

A wealth of water: Terre des Hommes Germany's community-based projects benefit Vietnamese children and youth

“Clean, safe drinking water is scarce... [N]early 1 billion people in the... world don't have access to it... And still today, all around the world, far too many people spend their entire day searching for it... [T]ime lost gathering water and suffering from water-borne diseases is limiting people's true potential. Education is lost to sickness. Economic development is lost while people merely try to survive...”

The Water Project

http://thewaterproject.org/water_scarcity



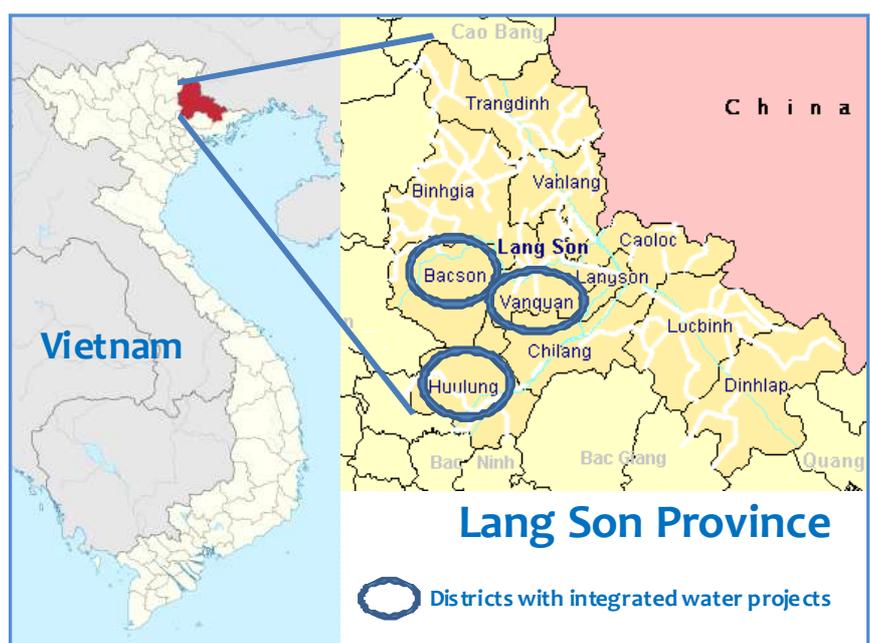
This dire reality is affecting many people in Vietnam's upland regions, where the impact of both the lack of clean potable water, and access to it, threaten to erode family and social structures.

Transforming with water

As a whole, Vietnam is a country rich in water resources, including plentiful rainfall, yet despite this water wealth, some areas suffer from great scarcity during the dry season. The water that is available to many communities is often either dirty or unsafe, frequently leading to skin diseases, diarrhea and other problems related to digestion, eye infections and an overall weakened immune system. And yet, people must drink, bathe, wash their dishes and clothes, irrigate their gardens or fields: water is essential for life.

The need for a reliable source of clean water can become urgent and all-consuming, and when it is met, can bring about transformation.

Supporting joint water projects in Vietnam since the mid-1990s, terre des hommes Germany's involvement has been instrumental in the making of such transformation. We work closely with main partner organization The Women's Union of Lang Son Province as well as local affected ethnic communities.





“During exam time I need time to study for my exams but then I had to fetch water, because water was more important. I sometimes went to school unprepared. I got bad grades and became so sad and ashamed that I wanted to leave school. Some of my friends in my village did drop out, because they couldn’t stand the pressure any more. Without the water from the this project, I don’t know if I’d still be going to school...”

Setiawan, 14, from 2012 terre des hommes water projects
Lang Son Province

The simple absence of a stable, nearby source of clean and safe water for this youth meant physical hardship, ill health and the probable sacrifice of his education. Many of the children and young people, who, like him, are growing up in Lang Son and elsewhere in northern Vietnam’s remote, mountainous regions bordering China, experience very similar conditions. Their parents are small scale farmers struggling to make a living off land that tends to be barren and rocky. Villages lie far part across mountain peaks and ravines, and the only water source is sometimes a river located miles away, requiring arduous daily water collecting trips for every family.

Understanding the situation on the ground was the first step for tdh. Once the complex challenges became clear, we decided to engage with our partners to begin building solutions for some communities in the province.

Lang Son Province – A Snapshot

- Population: c. 850,000
- Ethnic nationalities: Nung (43%) and Tay (37%)
- Area: c. 820.000 hectar
- Arable land: c. 110.000 hectar
- Percent of population based in rural areas: > 85%
- Below poverty line: > 50%
(earning a monthly income of < 400.000 Dong, c. 15 Euro)
- Hungry: 18%
- c. 30-40% of children under 5 are malnourished

The children of Huu Lien

Through our long-term partnership with the Women's Union of Lang Son Province, tdh in October 2014 started a third joint, integrated drinking water project – targeting the community of Huu Lien, in Huu Lung District. Huu Lien's residents form the third project partners. The project (to run until September 2016) focuses on health and improvement of living conditions especially for women and children.

The c. 3,500 villagers of Huu Lien – similar to countless others in this region – were dependant on polluted mountain streams for their water supply. This water crisis had started a downward spiral that seemed to be culminating in the community's loss of livelihoods, health and family coherence.

The lack of water affects all aspects of daily life here and can have a far-reaching impact. At least one family member spends up to three hours walking on steep mountain slopes every day to fetch water for the household. This means they cannot spend that time doing other work like farming. There was also little paid work available in the communities to supplement daily requirements beyond what farming could provide, while the inhospitable, arid soil only produced one harvest a year.

This threatened food security, resulting in malnutrition among the children and motivating more family members, mainly men, to leave home to seek paid jobs elsewhere. Women also sometimes leave for perceived better opportunities in China, where some unfortunately are forced into sex work or sold to Chinese men. Many other women and the children are left behind to fend for themselves.

Children bear the brunt of the impact from this crisis.

The departure of adults means less parental support for school- or homework and less supervision overall. The parent left behind needs help fetching water and is then forced to choose one of her children as 'water carrier'. Physically, the young water carriers often break arms or legs as they have to wobble on uneven, winding paths while weighed down by buckets and other containers for water.

Like young Setiawan relating his experience above, this affects the child's performance at school and causes both emotional and mental stress. Sometimes children are pulled out of school entirely, and the future for these children looks dismal.

The people of Huu Lien needed a sustainable way out of this vicious cycle, and water was the answer. In fact, two other tdh supported water projects in Lang Son Province had demonstrated highly successful outcomes and served as models.

Context is key

Over the years, tdh has developed a solid understanding of the local context and the main priorities of community members here in northern Vietnam. The three projects

supported are collaborative and integrated, reaching beyond the mere provision of, or access to, water. The goal of an intervention is the ‘wellness’ of a community as a whole, and this can include – but is not limited to! – environmental protection, health, education and income generation; and always with an emphasis on children.

Since arriving in Vietnam almost twenty years ago, tdh has built on valuable lessons learned. Some years before Huu Lien, the communities of Hung Vu und Tri Le benefitted from tdh’s interventions (2005-2008 and 2009-2011, respectively). Located in two different districts of Lang Son Province, community members faced challenges similar to those living in Huu Lien.

A 2012 external evaluation recorded that both the process and outcomes of these earlier projects reflected the effectiveness of tdh’s approach of supporting work that is based in the community. This is context-sensitive and locally rooted, and therefore also locally relevant, with an emphasis on the longer term. The major impacts, listed below, point to key improvements in the lives of the communities’ children.

Impacts:

How access to water has improved children’s lives in Hung Vu and Tri Le

- **82 % of households (139 von 171) use water from the project**
- **92% of the Na Nuay ethnic community make use of the water - the most of all target beneficiaries**
- **80% children reported improved performance at school and – “Going to school is more fun!”**
- **83% households reported improved health – the incidence of diarrhea, skin infections, eye diseases and gynecological diseases has decreased**
- **80% reported improved hygiene and sanitation practices while cooking, bathing and cleaning**
- **Hours previously given to getting water were redirected to farming, and spending time in the community or with family**
- **Male family members were are now more likely to help with housework and show interest in their children’s lives**

Participation, please!

In Hung Vu and Tri Le, with circa 4,000 community members per commune, the strategic preparation process included information sharing sessions to encourage a strong sense of ownership of, and a willingness to maintain, the project even beyond the implementation phase.

Community members' support and participation was necessary for project-related construction and transport work, while their knowledge of the



surrounding mountains could help find appropriate water sources. It was thus possible to identify water sources on higher ground, allowing the water to be transported to individual villages without needing pumps.

Awareness raising campaigns introduced environmental concerns, in particular forest conservation, which linked to re-forestation of bamboo and the protection of water sources. Hygiene and related health issues were raised in community health workshops. As evidence of the effectiveness of the project's combined elements (prevention education, the improved access to water and the resulting increase in self-motivation and confidence), Hung Vu and Tri Le community members later found the funds to build over 200 new toilets and over 100 bathrooms.

Another key element of the ongoing education work in the communities was based on tdh's own priority focus on children; the key cross-cutting topics of children's rights and gender equality were incorporated into every event. Facilitators used this as an entry point to discuss traditional roles and the social norms governing the lives of women and men, girls and boys.

Children's rights are human rights

The realization of children's rights forms the foundation of tdh's work globally: we support projects and partners whose work contributes to improving children's lives. This also includes women's empowerment and gender equality, because they are intimately connected to and have an important influence on a child's development overall.

tdh's joint integrated water projects thus attempt to respond to children's ability to thrive on multiple levels and across a broad spectrum of themes – and we face the innate complexity of the topic head on.

At first glance, a child's right to a healthy environment is the most relevant. Soon, however, it becomes obvious that this right is intertwined with other key rights - the right to live, survive and develop; the right to good health; the right to food; the right to an appropriate accommodation; and the right to education.

We regard children as full members of their village or community, making it necessary to include the entire community in our response to a crisis like the water scarcity in Lang Son. Core values ‘in action’ – like trust, respect, participation, ownership, equity and diversity – have helped create fertile ground for acceptance, collaboration and even self-driven continuation.

There was also the recognition, early on, that the power over and decision-making on local water resources must stay in the hands of the villagers. This empowerment and self-determination affects all aspects of community life, and our participatory approach gives children and young people a voice that will hopefully be acknowledged as an integral part of the whole.

A wealth of water



All of this valuable experience is being applied in tdh’s newest project. After an appropriate preparation period focusing on education and awareness raising work, it was time for Huu Lien to install its first clean, easily accessible drinking water system.

The source lies high in the hills, and the water is collected and filtered in a 4 m³ cement tank. It then flows down through the mountainous terrain via a 16,000

meter long piping system, ending in larger, 10 m³ cement tanks – project participants built a total of 11 reservoirs to reach all the villages, including Huu Lien’s school and the provincial health administration facilities.

Families now had access to clean and safe water for drinking as well as use in their households and home gardening . Those who used to be water carriers – mainly women and children – now no longer have to risk their limbs along twisting, uneven paths to the water sources.

Maintenance of the new water system is crucial and so every family contributes a monthly fee of 3000 Dong (c. 12 Cent). A ‘supervisor’ is designated in each village to ensure that the system works efficiently and can be repaired if needed.

This entire project cost 1,732,250,000 Dong (75,603 Euro). Given its emphasis on education, participation and instilling a sense of ownership, this is both cost-effective and sustainable. The numerical impact is Huu Lien’s population of almost 3,500, but the

actual impact is much broader, since the community can pass the valuable insights and knowledge gained during the project to future generations.

Globally, there is talk of a water crisis, although the earth is rich in water and there should be enough to go around. Individual water consumption is only a small part of the problem, it is mainly our industries that are polluting, mismanaging, exploiting and otherwise destroying clean and safe water sources for personal use. The world's growing population demands more and more water, and big business uses this as an excuse for uncontrolled expansion and exploitation. Unfortunately, it is the rural communities who are often at a disadvantage when companies or cities encroach on their land.

To address this larger problem, part of the discussion around water needs to revolve around basic human rights and accompanying legal protection. Practically, however, small-scale, participatory and community-based projects like the ones tdh supports – in the interest of children's rights – are a good beginning and demonstrate that there are low-cost, sustainable solutions, which can have positive 'ripple effects' within a region.

These immediate solutions may not always influence larger political developments, but they do directly impact children's day-to-day lives. A bottom-up approach allows the people themselves to feel confident and empowered – to speak out or to act – and this new ability may, in the long run, lead to sustainable change.

The children of Huu Lien

The people of Huu Lien have been using their new water system since January 2015. During initial follow up monitoring by tdh and the members of the Women's Union it appears that the same positive changes we witnessed with our other projects in Lang Son are also taking place here.

It is especially rewarding to see a change in the daily lives of Huu Lien's children, who are now able to, well, really be children. Of course they are still expected to help their parents in the household, and maybe even fetch the water – but with the water tanks only a relatively short distance away, this previously draining and dangerous task can become part of a sociable early morning and evening routine.

Parents can exhale, send the children off to school and focus on the day's work without the constant, nagging pressure of having to do more, or not having enough time to do what is needed. Their attention can turn to farming or seeking additional income, and when the children come home after school, there is time to share and to simply enjoy being together as a family.

And the children? They can do what children and young people do best: play, learn, grow – and live.

