



WOBA Viet Nam partnership structure

Lessons learned from the Mid-term Review

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Introduction

WOBA Vietnam is a project designed and implemented by Thrive Networks /East Meets West Foundation aimed to bring equitable water and sanitation services and hygiene practices to marginalized households in five rural provinces of Vietnam and to improve women's empowerment in the Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) sector. It is funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) through the Water for Women Fund over 4.5 years (June 2018 to December 2022).

Guided by a theory of change that aligns with the Fund's theory of change, WOBA has three strategies which are expected to contribute to the expected outcomes. The outcomes relating to the partnership structure in the project are as follows:

- Partner with district and commune government, Women's Union, and private sector WASH operators to strengthen coordination mechanisms (at all institutional levels) and private sector capacity in delivering WASH services for poor and GESI (Gender and Social Inclusion) households.
- Build capacity of government partners, women in the WU, and private sector WASH operators to implement Output Based Aid (OBA) WASH services for poor and GESI households.
- Leverage partnerships with government partners, WASH authorities, WU members, and private water operators to facilitate workshops to mainstream and advocate for gender, disability and socially inclusive approach in WASH delivery in Vietnam.

One of the Mid-term review's objectives is to evaluate the effectiveness and efficiency of partnership structure in WOBA. Data collection to achieve this objective included:

- (i) seven focus group discussions (FGDs) with the participants partners including National Centre for Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (NCERWASS), National Women Union (NWU), Vietnam Environmental Health Management Agency (VIHEMA), and Disability Research and Capacity Development (DRD) (in one national level discussion) and Provincial Centre for Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (PCERWASS), PWU, District Women Union (DWU), Centre for Disease Control (CDC), private water operators and sanitation suppliers (in 6 provincial and district levels);
- (ii) survey 37 respondents who were the participants in the FGDs at all level;

- (iii) 30 interviews with Commune Women Union (CWU) and village WU staff.

This learning note is based on the results of the focus groups discussions, survey and interviews with the WU staff. It aims to share WOBA’s experience and lessons learned in partnership structure to bring the WASH services to the marginalized households in the rural Vietnam.

Governance structure and implementation activities

WOBA’s implementation activities are conducted under two operational structures, one for sanitation and water components. In sanitation, the PPC is the main agency in governing the implementation activities of WOBA. The PPC operates in accordance with its political structure, which is a hierarchical structure of governance from the provincial, to district, commune, and village. The WU plays an important role from the national to village levels in cooperating with other partners.

At the village level, the CPC has authority over the head of village and the village Party cell. In the WOBA project design, which states that the WU establishes a project management board at each level (provincial, district and commune level), comprising key departments (People’s Committee (PC), WU, DOLISA, DARD and DONRE) who are involved in the implementation. In practice, the WU carry out WOBA implementation activities under the direction of the PC at all levels.

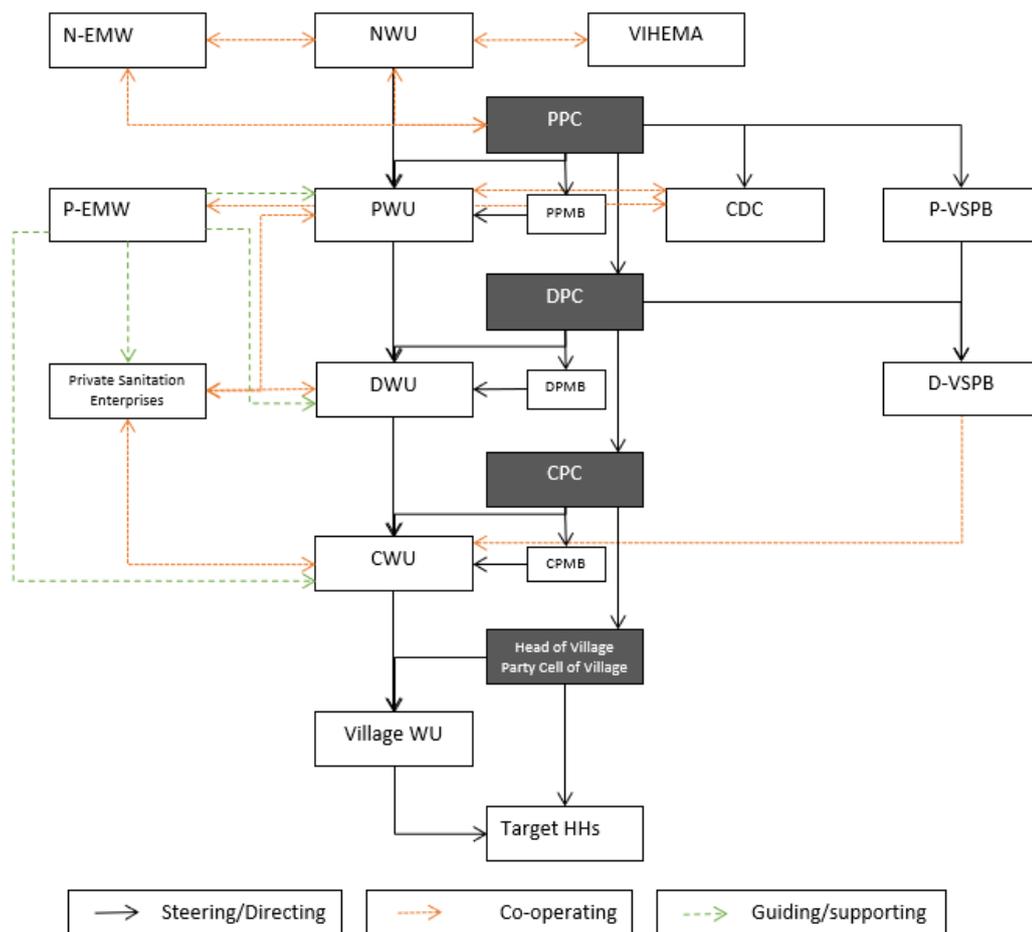


Fig 1. Map of Governance Structure – Sanitation

In the water component, PCERWASS coordinates the water operators and its own water scheme in WOBA. Only PWU cooperates with the PCERWASS while the involvement of DWU, CWU and WU at village level in water component is limited when the water operators directly cooperate with the CPC or head of villages but not the WU. There is no clear relation between the DWU, CWU with the water enterprises, which is different to the sanitation enterprises who cooperate with the WU.

WOBA’s operational structure leverages vertical relationship of government to steer and direct activities, and horizontal relationships among departments for coordinating stakeholders to carry out activities. This partnership structure is not newly established by WOBA, rather following established structure and networks from EMW’s previous projects (CHOBA).

“This project has the existing inheritance from the central to the local partnership structure. The vertical and horizontal relationships are good. We have known each other very well before.” (A participant, national FGD)

Most of the stakeholders interviewed considered the current partnership mechanism to be suitable for the context of WOBA. They considered WOBA as an extension of CHOBA because of the OBA model and their understanding that the project focuses on achieving targets of sanitation and water outputs.

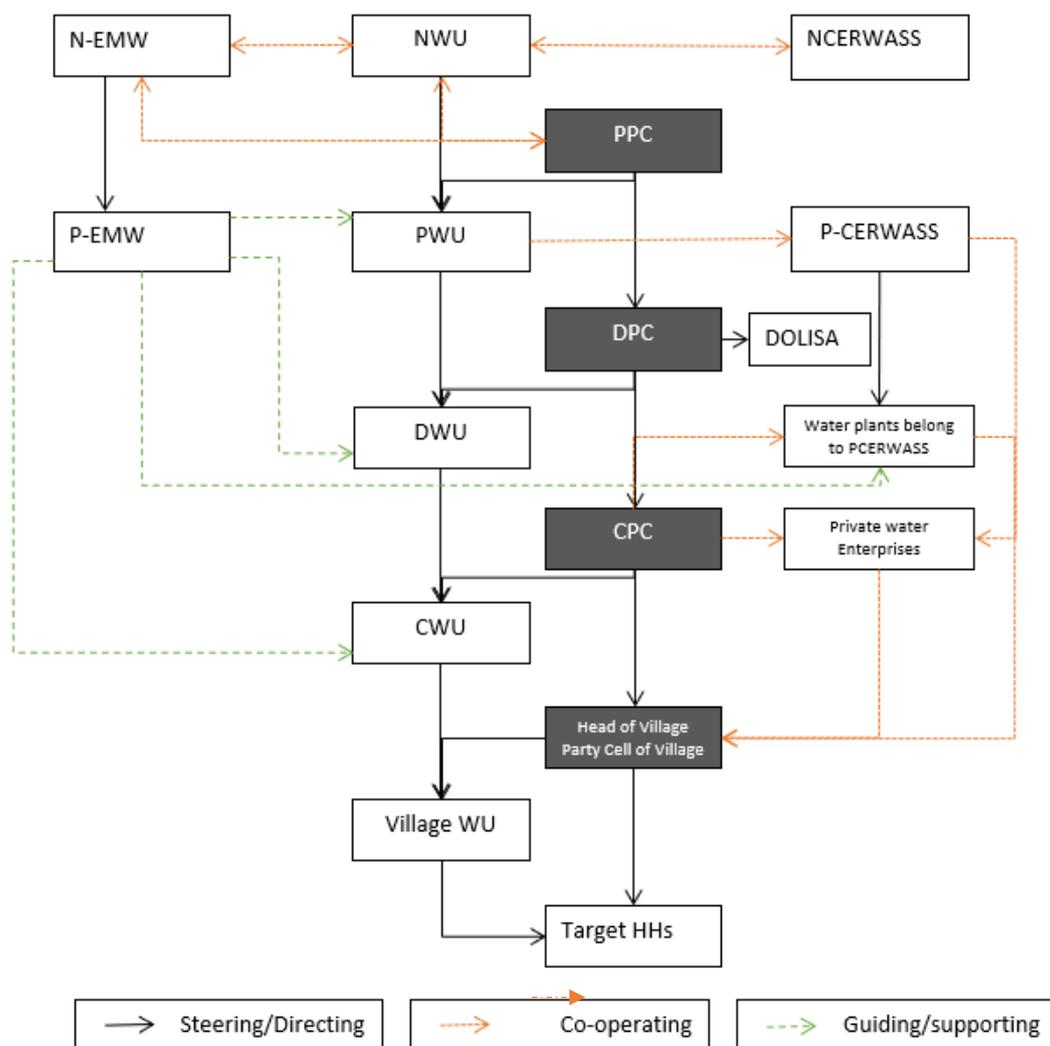


Fig. 2 Map of Governance Structure – Water

Information flow and decision making

Since WOBA leverages existing government structure through the PC as key authority for operation, the information flow in WOBA is one way from the provincial level downward to village authorities, and from the PC to WU to ensure the WU comply with the PC's decision and agreement. Among other stakeholders, there are almost two-way communication of providing information, discussing and feedback.

There is information exchange between the CWU and construction materials agents or stores, in relation to purchases of latrine materials. The CWU guarantees some difficult households to enable them to buy materials on credit from construction material stores so they can build latrines first, and pay the stores when they receive subsidies from the project.

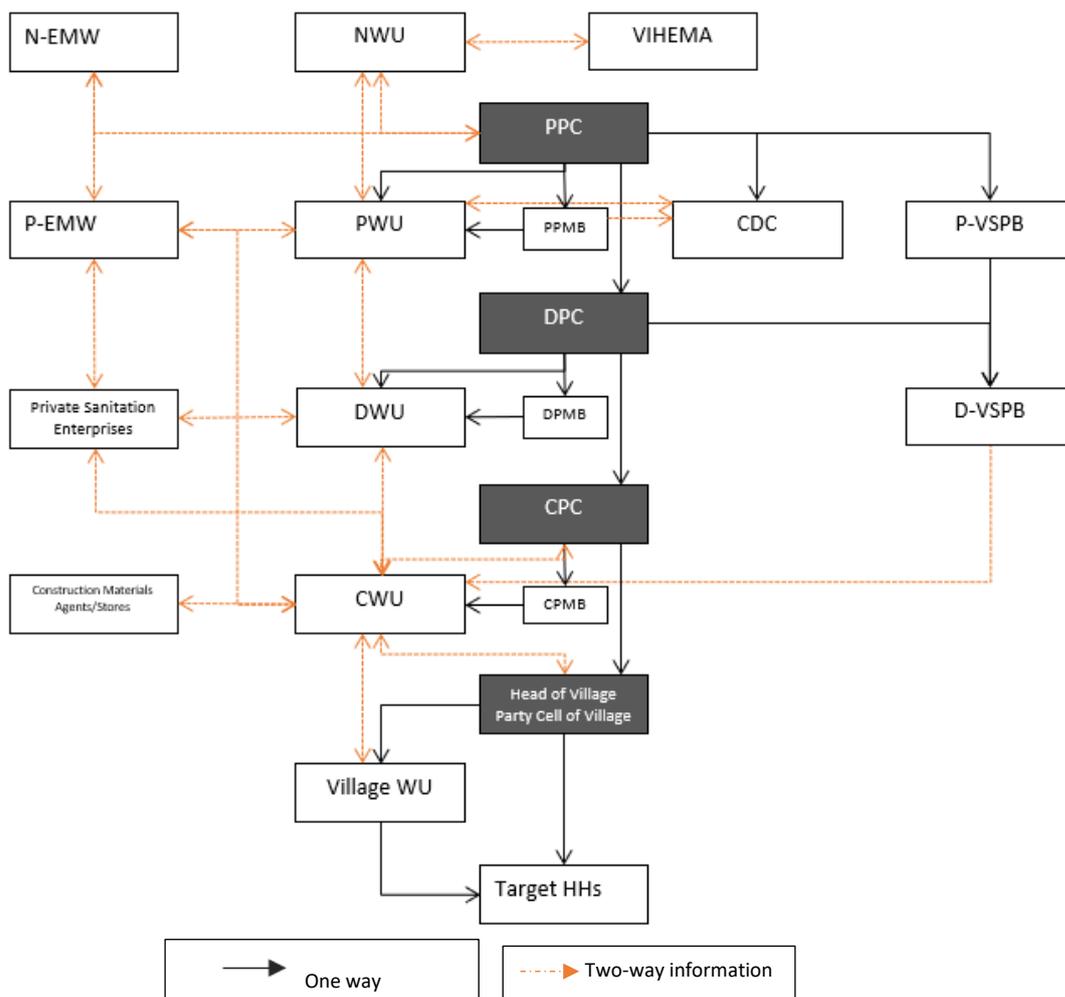


Fig 3. Map of Information Flow- Sanitation Component

According to the design of the project, the WU staff (village, commune) is the contact person with households to provide them with subsidy information before they decide to purchase latrine, during the process of building latrine, the verification process, and the process of receiving the subsidy. However, the beneficiaries interviewed also mentioned the village heads as their contact persons in addition to the WU in all these steps.

In the water component, the CWU did not have any information relating to the water connection because according to them, the water operator worked with the CPC only, and CPC did not communicate with the WU and vice versa. Both the WU and water operator recognized that it would be better if they cooperate with each other to mobilize the Households to access WASH services, because both components have same target beneficiaries.

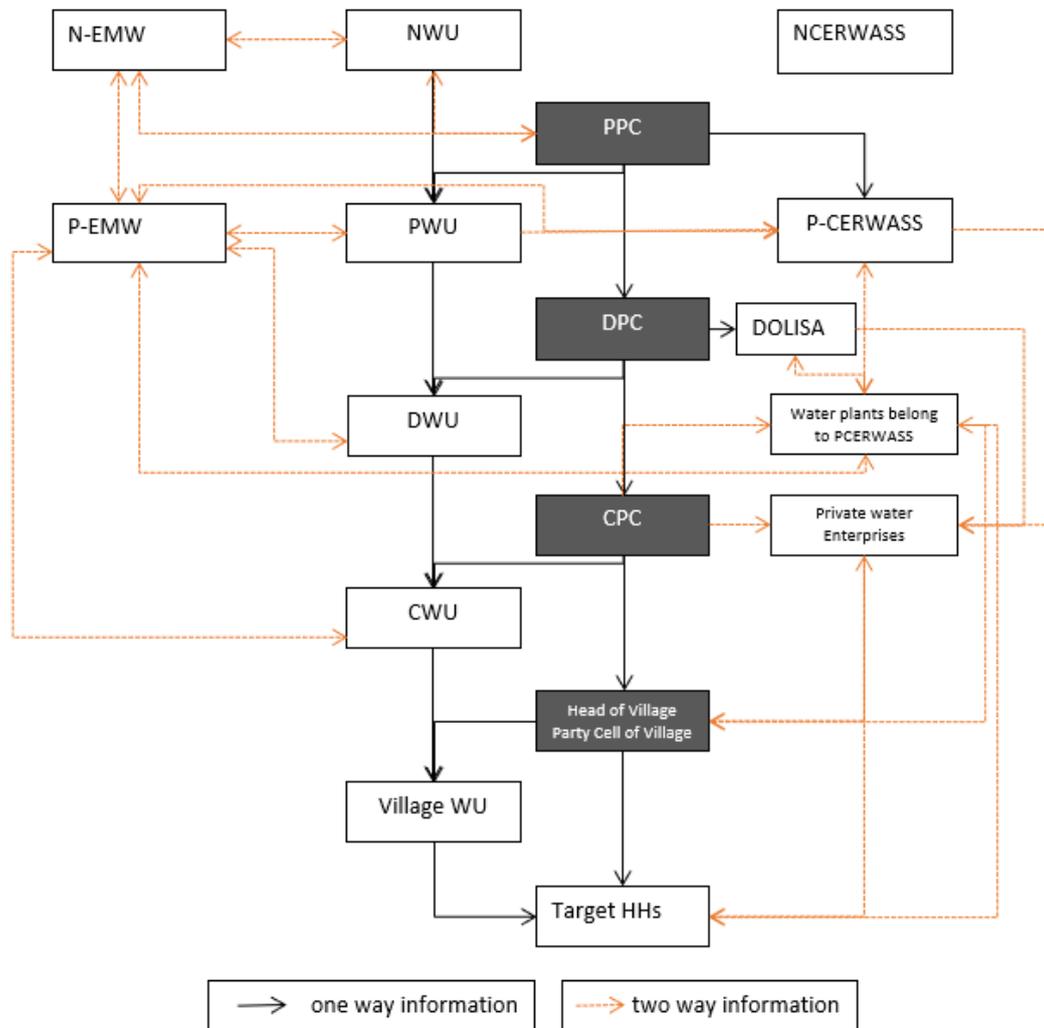


Fig 4. Map of Information Flow- Water Component

At the provincial level, the PPC has the key role in decision making in all implementation activities including participation in WOBA, co-financing of households’ latrine construction costs, and steering and directing stakeholders to implement the project activities. Without the PPC’s agreement, WOBA cannot be implemented in the provinces.

EMW and NWU worked with the PPCs to inform them about WOBA and invited them to the project, but some provinces did not meet the project requirements for co-financing. One WU in the FGD national level said,

“That time we worked with Tra Vinh PPC, they couldn't respond, so they had to stop. Although there was a very good relationship with PPC in Tra Vinh in CHOBA 2, they did not meet WOBA’s

requirements. I was afraid that they were not able to do it and they didn't have counterpart funds."

Implementation activities have focused on the target beneficiaries and subsidy payments to achieve set targets. The WU and local authorities mobilize the target beneficiaries to build their latrines in variety of ways. For example, the WU and local authorities have made many efforts to find different resources (not in WOBA) to support the target beneficiaries to build their latrines because they considered it is their political responsibility at the WU, especially WU at commune level, to do so. The main information that they concern was "which households can be selected to be target beneficiaries" and "what the subsidies for these beneficiaries are".

Effectiveness of partnership structure – WOBA partners' perception

According to the partners in the survey, the partnership structure of the project is effective and efficient. This is because the structure and tasks are carried out based on the direction of the PPC. And these duties are also within their area of expertise.

Although 100% agreed or strongly agreed with all statements, "clearer arrangements for monitoring and reviewing how the partnership is working", "partnership has had a positive impact on our organization", and "partnership has increased organizations' capacity to contribute to Vietnam's policy and strategy of WASH" received less strong agreement. This might reflect the focus of WOBA partnership on implementation to reach WASH targets. It could also reflect the result of leveraging existing structure of authority rather than changing or advocating for change at the system level.

Some FGD participants felt that the roles and responsibility of the members, units or agencies involved in WOBA must be clearly defined. Two thirds of the respondents who are from the partners of WOBA strongly agreed and one-third agreed with the statements that "the partnership is mutually beneficial", "our organization has an equal voice in the partnership", "our partnership is built on a shared vision of WOBA", "trust has been built between EMWF and our organization through the partnership" and "the overall level of communication with EMWF is satisfactory".

Half of respondents strongly agreed with the statements that "EMWF shares its resources with our organization (include monetary and non-monetary resources such as skills, training, mentoring, use of building etc." and "The overall decision-making process in the partnership is satisfactory to implement WOBA activities efficiently". As discussed earlier, this might reflect the concentrated decision-making position of the PPC in the project in relation to participation in WOBA, amounts of subsidy for target beneficiaries, and directing the stakeholders to involve in the project, with less autonomy for local partners to make decision. Paradoxically, because of the PPC role within Vietnam's government structure, without the decision from PPC, it is also difficult for the local partners to participate in the project because there is no basis to implement. Thus, on the one hand, leveraging the PPC to implement WOBA may enable access to the rural communities to conduct implementation; on the other hand, it compromises autonomy and decision-making capacity of local partners.

Challenges for the partnership structure in WOBA

The partnership structure has concentrated decision making at the PC and dependent on EMW's prior experiences with the PC and the WU. As a result, the OBA subsidy schemes and payment are adhered

to with the same mindset and understanding of OBA in prior projects, which is about achieving output of latrine/water rather than WOBA's intended outcome of private sector engagement for public-private partnership. OBA is seen as short-term results-based reward system to achieve WASH outputs, which alongside a centralized decision making, has resulted in a fixed rather than adaptable implementation. Further, because WOBA offers universal products across all provinces leveraging the existing WU structure and political position, it has provided the PC and WU legitimacy and effectiveness in transferring information down the chains of authority.

The concept of partnership used in WOBA can be said to fall within the idea of a shared understanding about the purpose of the intervention rather than the 'collaborative arrangements in which actors from the state, market, and civil society are involved in a non-hierarchical process through which these actors strive for a sustainability role'. Although many partners are involved in WOBA implementation, the link between them typify one-way information flow and decision-making. There is cooperation between organizations to serve the shared view that WOBA's main purpose is delivering WASH outputs rather than seeing WOBA as a forum for resource-efficient, outcome-effective and inclusive-progressive form of policy delivery as intended in the concept of public private partnership for sustainable development. WOBA certainly has the potential for multi-stakeholder partnerships that involve government, businesses, and NGOs to deliver innovation solutions. However, it would need a different kind of design and activities if it wants to pursue this aim. Further, the rationale for Public-Private Partnership (PPP) in the development context is that the private sector is intrinsically more innovative and efficient than the public sector. This is not the context of WOBA and Vietnam where private sector sanitation suppliers and water scheme operators are emerging with weak infrastructure, technologies, business skills and financing capabilities.

Ways forward

The partnership structure of WOBA follows the government political structure to execute implementation therefore the PC has the power and decision making in all aspects of the project implementation. Based on this structure, the function of each organization in the partnership, and the role of each person in the partner organization has been already established prior to WOBA. The stability of the partnership structure and its members' role in the implementation contribute to the achieving WASH targets in an effective way. A possible deviation is the WU with staff turnover resulting in some missed connection in the networks and missing important knowledge about WOBA. In this regard, ongoing training at the WU level especially at the village level is important.

EMW should continue to engage with the partners institutions to agree on outcome indicators to be tracked and reported by partners and synthesized by EMW and feedback to partners.

To promote partners' capacity building, more specific training and support for example in climate change, adaption measures, gender equality and social inclusion should be provided based on their desires and needs. Regular evaluation of impacts of these trainings should be built in WOBA's capacity building activities by EWM in collaboration with all partners in the partnership structure.

For the full report of the Mid-Term Review, please email Dr Lien Pham at lien.pham@eastmeetswest.org.au

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