



Women and men attended the “Living with Floods” IEC club in My Duc village, Phuoc Loc commune, Tan Phuoc district, Tien Giang province, VANGOCA project, 2007. (Bui Kim Huu/Oxfam)

VIET NAM CASE STUDY

Participatory Disaster Preparation and Mitigation Project

Oxfam in Vietnam has supported and implemented emergency response projects as a reaction to a range of natural disasters, including floods, droughts, typhoons and landslides, as well as implementing community-based disaster preparedness projects in a number of provinces. The project’s primary socio-cultural impacts were achieved through enhanced participation, particularly by women. It provided participatory methods training and support to leaders at village, commune, district and province levels and created opportunities to incorporate this in government practice. The project contributed particularly to human capacity development and increasing capacity to resist environmental shocks.

INTRODUCTION

The Mekong delta is a highly flood-prone region, and floods occur on an annual basis, often lasting for three months or more. The government's strategy is one of 'living with the floods', recognising that the annual floods make up an important part of the lifecycle of the region. However, families living in the most flood-affected communes with limited or no resources face real risks even during 'normal' flood times. Floods impact on security, health, livelihoods, educational opportunities, food security and income generation and affect men, women and children differently.

Even though Vietnamese institutions already have some capacities, improvement in community-based disaster management, disaster assessment and the understanding of humanitarian standards is both possible and desirable.

Oxfam in Vietnam has supported and implemented emergency response projects as a reaction to a range of natural 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 coordination amongst other agencies and departments and advocating for the incorporation of SPHERE standards and gender equality into humanitarian responses.

Participatory Disaster Preparation & Mitigation Project in Dong Thap and Tien Giang

The VANGOCA (Vietnam–Australia NGO Cooperation Agreement) programme was negotiated between the Governments of Vietnam and Australia, to make available AusAID funding for disaster management programmes in the Mekong delta. Within the VANGOCA framework, Oxfam GB implemented a five-year project on Participatory Disaster Management, in collaboration with the Department of Planning and Investment (DPI) in Dong Thap province and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) in Tien Giang province from May 2006. The project aimed to reduce the risks relating to floods for rural men, women and children in these two flood-affected provinces. Project activities focused on 24 communes in five districts, with a population of approximately 265,000 people. The project had five main component objectives:¹

- Building knowledge, skills and resources to mitigate, prepare for and respond to floods in 24 flood-affected communes.
- Enabling the Committee for Flood and Storm Control (CFSC)² to facilitate a more targeted, coordinated, timely and effective response to floods.
- Reducing the incidence of flood-related diseases affecting people in the project area.
- Improving flood-time food security, and the income of selected poor and vulnerable households.
- Ensuring effective and timely programme management and coordination.

ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The project's primary socio-cultural impacts were achieved through enhanced participation, particularly by women. It provided participatory methods training and support to leaders at village, commune, district and province levels and created opportunities to incorporate this in government practice. The project contributed particularly to human capacity development and increasing capacity to resist environmental shocks.

Disaster Preparedness and Mitigation through IEC clubs

The project supported local communities to be better prepared for an emergency response and raised awareness of disaster preparedness and mitigation within communities. Information, Education and Communication (IEC) clubs organised interactive group discussions in all targeted villages, ensuring the participation of men and women, children and old people. Households and IEC volunteers demonstrated high levels of confidence and enthusiasm as a result of increased access to information and greater awareness and know-how on disaster preparedness, flood-related diseases, and sanitation issues. One of the key achievements is that an effective network of IEC volunteers and clubs has been built at village level: they are enthusiastic and continuing their work after the end of the project.

“Half the burden, double the happiness”

Phạm Văn Hoàng from Tân Thuận village, Thanh Binh district, Đồng Tháp province, got involved in disaster preparedness and mitigation activities when the VANGOCA project came to his area. Hoàng was active in attracting new members to the Living with Floods IEC Club and promoting the contents to change people's behaviours regarding disaster preparedness and mitigation. Hoàng himself gained valuable information and knowledge from joining the club's thematic training. He was particularly influenced by the themes “*Flood-time clean water resources protection*” and “*Hygiene and health of women*”. Through the training Hoàng started to realize the significant role that women play in the family. He began to promote gender equality in his community, especially with regard to women's roles in disaster preparedness and mitigation. But Hoàng's behaviour really changed when his daughter had her first baby. His wife went to care for their daughter, leaving no time for housework. So Hoàng took on the tasks his wife would normally do, like cooking, cleaning and taking care of the family. Until then Hoàng 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, Hoàng realized that household responsibilities present a huge barrier to women's involvement in the community. Therefore, Hoàng decided to help his wife with the housework and take on certain chores. He also encouraged his wife to get involved in social activities, and she has gradually become an active member of the community.

Promotion of Gender Equality

During implementation of the project, women were encouraged to participate in all activities, such as training workshops on community-based disaster risk management and IEC campaigns. The project set a criteria of at least 30 per cent women's participation in every activity. In reality, some activities such as IEC campaigns and swimming training achieved more than 50 per cent participation. Women's participation was about more than numbers, however, and emphasised supporting women to make their voices heard and building their capacity to ensure that they could participate in a meaningful way.

Women built their capacities through participation in project activities and also had opportunities to participate in training on leadership and management skills. There was specific training on gender equality for both men and women at commune, district and provincial levels.

The participation of women in project activities was greatly appreciated by the project management board, Provincial CFSC, Women's Union and communities. This is in spite of the fact that gender inequity still remains evident in rural areas where traditional stereotyped roles and divisions of labour between men and women perpetuate inequality. The project activities have validated the importance of incorporating the views of women and poor people in disaster management action plans.

“Any woman can do the same, if she has determination”

Huỳnh Thanh Đào is the vice president of the Women's Union in Phuoc Lap town, Tan Phuoc district, Tien Giang province. She enjoys meeting people in the community and encourages them to take part in community activities. Đào got married at 19 and had her first baby at 20. She had only finished 9th Grade at school and was financially dependent on her husband which resulted in many arguments between the young couple. By chance, some older women in the village became aware of Đào's literacy and nominated her to become the secretary of the Women's Union. That was in 2001. She gradually participated more frequently in the Union's social activities.

Đào became a member of Oxfam's VANGOCA project in 2006. In the beginning, Đào's found it difficult to participate in the activities because she didn't have much experience. 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. Đào says, *“I gradually became more experienced. I became more confident in organizing meetings for women in the area and also in public speaking.”*

Besides improving her organization and communication skills, Đào realized that she needed to further her education. She decided to finish her basic high school education and subsequently completed an Adult College education.

“Laundry is not only women’s work”

Nguyễn Thị Hạnh Tuyền and Phạm Văn Sơn are a couple and are community leaders in Tân Thạnh town, Thanh Binh district, Đồng Tháp 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, the husband, took action and broke with tradition in his village by publicly showing that he - and not his wife - does the laundry. At first, this provoked questions and suspicion among the villagers. But gradually people understood that they do not have to stick to stereotyped roles and behaviours. Due to their active participation in the community, Son and Tuyen now have powerful voices. Tuyen participates in the local Women’s Union and in the Living with Flood IEC Club, whilst Son holds the position of village head. Although the VANGOCA project has ended, the couple continue their advocacy work and promote gender equality in many of the village’s social activities.

Building Knowledge, Skills and Capacity

The project built a good level of knowledge, skills and capacity in disaster management among commune, district and province leaders. Training was conducted with a wide range of local authorities and stakeholders from different sectors. Stakeholders in both provinces confirmed their understanding about the importance of local-level disaster preparedness, such as being ready to respond to emergencies, undertaking action planning, simulation exercises, forming emergency response teams and running training events. The project activities influenced institutional culture and continued to meet both men and women’s strategic needs for access to and control over information, influence and resources. For example, women were able to participate in and express their ideas and opinions at various community meetings related to disaster preparedness and mitigation, to which women were previously not invited.

“During the flood season, I no longer fear boating alone”

Phạm Thị Tuyết Nga is responsible for population and family planning issues at the local health station in Phú Lợi town, Đồng Tháp province. Since 2006 she has been a member of the VANGOCA project and works as a promoter for swimming classes. Understanding the risk to women and children of not being able to swim, Nga puts great efforts into encouraging people in the community to join the ‘teaching swimming for women and children’ project. In the beginning, Nga faced resistance from many parents who doubted the safety of the courses. Nga practically had to go to every individual family to persuade them of the necessity of swimming skills. Finally, most parents gave permission for their children to join the classes and some even proposed to run more classes in the community. One young girl, Thu, only survived the floods due to having learned to swim. 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’s participation in the swimming project. However, this has turned out to be more challenging than recruiting children, as husbands often present a huge barrier. 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 could join the class and now feels more protected and more independent in 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 acquired basic swimming skills in a short period of time. These positive results keep Nga motivated despite the difficulties and the currently small number of female participants in the classes. Nga admits that in order to be truly effective, the mobilisation process has to be combined with policies issued by local authorities and social groups.

NOTES

¹ Viet Nam – Australia Cooperation Agreement (VANGOCA) – Participatory Disaster Preparation and Mitigation project in Dong Thap and Tien Giang provinces (2004-09) proposal.

² The Committee for Flood and Storm Control (CFSC) is a government body which is in charge of disaster mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery. The system of flood and storm control in Vietnam is managed at national and sub-national level.

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