

Using Case Studies to Expand the Scope and Depth of Standard Monitoring and Evaluation



Bac Kan is a very poor mountainous province located in northeast Vietnam. The people who live in these impoverished highlands have little opportunity to develop their livelihood because of limited access to resources (capital, information, knowledge, technology and market access). The Pro-Poor Partnerships for Agroforestry Development project (3PAD) aims to achieve sustainable and equitable poverty reduction and improve the livelihoods of the rural poor in Bac Kan by establishing a framework for sustainable and profitable agroforestry development.

Since 2009, through the Community Development Fund (CDF), 3PAD has helped generate income opportunities for the rural poor. After 3 years of implementation, the interventions had produced substantial outputs and outcomes in the field of agroforestry (for example, livestock development and new crop plantations). However, the activities were not adequately recorded and reported both in terms of quantitative and qualitative information. A mid-term review recommended that the project improve its results-based management. After consultations with project stakeholders and partners, the M&E Division identified several methods for improving M&E. One of these methods was the case study approach. With support from the IFAD Vietnam Office, project staff were trained in the use of the case study approach in their regular monitoring work.

Central elements of a case study design

- **Research questions.** 'What', 'When', 'Where', 'Why' and 'How' (4W+1H)
- **Research design.** It links the data to be collected to the initial questions of the study, providing a conceptual framework and an action plan for arriving at conclusions.
- **Theoretical propositions.** They serve to focus attention on specific issues, limit the scope and suggest possible links between phenomena.
- **Units of analysis.** The main units must be at the same level as the study questions, and are usually comparable to those from the studies.
- **Logical links between data and propositions.** Pieces of information are matched to observed patterns in the data and then compared with general propositions looking for a fit.
- **Criteria for interpretation of findings.** It involves iteration between propositions and data, matching sufficiently similar and contrasting patterns from the data to the propositions and deriving subsequent conclusions.

Procedure for conducting a case study

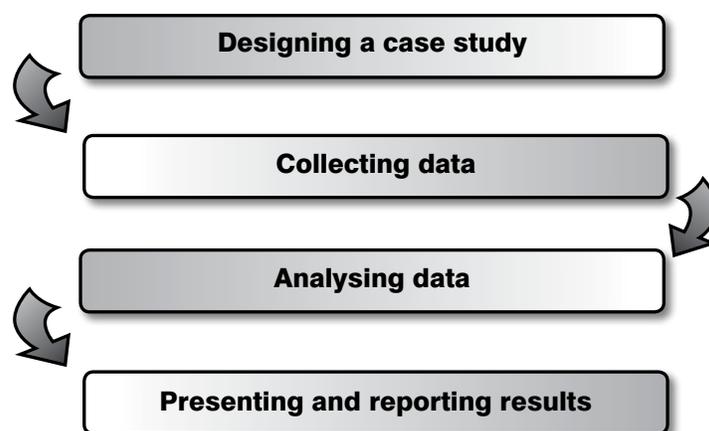


Figure 1. Steps in conducting a case study.

The single-case study is the preferred option for conducting case studies in the 3PAD project. The data are collected in the following ways:

1. Collecting physical articles/outputs
2. Collecting documents such as contracts, memos and reports
3. Conducting open-ended interviews
4. Conducting focused interviews
5. Making direct observations
6. Carrying out participant observations

The structure of a case study report

A case study usually includes the following parts:

1. **Executive summary.** A concisely written section, less than one page, placed at the front of the report. It briefly summarises the major points of the case. It describes the major issue, the proposed solution and the logic supporting the choice of solution.
2. **Problem statement.** Presents the central issue(s) or major problem(s) in the case.
3. **Alternatives.** Discusses all relevant alternatives. Briefly presents the major arguments for and against each alternative. State any assumptions and the impact of constraints on each alternative.
4. **Conclusion.** Presents the analysis and the logic behind a particular solution. Also discusses the reasons for rejecting the other alternatives.
5. **Implementation.** It outlines a plan of action that will lead to effective implementation of the decision.

Using case studies in results-based management

Case study evaluations examine the outcome of each project component (changes in economic benefits, income, increase of employment, benefits distribution, cost effectiveness, etc.) with the aim of systematising lessons learned and good practices. In fact, both qualitative and quantitative tools can be applied flexibly, but in the 3PAD context, the case study method was seen as the most relevant and appropriate tool for evaluation. The differences in benefits between the use of case studies and the use of other tools (both qualitative and quantitative) can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Case studies vs other tools.

Other tools	Case studies
<p>The report, based on existing data from the 3PAD surveys, covered the following aspects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Income of participants in the sectors ▪ Income sources and contribution of 3PAD projects' products and/or services ▪ Poverty profile ▪ Land, labour and occupations ▪ General production/ crop patterns ▪ Production of 3PAD projects' products and/or services ▪ Level of development of 3PAD-related industries ▪ Women's participation in production 	<p>The case studies expand the scope of the study by uncovering real stories, real enterprise and in-depth research:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Living standard of local people ▪ Equitable and sustainable ways of generating income for the poor ▪ Stakeholders' assessment of their participation in 3PAD activities ▪ Insights on beneficiaries' perceptions, feelings, opinions and concerns ▪ Cost effectiveness, cost-benefit analysis for specific cases ▪ Risk assessment of doing business with the rural poor ▪ Gender issues

Case studies can be used to assess project impact at the commune and village levels, directly through interviews with key informants from the target group (poor farmers, ethnic minorities, women, etc.). The outputs of case studies often include measurements of beneficiaries' perception, short-term outcomes of an activity or sets of activities, the application of what the local population learned through project trainings, benefits or effectiveness of using new techniques, etc. The information is classified and categorised into groups/topics, which are further related to the project's components and subcomponents. The results from the case studies also need to be compared with the indicators (levels 1 and 2) of the project's logframe in order to verify progress toward achieving project goal and objectives.

The 3PAD project conducts quarterly case studies. A total of 50 case studies have been completed at the time of writing. They are administered by the project's M&E Division, including four provincial-level staff and three district-level staff, with support from some commune staff as translators and guides. The topics are chosen by the head of the M&E Division, based on the need assessment of each project's component and the annual M&E plan. After each quarter, the project M&E Division holds a meeting to share and discuss progress as reported by the surveys and case studies. Table 2 shows the role and responsibilities of the case study team members.

Table 2. Role and responsibilities of a case study team.

Members/position	Role	Responsibilities
Head of M&E Division/M&E specialist	Team leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Choosing topics, designing case formats ▪ Defining data collection protocol, defining scope ▪ Developing case study reports
Provincial staff	Facilitator/data collector/ interviewer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Conducting interviews, collecting data ▪ Working directly with key informants
District staff	Interviewer/investigator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assisting provincial staff in interviews; taking notes ▪ Checking data validity, cross-checking results
Commune staff	Support/translator	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Providing logistical support and translation

Lessons learned

The problems found, the recommendation and the implementation of case studies can help the project management board make appropriate adjustments in project implementation. For example, in some communes, many people did not want to grow new species of forage on sloping land because they did not have the skills or know-how. They also thought that the new forage species were harmful and unsuitable as feed for livestock. They wanted to protect their land from environmental degradation.

Substantial gender-level impacts of interventions were uncovered. The case studies showed that most of the households were headed by men and that women were responsible for almost all activities on their land. The case studies resulted in an adjustment of the forage development strategy. Now, farmers grow the new grass in a group; one farmer functions as the group leader, supported by the project's nursery specialist. To ensure gender balance, new divisions of responsibilities in the forage groups were developed and monitored by the group leader. For example, men are responsible for livestock and transport while the women take care of harvesting and new planting.

Challenges and limitations

There are not enough trained project staff to adequately administer the case studies (i.e., inadequate capacities). Sometimes, the subjective feelings of the interviewer may influence the case study (researcher bias). For example, a quick look at an irrigation system in a village during summer may give the impression that the construction works are well-managed. However, its quality needs to be checked also during the winter season.



In a newly established project, many activities cannot be covered by case studies because of resource constraints (manpower, time, finances) and because impacts require some time before they become visible. Interpretation of case studies can be very time-consuming in the case of cross-case reports (i.e., comparing numerous case studies across different interventions).

Conclusion

Despite the challenges and limitations related to adoption, the case study is an appropriate tool for the project management board to have an overview of activities at different levels. A case study can cover a wider range of project outcomes than the broader survey. Case studies provide not only a measurement of real outputs, outcomes and expected/

unexpected results; they also allow for the inclusion of stakeholders' views of key success factors and problems. Furthermore, case studies or sets of case studies are a very useful knowledge management tool for sharing practical experiences and lessons learned by different projects.



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Acronyms and abbreviations

BISC	Business Investment Support Centre
CDF	community development fund
IFAD	International Fund for Agricultural Development
MTR	mid-term review
M&E	monitoring and evaluation
ToT	training of trainers
3PAD	Pro-Poor Partnerships for Agroforestry Development

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