

FLOOD PREPAREDNESS IN VIET NAM

A systematic gender-aware approach



Girls and boys practising swimming in a protective frame with net bottom in flood-prone areas in Dong Thap province, Viet Nam (VANGOCA Participatory Disaster Preparedness and Mitigation Project in Dong Thap and Tien Giang provinces (2006–2010) (Photo: Bui Thi Minh Hue/Oxfam)

In flood-prone areas of Viet Nam, most people are at high risk of drowning either because they can't swim or lack information about how to protect themselves in the event of a flood. Children and women are particularly vulnerable – the latter because many of them commute to work by boat. Oxfam and the governments of Viet Nam and Australia have worked with affected communities to develop and implement a participatory disaster management programme with a systematic gender-aware approach. It raised awareness of disaster preparedness activities through setting up information, education and communication (IEC) clubs at commune level, run by volunteers. It also built knowledge, skills, and capacity at provincial, district and commune levels through training rescue teams, carrying out simulation exercises, making early warning systems and weather warnings more accessible, and teaching women and children to swim.

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INTRODUCTION

Viet Nam is one of South-East Asia's fastest-growing economies. When Oxfam began working there in 1990, it was one of the poorest countries in the world. In 1993, 58 per cent of the population were living in poverty¹. By 2008 this had fallen to 14.5 per cent, although this was 18.7 per cent in rural areas². Poverty is overwhelmingly rural, and climate change has made people's livelihoods increasingly vulnerable. Weather-related disasters are becoming more frequent and severe, and seasons are becoming increasingly unpredictable, making it more difficult to grow rice and other crops. Small, localised disasters such as landslides are also affecting poor people's livelihoods.

Viet Nam has achieved many of its Millennium Development Goal (MDG) targets, although progress has been slow in some areas, including the political representation of women. There is still a need to improve equity and quality of education, particularly for children from minority ethnic communities in remote areas.

In principle, women and men have equal rights, and women play important roles in all spheres of Vietnamese society. However, in practice, women still face deeply ingrained gender discrimination and subordination. In 2006, the Vietnamese government adopted the Law on Gender Equality,³ and the Law on Domestic Violence was adopted the following year.⁴ However, there is no coherent system to monitor and collect data on the implementation of these laws, and no administrative mechanism to hold leaders to account for their enforcement.

OXFAM IN VIET NAM

Oxfam works with Vietnamese communities, national and international non-government organisations (NGOs), and the government, supporting rural livelihoods and infrastructure, education, disaster management, and advocating for changes in social and economic policy at national level. Oxfam's vision is for all people in Viet Nam to be empowered to pursue development opportunities that address all forms of poverty and injustice. By 2015, Oxfam aims to have built the capacity of movements, networks, and organisations in which women and other marginalised and socially excluded groups can articulate their own agendas and exercise their rights.

Oxfam in Viet Nam has supported and implemented emergency projects in response to a range of disasters, including floods, droughts, typhoons and landslides, as well as implementing community-based disaster preparedness projects in a number of provinces. At the national level, Oxfam is currently working to improve co-ordination with other agencies and departments, and advocating for the incorporation of Sphere Project⁵ standards and gender equality into humanitarian responses.

PARTICIPATORY DISASTER PREPAREDNESS AND MITIGATION PROJECT IN DONG THAP AND TIEN GIANG

The Mekong Delta (see map), where the Mekong River empties into the sea through a network of tributaries, is a highly flood-prone region, with annual flooding often lasting for three months or more. The government's strategy is one of 'living with the floods', recognising that they constitute an important part of the region's ecosystem. However, poor families living in the worst-affected communes, with little or no resources, face many risks, even during 'normal' flood times. Floods affect people's security, health, livelihoods, educational opportunities, food security, and ability to earn an income. In addition, they affect men, women and children differently.



Vietnamese institutions have already demonstrated some capacity to respond to annual floods, improvement in community-based disaster assessment and management and better understanding of humanitarian standards can and should be strengthened further.

With funding from the Australian government through AusAID's Vietnam – Australia NGO Cooperation Agreement (VANGOCA) programme, and working with local partners, Oxfam implemented a five-year project on participatory disaster management in two provinces in the Mekong Delta: Dong Thap and Tien Giang (VANGOCA 1 project). The project began in May 2006 and was implemented in collaboration with the Department of Planning and Investment (DPI) of Dong Thap province, and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) of Tien Giang. It aimed to reduce flood-related risks, reaching 265,000 people in 24 communes in five districts in the two provinces.

During a disaster, efficient and well-co-ordinated evacuations can dramatically reduce the number of deaths by drowning and the number of flood-related injuries. Women are particularly vulnerable during floods because many of them earn their living by commuting and trading on boats, and they are also less likely to have received weather warnings and information about floods. Bearing this in mind, the project aimed to enable committees for flood and storm control (CFSCs) at commune level to facilitate a more co-ordinated and effective response, and to carry out preparedness work to floods in the two provinces, including training rescue teams, running simulation exercises, and making early warning systems more accessible. Building on the success of the VANGOCA 1 project, an advocacy project was designed and implemented from October 2009 to March 2012, again funded by AusAID. The project was entitled 'consolidating lessons for disaster preparedness and mitigation in Dong Thap and Tien Giang provinces: a participatory model for Viet Nam's national community-based disaster risk management programme'.

Working in partnership with government

The project's government partners, the Department of Planning and Investment (DPI) and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) were nominated by the Provincial People's Committee (PPC) in each province. The DPI's role in disaster planning processes included overseeing and monitoring budgets, and it had experience in infrastructure development and working with international organisations. DARD was the focal point department for disaster preparedness and mitigation. The committee for flood and storm control (CFSC) in each province is located within DARD and DARD therefore played an important leadership role in supporting co-ordination activities. Staff from both the DPI and DARD worked closely with Oxfam in the design phase of the project, gaining valuable knowledge and skills in participatory approaches that were vital for the implementation phase.

A project management board was set up by the PPC, with two key tasks:

- playing a full role in the project management cycle;
- setting up processes to enable institutions at provincial, district and commune level to participate in project activities.

Working with civil society partners

Oxfam identified the Vietnamese Women's Union (WU) – which has 13 million members and operates at national, district, commune, and village levels – as a key civil society partner because of its broad reach and its mandate of supporting gender equality and development of women. At national level, Oxfam works with the WU to develop training materials and carry out research. It also provides training for WU staff, government officials, and community-based disaster risk management (CBDRM) practitioners on gender issues in disaster risk reduction (DRR) and climate change adaptation. At provincial, district, and commune levels, the WU has worked closely with Oxfam in designing and implementing project activities, as well as training. Many village women who are project beneficiaries are also members of the WU. They have been actively involved in mobilising other community members to participate in the various activities, including swimming lessons for women and children, gender training, and training in community-based disaster risk management. Some women have gained valuable skills and confidence through their involvement in the project and now hold more senior positions (see Box 1).

Box 1: 'All women can do the same, if they have determination'

Huynh Thanh Dao is vice president of the Women's Union in Phuoc Lap town, Tien Giang province. She enjoys meeting with many people in the community and encourages them to take part in community activities.

Dao got married at 19 and had her first baby at 20. She had only finished 9th grade at school and was very dependent on her husband for money, which resulted in many arguments between them. By chance, some older women in the village became aware of Dao's literacy skills and nominated her to become the secretary of the Women's Union. That was in 2001.

Dao began to participate more frequently in the WU's social activities and became a member of Oxfam's VANGOCA 1 project in 2006. At first, she found it difficult to participate because she didn't have much experience of taking a leadership role. However, she was able to improve her skills thanks to her own efforts, encouragement from her husband, and support from other people in the town. Dao says, 'I gradually became more experienced. I became more confident in organising meetings for women in the area and also in public speaking.'

Besides improving her organisational and communication skills, Dao realised that she needed to further her education. She decided to finish her basic high school education and subsequently completed an adult college education. When asked how she managed to achieve this, Dao said, *'I think any woman will have the capacity to do the same. They need to overcome certain difficulties and need to have a big passion for learning. When they have determination and the will to thrive, they will succeed.'*

ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The VANGOCA 1 project made a strong contribution to improving people's capacity to resist environmental shocks. This was achieved through increased community participation, particularly by women. Training on participatory methods and support to leaders was provided at village, commune, district and provincial levels, so that government staff could incorporate these methods into their day-to-day work practices, and thus becoming more sustainable.

Disaster preparedness and mitigation through IEC clubs

Knowledge is essential to promoting resilience and preparedness among communities that are frequently exposed to natural hazards. The VANGOCA 1 project raised awareness within communities of how they could prepare for flooding and other disasters.

An information, education and communication (IEC) club was set up in each village, and volunteers were recruited to manage them. The volunteers were trained on 20 key topics related to 'Living together with the flood', and on communication and club management skills. In total, 140 volunteers from 123 villages were members of the Women's Union or Youth Union, selected in close consultation with the Commune People's Committee. Volunteers attended a seven-day training programme, which focused on activities to be undertaken before, during, and after floods. Every six months, the IEC volunteers go on a refresher course to update their knowledge and skills. They also meet every three months to share experiences and learning.

Each IEC club had 30 members from local communities. Thanks to the enthusiasm of the volunteers, they were able to organise regular group discussions on relevant topics with local men and women, boys and girls. Life-saving information was disseminated among neighbouring households by club members. Materials giving visual information were produced in consultation with local communities, and a manual on 'Living together with the flood' was developed and distributed to all households in project areas.

During the project's implementation, women were encouraged to participate in all activities, including training workshops on community-based disaster risk management, leadership skills, and information, communication and education (IEC) campaigns. Female IEC volunteers were involved in decisions about timing of these activities so that women would be able to attend them. Men's support was especially important in enabling women's participation, as the example of Pham Van Hoang (see Box 2) illustrates.

Box 2: 'Half the burden, double the happiness'

Pham Van Hoang, from Tan Thuan village in Dong Thap province, got involved in disaster preparedness and mitigation activities when the VANGOCA 1 project came to his area. Hoang was actively involved in bringing new members to the 'Living with floods' IEC club and promoting its messages to change people's behaviour so that they would know what to do in the event of a flood.

Hoang himself gained valuable information and knowledge through the training provided through the club. He was particularly influenced by the themes 'Flood-time clean water resources protection' and 'Women's health and hygiene'. He began to realise the significant role that women play in the family, and became an advocate for gender equality in his community, especially with regard to women's role in disaster preparedness and mitigation.

But Hoang's behaviour really changed when his daughter had her first baby. His wife took the responsibility of caretaker, leaving no time for housework. Faced with this situation, Hoang took on the tasks his wife would normally do, like cooking and cleaning. Until then, Hoang had not truly understood the burden and difficulties of a woman's role in the family.

'If I was to become a woman, I don't think I'd be able to make it, to effectively manage my life even for a day', he reflected.

Moreover, Hoang realised that the burden of women's household responsibilities presented a huge barrier to their involvement in community activities. Therefore, Hoang decided to help his wife with the housework so that she would have some time to get involved in community activities, and encouraged her to do so. She has gradually become an active member of the community, with 'half the burden, double the happiness.'

BUILDING KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND CAPACITY FOR DISASTER PREPAREDNESS

As well as producing and disseminating IEC materials, the VANGOCA 1 project conducted various activities to improve people's knowledge and practical skills to help them prepare for a flood or other disaster. These skills included swimming, community-based disaster risk management, leadership skills, and awareness of gender equality. It also carried out participatory capacity and vulnerability assessments (PCVAs), helped develop disaster management plans at village and commune levels, and develop a monitoring and evaluation framework for CFSC activities at provincial, district, and commune levels.

The training courses were built around the expressed needs of communities, and with the full participation of local authorities and other stakeholders, including the DPI, DARD, the Women's Union, and Youth Union. Oxfam and its partners shared the organisation and facilitation of the training courses. For example, events to promote gender equality were led by the Women's Union, working closely with Oxfam and DPI or DARD. Oxfam provided technical and financial inputs, as well as overall management and monitoring. Most training events were developed using facilitators from the community, with the added benefit of using local knowledge and enhancing local capacity.

Training rescue teams

Once disaster strikes, certain practical skills and equipment are essential for survival. Rescue teams in project areas were trained in underwater rescue, first aid, transporting victims, etc. They were equipped with lifebuoys, life vests, stretchers, and first aid kits. The teams benefited from carrying out the drill before the flood season so that all members had the chance to practice skills and techniques and share experiences. This was also an opportunity to bring staff together, test their ability, and make any changes to procedures.

Carrying out simulation exercises

Simulation exercises were conducted in project areas to improve the capacity of commune leadership to co-ordinate flood-related activities, and to improve the flow of information and weather warnings to all people – men and women, girls and boys – in flood-prone areas.

The simulation exercises covered the different areas of flood response, such as dissemination of information to affected groups and co-ordination among CFSCs and relevant government departments. They also simulated different scenarios – for example, collapse of houses leading to evacuations, search and rescue missions, administering first aid, and crop protection following flooding of paddy fields.

The simulation exercises usually lasted for one day (half for the actual simulation, and half for discussing and sharing experiences). Between 180 and 200 participants attended for each project area, including representatives from the provincial and district government, commune-level CFSCs, provincial Red Cross, the Women's Union, Youth Union, the media, and ordinary members of local communities (men, women and children).

The simulation exercises allowed local groups to share their experiences about flood and storm control work, review the current level of rescue and response capacity, and make recommendations about any changes needed to improve the response in future.

Making early warning systems more accessible

Early warning systems were established in all project areas at suitable locations, and regularly upgraded. Female IEC volunteers were involved in decisions about the appropriate time to share information, so that women would not be busy with other tasks such as preparing food for the family. Similarly, the knowledge and needs of local women and men were borne in mind when deciding on the wording of disaster preparedness messages and how best to disseminate them. As a result, all community members could access daily information, including weather warnings, quickly and conveniently.

Teaching women and children to swim

Swimming lessons targeted women and children, who tend to be more vulnerable during flood season. During the project period, 160 women, 51 boys, and 34 girls learned to swim, despite the initial resistance of some families (see Box 3). Swimming lessons are continuing even though the project has ended, organised by the CFSC in each commune, with the active participation of the WU. After the 2010 floods, there were no reported deaths in communes where project activities took place.

Box 3: 'During the flood season, I no longer fear boating alone'

Phạm Thị Tuyet Nga is responsible for population and family planning issues at the local health station in Phu Loi town, Dong Thap province. Since 2006, she has been a member of the VANGOCA 1 project, and works as a promoter for swimming classes. At first, Nga faced a lot of resistance from parents who doubted the safety of the swimming courses for women and children. She had to go to almost all the every individual families to persuade them that being able to swim was a vital survival skill. Eventually, most parents gave permission for their children to join the classes and some even proposed that there should be more classes in the community. One young girl, Thu, only survived the floods because she had learned to swim as a result of the project. She remembers, 'It was in 2009, I was out picking cork cotton when I fell. However, thanks to my swimming ability, I was able to save myself, swimming back to land.'

Nga also actively encourages women to take part in the swimming project. However, this has turned out to be more challenging than recruiting children, as husbands often do not allow their wives to take part. For example, Vien had to overcome the objections of her husband, who was afraid that she would drown or humiliate herself in the swimming class. After Nga and other promoters spoke to him, he understood why it was important for his wife to learn to swim. Finally, Vien joined the class and now feels safer and more independent as she goes about her work. She says, 'During the flood season, I no longer fear boating alone.'

The swimming classes were very successful, and most children and women participants learned basic swimming skills in a short period of time. These positive results keep Nga motivated despite the challenges. Due to her efforts, the number of women participants gradually increased. Nga believes that in order to maximise impact, the mobilisation process has to be coordinated with policies issued by local authorities and endorsed by social groups.

Promoting gender equality

Gender inequality remains prevalent in rural areas of Viet Nam, perpetuated by traditional stereotypical roles and divisions of labour between men and women. Despite this, the project activities have demonstrated the importance of involving women in disaster management plans and activities.

The project stipulated that women should comprise at least 30 per cent of participants in each activity, but there was an emphasis on the quality of women's participation too. This was reflected in the provision of training on gender equality for men and women at all levels. Considerable efforts were made to provide opportunities for women to acquire leadership and management skills. For example, women's participation in rescue teams improved their status in the community and challenged certain stereotypes about roles and division of labour between men and women. Of the 1,418 rescue team members, 383 (1 in 4) were women. This presence encouraged other women to join the teams, and brought about other positive changes in family relationships and division of household labour. However, despite these achievements, the limited number of women in leadership positions is one area that still needs to be addressed by local authorities and committees such as CFSCs.

Box 4: 'Laundry is not only the woman's job'

Married couple Nguyen Thi Hạnh Tuyen and Phạm Van Son undertake key leadership roles in their community in An Thạnh town, Dong Thap province. They started as volunteers in the VANGOCA project in 2006. Through the project activities, Son and Tuyen gained awareness and knowledge about the importance of disaster preparedness and mitigation, as well as gender equality.

Son decided to act on what he learned and broke with tradition in his village by publicly showing that he – and not his wife – does the laundry and that 'laundry is not only the woman's job'. At first, this unfamiliar behaviour provoked questions and suspicion among other villagers. But gradually, people understood that they do not have to stay with stereotypical roles and behaviour.

Due to their active participation in the community, Son and Tuyen now have powerful voices. Tuyen is a core member of the local Women's Union and the 'Living with floods' IEC club. Son attended the 'gender equality' training session provided by the project. Later, he was elected village head. In this role, he was actively involved in project activities, organising workshops, and providing further training for people in his community.

Although the VANGOCA 1 project has ended, Son and Tuyen continue their advocacy work, promoting gender equality in many of the village's disaster preparedness activities, such as IEC campaigns, community-based disaster risk management, leadership skills, rescue skills, training events and simulation exercises.

CONCLUSION

To be effective, participatory disaster management programmes need to be comprehensive, involving all members of affected communities and providing people with a range of knowledge and skills to enable them to build resilience.

The approach taken by the participatory disaster preparedness and mitigation project in Dong Thap and Tien Giang provinces was indeed comprehensive. It embraced key institutions at all levels, and strengthened the capacity of all those involved, across all its activities. In addition, it promoted women's genuine participation in ways that raised their social status within the household and more broadly, in their community.

Better information and greater awareness and knowledge about disaster preparedness, flood-related diseases, and sanitation issues in particular increased the confidence and skills of IEC volunteers and club members, who are continuing their work well after the end of the project, demonstrating a degree of sustainability. Stakeholders in both provinces demonstrated a good understanding of the importance of local-level disaster preparedness, such as undertaking action planning, simulation exercises, forming emergency response teams, and running training events. Overall, the project resulted in greater levels of knowledge and improved skills and capacity in disaster management among commune, district and provincial leaders.

NOTES

- ¹ The World Bank, 'Vietnam Overview', <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/vietnam/overview> (last accessed September 2012)
- ² The World Bank, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.RUHC> (last accessed September 2012)
- ³ The National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (2006) 'The Law On Gender Equality' (No.73/2006/QH11). Article 4 states: 'The gender equality goals are to eliminate gender discrimination, to create equal opportunities for man and woman in socio-economic development and human resources development in order to reach substantial equality between man and woman, and to establish and enhance cooperation and mutual assistance between man and woman in all fields of social and family life.' For full text of the law, see: http://www.iknowpolitics.org/files/law_gender_equalit_Viet_Nam.pdf (last accessed February 2012)
- ⁴ The National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (2007) 'Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control' (No. 02/2007/QH12). Article 1 states: 'This Law regulates the prevention and control of domestic violence, protecting and assisting the victims of domestic violence; the responsibilities of individuals, families, organizations, institutions in domestic violence prevention and control and dealing with the breach of the Law on Domestic Violence Prevention and Control... Domestic violence is defined as purposeful acts of certain family members that cause or may possibly cause physical, mental or economic injuries to other family members.' For full text of the law, see: http://www.iknowpolitics.org/files/law_domestic_violence_viet_nam.pdf (last accessed February 2012)
- ⁵ In 1997, a group of humanitarian NGOs and the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement framed a Humanitarian Charter, which identified minimum standards to be attained in disaster assistance in each of five key sectors (water supply and sanitation, nutrition, food aid, shelter, and health services). This process led to the publication of the first Sphere Handbook, in 2000. The latest (2011) version, *Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Humanitarian Response*, is available from: <http://www.sphereproject.org/handbook/> (last accessed February 2012).

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