Supporting Collective Impact in Vietnam – Phase II:

Organizing for Action

A REDUCING POLLUTION CASE STUDY

This case study series aims to inform development practitioners and donors seeking to use a collective impact approach to support local stakeholders to lead efforts to enact their own agendas, leading to lasting change.

Photo: A house owner and the low-cost sensor installation team in Hai Duong Credit: USAID Reducing Pollution

Photo: Waste classification training for local authorities' staff in Phu Nhuan district, Ho Chi Minh city. Credit: VECA/USAID Reducing Pollution

Goal: Position local actors to take the lead on collective impact initiatives

Vietnam's rapid social and economic development has led to significant environmental pollution challenges, including poor urban air quality, contamination of surface water and groundwater, and ocean plastic pollution. The people of Vietnam are increasingly concerned about their local air and water quality. In response, the Government of Vietnam (GVN) passed the 2020 Law on Environmental Protection and accompanying National Action Plans related to air quality, water conservation, and plastic waste pollution. Given the complexity of the issues, broad cooperation between the GVN, the private sector, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), scientists, and community groups is needed to address environmental pollution challenges.

Intervention: Create the foundation for locally-led, sustainable and inclusive collective impact initiatives

The USAID Reducing Pollution project, a five-year effort implemented by Winrock International, is supporting locally-driven initiatives to reduce environmental pollution in Vietnam through a collective impact approach (please see the box). Reducing Pollution is being implemented in three phases: **Discovery, Organizing for Action, and Implementation**. This case study explores how the project used an Organizing for Action phase to prepare internal processes and tools necessary to start working with local partners to launch collective impact initiatives.

What is Collective Impact?

Collective impact is the commitment of a group of actors from across society to a common agenda for solving a specific social problem, using a structured form of collaboration. Collective impact has five key characteristics:

- A **common agenda** that reflects a shared vision for change;
- A **shared measurement system** to track progress and ensure accountability;
- **Mutually reinforcing activities** that leverage each organization's strengths;
- **Continuous communication** to build trust; and
- Support from a local **Backbone Organization** that leads the process of convening and coordinating participating partners.

Photo: Cans collected for recycling at the Binh Yen village, Nam Dinh province Credit: VESDI/USAID Reducing Pollution

IMPORTANCE & STEPS OF THE ACTION PHASE

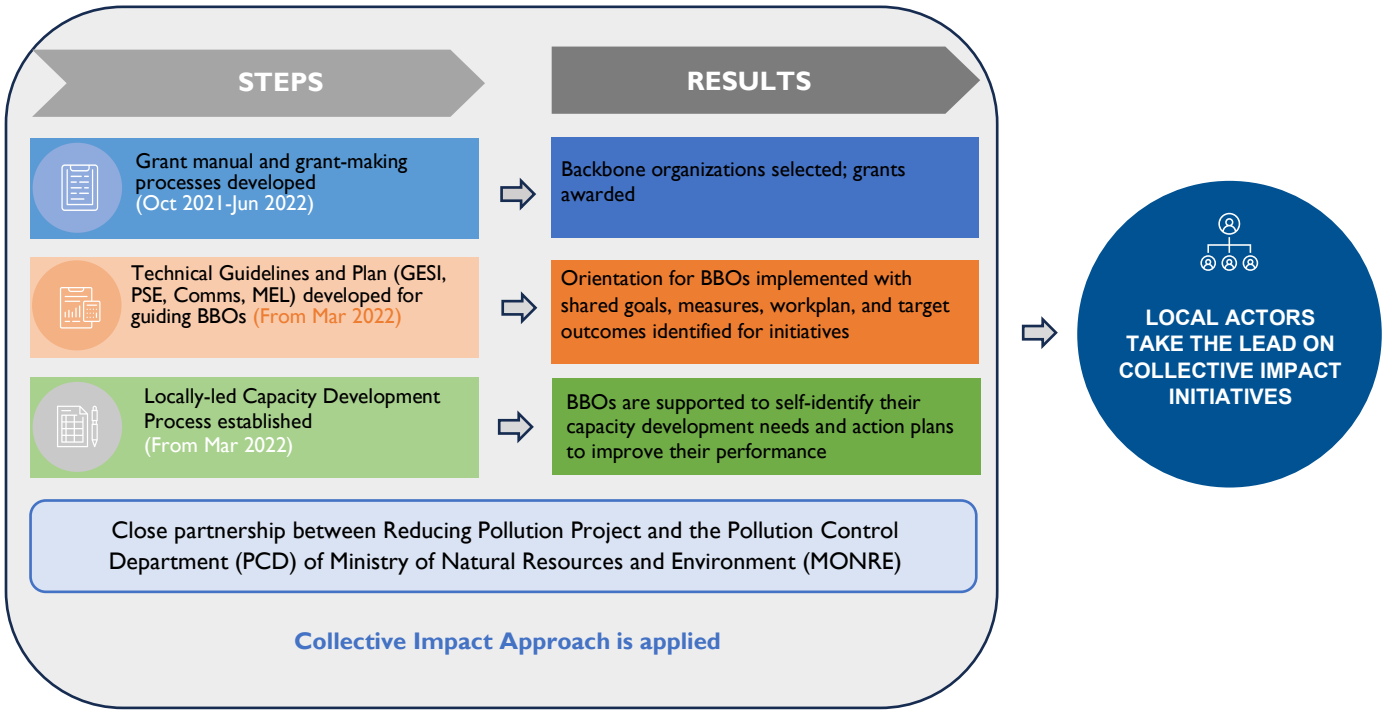
Why is the Organizing for Action Phase important for the success of collective impact initiatives?

The Reducing Pollution team used the Organizing for Action Phase to identify local NGOs, also referred to as "backbone organizations" (BBOs), to lead collective impact initiatives (CIIs). As most of them were new to working on USAID-funded projects and none were familiar with the collective impact approach, the Reducing Pollution team designed and implemented a comprehensive capacity development process (CDP) to strengthen the BBOs' capacity to facilitate and lead CIIs.

What steps did Reducing Pollution take to implement the Organizing for Action Phase and its results?

Figure 1 summarizes the key steps taken by Reducing Pollution during the Organizing for Action Phase. Each step is described below, along with the challenges the team experienced, and the recommended best practices which incorporate lessons learned.

Figure 1: Organizing for Action Phase Activities



CHALLENGES & RESPONSES

Grant-making process

***Challenges*:** Many local non-profit organizations that applied for BBO grants were new to the grant-making process. They lacked the necessary systems, processes, and experience to prepare proposals that met international donor standards. Additionally, the collective impact approach was very new to these organizations. In preparing their proposals, they faced difficulties with aspects such as constructing a theory of change, defining indicators, identifying stakeholders, applying the collective impact approach, and developing a budget.

Reducing Pollution's Response: To support organizations in preparing proposals, the Project organized workshops to share information on the collective impact approach, assessment criteria, and project indicators and answered questions related to proposal preparation. These sessions enabled candidates to better comprehend the Project's approach and focus on the essential requirements of the calls. The Project determined appropriate solicitation methods based on the different prioritized environmental pollution topics. A two-stage Annual Program Statement (APS) process was effective in identifying qualified backbones for reducing plastic and solid waste management because of the high number of diverse approaches being proposed by local organizations in Vietnam on this topic. Screening applications through a concept note stage saved time, effort, and costs for both applicants and reviewers. For other topics, such as air pollution from open burning, a one-stage Request for Application (RFA) process was found to be more appropriate because of clearly defined objectives to be achieved under the initiatives and fewer organizations likely to apply. The grant application materials included a budget template with examples to help applicants understand how to fill in the budget form. For shortlisted applicants, the Project used a Pre-Award Assessment Tool to identify possible challenges with the organization's systems and processes. These approaches contributed to the successful selection of BBOs to lead each CII.

Best practices – Grant making process

Through continuous learning and improvement of the process of selection of grantees, adaptive actions were taken to apply the best process: the two-stage APS, or the one-stage RFA for grant-making for different pollution topics.

Result: The Reducing Pollution Project was successful in identifying and funding BBOs, most of which had not received USAID funding before.

Technical Support to BBOs

***Challenges*:** As most BBOs had not implemented any USAID-funded project before, they had little understanding of USAID rules and regulations and limited familiarity with approaches related to Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI), Private Sector Engagement (PSE), and communications. Regarding GESI, almost none of the proposals submitted mentioned GESI and none of the eventually selected BBOs had experience analyzing GESI or making their work GESI-responsive. BBOs were largely not familiar with engaging the private sector. Related to communications, most BBOs were not familiar with USAID's branding and marking requirements and did not have an organizational communications strategy. Additionally, the CII monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) plan and associated indicators were new to most BBOs. Although Project indicators had been included in the APS and RFA, few of the applications made any reference to them.

***Reducing Pollution's Response*:** The project developed guidelines for GESI, PSE, and communications for BBOs to use.

The Reducing Pollution team used the Project's GESI Strategy to help BBOs understand how to integrate GESI into their interventions and create an inclusive enabling environment for stakeholders to join initiatives. GESI checklists for each CII have assisted BBOs to easily understand and incorporate GESI mainstreaming into specific activities.

The PSE tools enabled BBOs to build their PSE action plans with priority PSE actions that were mainstreamed into the existing workplan. These action plans are expected to help them to potentially engage a range of private sector stakeholders in the initiatives and contribute to their sustainability.

The communications guidance from the Project has supported BBOs to develop and implement their communications plan to achieve their desired results. The MEL plan of each initiative was developed by BBOs with close guidance and support from the Reducing Pollution team to help BBOs to document their progress.

All these technical areas were introduced to BBOs in orientation sessions once CIIs began. BBOs continue to receive technical assistance from the Project as needed.

Best Practices –
Technical Support to BBOs

BBOs started out with limited understanding of USAID rules, regulations, and development approaches; providing them orientation and technical support on GESI, PSE, communications, and MEL has proved to be effective.

Result: The BBOs gradually mainstreamed GESI, PSE actions into their work plan and are able to implement their communications and MEL plan.

Locally-led Capacity Development Plan

***Challenges*:** Each BBO required tailored technical assistance. Some had deep technical skills but were not operationally sophisticated, while others sought strategic guidance to grow and collaborate with more donors. They also started out with different levels of human and financial resources. The BBOs leading two of the Project's CIIs had proposed joint venture partnerships. The many months it took them to coordinate with their partners to sign the joint venture agreement slowed down the implementation of some activities, while they came to an agreement on the scope of work for each party. For the Project, supporting the BBOs to manage their joint venture partners added a layer of complexity on top of supporting them to lead their CII initiatives successfully and contribute to broader systems change and sustainable development outcomes.

Best Practices –
Capacity Action Plan

It is crucial that each BBO prepares and follows a capacity action plan specifically tailored to its needs. BBOs can utilize the capacity development process to build trust within their joint venture partners and within their individual teams.

Results: Two BBOs were successfully assessed as having improved performance after one year of implementation of their capacity action plan. Four BBOs are conducting capacity action plans and supporting their partners to improve performance.

***Reducing Pollution's Response*:** The Reducing Pollution team prioritized activities to help BBOs improve their organizational performance. The team reviewed tools from USAID and other donors for carrying out capacity assessments and developed a self-assessment tool for BBOs, called the *Capacity Development Process (CDP) Guidelines and Capacity Assessment Toolkit*. The Toolkit can be flexibly applied and customized to "best fit" each BBO depending on their needs and expectations. Topics include Program Management and Technical Expertise; Financial Management; Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL); Communications; Gender and Social Inclusion; and Culture and Sustainability. During this process, building trust between BBOs and the Reducing Pollution team was essential for full information sharing and effective capacity strengthening.

OTHER LESSONS LEARNED

Close partnership with the Government is essential for securing CII approval at provincial level

BBOs found some difficulties in navigating provincial government approval processes; it took quite a long time to get this approval before implementing initiatives. The restructuring and institutional changes within MONRE also presented challenges for the Project and BBOs. This led to difficulties in communication and coordination of activities and delays in providing technical assistance to MONRE as planned. In response, the Reducing Pollution team and BBOs collaborated closely with MONRE to get its support to work with the government at provincial levels and followed the approval requirements of the government. The team also redesigned the planned technical assistance activities to accommodate the needs and priorities of MONRE. This included managing the expectations of both the Pollution Control Department and USAID through clear and consistent communications.

Building an understanding of the collective impact approach requires significant time and effort

New project staff and BBO personnel need time to understand the collective impact approach and to feel confident in promoting the approach with their partners. BBOs need support to build the engagement and commitment of other stakeholders through continuous communication and learning channels. The Reducing Pollution team spent time learning about the collective impact approach and orienting new project staff to the concept. The team held workshops to explain collective impact to organizations applying to become BBOs. After the BBOs were selected, the team demonstrated the collective impact approach such as by creating a communication mechanism among CII participants, co-designing CII participant meeting agendas, consulting with BBOs before making decisions, discussing outcome indicators, targets, and measurement of each initiative, connecting BBOs with relevant stakeholders and learning events and discussing how the collective impact approach could best be applied in initiative interventions.

Photos from top to bottom:
1. From the right: Ms. Samantha Power, USAID Administrator; Mr. Nguyen Duc Duong, Partner/Organizational Development and Pollution Team Lead, USAID and Mr. Hoang Van Thuc, Director of MONRE's Pollution Control Department in a visit to VECA – a start-up using technology in waste collection in Ho Chi Minh City.
Credit: USAID
2. Visitors at the Air Fair organized by the U.S. Embassy being introduced to the air monitoring devices of the DLCorp
Credit: USAID Reducing Pollution
3. CHERAD's representative is introducing the initiative to the Consuls of the three countries of the U.S., Australia and Japan at the Can Tho University.
Credit: Can Tho University