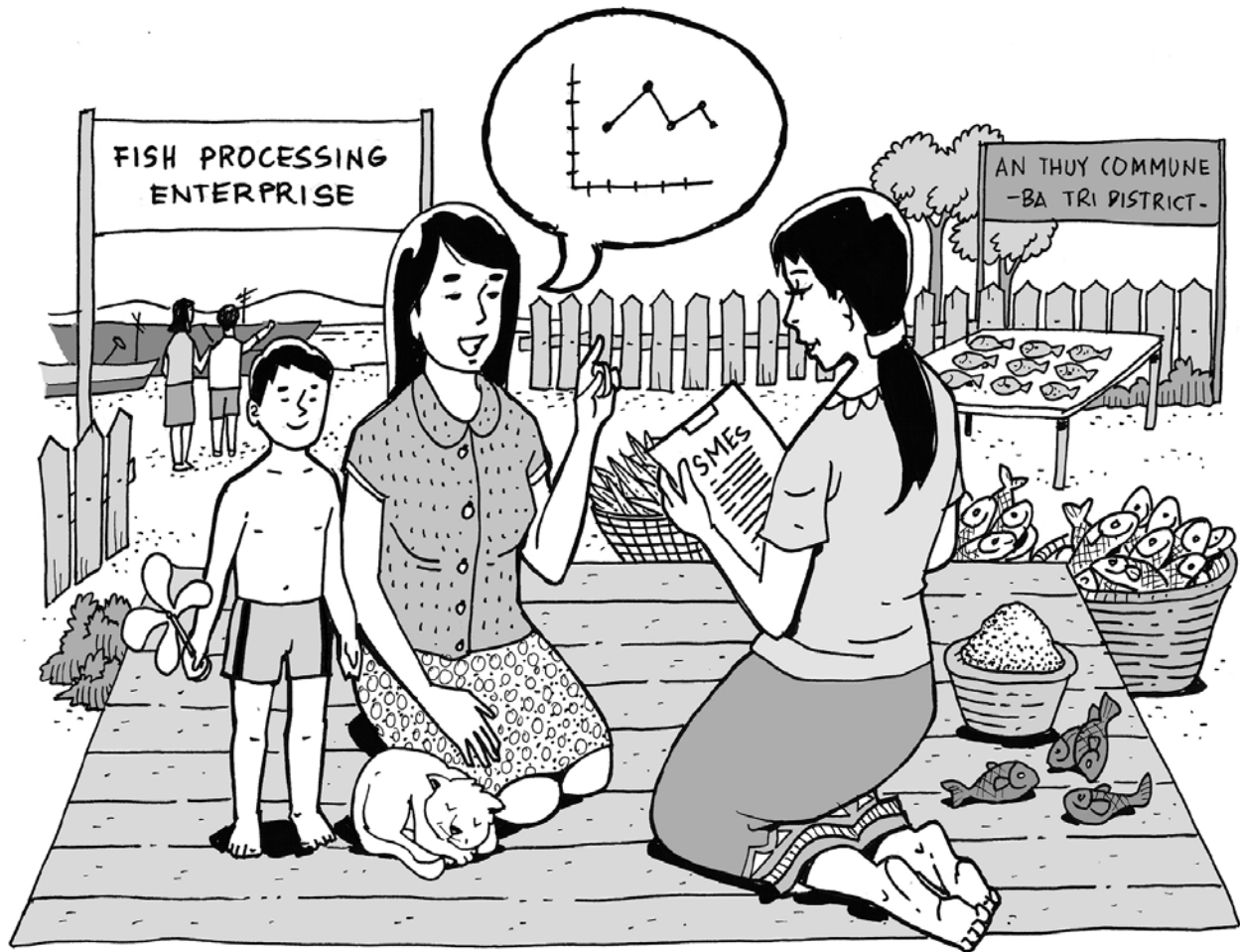


Annual Outcome Surveys:

Assessing Impact and Enhancing Project Implementation



The Developing Business with the Rural Poor project in Ben Tre Province, Viet Nam (DBRP Ben Tre) aims to support community members who are landless or own poor-quality land by helping them to diversify their livelihood sources and increase their income. The project has been active for 4 years, working with the 50 poorest communes in eight districts in the province. The activities reach out to both the agricultural and non-agricultural sectors as well as foster the development of small and medium-size enterprises (SMEs). In line with IFAD Asia Division's monitoring and evaluation (M&E) methodology, the DBRP Ben Tre conducted an annual outcome survey (AOS) to evaluate its performance in project areas. The data generated can be used to guide the adjustment of existing project activities as well as to develop new initiatives. Because two different types of stakeholders—impoverished rural households and SMEs—had to be included in the AOS, a comprehensive review and redesign of the questionnaire was required. It involved adjustment of the approach so that it could respond to the unique data-gathering needs of each type of

stakeholder. The experience of implementing such a multi-faceted survey was very beneficial for increasing the capacity of the Provincial Project Management Unit (PPMU) and for improving the joint decision-making process with key stakeholders and beneficiaries.

Fine-tuning annual outcome surveys

The AOS are an important tool for evaluating the outcome and impact of project activities. The value of the questionnaire as a tool lies in its versatility. It provides the opportunity to gather information on a large number of indicators and to compare and contrast these data between different survey locations. Also, it can be adjusted to measure the same layers of indicators with different target groups.

DBRP Ben Tre selected 20 different indicators to assess the impact on the target groups. Due to the large number of households in the communes (average of 2,350 households per commune), the chosen survey sample exceeded the usual IFAD-prescribed survey sample of 200 households per target group. In total, 600 farming households and 240 SMEs were selected. The survey questionnaires used for SMEs were applied to the whole commune area because the number of SMEs per project cluster was too small to yield representative results. In addition, the survey was also conducted in areas where the project is not active (control groups). The data from these areas (which have a similar socioeconomic makeup with the project-supported communes) were used for comparison with the results measured in project-supported areas. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the sample size per target group, the key indicators and the time needed to administer the survey.



Table 1. Key annual outcome survey indicators.

	Sample Size	Type of Questionnaires	Key Indicators	Average duration
Households	400 in target group A	30 HHs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Percentage of income increase ▪ Percentage of agricultural productivity growth ▪ Common interest group participating in buying inputs and working and selling products together 	30 min
	160 in control group B	20 HHs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increase in number and volume of contracts signed with traders ▪ Increase in secured stable jobs (over 6 months) 	
Small & medium enterprises (SMEs)	200 in target group C	15 HHs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increase in production and business investment ▪ Increase in turnover ▪ Access to production and business development support services 	15 min
	80 in control group D	10 HHs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Increase in number of employees ▪ Perceptions of rural infrastructure work and socioeconomic development plan of the commune 	

Innovation in the 2012 AOS

- Non-project areas (control groups) were also included in the survey. For each key target group, 30% of the sample was made up of households and SMEs in non-project areas, which provided a base for comparison and evaluation of the project impact in the intervention areas.
- The overall sample size was increased. The total sample size was 40% bigger than the sample used in the previous year. After the analysis of the data from the previous survey, it was decided that it was necessary to increase sample size in order to generate data that can be representative at the district level. The enlarged sample size could accommodate all of the eight project districts, allowing data to be segregated and analysed according to district. This made it possible for each District Project Management Office (DPMO) to draft individual AOS reports.
- The AOS was extended to include also SMEs (not just households). In the course of the implementation of project activities, it was noted that the impact on the SME target group needed to be studied more closely. By including a separate questionnaire for this target group, the PPMU could better assess the impact (in terms of business/enterprise development).

Key findings of the DBRP AOS

SMEs

SMEs in project areas reported increased turnover, and this increase was higher than in SMEs that did not participate in the project. However, the overall percentage of SMEs that reported a decrease in turnover remained high in both areas, which attests to the unstable conditions in rural SME-driven manufacturing and other business operations. Also, employment in the surveyed SMEs has increased compared with the previous year, and project areas generally reported better numbers than non-project areas.

Rural households

Compared with the previous year, project areas have reduced their proportion of poor households. Productivity was at least 20% higher in project areas, compared with non-project areas, and the highest growth was in aquaculture. Project areas also showed a higher increase of income than the control group (66% and 51%, respectively), especially in key livelihood agricultural activities (crops, livestock and aquaculture).



Lessons learned on the use of AOS

- After the mid-term review, the AOS needs to be conducted on a mid-year basis (from May to July), so that the results can be used to develop the subsequent annual work plan.
- The content of questionnaires and the sequence of administering the forms should be closely followed in the course of administering the surveys. This will help ensure the uniformity of surveys, reduce processing and backtracking efforts and help in the analysis and comparison of results.
- The AOS cannot reflect impact in a detailed and comprehensive way. The root causes of the problems usually cannot be determined. If there are available financial and staff resources, it is advisable to complement the AOS with qualitative research tools targeted to specific themes/issues. For example, case studies can be used to assess the impact of vocational training, while the most significant changes and photo book tools can be used to measure the impact of the newly constructed rural infrastructure work.
- The capacity of project staff to conduct the AOS should be improved, especially their basic knowledge on the livelihood of rural farmers and the business operations of SMEs in the target areas. This knowledge is important for adequately adjusting survey questions to ensure better targeting and easier administration.
- Indicators can be inputted and measured immediately as soon as the completed surveys are submitted. There is no need to wait to collect all survey forms before processing commences.

- Transport costs can be reduced by administering combined surveys and by improved planning of enumerator survey routes.
- The impact of the credit and capacity building for SMEs could be assessed in terms of easily comparable indicators, such as increases in job creation for rural youth.

Conclusion

Due to its flexibility, the AOS tool can be adapted to the projects' information needs and thereby helps project managers effectively steer decision-making processes to strengthen project performance and better achieve the objectives for the following years. Evaluation of the support activities aimed at helping the rural poor sustainably overcome poverty; AOS was effective in revealing the extent of the positive impact of the project activity.

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Acronyms and abbreviations

AOS	annual outcome survey
CDB	commune development board
CIF	commune investment fund
CIG	common interest group
DBRP Ben Tre	Developing Business with the Rural Poor in Ben Tre province, Viet Nam
DPMO	District Project Management Office
HHs	households
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development

M&E	monitoring and evaluation
PPMU	Provincial Project Management Unit
RIMS	Results-based Impact Management System
SMEs	Small and Medium-scale Enterprises

Acknowledgements

Special thanks are due the DEPOCEN staff who assisted in revising the questionnaire tool in the 2011 AOS. The contributions of staff in PPMU, DPMOs and CDBs (who helped in finalising the questionnaire tool) are also acknowledged.

Bio-sketch and contact details

Nguyen Thi Huong Giang

M&E Officer

Planning and M&E division, PPMU

Developing Business with the Rural Poor in Ben Tre Province, Viet Nam

giangdbrpbt@yahoo.com

+84 945451719

Ms. Nguyen Thi Huong Giang has more than 4 years of experience in M&E. Since 2008, she has served as the head of the monitoring & Evaluation Division of the Provincial Project Management Unit in Ben Tre Province in Viet Nam.