

Dr. Nguyen Thi Ngoc Phuong - 2024 Ramon Magsaysay Award Lecture
“Remembering the Vietnam War: Tragedies, Lessons, and the Unconventional Agents for Peace”
November 13, 2024

Panelist Charles R. Bailey Remarks

Thank you, Ambassador Albert and Congratulations to you Dr. Phuong!

We know Dr. Phuong to be a dedicated scientist and a strong advocate for Agent Orange victims but I can add something more: She is also just simply a lovely person to work with — gentle, kind, empathetic and steadfast. If I could pull any one sentence out of her lecture just now it would be this: “The scars left behind are not just on our lands, but etched into the very fabric of our society, our families and our bodies.” From my own time in Vietnam I know this to be true.

Dr. Phuong mentioned her work with the Vietnam Association of Victims of Agent Orange, known as VAVA, and the U.S.-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/ Dioxin. Each is a notable accomplishment—VAVA in aid and advocacy and the Dialogue Group in dialogue and reconciliation. I have some firsthand experience with both of them which I want to share with you.

Aid and Advocacy: Vietnam Association of Victims of Agent Orange (VAVA)

When Dr. Phuong sat down with others in 2003 there was no single Vietnamese organization exclusively dedicated to making Agent Orange victims visible, bringing them assistance and speaking out on their behalf. VAVA reminds us that Agent Orange victims are fellow human beings. That insistence has been incredibly important to any progress. Dr. Phuong visualized the need for such an organization and became the founding vice president of VAVA. As Dr. Phuong has just said, “The victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin and their families aren't just figures on a page - they're real people, real lives, each with their own struggles and stories.’

It's important to keep those stories, those people, those families, firmly in front of us.

In October 2013 I was in Quang Tri province where I met Lê Thị Hoa. Hoa’s parents met and married during the war. Two sons were born with no disabilities. Hoa and her sister however were born with stunted arms and legs and never reached normal height. When I met her, Hoa was planning to open a coffee shop. She now has a daughter in the 4th grade, has opened her shop, and three years ago VAVA built her a house—A house, imagine! This is a heartening story and it shows the power of VAVA to transform peoples’ lives. However let’s also not forget that many victims are even more severely disabled than Hoa and their prospects are more daunting.

Dialogue and Reconciliation: The U.S.-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/ Dioxin

Next year is the 50th anniversary of the end of the American War in Vietnam. The process of reconciliation between former enemies is often slow, and it’s slower the deeper the wounds and the longer the wounds are ignored. For the first 31 of the last 50 years—from 1975 to 2006—the United States and Vietnam were deadlocked on Agent Orange.

The turning point came in part because of a 2006 study by Vietnam's 10-80 Committee and Hatfield, Canadian environmental consultants, to discover the environmental fate of the dioxin in Agent Orange. This study was funded from my program at the Ford Foundation and showed that the dioxin danger was concentrated at several former U.S. military bases. Both sides could agree on this and the need to clean it up. In 2007 U.S. Senator Patrick Leahy launched the first funding from the U.S. government specifically for Agent Orange in Vietnam. Very wisely, Senator Leahy allocated funds for both dioxin remediation and disability assistance.

This was a good start, but we needed to keep nudging the U.S. government to make sure the funding for Agent Orange not only continued, but also increased. The nudge became the U.S.-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/ Dioxin and Susan Berresford, the president of the Ford Foundation, agreed to become its convenor.

Dr. Phuong was an influential member of this nongovernmental, citizen-to-citizen initiative. She brought her usual expertise and drive to the Dialogue Group, which produced a Roadmap to Reconciliation. It was a Plan of Action on Agent Orange/dioxin. The Plan projected \$300 million from the U.S. government from 2010 to 2020 for disability assistance and dioxin clean up. The Dialogue Group used the Plan over this ten years as a constant reminder, a check list and a guide to urge the two governments ahead. U.S. assistance for Agent Orange in Vietnam is now running at \$30 million a year for health and disability assistance and \$35 million a year for dioxin clean up at Bien Hoa. U.S. total assistance since 2007 has now reached well over \$500 million.

Is it enough? No, it's a start. Does it need to continue? Definitely. There's much more to do.

Thank you.