

International Support Group (ISG)

Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD)

A new Approach for Coordination

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ISG - Idea and Realization

The establishment of the International Support Group in service of sector development assistance coordination was ever taken into consideration and discussion in the former Ministry of Forest in 1994. Precious contributions to the idea have been made by many donors, Vietnamese relevant authorities and national and international consultants.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), established at the end of 1995, as the result of the Governmental restructuring, became a multi-sectoral ministry. Under the context, the coordination of policies and strategies among the sector, between MARD and other ministries, between the sector and the donor community, has become very complicated, and efforts are needed from many stakeholders, especially in the formulation of multi-purpose sustainable development programs and projects, reflecting the socio-economic and environmental development targets.

Based on the need of MARD's international support coordination and the experience gained in coordination, MARD officially established the International Support Group (ISG) by the Decision No 541 NN/TCCB-QD dated 9 April 1997. ISG process is aimed at general coordination, harmonization, and better unification of issues relating to development concepts and approaches in the field of agriculture and rural development. At the beginning, the funding for ISG activities was done through the Sweden-Vietnam Mountainous and Rural Development Program (MRDP). After more than two years of operation, ISG has made contributions to the strengthening of the awareness of the need of a forum, a mechanism where Government authorities and donors can meet for discussion and consideration of priorities, policies, strategies and experience in agriculture and rural development.

However, the pattern for ISG activities was not yet appropriate, lacking a unified system for problem analysis. Additionally, activities of the ISG process did not focus on major topics, several activities of the Thematic Ad-hoc Groups of a technical matter only. Furthermore, according to the then ISG model, the responsible person for the ISG operation was not clearly shown. These were stated in the Report on the Evaluation of ISG Activities at the end of 1999 and in the "new" ISG Terms and Reference (ToR) approved by ISG Plenary Meeting May 2000. This was a beginning point for renovations of ISG process.

ISG – Reality and Potentials

After the ISG Plenary Meeting May 2000, important consolidations has been made by MARD in legal and institutional terms, and ISG is accelerating its work in order to meet the need of newly-set tasks, avoiding the losing-momentum risk in making changes. ISG process,

through its first steps as a new coordination cooperation model, has possibly brought about some initial comments:

Confirmation of Vietnam's ownership over assistance management

It is agreed among the donor community that Vietnam's ownership is the prerequisite for the strengthening of the foreign support coordination. The ISG process's key role in the coordination in MARD, especially in the International Cooperation Department, is a prerequisite for the successful implementation of policy dialogues, priority identification, and thereby for better utilization of foreign funded sources. It is clear that in Vietnam there lacks an effective mechanism for inter-ministerial coordination. Therefore, the mechanism of the ISG process can make contribution to filling that gap.

MARD has shown its active role in the chairmanship and the deputy chairmanship of the ISG Steering Board with the participation of 10 representatives from the donor community, international organizations and non-governmental organizations and also with 12 members from Vietnam's side. The Decision on the establishment of the ISG Steering Board was signed by Minister Le Huy Ngo on 24th November 2000. At the same time, ISG Secretariat was consolidated, and was officially established by Minister's Decision also dated 24th November 2000 as an office under the direct management of ICD.

Vietnamese Government also expressed its support to ISG activities through the Decision by the Prime Minister No 1167/CP-QHQT dated 18 December 2000, allowing MARD to establish a Trust Fund for the ISG process. The Guidelines on the Management and Utilization of the ISG Trust Fund have already been drafted, commented, and approved by the ISG Steering Board and submitted to MARD leader for issuance.

A forum for experience exchange and policy dialogue

The function of ISG forum is not only shown at the annual ISG Plenary Meeting and Steering Board meetings held four times each year, but also in the expected outputs of the management information system with various types of information collection and dissemination that ISG is establishing and developing. The system will operate in many forms, from the collection of information from standard questionnaires sent to programs, projects and donors for regular provision of standard reports to stakeholders, or unusual reports on request, publishing quarterly news letters and a website in service of development.

In December 2000, ISG Secretariat already sent *questionnaires on ongoing projects* to over 200 agencies under the management of MARD. In February 2001, the questionnaires were sent for the second time to the agencies that had not replied. Also in February 2001, ISG Secretariat delivered the *questionnaires on on-going and planned projects* to donors and international organizations, in order to collect further sufficient information and compare the information of the projects. Several reports on List of ODA projects under MARD management have also been sent by ISG to MARD leader for steering information. ISG Secretariat is constantly collecting information from the database of relevant ministries, localities, and donors for the development of a database on agriculture and rural development projects, *not only those under MARD management*. The database is compared to the one on rural development constructed by UNDP at the end of last year (2000) in order to have sufficiently-combined information.

The quarterly-published ISG News Letter (first volume in January 2001) will include carefully-sorted information of great importance relating to cooperation activities in the sector. ISG website, with the assistance from REFAS project and UNDP, besides the dissemination of development information, can possibly be a place where the comparison of

data sources can be done, and can serve as a regular forum for the exchange of information in service of development assistance management. The demonstration website was presented at the ISG Steering Board Meeting 8th May 2001 for comments and approval. The contents and mechanism for management of information loaded on the web will be submitted to MARD leader for approval before officially loaded on the Internet (tentatively in June 2001).

ISG model will contribute to the overcoming of the fault in information flow in service of development, since it will not only contribute its part to strengthening the link among MARD agencies, but to developing cooperation relations in management of foreign support with other ministries and donor community as well.

Creation of an environment for a new approach

ISG activities are the ones oriented to clear results, with focus on several specific issues under the framework of policies, strategies and priorities for the formulation of projects/programs. With those changes, ISG process will, in the future, promote the support of modern approach toward the management of foreign assistance being carried out by MARD.

Program, target approach (sector wide approach)

The first meeting of ISG Steering Board (22 December 2000) approved the ISG work plan 2001 and established two new Thematic Ad-hoc Groups (TAG) ***on International Agro-economic Integration and Policy*** and ***Water Resources Management Support***. The second meeting of ISG Steering Board (8th May 2001) approved the Terms of Reference and work plans of the two TAGs.

Activities of the TAGs, right from the first days of preparation of the ToR and Work plans, gave a chance for the finding out of overlappings in development activities among Vietnam agencies as well as among donor community. This shows great potentials of the ISG process in supporting MARD and donor community in the implementation of target, program approach, as well as in service of development partnerships currently undertaken by MARD and donors.

ISG process has also closely collaborated with and created an environment for the establishment and development of the partnerships in MARD, namely, 5 Million Hectare Reforestation Program Partnership (5MHRP), and Natural Disaster Mitigation Partnership in Central provinces (NDM).

Making use of lessons learnt and orienting results

With the database and the wide participation of many stakeholders, the lessons learnt from various programs/projects or activities will be shared.

ISG Secretariat has compiled the *draft Code-numbering System* for the projects under MARD management, supporting the unified management over the process of preparation, submission, appraisal and approval of ODA projects. The draft code-numbering system has already been sent to Vietnam's agencies, donors and international organizations with an aim to collect suggestions/comments, and will then be submitted to MARD leader for consideration and issuance in not too distant future.

The Code-numbering System can serve as a tool for MARD management over ODA projects. The procedure for receiving information of project management proposed in the

Draft was made in the highest compliance with the newly issued Regulation on the Management and Utilization of ODA by the Government.

Mechanism for participation of stakeholders

Mechanism for the participation of stakeholders is clearly shown in the structure of the ISG Steering Board. The past Steering Board meetings received comments from many stakeholders, representing the approach as well as the rights from many sides.

The activities of the TAG on Integration, TAG on Water Resources Management, or the development of database of management information being undertaken by ISG process are all participated by many stakeholders.

Annual ISG Plenary Meeting has actually become the largest forum for organisations interested in agriculture and rural development in Vietnam.

Mechanism for participation of stakeholders is not only shown in ISG process itself, but also serves the approach that MARD is looking to. ISG process can function as a catalyst for healing the gap caused by assistance procedures and non-identical approach concepts in the preparation and implementation of ODA projects.

ISG process is becoming a forum with new methods for activities, including:

- Management Information System
- Website in service of development
- Code-numbering system in support of management of projects
- Quarterly News Letters
- Annual Plenary Meeting
- Steering Board Meetings

Coordination is a new and difficult task, requiring "learning while working", and will certainly be successful.