

# Creating a Safer Tomorrow for the Future Generations

*A Comprehensive Approach to Ensure the Safety of Children in Vietnam*

## ABSTRACT

*Ensuring the safety of children against flood drowning is the main message of this case study. In two instances, the Vietnamese government and a collaborating NGO and UN agency conducted a very innovative way of instilling children's preparedness against flood risks. The first was the institutionalization of a national swimming program for children. Here, they devised simple but effective swimming nets where the children were taught how to swim. The nets were placed beside rivers and were constructed in such manner that they were deep enough for the children to manage. Another activity was the establishment of emergency kindergarten and child care centers where very young children stayed while their parents were out earning a living. The centers had caretakers who were earlier trained on childcare, child nutrition and hygiene. The last activity was the School Flood Safety Program which involved the orientation sessions for schoolteachers. A flood information kit for the teachers was prepared.*



Swimming lesson in Tan Ho Co commune, Tan Hong, Dong Thap province.

## THE INSIDE STORY

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## INTRODUCTION

The historic floods of 2000 and 2001 in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam saw an emergency situation of large-scale proportions, with over 1,516 deaths (including 642 children) and 1,223,874 households severely affected. Nearly 1,000 schools were inundated, severely cutting short the school year and crippling the education system in the region. In 2002, the total number of deaths in Vietnam resulting from natural disasters was 694, 448 of which occurred in the Mekong Delta, and 319 cases were children who drowned. The main cause for the high death toll of children was identified as drowning. Many of the children who drowned were the ones left at home unattended, while the parents sought help, food or work.

In the Mekong Delta of Vietnam where waterways outnumber the typical land

roads, travelling by boat is the primary mode of transportation. Traffic collisions along these watery highways are causing around 12,000 Vietnamese children to drown every year because they cannot swim. Many people assume that children in the Cuu Long (Mekong) Delta know how to swim well but a recent survey in six provinces, an excerpt of which was published by *Vietnam News*, shows 92% of children under six, 80% of kids between six and eight and 25% of teens from 13 to 16 could not. Child drowning occurs not only during the monsoon season when the water level is high but also under the circumstances of considerable normality due to rough play, dangerous swimming holes and unsafe water transportation.

Many of the deaths can be prevented with basic swimming lessons and better supervision of young children. A number of researches were conducted by the NGOs together with their government



The main cause of high death toll of children was identified as drowning.

counterparts with the participation of the community, especially the children, and with the needs clearly identified, partnerships between the Government agencies and the international NGOs working in the Mekong Delta were fostered to provide programs focusing on minimizing the flood risks on children in the Mekong Delta.

## 2. IMPLEMENTATION OF A NATIONAL PROGRAM ON SWIMMING SKILL UNIVERSALIZATION FOR CHILDREN IN AN GIANG AND DONG THAP PROVINCES

Between 2000 and 2005, the number of child drowning casualty reaches an alarming rate of 76% of total death toll in An Giang and DongThap provinces. Since then, as a measure to minimize the child drowning cases, the Provincial Committees on Flood and Storm Control (PCFSC) have been organizing swimming lessons for children in their annual Flood and Storm Control and Natural Disaster Mitigation Plan as well as in their long term, 5-year Plan. The provincial Committee

for Sports and Physical Training (CSPT) is recognized as the lead agency, and at the district level, the People's Committee assigns district CSPT in collaboration with Youth Union, Department of Education (DoET), Committee for Population, Family and Children (CPFC), Department of Health, Finance and Planning to realize the plans.

### *Enhancing the Resource Base - Sharing of Resources between Government and Non-government Agencies*

Dong Thap PCSFC enjoys the privilege of being the only province in the Mekong Delta where the Provincial People's Committee issues special annual directives to organize swimming lessons for the children. They have the challenging as well as daunting target of having all children between 7-15 in Dong Thap learn how to swim by 2016. From 2002 to 2007, 1,125 swimming classes were conducted for 37,044 children. In An Giang, 1,720 swimming classes were arranged for 43,840 children up to 2006. The province constructed 12 permanent swimming pools, 2 assembled swimming pool and many simple swimming pools in the localities.

### **Dong Thap Provincial 5-Year Plan ( 2006-2010)**

To reduce the deaths of children caused by drowning in the flood season, strengthen the information dissemination, and conduct educational programs to enhance responsibility of parents and community in taking care of children. Continue to maintain 175 existing child care points in rural areas. Additionally, prepare and plan to establish temporary child care points during severe flood months. Annually, the Youth Union cooperates with Committee for Sports and Physical Training to organize 150 training courses to teach swimming for 4,500 children, with a 75 million VND budget per year.

Both Dong Thap and An Giang provinces invested significant amount of funding and other resources to serve the single purpose of providing swimming lessons. Yet the total amount of resources

### **National Programme on Swimming Skill Universalization for Children in 12 Mekong Delta provinces**

Referring to Guidance Letter No 99/2002/UBTDTT-QG dated 21 January 2002, issued by National Committee for Sports and Physical Training, the objectives of National Programme are as follows:

- Enhance awareness on the benefits of swimming for people living close to rivers and canals.
- Provide children of 6-15 age range with basic swimming knowledge and skills so that they can protect themselves when they fall into rivers and pond by accident.
- Promote swimming as a widespread massive movement.
- Highlight roles and responsibilities of various child-focused organizations to join efforts to reduce child accidents.

that need to realize the ambitious 5-year plans were beyond the means of the provincial and district flood and storm control committees. One of the first hurdles faced was finding a suitable location to conduct the lessons. Swimming pools were expensive to construct and existing rivers and canals were too deep to conduct swimming lessons for kids.

The government and non-government sector agencies recognized the magnitude of impacts that might be brought about by the scheme. Challenged, the two sides joined forces and came up with a revolutionary idea to build swimming nets, which when placed in deep water bodies form shallow pools suitable for the required purpose. UNICEF and Save the Children Alliance developed and experimented successfully with a new design of swimming net, making use of available local materials from bamboo to PVC pipes. That helped set a standard design specification for the future net construction.

With the NGOs contributing the financial and material resources and the CSPT providing the skilled human resources, the swimming lessons scheme got its start in the Mekong Delta. Life jackets were also provided during the lessons for greater safety measures. CSPT provided the trainers - their most reliable swimmers, highly trained and competent.

#### **Nodal Agencies for Swimming Skill Universalization Program in the Mekong Delta and their Respective Roles and Responsibilities**

- Committee for Sports and Physical Training (CSPT): prepare swimming universalization plan, lesson plan, curriculum.
- Youth Union: assign volunteers to be trained as facilitators, mobilize and manage the children attendance at swimming sites
- Department of Education and Training (DOET) (through its school network): survey on the number of children who don't know how to swim.
- Committee for Population, Family and Children (CPFC), Radio and Television stations, People's Committee at provincial, district and commune levels: administrative and public relation (awareness raising)

In An Giang and Dong Thap provinces in 2006, before a swimming program, the District People's Committee made



Children enjoy participating in a swimming lesson.

announcements in villages considered most vulnerable in the districts. Kids of 6-14 years old were invited to register and participate.

The higher the appreciation for the swimming lesson scheme, the greater the participation of the stakeholders. Hence, when swimming lessons were conducted in Tan Chau and Chau Thanh districts of An Giang province and Tan Hong and Thanh Binh districts of Dong Thap province, the volunteers from Women Union, including the parents, provided the logistic and administrative support. Swimming nets as per standard were constructed, one for each province, and used in the rivers and canals. Two swimming lessons of 5 days duration were conducted in each area for as many as 50-60 kids per lesson.

Though they do not become expert swimmers by the end of the lessons, the children found themselves being able to float in the water and perform basic strokes. While FEMS project bore the cost of the swimming nets made out of PVC pipes, the district people committees shouldered the transportation cost of the nets from one place to another. To ensure the sustainability of the swimming program in the district, potential future trainers were also invited to join the classes as assistant supervisors.



Cost-effective swimming net was set up in canals to provide facility for swimming lessons.

Table: Number of boys and girls participating in the swimming lessons under FEMS

Province	District	Participants			No. of Commune Covered
		Total	Boy	Girl	
An Giang	Tan Chau	121	76	45	2
	Chau Thanh	112	79	33	2
Dong Thap	Tan Hong	144	85	59	2
	Thanh Binh	80	29	51	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4 districts</b>	<b>457</b>	<b>269</b>	<b>188</b>	<b>8 communes</b>

#### ESTABLISHMENT OF EMERGENCY KINDERGARTENS AND ENSURING THEIR SUSTAINABILITY THROUGH SKILL ENHANCEMENT OF CHILD CARETAKERS

In addition to providing swimming lessons, the Ministry of Education, Central Committee for Flood and Storm Control and UNICEF initiated setting up of emergency Child Care centers (CCC) or emergency kindergartens (EK) in the highly flood vulnerable areas. In 2001, 810 temporary CCC or EK were established all over the Delta for children within the age bracket of 2-6 years whose farmer parents must leave home to earn a living (source: Vietnam News).

In both An Giang and Dong Thap provinces, the provincial authorities led

by People's Committee with the Departments of Education and Training (DoET), Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (LISA), Health, Committee for Population, Family and Children (CPFC) and Women's Union, contributed financial resources to support these centers.

In Dong Thap province, the initiative of organizing emergency kindergarten was first taken up by members of Youth Union in Phu Tho commune, Tam Nong district, in the year 2001. Dong Thap, provincial People's Committee assigned the Department of Education and Training (DOET) as a nodal agency to operate and maintain the emergency kindergartens.

In An Giang province, the model of emergency kindergarten was initiated in 2001 in the upstream districts of Tan



An emergency kindergarten in need of structural improvement.

Chau, An Phu, Chau Phu and Tri Ton, with the provincial CPFC assigned to take the lead in child-care activities. The province plans to establish 125 permanent CCCs all over the province by the year 2010 to meet the needs of child care all year around (i.e., to be used as emergency kindergarten during flooding months). So far, there have been 8 permanent CCCs set up with the internal resources and external help<sup>1</sup>.

However, the venue of the EK varies from government offices to the house of some generous local residents can be as elaborate as occupying a separate building or as simple as the extension of the veranda. Many of the EKs are still in need of structural improvements to accommodate the daily childcare activities and also to ensure the safety of both children and the teachers from any kind of natural hazards and other unexpected shocks.

#### An Giang Provincial Action Plan 2006 for Flood, Storm Control and Search and Rescue

".....To be more active and further promoting activities for children at child care centers, the Committee of Population, Family and Children cooperates with the Department of Education and Training, Department of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs, Department of Health and others to develop Plan to protect children in the flood season in 2006 as follows:

- Maintain and foster 116 existing child care centers.
- Mobilize resources to establish more child care centers and motivate families from the deep-water areas to bring the children to these centers.
- Improve facilities of CCCs/EKs
- Provide training to Child Caretakers
- Prepare vehicles, fuel for commuting children to the child care centers."

<sup>1</sup> 1 by Fatherland Front and 7 by Green Cross Association and other sponsors



Children caretaker in action during flood.

### *Enhancing the Capacities of Child Caretakers*

A significant percentage of child caretakers are selected based on their volunteerism, life experience and love for the children. It is recognized that to preserve the sustainability of the child care schemes during flood times, nurturing more committed and skilled child caretakers are vital. With the assistance of the NGOs, many of the volunteer child caretakers have been provided with trainings on appropriate childcare skills including preparation of toys from the local materials, child nutrition and child hygiene.

From July 2006 to April 2008, 6 Emergency Kindergarten management training courses were conducted, each of 3-day duration. The training covered 101 emergency kindergartens in 71 communes from 6 districts<sup>2</sup> of An Giang, Dong Thap and Tien Giang provinces. A total of 351 (344 women and 7 men) representing the existing Child Caretakers, EK supervisors, and Volunteers from Women Union, participated in these trainings.



Child caretakers prepare toys using local materials.

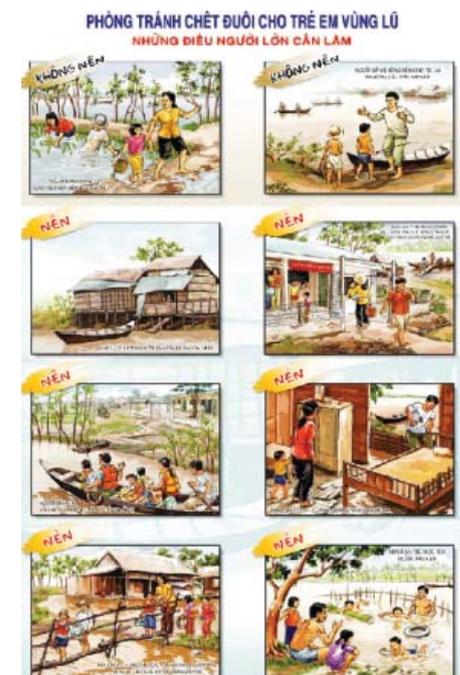
## 3. RAISING THE AWARENESS OF FUTURE GENERATIONS

In the Mekong flood plains of Vietnam, the annual floods call for keeping the communities aware of the flood risks at all times so that they will be able to respond to any flood situation with little consequential damages to both their lives and properties. The Component 4 of Flood Management and Mitigation Program (FMMP), in this particular aspect, highlights the children of school age as the risk communicators, who can help educate the remaining members of the communities. The proj-

ect emphasizes on the development of information, education and communication (IEC) materials for children and participatory formulation of awareness raising and flood risk reduction activities in schools and the communities.

*Adaptation and Publishing Posters for Children and Parents and their Distribution through Appropriate Channels*

Save the Children has been one of the



leading child-focused institutions in Vietnam that promote child safety and child rights. With their kind permission, FEMS project funded the reproduction of a set of posters, originally designed by Save the Children, on “prevention of child drowning” addressed to parents and children.

### *School Flood Safety Program*

In all three target provinces of Component 4 - An Giang, Dong Thap and Tien Giang - School Flood Safety Programs (SFSP) were designed and conducted. By encouraging the involvement of the school teachers, considered as the influential figures in the community, the impacts of the activities were envisioned to be widespread and well-sustained through knowledge enhancement of educa-

### Course Content

**Section 1:** Organization of daily activities for the children

**Section 2:** Talking and telling stories

**Section 3:** Child nutrition

**Section 4:** Water and sanitation, child group management and family consultation

**Section 5:** Preparation of food and child feeding techniques

**Section 6:** Care for child's sleep and personal hygiene

**Section 7:** Preparedness for and treatment to child diseases during flood season.

**Section 8:** Organizing EK activities, making toys with local materials

**Section 9:** Organizing EK activities by reading poems, traditional songs, funny quizzes, learning and singing children's songs.

**Section 10:** Building confidence for child-caretakers

**Section 11:** Organization and management of EK during flood season

<sup>2</sup> An Giang – Tan Chau & Chau Thanh districts, Dong Thap – Tan Hong and Thanh Binh districts, Tien Giang – Cai Be & Cai Lay



Teacher orientation workshop introducing flood safety measures to be included in school flood safety program.

tors for generations to come.

In preparation for the orientation sessions, a “Flood Information Kit for Teachers” was developed as the key reference material. Each kit contained a flood booklet, teaching aids on flood safety (household and school level flood risk mitigation measures before, during and after floods and pictorial activity cards) and a set of audio-visual CDs and DVDs on “Living with Flood” and the “Puppet show on Flood Hazard”.

The one-day orientation sessions concentrated on improving the knowledge on flood hazards, such as food security, disease prevention, safe shelters and means of protection and necessary actions to be carried out before, during and after floods. At the end of each session, the participants were requested to develop an action plan for each individual school on how the information conveyed at the sessions could be further disseminated to the students. The sessions made use of the local experts as resource persons, mainly from the District Committee for Flood and Storm Control. In total, this program involved around 322 primary and secondary schools in three provinces.

Questionnaires on the basic flood risk assessment, with regards to the

structural features of the school buildings, were also distributed during the Orientation Session and schools were assisted in completing not only the initial assessment but also in analyzing the results of the assessment and preparing a consolidated report. Approximately about 150 schools had

been helped to complete the initial flood risk assessment and the flood risk assessment report. The assessment attempted to assist the teachers and educators in learning the existing risks in their immediate environment and to devise solutions.

The implementation of the awareness raising campaigns in the form of “School Flood Safety Day” followed suit. This was planned and organized by the individual school in cooperation with the district and provincial DOET. Such activities as painting contests, quiz competitions, performance by the students and audio-visual shows were conducted and the community members were invited to attend. So far, around 90 selected schools in all three provinces organized the School Flood Safety Day celebration. In support of the SFSP, the “prevention of child drowning” posters and flood booklets were distributed to all participating schools.

In Tien Giang Province, in recognition of the effectiveness of the SFSP, the provincial DOET formulated a Provincial Partnership Strategy to take this model to all the flood-prone schools in the province with possible funding support from other stakeholders at the national and provincial levels.



Students watching “Living with Floods” video during school flood safety campaign.

### 3. LESSONS LEARNED

- Swimming lessons provide basic knowledge and swimming techniques/skills to children and at the same time, raise awareness of the adults on flood risks to children and issues related to child safety.
- Organizing swimming lessons as support to the implementation of existing PCFSC and DCFSC plans imbues a sense of local ownership of the activities.
- The operation of emergency kindergartens yields two-fold benefits: providing much needed child care assistance to poor parents during the rainy seasons and promote multi-stakeholder partnerships between such stakeholders as CPFC, Women's Union, DoET, LISA, Youth Union, VNRC, Fatherland Front, and other mass organizations under the coordination of PCFSC/DCFSC.
- The curriculum for trainings of child caretakers was adapted from the existing one with slight adjustment to suit the needs of the key recipients of the trainings, the volunteer child caretakers. Through the trainings, not only their child caring skills are enhanced but also they are equipped with knowledge on child rights and child protection within the context of flood risk reduction.
- The simple and replicable design of school flood safety programs highlights that a well-thought-out activity with nominal financial requirements can have substantial impacts and can be duplicated in other areas with similar flood situation. In addition, the engagement of provincial and district Education Departments demonstrates the vital role the Departments could play in reducing flood risks in the community.
- The multi-stakeholder approaches employed in child safety programs strengthen the existing bonds between various PCFSC and DCFSC member agencies, allowing them to share resources.

### 4. THE NEXT STEP

It has to be realized that no matter how successful the results are under the school flood safety programs, the geographical coverage will always be restricted for any resource- and time-bound projects. For the expansion of such programs, the education authorities at the provincial and district levels suggested the involvement of national level bodies such as Ministry of Education. With their participation, such activities can expand to an extensive scale and can become part of the national initiatives, guaranteeing their long-term sustainability.

Furthermore, school flood safety day celebrations are non-expensive versions of mass awareness raising. With minimal external support, they can be maintained and extended. Therefore, engagement of external actors, particularly from the local commercial sectors should be explored. Same concept should be applied in expanding the swimming lesson programs.

There is a need to standardize the lesson plan for 5-day swimming classes to ensure most effective results within a limited period of time for future implementation. This is the right time to do it since considerable number of lessons have been carried out and enough experience gained, especially by the CSPT, which is the ideal lead agency for such an endeavor.

The emergency kindergarten management trainings are meant to develop the child caring skills, specifically, of the volunteer child caretakers. The existing course materials cover a wide range of child-related issues and further update on specific needs of children during emergencies will make it more useful for the volunteer child caretakers. At the same time, improved facilities such as safe transportation, clean water supply and safe environment are essential to provide proper services for children at emergency kindergartens during the flood season. Therefore, a balanced combination of capacity building activities for the child

caretakers and structural improvement schemes of the Kindergarten buildings has to be obtained to improve the safety of children living in flood-prone areas.

The local authorities have been exploring various opportunities to sustain the operation of emergency kindergartens as well as in establishing new ones. One recommendation made is to promote a neighbor-helping-neighbor scheme in poor villages with activities ranging from taking care of children to community development projects which are worth exploring.

Nonetheless, Mekong Delta has not seen any big floods in the recent years since 2001 and the keenness and enthusiasm being created for emergency kindergartens has waned notably. Keeping in mind that the children have their rights to uninterrupted education and to healthy/happy lives, the parents and the community as a whole have the responsibility to grant their future generation the rights they deserve.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Safer Communities would like to acknowledge the following for their contribution in the production of this case study:

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**Safer Communities** is a series of case studies that illustrate good practices of disaster preparedness and mitigation undertaken by either the government or non-government agencies with the goal of reducing the vulnerabilities and risks on the communities living in hazard-prone areas.

The series aims to provide decision makers, development planners, disaster management practitioners, community leaders and trainers with an array of proven ideas, tools, policy options and strategies derived from analyses of real-life experiences, good practices and lessons learned in Asia and the Pacific region, with a specific focus on reducing community risks and vulnerabilities and building more disaster-resilient and better prepared societies.

The first few case studies under the series have been developed under the Component 4 "Flood Emergency Strengthening" (FEMS) of the Flood Management and Mitigation Programme (FMMP) of the Mekong River Commission Secretariat (MRC). Therefore, the focus of these studies will be on flood risk management and their geographical coverage is limited to four MRC member countries of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Vietnam. However, good practices from other countries and other natural disasters are to be added over the years.

The Mekong River Commission Secretariat implements a Flood Management and Mitigation Programme (FMMP) designed to prevent, minimize, or mitigate people's suffering and economic losses due to floods, while preserving environmental benefits. FMMP has five components:

1. Establishment of Regional Flood Management and Mitigation Centre
2. Structural Measures and Flood Proofing
3. Enhancing Cooperation in Trans-boundary Flood Issues
4. Flood Emergency Management Strengthening
5. Land Management

The Component 4 "Flood Emergency Management Strengthening (FEMS)," of the FMMP has been implemented by the MRC with technical assistance from the Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC) and funding support from the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), started from September 2004 to April 2008. The project target areas are in Cambodia and Vietnam, namely two provinces and four districts each in Cambodia and Vietnam. The project partners are the National Mekong Committees, National Disaster Management Offices and their local authorities at provincial, district and commune levels, concerned line agencies, mass organisations, Red Cross Societies, international organisations, local and international NGOs, etc.

Since 2004, FEMS has achieved the following:

1. Flood Preparedness Programs (FPP) in the target districts and provinces developed and implemented
2. Local and national capacity in support to the FPP development and implementation process built through training at local levels on community based flood management, damage and need assessment, search and rescue, emergency kindergarten management, swimming lessons for children, etc. and involving/participating in the project implementation
3. Public awareness on household safety measures at local levels raised, including school teachers' orientation and School Flood Safety Program for schools, identification of special needs of women-headed households, cultural performances, folk songs, distribution of flood booklet, posters, etc.
4. Local and regional knowledge sharing conducted through national and regional workshops as well as distribution of good practice documents

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Funded by:



Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit