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Prepared by: Judith Hahn Gaubatz
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ICR Review Coordinator: Eduardo Fernandez Maldonado
Group: IEGHC (Unit 2)

2. Project Objectives and Components

a. Objectives

According to the Financing Agreement (page 5) and the Project Appraisal Document (PAD, page 7), the project objective was as follows:
To raise student learning outcomes by: (i) revising and implementing the curriculum following a competency-based approach; and (ii) improving the effectiveness of instruction by creating and disseminating textbooks aligned with the revised curriculum.

b. Were the project objectives/key associated outcome targets revised during implementation?
No

c. Will a split evaluation be undertaken?
No

d. Components

Component 1: Curriculum Development (Appraisal: US$17.5 million; Actual: US$10.46 million): This component aimed to support the development and implementation of a revised competency-based curriculum for all school subjects from grades 1 to 12. Activities included: establishing a Core Technical Committee (CTC) and up to 11 Subject-Specific Technical Committees (SSTCs) to lead the curriculum changes; piloting the new curriculum; providing training to teachers and "Curriculum Champions" who act as peer coaches for fellow teachers; and developing guidance materials for publishers of textbooks and other pedagogical materials.

Component 2: Development and Dissemination of Aligned Textbooks (Appraisal: US$21.6 million; Actual: US$0.48 million): This component aimed to support the development of revised textbooks and pedagogical materials. Activities included: developing textbooks in alignment with the new learning outcome standards upon completion and official adoption of the new curriculum by the Ministry of Education (MOET); translating several textbooks into ethnic minority languages; and providing textbooks to schools with high numbers of economically disadvantaged students.

Component 3: Learning Assessment and Analysis for Continuous Improvement of Curriculum and Policy (Appraisal: US$35.4 million; Actual: US$5.48 million): This component aimed to improve and expand the national learning assessment system and research capacity to inform education policy. Activities included: establishing multiple sites for the National Centre for Sustainable Development of General Education (NCSDGEQ) and the National Center for Foreign Language Testing (NCFLT), which were designed to advance research in areas related to curriculum, assessment, and learning, and to provide research and training for teaching and learning of foreign languages; improving the coverage and quality of the national assessment system; and promoting public awareness of the reform process.

Component 4: Project Management (Appraisal: US$2.5 million; Actual: US$0.12 million): This component was to support project management and monitoring.

At a December 2020 restructuring, US$60.46 million of the IDA financing was cancelled due to two main activities that were not implemented: textbook development (including bilingual textbooks and textbook distribution to disadvantaged schools) and construction of the NCSDGEQ and NCFLT (including their associated research and capacity building activities).
e. Comments on Project Cost, Financing, Borrower Contribution, and Dates

Project cost

- The project cost at appraisal was US$ 77.0 million. This was later revised to US$ 14.2 million, with an actual cost of US$ 16.5 million.

Financing

- The project was to be financed entirely by an IDA Credit of US$ 77.0 million. This was later revised to US$ 14.2 million, with an actual disbursement of US$16.5 million.

Borrower contribution

- There was no planned Borrower contribution.

Dates

- *December 2020*: The project was restructured such that US$60.46 million of the IDA financing was cancelled due to significant implementation delays and changes in implementation arrangements (the project became effective 13.5 months after approval due to a delay in countersigning; the rollout of the new curriculum was postponed to September 2020; the national assessment was also postponed to 2020; and the MOET withdrew from the construction of the NCSDGEQ and NCFLT).

3. Relevance of Objectives

Rationale

Vietnam has been experiencing robust economic growth and a stable macroeconomic environment; however, its global competitiveness is weak due to low-value-added products and modest technology. Investment in education has been identified as a key pathway for structural transformation of the economy from rural, small-holder agriculture to urban employment. While the country has achieved universal primary and lower secondary education, there remain disparities in access, particularly for disadvantaged and minority ethnic groups, and low quality in primary education (for example, previous large-scale Grade 5 reading assessments indicated inadequate abilities for the poorest students to write at the level expected for their age). Moreover, employers report challenges in hiring new workers with adequate skills, such as the ability to think critically, solve problems, and communicate verbally. Previous attempts by the
The government’s recent social and economic development plans (2012-2016, 2016-2020) identified the development of high quality human resources as a key action, to be measured by improved education quality and outcomes. More specifically, the 2014 Resolution – the "Reform of General Education Curriculum and Textbooks after 2015" – aimed to develop key qualities, competencies, and skills for all graduates as 21st century citizens, and the 2019 Education Law further institutionalized the government’s shift from content-based to competency-based education.

The Bank’s Country Partnership Framework (FY 2012-16), in place at the time of project appraisal, identified improved basic public service delivery and access (including education) as a key outcome, with Grade 5 learning outcomes as a key indicator. The more recent Country Partnership Framework (FY 18-22), however, shifts the focus of education priorities to labor market readiness through the tertiary education sector. The relevance of the objectives is therefore rated High, although it is noted that the objective statement did not specify the project's focus on the basic education sector.

Rating
High

4. Achievement of Objectives (Efficacy)

OBJECTIVE 1

Objective
Raise student learning outcomes

Rationale
The theory of change was clear, although the means to achieve the intended outcome (to raise student learning outcomes) was narrowly focused on curriculum without addressing other factors that could also affect student learning outcomes (i.e. class size, classroom management, school leadership). The key outputs were a revised competency-based curriculum and accompanying textbooks. The intermediate outcomes of increased teacher capacity to deliver the new curriculum and increased access to the learning materials by disadvantaged school children were important intermediate elements of the results chain that would contribute to the intended outcome to raise student learning outcomes. The link between the activity to establish learning assessment and research centers (which would have accounted for about half of the appraised project cost) and the intended outcome to raise learning outcomes was less direct and likely outside the time frame of the project period.

Outputs
Establishment of a CTC and 17 SSTCs, which led the development of the new curriculum and online teacher training tools. CTC members had an average of 35.17 years of relevant professional experience (target: 15 years). The CTC and SSTCs also drafted guidance materials for textbook publishers on textbooks and other pedagogical materials.

Development, pilot, and rollout of the new curriculum. The MOET endorsed and launched 29 new competency-based school curricula consisting of a general curriculum and 20 subject-specific curricula in December 2018, which were then piloted in 1,165 classrooms in 48 schools at three grade levels (grades 3, 8, and 12). The new curriculum was rolled out to the first full cohort of grade 1 students across the country in the 2020–2021 school year. Due to the initial delays, the full rollout to all grade levels is expected to be completed in the 2024-25 school year.

Training of 151,930 teachers on the new competency-based approach, although only a small proportion was directly financed through the project. This represented about 40% of all primary teachers. Teacher training was delivered through professional development modules to increase understanding of the curriculum and its implications for classroom practices and learning assessments. 21,320 “Curriculum Champions” were identified, who were supporting their peers to implement the new curriculum (target: 8,000). According to the ICR (page 17), an online teacher satisfaction survey showed a high level of satisfaction with the modules among the respondents, including in areas such as the usefulness of the modules in classroom applications and their contribution to improving student learning. Of the 433,325 teachers who participated in the online satisfaction survey, 418,600 (96.6%) responded favorably to the survey questions regarding the usefulness of the modules, with an average score of 3.26 (out of 5), and 417,814 (96.4%) provided positive responses to statements regarding the contribution of the modules to enhancing student learning experiences and results, also with an average score of 3.26.

Production of 110 new textbooks for nine subjects at the primary level (for grades 1 and 2) and for 12 subjects at the secondary level (for grade 6). The project supported the development of training materials for textbook appraisers and detailed guidance for textbook appraisal, including quality standards, criteria, and indicators for textbooks.

Completion of one round of the National Large-Scale Assessment (NLSA), including training of researchers, teachers, administrators, and experts from the Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences. The NLSA for primary, lower, and upper secondary education was administered to twelve nationally representative samples of grades 5, 9, and 12 students on fourteen subject exams during June and July 2020. Because of the delays in launching the NLSA, only one round was completed during the project period.

However,

Textbook production was dropped, due to a government decision to use private funds rather than IDA funds for textbooks. MOET’s initial attempts to procure a large group of individual textbook writers and editors did not succeed (175 candidates were selected and contacted to negotiate contracts, but the negotiations were unsuccessful as most of the selected candidates were already under contract with publishers for textbook compilation). Instead, the government chose to take on a textbook appraisal role to ensure quality and alignment with the new curriculum. Therefore, the project provided support to identify measures to monitor the quality of textbooks and increase transparency in textbook selection.

Textbook distribution to disadvantaged schools was dropped, due to a new government policy stating that all students should be provided with books, notebooks, and school supplies by parents, schools,
or local authorities. Instead, the government suggested that disadvantaged schools provide textbooks that could be borrowed from libraries.

- The online learning management system was dropped.
- Bilingual textbook development was dropped.
- Construction/establishment of national learning assessment centers was dropped, due to substantial delays in civil works procurement processes.
- Research and analysis on learning assessment and curriculum development were not carried out.

Outcomes

- Student learning gains in math and Vietnamese language were not measured, due to delays in administering the NLSA such that only the baseline round was conducted. However, ex-post field surveys by the Bank team in two provinces indicated the following improvements among grade 1 students (ICR, page 15): According to teachers’ evaluations of student reading comprehension, by the 19th–23rd week of the 2020–2021 school year after the new curriculum was rolled out that previous September, the majority of students who had finished learning syllables could pronounce them clearly and read well, and by the end of the first semester in January 2021, many children could read materials (i.e., reference and additional learning materials, excluding textbooks) other than the first-grade Vietnamese books that were part of the curriculum. In math, teachers commented that students who had been engaging in various creative and experiential activities under the new curriculum exhibited confidence and speed in the area of communication skills.
- The proportion of teachers implementing the new curriculum was not measured, although approximately 40% of primary teachers were deemed qualified to teach the new curriculum, surpassing the target of 25%. However, while the project provided the training materials, the training itself was funded almost entirely by another Bank project and by provincial committees.
- Improvements in the student:textbook ratio in the bottom ten percent of schools (according to income distribution) were not measured, due to dropping of the relevant activities.

In addition, the ICR (page 12) suggested that mobilizing private sector financing for textbook development, rather than utilizing IDA funds as originally planned, was a better way to support the government's new multiple-textbook policy. By developing the MOET’s capacity as a textbook appraiser, private publishers strengthened their capacity as textbook developers, and schools put more focus on curriculum intent rather than on textbooks (i.e. teaching to the exam).

Rating
Modest

OVERALL EFFICACY
Rationale
Achievement of the objective to raise student learning outcomes is rated Modest due to significant shortfalls in implementing key outputs (i.e. textbook production and distribution, construction of learning centers, learning assessments and research) and lack of sufficient evidence on increased student academic scores or on increased access to the new curriculum for disadvantaged students.

Overall Efficacy Rating
Modest

Primary Reason
Low achievement

5. Efficiency

The economic analysis at appraisal (PAD, page 17) provided the economic basis for the project, including benefits directly deriving from improved student cognitive ability and hence increased ability of workers to be more effective and efficient over the course of their working lives due to the larger and more coherent set of knowledge and skills they possess -- in other words, increased labor productivity. The costs are calculated as project costs. Under different scenarios for the extent to which wages would increase, the cost-benefit analysis showed that the internal rate of return (IRR) ranges from 19.86 % to 27.2%, and the benefit:cost ratio ranges from 2.67 to 6.84.

The economic analysis at completion (ICR, Annex 4) updated the cost-benefit analysis with the number of students benefiting from the new curriculum under the new rollout schedule and the opportunity costs associated with cancelled project funds. The IRR ranged from 1.24% to 27%, with a net present value of US$ 81.5 million.

The project implementation period was marked by significant delays and policy changes that lead to shortfalls in activities completed. The amount of time elapsed between project approval and effectiveness was 13.5 months, the MOET's approval of the new curriculum did not take place until December 2018, the National Assembly cancelled the use of IDA funds for textbook development, and the MOET’s extensive internal review process caused significant delays in implementation. The project was able to disburse only about 21.5% (US$16.54 million) of what was planned, leading to the cancellation of US$60.46 million from the original committed credit amount of US$77 million, thereby indicating negligible efficiency.

Efficiency Rating
Negligible

a. If available, enter the Economic Rate of Return (ERR) and/or Financial Rate of Return (FRR) at appraisal and the re-estimated value at evaluation:

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* Refers to percent of total project cost for which ERR/FRR was calculated.

6. Outcome

Based on High relevance (due to strong alignment with country conditions, country education strategy, and Bank country strategy), Modest efficacy (due to low achievement of outcomes) and Negligible efficiency (due to significant implementation delays and low disbursement), the overall outcome is rated Unsatisfactory, indicating major shortcomings in the project's preparation, implementation, and achievement.

a. Outcome Rating

Unsatisfactory

7. Risk to Development Outcome

The original set of activities for the project was significantly reduced and the timeline of key outputs was delayed; however, the overall trajectory of project implementation remained supportive of intended changes to the general education system in Vietnam. The development of the new competency-based curriculum and the related teacher training, as well as the development of the NLSA, are highly likely to contribute to the intended outcome to raise student learning outcomes. As noted in the ICR, these activities laid the necessary foundation for moving forward with education reforms. Government policies remain supportive of such reforms, including full rollout of the new curriculum by the 2024-25 school year.

8. Assessment of Bank Performance

a. Quality-at-Entry

Project design centered on curriculum reform, a technically complex effort that involved a significant level of risk. Readiness to initiate the reforms was facilitated by the country's recent participation in Russian Education Aid for Development (READ) capacity development activities, including technical advice from experts and practitioners on curriculum and learning assessment reform processes. Also, project design drew on lessons from the country's previous attempt at curriculum reform (toward more student-centered and active, collaborative learning), which had failed due to lack of coherence and clarity in the endorsed principles. However, the risk assessment did not adequately take into consideration the political climate, which ultimately impacted project implementation: according to the ICR (page 27), "there was already a sign of challenges during the project preparation in navigating the possible ramifications of political decisions on the curriculum reform. The MOET expressed its reservations about pushing through the project approval without the National Assembly's official endorsement of the curriculum reform. Even after the approval by the Board in June 2015, the Ministry of Finance and Vietnamese president also voiced their dissent in relation to the use of IDA funds for the project on the grounds that ODA resources..."
should be utilized only for interventions for which national funds or expertise were inadequate or unavailable." The timetable was also overly ambitious, considering that curriculum reform is highly technical and politically sensitive. Lastly, as noted in the ICR (page 28), the results framework had shortcomings in that the level of ambition for some of the key project indicators (25% of teachers trained and equipped to teach new curriculum, 10% increase in student: textbook ratio for ethnic minority students) would have been of insufficient magnitude to achieve the intended outcomes.

Quality-at-Entry Rating
Moderately Unsatisfactory

b. Quality of supervision
As discussed above, project implementation faced many challenges due to conflicts between initially planned activities and government policies, including in textbook distribution to disadvantaged groups, use of public funds for textbook development, and use of IDA funds for technical assistance. Also, despite the Bank team's repeated guidance, there was no systematic communication plan in place for the curriculum reform activities; such a plan was critical for garnering support and buy-in from multiple stakeholders. For example, at the time of the mid-term review, a qualified communication consultant still had not been hired. Although communication activities were being conducted toward the end of the project period, strategies in place at an earlier stage might have facilitated project implementation. The lack of coordination among the various stakeholders also prevented a more timely project restructuring, despite the Bank team's concerted efforts. Lastly, the ICR (page 36) noted some inconsistencies in the submission of Implementation Status and Results Reports (ISRs), especially in the first two years of project implementation. ISRs were submitted to management prior to the planned missions with an indication that updates, including performance ratings, would be provided at the conclusion of the missions; however, no updates or revisions were actually submitted.

Quality of Supervision Rating
Moderately Unsatisfactory

Overall Bank Performance Rating
Moderately Unsatisfactory

9. M&E Design, Implementation, & Utilization

a. M&E Design
There were shortcomings in M&E design, including the selection of indicators and targets. The key outcome indicator - increased scores in math and Vietnamese - was unlikely to be directly and immediately impacted during the short timeframe of the project, given the multiple activities that needed to be completed in sequence (curriculum revisions, textbook development, teacher training, learning assessments based on
new competency-based curriculum). Also, targets for the two other key outcome indicators - 25% teachers prepared for new curriculum and 10% improvement in student: textbook ratio for disadvantaged populations - were of insufficient magnitude to produce the intended outcomes. M&E arrangements largely relied on the establishment of the national learning assessment system, but again the timeline for conducting the baseline and endline assessments was overly ambitious.

b. M&E Implementation

The project management and Bank teams made concerted efforts to revise the data collection methodology, given the significant changes in government policy and project design. In the absence of timely baseline data for learning assessment, or any endline data, ex-post field surveys were conducted in six provinces. The surveys were to identify any challenges in implementing the new curriculum in grade 1 and thereby inform the curriculum roll-out for other grades. An impact evaluation study was also planned to replace the national assessments, but due to delays in finalizing the design of the study, it was not completed.

c. M&E Utilization

The delays in revising the definitions of some indicators and finalizing methodologies to set the baselines and targets limited the usefulness of the M&E data in measuring achievements and informing project implementation decisions. The inability to complete the impact evaluation study also prevented full evaluation of the impact of the new curriculum on student learning outcomes. Nonetheless, there were adequate M&E data available to enable some assessment of project achievements.

M&E Quality Rating

Modest

10. Other Issues

a. Safeguards

The project was classified as an Environmental Category "B" project due to planned civil works (construction of national assessment and research centers), triggering the safeguard on Environmental Assessment (OP/BP 4.01). An Environmental and Social Management Plan was developed. However, the civil works were subsequently cancelled. Project performance with regards to environmental safeguards was rated satisfactory throughout the project period.

The safeguard policy on Indigenous Peoples (OP/BP 4.10) was also triggered due to potential barriers related to curriculum and textbooks for ethnic minorities. A bias avoidance framework was developed, which was included in the curriculum and textbook development process. However, the bilingual textbook activity was dropped, although the curricula for eight ethnic minority languages was developed.
b. Fiduciary Compliance

Financial management: According to the ICR (page 34), the project complied with all fiduciary requirements, including (a) timely submission of the interim financial reports; (b) internal and external audits carried out per the Bank’s recommendations; and (c) unqualified audits with no major control or accountability issues raised.

Procurement: The project was in compliance with the Bank’s procurement guidelines and policies throughout the implementation period. However, there were consistent delays in the procurement of goods and technical assistance services and contracts implementation, and the procurement packages for textbook development and the construction of the NCSDGEQ and NCFLT were cancelled, leading to overall low disbursement for the project.

c. Unintended impacts (Positive or Negative)

None reported.

d. Other

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11. Ratings

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12. Lessons

Lessons drawn from the ICR (page 38) and adapted by IEG:

- The lack of an effective communications plan to go hand-in-hand with a complex reform process can undermine decision-making and collaboration among key stakeholders and lead to diminished outcomes. In the case of this project, there was no well-defined communication strategy nor was the staffing of critical communications specialists ensured early in the project period. Given the multiplicity of stakeholders in the curriculum reform process, changes in policies and interference from divergent interests caused significant delays and disruptions to project implementation.
• Ensuring that there is an institutional mechanism to promote coordination among various stakeholders can mitigate risks such as unforeseen shifts in government policies. In the case of this project, the significant shift in textbook development and distribution policies meant adjustments in implementation arrangements, new roles for private textbook publishers and authors, and new expectations for schools and parents, all of which lead to delays and disruptions to project implementation.

Also,

• A PDO outcome that is too far removed in the results chain from the direct project interventions can make measurement and attribution challenging. In the case of this project, there were multiple key steps in the results chain (curriculum revision, textbook development, teacher training, learning assessments based on the revised curriculum, establishment of learning and research centers) that made it less likely that improved student learning outcomes would be realized (and measurable) during the tight project time frame.

• M&E design that develops a comprehensive assessment system as part project design but then relies on that system to measure project outcomes can be problematic. In the case of this project, the learning assessment system was to be constructed as part of project activities but needed to wait for curriculum revisions and design of the new learning assessments. The baseline assessment was therefore conducted late in the project period, and an endline assessment was never carried out.

13. Assessment Recommended?

No

14. Comments on Quality of ICR

The ICR was concise and straightforward. It was candid about the project implementation experience within the challenging political/policy environment, including areas where the Bank could have better anticipated the challenges. Despite the significant shortfalls in implementation and numerous dropped activities, the ICR provided sufficient evidence to assess the project's achievements. Within the context of unsatisfactory outcomes, the ICR put appropriate focus on how the project contributed to laying the foundations for further developments in the education sector.

a. Quality of ICR Rating

Substantial