Oxfam's community-based adaptation to climate change case study:

CO-MANAGING COASTAL ECOSYSTEMS FOR INCREASED RESILIENCE TO CLIMATE CHANGE IN VIETNAM'S RIVER DELTAS

Mekong Delta, Tra Vinh Province Vietnam: local livelihoods such as fishing are being supported through improved management of the delta's mangrove ecosystems. Photo: OxfamGB.

CLIMATE CHANGE IN VIETNAM'S RIVER DELTAS

Vietnam is highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate variability and change. Its long coastline is exposed to frequent tropical typhoons and storms, and the country's two large, low-lying river deltas — at the mouths of the Mekong and Red rivers — are highly climate sensitive.

Climate change projections for Vietnam include extreme rainfall, flooding, increased temperatures, increased salinity of river waters, and a higher number of typhoons.

The effects of these changes on Vietnamese farming and fishing communities can already be seen in higher salinisation of agricultural land, loss of mangrove areas due to coastal erosion, and damages to ecosystems and infrastructure.

Many communities, particularly marginalised groups and ethnic minorities, rely on agriculture and rural livelihoods; climate change places them at further risk.

WHY IS OXFAM WORKING IN THE DELTA AREAS?

While Vietnam has good disaster management policies and programs in place that help reduce their vulnerability to natural disasters, little progress has been made in ensuring communities are prepared for the impacts of climate variability and change.

Province and community-level planning processes in the delta regions do not effectively account for the risks climate change presents to the sustainability of socio-economic development activities, nor the level of understanding of climate change among the population. Coastal ecosystems in the deltas continue to be exploited with little understanding of the role delta ecosystems play in building resilience to climate change impacts. The central government has programs in place to support adaptation; however, with multiple layers of bureaucracy and low technical capacity at the provincial and local levels, the plans are weakly implemented, especially in the poorest and most marginalised coastal communities.

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"Vietnam is among the countries that are warned to be seriously affected by adverse effects of climate change. Impacts of climate change … will heavily affect the country's economic production, livelihood, environment, infrastructure, public health, and threaten the achievements of poverty reduction, food and energy security, sustainable development, as well as the fulfillment of the Millennium Development Goals."

— Dr. Pham Khoi Nguyen, Minister of Natural Resources and Environment, 2010

Life is becoming steadily riskier for communities in the deltas, particularly the landless or land-poor, people with a disability, and female-headed households. These are the people who often have least access to resources or the opportunity to engage in adaptation-planning processes, and often have their specific needs and capacities overlooked.

WHAT ARE WE DOING ABOUT THESE PROBLEMS?

In response to these issues, Oxfam and our partners have developed the Partnership for Equitable Resilience to the Impacts of Climate Change of the Coastal Communities in Deltas of Vietnam. The project is supported by the Australian aid program, and works with the most vulnerable communities and households across five climate-vulnerable provinces. The project works with women, men and local authorities to assess vulnerabilities to climate change through a participatory process, helping people to ensure their voices are heard, and increase their understanding of what climate change means for local socio-ecological systems in the delta regions.

Some of the key adaptation measures identified included restoring mangroves and associated delta vegetation, and co-management strategies for conserving/restoring mangrove forests. The results from the assessment have been used to develop integrated livelihood and ecosystem strategies, which the project then helps communities implement.

HOW HAVE THINGS CHANGED FOR THE BETTER?

To date, the project has helped develop four community-based coastal mangrove ecosystem co-management initiatives. The co-management strategies seek to increase access to livelihoods that respect the ecosystem, and sustainably manage the use of mangroves so that they continue to provide food and income opportunities, as well as help protect communities from climate-induced hazards now and in the future.

The co-management approach allows local resource owners to play a more central role in decision-making over the use of local mangrove resources, which can bring both economic and environmental benefits if managed well.

"The activities not only help my community but also bring much experience and valuable knowledge to me, help me to be more confident in my job … which makes me feel proud because I could contribute to helping my hometown, especially people living in difficulty attempting to improve their lives."

— Ms Le Thi Hoa, Binh Tan Commune Women's Union Vice-Chair, Tien Giang province

Local authorities are recognising the importance of mangrove forests in mitigating the heightened climate-related impacts of typhoons and storms. They have changed their policies to promote co-management and use of resources that combine development and conservation objectives. Likewise, communities working with the project better understand that socio-economic development and environmental protection must go hand-in-hand if either is to be sustainable — especially in the face of climate change.

WHAT ARE WE LEARNING?

From implementation to date, several key lessons are emerging for ecosystem-based adaptation measures:

Coordination is essential

Strong coordination among local counterparts is critical for integrating adaptation programs into ongoing government programs and strategies. In this case, Oxfam's long-term involvement with Vietnam's national disaster risk management policies helped to support the implementation of their socio-economic development plans and influence on climate change issues.

Transparent participatory processes are fundamental

In order to engage communities in achieving adaptation outcomes, the process must identify climate-related impacts on key livelihood priorities, be based on available scientific information, and assist those least able to manage the impacts of climate change.

Capacity building is required at all levels

Adaptation can only be successful if project and community structures are flexible and adaptable as the challenges evolve over time. Capacity building also includes knowing when to bring in external expertise, especially to help translate climate projections to local realities. However, it is essential that the community makes the ultimate decisions about when and how to adapt.

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