

Background

The New Zealand Vietnam Health Trust (the Trust) was formed in 1996 by civilian and military medical team members who served in Binh Dinh province in the period 1963-1975. The Trust's purpose is to provide funding to New Zealand organisations and persons engaged in health care to support projects and activities that will result in quality improvements to the delivery of health care to the peoples of Vietnam by way of study grants, travel grants, educational material grants, equipment grants, research grants and other grants. The Trust currently has a range of projects and activities in Binh Dinh province addressing three core areas of work: maternal and child health (including women's health and paediatric initiatives); trauma (including injury, rehabilitation, ambulance and orthopaedic, equipment supply and maintenance initiatives); laboratory (including quality assurance and blood transfusion initiatives).

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of the review was to assist the New Zealand Agency for International Development (NZAID) to determine the nature of its future relationship with the Trust in working with the health sector in Vietnam, in accordance with NZAID policies and strategies. The objectives of the review were:

- to assess the performance of the Trust over the past five years in meeting its overall objectives and those of its various projects and activities
- to assess the achievements of the partnership between the Trust and Binh Dinh province in the period 2004-2007
- to identify what has changed as a result of the Trust's intervention in Binh Dinh province
- to identify the lessons learned and implications for the future, both for the Trust and for NZAID.

Main Findings

The review found that while the benefit of the Trust support was visible in some clinical areas, it was difficult to support this with quantifiable data in the absence of any monitoring and evaluation framework. It also noted that areas of programme support, especially where there had been sustained inputs over a period of time, and where the brief periodic Trust inputs supported long term technical assistance, were likely to have provided benefit, albeit not measurable.

The review referred to a 2003 review that had highlighted that the Trust was at a crossroads: “it can make either make a decision to develop into a more professional aid organisation, or remain a pool of health professionals . . . who contribute limited management and analytical capacity”. In spite of some limited initiative, the review concluded that the trust had remained the latter, and hence had been “less effective in terms of the impact on health services . . . and how well NZAID funds are spent”. This was based on the observations that:

- the level of partnership with the Department of Health lacked depth and there was no process of prioritisation and planning to address the significant concerns of health in the province

- the overall objective of the Trust's support was not well defined, there was no strategic plan and the work presented as a collective of inputs working independently needed to be more complete and integrated to ensure that intended outcomes at patient and population level would be achieved
- monitoring and evaluation of the overall Trust support and within programme areas were very weak, undermining the capacity to determine effectiveness and manage ongoing programme inputs on the basis of results achieved, and there had been no support for the Department of Health to enhance its capacity to do so
- there was no 'phase-out strategy' for those programmes that will require ongoing assistance prior to achieving a level of independence or contingency plans to source ongoing funding.

The review found a strong relationship existed between the Trust and the health workers of Binh Dinh, which was based upon a high level of respect, both by the Trust volunteers for the health workers, and by the health workers and managers of Binh Dinh for the volunteers. There was a high measure of goodwill and a strong appreciation of the support provided. The review concluded that the Trust support had been highly valued, and in many of the programs that it has supported, it had provided much benefit. It had much to offer and the depth of its technical expertise and the strong relationships that prevail with the province provided a good platform to further strengthen the health services of the Province.

However, the current modality of its support would need to change toward a more developmental focus if it is to maximise the effectiveness of its support.

Key Issues and Learning for NZAID

There are a number of lessons that can be drawn from the Trust's experience:

- to achieve sustained health gains in the complex development environment, a development perspective is essential
- aid effectiveness and improved development outcomes must be planned and support activities need to be placed in a strategic context (e.g. the LogFrame and a monitoring and evaluation plan)
- short-term technical adviser inputs can make an important contribution to capacity development but this is greatly enhanced when those inputs support a longer term continuous presence that can both provide adequate preparation for recipients of support, well grounded briefing for the short term adviser, and an ongoing support that allows for accessible back up for trainees
- partnerships that underpin programmes need to be clearly defined and transparent in regard to the partners' responsibilities, involving formal agreements, joint planning and joint determination on contribution.

The review also identified some useful qualities of a good technical adviser. These were:

- personal attributes of patience, polite and tactful, respect for local persons and a willingness to listen
- commitment to the task, and working with the local team to achieve the job required, ensuring that the skills have been achieved through observation

- professionalism and level of expertise, a good understanding of the health systems and environment in which the partners work within, and a knowledge of local skills to identify gaps
- work at both technical needs and managerial needs
- strong communication skills and effective use of interpreters
- continuity of advisers – avoiding changing visiting personnel
- short, sharp inputs (and possibly more frequent) provide important support to long term presence.

Follow-up

The review made five recommendations. NZAID agreed with all of them. However, implementation to: establish the Trust as a development agency with sound governance; develop a strategic approach; explore new funding options; and strengthen partnerships in Vietnam, requires that agreement, commitment and action of the Trust.

To request a copy of the full report email aidevaluation@mfat.govt.nz and quote the reference number - Eva0820.