

# Country and Community information



# Vietnam

# ActionAid in Vietnam



*Vietnam lies in the centre of Southeast Asia. It borders China in the north, Laos and Cambodia in the west and the Pacific Ocean in the east. It's an incredibly beautiful country with a patchwork of brilliant green rice paddies running along the coast and densely forested mountains and hills in the interior.*

*The country has a monsoon climate and is characterised by four distinct seasons with high humidity. The average annual temperature ranges from 18 degrees in the mountains to 31 on the plains. Occasional typhoons bring extensive flooding to the middle regions of Vietnam.*

*In recent times, Vietnam has had to recover from the ravages of war and the loss of financial support from the old Soviet bloc. And whilst the move towards a market based economy has brought increased opportunities to work, learn and enjoy a better life, much of the population still lives in extreme poverty. Medicine, education and seeds, previously subsidised by the government, are now beyond the reach of most people.*

*ActionAid works with Vietnam's poorest people, who live predominantly in remote rural areas. Our aim is to give them the support they need to make positive and lasting changes to their lives.*

## Vietnam Facts:

- Vietnam has a population of 80 million people.
- Average life expectancy is 69 years.
- 1 in 26 children dies before they reach their fifth birthday.
- Up to 76% of people living in rural areas do not have access to safe water.
- 37% of people live on or below the poverty line.
- 37% of children under 5 are malnourished.

## Where we work

ActionAid works throughout Vietnam including the Quang Ninh, Son La and Lai Chau Provinces in the mountainous north and the Ha Tinh Province in central Vietnam. More recently, we've begun work in the southern province of Ha Giang and with people living in the slums of Ho Chi Minh City. For many families, each day is a struggle – with little or no access to life's essentials, such as safe drinking water, sufficient food or the chance of a livelihood. Few have anything more than a tiny plot of land on which to grow food.

## Making a difference to the poorest people

ActionAid began work in Vietnam in 1989. During this time, we've offered thousands of people our support. Each of our projects is tailored to the needs of the local community and we work closely with existing organisations to make sure that the change we achieve together is appropriate and long lasting. Our long-term aim is to make the voices of poor people heard in Vietnam – so that they play an active role in bringing about a fairer society, where each individual has the chance to live a life free of poverty.



## Water

Up to 76% of people in the northern and central provinces of Vietnam live without access to safe drinking water. This puts families at risk of contracting water-borne diseases such as cholera and dysentery. But by helping local communities to construct protected water systems, ActionAid is working to ensure that everyone is able to drink water that won't make them ill.

Water from mountain streams is piped to convenient distribution points – giving many families a supply of clean water that they can depend on. And because we train local people to maintain the new water systems, they'll have the supplies needed for land irrigation, drinking and washing for many years to come.

Maintenance, upgrades and any water-related problems are dealt with by the Water Users' Associations (WUAs) that consist of local government and villagers.

### Than Thi Sy's story

*Before the canal system was upgraded with ActionAid's support and before the establishment of the Water Users' Association, I used to be worried every time my son went out to get water. Water supplies were not reliable and fights for water were common. Now I no longer need to worry. The Water Users' Association takes care of their villagers – water is delivered to every plot and there is no more fighting.*

## Health

In Vietnam, dirty drinking water is a major cause of ill health. During droughts, existing water shortages are exacerbated – leaving people so desperate that they will drink from local pools, lakes and swamps, which are often polluted. During the rainy season, wells are contaminated with floodwater – and families are once more forced to drink dirty water. Because of this, local families suffer from water-borne diseases such as cholera and dysentery.

When people get ill, there is little support available. Private practitioners sell drugs at high prices on the open market. And although there are a reasonably good number of government health clinics in Vietnam, many in the rural mountainous regions lack resources – including medicines and doctors.

Improving the health of local people doesn't only involve



upgrading health facilities, but also equipping them with the knowledge to prevent disease. ActionAid trains community health workers, who travel to rural areas, providing life-saving information. Increasingly, this includes how to live free of HIV/AIDS.

We are also promoting child immunisation against preventable diseases and supporting health education about locally common diseases such as malaria.

## Livelihoods

Over 90% of the population depends on wet rice cultivation to provide for their families. But due to the lack of water during the dry season, their livelihoods suffer.

A vital part of our work is to help poor people develop new farming techniques – which will enable them to have food all year round. ActionAid teaches farmers how to combat soil erosion, to farm on steeply sloping mountainous land and how to prevent disease amongst their livestock.

Access to water is also a major issue for poor farmers especially those with fields on higher land. We give them the support they need to set up irrigation systems to provide sufficient water to farm.

## Education

Many children from ethnic minorities miss out on the education that is rightfully theirs – because of poverty and a lack of schools. Often their families can't afford the fees to send them to school or struggle to pay for the books they need. ActionAid helps by enabling poor children to borrow books from our book lending service and also offers scholarships.

For adults in Vietnam, literacy rates are high with over 90% of people being able to read and write. We target our work in poorer provinces where more than 60% of women



and 37% of men are illiterate. Through classes, we enable people to come together to gain reading, writing and numeracy skills. At the same time, they learn how to use these to fight poverty – meeting and talking to become active members of their community.

## Credit & savings schemes

Poor people – especially women – in Vietnam find it almost impossible to secure a bank loan. This makes it incredibly difficult for them to build a livelihood. Families simply don't have the money to buy food let alone invest in the tools, seeds and fertilisers, which could change their lives. Many, desperate for a better life, turn to illegal money lenders. The sky-high interest they charge condemns people to a life of poverty – struggling to make repayments on a debt they will never be free of.

ActionAid supports schemes run by local people to provide affordable loans. In many cases, women set up savings and loan groups of their own. Members save small amounts whenever they can and take out loans at a reasonable rate. These allow them to buy essential foodstuffs as well as the equipment they need to develop their livelihood and build a life free of poverty. So far, we've been able to reach over 23,000 women through such schemes.

## Trafficking

Trafficking is an increasingly serious issue in Vietnam. It occurs when people illegally go into poor communities to offer children and young women the chance of a job – something women are often denied in Vietnam – and a better life. Desperate to give their

children the best possible chances, poor families accept. But instead, women and children find themselves forced into prostitution or child labour. The scale of the problem is now huge. Between 1990 and 1999, tens of thousands of women and children were trafficked to China and other countries.

ActionAid's aim is to tackle the root causes of the trade, which includes the lack of opportunities available to poor women. An education, for example, will allow women more choice in life – and the chance to build a livelihood of their own.

## Rights based approach

At the heart of ActionAid's approach is the belief that each of us – rich or poor – is entitled to the same basic human rights. These include access to food, water and an education. But we also have a right to play an active role in our societies. Too often, the voices of poor people are ignored. We work to change this by equipping people with a knowledge of their rights, so they have the power to change their lives for themselves. We then give them the support they need to lobby the government and change policies so that they aren't left powerless – and living in poverty.

Thanks to the generosity of our supporters, ActionAid is able to do so much to improve the lives of some of the world's poorest families. Since 1972, we've helped millions of people throughout the world, giving them the chance to enjoy a healthier, happier and more dignified future. Vietnam is just one of over 30 countries we are working in.

Photos: FRONT COVER – top left: Nguyen Quang Minh/ActionAid, top right: Michael Amendolia/Network/ActionAid, bottom: Nguyen Thi Tu/ActionAid. INSIDE – bottom left: Nguyen Quang Minh/ActionAid, top right: Nguyen Quang Minh/ActionAid. BACK – top left: Michael Amendolia/Network/ActionAid, top right: Nguyen Quang Minh/ActionAid.

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