forward in the Context of Climate Change and Globalization*. Discussion paper (Draft).

the game, which produce and reproduce these rules as norms and attitudes. The implications for such a framework are clear: there is a need to shift from the “how” (strategies) to the “what” works (outcomes) for gender integration. In this sense, GTA has led to efforts to understand typologies of change not as “road-maps” but as composite scenarios to better understand what works in a particular context.⁴⁵ Within the scope of this assessment, GTAs will be adopted to examine how gender concerns have been included, addressed at three key stages of NTP NRD, naming: design and planning, implementation, and outcomes.

1.3 Methodology

Methodologically the qualitative approach applied in this assessment includes the following research instruments: Key Informant Interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and In-depth Interviews (IDI). The utilization of IDI and KII with relevant stakeholders aimed to grasp their reflections on the NTP NRD, their personal experience with the Programme elements and their feedback on NTP NRD implementers’ support. Whereas the qualitative method of FGD was applied to gather information from beneficiaries as a group. These methods are relatively flexible and allow additional questions to be brought up during the interviews/discussions based on what an interviewee says. This style allows the interviewee time to reflect on the Programme and provide further insights than would normally be elicited for Programme documentation/publication.

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) were conducted with representatives from the government agencies, donor-supported projects at all levels in the five selected provinces. At the provincial level, KIIs were held with representatives from Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD),

Department of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (DOLISA), Department of Planning and Investment (DPI), Department of Finance (DOF), Women’s Union and Farmers’ Association. At the district level, the district affiliates of the respective organizations were involved as key informants. At the commune level, the Chairman or Vice Chairman or the Commune People’s Committee (CPC) and key staff were the audience for consultation.

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were carried out with numerous stakeholders at the commune and village levels. At the commune level, FGDs were conducted with the key staff of the CPC. At the village level, FGDs were held with the village representatives such as village head, village mass organizations, family clan chiefs, and village elders. In addition, FGDs were organized separately with male and female representatives of 6-8 households with a range of different household poverty statuses (i.e. poor, near poor, non-poor) and ethnic groups in the villages (if having more than one ethnic group in the study village). In addition, in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with several selected households.

Ethical Considerations. Participation in this study was voluntary. Data collection sessions, either through IDIs or FGDs, began with a full informed consent procedure. Furthermore, participants could choose to stop participating in the FGDs, IDIs or KIIs at any points during the data collection session and/or could decline to answer specific items without any penalty. All potential participants went through a verbally informed consent procedure with the research team before any data collection began. Participants’ confidentiality was protected by not recording any names, identifying information or specific locations in the study report.

Study sites. The selection of study settings aligned with the quantitative survey conducted in parallel by IPSARD between September and December 2019. The selected five provinces for empirical data collection are Hà Nội, Hà Tĩnh, Quảng Nam, Lâm Đồng, and Long An. These five provinces were selected in alignment with the following basic criteria set for the quantitative survey carried out in parallel by

45 Danielsén, Katrine, Franz F. Wong, Dana McLachlin and Silvia Sarapura (2018). *Typologies of Change: Gender Integration in Agriculture and Food Security Research*. Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute (KIT).

IPSARD team: i) having relatively representative characteristics of different geographical regions; ii) not having been included in the seven provinces previously selected for the conduct of “The survey and assessment of basic transformations in rural development and identifying basic issues of new rural development to serve the review of NTP NRD” (assigned to the IPSARD for implementation between January-June 2019 by MARD); iii) showing relative differences in NRD results ranging from good/average to experiencing difficulties and limitations in rural development and NTP NRD.

Study sampling. Given the research sites have been selected for the IPSARD quantitative survey, the sampling for the qualitative assessment has been arranged mainly by the local implementing partners. As such, the balance sex ratio of the study samples was taken into consideration in the process to identify the participants in the KIs and FGDs at the village level. However, for stakeholder consultation at provincial, district, and commune levels the selection process was based on the availability of the officials’ mandate related to NTP NRD. The field trips were carried out between September and December 2019 in 5 selected provinces, 10 districts, 21 communes, and 25 villages. In total, the study team consulted 50 stakeholders at the provincial level, 39 at the district level, 66 at the commune level, and 126 at the village and household levels (of which 54.1 percent was female), making a total of around 281 persons in the consultation sample.

1.4 Limitations of the study

As gender related issues were not systematically integrated into programme reporting. Robust data, especially regarding programme effects on gender relations achieved by the NTP NRD, was scarce. Gender specific project documentation, beyond a gender equality criterion and gender disaggregated data on participation in the NTP NRD components and related trainings were rather limited. Given these limitations in documentation, the assessment relies on insights and experiences shared directly by respondents during the empirical data collection.

Beyond the advantages of a qualitative approach adopted in this assessment, some limitations are obvious. Due to the limited scope of this assessment, only a small proportion of rural populations were interviewed in the selected sites, and thus the study results should not be generalized. Furthermore, the community respondents are likely to be atypical of the larger rural populations as they were selected via village cadres (even though there were general criteria available for this selection). These might be relatives or acquaintances of these cadres and therefore might not reflect the real conditions on the ground. However, this was mitigated because the researchers conducting the interviews and group discussions are experienced in remaining non-judgmental and objective during interaction with study participants and they were independent of the MARD or NRD cadre teams thus minimizing the immediate response bias during the data collection.



2. Gender dimensions in the design of the NTP NRD

Photo: UN Women/Hoang Hiep

2. Gender dimensions in the design of the NTP NRD

2.1 Gender dimensions in the design of the NTP NRD

This sub-section focuses on how gender-related issues were envisaged in the design of the NTP NRD. The original “design” document of the NRD could be traced to Resolution No. 26-NQ/TW on 05/8/2008 of the Communist Party of Viet Nam, which laid the background for NTP NRD. Proper design documents were the Decision No. 800/2010, Decision No. 695/2012 on the design of the NTP NRD in the early stages; Decision No. 1600/2016 on the latest design of the NTP NRD 2016-2020.

Gender equality has been approached as a thematic issue in the “background” design of NTP NRD. The Resolution No. 26-NQ/TW of the Communist Party of Vietnam on agriculture, rural areas, and farmers (i.e., *“nông nghiệp, nông thôn và nông dân”*) represents the “background” for NTP NRD. The Resolution sets the targets for agriculture and rural development by 2020 and detailed on eight main solutions. Out of these solutions, what has been written in the resolution is the promotion of gender equality under the Solution No. 3 on *“improving people’s material, spiritual life in rural areas, especially regions of economic difficulties”*. The solution emphasizes on job creation, skills development, access to healthcare services, social production, poverty reduction for rural

population. At the very end, the solution stresses on *“implementing gender equality, improving women’s material, spiritual life, and women’s capacity and status in rural areas”*. In this regard, gender equality was addressed as another thematic target of this solution (rather than a cross-cutting issue).

The previous design of the NTP NRD 2010-2020 as per Decision No. 800/2010 did not incorporate gender equality.

Having been included in the Resolution No. 26-NQ/TW, gender equality was however not mentioned in the Decision No. 800/2010 on the approval of the NTP NRD 2010-2020. It is noted that the NRD criteria for the period 2010-2015 did not reflect gender matters and therefore, it is reasonable to argue that any reference to gender was left out in the early design of the NTP NRD (which is conceptually referred to as “gender-blind”).

Compared to previous period of NRD which was gender absent, Decision No. 1600 represents additional attention on gender by engaging the Women Union as an implementer and creates a motivation for mass organizations.

(Female, middle aged, Provincial VWU, Quảng Nam)

The design of the NTP NRD 2016-2020 as per Decision No. 1600/2016 did not spell out gender equality, but had a specific component assigned to VWU. Looking at the Decision No. 1600/ QD-TTg dated 16th August 2016 in comparison with the Decision No. 800/2010, the content of the NTP NRD for 2016-2020 remains unchanged. Gender equality was not spelled out in this Decision No. 1600 on the approval of the NTP NRD 2016-2020. However, it is worth noting that there is a thematic item Number 7 of Section 9 in

the Decision No. 1600/2016, “implementation of “Five No, Three Clean” campaign” delegated to VWU as the responsible body for leading and guiding throughout the implementation process”. VWU has officially been assigned to chair and implement this specific NRD component, while the Fatherland Front chairs component Number 2, “the national emulation campaign on the entire people making a unified effort to achieve NRD”. From a power dynamics analysis, this has created a certain position for VWU compared to other mass organizations. Nonetheless, the content assigned to VWU is “gendered”, and further implies an association between the VWU and female members with activities that have always been considered “appropriate” for women, and the VWU (as compared to other “male-dominated” mass organizations), i.e., environmental sanitation, public landscape preservation, etc. More important than the nature of assigned content and responsibilities is the allocated fund for VWU activities, which is often more modest than the budget for poverty reduction programs – a task that is frequently assigned to the Farmers’ Union. Therefore, the implementation on the ground is also subject to difficulties, which is addressed further in Section 3 of this report.

2.2 Gender dimensions in the NTP NRD criteria

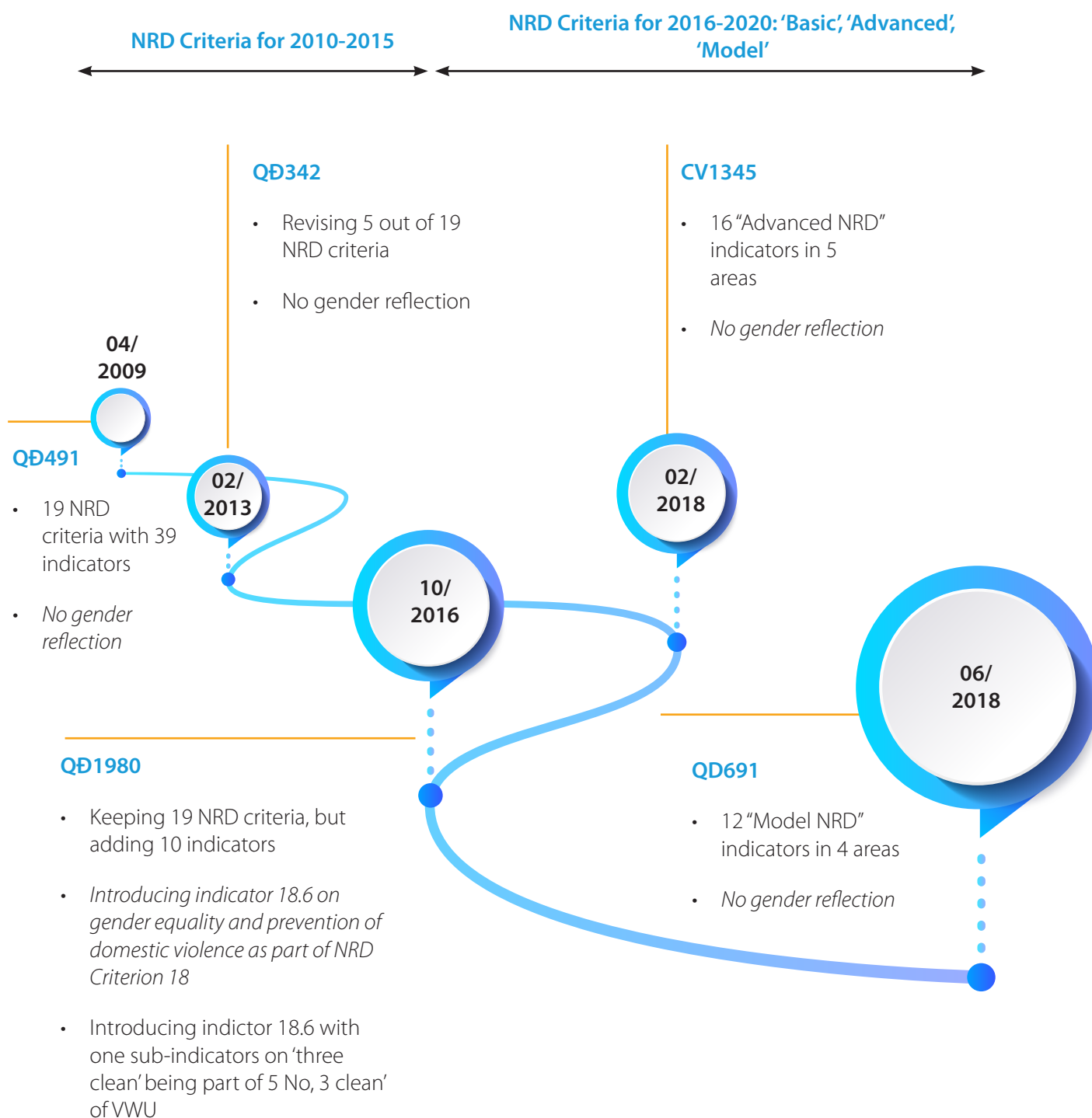
This section assesses how gender dimensions are reflected in the design of the NTP NRD. The term “design” is applied to refer to regulations, strategies, approaches, or implementation

arrangements issued in relation to the implementation of the NTP NRD, including the Programme criteria.

The NTP NRD criteria have been developed over a decade with different updates that have elaborated or added further criteria to the Programme.

Decision No. 491/2009 issued by the Prime Minister in 2009 promulgated the first set of 19 NRD criteria at the commune level. It was then revised by Decision No. 342/2013 (with 5 criteria revised). Decision No. 1980/2016 updated the NRD criteria for the period 2016-2020 with the same number of 19 NRD criteria that were determined by 49 indicators, representing 10 additional indicators compared to those in Decision No. 491/2009. Based on this comprehensive of 19 NRD criteria with 49 indicators, MARD has introduced Document No. 1345/2018 with guidance on a new set of “advanced NRD criteria” with the 16 “advanced NRD indicators” structured into five “advanced NRD criteria”. These “advanced NRD” criteria and indicators basically “top up” the set of NRD criteria – which became the so-called “basic” NRD criteria. Notably, four months after the Document No. 1345, the Prime Minister enacted Decision No. 691/2018 that introduced another “top-up” set of “model NRD criteria”. Accordingly, a commune is realized as “Model NRD” when it has accomplished all the “basic” NRD criteria and the addition of 12 indicators under four “Model NRD criteria”. Figure 1 below summarizes the evolution of the Programme criteria and how gender matters have been reflected in that process.

Figure 1. The development of NTP NRD criteria and gender references



Source: compilation based on Decision No. 491, Decision No. 342, Decision No. 1980, Decision No. 691 issued by the Prime Minister and the Document No. 1345 of MARD

Streaming gender equality in NTP NRD.

Notably, with the Decision No. 1980/QĐ-TTg dated 17th October 2016, the indicator 18.6 was introduced to the set of basic NRD criteria. In other words, it was the Decision No. 1980 to mark the “debut” of gender equality in NTP NRD (see Figure 1). This reflection was made in the form of having an indicator 18.6 to “*Ensure gender quality, domestic violence prevention and control; protect and support vulnerable people in the spheres of family and social life*” – among six indicators under the NRD criterion 18 for “*Political system and legal access*”.⁴⁶ In addition, one part of the Vietnam Women’s Union (VWU) “Five No, Three Clean” (i.e. “5 Không, 3 Sạch”)⁴⁷ campaign was also included as a content of indicator 17.6 “*The percentage of households that have a toilet, bathroom, sanitized water tank and ensure three clean*” – among eight indicators under the NRD criterion 17 on “*Environment and food safety*”. With this indicator 17.6, the VWU has been assigned an implementing role in NRD (rather than the business-as-usual “collaboration and propaganda” roles) and this helped strengthen the visibility of VWU in NTP NRD (Section 3.1 addresses this aspect further). This was especially manifested in the component “three clean” of indicator 17.6 apart from having a hygienic toilet, bathroom,⁴⁸ and water tank. The indicator 17.6 contributes to enhance the role of the VWU in NRD, and therefore it may help ensure women’s voices are addressed in NRD. In other words, with Decision No. 1980/2016, gender concerns were reflected in “one and a half” indicators (i.e., indicator 18.6 and one component of indicator 17.6) of a total of 49 NRD indicators. To put this in physical terms, assuming all indicators carry

46 Within the scope of this assessment, it was not possible to flesh out the whole process of advocating for the integration of gender equality into the NTP NRD 2016-2020 as well identifying relevant stakeholders engaged in this process. Part of the reason is the interviewed NRD focal points in this current study were not directly involved in the process, or were assigned to the position later on, and thus might not be informed of the design process.

47 The 5 No and 3 Clean campaign consists of 8 indicators such as “No poverty”; “No violation of the laws and social evils”; “No domestic violence”; “No third baby”; “No child malnutrition and school drop-out”; and “clean house, clean kitchen, clean alley.”

48 For typical rural housing setting, shower facilities are not installed in the toilet. Instead, “bathroom” is a separate facility and not necessarily attached to toilet.

the same weight, it means the gender-related “content” accounts for around three per cent of the total NRD content (i.e., 1.5 indicators out of 49 indicators). Further analysis on the indicators 17.6 and 18.6 will be conducted in Section 3.8 and 3.9 respectively.

Gender matters are addressed as sub-thematic (rather than cross-cutting) issues in NTP NRD.

With respect to the NRD criteria applied for the period 2016-2020, the addition of indicator 18.6 in the “thematic” NRD criterion 18 on “*Political system and legal access*” is the most significant aspect of gender mainstreaming in the NRD criteria. Being one indicator structured in the theme of “*Political and legal access*”, gender equality is implicitly considered as a sub-thematic issue. More importantly, having gender equality addressed specifically as a sub-theme (among 49 thematic NRD indicators of 19 criteria) seems to indicate that gender matters might not be relevant to the remaining thematic NRD criteria. Consequently, gender concerns have not been taken in consideration in the NRD criteria related to socio-economic infrastructures, economy and production, access to public services (education and healthcare), or even in environmental protection. As mentioned earlier, the indicator 17.6 refers to one element of the “Five No, Three Clean” campaign of VWU and therefore it highlights the role of VWU as key “contributors” to implementation of this particular NRD indicator. Such contributions are however primarily associated with gender stereotypes of women’s participation in ‘non-economic’ activities. While the Decision No. 1980 has incorporated gender equality as a sub-theme, rather than cross-cutting issue into NTP NRD, it represents a “partial” and women-targeted approach toward gender equality.

The “partial” and women-targeted approach toward gender equality is reinforced in the detailed guidance for achieving gender equality.

Based on the NRD criteria promulgated in Decision No. 1980/2016, MARD has developed Decision No. 69/2017 to provide guidance on how to implement the basic NRD criteria and related indicators. It should be noted that MOLISA issued Document No. 4999/LĐTBXH-KHTC on 12th December 2016 regarding the guidance

on the implementation of NTP NRD criteria for 2016-2020. In this Document, MOLISA provided guidance on the implementation of criteria 11, 12, and indicators 14.3 and 18.6. Accordingly, the indicator 18.6 on “Ensure gender quality and domestic violence prevention and control; protect and support vulnerable people in the spheres of family and social life”

is evaluated on the basis of achieving five conditions, including (i) having at least one female leader in the leadership positions in the commune governance;⁴⁹

(ii) 100 percent women in poor households, women in areas with a high concentration of ethnic minority groups; and women with disabilities who want to apply for a loan could have access to preferential credit schemes for job creation, poverty reduction, and other credit sources; (iii) having no case of early marriage⁵⁰ or forced marriages; (iv) having at least two broadcasting programs on gender equality per month on the commune broadcasting system; and (v) having at least

49 It should be noted that the objective of “having at least one female leader in the leadership positions in the commune governance” was then revised in alignment with the guidelines for the incorporation of the Official Dispatch No. 5180/LDTBXH/2017 and Official Dispatch No. 93 BNN-VPDP/2018 aiming to overcome the reality that the all-level Party congresses for the term 2015-2020 and the election of all level People’s Councils for the term 2016-2021 had been complemented prior to the implementation of this criterion. Accordingly, the indicator has been adjusted to “having at least 15 percent of female members in the Commune Party; or to have female cadre(s) in the Commune’s Standing Party Committee, and have planning for key female leaders in the commune, when one of the key positions is opened, arrange female cadres to fill in these positions as stipulated.”

50 Early marriage is any marriage where one or both partners have not reached the minimum age stipulated by the Marriage and Family Law 2014 (20 years for men; 18 years for women). The same Law defines forced marriages in Article 3.9 “Forcing marriage or divorce means threatening, intimidating spiritually, maltreating, ill-treating, demanding property or another act to force a person to get married or to divorce against his/her will”.

a “reliable address” or “temporary shelter” for domestic violence and gender-based violence (GBV) survivors.

Assessing this gender equality indicator 18.6 on these selected conditions demonstrates that gender equality is interpreted in a rather

mechanical and narrow way such as awareness raising activities, eliminating early marriages and forced marriages, GBV service provision, promoting women’s leadership in the local governance, and enhancing women’s access to credit. Whereas these two dimensions are inevitably important to women’s

empowerment toward gender equality, many potential aspects such as access to economic opportunities (rather than credit), access to public services, labour market participation, voices and intra-household decision making power are not integrated in this criterion. Adding further ambiguities to the “women-targeted” approach in the NTP NRD, an official definition of gender-based violence does not exist, the term “gender-based violence” is mentioned in the Gender Equality Law (Article 10) and a number of articles in Circular 07/2011 TT-BTP regarding guidelines on guarantees of gender equality in staff organization and legal aid activities (Article 11, item 3; Article 13; Article 16, item 2), though.⁵¹

Gender equality is not promoted further either in the recent debut “advanced” or “model” NRD criteria. While gender equality has not been sufficiently mainstreamed in the “basic” NRD criteria (e.g. the set of 19 criteria on NTP NRD as mentioned in Section 2.1), the development of “advanced” or “model” NRD criteria might bring in a window of opportunities to enhance gender dimensions

51 In the Law on Gender Equality, Article 5 concerning explication of terms does not cover the notions of gender identity and sexual orientation. As a result, there are no provisions aimed at protecting persons with gender identity and/or sexual orientation not conforming to heteronormative norms.

in the NTP NRD. Nevertheless, as summarized in Figure 1, neither Document No. 1345/2018 nor Decision No. 691/2018 have promoted gender references in the sets of “advanced” or “model” NRD criteria. It is further noted that in addition to the NRD criteria at the commune level, there have been NRD criteria at the district level (which are primarily based on the NRD criteria at the commune level – see Decision No. 491/2009 and Decision No. 1980/2016).

2.3 Gender dimensions in the implementation guidance of the NTP NRD

Under the above “design” decisions, there have been a number of documents released by MARD and respective line ministries (some were also issued by the Prime Minister or National Steering Committee on NRD, especially those by the NRD National Coordination Office, on the implementation of the NTP NRD in practices). Some of these are “legal” documents put in the forms of ministerial Circulars, but the majority constitute a “working” document (especially those of the NRD NCO) and hence is not legally binding. The focus of this sub-section is to find how these implementation arrangements address gender equality. As gender references have been only introduced to the current NTP NRD 2016–2020, this sub-section mainly focuses on the implementation arrangements for the current period 2016–2020.

Overall gender concerns have been poorly addressed in the implementation arrangements of the NTP NRD. As gender dimensions have been poorly covered in the NRD design documents and NRD criteria, it is no surprise that the documents on implementing arrangements of NRD are also limited in addressing how gender dimensions should be implemented in practice. Decision No. 69/2017 on detailed guidance of assessing the NTP NRD criteria and indicators is properly the most opt-cited guidance for

NRD implementation. With the exception of conditions to assess the indicator 18.6, gender matters are not considered in the same way in which other criteria and indicators are assessed. Decision No. 69/2017 also refers to several other implementation arrangements developed by line ministries (see the Decision No. 69 for more details). A closer scrutiny of these documents reveals that gender matters are absent. Additionally, Circular No. 05/2017 of MARD (and Circular No. 04/2019 with some revised contents of Circular No. 05/2017) represents another key implementation document for the NTP-NRD. Looking from a gender perspective, this Circular is of no exception.

Gender references in the organizational structure of the NTP NRD management.

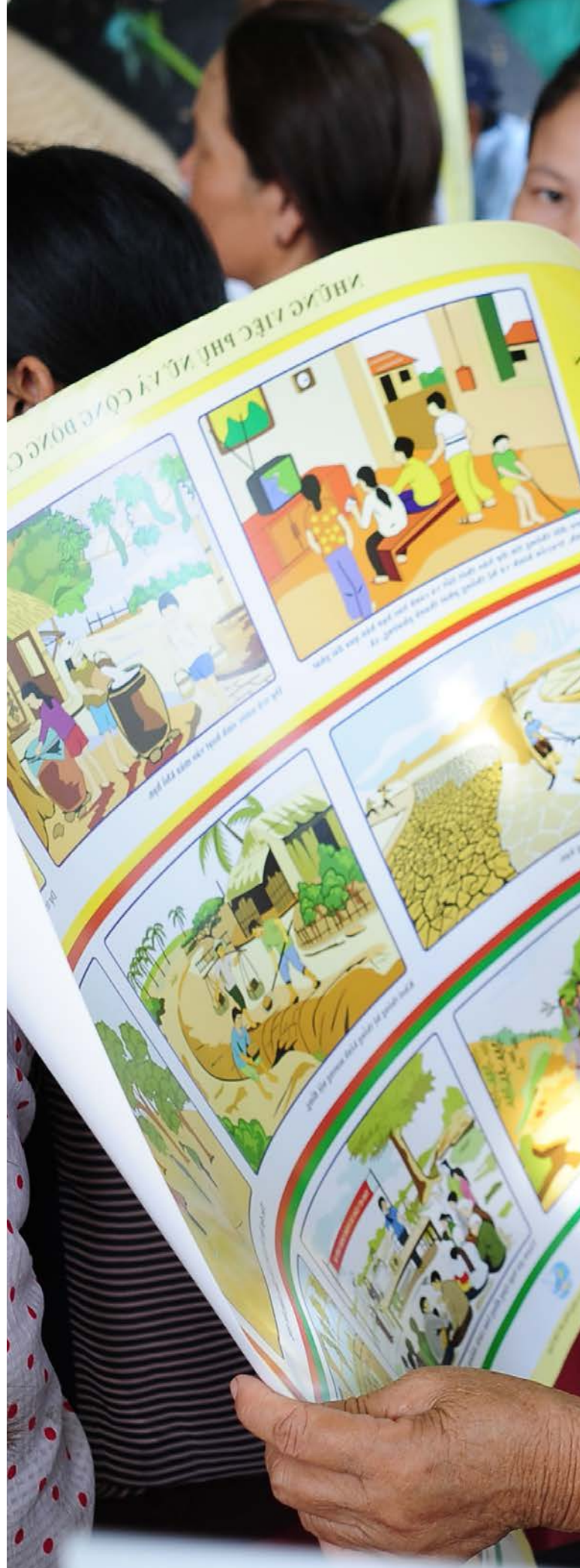
As one out of 49 NRD indicators, gender equality does not represent a focus in the organizational structure for implementation of the NTP NRD. Decision No. 1920/2016 of the Prime Minister provides the background for organizational structure of NRD Coordination Offices at different levels. At the central level, the organizational structure of the NRD National Coordination Office (NCO) for the current period 2016–2020 was regulated in the Decision No. 1428/2018 of MARD (which replaced the Decision No. 2501/2010 on the establishment and structure of the NRD NCO). Gender issues do not appear to be a management function of the NRD NCO. At the sub-national level, Decision No. 1920 provides the background structure but decentralizes institutional arrangements and staffing to the provincial authorities. An overview of the NRD Coordination Offices at the provincial level also indicates that gender issues do not constitute a management function of these units.

Gender equality monitoring in the NTP NRD. Another important aspect of implementation arrangement is how gender is monitored in the NTP NRD. In this regard, the monitoring and evaluation system of the NTP NRD needs to be aligned with the Decision No. 41/2015 on the management of NTPs. Circular No. 05/2017 of MARD provides detailed guidance on monitoring and reporting. Annex 1 of the Circular sets a template for monitoring

It is a huge challenge for gender mainstreaming in the programming of each sector. Since gender is just not on their list of priorities. That is not something that they have to deal with on a daily basis. For example, for agricultural sector they care about what plants to grow, what livestock are farmed, what machines are good.

(Male, middle-aged, labour and social affairs focal point, Hà Nội)

the progress of NRD according to the NRD criteria. Gender disaggregated data, even when possible, such as women as a percentage of trained labour forces, are not required. Bi-annual and annual reporting templates required by the programme at different levels do not required sex-disaggregated data. When it comes to gender equality, MOLISA and its local branches bear the responsibility of state management of gender equality, and thus are mandated to monitor the implementation of indicator 18.6 in the NTP NRD 2016-2020. Nevertheless, Ministry of Culture, Sports and Tourism (MOCST) leads on the National Action Plan on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control and therefore is responsible for monitoring some parts of the criteria 18.6. Monitoring progress against the gender equality criteria requires coordination between MOLISA and MOCST.





3. Gender Assessment in the implementation of the NTP NRD

Photo: UN Women/Hoang Hiep

3. Gender Assessment in the implementation of the NTP NRD

This part of the presentation is based on the content matter of the NTP NRD as stipulated in Decision 1600/2016/QĐ-TTg on Approval of NTP NRD 2016-2020 covering major groups of tasks divided among various ministries, spelling out specific roles and ways of carrying them out by each ministry.⁵² The following discussions focus on the implications for gender equality resulting from exchanges with local residents and consulting officials about the issues. By going through the content, existing gaps and inconsistencies in gender considerations will be highlighted.

3.1 Gender considerations in the NTP NRD planning

Box 1. Criterion 1 Master planning

[1.1] Having master plan approved and disseminated

[1.2] Having management policy on the master plan and implementation of the master plan

NTP NRD planning in this report refers to the master plan (which is the first group of the NRD criteria) and annual planning for NRD

⁵² The content No 11 regarding capacity development for NRD staff is addressed in Section 4 on NTP NRD implementing obstacles later on.

activities (which is an annual process to identify priorities for NRD). To what extent women have participated in these two planning activities is an important aspect of gender equality implementation in the NTP NRD. It should be mentioned that since 2013 MARD has initiated a reform in its direction (shifting priorities from infrastructure to production development for sustainable new rural development) and added the task of production development together with agricultural restructuring as the focal task from the planning stage for the Programme.

Master plans are mainly produced by the commune cadres and contractors, focusing on infrastructure interventions.

Having a commune master plan remains the first commune-level NRD criterion since the early stage of the NTP NRD 2010-2015. Nevertheless, as indicated in Section 2, the absence of gender references in the NTP NRD 2011-2015 and the NRD criteria led to the situation that the Programme criteria can either promote or hinder equality between men and women depending on the way they are implemented.⁵³ According to Decision 1600/2016/QĐ-TTg on NTP NRD 2016-2020, Ministry of Construction (MOC) has presided over and provided guidance for the implementation of the master planning criterion. The procedure for rural commune master planning was stipulated by the Ministry of Construction (MOC) in the Circular 09/2010/TT-BXD.⁵⁴ Accordingly, consultative meetings

⁵³ World Bank and UN Women (2015), *Gender analysis of New Rural Areas National Targeted Programme*.

⁵⁴ Circular 09/2010/TT-BXD dated 04/8/2010 on the procedure for master planning of new rural commune for the NTP NRD 2010-2015 and Circular 02/2017/TT-BXD dated 01/03/2017 for master planning of NRD commune for the NTP NRD 2016-2020.

At some hamlet meetings women residents were hastily mobilized to attend the consultation, but it was only for show. There was limited evidence that women's voice is heard at those hamlet gatherings.

(Male, middle-aged, NRD district-level focal point, Hà Nội)

with local residents on the provisional master plans were stated in the Circular, yet there was no mention of women's participation. Due to complexity of this master planning process, rural commune master plans were developed made by the commune cadres and contractors. This was among the NRD criteria that were achieved soonest in all NRD communes. Qualitative findings show that some villager respondents were only aware of the commune master plans which were publicly posted at the Commune People's Committee Hall. However, there was no recollection of a consultation process, as part of this master planning, by the respondents consulted.

Participatory annual planning and giving a voice to rural women were institutionalized in NTPs, but limited application in realities. This planning process is to prioritize annual activities for the NTP NRD. It should be mentioned that since 2016 NTP NRD has been subjected to the management mechanisms of the NTPs as stipulated in the Decision No. 41/2016/QĐ-TTg of the Prime Minister. Accordingly, like other NTPs, the NRD planning is supposed to be participatory and part of the local socio-economic development planning (SEDP) process both annually and medium-term (Article 3, Decision No. 41/2016). To provide guidance for NTP "owning agencies", MPI has issued the Circular No. 01/2017 with guidance on the planning for NTPs as part of the commune SEDP. In that Circular, it is made clear that NRD planning must be participatory and the voices of women as well as other disadvantaged groups must be reflected

in the planning process. Specifically, it stipulates that women must constitute at least 30 percent of the total participants in the participatory planning

meetings related to NTPs. This annual planning procedure represents the major and perhaps the only mechanism in place, at least "on paper" to empower voices and needs of women in deciding the priorities in the NTP NRD implementation. In fact, this was hardly apparent from the fieldwork that the NRD planning was made in consultation with the grassroots levels (e.g., villages or even communes).⁵⁵ In reality the set of NRD criteria is fixed and as a result, the prioritization process is mainly concerned with the resources available and timing or sequence to achieve each of the NRD criteria. This limits the space for participatory planning on prioritizing the activities that are most desirable for communities.

Women's participation in actual planning was a mere "formality". The previous gender assessment of the NTP NRD 2011-2015 revealed an absence of gender references in the Programme policies and criteria,⁵⁶ and therefore gender was not a concern in the planning process. For the NTP NRD 2016-2020, in some places, the percentage of women's participation in these hamlet meetings for implementation of the NRD activities (mainly road access) was reported to be relatively

55 The Budget Transparency, Accountability and Participation (2018). *Voice of local people and officials on the National Programme on New Rural Development in 2016-2020 period: The case of Hoa Binh and Quang Tri provinces.*

56 World Bank and UN Women (2015), *ibid.*

high. This could be linked to efforts to institutionalize a participatory planning process by development partners such as the World Bank, IFAD, or INGOs such as Oxfam, Plan International, Child Fund International etc. This participatory planning procedure identifies the necessity of people's participation in this process, in which there are some measures to promote the voices of women and other vulnerable groups. Still, in accordance with regulations on public investment and local characteristics, when the participatory planning procedure was institutionalized, the applied mechanism within the scope of cooperation with development partners is likely reduced to basics. Moreover, the reported high rate of women's participation in some community consultation meetings does not necessarily reveal the quality of their participation. Because the quality of participation is reflected in the extent to which women contribute their suggestions and the possibility that their voices are heard and wishes considered and implemented at some point in the Programme activities. Section 3.2 illustrates to what extent women's opinions have been considered in the infrastructure planning process. Furthermore, women, especially young or unmarried women tend to collectively sit in *a corner* or *at the back* of the room, and sometimes even *outside* of the village hall. Only a few women holding positions in mass organizations, such as VWU, the Youth Union, are at the centre of the meetings alongside other cadres, elders and male representatives of households. In other instances, even without any sitting arrangement, women tend to sit together at one side. These spatial arrangements are in fact not encouraging women to share opinions and participate in the public discussions. Furthermore, leaders and representatives of mass organizations at hamlet-level (which are often male) have limited experience in facilitating meetings, organizing and encouraging women to speak-up and voice their concerns.⁵⁷

57 Cf. CARE, Oxfam, and SNV (2019a). *Summary of the Independent Evaluation Report: Gender Analysis of the National Target Programme on Sustainable Poverty Reduction (2016-2020)*.

Doing NRD does not differentiate male or female, we are doing the same thing, benefit equally, there does not need to be separation.

(Male, middle aged, district NRD focal point, Quảng Nam)

We got feedback from some senior, core cadres at village level that women attended the village meeting on planning at times. However, at those meetings women rarely raised their voice, and if they did, their opinions were off point.

(Women, middle-aged, district VWU staff, Hà Tĩnh))

There is a misconception of women's capacity in determining infrastructure priorities. The content of NTP NRD planning focuses on rural infrastructure development. Interviews with representatives from multi-sectors at district-level and commune-level demonstrated no evidence that women's benefit should be specifically considered in the review and approval process of infrastructure constructions. This reflects a perception that basic infrastructure criteria that aim to serve the needs of community, including women, so it is not necessary to have priorities for women. In this line of thought, women and men as local residents are assumed to automatically benefit from new/upgraded "gender neutral" infrastructure. The reason lies with the gender-based prejudice of implementing cadres and women in the community referring to the perceived capacity of women in determining infrastructure investment priorities. In many cases, despite female participation, women

are said to have few opinions when discussing topics regarding infrastructure interventions, which are technical by nature – a topic that is considered to be “unsuitable” for women, whom are “weak” and “incapable” in technical and engineering fields.⁵⁸ As asserted by commune and hamlet cadres who are experienced with the planning activities, women’s participation is assessed as “unqualified” due to their lack of confidence when expressing their opinions on, for instance, infrastructure projects. In many cases, even though they have participated, women are unable to make decisions in the meetings, rather they must defer to a husband’s actual say. This finding confirms the results of other studies⁵⁹ that women’s participation in project planning as decision makers is almost non-existent leading to their limited benefit as users from local infrastructure development.

Some participatory meetings with a high rate of women’s attendance were reportedly organized at village or commune levels on the implementation of infrastructure activities, instead of identifying priorities for NRD. At five visited provinces there was evidence that participatory meetings were organized at village or commune levels on the implementation of activities, instead of identifying priorities for NRD. It should be noted that in the 2016-2020 period, special investment mechanism continues to be completed through the introduction of Decree No. 161/2016/NĐ-CP

58 See also UN Women and CEMA (2019). *Hướng dẫn thúc đẩy và thực hiện Ngân sách có trách nhiệm giới - Áp dụng đối với Chương trình phát triển kinh tế xã hội các xã đặc biệt khó khăn vùng dân tộc thiểu số và miền núi (Chương trình 135) giai đoạn 2016-2020.*

59 CARE, Oxfam, and SNV (2019a), *ibid.*

on 2nd December 2016. The application of the mechanism has contributed to a system of special investment mechanisms for the effective mobilization and use of resources in building NTP NRD.⁶⁰ Right from the initial stage of New Rural Development, a new feature in the investment mechanism is the mechanism for site clearance through advocacy and

The village consultations are usually held in the daytime as it would be difficult for the required staff to make it for the evening. During the day men go to work so most of the time the majority of attendees are women. They would raise lots of questions on educational, credit schemes. When it comes to infrastructure building, they have very little to say on the matter.

(Male, middle aged, provincial NRD staff, Long An)

does not implement ordinary compensation mechanism. This is a crucial change in implementing criteria on infrastructure because site clearance is extremely complicated, cost-consuming and exceeds the capacity of the state budget and people’s contribution. Stemming from the thinking that this is the people’s programme to serve the people, so during the process of building the Programme and guiding documents, a mechanism of encouraging people to donate their land has been born out. As such, the role of women at these meetings are primarily concerned with making contributions in

land and cash for rural infrastructure building. This echoes the findings from the study on women’s role in the NTP NRD for 2011-2015 that women’s participation in the construction, supervision and monitoring of infrastructure projects such as rural road networks, irrigation, market and cultural house facilities was very

60 Therefore, central-level budget allocation has contributed only a relatively proportion of the total NRD funding. In the period of 2016-2020, central-level budget has constituted only 2.4 percent of the total budget. Notably, local budget (at provincial, district, and commune level) contributed 11.7 percent. Contribution from rural households were estimated at 6.2 percent while contribution of private sector was at 4.9 percent. Adding all the above sources together, the Government budget, contribution from private sector and rural farmers have contributed up to 38.8 percent of the total NRD budget in 2016-2020.

low.⁶¹ How the absence of women's input into the infrastructure planning process impacts on their well-being at the grassroots will be discussed in the following section.

3.2 Gender considerations in socio-economic infrastructure development

The content for socio-economic infrastructure development is consisted of nine components, including village and commune transport system; intra-field irrigation system; electrical grid system; pre-school and elementary infrastructure; village assembly-sport hall;⁶² rural market; clinic;⁶³ primary communication system; and clean water supply. The target is to fulfill Criteria 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 in the National Criteria Set of NTP NRD.

Rural road networks

Box 2. Criterion 2 Rural road

[2.1] Commune roads and the road from commune center to the district are asphalted or concreted, ensure convenient travel for cars year-round

[2.2] Village and hamlet roads and inter-village/hamlet roads are at least hardened, ensure convenient travel for cars year-round

[2.3] Alley and neighboring roads are clean and not muddy during rainy season

[2.4] Major field road ensures convenient transportation of goods year-round

61 Nguyễn Thị Ánh Tuyết (2017). Báo cáo tóm tắt kết quả khoa học công nghệ Đề tài nghiên cứu Phát huy vai trò của phụ nữ trong xây dựng Nông thôn mới (Summary Report of the Research Project on Promoting women's role in NTP NRD). MARD.

62 The element of the village assembly hall (Criterion 6) will be addressed in Section 3.7 improving the culture life

63 The element of clinic will be addressed in Section 3.6 primary health care development (Criterion 15).

According to the General Statistical Office, the rural transport system in the country has developed strongly.⁶⁴ As of June 2019, there are 8,927 communes with established roads connected to the District People's Committee, reaching 99.4 percent, (in 2011 it was 98.6 percent). Rural transport is ensured with 98.9 percent of communes having roads to center of the district (97.2 percent in 2011). The proportion of communes with asphalt and concrete roads to the district-center increased rapidly from 70.1 percent in 2006 to 87.4 percent in 2011, reaching 97 percent in 2016.

The transport infrastructure interventions helped increase women's mobility, and thus potentially contribute to economic activities.

Overall, the study findings show a positive picture in NRD achieved communes with new infrastructures constructed and these infrastructures were perceived as important improvements in the living standards of local residents including women. Among awarded NRD communes and aiming-for-NRD "kiểu mẫu" communes, the improvement and upgrade in inter-commune and inter-village roads, and especially within the village has created favourable conditions for women's mobility. For example, in mountainous areas that often suffer from floods like Hương Khê district of Hà Tĩnh, or Nam Giang of Quảng Nam, or An Phú commune of Mỹ Đức district (Hà Nội) the mobility of women was extremely difficult and muddy when there were only dirt roads. With the system of expansive concrete roads at the research sites, it is cleaner, safer and more convenient for women. Some of the middle-aged women shared that since there were concrete roads, it was easier for them to travel. They were supported by their husbands and children to practice riding motorbikes or electric bikes, so that they would be more mobile and have greater independence (such as going to the market, periodic health examination, visiting friends, etc.) and would not have to rely on other family members for transportation.

There is evidence on **increased women's mobility in the uplands** where dangerous mountainous and forest roads may be perceived

64 Ban Chủ nhiệm Chương trình KHCN phục vụ xây dựng NTM (2019), *ibid*.

as insecure and unsafe for women and children. The upgraded rural road network contributed to benefits of improved mobility for ethnic minority women. Since they are less likely to use or own motorcycles, so travelling distances of over ten kilometres is a challenge for them.⁶⁵ These difficulties cause ethnic minority women living in remote areas with limited use of transportation to be more dependent on men when accessing basic social services.⁶⁶ Recent evidence shows that all young women including those of ethnic minorities can ride motorbikes nowadays, which significantly contributes to reducing the gender gap in mobility and increasing women's power and status.⁶⁷ In this regard, this is a good example of innovative ways of overcoming gender-based barriers such as cultural restrictions which can impact on women's use of the roads but most especially ethnic minority women, whereby women may be restricted in obtaining training for vehicle licenses affecting their mobility. Having recognised this common barrier to women's mobility, under the NTP NRD component, the VWU in Đơn Dương district of Lâm Đồng took the initiative in a collaboration with the police sector to organize two free-of-charge training courses on motorbike driving while at the same time holding motorbike driving license exams for a total of 100 ethnic minority women participants from the Ka Đô commune of the district.⁶⁸ However, there are a few initiatives such as this reported within the scope of this present study.

The improved connectivity contributed to more opportunities for ethnic

65 CEMA, Irish Aid, and UN Women (2017). *Figures on Ethnic Minority Women and Men in Viet Nam 2015. Based on the Results of the Survey on the Socio-economic Situation of 53 Ethnic Minority Groups in Viet Nam 2015*. Hanoi: UN Women.

66 World Bank and CEMA (2019), *ibid*.

67 Nozomi, Kawarazuka, Nguyen Thi Van Anh, Vu Xuan Thai, Pham Huu Thuong (2019). "A bird locked in a cage": Hmong young women's lives after marriage in northern Vietnam. In *Gender, Agriculture, and Agrarian Transformation: Changing relations in Africa, Latin America and Asia* edited by Carolyn E. Sachs. London: Routledge.

68 Women's Union of Đơn Dương District (2019). *Báo cáo Kết quả công tác tham gia xây dựng Nông thôn mới 6 tháng đầu năm 2019 (Report on the Results of participating in the NRD during the first 6 months of 2019)*. Report No 138/BC-BTV dated 01st July 2019.

minority women's participation in wage employment, albeit to a lesser extent compared to males. Furthermore, with respect to economic opportunities, findings from focus group discussions with Cơ Tu women residents of mountainous district of Nam Giang (Quảng Nam) indicate that rural transportation has been substantially improved so that this connectivity to industrial clusters surrounding Điện Bàn town or Đà Nẵng City enables many women to commute to work. In the villages of Nam Giang visited during the fieldwork, there were reportedly increasing numbers of young women who are becoming highly mobile as migrant workers in urban contexts. This phenomenon is also reflected in recent studies that the improved connectivity made by continuous investment in rural infrastructure has enabled many ethnic minority workers to commute every day to work in labour intensive factories. Whereas this creates opportunities for women to become employed in the wage employment sector, male-headed households are significantly more likely to take advantage of these opportunities. The reason lies in unpaid care and domestic work which appear to be a critical impediment to women's economic opportunity. Societal prejudices that have been internalized by women themselves – particularly their 'traditional housewife' role – and this impacts on the participation of women in non-agricultural economic sector activities, for example, by seeking work outside of their vicinities. Apparently, improving road connectivity alone may not be sufficient to improve women's economic opportunity.⁶⁹

As road infrastructure development projects are "gender neutral", insufficient attention has been paid to the ways in which women and men have benefited differently. Owing to a "gender neutral" approach in infrastructure development aiming to serve the most common community needs, the road infrastructure build-up has not yet been gender-responsive. Road infrastructure interventions are thus deemed not to have paid sufficient attention to the ways in which

69 Mannava, Aneesh, Elizaveta Perova, Phuong Thi Minh Tran (2019). *Who benefits from better roads and why? Mixed-methods analysis of the sex-disaggregated impacts of a rural roads project in Vietnam*. Hanoi: The World Bank.

women and men will benefit differently. For instance, at an upland ethnic minority commune of Nam Giang district (Quảng Nam) that has reached NRD, the inter-hamlet road has been concreted for better and more convenient mobilization and production activities of women. Nevertheless, the suspension bridges connecting the hamlet to production areas have not been upgraded, so that local residents had to take a roundabout route to get to the grazing pastures. Women with motorbikes that know how to ride are well served by convenient transportation compared to the majority of Cơ Tu women who do not know how to ride a motorbike and have to walk, or ask their husbands or children to give them a motorbike ride. Even though women have proposed to build additional suspension bridges leading to the production areas, at the time of the study this infrastructural change has not been implemented. In this case, women stated their needs, however, their concerns were not converted into actual practical intervention. This finding echoes the observation made in the study on female farmers in rice and orchard production that roads linking others to rice fields are found to be incomplete. They are merely small pathways which made it difficult to use machines to do the work in the fields.⁷⁰ Whereas load bearing is primarily the responsibility of women, the incomplete improvement of tracks and pathways is deemed not to meet the needs of women, especially the middle aged and elderly who transport goods often without the assistance of technology.

Another example of a commune located in an area located in both the mountains and the plains (*bán sơn địa*) in the Mỹ Đức district (Hà Nội) where the NTP NRD is underway, the local government has completed a network of concrete roads connecting various hamlets. However, more than half the **roads and pathways inside the villages or those connecting with the fields are yet to be hardened with concrete, and thus pose difficulties to women's outdoor activities and increase health risks during the rains**. During group discussions with young and middle-aged women, we learned that

⁷⁰ UN Women and IFGS (2015). *Female Farmers and Inclusive Growth in Vietnam*.

there were plans to improve the lane tracks, pathways within the villages, but at the time of this research nothing has been undertaken as yet. Local authorities told us that building cultural houses and upgrading schools rank higher than concretization of intra village roads in order of priority in the NTP NRD for 2016-2020 and following years. For women who live in parts of the village without concrete pathways, accessibility becomes difficult during the rainy season. A female villager described the situation: "When the sun shines, we have tracks but in the rainy months of July and August these are flooded, the water rising above waist level. Since my women neighbours and I have to carry our small kids to school on our backs, now we have to walk over the grounds of neighbouring houses to avoid the swampy waters which makes it even harder". Villagers often jokingly refer to 20 households in this part of the village as "residents of the naked neighbourhood". The bushy terrain around these unpaved roads are full of poisonous snakes which often enter the nearby houses. Hilly roads in the area are also obstacles making women shy away from evening meetings. The tracks connecting the fields are in bad condition making the carrying of paddy to the main road very arduous and time consuming. In the inundated fields women must often wade into muddy water up to their waists and many women can suffer from gynaecological infections as a consequence.

Irrigation system

Box 3. Criterion 3 Irrigation system

[3.1] At least 80 percent of the agricultural area is automatically irrigated and drained

[3.2] Ensure sufficient conditions to meet residential needs and follow the regulations of disaster prevention

The application of technology and science in irrigation has helped save labour costs and time consumption, especially in some agricultural activities traditionally performed by female farmers.

According to IPSARD report, the hydraulic systems had a total irrigation capacity of 3.52 million hectares of cultivated land, which ensured irrigation for 7.48 million hectares, created water sources for 1.3 million hectares of planted land, supplied about 6 billion m³ of water for domestic use and industry sector, deacidified 1.6 million hectares of land, and drained water for more than 1.75 million hectares of agricultural land and 1.65 million hectares of upland crops by 2017.⁷¹ The same report shows that the additional irrigation capacity and drainage were 240,000 hectares and 207,000 hectares respectively, increasing irrigation efficiency of hydraulic works from 71.5 percent in 2008 to 78 percent in 2017 and drainage efficiency from 86.7 percent in 2008 to 90.2 percent in 2017. The application of technology and science in irrigation has helped save labour costs and time.⁷² For instance, findings from focus group discussions with women residents of Hương Trà commune (Hương Khê district, Hà Tĩnh) and Hòa Phú commune (Châu Thành district, Long An) indicate that the application of a drip irrigation system for their dragon fruit (Long An) and tea (Hà Tĩnh) plantation helped reduce their workloads with respect to the number of hours women used to spend fetching water for their crops. Irrigation has made it easier for women's animals to be watered in convenient places as demonstrated by women residents of Điện Quang commune (Điện Bàn town, Quảng Nam). This provides some women with more time for other, more productive or livelihood activities.

The irrigation initiatives benefit men more than women. The 2006 Agricultural and Rural Census showed that overall, the percentage of agricultural households which owned water pumps was small. The proportion of female headed households that now own small tractors or water pumps is smaller than in the households headed by their male

counterparts.^{73,74} Notably the mechanization of irrigation mostly benefits men as irrigation is predominantly a male activity. Micro-irrigation and water harvesting are labour intensive, primarily undertaken by men because the machines and water pumps require physical strength, e.g., to carry to the production areas. This labour division pattern is common in both visited lowland and mountainous communes in the study. Given the trend of "feminization of agriculture" in rural settings due to men's outmigration for non-farming jobs, some female farmers can seek irrigation rental services which are increasingly available, and also operated by men (as hired labour). Nevertheless, this type of service is costly, and is not affordable to all farmers. This implies the disadvantages of ethnic minority, poor women regarding their water needs for agricultural production. In water-scarce regions, inequitable access to water resources for production affects poor rural people, especially women. Obviously, better irrigation systems will benefit women more and make their work more productive.

Electricity network

Box 4. Criterion 4 Electrification

[4.1] Qualified electrical system

[4.2] The percentage of households using electricity frequently and safely from various sources

Improved road light system in communes and villages allows women to actively and excitedly participate in hamlet meetings.

Alongside the road system, the electricity network has been covered in most rural areas, 100 percent of communes have electricity (in 2011 it was 99.8 percent). The Northern Midlands and Mountainous area have the lowest percentage of rural areas with electricity, but still at 94.5 percent. This is a great achievement in implementing the Electricity Supply Programme for rural, mountainous and island areas.⁷⁵ In all

73 UN Women and IFGS (2015), *ibid*.

74 FAO (2019), *ibid*.

75 Ban Chủ nhiệm Chương trình KHCN phục vụ xây dựng NTM (2019), *ibid*.

71 Ban Chủ nhiệm Chương trình KHCN phục vụ xây dựng NTM (2019), *ibid*.

72 UN Women and IFGS (2015), *ibid*.

the visited communes, female respondents state that the improved road light system in communes and villages allows them to actively and excitedly participate in hamlet meetings of the NRD awarded communes. This is because most of the VWU activities usually take place after eight o'clock in the evening (once women have finished dinner preparation and other household chores).

Previously, women were afraid of the dark (due to the absence of streetlights), dirt roads (difficult to navigate), overgrown canebrake (snakes), and other "risks". Nonetheless, at a few villages, it has been reported that local residents want to save on the cost of electricity, so street lights are only turned on during "important" occasions and festivals, while on other days, they are not.

At the domestic level, despite access to an electricity supply, at several villages half of households do not have adequate electricity at peak periods which severely affects their daily activities and productivity. This is a concern for local residents even at some NRD-achieved communes. These residents expressed their desire and willingness to pay for an uninterrupted and stable power supply, to be used for lighting, cooking, television, electric fans and in some cases for water pumping. From a gender perspective, the lack of a stable and affordable power supply as reported in some communes may occupy a quarter of poor rural women's time, and impact on their strategic interests. As women bear the brunt of household chores, including the provision of food and fuel – tasks which may become more challenging and time-consuming as climate change contributes to resource scarcity. Switching to electric appliances thus enables women to spend more time on non-household tasks, contributing to improved gender roles.⁷⁶

76 UNDP (2019). *Empowering women and delivering electricity access to the off-grid population in Viet Nam*. Technical Brief.

Village roads have the electrical light system that makes us feel more comfortable to go out in the evening. We are no longer scared of seeing snakes crossing the road. There is less reported occurrence of mugging and theft.

(Female, middle aged, Kinh, VWU district level staff, KI, Hà Tĩnh)

The power supply has also implications on women's access to information. Because television has been identified as the first and foremost source of technical information for women.⁷⁷ Women felt disadvantaged when they did not have technical information and information on market prices. It is also evident that ethnic minority women in rural areas have access to information such as the broadcasting programs Voice of Vietnam or Vietnam Television.⁷⁸ Recent data

show that ethnic minority men also have better access to different sources of information such as specialized training, printed materials (posters, leaflets, etc.), bulletin boards or mini-library. Because these sources are mostly available in the offices of the Commune People's Committee, ethnic minority women, who generally are less mobile than men, are less likely to access such information.⁷⁹

Public education infrastructure

Box 5. Criterion 5 School

[5] The percentage of schools: preschool, kindergarten, primary and secondary school have infrastructure and teaching equipment that meet the national standard

77 Trương Thị Ngọc Chi, Franz-Michael Rundquist, Duong Van Chin, and Magnus Jirstrom (2010). Gender roles in agricultural diversification in O Mon and Co Do Districts, Can Tho Province, Mekong Delta, South Vietnam. *Omonrice* 17: 203-219.

78 CEMA, Irish Aid, and UN Women (2017), *ibid*.

79 CARE International in Viet Nam (2018). *Vietnam's Law on Access to Information: an opportunity to narrow information gap among ethnic minorities*. Media release on 12 July 2018. Available at: <https://www.care.org.vn/more-efforts-needed-to-bring-law-on-access-to-information-to-life/> Retrieved 14 May 2020.

Before we have the new cement road with the light system in the hamlet, it was very difficult for us women to attend hamlet meetings. That was why all Women's Union meetings used to be held in the morning. As women used to be afraid of going out in the late evening. They were scared of seeing snakes in the road, having dog bite incidents, and being sexually harassed by some drunken men hanging around in the late evening.

(Female, middle aged, Cơ Tu, FGD, Quảng Nam)

There is a large investment in public education infrastructure. The school system has been reorganized and its physical infrastructure has been strengthened, accounting for 72,3 percent of total kindergartens, 81,3 percent of total primary schools, 90,1 percent of total secondary, and 96,5 percent of total high schools by 2016.⁸⁰ Under NTP NRD, public education infrastructure has been invested in pre-school and elementary infrastructure only.

Poor school sanitation facilities may impact the wellbeing and educational outcomes of children, especially girls. At several elementary schools in visited sites, basic facilities such as running water or outdoor lighting are reportedly still lacking. In some communes, the classrooms of kindergartens do not have private toilets. The classrooms delivered at villages of uplands locations usually do not have proper separating walls or fences, exercise grounds, and toilet facilities are in very poor state or non-existent. The lack of proper toilet and hand washing facilities in schools threatens the well-being and health of children, who are at risk of getting sick due to poor hygiene, and subsequently miss school. The impact on girls is greater as toilets do not provide adequate conditions for proper menstrual hygiene management. Moreover, as some doors cannot be closed, female students

feel unsafe when using the toilet.

Rural market infrastructure

Box 6. Criterion 7 Rural trade infrastructures and facility

[7] Commune has a rural market or location for selling, buying and exchanging goods

The content of rural market infrastructure explicitly mentions that rural markets should be upgraded to improve commercial networks and boost the local economy. In the NTP NRD 2010-2015, a local market is a mandatory criterion in the NRD planning. In reality, not every commune must have a market because local residents might not need one or such demand is low. In that case, even when construction of a market is completed, it does not provide any added value. In 2016, the Ministry of Industry and Trade (MOIT) has promulgated the Decision No. 4800 QĐ-BCT dated 8th December 2016 on Guidelines for the implementation and assessment of rural commercial infrastructure criteria in the NTP NRD to 2020. This Decision came as a relief to local authorities who are striving for the New Rural Development. According to Decision No. 4800, communes that have rural commercial

⁸⁰ Ban Chủ nhiệm Chương trình KHCN phục vụ xây dựng NTM (2019), *ibid*.

infrastructure in the planning that has already been approved by a competent authority (e.g., Provincial People's Committee and the Department of Domestic Market under MOIT). Yet this reflected the current context of not needing to invest in construction, those communes that do not have a commercial rural infrastructure in the planning, would not be assessed for the Criterion on commercial rural infrastructure.

Anecdotal evidence from field trips to Quảng Nam revealed that a market had been built in Phase 1 of the NTP NRD, but no one has used the newly built structure because of the lack of consultation with the community, including women, beforehand. The lack of participatory consultation led to the inefficient use of public infrastructure in the context of Kinh culture where petty trade has been and still is seen as a typically female activity. In some visited lowland communes, there are newly built markets under the NTP NRD but a number of female vendors at or around the old market have not moved into the new building. According to some of the female traders interviewed, the reason is that they were afraid of losing their already established clientele who would have to find them at another location. For these respondents they are also on good terms with their neighbouring stallholders as a result of cultivating these social bonds over many years.⁸¹ This reflects the “organizational and group spirits” (*tinh thần tổ hội*) which is very strong among women traders in rural and mountainous areas. It should be noted that in a number of upland villages, **ethnic minority women mainly trade their goods from fixed places or by peddling inside their villages**; in villages close to district townships they could go to district markets to buy and sell. This reveals that in remote areas setting up local markets is difficult due to the lack of convenient space.

81 Horat, Esther (2020). Willing to improve? Modern marketplaces and civilized trade in a northern Vietnamese village, *South East Asia Research*, 28:1, 56-69, DOI: 10.1080/0967828X.2020.1715829

Community information and communication

Box 7. Criterion 8 Information and communication

[8.1] Commune has a location for postal service
[8.2] Commune has internet and telecommunication services
[8.3] Commune has a radio station and a speaker system at hamlets
[8.4] Commune that applies information technology in management and administration

Information and communication infrastructure continued to be strengthened. In 2016, there were 7493 communes that had a communal postal and cultural point, which accounted for 83.5 percent of all communes, in which 3019 postal and cultural points had internet connection, computers that can connect to the internet, which accounted for 33.6 percent of all communes that had a postal and cultural point. **Women tend to combine information from the mass media with their experiences in order to sell their products. Ethnic minority elderly women have limited access to information.** All villages have a postal station, a relay radio station and a public service loudspeaker system. As indicated earlier, women's limited access to information, combined with women's lower educational level as compared to men and gender stereotypes, makes it harder for them to express their opinions and increase their decision-making power within the family and the larger community.⁸² Qualitative data from this present study demonstrates that women tend to combine information from the mass media with their experience in order to sell their products for the maximum as good profit as possible. In remote uplands relaying radio broadcasts is not effective due to the dispersed locations of the houses over vast areas. Moreover, the majority of these broadcasting contents is in the official Viet language, which represents a further barrier to some ethnic

82 CARE International in Viet Nam (2018), *ibid*.

minority elderly women (e.g., Cơ Tu in Nam Giang district of Quảng Nam, Khmer in Đức Huệ district of Long An).

Mobile phone owners, mainly men, are able to access information about market opportunities and prices. It should be noted that new market information services may be influencing selective means of access to information. Mobile phone owners can access information about market opportunities and prices electronically. Even though the proportion of mobile smart phone penetration by age group is very high (62 percent for age 15-25; and 63 percent for age 25-35) in Viet Nam, women are on average 14 percent less likely to own a mobile phone than men.⁸³

Clean water supply

Box 8. Criterion 17 Environment and food safety (Indicator 17.1)

[17.1] The percentage of households using clean and sanitized water as regulated

During the 5-year period (2011-2015), the Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Programme mobilized VND 32,361 billion, of which 6.7 percent was mobilized from the private sector. As a result, by the end of 2015, 86 percent of rural population had access to sanitary water, exceeding the 5-year target of 85 percent. For the period from 2016 to 2020, the programme was integrated as a component in the NTP NRD. More than 16,342 concentrated works to supply clean water were built and upgraded, using different sources of funding (state budget, ODA and private investment). As a result, the percentage of the rural population with access to sanitary water increased 2 percent/year to 88.5 percent in 2017, an

83 Statistics from Telecommunication Bureau reveal that as of May 2017, there are more than 116 million active mobile subscribers, of which approximately 49 million are 3G mobile subscribers. Vietnam had about 58.9 million Internet users, which is more than half of the population.

increase of 12.5 percent compared with 2008.⁸⁴

Clean water supply projects reduced women's workloads, particularly in unpaid labour.

While men prefer to use water to irrigate cash crops or livestock, water collection for domestic purposes is generally the responsibility of women and girls in all the visited communes. Women in many cases also take the primary role in educating children, in child and family health including sanitation and in caring for the sick. If women value the health of their children more than men, and unclean water is responsible for a large fraction of infant death and illness due to diarrheal diseases, women may have a greater incentive to ensure that a local water source is maintained and kept clean. In this regard, women's preferences are more aligned with the preferences of a benevolent social planner. Moreover, the availability of clean water close to home reduces women's workloads, and the time saved in fetching water may be spent on other activities to strengthen livelihood resilience, including productive activities.⁸⁵ Within the scope of this assessment, there is only one district-level NRD focal point in Hà Tĩnh which indicates that when investing in an installation to provide clean water at hamlet-level, they considered the possibility that women would be the main beneficiaries due to their responsibilities such as performing household chores and the daily activities of the household. In the case of Hà Tĩnh, women and girls were considered the primary clients whose satisfaction was a critical factor in ensuring the project's success and sustainability. Local women were encouraged to establish a user group "*tổ tự quản công trình cung cấp nước sạch tập trung*" to manage and maintain the infrastructure. It clearly demonstrates that if effective participation strategies have been developed to involve women users in infrastructure planning and design at the community level, women can contribute to project implementation in many ways – as users, beneficiaries, and maintenance workers, advisors, and managers.

84 Ban Chủ nhiệm Chương trình KHCN phục vụ xây dựng NTM (2019), *ibid*.

85 International Fund for Agricultural Development (2012). *Gender and water: Securing water for improved rural livelihoods: The multiple-uses system approach*.

Clean water supply initiatives did not consider differences in gender division of household labour among poor, ethnic minority women.

Qualitative findings from field trips to Quảng Nam and Lâm Đồng reveal that water supply initiatives did not consider differences in the gender division of household labour among poor, ethnic minority women. Some Cơ Tu (Quảng Nam) and K'Ho (Lâm Đồng) women respondents reported that even though their communes have achieved NRD, a number of households located at upland hamlets/villages have not had access to the water source because the pipe system was not fully equipped/renovated. These upland households often contribute money to dig wells for collective use or invest money in buying pumps and pipes to bring water from the lowlands to their houses. For a low-income household, they tend to have more children, so the demand for water is relatively substantial. This raises the question of the ability to pay for water fees and additional electricity consumed for a water pump. From a gender perspective, women are frequently the primary users of water in domestic consumption, and thus to save these additional expenses women will go farther to fetch water for family use. As a result, women, especially those from poor households, are more likely to face time constraints that keep them from engaging in potentially income-generating activities. Seen from an ethnic dimension there is very likely an ethnic difference in the impact of water scarcity on men and women among the lowland Kinh and the uplands. When water scarcity occurred, women became water fetchers for domestic use.

3.3 Gender considerations in production development

The plan for production development is tied with agricultural restructuring, rural economy transformation, and raising incomes. It consists of six components which are: implementing the Proposal on the agricultural restructuring toward value chain linkages; strengthening agricultural incentive activities, promoting

the application of science and technology, especially high technology in agricultural, forestry and fishery production; promoting value chain linkages between the production and consumption of products; renovating agricultural production; developing rural industries; and improving the quality of vocational training for rural workers. The target is to fulfil Criterion 10 on income, Criterion 12 on the proportion of labourers with permanent employment, Criterion 13 on production organization in NTP NRD, improve operational efficiency of cooperatives through the strengthening of organizational, managerial, operational, and business capacity of cooperatives and groups. The focus of this section revolves around the gender analysis of four main components, including (i) value chain linkages development; (ii) technology transfer and application; (iii) production organization renovation; and (iv) vocational training for rural labourers.

It should be noted that the NTP NRD activities under the areas of “economy and production organization” focus on production support to achieve the criteria set on average income, poverty rate, and production organization (i.e., *tổ chức sản xuất*, which are reflected in having cooperative and production model with market linkages on key agricultural products). Production support under the NTP NRD consists of three main activities, including: (i) production through value chains; (ii) development of cooperatives, and (iii) development of rural occupations (according to Decree 52/2018/ND-CP). In practice, the NTP NRD has mainly focused on the first two main activities. The implementation arrangements for these two activities consist of a Production Support Manual, which was issued by Decision 4781/QĐ-BNN-VPĐP in 21st November 2017 to guide the production support through value chains, and the new Cooperative Law 2012 (and Decree 193/2013/ND-CP providing details for implementation of the Cooperative Law). A scrutiny of these documents indicates that gender was not considered.

Promoting agricultural value chains

Box 9. Criterion 10 Income

[10] Income: Per capita income in rural areas until 2020 (million dong/person)

Production support through value chains towards increasing the producers' incomes has been at the fore of MARD agricultural production development initiatives, particularly with the pronouncement of Decision 4781/2017. By the end of 2017, about 21,000 models for production linkages along value chains were developed in provinces, high technology was widely applied, and some commercial concentrated production areas were established – key examples are: models for new rural development associated with agricultural restructuring, development of clean agriculture along value chains; new rural development in close relation with eco-tourism; linkage with growing medicinal plants; flower and handicraft production villages in combination with homestay tourism; and winter crops with high value of 300-400 million VND/ha.⁸⁶

As stipulated in the Guiding Circular No.18/TT -BNNPTNT 9th October 2017, the Commune People's Committee is responsible for proposing activities and design projects to support production development. Even though the central government advises provinces to decentralize and assign communes to be investors, provinces implement the model in different ways. The Commune People's Committee bears the responsibility of production support projects because planning, submission, approval and monitoring of activities are conducted at commune-level, despite the fact that there are other sectoral departments or organization committees acting as investors for some projects in the commune. At the visited sites, local authorities at all levels actively explores the market, strengthens joint ventures, production linkages and product consumption. These production

development activities are predominantly associated with the implementation of the Proposal "One Commune One Product" (OCOP). For instance, the model of households that participate in economic development through establishing farms that are linked with the consumption of Phúc Trạch pomelo, Khe Mây oranges are linked with Tân Thanh Phong Enterprise, Vinmart supermarket (Hương Khê, Hà Tĩnh), agricultural service cooperative group produces coffee to supply members with ensured quality fertilizer with lower price compared to that of the market, creates linkages for product consumption (Di Linh, Lâm Đồng), or dragon fruit production (Châu Thành, Long An), or *tôm vàng* pomelo (Đan Phượng, Hà Nội). All these value chains are developed on the availability of some valued indigenous crops in each location.

Spouses' educational level and general perception of gender equality affects the decision-making process for value chains. Looking at the gender dynamics in these agricultural value chains, qualitative data from interviews with local residents reveal that decisions of financial investment for production including how much capital is to be invested, what size loan is needed and from where, requires a mutual agreement between the wife and husband because it requires a high level of capital. An individual in the household rarely makes such decisions. Loans they need are mostly from their relatives or banks which require both wife and husband to be present. Thus, the financial investment for these value chains is mostly decided by both wife and husband. Preliminary findings indicate that local entrepreneurs and 'better-off' households very likely come from a family in which husband and wife seek advice from each other and have mutual respect, such as the Cuối Quý Organic Vegetable Cooperative (Đan Phượng, Hà Nội), the Dương Xuân Dragon fruit Production Cooperative (Châu Thành, Long An), etc. This observation can also be found among young couples of Cơ Tu (Quảng Nam) and K'Ho (Lâm Đồng) ethnic groups. For ethnic minority women, those who have had some schooling and are fluent in the Kinh language, they tend to have more say on agricultural matters. Because they can confidently negotiate with their husbands in

⁸⁶ Ban Chủ nhiệm Chương trình KHCN phục vụ xây dựng NTM (2019), *ibid*.

making decisions regarding production. This suggests that the spouses' educational level and perception of gender equality influences the decision-making process for production.

Market shocks may generate gender-differentiated impacts owing to the pre-crisis inequality in access to land and other resources

A general trend in agricultural value chains of the visited sites is that the rural value chain stakeholders generally only receive a meagre share of the value of the final agri-product, which revealed marketing intermediaries buying at low prices and taking advantage of the farmer's weak marketing power. As observed in Hà Tĩnh, the economic gardening model often leads to an intense expansion in production scale that will likely result in "oversupply" compared to the market demand. The weak market power may reason from small-scale production, non-homogenous product quality, poor market information and knowledge, high transaction cost per unit of marketed product, cash shortage, and perishability of product. Particularly in these value chains of highly perishable products, for example, pomelo, oranges, dragon fruits and vegetables there is a high risk of decay during transportation and storage at different markets. Here one may raise questions on whether the market shocks generate gender-differentiated impacts? Did farming households headed by women respond differently to those of men in the face of these economic shocks? Within the scope of this present study it is possible to presume that the impact will vary mainly because of the pre-crisis inequality in access to land and other resources. Additionally, it is well evidenced that unequal access to land and other resources including agricultural extension services are the major causes behind the gender-differentiated impacts of the market shocks on a farming household's welfare.⁸⁷

Cultural determinants and language barriers hinder ethnic minority women's capacity to shape their market linkages

With respect to communes in ethnic minority

and mountainous areas, recent research on drivers of socio-economic development among ethnic minority groups in Viet Nam indicates that males generally assume the task of dealing with outsiders when marketing household products; the male family members are more apt to speak the Kinh language coupled with their physical endurance and mobility for riding motorbikes over long distances.⁸⁸ But, another reason for lacking access to the market is attributed to the pervasive prejudice toward ethnic minority groups by the majority of Kinh people who mostly control the lowland markets. Moreover, as pointed out in that same study, the degree of market power exercised by local traders, retailers, or shop owners, especially those who happen to be private money lenders, seems to be a major impediment to an ethnic minorities' capacity to shape their market linkages and livelihood strategies. The disempowerment of ethnic minorities within local markets was also experience by the Cơ Tu (Quảng Nam), K'Ho (Lâm Đồng) and Khmer (Long An) participants in the present study. It is therefore necessary to conduct a careful analysis of the value chain, select suitable products for each locality, establish close relationships with enterprises, connect the services of related stakeholders, and promote the implementation of the "pioneering – inspiring" mechanism in working with rural poor, ethnic minority populations.⁸⁹

Value chain development policies were not tailored to the needs of women in diversified types of households to facilitate their participation.

In accordance with Decision No.2277/QĐ-BNN-VPĐP on 5th June 2017 «Approving the Proposal "National Programme: One Commune One Product" for 2017-2020 period, orienting toward 2030 and the survey tools for developing the Proposal», and the guidance in the Circular No. 18/ 2017, many production development projects were set up, aiming to develop specialty plants and animals that are the strength of the locality. These current trends of encouraging the development of the production of goods, by

87 Khondoker Abdul Mottaleb, Dil Bahadur Rahut, Olaf Erenstein (2019). Do market shocks generate gender-differentiated impacts? Policy implications from a quasi-natural experiment in Bangladesh. *Women's Studies International Forum* 76, 102272.

88 World Bank and CEMA (2019), *ibid*.

89 CARE, Oxfam, and SNV (2019b). *Summary of the Thematic Evaluation Report: Livelihood development support under the National Target Programme on Sustainable Poverty Reduction (2016-2020)*.

creating centralized production zones, and taking part in value chains may be useful to optimize the production process and raise household incomes. But at the grassroots, these value chain concepts are beyond the grasp of local residents, especially women from poor or relatively poor households, as shown from group discussions with women in Quảng Nam and Long An. In fact, these women are apprehensive about the possible risks to their properties, for example, their cattle may get lost or get sick while being under a collective care module “*chăn thả tập trung*”). These women’s concerns are derived from the fact that they are tied to small-scale agricultural production and tend to have limited control over household assets (e.g. land) than their husbands who prefer to work as hired day labourers. This sector of the female population appeared to be reluctant to risk losing everything by participating in value chains that are based on enterprises and cooperatives. What these female respondents want most are opportunities to diversify their livelihoods on a small scale to improve household incomes. This strongly supports claims for value chain development policies that are tailored to the needs of women in diverse types of households to facilitate their participation.

Technological transfer and machinery application

Since 2010 the implementation of policies supporting the procurement of machines and equipment for processing and reducing post-harvest loss in agriculture, forestry and fisheries has helped meet farmers’ urgent needs to some extent, especially in areas of commercial rice production. By 2017, the mechanization rate of land preparation for planting reached 93 percent, an increase of 23 percent compared with 2008.⁹⁰ High-technology models in crop production, livestock production and fisheries increased economic effectiveness by 10–30 percent by using high yield and quality varieties and breeds, advanced and climate smart production practices. By the end of 2017, in crop production, 1,575 units with 21,096.4 hectares had valid VietGAP certificates; more than 200,000 hectares of coffee were certified

⁹⁰ Ban Chủ nhiệm Chương trình KHCN phục vụ xây dựng NTM (2019), *ibid*.

UTZ, 4C and rainforest; 33 local provinces had organic farming models covering about 70,000 hectares with diversified types, scales and products. In livestock production, nine per cent of farms complied with VietGAHP and GloGAP; two per cent of pigs and 15 percent of chickens were raised following the standards of VietGAHP. As a result, there has been an increase in yield, quality and prices of numerous products; the income from one hectare of crop production reached VND 90 million in 2017 (double that of the income earned in the previous 10 years); livestock production was changed from small-scale and fragmented production to farm-scale industrial or semi-industrial production.

The technological transfer and the application of machinery generally changed the gender-based division of labour in certain farming activities.

At the visited sites, the government has implemented many programs to support farmers through local government agencies. These support programs include technical skills training, study visits, business skills training, seed money for start-ups and support to invest in new technologies for production and branding. Farmers are now doing farming with the effective aid of machinery for example, cooperative groups which produce dragon fruit apply the method of off-season lighting using red compact light bulbs, using an up-to-date and cost-effective watering system in Long An, Hà Tĩnh, etc. that has created certain changes in the nature and extent of the participation of male and female farmers. For instance, in response to the application of advanced farming techniques in red-flesh dragon fruit (*thanh long ruột đỏ*) cultivation, some farmers interviewed in Long An have replaced the traditional growing method of dragon fruit “*leo trụ*” (single-pole climbing) with a new technique of *giàn sắt* (round/circular-metal frame) and the drip irrigation system. It was observed that this new advanced farming method reduced the workloads of some female farmers in watering the plants during the dry season. Also, the new method reduced the burden of men’s labour in setting and reinforcing cement poles for dragon fruit growing. As a result, these male farmers could reportedly help their wives with other

more “meticulous and gentle” (*tỉ mỉ và nhẹ nhàng*) activities that used to be undertaken by female farmers such as pruning, weeding and the sanitation of orchards. With the progress of technology, local people, especially some women are better able to control their production and rely less on their husbands in the cultivation methods such as the customary hiring of services for those who could afford it.⁹¹

Still, men bear the primary responsibility for using agricultural machinery and technology. Some women respondents in the upland, mountainous communes of Quảng Nam and Lâm Đồng remonstrate that men bear the primary responsibility for using machinery such as tractors, ploughs, and combine harvesters, though these are often contracted in together with drivers, only by a lessee who can afford it. Since such machinery is considered physically too heavy for women or technically too difficult or dangerous for women to handle.⁹² Furthermore, these machines are deemed unsuitable for wet-rice farming in the lowland fields as they are too big and heavy to carry and use in steep mountainous areas. In the households from which husbands migrate to work, women still consult their husbands about the work related to cultivation techniques, or the husband will return home to handle the problems, or take on the chores that are perceivably heavy and harmful such as tillage, harvest, and pesticide spraying. Whereas modern machinery and large-scale farming techniques are more suitable in rice production in the Mekong Delta provinces such as the study site of Long An. For instance, four-wheel tractors are more common than two-wheel tractors in the Mekong Delta region. It was observed that larger farmers are generally more likely to own tractors and provide tractor rental services to smaller and neighbouring farms. Most of the farm machinery is operated by men either as a tractor owner/operator or tractor-rental service provider/operator. This finding reveals that all technology is often considered to be within the purview of men. Gender norms with respect to men’s control of technology, information, and knowledge limits women’s opportunities

91 UN Women and IFGS (2015), *ibid*.

92 Nozomi et al. (2019), *ibid*.

to learn, use and benefit from labour-saving technology.⁹³

Barriers to women’s access to and utilization of agricultural extension services. Interviews with local residents reveal that agricultural extension services are carried out primarily by male cadres. This is because they usually need to travel across communes on difficult and empty roads. With these conditions, female cadres are at a disadvantage. This structure of the extension system itself adds further obstacles as the ability of the system to address women’s issues is limited. Male workers may not recognize or understand the work that women engage in or may not be able to communicate effectively with them. Women often cannot travel long distances to attend extension sessions owing to time, cost and child care responsibilities, as well as culturally specific restrictions, particularly among ethnic minority groups.⁹⁴ It is noteworthy that the responsibility of agricultural extension staff in some communes is to provide local farmers with a farming calendar with a schedule for irrigation and spraying pesticides which follow the growth cycle of plants.⁹⁵ During IDIs and FGDs with both Cơ Tu and Kinh women respondents from Nam Giang (Quảng Nam) and Châu Thành (Long An), they express a preference over female cadres in agricultural extension services. For these women it would be more receptive, because middle-aged women tend to be more reluctant approaching male cadres than young women. Combined with language barriers, illiteracy or low educational attainment, they may feel inhibited asking questions of the male extension agent. In that situation, the head of the family clan appears to be the main source of information about the development of agricultural production, access to loans and jobs for lots of middle-aged women in the visited sites. Additionally, discussions among women during social events were a vital source of information on agricultural and economic matters for rural women.

93 FAO (2015). *Running out of time: The reduction of women’s work burden in agricultural production*.

94 FAO (2015), *ibid*.

95 UN Women and IFGS (2015), *ibid*.

Men are generally more attuned to technical matters, and thus receive a greater proportion of technical assistance and extension services. Moreover, the topics covered do not necessarily meet women's needs because extension programs often aim for market integration and the improvement of cash-generating activities, fields that in many contexts are the traditional responsibility of men (as indicated above). Extension workers, or other agricultural staff, would usually invite the men to the dissemination events of agricultural technology and information. Since men are generally perceived to be more attuned to technical matters, they are more likely than women to participate in the Farmers' Union activities and be informed about new trends in cultivation and animal husbandry. Therefore, men are often perceived as the "real" farmers and receive a greater proportion of technical assistance and extension services, even for tasks and crops that women manage. Most of the women were not giving any guidance to agriculturally related technology.⁹⁶ A number of women respondents in all visited sites did not know where to find the extension workers and other agricultural staff as the husband is usually the one seeking out such information. With regard to agricultural extension and advisory services, a complex array of individual characteristics – including age, marital status, income, and educational attainment – as well as social categories such as ethnicity and gender influence the abilities of technicians to deliver the knowledge they have and the willingness and capacity of producers and processors, especially ethnic minority female small farmers to make use of the services offered.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

Restructuring production organizations

Box 9. Criterion 13 Production

[13.1] Commune that has cooperatives as regulated in the Cooperative Law 2012

[13.2] Commune that has associated production model tie in with key agricultural product consumption to ensure sustainability

The content restructuring production organization under the NTP NRD aims to support the development of cooperatives with various forms of linkage and cooperation; small and medium-sized businesses, start-up movement and innovation, creating a premise for households to develop effectively in agriculture, industry and service; contribute to the formation of the value chain from production to processing, consumption and ensure the harmonization of interests of participating stakeholders. In all visited provinces, the VWU has publicised and advocated for the need for support in constructing economic models, cooperative groups, and cooperatives. This was recently promoted with the Plan No. 143/KH-BTV issued on 27th April 2018 on the implementation of the National Project on Supporting Women's Start-up in the period of 2018-2025. VWU has taken initiatives to collaborate with other government agencies such as MARD, VBSP, VBARD and Cooperative Alliance to create favourable conditions for women-owned enterprises.⁹⁷

Significantly, **there are good practices of institutional support provided to women's start-up initiatives.** For instance, the District People's Committee of Đan Phượng (Hà Nội) realized the importance of institutional intervention and support to promote the establishment of vegetable Co-ops especially those led by women entrepreneurs. The district

⁹⁷ *The 2017 International Finance Corporation study report indicates that there has been an increase in the number of firms operated by women, i.e. 95,906 firms, representing over 21 percent of the total number of formal or registered enterprises in Viet Nam.*

and commune authorities have supported them in many ways, such as providing land for a “cold-storage facilities/warehouse” (*kho lạnh*), upgrading “intra-field tracks and pathways” (*đường nội đồng*), and promoting market accessibility. The district authorities have taken the initiative to invite the principals of 52 schools located in the district to attend the local Agricultural Fair to introduce local-grown vegetable products. Further to that “marketing” initiative, the district authorities have committed to provide a financial “consumption” subsidy to those schools if they purchase a “clean and traceable source” vegetable supplied by a local producer which would cost more than the market price option. As a result, it was reported that these vegetable supplies were deemed to be inadequate for meeting the increasing demand of the local market at the time of this study. Also, findings from interviews with VWU representatives suggest that membership in the Women Entrepreneurs’ Club such as Lâm Đồng Provincial Club of Women Entrepreneurs led to women’s higher performance in business leadership. In addition, membership in a microcredit programme may teach women entrepreneurs to be less tolerant of risk. It means that helping women business owners understand the value of entrepreneurship, women’s status in the family and society at large, and their role as agent of change can lead to their success and motivate them to try out new business ventures.⁹⁸

Findings from stakeholder interviews in all visited sites show that the current economic models, **cooperative groups and cooperatives are lacking sustainability** and heavily revolved around “achievement goals” (*chạy thành tích*). Cooperatives have underperformed and not developed appropriate production plans. There is no production and consumption linkage model for key agricultural products. Current solutions are only concerned about the selling price of agricultural products, with no specific solution on the application of technology and mechanization into production and processing to decrease

production costs and increase profits.⁹⁹ Moreover, in-depth interviews show that Cooperative establishment has lately become a local movement in many of the communes in the study. Cooperatives are community-based and rely heavily on mobilization. The majority of the population are farmers with limited free time, and currently there is no mechanism to advocate for their involvement. Therefore, no one would like to join a Cooperative, where much time would be spent trying to convince local people to be part of the new Cooperative. Despite of the absence of gender disaggregated data on the numbers of cooperative leaders and membership, local consultation reveals that there are economic models and cooperative groups (*Tổ hợp tác*) that have been established by women, with support from VWU, mostly in the fields of animal husbandry, gardening, and small-scale business, but unfortunately, they only seem to last for a short period of time and then are quickly dissolved.

There are concerns about women’s perceivably limited management capacity at production units.

Local residents tend to associate the term Cooperative with management, so they assign managerial tasks to men. It should be mentioned that the administrative requirements and procedure for establishing a cooperative are complex. Cooperative enterprise in the district applies the model of cooperatives in the whole commune (*HTX quy mô cấp xã*), not just certain hamlets (*HTX quy mô cấp thôn*). The chair of the commune cooperatives must exercise production and socio-political responsibilities because the chair of the commune cooperatives is also a member of the Commune/District Standing Committee. If it is a chairwoman, then probably there are certain limitations regarding women’s time constraints and gender stereotypes with respect to women’s access to markets and business connections. Likewise, most of the agricultural cooperatives are directed by men for the purpose of diplomacy, exchanges and to build up business relationships. There is an opinion among interviewed male residents that VWU cadres are only able to convince

98 Le, Quan V. and Peter V. Raven (2015). Women entrepreneurship in rural Vietnam: Success and motivational factors. *The Journal of Developing Areas*, Volume 49, Number 2, Spring, pp. 57-76.

99 Ban Chủ nhiệm Chương trình KHCN phục vụ xây dựng NTM (2019), *ibid*.

their own members to join. They do not have the influence to convince male residents, whereas some men tend to be cautious and do not want to be led by women. This reflects the traditional mentality of farmers, they are afraid people would gossip about the reason men would join cooperatives such as “the male members may have a crush on the female cadre manager, and their wives would get jealous”, as a male civil servant of Châu Thành (Long An) reasoned. Some male cadres recognized that women’s participation would be more suitable because they are more detail oriented. However, most interviewed male officials explained that women’s decision-making is often experience-based due to their limited management experience of production units.

Some women show reluctance to take a leadership role in cooperatives. In-depth interviews with women in the five studied provinces indicate that women often hesitate in joining the Cooperative Committee because it demands regular exchange tours and study trips, which would be difficult for them to arrange with their family commitments. Still, some women tend to value family over other socio-economic responsibilities. The problems faced by women-owned microenterprises were found to be primarily due to a number of misconceptions on gender preconceptions such as women entrepreneurs are more risk averse than men in seeking finance, women only focus on small businesses “on the side”, or women having small children do not devote enough time to running a business. Conversely, it is systemic barriers and patriarchal social norms which still impede the profile and growth potential of women entrepreneurs and women-owned businesses.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, some women prefer running their own businesses, rather than joining local Cooperatives because they can manage their business individually and run it independently. It should be noted that these entrepreneurs are mostly middle-aged women with experience and networks built from years of work. They have long-term business relationships that would have taken any “beginner” traders’

100 International Finance Corporation (2017). *Women-owned enterprises in Vietnam: Perceptions and Potential*. World Bank Group.

irrespective of gender, a significant period of time to build up.

Technical, vocational education and training for rural labour forces

Box 10. Criterion 12 Employment

[12] Employed population: The percentage of people at working age are employed

The promotion of technical, vocational education and training (TVET) has been a policy of Viet Nam under the Project 1956, which has become an integral component of the NTP NRD since 2016. Since then vocational training in agriculture is the content set under the NTP NRD while non-agricultural technical training is structured into the NTP SPR.¹⁰¹ Therefore, vocational training on agriculture under the NTP NRD mainly aims at agricultural skills development rather than preparing the rural labour force for non-agricultural employment. Under these policies there are district-level centers that provide free-of-charge vocational training. There has been a great improvement in the quality and effectiveness of vocational training for rural labourers, but the results were still not impressive. The proportion of trained rural labour (including the number of labourers who have been trained but without a diploma, certificate) only increased from 15.45 percent in 2011 to 34.14 percent in 2016.¹⁰²

101 It is noted that the Decision 1600/2016 of the Prime Minister on the approval of the NTP NRD 2016-2020 incorporated the NTP SPR under the content on poverty reduction and social protection. However, in actual implementation, the two NTPs were managed and implemented separately.

102 Ban Chủ nhiệm Chương trình KHCN phục vụ xây dựng NTM (2019), *ibid*.

Vocational training courses were not really demand driven. In the visited areas, the local Department of Natural Resources and Environment has collaborated with the Farmers' Union and VWU to organize training seminars, science and technological exchange on prevention of diseases for cattle and poultry, knowledge exchange on fruit trees, lilies, organic vegetables and fruit tree planting. However, there was no evidence on the development of the training content with community participation subjective and grassroots cadres or the target beneficiaries. In fact, commune authorities proposed the content, often based on their subjective assessment of the local livelihood potentials, to the district authorities for their approval and allocation of required funding. This undermined the quality and effectiveness of these vocational training activities. This reflects the existing TVET programs, which are not market driven and lack linkages between government and private sector, and government and enterprises. The TVET system is still contingent on the old supply driven model, so training programs are not up-to-date with the high-speed transformation of the market. The market is constantly changing, as well as its demand that requires everyone to be updated regularly. In the lowland and urban areas like Hà Nội, short-term vocational training is challenging because the agricultural sector is decreasing and local residents have a better grasp of basic techniques from previous training. Therefore, it is getting more difficult to mobilize their participation. Notably, the young aspirants were not interested in vocational training on agriculture or livestock, but in fact were looking for labour market opportunities outside agriculture.¹⁰³

TVET recruitment schemes inhibit the participation of women more than 55 years old. In accordance to Decision No 1952/QĐ-LĐTBXH 19th December 2017 on issuance of the National Plan "Improving the quality of TVET for rural labour forces" under NTP NRD 2016-2020, the targeted participants belong to a specific working age group, meaning 60 years for men and 55 for women. Those who want and have the need for repeated training are usually older than these age thresholds but

are not eligible for the training opportunity. This implies a challenge to women above 55 age group since these women do not have access to TVET activities while they are still in good physical condition, even playing a major role in households having adult children working away from home. This also reflects the current retirement threshold of 55 years for women and 60 years for men which constitutes gender-based discrimination.¹⁰⁴ Even these rural women are not working in the formal sector with retirement protections yet there is still an expectation that women will retire (or being at that age group) to resume caring roles for their grandchildren. Such unequal treatment limits, in this case, women's access to training opportunities.

Women make up the majority in NTP NRD agricultural vocational training activities because they are more involved in small scale and home-based agricultural activities At the provinces visited in this assessment, it is observed that women (of working age group) make up the majority in these agricultural vocational training activities of the NTP NRD. This tendency can be explained by the intra-household gender dynamics in which women are more involved in small scale and home-based agricultural activities, while men are more likely to engage in non-farm wage employment. It is worthy of note that while women are often mobilized to attend these NRD related agricultural training courses, this does not mean that they have actually acquired the necessary technical skills in agricultural production. With respect to the application of technology mentioned earlier, when agricultural cadres organized training workshops it was aimed exclusively at male peasants. Since these TVET training sessions are not demand driven, the quality of technical information is not always updated, and therefore the outcomes are uncertain. Some female respondents told us these sessions last just a few days, offering little practical application, and the teaching methods were not suited to women with little educational experience. Some women cannot attend

¹⁰⁴ UN Women and DFAT (2017) *Brief: Informal Ambassadors / Heads of Agency Gender Policy Coordination Group Gender Review of Vietnam's Labour Code*.

¹⁰³ World Bank and CEMA (2019), *ibid*.

because these sessions are often held at night when they are engaged in domestic chores. This implies that the concerned TVET approach did not take women's diverse needs and social roles into account.

3.4 Gender considerations in poverty reduction and social welfare

The content of poverty reduction and social security is to effectively implement the National Target Programme for Sustainable Poverty Reduction (NTP SPR) during 2016-2020. The target is to achieve Criterion 11 on poor households in the National Set of Criteria on NTP NRD. The following discussion revolves around gender aspects of poverty reduction activities.

Box 11. Criterion 11 Poverty

[11] Poor household: The percentage of multidimensional poor household during 2016-2020 period

Under NRD as well as other programs (such as NTP SPR) there is **the principle of "giving priority" to women in poor households and ethnic minority women for participation in and benefit from the livelihood support programs**. With respect to poverty reduction, it has been reported that 62.3 percent of communes nationwide met the income criterion, 58.5 percent of communes satisfied the poor household criterion and 71.2 percent of communes realized production organization criterion by 2017.¹⁰⁵ From a gender perspective, NRD as well as other programs (such as NTP SPR) were designed with the principle of giving priority (*nguyên tắc ưu tiên*) to women in poor households and ethnic minority women for participation in and

benefit from the livelihood support programs. At the visited sites, VWU representatives mentioned the positive impact of credit and savings programs in fostering participation as well as fostering a model for better-off women in a village getting together to help one or more poor women rise out of poverty.

Rural livelihood activities for sustainable poverty alleviation were not diverse, being unable to meet the need of diversified livelihood patterns among women.

It has observed in all the visited sites that male labourers prefer to migrate to other provinces/cities to work as day labourers or to run a small business.¹⁰⁶ The women, are constrained by a traditional gender division of labour choosing to work nearer the home and take care of the children and undertake the farming work for the household. Therefore, the absence of male labour and the constraints on female labour alone can clarify the key role of women in production development and poverty reduction activities. Field results indicate that there is a lack of diversity in the list of production development support, focusing on a limited number of plants/animals. The most popular form of support is cattle raising (cows in lowlands areas and buffaloes in the uplands), machinery production and small-scale manufacturing in communes involved in Programme 135 (tractor, rice threshing machine, corn separator machine). Meanwhile in these same areas the list of livelihood support derived from IFAD or WB loans is much more diversified such as the raising of goats, sheep or cultivating medicinal plants. The lack of diversity in production development support can be traced to the lack of local people's participation in the planning process. In many instances while a commune is the main investor in a support project, the decision on what to invest is made by the district or provincial authorities. This may explain why production development support activities generally do not accommodate the needs to diversify livelihood support for women.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁶ Some men do not migrate out, besides engaging in agricultural production for their own family they also provide agricultural services for other households in their communes.

¹⁰⁷ CARE, Oxfam, and SNV (2019a), *ibid*.

¹⁰⁵ Ban Chủ nhiệm Chương trình KHCN phục vụ xây dựng NTM (2019), *ibid*.

Women's participation in the livelihood support programs – that may eventually result in a “double” burden for them – is explained by the gender division of household labour. In the visited locations, it has observed that women are deemed to be responsible for small-scale agricultural production activities which revolve around predominantly food crops and small-scale husbandry.¹⁰⁸ Meanwhile, men tend to be more involved in non-agricultural activities, especially as hired labour. In this regard, women's participation in implementing support production development projects will not automatically lead to an increase in women's status in the decision-making process. Therefore, women's participation in these production development activities, in some cases, may eventually result in a “double” burden for them. This indicates that time poverty is a critical gender dimension of poverty. Within this context, if activities to support production development do not have the necessary gender sensitivity to take into account that women are time poor, then this would unintentionally create a broad range of inequalities between men and women in the gender division of household labour.

The gender of the head of household seems to be a misleading proxy for intra-family power dynamics. It is noted that most of the livelihood support programs target the household farm production unit. The recent qualitative research found that the categorization of male-headed households or female-headed households does not seem to reflect the unequal situation of women who live in male-headed households. The gender of the household head seems to be a misleading proxy for gender relations. While male-headed households are composed of households in which both spouses are present, female-headed households are made up mostly of households in which a husband is not present, either by death, divorce, or migration. A woman could head a household if she does not marry (as among the K'Ho in Lâm Đồng and Khmer in Đức Huệ district of Long An). In such cases, it is important to distinguish between *de jure* female-headed households (headed by divorced or widowed women) and

de facto female-headed households (in which the husband is absent but may contribute to household finances). Furthermore, in male-headed households, particularly when the husband's parents make all decisions on expenditure, a young wife who does not have any access to household resources is in a vulnerable situation. This situation reveals the intra-family gender and generational dynamics of control between husband and wife, between parents themselves, and between parents and young couples.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, context-specific and gender-specific priorities and restrictions also need to be considered in NRD related programming.

3.5 Gender considerations in rural education development

Box 12 Criterion 14 Education and training

[14.1] Universal preschool for 5-year-old children, eradicate illiteracy, age-appropriate universal elementary education; universal secondary education

[14.2] The percentage of secondary school graduates pursuing higher education (high school, continuation or intermediate school)

[14.3] The percentage of employed people who have received training¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ World Bank and CEMA (2019), *ibid*.

¹¹⁰ The content of indicator 14.3 has been addressed in “Technical, vocational education and training for rural labour forces” part of this report.

¹⁰⁸ UN Women (2016), *Discussion Paper: Unpaid care and domestic work issues and suggestions for Vietnam*.

The content of rural education development focuses on four components including i) universalization of pre-school education for children at the age of 5; ii) eliminating illiteracy and prevention of re-illiteracy; iii) universalization of primary education; iv) universalization of secondary education. This content aims to achieve Criterion 14 in the National Set of Criteria on NTP NRD. The following looks at the community mobilization for children's enrolment.

Community mobilization for children enrolment has seen as one of incentives to achieve universal primary education.

Specifically, the programme for primary education universalization was designed for children age 6-14 who have not completed primary education. The programme for lower secondary education universalization was designed for adolescents' age 11-18 who completed primary education but have not graduated from lower secondary education.¹¹¹ The development of primary school and secondary education in rural areas has been rather successful in the sense that the percentage of enrolment at the prescribed age has seen constant improvement in recent years. In 2016, for example, the percentage of pupils attending schools in general and the percentage of pupils attending secondary schools are 89, 8 percent and 86 percent respectively.¹¹²

Peer pressure-related and individual factors influencing dropout represent a challenge for community mobilization for school attendance among the lowland children.

For ethnic minority children, school dropout prevalence is reportedly due to geographical distance between home and school and lack of social contacts leading to language barriers, including limited contact with outsiders in the national language. According to local consultations, in lowland rural areas school dropout is caused less by economic reasons or geographical distance

from school but more by peer pressure and other social factors. This poses a dilemma for local organizations in their efforts to keep children at school until they finish, as some VWU cadres in Quảng Nam point out. In some cases, if parents of poor households asked their children to stay home to become a farm hand the VWU cadres (in joint efforts with the teachers at times) could mobilize some contribution and financial help from local authorities or the community to poor households. Nevertheless, if there are "social factors" (peer pressure) involved in children's dropout the VWU cadres would need the "soft skills" of a social worker – something that not every cadre possesses.

Dropout in the years following lower secondary school or high school is found to be more prevalent among girls, especially ethnic minority groups.

Qualitative information from stakeholders interviewed in Đức Huệ (Long An), Nam Giang (Quảng Nam), and Di Linh (Lâm Đồng) reveal that in these areas populated by ethnic minority groups, keeping children at primary school and secondary education prove to be a formidable problem since boys want to quit early to find work and girls want to marry early. Although the school enrolment rates at the stipulated age are similar for ethnic minority groups and the Kinh ethnic group, the gap is wider in higher-level education. For secondary schools or higher levels, the Kinh ethnic group exhibit considerably higher levels of educational attainment.¹¹³ These numbers also suggest that many pupils from ethnic minority groups drop out after primary or lower secondary education. It is important to note the trend that ethnic minority girls attend the right educational level more than ethnic minority boys.¹¹⁴ However, dropout in the years following lower secondary school or high school is found to be more prevalent among girls. Older people in ethnic minority groups had higher illiteracy rates, particularly women.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ CEMA, Irish Aid, and UN Women (2017). *Figures on Ethnic Minority Women and Men in Viet Nam 2015. Based on the Results of the Survey on the Socio-economic Situation of 53 Ethnic Minority Groups in Viet Nam 2015*. Hanoi: UN Women.

¹¹² Ban Chủ nhiệm Chương trình KHCN phục vụ xây dựng NTM (2019), *ibid*.

¹¹³ CEMA, Irish Aid, and UN Women (2017), *ibid*.

¹¹⁴ *ibid*.

¹¹⁵ *ibid*.

Secondary-age children who do not attend school are vulnerable, particularly girls who face possible early marriage and adolescent pregnancy.

As a result of school dropouts, quantitative data from the 53 Ethnic Minority Survey indicate that ethnic minority girls tend to engage in the labour market much earlier than their Kinh fellows.¹¹⁶ By the age of 15, many ethnic minority girls have joined the workforce full time, while most Kinh girls of the same age continue attending school. This, in turn, hampers ethnic minority girls' ability to take advantage of emerging new jobs because of their location in remote communities, low skill levels, and language barriers. A cutting issue here is the tendency that secondary-age children who do not attend school are vulnerable, particularly girls who face possible early marriage and adolescent pregnancy. These young women's lower educational attainment may deepen further their dependency on their husband economically and may expose the women to intimate partner violence. Not surprisingly, adolescent girls who marry early achieve less education and subsequently have less earning capacity. More importantly, **adolescent pregnancy is an important cause of impeding life chances in both adolescent girl-mothers, and her child.** While targeting "gender equality" in the indicator 18.6 (including the objective of eliminating early marriages and forced marriages), and the objective of reducing the child undernutrition of the criterion 15 below, it is important to realize the link of dropout to early marriage, and possibly child undernutrition particularly among ethnic minority groups. Lowering the risk of dropout requires a broad set of policies aimed at reducing these underlying vulnerabilities.

3.6 Gender considerations in primary health care development

Box 12. Criterion 15 Health Care

[15.1] The percentage of people with health insurance

[15.2] The percentage of children under 5-year-old with malnutrition and stunting (height-for-age)

The content of primary health care development focus on the commune health center facilities, even though the primary health network (PHN) in Viet Nam includes villages, communes, wards, towns, and districts, which provide the most direct medical service for the people. The objective is to achieve Criterion 15 of the National Set of Criteria on NTP NRD. The following discussion investigates some aspects of gender in accessing grassroots medical services.

Health insurance schemes have achieved a wide coverage

Viet Nam enshrined universal social health insurance (SHI) coverage in the Decision No. 122/QĐ-TTg on 10th January 2013, approving the National Strategy to protect, care, and improve public health during 2011-2020. The national SHI targets were set to obtain over 90 percent coverage by 2020 and 95 percent coverage by 2025. Since then the GoVN has invested in the establishment and development of the primary health network in the new situation (Decision No. 2348/QĐ-TTg dated 05th December 2016). Health insurance development has become more intensified, covering 86,9 percent of the population in 2018. The proportion of women with medical insurance is slightly higher than that of men (56.11 percent versus 52 percent).¹¹⁷ Around 44.8 percent of all the ethnic minorities were provided with free health insurance cards (meaning around 6.67 million health insurance cards were provided free to the ethnic minorities). In recent years, the provision

¹¹⁶ *ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *FAO (2019), ibid.*

of free health insurance for the poor and ethnic minorities contributed significantly to the willingness to seek help from healthcare services. With the improvement of healthcare, many Cơ Tu and Khmer respondents reportedly no longer had much need to visit the traditional healers.

CHC is not directly sensitive to gender, lacking essential equipment in medical examination and treatment. Up to 2018 there are more than 80 percent of Commune Health Centers (CHC) eligible for services. The 2015 Vietnam district and commune health facility survey indicates that all surveyed health facilities have electricity, almost all have toilet facilities, and most have waste water and solid waste treatment systems.¹¹⁸ The 2015 Socio-Economic Survey of 53 ethnic minority groups shows that 68 percent of CHCs are in solid structure buildings, serviced by 26,557 commune health staff (of which 12 percent are doctors and 49 percent are ethnic minorities).¹¹⁹ In the present study, a number of visited health stations do not have separate consulting rooms for men and women. Some do not have toilet facilities in the maternity sections. Some CHCs in the upland areas lack a source of clean water.¹²⁰ According to local consultations, the equipment has been degraded and there is a lack of essential equipment in medical examination and treatment. Even at a CHC of Đan Phượng District (Hà Nội) the only ultrasound machine was purchased six years ago. There is no ultrasound machine for obstetrics and gynaecology examination. This reflects a lack of consultation with local health staff on gender-responsiveness throughout the project planning and implementation process.

The generally poor quality of CHCs have adversely affected attendance by rural populations. In most rural settings, depending on the distance between their houses and district health centers and other medical facilities, patients still tend to prefer higher-level hospitals. This has something to do with their long standing habits and the

generally poor quality of CHC such as: lack of medical equipment and well-trained personnel and inadequate sanitary conditions.¹²¹ Gender differences in access to services also exist, with 43.6 percent of women using medical services compared to only 34.6 percent of men.¹²² It has been reported in other literature that health care-seeking behaviour is influenced by many patient characteristics such as by socio-economic status, gender and age.¹²³ Men are still underrepresented in primary care; it is difficult to understand why, and this is an ongoing issue. At the visited sites, mothers often go to these health stations to have their children vaccinated or to ask about nutrition problems. Furthermore, most CHCs did not provide preventive services for early detection and management of long-term treatment of patients with non-communicable diseases (especially hypertension and diabetes) in the community. According to a report by the World Health Organization (WHO), the number of NCD patients had increased considerably, accounting for 66.2 percent of the total diseases due to all causes in Viet Nam by 2012.¹²⁴

Access to birth and post-natal care is still unavailable to ethnic minority women in some uplands areas. In the recent decades, progress has been achieved in intervening reproductive healthcare/maternal, infant, and child health, especially in reducing maternal and infant mortality rates. In 2016, the GoVN issued a National Guideline on reproductive healthcare services, with the commitment to improve capacities of the primary healthcare system at ethnic minority regions and remote areas. However, recent statistical report shows that there is a significant difference in the results and accessibility indicators of reproductive healthcare/maternal, infant, and child health in various regions, ethnic

121 World Bank. (2016). *Quality and Equity in Basic Health Care Services in Vietnam: Findings from the 2015 Vietnam District and Commune Health Facility Survey*. Hanoi: World Bank.

122 FAO (2019), *ibid*.

123 World Bank (2016), *ibid*.

124 WHO – NCD, *Country Profiles, 2014*, and WHO, *Health statistics and information systems. Global Health Estimates for the years 2000 - 2012*: http://www.who.int/healthinfo/global_burden_disease/estimates/en/

118 World Bank (2016) *Findings from the 2015 Vietnam District and Commune Health Facility Survey*.

119 CEMA, Irish Aid, and UN Women (2017), *ibid*.

120 Clean water is defined as piped water or water from a protected well.

communities and low-income groups.¹²⁵ Some Cơ Tu (Nam Giang district, Quảng Nam) women respondents shared a view that pregnancy and childbirth are healthy and normal processes, and it is therefore not necessary to visit health professionals unless complications arise during pregnancy or labour. Among the three ethnic minority groups in this study, Cơ Tu appears to have the highest rate of home-based delivery (38, 70 percent), compared to Cơ Ho and Khmer (18, 40 percent and 8,20 percent respectively).¹²⁶ This confirms the results of other research that prenatal care visits are reported to be very low, and home-based delivery rates are high, especially among ethnic minority women in the Northern mountainous provinces, ranging from 40 to 60 percent.¹²⁷ Quantitative data from the Socio-Economic Survey on 53 Ethnic Minority Groups indicate that commune health centers are poorly equipped to provide, with only 20.5 percent of these health facilities were reported to have met national standards. Additionally, the lack of cultural sensitivity and language barriers among healthcare workers contribute to misunderstandings and a poor ability to communicate regarding health issues. Inadequate care and feeding practices for mothers and children, and inadequate access to health and environmental service are found as underlying determinants of a high prevalence of childhood undernutrition among some ethnic minority groups.¹²⁸ In this regard, recent data indicate that chronic childhood under-nutrition levels in largely ethnic minority regions in Viet Nam remain among the highest in the world.¹²⁹ As indicated in Section 3.5, there is a link between early marriage and child undernutrition, particularly among ethnic minority groups.

125 UN Women. 2017. *Đánh giá giới trong ứng phó với HIV tại Việt Nam*. http://www.un.org.vn/vi/publications/doc_details/557-danh-gia-gii-trong-ng-pho-vi-hiv-vit-nam.html

126 CEMA, Irish Aid, and UN Women (2017), *ibid*.

127 CEMA, Irish Aid, and UN Women (2017), *ibid*; World Bank and CEMA (2019), *ibid*.

128 Mbuya, Nkosinathi V. N., Stephen J. Atwood, and Phuong Nam Huynh (2019). *Persistent Malnutrition in Ethnic Minority Communities of Vietnam: Issues and Options for Policy and Interventions*. International Development in Focus. Washington, DC: World Bank.

129 *Ibid*.

3.7 Gender considerations in improving the cultural life

Box 13. Criterion 6 Culture infrastructures and facilities

[6.1] Commune has a community house or multi-purpose room and a sports field for cultural and sporting events of the entire commune

[6.2] Commune has playground, entertainment and sporting locations for children and the elderly as regulated

[6.3] The percentage of village and hamlet has a community house or common cultural and sporting space for community activities

Box 14. Criterion 16 Culture

[16] The percentage of hamlet, village achieved the cultural standard as stipulated

There are two components within the content of improving the cultural life, which are (i) construct, develop and improve the efficiency of primary cultural and sports institution systems; and (ii) expand best models on regional and ethnic cultural identity and traditions promotion. The target is to achieve the Criterion 16 on culture of NTP NRD. It is necessary to note that Criterion 16 is considered a “super criterion” because it covers a wide range of other criteria of NTP NRD such as Criterion 6; 9; 10; 11; 12; 14; 15; and 17, and fulfilling this criterion is equivalent to completing many other criteria. Cultural support in NTP NRD is primarily emphasized on infrastructure and other superficial aspects, such as building assembly halls.

With the Assembly Hall facilities newly upgraded/built under NRD, many residents, particularly women were enthused to be able to participate in cultural, sports activities, and residential meetings there.

Another example of socio-economic infrastructure development under NTP NRD is the construction of the Assembly Hall at hamlet level. The proportion of communes with cultural houses increased from 30.6 percent in 2006 to 58.6 percent in 2016. In some provinces and cities under direct management of central government, more than 90 percent of communes have cultural houses. 98.3 percent of communes have legal bookcases (97 percent in 2011). The proportion of communes with loudspeaker systems increased from 81.4 percent in 2011 to 89.6 percent in 2016.¹³⁰ During this study at both “unqualified” and “reached the finish line” communes or those that are moving toward a “model” commune in Hà Tĩnh, Hà Nội, Lâm Đồng and Long An, interviewed residents, particularly women were enthused to be able to attend cultural, sports activities, and residential meetings at the “Assembly Hall”, and to a lesser extent contribute to the recommendations for village infrastructure improvement/building.

Gender responsiveness is not necessarily guaranteed. Observations from some villages of communes with NRD achievement, the restrooms of the villages do not have a hand-washing area, soap, trash can, toilet, and some have “loose” doors to separate male and female restrooms. In this regard, even at villages of “reached the finish line” commune, this aspect of gender responsiveness is not necessarily guaranteed. This reflects a lack of consultation with local residents on gender-responsive dimensions. Ensuring to provide female-friendly sanitary facilities at the Assembly Hall makes it more comfortable for women residents to partake in the public activities. It should also be noted that rural infrastructure building such as the Assembly Hall does not consider the needs of accessibility of people with disabilities (PWD). It is important to provide opportunities for PWD, and especially women with disabilities (WWD) to participate

in social activities and increase their ability to live and integrate into the community. Therefore, it is vital that commune people (ensuring the full and equal participation of women) are consulted at the early stage of an infrastructure project’s development in accordance to the Circular 09/2010/TT-BXD (as mentioned in Section 3.1 of this report).

3.8 Gender considerations in rural environment protection

Box 15. Criterion 17 Environment and food safety

[17.1] The percentage of household using clean and sanitized water as regulated:

[17.2] The percentage of production – business – aquaculture and craft village facilities follow environmental protection regulations:

[17.6] The percentage of household that has toilet, bathroom, sanitized water tank and ensure the 3 cleanliness:

[17.7] The percentage of animal husbandry household with cage to ensure hygiene:

[17.8] The percentage of household and food production and business facilities follow food safety regulations:

¹³⁰ Ban Chủ nhiệm Chương trình KHCN phục vụ xây dựng NTM (2019), *ibid*.

The content of rural environmental protection consists of three components, including (i) improve sanitation conditions, awareness raising, change sanitation behaviours and reduce environmental pollution; (ii) build green-clean-beautiful landscape; and (iii) remediate pollution and improve polluted craft villages. The target is to fulfil Criterion 17 on environment in NTP NRD. The discussion emphasized the gender analysis of environmental protection, as of in the “Three Clean” campaign of the VWU. As indicated earlier in Section 2.1, the VWU has been assigned an implementing role in NRD, especially the component Three Clean’ (i.e. clean house, clean kitchen,¹³¹ and clean residential lane – or “*sạch nhà, sạch bếp, sạch ngõ*”) of indicator 17.6 apart from having hygienic toilet, bathroom,¹³² and water tank.

Women are the key force in the village cleaning and rural environment protection

All of the interviewees confirmed the key role of women and the VWU in building NRD, in which women are both the subject and the beneficiary of NRD. Especially, in the campaign “Women actively build clean houses, beautiful gardens and contribute to the building of NRD”, women are the key force in the village cleaning and rural environment protection. In addition to these officially recognized achievements, interviews with the residents and VWU officials demonstrated that this major role imperceptibly further emphasizes the gender stereotypes about which tasks are “suitable” for women, and the secondary position of female members (in terms of the accessibility of activities that will generate income for the family, especially in the non-agricultural sector), and the VWU (in relation to other mass organizations and government agencies). From the implementation perspective, village cleaning is assigned to four mass organizations (VWU, Farmers’ Union, Veterans’ Association, and Youth Union) to alternately manage (each mass organization will be usually in charge for ten days). Nonetheless, women always make up the majority of participants. This is

131 For typical rural housing, kitchen is usually separated from the main house.

132 For typical rural housing setting, shower facilities are not installed in the toilet. Instead, “bathroom” is a separate facility and not necessarily attached to toilet.

because within the Farmers’ Union, women are also members of the VWU, so when they have to appoint a member of the household to participate, it is always a woman. Even though the majority of members within the Veterans’ Association are male, according to local people, men often ask for sick leave and send their wives to “represent” them; the Youth Union is in fact the “thinnest” force in the research sites, because most of their members are either in school or out-migrated for work, so eventually, it is still their mothers and older sisters who take their place. Apparently, the key lies in who is in charge and the influence that mass organization has over its members.

Gender stereotypes associate women and the VWU with certain tasks that are perceived as appropriate for them

Further analysis from the perspective of gender reveal a wide-held perception that the VWU is still focusing on “beauty” criteria, so they are suitable with movements such as setting up and maintaining “roadside flower borders” (*đường hoa*). While the Farmers’ Union is all about new technological application in planting, husbandry, and those that are related to income-generating activities. Creating “flower lined streets” is a community activity that takes care of the roadside and very often requires local residents’ enthusiasm. Another example is the clean field model, which is in direct relation to farmers, but if the chairman of the Farmer’s Union does not implement this, the VWU would take care of the “cleaning” task. In this regard, women are perceived as always more enthusiastic to take up this particular “gendered” element of NRD. This is highly gendered, further perpetuating a general perception that “women’s issues” are dealt with by VWU and are not, therefore, the professional responsibility of other government agencies. Therefore, other mass organizations are perceived as not as efficient as VWU in the campaigns advocating for the involvement of all residents in village cleaning. Some male official respondents perceived that often women would only do “light” tasks, such as pruning flowers, and weeding, while men handle the “heavy” work such as removing chain-link fences and cutting down trees. The male officials’ distinction between “heavy” versus “light” work reflects their own

perceptions and awareness of gender capacity that influenced their implementation of NTP NRD activities. However, information collected from the focus-group discussions with women residents showed that even during such public labour sessions, they are always “ready” to work together with the men in doing those so-called “heavy” tasks.

There is a power dynamic between VWU and other more male dominated mass organizations A closer look into the institutional collaboration on “Three Clean” campaign implementation demonstrates a power dynamic between VWU and other more male dominated organizations such as the Farmers’ Union. This means that when VWU proposes the “Three Clean” planning to the local authorities if the Farmers’ Union does not propose to cooperate with VWU, then VWU is not entitled to request the Farmers’ Union do so. This ‘on the ground’ condition reflects vividly the sub-component of NRD implementation that has been officially mandated to Women’s Union as stipulated in the Decision No. 1600/2016 QĐ-TTg (as mentioned in Section 2.1). In some “not-yet achieved NRD” communes, the local authorities e.g. *cấp ủy và chính quyền* acknowledged this reality, so they directed the Veterans’ Association (whereas male members are also fathers) to sign a document committing to cooperate closely (*Bản cam kết phối hợp*) with the VWU in cleaning the village, and not only targeting women, but also men to raise awareness, change behaviour, and actively participate in building the NRD. Looking into the perspective of the organizational structure, consensus on the coordination between the Veterans’ Association and VWU in implementing community activities has confirmed the necessity of engaging both men and women. These activities have traditionally been overlooked and often directly associated with women. This has contributed to informing community members of gender roles. At provincial level, likewise, the Farmers’ Union of Hà Tĩnh is working with the VWU to develop the Proposal for propagating and advocating for environment cleaning that is expected to be implemented in the near future. Other mass organizations still maintain the mentality that community campaigns such as “Five No, Three

Clean” are not relevant to them. There should be direction from the Party Committee to assert that while VWU is the focus, other mass organizations must still collaborate with VWU.

Under VWU, there are some examples of flexibility in the implementation of the “Five No, Three Clean” campaign to make it fit locally specific characteristics

Regarding organizational structure within VWU, the “Five No, Three Clean” campaign has gone into depth – in the direction that Central VWU assigns Provincial VWU to flexibly select some of the criteria in “Five No” for implementation. Therefore, Provincial VWU has adjusted the programme to be suitable to the local situation, then assign to the district unit, which in turns directs the commune branch. Specifically, the provincial VWU needs to choose “two No” as major criteria, such as “No poverty” and “No Domestic Violence”. Other criteria will be assigned to the district VWU according to local conditions and context. For instance, Quảng Nam Provincial VWU has selected “Three No” depending on the specific characteristics of their locations. For highland and mountainous areas, it would be “No early marriages” (*Không tảo hôn*). For lowland districts like Núi Thành, it would be “No selling un-sanitized food” (*Không bán thực phẩm bẩn*); for Đại Lộc, one of the noting issues is “No usury” (*Không tín dụng đen*); for Điện Bàn it would be “No traffic violations” (*Không vi phạm giao thông*). This direction is said to be more expedient and creates favourable conditions for all levels of the VWU to flexibly select eminent issues, then build plans and request for funding from the local authorities. That way VWU activities also contribute to solving these issues within the vicinity. Nonetheless, this direction has some inconsistencies in the monitoring, administration and management procedure.

3.9 Gender considerations in strengthening the socio-political system

Box 16. Criterion 18 Political system and legal accessibility

- [18.1] Qualified officials and commune civil servants
- [18.2] Having all organizations in the political system
- [18.3] Commune Party and authorities are recognized as “Clean and Strong”
- [18.4] Socio-political organizations are classified as “good” and beyond
- [18.5] Commune to meet the standard for people’s access to legal knowledge and information
- [18.6] Ensure gender quality and prevention of domestic violence; protect and support vulnerable people in the fields of family and social life

The content of strengthening the socio-political system focuses on improving quality, promoting the role of Party organizations, authorities, and socio-political organizations in new rural development; improve and upgrade the quality of public administrative services; ensure and strengthen legal access for the people. The content aims to achieve Criterion 18 on political system, public administrative services and legal access in NTP NRD. There are seven sub-contents, including (i) knowledge training; (ii) socio-political organizations participate in new rural development; (iii) strengthen the Steering Committee and its assisting apparatus at all levels; (iv) implement the Plan for Emulation “National contribution to new rural development”; (v) improve and upgrade the quality of public administrative services; (vi) ensure and strengthen legal

access for the people; (vii) the campaign “Building Five No Three Clean”. This section focuses on assessment of the gender equality indicator 18.6, regarding particularly community awareness raising on gender equality, women’s political participation, gender-based violence service provision, and women’s access to financial services. The analysis is structured according to (i) how this criterion is understood/perceived by different stakeholders and beneficiaries; (ii) how this criterion is implemented in practices and what are the possible outcomes/impacts of its implementation.

Community awareness raising on gender equality

Changes among many men and women residents about the social roles expected of males and females in the family and in society thanks to the community awareness raising on gender equality. In accordance to Document No. 4999/LĐTBXH-KHTC on 12th December 2016 regarding the guidance on the implementation of NTP NRD criteria for 2016-2020, one of the objectives for the fulfilment of indicator 18.6 is to have at least two broadcasting programs on gender equality per month on the commune broadcasting system. Overall reflections from local participants at visited places are positive about the gender equality awareness raising programme on the commune broadcasting system. Considering the perception on gender roles, information collected from the interviews indicate that there are certain changes and transformations at the research sites. At “qualified” and “advance” communes, women and particularly male members (mainly middle-aged and the elder men) who participated in separate focus-group discussions asserted that the majority of men living in the village has been informed and has knowledge of gender equality (via newspaper, television and other community propaganda activities of the local mass organizations). Therefore, they volunteered to share housework and childcare responsibilities. It is remarkable that these men were happy and comfortable in doing this work, rather than displaying hesitation that this might cause them to lose ‘face’. Ultimately, they all acknowledged the necessity, advantage

and support for women to participate in key leadership roles at the village, as well as at administrative management levels. Even though all these men were “assigned” to participate in the interviews, they were “core” members that possess a certain prestige and respect in the village. The positive transformation obtained among these male individuals might lead to a ripple effect to other (male) members in the community.

Young men with little education and working at the low end of the labour market should be mobilized to engage

in community activities. Here it is worth noting that a large majority of these male respondents had participated in community organization activities such as those organized by the Farmers’ Union or the VWU. In other words, most of them are senior and core cadres who enjoy a certain respectability in their community owing to their social position and on account of their seniority in age and experience. Ordinary citizens, especially working men are mainly preoccupied with earning their livelihood, and thus might have little time and energy left for other activities. Therefore, it is not easy to recruit members of this group to join community activities. This reality helps explain the majority of women participating in community and voluntary activities such as the “Five No, Three Clean” campaign due to the absence of these young men. Seen from an intervention perspective, to recruit participants among other social groups such as (low income) working young men would require more time and effort. Further research should look into the link between the young men’s engagement in community activities and gender equality efforts, and their awareness of gender issues.

Women’s leadership and political participation

Human resource development policy has been implemented under indicator 18.6 within NTP NRD. The implementation of this indicator follows guidance from the Official dispatch No. 93/BNN-VPĐP on additional guidance on implementing indicator 18.6 in the NTP NRD at communal level 2016-2020 dated on 5th January 2018 (based on Official dispatch

No. 5180/LĐTBXH issued on 11st December 2017): proportion of female members in the commune committees is at least 15 percent; or there are female officials in the Commune Standing Committee and plan for key female leaders, when one of the key positions became available, arrange a female to fill up this position accordingly.

More women have risen into positions of leadership at different levels of state bureaucracy and administration.

At the grassroots level, local authorities pay attention to standardize and select staff who have completed high school education, provide professional training and ensure 100 percent of staff have a bachelor’s degree. Mass organizations attempt to train their cadres at different branches and associations of VWU and Youth Union, encouraging their cadres to pursue higher education. At both “qualified” and “unqualified” communes visited in this study, the majority has at least 15 percent of its committee members female. Yet in only a handful of the visited communes there was at least 1 female leader (including the following positions: Secretary of the Commune Party Committee, Deputy Secretary of the Commune Party Committee, Chairman of Commune People’s Committee, Vice Chairman of Commune People’s Committee, Chairman of Commune People’s Council, and Vice Chairman of Commune People’s Council). Within the scope of this study, it seems to be an exception with the case of “unqualified” commune of Hương Long (Hương Khê, Hà Tĩnh), the local authority has proposed three titles of Commune People’s Committee Vice Chairman, Commune Deputy Secretary of the Party, Vice Chairman of the Fatherland Front for capable female officials for the upcoming election at the grassroots Party Committee Congress for 2020-2025. Another progressive example is the planning of female cadres at district level of Mỹ Đức (Hà Nội). There is a current female district party secretary. At the commune level, there are three communes within the district that has a title of CPC chairwoman and two permanent party vice-secretary posts. These female cadres have been promoted from mass organizations, such as VWU, Farmers’ Union, etc. At hamlet level, there are cases where women are holding the positions of the village head and village

secretary, for instance, in Hà Tĩnh and Hà Nội.

Women's representation in key positions is small and tends to be at lower levels of government.

In five visited provinces, women's representation still remains low in key bodies of the Communist Party: the Politburo, the Central Committee, and the Secretariat. The civil service has a large share of women, but their representation in leadership positions is small and tends to be at the lower levels. For instance, in Lâm Đồng most sectors have women holding key leadership positions (i.e. accounting for 12.2 percent as the chairperson, and 12.1 percent as the vice chair), with exception in the fields of transportation and police. However, in Quảng Nam, even among sectors that have high percentage of female labour such as healthcare and education, there are no female leaders. There are multiple actors and agencies that have an impact on women's political participation. While it is well evidenced that there needs to be encouragement from family, especially the husband, the arrangement of human resources depends heavily on the mobilization of the Party Committee. Research evidence indicates that to this agency, women have not been promoted to influential positions. Women constitute only 18.3 percent of Party leadership at the commune level, 14.2 percent at the district level, and 11.3 percent at the province level.¹³³

A positive change in perceptions around women's leadership but multiple barriers to women's political participation still remain.

Information collected from interviews with the residents and officials indicate their support and acceptance of the advantage of having women holding leadership roles, such as "women have the ability to advocate flexibly and more convincing than men, meticulous and careful" (which is needed in storing files and documents). Many respondents remark that "tasks that are assigned to women will be completed successfully"; "village head is not a hard position with a focus on propaganda, in which women will succeed. Women are more in number, and in every meeting, they are of majority and their voices are stronger".

133 ¹³⁶ UNDP (2013). *Women's Leadership in Viet Nam: Leveraging a Resource Untapped*. Hanoi: UNDP.

Some comment further that "people tend to prioritize and stick up for women. In case of shortcomings, women are more likely to be forgiven, which does not happen to male cadres. People do not criticize and complain. Men sometimes get carried away by friends, so if their wives and children intervene, they will tend to listen and do not fight back". However, these changing attitudes to women's leadership do not reflect the reality of women's political participation. The reasons for the limitation of women taking part in political sphere, leadership and management are fivefold including (i) a question of women cadres' educational attainment; (ii) women's inferior-learning-attitude toward leadership and internalized priorities for family duties; (iii) an existing cavity within human resources management; (iv) a need for an open-minded leadership; and (v) a fading interest in State sector jobs among some female youth.

A shortage of qualified female staff versus women's limited access to training opportunities.

First, the problem lies at the average education of women cadres who are primarily high school graduates. Prior to NTP NRD 2016-2020, if the potential candidates for staff training and capacity development programs were studying at undergraduate level, then they might have their diploma submission waived during the recruitment process with the condition of a later submission. At present the candidate must have a university diploma in order to apply from the beginning. If they have graduated but not yet received the diploma, then the application will not be accepted. In this regard time constraints (primarily owing to unpaid care work) limit women's access to training opportunities. Whereas male cadres tend to have more time to invest in higher education, such as capacity development and post-graduate education. Women are often occupied with their household chores, so they cannot arrange the time to attend this extra training. Especially, women in rural areas face the challenge of combining education and training with farming, household, community and care responsibilities.¹³⁴ Therefore, it is difficult for women to compete against their male counterparts.

134 FAO (2019), *ibid*.

Some women tend to avoid leadership roles because of work and family balance, but not all. Similar to the discussion at Section 3.3 about the persistence of the “glass ceiling”, there is a widely-held preconception about women’s inferior-learning-attitude toward leadership and internalized priorities for family duties. Interviews with different stakeholders (men and women, local cadres and residents) indicate that women do not seek leadership jobs because of work and family balance. Women participate with enthusiasm when the community movement has launched, but they do not want to be promoted in the local power structure. It is not simply that women do not want or cannot handle the responsibility. And not all of them are struggling to balance work and life or are planning to have children. That assumption is false, in fact, there are quite a few factors that contribute to why women are reluctant to take such a huge leap. The following illustrates further.

Another issue is a cavity within human resources management in many communes. Women enter the management structure and rules that have generally been established decades prior by men. There are not enough role models. According to local consultations women leaders take more interest in promoting gender equality. But there has been only a handful of key female leaders, so other female cadres tend to have low self-esteem. For instance, in some visited communes of Mỹ Đức district (Hà Nội) there is likely no tradition of female leadership and that has been an unwritten rule. This partly explains why human resources planning has been going on for years, but there is only a handful of female cadres on the Standing Committee. No one has ever considered this an issue, so it has formed a cavity within human resources management in many communes, to leave alone the higher administrative levels. At the provincial level, voting sessions for leadership positions have a fixed percentage for the number of female cadres. In some cases when female cadres run for a position, they often failed at the voting stage. Also, when women are hired or promoted, some Vietnamese employees have qualms reporting to women in leadership. There are also disproportionately high expectations for women leaders, creating a double standard in how their leadership is evaluated. Many expect

women leaders to be beautiful, well-dressed, articulate, modest, and flexible in leadership style; expectations not held for men.¹³⁵

There is a need for an open-minded leadership. It all boils down to the fact that having female cadres in key positions at committee and government levels requires an open mind from the leaders. It depends on whether the leaders are interested in considering this matter; whether they are confident to implement it because the leader is required to direct the potential staff every step of the way. For example, if there is a plan to promote a female cadre to a leading position, then she should be provided with the opportunity to become acquainted with the job over time, so that when the promotion comes, she is ready for it. The important thing here is to change the mindset and perception of the leaders. Patriarchal attitudes are still common in Viet Nam, including in the workplace, where there is a pervasive stereotype that men are more capable than women. As a result, when there are two equally qualified candidates for a leadership position or elected office, employers and voters tend to choose men over women on the perception that they are more capable leaders. It is related to the assumption that women’s primary concern is family and children.

According to anecdotes of some young, educated women are not keen on assuming local civil service positions. According to local consultations, it has observed that some university graduates seem not to be keen on applying for local civil service positions, because they perceive it to have low income and high work pressure. Many interviewed representatives of grassroots authorities raise concerns about cadre recruitment and allocation. Because when a graduate student is hired, the Party Committee cannot promote the staff right at the beginning, to even be a member of the Party, let alone holding leadership role. The potential candidates always must work at a position for approximately five years. In the current

¹³⁵ International Finance Corporation (2017). *Women-owned enterprises in Vietnam: Perceptions and Potential*; UNDP (2013). *Women’s Leadership in Viet Nam: Leveraging a Resource Untapped*. Hanoi: UNDP.

context young people “get tired” of working for the government under “temporary contract” conditions (*làm hợp đồng*) for a long period of time. They will have to find and work in other sectors for a living. Youths also lose interest in working in governmental agencies because of low pay and high complexity compared to other jobs in the private sector available in their vicinity.¹³⁶ From the perspective of gender, women and men may start in a particular job at the same time, but women receive lower pay, move up more slowly and rarely reach the top. Therefore, there were anecdotes of some female university graduates who had no interest in applying for a state-sector job, or participating in political organizations and activities, but starting their own businesses. Furthermore, the grassroots staffing procedure is different from the district-level procurement, because “cadre planning” (*quy hoạch cán bộ*) means that promoting civil servants to be leaders. In fact, most of grassroots public civil servants were formerly mass organization cadres. Given rural provinces become increasingly exposed to a shortage of skilled and educated labour (owing to outmigration among rural youth) it has become an emerging issue in membership mobilization for mass organizations at grassroots level. This especially creates a challenge for Party membership development and cadre planning at grassroots units, which, in turn, limits the young candidate pool for selection process to higher-level units.

Gender-based Violence service provision

According to the guidance from Document No. 4999/LĐTBXH-KHTC on 12th December 2016 regarding the guidance on the implementation of NTP NRD criteria for 2016-2020, another objective of the 18.6 indicator is to have at least a “reliable address” or “emergency safe shelter” for domestic violence and gender-based violence survivors. In this regard, MOLISA promulgated the Standard temporary regulations on minimum conditions of Reliable address – Community temporary shelter in the Decision No. 1814/QĐ-LĐTBXH on 18th December 2018. Among five study provinces, there is only Lâm Đồng to recently initiate the establishment of a temporary shelter

model located in Đà Lạt City in 2019. There are no statistics available on the number of “Reliable address – Community temporary shelter” at the grassroots level. In all the NTP NRD documentations provided by relevant stakeholders in the five study provinces there is no mention of achievement of this specific objective. It is usually reported under the indicator 18.6. There was only a report of the VWU district of Mỹ Đức (Hà Nội) made available to the research team, indicating a total of 66 existing “reliable addresses” (*địa chỉ tin cậy ở cộng đồng*) in the district.¹³⁷

“Voluntary” private residences are usually mobilized for the function of “reliable” address or “temporary shelter”, inhibiting effective gender-based violence service provision. According to local consultations in five visited provinces, all communes have a “reliable” address model (*mô hình địa chỉ tin cậy ở cộng đồng*) and temporary shelter (*nhà tạm lánh*). At both “unqualified” and “qualified” communes, the private residence of selected “core” officials, such as head of the village, chairwoman of the local VWU or Chief police, is usually utilized as a “reliable address” or temporary facility for domestic violence survivors. At the private residence, the “voluntary service providers” do not have professional medical knowledge and skills, so they can only provide some sort of emotional support. This creates inconveniences for these local cadres themselves because there are also other residents in their house. Furthermore, it also puts them at the risk of being threatened and avenged by the perpetrators and their family. For instance, some safety concerns have been raised about the solution of mobilizing the private home of the VWU chairwoman to be used as a “reliable address”. A local VWU cadre expressed her concern that “When I take care of other women, who will do the same thing for me? What if my husband hits and throws me out of the house? Where will I run to?”

Existing public facilities are also utilized for the purpose of “reliable address” without a victim-centred approach. At other communes (both NRD “achieved” or “not-yet-awarded” communes), the local executive

¹³⁶ World Bank and CEMA (2019), *ibid*.

¹³⁷ VWU Mỹ Đức District. Báo cáo đánh giá 10 năm thực hiện Luật Bình đẳng giới. Dated 23rd October 2019.

committee and authority use the Commune Health Center (CHC) as “reliable address” instead of private home address in order to mitigate barriers for the survivors in seeking out for support and intervention services. However, there are mixed opinions about using CHC as temporary shelter because most of the medical staffs working nightshift are usually female, and very often without security guards. The concern is if the domestic violence survivors come to seek help, and the abusers also come looking for the survivor, the staff may not be able to handle the situation. The bright side of having CHC used as “reliable address” is that there will always be medical staff available to provide first-aid to the survivors. There is a commune in Điện Bàn district of Quảng Nam that uses its post office (where living spaces are arranged for female workers on the nightshift) as temporary “shelter” facilities. Some of the interviewed officials suggest that a better option is to come to the People’s Committee Hall or the Police Station which also have waiting rooms that can be used as temporary shelter for domestic violence survivors. Furthermore, there is a belief that voices and intervention from the police and local authority will be more effective to the perpetrators. Seen from the women survivors’ perspectives, they prefer to seek shelter at other women’s houses rather than coming to the People’s Committee or Police Department. Even when they were hit and wanted to bring the issue to court, they still prefer to turn to women associates for sharing and consolations.

Budget constraints are cited for the absence of the standard shelter. The question is for what reasons there is so far non-existence of a “real” (standard) temporary shelter at commune level. Among five study provinces, there is only Lâm Đồng to recently initiate the establishment of temporary shelter model located in Đà Lạt City in 2019. Some interviewed officials have raised concern about the sustainability of this pilot project, for instance, how to maintain and allocate human resources after the project has terminated in the next few years, though. It goes back to the financial constraints. In all study provinces there is a shared opinion that at commune level the local authorities do not have the necessary resources to invest in the standardized

model of temporary shelter, as regulated by the Decision No. 1814/QĐ-LĐTBXH on 18th December 2018 of MOLISA promulgating the Standard temporary regulations on minimum conditions of Reliable address – Community temporary shelter.

Gender-based violence prevalence has been shrouded by a conspiracy of silence.

Moreover in all visited provinces male officials and residents asserted that physical violence ‘rarely occurs,’ so there is no survivor coming to these “reliable addresses” for support or intervention. “Not many people will come because they are only angry at each other for a few days, then get reconciled” as a CPC chairman in Lâm Đồng commented. In fact, VWU cadre respondents in Quảng Nam revealed that victims of human trafficking are more likely to come to the CHC for first-aid than domestic violence survivors. In this regard, it should be mentioned that Criterion 19 requires communes to meet certain safety standards for security, social order, and peace, a proof of no cases of “social evils” (*tệ nạn xã hội*) in the entire residential area. This requirement may facilitate a tendency among local authorities to avoid and even reject cases of domestic violence. According to the interviewed VWU cadres, the official labelling of “social evil” might also ward off the victims from sharing, seeking support and intervention from local mass organizations or authority. Moreover, the common misconception of domestic violence that only includes physical violence, very often ignores other forms of domestic violence, such as mental, financial abuse and sexual violence. More importantly, the use of private residence of VWU cadre indicated above as “reliable address” appears to be in direct conflict with the role of the VWU in the local Reconciliation Unit (*Ban hòa giải*). In some cases, this led to the situation whereby the VWU cadre would facilitate reconciliation between an abusive man and his female partner. As research shows, reconciliation cannot fix the underlying cause behind why the violence occurs, or provide an adequate solution for survivors.¹³⁸ It has

¹³⁸ Mike Perkins, Louise Cotrel-Gibbons, Huong Thu Nguyen (2017). “The Vietnamese police response to family-based violence: The family unit under pressure”. In Diana Peterson and Julie Schroeder (Eds) *International Response to Domestic Violence*, pp. 147-164. London: Routledge.

been reported that 77 percent of reconciliation cases did not produce the expected outcome, resulting in continued violence against the survivor.¹³⁹ Adding to this social conspiracy of silence, the content of broadcasting the programme on gender equality in general, gender-based violence in particular (as an objective of the indicator 18.6) was reportedly limited to the introduction of a Law on Gender Equality and a Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control. Against the backdrop of cultural values on “family reputation” and the women’s responsibility to “maintain family harmony”, women survivors are not likely to speak out about their victimization, except in serious cases that involve serious injury or are life threatening.

Box 17. Criterion 19 National defense and security

[19] Commune achieves safety in terms of social security and order, ensures peace: no crowd demonstration; no serious crimes; criminals and social evils (drugs, theft, robbing, gambling, addiction) are controlled and constantly decrease compared to previous years.

Women’s access to credit

Providing women with access to preferential loans is a great achievement in rural development.

It should be mentioned that formal credit is mainly provided by state-owned banks such as the Vietnam Bank for Social Policies (VBSP) and the Vietnam Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (VBARD), Credit Support Funds, as well as some micro finance initiatives. The subsidy credit programs for the poor and for policy beneficiaries (target groups of government policy) were also implemented at VBSP with a wide range of beneficiaries in more than 20 credit schemes. Each programme has specific objectives varying from the credit lines

¹³⁹ Ibid.

for the poor and “near poor”,¹⁴⁰ labour export, housing for the poor, job creation, credit to finance for education of students and pupils, credit line for clean water and rural sanitation, and small and medium-sized enterprises (SME). It has been estimated that nearly three million women from poor households and female-headed households have had access to loans worth more than VND 75.000 billion by 2017.¹⁴¹

Women’s access to preferential loans has been constrained by some loan appraisal procedures.

According to women respondents, the authority certification procedure does not facilitate favorable conditions for women who need loans. VBSP preferential credit lines rely on “entrusted loan” (*cho vay ủy thác*), meaning that the clients are not required to have collaterals. Instead, the local authorities are responsible to assessing, through mass organizations, the creditability of potential clients and provide “trust” guarantee for the clients to access to the VBSP credits. Even though VBSP only requires confirmation from the village head in the letter of authorization (handwritten letter signed by the village head is accepted). However, when given to the People’s Committee for authentication, the commune legal officer relies upon regulations in the Law on Notarization that require all family members to be present alongside the loan applicant. During these days many households have family members who either work or study at other cities/ provinces, and cannot travel back home to present their signatures, so the application is deemed invalid and the request for loan is rejected. Many people think that this procedure is overwhelmingly complicated, so some of them opted to not apply a loan from VBSP

¹⁴⁰ In Viet Nam the Multidimensional Poverty Index (MdP) was institutionalized by the Decision No. 59/QĐ-TTg dated 19th November 2015. Accordingly, the MdP consists of income and access to basic public services, including housing, water and sanitation, healthcare, education, and information. In that sense, a rural household is classified to be “poor” if the household happens to fall into either the following situations: (i) having income per capita of less than VND 700,000 per month; or (ii) having income per capita between VND 700,000 and one million VND per month and lack of access to at least three out of the ten indicators that reflect the access to basic public services.

¹⁴¹ Ban Chủ nhiệm Chương trình KHCN phục vụ xây dựng NTM (2019), *ibid*.

as observed in the study sites. Furthermore, for the most part the VBSP loans are small, especially if there is a high demand for a certain type of loan in a specific area. The maximum loan sizes VBSP provides is VND 30-50 million. There are usually 10-15 loans available each year in most of their rural branches due to a lack of capital. Recently, VBSP has implemented a new loan scheme via VWU that reaches VND 100 million. Interviews with some women residents reveal that it is extremely difficult for them to have access to this loan scheme, because the applicants must present a plan detailing how the loan will be used, and then that plan has to be evaluated to for maximum outcomes bring high productivity, which requires them to have certain assets such as a farm. While VBARD's loan size is higher but requires a land certificate and specific conditions such as having a business plan and a good financial performance during the past three years. This appears to be complicated for most rural informal business owners, and especially for women entrepreneurs.

A gap between the financial need of women owned businesses and credit availability.

The financial constraints would be exasperating for most microenterprises, which play an important role for Vietnamese women to generate income. According to figures from International Finance Corporation (IFC) 2017 study, 26 percent of all Vietnamese enterprises (93,224 enterprises) are women-owned.¹⁴² The same study found that 27 percent of the women-owned enterprises are small enterprises and 72 percent are micro enterprises. Most of these enterprises (61, 4 percent) operate in service delivery and a large part operate in rural areas. Only one per cent of the women-owned enterprises are in agriculture. In five visited provinces, both the local cadre and resident respondents point out that rural household-based business, and especially women-owned enterprises continue to be held back by a significant gap between their financing needs and the available supply. Since women entrepreneurs tend to run smaller businesses than men, this puts them at a disadvantage when accessing bank finance because banks prefer to work with larger loan sizes. It is noticed therefore that the larger amounts are mostly

¹⁴² IFC (2017), *ibid.*

provided to men because men are able to focus more on highly profitable businesses and are willing to take higher risks.¹⁴³ This finding reveals that women who have no immediate access to a guarantor, a husband or other family member, or have no regular income face more issues in accessing loans and encounter additional constraints to grow their businesses.

Recent initiatives on financial inclusion aim to improve women's access to financial services

It should be noted women and the poor's insignificant use of financial services is partly due to the lack of banking infrastructure in rural and isolated areas, the lack of formal identification documents, and low incomes. Additionally, financial literacy limitations of the population constrain the management of their potential risks and good financial decisions. According to a study on the financial capability of women in 27 countries funded by VISA,¹⁴⁴ Viet Nam has been ranked at the bottom (25th out of 27 countries). Ethnic minority women are particularly vulnerable to financial exclusion given cultural mores, financial illiteracy, as well as the technical and awareness barriers that they face. Against this background, a recent development to reach out to rural areas is the introduction of mobile phone transactions in Viet Nam. Since 2017 Vietnam Bank for Social Policies (VBSP) has successfully launched and rolled-out the SMS notification services across VBSP's nationwide network, aiming to improve access to financial services for low-income women, since women can now access the services from home without traveling long distances.¹⁴⁵ At five study provinces, VBSP women clients reported benefits from SMS notification services such as they are informed of their account balance and the due dates of the principal payments. More importantly, the SMS services helped build clients' confidence to continue applying for other loans from VBSP for their livelihood activities.

¹⁴³ NpM, *Platform for Inclusive Finance (2018). Financial services for women: agri-finance products for female farmers in Vietnam.*

¹⁴⁴ VISA (2013). *Visa's International Barometer of Women's Financial Literacy.*

¹⁴⁵ The Asia Foundation and VBSP (2020). *Impact Study – A Case Study Approach: Mobile Banking – Financial Inclusion and Economic Empowerment for the Low - Income Population and Women in Vietnam.*



Photo: UN Women/Hoang Hiep

4. Obstacles for implementation of gender equality in the NTP NRD

Section 2 and 3 have reported that gender-related issues are poorly reflected in both the design of the NTP NRD and the implementation in practices. This section is expected to point out the obstacles or rationale underlying such gender-related poor performances of the NTP NRD. The analysis is structured according to (i) lack of strategies, approaches, and implementation arrangements for gender mainstreaming in the NTP NRD; (ii) lack of budget and capacity to implement some gender-related contents in the NTP NRD; (iii) other obstacles for gender mainstreaming in NRD (e.g., gender bias, and other intersectional factors such as ethnicity, disability, etc.).

4.1 Lack of strategies, approaches, and implementation arrangements for gender mainstreaming in the NTP NRD

In this sub-section, the focus is placed on how the lack of an appropriate strategy for gender mainstreaming and lack of implementation arrangements have caused confusion and difficulties for the local in implementation of the NTP NRD with references to gender-related issues. This will be analyzed from the perspectives of the interviewed local cadres who oversee NRD implementation in practice.

Insufficient gender mainstreaming represents a risk to exacerbate gender inequality in the NTP NRD implementation.

How gender dimensions are reflected in the design and implementation arrangements of the NTP NRD was discussed in Section 2. Overall, gender equality is reflected in the current NTP NRD as a sub-thematic issue (rather than a cross-cutting issue). Gender equality is limited to one sub-thematic NRD indicator 18.6. In addition, the gender equality in this criterion was articulated in a relatively narrow definition of gender equality (as discussed in para 83). This constrains the space for any meaningful strategies and approaches for gender mainstreaming. Consequently, implementation arrangements for gender equality remain very limited. It is noted that insufficient gender mainstreaming and the lack of implementation arrangements for gender-related issues are not confined to the NTP NRD only. In fact, this echoes findings from many other policies and programs on rural development and poverty reduction in Viet Nam such as the NTP SPR.¹⁴⁶ This clearly calls for a change in how to mainstream gender issues in the NTPs after 2020.

The NRD planning represents a “grey” area in implementation of the NTP NRD. Planning for the NTP NRD is regulated by Decision No. 41/2015 of the Prime Minister and accordingly, annual planning of NTPs needs to be made in participatory manner and as a part of the local socio-economic development planning (SEDP). Circular No. 01/2017 of MPI provides further details on how to do annual planning for NTPs as part of the local SEDP. As a participatory process, this annual planning represents an opportunity for getting voices of women reflected in the priorities of the NTP NRD. As a

¹⁴⁶ CARE, Oxfam, SNV (2019a), *ibid*.

matter of fact, this Circular No. 01/2017 states that women must constitute at least 30 percent of the participants in the participatory planning meetings for NTPs. However, this remains the basic principle of gender mainstreaming and has not been translated into explicit mechanisms or guidance.¹⁴⁷ As a result, these planning arrangements were rarely made in practice. NRD is based on a pre-determined set of indicators and meeting NRD criteria is the only way to be recognized as “NRD” communes. Therefore, annual planning is basically to review what indicators are under-achieved and what is the level of resources available. At all the visited sites, the gender-related indicator (e.g., 18.6) was reportedly among indicators that were considered “not so difficult” to achieve given the “flexibility” in local authority application, monitoring and evaluation. In practice, the NRD annual plan is usually a top-down process from the provincial or district to the commune based on reviewing the NRD indicators. This basically disables the opportunity for local residents, particularly women to have their views reflected in the annual NRD planning process (as pointed out in Section 3.1). It is also noted that the space for participatory planning in order to identify priorities is limited as the target is to reach a pre-determined set of indicators.

Whether gender could be addressed in other criteria or indicators (rather than 18.6) is another “grey” area in the implementation of the NTP NRD. Consultation with the local cadres during the field visits indicate that gender could also be “integrated” into other indicators rather than singularly in the indicator 18.6. One possible area for gender to be enhanced is the indicator 14.3 (percentage of trained labour of those who have jobs). It was indicated that priorities could be placed on women to enhance their skills and hence access to wage employment opportunities. However, to do that, the local cadres would need clear guidance on whether prioritizing women in vocation training is justifiable, especially in terms of budget. Another example is the production support under NRD. To follow up Circular No. 05/2017 of MARD, a Manual on Implementation of the Production Support under the NTP NRD 2016-2020 was developed and approved with Decision No. 4781/2017 of MARD. In this Manual,

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

gender equality is not addressed. Some local cadres consulted during the field work indicated that they have thought about whether and how women could be prioritized in the production support activities. However, in the absence of any implementation guidance, they have chosen to follow the guidance rather than exploring some departures from Decision No. 4781/2017 to target women or female-headed households. Consultations in the field sites indicate that when encountering “grey areas”, local cadres tend to rely on existing guidelines rather than exploring proactive options and innovations.

4.2 Lack of gender-responsive budgeting in the NTP NRD

Under NTP NRD, there is only a limited budget allocation for VWU to implement the “Five No Three Clean” community campaign (which is also counted as ‘integrated budget’ in the total NRD financing package). This funding shortage can be explained by the lack of enforcement in the participatory planning which has disabled the arguably most important mechanism to get the voices and needs of women reflected in the prioritization for NRD components. Subsequently if there are inadequate considerations on gender related objectives and tasks with a respective allocation of funds for fulfilling the objectives set in the local annual financial plans, it can be potentially a good resource for rural women to access larger loans. Because there is usually additional funding from the annual local budget entrusted via VBSP regarding increased access to financial services in rural areas. Apparently gender integration in poverty reduction programs needs to be institutionalized by concrete provisions including a specific budget allocation. There should be clearer guidelines from the government regarding the role of women and most specifically of the local VWU in the process of setting up socio-economic development plans. Within MARD, Decision No. 91/QĐ-BNN-TCCB on January 13th 2016 Gender Equality Action Plan for the 2016-2020 period of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development can be seen as an institutional development plan of MARD

to ensure gender equality in MARD human resource development strategy. However, there is no mention of gender budgeting/adequate resources in the Annex of Concrete Guideline on the Organization of Implementation of the Action Plan. This has an effect on MARD staff's capacity development to implement gender equality agenda in the NTP NRD as addressed in Section 4.3 of this report.

A limited budget allocated to *Ban Vì sự tiến bộ của phụ nữ* (Committee for the Advancement of Women) is currently the budget line of public spending on regular activities for gender equality promotion.

As regards the implementation of indicator 18.6, the provinces usually allocate VND 15-30 million from the budget each year to *Ban Vì sự tiến bộ của phụ nữ* of various sectors to implement regular activities that promote gender equality.¹⁴⁸ This budget line is assigned to the Provincial Committee for the Advancement of Women, in which the Department of Labour, Invalid and Social Affairs (DOLISA) is the permanent agency. As representatives from the Department of Finance of five visited provinces indicated, this is the only budget line of public spending on regular activities for gender equality promotion. Along these budget lines, there are some thematic sessions about laws on gender equality, domestic violence prevention and control which were broadcasted through the local loudspeakers and held at commune level to raise community awareness about the issue. These elements were then eligible to be counted as local activities and efforts to fulfil the NTP NRD criterion 18, particularly indicators 18.5 and 18.6. It is worth mentioning that the main source of governmental budget for piloting the model "Reliable address – Community temporary shelter" is allocated from the target programme on developing social protection system for 2016 – 2020, as stipulated in Document 3201/LĐTBXH-BĐG on 03rd August 2017. Accordingly, Ministry of Finance has issued the Circular No 98/2017/TT-BTC on 29th September 2017 guiding the management and use of recurrent fund to implement the Target Programme on developing social protection system for 2016-2020, a maximum budget of VND 40 million is provided to commune authorities for supporting the

establishing and operating the model "Reliable address – Community temporary shelter" at grassroots level (Article 16). However, actual allocation of this budget depends availability of fund.

At commune level, the financial resources for women's and gender equality activities depend primarily on the level of support and attention of the local authorities.

While the financial resources allocated to women's and gender equality activities are still limited, the support from local authority to the VWU activities is of ultimate importance, as reported in all study sites. At commune level, the financial resources for women's and gender equality activities depend primarily on the level of support and attention of the local authorities. At the "not-yet-qualified" commune of Hương Long (Hương Khê, Hà Tĩnh), for instance, it is still considered to be a commune that pays close attention and direction to women's and gender equality activities. They have a commune chairman concurrent with the Deputy Secretary of the Commune Party in charge of the implementation and completion of Criterion 18 – annual budget allocated from the budget resources for propagation and advocacy activities of the VWU fluctuates between VND 1.5 to 2.0 million. To acquire additional financial resources, the VWU in all visited provinces raises funding from local organizations and private enterprises located in the commune territory, via the connection and direction of the local Party and commune authority.

4.3 Lack of adequate capacity for gender mainstreaming in the NTP NRD

A misleading impression that capacity development activities are sufficient.

Qualitative findings indicate that gender was not a primary subject in capacity development activities under NRD. In Document 5842/BNN-VPĐP on 18th July 2017 issuing training topics, fostering multi-level officials for building new rural development for the 2016-2020 period there were no

¹⁴⁸ UN Women (2015). *Gender Responsive Budgeting in Vietnam*.

requirements of gender equality and gender mainstreaming in the Training Programme. Implicitly, the topic is understood to be “integrated” in some other capacity development activities. Furthermore, the frequently targeted governmental officials of these training activities seem to be limited to those whose mandate are perceivably gender related such as the focal point in socio-labour or cultural affairs (e.g. at communal level). In fact, such capacity development activities could be more or less redundant at places.¹⁴⁹ As a consequence, gender awareness and gender mainstreaming are not well understood by grassroots officials and agricultural businesses, especially by men.¹⁵⁰ Empirical research indicates that most officials, especially those who are in leadership positions are absent from gender training courses and if they had already attended the training it was too long ago to remember the lessons. This has a significant impact on the results of gender mainstreaming in agricultural activities.

A “women-targeted” approach in capacity development. There is a misinterpretation that gender is solely *about* women, *for* women, and *by* women only, and thus too often by peppering the words “women” and/or “gender equality” across a programme document or law proposal the respective programme can be considered as gender responsive.¹⁵¹ Evidence reveals the content of these training courses (e.g. provided under the NTP SPR) is simply to introduce the existing legal frameworks on gender equality and domestic violence prevention and control.¹⁵² This is linked to the old-fashioned capacity development activities that are mainly focused to elaborate the policy and programs, their implementation mechanisms and organized in a one off manner. Advancing gender equality in the Agriculture and Rural Development (ARD) sector requires capacity and facilitation, and there is a need for capacity development

to implement gender equality agenda in the upcoming NTP NRD. Currently, policy measures that support women’s economic empowerment focus on improving the productive work of women, without adequately challenging the barriers that continues to disadvantage women. Because economic empowerment does not lead straight to gender equality. In other words, improving productivity by focusing on access to inputs tends to ignore the additional gender barriers that must be overcome to maximize effective use of these inputs to achieve equal productivity.¹⁵³ This finding confirms systematic barriers and patriarchal norms, which impede women from realizing their rights in the agriculture sector or benefitting from sustainable initiatives.¹⁵⁴ Not to mention that there is a tendency of sending female staff to attend capacity development activities related to gender issues.

Gender equality is not applied as a principle in the overall architecture and human resource of the NRD management structure.

Compared to the existing programs (such as the NTP SPR) and other policies, the NTP NRD is arguably the one that has developed the most comprehensive management structure from the central to the local level with the models of NRD coordination offices at the national and sub-national levels. How gender equality and other social inclusion are reflected in the actual implementation of the NTP NRD largely depends on the awareness and capacity of staffing in this management structure. The preliminary findings from the field visits indicated that gender is not an issue in the overall architecture and human resource of this management structure. Because Decision No. 1920 on specialized NRD official creates difficulties in arranging full-time NRD officials at provincial and district levels. Due to staff shortage, many communes cannot allocate a specialize official for NRD. This is related to Decree No. 92/2009/NĐCP which regulates

149 World Bank and CEMA (2019), *ibid*.

150 UN Women and IFGS (2015), *ibid*.

151 Reggers, Amy and Nguyễn Thu Hương (2019). *UN Women’s WEE Scoping Review: Mapping on women’s economic empowerment initiatives in Viet Nam between 2013-2018 and recommendations for UN Women*. Hanoi: UN Women.

152 CARE, Oxfam, SNV (2019a), *ibid*.

153 Danielsen, Katrine, Franz F. Wong, Dana McLachlin and Silvia Sarapura (2018). *Typologies of Change: Gender Integration in Agriculture and Food Security Research*. Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute (KIT).

154 Nguyen, Mortensen, and Pravalpruskul (2019). *Pathways for women’s empowerment in agriculture in South and Southeast Asia*. Bangkok: Stockholm Environment Institute.

the exact number and position of commune cadres and civil servants. At grassroots level, the authorities cannot allocate an extra officer for NRD related tasks. As a result, NRD officials are frequently rotated that makes it difficult for the oversight and implementation of NRD. There is an exception of Hà Tĩnh with the consolidation of three Steering Committees into One Steering Committee and assigned the District Party Secretary and the Party Committee Secretary to be the head of the steering committee, which has created strong uniformity in leadership and direction. Overall assigning specialized officials to work at the NRD Coordinating Office has provided stability, professionalism and avoidance of distraction from other responsibilities. Nevertheless, information collected from the in-depth interviews indicate that there are some persisting problems.

At grassroots level, NRD focal points, the lack of gender awareness, capacity and incentives for gender mainstreaming.

At the district level, the model of the District Party Secretary being the Head of the Steering Committee has fostered strong unity in leadership, direction, and mobilization of the entire political system. However, one of the difficulties lies in the implementation, which is not comprehensive, especially in specialized fields according to each criterion and related State management (compared to the Chairman of the People's Committee). The district NRD Coordinating office consults and supports the Steering Committee, that is established, managed and directed by the district People's Committee, without specific personnel regulation; officials working at the Coordinating office are mobilized by the district People's Committee from other departments, units, and commune People's Committee within the district. The working period tends to be short (only three years). Salary and other benefits provided by the management agency affects the mentality and have not brought assurance to the employees. At the commune level, NRD specialized official has not been arranged as regulated. The official in charge of NRD at the commune level often holds other positions concurrently. They are responsible for both specialized tasks and NRD; the workload is substantial, there is no

time and conditions to focus on advising and implementing NRD; not qualified for specific allowance as regulated. Furthermore, the identification and evaluation of the current "level of qualified and unqualified" of the criteria at each site is still confusing, inaccurate and not the centre of attention, which leads to imprecise and disputable direction, and ineffectiveness. Many communes have developed a detailed, clear and pragmatic workplan for the commune, village and hamlet. In addition to this reality, the fulfilment of NTP NRD gender related criteria deem to be a mere "formality" as mentioned in Section 4.1.

4.4. The role of Vietnam Women's Union in the implementation of gender-related issues in the NTP NRD

The leading role of VWU in the "Five No Three Clean" community campaigns may reinforce gender stereotypes.

As indicated in Section 3.8, the campaign activities target almost exclusively VWU's members, underlining the misconception that unpaid care and domestic work are women's "granted" responsibilities. So, it may reinforce the secondary position of female members (i.e. in terms of the accessibility to activities that will generate income for the family, especially in non-agricultural sector), and the VWU's role limited to its social advocacy, rather than economic empowerment interventions (i.e. in relation to other more "male dominant" mass organizations and government agencies).

The VWU's fund raising activities may eventually bring financial stress on its members, especially the most disadvantaged such as women of "poor", "nearly-poor" households.

It should be pointed out that unlike other national targeted programs, where funding comes primarily from the state budget, the NTP NRD aims to mobilize resources from all sources to realize this programme including state budget, private sector, people's contribution, financial

institutions and nongovernmental aids.¹⁵⁵ At implementation level, local cadres have been instructed by governmental decisions not to compel people to make contributions, instead people should be mobilized to voluntarily make contributions.¹⁵⁶ In this regard, the study findings demonstrate the vital role of VWU in community mobilization on NRD related elements, particularly fund raising activities (as discussed in Section 3). At the household making monetary donation, contribution for public interests is regarded as *chuyện đàn bà* (women's affairs), something the husband, as head of the family, would rather let his wife handle. A similar observation was made in the gender assessment of the NTP NRD 2010-2015 that women were the ones who adjusted family spending priorities to have money available for the NRD.¹⁵⁷ This practice, however, may vary among ethnic minority groups because men, besides agricultural production, take other work like butchery, motorbike repairs, etc. which bring ready cash to pay for day-to-day-expenses. As indicated in Section 3, ethnic minority men generally assume the task of dealing with trading and specifically monetary issues.

As an under-resourced entity, VWU lacks mechanisms for participating in the formulation, social counter-argument, and supervision of implementation of NTPs on gender equality. Limited interest in tackling gender inequalities is further perpetuated by a general perception that “women’s issues” are dealt with by the VWU by default, and not, therefore, the professional responsibility of other government agencies. Specifically, the VWU does not have resources, capacity or authority to intervene in MARD strategies toward gender equality. More importantly, the VWU’s financial

reliance on the local Party and commune authorities seems to hamper one of its central goals that participating in the formulation, social counter-argument, and supervision of implementation of NTPs on gender equality.

Due to resource scarcity and the politics of budgeting, the role of VWU is again limited to its social advocacy, rather than economic empowerment interventions. With

regard to women’s economic empowerment, it should be mentioned that on 30th June 2017, the Prime Minister has issued Decision No. 939/QĐ-TTg on the Approval of the National Project on “Supporting women’s start-up in the period of 2017-2025”. The project sets a number of strategic objectives such as by 2025 having 90 percent of women’s union officials at all levels joined the project to be equipped with knowledge and methods on supporting women’s business development; 70 percent of VWU members advocated and raised awareness on employment and start-up opportunities; supporting 20,000 women to launch a business or start-up; setting up 1,200 cooperatives managed by women; and supporting the establishment and enterprise development of 100,000 new firms owned by women. The project will prioritize poor and disabled women, and those from disadvantaged areas and ethnic minority groups. Nevertheless, as indicated by many VWU staff in this current study, budget for implementation was not allocated separately. Instead, it should be “integrated” into the existing resources, including those from the NTPs, which represent another challenge. In actual terms, budget was either not allocated or very limited to support the implementation of this Decision.

The MARD-VWU collaboration programme on promoting propaganda, advocacy and support activities for women’s participation in building NRD has **paid insufficient attention to promote technology transfer and application in agricultural production among women-led enterprises.** There is lately the MARD-VWU collaboration programme on promoting propaganda, advocacy and support activities for women participation in building new rural development within the scope of the agricultural reconstruction in 2018-2020 period. The results of the collaborative Programme are

155 The state budget fully covers only three kinds of activities: (1) commune master planning, (2) building communal government offices, and (3) training commune, village and cooperative cadres on new rural development. Besides that, the communes in 62 poorest districts of the country can also get a maximum of 100 per cent support from the state for building necessary infrastructures, such as roads, schools, health clinics, cultural houses or sport facilities. For all other communes, the state budget provides only partial financial support for such infrastructures.

156 MARD, *ibid.*

157 World Bank and UN Women (2015), *ibid.*

unknown yet. A closer look at this Programme reveals that there seems to be limited support for women to develop production and enterprise models at small and medium scale (i.e., to support and connecting agricultural production and safe food facilities that are managed by women to distributors and consumers. While the Programme sets to pilot cooperative society and team, to farm in large scale agricultural environments that applies science and technology, safe production it does not specifically aim to support those led or initiated by women. This may implicitly further emphasize gender stereotypes that women are less attuned to technical matters than their male counterparts.

Inadequate attention has paid to capacity development on women's economic empowerment (WEE) for VWU grassroots cadres. Furthermore, at implementation level, the capacity of VWU officials in production model development, financial management and planning skills are also limited, so they are often confused in selecting content, consulting, and collaborating with members in brainstorming ideas for production development and start-ups. In-depth interviews with VWU representatives at different levels reveal that cadres at the grassroots level appear to have very limited opportunities for capacity development, given that the majority of them developed from community campaign activities. Having realized this lack of capacity, there is a recent Decision No. 1893/QĐ-TTg on 31st December 2018 on the Approval of the National Project on capacity development of VWU officials, cadres at all levels and the Chairwomen at hamlet level for the period 2019 – 2025. The Decision sets a number of objectives for capacity development of the VWU officials and cadres. However, specialized professional skills development and capacity training activities are provided to the VWU officials and cadres at the central, provincial, and district levels, while the commune cadres and the chairwoman at hamlet level are subjected to training programs related to the VWU activities only. This reflects a missing link in capacity development as the hamlet level staff are not provided with adequate skills training. As observed in all visited sites, the VWU cadres at the grassroots level seem to take an active role in providing members with information

to develop their livelihood, especially in terms of loans and employment. But many of them had only completed secondary school and felt the strain of a heavy workload. These cadres' capacity constraints in turn have an impact on the VWU goals to consolidate their membership at grassroots level.

VWU is an active partner for project implementation with development donors. At the same time, it is well recognized that VWU is a frequent partner for the implementation of projects with the United Nations, international organizations and development donors. Experiences in other programs and especially donors-supported development initiatives tend to suggest that some "affirmative" arrangements for gender-related objectives or outcomes should be in place. These affirmative arrangements could take place in many forms e.g., having a separate sub-component or activity line under the mandate of VWU or groups led by women; having women in leadership roles of community-based organizations supported by these projects. Success of VWU in managing a number of micro finance initiatives within donors-supported projects represents a solid example of effectiveness of having such affirmative arrangements in economic empowerment for women. Unfortunately, these affirmative arrangements are hardly observed in any GoVN-led programs or policies and the NTP NDR is not an exception.

4.5 Other obstacles for implementation of the gender-related issues in NTP NRD

Lack of gender-responsive monitoring mechanism in NTP NRD. It is recognized that the lack of data/information, and gender analysis for the identification of gender issues has been a weakness of the planning process in Viet Nam. Regulations on the responsibility of Provincial and City People's Committees to mainstream gender equality issues in the formulation and implementation of local socio-

economic development plans are provided in Decree No.70/2008/ND-CP on detailed regulations for the implementation of some articles stipulated in the Gender Equality Law. However, the lack of a mechanism for enforcing and monitoring this has resulted in gender analysis being ignored in this planning process. Moreover, planning is primarily based on ad-hoc and insufficient data as all ministries model development strategies for sectors without gender analysis. Sex-disaggregated indicators for monitoring were observed in most of the donor-supported development projects in the country but this practice has not been institutionalized in the GoVN-led programs. Under NRD, there are often disaggregated targets on vocational training, specifying the percentage of those receiving vocational training that were women.

There is inconsistency in reporting sex-disaggregated data. At the five visited provinces, DOLISA and its local branches, the agency that is responsible for both gender equality and vocational training programs, could provide gender disaggregated indicators on vocational training (e.g., number of male, female trainees). This appears to be the only source of gender statistics in the current NTP NRD. However, other agencies and organizations, for example the Agriculture Extension Centre, did not monitor their trainees in a disaggregated way, even though they regarded women as an important training audience. Looking at the official presentation on Climate Change Adaptation in Agriculture toward directing strategies for ARD 2021-2030, there is a mention of the principle of gender mainstreaming but without any indicators.¹⁵⁸ If the data are disaggregated by sex, then it will be better for the implementing bodies, which means that they will know the current accessibility and women's needs. Nevertheless, there is a concern raised by some VWU cadres that the addition of a gender disaggregated dataset may increase further VWU workloads. This concern is linked with the misperception

that any issues related to women will fall under the VWU responsibilities and functions. In that sense the local authorities will be based on gender specific statistics on socio-economic issues to assign responsibilities to VWU.

An absence of tailored programming for different geographical regions. The current NTP NRD related provisions have not yet covered the particular cultural and structural needs that marginalized populations have and may require different interventions and services. Existing policies and legal framework reveal little diversity and inequalities among target groups. Since gender is a dynamic quality that interacts with other axes of differences such as age, ethnicity, socio-economic status, disability, sexuality, residency to shape women's vulnerability to poverty and violence. Empirical materials from this current study demonstrate that diversity exists among localities. Empirical materials from this current study demonstrate that diversity exists among localities. Take the case of Quảng Nam province for instance. Đại Lộc district is a lowland area, but experiences minimal impact from urbanization, thus their cultural pride and kinship are more prominent. VWU activities implemented via family head will easily attract more participation. Núi Thành is under more impact of urbanization and industrialization, so traditional customs are taking on different shapes adapting and accommodating employment characteristics of the people. For instance, if the funeral anniversary is on a weekday, and factory workers must work in the industrial zone, then their family will arrange the ceremony following working hours. In contrast, in Đại Lộc, people still practice the traditional funeral anniversary ceremony.

158 Trần Đại Nghĩa. *Chương trình thích ứng BĐKH ngành Nông nghiệp trong định hướng chiến lược phát triển Nông nghiệp Nông thôn 2021-2030*. Chương trình Hội thảo tham vấn 'Lồng ghép BĐKH vào quá trình xây dựng chiến lược, kế hoạch của ngành Nông nghiệp và PTNT giai đoạn 2021-2030, tầm nhìn đến năm 2045', Hà Nội, 4/4/2019.

A photograph of two women working in a food processing facility. They are wearing blue hairnets and face masks. One woman is standing and pouring yellow grains from a large red bowl into a machine. The other woman is sitting and sorting the grains on a conveyor belt. The machine has a metal grate and a blue bucket is visible at the bottom left. The entire image is framed by a white dotted line.

5. Recommendations for gender mainstreaming in the next phase of the NTP NRD

Photo: UN Women/ Doan Ngoc An

5. Recommendations for gender mainstreaming in the next phase of the NTP NRD

Gender equality is at the heart of government commitments to achieve the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were nationalized in the National Action Plan to implement the 2030 Agenda for SDGs (SDG NAP) in May 2017, with 17 SDGs and 115 specific targets that fit national conditions and development priorities in Viet Nam.¹⁵⁹ Many SDGs also being integrated into the national development policy system, including laws, socio-economic development strategies and plans as well as action plans of ministries, agencies and provinces. The goal to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” should be treated as a cross-cutting theme for all 2030 Sustainable Development Goals.

Economic benefits of gender mainstreaming.

At global level, there is recent evidence on the “smart economics” of gender mainstreaming. For instance, by increasing women’s labour force participation in quality jobs and their representation in entrepreneurship and business leadership, the economies of the Asia Pacific could boost their collective GDP by USD 4.5 trillion a year by 2025, a 12 percent increase over business-as-usual GDP.¹⁶⁰ It has been estimated that if women having equal access to economic opportunities, agricultural output could increase by 20 to 30 percent, reduce between 12 to 17 percent of hunger

people in the world.¹⁶¹ Women in Viet Nam who experienced violence and accessed services, leaving home or replacing/repairing damaged property incurred a total cost of nearly 10 billion VNDs in 2019.¹⁶² This was equivalent to 0.1677 percent of the 2018 GDP, and the loss in labour productivity was approximately 1.81 percent 2018 GDP.¹⁶³ Therefore, narrowing the gender gap in the economic, labour and employment domains, with a focus to increase the access of rural poor women and ethnic minority women to economic resources and the labour market, is the second objective of the National Gender Equality Strategy 2011-2020. Mainstreaming gender concerns in national agriculture and rural development policies, strategies, plans and programs are vital not only for achieving gender equality but also for the societal development of rural Viet Nam. Against this background, enhancing gender dimensions in the NTP NRD, if properly designed and implemented, helps achieve gender equality objectives, poverty reduction, and rural development goals. Policy recommendations are structured as follows:

Making gender an objective of the NTP

NRD. Mainstreaming gender into the NTP NRD represents a requirement mandated by the Law on Gender Equality. This is also in line with the commitments of Vietnam to SDGs. There have been some recent improvements in gender mainstreaming in socio-economic

¹⁵⁹ Decision on The National Action Plan to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals, No. 622/QĐ-TTg of the Prime Minister, dated 10 May 2017.

¹⁶⁰ McKinsey and Company (2018). McKinsey Global Institute. *The Power of Parity: Advancing Women’s Equality in Asia Pacific*.

¹⁶¹ FAO (2011). *The State of Food and Agriculture: Women in agriculture: closing the gender gap for development*. Rome, Italy.

¹⁶² MOLISA, GSO and UNFPA (2020), *Results of the National Study on Violence against Women in Viet Nam 2019 - Journey for Change*.

¹⁶³ MOLISA et al., *ibid*.

development policies as required by the law however, as pointed out in a report of the Government to the National Assembly, gender mainstreaming remains not only a ‘protocol’ to meet the requirement of the law but also the actual contents of gender mainstreaming were in fact limited.¹⁶⁴ Gender mainstreaming in the next phase of the NTP NRD should be enforced. The previous stages of the NTP NRD have not specified gender equality as one objective to be pursue and this has kept gender equality out of the main focuses of the NTPs. It is therefore recommended that the next phase of NTP NRD should include gender equality in its overall objective. This will lay the background for making gender mainstreamed in the components and activities in the next phase of the NTP NRD

Making gender a cross-cutting issue in the NTP NRD. Having gender equality as a thematic issue confined in one indicator is probably the rooted cause of limited gender reflections in the implementation of the NTP NRD. It is strongly recommended that gender should be addressed as a cross-cutting socio-economic variable in the next phase of the NTP NRD. Accordingly, gender should be reflected in other contents of the NTP NRD and NRD criteria, whenever appropriate and relevant. This could be made by making different activities of the NTP NRD responsive to women’s voices and needs (rather than being confined to the activities toward the indicator 18.6). Consequently, the implementation of the NTP NRD will become gender sensitive in the sense that differences in needs of women and men, gender norms and roles are considered in the development, implementation, and monitoring processes of the NTP NRD activities. It is noted

¹⁶⁴ Government of Vietnam (2020), Report 362/BC-CP on implementation of the national gender equality 2019 and for the period 2011-2020.

that having gender addressed as a cross-cutting socio-economic domain reflects the requirement of the Law on Gender Equality.

Extending the intent of the criteria 18.6.

The existing guidance on the criteria covers limited intent of gender equality. This includes women’s participation in political leadership, access for women to preferential loans, control of child marriage and forced marriage, having broadcasting programme on gender equality, and having “reliable address”. This articulation of gender equality criterion covers only some aspects of gender equality. As a result, even a commune is classified as achieving the criteria 18.6, it does not represent a significant improvement in gender equality. It is therefore important to consider options to expand the intent of gender equality in the criteria 18.6 in the next phase of the NTP NRD. In expanding the intent of this gender equality criterion, other nuances of gender equality should be added so that achieving this criterion would result in meaningful and significant improvement in gender equality.

Adding gender dimension in other NRD criteria.

Making gender a cross-cutting issue in the NTP NRD would imply that gender dimensions should be added to the NRD criteria (rather than confining to one indicator 18.6 as it has been in the current NTP NRD 2016-2020). Current NRD criteria are stipulated in the Decisions issued by the Prime Minister; detail guidelines for criteria are supplementary developed by MARD that are region-specific. The advantage of this policy making mechanism is to appropriate to local characteristics, but these detail guidelines are not legal binding. With some “qualitative” criteria (i.e., gender equality), this mechanism will lead to “flexibility”

in implementation; especially, there is no legal basis for budget allocation to implement sub-criteria. Therefore, a set of indicators for NRD criteria should be included in the same Decision issued by the Prime Minister. This will help strengthen legal implications of the criteria and reduce the amount of supplementing decisions and guidelines issued by line ministries, in turn, contribute to the streamline of regulations, monitoring procedures and evaluating NRD components.

Strengthening gender responsive budgeting (GRB). It is important to make budget provision for carrying out activities for the advancement of women in the estimated, regular budget of all units of agricultural related sectors. Nevertheless, GRB is not simply about creating separate budgets for women, or solely increasing spending on women's programs related to NTP NRD.¹⁶⁵ It seeks to ensure that the collection and allocation of public resources is carried out in ways that are effective and contribute to advancing gender equality and women's empowerment in the NTP NRD. Most importantly, it will have to make sure that whenever there are gender-related activities or targets, there should be provision of budget for those activities or targets (instead of "integrating" into some broad budget lines). In this regard, MOF should issue a new circular or revise a relevant circular based on the GRB pilots in selected sectors to ensure that gender mainstreaming in all stages of the State Budget process is an integral compulsory requirement.

Toward adaptation of gender-responsive budgeting in the NTP NRD. Adopting gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) is a process that might require legislation changes (such as the Budget Law) and it is not plausible to argue for GRB in the next phase of the NTP NRD. Instead, application of simplified GRB is recommended to make budget provision for carrying out activities for the advancement of women in the estimated, regular budget of the implementing agencies of the NTP NRD. Most important, it will make sure that whenever there are gender-related activities or targets, there should be the provision of a

¹⁶⁵ See for example UN Women and CEMA (2019). *Hướng dẫn thúc đẩy và thực hiện Ngân sách có trách nhiệm giới - Áp dụng đối với Chương trình phát triển kinh tế xã hội các xã đặc biệt khó khăn vùng dân tộc thiểu số và miền núi (Chương trình 135) giai đoạn 2016-2020.*

budget for those activities or targets (instead of "integrating" into some broad budget lines). A good example of this GRB application is reflected in UN Women and CEMA (2019) in the Programme 135 – being a component project of the NTP SPR 2016-2020.¹⁶⁶ Similar application is feasible for the next phase of the NTP NRD.

Strengthening women's voices and participation in the planning procedures for the NTP NRD. Participatory planning is probably the most important tool to enable women to raise their voices and needs in the prioritization process for a development initiative. This participatory planning was partly institutionalized in NTPs but enforcement remains limited. It is recommended that a participatory planning procedure should be developed and fully institutionalized for the next phase of the NTP NRD. In that procedure, there needs to be a mechanism and specific regulations to ensure the quality of women and other vulnerable groups' participation, by identifying the role of the Women's Union in the procedure and ways of promoting voices of women in the planning meetings at hamlet level.

Setting up implementation arrangements and guidance for gender mainstreaming. Having gender reflected in the NRD criteria and the activities of the NTP NRD is a prerequisite for gender mainstreaming. It is equally important that there are implementation arrangements, in the sense of how these gender-related criteria and activities should be implemented, and guidelines available to the implementing agencies and officials at various levels of the NTP NRD implementation. In these implementation guidelines, "affirmative action" should be in place where relevant and appropriate in order to provide concrete references for implementation. For instance, one affirmative action could be to ensure that a certain percentage of women benefit from production support activities.

Enhancing capacity for gender mainstreaming in the NTP NRD. An addition of gender equality and gender mainstreaming topics should be made to the training topics, fostering multi-level officials for building new

¹⁶⁶ UN Women, Ủy ban Dân tộc (2019). *Hướng dẫn thúc đẩy và thực hiện Ngân sách có trách nhiệm giới - Áp dụng đối với Chương trình phát triển kinh tế xã hội các xã đặc biệt khó khăn vùng dân tộc thiểu số và miền núi (Chương trình 135) giai đoạn 2016-2020.*

rural development in the next period. The capacity development component of the next phase NTP NRD should be refocused on increasing the ability of individuals, organizations, institutions to perform their functions, fulfil their mandates and achieve their goals by integrating gender and women's economic empowerment perspectives in their strategies, processes, systems, and inputs. Supporting capacity development for Viet Nam Women's Union cadres on women's economic empowerment in the NTP NRD is another priority. An addition of gender equality and gender mainstreaming topics should be made to the training topics, fostering multi-level officials for the implementation of the next phase of the NTP NRD 2021-2025.

Advancing the role of Women's Union in monitoring gender equality in the NTP NRD. There are two roles of the Women's Union in the current NTP NRD, which include an "implementing" role and a "supporting/advocating" role. Regarding the former, the role of the Women's Union was only confined to the campaign "Five No, Three Clean". For the latter, the Women's Union is supposed to play an advocacy role (which is not clearly prescribed) to support other implementing agencies of the NTP NRD. For the next phase of the NTP NRD, the implementing role of the Women's Union should be expanded to the activities that are directly managed by the Women's Union. In addition, a gender monitoring role should be added so that the Women's Union would become a 'monitor' of how the gender-related criteria and activities are implemented in practices, and more importantly, the outcomes of these activities.

Strengthening the role of the standing body of the Provincial People's Council. It is also important to raise the role of the standing body of the Provincial People's Council to ensure that gender equality activities can be mainstreamed effectively. In this connection, officials of the responsible units under Provincial People's Council (e.g., Department of Cultural and Social Affairs) should be equipped with necessarily relevant skills. It is noted that the provincial authorities have played a key role in providing detailed guidance, resource allocation, and supervision of the NTP NRD in practice. Therefore, ensuring the role and capacity of the Provincial

People's Council in mainstreaming gender into the local decision-making process for the NTP NRD would be instrumental for closing the gender gaps in the rural areas.

Addressing gender stereotypes in families and communities. The analysis in this report indicated several gender stereotypes and misperceptions on gender roles in families and communities that constrain equal access for women to available opportunities. These stereotypes and norms could be addressed by promoting innovations in community-based communication campaigns on both men and women on gender equality. Active participation of men in these communication campaigns in order to change gender misconceptions is crucial to raise awareness and steadily address gender stereotypes. In addition, gender misperceptions amongst the government officials and public service staffs should also be addressed by capacity development as suggested above.

Strengthening gender inclusion in the NTP NRD management, including monitoring and evaluation. It is recommended that a function of social inclusion (for women, ethnic minorities, and other vulnerable) should be added to the management structure of the NTP NRD, at least at the national and provincial level. This function could be filled by full-time staff or as a function of existing staff who will ensure that the implementation of the NTP NRD will be inclusive and gender sensitive. In addition, monitoring gender mainstreaming in the next phase of the NTP NRD should also be enhanced. Once gender is reflected in the NRD criteria and activities of the NTP NRD, it is important to ensure that there will be a monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system in the next phase that could collect gender disaggregated data to inform the progresses and outcomes of the gender-related NRD criteria and activities. This will require a clear guidance on the set of indicators that need to be gender disaggregated, data collection arrangements to inform these indicators, and more importantly, how this disaggregated data should be used to improve performances of the NTP NRD in terms of gender responsiveness.



Photo: UN Women/ shutterstock.com

Annexes

Annex 1. List of organizations consulted

	Organizations
Hà Nội	
1	National Coordinating Office for NTP NRD
2	Hanoi Coordinating Office for NTP NRD
2	Mỹ Đức District People's Committee, Coordinating Office for NTP NRD, the Economics Unit
3	Mỹ Đức District Women's Union, Fatherland Front, Farmers' Union
4	Phùng Xá Commune People's Committee, NRD focal point, Women's Union; Farmers' Union; Veterans' Association, Youth Union, Health Centre
5	Female and male residents, village authority and mass organization representatives of Thượng 1 Hamlet, Phùng Xá Commune
6	An Phú Commune People's Committee, NRD focal point
7	An Phú Commune Women's Union, Farmers' Union, Veterans' Association, Youth Union, Police Unit, Health Centre
8	Female and male residents, village authority and mass organization representatives of Hamlets Gốc Báng, Dốc Éo, Đồi Rừng, and Đình
9	Đan Phượng District Coordinating Office for NTP NRD, the Economics Unit
10	Đan Phượng District Women's Union, Farmers' Union
11	Song Phượng Commune People's Committee, Women's Union; Farmers' Union; Health Centre, Primary School
12	Female and male residents, village authority and mass organization representatives of Tháp Thượng Hamlet, Song Phượng Commune
13	Thọ Xuân Commune People's Committee, Women's Union; Farmers' Union; Veterans' Association, Youth Union, Health Centre, Primary School
14	Female and male residents, village authority and mass organization representatives of Cực Nam Hamlet, Thọ Xuân Commune
Hà Tĩnh	
15	Hà Tĩnh Provincial People's Committee, Coordinating Office for NTP NRD

16	Department of Finance, Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Department of Culture, Sports and Tourism, Department of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, Department of Construction, Department of Resources and Environment, Department of Planning and Investment, Department of Sciences and Technology, Women's Union, Fatherland Front, People's Council, Farmers' Union
17	Thạch Hà District People's Committee, Coordinating Office for NTP NRD, the Economics Unit, the Labour, Invalids & Social Affairs Unit
18	Thạch Hà District Women's Union, Fatherland Front, Farmers' Union
19	Tượng Sơn Commune People's Committee, Women's Union; Farmers' Union; Veterans' Association, Youth Union, Health Centre
20	Female and male residents, village authority and mass organization representatives of Hà Thanh Hamlet, Tượng Sơn Commune
21	Thạch Sơn Commune People's Committee, Women's Union; Farmers' Union; Veterans' Association, Youth Union, Health Centre
22	Female and male residents, village authority and mass organization representatives of Tân Hợp Hamlet, Thạch Sơn Commune
23	Hương Khê District Coordinating Office for NTP NRD, the Economics Unit
24	Hương Khê District Women's Union, Farmers' Union
25	Hương Trà Commune People's Committee, Women's Union; Farmers' Union; Health Centre, Primary School
26	Female and male residents, village authority and mass organization representatives of Nam Trà Hamlet, Hương Trà Commune
27	Phú Gia Commune Women's Union, Hương Long Commune People's Committee, Women's Union; Farmers' Union; Health Centre
28	Female and male residents, village authority and mass organization representatives of 1 & 4 Hamlets, Hương Long Commune
Quảng Nam	
29	Quảng Nam Provincial People's Committee, Coordinating Office for NTP NRD
	Department of Finance, Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Department of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, Department of Construction, Department of Resources and Environment, Department of Planning and Investment, Department of Sciences and Technology, Women's Union, Fatherland Front, People's Council, Farmers' Union
30	Điện Bàn Township People's Committee, Coordinating Office for NTP NRD, the Economics Unit, the Labour, Invalids & Social Affairs Unit
31	Điện Bàn District Women's Union, Fatherland Front, Farmers' Union
32	Điện Quang Commune People's Committee, Women's Union; Farmers' Union; Veterans' Association, Youth Union, Health Centre, Primary School

33	Female and male residents, village authority and mass organization representatives of Bảo An Hamlet, Điện Quang Commune
34	Điện Trung Commune People's Committee, Women's Union; Farmers' Union; Veterans' Association, Youth Union, Health Centre
35	Female and male residents, village authority and mass organization representatives of Nam Hòa 1 and Tân Bình Hamlets, Điện Trung Commune
36	Nam Giang District Coordinating Office for NTP NRD, the Economics Unit
37	Tà Bính Commune People's Committee, Women's Union; Farmers' Union; Health Centre
38	Female and male residents, village authority and mass organization representatives of A Liên and Pà la Hamlets, Tà Bính Commune
39	La Dê Commune People's Committee, Women's Union; Farmers' Union; Health Centre
40	Female and male residents, village authority and mass organization representatives of Đắc Ốc Hamlet, La Dê Commune
Lâm Đồng	
41	Lâm Đồng Provincial People's Committee, Coordinating Office for NTP NRD
42	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Department of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, Department of Construction, Department of Sciences and Technology, Women's Union, Farmers' Union
43	Di Linh People's Committee, Coordinating Office for NTP NRD, the Economics Unit, the Labour, Invalids & Social Affairs Unit
44	Di Linh District Women's Union, Fatherland Front, Farmers' Union
45	Định Lạc Commune People's Committee, Women's Union; Farmers' Union; Veterans' Association, Youth Union, Health Centre, Tân Lạc and Tân Phú Primary Schools, Định Lạc Secondary School
46	Female and male residents, village authority and mass organization representatives of Đồng Lạc 1 & Tân Lạc 3 Hamlets, Định Lạc Commune
47	Tân Thượng Commune People's Committee, Women's Union; Farmers' Union; Veterans' Association, Youth Union, Health Centre
48	Female and male residents, village authority and mass organization representatives of Number 1 Hamlet, Tân Thượng Commune
49	Đơn Dương District Coordinating Office for NTP NRD, the Economics Unit
50	Pró Commune People's Committee, Women's Union; Farmers' Union; Health Centre
51	Female and male residents, village authority and mass organization representatives of Pró Ngó Hamlet, Pró Commune
Long An	
56	Long An Coordinating Office for NTP NRD

57	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Department of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs, Department of Planning and Investment, Department of Construction, Women's Union, Farmers' Union, Fatherland Front
58	Châu Thành People's Committee, Coordinating Office for NTP NRD, the Economics Unit, the Labour, Invalids & Social Affairs Unit
59	Châu Thành District Women's Union, Fatherland Front, Farmers' Union
60	Hòa Phú Commune People's Committee, Women's Union; Farmers' Union; Veterans' Association, Youth Union, Health Centre
61	Female and male residents, village authority and mass organization representatives of Mỹ Xuân Hamlet, Hòa Phú Commune
62	Dương Xuân Hội Commune People's Committee, Women's Union; Farmers' Union; Veterans' Association, Youth Union, Health Centre
63	Female and male residents, village authority and mass organization representatives of Vĩnh Xuân A Hamlet, Dương Xuân Hội Commune
64	Đức Huệ District Coordinating Office for NTP NRD, the Economics Unit
65	Đức Huệ District Women's Union; Farmers' Union, Financial & Planning Unit, Culture and Information Unit
66	Mỹ Thạnh Đông Commune People's Committee
67	Mỹ Bình Commune People's Committee, NRD focal point, Primary School, Secondary School, Highschool
68	Female and male residents of Number 5 Hamlet, Mỹ Bình Commune



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