US-VIETNAM DIALOGUE ON AGENT ORANGE/DIOXIN
SUMMARY REPORT ON
THIRD DIALOGUE GROUP MEETING
HANOI
FEBRUARY 1, 2008

After project and other site visits in Ho Chi Minh City; Cu Chi; Bien Hoa; Danang and Quang Nai, the US-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin met in Hanoi on February 1, 2008 to review the past year’s work and look ahead to a second year of cooperation. The meeting was chaired by Susan Berresford, Convenor of the DG. Madame Ton Nu Thi Ninh of Tri Viet University participated as chair of the Vietnamese group. Also attending from the Vietnamese side were Professor Vo Quy (Vietnam National University); Dr. Nguyen Thi Ngoc Phuong (Medical University of Ho Chi Minh University); Mr. Do Hoang Long (People-to-People Relations Department of the Party External Relations Committee); and General Tran Hanh (Vietnam Veterans Association).

Mr. Walter Isaacson (Aspen Institute) participated as chair of the American group. Also attending were Dr. Vaughan Terekian (American Association for the Advancement of Science) and Ms. Mary E. Dolan-Hogrefe (National Organization on Disability). Mr. William Meyer (Park Avenue Equity Partners) participated by telephone from California. Dr. Melanie Walker (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation) attended the meeting as a guest. Also present were Catharin Dalpino (Aspen Institute); Charles Bailey (Ford Foundation); and Nguyen Trang-thu (Tri Viet University).

The meeting chair reviewed the major tasks of the Dialogue Group: (1) to demonstrate that dioxin can be remediated through containment and clean-up; (2) to train trainers in landscape restoration; (3) to establish a laboratory to analyze dioxin samples; (4) to support models for service to disabled victims of dioxin and their families; and (5) to mainstream the Agent Orange/dioxin issue in the United States to promote funding from US and other sources.

Participants discussed the central role of the Dialogue Group, which is to identify worthy projects and help identify funding for those efforts. It was underscored, however, that the DG is not itself a funding agency and, moreover, that the DG must look beyond the Ford Foundation for funds – building a broader and more sustainable donor base is an urgent and ongoing task.
Laboratory

If this project is successful, the laboratory planned would be the first one set up in Asia to meet international standards for dioxin testing. Beyond testing samples for dioxin levels, the laboratory would help to train professionals on issues related to dioxin remediation, as well as research and develop new technologies to contain the problem.

An American participant remarked that the present Committee 33 funding request from donors was probably insufficient. The present request level is $10 million, which includes requests to donors and $3 million anticipated from the Government of Vietnam. In addition to equipment and staff, the proposal would do well to include education and pilot programs. In addition, she believed that the laboratory would need a strong business plan to diversity beyond dioxin and include other contaminants, so as to sustain itself and secure its position in the international scientific community. Another American agreed with her, and noted that to be operational for the long term, the lab would need to be a research and training center for students.

Participants agreed that the DG should encourage as much funding upfront as possible, particularly since the Vietnamese government may find it difficult to find matching funds further down the line. Assuming that start-up grants are made in the next few months, it would take approximately three years to get a laboratory up and running. An American member thought that initial funds could be in hand by this June. If so, equipment could be in place and essential staff on board by December. Under this fast-track schedule, the first tests might be performed in early 2009.

Bases Containment

The meeting chair observed that the measures to contain dioxin on the north end of the Da Nang runway were now in place and asked the group to consider next steps in the area of bases containment. A Vietnamese participant remarked that she was pleased that the human side of containment was also being addressed, that concrete slabs, a watch tower and a higher wall were in place to prevent people from wandering into contaminated areas.

Another Vietnamese member argued emphatically for addressing the south end of the Da Nang base and remarked that people working in that area are not fully aware of the risk involved. An American participant wondered if the DG should make Da Nang the sole focus for containment and pursue a comprehensive strategy, including services to families in the surrounding area.

However, a Vietnamese member believed that the group needed a two-prong approach. Affected Vietnamese populations are not likely to understand why the DG would concentrate solely on Da Nang and ignore Bien Hoa, which also has high levels of contamination as well as a high profile as a former US base. The Vietnamese Government is doing some containment in Bien Hoa, but one Vietnamese participant
believed that much more needed to be done. However, since foreign researchers have not been allowed to take samples from the Bien Hoa base, it is less clear what the next steps for remediation there might be.

The consensus among the group was that the DG should continue a strong push on containment in Da Nang but plan to consider a second focus on Bien Hoa when more information about contamination there is available.

**Congressional Earmark**

An American participant reported that funds under the $3 million earmarked appropriated by Congress earlier this year have not yet been released. Her understanding was that the State Department intended to use the funds solely for environmental projects, despite the fact that the earmark language also allowed the possibility of human health projects. The DG was divided on whether State should be encouraged to focus on a few projects or to distribute the money widely, in the hope of seeding ideas and efforts across the board.

A Vietnamese participant emphasized that the earmark funds should go to efforts on the ground in Vietnam, rather than to US institutions for theoretical studies. She also underscored the view that although $3 million is not a large amount, the earmark had great symbolic value in the bilateral relationship and with the Vietnamese public.

An American participant remarked that the language of the earmark was rather weak and did not require the administration to report back to Congress on their intended use of the fund and progress toward paying them out. Another American pointed out, however, that the administration would not have gone to the trouble of convening an inter-agency process if they did not intend to implement the earmark.

Notwithstanding the need to push for immediate movement on the funds, several American participants underscored that the group should aim to make the earmark sustainable. That will only happen if, over time, the executive branch adopts the earmark as a program of its own and eventually comes to request funds from Congress for it in the President’s budget, rather than responding to earmarks initiated by the Hill. To encourage this, it is important to treat the State Department and other administration agencies as allies in the process. The first step in that regard could be the DG’s meeting with the US Ambassador later that afternoon. In addition, an American participant reported that she would be meeting with the State Department Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Southeast Asia in mid-February and would raise the earmark.

Another factor in both the short-term and long-term scenario is the need to involve the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington more fully in the earmark process. That issue could be raised at the group’s meeting with the Deputy Foreign Minister that afternoon and at a meeting with the Vietnamese Ambassador that an American participant had scheduled for later in the
month. A Vietnamese participant pointed out that MOFA and the Vietnamese Embassy should be reassured that the bilateral relationship had reached a point where sensitive issues such as the impact of dioxin could be considered without jeopardizing other key policy areas, such as economic ties.

Mainstreaming the Dioxin Issue

Beyond advocating for the earmark and other US Government support, the dioxin issue requires ongoing work through the DG’s mainstreaming activities. In this regard, an American participant defined the target audience for these efforts: the Washington policy community and the 15% of the American public who follow foreign policy and international issues. She remarked that the 2008 election season in the US could provide some additional opportunities to reach that 15%.

She also reported on the October 30 roundtable at the Aspen Institute. The meeting had four purposes: (1) to introduce the work of the Dialogue Group and the Ford Foundation’s special initiative to the Washington policy community; (2) to build bridges with organizations and individual activists who had been working on the Agent Orange issue for a decade or more and may have felt excluded in the DG’s efforts; (3) to offer a diagnostic for interest in the Agent Orange issue in Washington; and (4) suggest additional activities or issues that the Aspen advocacy program might pursue. With respect to (3), the participant reported that the US Government had sent representatives to the meeting but appeared somewhat reluctant to do so.

The Aspen Institute laid out a slate of program activities planned for the next several months of the advocacy program. These included:

- A briefing in Washington in mid-March to disseminate the results of the February DG trip and to continue the momentum begun with the October 30 roundtable;

- Smaller group meetings to explore two specific issues that were raised at the inaugural roundtable. Policy briefs will be produced from these meetings:
  - A meeting with business representatives, business councils and specialized groups such as the Business Roundtable, to discuss the various ways that the business community could contribute to the remediation of the impact of Agent Orange in Vietnam. A Vietnamese participant pointed out that the pending class action lawsuit made this issue area somewhat tricky, but that businesses with activity in Vietnam could be targeted.
  - A low-key, closed-door meeting with representatives of the Vietnamese-American community to explore the impact of the Agent Orange on this community. The Aspen staff member briefing the group on this requested guidance from the Vietnamese DG members on this
project idea. Vietnamese participants counseled that such a meeting would be worthwhile but that it should be approached cautiously, so that this step is in keeping with recent measures to forge a deeper relationship between the overseas Vietnamese community and Vietnam. For example, the Government of Vietnam is in the process of granting permits to establish a business association of overseas Vietnamese.

- Greater outreach to the US veterans community, which is itself profoundly affected by the dioxin issue. Beyond including them in roundtable meetings (as was done at the October meeting), specific briefings on the DG’s work for officials from the Veterans administration would be useful;

- Outreach to other public policy research institutions (e.g., Council on Foreign Relations, World Affairs Council) to co-sponsor meetings on the impact of the dioxin issue in US-Vietnam relations. Aspen will prepare a brochure on the Agent Orange program for use in this outreach.

Additional ideas suggested by participants included:

- The establishment of a Business Council to advise the DG on potential contributions from that sector to work on the Agent Orange issue. An American participant believed that this could be done through the Aspen program, and that a number of businesses might be represented through their Washington Vice Presidents. These include General Electric, United Airlines, Boeing, Nike, Microsoft, Intel and General Motors;

- The establishment of a Disabilities Council, made up of representatives and advocacy organizations, to advise the DG and to underscore that greater attention to services for the broader disabled population is needed, not only for those whose disabilities are linked to dioxin. There was some disagreement among American participants as to whether forming this council should be a priority, since most US-based disability groups are focused more on domestic issues than international ones. A particular issue was whether Council members’ organizations should bear the costs of their representatives’ travel to Vietnam. One American participant believed that they should; another thought that they would not go if that were the requirement.

- A series of meetings on US campuses on the dioxin issue, in partnership with university departments of public health; and

- A second campus series on dioxin, in conjunction with schools and departments of journalism at US universities:

Before leaving this subject area, a Vietnamese participant commented that mainstreaming activities are needed in Vietnam as well as the United States. She believed that the National Assembly should be kept up to date, on the dioxin issue in general and on the work of the Dialogue Group. Beyond that, a number of ministries —
Science and Technology; Environmental and Social Affairs; Culture, Education and Youth; and Foreign Affairs should be kept in the loop.

Support Centers

Over the duration of this year’s visit and the one last year, the Dialogue Group has seen a number of models for the delivery of disability services in Vietnam. New donors, such as UNICEF, are taking up this issue area, and the DG needs to leverage its efforts with those of other groups for the greatest impact.

An American participant listed a number of activities she thought should be pursued in this subject area:
- Advocacy and awareness programs, and the creation of centers for Persons with Disabilities (PWD);
- Another national disability conference in Vietnam;
- Study tours and high-level delegations for disability organizations to visit Vietnam and see the problems first hand;
- A survey of the professions in Vietnam that serve the disabled, to ascertain what further training is needed, as well as areas in which specific workers (social workers, case managers) might be needed;
- Building schools for PWDs;
- Construction of additional care facilities to serve the disabled;
- Physical therapy programs for the disabled and respite care programs for their families;
- Immediate medical interventions for the worst suffering among the disabled;
- Genetic testing programs and genetic counseling centers.

The list sparked debate among the Dialogue Group as to the appropriate approach in this program area. Should the DG’s aim be to promote a range of items, such as those reflected in the list, or choose a specific focus and a few models? Should the group’s efforts be national or focus on areas of Vietnam that feel the greatest impact from dioxin? Should the DG aim for breadth or for exemplary programs that will create a demonstration effect?

A prominent aspect of this debate was on the value of pilot programs. An American participant maintained that “The world is full of pilots” and noted that he DG should identify model programs that (1) show significant innovation; (2) are financially sustainable, or have the potential to be; (3) include victims whose disabilities might be linked to dioxin; but (4) also include PWD whose disabilities may not be associated with exposure to Agent Orange.

There was also some discussion on genetic counseling. A Vietnamese participant recommended that the DG should forge linkages with US professionals in this area to

Participants generally agreed that the site visit to Bien Hoa was sobering and raised a number of questions. Should the DG aim to help build a new disabilities center or expand an existing one? Are centers the preferred approach, or should the focus be on strengthening community networks? Several members remarked that the visits to families revealed an immediate need for respite care for families, not only to lessen the strain of caring for severely disabled individuals but also to boost family finances.

A Vietnamese participant pointed out that the discussions with community leaders in Dong Nai was merely an opening, and that it was not realistic to expect formal agreement on a project plan. She believed that the DG should come up with the blueprint for a pilot program for the province that defines the kind of center that would be useful; shows how the center would relate to community networks; and suggests a plan for training health professionals. The province could be expected to provide the land and buildings, but equipment and training will need to come from the outside. The program should address both education and daily living needs for PWD’s.

A Vietnamese member encouraged the group to think about establishing a pilot program in a single province and then attempt to disseminate the best practices from that center on a nation-wide basis. An American participant thought that the pilot program should have benchmarks to illustrate efficacy from the beginning, which would eventually help in spreading the results beyond the province.

A Vietnamese participant pointed out that a necessary first step is gathering data to support a pilot program. She recommended a survey to produce more precise data on the number of PWD’s in Vietnam and, if possible, to get reliable numbers on persons specifically affected by dioxin.

The meeting chair summarized the three items that could be pursued immediately in this program area: (1) a survey of PWD’s in Vietnam, which might simply be a matter of collecting and processing existing data; (2) efforts to provide respite care for PWD’s in the most affected areas; and (3) a blueprint for a pilot program that takes a comprehensive approach to meeting the needs of disabled people and their families in a target area.

Relations with VAVA

Several participants remarked that, as the DG’s work progresses, it will be increasingly important to cooperate with the Vietnamese Association for the Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin (VAVA). The Association is the focal point in each province and needs to be informed of DG activities on an ongoing basis. A Vietnamese participant believed that the DG should identify a VAVA contact person to work with in each province. In addition, there should be a contact person in the People’s Committee for
each project although, depending on the nature of the project, there may be several liaisons within the Committee.

**Fourth DG Meeting**

It was decided that the fourth Dialogue Group meeting would be held in the United States, in either New York or Washington, later this year. Although no definite date was set, several participants felt that it would be advisable to hold the meeting after the November US elections.