

Reaching out to the Public

Raising the Awareness of the Community in Flood Risk Reduction in Vietnam

ABSTRACT

This case study documents the efforts of Vietnam's Central Committee on Flood and Storm Control (CCFSC) in raising community awareness on flood mitigation and disaster risk reduction. As an initial step, existing information, education and communication (IEC) materials were reviewed. This led to the development of new posters on household safety measures before, during and after floods. A flood information dissemination strategy for the general public was devised. This consisted of a cultural performance and installation of billboards. The success of this public awareness campaign provides some lessons in sustaining community awareness on flood risk reduction.



Students and teachers of a primary school attend School Flood Safety Campaign.

THE INSIDE STORY

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Nguyen Van Hun has spent all his life in Village 2, Tan Thanh B commune of Tan Hong district in Dong Thap province. Having lived in a village that is located right at the conjunction of 2 canals connected to Mekong (Cuu Long) River, he has experienced the devastating floods of '60s and the early 2000s. He, like other inhabitants of the Village 2, knows what he needs to do to prepare for floods based on his lifelong experiences. In 2007, for the first time in Village 2, a travelling performance troupe came to present a play that focused on flood preparedness. To express his appreciation, he and his family offered to cover the cost of electricity for the entire show. The thorough explanations and technical details that the play provided made him realize a lot of measures could be undertaken at the household level, on top of what they were already practicing, to further re-

duce the risks of floods. Ever since then, he has witnessed the village fishermen carrying floatable materials when they go out for fishing during the flood season. He hopes the troupe will visit the village again because it affords valuable information. Plus he believes the village needs a reminder of such information, as often as possible.

INTRODUCTION

The complicated topography of Vietnam consists mainly of hills and densely forested mountains in the north and central regions. The plains of the southern Cuu Long (Mekong) Delta cover no more than 20% of the country. The Delta is crisscrossed with streams and rivers as well as man-made canals connecting them. For the locals, these waterways provide a transportation system that is conve-

nient and cheap. In addition, the fertile soil of the Delta, with its propitious climate for agriculture, earns the delta the name: “the rice bowl of Vietnam”. The region is Vietnam’s highest producers of rice, vegetables and fruits, which make up the core of the economy of southern Vietnam. The key occupations of the communities living in the Delta are farming and fishing, with many settlements situated along the rivers and waterways.

However, the constructive power of Cuu Long (Mekong) river can turn into destructive forces during the rainy season. Most of the communities see these annual recurring flooding as part of nature’s cycle of purifying the river and depositing rich nutrients on the soil. Particularly in the poor rural areas, the flooding has come to be considered as mundane annual events which do not require much attention until the water level reaches dangerous heights. This nonchalant attitude results in loss of lives and properties every year. Therefore, while acknowledging the positive effects of annual Mekong floods, the communities living in the Delta have to be made aware of the affordable preparedness measures that can help save their lives and valuable assets.

2. REACHING OUT TO THE COMMUNITY

The provincial and district Committees on Flood and Storm Control (PCFSC and DCFSC) believe that to sustain the negative impacts of floods at its minimum, regular community awareness raising should be in place for flood mitigation and risk reduction purposes.

Particularly important for the poor communities, who have to struggle to maintain a steady income at all times, information on self-help, non-costly preparedness measures are to be imparted through innovative means.

Design and Production of Public Awareness Materials

With the increased rate of migration and mass movements of people in the Cuu Long Delta, brought about by its

rising economic opportunities, it has become a big challenge to keep the communities aware of the flood risks at all times, chiefly of the new inhabitants. To achieve long-lasting impacts with the limited available resources, the Flood Emergency Management Strengthening (FEMS) project, implemented by the Mekong River Commission (MRC) Secretariat with support from the Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC) under the Component 4 of MRC’s Flood Management and Mitigation Program (FMMP), perceived that the first step was to produce simple but informative public awareness

The main task of flood and storm control and natural disaster mitigation in 2006 is to enhance the guidance, direction and natural disaster forecast, protect infrastructural work, life, property of people and state; and strengthen information dissemination and public awareness. To effectively implement the flood and storm control plan in 2006, this plan is divided into 3 stages as shown below:

Before flood (from 1 January to 30 June):

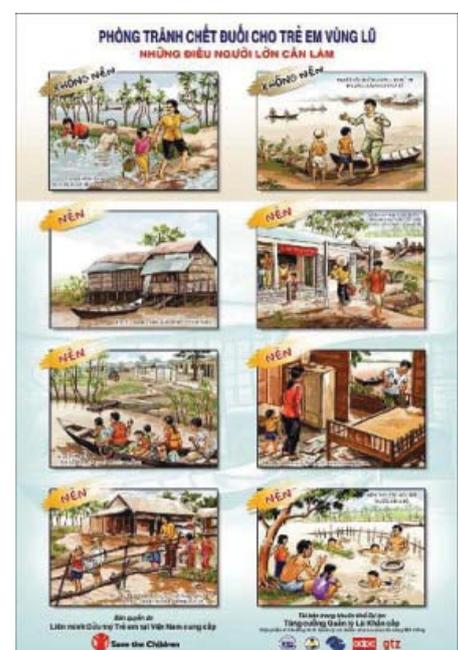
This is the most important stage in deciding on a successful flood, storm control and natural disaster mitigation, so that concerned sectors can quickly make implementation plan in detail. The plan must have focus and the main points are: prepare vehicles, manpower and logistic according to the guideline “on 4 spot policies,” and create conditions to actively cope with main flood.

Plan on Floods and Storm Control and Natural Disaster Mitigation 2006, Dong Thap Province

educational materials. The Central Committee on Flood and Storm Control (CCFSC) expressed its pledge to be the key partner in this venture.

The first activity undertaken was to

review the existing public awareness materials in Vietnam, with regards to flood risk reduction. It was found that a number of high quality materials already existed, results of projects implemented by non-government organizations over the years. However, their distribution was limited to the project areas alone. Therefore, it was decided that in addition to the development of new materials, re-production of relevant noteworthy materials would be undertaken to facilitate the replication of good practices. By middle of 2007, the Central Committee on Flood and Storm Control (CCFSC) with financial

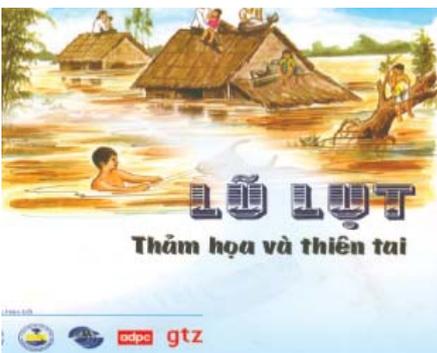




support from FEMS project produced:

- A set of two posters on “Prevention of Child Drowning” – one targeting children as its audience and the other, the parent (reprinting of Save the Children Alliance’s posters).
- A set of three posters on “Household Flood Safety Measures” – one for each phase of flood: before, during and after.
- Replicate copies of “Living with Floods” video, conceived and produced originally by Vietnam Red Cross (VNRC).
- A flood booklet featuring different types and characteristics of prevalent floods in Vietnam and their impacts, together with do’s and don’ts before, during and after floods.

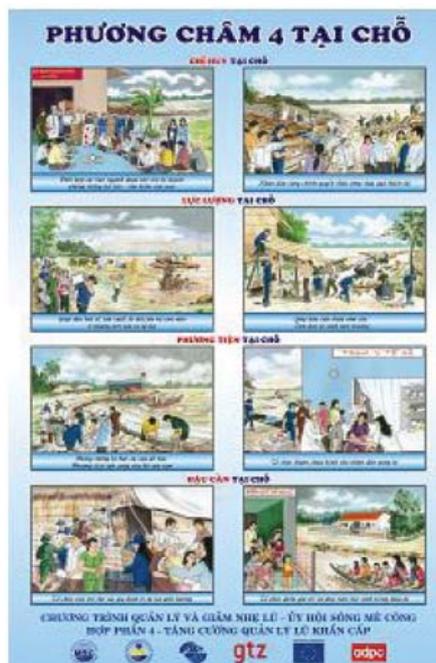
- A poster depicting 4-onsite motto, the basic standard code of conduct



to be followed by any kind of crisis response operations in Vietnam.

4-onsite motto

- 1- On-site leadership - the commander is authorized by the People’s Committee, local government, mass organizations or communities to coordinate all flood preparedness and response activities .
- 2- On-site human resources – involvement of local residents, task forces of military, public security, local mass organizations ready to



respond to emergencies within the locality.

3- On-site materials/equipment – State and People working together with local population contributing local labor, fund, materials, and equipment. For instance - vehicles for search and rescue, evacuation, dyke and road maintenance, places to open emergency kindergarten, boats for pickup service of school children.

4-On-site logistics – preparing food, foodstuff, medicine, household kits, etc. to facilitate immediate life stabilization and production development

Conceiving an Information Dissemination Plan for the General Public

With the basic reference materials for public awareness raising developed, the next step was to implement the pilot public awareness raising activities in the specific areas of Tan Hong district in Dong Thap province and Tan Chau district in An Giang province.

The DCFSCs of Tan Hong and Tan Chau¹ realized that for a large-scale public awareness raising to take off, a responsible government agency, specifically a member of the DCFSC, had to take the lead in formulating a feasible plan. It had to be an agency with prior experience in organizing large-scale public campaigns and with substantial knowledge and understanding on information dissemination methods that would appeal to mass populations. The ideal agency was identified as the district Office of Culture and Information (OCI).

Through bi-lateral meetings with the DCFSCs and OCIs of Tan Hong and Tan Chau districts, two innovative activities were agreed on:

1. Conducting a play or a performance to capture people’s interest. The

¹ Under the Flood Emergency Management Strengthening (FEMS) project, the following provinces and districts in Vietnam are covered:

- An Giang province – Tan Chau and Chau Thanh districts
- Dong Thap province – Tan Hong and Thanh Binh districts

² On average, they conduct around 90 performances district wide every year.

OCI of Tan Hong district, Dong Thap province in particular was keen to take on the idea since they already had an 11-member dissemination team, responsible for non-profit public awareness raising activities², with extensive connection to other cultural and performing troupes/artists in the area.

2. Installation of information billboards at strategic places in the dis-

Performing Arts and Southern Rural Vietnam³

The performing arts in the form of theatre and spoken performances maintain their popularity in Vietnam even in the era of MTV and computer games. They continue to be performed by government-organized troupes and their popularity is remarkably more significant in the rural areas of Southern Vietnam where their roots can be traced. Their appeal can be felt centuries back from its birth in the 13th century Vietnam. The theatre and spoken performances have been used to deliver messages of various intents from preservation of patriotic sense to conducting public education campaigns on safe sex and reproductive health.

At the district level, under the leadership of the District People's Party, the OCI is responsible for an extensive network of culture and information centers. In addition to organizing a range of social and sporting activities, OCI's responsibilities range from promoting participation in and appreciation of music, dance and theatre, organizing film screenings and lectures, coordinating the organization of traditional festivals, providing newspapers and books for local people to read and disseminating government directives regarding a cultured way of life.

trict which would act as constant reminders of what measures need to be taken at the household level to reduce the flood risks. The DCFSCs and OCIs of both Tan Hong and Tan Chu districts endorsed the effectiveness of the information billboards. It was decided that the billboard would display the selected household level flood preparedness messages extracted from the existing IEC materials.

While the dissemination plans were taking shape, the designs of the billboards and the messages to be displayed on them were finalized and the scripts for the performance were endorsed by the DCFSCs in conjunction with the OCIs of both districts.

Installation of Billboards



The billboards in Tan Hong district.t



The billboards in Tan Chau district.

In July and August of 2007, a total of 10 information billboards were erected in ten selected communes, five communes each in Tan Chau district, An Giang province and Tan Hong district, Dong Thap province.

The carefully selected locations of the billboards in both districts ensured the maximum visibility and viewing by all passerbys and the villagers. These were areas such as at the market, at the intersection of key provincial/district roads, ferry terminal, near a major provincial bridge or close to People's Committee buildings.

The boards were made mainly of corrugated iron sheet in the size of 2m x 3m or 2m x 1m, each costing between 3,000,000 and 3,500,000 VND. They had two key messages:

- Do not allow children to swim in flood waters.

³ [http://www.culturalprofiles.net/Visiting_Arts/Directories/Overview/\(Visiting Arts: Cultural Profile Projects\)](http://www.culturalprofiles.net/Visiting_Arts/Directories/Overview/(Visiting Arts: Cultural Profile Projects))



Tan Hong completed the script June 2007. The OCI also took care of the announcement of the dates and venues of the performances within the com-

The Summary of the Performance “The Life Vest”

The performance featured six main characters: a father, a mother, son, brother of the father, the Chief of the Commune Red Cross and an officer from the Commune Women’s Union. The story looked at the life of a family living on the flood plains of Mekong.

The father and the son were excellent swimmers known in the village as the best and the father became complacent believing only those who cannot swim well got hurt or killed in the floods. Despite the warnings from Commune Red Cross and Women’s Union, the father still encouraged his son to go out and swim in the flood water to play, much to the mother’s chagrin. He had also adopted a passive attitude towards the annual floods - that the damages were unavoidable no matter how prepared one was as long as one lived on the flood plains. So no preparation whatsoever was deemed essential. They ignored such simple measure as carrying along empty cans or plastic containers or rubber tube to serve as life vests while travelling on boats during the flood season. Due to carelessness and lack of such measures the father and son team, while on a fishing trip one night, faced a very strong wind and current and almost got drowned but were saved by the Red Cross Rescue Team. That taught them an invaluable lesson to be alert and prepared at all times.

- Closely follow the flood forecast information and strengthen the houses before flood.

Organizing the Performances

The necessary preparations for the performances were overseen by the Tan Hong district Office of Information and Culture (OCI) in late May 2007. The district OCI had extensive experience in coordinating performances for specific educational purposes, including the ones that concentrated on conveying the messages to prepare for any kind of natural disasters prevalent in the district such as floods and storms. Under the direction of Tan Hong DCFSC, OCI usually prepared the scripts based on the previous year events. The performance group from OCI conducted the shows according to the schedule prepared by OCI.

For the particular performance under Component 4, OCI used as basic reference materials, the “Living with

Floods” video and the flood booklet in developing the script. OCI’s past experience in conducting similar performances, particularly on flood awareness issues, eased their tasks of script preparation. Nevertheless, OCI was appreciative of the reference materials since they provided more methodical understanding of the subject.

Guided by PCFSC of Dong Thap and DCFSC of Tan Hong, district OCI of



A scene from a cultural show, Dong Thap province, Vietnam.

³ [http://www.culturalprofiles.net/Visiting_Arts/Directories/Overview/\(Visiting Arts: Cultural Profile Projects\)](http://www.culturalprofiles.net/Visiting_Arts/Directories/Overview/(Visiting_Arts:_Cultural_Profile_Projects))



A scene from cultural show, Dong Thap province, Vietnam.

Most of the audiences were able to grasp the flood risk reduction messages embedded in the performance because the script was written and presented in a simple but entertaining manner. They also enjoyed the question and answer sections which made the event more exciting.

On the whole, 18 performances were organized for around 4,300 audiences in Tan Hong district alone. For the first 9 performances, Component 4 bore the total costs but realizing the practical and effective way of such traditional performances which combines the entertainment values with educational purposes, OCI of Tan Hong contributed 30% of the expenses for the last 9 performances.

In conjunction with the development of IEC materials and the awareness raising activities targeting the general public, a harmonizing “School Flood Safety Program” was also devised simultaneously with a focused group of recipients: the teachers and the school children of primary and secondary levels.

The program made use of the developed IEC materials as the core of its information dissemination plan. The teachers and school authorities from around 340 primary and secondary schools in An Giang, Dong Thap and

munity.

The first performance was organized in June 2007 in the compound of Tan Cong Chi elementary school, Thong Nhat village, Tan Cong Chi commune. The community enthusiastically supported the event by volunteering to assist in the logistical arrangements such as cooking dinner for the organizers and lending a hand in setting up the stage.

The performance began with an introductory message underlining both the positive and negative impacts of the annual floods. While the annual floods enriched the soil by depositing the rich minerals the river carried from the upstream highlands and the process acted as a natural cleansing process on the flood plains, they also caused loss of lives and properties and disrupted economic and development activities in the region. The upstream location of the Tan Hong district meant the annual recurring floods were unavoidable.

The performance was broken down into 3 scenes and at the end of each scene, a discussion on the previous scene was presented. The audiences were given five questions in relation to the previously delivered scene and the message it contained. The audiences, especially the children, eagerly

responded by shouting the answers, generating a lively environment. The audiences were also informed of the number and locations of rescue posts and emergency kindergarten in the district and were encouraged to contribute to maintaining these services in any way they could. At the end of the performance, 2 sets of posters, the Flood Booklet and VCD “Living with Floods⁴” were distributed among the audiences.



A scene from cultural show on flood risk reduction, Dong Thap province, Vietnam.

Tien Giang provinces were first oriented on the basic flood risk reduction concepts. Following that, the program introduced school flood safety days at the selected schools, prepared and

implemented by the school authorities who attended the orientation sessions to advance their knowledge to school children. The program complemented the billboards installation and tradi-

tional performances through nurturing of more enduring groups of information disseminators.

3. LESSONS LEARNED

- Distribution of easily comprehensible IEC materials is the most effective way to reach a mass population. Acknowledging that many flood risk reduction IEC materials already exist in Vietnam led to the review of existing materials in the country which in turn results in fostering a rare and beneficial partnership among various non-government agencies in sharing of the existing materials. This helps avoid duplication and enhances the coverage of programs or projects regulated by limited resources.
- The district Office of Culture and Information has wide-ranging experiences in designing and conducting traditional performances with focused messages. Identifying them as the lead agency in undertaking the key activities under public awareness raising creates a valuable collaborator who can take the activities further to other areas with similar problems.
- The traditional performances supplement the OCI's plans by offering greater coverage. Additionally, the vigorous promotion of the events draws large crowds in villages.

4. THE NEXT STEP

Sustaining the awareness of the communities on flood risk reduction should be treated as a regular program rather than as a one-shot event and requires involvement and contribution from all stakeholders – the disaster management authorities, the relevant line agencies, non-government organizations as well as the general public.

Provincial and district Culture and Information offices should be given proper guidance and training on risk reduction measures and programs for them to be able to design and deliver comprehensive, effective and innovative public awareness raising programs on various subjects of floods, drought, etc. – natural disaster events that frequently hit the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. Ideally, it should be part of the annual flood and storm control plan of the local disaster management authorities and

the People's Committee.

In order to reach a greater mass of population in the Cuu Long Delta, different types of information dissemination media need to be researched. It has been found that many families listen to radio and watch television regularly during the rainy season on flood monitoring news. But the technical nature of these messages sometimes creates confusion and suggestions have been made to present similar forms of traditional performances on radio and television.

At the same time, it is imperative to educate the public not just on the negative impacts of floods but also on its positive impacts and promote "Living with Floods" concepts rather than relocation of communities who have been living in the Cuu Long flood plains for generations.

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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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