

Australia-World Bank Group Strategic Partnership in Vietnam Phase Two (ABP2)

Mid Term Review Report
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The Mid Term Review was led by Beth Elson, an independent evaluator, supported by Karen Dunn. The views presented reflect the professional judgement of the Review Team and do not necessarily represent the views of DFAT or the World Bank Group, nor bind them to action.

Acronyms

ABP2	Australia-World Bank Group Strategic Partnership in Vietnam Phase 2
APEC	Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation
APR	Annual Program Review
CEMA	Committee for Ethnic Minority Affairs
CIEM	Central Institute for Economic Management
CGAP	Country Gender Action Plan, World Bank
CPF	Country Partnership Framework
CPTPP	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership
DFAT	Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Government
DNEI	National Economic Issues Department
DSI	Development Strategy Institute (of MPI)
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GESI	Gender Equality and Social Inclusion
GoV	Government of Vietnam
GSO	General Statistics Office of Vietnam
HCMA	Ho Chi Minh National Academy of Politics
IFC	International Finance Corporation
M&E	Monitoring and evaluation
MOIT	Ministry of Industry and Trade
MOJ	Ministry of Justice
MoLISA	Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs
MoNRE	Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment
MoT	Ministry of Transport
MPI	Ministry of Planning and Investment
MTR	Mid Term Review (of ABP2)
NDC	Nationally Determined Contributions (to emissions reduction)
NTP	National Target Program
OOG	Office of the Government (of Vietnam)
SEDP	Socio-Economic Development Plan
SEDS	Socio-Economic Development Strategy
T&C	Trade and Competitiveness Theme (ABP2)
TUS	Time Use Survey

Executive Summary

The Australia-World Bank Group Strategic Partnership in Vietnam Phase Two (ABP2) aims to share knowledge and strengthen policies and programs for selected development priorities for Vietnam, with a particular focus on gender equality. The Program engages the Government of Vietnam (GoV) through policy dialogues, analytical work, knowledge-sharing forums, and capacity building. The Program has six Themes: (1) investment in ethnic minorities, (2) gender equality and women's economic empowerment, (3) climate-resilient development in the Mekong Delta, (4) trade and competitiveness, (5) efficient and sustainable transport, and (6) moving the *Vietnam 2035 Report* from strategy to action. Gender and innovation are cross-cutting themes. With Australian funding of AUD 25 million from April 2017 to December 2021, ABP2 is operationalized through a single-donor programmatic trust fund at the World Bank in Vietnam. Conducted in May-June 2019, the ABP2 Mid Term Review (MTR) comprised a literature review, interviews with GoV counterparts, and discussions with program participants from Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the World Bank Group in Vietnam.

The MTR found that the ABP2 is performing well against all of the MTR criteria. The key findings are as follows for each of the criteria:

1. **Relevance:** Overall the Program is well aligned with the strategic objectives of the GoV, Australia, and the World Bank Group in Vietnam, and it has adapted extremely well to changes in the policy and operational context. Some concerns have arisen, however, about the continuing relevance of the ethnic minority work to Australia's evolving priorities.
2. **Effectiveness and efficiency:** The overall Program and all Themes are contributing to the achievement of their intended objectives and making efficient use of resources. While progress varies within and across Themes, the cases of relatively slow progress reflect dedication to capacity building, relationship building, and responsiveness to the changing context.
3. **Gender equality:** The ABP2 approach to gender equality—deploying both vertical and horizontal programming and a combination of analysis, capacity building, and program preparation support—has been highly successful, providing a valuable model for programs in other countries and contexts.
4. **Sustainability:** The prospects for sustainability are good. Demand-driven programming, capacity building, and alignment with the *Vietnam 2035 Report* have generated strong GoV ownership, and the ABP2's analytical and knowledge-sharing work has begun contributing to policy changes that can be expected to have lasting impact.
5. **M&E:** The program logic remains valid. The M&E system provides effective quantitative measurement of results, which was sufficient for the first half of the Program. M&E information is used well for management, accountability, and responsiveness to external changes.
6. **Impact:** The ABP2 and all Themes are showing strong potential to produce positive impacts.
7. **Risk management:** The Program monitors and manages risks well and faces no significant risks. Areas of potential risk include “scope creep” and upcoming personnel transitions, both of which the Program is well prepared to handle.
8. **Program management and implementation:** The Program's governance structure is effective and efficient. The overall quality of partnership is very high, stemming from a mix of circumstances and good planning, the governance structure, and the personalities of individual participants.

Partnership workshops contributed to the partners' understanding of each other's processes and to improvements in efficiency. Some issues of partnership communication arose at the technical level, however, and questions arose about whether the funding mechanism enables contributions of the International Finance Corporation (IFC) to the Program's best advantage. The Program's implementation rate and initiatives for communication/visibility are fully satisfactory.

The areas where the ABP2 appears most likely to contribute to impact-level changes are as follows:

1. Through its support for the development of the GoV's **medium- and long-term development strategies**, the ABP2 is positioned for positive impact on Vietnam's ability to avoid the middle-income trap and reach its goals for becoming a high-income country.
2. ABP2 research influenced the GoV's decision to join the **Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP)**, which can be expected to contribute directly to economic growth and represents a new GoV commitment to accelerating reforms.
3. The ABP2's participatory approach to research on **ethnic minority development** generated a strong sense of GoV ownership and a solid evidence base for policy making, which could in turn contribute to long-term economic stability and poverty eradication.
4. The ABP2 informed the GoV's decision to incorporate gender issues in **Resolution 1/2018** and to mainstream gender in future versions of Resolution 1, which guides implementation of the Socio-Economic Development Plan each year.
5. A solidified relationship with the National Assembly is likely to facilitate the ABP2's influence on **gender in legislation**, and the decision of GoV training institutes to incorporate **ABP2 courses on gender equality** into their curricula holds the promise of changing mindsets over the long term. Moreover, the ABP2 Gender Theme has become a model for comprehensive gender programming, influencing **the way the World Bank works** in Vietnam and regionally.
6. By supporting an all-of-Government approach to regional planning in the **Mekong Delta**, the ABP2 is influencing institutional development and ways of thinking. Mekong Delta Conferences have brought high-level attention, led by the Prime Minister, to Vietnam's climate change challenges.
7. Analytical work and consultations on **trucking and inland waterways** have mobilized the Ministry of Transport to pursue follow-up action, signaling that impact-level changes in mindsets, policies, and investments may be on the horizon.

The findings of the MTR led to the following recommendations:

1. **Ensure follow-up to analytical work and provide for continuity of policy support.** The Program should ensure that analytical work identifies areas where supplementary support is likely to be needed for results beyond the adoption of a policy or law. The Program should also design analytical work with measures to track and facilitate its use and to identify partners to champion any needed follow-up, including advocacy for recommended reforms. DFAT and the World Bank should explore the extent to which such advocacy falls within and beyond the Program's scope. The Results Framework should incorporate indicators on whether policy studies identify follow-up actions and responsible parties. To build on reform momentum and avoid adverse effects of abrupt declines in policy support, the Program should seek to ensure smooth transitions when funding ends. This may mean additional ABP2 funding, a transition period to enable the GoV to continue the reform process independently, policy support under an ABP3, and/or coordination with other partners and Australia's bilateral programs.

2. **Strengthen qualitative assessment of results.** For impact measurement, the Program should explore tools to track the complex variables inherent in governance reform processes, such as the Qualitative Impact Protocol (QuIP). As an immediate step toward qualitatively assessing results, the Secretariat could ask each Theme to identify at least one success area—or one success area and one area of stalled progress—from which case studies could be developed and consolidated into an overarching story that illustrates what results ABP2 achieved, how they were achieved, and how they connect with the GoV’s long-term development vision. The Results Framework could incorporate indicators on the completion of these case studies/stories and an assessment of how well they are shared internally and externally.
3. **Consider incorporating social inclusion more broadly.** If an ABP3 is pursued, DFAT and the World Bank Group could consider designing the Gender Theme to encompass social inclusion more broadly. If this could be done without dampening the Program’s gender equality impact, it could provide an avenue for addressing the inclusion of people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and other excluded groups while enhancing consistency with DFAT’s gender strategy.
4. **Continue dialogue on the relevance of the Ethnic Minority Theme.** If an ABP3 is pursued, the MTR Team recommends that the partners take into account both the nature of Australia’s evolving priorities and the significance of ethnic minority development for Vietnam’s long-term stability and economic growth. If the Gender Theme were broadened to encompass social inclusion, the partners could incorporate some ethnic minority work into that Theme.
5. **Expand the partnership workshop and monitor the Partnership Success Indicators (PSIs).** The partners should consider expanding the scope of the next partnership workshop to address issues of the Program’s substance and to enhance cross-thematic learning. Breakout sessions by Theme would be useful, followed by a plenary session for sharing lessons learned. To ensure that all participants are onboard with the workshop outcomes, the partnership broker’s report could be shared with Theme Coordinators for comment before it is finalized. The Secretariat should qualitatively monitor the overarching PSI, as envisioned in the Operations Manual, and actively facilitate the timely resolution of disagreements. Input on the PSIs could be solicited from Theme Coordinators prior to the partnership workshops and the finalization of Annual and Final Reports.
6. **Remain vigilant to the potential for “scope creep.”** The ABP2 should pursue new interventions only if they maintain the Program’s strategic focus, reflect shared priorities and client demand, and address areas where the World Bank Group has funding needs and comparative advantage.
7. **Assess the funding mechanism vis-à-vis the IFC.** The partners should consider opportunities for the IFC to add more value. If a World Bank *Group* partnership is pursued in an ABP3, all partners should reconsider and agree on the desired role of the IFC and design the program accordingly.
8. **Explore opportunities to increase gender sensitivity in ABP2 events.** The Secretariat should explore opportunities to systematically include data, evidence, and discussion of gender equality in ABP2 events and assess the importance of increasing the proportion of women presenters.
9. **Encourage an expanded role for national experts.** Where relevant and feasible, the Program should encourage the GoV to identify national expertise and provide budgetary resources to expand the role of national experts as counterparts to ABP2-supported international experts.
10. **Explore opportunities to work with other countries in the region on Mekong Delta issues.** DFAT and the World Bank have the opportunity to identify investments with potential impact on climate-change resilience at the whole landscape level in the Mekong Delta.

1 INTRODUCTION

This document is the report of the Mid Term Review (MTR) of Phase 2 of the Australia-World Bank Group Strategic Partnership in Vietnam (ABP2). The Report's structure and contents follow the MTR Terms of Reference, the MTR plan, and an MTR report outline agreed by Australian and World Bank members of the ABP2 Secretariat.

1.1 ABP2 BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Australia and the World Bank are jointly supporting Vietnam's development agenda through the ABP2 Program. The Program's development objective is to share knowledge and strengthen policies and programs for selected development priorities for Vietnam, with a particular focus on gender equality. The Program has six Themes focused on (1) investment in ethnic minorities, (2) gender equality and women's economic empowerment, (3) climate-resilient development in the Mekong Delta, (4) trade and competitiveness, (5) efficient and sustainable transport, and (6) moving the *Vietnam 2035 Report* from strategy to action. Gender and innovation are cross-cutting themes. The ABP2 approach is to engage with the Government of Vietnam (GoV) through policy dialogues, analytical work, knowledge-sharing forums, and capacity building programs. With Australian funding of AUD 25 million, from April 2017 to December 2021, ABP2 is operationalized through a single-donor programmatic trust fund at the World Bank in Vietnam.

1.2 OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The objectives of the MTR were (1) to independently assess ABP2's effectiveness and efficiency in achieving the Program objectives; and (2) based on the assessment of findings and analysis of the changing context, to offer recommendations for program improvement.

The research method comprised the following four components: (1) literature review; (2) meetings and discussions with stakeholders selected by the ABP2 Secretariat, which included at least one GoV counterpart for each Theme; (3) semi-structured interviews, including a deep dive into at least one activity per Theme with program participants of the Australian Government's Department for Foreign Affairs (DFAT) and the World Bank Group; and (4) discussions with selected program management team members to reflect on the issues emerging from the MTR, including a joint debriefing with senior DFAT and World Bank Group representatives on preliminary findings.

The MTR uses critical case sampling, which permits logical generalization and maximum application of information, i.e., if it is true in this case, it is likely to be true in other cases. The literature review did not uncover any cases that were outliers. Issues that arose during interviews are highlighted in section 2 of this Report (Assessment of ABP2 Performance) and were raised during the joint DFAT-World Bank Group debriefing.

1.3 OVERALL FINDING

A performance indicator for the Program, set forth in the ABP2 Operations Manual, is "The ABP2 Mid Term Review rates the program on track in terms of progress towards achieving its objectives, measured as yes/no." The MTR Team assesses the answer to this question to be "yes"—for the Program as a whole and for all eight of the evaluation criteria: relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, gender equality, impact, sustainability, M&E and risk management.

1.4 LIMITATIONS

As noted in the MTR Plan, triangulation of data collection methods is intended to strengthen confidence in the findings. In the event the MTR Team was unable to meet more than one GoV counterpart within a Theme, and/or felt they did not have enough material to make a judgement, this was raised with both DFAT and the World Bank Group during the in-country mission. The assessments of the MTR Team are based on the literature review and a series of interviews and meetings held during an eight-working-day mission in Hanoi. Given the scope of the Program and the timeframe allotted for the MTR, it was not possible to cover all Program components in detail; hence the use of the critical case sampling method described above and in the MTR Plan. Moreover, the MTR Team relies on the accuracy of the material in the literature review and the statements made by interviewees, who were selected by the ABP2 Secretariat. These have been triangulated to the extent possible.

2 ASSESSMENT OF ABP2 PERFORMANCE

2.1 RELEVANCE

Overall the Program is very well aligned with the strategic objectives of the GoV, Australia, and the World Bank Group in Vietnam, and it has adapted extremely well to changes in the policy and operational context. The following subsections provide supporting evidence.

2.1.1 Alignment of Objectives and Design with the Partners' Strategic Objectives

ABP2 was designed on the basis of shared strategic objectives among the GoV, DFAT, and the World Bank Group in Vietnam. All of the Themes remain solidly within the strategic priorities of the World Bank Group in Vietnam, whose Country Partnership Framework is in turn fully aligned with the GoV's ten-year Socio-Economic Development Strategy (SEDS) and five-year Socio-Economic Development Plan (SEDP). Overall the program also remains within Australia's strategic priorities. It has been at the center of DFAT's transition toward an economic partnership between the two countries.¹ Australia is moving "away from the traditional donor-recipient relationship towards ... knowledge-based assistance designed to support policy reform, build institutional capacity and raise the quality of national development spending" in Vietnam and other middle-income countries of Asia.² This transition places Australia's emerging priorities squarely within the scope of ABP2.

The GoV officials interviewed for the MTR confirmed that ABP2 priorities originate with their Government. The Program's approach of engaging in regular dialogue with the GoV and tailoring its support to client demand gives every indication of keeping the partnership in alignment with evolving Government thinking. Moreover, the *Vietnam 2035 Report*, which is widely accepted as a blueprint for Vietnam's long-term development, underpins all of ABP2's priority areas and activities.³ Over the past two years, the GoV has intensified the priority it places in a number of areas where ABP2 is active, including private sector development and participation, innovation, social protection reforms, and regional integration.⁴

¹ DFAT (2019), Annual Quality Check for ABP2 (covering 2018).

² DFAT Office of Development Effectiveness (2018), Investing in Regional Prosperity: Positioning the Aid Program to Support Australia's Economic Partnership in Asia.

³ GoV and the World Bank prepared the *Vietnam 2035 Report* in 2016 with partial support from Australia.

⁴ See World Bank Group (2019), Performance and Learning Review of the Country Partnership Framework for FY18-22.

The Australian Ambassador recently acknowledged the importance of all ABP2 Themes but said the Ethnic Minorities Theme was difficult to align with Australia’s evolving priorities.⁵ This concern was confirmed during MTR interviews, though some interviewees also highlighted that the concentration of poverty among ethnic minorities, together with their primary location in border areas, has critical implications for economic growth and stability in Vietnam. The MTR Team finds both perspectives valid and suggests that there may be opportunities to strengthen alignment with the partners’ priorities by consolidating some of the work on ethnic minorities and gender equality if a third phase of the partnership (ABP3) is pursued. DFAT’s current strategy for gender equality recognizes the significant crossover between gender equality and social inclusion, whereby marginalization based on ethnicity or location reinforces disadvantage caused by gender. One of the objectives of the World Bank Group in Vietnam is expected to be reformulated to more broadly address the welfare and development of ethnic minorities, women, and vulnerable groups.⁶

2.1.2 Program Adaptation to Changes in Policy or Operational Context

The Program has adapted to changes in the policy and operational context extremely well. For example, after the change of Government following the 2016 Party Congress, the VN2035 Theme supported the new Government’s preparation and launch, in 2018, of its medium-term Vietnam Economic Policy Framework (*Vinanomics*), which consolidated national commitment to the reform agenda in the *Vietnam 2035 Report*. The Theme has responded to the GoV’s demand for support on e-Government, development of the new Science, Technology and Innovation Strategy, and analytical work to inform the next SEDS and SEDP. The Trade & Competitiveness Theme provided the GoV with just-in-time analytical work on the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and implications of the international trade war. Based on earlier analyses and training and dialog with select National Assembly members, the Gender Theme responded to the National Assembly’s request for 300 copies of their policy paper on gender in the Labor Code for review during deliberations on revising the Code.

2.2 EFFECTIVENESS

Overall the Program and all Themes are contributing to the achievement of their intended objectives. As one would expect, progress within and across Themes varies. The subsections below provide examples to illustrate the effectiveness of the Ethnic Minorities, Mekong Delta, Trade & Competitiveness, Transport, and VN2035 Themes and innovation as a cross-cutting theme. The effectiveness of the Gender Theme and the Program’s work on gender as a cross-cutting theme is discussed in a separate section.

Cross-thematic engagement, which is likely to enhance effectiveness of the Program as a whole, is taking place among some of the Themes. For example, the Transport Theme has links with the Trade & Competitiveness and Mekong Delta Themes on issues of connectivity. The Ethnic Minorities Theme’s work on social protection is linked with the VN2035 Theme’s work on e-Government. The innovation component of the VN2035 Theme reported close work with the Trade & Competitiveness Theme in regard to firm competitiveness and FDI-domestic firm linkages. In general, however, **cross-thematic fertilization appears to be limited**, both between DFAT and the World Bank and internally within them. This reflects the intense drive each of the Themes has made during the first half of the program to get their activities up and running.

⁵ Minutes of the March 2019 ABP2 Steering Committee meeting.

⁶ World Bank Group (2019), Performance and Learning Review of the Country Partnership Framework for the Socialist Republic of Vietnam for the Period FY19-FY22.

2.2.1 Ethnic Minorities Theme

The development objective of the Ethnic Minorities Theme is *to share knowledge and to inform and influence policies and programs on poverty reduction to more effectively target the needs of the diverse ethnic minority groups, particularly women and youth*. The Theme has three components: (i) using new ethnic minority data to enable better tailoring of policies and programs to Vietnam's diverse ethnic minority groups; (ii) targeting ethnic minority women and youth in National Target Program (NTP) livelihood investments through the use of value chain analysis; and (iii) expanding understanding of the drivers of ethnic minority access to and use of social assistance programs and piloting interventions to address constraints, especially for women and youth.

Since poverty in Vietnam is concentrated among ethnic minorities, focusing on these groups is an effective strategy for poverty reduction. Accordingly, GoV participants in the MTR praised ABP2 for devoting a Theme to these groups.

ABP2-supported research and analytical work has explored whether and how different ethnic minority groups can rise out of poverty. Time was invested in training CEMA staff on research theories and methodologies, and the staff subsequently conducted the research alongside experts brought in by the ABP2. The CEMA participants in the MTR reported that the training improved their staff's research skills and expressed confidence that the research provided an evidence base upon which they could influence policies that would in turn be appropriate and effective. The report arising from this research, *Drivers of Socio-Economic Development Among Ethnic Minority Groups in Vietnam*, was well-received by the GoV.⁷ It was particularly timely as the GoV is preparing a master plan for investment in the remote areas of the country where ethnic minorities live. The World Bank is linking this work to investments in transport and infrastructure. These observations indicate that ABP2 is influencing both the GoV and the World Bank to approach the challenges facing ethnic minorities in a more cohesive way.

The ABP2-supported diagnostic study of ethnic minority access to and use of social assistance is designed to provide practical policy recommendations, especially for reaching women and youth. The GoV has an ambitious plan to provide comprehensive social protection services electronically. In preparation, the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MoLISA) is conducting a trial in two provinces, one focusing on e-registration and the other on e-payments. ABP2 has provided significant support to this effort, including technical consultants and communications experts. As e-Government for social protection is a new area for Vietnam, GoV counterparts acknowledged the need for technical assistance to help achieve their vision. They expressed appreciation for a recent ABP2-supported study trip that enabled GoV officials to learn from Australia's experience with advanced e-Government systems, along with hopes for this type of support to continue.

The Theme's work on livelihoods includes support for a Mid Term Review of the National Target Program on Poverty Reduction and a value-chains ideas contest, which are intended to enable support for promising new enterprises, NTP capacity building, and the identification of policy lessons. According to the ABP2 Annual Report for 2018, this work has contributed to high-level commitment to integrating the value-chain approach into the production-related activities and approaches of national programs and policies. Different views arose during the MTR among DFAT and World Bank participants regarding the conception and execution of the value chain contest. The MTR Team was

⁷ For example, the Minister-Chairman of CEMA said the research was "a valuable source of reference for our policy formulation process," according to the World Bank News Release "New World Bank study sheds light on drivers of socio-economic development of ethnic groups in Vietnam."

not able to meet with GoV counterparts working on this component to fully triangulate the evidence; based on the literature review and discussions with the DFAT and World Bank Secretariat, the MTR Team assesses this component to be on track for effectiveness.

2.2.2 Mekong Delta Theme

The Mekong Delta Theme—Advancing Climate Resilient Development: Inclusive, Innovative, Integrated—is the only ABP2 Theme with a geographic focus. The Mekong Delta is a complex region in which multiple ministries, levels of government, and development partners are involved in the development process. The Theme’s development objective is *to strengthen regional planning and coordination and improve knowledge and decisions on climate-resilient infrastructures and livelihoods in the Mekong Delta*. Its three components are as follows: (i) support for regional planning and coordination; (ii) enhancing spatial analytics for climate-resilient investments; and (iii) strengthening multi-stakeholder capacity for adapting agriculture, aquaculture and horticulture livelihoods.

Prime Ministerial Resolution 120 on climate resilient and sustainable development of the Mekong Delta resulted from the ABP2-supported Mekong Delta Conference of 2017, which the Prime Minister chaired. The Theme’s work aims to inform the implementation of the strategy outlined in Resolution 120. After a slow start to activities following the Conference, the Theme is now making good progress, especially in regard to regional planning and coordination. The Mekong Delta Conference of 2019, also chaired by the Prime Minister, provided an opportunity for the ministries involved in implementing Resolution 120 to report on progress.

The Theme’s approach to supporting regional planning and coordination involves convening and engaging with stakeholders and brokering relationships in a careful and systematic manner that is inherently slow but necessary for effectiveness. GoV counterparts expressed appreciation for the Theme’s convening role (and the World Bank’s support for the multi-partner Mekong Delta Working Group), its methodical approach, and its enthusiasm and productivity. ABP2-supported analytical work on the options for a coordinating mechanism enabled counterparts in the Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) to make an informed recommendation to the Minister. The ABP2 team explored three options with the MPI, setting out the advantages and disadvantages of each. The result was MPI counterparts’ support for the establishment of a regional coordination council, even though this would mean relinquishing some of their authority. ABP2 support has also increased MPI’s capacity, giving them confidence that this is the right moment for the proposed change. The Theme’s approach thus holds the promise of significant impact in emboldening reform-minded officials to introduce changes in governance structures.

Several discussions during the MTR mission pointed to the potential value of further DFAT engagement in the Mekong Delta. The World Bank’s ABP2 Mekong Delta team expressed the wish to connect more with DFAT’s regional and global experience. Through ABP2, a recent mission on the World Bank’s Mekong Delta investment loan identified two Australian water experts who provided valuable technical expertise and brought in new thinking. A GoV counterpart expressed concern that many of the challenges to sustainable development that Vietnam faces in the Mekong Delta stem from the use of land, water, and infrastructure in upstream countries, requiring improved cooperation among countries of the Delta. This suggests that more could be done to connect DFAT’s investments to the challenges of the Mekong Delta and the Resolution 120 agenda.

2.2.3 Trade & Competitiveness Theme

The development objective of the Trade & Competitiveness Theme is *to share knowledge and strengthen policies and programs in order to leverage global integration for inclusive growth and job*

creation in Vietnam. The Theme has two components: (i) promoting trade facilitation and international integration; and (ii) strengthening private sector participation in global value chains.

GoV counterparts highlighted two areas of notable support concerning the strengthening of trade logistics and connectivity to facilitate trade: the annual Vietnam Logistics Forum, which serves as a high-level platform for advocacy, and implementation of Vietnam's National Logistics Action Plan 2016-2020. Analytical support has helped GoV counterparts to look at logistics in a more systematic way, and study tours and international trade promotion delegations have enabled Vietnamese logistics stakeholders—from the GoV and the private sector—to learn from practices in other countries. The Theme's approach capitalizes on the eagerness of GoV officials for exposure to international experiences and new ways of thinking for adaptation to the local context. This enhances its prospects of influencing positive change.

Another encouraging example of effectiveness is the timely analytical work and consultations that the Theme has supported. During the MTR, GoV counterparts stated unequivocally that this work contributed to Vietnam's decision to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) in 2018. The ABP2 helped the GoV to identify the consequences and policy implications of joining the CPTPP, which was especially important and timely after the United States pulled out of the process. The Ministry of Justice used the *Legal Review and Gap Assessment for CPTPP Implementation* and *Economic and Distributional Impacts of the CPTPP* in preparing its submission to the National Assembly for ratification. The gap analysis was a first step, with results leading to a roadmap for legal reform that the National Assembly adopted. The technical assistance team included a professor from the University of Melbourne, whose contributions represented an effective use of Australian expertise.

The Theme's analytical work has engaged both international and national experts. Some GoV counterparts expressed the wish for investment in more time for national experts to complement the work of international experts, especially in regard to legal analysis, given the complexity of the national legal context.

2.2.4 Transport Theme

The development objective of the Transport Theme is *to share knowledge and to strengthen development policies and programs for efficiency, sustainability, and connectivity of transport infrastructure and services, with a particular focus on gender equality.* The Transport Theme is supporting Vietnam's efforts to improve the efficiency and competitiveness of transport and logistics, to ensure environmental and social sustainability of transport development, and to strengthen multimodal connectivity.

There are strong indications that the Theme's advisory work on transport and logistics is contributing to measures for improved efficiency and competitiveness. Preliminary findings from studies on strengthening Vietnam's trucking sector for lower logistics costs and GHG emissions and on sustainable development of inland waterways transport were discussed in high-level forums, and the Minister of Transport attended their launch, enhancing the likelihood that the work will influence policy change. Based on the Theme's analytical work on both trucking sector and climate change, the GoV has requested support in revising the Law on Road Traffic.

The only GoV counterparts of the Transport Theme with whom the MTR Team was able to meet were officials of the Vietnam Inland Waterways Administration. They were involved with the inland waterways study, which focused on regulatory, institutional, and funding frameworks. They highlighted the high caliber of local and international experts and the value of a findings review seminar that was well attended by a range of key stakeholders who collectively strengthened the

report. They appreciated the Program's regular sharing of research updates with the Ministry. They were less satisfied with the report's coverage of funding issues and said they would welcome additional support for resource mobilization.

Recent reports indicate that ABP2-supported analysis and consultation have influenced the transport sector's mitigation and adaptation targets. Mitigation measures proposed in the Program's analytical work are expected to provide the basis for a Ministry of Transport decree on climate change mitigation and to be incorporated into Vietnam's updated Nationally Determined Contributions (NDC) to climate change under its commitment to the Paris Agreement.

During the MTR mission, the World Bank and DFAT transport teams reconfirmed their commitment to capitalize on the successful launch of high-profile reports and agreed to discuss further ways of ensuring that policy recommendations can be adopted and implemented by Vietnamese counterparts. DFAT's transport team expressed the desire for more interaction between the World Bank and Aus4Transport, including World Bank participation in their quarterly working groups. This would present an opportunity for greater coordination between the World Bank and DFAT's many transport investments.

2.2.5 VN2035 Theme: Moving the *Vietnam 2035 Report* from Strategy to Action

The VN2035 Theme's development objective is *to share knowledge and to strengthen policies and programs in order to facilitate the realization of the Vietnam 2035 vision by informing the design, implementation, and monitoring of critical structural reforms*. The *Vietnam 2035 Report*, a joint product of the GoV and the World Bank prepared with partial funding from Australia, provides a long-term vision for Vietnam to become a modern and industrialized nation and a prosperous, creative, equitable, and democratic society. The implementation of this substantive and relevant blueprint for change is the focus of the VN2035 Theme, which can therefore be considered the backbone of the ABP2.

Indications of the Theme's effectiveness, from the literature review and all stakeholders during the MTR process, were overwhelmingly positive, and strong GoV ownership of the *Report* and its recommendations was evident. One of the Theme's most significant achievements was its support to the MPI in drafting the Vietnam Economic Policy Framework (*Vinanomics*), which the Prime Minister launched in early 2019. Building upon the concepts in the *Vietnam 2035 Report*, *Vinanomics* is aimed at the business community, international organizations, and the general public. It provides an economic policy framework for the medium term, focusing on private sector development, human resource development, innovation, establishing modern and integrated infrastructure, and making the state administration effective and efficient. The former Deputy Chair of the Australian Government's Productivity Commission provided valuable technical input to the Framework.

GoV counterparts regard the Theme's support as high-quality, timely, and responsive, reflecting both an understanding of the Vietnam context and relevant international experience. Examples provided to the MTR Team included the Theme's support for preparation of the Public Investment Law under a tight deadline and the identification of a realistic GDP target for the new growth model.

The VN2035 Theme has initiated two new components, one on e-Government and one on innovation, both of which are connected with recommendations in the *Vietnam 2035 Report*. The e-Government component will support the Office of the Government with the design and initial implementation of Vietnam's e-Government program for 2018-2020 and toward 2025. It is currently supporting the development of an e-architecture framework to facilitate administrative reform measures. This work originated with a GoV request to Australia in recognition of the country's reputation as an e-Government reform champion. Serving as an effective broker for the relationship between the Office

of the Government and the Ministry of Information and Communications was an early success of this component, enabling the establishment of a working group. ABP2 has supported study tours to expose Vietnamese officials to the different approaches of countries with advanced e-Government systems, and the GoV has found these tours valuable. The e-Government component promotes gender equality in e-services, providing a solid example of the operationalization of gender equality and innovation as cross-cutting themes.

The new innovation component responds to a request from the Ministry of Science and Technology for support in formulating Vietnam's Science, Technology and Innovation (STI) Strategy for 2021-2030 and a roadmap for its implementation. The STI Strategy will seek to enhance productivity and competitiveness by strengthening the policies, markets, institutions, and individuals—and the links among them—that constitute the national innovation system. The Program has completed analytical work and supported several high-level consultations (e.g., on policies and incentives for enterprise-driven innovation) to inform the preparation of the first phase of the STI Strategy and the incorporation of STI as priorities for medium-term growth in the SEDP and SEDS.

The VN2035 and Gender Themes jointly informed the 2018 version of Government Resolution 1, which guides the implementation of the SEDP during the year. Whereas the draft of Resolution 1/2018 contained no reference to gender, the final version addresses implementation of the National Action Program on Gender Equality and the Anti-Domestic Violence Program and makes a commitment to mainstreaming gender equality in future versions of Resolution 1.

2.2.6 Innovation as a Cross-Cutting Theme

The MTR Review confirmed the finding in DFAT's 2018 Partner Performance Assessment that all ABP2 Themes are pursuing innovative approaches and practices. New activities are successfully responding to the emerging priorities of both Australia and GoV, including those under the new e-Government and innovation components. An example of innovation in the Program is its support to the GoV for piloting electronic social assistance registration and payments systems to improve delivery to ethnic minorities, elderly, poor, and other disadvantaged groups. Several innovative capacity building initiatives are also underway, such as the e-learning course for staff of key ministries and the National Assembly on promoting gender equality. Moreover, the M&E system is innovative in its focus on knowledge sharing and policy development without prescribing specific policies, laws, or research topics, which enables timely adjustments.

2.3 GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

The ABP2 approach to gender equality—deploying both vertical and horizontal programming and a combination of analysis, capacity building, and support in the preparation stage—has been highly successful, providing a valuable model for programs in other countries and contexts.

The Gender Theme's development objective is *to share knowledge and strengthen policies and programs that address emerging challenges to women's economic empowerment*. Work under this Theme is structured under three components: (i) data and evidence-based analysis on emerging challenges to gender equality; (ii) stakeholder ability to advocate for policies and initiatives that address emerging challenges to women's economic empowerment; and (iii) incorporation of innovative approaches and recommendations to address challenges to gender equality in World Bank engagements.

Indications of the Gender Theme's effectiveness, from the literature review and all stakeholders during the MTR process, were overwhelmingly positive. For example, more than 1,600 GoV officials have been assigned to receive the ABP2 training provided to HCMA. Key MoLISA staff, National

Assembly staff, and National Assembly members are receiving training on how to assess laws through a gender lens. MoLISA's training institute is incorporating the ABP2 gender training modules into its own curriculum, with the expectation of reaching about 10,000 commune officers and 2,000 provincial and district officials.

The Theme actively seeks to collaborate and communicate transparently with all GoV stakeholders. During the MTR, one GoV counterpart expressed the view that better coordination among agencies within MoLISA could strengthen the impact of the gender training. Responsibility for addressing this potential coordination issue appears to lie with the GoV and to fall beyond the scope of the ABP2.

The recent launch of the ABP2-supported policy note on the Labor Code is an example of the translation of the Gender Theme's analytical work into advocacy. The policy note stemmed from two years of work with the GoV on how to review laws with a gender lens. Based on earlier analyses, training, and dialogue with select National Assembly members, the Gender Theme responded to the National Assembly's request for 300 copies of the policy paper for National Assembly members' review during their deliberations on revising the Labor Code.

GoV and DFAT partners confirmed that the World Bank's longstanding and trusting relationship with the GoV enables the Gender Theme to raise sensitive issues and pursue related interventions. An example is the recently approved time-use survey, which will quantify disparities in how men's and women's time is allocated across daily tasks, including home care responsibilities and paid work. Moreover, the World Bank is uniquely positioned to convey economic arguments for gender equality, which resonate with the GoV.

The ABP2 has made substantial progress in integrating gender equality considerations across Themes. Notable results have included a gender review of World Bank lending operations, the Trade & Competitiveness Theme's knowledge product on the gender implications of the CPTPP, and the Transport Theme's support for a gender policy dialogue with the Ministry of Transport and an analysis of female employment in transport. During the MTR, some partners expressed the view that ABP2 events (beyond those of the Gender Theme) could more systematically include data, evidence, and discussion of gender equality and that there might be ways to expand the proportion of women presenters.

The Gender Theme has supported the development of the World Bank's Country Gender Action Plan (CGAP), which is now being finalized. The CGAP will identify priority gender gaps and include a bolder strategy for policy, analytical, and capacity work to help World Bank teams to integrate gender into their work.

The ABP2's comprehensive model of programming for gender equality—structuring the Program with gender equality as both a core and cross-cutting theme and providing a mix of support for analysis, capacity building, and program preparation—is influencing gender programming in World Bank investments beyond ABP2 and beyond Vietnam. At the APEC Women and the Economy Forum in 2017, the World Bank's Vice President for the East Asia and Pacific Region highlighted ABP2 as a good example of work with governments to assess new laws and policies through a gender lens. Uptake of the comprehensive model has been seen in Cambodia, Myanmar, Indonesia, and the South Pacific region.

2.4 SUSTAINABILITY

Overall, the ABP2 shows strong promise of leading to sustainable results. Demand-driven programming and capacity building have generated a strong sense of GoV ownership, and some of the Program's analytical and knowledge-sharing work has begun contributing to policy changes that

can be expected to have long-term influence. The Program could further enhance sustainability by ensuring that follow-up measures are in place for analytical work and by attending to concerns about the continuity of policy support. This section provides examples in support of these conclusions.

During the MTR mission, GoV counterparts confirmed that ABP2 activities are built around their priorities, and many examples of demand-driven programming arose, as noted in the Effectiveness section above. A prime example of capacity building leading to ownership is the Ethnic Minority Theme's support for CEMA staff to use new research skills for analytical work. GoV counterparts recognize that it would have been quicker and easier to commission a report from a technical expert. The participatory approach taken by the ABP2 led to an internalization of the research results and policy recommendations that is conducive to lasting change. The Gender Theme's capacity building initiatives on gender equality are another example. In this case, the capacity building process itself has a vehicle for sustainability as the Program's curricula are being integrated into those of government institutes. Other salient examples include support for GoV's capacity to prevent and manage investor-state disputes and to conduct economic modelling of the impacts of trade agreements.

GoV ownership and the promise of sustainable results are also evident in the Mekong Delta Conferences of 2017 and 2019. The GoV led these Conferences, whereas development partners led the previous Mekong Delta Forums. In a joint statement on behalf of development partners at the 2019 Conference, the World Bank Country Director gave an overview what is necessary for the sustainability of further support to the Mekong Delta: "strong institutions, effective implementation, robust information, commitment to innovation, and involvement of all stakeholders." The ABP2 is well placed to help the GoV achieve these prerequisites.

The ABP2-supported studies and consultations that contributed to Vietnam's ratification of the CPTPP are highlights among the activities that can be expected to have sustainable results. A number of new and ongoing studies and consultations are heading in this direction, including those to inform the GoV's new SEDS and SEDP, those on the drivers of socio-economic development among ethnic minority groups, and those on trucking and inland waterways.

The Program could promote greater sustainability by designing analytical work with follow-up measures to track and facilitate its use and to clearly identify partners who will champion the follow-up. Many MTR participants, on all sides, have seen donor-supported studies "sit on shelves" (or websites) after completion rather than leading to action. Concerns were therefore raised about whether some of the analytical work supported by ABP2 could suffer a similar lack of traction. The World Bank—as a technical institution that aims to influence policy directions in an impartial, nonpolitical, and direct manner and does not engage in public advocacy—is not always the best or most appropriate partner for translating analytics into impact.

Continuity of policy support is likely to be important in the near future so that that today's experienced reformers remain involved through a critical time for institutionalizing recent and upcoming development strategies and policies. Some GoV counterparts observed that after the World Bank positively assessed the economic transition in the early 2000s, its policy support subsided, reform-minded officials left government service, and a reform slowdown followed. In contrast, early implementation of the recommendations in the *Vietnam 2035 Report* benefitted from the continuous engagement of GoV officials who worked on the *Report* and were then involved in preparing related Party and Government documents. These documents contributed to a renewed national emphasis on the private sector as the driving force of the economy, among other themes of the *Report*. Some counterparts are concerned that the long-term impact of current support for reform processes could suffer a fate similar to those of the early 2000s if there is a hiatus in policy support.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the opening of the World Bank office in Vietnam. Many GoV counterparts expressed appreciation during the MTR for the enduring partnership, which promotes national ownership and alignment with Vietnam’s priorities. The potential downside of longevity and close association is the risk of inducing a culture of dependency. MTR participants from DFAT, the World Bank, and the GoV observed that officials are more likely to feel like passive onlookers if technical assistance inhabits too many aspects of GoV operations and that vigilance is needed to ensure the Program continues focusing on the sharing of international experience and avoids getting drawn into activities that the GoV should do on its own.

2.5 MONITORING AND EVALUATION

This Section reviews the Program’s logic, assesses how effectively the M&E system measures progress toward objectives, and assesses how well the ABP2 uses M&E information for management and accountability. **The MTR Team found that the program logic remains valid. The M&E system is results-oriented and effectively allows for responsiveness to an inherently complex and evolving policy environment. It currently provides effective quantitative measurement of achievements. Qualitative assessments will become increasingly important during the remainder of program implementation. The ABP2 uses M&E information well for management and accountability. More regular monitoring of the Partnership Success Indicators would be useful.**

2.5.1 Review of Program Logic

The Joint Concept Note for ABP2 provides the Program’s development objective: *To share knowledge and to strengthen policies and programs for selected development priorities for Vietnam, with a particular focus on gender equality.* The monitoring and evaluation of progress toward this objective is primarily based on the Results Framework, which the partners jointly developed and agreed upon at the start of the program. The Outcome Indicators encompass the policies, laws, and development programs impacted, the high-level knowledge-exchange and dissemination events held, and the communication products issued. Intermediate Outcome Indicators reflect trainings and seminars held, the policy briefs and analytical work produced, and interventions for data collection and analysis.

Expected results are further elaborated in Theme-level results chains, which feed into the Results Framework. A review, consultation, and approval process underpinned the development of Concept Notes for each Theme, including each Theme-level development objective. Each Theme prepares, follows, and reports on an annual workplan connected to the expected results in its results chain. The partners have also agreed on a set of Partnership Success Indicators.

The M&E system is thus results-oriented. It offers a look into the depth and detail of progress at the thematic levels while enabling the aggregation of results across Themes for a view of progress at the overall program level. By focusing attention on knowledge sharing and policy development in areas of shared priority among GoV, DFAT, and the World Bank—without prescribing specific policies, laws, or research topics—the Results Framework gives the program the flexibility to make timely adjustments in response to Vietnam’s evolving needs and circumstances. In this sense, the M&E system is innovative.

The international discipline of M&E is yet to fully develop systems for measuring the contributions of advisory and analytical support, consensus building, and knowledge sharing to policy development. Distilling the results of this type of programming is inherently complex, can be politically sensitive, and requires deep knowledge of policy making processes, which vary by country. To the extent that it can successfully encompass these elements, the ABP2 M&E system could provide a model for other policy-oriented partnerships and interventions.

2.5.2 Effectiveness of the M&E System in Measuring Progress Toward Objectives

For Themes that are rapidly producing analytical work on specific topics and/or directly influencing current legal and policy changes, the M&E system has provided effective quantitative measurement of what they have achieved against what they agreed to do. This is the case for the Gender, Trade & Competitiveness, Transport, and VN2035 Themes.

Capturing the progress achieved under the other two Themes has been more challenging. The evidence base that CEMA has created under the Ethnic Minorities Theme, for example, can be expected to have significant policy impact in the second half of the program, but the Theme's approach of building the capacity of relatively inexperienced local researchers and ensuring deep and genuine national ownership of the results has taken a long time.⁸ In the Mekong Delta Theme, the level of effort demanded from the team and their counterparts has expanded significantly over the first half of the program as the need and political will for an all-of-Government approach came into play. The complexity and path-breaking nature of the Theme's work have led to what appear as delays under the current M&E system, though they may lead to good results in the medium- to long-term, as institutions develop and practitioners change their ways of thinking to accommodate links between regional and provincial planning processes. In both of these Themes, narratives about the process could provide valuable, practical lessons on development policy support.

In all cases, quantitative measurements provide only a piece of the story. As the program moves into its second half, the M&E system will need to evolve to better capture the influence of analytical work after it is produced and disseminated, qualitative assessments of impact, the learning that has taken place within and across the Themes, and the lessons that can be learned from successes, failures, and areas where progress has followed unexpectedly nonlinear paths. The second half of ABP2 will be a time for enhancing narrative across the Program and providing qualitative evidence of impact.

2.5.3 Assessment of the Use of M&E Information for Management and Accountability

The reporting structure for ABP2 involves three main reports: an annual progress report, this MTR, and a completion report. The initial structure included semi-annual progress reports. After the first year of implementation, the partners agreed to consolidate them into a single annual report. The annual report is produced at the end of the calendar year, after the World Bank's Annual Progress Review meetings and in time to provide input for Australia's annual Aid Quality Check. This streamlined reporting structure better accommodates both partners' needs and timetables.

The partners also refined the nature of the progress reporting, with the details of activities placed in annexes while the body of the report highlights results and areas of concern and provides examples to illustrate progress. The flexibility of the Results Framework, the program's thematic structure, and the focus on results in the reporting process effectively hold program implementers accountable for results rather than activities. A 'traffic light' system, introduced at DFAT's request, color-codes activities (which are presented by Theme) according to their degree of progress against expectations. This enables ready examination of progress and areas of delay or risk that may require additional management or oversight. Most of the ABP2 participants interviewed for the MTR expressed the view that reporting requirements are about right, at least in terms of quantitative reporting.

Information generated through the M&E process has maintained the program's overall focus while allowing management decisions based on each Theme's progress. For example, the M&E system

⁸ CEMA counterparts who met with the MTR Team strongly expressed this perspective. They appreciated the program's "bravery" in taking a participatory approach that "perfectly transferred" capacity to its researchers and led to a strong sense of national ownership.

confirmed that the VN2035 Theme had the capacity to respond to client demand with the absorption of new components on e-Government and innovation and that the Trade & Competitiveness Theme had the capacity to respond with critical just-in-time initiatives. An 'at-risk' rating in the traffic light led to additional management support for accelerating the Government's approval of the Recipient Executed Trust Fund for the Time Use Survey under the Gender Theme. Similarly, M&E information motivated efforts to accelerate the selection of a service provider for the value chain pilots under the Ethnic Minorities Theme. Signals of slow progress in the SOE reform component led to an agreement to seek new entry points.

The Partnership Success Indicators, which were adopted in 2018, provide an opportunity to monitor the effectiveness of communication on a more regular basis.

2.6 IMPACT

The ABP2 and all Themes are showing the potential to produce significant positive impact-level results. The realization of these impacts will depend in part on the ABP2's effectiveness in anticipating and coordinating follow-up action with the GoV during its second half of implementation, as discussed in the Sustainability section. This section identifies the positive impact-level changes that the ABP2 is likely to produce (directly or indirectly, intended or unintended).⁹ The MTR did not identify any areas where negative impacts should be anticipated. The section also highlights the challenges to measuring impacts in a policy-focused program and the need for new evaluation approaches during the Program's second half.

Based on the evidence available at the time of the MTR, the following are the main areas where the ABP2 is likely to contribute to impact-level changes:¹⁰

8. The ABP2 is clearly influencing the GoV's medium- and long-term development strategies (as set forth, for example, in the Vietnam Economic Policy Framework (*Vinanomics*), Vietnam's new economic growth model, and the forthcoming SEDS and SEDP). The analytical work and consultations supported by the VN 2035 Theme strongly position ABP2 for positive impact on Vietnam's ability to avoid the middle-income trap and reach its goals for becoming a high-income country.
9. The ABP2 contributed to the GoV's decision to join the CPTPP, which can be expected to contribute directly to economic growth through expanded trade. Moreover, joining the CPTPP represents a new GoV commitment to accelerating the reforms needed for sustainable development. Related work of the Trade & Competitiveness Theme is also likely to be expanding GoV capacity to analyze the impacts of future trade agreements.
10. The Ethnic Minority Theme's participatory approach to building the capacity of CEMA researchers and engaging them in analytical work has generated both a solid evidence base and a strong sense of GoV ownership of the research findings. As a result, the research is likely to positively influence upcoming policies and laws related to ethnic minority development, which in turn holds the promise of contributing to Vietnam's success in long-term economic stability and poverty eradication.

⁹ As one should expect at the mid-term point in a five-year program, the ABP2 has not been implemented long enough to have produced and measured impact-level changes. The MTR Report therefore focuses on impacts that are likely to be realized in the future.

¹⁰ Further details on most of these areas of impact can be found in the Effectiveness and Sustainability sections of this report.

11. The Gender Theme’s analyses, training, and dialogue led to the National Assembly’s review of the ABP2-supported policy paper on gender in the Labor Code during deliberations on revising the Code. This signals the solidification of a relationship with the National Assembly that is likely to facilitate further influence leading to impact. The Theme’s work is already showing promise of changing mindsets through its courses on gender equality, which GoV institutions are incorporating into their own curricula.
12. The ABP2 informed Government Resolution 1/2018, which addressed issues of gender equality and contained a commitment to mainstreaming gender in future versions. This annual resolution guides the implementation of the SEDP during the year. The recognition of gender issues as a priority at this level is a breakthrough with the potential for significant impact.
13. The Gender Theme is influencing the way the World Bank works both in Vietnam and regionally. Following the Theme’s support, other World Bank teams in Vietnam have begun actively identifying opportunities to integrate gender equality into their work, and the World Bank has begun using ABP2 regionally as a model for comprehensive gender programming.
14. The Mekong Delta Theme is responding to the political will for an all-of-Government approach to regional planning. This approach has the potential for substantial impact-level results as institutions develop and practitioners change their ways of thinking. The 2017 Mekong Delta Conference led to Prime Ministerial Resolution 120 on climate resilient and sustainable development which gained traction as the ministries involved in its implementation reported on progress at the 2019 Mekong Delta Conference.
15. The Transport Theme’s analytical work and consultations on trucking and inland waterways have mobilized the Ministry to pursue follow-up action, signaling that impact-level changes in mindsets, policies, and investments may be on the horizon.

These emerging impact-level results are intentional, though some have emerged since the Program was initially designed. The main external factor affecting likely impact is the long-term, trusting relationship the World Bank Group has established with the GoV, which provides a level of access and influence that would not be possible otherwise.

Like other development partners, the World Bank and DFAT are grappling with the challenge of finding the best ways to measure and report on the impact of policy development support. Development partners can, at best, share skills, knowledge, experience, and fresh perspectives that contribute to informed decision-making by Governments that are themselves fully responsible for their policies.¹¹ Often, the more successfully a program influences policy changes, the more important it is to hide the program’s footprints, as in most countries any suggestion that outsiders are influencing policy is likely to create resistance. Also, the complexity of policy processes makes it very difficult to identify the precise pathway that led to a particular change and to attribute the contributions of different actors.

The ABP2 has an opportunity and responsibility to advance learning in this area. As discussed in the M&E section, increasing attention to qualitative assessments is called for during the second half of ABP2 implementation. To control for interviewees’ tendency to endorse the Program out of affinity

¹¹ DFAT’s recent publication “Investing in Regional Prosperity” observes that “it is important not to overstate the level of influence that can be achieved as an external actor. Policy making is unpredictable and subject to many factors beyond Australia’s control.... [Australia] needs to be willing to take a low profile in helping national reformers to achieve their objectives.”

or gratitude, mechanisms may be needed to see through confirmation bias in assessments involving interviews with GoV counterparts.

2.7 EFFICIENCY

The Program is making highly efficient use of resources to achieve its objectives.¹²

The Program demonstrates a commitment to efficient governance and communication mechanisms, good value for money, and eliminating inefficiency and duplication. Australia's relatively modest grant funding is facilitating access to the World Bank's significant lending portfolio, staff resources, and other trust funds in Vietnam. The Secretariat teams are strong on both sides of the partnership, contributing to an efficient working relationship built on mutual respect. A combination of the personalities involved and the systems that the ABP2 has in place have enabled the Program to ensure that Australia, the GoV, and the World Bank are all appropriately engaged in decision-making without impeding efficiency. This is a substantial achievement, given that a high level of consultation among partners, while enhancing legitimacy and avoiding wrong turns, can entail trade-offs in efficiency by adding complexity and slowing down decision making.

Several streamlining measures have enhanced the efficiency of administrative processes during the first two years of implementation, and the Operations Manual was revised to institutionalize these improvements. As discussed in the M&E section above, a streamlined reporting structure better accommodates both partners' needs and timetables. Governance and review mechanisms have been combined, with DFAT Theme Coordinators participating in the World Bank's comprehensive internal Annual Program Review (APR) meetings. This has eliminated the need for separate ABP2 technical review meetings. New proposals and significant changes require approval by the Steering Committee, while day-to-day decisions are made by the Secretariat. Both DFAT and the World Bank reported that the trust fund model is fulfilling its intended function of enhancing efficiency in implementation, reducing administrative costs and overheads, and enabling flexibility and responsiveness.

The World Bank has systems in place for monitoring and reporting on expenditure by activity across the Themes, and the data can be readily accessed and analysed. The Program's M&E system enables the tracking of disbursement rates compared to expected expenditure. Robust systems and procedures are in place to monitor and manage value for money, for example through the APR meetings, which are chaired by the Country Director, and the peer review and design processes that are undertaken in consultation with DFAT for new activities.

2.8 RISK MANAGEMENT

The Program monitors and manages risks well and faces no significant risks in implementation, disbursement, or strategic focus.¹³ **Areas of potential risk include "scope creep" and upcoming personnel handovers, both of which the ABP2 Secretariat is well prepared to handle.**

Program participants at all levels of the partnership report that they regularly discuss risks and seek action to mitigate them. The World Bank executes most ABP2 activities, helping to reduce risk. DFAT has reported that the risk register is renewed and updated as required. The implementation challenges facing the program lie in areas affected by low government processing capacity,

¹² Many of the conclusions in this section are supported in findings of DFAT's most recent ABP2 Partner Performance Assessment and ABP2 Aid Quality Check.

¹³ The MTR Team agrees on this point with previous assessments, including those in the ABP2 Annual Progress Report for 2018 and DFAT's most recent ABP2 Partner Performance Assessment and ABP2 Aid Quality Check.

coordination issues, differences in perspective among government agencies, and low client demand. In the Themes where these issues are most relevant, management actions are being taken and, where needed, discussion has been elevated to Government leadership.

Two issues of potential risk arose during the MTR. The first was “scope creep” as the range of activities and expected results expands to meet new priorities of the partners and client demand. The Program has expanded during the first half of its implementation to include the VN2035 Theme, two new components under the VN2035 Theme, and new activities under several other Themes. Interviewees for the MTR confirmed that both new components and most of the new activities were demand-driven and well aligned with the program’s overall focus. Remaining disciplined on scope will be important given the likelihood of upcoming resource constraints. Any expansion would need to maintain strategic focus, reflect shared priorities and client demand, and focus in areas where the World Bank Group has both funding needs and comparative advantage. Partners expressed commitment to ensuring this.

The second area of potential risk discussed during the MTR involved upcoming personnel changes. During the next few months, the Australian Ambassador, the World Bank’s Portfolio and Operations Manager, and the World Bank’s Theme Coordinators for Transport and VN2035 are due for transition. In both the literature review and interviews, some partners identified the handovers as presenting a risk while others perceive them as matters for management attention that do not amount to risks *ex ante*. The handovers present an opportunity to reconfirm the Program’s priorities and partnership principles. Appropriate handover procedures and briefings on the ABP2 approach can help to ensure smooth transitions. DFAT intends to organize a third Partnership Health Check soon after the transitions take place to ensure a shared understanding of ABP2 objectives and approaches.

2.9 PROGRAM MANAGEMENT

2.9.1 Program Governance Arrangements

The Program’s governance structure is effective, efficient, and an important factor in the partnership’s success. Questions arose, however, about whether the funding mechanism enables contributions of the International Finance Corporation (IFC) to the Program’s best advantage.

The ABP2 operates at three levels of partnership: (1) the Steering Committee, co-chaired by the Australian Ambassador and the World Bank’s Country Director; (2) the Secretariat, which serves management and administrative functions with representatives from both DFAT and the World Bank; and (3) six pairs of Theme Coordinators (one from DFAT and one from the World Bank for each of the six Themes). The Program initially envisioned that the Steering Committee would meet twice yearly. During an April 2018 partnership workshop, participants agreed to hold the Steering Committee meetings only once a year and to limit their agendas to strategic issues, implementation highlights, high-risk areas, and any proposed high-level changes to the Program. The streamlined agenda was put into practice at the March 2019 Steering Committee meeting.

The literature on the ABP2 suggests that the governance structure is working well. Many of the ABP2 participants confirmed during the MTR that they consider its structure to be an important factor in the partnership’s success. Some referred specifically to the responsiveness and effectiveness of the Secretariat, which relieves other levels of the partnership from administrative burdens.

The MTR process identified one issue in regard to the governance structure that merits further consideration. ABP2 is designed as a partnership between DFAT and the World Bank Group, which includes the IFC. The IFC has an exclusive focus on private sector development and a long history in Vietnam and as a recipient of Australian aid programs. The IFC Senior Manager is a member of the

ABP2 Steering Committee. The World Bank country office serves as the main point of contact with DFAT, and IFC-managed activities are nested within the Trade & Competitiveness Theme.

The ABP2 was designed with the single point of entry to the World Bank Group in the interest of efficiency. The IFC explained that such an arrangement is uncommon and has created some difficulties, given the agencies' different finance, governance and M&E systems. Total allocations for IFC-managed activities, which are intended to reflect the needs of the Program and are not based on a set target, currently amount to less than 3 percent of the Program's total funding. There may be opportunities for the IFC to add more value to the Program in a variety of areas—such as corporate governance for local corporations, gender, and SOE reform—and to carry forward some of the recommendations in ABP2's analytical work related to the private sector, for example those related to agribusiness.

2.9.2 Partnership Quality

The overall quality of the partnership is very high. DFAT and the World Bank Group build upon each other's comparative advantages, they have a high quality of dialogue, and the GoV places a high value on the partnership. A mix of fortunate circumstance and good planning, the Program's governance structure, and the personalities and commitment of individual participants appears to account for the partnership's success. Partnership workshops contributed to the partners' understanding of each other's processes and to improvements in efficiency. Some communications issues have arisen at the technical level, highlighting the importance of continuous monitoring of the Partnership Success Indicators.

The Program draws on the comparative advantages of DFAT and the World Bank in a way that makes the partnership more than the sum of its parts. The GoV and the World Bank appreciate DFAT's expertise—and the Australian expertise that DFAT can access—in areas such as regional coordination, trade, economic reform, climate resilience, gender equality, and, especially, e-Government. Beyond the funding that DFAT provides, the World Bank team values its fresh thinking (for example, in pushing for a stronger results orientation and gender focus) and linkages to Australia's bilateral programs and institutions. DFAT can communicate findings from analysis in ways that the World Bank's remit would not permit, such as promoting messages that could be interpreted as normative or political. The DFAT Secretariat makes conscious efforts to avoid being a "high-maintenance donor"; World Bank participants appreciate the flexibility of DFAT's funding mechanism and its decentralized approval process, which allows rapid decision-making.

Aspects of the World Bank Group's contributions that DFAT appreciates include its wide-ranging technical expertise, experience in high-level policy dialogue, financing and convening power, ability to advocate economic arguments related to gender equality and social inclusion, openness to sharing expertise, and strong procurement guidelines. The Ambassador attributed DFAT's ability to reach its current high level of engagement on e-Government to the ABP2. The World Bank's neutrality was especially valuable to DFAT in the support related to the CPTPP, and the Program's work in the Mekong Delta is important as part of Australia's long-term story of support to the region.

Pride in the Program was expressed at high levels on both the DFAT and World Bank sides. The Ambassador said the partnership provides a model of how to use Australia's aid program for influence, and the ABP2 Operations Manager said it is one of the strongest partnerships he has seen in his (substantial) experience with the World Bank. Strong relationships between the Australian Ambassador and the World Bank Country Director and between the DFAT and World Bank Secretariat members set a tone of collaboration and congeniality throughout the Program.

A high level of mutual appreciation was expressed among most of the technical teams as well. A common thread among these partners was an understanding of their different roles: trust in the World Bank’s technical knowledge, ability to engage constructively with the GoV, and ability to discern areas of traction and client demand; and clarity from DFAT on the areas where they want to engage fully or step back. In two of the thematic teams, however, some concerns were expressed regarding the level of communication in the planning of activities, DFAT’s opportunities to engage with Government counterparts, and the timeliness of communication about important events. By the end of the MTR mission, the teams involved had begun to form mechanisms to address these concerns.

DFAT organized two partnership workshops, led by an experienced partnership broker, during the first half of ABP2’s implementation period. One outcome was a set of Partnership Success Indicators, which have been incorporated into the revised Operations Manual. The overarching indicator is that five principles—diversity, equity, openness, mutual benefit and accountability, and courage—are honored and practiced at all three levels of the partnership. The Secretariat is tasked with qualitatively assessing this indicator as part of the M&E process. Another outcome was the identification of improvements in the structure and timing of the review process, which were subsequently implemented, contributing to the Program’s efficiency.

Participants generally found that the workshops improved communication, created understanding, provided the thematic teams with useful insights on how other teams worked together, and provided useful messages from management. In one Theme, however, there was a sense that feedback from the workshop was insufficiently direct, resulting in misunderstandings about how well the partnership was going. Suggestions that arose during the MTR for improving the workshops in the future included placing a greater focus on the substance of the partnership’s work together, holding breakout sessions by Theme, and ensuring that all participants are onboard with the workshop outcomes.

The ABP2 has substantial complementarity with DFAT’s bilateral initiatives, and common GoV counterparts—such as CIEM on regulatory reform and HCMA on leadership training—adds value. Some of the technical teams expressed the desire for more sharing of information and dialogue between the ABP2 and DFAT’s bilateral initiatives.

GoV counterparts expressed great appreciation for the partnership. The trust generated from the World Bank’s long history in Vietnam emerged strongly; despite the MTR Team’s questions focusing on the present program, they made abundant references to the 1990s. In addition to *long-time experience*, counterparts used the words *reliability*, *neutrality*, *expertise*, *dedication*, *objectivity*, *honesty*, *effectiveness*, *comprehensiveness*, and *responsiveness* in describing the World Bank Group. Examples of GoV observations on the ABP2 included the following: (1) The study on ethnic minority poverty gave CEMA a solid evidence base for policymaking for the first time in its 20-year history. (2) The e-course on gender in legislation was concise, interesting, and convenient; it condensed, for the first time in Vietnam, all relevant knowledge so that even those without gender expertise could understand the issues. (3) The diligence and industriousness of the ABP2 staff is the main ingredient making the Program effective in promoting regional planning and coordination in the Mekong Delta.

2.9.3 Communication & Visibility

The Program’s initiatives for communication and DFAT visibility are fully satisfactory.

In agreeing to the ABP2 Program, Australia required the Program to prioritize the visibility of DFAT as the donor and technical partner. The Ambassador informed the MTR Team that the Program had delivered on this commitment and that it contributed to DFAT’s decision to increase the Program’s funding. From the World Bank perspective, DFAT visibility also helps with the Program’s credibility because of Australia’s good reputation in Vietnam. There are times, however, when the Government

does not welcome the visibility of a bilateral donor, and DFAT has been understanding in these circumstances.

The Program has enhanced its communications products during the past year. The ABP2 communication action plan was frequently updated. A visibility package, including formats and a program logo for reports and presentations, was produced and endorsed. Fact sheets were produced for each Theme for use in sharing information with external partners. Exhibition materials were produced for display at ABP2-funded events. A quarterly newsletter series was initiated, highlighting the Program's key achievements and plans. A regularly updated list of key upcoming events has helped to ensure DFAT's participation. All Themes have been following the requirements of the communication strategy and action plan.

Visibility is also ensured through joint participation in events. DFAT's Theme Coordinators have attended all key events and missions, and the Australian Ambassador and the World Bank Country Director were both present for many of them. In one case, however, DFAT participants in the MTR reported that they were informed about an important event too late to make arrangements for high-level representation. By the end of the MTR mission, team members from the World Bank and DFAT in the Theme responsible for this event had devised a new schedule of regular meetings to prevent the recurrence of missed opportunities.

2.10 IMPLEMENTATION PROGRESS

The rate of implementation progress is fully satisfactory.

Information provided by the World Bank on June 20, 2019, showed the Program had disbursed 45 percent of the total approved grant amount. Taking current commitments into account, 53 percent of the funds were spent or allocated to activities. The disbursement rate varied among thematic areas, with the Transport Theme having disbursed most of its allocation (66 percent), which is some way ahead of the Mekong Delta Theme, which had disbursed only 28 percent, and the Gender Theme at 35 percent. When commitments are taken into account, Mekong Delta and Gender Themes stood at 39 and 37 percent respectively, which was still some way behind the other Themes. However, disbursement rates in programs of this sort are rarely linear, and variations are to be expected. For example, the Program's Mekong Delta team explained that their efforts have been directed toward relationship building across ministries and levels of government, which has not required substantial financial resources but represents value for money and will unlock opportunities for the future. None of the Theme Coordinators expressed concern that they would be unable to disburse the entire allocation.

A summary of ABP2 allocations, disbursements, and commitments can be found in Annex 3 and a Consolidated Scorecard in Annex 4.

3 LESSONS LEARNED

The following key lessons arose from the findings of the MTR:

1. Approaching gender equality through both vertical and horizontal programming and combining analysis, local capacity building, and support across interventions can create the necessary impetus to change norms, behaviour, and expectations within governments and international organizations alike.

2. Supporting the formulation of a government-owned, long-term national development vision can provide an effective shared framework for designing targeted interventions that are likely to be supported by officials.
3. Consistently demonstrating reliability, integrity, and respect in the relationship with the government of a partner country opens doors for continuing influence in areas of shared interest as the country develops, the issues it faces become more complex, and the need for external resources declines.
4. Bilateral donors and multilateral organizations have different interests, values, and competencies. It is not automatic that a partnership between them will be a good fit. Making such a partnership successful requires an appreciation of how differences can be reconciled in design of procedures and systems. This requires flexibility on both sides. For instance, the bilateral donor can be “low-maintenance” in terms of reporting requirements while encouraging meaningful dialogue about progress. Technical partners can adapt their communication approach to ensure the bilateral donor is able to align program outputs with their diplomacy goals.
5. Vietnam’s history shows that momentum for policy reform has a tendency to stumble when technical support from development partners is abruptly scaled back. To ensure sustained interest in reform, development partners need to design enduring partnerships, not only building local technical capacity but also endowing reformers with political skills.
6. The quality of processes can be as important as outputs. This is especially relevant when engaging national partners in analysis, which creates ownership of results (and potentially greater commitment to translating outputs into policy) while building capacity for future analytical work. Too much attention to intermediate outputs could detract from attention to the quality of longer-term processes.
7. Having a Gender Theme Coordinator who is also a senior technical lead on gender at World Bank headquarters brings expertise and influence conducive to strong progress in achieving gender equality objectives, including influence on other World Bank programming.

4 RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations arose from the findings of the MTR:

1. **Ensure follow-up to analytical work and provide for continuity of policy support.** The MTR Team recommends that the Program ensure that analytical work identifies areas where supplementary support to the GoV is likely to be needed for the realization of recommended reforms beyond the adoption of a specific policy or law. The Program should also ensure that new knowledge products are designed with follow-up measures to track and facilitate their use in reform processes and to identify the partners who will champion any needed follow-up, including advocacy for recommended reforms. In this regard, DFAT and the World Bank Group will need to explore the extent to which such advocacy falls within the Program’s scope. Depending on the context, Australia, other bilateral donors or groups of development partners, GoV ministries or institutes, academics or think tanks, and/or civil society organizations may be best suited to take the advocacy lead. The Results Framework should incorporate new indicators on whether policy studies identify follow-up actions and the parties responsible for carrying them out. To build on the reform momentum generated during the Program and avoid adverse effects of abrupt declines in policy support, the Program should seek to ensure smooth transitions when funding ends. This may mean giving

consideration to additional ABP2 funding, a transition period to enable the GoV to continue the reform process independently, and/or policy support under an ABP3. In many cases, coordination with other donors, Australia's other bilateral initiatives, and civil society will play an important role in this process.

2. **Strengthen qualitative assessment of results.** The MTR Team recommends that the Program explore ways to incorporate qualitative assessments into the M&E system. For impact measurement, the Program should explore tools to track the complex variables inherent in governance reform processes, such as the Qualitative Impact Protocol (QuIP), which uses double-blind surveys to disentangle the various contributions to change. As an immediate step, the Program should consider asking each Theme to identify at least one (and up to three) areas of success—or one success area and one area of stalled progress—from which case studies could be developed, tracking pivotal steps along the way and any stumbling blocks from which lessons could be learned. The case studies could then be consolidated into an overarching story that illustrates what results ABP2 achieved, how they were achieved, and how they connect with the GoV's long-term vision in the *Vietnam 2035 Report*. The Results Framework could then incorporate indicators on the completion of these case studies/stories and an assessment of how well they are shared internally and externally.
3. **Consider incorporating social inclusion more broadly.** If a third phase of the Program (ABP3) is pursued, the MTR Team recommends that DFAT and the World Bank Group consider designing the Gender Theme to encompass social inclusion more broadly. If this could be done without dampening the Program's gender equality impact, it could provide an avenue for more explicitly addressing the inclusion of people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and other excluded groups, where relevant to overall Program objectives, while enhancing consistency with DFAT's current gender strategy.
4. **Continue dialogue on the relevance of the Ethnic Minority Theme to evolving priorities.** If an ABP3 is pursued, the MTR Team recommends that DFAT and the World Bank Group take into account both the nature of Australia's evolving priorities and the significance of ethnic minority development for Vietnam's long-term stability and economic growth. If the Gender Theme were expanded to encompass social inclusion more broadly, the partners could incorporate some ethnic minority work into that Theme.
5. **Expand the scope of the next partnership workshop and monitor the Partnership Success Indicators (PSIs).** The MTR Team recommends expanding the scope of the next partnership workshop to encompass more issues related to the substance of the Program and to enhance cross-thematic learning. Breakout sessions by Theme would be useful to develop/refine lessons learned, identify potential joint field visits and other opportunities to enhance the shared understanding of ABP2 interventions and results, opportunities for more interaction with Australia's bilateral initiatives, and enhance communication. A session with all participants could then be dedicated to sharing lessons learned among the Themes. To ensure that all participants are onboard with the workshop outcomes, the partnership broker's report could be shared with Theme Coordinators for comment before it is finalized. The MTR Team also recommends that the Secretariat qualitatively monitor the overarching PSI within the M&E system as envisioned in the Operations Manual. Both DFAT and World Bank members of the Secretariat should exercise vigilance regarding communication issues among the teams and facilitate the timely resolution of disagreements. Input on the PSIs could be solicited from Theme Coordinators prior to the partnership workshops and the finalization of Annual and Final Reports.

6. **Address potential risks by remaining vigilant to the potential for “scope creep” and carefully managing upcoming personnel changes.** The MTR Team recommends that the Program carefully vet any proposed new activities or components, pursuing them only if they clearly maintain the Program’s strategic focus, reflect shared priorities and client demand, and address areas where the World Bank Group has both funding needs and comparative advantage. The Program should also embrace the opportunity to reconfirm the Program’s priorities and partnership principles during the upcoming transitions of key personnel, paying close attention to handover procedures and convening the next Partnership Health Check soon after the transitions take place.
7. **Assess the funding mechanism vis-à-vis the IFC.** The MTR Team recommends that the partners consider opportunities for the IFC to add more value. This may be possible in areas such as corporate governance for local corporations, gender, and SOE reform and in carrying forward ABP2 recommendations related to the private sector. If a World Bank *Group* partnership is pursued in an ABP3, the MTR Team recommends that the partners reconsider and agree on the desired role of the IFC and design the program structure and funding mechanism to ensure that its contributions are utilized to the Program’s best advantage.
8. **Explore opportunities to increase gender sensitivity in ABP2 events.** The MTR Team recommends that the ABP2 Secretariat explore opportunities to systematically include data, evidence, and discussion of gender equality in ABP2 events, especially those in traditionally gender-blind sectors (e.g., trade, economic reform, and infrastructure), and assess the importance of increasing the proportion of women presenters.
9. **Encourage an expanded role for national experts.** The MTR Team recommends that the Program encourage the GoV, where relevant and feasible, to identify national expertise and provide budgetary resources to expand the role of national experts as counterparts to the international experts brought in by ABP2.
10. **Explore opportunities to work with other countries in the region on Mekong Delta issues.** DFAT and the World Bank have the opportunity to identify investments with potential impact at the whole landscape level in the Mekong Delta, considering how climate change resilience will be affected and to what extent the needs of poor and marginalized communities in all of the Mekong Delta countries are being addressed.