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VUFO-NGO Resource Centre Working Group Guidelines – 2016 Update

Introduction

For more than two decades the Working Groups established under the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre have provided a valuable space for sharing experiences and information on activities in key development sectors in Vietnam. The scope of Working Groups has grown significantly in recent years. They frequently host information meetings, presentations and discussions about current issues and on-going projects in Vietnam. They also play an important role in sharing resources and supporting consultations on new policies, laws and plans. Working Group participants are implementing programmes across the country, jointly constituting a valuable resource for other partners and decision-makers with their practical experiences.

These guidelines have been prepared with inputs from the Working Groups and have been approved by our Steering Committee and participants of previous INGO forums. They are intended to provide clear and practical information about the status, organization and activities of the Working Groups established under the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre. As such, they serve as 'minimum structure and standards' within which Working Groups should operate, drawing on practical experiences over the past years. We hope that the guidelines reflect an aspiration for sharing information, best practices, experiences and resources; developing relationships; and facilitating coordination between Working Groups' participants.

In line with the overall objectives of all international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) in Vietnam and the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre, our main goal remains to support hunger eradication, poverty reduction, sustainable development and other effective humanitarian activities in Vietnam. A complete list of Working Groups and a digital copy of these guidelines are available at: www.ngocentre.org.vn/wg

Background

In early 1990s INGOs began meeting together regularly on the last Friday of each month to promote coordination and to share experiences and resources. Building on this coordination, in 1993 the NGO Resource Centre was initiated with the support of the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organisations (VUFO). With currently more than hundred INGO members, the objectives of the centre remain to:

- promote, facilitate and contribute to the sharing of information, resources and experiences within and between INGOs, their partners and local organisations, in order to improve the quality and impact of their work in Vietnam
- strengthen relationships and enhance dialogues between INGOs and other development 'actors' in Vietnam, including government agencies, donors and local organisations

The VUFO-NGO Resource Centre facilitates gathering of INGOs at least once per year (INGO Forum). The centre operates under the supervision of a Steering Committee comprised of 5 elected INGO representatives and 5 appointed Vietnamese members who come from VUFO and other related governmental agencies.

As the annual INGO Forum is not able to accommodate all different interests of INGOs working in Vietnam, INGO members have established a range of sectoral and cross-sectoral Working Groups as an extension of the INGO Forum. The Working Groups provide INGOs with opportunities to share experiences or problems; as well as to work collectively towards appropriate solutions in line with development agencies working in the same field. Over the past two decades, these groups have provided valuable platforms for sharing information, ideas, resources and experiences within the development community of Vietnam.

Meetings of the Working Groups usually take place at the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre unless scheduling conflicts or a larger number of participants require another venue. The centre provides the Working Groups with access to mailing lists, website space for publishing their own events and information, and publicity through the regular Newsletter and online INGO Directory. The centre's library is also a valuable tool for Working Groups to access and distribute information on their activities and other resources.

Participation in Working Groups

The Working Groups are intended to provide platforms where interested individuals and organizations can share information, experiences and ideas in an open way. As they exist within the institutional framework and responsibility of the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre, they will always be initiated and led by INGOs which are paying members. However, the Working Groups are inclusive and participation is open to all interested parties working on similar issues: other non-member INGOs, governmental agencies, donors, mass organisations, local organisations and interested individuals.

Due to the informal nature of the Working Groups and the lack of formal registration procedures for participants, there is no specific definition of 'membership' in the Working Groups. Decisions about Working Groups' coordination and terms of reference should be made democratically and transparently by regular participants of the same group.

As the primary objective of the Working Groups is information sharing, they are not an appropriate venue for advertising commercial services, seeking employment or anything that may detract from the main goal of the group. Similarly, attendance of members of the press should be carefully considered to ensure that their presence does not inhibit an open sharing of information by participants or shift the focus of the group.

Invitations to Participate in Working Group Meetings

The Working Groups exist within the institutional framework of the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre and have no independent status. Therefore, all formal invitations to the Working Groups' events should be issued by the centre. This may be particularly important for presenters and participants coming from official agencies, as the status of the Working Groups is not always clear to everyone. They may feel more comfortable to attend meetings that are linked to appropriate institutional framework of the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre.

Descriptions of the activities and participation in meetings should reflect the reality that some participants – particularly those from official agencies– may be attending based on their own personal interest rather than as authorised representatives of their agencies. It has proved very effective to have the participation of such people on this basis, and facilitators or minute takers should be sensitive to this.

The Roles of the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre Steering Committee and Staff

Steering Committee

Through its regular meetings, the Steering Committee is responsible to supervise the overall activities of the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre, including the Working Groups. The Steering Committee is responsible to

approve these guidelines, as well as all new or amended Terms of Reference submitted by any individual Working Group. The Steering Committee provides overall guidance to co-directors in their work with the Working Groups. Where possible, a Steering Committee member will be involved in activities of 1–3 different Working Groups relevant to their own INGO's work, so that they can mentor and supervise them.

Co-Directors

The VUFO-NGO Resource Centre is managed by a full-time expatriate Managing Co-Director, supported by a Vietnamese Co-Director who is based at PACCOM. The latter is usually PACCOM Deputy Director General. The Managing Co-Director is responsible for overall supervision and guidance of the Working Groups' activities and is a direct manager of the Senior Working Groups Coordinator. The coordinator is responsible to work with each Working Group; provide support; and ensure that each group's Terms of Reference, annual plan and activities are appropriate in the context of Vietnam and according to these guidelines. The Managing Co-Director oversees preparations of the Working Groups' Annual Report, which is shared with all development partners at the Vietnam Development Partnership Forum (VDPF) by the end of each year. The Co-Director from PACCOM provides guidance to the Managing Co-Director from the perspective of Vietnamese socio-economic development and humanitarian goals, laws and culture. Together, the two co-directors organise and facilitate Working Group Coordinators' meetings twice per year.

Senior Working Groups Coordinator

The Senior Working Groups Coordinator is a full-time staff of the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre. S/he is responsible for maintaining contacts with and supporting the Working Groups – in order to maximise their effectiveness as a space for information sharing; as well as exchange of ideas, resources and experiences within the development community in Vietnam. The coordinator will usually attend all meetings of each Working Group and sub-groups. S/he provides basic secretarial support to the Working Groups, including arranging meeting announcements and posting meeting details on the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre's website, sending out meeting invitations and agenda to relevant email lists, and arranging the meeting room. The coordinator is responsible to collect and distribute meeting minutes and other information via the centre's website, newsletters and mailing lists; and to set up a specific sub-section of the website for each Working Group. The coordinator provides updated information and monthly briefing reports to co-directors; and supports arrangements for annual Working Group Coordinator's meetings. S/he collects updated information for inclusion in the online INGO Directory, and coordinate preparations of the Annual Report with each Working Group. S/he helps with issues which require support from PACCOM, and follows up on all external requests outside the regular Working Group meetings.

Establishment of INGO Working Groups

There are many ways in which Working Groups have been established over the past years. Some Working Groups have grown out of topical meetings, when a number of INGOs realized that there might be some benefit to continuing regular networking. Others have come together with the purpose of collectively addressing a specific development issue. Some groups have evolved simply from a desire to network with other professionals in order to gain experience and share lessons learned.

The common thread is that each Working Group represents a broad interest of INGO members and strives to improve the quality of INGOs' work in their respective fields. Once the idea of a new Working Group is conceived, interested INGOs should use the following steps as guidelines:

- Discuss the idea with the Managing Co-Director of the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre
- Work with the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre to organise an initial meeting. This meeting can discuss relevant topics, and provide a practical basis to assess broader interest and discuss the objectives for the proposed Working Group

- Based on this initial meeting, a small voluntary task force can be assigned to draft Terms of Reference (ToR) for discussion by the future group. This ToR should follow the general format established by the Steering Committee in these guidelines. A draft version of the ToR will be shared with other interested members for suggestions and adjustments. This will be submitted to the Steering Committee for the final approval
- The Managing Co-director of the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre will present the proposal to the Steering Committee and provide feedback
- Once the ToR is approved, the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre will announce the new Working Group; create a sub-section on the website and start a relevant mailing list
- It is generally useful for each Working Group to produce annual plan outlining proposed activities for the coming year

Coordination, Liaison Mechanisms and Roles

Each Working Group should establish a liaison person who is a staff member of one of the INGOs, members of the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre. This person acts as a focal point for the group and is responsible to maintain ongoing contacts with the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre's team. In order to promote exchange of experiences the centre organises meetings of the Working Groups' coordinators. These meetings are hosted 2–3 times per year and facilitated by both co-directors.

Any other coordination or structure within Working Groups is left to participants to create. Over the past years, a range of approaches have been taken by different groups. Some prefer to have a single chairperson who takes the lead, while other groups may find that a small 'core group' is more effective. We have found that the following models are most effective:

- A clear assignment of responsibility and liaising with the centre to one person from one organisation. This person must have their INGO's support to take on this role; and their INGO must be a member
- A clear process for selecting a coordinator or chairperson and/or any new core group member. The process must reflect basic principles of volunteerism, democracy and transparency. It should be clearly outlined in the group's ToR, together with the associated time frame
- Reasonable continuity in personnel, so that there is a consistent approach over time and the chair / coordinator / core group have a good understanding of the history of the group. We have found that 1–2 years is an appropriate time frame. Attempts to have meeting-by-meeting or 6-month rotations of the overall Working Group leadership have often created difficulties
- Past experience has shown that where an organisation assigns a permanent full-time staff to take charge of a Working Group, this may actually create a risk for long-term sustainability. The reason for this is that when that organisation can no longer support the group, other participants do not feel able to match –on a part-time/voluntary basis– the work previously done by a full-time staff. A number of Working Groups have faced this challenge

Working Groups Activities

Regular Working Group meetings are considered the core activity of the Working Groups. They represent the ultimate aim of the group, which is to share information and learn from the experiences of other professionals. Taking into account the Vietnamese context and regulations for management of international

conferences and seminars, the Working Groups meet under the auspices of the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre, with VUFO and PACCOM providing formal prerequisites for these meetings.

Participation

As noted above, participation in the Working Groups meetings is open to INGO staff as well as others working in related fields, including INGOs, VNGOs, governmental agencies, consultants and researchers.

Location

As mentioned above, meetings will usually take place at the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre. Scheduling conflicts and unusually large numbers of participants may require another venue. No charge will be levied by the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre for the use of their meeting room. Meetings to be held outside of Hanoi will normally require approval in accordance with Decision 122/2001/QD-TTg. This usually requires approvals from relevant provincial or city authorities. Plans for such meetings should be discussed with the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre well in advance –at least 6 to 8 weeks before the meeting– so that necessary approval procedures can be identified and followed.

Timing

Regularly timed meetings that are planned well in advance have been most effective in the past. Working Groups that organise meetings outside Hanoi must be considerate of participants who may need to travel long distances. Scheduling meetings at regular intervals and close to the weekend –for example, on Friday afternoon– is usually more accommodating than meetings held on a short notice. The length and the agenda of the meeting are decided by the Working Group. It is more considerate to hold one longer meeting rather than trying to coordinate several short meetings over a short period.

Funding

Generally, there should be minimal funding requirements for regular Working Group meetings. Individual participants may be invited to support basic costs: meeting room, tea break, photocopies, translation or similar. Meeting room space is often volunteered by a member INGO, when the centre's meeting room is not suitable. The Working Groups should not solicit funding for regular activities. The activities with significant budgetary implications may require co-directors to consult the Steering Committee on behalf of the group.

Sub-Groups

Regular meetings of the Working Groups may not be sufficient to deal with all relevant issues and/or initiate all activities which may be suggested. One response to this has been to establish short-term task forces or regular sub-groups to pursue more detailed discussions on specific topics. If sub-groups are formed, the Working Group and sub-groups' coordinators must take responsibility to ensure that sub-groups retain a strong link to the main group. They should operate within the framework of the main group's ToR. Sub-groups' coordinators usually join meetings of core groups to report on sub-groups' activities. Practical experience so far confirmed that sub-groups should try to keep at minimum any risk of diverting interest, attention and resources from the main Working Group's activities.

Other Activities

Activities that are not part of regular Working Groups' gatherings –such as workshops, seminars, conferences, study tours or media events– should be discussed with the co-directors well in advance¹. For policy issues or issues involving significant budget implications the co-directors may seek advice from the Steering Committee. The co-directors will provide timely feedback on such issues.

As platforms established under the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre, the Working Groups are not allowed to initiate activities as separate legal entities. All activities that have been agreed upon by the Working Group

¹ How far in advance would depend on the activity in question but would usually be at least 6 weeks prior to the proposed activity. Decision No. 122/2001/QD-TTg 21/8/2001 establishes basic time-frames for seeking approval of workshops and conferences in Vietnam.

participants must be conducted jointly by these same participants and/or the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre.

Publications

The Working Groups may share information and updates on their activities through informal communication tools such as overviews, reports, summaries, brochures or announcements. Any materials released by the Working Group should be discussed in advance with the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre. It should be available at the centre's library and shared digitally via the centre's website. Any public newsletters prepared by the Working Group should clearly state its link to the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre. Formal publications prepared by the Working Groups –including films, books, magazines or research reports– may be released under the institutional responsibility of a participating NGO and in line with the Vietnamese publishing laws.

Research Activities

Participants meeting through the Working Groups may jointly identify useful areas in which to conduct research that can then be shared through the Working Group's regular meetings. Actual research activities should be carried out either under the institutional responsibility of individual agencies participating in the Working Group, or if appropriate by the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre. It is not appropriate for the Working Groups themselves to independently contract consultants to carry out research, as the Working Groups have no legal status to sign contracts, receive or provide funds, or to take responsibility for research activities and products.

Information Sharing and Online Resources

The VUFO-NGO Resource Centre provides a dedicated space for posting information on the groups' activities at the centre's website. The Working Groups should not create separate websites as they can lead to confusion and distract from the central distribution point of relevant information. The VUFO-NGO Resource Centre provides further support by sharing electronic invitations, agendas, meeting minutes, reports and/or copies of the Working Groups' presentations. These materials are shared via different mailing lists, designated to each Working Group.

Policy Advocacy and Recommendations

The Working Groups are increasingly involved in providing recommendations for policy dialogues in respective sectors and jointly advocating for policy changes in Vietnam. The Working Groups represent a valuable resource to decision makers, bring together practical experiences from relevant fields and combining it with INGOs' global expertise.

Due to the lack of a formal 'membership' status in the Working Groups, some concerns have arisen when official letters or advocacy-related documents were sent 'on behalf of the Working Group' together with a list of participating 'members' which simply listed all subscribers to the group's mailing list. Also, individual staff participating in the Working Groups' meetings does not always have the authority to represent their organisation.

Occasionally, public recommendations have been made 'on behalf of the Working Groups' without any indication of their relationship with the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre and/or without including co-directors in the review process. Bearing in mind these concerns, any recommendation, publication or other kind of representation prepared by the Working Groups must be submitted under the signature of an individual authorised by the participating INGO and/or brought to the attention of the VUFO-NGO Resource Centre for submission to the Steering Committee's approval.