Improving the Effectiveness of Information Provision for National Assembly Deputies

HA NOI, OCTOBER, 2013

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1. Executive Summary

This summary paper aims to assist development of an improved understanding of the policy analysis and information needs of National Assembly deputies in Vietnam, review the existing structure of information provision and provide recommendations of how challenges in information provision can be addressed. The research used a combination of desk research, focus group discussions and a survey of 274 National Assembly deputies and over 500 of their support staff. The research was carried out between 2012 and 2013 by the Training Center for Elected Representatives (TCER) with technical assistance from the Development and Policies Research Center (DEPOCEN) as well as technical and funding support from The Asia Foundation.

The National Assembly of Vietnam reviews proposed laws, monitors the government’s activities and scrutinizes government implementation of laws, as well as decision making on important national issues. In recent years the National Assembly has emerged as a respected institution, increasingly active in pursuing its legislative, oversight and representative functions, with a developing set of support institutions. However, the National Assembly continues to face a number of challenges in fulfilling its tasks effectively. One key task among those is ensuring the access of National Assembly deputies to diverse, broad, in-depth, reliable and timely information.

Our survey asked both National Assembly deputies and their support staff about where they get their information from and its appropriateness to their needs. The research results show that, in general, the support institutions provide information that accords with deputies’ thematic interests. However, there continue to be deficiencies in the timeliness, form and depth of information provided to deputies. Deputies regarded information provided for discussions and voting as generally being of good quality and quantity. However, deputies were less satisfied with their access to in-depth analysis of issues coming up on the legislative agenda or the documents required to effectively fulfill their oversight functions. Deputies also complained of feast and famine. Overwhelming amounts of information were provided during the National Assembly sessions but between sessions deputies, particularly those who are part-time, struggled to get hold of the information they needed.

The research also explored the pattern of information use between internal and external sources. Information from the state dominates, with few deputies making full use of the range of potential information available to them. Information from management agencies, and the national media, were both most commonly used and also received the highest satisfaction scores. However, information from external experts was highly appreciated for its quality. Deputies also differentiated in terms of which information source they accessed for which task, tending to appreciate alternative information from external organizations more for oversight activities.

The survey, desk study and discussions allowed the research team to make recommendations to support future improvements in information provision. These include a regular feedback mechanism for deputies as well as increasing the clarity of duties in relation to information provision to the National Assembly. The team also identified several areas of skills development, looking particularly at improving the ability of support staff to develop analysis, but also assisting those organizations interacting with the National Assembly to develop a style of information presentation that is effective for deputies’ use.
2. Introduction

The National Assembly of Vietnam is responsible for reviewing proposed laws, monitoring the government’s activities and scrutinizing government implementation of laws, as well as decision making on important national issues. In recent years the National Assembly has emerged as a respected institution, increasingly active in pursuing its legislative, oversight and representative functions. However, it continues to face a number of challenges in fulfilling these tasks effectively. One key challenge is ensuring the access of National Assembly deputies to diverse, broad, in-depth, reliable and timely information.

National Assembly deputies require different information to fulfill their different functions. In their legislative role, deputies need information on the broad issues, understanding of the policy alternatives and predictions of the consequences of particular provisions. In their oversight role, they need specific information enabling them to monitor the success of ongoing programs and identify areas of weakness. The quality of laws and policies promulgated by the National Assembly, as well as the efficacy of monitoring of government implementation of laws, depend greatly on the quantity and quality of information provided to National Assembly deputies. While the National Assembly’s official policy advisory institutions, such as the Institute for Legislative Studies and the Office of the National Assembly, provide policy research to National Assembly deputies, there is often little evidence on the degree to which that information and analysis meets the requirements of the deputies or the ability of those institutions to provide tailored information at the request of National Assembly deputies.

In addition to the National Assembly’s official institutions, National Assembly deputies also have access to external sources of information. They can collect information directly from constituents, experts, and researchers from government think tanks, academia, businesses, and media. The need for deputies to access independent information is probably even greater in Vietnam, where government is the primary gatekeeper of information relevant to policy-making and few non-governmental alternatives exist. When government is the only source of information, or when available information is unclear, not timely or poorly presented members of the National Assembly are limited in their ability to hold government to account, and an imbalance of power between the legislature and the executive may result.

With nearly three quarters of deputies replaced every five years the institutionalization of effective paths of information provision is even more challenging. Most National Assembly deputies have limited understanding of mechanisms and methods for gathering high quality information to enable them to improve the performance of key legislative and oversight functions. The capacity of supporting institutions and support staff in providing timely and targeted technical briefing is limited.

This paper provides a summary of key findings from a research project conducted between 2012 and 2013 aiming to better understand the policy analysis and information needs of National Assembly deputies in Vietnam, the existing structure for information provision and analysis of how challenges in information provision can be addressed.
The research was carried out by the Training Center for Elected Representatives with technical assistance from the Development and Policies Research Center (DEPOCEN) as well as technical and funding support from The Asia Foundation.

**The legal framework governing the provision of information for National Assembly deputies**

Vietnamese laws give National Assembly deputies the right to information. These rights are stated in a number of legal documents including the Constitution, the Law on National Assembly Organization, and the Law on National Assembly Oversight Activity. According to these laws, National Assembly deputies have the authority to request information from line ministries, governmental offices and government staff.

In its meeting session in 2012, the National Assembly passed Decree No. 27/2012/QH13 aiming to improve the quality and efficiency of National Assembly activities. In particular, Section 8 of the decree directly regulates the provision of information for National Assembly deputies. Specifically, National Assembly deputies must be supplied with complete information about all projects, initiatives and reports to be reviewed by the National Assembly. Currently, the Office of the National Assembly (ONA), the Institute for Legislative Studies (ILS) and the provincial National Assembly delegation offices are tasked with supplying that information to National Assembly deputies. Section 8 also requires that meetings, workshops, and live discussions be held between the central National Assembly and National Assembly support units in the 63 provinces and cities, and that the National Assembly library and National Assembly website provide a source of up-to-date information to support deputies' activities. According to Section 8, the National Assembly will establish a mechanism for deputies to hire experts and obtain information to serve their functions, providing each deputy with a budget of 50 million VND which can be spent on hiring assistants, consultants, or experts.

**Support institutions providing information for National Assembly deputies**

The Office of the National Assembly (ONA), the Institute for Legislative Studies (ILS) and the provincial National Assembly delegation offices are responsible for providing information to National Assembly deputies.

1. **Office of the National Assembly (ONA)**

The ONA’s duty is to assist with conducting surveys and gathering expert opinions and public opinions on implemented laws. To support National Assembly deputies’ oversight activity and ensure its efficacy, the ONA provides administrative support to organize each oversight mission, examine reports from the ministries, and assemble questions for the interviews. The ONA also assists the National Assembly in decision making on many important issues, including appointment of high-ranking government officials, approval of national development and investment plans, ratification of international treaties, as well as resolving petitions from constituents, complaints and denunciations.
2. The Institute for Legislative Studies (ILS)

The ILS is a subordinate unit of the National Assembly Standing Committee and was founded in 2008. The ILS’ mission is to conduct research and provide the National Assembly with scientific information to assist its offices and deputies with their functions. To fulfill this mission, ILS researches fundamental issues in the organization and operation of the National Assembly and administers a database on National Assembly activities.

3. Provincial National Assembly Delegation Offices

All National Assembly deputies elected in a province or a centrally-run city gather into a delegation of National Assembly deputies. There are 63 delegations of National Assembly deputies representing 63 provinces and cities. Each delegation has an office headed by a full-time deputy. The provincial offices of the National Assembly delegations and the People’s Council are responsible for assisting National Assembly deputies in collecting and processing provincial level data, contributing ideas for law projects, analyzing data from oversight activities, visiting constituencies, and resolving complaints and denunciations.
3. Research Approach

The research design aimed to explore patterns of information collection and use by National Assembly deputies to develop an evidence base for more effective policy research and information services, as well as more targeted capacity building for NA deputies to fully exploit these opportunities. In particular to assess:

- How the National Assembly’s official policy advisory institutions and government agencies meet National Assembly deputies’ information needs and satisfaction with the information provided by those institutions and agencies;

- Which external sources National Assembly deputies use for information related to their work and the quality of information provided by those sources.

The research team used a variety of qualitative and quantitative methods to conduct the study, including:

1. **Desk research and rapid literature review** of relevant legal documents and literature pertaining to National Assembly deputies’ requirements for policy research and information services. The data from the review fed into the development of a research framework for the full study.

2. **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)** at the provincial level with National Assembly deputies and National Assembly provincial supporting units provided a structured opportunity to discuss the research framework.

3. **Survey:** Drawing on the desk research and FGD results, the research team developed two questionnaires, one for National Assembly deputies and one for National Assembly support staff. These questionnaires were designed to survey the opinions of the two subject groups on the same issues. 459 questionnaires were delivered to National Assembly deputies with 274 returned (approximately a 60% response rate). 1053 questionnaires were delivered to support staff in the offices of National Assembly deputies and National Assembly delegation offices with 557 returned (approximately a 53% response rate).
4. Research Findings

National Assembly deputies perform tasks and functions that require knowledge about a wide variety of subjects and sectors. Their information needs are both broad but also highly specific, changing over time with the functions they have to perform. Each deputy has his or her own areas of interest that may relate constituent interests, in which they require targeted and timely information. For supporting institutions to be effective they must provide timely and specific information that relates to deputies’ immediate needs, a highly challenging task. The analysis seeks to identify where National Assembly deputies are drawing their information from and their levels of satisfaction with that information, in order to develop an evidence base for more effective policy research and information services.

The research findings draw on the desk study, focus group discussions and survey to analyze the quality, focus and timeliness of current information provision for National Assembly deputies.

1. Satisfaction with available information

Information provision by theme

The subjects/sectors identified by National Assembly deputies as being of greatest concern were Economics/Finance/Budgeting; Agriculture; Education/Training and Land/Construction/Planning. In general, the survey results show that the best quality information is provided on the topics of greatest interest. Those topics had the fewest deputies claiming that the information provided to them was insufficient. However, there remain some areas of significant interest where a large proportion of deputies say that the information provided to them is poor e.g. Land, Construction and Planning, National Defense/Security and Environment. Other areas such as Culture, Sports and Tourism have low levels of interest and high levels of information.

Figure 1: Comparison between information needs and information provided to deputies
Timeliness and quality of information

The amount of information provided for deputies during each National Assembly meeting session is overwhelming. It can be challenging for deputies to process and select the most necessary pieces. National Assembly deputies stressed the need for information that is precise, comprehensive, accurate, timely, and multi-dimensional. Deputies expressed appreciation for information that represented different points of view. These themes are borne out in the types of data deputies are most keen to receive. While over 50% of deputies said the provision of analysis, evaluation and in-depth forecasts were very necessary, only 10% appreciated the provision of summaries of international news. They can source that information elsewhere. Deputies remain short of precise, comprehensive, accurate, timely, and multi-dimensional information.

Figure 2: Usefulness of information supply methods for National Assembly legislative and decision making functions reported by deputies

The general satisfaction levels of the deputies with the information they are provided with are relatively consistent across subject areas. Deputies are more satisfied with information provided by support staff in relation to supervision and responses to voters’ questions and complaints while information about the process of settling complains and denunciations need to be improved the most. A majority of deputies ranked information provided to help decide budgets and major government projects as “partly satisfying” their needs or even leaving them “unsatisfied”.

![Figure 2: Usefulness of information supply methods for National Assembly legislative and decision making functions reported by deputies](image-url)
Deputies stated that the amount and quality of information provided to them varies over time. Information provided during each National Assembly meeting session is generally plentiful and timely. However, getting information between the sessions is more challenging and the information is often out-of-date by the time it reaches the deputies. Deputies complained of delays in sending of official documents and reference materials to deputies and the delegations of National Assembly deputies. Between the six monthly meeting sessions full time deputies, participating in the committees of the National Assembly or those in higher positions within the assembly were able to get hold of high quality information. However, evidence from the focus group discussions indicated that part time deputies tended to receive little information, and what got to them was of low quality. This may also relate to issues around the quality of information relating to the various functions of the National Assembly covered below.

**Information for legislative, oversight and decision making functions**

National Assembly deputies perform a series of different functions; review and appraisal of new laws, monitoring of the government’s activities, scrutiny of government implementation of laws, and decision making on important national issues. The workload for each of those functions, and therefore the information requirements to perform those functions are not equally divided. Legislative duties occupy around half the time of each National Assembly session, with a smaller amount of time devoted to decision-making and oversight. As a result, the amount of information provided by the support institutions to assist deputies in performing their legislative function is much larger than that provided in relation to the other two functions.
The responses of deputies to our survey showed satisfaction with information received in relation to legislative functions. 70% of deputies were highly satisfied with the information provided to assist them in discussion and voting. In contrast 75% of deputies were not fully satisfied with the information provided to assist them in proposing new legislations. While deputies were more likely to state that the information provided to them for oversight activities was necessary or very necessary the majority of deputies reported that the amount of information provided did not or only partly satisfied their needs. The oversight information that received the lowest scores is information for monitoring and resolving complaints where less than 40% of deputies are satisfied. While deputies said the amount of information provided for oversight and constituencies' representative activities was adequate they felt the quality of the information was not high. Satisfaction about information for decision making activities followed a similar pattern.

**Figure 4**: Deputies’ satisfaction levels with information provided for decision-making

**Figure 5**: Deputies’ satisfaction levels with information provided for legislative functions
Figure 6: Deputies’ satisfaction levels with information provided for oversight activities

2. Sources of information

Internal

As described in the introduction three key support institutions are tasked with providing the information that Deputies need: the Office of the National Assembly, The Institute of Legislative Studies and the Provincial Delegation Offices. Deputies gave the support institutions similar scores on timeliness and quality, with the Provincial National Assembly Delegation offices receiving the most positive feedback on timelines and ILS on quality.
Figure 7: Evaluate the timeliness of information provided by the units

![Figure 7: Evaluate the timeliness of information provided by the units](image)

Figure 8: Evaluate the quality of information provided by the units

![Figure 8: Evaluate the quality of information provided by the units](image)
External sources of information

In addition to the information received through support agencies deputies consult, receive and appreciate information from external sources. The survey sought to identify those sources and consider the frequency they were used, and the trust and appropriateness of the information provided through them.

Frequency of use of external information sources

Different information sources play different roles. We divided the information sources into two groups (separated by the red line in Table 1 below). Information from governmental organizations is used by a larger proportion of deputies than information from external organizations such as research institutes and civil society organizations. This trend is even more pronounced in relation to decision making on important issues where, although over 70% said that external sources of information were important, deputies primarily use information from central level units.

Table 1: Deputies’ use of information by source

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Information sources</th>
<th>Legislation</th>
<th>Oversight</th>
<th>Decision making</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of</td>
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<tr>
<td>National Assembly support units at the central level</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>246</td>
<td>254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>97.3%</td>
<td>96.9%</td>
<td>99.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provincial National Assembly Delegation offices</td>
<td>241</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>95.3%</td>
<td>95.7%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ministries, Government agencies</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>243</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>91.3%</td>
<td>91.9%</td>
<td>96.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local agencies and local government offices</td>
<td>218</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>86.5%</td>
<td>92.3%</td>
<td>89.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Media agencies and the press</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>224</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>92.2%</td>
<td>94.1%</td>
<td>91.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research institutes, Universities</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>176</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>70.4%</td>
<td>65.1%</td>
<td>76.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socio-political organizations</td>
<td>191</td>
<td>193</td>
<td>183</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>81.8%</td>
<td>81.1%</td>
<td>77.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil society organizations</td>
<td>121</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>124</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>54.3%</td>
<td>58.4%</td>
<td>58.5%</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Management agencies (the line agencies, or agencies that part-time deputies work for) received the highest scores for both frequency of use and also for quality of information. Although the information provided by external organizations is used by fewer deputies, many deputies stated their appreciation for its quality, especially that from management agencies, research institutes, universities, and independent experts. Deputies also differentiated their comments depending on the purpose of the information. So, while only two thirds of deputies felt information supplied by civil society organizations was important or very important in their legislative duties, over 85% said that it was important or very important in their oversight work. Only 47% of deputies used foreign media sources, perhaps a reflection of language abilities. Foreign publications received the lowest scores for quality of information, half that of national level Vietnamese media. Support staff rated the public media as providing the information that most met their needs. In general, support staff was more likely to rely primarily on central government information than the deputies.

Figure 9: Quality of information supplied by social and private organizations

3. Deputies and their staff’s role in accessing information

Deputies spend considerably more time on information processing than they do on seeking out information. How active a deputy is in seeking information and information sources varies considerably. The number of deputies who regularly conduct external research and request information is not high. While 99% of deputies said they use public media and news agencies as a key information source only 34% often use their assistants to search for information and only 16% make regular requests to government ministries for information. While 96.5% of deputies report having sought expert opinions in the past, only 22.7% reported doing so on a regular basis. This may also reflect the quality of support staff available. The survey suggested that support staff often have relatively limited qualifications in relation to their job requirements and deputies are often more capable with technology than their staff. Only 44% agreed that support staffs are fully equipped to search, approach and handle information.
Overall, the majority of deputies do not fully exercise their rights to request information, nor do they actively express their need for particular information. The data shows the variations in participation and interests of the deputies, highlighting the differences in the way full and part-time deputies fulfill their roles. The survey also gathered data on the tasks that deputies requested their support staff to carry out. Over 40% of support staff regularly synthesize information on constituents’ petitions with a further 25% sometimes doing so. In general, support staff spends less time analyzing information than they do on other activities. Only 19% of support staff regularly provide analysis or in-depth forecasts of upcoming bills or oversight activities. These trends are especially clear among part-time deputies. Analysis skills scored highest for both deputies and support staff when they were asked about necessary skills and also which skills needed most improvement among support staff.
Figure 11: Activities support staff are required to do

- **Socio-economic updates**: 60% regularly, 57% sometimes, 49% rarely, 42% never, 27% never, 30% rarely, 32% sometimes, 25% regularly.
- **Quick synthesis notes**: 32% sometimes, 17% rarely, 14% never, 7% regularly, 8% rarely.
- **Data analysis**: 38% sometimes, 16% rarely, 14% never, 6% regularly, 2% never.
- **Agencies, organisations & individuals' data**: 44% sometimes, 21% rarely, 21% never, 10% regularly, 7% never.
- **International socio-economic analyses & in-depth forecasts**: 32% sometimes, 21% rarely, 19% never, 10% regularly, 7% never.
- **Public opinion surveys**: 39% sometimes, 14% rarely, 7% never, 10% regularly, 7% never.

Categories: Regularly, Sometimes, Rarely, Never.
5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Following the completion of the qualitative and quantitative research the research team drew key conclusions. These relate both to recommendations for improving information in key areas identified as weaknesses through the survey but also strategies to improve information provision, including through improving the training and skills development for support staff and deputies.

1. Information provision

The research identified areas of key interest to National Assembly deputies, but also areas where deputies felt the information provided to them was weak. A majority of deputies rated information provided to help decide budgets and major government projects as “partly satisfying” needs or even “unsatisfied”. Deputies were also dissatisfied with support on law development, a comment that was especially clear in responses from full-time deputies. This category of information received the most “inadequate” ratings among deputies. Information to help deputies discuss law proposals and for settling complains and denunciations also needs to be improved in both quantity and quality.

Deputies’ priorities, as well as their opinion of the quality and quantity of information provided to them will change over time. While National Assembly staff regularly track the opinions of deputies informally, a regular feedback mechanism, perhaps in the form of a survey, would be useful to analyze trends and assess changes in the quality of provision of information.

2. Strategies to improve information provision

Improving support to Deputies

Deputies currently have limited access to qualified support staff. The staff that they do have are often primarily focused on administrative rather than research and analysis tasks. Support staff also report being overstretched, unable to fulfill all the tasks allocated to them. Additional, highly qualified human resources to support deputies would have a significant impact on their ability to effectively access information.

The Provincial National Assembly Delegation offices and People’s Councils can potentially play a stronger role in helping local deputies access information services and the research of central offices. They could also help local deputies familiarize themselves with local issues and assemble a strong team of researchers and advisors to assist with information support.

Expert participation in National Assembly activities should be encouraged. Support institutions should facilitate the process, paperwork and budget for their engagement. The National Assembly also needs to actively seek connections with experts and scientists.
The support units should serve as a connection hub bridging knowledge between deputies and experts.

Support staff can also play a stronger role in addressing the lack of information provided between National Assembly sessions. By pressuring government agencies to provide information between sessions and considering the timing of information distribution, support staff can help address the challenges of information overload and famine.

The communication and presentation of information provided through existing channels can also be improved (further details in training and skills below). In addition to presentation, different methods of information delivery should be considered such as hotlines and online information systems for deputies that have been used in other countries.

**Improving provision of information by the government**

The data from the survey shows government agencies are the key source of information for deputies. However, deputies report issues in the timeliness, quality and accessibility of information provided to them by those agencies. The Law on National Assembly Organization and the Law on National Assembly Oversight gives National Assembly deputies the authority to request information from line ministries, governmental offices and government staff. However, working relationships and the interaction between National Assembly subordinate offices and units and Government agencies often remain unclear, undermining the quality and timeliness of information provided to the National Assembly. 81% of surveyed deputies and more than 94% of supporting staff supported amendments to make the obligations of line ministries, organizations and individuals to fulfill their duties in a timely manner clear.

There are limitations in the quality of the information currently provided to deputies. One recommendation is the provision of capacity building support for offices providing information to the National Assembly to tailor information to deputies’ needs. In particular, deputies seek analysis and in-depth forecasts, provided in precise and clear 5-6 page briefs. Reports should focus on up-to-date and accurate assessment of the situation, allowing readers to arrive at their own conclusions.

**Skills and training support**

In addition to the training provided to offices of the Government providing information to the National Assembly further training is recommended for officials in support institutions. Information provided for deputies concerns national policy making. They require well presented point of views, policy recommendations that are useful for discussion and decision making processes. The information provided needs to supply deputies with the best evidence and policy solutions for deputies to consider. Information needs to be diverse and multi-dimensional, including in depth evaluations on issues that will be discussed in the next National Assembly meeting sessions. Information needs to be clear, concise, focusing on the main policy issues.
Over 95% of National Assembly deputies and support staff welcomed additional capacity building support. In particular, over 90% of deputies emphasized the importance of ‘synthesizing, analyzing, and assessing information’ skills to improve the presentation of analysis that reaches deputies.
Improving the Effectiveness of Information Provision for National Assembly Deputies