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Cao Thuong Commune Development Fund Final Evaluation Report



Ban Cam village, Cao Thuong commune

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ABBREVIATIONS

AEC	Agricultural Extension Center
CDF	Commune Development Fund
CPC	Commune's People Committee
DPC	District People Committee
ELP-BB	Empower Local People for the Management of Natural Resources in Ba Be
Helvetas	Swiss Association for International Cooperation
HH	Household
EU	European Union
LMAG	Local Monitoring and Auditing Group
FA	Farmer Association
FU	Farmer Union
PMB	Project Management Board
SCD	Swedish Development Cooperation Agency
VDP	Village Development Plan
VND	Vietnamese Dong
WU	Woman Union

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

PROJECT NAME: Cao Thuong Commune Development Fund (2003-2006)

DONOR	Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
REPORT TITLE	Cao Thuong Commune Development Fund Evaluation Report
GEOGRAPHIC AREA	Cao Thuong commune, Babe district, Bac Kan province
SECTOR	Participatory Development Planning, Capacity building
LANGUAGE	English
DATE	November 2006
EVALUATION TYPE	Project completion
TYPE OF PROJECT	Grant
BUDGET	130'000 CHF
EXPENDITURES	128'760 CHF
EXECUTING AGENCY	Cao Thuong Commune People's Committee
SUPPORTING AGENCY	Helvetas Vietnam

One result of Vietnam's continued decentralization and public administration reform efforts is that more authority and responsibility has been established at the commune level (local development, poverty alleviation, rural infrastructure, etc.). However, not all the necessary funding and reform regulations have been put in place. The capacities of local officials at commune level are still weak.

After viewing the commune project, the SDC delegation pledged a budget contribution in the form of a Commune Development Fund (CDF) of CHF 100,000 (excluding CHF 30'000 technical support by Helvetas) over three years, equivalent to VND 1'200 Million (VND 300 million/year). The objective of the CDF was to provide the Cao Thuong with an investment fund promoting commune development.

The evaluation mission had a comprehensive program of meetings, visits, workshops and interviews with all the main stakeholders at district, commune and village levels. Several produced document have been reviewed. The program included visits and interviews to sample households in upland and low land villages. A debriefing was held at Helvetas office in Hanoi.

As main findings for future donors, the commune should be targeted as the main partner for community development:

- This is the closest level to the people and therefore best for understanding people's needs
- The Government's new requirement for commune cadres has improved the quality of their services, and has thereby ensured smoother operation of social and economic development
- Direct investment to the commune could reduce part of the administration and overhead costs

However, future projects should also take the following into consideration:

- Situational analyses should be done carefully during project design (social and economic contexts, human resources at the commune and villages levels, etc.)
- Sufficient training for the skills and knowledge required for the project management
- Development of indicators for monitoring and impact evaluation.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

The Cao Thuong commune lies 15 km from its district center of Ba Be District, Bak Kan province and borders Ba Be National Park. Due to its close proximity to the park, the commune faced restrictions on land use owing to government imposed conservation stipulations. Further complications came from a lack of auto-accessible roads, markets, and extension services, nor was there any real access to information. It is also important to note that the installation of a single telephone line in the district post office and hook up to the national electricity grid only took place during the duration of the project (in 2004).

The vast majority of the population in this commune depends upon subsistence agriculture but lacked the necessary agricultural inputs, services, veterinary medicines, and storage facilities. An annual income of around 30 million VND and an annual allocated government budget for the commune of 500 million VND, meant that only administrative expenditures and annual activities of all the sectors (health, education, agriculture...) were adequately covered.

Cao Thuong has a population of 3,590, comprising 654 households. It is composed of several different ethnic groups, with the Dao and Tay minorities both registering 35% of the total population, the H'mong 19.2%, and the Kinh majority registering less than 1%. The households are disbursed among 15 separate villages (6 lowland, 9 upland), with the Tay and Dao in the lowlands, and H'mong and Dao in the uplands. The upland villages are scattered throughout the mountains and accessed only by rocky footpaths. A walk from the commune center to the most remote village takes 5 hours. With its high percentage of ethnic minorities and difficult, remote access, Cao Thuong is ranked as a very difficult commune

The Helvetas Vietnam project, 'Empowering Local People for the Management of Natural Resources in Ba Be', implemented during 1999-2002 targeted improvements in food security for the local population in the Cao Thuong commune. While the project addressed all socio-economic groups and both male- and female-led households, priority was given to the most vulnerable segments of the population: ethnic minorities, women, and poorer households.

In brief, activities concentrated on:

- Transfer of new agro-forestry technologies adapted to the local conditions through participatory technology development (PTD)
- Training courses, farmer field school (IPM)
- Training and support of local community based extensionists and farmer trainers
- Improvement of small scale, village based infrastructure such as irrigation schemes or drinking water systems

However, due to budget limits Helvetas had decided to close the Babe project at the end of its first phase in 2002.

In May 2002, the Swiss Agency for Development & Cooperation (SDC) visited the Cao Thuong commune. The delegation pledged a budget contribution in the form of a Commune Development Fund (CDF) of CHF 100,000 over 3 years, equivalent to VND 900 Million (VND 300 million/year). The objective of the CDF was to provide the Commune with an investment fund promoting commune development. Both the generated activities and the funds were to be managed by the commune authorities in a participatory and transparent way. The Cao Thuong Commune

Development Fund was therefore the first to be managed and owned by the local government and people. With the technical support for planning coming from Helvetas Vietnam, the commune was to be responsible for its own planning, implementation, management and monitoring.

With the support of Helvetas Vietnam, the commune organized start-up and planning workshops in March and April 2003. These workshops resulted in the Annual Plan of Operation 2003, and a General Agreement between Helvetas Vietnam (authorized by SDC) and the People's Committee of Cao Thuong Commune signed on April 24, 2003, whereby Helvetas would monitor and support the commune on a bi-annual basis. This agreement was then continued and combined with the annual plans for 2004, 2005 and 2006. Due to the difference in the exchange rate, the fund was extended one more year to November 2006 with the same annual budget of VND 300 million.

2006 marked the final year of the CDF. Helvetas Vietnam therefore submits this final evaluation for review and analysis of the results of the CDF implementation, as well as for recording the experience and lessons learned for its own future projects. An external consultant was contracted to carry out the evaluation with the support of a Helvetas Vietnam project officer and an external field consultant. The objectives of the Mission were, a) to Review and analyze the results of four year implementation of commune development fund by Cao Thuong People's Committee and its people, and b) Capitalization of the Communes experience on development fund management. (See Annex 1 for a detailed description of the mission)

1.2. Methodology

Methodologies used in the evaluation included:

Document review and preparation for field visit

To gain an overview of the Cao Thuong commune and the effectiveness of the SDC fund, the Evaluation Team reviewed all related documents, including agreements between SDC and Helvetas, between Helvetas and the Commune, monitoring forms, semi-annual and annual monitoring reports (prepared by recruited consultants), and Helvetas and commune annual reports. These sources provided the consultant with basic information on the commune, as well as background on the fund, and progress made and problems encountered by the commune during its implementation. The information from these documents, particularly the data from the monitoring reports, was very useful for the final evaluation. Questions for focus group discussions, semi-structured and structured interviews, and report forms were prepared before field visits to the district and commune.

Field visit

A four-day visit to the Cao Thuong commune was arranged for the evaluation mission. It included interviews with different stakeholders at district and commune people's committee levels, and two upland villages. Depending on the stakeholders, the team used different methods of information gathering (focus group discussions, semi-structured and structured interviews, and observation).

Focus group discussion

A workshop was conducted in the commune's centre with participation of 27 people (8 women) including the Chairman of CPC, representatives of mass organizations such as the FA, WU, and village leaders in the commune. In order to get the most amount of information possible, the evaluation mission implemented a participatory approach. During focus group discussions, people were encouraged to answer questions on benefits from the SDC fund by using color cards individually and/or in-group discussions. Each group then summarized their opinions and selected a representative to make a presentation. This method gave an opportunity for all people (even people who can not read or write, or those who are afraid to speak at the meeting) to give opinions and provide information. This information was then clarified after each presentation. In order to get more comprehensive information as well as confirmation, participants were requested to complete

the questionnaires about beneficiaries, commune capacity improvements, and participation by women in the implementation of CDF.

Semi-structured and structured interviews

This method was conducted at the district and commune levels, and in two of the upland villages. It included interviews with the Vice Chairman of District Farmer's Association, the Head of District Agricultural Session, the Chairman of the Commune People's Committee, commune staff, Chairman of Commune WU, and four villagers. Most interviewees were asked similar questions regarding beneficiaries, with some specific questions used for upland villagers. This information, derived from group discussions and different interviews, was then used for cross checking and analysis.

Briefing at Helvetas office

Initial findings of the mission was presented at Helvetas office to number relevant projects' representative. Discussions and out puts of the briefing were also used for the finalization of the report.

1.3. Team composition

The team consisted of the following members:

1. Mrs. Phung Thi Ngan Ha, National Consultant, team leader
2. Mrs. Le Thi Luong, Agronomist of Pacnam Woman Union, Local Consultant, team member;
3. Mrs. Nguyen Lam Giang, Senior Project Officer of Helvetas, team member;

The country director of Helvetas Vietnam, Daniel Valenghi joined the team on the last day of field visit to the commune.

2. ANALYSIS OF ACHIEVEMENTS AND IMPACTS

2.1. Achievements and impacts

2.1.1. Benefits to the majority of the commune

During the four years of CDF implementation a wide range of activities was carried out, including agricultural extension and small-scale infrastructure projects. These directly benefited a large number of people living in the 15 villages. The activities are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Activities implemented by using CDF fund 2003-2006

No	Activity	Village	Ethnic group	No. beneficiaries
Agriculture extension				
1	Training courses on veterinary medicine	Coc Mon Khau But Ban Cam Na Slien Tot Con Khuoi Hao	H'mong Dao	195 male 60 female
2	Training courses on soy beans, and provision of new varieties	Khau But Ngam Khet	Dao and H'mong	9 female 76 male

No	Activity	Village	Ethnic group	No. beneficiaries
		Khuoi Hao Nam Cam		
3	IPM training course on maize, and provision of inputs	Ban Cam	Dao	14 female 50 male
4	Technical training for winter maize	Pac Nghe	Tay	9 HH
5	Training course on elephant grass planting and fattened cow raising	Khau But Tot Con Ban Cam Khau Luong Khuoi Hao Nam Cam Coc Mon	H'mong Dao	6 female 50 male
6	Training course on bamboo planting	Coc Mon Na Slien Tot Con	H'mong Dao	18 female 85 male
7	Training course on fruit trees, and provision of seedlings	Khau But Coc Mon Ban Cam Na Slien Tot Con Khuoi Hao	H'mong Dao	72 female 200 male
8	Provision of revolving fund for fattened cow training	Tot Con	H'mong	2 HH
9	Vaccination campaign	4 upland and 2 lowland villages	Tay, Dao H'mong	546 animals
10	Study tours to Cao Bang province	Commune carders		3 female 17 male
Infrastructure & equipment				
1	Pac Puoi irrigation scheme	9 villages	Tay, Dao	23 HH
2	Drinking water system	Coc Ke 2 schools	Tay	9 HH and 2 schools
3	Drinking water system	Ban Tau	Tay	13 HH

No	Activity	Village	Ethnic group	No. beneficiaries
4	Drinking water system	Khuoi Hao	Tay	5 HH
5	Drinking water system	Pu Khoang Khuoi Tang	Tay	25 HH
6	Irrigation pipe	Khuoi Hao Nam Cam	Dao H'mong	5 HH
7	Water tanks of 3 m ³ , and wells	Khau But	Dao	6 HH
8	Water tanks of 2 m ³	Nam Cam Khau But	H'mong Dao	29 HH
9	Extension (storage) house, and veterinary equipment	Commune	Tay, H'mong Dao	All people in the commune
10	Suspension bridge	10 villages	Tay, H'mong Dao	All villagers
11	Computer and photocopy machines	Commune	Commune staff and people	
12	Veterinary equipment	Commune	All villagers	
13	Credit for Veterinary services	Commune	All villagers	

It depended on the nature of the activities, there could be whole villagers benefiting from the activity or some households. The suspension bridge or the extension house, for example, has helped all villagers benefiting. Whereas, the construction of household water tanks can meet only demands of those who were most in need of water as well as those were the poorest.

In extension training, total beneficiaries are 478 male accounts for 80% and 113 female accounts for 20% of total participants. The unbalance between men and women to participate in the training again proved that the chances for women to participate in training (as well as social activities) are less than men due to their low level of education and inability to speak the common languages.

Table 2: Commune Development Fund allocation per domain of activity (2003-2006)

Agricultural Extension	12 %
Infrastructure and equipment	86 %
Meetings, workshops	2 %

In terms of investment, 86% of the fund has been used for infrastructure, 12% for agricultural extension and 2% for the organization of meetings and workshops (table 2). The focus on infrastructure reveals high demands for infrastructures for basic needs (water tanks, bridge, irrigation schemes, etc.). Only 12% of the Fund went to extension and training activities. The project

management board, together with support from Helvetas had tried hard to integrate the training and extension activities into the plan of operation and tried to avoid too much on infrastructure. This was also the objectives of the agreements approved by the donor.

These aforementioned activities, largely relating to small-scale infrastructure projects and agricultural extension, are typical of the actual needs of such poor, remote, upland communes like Cao Thuong.

The commitment of 300 million VND/ year for such a remote and mountainous commune like Cao Thuong proved to be a practical amount. It's within the manageable and coordinately capacity of the commune cadres and its village's leaders (see 2.5 for more information).

Table 3: Expenditures of the project "Cao Thuong Development Fund" during implementation 2003-2006 (in CHF)

	2003	2004	2005	2006	Total
Budget	30 000	32 000	31 000	37 000	130 000
Expenditures	32 512	28 647	32 521	43 582	137 262
%	108	90	105	117	105

The total budget included the direct contribution to the commune (77%) and the technical support by Helvetas (23%). The disbursement over the years, the budget vs. the actual expenditures showed a good planning by the commune and in time support by Helvetas. Since the annual contribution to the commune was fixed, there were not big differences from one year to others.

As previously mentioned, this was the first time that the commune cadres directly managed a development fund. It was also the first time they conducted situational analyses for solutions of villager's demands, and the first time they created a commune development plan. The subsequent experience and lessons learned from the first year were then taken into account in the following years. As a result, the commune development plan became more feasible, targeted more upland villages, and benefited larger communities. The subsequent plans also reflected the improvements made by local commune cadres in managing and facilitating the fund.

During 2003, the first year of CDF implementation, the fund was allocated merely to lowland villages. The reason was the inexperience of the commune peoples committee (CPC) to manage such kind of fund. The commune needed first to gain relevant experiences in decision making, implementation and management. Especially the commune needed to find out an approach to implement small-scale infrastructure projects and to decide the local contribution level of the beneficiaries. Finally, it was decided that small scale infrastructure projects should be co-financed by the beneficiaries. The beneficiaries for small scale infrastructures had to contribute 20% of the total amount of the estimated budget. Contributions could be made in kind - for example, local materials such as sand and stone, and basic labor. For extension activities any local contribution was requested.

Table 4: Commune Development Fund allocation for small scale infrastructure and equipment (2003-2006)

Lowlands villages	45 %
Uplands villages	55 %

However, when it came to the upland villages, the policy of local contribution could not applied. It was explained by both the commune cadres and Helvetas support staff that people in the upland are too poor to make contribution. Unless the project changed its policy, the fund could have never

reached the upland villages. As a result, the last two years saw more upland villages benefiting from the fund.

2.1.2. Increase of production and income

The storage facility

The storage facility and veterinary equipment benefited the entire commune by supplying, for the first time, stable inputs for agricultural production and veterinary services. The Chairman of CPC noted that prior to the storage facility, the commune was not always able to acquire inputs for agriculture production such as fertilizer, pesticide, seeds, nurseries, and veterinary medicine. Furthermore, there was no place to actually store the inputs for agriculture production, nor were there any veterinary services in the commune. In the past, acquiring inputs and services required day's journey by boat. This journey could be further compromised during the rainy season, when flooding would shut down transportation routes completely.



Picture 1: The Storage facility newly builds in Cao Thuong commune, using CDF

The storage facility now also serves as a working place for the newly appointed commune extensionist and vet worker. It has become a place where people can get the latest information on crops, see the new varieties, and get advice from the technical staff. Conveniently located at the market centre, the facility is easily accessible by everyone. Future plans for the facility include the development of a market information center. This is a positive but challenging idea, which, shows that the facility has become a starting point for other new initiatives, and an impetus for further progress.

Agriculture extension

A number of agriculture extension training courses were conducted by the district technical officers from the Plant Protection Station, the Agricultural Office, the Farmer's Union, and the Veterinary Station. These were carried out under the coordination of the commune's Farmer's Union. The training courses varied with respect to the new varieties of maize, soybean, bamboo, and elephant grass planting. These, together with the IPM on maize and veterinary medicine, have helped people in the commune apply new techniques in their agriculture production and animal raising.

The CDF helped make it possible to organize trainings for upland villagers. In the past, it was very difficult to ask the district technical officers to come up to the Dao or H'mong villages to carry out the trainings, due to government budget limits and insufficient government staff. Now, because of the fund, the commune can contract the district technical staff to carry out the trainings directly for the H'mong and Dao people. Because the commune operates as a direct partner to the district, it is entitled to request the trainers adjust their teaching methods, and has called for changing the typical theoretical teachings to more practical training with lessons directly in the fields. This has been helpful for all, but particularly for those who cannot read and/or write.

Successful models of applying new techniques in grass planting, winter maize cultivation, and cattle raising have benefited a significant number of households in the commune. People in the workshops said that they were not previously able to get much meat from the cow because there was never

enough grass for feeding. But after applying techniques learned in the training for growing new variety of grass, there is enough to feed the cows, and subsequently greater meat production.

The other model was cultivating winter maize in the Dao village in Cam Thuong. The Dao were taught new techniques and given new varieties of maize in order to grow two crops of maize a year, rather than one, which had been the norm. This increased the production from 450kg/ha to 530kg/ha – and in some pilot areas, it has even increased up to 880kg/ha. This second crop of maize has helped to raise income levels in the village, and, together with several other crops, has contributed to reducing the poverty rate from 28% to 4% after three years. Mr. Song, Vice Chairman of the Farmer's Association said that in 2007 villagers would be encouraged to extend the cultivated areas for the cultivation of the second maize crop. Successful models will be further disseminated to larger areas.

2.1.3. Improvement in standards of living

Other common needs of the upland villages are water irrigation and drinking water systems. These villages are often far away from any water source – a fact that is compounded in the dry season when they have to travel further to get water. This practice of fetching water has long been a burden to the villagers - particularly for the women. It has been, therefore, a top priority to install a drinking water system. Therefore, the CDF supported the building of family water tanks, tanks for a group of families, and collection tanks for the villages. These water tanks have helped the villagers save labor and time, which now can be spent on the family, taking care of children, resting, or other farm labor.

Compared to the drinking water system, the CDF was not used as much for the irrigation schemes; only 28 households benefit from the irrigation, while 92 households benefit from the drinking water system. Those who benefit from both systems are the poorest households in the villages. Over the last four years, together with government's 135 program, 44,4% of households in the commune now have access to clean water, of which 17% households are directly benefiting from CDF implementation.

All these have contributed to the achievement of set target for socio-economic development of the commune and stabilization and improvement of people's lives.

2.1.4. Improvement of infrastructure and transportation

The Suspension Bridge has improved infrastructure and transportation in the commune and brought benefits to people in nine upland and one lowland village in the commune. The bridge is especially important for the people in the upland villages, as it has improved their access to the market, post office, storage facility, and boat station.

The commune had long desired a suspension bridge, but the costs of building such were prohibitive, and therefore they had to make do with a far less stable bamboo bridge. This bridge was often damaged by flooding during the rainy season. People in the commune said that every year they had to re-build or repair the bridge after the rains, which would cost and about VND 2 Million annually.

The commune is very happy with the new suspension bridge which was built from the CDF budget. As direct investors in the bridge construction, the CPC has increased its own construction management capacities, which should have positive future consequences with other similar development investments (see 2.1.5 for detail). Alongside these developments, the bridge construction has further noteworthy accomplishments:

- The bridge was the cheapest construction of its kind ever built in the district
- It was constructed with the highest local contribution/participation
- It benefits a large part of the upland population
- The bridge will have a long-term positive impact.

Before



After



Picture 2: The Suspension Bridge makes upland people's lives easier

2.1.5. Better Access to Information and Strengthening of Commune Management Capacities

By using a portion of the CDF for office equipment (computers, photocopy machines) the commune now has better access to information, which has positive repercussions on labor effectiveness and efficiency. The Chairman of commune noted that it had previously been difficult for them to do simple things like photocopy documents or contact related agencies and/or outside help for services. Such acts had required going to the district for getting documents typed or photocopied. The procurement of office equipment has significantly reduced inefficient labor, and increased the productivity of the limited number of staff in the commune.

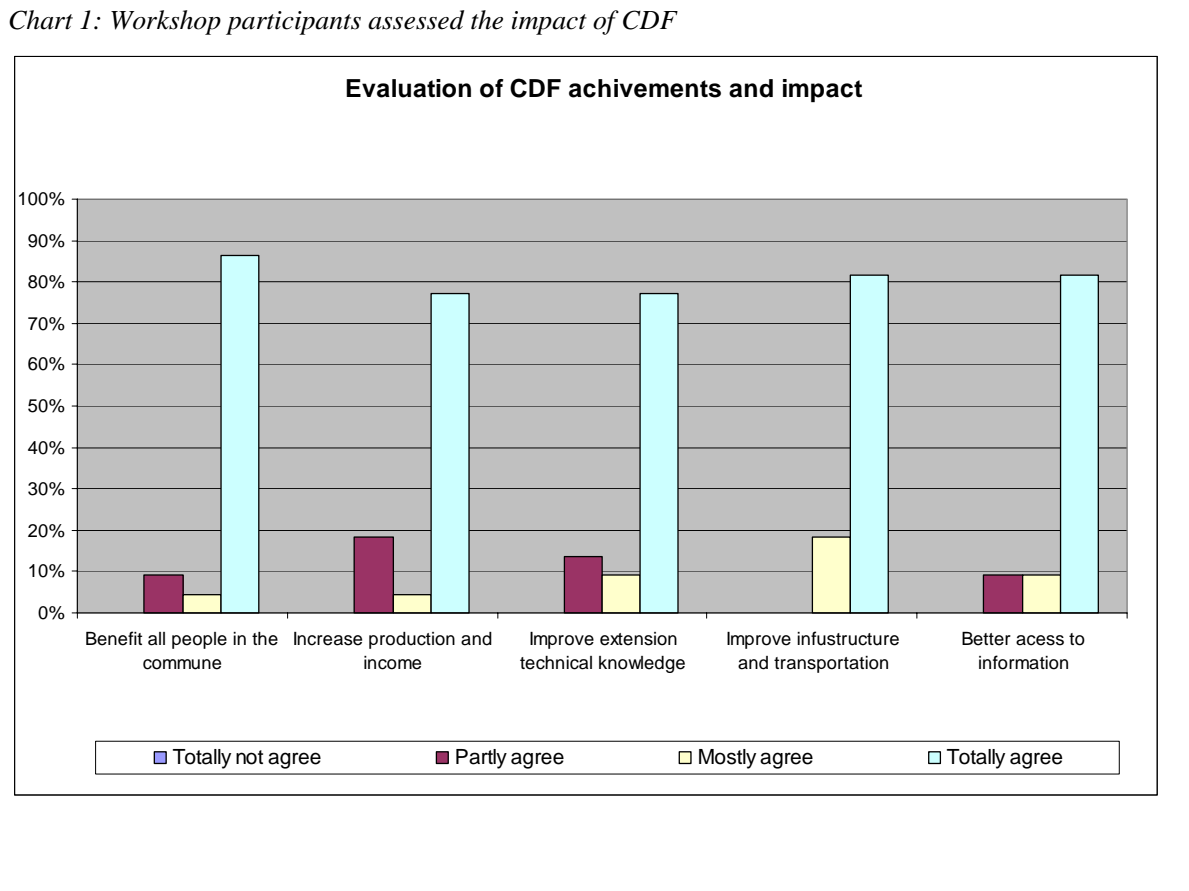
Through working with the management of CDF, commune leaders and staff have improved their abilities to manage, organize, monitor, evaluate, and apply participatory planning methods. (Greater details are provided in the following section).

One important impact from CDF experience is that the fund has helped improve the commune's general understanding of economic development. By being exposed to information and access to services through the demands of the project, the people in the commune have come to adopt more

market-oriented production methods, and reduce their historical patterns of producing only for their own consumption. The Chairman of CPC said that the commune will soon contact a potato processing company in order to secure a contract for producing and supplying potatoes for snack-foods processing. People in upland villages (such as the Nam Cam village) also want to grow bamboo for marketing, which could bring higher incomes. These examples illustrate the progress in the commune’s understanding of economic development, as well as subtle but significant change in their ways of thinking.

These developments are also evident in management and coordination activities. Prior to the CDF experience, the CPC was only involved in administration management. With the CDF, the commune leader was required to coordinate the technical staff in a way that successfully added relevant CDF responsibilities to the usual work expectations. This meant that the staff needed to be provided with a good and clear plan of activities, and were expected to exercise good time management in order to meet deadlines – particularly those activities which were crop based and therefore heavily dependent on proper timing.

One of the requirements of the fund management was to incorporate a participatory approach to



problem solving in order to increase interaction and understanding between the commune cadres and the villagers. This requirement resulted in more appropriate expenditures of the CDF, as well as the improved administrative management capacities.

This was the first time a commune in this district had the opportunity to be put in charge of a development fund. District leaders have expressed their interest in the project and have requested reports and lessons learned in order to prepare for other similar projects/programs in the district and province in the future.

As described in the methodology session, 27 people participated in the final evaluation workshop and were requested to evaluate the benefits that the commune received through using the CDF. The results of project achievement evaluations and project impacts as noted by participants during the final evaluation workshop are summarized in Chart 1. There were 4 levels of evaluation: totally disagree, somewhat agree, mostly agree, and totally agree. Participants' answers were summarized in the chart. The results show that most are very positive in their views of how the fund was used (blue column). However, when we look at the red column, the greatest disappointment is registered in the 'increased production and income' category. This is not necessarily a negative reflection on the fund, particularly when considering that much greater effort and money was spent on drinking water systems and bridge construction. Another clear example is from the agriculture extension program, where activities such as bamboo planting take longer periods before profitability; the same can be said for fruit tree cultivation, and grass planting for fattening cattle.

2.2. Institutional and organizational aspects

During the first workshop, a Project Management Board (PMB) with 7 members was set up through the support of Helvetas Vietnam. The PMB included the Chairman and vice Chairman of the Commune People's Committee (PCP), the accountant, the cashier and 3 commune technical staff. The functions and responsibilities of the PMB were delineated through the decision 31/QD-UB dated 10th May 2003, and the additional decision No. 18/QD-UB dated 20th September 2005 of Cao Thuong CPC.

For the financial monitoring, a Local Monitoring and Auditing Group (LMAG) was set up with 5 members which included a Chairman, Vice Chairman and 3 members under decision No.32/QD-UB dated 10th May 2003 and additional Decision No.19/QD-UB of Cao Thuong CPC. Members for this LMAG are mainly representatives of mass organizations such as the Father Land Front, the Farmer's Union, and the Women's Union.

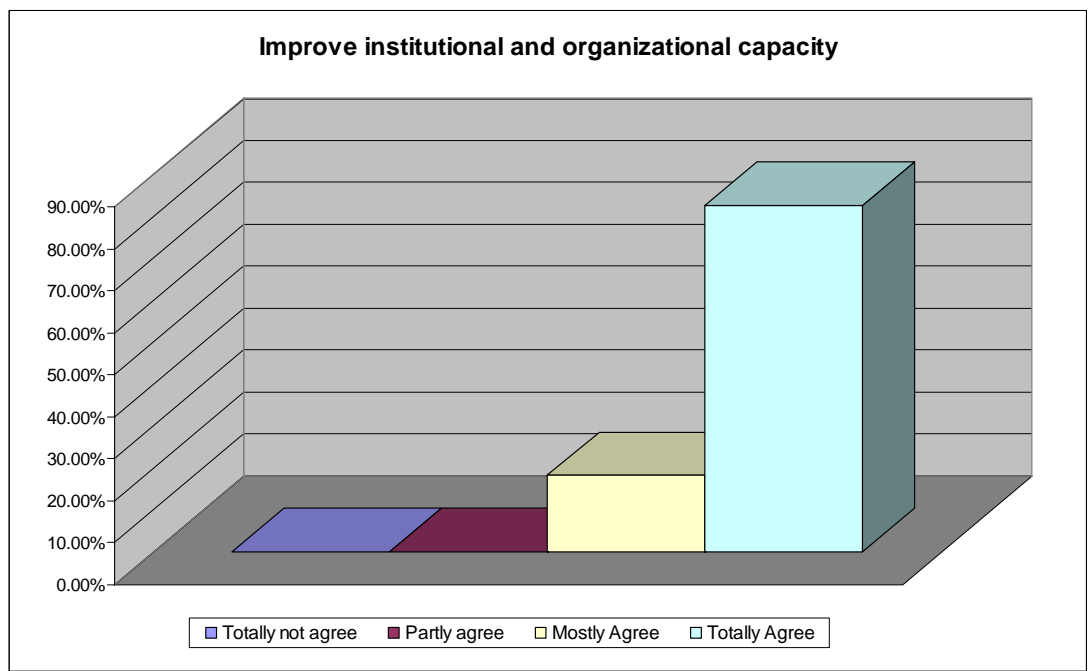
In the same workshop, Management Board and Monitoring & Auditing members were provided with all information about SDC fund for the Commune, basic principles of participatory planning, and transparent financial management. The workshop also defined the functions and responsibilities for these two boards.

The Management Board then divided the work and appointed commune staff to implement project activities. Activities included: planning, implementing, monitoring and reporting.

Following the basic principles and guidance introduced by Helvetas Vietnam, the commune staff, together with the support from the village heads, facilitated the villagers in making village plans. In these village meetings, they had to inform all villagers to join and express their needs. Afterwards, these needs would then be prioritized by the villagers. The prioritized lists from all the villages were then presented at the commune development planning workshop, where all commune cadres and representatives of villages' Women's Union and village heads again set the priorities for the Commune Development Plan (for more details, see 2.3). The final commune development plan was then submitted for donor and budget approval, with the commune management board starting implementation by contacting the relevant technical agencies and/or service providers from the district or beyond.

Helvetas Vietnam also supported the commune developing cost norms for the expenditures, particularly with respect to infrastructure projects. These cost norms were calculated on the basis of the commune and villages' actual context, and therefore proved to be very economical.

Chart 2: Improved institutional and organizational capacity



In this manner, the commune leaders and staff worked more closely with villagers, especially in the upland villages, and were better able to understand their demands. They also set up closer relationships with related agencies and service providers in the district. Using the fund for contracting with service providers in the district has helped the commune to get better services and to be more confident in working with/at the higher levels. This also provided more opportunities to develop relationships with service providers beyond the commune and district in the future. The Chairman of the Commune said that they would contact people in other districts or even other provinces for getting the best services in the future.

To see how people in the commune assessed this aspect, a similar approach to that described in the methodology and previous section was applied for the evaluation of improvement of institutional and organizational capacities.

As shown in Chart 2, 83% respondents totally agreed that commune capacity in institutionalization and organization has been improved, with the remaining 17% mostly agreed. There were no respondents registering totally not agree or only partly agree.

'This is the first time the commune have their own fund to contract the district service providers for their needs. As a result, this new way of relation has helped them to be independent in their work, to be more confident when working with the higher level. They actively involve in preparation of the trainings, the work and make adjustments in accordance to the local context. This new relationship has helped the commune to have their voice up with the district level upon the quality of the district work.'

Abstract from a progress monitoring report

2.3. Application of participatory tools and approaches

The agreement signed between the commune and Helvetas stipulated that the commune is free to decide how to allocate the fund. However, it was also clearly stated that the fund should not be used for those things which were already covered by the government or by other programs and that the fund had to be managed in a participatory and transparent approach.

Based on the conditions in the agreement, the CDF was planned to meet the most urgent needs of the majority of people in all villages in the commune, with priority to the poorest segment and upland villages.

The commune leaders and staff have tried to apply the participatory planning approach with willingness and enthusiasm. With information and knowledge on participatory planning methodology that they got from the inception workshop, the commune staff went to the villages to facilitate the creation of a village plan with the people. Afterwards, the commune plan was developed by combining all village plans in a workshop conducted in the commune with participation of head of villages. This planning method was positive, as it has provided villagers, especially the poor, the ethnic minority people and woman in upland villages the chance to participate in the planning. Therefore, the commune plans are viewed as having reflected the demands of all groups people in the commune.

However, it gradually became apparent that the planning capacities of the commune and villages were still weak. Most planned activities were not implemented or delayed due to a variety of reasons, including such unforeseen problems as: overloading work, poor management, insufficient staff or unavailable services during harvests seasons. For example, in 2003, the first year of project implementation, of the 10 planned activities, only 3 were implemented. Similarly, the estimated cost for drinking waters systems for the same year was VND 50,000,000, but in fact VND 120,893,000 was actually spent.

Further challenges came from traditional approaches and a gradual learning curve. The attempts to implement participatory planning methods were slowed by influence from typical traditional planning methods. The target groups were also not well informed about objectives and the usage of the CDF, nor were they completely aware of the planning methodologies. Their participation in planning was very limited because commune staff still dominated and influenced the planning process. Heads of villages and commune staff often set the prioritization of planned activities. During the commune-planning workshop at the commune, the village heads, especially those from uplands and minority groups, often had little chance to speak or be heard. As a result, in the first and second year of project implementation, most activities were concentrated in lowland villages and the upland villages were covered only in the last year of implementation. Furthermore, most of the budget had been spent on hard investment for procurement rather than capacity building and knowledge improvement.

Planning meeting at village



Planning meeting at commune



Picture 3: Participatory planning

Apart from this, mobilizing the contributions from upland villagers failed, as the approved commune plan that was created by combining villager needs was not brought to the people in the villages. Villagers were informed only about these activities right before construction started, and only with purpose of getting them to contribute. Moreover, changes to the villager's proposals, including time for implementation, were decided by the commune themselves without consulting the villagers. Therefore, the farmers, especially poor farmers in upland villages could not make themselves available for collecting local materials or transporting purchased materials to the construction sites, and thus some activities in the villages were cancelled.

There were a number of other problems rising from planning and implementation, such as: Poor surveys made by the service provider; unavailable service due to too much dependence on one service provider; irrelevant technical training on vegetables and fruit trees in upland villages resulting in low project outcomes. All these have reflected the weakness in the planning capacities of leaders and commune staff, and that the participatory and transparent usage and management of CDF was not implemented properly in the commune.

The Commune and Helvetas recognized these problems and tried to make the necessary changes and provide increased support to the commune. As a result, more activities were implemented in upland villages and more poor and ethnic minority people benefited from the CDF. Lessons from the first and second years were brought into consideration for the last two years.

2.4. Monitoring and Evaluation

2.4.1. Monitoring by Helvetas

Helvetas conducted monitoring and evaluation as agreed upon with the commune as well as with the donor, SDC. Helvetas sent a monitoring team to visit the commune twice a year to monitor and report on the application of methods and approaches and project implementation. Each year the monitoring mission consisted of one external technical consultant and respective Helvetas project officers from Hanoi or Helvetas Cao Bang. Results of the monitoring were used by the commune management board to make necessary changes to the planning and implementation of CDF in order to achieve the targeted objectives. From monitoring reports made in the first and second year of the project implementation, the problems were identified and analyzed. Certain important actions were taken for solving the problems. For example, Helvetas recruited a local field consultant to support the commune in planning and implementing project activities. The consultant also acted as a facilitator between the commune and district service providers. This local consultant also helped the commune identify problems early enough so that solutions could be enacted.

Through all the monitoring and supporting from Helvetas, there were more meetings with upland villages conducted, and as a result, more priorities were given to upland villages. The commune plan was developed with more active participation of upland villagers and reflected their demands.

However, this monitoring seemed to focus too much on the technical part of the fund management - such as participatory planning, implementation, targeting the poor, upland villages - but not on the organizational and management parts, such as the performance of LMAG, and management board (See 2.4.2 for detail).

2.4.2. Monitoring by LMAG

Through the support of Helvetas, Local Monitoring and Auditing Groups (LMAG) were set up in the commune at the introduction/inception workshop. The guidance on monitoring and evaluation, as well as reporting formats, was also provided in the inception workshop. However, it seemed that the concepts of Monitoring and Evaluation were not sufficiently clarified within the project, especially to the commune leaders and staff. As a result, the LMAG was set up for monitoring, but the functions and tasks of the members were not clearly defined. There was no task description for

each LMAG member nor for the Management Board. There was confusion and overlapping in monitoring work between PMB and LMAG. Both did not know what they have to report and to whom they had to submit their reports. These problems happened in the first year, however, no subsequent effort was seen by Helvetas for improving knowledge and understanding between PMB and LMAG in monitoring and evaluation.

Moreover, members of the LMAG are representatives of the mass organizations in the commune. These members are more or less the colleagues of the CPC and are closer to the cadres of the CPC than the local villagers. This has influenced the functions of LMAG. The LMAG should represent the local villagers, the direct beneficiaries of CDF, by monitoring all that the Commune Management Board was doing. But in reality, their monitoring performance was not as strict as regulated and expected.

Notably, Helvetas Monitoring focused much more on the output rather than outcome. There were no indicators for impact evaluation. The monitoring system was not consistent, due to a lack of usage of the reporting format and tools. People in the commune complained that the forms were too complicated and different from the usual government system. But from the Helvetas point of view, the forms were good and clear. People in the commune need more training and coaching so that they can use these forms for reporting.

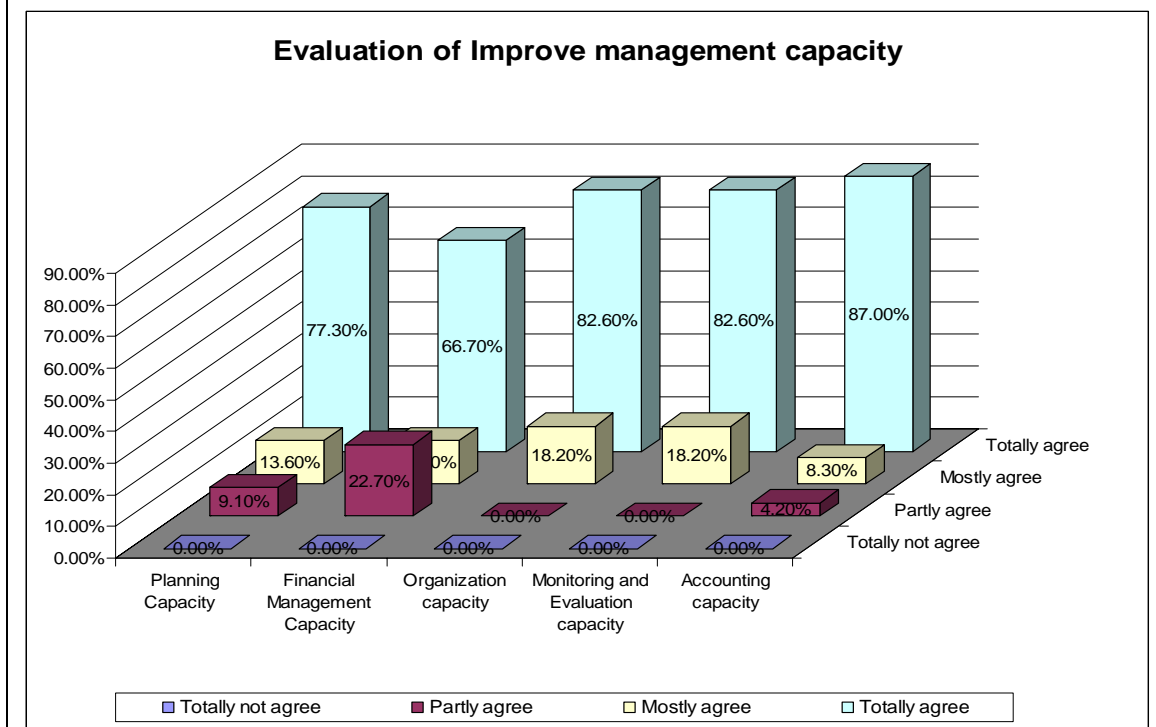
2.5. Assessment of Financial Management

As was the case with participatory planning method and M&E, financial guidance and forms were provided by Helvetas to the accountants and people in the commune in the inception workshop. This included financial reporting forms for training, extension, technical and construction activities. Financial monitoring was included in the yearly monitoring mission of Helvetas during the project implementation, and provided support to commune when necessary. In the monitoring mission conducted in March 2004, the financial forms were reviewed and reported. It was discovered that, instead of using project forms for financial reporting and accounting, they had to use government forms. It was also mentioned that the District Auditors were satisfied with project bookkeeping and final accounts, but there were no details of problems when analyzing in these reports.

There was not much information about financial problems found in monitoring report. But it should be noted that Helvetas made efforts to give more support to the commune in finance management during its Monitoring mission in 2005. Unfortunately, it failed due to flooding and an accident in the commune (see monitoring report by Helvetas, August 2006).

During the final evaluation mission to the commune, through discussions with the PMB and the accountant, problems in training and capacity building in financial management were addressed by the Chairman of the CPC and the accountant. It was mentioned that there was no training on financial management and accounting during the project implementation and it was clearly stated that this training should have been necessary and should be conducted right from the beginning of the project implementation.

Chart 3: assessment on the improved financial management



The case for Cao Thuong was also rather special, as the commune accountant was particularly weak in accounting skills (this had nothing to do with CDF). It therefore was extremely difficult for him to make a financial report. Although the commune was informed about the final evaluation and plan for the workshop had been made few weeks in advance, the financial report was not ready by the time the evaluation team came and the workshop conducted. This weakness in the accountant's ability has negatively influenced the financial management of CDF.

The evaluation made by participants in the final evaluation workshop on improvement of financial capacities also has shown that improvement of financial capacity was lowest among other improved capacities. People in the commune complained that there was no training on accounting; they found difficulties in doing the work.

The highest percentage of responses (22,7 %) only partly agreed that management capacity was improved, while most agreed or mostly agreed that organizational and monitoring capacity was improved.

2.6. Gender Balance

By applying participatory planning methods, more women were encouraged to participate in the planning and training exercises. In the past, planning and training was not concerned with gender issue and encouraged women to attend. Therefore, there were very few women who attended the events. People from the Farmer's Associations and PMB mentioned that there was about 30% woman participated in the meeting and training (see table 2). They also confirmed that more women in lowland villages participated than women in upland villages, and that although women may have participated in the meeting or training, they did not speak. In upland villages where Dao and H'mong people live, men make the decisions in the family as well as at the meetings. Therefore, they are the ones who went to the meetings. The information derived from interviews in the Chau But and Ban Cam villages confirmed this.

The Women's Union in the commune and Women's Group in the villages are rather weak in their ability to organize social events for the women and create opportunities for women to be together. The Women's Group in the village conducts meeting only once a year. One woman interviewed said that she did go to a Woman's Group meeting in the village but she did not remember what was said at the meeting. There is no initiative in the commune and villages to improve women's participation to date.

3. Conclusion

- The Commune Development Fund (CDF) allocated to Cao Thuong Commune has proven to be very useful to the development of Cao Thuong.
- The CDF has increased mobility, improved public service delivery, and increased agricultural production and income.
- In Cao Thuong, the CDF was used effectively and provided support to face real problems of the concerned people living in the commune. It has, together with other support programs, contributed to reduce poverty in the commune.
- The fund was used efficiently. For the infrastructure and service delivery by district and commune cadres, the government cost norms were strictly applied.
- The decision-making process was harmonized with the commune. The plans and the cost estimates for construction were approved by the responsible district agencies, who took into account the relevant local cost norms.
- The introduction and training workshops provided by Helvetas Vietnam were necessary and useful. However, further training or continuation of trainings which better reflect the on-going needs of local cadres, such as monitoring & evaluation and financial management, have not been satisfactorily considered.
- This was the first time that the Cao Thuong commune experienced using a CDF . This experience was recognized by the district level and the district now considers Cao Thuong to be the pilot commune for the 135 programme, phase II.
- By managing the CDF, the commune cadres and the commune leader's capacities have improved in managerial aspects including planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. The fund has also provided the opportunity to go further in economic development and to be more confident in working with higher levels and external service providers.
- Although the activities supported by CDF have reflected the urgent needs of the local people, the fund was not sufficiently and efficiently allocated to respond to the needs of the upland villages.
- The decision-making process of the CDF did not adequately consider the problems and needs of the most remote villages in the commune. This was also an issue related to language problems and the low literacy rate.
- Monitoring and coaching activities provided by Helvetas Vietnam were not always sufficient. Especially in the case of financial matters, where the commune accountant was not able to provide the necessary reports in an acceptable manner.
- Nevertheless, the mission was not able to collect any indicators or information on any misuse of funds. The low capacity of the financial monitoring resulted principally in delays to the activity implementation.

- There was not much improvement in terms of gender and environment protection.

4. Lessons learned and recommendations

CDF has met the demands of local people. It is even more meaningful when these demands are not covered by other projects or government programs. Meeting the demands of local people has also contributed to implementation of government policies on social and economic development. It has been suggested that support similar to CDF should be continued in the future. The support fund from SDC to Cao Thuong commune is small, but the lessons learned are valuable.

Similar future projects should study the lessons learned from Cao Thuong and consult Helvetas and SDC. Similarly they can gather valuable experiences from other programs, such as: the Northern Mountain Poverty Reduction Program (NMPRP-funded by WB) of China Se Program (funded by SIDA), which also have been working on the CDF for years.

The following issues should be taken into consideration for future project design and implementation:

- The Fund should be divided into several stages. The first stage should see the smallest parcel of the budget in order to help the commune first prove their management capacity and gain first hand experience. When lessons learned from the first stage are taken, the following stages could see increased budget. This would help reduce the risks for both the commune and the donor.
- Knowledge levels, language problems, difficulties of target groups, different ethnic groups, all need to be understood and analyzed for better project design and implementation.
- In order to ensure the participation of poor people, ethnic minorities and women in the planning and implementation processes, and ensure that they all benefit from the fund, proper criteria and encouraging framework should be developed and clearly explained to people in the commune in the beginning of implementation.
- Some remaining issues such as capacity building, monitoring and evaluation, and financial management need to be taken into account for future project design.
- It is very important to build or enhance the management capacity of commune leaders and staff at the outset of fund implementation. This includes: leadership, organization, monitoring and evaluation, financial, accounting, and facilitation skill development. Furthermore, consultation and coaching should be provided during the entire duration of implementation in order to ensure best results of the fund
- Monitoring mechanisms need to be set up at the beginning of the project with clear indicators, output monitoring, and report forms.
- The set up of Local Monitoring and Auditing Groups (LMAG) is very useful. The LMAG should be represented by the local villagers (the beneficiaries).
- Quarterly monitoring rather than half yearly or yearly monitoring is more appropriate for this type of project.

5. Annexes

5.1. Annex 1: TOR of the evaluation mission

Background

Cao Thuong was a project commune of the Helvetas financed project "Empower Local People for the Management of Natural Resources in Ba Be" (ELP-BB 04/1999 - 06/2002). The ELP-BB project (1999-2001) aimed at improving the food security of the local population which depends to a great extent on subsistence agriculture. It addressed the needs of families that are women as well as men. It included all socio-economic groups but with priority to the most vulnerable segment of the population such as ethnic minorities, woman and poor households. The commune is situated in the Buffer Zone of the Ba Be National Park and thus faces restrictions on land use due to conservation needs. The commune has no car access road and is not connected to the national electricity grid. One telephone line was only recently installed at the post office station of the commune center. Other difficulties are access to information, inputs, markets and extension services.

During Swiss agency for Development & Cooperation (SDC) field visit to Cao Thuong commune on May 5, 2002, the delegation pledged a budget contribution of total VND 900 mio for 3 years (VND 300 mio/year) in form of a Commune Development Fund. The inception and planning workshops were organized by the commune in March and April with the support of Helvetas. As the result from these events a Yearly Plan of Operation 2003 was made and the General Agreement between Helvetas Vietnam (authorized by SDC) and the People's Committee of Cao Thuong commune was sign on April 24, 2003. Annually, the commune organized village development plans in all of its villages which then generated to be the commune development plan. The last two years focused the funds for upland villages only (9 out of 15) therefore VDP was not done in all villages. The next year planning can not be done if the previous plan is not reviewed and closed.

Helvetas has supported its project communes, villages to meet their basic needs which are not covered by the government. However, beside financial support, Helvetas' support involved also technical and close monitoring. For the first time, with Cao Thuong commune development fund, the management and ownership of the fund are handed to the local government and people. With little technical support for planning, the commune make their own plan, implementation, management and monitoring. Experience from Cao Thuong could be interesting lessons for Helvetas' support strategy to other villages, communes in the future.

Due to the difference of exchange rate, the fund was extended one more year to November 2006. This year is the last and final year of the commune development fund.

Objective of the Commune Development Fund

To provide the commune with an investment fund that promotes commune development; the generated activities and the funds are managed by the commune authorities in a participatory and transparent way.

Objectives and expected results of the mission

Objectives

- Review and analyze the results of the four year implementation of commune development fund by Cao Thuong People's committee and its people.
- Capitalization of the commune's experience on development fund management.

Expected results

- The achievements and impact of the project in relation to their objectives and expected results are assessed;

- The institutional and organizational aspects of the project are assessed;
- The application of participatory tools and approaches which were introduced by Helvetas for planning, implementation and monitoring of the commune fund are assessed (strengths, weakness) such as activity sheet, monitoring format, activity final report;
- Financial management is assessed: what has been done with the financial support; analyze the effectiveness and efficiency of the financial support in relation to the achievement;
- Support/monitoring and coaching from Helvetas is assessed: Was it sufficient? What could be better? How to do it next time?
- Gender balance in the decision making process and in the beneficiary;
- How do the commune use the CDF experience in the future?
- Lessons/experience of the commune development fund are withdrawn for future dissemination.

Evaluation team and its function

- Phung Thi Ngan Ha, Team Leader
- Le Thi Luong, Agronomist of Pacnam Women Union, team member
- Nguyen Lam Giang, senior project officer of Helvetas, team member.

Resource Persons:

- Concerned authorities at Ba Be District
- Other stakeholders (cadres of Government services, extension workers, farmers)
- Schedule of evaluation mission
- Day 1 21 Nov Preparation of evaluation mission in Hanoi
- Day 2 22 Nov Preparation of evaluation mission in Hanoi
- Day 3 23 Nov Travel to Babe and meeting with district relevant authorities
- Day 4 24 Nov Workshop in CT¹ and meeting with relevant stakeholders
- Day 5 25 Nov Visit two villages
- Day 6 26 Nov Travel back to Hanoi
- Day 7 27 Nov Reporting
- Day 8 28 Nov Reporting
- Day 9 29 Nov debriefing with Helvetas in Hanoi, finalize the report.

Method

- The review shall be based on reports (bi-annual and annual reports),
- The evaluation team shall apply participatory methods, such as semi-structured interviews, facilitated meetings and field visits.

¹ The commune PC is organizing a final, half-day evaluation workshop

- The evaluation members shall work in a team; they divide the work among themselves.

Reporting

The team leader will report to Helvetas Vietnam Representative, Daniel Valenghi. Final report will be discussed at Helvetas Hanoi Office.

Logistics

The Helvetas Hanoi office will organize all necessary documents, materials, transport, room, food and accommodation for all the Evaluation team.

Next steps

The team leader finalizes Evaluation report and present outcomes to Helvetas Hanoi Office.

Documents

- VDP/CDP concept paper of Helvetas
- Agreements of the project
- Monitoring reports.

5.2. Annex 2: Detail expenditure of the CDF

Total Budget: 1'200'000'000 VND

No	Activity	Village	Ethnic group	Actual expenditure (VND)	Local contribution (VND)	No. beneficiaries
Agriculture extension						
1	Training courses on veterinary medicine	Coc Mon Khou But Ban Cam Na Slien Tot Con Khuoi Hao	H'mong Dao	16'056'000		195 male 60 female
2	Training courses on soy beans, and provision of new varieties	Khou But Ngam Khet Khuoi Hao Nam Cam	Dao and H'mong	5'500'000		9 female 76 male
3	IPM training course on maize, and provision of inputs	Ban Cam	Dao	7'447'000		14 female 50 male
4	Technical training for winter maize	Pac Nghe	Tay	6'561'000		9 HH
5	Training course on elephant grass planting and fattened cow raising	Khou But Tot Con Ban Cam Khou Luong Khuoi Hao Nam Cam Coc Mon	H'mong Dao	27'216'000		6 female 50 male
6	Training course on bamboo planting	Coc Mon Na Slien Tot Con	H'mong Dao	8'498'000		18 female 85 male
7	Training course on fruit trees, and provision of seedlings	Khou But Coc Mon Ban Cam Na Slien Tot Con Khuoi Hao	H'mong Dao	34'072'000		72 female 200 male

No	Activity	Village	Ethnic group	Actual expenditure (VND)	Local contribution (VND)	No. beneficiaries
8	Provision of revolving fund for fattened cow training	Tot Con	H'mong	30'000'000		2 HH
9	Vaccination campaign	4 upland and 2 lowland villages	Tay, Dao H'mong			546 animals
10	Study tours to Cao Bang province	Commune carders		11'097'000		3 female 17 male
Sub Total (1)				146'447'000 (12,2%)		
Infrastructure & equipment						
1	Pac Puoi irrigation scheme	9 villages	Tay, Dao	47'040'713	3'560'000	23 HH
2	Drinking water system	Coc Ke 2 schools	Tay	73'010'357	8'598'419	9 HH and 2 schools
3	Drinking water system	Ban Tau	Tay	48'091'626	8'220'317	13 HH
4	Drinking water system	Khuoi Hao	Tay	30'444'299	5'766'238	5 HH
5	Drinking water system	Pu Khoang Khuoi Tang	Tay	56'978'963	11'505'711	25 HH
6	Irrigation pipe	Khuoi Hao Nam Cam	Dao H'mong	3'800'000		5 HH
7	Water tanks of 3 m ³ , and wells	Khau But	Dao	30'143'580	4'157'096	6 HH
8	Water tanks of 2 m ³	Nam Cam Khau But	H'mong Dao	145'121'345	2'920'585	29 HH
9	Extension (storage) house, and veterinary equipment	Commune	Tay, H'mong Dao	117'999'744		All people in the commune
10	Suspension bridge	10 villages	Tay, H'mong Dao	427'092'563	31'935'039	All villagers
11	Computer and	Commune		45'700'000		Commune staff

No	Activity	Village	Ethnic group	Actual expenditure (VND)	Local contribution (VND)	No. beneficiaries
	photocopy machines					and people
12	Veterinary equipment	Commune		4'050'000		
13	Credit for Veterinary services	Commune		5'573'000		
Sub total (2)				1'035'046'190 (86,2%)	76'663'405	
Meetings and Workshops						
1	2003	Commune		9'123'000		
2	2004	Commune		1'310'000		
3	2005	Commune		2'275'300		
4	2006	Commune		4'063'800		
Sub total (3)				16'772'100 (1,3%)		
Total (1, 2, 3)				1'198'265'290 (99,8%)	76'663'405 (0,6%)	

5.3. Annex 3: List of persons interviewed and program of the mission

Day	Date	Activity	Persons discussed with	
			Name	Function
1	21 Nov	Preparation of evaluation mission in Hanoi		
2	22 Nov	Preparation of evaluation mission in Hanoi		
3	23 Nov	Travel to Babe and meeting with district relevant authorities	Mrs.	Head of ARDO
			Mr. Ma Van Duy	Head of district farmer Union
4	24 Nov	Workshop in CT ² and meeting with relevant stakeholders	Mr. Nguyen Van Duy	Chairman of CT
			Mr. Song	Farmer Union
			Mr. Nhay	Accountant
			Mr. Doan	Agri worker
			Mrs. Nong Thi Ha	Women Union
			Mrs. Dang Thi Ta	Dao Farmer
			Mr. Phung So Sinh	Dao farmer
5	25 Nov	Visit two villages	Various farmers in the Tay and Dao villages	
6	26 Nov	Travel back to Hanoi		
7	27 Nov	Reporting		
8	28 Nov	Reporting		
9	29 Nov	Debriefing at with Helvetas Hanoi	Daniel Valenghi	Programme Director
			Le Bich Van	Program Officer
			Hans Schaltenbrand	ETSP CTA
			Franziska Voegtli	ETSP TA
			Ngo Van Luong	ETSP PO
			Tran Van Tri	CB-GEM manager
			Luu Thi Vien	CB-GEM PO

² The commune PC is organizing a final, half-day evaluation workshop