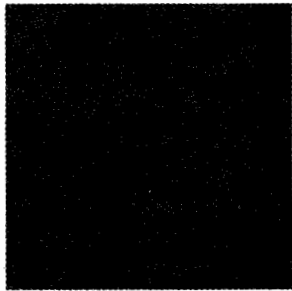


Participatory Child Poverty Assessment in Rural Vietnam

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There are increasing calls for more child specific measures of poverty in developing countries and the need for such measures to be multi-dimensional (that is not just based on income) has been recognised. Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPAs) are now common in international development research. Most PPAs have been undertaken with adults and there are still relatively few PPAs with children. The objective of the current study was to understand adults' and children's perceptions of the causes and consequences of child poverty in rural Vietnam using a variety of participatory methods. Poor children are perceived by poor children as those who lack basic needs such as food, clothes, and safe shelter. Poor children feel they do not receive enough attention from their parents, have to work and have no safe place to play. Copyright © 2004 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Introduction: Why measure child poverty?

Child poverty in developing countries has recently emerged as a topic of importance in its own right, as distinct from poverty in general. This is for several reasons: (a) children make up a large proportion of developing country populations (one-third to one-half are under 15, while in developed countries it is typically 25 per cent); (b) future individual and national well-being depend on the quality of life of current children (White and others, 2002); (c) children are particularly vulnerable among the poor, because their welfare rests upon the resources of their parents. Poor children are at risk of a host of developmental problems. They are far more likely to be of low birth weight due to poor health status of the mother and inadequate prenatal care; they have higher rates of childhood morbidity and mortality; and they are continually exposed to unsafe environments and conditions that pose additional risks (Bradley and Whiteside-Mansell, 1997). In addition, child poverty has the unique feature that short-run deprivation can have long-run consequences (for example, in terms of causing chronic adult morbidity or even premature death).

When measuring child poverty, indicators must reflect the special position of children. A child rights-based approach

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suggests using measures that reflect the things that matter most to children (Sinclair-Taylor, 2000; O'Kane, 2000; Johnson and others, 1998). While it is important to capture the child's view, child poverty must be measured in a multi-dimensional way. Poverty used to be regarded as lack of income only, but this view has now been replaced with an acceptance that poverty encompasses not only material deprivation (as measured by income or consumption) but also low achievements in education and health. Increasingly, the definition of poverty is broadened further to include vulnerability and exposure to risk (World Bank, 2001). For studies of child welfare it is particularly important not to limit research to income poverty, because various empirical investigations show that this is rarely the sole cause of poor children's risks of illness, school problems or other negative outcomes (Sherman, 1997; Ashiabi, 2000). For example, Korenmann and others (1995) found that about half of the effect of chronic poverty on children's literacy was attributed to non-financial disadvantage, such as the low literacy of mothers.

This article illustrates the application of a participatory poverty assessment (PPA) method that captures both children's views and a multi-dimensional measure of poverty.

PPAs in Vietnam

Participatory poverty assessments are now common in international development research (Norton, 2001). They generally engage respondents actively in the research process through the use of open-ended and participatory methods. Ideally, they also empower participants and lead to follow-up action. Most PPAs have been undertaken with adults; there have still been relatively few PPAs with children. However, there is an abundance of other forms of participatory work with children in developing countries (see for example, IIED, 1996, 2001). In Vietnam, PPAs are now an established part of development needs appraisals and were used to inform the government's poverty reduction strategy programme in the late 1990s. They complemented quantitative data on poverty from national household surveys such as the Living Standards Measurement Survey. Because the use of PPAs with children has been relatively extensive in Vietnam, this paper reviews them as a case study and presents in detail one such assessment from the northeast of the country.

Vietnam is undergoing major economic and social transitions. Since the process of reform and economic renovation, known as *doi moi*, started in 1986, there has been decollectivisation, redistribution of land and a general shift towards a market oriented economy. These shifts and the increasing pressure to make money for survival need to be considered when measuring perceptions of poverty. Vietnam's achievements in terms of income poverty reduction are hailed as one of the greatest success stories in economic development. Evidence from three rounds of Living Standards Surveys show that a third of the population was lifted out of poverty in the last decade. However, there are now concerns that further poverty reduction may be difficult and fears that inequalities may grow—particularly when Vietnam joins the World Trade Organisation. Poverty remains—particularly in remote, rural, minority ethnic areas. According to the 1998 Vietnam Living Standards Survey, 63 per cent of children under 15 years old lived under the poverty line. UNICEF (2000) suggests that Vietnamese children who grow up in poverty

are more likely to have learning difficulties, to drop out of school, to resort to drugs, to commit crimes, to be out of work, to become pregnant at a young age and to live lives that perpetuate poverty and disadvantage into succeeding generations.

Child poverty is where children grow up in households with inadequate resources to provide their material needs, where families and communities are unable to nurture and protect them and are unable to develop their full potential and are, for example, uneducated or ill . . . (Save the Children UK, 2000).

Previous PPAs with adults in the provinces of Tra Vinh, Ha Tinh, Lao Cai and Ho Chi Minh City indicated that most households which had many children or lacked labour resources were poor households which became more vulnerable when they had to pay health and education fees which are increasingly being introduced in Vietnam (World Bank, 1999). The direct expenses that households paid for children's education fees were high (4–5 per cent of the average income of poor households, UNICEF, 2000). PPAs in Vietnam offer relatively detailed data about school drop-outs. In Soc Trang, Binh Thuan and Khanh Hoa, 35 per cent of drop-outs had difficult family circumstances. Twenty-two per cent children dropped out because their parents decided, and 78 per cent dropped out on their own volition (Save the Children Alliance, 1998). Other research points out that most children were asked to leave school by their parents because they could not afford education fees and furthermore they needed labour resources (Theis and Huyen, 1998). Other reasons for drop-out mentioned in PPAs are: children seeming uninterested in school and wanting to give up, delayed payment of tuition fees and resulting shame with friends when teachers repeatedly ask for fees (see for example, Oxfam GB, 1999), and lack of books resulting in lack of interest in school (Save the Children Alliance, 1998). Feeling shame is especially difficult for children in a culture where 'loss of face' is a major embarrassment. Up to now, participatory research on poverty in Vietnam has largely focused on adults or on specific aspects of children's lives such as school drop-out. This study takes a more multi-dimensional view of child poverty and explores the causes and consequences of poverty from children's perspectives as compared to adult perspectives. The research was done in preparation for a larger, international, longitudinal study of child poverty entitled 'Young Lives' (www.younglives.org), in order to obtain qualitative research to inform a later large-scale quantitative household survey.

Methods

With a diversity of geographical characteristics (lowlands, middle-level land and mountains), the selected province of Phu Tho is in the northeast region in which there are differing economic, social, and cultural conditions. Official 1999 statistics for Phu Tho province show a total population of 1.3 million (370 per square kilometres) in eight districts and 249 communes (GSO, 2001). The people are poor (US\$ 192 per capita GDP), and 16 per cent of the population is below the income poverty line (NCSSH, 2001). Eighty-five per cent of the population is the majority ethnic, Kinh. Communes in Phu Tho province have on average about 5200 inhabitants typically in 12 hamlets of 90–100 families each. In order to cover a range of geographic, economic, social and cultural factors, two communes in Phu Ninh district (a mountainous area) and two communes in Thanh Ba district (the mid-land) were selected. In each of the two districts, two communes were selected: one poor commune and one better-off

Table 1: Sample size for each of four communes

Target group	Poor households	Average households	Better-off households
Adult	2 HHs without children or with children over 15 years old	1 HH without children or with children over 15 years old	1 HH without children or with children over 15 years old
	4 HHs with children under 15 years old	2 HHs with children under 15 years old	2 HHs with children under 15 years old
Children	6 children aged around 7	3 children aged around 7	3 children aged around 7

The 12 HHs and 1 hamlet leader formed a group. Therefore there was 1 group per commune (4 in total). HH, household.

commune. The Vietnamese government designates a commune poor when more than 40 per cent of its households are living under the national poverty line and the commune lacks basic public infrastructure facilities. A poor household is defined as having less than 100 000 Dong per capita per month. Within each commune one hamlet was selected for the participatory exercises. Twelve households of varying wealth and presence of children were selected in each hamlet, according to the Commune Peoples' Committee's appraisal of household economy. Table 1 describes the details of the sample size in a commune.

Various participatory tools were used for the research: household wealth ranking, cause and effect trees, focus group discussions, Venn diagrams, and mobility maps. Additional methods were also used to work with seven year old children. These encouraged the children to join in the research without fear and included drawing, daily timetable, and case studies. Some of these methods are described in Figure 1.

Wealth ranking was required in order to identify reference groups of 'poorer' and 'better-off' households for use in later discussion. The wealth ranking exercises were carried out by small groups of adult men and women, who had generally been living in their neighbourhood for a long time and who knew the local area and its people well. Participants defined and ranked all the households in their hamlet (60–90 households per hamlet) into five pre-determined wealth categories ('rich' through to 'very poor'). When using participatory methods with children a comfortable environment was established. Most of the children were eager to draw, however some of them needed guidance and others liked to copy from their neighbours. Some drawings were difficult to interpret but others were clear. Drawing was used mainly to 'warm up' and stimulate children to join in the following activities. In general, the children appeared to feel more comfortable talking rather than drawing. The PPA teams consisted of four researchers and one principal investigator. All had experience in using PPA tools. Vietnamese was used throughout and there was no translation needed. Ethical approval had been granted by the Vietnam Union of Science and Technology Associations. Fieldwork was conducted in 2002, and lasted one week.

The only notable difficulty in the fieldwork was the time it took to enable children to relax sufficiently with interviewers. While parents were keen on the research and remarked that nobody had come to talk to their children before, interviewers needed to sing songs with children and ask to be taught some local games before gaining a rapport with the children. This took about half an hour with each group of children. This is perhaps not surprising

Drawing

Pencils and paper were provided to the children. Then they were asked to draw their father and mother. This allowed them to express their views or, impressions of their parents and, hopefully, their circumstances.

Daily timetable

The aim of this tool is to identify the children's activities and their timing. The facilitator drew an empty schedule and asked children to talk about the activities that they usually do everyday.

Mobility map

A group of people (maximum 10) sit together on the floor. They draw their house on the centre of paper then the facilitator asks them to identify the location of some main places that they often go to. Meanwhile, they also use a pen to draw a line linking their house to the identified places.

Venn diagram

A group of people (maximum 10) sit together on the floor and consider child poverty issues in their commune and identify stakeholders who have contributed to dealing with this issue. Using a pen or pencil to write the issue in the centre of paper, the participants are then asked to allocate a circle of different size for each stakeholder. The size of the circle reflects the power and influence of the group or unit. The bigger size indicates the group has more power or influence on the issue.

Group discussion

Children were grouped together to discuss the following topics: who are the poor and rich families? What do they like and dislike?

Figure 1: Selected participatory methods used with children

given that interviewers worked with children indoors while parents were elsewhere (returned to their home to resume work or chatting with other family members while children were gathered in, for example, a household with a sufficiently large courtyard). Parental consent from both parents was obtained and all seemed happy to leave their children in order that the children could speak without being overheard by a village adult. Interviewers gained the impression that children felt more at ease with female rather than male fieldworkers.

Results*Who are the poor according to adults?*

Table 2 summarises the perceptions of 'poor' and 'better-off' households as elicited by the adults. The main distinguishing characteristics are: ownership of house and productive land/animals; durable consumer assets; occupation; amount of capital/access to credit; number of dependent children; and health status. Essentially, this part of the study confirmed the main characteristics of the rural poor as previously suggested by the four PPAs undertaken in Vietnam in 1999 (World Bank, 1999).

Table 2: Key characteristics of poor and better-off households as identified by adults

Criteria	Poor household	Better-off household
Ownership of house, land	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Recently moved out of parent's home, have little land for production - No garden or pond - No permanent pens for animals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have inherited land, flat land, built house - Have garden and pond
Facilities and assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No television - No motorcycle - No refrigerator 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have colour television - Have good motorcycle - Have refrigerator
Equipment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No cow or buffalo - Have to hire farming equipment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have cow, buffalo, ox-cart, even for rent - Own farming equipment
Occupation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Farmer, manual labourer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employee or working in government offices
Capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No capital, borrow money from bank - Not able to make payments so that loans are overdue and must borrow money from private lender with high interest - Large debt 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have monthly salary or available capital, borrow loans from bank and pay them on time
Household composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have a lot of old people - Many children - Lack of labour-force 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have grown up children
Education of children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have several children in school (more expenditure on child education) - High drop-out rate after finishing primary school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Children graduated from secondary school
Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Always have sickness and disease requiring them to pay a lot for medicines and examination expenses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rarely sick because they are leisured and have sufficient nutrition intake but if sick, they can afford medical expenses
Social capital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of work experience 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have wide social relationships

What causes child poverty according to adults?

Figures 2 and 3 illustrate examples of poverty trees that examined the perceived causes of child poverty. A main cause of child poverty was debt. For example, households had borrowed money for a wedding or constructing their house. According to local custom, the wedding must be large. All families in the village would attend the wedding party, so expenditure was significant. Even poor families obtained some money so that their wedding ceremony was as big as their neighbours. Thus after the wedding, the loan was burdened on the new couple. 'My parents said that although we are very poor we have to organise a wedding as big as others so that no one could slight us' (a woman in Binh Bo commune). In some previous PPAs (Oxfam GB, 1999; Save the Children UK, 1999), having many children and lack of labour were identified as causes of child poverty. In this research as well, these were the main causes of child poverty. In households with many small children plus elders, the income of the family depended on the couple who have to pay for food, education fees and health fees. There was often no capital for productive investment with the main reason being that they had no assets or land certificate in order

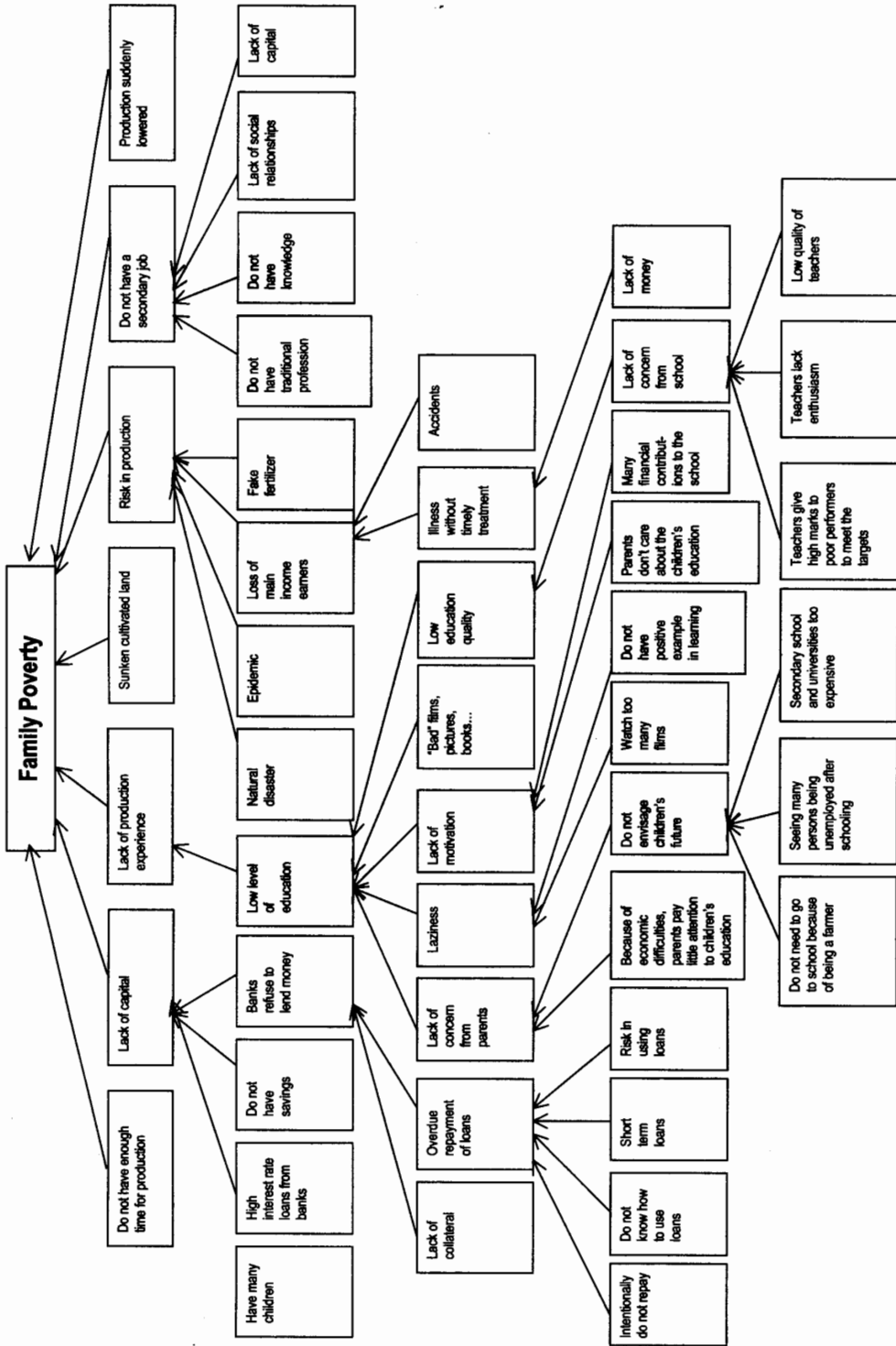


Figure 2: Causes of family poverty Yen Noi commune, Thanh Ba District

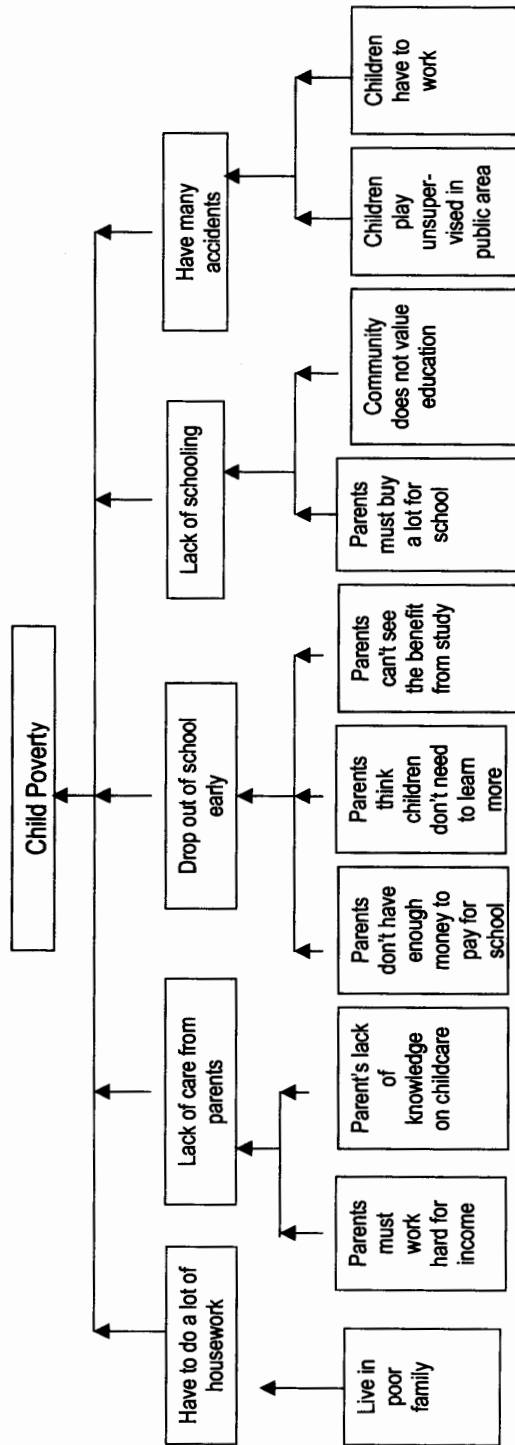


Figure 3: Causes of child poverty Vu en commune, Thanh Ba district

to access loans from 'within' their community (typically from state banks which primarily serve the poor). If they were to borrow money from 'outside' (rich individuals), the interest would be so high (1–3 per cent per month) that they would not be able to repay. Some households borrowed money 'from outside' and when due, they had to borrow from others to pay.

The poverty tree from Yen Noi (Figure 2) also includes many individual behavioural factors which are perceived as contributing to child poverty: 'laziness', exposure to 'bad films, pictures, books', 'lack of motivation', 'watching too many films'. These are in contrast to the uncontrollable 'environmental' or exogenous factors like 'sunken land', 'fake fertiliser', 'epidemic' and 'natural disaster'. The rapidly changing lifestyle in Vietnam can be seen to be conflicting with Confucian values (particularly the value of hard work) which are reflected in comments about potential negative effects of such lifestyle changes.

What were some of the effects of poverty? School drop-out was again mentioned as a specific effect. The causes of school drop-out were: unaffordable fees, embarrassment about delayed payments and parents' belief that education would not benefit their children. Extra classes are a growing phenomenon in Vietnam and have not been mentioned in previous PPAs. They appear to be putting extra economic and psychological pressure on poor families. Overall, the poor felt it was difficult to break out of the poverty cycle. *'It seems that the risks to be poor are so many and they are linked together, supporting each other to keep us in a "poor well"',* a woman of the poor household group said.

Adults' and children's perceptions of 'poor children'

There are differences between adult's and children's perceptions of poor children. Adults in general said that poor children are children who live in a poor family. They did not separate children from their family and their community. This is in line with a manual for participatory research with children which suggests:

Even though children may be the specific target or priority, it should never be forgotten that they are integral to families, communities and nations. An approach that takes account of this will try to understand what childhood, family, community and nation mean to children, as well as the values placed on children and childhood by the adults who influence their lives (Boyden and Ennew, 1997).

When asked why living in a poor family means that children are poor, the adults gave reasons such as: children have to spend more time to help the family, children do not receive enough attention from their parents, children drop out of school early and children do not have a safe place to play so that they easily have accidents. Although child poverty research (Neeffjes, 2002) suggests that it is important to distinguish child poverty from family, or household, poverty, it seems that poor people themselves do not make this distinction.

A discussion group of adults analysed the key characteristics of children living in two groups (better-off and poor) in order to identify characteristics of poor children (Table 3).

Table 3: Characteristics of better off and poor children according to adults

Characteristic	Children living in group 1 (better-off group)	Children living in group 1 (poor group)
Food, clothing, living conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Food: 3 meals per day (have fish or meat every meal) - Drinking boiled water - Living in solid house with conveniences such television, fridge, motorcycle, bicycle, etc. - Having enough good quality clothing. Parents often buy clothing for their children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Food: 3 meals per day (have mostly vegetables, salt, nuts; fish or meat is limited) - Drinking boiled water - Living in bamboo/straw house without conveniences such as television, fridge, motorcycle, bicycle, etc. - Lack of clothing and almost never get new clothing from parents
Physical Environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Using built well, drilled well - Hygienic toilet, 'double drawer' toilet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Using dug-well - Without toilet or having primitive toilet
Health and health care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Having enough nutritious food so the children are healthy - Sick children are given medicine, taken to see doctor and given more nutritious food 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The children are often ill - Sick children are not given medicine, or nutritious food because parents have little money. Sometimes they have to buy on credit or borrow money to treat ill children
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Children are given necessary equipment for school, and have books - Parents are able to afford the school fees - Parents have time to teach children and take children to school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Because they have a lot of children, parents have to look for work. For this reason they cannot pay attention to children's education - Lack of books and educational material so the children have to borrow from friends - Parents do not have money to pay school fees or pay late - Children drop out to help parent work (transplanting, weeding) - Children drop out because they feel ashamed - Children drop out, but the teacher encourages the parent to take children to school
Play, entertainment, family environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The children are given toys by parents - Children watch television with parent, sisters and brothers - Children are given bath by mother - Have afternoon nap - Sleep with mother or father - Reserve a little time for helping parents: cooking, preparing meal, tending cattle - If the children make a mistake parent reprove and use a cane 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have no toys. Play quap¹ - Go to neighbours house to watch television - Must bathe themselves - Have afternoon nap - Sleep with mother or father - Reserve a lot of time for helping parents: cooking, preparing meal, tending cattle, transplanting, weeding
Relationship with neighbours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Playing in neighbourhood - Playing at friend's house and call friend for playing at the children's house 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Playing in neighbourhood - Neighbours help children as they feel sorry for the children and they also give a little food when the children are ill
Security		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Children have to work - The children do not have a secure place to play so they have to play in public place. This leads to children having accidents such as falling into ponds and out of trees

¹Quap is a game whereby a group of children hop from foot to foot and pick up a stone then throw it into the targeted circle.

Table 3 shows that food security was perceived by adults as a major distinguishing characteristic between poor and better-off children. This is not surprising as 40 per cent of eight year old poor rural children in Vietnam are stunted (malnourished as measured by height for age) (Tuan and others, 2003). Level of parental care/attention and school attendance are other distinguishing characteristics. Table 4 shows that children perceive the main differences between poor and better-off children as relating to food, clothes, level of shame, assets (house, TV, toys) and level of labour. Importantly, water and sanitation differences were not noted by the children, while they were named by adults. This corresponds to the recent finding that while 68 per cent of poor children in Vietnam use unprotected (potentially dangerous) water, only 2 per cent of 1000 eight year olds felt that the water they drank was 'bad' (Tuan and others, 2003). Children are more aware of visible environmental threats like rubbish (74 per cent of the 1000 eight year olds said the rubbish situation was 'bad'). Children did not mention 'health' issues either but they mentioned child work more than adults.

Unlike findings from other research, security of children was salient here. Working and playing outside without parents' care were perceived as the main causes of child accidents by adults. The poor children usually played outside climbing trees, wading through lakes or ponds. Meanwhile the better-off children were perceived (by adults and by children) as playing at a home full of toys and with adult care. In relation to the lack of safe outdoor play areas for children, the vice-chairman of Vu En commune said 'The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak, we don't have funds for constructing entertainment places for children'. According to a report of the Vietnamese General Statistics Office (GSO) and

Table 4: Characteristics of better-off and poor children according to children

Characteristic	Children living in group 1 (better-off group)	Children living in group 1 (poor group)
Food, clothing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have fish or meat everyday - Usually have new clothes and sandals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rarely have fish and meat Mostly with salts and sesame - Wearing mended clothes
Toys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have toys - Go out to visit relatives with mother or father 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have no toys. Play quap¹ - Play at the neighbour's houses on pasture - Parents are busy working so children were never taken anywhere
Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have adequate notebooks, textbooks and study materials - Loved by teacher - Tutored by parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Have to borrow textbooks from friends but sometimes they didn't lend - Always were reminded about tuition fees - Parents have no time to care
Work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Do some occasional housework like sweep floor, wash dishes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tend oxen, buffalo, gather wood for fuel - Do housework like tidy up, cooking, looking after sibling
House and assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Beautiful house - Have lots of furniture - Have colour television 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ugly house - Have no television so often go to the neighbour to watch television

¹Quap is a game whereby a group of children hop from foot to foot and pick up a stone then throw it into the targeted circle.

Table 5: Typical day of a group of seven years olds in Yen Noi commune

Time	Activity
6 a.m	Clean face Rinse mouth with salt water Breakfast Clean table and chair
9 a.m	Sweep floor Visiting friends Playing football Graze cow Look after younger sister/brother Study
11 a.m	Cooking Having lunch Take a nap Sweep floor Playing
1 p.m	Walk to school (it takes one hour to go to school)
4 p.m	Graze cow Gather wood for fuel (if refuse, will be punished) Prepare for cooking Sweep floor Cooking dinner Wash dishes Having dinner
7 p.m	Watching television at home or at the neighbour's home Cleaning teeth Go to sleep

the Vietnamese Committee for Protection and Care for Children (CPCC, 2002), now called Vietnamese Committee of Population, Family and Children (CPFC), in the northeast region only 10 per cent of recreation areas are for children in comparison to much higher levels in other regions, for example, Red River Delta region where the level is typically 60 per cent.

T, 8 years old, living in Hamlet 3, Yen Noi commune, has one older sister. Her family is very poor. She usually gets up at 5.30 in the morning. She eats cold rice with sesame and salt for breakfast. Sesame and salt is the main dish in her family. They rarely eat meat; only once a week. Every morning, she has to do some housework such as chopping pig's fodder, feeding cattle, cleaning house and cooking for lunch. After lunch, she goes to school. Her school is very far from her house. It takes 30 minutes to get there by foot. 'I wish my parents had money and could buy new clothes and text books for me. I always have to borrow books from my friends but sometimes they don't want to lend to me. And I wish my parents could pay the tuition fees on time'

Figure 4: Expectations of an eight year old girl about her life (obtained from daily timetable method)

Table 5 describes a typical day as reported by a group of seven year olds. The day is very full with labour, education and play. Figure 4 provides a case study of an eight year old girl which again mentions the 'shame', and presumably the loss of face, related to school fees.

Discussion

A major issue to emerge in this PPA was the burden of education and health fees and their relationship with child poverty. Officially, children living in poor families have the right to reduced school fees, and poor children who are sick have the right to be exempted from health facility fees. Poor children had not received any special social welfare except on some occasions, such as the mid-autumn festival or international children's festival, when children received gifts from the District Women Union or Provincial Red Cross Association. According to the participants, poor children should be given more consideration by the local authorities. However the People's Committee was perceived as 'busy' and there was 'no policy for child poverty'. In fact, nationally, there are some policies for poor children but they also have some limitations. For instance the national plan of action for children 2001–2010 has objectives and indicators related to health, education, water and sanitation, culture, recreation and sports, and special protection in order to improve the quality of life of poor children (CPCC, 2002). In addition, the poverty reduction programmes of the government include free health insurance cards and other health service provision, tuition fee exemptions, assistance to minority ethnic households in especially difficult circumstances, credit, and extension and infrastructure development to poor families. In addition, the national Hunger Eradication and Poverty Reduction programme is a major poverty reduction effort, but the specific circumstances of children have not been reflected in the programmes (Neeffes, 2002). Compared to other developing countries, Vietnam has a fairly extensive social welfare net. However, this study suggests that the required targeting of poor children is not working.

Recording the daily activities of children did not include obtaining their perceptions of which part of the day they most enjoyed—their perception of 'quality time'. Recent research in the UK (Christensen, 2002) has identified the need to examine the varied aspects of time that matter for children. For example, in the UK, children's (aged 11) views of time spent with their families cannot be seen as separate from the time they spend with friends, at school and on their own. What does 'quality time' mean for Vietnamese children? This is an area for future research and the increased cultural emphasis on education may mean that children excluded from school may feel they lack an important aspect of 'quality time' that is the 'luxury' of attending school.

Environmental health conditions for many children in Vietnam remain poor. Awareness of this was one of the main differences between adults' and children's perceptions of child poverty. Adults were conscious of poor drinking water, sanitation and dangerous spaces for children, while children did not mention any aspect of environment apart from the 'beautiful houses' of the better-off children. This has implications for health promotion activities for children in communities and schools. Vulnerable children need to be made aware of environmental hazards and how to avoid them or cope with them (for example, importance of boiling contaminated water).

Obtaining qualitative perceptions of the causes and consequences of poverty is increasingly common in developing countries. Poverty is rarely measured by income/expenditure alone these days. As the concept of poverty is enriched by the nuanced views of the poor themselves, we need to ensure that the views of poor children are also included.

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