

## **OPEN ACCESS AND INFORMATION FOR DEVELOPMENT IN VIETNAM**

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### **The Perspective of a Canadian Development Worker**

From 2002 until 2005 I worked as a librarian in Vietnam, first for a Canadian funded capacity building project with Vietnamese universities, and later for the Vietnam Development Information Center, which is a multi-donor funded public information centre in Hanoi, managed by the World Bank. In both jobs, my goal was to improve access to information for development in Vietnam. During those years, we frequently heard about new and exciting initiatives to improve access to journal articles for people in developing countries: AGORA, HINARI, INASP/PERI, etc., and we learned about a growing range of Open Access journals and directories. From my perspective, as a foreigner with access to fee-based databases, the Open Access movement had little significance for my day-to-day work. However, I believed that these initiatives would be a great benefit to my users, who were NGO staff, development workers, and students with basic English language skills. As I look back, I wonder if this is true.

### **Vietnam Today**

Vietnam, now at peace for over 25 years, has undergone rapid economic development since the Communist government opened up the economy to private enterprise and foreign investment starting in 1986. With annual economic growth rates of around 7% (second in the world only to China), life for many people, especially those in the cities, has changed dramatically in a generation. Vietnam ranks 108 out of 177 countries on the UN's Human Development Index (2005), with an impressive literacy rate of 90% and a life expectancy of approximately 70. However, most of the population remains extremely poor. Rural people, who comprise 75% of the population, and ethnic minorities, are the last to benefit from Vietnam's strong economic development, and the gap between rich and poor in Vietnam is widening.

The social and economic context of Vietnam is such that the Open Access movement could have a strong impact here. Internet service is generally fast, accessible, and affordable for urban people (although Vietnam has only close to 6 million Internet users, in a population of 84 million). Internet cafés can be found throughout major cities, small towns, and even many villages. The cafés, populated primarily with young people playing games and chatting, provide hope for the future of information access. Various internationally-funded projects have promoted the idea of an "electronic library," and it has caught on quickly, particularly in universities and research institutes. Students and educated professionals in Vietnam have the desire and, largely, if they live in urban areas, the ability and the means to search for information online.

### **The Development Scene in Vietnam and the Need for Information**

Hundreds of foreign NGOs and international organizations are active in Vietnam, employing local people, usually well-educated and English-speaking young people, as program managers and staff. Vietnamese NGOs, which do not thrive as in other countries because of government restrictions on civil society, are nevertheless increasingly active, and many of these have a research focus. The government also employs development workers and adult educators as agricultural extension workers, and as leaders/trainers in Vietnam's mass organizations such as the Women's Union, Youth Union, etc. The environment in Vietnam is shifting from state domination of development activity, to one with a more active role for other

development actors. What information do these people need?

In my experience, the few print scholarly journals that we held at the development library were rarely consulted. Only certain types of users accessed journal articles online: bright students, and researchers/economists with the large multilateral agencies. The front-line development worker was generally not interested in finding journal articles. Since the Open Access movement focuses on peer-reviewed scholarly and scientific research articles, I doubt that most development workers derive much direct benefit from the Open Access journals and directories (although there are undoubtedly many individual exceptions).

I found that information needs varied by subject of course, but usually people wanted information that was specific to Vietnam, practical (i.e. training manuals, summaries or overviews of current situations, lists of ongoing projects in a certain field, case studies), and up-to-date. Reports from the World Bank, United Nations, bilateral donors, and NGOs about Vietnam were popular, such as the World Bank's annual *Vietnam Development Report*, or a DFID report on aid effectiveness in Vietnam. These locally produced reports were usually available in both English and Vietnamese, and the Vietnamese versions were eagerly read. Vietnamese statistics, laws, government policies and regulations were also needed.

### **Where Do Development Workers Currently Find the Information They Need?**

Where can people find this type of information, if what they need is not supplied by their organizations? In Hanoi, there are good development libraries (donor funded) open to the public that collect this information, but outside the capital, the options are few. Web portals for development information are seen as the answer. Even in the cities, where people have the option to visit libraries, people prefer to find information online. I know of two user surveys carried out by organizations with small development libraries in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. Overwhelmingly, the survey results revealed that development workers want information that is online and free. Development workers claim that they do not have enough time to visit libraries or resource centres to collect print materials.

Reports and studies from donors, agencies, and NGOs are generally available online from the organization's Web site, and are often available in print free of charge from the local office. When people came to visit the library where I worked, I would often send them away with lists of URLs, so they could download publications in their offices. People were usually always pleased to find out they could retrieve something online. Several initiatives and agencies (such as Mekonginfo.org, and the Vietnam Development Information Center's library catalogue) have attempted to create Web portals for online information about development in Vietnam, with varying degrees of success.

Vietnamese government information and data can be elusive and difficult to access in Vietnam; it is often sold for very high prices or simply not available. As in any relatively closed political system, information in Vietnam is power, and is a currency that is actively traded and hoarded by government officials.

### **Barriers to Open Access**

Restrictions on freedom of access to information, freedom of speech, and freedom of the press are definitely an issue in Vietnam. In the past few years, the government has passed laws to try to control what information can be published and read on the Internet, and certain sites that are critical of the Vietnamese government are censored. Enforcement of these laws is difficult and inconsistent, and is focused on domestic dissent. Generally, Open Access journal sites would not be restricted, however, this could

change at any time. An Open Access journal with political content contrary to the views of the Communist government could very well be firewalled in Vietnam.

A more obvious restriction for Vietnamese researchers is language. Although English language training is booming in Vietnam, knowledge of English is not widespread. Since most literature available in Open Access journals is in English, only a minority of Vietnamese scholars will be able to read it.

### **Copyright**

The Open Access movement campaigns for information to be free from most copyright restrictions. Copyright infringement is widespread in Vietnam, but the government has been cracking down as Vietnam works to join the WTO in this year. Therefore, although photocopying of foreign books and journals is common, the Open Access campaign against copyright restrictions may be more relevant in the future if copyright is enforced in Vietnam.

### **How to Improve Access to Information for Development**

For those who know English, the Open Access movement provides access to a wealth of academic literature that was previously unavailable to most people in Vietnam. So it seems that the impact on science and scholarship is clear: the Open Access movement will improve, to some extent, Vietnamese academic research. But what impact will the Open Access movement have for development workers in Vietnam?

Development workers certainly benefit from having access to information online, and as donors and government continue the trend to put more online, such as project reports, case studies, budgets, laws, etc. the development worker will be well served. Much room for improvement exists. People would like to have more information translated into Vietnamese, more government information, and more Vietnamese publications online. Also, people in the countryside need better access to the Internet. Although these issues are beyond the scope of the Open Access movement, their resolution draws inspiration from the same egalitarian philosophy that drives Open Access.

### **References**

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