

After the Storm

Natural Disasters and Development in Vietnam



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Note: All informants have been given pseudonyms in the thesis to protect their anonymity. Names of locations, organisations and well-known persons remain unchanged.

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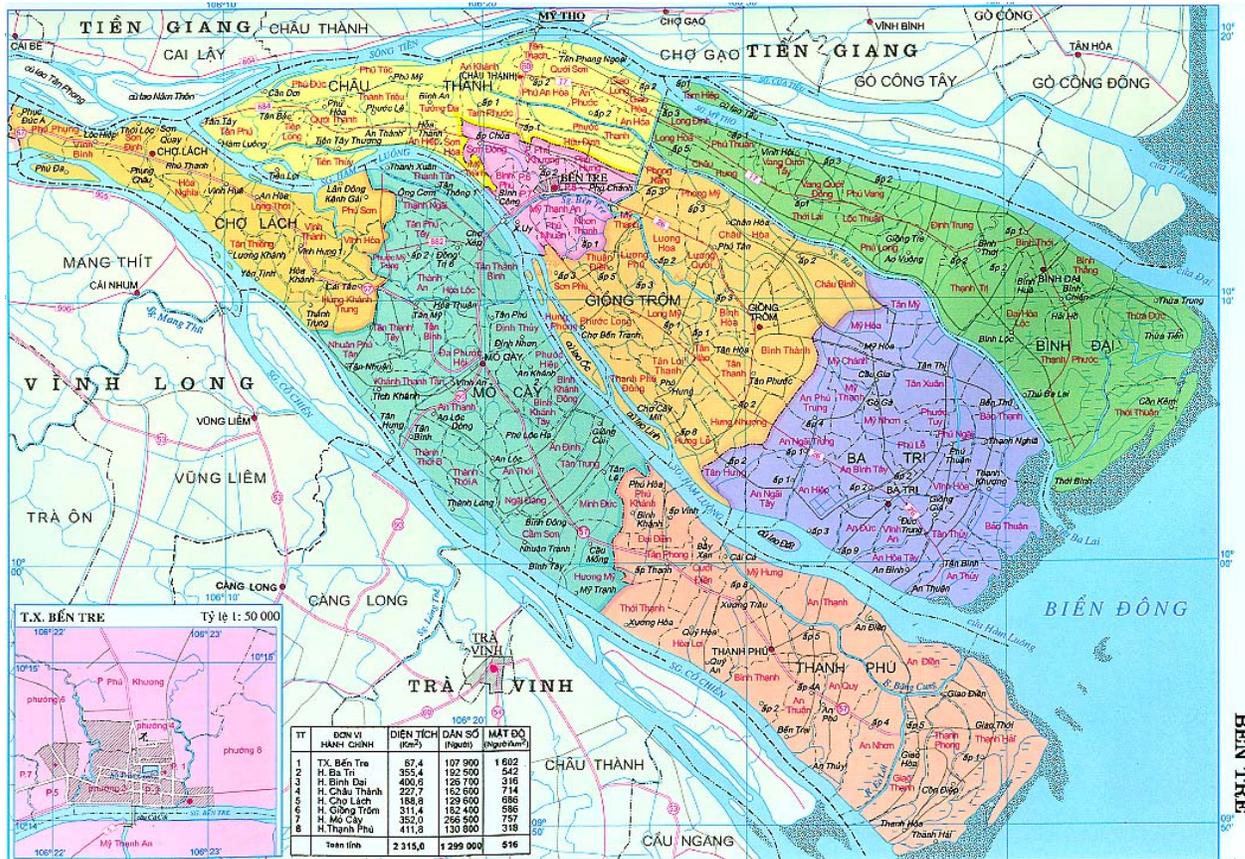
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Acronyms and abbreviations

AFAP	The Australian Foundation for the Peoples of Asia and the Pacific
AI	Amnesty International
ARVN	Army of Republic of Vietnam
CBDM	Community Based Disaster Management
CFSC	Committee for Flood and Storm Control
DARD	Department of Agriculture and Rural Development
DMWG	Disaster Mitigation Working Group
DMC	Disaster Management Continuum
DPI	Department of Planning and Investment
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GRDD	Grass Roots Democratic Decree
HVCA	Hazard Vulnerability Capacity Assessment
INGO	International Non Governmental Organisation
IFRC	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
IHRA	International Human Rights Association
MDG	Millennium Development Goals
NGO	Non Governmental Organisation
NMA	Norwegian Mission Alliance
VANGOCA	Vietnam Australia Non Governmental Organisation Cooperation Agreement
VDG	Vietnam Development Goal
VHF	Very High Frequency
VND	Vietnam Dong
UN	United Nations
USD	United States of America Dollar
WTO	World Trade Organisation



Above maps of Vietnam and Bến Tre province courtesy of Wikipedia
 Detailed map of Bến Tre province below courtesy of Viet Nam Product Sourcing¹



¹ <http://www.vnbd.com/maps/ben-tre.jpg>

CHAPTER 1: The Anthropology of Natural Disasters

Thesis Introduction

This thesis will look into how Vietnamese people cope with natural disasters which put additional pressure on top of their already tough daily demands. In order to do so it is necessary to look at the country's past. Vietnam has a long history of struggles and battles against both external and internal forces. It has been under Chinese and Japanese occupation and served as a colony for France. Furthermore both the First Indochina War and the Second Indochina War (better known as the Vietnam War) put heavy strain on the Vietnamese people, and its after effects are still felt today. Yet the Vietnamese people strive on, trying to climb up the world economic ladder as a country. Being a sign of many changes to come, Vietnam recently joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO), meaning increased economic and political linkages to the world economy. It is certainly a country of contrast and opposites, as it undergoes the arduous transition from a developing to developed nation. High rise buildings are being constructed around the clock, while the less fortunate are shoved into poor neighbourhoods. This is the reality for many Vietnamese today, and the thesis will look into this everyday reality which has both traditional and modern elements.

The thesis looks at how this everyday reality is shaken by an extraordinary event. On the 5th of December 2006, typhoon Durian hit Bến Tre province in Southern Vietnam. Previously the typhoon had hit the Philippines, resulting in over 1300 dead. In Vietnam, though only close to 100 died, typhoon Durian left thousands of buildings collapsed including schools and hospitals, power lines destroyed, and trees uprooted. More than 210 000 houses in the South were damaged by the storm, which also sank more than 800 moored fishing boats. In a brief moment of time, people's entire bases for living were swept away, gone with the torrential wind. The government and international organisations like the Red Cross moved quickly in to save lives and minimise damage, having valuable experience in handling such crisis situations after many years of disaster management. Local organisations like the Women's Union and Youth Union also contributed by rebuilding homes, schools and infirmaries. To respond to the increasing environmental threat the Vietnamese government has set up various organs nationwide for more effective response. The thesis takes a look at how disaster management is done by the various actors and how they cooperate.

Vietnam has a 3200 km long coastline, therefore it has much to gain from fishery, oil industry, and other resources from the sea, but this is a double edged sword. Many tropical storms wreak havoc in the country every year. This is the reality for the coastline communities who suffer the most, but people who live further inland are affected as well. Most disaster prone are the Northern and Central coastline provinces, experiencing five or more serious storms annually, on top of the seasonal flooding. Though I had several options for my location of fieldwork, in the end I chose to do fieldwork in a province in the South, for my own safety and because typhoon Durian had been a recent and relatively big disaster. Southern Vietnam is more fortunate in being less disaster prone, but typhoon Durian certainly demonstrated that no place is out of reach. In the period right after the disaster, there was a lot of activity in the area, creating many complex connections between the local and the global. By the time I came there some eight months later though, most activity had faded away, and people had other worries. The thesis looks at what has happened throughout this period.

I will approach the thesis with three main actors in mind; the people, the NGOs, and the state, each having their role in managing natural disasters and related development issues. The thesis will be divided into five chapters, the first one being an introductory chapter. The three main actors will then be described in their separate chapters, before the last concluding chapter ties the many key themes together.

In **chapter one** I wish to introduce the reader to the anthropology of natural disasters. It is a relatively new subject compared to some of the other research topics of anthropology, but there exists a growing amount of background material on it, due to the increasing threat of natural disasters. Different theories will be presented to see what researchers are concerned about and how this works in the field. Methodology will also be addressed.

Chapter two will describe the field sites, followed by a description of typhoon Durian which struck Bến Tre province in late 2006. Details about the storm and its aftermath are laid out, followed by my ethnographic experience in the same area, almost one year post-disaster. This chapter is mainly focused on people's everyday lives and concerns and how this was affected by the disaster.

In **chapter three**, the state is examined to see how it deals with issues of governance and legitimacy. Vietnam is a country with a turbulent past, and this chapter explores how the

political system has come about, and how it affects the people the day today. The role and legitimacy of the state is an interesting discussion, particularly in Vietnam where the state has an ambiguous relation to its people. On the one hand it is seen as a provider of security and assistance, for instance when managing natural disasters. On the other hand the people are mistrustful of the Communist regime and are denied religious and political freedom. Corruption is another well known problem in Vietnam which the people are wary of. The chapter will conclude with an outlook of where Vietnam might be headed in the future.

In **chapter four** the role of NGOs will be discussed in relation to disaster management and other development issues in Vietnam. Natural disasters are viewed from a local as well as a global perspective, to see how they influence our modern world in cultural, economical and political terms. The anthropology of aid and globalisation will also be addressed to see what role anthropology has in the development industry and in doing research in developing countries.

Chapter five is the final chapter, summarising the anthropological themes which have been discussed. The themes will be tied together to make sense of the complex connections which are made before, during and after a disaster situation as exemplified empirically by my study of B n Tre province. The chapter will conclude on possible future research.

The Anthropology of Natural Disaster

The anthropology of natural disasters goes back a number of years, but natural disasters have always been part of humankind's existence. Ever since we began telling stories we have heard narratives about great cataclysmic disasters brought on by forces of nature. The Great Flood, the Ten Plagues of Egypt, the volcanic eruption in Pompeii, all of them were disasters which changed or destroyed an entire civilization, though some were perhaps more factual than others. We have always both been fascinated and terrorized by these events regardless of their origin.

With the birth of anthropology in the late 19th century the study of humankind and culture had taken scientific roots, making it a natural step to study humankind's relation to nature. The relation between the two have been the discussion of many an anthropologist in vastly

different locations. The myths about the beginning and end of the world are in many cultures associated with natural events and disasters, making it part of the anthropological research within the study of Creation. However, the study of modern natural disasters started very cautiously in the 1950s with researchers such as Baker & Chapman (1962) and Barton (1969). It was more or less an accidental study, as anthropologists did their ethnography in places which happened to be affected by draughts, floods and quakes (Anderskov 2004).

In the 1960s there was a rediscovery of interest in socio-cultural change and cultural ecology, while later in the 1980s there was a focus on political ecology and discourse analysis. These studies helped push natural disasters to the forefront of anthropological research (Oliver-Smith 2002: 5) With the increasing mobility of people and the communicative means of globalisation, anthropologists have been able to study the effects of natural disasters closer than ever before. Today there is a solid amount of literature in most sciences on the effects of natural as well as man-made disasters. Anthropology has contributed with works such as Susanna M. Hoffman & Anthony Oliver-Smith's "the Angry Earth" (1999), "Catastrophe & Culture" (2002) and Dennis Mileti's "Disaster by Design" (1999).

Oliver-Smith argues that the reason why we should study natural disasters is that they both reveal and are an expression of the complex interactions of physical, biological and socio-cultural systems. Local and global linkages of production, population increase, environmental degradation, human adaptability and cultural frameworks become more visible during times of crisis. Oliver-Smith (2002: 6) writes: "Few contexts provide a social science with more opportunity for theoretical synthesis of its various concerns than does the study of disasters provide anthropology."

Other issues that anthropologists are concerned with are coping strategies both on the individual as well as the communal level, social disintegration, galvanisation and integration, and the development industry itself. Regarding the anthropology of natural disasters, Oliver-Smith and Hoffman are among the leading scholars, having gathered many fellow anthropologists in their edited works since the 1980s (Anderskov 2004).

What many have discovered is that natural disasters can not be studied in isolation. There is always a background story to the people, to the place, to the environment which needs to be taken into account if we are to understand the big picture. This is the so called 'holistic

approach' which is so characteristic to anthropology, though in relation to natural disasters the approach is known as the 'vulnerability approach' as described by Mohammad Zaman, an anthropologist who has done fieldwork in disaster zones in Bangladesh (Zaman 1999).

With this tool, we can gain a richer picture of what is happening by situating the field in terms of its history and surroundings. A community may suffer great losses through a disaster, but this is not caused by the natural hazard alone, it only acts as a magnifier of the community's already vulnerable position in society in terms of economic, historical, social and political significance (Zaman 1999: 193). The real impact of a disaster is therefore dependent on many elements, not just the magnitude of the natural force.

The effects of natural disasters show many similarities to the effects of war. Infrastructure is decimated, and many people become refugees within their own country. Families and societies are torn asunder, their very livelihoods destroyed. Some show post-traumatic stress disorder after such an incident and need years of counselling. A disaster can bring a community together, creating bonds which last a lifetime, as in the Oakland firestorms of 1991 in the United States. On the other side of the coin, communities can be driven apart, creating a division between those who have experienced a disaster and those who have not. This is the finding of Hoffman (2002) who had firsthand experience of the disaster and its aftermath.

One difference between disaster and war stands though, and that is the donations received in the post-disaster period. Paul L. Doughty's research in El Salvador shows that international disaster contribution outnumbers the contributions in wartime by four to one. The reason for this was that wars had negative connotations of 'winners and losers', 'right and wrong', while in a natural disaster, no one was to blame. Doughty also said that future response to natural disasters would be more like developing an effective response to war because "... these disasters are largely the product of human enterprise, willfully executed if not fully understood" (cited in Oliver-Smith 1991: 369).

Being anthropologists, we are interested in the connotations of natural disaster. The human rationalisation of a natural disaster might play out in different ways, explaining it as divine intervention or simply bad luck. Some outsiders called the Oakland fires an act of God, being a punishment for people having committed sins like gluttony and pride. The survivors on the

other hand, started re-imagining the disaster, thereby rationalising the events through their own symbols and understanding. They made art pieces and told stories about the “creative destruction” and how the disaster was a “terrifying beauty” (Hoffman 2002: 138). By doing so they could claim ownership over it, and also mask the stark reality of fire and death.

Symbolically, the survivors adopted a dual view of the disaster as both the Monster that destroys, and the Mother who cleanses, nurtures, and takes nature back to its ‘origin’. Hoffman describes how the community was at first horrified by what had happened, but as time went on, they became more at ease with the Monster, saying it purified the community, giving them a fresh start. People also said it was an inevitable event because people had built their houses too close to the woods. Mother Nature had therefore reclaimed her land through the firestorm, which the people now understood and respected. The view of Mother Nature as both a giver and a taker is a dualistic view, similar to religious figures. The same dualistic notion is shared in Vietnam, where people say the flood water can be a burden, but at the same time it revitalises the environment (Oxfam 2005: vii).

Another aspect about the study of natural disasters is humankind’s relation to nature. We are dependent on it for food, shelter, and tools, though to varying degree depending on our location in the world. The tension between taming the wild nature for our use, and letting nature ‘be free’ makes the study of natural disasters even more interesting. Many see nature as ‘wild’ and ‘reckless’, and this ‘anthropomorphising’ of nature can yield much interesting research. Sensational news reports will often state that ‘nature is striking back’, or that ‘the earth is angry’, as is the title of one of Oliver-Smith’s books. The angle of this view is important because it treats nature like a sentient being which has been mistreated to such a degree that it has decided to backlash on us in a violent way.

At the start of disaster research natural disasters were regarded as unusual happenings which disrupted the normalcy of conditions. Hoffman however, says that in areas where natural disasters are more common, people adopt a cyclical view where “nature destroys culture, but simultaneously begins culture again” (Hoffman 2002: 133). Disaster is then expected and because it is, people prepare for the worst, and plan their lives as best they can accordingly. It is therefore of great interest to see how disasters are incorporated into people’s everyday lives, according to their environment. Oliver-Smith, Hoffman and other disaster researchers have

therefore done much research in the existing local adaptive processes and coping mechanisms, which will be explained in the next section.

Applied Anthropology

Oliver-Smith writes that “anthropologists involved in disaster research carry the responsibility of the field’s fifth, and often un-embraced area, applied anthropology” (2002: 14). Because we as anthropologists become a part of the communities we study, we have to shoulder part of the responsibility of protecting the people and the environment they live in. We are also in the position of being partly ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ and can therefore try to help mitigate the many external pressures that arises after a disaster.

What does previous theory and experience tell us? It shows that anthropology is well suited for studying the many levels of interactions in a natural disaster area. As anthropologists we are interested in humankind’s relation to fellow human beings. We are also interested in change, as the onset of a natural disaster will greatly disturb the status quo, and things will perhaps never be the same again, for better or for worse. The damages of a tornado or a tsunami are more than physical, as family ties are abruptly severed, and the people’s relation to the state might reach a breaking point. At the same time, the worst tragedies might bring out the very best in people, helping one another without question. This is the social aspect of the anthropology of natural disasters which can be studied in the aftermath of such an event.

Another anthropological theme connected to disaster research is global warming. Many blame the Western industrial ways for corrupting the planet’s eco-system, creating more and more havoc for each year. Research in disaster management therefore also includes research into finding more eco-friendly ways to live. Finding more sustainable ways for economic growth and development have been the topic of many researchers. Some critical perspectives believe we have distanced ourselves too much from nature and are living in discord with it (Oliver-Smith 2002: 32). Fieldwork research has therefore gone into re-discovering our ‘roots’, to find out how ‘natural people’ are living alongside the environment without harming it, though this can also be a misconception as not all indigenous societies live harmoniously with their environment (Eriksen 1998: 272).

When faced with disaster, people across the globe react differently. What we as anthropologists can do is to help them overcome these challenges in the best possible way by incorporating their traditional coping mechanisms with the modern development industry. As Olive-Smith (1991: 369) writes:

Many of the papers in these two disaster research sessions were based on long-term experiences and field research in the affected areas before and after the disaster event. Indeed, if there was a theme which united all the contributions it was the importance of knowledge of local contexts and an understanding of linkages between local and national and international systems for effective responses to disaster events and the challenges of reconstruction. Such knowledge and understanding is in most cases the product of the kind of first hand experiences and field work which characterizes most anthropological research

Research has found out that common people have come to rely on existing frameworks in order to tackle crisis situations. ‘Resilience’ is a concept which the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) have adopted on a global scale to describe community strength. In a World Disaster report published in 2004, the Red Cross writes about community resilience in relation to disasters. Their definition of the concept ‘resilience’ is as follows (IFRC 2004: 12): a) the amount of change the system can undergo and still retain the same controls on function and structure; b) the degree to which the system is capable of self-organization; c) the ability to build and increase the capacity for learning and adaptation.

‘Resilience’ is therefore much more than simply resistance to external forces, but it is also the degree of flexibility, durability, and adaptive abilities of a social system, all which are vital for its survival during stress. The need to recognize and support local knowledge in the future is crucial, as Secretary General Markku Niskala of the IFRC writes (IFRC 2004:8): “If we fail to shift from short-term to longer-term support for communities in danger, we risk wasting our money and undermining the resilience we seek to enhance.”

Oliver-Smith and his co-researchers agree with this point about using and promoting the existing framework as he writes: “As experienced practitioners in the disaster field, the authors report that the most important elements they have found to have the greatest effect on the recovery process are the existing formal and informal systems within the disaster area and how they function and are enabled” (Oliver-Smith 1991: 368).

The same findings were written about in a study concerning natural disasters in Jamaica. Here researcher Ina Østensvig found out that strong willed individuals from within the community would make the difference in how disaster situations were managed. To quote her (Østensvig 2006): “The experience from Jamaica shows that preparedness at community level can benefit the communities more than the disaster management system as such. Their success in community disaster preparedness, strengthen community and national self-esteem.”

My research will look at the post-disaster situation from an actor-oriented point of view, thereby leaving much of the symbolic, religious and ecological research aside. My chief interest is in the actors themselves, and how they negotiate their roles and test their boundaries in the special event that is natural disaster. Actor-oriented anthropology emphasises agency, strategising and situation maximisation, which I will apply to my study. Seeing how the people deal with external actors such as NGOs and the government will be an interesting study, as the Vietnamese are a people who have endured much hardship over the years while doing their best to manage on their own.

I hope that my findings can lead to better understanding of relations between the people, the NGOs and the state. Though I will not come to any groundbreaking conclusion, I hope that my research can be an example of how dialogue and trust between all parties is essential for disaster management to work. In the end, we will see if my study concurs with previous studies which have emphasised the importance of utilising existing frameworks and local resilience. The next section will explain my fieldwork methods.

Methodology

During my fieldwork I used the most commonly known method in anthropology; participant observation. Being a very broad term, it mostly consisted of spending time with the locals, getting to know their language, habits and ways. Because I am of Vietnamese origin, I felt I had an advantage in being half-immersed in the ‘culture’ already, which would make the transition somewhat smoother. On the other hand, my position as a Vietnamese born outside of Vietnam had an impact upon how people reacted and responded to my enquiries. I would find out that people were as interested in hearing about Norway and Norwegian culture as I was interested in them. My ‘kind’ was known as *Việt Kiều*, meaning Vietnamese people who

live outside of Vietnam's borders. This has become a common term because of the many Vietnamese who fled during and after the Vietnam War, and who now return for family visits and vacations.

Participant observation sometimes meant getting my hands dirty, quite literally. I would help my host families with vegetable or herb gathering or setting up a fence, which they would at first object to quite blatantly. There was no need for an educated student like myself to become dirty doing such 'trivial' matters they would tell me, but to me this was as important as everything else. Doing what they do, however 'trivial' they found it gave me some understanding into their lives, and it also gave them and me great amusement when I stumbled in my efforts. This was a helpful way of establishing trust between my participants and me, and perhaps they saw it as my way of contributing to the family household, instead of just expecting to be served like a guest.

I would observe people in the many cafés and eateries that dotted the town, and try to listen briefly to what they were talking about. Morning coffee is a usual event for the adults, as is the second cup in the evening after dinner. I would have many interesting conversations over a cup of coffee with many different people, as this was relaxed and comfortable setting where people felt free to speak their mind. Sometimes I would have simple conversations with them regarding day to day matters, other times I would try to talk to them about topics related to my project.

The secondary part of my data collection method was interviews. As I wanted to find out how each actor handles disaster management I would have interviews with the various local organisations in the area including the People's Committee, the Women's Union and the Youth Union. These interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, as their knowledge of English was limited, which made the data less precise as I had to translate our conversations to English while taking notes. Though I had acquired a tape recorder for doing interviews I would find out that this format made my interviewees uncomfortable, and they would prefer if I only took notes as we went along.

One on one interviews with NGO workers and university students who spoke English provided me with more detailed information. These interviews were very informal and unstructured, but usually centred on their role or opinion on disaster management and project

work. At first I wanted to only focus on natural disasters, but seeing how Vietnam was struggling with many other development issues, I chose to expand my interview topic to some of these. Because these topics of conversation often changed depending on the person, the interviews could not be compared to each other. The data collected through this method was very extensive though, and have been very helpful in the writing of this thesis.

Regarding the fluency in the vernacular language, I felt I learned a great deal during my stay, but in the end still lacked in some departments. Clifford Geertz' concepts of 'thin' and 'thick' description in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Geertz 1972) tell us about the world we inhabit. There is that which anyone can see, be it an action, movement or gesture, which is the 'thin' description. The true meaning of that action, the 'thick' of it, is more complicated and requires analysis, understanding and some fluency in language. I felt that some of my conversations did not develop enough 'thickness' when I was speaking Vietnamese, and I often wished I had developed a better vocabulary in order to be more inquisitive. However, one can argue about how much 'thickness' there can really be, so I will leave the matter.

The language barrier is something many anthropologists have had to struggle with in their fieldwork. Though the thought of using an interpreter had occurred to me, I imagined that it would be costly and unnecessary to hire such a person, seeming more like a burden than an asset. Regarding the discussion about the use of interpreter I relied on Leslie and Storey (2003) who state that there are both upsides and downsides in using an interpreter, but that one of the most important things to remember is that there is a distinction between translating and interpreting, and that persons may simplify or omit certain details as they see fit, thereby acting as a 'filter' of information. I therefore chose not to use an interpreter, as I also imagined that I would pick up the language quickly, seeing as I already had a basic understanding from lessons at home.

With a small notebook in my pocket I wrote down whatever words and expression that escaped my grasp, which I later translated when I found the time. This way I developed a list of important words which would become useful in my fieldwork. At evenings and when I had some free time I wrote in my field diary, where personal thoughts and events were transcribed. Though I had initially planned for my field diary to be mostly 'professional' with plans of progress and other data, it quickly became a very personal diary as I began to feel the emotional weight of fieldwork. This diary would prove to be a useful tool in helping me

remember people and conversations, as well as serve as an outlet when I had fieldwork 'blues'.

The methodology of fieldwork was something which needed to be both planned and improvised. Because I did not know what my field site would be like, or who my "fellow participants" would be, part of the methodological process meant preparing for the unknown. Though this seemed like an uneasy notion at first, I also knew this was part of the eclectic experience of fieldwork.

CHAPTER 2: Disaster Strikes

Chapter Introduction

The previous chapter laid out the theoretical background and methodology of doing anthropological research in a post-disaster area. In this chapter the reader will get to know the various sites, and a description of the disaster in detail. The reader will also get a glimpse of what the daily lives of Vietnamese living in towns and countryside are like.

Through ethnographic examples I wish to show how the people were affected, and also how their lives are post-disaster. Have their lives changed much because of the disaster? Were they content with the help they received? What are their important concerns at the moment? These questions will be answered, in an attempt to describe the special ‘in limbo’ period immediately after the disaster, and some eight months after when I entered the field.

The difference between living in an urban and a rural setting will also be addressed. Anthropology is known for its comparative approach, which enables the researcher to see what differences and similarities exist. Hopefully through this approach we can come to understand why the situation has become what it is.

Urban Fieldwork

My chosen site of research is Bến Tre province, one of the many provinces situated in the Mekong Delta in Southern Vietnam. The province is divided into eight districts. Bến Tre municipality, from here on shortened to Bến Tre town, is the smallest district, but is the most developed and urban one, and it is where most business is conducted and the government has its provincial office. The province is split into three ‘islands’ by branches of the Mekong river, and therefore has rivers and water canals wherever you look. Many people depend on the river for fishing, transport and farming, and they say that the lives of people in Bến Tre province follows the ebb and flow of the coffee coloured water that surrounds them.

During my fieldwork I managed to travel around the province, mostly with my two host families whom I got acquainted with through my mother’s contacts in Norway. Most of my

time was spent in Bến Tre town and Bình Đại district. In order to better understand how the country is segmented by the state here is a brief ranking, starting from large to small:

Nation – province – district/municipality – village – hamlet e.g.
Vietnam – Bến Tre – Bình Đại – Vang Quoi Tây – Vinh Diên

Bến Tre province is famous for its many coconut trees and being the final resting place of well known Vietnamese nationalist and poet Nguyễn Đình Chiểu. Located roughly 85 km from Ho Chi Minh City, it is only a couple of hours away by bus or moped, making it easily accessible for Vietnamese as well as foreign tourists. The government is currently building a bridge between Tiền Giang and Bến Tre province across water, which has previously only been passable by the use of the Viet Dan ferries².

With the completion of the bridge expected in late 2008, the government hopes to increase tourism, communication and business flow into the province. Bến Tre town has certainly seen considerable infrastructure development in the recent years, having an impressively modern and wide road going in and out of the town. This stands in contrast to the many small dirt roads that appear as soon as you drive to the outskirts of town.

Bến Tre town is a relatively urban area, with all the facilities and infrastructure of a small town. Urbanism can be a relative concept though, as people in Ho Chi Minh City would call Ben Tre town countryside, whilst people in Bến Tre town would call its other districts countryside. Though people in Bến Tre town stay in touch with their rural relatives, there is a tendency for people there to think of themselves as more modern and developed than their rural counterparts.



Bến Tre town road, courtesy of provincial web site

Countryside, they say, is *buồn*, meaning sad, boring or depressing as there is little to do, and no places to go. A foreigner could perhaps say the same about Bến Tre town, so clearly urbanism is in the eye of the beholder.

² These ferries were built with the help from the Danish government, therefore they were named the Viet Dan ferries.

The town has a small man-made lake in the centre which is lit up at night. Here people do their daily exercises by walking or running laps. A branch of the Mekong river snakes through the town, and all day you can hear the slow tuk-tuk sounds of the boats travelling up and down. The town has a couple of hotels and tourist offices, a cinema and a main post office where you can use the internet, post packages and make international calls. BẾN Tre town has yet to become a popular tourist destination, though there are signs that this might happen in the future.

In the centre of town is the marketplace, with fresh vegetables, fruits and catches from the river in the lower level. The upper level has all your other needs; clothes, soap, school material, and cosmetics. It also houses the only ‘supermarket’ in town, with cash registers (a rarity) and a cold section for meats and dairy products, which is also not so common in stores because most people do not own refrigerators.

There are plenty of eateries and cafés scattered across town, as if there is one thing the Vietnamese people like to do, it is eating good food and drinking coffee whilst talking about what is happening in the world. Unfortunately, this appears to have become such a habit for some men, that they ignore their family duties and indulge themselves in coffee, smoke and read newspapers all day, leaving the household burden to their wives. This is only a personal opinion though, made after many talks and observations, and should not stand as a conclusive factual statement.

Private houses in BẾN Tre are mostly made from cement with metal sheets as roofing. Wealthier houses have tiled roofs, while poorer ones use thatched bamboo leaves. The houses are mostly light coloured to minimize the heat inside the house, as it can get really hot during the day. People get up as soon as the sun rises and most work from 7.00 to 11.00, and then have a midday break for two hours before working from 13.00 to 17.00. The reason for this break is that at noon, it is often so hot that most people do not go much outside, much less work, instead having a midday siesta. These working periods are punctuated with an air horn alarm which can be heard all over town.

Scattered across town are also public loudspeakers, which send messages to the masses. This is actually one of the ways the government tries to warn the public about imminent disasters, but whether people listen or not is another question. In a newspaper article I read the older

generation said that the speakers used to be the only way they could receive news, but now with most homes having a television this vintage technology was not so necessary anymore.

Posters and signs are another way the government is reaching out to the people. They could be advocating anything from how to properly raise a family, to combating malaria. To the right is a poster with Ho Chi Minh, the Communist leader and idol who fought the French during the First Indochina War and the American and South Vietnam forces during the Vietnam War.



The writing can be roughly translated as: Strive, labour and study with 'Uncle Ho' as a model of great example.

Bến Tre province has had few run-ins with natural disaster. The last major one was over hundred years ago, in 1904 according to AFAP, an Australian NGO³. This was such a significant event that it spawned a saying called '*Năm Thìn bão lụt*', meaning the year of the Dragon is a year of storm and floods⁴. Another typhoon called Linda had hit other provinces further south in 1997, but little could prepare them for what was about to come December 2006.

Typhoon Durian

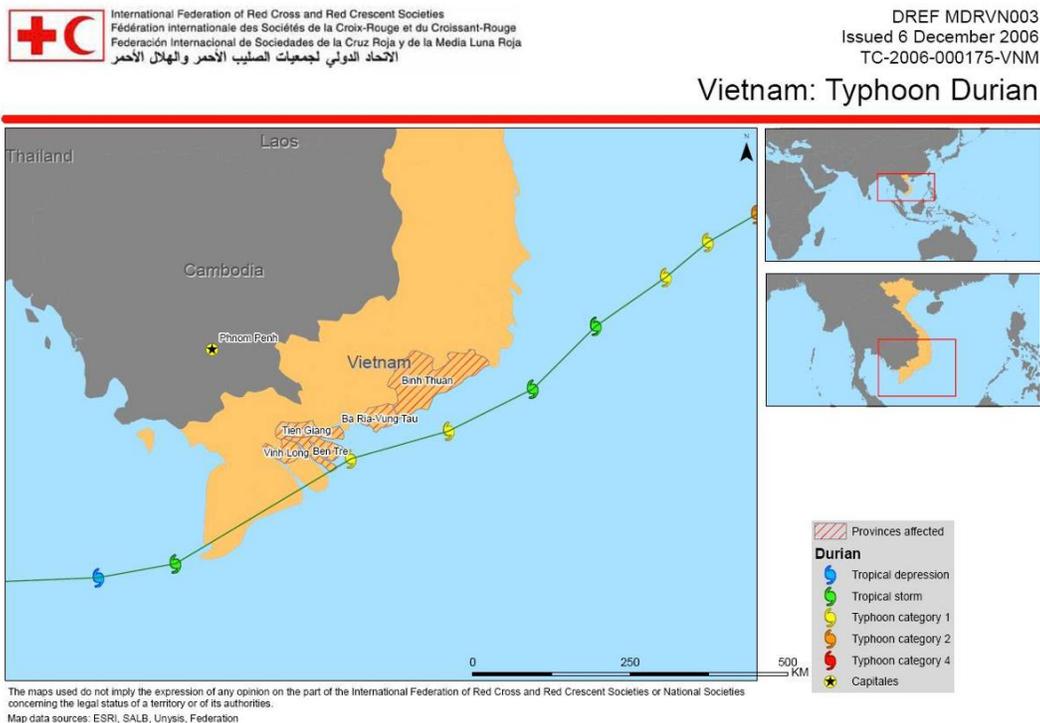
According to the final official report which I received from the People's Committee of Bến Tre province office, the preparations for typhoon Durian began on the 29th November of 2006. After receiving fresh weather reports from the Meteorology and Hydrology Centre it became evident that the typhoon would hit Bến Tre province, and every agency and organisations in the area were alerted about the incoming disaster. By the 3rd of December the main tasks and necessary delegations had been made, but there was still much work to do.

³ <http://www.afap.org/documents/AFAP19NewsletterApril2007V5.pdf>

⁴ According to the Vietnamese and Chinese Zodiac calendar, every year is represented as one of twelve creatures, the Dragon being one of them. The calendar is cyclical, and people born that year are said to inhabit certain characteristics and be compatible or incompatible with people of other specific animals.

Every day on TV channels, radio, and public loudspeakers the warning message was broadcasted. The coastguard received the notice as well and sent messages out to all fishing boats, telling them to either come ashore, or seek refuge further out at sea, away from the typhoon's path. By the 4th of December at 18:00 all preparations and emergency evacuations were supposed to be done, but on the seaside South in the province only fifty percent of the population had been evacuated. As late at 22:00 that day people still worked hard, fastening and securing their boats, houses and farms, and evacuating those who were in the danger zones.

On the morning of 5th of December all ferries were shut down and all schools were closed. People were banned from moving outside by the police and military. Most people were anxiously bracing themselves for what was to come. Stories say it started with a light wind, which only built itself up louder and louder till it was a deafening roar. Some have described it as incredible, others called it frightening. For many, this was an event unlike anything they have ever seen or felt before. As the storm moved over BẾN Tre province, the walls and roofs creaked, and many houses had to buckle before the enormous natural forces, sending tin sheets flying in all dangerous directions. One woman was apparently decapitated by such a tin sheet, or so the rumours went. Here follows a map, courtesy of IFRC, illustrating the path of the typhoon.



The yellow swirl indicates that the typhoon increased in strength to Category 1 as it made landfall, before weakening to a Tropical Storm (green swirl) as it moved further South before finally dissipating out at sea. Category 1 typhoons on the Saffir-Simpson Tropical Cyclone Scale can blow winds with speeds from 119 to 153 km per hour and cause coastal waves, also known as coastal surge up to 1.5 meters. Though typhoon Durian was not at its peak strength, it was still enough to cause massive damage.

“Coconut trees were bent with the wind, their leaves all twirled up”, said a woman working at the Women’s Union in BẾN Tre town. She had been in her office then, preparing to carry out relief work as soon as things calmed down. She had never been as scared as she was then and she told me that even to this day, strong winds made her scared because of what had happened. After the wind had lessened a bit came the rain. It poured down in heavy showers over the flattened and torn houses as people wondered what would happen next.

When the rain had lessened, people emerged from their shelters to find their neighbourhood almost unrecognizable. Everywhere there was debris from rooftops, broken windows and fallen trees and signs. As people started to clean up the chaos around them they received another warning that the storm might return later in the afternoon, and people should therefore only clean up temporarily and fasten their homes for the second ‘wave’. Fortunately for everyone it never happened, and as soon as people felt safe enough they started the actual rebuilding process.

Though I heard many narratives about the storm, I also acquired some quantitative data in form of statistics and facts from typhoon Durian from the local and provincial People’s Committee. The NGOs and government have done a quite thorough job of counting every ‘item’, as there are figures for most things that got damaged in the storm; people killed or injured, houses flattened, trees uprooted, electricity poles knocked over, and so on. The storm caused damage to a sum upward of 300 billion Vietnamese Đồng (VND), being equivalent to about 14 million United States Dollars (USD). This is an enormous figure, especially considering the economic budget of Vietnam. It is no wonder then that the state had to appeal to foreign aid in order to tackle this crisis.

From the official report it states that although precautions had been made, no one could have anticipated the level of destruction that occurred, as the typhoon had been much stronger than

imagined. Also, because storms do not happen as often in Southern Vietnam as in Northern Vietnam, many people did not think it was going to be that serious. “We are sleeping on safe!” exclaimed a Red Cross worker to me, explaining why the storm caught people by surprise. “However, like the experience of drinking too hot tea, people always learn, and next time we will have this experience and be more ready, like taking smaller sips”, he continued optimistically.

Amongst the international NGOs which did work after typhoon Durian were Oxfam, Church World Service and Care International. The United Nations Development Program sent some support as well, in the form of money meant for reparation for damaged houses. As with all natural disasters, emergency aid must be handled quickly and efficiently in order to save lives. People need medical treatment for injuries and temporary shelters to live in. Clean food and uncontaminated water is also essential to avoid diseases like cholera and dysentery. This is especially important in flood disasters when the drinking water becomes polluted. Simply put, a lot of work must be done in the aftermath of a disaster, and coordinating this is no easy task.

To ensure that the population is protected and safe, the NGOs have agreed to follow the worldwide Sphere process. This is both a humanitarian charter and minimum standard to be adhered to in disaster response in five key sectors being water supply and sanitation, nutrition, food aid, shelter and health services (Oxfam 2005: vi) . This way there is little confusion regarding which basic needs should be addressed first in relief aid, and this Sphere standard was used in typhoon Durian’s aftermath.

The Fatherland Front, a pro-government mass movement, and Red Cross together had to facilitate the aid and relief work as best as they could. In BẾN TRE town, a centre was established in the centre of town where all aid was stored. The inflow of aid material was substantial, but coordinating the distribution took time. Keeping communication and logistics alive between districts that had been affected was essential, but this was difficult as telephone and electricity lines were down all over the province. Also, many roads and bridges had collapsed or been blocked by fallen trees and electricity poles.

As soon as the imminent danger was over, NGOs with local Red Cross guides came around the area to do what they call a Rapid Assessment. Here they saw what had happened and what was needed, and from there requested the appropriate aid from their sources. One of the major

faults of relief and post-disaster work is overlapping, as doing so is a waste of valuable time and resources. One example of overlapping is from Sri Lanka where some families had been given several fishing boats from different donors after the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, even though they had not been fishing people to begin with. Because the tsunami victims had received the attention of the entire world, it resulted in an overflow of NGOs and relief aid into the area (Angelskär 2006). This concept of overflow and ‘hot-spots’ will be addressed later in chapter four.

Though typhoon Durian had not received as much public attention as the Indian Ocean tsunami, there was a great appeal in NGO circles to enter the area and help out. The IFRC launched an emergency appeal for 2.47 million USD⁵. The period that followed saw relief and reconstruction of the region, as people put back the pieces of their lives. From my talks I learnt that for some people it did not take long before things were back to how they used to be, for others life was never the same.

Entry to the Field

Between July and November of 2007 I spent my fieldwork travelling around Bến Tre province looking at the aftermath of typhoon Durian. My entry to the field was quite an emotional transition. Going from Ho Chi Minh City where I had stayed with relatives to being all alone in a foreign place which I had only seen in pictures was a sudden shock. The feeling of alienation and desperation slowly crept up on me like a cold chill, and as I sat alone in my hotel room in Bến Tre town, I felt that I had done a terrible, terrible mistake and wanted to return home at once. “What was I doing here, how could I possibly think that this project was feasible?” I thought to myself.

After some days in the hotel room and doing preliminary exploration on my own I was feeling anxious and ready for change. I had walked a fair bit around the town, which had made many Honda drivers take notice of me. The explanation for this was that very few people actually walk in Vietnam, unless they are selling lottery tickets, drinks, sunglasses or other small trinkets. Being a ‘Vietnamese’ in Western clothes, walking up and down the streets all day,

⁵ <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/RWB.NSF/db900SID/YSAR-6WAQMG?OpenDocument&rc=3&emid=TC-2006-000175-PHL>

looking around like I was lost certainly made a few heads turn. Some even called out to me, asking where I was from, or what on earth I was doing. Most people prefer to drive or be driven, even for very short distances. That is why many men, and a few women, have taken up a career as Honda drivers, driving people to and from places.

When Vietnamese speak of Hondas, it is not Honda brand cars they are talking about, but Honda mopeds and motorbikes. In the past, Honda used to be the only moped brand people could get a hold of, but nowadays with the economic growth, all sorts of brands are available. Before a luxury commodity, it is now affordable to most people, making the streets and roads packed with mopeds and bicycles most times of the day. Still, even with all the variety most people call all mopeds for Hondas, a true testimony of how a brand name can be so embedded in people's lives that they forget it is only a brand.

The Honda drivers are seen everywhere in Vietnam, most often parked in packs in front of public places like markets, post offices, or bus centrals. They sit there and talk, smoke cigarettes, and wait for anyone passing by on foot so they can call out to them, offering them a ride. The fare of your ride can vary dramatically depending on the chauffer, and since this is a private business between you and him, it is up to yourself to negotiate a reasonable price.

Considering the small size and lesser quality of most roads in Vietnam, and the amount of traffic which is present at any given time, a Honda driver will most likely get you to your destination faster than any car could. The Honda drivers are an example of how people have adapted according to time, as in the past you would be driven around in *cyclos*, carts pulled by people.

In Bến Tre town I sat and waited for an important contact, hoping my project would soon get going. The man I was going to meet was an old friend of my mother, who was in the area to meet some Buddhist monks. We met and talked, but in terms of my research he could not be of much assistance as he had his own business to take care of. He did however introduce me to a woman by the name of Mrs. Nguyen, a person with a spare room whom he had heard of through some of his contacts. This was where I could stay while I did my research he said, as she could provide accommodation, food, and transportation to wherever I wanted to go. He then left me in her care, and vanished as quickly as he had appeared. Little did I know that Mrs. Nguyen and her family would turn out to be a remarkable source of information and experience for me.

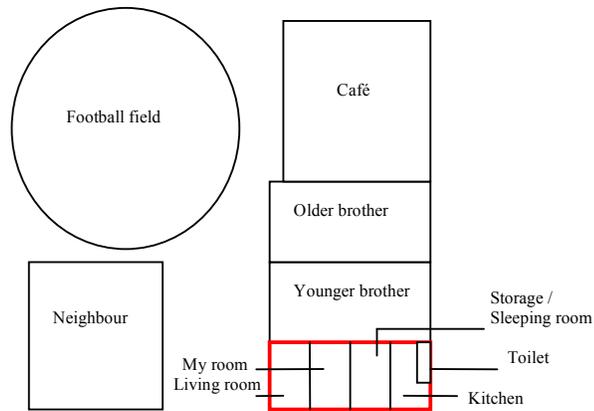
Life in BẾN Tre town

Mrs. Nguyen was a small plump woman in her late 30s, having two children with her nearly fifty year old husband. Born and raised in BẾN Tre province in a family of ten children, she spent most of the day at home, looking after the family and house. Being a relatively young housewife, she had quit her previous job as a waitress/cook, and was now occupied with dieting, talking gossip and managing the small café next door. She also had a spare room in her small house which she rented out occasionally for extra income, which I was going to occupy. From what she told me, the room had seen quite a few tenants in the past, mostly students. In addition, she looked after a boy nicknamed Tin, the son of her brother who had died during the Vietnam War. According to Mrs. Nguyen, Tin's mother did not properly take care of him, drinking away what little income came into the house. He therefore stayed at her house most of the time, only seeing his mother in the weekends or so.

Mrs. Nguyen's house was of modest size with cemented walls and a tin roof. In the back there was a squat toilet and a small kitchen. The water used to be carried into the house in big tubs, which would be used for all purposes like dishwashing, cooking, flushing, clothes washing and showering. With the help of my rent payment all up front though, she could afford indoor plumbing, which made life a bit easier for the family. Next were two rooms for sleeping and storage, and in the front was the living/dining room with the television set, refrigerator and hammock. She was neither wealthy nor poor, but considered herself lucky to have the things she had. She would sometimes wonder though, what life would be like if she had fled to a foreign country when she had the chance so many years ago.

The next door houses belonged to Mrs. Nguyen's younger brother and older brother respectively. Though theirs were larger, she would always be the one who took care of family visits from the countryside. This was because she was more hospitable, and knew how to cook and take care of guests, even if her house was a bit small, she said. During my stay in her house, I did experience more than one visit from her siblings from the countryside and North Vietnam, and though the space got smaller, there always seemed room enough for one more.

In front of the houses were the football field and the small café where Mrs. Nguyen did some work occasionally, for instance buying supplies or overseeing the two girls who ran it. It was a very simple place, where a few guests could order simple dishes and drink their liquor. The furniture was small and plastic like in most cafés and eateries, and the roof and floor were uneven after the storm, but this made little difference to its patrons. People were just happy to have a place to sit down and talk and drink until the late hours, and more than once did I hear the loud chatter and drunken singing of the men in the café whilst sitting in my room. Here is an overhead map of Mrs. Nguyen's house (in red) and her closest neighbours. As can be seen, there was not much space, but they still managed. It also shows how members of a family usually tried to live close by each other for support and companionship.



Mr. Nguyen worked at a store selling spare parts for mopeds, while Mrs. Nguyen's oldest son worked in a small steel shop. Mrs. Nguyen's other child was a student of about 14 years of age, though there was some concern regarding where she was headed. Her grades had been dropping, and in Vietnam school costs a lot of money, they told me. Unless you were really smart or rich, it was difficult and maybe not worth to get into higher education, and therefore many youths had to find work in menial jobs like waitressing or cleaning. This had been the case for her son who had done well at school at early age, but could not finish his education because of difficult classes and little money. Young girls with uncertain futures could also become mail-order brides to countries like South Korea or Japan. This had apparently become quite an industry in recent years.

Especially in the countryside, education is the key to ensure that the children get a good start and good job opportunities. Unfortunately, school is costly in terms of fees, school material and books, and if your child need extra tuition, even more fees. Pupils and students who fail their tests and exams are held back one year, adding more costs to their education. It is no wonder then that for the poorest, education has to take a step back for more pressing priorities, like ensuring the family has food on the table and beds to sleep in.

Mrs. Nguyen was fond of talking gossip about the neighbours, her family, and the neighbourhood in general. She would often be recognised on the street, people asking her if she was still working and who her strange person was (being me). Sometimes she would recognise other people whom she had lent money to in the past, but who now avoided contact with her, fearing she would demand her money back. She thought personally that it was a shame that people could not be more honest, but she would not confront any of them. “That is their burden to bear”, she said, “and they can repay me if they wish.” She told me about fate and karma, and how as long as she treated others with kindness and respect, good fortune and happiness would eventually come to her.

In the past, she had looked after some street kids, giving them spare clothes or a simple meal to eat, but now they also ignored her. Again she said it was a shame, but there was little she could do about it. Throughout this conversation, I got the feeling that she was portraying herself as a do-gooder, and victim of the injustice of society. I remained sceptical of the truthfulness of these stories, but the community seemed to know her pretty well. The arrival of a foreign student in her care further elevated her status in the community I would think, and I did get the feeling that she introduced me around with pride.

All in all, the Nguyen family was perhaps not so different from any other family living out in provinces of Vietnam. Family issues, monetary difficulties, educational struggle and the occasional run in with a natural disaster would make life demanding, but somehow those were just the facts of life and the Nguyen family did as best they could. Whereas people of less endurance would simply give up, I respect the Nguyen family and the Vietnamese people for their toughness and willingness to make it through rough times and help each other in the community. One motto which Mrs. Nguyen told me was important to remember was “*lá lành đùm lá rách*”, meaning the undamaged leaf should support the torn leaf.

Her family had received little compensation after the storm, but that did not matter as long as that money was given to someone else who needed it more, she said to me. Though it had been quite a scary storm, it had not affected them too seriously, and there were plenty of people who were in a worse situation, some of which I had a chance to interview. For the Nguyen family, life had returned to normalcy not too long after the disaster had struck.

After spending some time in BẾN Tre town I felt the need to venture out to the districts where reports and interviewees had told me the damage was more substantial. With some additional assistance from my mother, she set up a meeting for me with a person living in Bình Đại district. Before that, the reader should get to know the site in terms of location and environment.

Rural Fieldwork

Bình Đại district is located not too far away from BẾN Tre town, about one hour drive by moped. To get there you have to drive on a long road with no traffic- or street-lights, making it the most traffic accident filled road in the province. Traffic safety is a big issue that the Vietnamese government is trying to improve, but during my stay I encountered much reckless and



A rainy day in Bình Đại

drunk driving, as there is a very different traffic ‘culture’ compared to Western countries. Many people die in traffic accidents, but people seem to have no fear or respect for that.

In Bình Đại district there is only a district centre, but not a proper town so to speak. Though the main road is asphalted, the side roads are more often dirt than concrete, which makes transportation a challenge during wet months. This is your ‘typical’ countryside, with fruit trees, rice farms and water buffalos chewing grass by the road.

People here live by fishing out by the coast, and farming agriculture products like coconuts, sugarcane and various fruits further inland. A recent trend has been the farming of fish and shrimp, which has proven successful for some people out by the coast. It is only possible in this region because salt water is required. Lucky for them, the storm did not affect the fish and shrimp farms much because the ponds are on ground level. Most fruit trees however were very much damaged, and will take years to recover to full strength.

Coconut trees grow everywhere, and people therefore use them as an extra mean of income. About once a month, the coconuts ripen and people harvest and sell them to their local coconut buyer, who then takes it to the coconut factory. There it is processed and made into oils, creams, coconut mass etc. ready for shipping further up the commodity chain, both domestically and for export. The coconut tree is a very useful for the people, as the leaves and wood can be used for building material and firewood, while the coconut can be used as a drink, in cooking, or be sold for money. Houses in Bình Đại can vary greatly depending on the wealth of the owner, but the standard is most definitely under what you will find in town. The poorest ones have wooden houses with dirt floor, and thatched bamboo leaves as roof. Though this keeps them dry during rainy season, the houses are easily collapsed by a storm.

Indoor water and plumbing is a rarity, and most use outside ‘public’ toilets, which basically are four low walls over a closed section of the river where people squat. Here is a picture of such a toilet. This tells us about some of the simple but effective ways the people utilise their environment. The problem with these toilets was that during flood months, the water level would rise making the dirty water overflow, thereby contaminating their surrounding water sources, increasing the chance of spreading diseases.



People in the countryside are poorer than in Bến Tre town, but prices here are lower too. A meal in Bình Đại may cost you half a USD, while in town it could be about 2 USD. This was certainly small potatoes for a Norwegian student, but a major difference for the people living in the countryside. People try to get by day by day, but many are lured out to the towns and cities with prospects of a better future, especially the youth. Rural poverty and unemployment is a widespread national problem, and a serious one that can lead to domestic disturbance and alcoholism. During my stay in the countryside, people were also talking about falling prices in coconuts and livestock, which meant that people had to find extra means of income to cover their needs.

During the day, most people work out in the field, tend their cattle or goats, or go out fishing in the river with their boats. Many women work in garment companies, while men work in mechanical workshops or processing factories. Those who do not work either sit at cafés, play pool or get drunk with their friends, even during daylight. Alcohol and cigarettes are very easy to get a hold of and very cheap too, because many make homebrew rice liquor at home. Cockfights could also be held from time to time. Housewives either stay at home taking care of the children and house, or sell vegetables or fish out in the market. Some run eateries from their house.

After working hours people come home for dinner, and afterwards people drink tea or coffee, talk and watch television, 'Vietnamese Idol' being one of the favourite programs. Neighbours or relatives may drop by unannounced with their babies to have a chat, while children play in the front yard. Some men go with their friends for a drink. Karaoke machines are very common household items, and Vietnamese people are fond of singing and dancing, so this is also a common late night activity.

When darkness falls in the countryside it really gets dark as there are no street lights, so the only light sources come from people's houses. It is even darker when the electricity is gone, which happens every other day. House visitations must therefore be done with a flashlight or oil lamp. Having electricity is a relatively new experience for rural people, as many adults still remember how life was without it, and can still manage when it disappears.

People then go to bed relatively early at about 22:00-23:00, ready for a new day at the crack of dawn. Compared to Norway, this is a very different and simpler life, but it can be a rich and full life nonetheless. However, one major drawback for the rural people is living in uncertainty, as they can not be sure if the weather is going to turn out right for their crops, or if they will still have a job next year. One example of this uncertainty lies in the coconut.

Many people in the area are in the coconut business, meaning they either harvest it, transport it by roads and rivers, or work at a processing factory. Because of the falling price of coconuts, working hours at the factory had been unstable lately. Two members of my host-family worked there, and they said some times there was much to do, some times there was little, it went up and down. Working shifts could be either night or day time, sometimes lasting over 12 hours. It was an unreliable occupation, meaning you never knew when you

had work or not, and if coconut business was slow, many people had not much else to do. Some chose therefore to move out to the city where there were more jobs, but this meant leaving family and friends behind. Also, living in the city was very expensive for people from the countryside. Migrating was therefore not a decision to take lightly.

These are very common trends in countries changing from rural to urban economy. As Eriksen (1998: 351) writes:

One of the most visible aspects about social and cultural change in the twentieth century has been urbanisation. While less than five percent of Africa's population lived in cities in 1900, the number was almost fifty percent in 1990; numbers almost as dramatic as these could be shown for Asia and South- and Central-America as well.

Vietnam is no exception when it comes to shifts in economies. My experience in the field showed me that these are not just the numbers and statistics we are dealing with, but real people's lives and fates. Some people had lived in the countryside since birth, having only visited Ho Chi Minh City once or twice in their lifetime, much less visited another country. Moving out to the towns and cities would therefore be a major change. Their world is still a small place and globalisation has not increased their mobility, but it has given them a glimpse of a wider perspective through the television. Many wished they could travel abroad like I had done, but for most this was just a daydream.

Life in Bình Đại

In my second research site out in Bình Đại district I got a sense of what rural life truly was. There I lived with a mature woman named Mrs. Hanh and her family for about two months. Her husband Mr. Hanh worked in the nearby coconut processing plant, along with one of his sons. They had four children, the oldest one had already married and was expecting her second child. The younger sister was getting married not long after I had arrived, and I was fortunate enough to be able to attend her authentic countryside wedding. Next came her son who was about one year older than myself, and he had also gotten married earlier that year. Her youngest child was about one year younger than me⁶. He was finishing his apprenticeship

⁶ The reasons for the uncertainty in age was that the Vietnamese have a peculiar way of counting age, sometimes the first year not being counted.

at a barbershop in Bến Tre town, but came home occasionally to visit his family. Like Mrs. Nguyen's youngest child, he had an uncertain future, not wanting to work in the coconut business, or being able to find a suitable place to carry out his trade.

Mrs. Hanh was also part of a big family, similar to Mrs. Nguyen from Bến Tre town. As usual in traditional times families tended to be big, with many children and grandparents all living under one roof. Mrs. Hanh was the second oldest child in a family of eleven children, and therefore still had responsibility toward her younger siblings and her parents. Her own children grown up, she now looked after the house and her grandson, and sometimes visited her parents who lived some minutes away with one of her sisters.

Though she was not wealthy, she was better off than most people living in the countryside. Her house was fairly large, with several guest rooms, indoor plumbing and ceiling fans. The odd thing was that even with all this luxury, she herself and her husband lived a very modest life, and tried to save money whenever they could. They had only spent one night in the house, and that was the day the house was just finished. Usually they slept out in the small shack out front, which was very cramped and dark.

When I asked her why she did not sleep in the house where it was more comfortable, she answered that she had to look after business. It turned out the shack was more than just a place to sleep, it also had a freezer from which she sold ice cubes to the neighbours. In addition, she sold small sundries like rice, gasoline, cooking oil and rice liquor. Because people could come by any time, even during the night when most were sleeping, she felt she had to be available, in case people needed something.

Mrs. Hanh also did some charity work for the community. She had knowledge of which areas were poor and knew people who were old, sick or handicapped. Because she had contacts in Norway and the United States, she would sometimes receive money or rice from overseas to be given to the poor, and therefore the community knew her name well. Note that this was a very small village, so perhaps it was not unusual for everyone to know everyone. When Mrs. Hanh then heard about my research topic, she was delighted to be of service, and she hoped that I could somehow help the community with my findings which I would bring back to Norway.

With her help I got to see the best and worst areas of Bình Đại district, and she helped me get in contact with local organisations and the village People's Committee. In addition she helped me with conversations when I could not find the appropriate words. Sometimes I did feel like she oversimplified some things, but perhaps that was the only way I could understand more complicated matters. In the end, she was my closest informant, but as with all informants you may be 'boxed' into their perspective when it comes to information. I am thankful for the help she gave me though, and could never have finished my fieldwork without her.

Field Site Comparison

This chapter has told the reader about my anthropological entry to fieldwork. The disaster and the location have been described in terms of the daily lives of Vietnamese, one year after the typhoon. The description of daily life might seem plain in the sense that not much of the disaster is mentioned, but that was in fact the current situation. People did not talk about it much, except when I asked them about it. Their concerns were other daily issues like falling commodity prices, education, poverty and state corruption.

Because I had two field sites to travel between I could clearly see the contrast between living in an urban and a rural area. In the urban area I got to speak to various organisations such as the provincial People's Committee, the Red Cross, Youth Union and Women's Union. They also provided me with helpful information and logistics regarding where I should do my rural data collection. The typhoon had not done as much damage in the town as out in the districts, so it was out in the rural area where I had most talks with survivors of the storm.

The change in living standard as well as post-disaster reconstruction was very visible. While you could almost not notice there had been a typhoon in the town under a year ago, it was still visible in the countryside. We must not forget that the coastal communities were more severely affected, making it more 'natural' that there would be more reconstruction to do. Still, it is concerning that I could see several houses in the countryside abandoned, either half torn down by the storm, or only half way constructed, stopped short due to lack of additional money. Here are two pictures from the countryside that illustrate my point:

The picture to the right shows a broken electricity pole, held up by a tree branch. It had been so since the storm.

Below is a picture of a house which was never completed.



This difference between urban and rural housing and economy is not a consequence of the storm alone, but I would dare to say that the storm has made that disparity wider for some. This is because a natural disaster is not a serious disaster in itself until it affects someone who is already in a vulnerable position in society, as the vulnerability approach tells us. Oliver-Smith (2002: 3) has this to say:

A disaster becomes unavoidable in the context of a historically produced pattern of 'vulnerability,' evidenced in the location, infrastructure, socio-political organization, production and distribution systems, and ideology of society. It conditions the behaviour of individuals and organizations throughout the full unfolding of a disaster far more profoundly than will the physical force of the destructive agent.

For a simple example I can compare a rich family living in an urban area to a poor one living in a rural area. The storm could affect them both more or less equally, but the wealthy family will receive their help faster and have enough money to recover from what they might consider just an inconvenience, albeit a serious one.

The rural family on the other hand, being already poor, does not have the money to return their household economy to the way it was, even with compensation money from the government. With a destroyed house and perhaps destroyed crops, they may have to take up

loan just in order to have food on their table for the next few days. For them, the storm was a tremendous disaster which may take years to recover from. Living out in the countryside, they might have to wait longer for emergency care, relief aid and compensation money as well.

This comparison can also be made across countries. Christopher L. Dyer has found out that development countries struggle much more in recovering from disasters than developed countries do, because the impact exceeds their domestic economic and resource capacity. Average income losses from recent disasters in developing countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Nicaragua were ten to twenty times greater than in the United States (Dyer 2002: 161). Another very revealing statistic about differences in vulnerability is that almost 98 percent of people who die in natural disaster live in developing countries⁷.

From my observations in Bến Tre province, I can say that there are big differences between urban and rural households. The standard of living is lower, but luckily so are the prices of food and basic necessities. Rural side poverty is still more common than urban though, and it is therefore not surprising that people there worry more about their daily demands than what happened last year. One positive factor about living in the countryside was that the many coconut trees shooting up everywhere gave shelter from the storm to the houses underneath. That is, if they did not topple over and crush your house, one villager mused to me.

This does not mean that life in the town is worryless, as they are also concerned with troubles. For example, the government is expanding roads and buying up land from commoners for cheap money, making the plot ready for factories and big business. Though it was very evident in Ho Chi Minh City, it was also very visible in Bến Tre town. My host family would often point out to me as we drove around the different plots which either had been bought up or were going to be, including a popular breakfast eatery.

A very common topic amongst people I talked to was the amount of money which was given to people as compensation for their damaged houses. The standard compensation given out by the government was 5 million Vietnam Đồng (VND) for a completely destroyed house, which was equivalent to about 300 USD. Between 3 million and 500 000 VND were handed to people with partially destroyed houses with torn walls or roofs, depending on the damage. From people I have spoken to, most have said the compensation money was not enough to

⁷ <http://www.cicero.uio.no/fulltext/index.aspx?id=6245>

pay for repairs, and have had to borrow money from elsewhere. Others have tried to build a house or repair it as best as they could with what they received, which made for a very bare and simple house. Some houses could only be finished with the help of local organisations, like the local Catholic group.

My ethnographic experience indicated to how people looked after one another, even though they might not be that well off themselves. This sense of ‘community’ might not have been manifest through village gatherings or the like, but it was still something which I felt existed through what I learned in my talks and observations. This was attributed to the Vietnamese spirit of helping your fellow man, one NGO worker said to me. This ‘brotherly’ spirit had its origin from when the Vietnamese first ventured down from China and into the Vietnamese jungles. People had to watch each others backs in order to survive against the wilderness. Though it might not be quite historically accurate, it still has value as an anecdote of what it means to be ‘Vietnamese’.

As mentioned, the storm had left deeper markings in the countryside. The rural poor did not have much to begin with, so one of my many questions to them was if life had changed much after the storm. My follow up question was whether or not they received any aid or help on a regular basis, either from the government or other actors. Some received a small sum every month, others had an insurance card from the government which covered basic medical treatment and medicine. In the end though, most had to take care of themselves with the help of people nearby. As for life itself, most said it had had not changed much, but if it had it was certainly not for the better.

From these talks with the rural poor I never felt that there was much anger or hostility towards the government. Perhaps some were disappointed, but it was as if they did not really expect much from the government to begin with. Many showed a face of resignation, having come to terms with what life was, perhaps feeling fortunate if they had received any government support at all. Coming from a Western country this was a surprise to me, as I was used to people speaking up whenever they felt unfairly treated.

During my talks with them I came to realize that these people were living in a very different reality compared to mine. Not only in terms of economic poverty, but also in socio-political terms. The poor have fewer rights, and there is not much they can do about it on their own.

Their coping mechanism remains very strong though, as they have a ‘whatever will be, will be’ attitude which astounds me. Though we should not underestimate their agency or desire for change, their place in society has limited their choices, and perhaps they have accepted that. They are truly the vulnerable, the voiceless, the marginalised ones in society, but it is precisely these people who need to be given a voice.

The reader has hopefully gotten a glimpse of how life is for both the urban and the rural people living in Bến Tre province. In both places I got to know people and how they experienced the storm. Many said it had been a serious disaster, but that it was all in the past now and a closed matter. I was surprised at how well people had overcome it, and at the toughness and sturdiness of the Vietnamese people. They showed me a strong coping mechanism, which made me interested in finding out more about this phenomenon. The next chapter will examine the history of Vietnam and how the coping mechanism relates to the state and its extensions. It will also address how the state works within disaster management and mitigation, and state-wide goals such as poverty alleviation.

CHAPTER 3: History, Bureaucracy, Democracy

Chapter Introduction

...the state has a double monopoly on taxes and legitimate use of force where it is operative. It creates new constellations of power and applies new duties to its citizens, and very often it uses force or threats of force to encourage loyalty and obedience among groups who challenge the legitimacy of the state. (Max Weber cited in Eriksen 1998: 226)⁸

In the previous chapter the reader got to know the people and their situation, and now the discussion continues with the role of the state. The third chapter will introduce the reader to the political history of Vietnam and its government. Vietnam has a history filled with conflict, which has affected the people in a significant way. The current state of governance is also a direct result of that conflict. Through ethnographic examples and stories the reader will see how the Communist state interacts with the population, both positively and negatively. Because this 'system' is very bureaucratic and people are denied freedom of speech, most people have little choice but to try to tolerate it.

An informant at Ho Chi Minh University gave me some insight into the matter. The economy has improved dramatically he admitted, but looking at the city you can see the difference between those who 'have' and those who 'have not'. He gave me one example of how a section of Ho Chi Minh City which previously had been for everyday working people had been cleared, demolished, and then sold to entrepreneurs for the construction of luxury houses and hotels. Those who had lived there before had been 'bought up' by the government for cheap money and then relocated. This gave the city a cleaner look, and as the poorer sections were put in the background, business districts emerged. My informant also briefly touched upon the issue of governance when I asked about if he was happy about how the government did their job. "What choice do we have", he sighed, "it is a one-party system".

I feel this one sentence sums up the sentiment of many Vietnamese people I met. There is frustration and a longing for change, but change is difficult when the government is controlling most aspects of society. The problem is that there is no choice at the moment, as any political movement outside of the official party is taken as a sign of undermining the

⁸ Freely translated from Norwegian

regime. If you are unfairly treated by the system, who can you go to for help? The system tends to protect its own, therefore people can not rely on the government for fair treatment. The Vietnamese live tough lives, but they have done so for a long time through Chinese and French rule, Japanese occupation, two wars and oppressive Communistic governance. To state that the Vietnamese have a strong coping mechanism would be an understatement, and this chapter explores how this mechanism relates to the past and present state. The chapter concludes with where Vietnam might be headed in the future.

History of Vietnam

In order to understand the present bureaucratic system in Vietnam which perforates the lives of everyday Vietnamese to such a degree, it is necessary to look at its political history. As previously mentioned, Vietnam has a history filled with struggles, both domestic and foreign. Over the centuries countless battles have been fought with its Northern neighbour China, and more than once has Vietnam been under Chinese rule. However, the Vietnamese people take pride in that they have always repelled their invaders and gained their freedom. Still, the Vietnamese can not deny that many aspects about their culture are from Chinese influence.

During the French colonial rule in mid 19th century the area of Vietnam was known as Indochina. The colonialists claimed to be civilising the area, like most colonising nations at that time, but in reality they were using the land and people to produce raw materials like rice, rubber and coal. The rule was, in the words of historian David L. Anderson, “incredibly brutal and exploitative” (Anderson 2005: 6). As time passed, the Vietnamese became impoverished and increasingly frustrated, and anti-colonial movements began to emerge. Though there were some uprisings, they were immediately squashed, with the rebels being executed or having to flee to China.

In the 1930s the Communist revolutionary Ho Chi Minh rose through the ranks of the underground party to fight against the colonialists. Described by Anderson as a “charismatic leader whose humble image masked his tremendous tactical skills” (Anderson 2005: 8), Ho Chi Minh has become such an iconic figure in Vietnam that his face is seen in every government office and on every street corner. This is because the Vietnamese government

holds 'Uncle Ho' (as everyone calls him) in such high reverence. The Communist party describes him in this manner (Pribbenow 2002: 252):

He was our soul, our shining star. He led our entire Party, our entire population, our entire army, all united as one, in our courageous fight, writing the most glorious pages in the entire history of the Fatherland. ...He left us a priceless heritage. That heritage is the Ho Chi Minh era, the most brilliant period in the glorious history of our nation, the age when our Fatherland gained its independence and freedom and the era when we began building socialism in our nation.

The Second World War saw the invasion of the Japanese, as the French colonialists lost their power base due to Nazi occupation back home. However, as the World War ended in 1945, a power vacuum appeared. Who were going to seize the country; the French colonists again or the Vietnamese rebels, now known as Việt Minh? The French then fought for a period against the Việt Minh, in what would become known as the First Indochina War. After years of fighting, a settlement was reached in 1954 in a Geneva Convention, and Vietnam was temporary split into two halves on the 17th parallel, pending free general elections in 1956 (Anderson 2005: 26).

The Northern half was under Communist rule, while the unstable Southern government was supported by French and American supplies and funding. American intervention at this time could be explained with the so-called 'domino theory'. Basically, the theory said that if not stopped, Communism would spread all over the Asian countries one by one, like dominos being toppled over. Prior to this, China and North Korea had fallen into Communist hands, and American President Eisenhower and his cabinet feared that if Vietnam followed suit, then the whole South-East Asia region could become Communist, thereby America would lose potential allies in the Cold War.

The free elections in 1956 regarding the unification of Vietnam were going to be crucial, but were unfortunately never carried out. The two governments could not agree on how to hold the election, and the Southern government feared that if held, the Northerners would win due to them being seen as liberators from the colonialists. As time passed with no solution in sight, both governments had to quell small uprisings quite brutally in what would become an escalation to full war.

In 1959 the Vietnam War broke out, and a fierce period of bloodshed followed, resulting in an estimate 3.4 million lives lost. As the French withdrew completely from the area, the United States committed itself fully to the war by deploying their own troops to fight alongside the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). By now, President Kennedy had taken over the reigns at the White House, believing firmly that Vietnam would be the staging ground for holding back 'the red tide of Communism' (Anderson 2005: 33).

The Vietnamese Communist forces became known as *Việt Cộng*, from the Vietnamese word *Cộng Sản*, meaning Communist. They had an advantage over the American troops, being used to warfare in the jungle and using Vietnam's topography to their advantage. The *Việt Cộng* were for a time supplied by North Korea, China and the Soviet Union in their combined struggle against 'Capitalism'.

The American and ARVN forces were aided by the Australians and New Zealanders. To gain the advantage over the Communist forces, the Americans tried using massive firepower by dropping millions of tons of bombs, napalm and chemicals, one of them called Agent Orange. This herbicide was meant to destroy the vegetation which the *Việt Cộng* were hiding in, but time showed that it also resulted in soldiers on both sides developing cancer and children being born with severe defects (Anderson 2005: 123). This is one of the effects of the war which are still felt today.

The two opposing sides would engage in many bloody battles across Vietnam's soil throughout the 1960s. The ARVN and the American troops were holding their ground against the *Việt Cộng*, but the war was taking its toll on the American people. Eventually the war lost its public support in America, and there was a strong demand to call the American soldiers home. With the withdrawal of the American forces, the *Việt Cộng* seized the opportunity to claim Southern Vietnam, marching into its capitol Saigon on the 30th of April 1975 (Anderson 2005).

One Vietnam: Reforms and Refugees

This day became known as Unification day and it has been commemorated ever since, though not everyone thinks of the day as worth celebrating. In the following period, the Communist

party made several reforms to build up a closed socialist system, with additional support from the Soviet Union and its Communist allies. The soldiers from the ARVN were put in so-called re-education camps for several years, many not surviving. This period also saw the exodus of millions of Vietnamese who did not want to live under Communist rule, therefore venturing out to sea in rickety fishing boats, hoping to be picked up by foreign vessels. They became known as the very first boat people, and though some were picked up and rescued, many were not as fortunate and fell victim to the turbulent South China Sea.

In the end, Communism failed in the Soviet Union and so Vietnam had lost its most important ally. Vietnam's neighbours Cambodia and Laos also went through a violent and chaotic period, meaning Vietnam could not rely on them for support either. Now the country had to forge a new path for itself, starting with opening up its borders to foreigners, including its former enemy, the United States. Its economic system needed to change in order to keep up with the changing global climate.

This resulted in the *Đổi mới* reforms (renovation) in the 1980s which consisted of three main policies (Boothroyd & Pham 2000: ix): 1) shifting from a bureaucratically centralized planned economy to a multi-sector economy operating under a market mechanism with state management and a socialist orientation; 2) democratising social life and building a legal state of the people, by the people, and for the people; 3) implementing an open door policy and promoting relations between Viet Nam and all other countries in the world community for peace, independence, and development. Though the Communist Party reforms improved the economy, most notably in allowing private business, it remained a bureaucratic and undemocratic regime with limited religious and political freedom throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s.

The state itself has undergone many transformations, from very closed and inward-looking to an open arms policy encouraging tourism and investment. Throughout all these changes, the state has never wavered in their stance as the legitimate leader of Vietnam, even if the many Vietnamese who resettled in France, United States, Germany and Norway meant otherwise. Some of the boat people swore never to return to their home country before the Communist state was gone, others have returned home as investors or humanitarians with their families. Some have reconciled with the past, others can not forgive or forget what has happened.

Nevertheless, this brings the reader to the present day. Vietnam is still a Communist country (though it refers to itself as a Socialist Republic), one of the remaining few in the world alongside China, Cuba, Laos and North Korea. Vietnam is governed today by the General Secretary of the Communist Party Nông Đức Mạnh, President Nguyễn Minh Triết, and Prime Minister Nguyễn Tấn Dũng. There are internal elections held every fourth year, but there is no alternative to the Communist party, being a one-party system. Any objections and criticism to the state is seen as harmful propaganda, and outspoken people are considered enemies of the state.

With the onset of modernity and the global spread of human rights, Vietnam has taken a stance as having ‘Asian values’. This means that though Vietnam will modernise, it will retain its values of the collective good, “maintaining a more restricted notion of individual rights, and avoiding ‘the West’s’ perceived notion of individual rights, or avoiding ‘the West’s’ perceived moral vices (Ferguson 2006: 184). This has given countries like China and Vietnam the basis for limiting Western ideas about individualism, stating that ‘Asian values’ are more concerned with group cohesion and loyalty to the family and country. Whether this is the reality or an excuse for legitimising their governance is for the reader to decide.

The political system of Vietnam is constructed for the purpose of controlling most aspects of the population’s lives. They have devised a system where the People’s Committee, Security Police and other pro-government organisations have offices and reach from the very top government level, down to the very hamlets of countryside Vietnam. The People’s Committee basically handles the paperwork and bureaucracy of the Vietnamese state, while the Security Police enforces the laws and regulations. Though the Security Police’s job is to enforce the law, they are also feared because of their readiness to put anyone they deem appropriate into prison. Together, these two extensions of the government make a fearsome duo of bureaucracy and rule enforcement.

Economically, it is one of the fastest growing economies in the world with heavy investors like Ikea, Nike and Unilever pumping billions of USD into the country annually⁹. Due to its low wages and loose business regulations many countries like Korea, Singapore, Japan and the United States view Vietnam business sectors as ripe for investment. For the Vietnamese

⁹ <http://www.vietpartners.com/Statistic-FDI.htm>

people this means a fast transition from a traditional lifestyle to an industrial society. Population movement from rural areas to urban ones is therefore inevitable as the working sector shifts emphasis.

Aside from the economic changes, there are changes in the society as well. People generally have more money on their hands, thereby increasing their quality of life. Education, literacy and life expectancy on the rise is a positive effect of economic growth. People are better off now than they were 10 years ago, but regarding human rights there are improvements to be made. The next part will describe how the extensions of the government interact with the people.

A common 'sign' of industrialisation is family planning to slow down the population growth, which I saw several posters for, with messages like: "Limit your family to two children" and "A good family is a cultured, well-fed family", usually depicting a mother, father, and a boy and a girl. One humorous side-effect of this, which Mrs. Hanh noted, was that because people had fewer children and more money, they would be more spoiled and demanding. This was said after her grandson had thrown a tantrum when he was denied sweets.

Men in Green

The Security Police, or *Công an* in the local vernacular, have an ambiguous relation to the people in Vietnam. Some fear them, others merely mistrust them, but at times they are also of service. Acting as the local police in villages and hamlets, they claim to keep law and order. If you steal or break the law, it is not the regular police that are going to arrest you, but it the Security Police. They always appear in their green uniforms and are instantly recognizable by everyone. In most of my encounters with them they had a very serious tone, and always projected themselves as authority figures. They are the regulating extension of the Communist Party, the 'Big Brother' that watches you so to speak. They have an eye on most things that happen in their community, and certain things must always be checked with them for clearance.

I lived in two separate sites, and both places the Security Police wanted papers on what I was doing there, where I was staying and how long I was going to stay. They wanted my research

permits, my passport and my study visa, but following some advice I had left my passport at a safe location in Ho Chi Minh City, which caused some trouble down at the local station. Though they seemed very sceptic at first, the Security Police in BẾN TRE town eventually gave me the benefit of the doubt after my hostess Mrs. Nguyen did some 'greasing of the machinery'. She invited the officer out for coffee and bought him a pack of cigarettes, and after a silent and awkward coffee break he agreed to let me stay.

"Why did you do that?" I asked after he had left, referring to the cigarettes and coffee. "It is just the way things are, we do it to make our lives a bit easier", she replied casually. She continued by explaining how by doing them small favours and having them on your good side, they could be easier to deal with when you needed something from them in return, for instance a permit. Even though I was granted a local living permit, I never received any papers for it. To me, it seemed like it was a way for them to have control and know who lived in their area, in case something happened.

And one day something did happen, but fortunately not to me. One evening as we were about to head out for our evening coffee, we heard shouting and a ruckus from the neighbours. Apparently there was a domestic dispute and the Security Police were sent to settle the situation. After they arrived, things very quickly calmed down, as no one wanted trouble that involved the Security Police. To me, this was a demonstration of the grip they have on the population and the authority that they exert.

Another occasion I was made aware of their authority was when the family and I were watching the international news on TV. There was a demonstration in Myanmar which got violent, and Mrs. Nguyen said that would never be possible in Vietnam, as the Security Police would lock you up as soon as you began thinking about causing trouble.

Apparently the Security Police are very good at finding and punishing troublemakers, which is why people are afraid of speaking out publicly against the government. This gave me the feeling that even the walls had ears, and people feared being arrested because of something they might have said. The Security Police have a tight and I would say tension-filled relationship with the people. Some people say they are abusing their authority, but in the end, perhaps not much can be done. The next section deals with bureaucracy and how this makes life complicated for many Vietnamese.

Where are your Papers?

The *Ủy ban Nhân dân*, or the People's Committee, has branches and offices in most corners of Vietnam like the Security Police, but they serve a different purpose. The Committee stands for bureaucracy where papers and permits are always needed in order for anything to happen. This happened many times during my fieldwork, where bureaucrats demanded to see my papers, and if they were unsatisfied with the ones I had, they sent me to various offices, back and forth until they were absolute certain that I had the right ones. The system is complicated for people working inside as well as outside the bureaucracy. This results in an unwillingness to take too many individual actions, as people are very afraid of ill consequences if they overstep their line. I had read about how bureaucracy can complicate project work and field research in a doctorate thesis about missionary work in the Vietnamese highlands (Bjune, 2003), but I could not imagine the arduousness of it until I experienced it myself.

When I first arrived at Bến Tre town, I went directly to the People's Committee town office, who then said that I would have to go to the province office, which was not far away. After talking to the armed security guard, I was granted access into the building which was very modern and large, with elevators. Here I met Mr. Phuoc, a middle aged pen pusher who said that my introduction letter from the University of Humanities and Social Sciences of Ho Chi Minh City was not specific enough, and I had to return to the city to get papers on specifically what I was studying, which offices/branches I needed to talk to and so on. After some backtracking to Ho Chi Minh City and with the help from the staff at the University I finally got the new introduction letters, in Vietnamese, which were addressed to various offices in the area including Resource & Environment, and Agriculture and Rural Development.

After that Mr. Phuoc, the gatekeeper of my project, began processing my paperwork and soon after that I received my official provincial permission to start fieldwork. After this, things went more smoothly, but not without hiccups. After collecting data in Bến Tre town, I was eager to move out to the countryside, where I had heard the typhoon had caused more extensive damage. My interviewees had given me several possibilities as to where to go next, and in the end I chose the district that had seen the most destruction. This was Bình Đại district.

During my initial trip to Bình Đại district I went first to the People's Committee district office where I got an overview of the area, and I was then directed to the People's Committee village office of Bình Thắng village, where there had been some serious damage. Thanking the man I had spoken to, I left the office, thinking that my project was finally getting somewhere.

Unfortunately that was where my project momentum grinded to a halt. Though the provincial papers with stamps and signatures looked official enough, the village office would not speak with me without an introduction letter from the district office, as without permission from the 'higher level', I could not do any research in the area. Going back to the district office, I talked to the same man as before, got the introduction letter, and went back to the village office. Finally being accepted, I explained my research, but unfortunately the man who would be most helpful to me was busy with a training course, and I would have to come back in two days.

After two days stored away in a hotel room I returned to the village office, and explained my project to the workers. My papers were fine they said, but what I was asking for was impossible. There was no way I would be able to do participant observation with a community in their area, or any area for that matter because I was a foreigner, and if something would happen to me or my material, they would have to be accountable. The only way I would be able to do research would be if I stayed at a hotel and came out to their office at early morning. They would then assist me however they could, show me the sites where the storm had hit and so on, and in the afternoon when I was done I would report back to them, and return to my hotel room. This was their offer, take it or leave it, they said. I was not ready for this blunt reply, probably due to insufficient research on my behalf, as I later found out that this was a common problem for foreign nationals trying to do research in Vietnam.

Trying my best to tackle the situation, I went back to the district office where I received the same reply. Living with the locals would not be permitted, as I had been told, but also unnecessary, as all the information and stories I needed I could get from the People's Committee offices. Very distraught, I left Bình Đại district by bus that day, disillusioned about what fieldwork and participant observation actually meant. The bureaucracy of paperwork and the terms of research they had given me had weighed me down to such a degree that I needed to take some time off in Bến Tre town to re-evaluate my position as a researcher in a foreign country. I would later return to Bình Đại district, only this time under better circumstances with an informant.

I decided then that I would have sparingly contact with the administrative side of the government, and instead focus on getting information from the people and the various organisations in the region. By the end of my fieldwork though, I had somewhat grown accustomed to the constant questioning about papers and permission slips. I was no longer surprised, but it still annoyed me, as even the smallest request from an office required the right papers.

Though I understood that my ‘special’ position as foreign researcher indeed necessitated some paperwork, I read and heard about many other instances where regular people felt frustrated by an overly complicated bureaucratic system¹⁰. This had been the case after typhoon Dorian, where people had to wait for a long time before receiving their compensation money, but the bureaucracy could also make daily life a real challenge. I had personally felt how bureaucracy had made a tangled mess of my fieldwork, but that was nothing compared to what the people had to live with every day. The next section will describe how the Communist party is directly involved in people’s lives through various organisations.

Mass Organisations

As I did research on the disaster that had occurred, some organisation names kept being mentioned. These were nationwide organisations which had contributed greatly to the post-disaster work. The Government had deployed the military and police into the area for emergency evacuation and safe keeping, but these other organisations took care of matters like distributing relief aid and rebuilding damaged houses and schools. The three most important actors were The Fatherland Front (*Mặt Trận Tổ Quốc Việt Nam*), the Women’s Union (*Hội Liên hiệp Phụ nữ*), and the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union (*Đoàn Thanh niên Cộng sản Hồ Chí Minh*).

Like the Security Police and the People’s Committee, these mass organisations are spread throughout the country with offices at most administrative levels. The Women’s Union has made women’s rights one of their chief concerns as spousal abuse is a well know problem. The Youth Union is a popular social club so to speak, resembling something akin to the Scout

¹⁰ <http://vietnamnews.vnagency.com.vn/showarticle.php?num=01HEA180707>

Movement in Western countries. Here the Youth gather for social meetings and to do community services, therefore helping out after typhoon Durian was a given for them.

These mass organisations are no accidents, as each one of them has close ties to the Communist party. In this fashion, the Communist party has an ever presence in the lives of the Vietnamese. No matter where you turn, there they are. The Communist party always represents the people of Vietnam as high spirited, hard working and united for a common cause. Propaganda posters, media events, war memorials and organisations for the masses are but few of the tools of the Communist party to promote the state discourse on nationalism and unity. The Communist motto is after all “*Độc lập, Tự do, Hạnh phúc*” meaning Independence, Freedom and Happiness.

By helping the poor and the needy in the country, these organisations give the Communist party a friendly ‘face’ in the community. The effect this has is that they show solidarity with the commoners, and that Communism ‘works’. This also contributes to the indoctrination of communistic ideals into the youths and women who join them. The ‘system’ is therefore very encompassing of all society, following you from cradle to grave. The next section will examine how the ‘system’ works in dealing with disasters.

The Government and the Storm

Chapter two briefly mentioned the government’s role regarding typhoon Durian, but here the role will be fleshed out. The government has certainly had to deal with its fair share of disasters, and therefore has much valuable experience. In fact, there are so many storms in Vietnam that they are not known by their Western names, but by their number of when they became known to the general public. Typhoon Durian for example was the ninth storm to hit Vietnam in 2006, and therefore people only remember it as storm number nine. Every year the count is reset, which says how common storms are and how storms are seen in a cyclical manner, returning every year.

Because Vietnam has such a massive population and many of them being rural poor, economics will always be important to how well the government can handle a disaster. Money spent on rebuilding infrastructure is money lost in industry, so the government has to spend its

resources wisely. However, a source at the Red Cross told me that the costs of disaster preparations and awareness campaigns would be half or less of disaster reconstruction, but just as effective. By spending money in pre-disaster work the government was therefore actually saving costs.

In my opinion, I think the government has designed a robust disaster management program. The Central Committee for Flood and Storm Control (CFSC) have presence in most parts of the country, like the other extensions of the government. Its members vary from location to location, but usually includes the Meteorology and Hydrology department, various NGOs like Red Cross and Oxfam, and the People's Committee. In this aspect, I agree that having many offices might be useful, as well timed coordination and plan execution is crucial in disaster management and relief work.

Where improvements can be made is in the way some people have been treated in the aftermath of the disaster. Because of the bureaucracy, some have had to struggle greatly for their compensation money, while others have not received any at all. In Vietnam the distribution of aid and money from top to bottom can be a very tricky path, with many detours and hungry pockets. The main issue here is corruption. Though it was said that officials from the top level were down in Bến Tre province to oversee the distribution and stop corruption, many commoners I spoke to were still dissatisfied with how the distribution went.

Corruption is such a well known phenomenon in the government and business circles that everyone talks about it as if it was a given, but still they do so with lowered voices. Government corruption is considered a somewhat taboo subject, and people prefer not to mention names in front of people they do not trust. Most have said that the People's Committee would first and foremost give out compensation money to their family and closest friends. 'Normal' people had to wait in long lines, having to hand over documentation that they lived where they claimed to live in order to be processed. Some places required witnesses in order for them to believe you.

Here follows the summary of the official provincial report on the disaster, written in August 2007. I was surprised to receive it actually, as it seemed like a very important document, complete with a provincial stamp and signature¹¹.

Positive outcomes:

- Disaster management has become a high priority case during rainy season.
- The spread of information from central out to districts was a good exercise.
- During crisis, the district officials are in the field with the people, creating relations and bonds.
- The work of the bureaucrats have become more internalised and part of routine. This means everyone has a responsibility in this work and has to cooperate well in order for the disaster management to function well according to schedule.
- The delegation of work went well and committees and other meetings worked well.
- The disaster gave the region special attention from the upper levels of state. This has helped to put a focus on and improve infrastructure.
- All organisations have received accolades for their outstanding work and cooperation. The freezing of market prices was especially a wise action.
- The mobilisation of maximum resources and tools was well executed.
- Law and order was maintained.
- The people have shown courage and a tough mentality in dealing with this crisis by helping themselves and helping others. Solidarity has been shown by other people in the country. Together we have struggled greatly to come back to normalcy.
- Many who were affected by the storm were kind enough to help others before they helped themselves, thereby showing great unselfishness.

¹¹ I have translated the text with an informant of mine so I can not claim 100 percent accuracy, but the essence of the report should be intact.

Negative outcomes:

- The contingency plan was not specific enough.
- There is a lack of experience when dealing with the spread of information.
- The people were not aware of the magnitude of the storm.
- Some resources were not available at the required time, thereby lengthening the overall waiting time.
- In some areas the resources have not been well coordinated, therefore people have been working separately, causing delays.
- A part of the disaster management personnel did not do their job properly, because they were reluctant to work out in the field with the people.
- There have been some problems in the standardisation of reports on classification, items destroyed, injuries etc. The extent of damage and support was not properly followed according to standard procedure, thereby making people feel they have been unfairly treated. Their compensation money arrived late.
- A part of the population demanded help from the government, without doing anything themselves, which slowed down the rehabilitation process.
- Some officials are not accurate enough in doing their job, thereby making people unsure of who really gets the compensation money.
- Private donations from others make the distribution of help unfair, further leading to jealousy amongst recipients.
- The plantations of fruit trees will take some time to recover.
- Forwarding the national plan on disaster management has not been handled correctly. Many people are therefore not happy and complain because they do not understand the system.

From the report it seems the disaster management went on overall well, with some setbacks. People I have spoken to have said the help arrived on time or it never arrived at all, depending on whether I was in an urban or rural setting. All in all, I received a very mixed response, which says something about the differences between the urban and rural situations.

One aspect about the disaster management which many people I spoke to applauded was the freezing of the market prices on foodstuff and building material, though an earlier Oxfam

report actually contests this, stating there was a price increase in candles and roofing material¹². The provincial report also states that other provinces have supplied the area with extra building material at low costs to help the people in need. This gave people a chance to rebuild their homes at reasonable prices, unlike what has happened in Myanmar after cyclone Nargis in May 2008. Here some commodity prices have risen up to hundred percent, making the situation even worse than it already is¹³.

We have to read the typhoon Durian report with a grain of salt though. As this is an official report, it can not be too critical of its own shortcomings. My informant who helped me translate told me something interesting regarding this subject. The problem with these official reports was that they were not accountable to anyone. In a Western country he told me, the media could investigate and find errors if they wanted to. In Vietnam, the media is state controlled and there is little press freedom. The officials can therefore write what they want. Even so, I was surprised that there were reported faults, even if many of them would be classified as ‘misunderstandings’ and ‘communication failures’. This speaks of a seemingly openness and an attempt by the state to be as transparent as possible, though it could also be facade.

Another point worth noting about the official report was the number of complaints by the people against the state officials who were in charge of distributing compensation money. Two delegations were set up to administrate complaints and errors, and also reprimand those who had made them. Out of 1106 complaints, 1021 were turned down after the delegations had explained how ‘the system works’. Out of the remaining 85 cases where the complainant had ‘good’ reason to be dissatisfied, most errors were due to a secondary group (organisation or village committee) not properly informing the people or noting statistics. Only in 9 cases, out of the 1106 complaints, were the officials at fault themselves. The compensation money was then handed out, while the officials were given appropriate penalty, though my informant told me that they would probably only receive a slap on the wrist, and not actually any penalty according to law.

All in all, the provincial report concluded that most complaints have been dealt with in an effective manner. What can be seen from this report is that though people are brave enough to

¹² http://ngocenter.org.vn/file_lib/durian_assessment_report_careoxfamsc_2006.pdf

¹³ <http://www.reliefweb.int/rw/rwb.nsf/db900sid/KKAA-7EBA9F?OpenDocument>

complain against the government, not many cases are approved and it turns out less than one percent is given compensation. Most of the cases are denied, while the rest are seen as systemic errors and outside of the state responsibility, and therefore the state owes them no money.

In the end there are few options, as there is no other party to turn to, and people who feel they have been wronged can only return to their damaged homes empty handed. Again we see how the 'system' seems to protect its own, and although some are penalised, it could simply be a theatrical display to ease the minds of dissatisfied Vietnamese. This shows that although certain improvements in state transparency and accountability have been made, it is still a closed system. People might have the ability to complain, but it matters little when those complaints are ignored and buried by bureaucracy.

The report can also be seen as an example of how the state presents the 'official' view of the disaster. By doing so, they are directing the survivors and those who hear about it through the media to their chosen viewpoint. This is part of the state discourse which emphasises unity in the people and the effectiveness of the state. The report applauds the people's courage and efforts, but it also applauds itself for well-handled disaster management. Another point which the report emphasises is the increased interaction between the people and the state during times of crisis. It tries to present an image of cooperation, trust and camaraderie, as if saying: "Yes, we were there with you when it happened". This is part of how the state legitimises itself as the proper (and only) caretaker of the country and its people. The next section tells about another interaction between the People's Committee and the people.

The 99 Needy: A Question of Distribution and Trust

During my stay in Bình Đại district, I had gotten advice that I should not be straightforward about my main objective, which was looking at the post-disaster situation. I was informed by close contacts that the local People's Committee would not be pleased about a foreign person looking into their affairs, finding faults or corruption. I therefore twisted my story a bit, with help from Mrs. Hanh, and now I was there to document the poor and disabled people living in the community, particularly handicapped children affected by the Agent Orange chemical.

Though I felt I was deceiving the People's Committee, I thought it best to follow the advice of my informants.

Because of this new approach I was guided to many poor people living in the area, many who had a severely disabled child in their family with little choice but to stay home to look after him or her. Through this 'accident' I had the opportunity to ask the people who were the most marginalised how they felt, not only about the storm, but also about how they were coping in general. Most answered the same, that they had received the standard compensation sum after the storm, but received nothing else otherwise. Some lived in what can barely be described as a house, with no door, only four walls and a bamboo/tin roof to shelter them from the rain. One person told me that people in the community no longer put much effort into building houses anymore of fear that it would only be ripped apart by the next storm.

Some households were very poor, with a person or two living what could almost not be consider a decent life. I remember quite well an old woman who was nearly blind living in a small hut. She had a son and a daughter, both adults, but they were also disabled in some manner. Her daughter was bedridden with an infectious growth on her face, making her unable to see and talk. Her son was blind from birth, but otherwise physically fine, and used to take walks to the nearby church. These three people lived under one roof, but relied heavily on the community for support and food. Mrs. Hanh whispered to me after we had left that there had been a rumour going around that the old woman had tried to buy poison in order to take her own and her children's lives, ending what people called 'miserable lives', but I never found out the truthfulness of these rumours.



Other families I visited also lived a very meagre existence. There was usually a person, it could be a mother, father or a sibling, who had to take care of someone with a severe handicap. The handicapped would lie on a wooden bed inside the house most of the time, not receiving any stimuli of the outside world. They also had very limited or no communication skill, meaning they could not say whether they were hungry or about to soil themselves.

Because the caretaker had to be at home at all hours, they did not have the opportunity to find work, and therefore relied on charity from the community.

In developed countries most disabled people are properly taken care of with the help from the state, but not so in Vietnam. I felt very sorry for them and asked Mrs. Hanh if the state had some hospital or nursery home where they could be taken care of, but there was no such thing in this area, and even if there were, these people would not be able to afford it. Though there was sympathy with these families, there was also a great sense of pity and people thought that the disabled put such a terrible burden on the others. “For people with such sicknesses, they sure live long...”, Mrs. Hanh sighed as we were walking home from one of our visits. She explained that life was very hard for the disabled and their families and that perhaps it would be best for everyone if the disabled died, better sooner than later, but only by natural causes. Taking lives was out of the question.

This might seem like a harsh notion, but such is country life in Vietnam, where there is no safety net to fall back on. People have to manage as best as they can on what little they have. Most never received any support from the state, only a gift or two at New Year celebration and other holidays. Looking at their sparse living conditions, I too felt a great sense of pity and thought that was no way to lead a life. In the end, there was not much I could do about their situation except give them some money for the time they gave me.

An interesting event happened on one of my visits to the poor households. I had been taking names, birthdates and pictures of several handicapped children, and as usual felt uncomfortable for doing something which ultimately would never benefit them. I was then taken out to lunch with Mrs. Hanh and a worker at the People’s Committee who had accompanied us. They were long acquaintances and had done several ‘poor household rounds’ before with foreign donors and officials.

Before I had arrived, and in relation to the damages of typhoon Durian, one private foreign donor had given 300 USD to my hostess, who had then passed it onwards to the People’s Committee for redistribution. The People’s Committee worker told about how there were 99 needy children in the area, and how the money had been given to them. Mrs. Hanh however refuted this claim, and said that we had in the last few days visited all the poor and needy ones

in the area, which amounted to only twenty or so. This generated some discussion regarding who the 99 needy ones were, and how that money was spent.

After this incident Mrs. Hanh told me she was now sceptical of the People's Committee, and said they had misused her trust in them. If she would be given the task of distributing more donations again, she would do it herself she said. Not only was she then sure that the money was used for its right purpose, but she could directly give credit to whoever had been the donor. The People's Committee would take that credit she said, as if the money had been theirs to give away, when they were only redistributing it. This gave the People's Committee a false image as benefactors of the community. Corruption was also a factor in her scepticism, saying they were more inclined to help 'their own' before anyone else.

This experience shows how the People's Committee are involved in the communities. Though they can be of assistance and try to present themselves as helpful and supportive, not everyone believes and trusts them. The question of who should distribute aid comes to mind, as the People's Committee seem to think they are best suited for the job in order to avoid 'jealousy amongst recipients' as it states in the official report. Whether or not to trust the People's Committee was an important question which Mrs. Hanh had to ask herself, with this experience shaking her foundation of trust in them.

The household visits were eye-opening experiences into a different world for me. It made me realise that despite Vietnam's economic upswing in recent years, rural people were still poor, and there was still much work to be done. No doubt about it, Vietnam is still a developing country, and has a long way to go in eradicating rural poverty. According to national statistics though, the poverty rate has gone down from 60 percent in 1990 to 18.1 percent in 2004, which does show improvement, and hopefully a step in the right direction¹⁴. Being the 13th most populated country in the world means there are many in need of assistance, and we can only hope for the best.

¹⁴ <http://www.undp.org.vn/undpLive/Content/What-We-Do/Focus-Areas/Poverty-Reduction>

The Legitimacy of the State

This chapter opened with a statement regarding the state monopoly on the legitimate use of force. This presents a myriad of questions regarding the legitimacy of state power. What are the responsibilities of a state towards its peoples? If the many Vietnamese people who live inside as well outside of its borders wish for change, how will this come about? This section will assess the legitimacy and role of state in Vietnam.

James Ferguson has looked into this issue in “Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order” (2006), where he views how the concept of modernity has changed over the years. People used to believe that all nations were on a linear path toward progress and industrial economy. The reason why some nations were poorer than others was that they were further behind on this evolutionary line, but their time would eventually come.

Time has proven that this model was too simplistic, though it did set itself apart from the previous rigid belief which stated God had decided who were going to be rich and poor in a timeless ranking, also known as the Great Chain of Being. Theorists now say that the idea of modernity and development has lost its credibility in many places. Some post-modern authors like Escobar (1995) and Rahnema & Bawtree (1997) believe that development is ‘over’, which according to Ferguson (2006:182) “would surely sound strange to many people in, say, South Korea or China, who seem to take both ‘development’ and its promises very seriously indeed (and not without reason)”.

Vietnam shares this belief with said countries, and strongly believes in it. The Government has made considerable headway into completing the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDG), even going as far as adopting their own version called the Vietnam Development Goals (VDG), which are to be completed by 2015. The MDG and VDG cover a wide range of development issues, from poverty alleviation and gender equality to ensuring environmental sustainability¹⁵. This shows that the government has improved in many ways, by using their new found economic prosperity for economic development.

¹⁵ <http://www.undp.org.vn/undpLive/Content/MDGs/Viet-Nam-and-MDGs>

Considered to be a great effort by many developed nations, it has set a prime example for other struggling developing countries. We have to be careful in blindly trusting statistics though, as it states in an Oxfam report that numbers can be fixed to appear better: “Finally, while government statistics show a marked decrease in poverty, this may be attributed to a combination of redefining of poverty levels as much as it is an indicator of real changes in people’s lives” (Oxfam 2005: 6).

However, if the VDG numbers are correct, then Vietnam is on the right path. Many countries with new found wealth can end up with a very skewed distribution. Some say that ‘Asian values’ promoting the collective good and Confucian moral standards are part of the reason why many Asian countries are improving now. The Asian Tigers (Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore and South Korea) have certainly grown to solid economic powers in the world economy, and Vietnam might join them in the future.

Part of the VDG is opening up for the participation of people in decision making. There have been some improvements in opening up for more democratic elections, as in the Grass Roots Democratic Decree (GRDD). From the Oxfam report it states: “... the Grassroots Democracy Decree stipulates the rights of people to be informed and involved in decision-making and activities that affect them.” It seems the state is trying to grant the people more freedom to make their own decisions, and also remove some of the bureaucratic muddle which makes decision making so difficult.

Perhaps this is related to the government sensing that there is unrest in the people. For what is a state without the people? It cannot exist without the support or at least the conformity of the population. This support has crumbled under the feet of many governments who have neglected their people by not providing them with the security and stability they need. Examples of this happening throughout history are the French revolution at the end of the 18th century, up to the Colour revolutions in the 2000s.

Today, many states are in guerrilla war because of dividing factions within its borders, as in Sri Lanka with the Tamil Tigers (Kapferer 1997). Here Kapferer discovered that the state legitimised its use of violence against the Tamil Tigers through re-inventions of myths and legends of the past. Buddhist values of hierarchical order are promoted to legitimise the dominance of the state, while enemies of the state are depicted as ‘demons’, being the lowest

of beings in the order. This 'remythologisation' as Kapferer calls it, tells us that even in (or perhaps especially in) conflict situations, states must try to appear legitimate in order to have the support of the people. Kapferer (1997: 167) states:

The mark of the contemporary political state, possibly everywhere and certainly not Sri Lanka alone, is its legitimisation, above all else, as a rational order which commands the bureaucratic and technical apparatuses necessary to the reproduction of the rationalist order of the state.

In these armed conflicts several parties will claim they are the legitimate leaders of the country, but it is usually the civilians who suffer the most. The difference between freedom fighter and terrorist depends on whose side you are on, and being on the wrong side in the wrong situation may cost you your life. Because Vietnam has gone down this bloody path before, I believe it is unlikely to happen again. However, I do believe that social unrest is possible in the future if the state does not open up for more democratic reforms.

As seen in recent news, the cyclone in Myanmar in May 2008 has caused devastating damage, with the world audience gasping in shock. Even though the cyclone has done enough damage by itself, what has made greater headlines is the military junta ruling the country being very little cooperative with foreign NGOs. Here we can see how an oppressive regime has made the population truly vulnerable during many years of neglect and abuse. They are currently only allowing a small amount of NGO workers into the country, while confiscating tons of relief aid coming in from all across the world. The military junta, having ruled the country illegitimately since 1962, claims the situation is now under control, and is able to handle the situation. Meanwhile, various agencies have estimated that up to 1.5 million people are in peril, due to lack of proper shelter and food¹⁶.

The current situation is tense, especially because there were massive demonstrations in the country under a year ago. The population is tired, frustrated and very unhappy about the way the junta is handling the situation, while the world community is putting pressure on the government to allow more aid workers into the country. What we have here is a potential powder keg which might explode, because the Myanmar military regime is not doing what a state is supposed to do, namely support and protect the people during times of crisis.

¹⁶ <http://www.aftenposten.no/nyheter/uriks/article2417346.ece>

The states which have little or no support from its people, which abuse and disregard human rights are hopefully coming to an end. These states are openly condemned by watchdog organisations like Amnesty International and International Human Rights Association. Where does Vietnam fit in this context? Though not on the top list of worst offenders, they do have a sketchy record in the ‘watchdog’ lists¹⁷. Harassment and imprisonment of people who have used the internet for democracy discussion have occurred, as well as human rights violations against ethnic minority groups.

Although the Communist state in Vietnam has been helpful in giving the people support through reforms and programs, they are reluctant to give them one of their most basic needs; freedom of expression. Small advances have been made through democratic reforms, but I believe this is not enough until the Vietnamese people can feel free to think, speak and write what they want. Many have fought for this right, and paid for it with their freedom. Recently, several human rights activists in Vietnam have been arrested and sentenced to imprisonment for ‘terrorist activities’¹⁸.

Democratic Outlook

Despite the tight government extensions, reforms and organisations, there is resistance within the population. Not everyone is swayed by the Communist propaganda, and many still bear resentment towards the Communist party for what happened only a generation ago. Amongst these people are religious groups, academics, minority groups, journalists, and now recently part of the young generation who are able to communicate with the outside world like never before, thanks to the internet.

Having joined the WTO and gained some access to the world market, Vietnam has opened up for business and free trade. With this development also comes an internal and external demand for a more open and transparent form of government. Human rights organisations have several times criticised the government for arresting and imprisoning political activists and members of pro-democratic groups, but the government sees this matter in a very

¹⁷ <http://www.amnesty.org/en/region/asia-and-pacific/south-east-asia/viet-nam#report>

¹⁸ http://www.viettan.org/article.php3?id_article=5692

different light. They would prefer that the international community stay clear of such internal affairs.

Several Norwegian citizens have also been detained, questioned and promptly expelled from Vietnam in relation to the resistance, as in 2007 when the Rafto Foundation¹⁹ of Bergen tried to contact Thich Quang Do, the 2006 Rafto Prize Laureate in Ho Chi Minh City. In February 2008, Right wing politician Peter Gitmark was ordered to leave the country as soon as possible after contacting a pro-democratic author named Than Khan Tran Theuy.²⁰

Bloc 8406 is a free rights and non-violent movement based outside Vietnam, by Vietnamese people living in other countries. It is based on a manifesto which was signed on the 08.04.06, hence its name²¹. The supporters have fought for free rights and democracy in Vietnam ever since the Communist party came to power. Now they have gained some support inside Vietnam from various holds, but unfortunately the state has struck down hard on these 'threats' to the state. The internet has made information sharing about the movement easier, but the government is trying to control and censor this as well. One informant told me that as soon as an anti-communist web page is made, the state takes it down, which people respond to by making new pages, and so it goes back and forth.

Where Vietnam is headed is uncertain, but one can hope for a peaceful transition to democratic elections. With people getting more money, more choices and most important, more education, people will want change. The question is, will the government be willing to change as well or will they try to cling on to their power, despite the voice of the people?

Ultimately, the result will rely on a dialogue between the people and the state. If there is a strong enough demand for democratic reform, it might just come about in the coming years. As stated at the beginning of this chapter the Vietnamese have a tremendous coping mechanism to overcome any challenge, and I believe gaining democratic freedom is possible for them. Many people I spoke to were not satisfied with the government, but at the same time also afraid of state authority.

¹⁹ The Rafto Prize is a peace prize similar to the Nobel peace prize

²⁰ <http://www.hoyre.no/artikler/2008/2/1203937828.38>

²¹ http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/HI14Ae01.html

This chapter has shown only some of the hurdles the Vietnamese must overcome in their daily lives, and I believe that typhoon Dorian accentuated some of these struggles. Some of the poor are in a worse situation now compared to before the disaster. Bureaucracy has made the recovery process very difficult for others. Trust between the people and the state might also have changed depending on the degree of assistance received. However because of the strong coping mechanism, perhaps the Vietnamese have come to accept that they live with a state which will not always help them? The future will depend on the state, but also the people, who must dare to take action rather than choose conformity. As David Kertzer (1988: 39) writes²²:

Either looking at historical chronicles or at the world today, the most striking is not the oppressed rising up to crush the political system which exploit them. Rather, it is the overwhelming conformity amongst people who live in such societies, which is the most remarkable.

In the next chapter the role of NGOs and the development industry will be discussed. The global efforts to combat natural disasters and what kind of impact this has on the global as well as the local community will also be looked into.

²² cited in Eriksen (1998: 227), freely translated from Norwegian

CHAPTER 4: Aid and Globalisation

Chapter Introduction

In this chapter the reader will be presented to the NGO work which was ongoing in B n Tre province and other provinces nearby. Through examining these projects the reader will see how people are coping with natural disasters with NGO assistance, and also how they have agency and choice when faced with agents of outside intervention. At the end of the chapter I also wish to view the natural disaster issue from a global perspective.

There is a substantive amount of material on the anthropology of aid and development, mostly written after the Second World War when the development industry began to grow. One reason why development is an issue close to the anthropological heart is because anthropological fieldwork has traditionally been conducted in remote areas with people who have been marginalised in some manner. When these people are then faced with modernity and development, anthropologists have been there to record the events.

There are basically two main strands within the anthropology of development, those who are for development work and those who are against it. The post-modern strand of anthropology is very sceptical to issues concerned with aid, seeing it as a continuation of the old imperialistic ways of the West in a new guise. They see the developing nations locked in the same exploitative patterns of the past, therefore trying to solve development issues solely through project work will not work. This is known as the dependency theory, mainly associated with the works of Andre Gunder Frank (1967).

Development has been discussed by many over the years. Sharp (1968) has written a classical piece on what happens when introducing foreign technology to a social system, while Gardner & Lewis (1996) and De Sardan (2005) have written about the problematic relationship between anthropology and development. Hviding (2003) has written about how intricate local-global connections are made in small regions under development, while Filer (1997) has discussed the issue of community resistance against industrial corporations. What anthropologists ultimately are interested in are the processes of change which development brings.

Regarding anthropology and aid work, Eriksen (1998: 346) has this to say: “In general, aid organisations utilise terms concerning development which have to be unacceptable to anthropologists, because they assume that there exists one type of society which is ‘better’ than the rest.” However, Eriksen later states that anthropologists can be of assistance in this field by giving projects local context and relevance, a view shared by more and more anthropologists.

Aid can be seen as just another form for globalisation and foreign intervention, or it can be seen as progress and the way forward. Aid is indeed about change, often by introducing foreign ideas or elements into a system. Because anthropology uses concepts such as whole social systems and cultural relativity where a society or culture can only be understood on its own terms, anthropology takes a ‘conservative’ stance to development, as it is change brought on by an outside force (Eriksen 1998: 348). Because of this ‘conservative’ stance anthropology end up with a double edged role concerning development; on the one hand it is cautious of foreign intervention, and on the other hand, it has to acknowledge that development is a form of globalisation which might benefit the people.

The development industry has grown immensely in recent decades, and now operates on all levels, in almost every part of the world through Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs). These organisations have become the poster child of the development industry and have almost become synonymous with projects and grassroots work. In contrast to government initiatives which may encompass a larger framework, like a dam project, NGOs are focused with working with the specific communities. Indeed, this is what sets the two actors apart, one NGO worker told me.

The government works with a top-down approach, creating solutions from the state and then applying it down to the individual communities. The NGOs on the other hand work with a bottom-up approach, crafting each project appropriate to the community they are working with. This makes the project more useful, as they are context specific and answer the needs of the community. Supporters of NGO work will claim this works better than the cookie cut formula which governments might use.

However, NGO work is not the end solution to all of the world’s problems. There are arguments against NGO work, and not all see their performance in positive light. In some

places NGOs have established an over-presence, making a NGO hot-spot. This means that areas might be flooded with all sorts of different organisations trying to get a piece of the development pie, ultimately creating a mess of project work and the community. One example of this happening is from the Solomon Islands where a collection of international environmental NGOs have established projects in order to protect the wildlife and natural resources. This contributes to a situation Hviding calls 'compressed globalisation', meaning a dense concentration both in space and time of local-global connections (Hviding 2003: 542). Hviding applies his theory to very small scale societies, but I believe this is also true more generally for post-disaster areas where many NGOs suddenly flow into one spot to do relief work.

Hviding has written about the relationship between community and NGO, which at times can be a perplexing phenomenon. The communities on which NGOs are so dependent in order to create projects are not always actually existent before the NGOs arrive. In these cases, the 'communities' are created by the people who live there, in order to fulfil NGOs requirements regarding "community participation". The people show creativity and agency in the sense that they understand that a NGO can channel resources to the area. They therefore choose to 'play along' until they get what they are after, but really have little interest in the project. In these NGO hot-spots, the people can go NGO 'shopping' to see who can best meet their needs. As Hviding (2003: 551) writes: "Obtaining a *porojek* [project] and keeping it in the village gives an open channel for fulfilling local desires through the flow of money, goods and services"

The relationship between a community and an NGO has to be of mutual trust and understanding in order for a project to be successfully carried out. One of the major faults of the development industry in the past was to judge the recipients of the project as helpless and without agency, thereby excluding them from the planning process. This is a view which is fading away, and most project work now tries to encourage community participation as much as possible.

Most NGOs have guidelines involving gender issues and targeting vulnerable groups such as children and the elderly. This means involving women in discussion groups, even though this might not always be very culturally appropriate. Proponents of gender issues will say that the voice of women must always be heard, but this might be very hard in cultures where the public sphere is reserved for men. The solution requires tact and understanding of the culture,

as simply entering an area demanding women's opinion will most likely only create aggravation and a one-way ticket out of the village. Because NGOs need this 'insider' understanding, many anthropologists have been employed to be the bridge between the local world and the global world.

NGOs do not always benefit the community though, even if they have the best intentions. A common sentiment amongst people who live in NGO 'hot-spots' is that many meetings and discussions might be had, but in the end, there are no real results. The many working groups and seminars also requires time to participate, which otherwise would be used for jobs or household work. It is no wonder then that some remain sceptical of NGO projects, having experienced how little rewarding and futile it can be.

In the next section the reader will get to know how the various NGOs operate in Bến Tre province. When it comes to natural disasters, all efforts and strengths must be utilised in order to minimise damage and casualties. Though the government has to do a considerable effort, it needs the help of the people and the many NGOs in order to overcome the situation. In relation to typhoon Durian the main NGOs were Oxfam, Church World Service, Care International and the Red Cross. The background, structure and aims of these organisations may differ, but it is without a doubt the Red Cross that has the most experience in dealing with this kind of event.

The Red Cross

Responding quickly to emergencies around the world, the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement have provided provision and immediate aid to disaster and conflict zones for over 140 years. Through the International Committee of the Red Cross, the IFRC and the many national organisations around the world, they have gained world wide recognition as valued aid workers. Though often finding themselves in the line of fire and dangerous situations, the men and women working for Red Cross have not faltered in their steps in helping those who need it the most. In Vietnam, the Red Cross considers the most vulnerable target groups to be the poor, the handicapped, children and the elderly and it is these groups who are part of Red Cross' many projects.

The person I had most contact with was a local Red Cross worker named Mr. Hai Duong. I was lucky to find such an experienced and informative person. He had worked for the Red Cross for a number of years in the provincial office, and had on several occasions cooperated with foreign agencies. With regards to natural disasters, he was the ‘number one guy’ in the area I was told by his associates, and they had not been wrong. A loyal worker of the Red Cross, he mused himself with the notion that he would probably work in Red Cross until he retired, as there was always more work to do. He compared Westerners to cats, in that they were more individual set and therefore Westerners could change occupation as they saw fit. Asians however were more like dogs, loyal to their owner and to their group, and he would therefore never change occupation. This was part of ‘Asian values’, he told me.



Mr. Duong in his office

He explained to me how one of the most important elements of project work was to incorporate the community into the development plan, instead of just telling them what to do. We had many stimulating talks about development work and natural disaster issues, mostly due to his rich experience with disaster management, but also because he was well-spoken in English. Finding people who could articulate themselves in English was a true rarity out in B n Tre province, so it was always refreshing to talk to him. He had been very much involved in the work surrounding typhoon Durian and gladly shared his experience with me.

When not occupied with disaster management, he plans and oversees various development projects, one of them being what he calls Capacity Projects. It usually starts with a Red Cross project manager like himself going out to a community asking the important question: “What do you need?” Mr. Duong told me about his latest Capacity Project concerning the construction of a small bridge on a school road. After attending four group discussion-meetings as part of Red Cross’ standard Needs Assessment, the participants wrote down what they considered most important for their community.

Three out of four had said they needed the previously mentioned bridge, as this was a road frequently used by school children. As they had decided on what they needed the most, they

could then start planning on how to do it. Because this was a rather poor community they could not pay for it all, but they wanted to pay part of it themselves, with the rest coming from outside sources. Mr. Duong then made a budget plan which he applied funding for. What was important with these Capacity Projects was the sense of empowerment and being active in improving your own community as Mr. Duong told me: “The people are doing it themselves, so they can say: We built this”. The Red Cross acts as the coordinator and facilitator, but the main work is done by the people of the community, based on their own needs and capacity, hence the term Capacity Projects.

The needs of the communities could vary depending on their situation, but in the Mekong Delta it was often related to flood and storm issues. Building bridges across rivers and canals or providing swimming lessons for children could save lives during those tough flood months, and could make a great difference in their life quality. Other times the projects included micro-credit schemes, a project form which has proven successful in many parts of the world, with Vietnam being no exception.

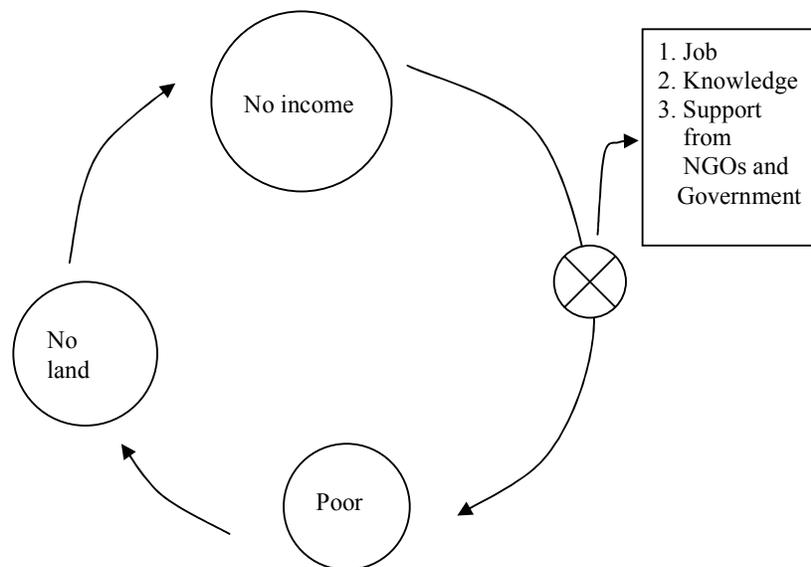
He gave me one example of how they used the micro-credit ‘formula’ for poverty reduction projects called Funds Circles. The runtime is usually between six and twelve months. A family receives some small funds to buy a pig, a cow or seeds, or whichever is appropriate to that area. After the year has passed, Red Cross does a check-up to see if there are any improvements in their situation.

According to Red Cross statistics, only five percent of the families involved in the Funds Circles never showed any improvement, which were very positive results. At that time, Mr. Duong was in charge of managing thirty such families, but he knew of parallel projects being carried out in three other districts, so it seemed like a successful project model.

“What happens to the families that do not show any change?” I enquired. He replied that they would get a new chance at improving their situation for another 6 or 12 months, but as for what happened after that I did not find out. The reason they called it Funds Circles was that the same funds were always given back to Red Cross when the situation had improved, and then passed on to the next family. This meant that the costs of the project stayed low, and it could continue as long as there were appropriate families. As for the selection process, that was a matter of the local Red Cross in the different villages.

Every project Mr. Duong plans takes time to research and implement, but he says that he always wishes he had more of it. Some types of projects only last for six months, but Mr. Duong meant that six months was not enough to see real change, and preferably the runtime of any project would be twelve months or more. Real sustainable change meant not just a temporary alleviation in poverty, but an escape from the poverty circle. Mr. Duong told me about a Vietnamese proverb which goes: “*Đưa cần câu thay vì cho xôi cá*” which can be roughly translated as “give a man a fish today and he will be full for a day, but give him a fishing rod and he will be full for the rest of his life.”²³ This is the very principle that the Red Cross is trying to see through.

Here is an illustration of the poverty circle as explained to me by Mr. Duong. The poor were in their situation partly because they did not have their own land to work or live on, only renting or scrounging the property of others. This meant the only way to make a living was by selling their labour for cheap money, which was very unreliable. This lack of knowable income made them poor in periods of unemployment. So the circle would go round and round, but sometimes it would worsen due to unforeseen events like an illness or a natural disaster.



As Mr. Duong continued to explain the poverty circle he emphasised that the Red Cross was strongly against giving out money, as this would lead to a dependency relation between the benefactor and the recipient. On a global scale this is known as before mentioned dependency

²³ There is some discussion regarding the origin of this saying, more details are available online at: http://www.lib.washington.edu/SouthEastAsia/vsg/elist_2004/Translation.htm

theory, but this can also be applied to a small scale situation. Being dependant on aid meant some people would become more passive, and expect handouts from institutions without making an effort themselves. Therefore instead of helping them, the sponsor is creating a relation where the poor become dependent on them, and when they leave, everything returns to the way it was. Mr. Duong also said that giving money was a very short term solution, as if people spent all their money today, they would have nothing the day after.

The break from the circle is represented with the X, where three important elements must be present. It is not easy, but still possible to break the circle if the people are willing, according to the Red Cross worker. The poor need some form of occupation, they need knowledge or a plan, and they need support from an outside source, each which will be described in detail further on.

Firstly, when offering a job to someone poor, it is not about shipping them off to the closest sweatshop. The job has to be a livelihood which is reliable and sustainable. In that fashion, calling it a job would perhaps be too simplistic, but this illustration was only a fast sketch made by Mr. Duong. Providing them a job meant providing them with the means to make an income. This could be in form of some occupational training, or it could be raising livestock like chicken or cows or starting a plantation of fruit trees.

Secondly, knowledge was important. This meant they needed a plan of how to save and to keep their savings when the Red Cross had gone. A plan of how to sell and buy additional livestock was an option, or it could be a savings or investment plan for the coming years. Knowledge also meant that others could benefit from the project through sharing of information. When a farmer passes on knowledge to his neighbours or his children, they could also benefit from what he learned. This is what the Red Cross called indirect benefactors.

Lastly, support from outside actors and from within the community must be present if the poverty circle is to be broken. Breaking out on your own is near impossible because your situation limits your options. There needs to be an external input, but this input must be relevant to those involved. The important question that Mr. Duong asked then was: “who would help them?” He answered his own question, saying NGOs and the government must take responsibility. Rural poverty was a big problem nationwide he said, and one that has been taken seriously by the government.

According to government statistics, poverty has decreased in recent years in the Mekong Delta as a whole, from 37 % to 23 % of population from 1998 to 2002. This has been due to improvements in infrastructure, education, government policies, job expansion, price stability and improved agricultural terms of trade, and more favourable climatic conditions with no major natural disasters since Typhoon Linda in 1997 and severe floods in 2000 (Oxfam 2005: 5). Note the date however, as this was written before typhoon Dorian.

The same report tells that though poverty levels have decreased, a higher disparity between rich and poor have begun to emerge. The absolute number of poor people is still significant, with 96 percent of them being rural. This means there is still much work to do, but the Red Cross will be there as always to take up the challenge. The next NGO to be presented is Oxfam.

Oxfam

Oxfam was founded in 1942 in Oxford London to alleviate famished areas of the world. Since then, it has grown to a federation of 13 organisations working with over 3000 partners in more than 100 countries under the name of Oxfam International. It is one of the largest International Non Governmental Organisations (INGO) in the world, and has considerable weight in the development industry. They are concerned with many development issues, including fair trade, poverty alleviation and community empowerment. They are also involved in areas affected by humanitarian disasters, running programs on preventive measures, preparedness, as well as emergency relief²⁴.

I had the chance to talk to Oxfam worker Oanh Le. She is a Project Coordinator for a Participatory Disaster Preparation and Mitigation Project. The project is being carried out between 2006 and 2010 in two provinces further inland, and concentrate on living and coping with flood disasters. Oxfam has worked closely with the government in this project, believing that learning to live with the flood, rather than preventing it, is the right way to go forward. Ms. Oanh Le described how this project was brought together through a Viet Nam – Australia NGO Cooperation Agreement (VANGOCA), proving firmly that development projects often

²⁴ <http://www.oxfam.org/en/about/>

come from global connections being used in local contexts. She then explained to me the intricacies of the project and her role as Project Coordinator. The project purpose is to reduce the risk of floods to men, women and children in Tiên Giang and Đồng Tháp provinces. The project aims to both decrease their vulnerability and increase the capacity of communities and institutions in the area. Tiên Giang and Đồng Tháp province are both situated in the Mekong Delta and Tiên Giang neighbours Bến Tre province.

The project has five built in component objectives (Oxfam 2005: viii): 1) To build knowledge, skills and resources to mitigate, prepare for and respond to floods amongst leadership and households in 24 flood-affected communes; 2) To enable the CFSC to facilitate a more targeted, coordinated, timely and effective response to floods in Đồng Tháp and Tiên Giang; 3) To reduce the incidence of flood-related diseases affecting people in the project area; 4) To improve flood-time food security, and the income of selected poor and vulnerable households; 5) To ensure effective and timely programme management and coordination.

Judging from the component objectives the programme aims to enhance disaster preparedness both at community level as well as on the organisational level. Two government partners are involved, the Department of Planning and Investment (DPI) and the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD). This way the community, the NGOs and the government can work better together because everyone has a specific role to carry out.

From preliminary reports the project seems to be a success, though in some departments a greater effort is needed. More women participation is one of Oxfam most important flagships, but this has been difficult to change. As it states in Oxfam's report (Oxfam 2005: 7): "Men commonly have primary decision-making power within and outside the household, while women shoulder a significant productive and reproductive burden" and it continues (Oxfam 2005: 13): "In Tiên Giang and Đồng Tháp very few women hold leadership roles unless as a member of the Women's Union, so their participation in commune decision making forums is limited".

The project does not include improving water and sanitary conditions, nor fishing or agriculture livelihood programs as these would be too costly and out of the project's scope. However a number of important goals in the project have been reached, for instance training on swimming for 1120 women and children, and supplying communities with early warning

system equipment like horn speakers, rescue lifebuoys and torches. Oxfam has also finished training on Community Based Disaster Management for village leaders, representatives of local mass organisations and community members from the most vulnerable groups.

Later in the report it states (Oxfam 2005: 14): “Oxfam’s experience working in Đồng Tháp and Ha Tinh supports the lessons learned internationally: Community Based Disaster Management is a prerequisite of targeted, relevant and sustainable disaster risk management”. From this sentence we can clearly withdraw that Oxfam believes in working with the community to find solutions. Unfortunately these communities were not within my reach, so I could not speak to any beneficiaries to hear their opinion.

As we can see from the project outline, the project attempts to cover many aspects of development. Bringing government partners into the program ensures the government is involved, both for knowledge exchange and economic support. Being a foreign based NGO though means Western ideals of gender equality being promoted, though this might be hard to push through in a male-dominated country like Vietnam. Here we can see how global and local ideas sometimes clash because of difference in cultures. The outcome of this clash will depend on how well the NGO and the community communicate.

Ms. Oanh Le revealed much about how NGOs work in Vietnam, but also about Vietnamese attitudes regarding gender roles. She was curious about how equal men and women were in Norway, which she considered to be one of the leading countries within that development. I thought it best to be honest and state my personal critical opinion: “Though it seems to be more equal back home than it does in Vietnam, no country is perfect and there is always room for improvement”, I cautiously said. Ms. Oanh Le then seemed genuinely disappointed and perhaps a bit disillusioned about the ‘perfectly equal’ gender myth that Nordic countries have.

NGO Cooperation

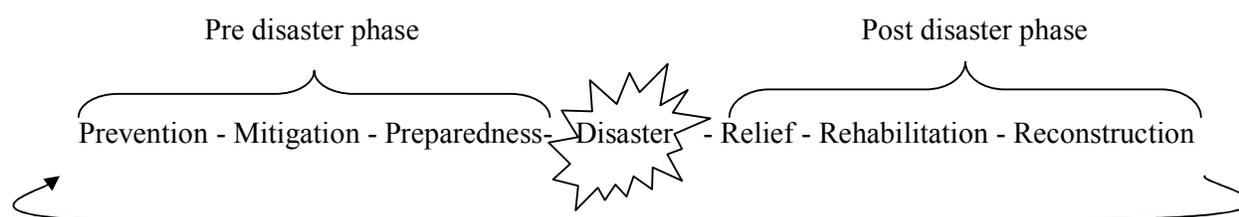
To ensure that as little as possible of effort and resources are wasted, the government and NGOs have a working group called the Disaster Mitigation Working Group (DMWG) that meets each month in Hanoi. Here they coordinate and delegate their missions and projects. “Better communication and flow between all parties is vital”, said Ms. Oanh Le about the

cooperation. She thinks that the DMWG is well coordinated, and thanks to the meetings there will be minimal overlapping. The working group has a leader and core members.

In the Mekong Delta they also have coordination meetings, only more informal. Amongst the organisations active are Care International, Asian Disaster Preparation Centre and Oxfam. Through an agreement of knowledge sharing, they share their experiences. “Without cooperation, we have nothing” Ms. Oanh Le concluded, confirming that in the development industry, knowledge sharing is as important as the knowledge itself.

In the aftermath of the disaster state officials visited the different districts and communes to see the damage with their own eyes and assess the costs. The Prime Minister came around as well to show support. When the initial crisis period was over though, people needed help to get their lives back to ‘normal’, but the question was then: What is ‘normal’ and do people wish to return to it? Can relief aid be used as a springboard for sustainable development? How can disaster prevention and disaster management be improved?

Part of the answer lies in the Disaster Management Continuum (DMC)²⁵, developed by the government and Oxfam. There are two main phases, the first one is the pre-disaster phase, aimed at disaster reduction. The pre-disaster phase is concerned with prevention, mitigation and preparedness. All of this happens before the disaster to minimise loss of life and the impact the disaster. Here follows a diagram of the DMC:



The post-disaster phase is the disaster response, encompassing relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction. According to the DMC, the community should first be receiving immediate relief, and then later the help they need to rebuild the community to its pre-disaster state. However it must do so “whilst encouraging and facilitating the necessary adjustments to the

²⁵ <http://www.oxfordclimatepolicy.org/publications/iri.pdf>

changes caused by the disaster”²⁶. This means that efforts must be made to ensure that the community is stronger than before, and therefore less vulnerable to the next disaster. Whether or not this is something that can be carried out in reality is another question.

From what I have seen during my fieldwork, and in my discussions with survivors, it seems not much has changed. Houses and schools have been rebuilt, but in most places it has merely been rebuilt to its pre-disaster state. For the poor in the countryside, this is all they can afford. As mentioned before though, I did not visit any communities which had been targeted for project work, so I can not speak for those.

This means that there is a gap between theory and practise, which is a problem for many development projects. This is because reality offers many more obstacles than theory, and many unforeseen situations might arise. However, this does not mean that theory is not useful, as there will always be differences between what is on paper and what is out there in the real world. The discrepancy becomes a problem when the two diverge too much, creating false hopes and expectations to those involved. It is also possible for both NGOs and government to promise much, but deliver little, ultimately alienating themselves from the community. It is therefore important for the NGOs and government to keep their promises and follow through with their plans if they are to keep their credibility. What we have learnt is that cooperation and open communication between government, NGOs and the people is of outmost importance in order to reduce overlapping and building trust.

Norwegian Mission Alliance

Thomas Jensen, the Country Representative of Norwegian Mission Alliance (NMA) in Ho Chi Minh City, gave a Norwegian perspective on development in Vietnam. Norway being a country which promotes free speech and free press has not always seen eye to eye with the Vietnamese government, and therefore Norwegian aid workers and journalists have had some difficulty in doing their work over the years. In addition, NMA is a Christian organisation, which does not always fit within the Communist paradigm. Jensen told me how in 2001, after there had been a small uprising amongst some minority groups in the mountains, all Christian

²⁶ <http://www.oxfordclimatepolicy.org/publications/iri.pdf>, p.2

NGOs and missionaries were expelled from the country. Apparently, the Christians were feeding the minority groups 'dangerous ideas'. After some time, the Christian groups were let in again, though they have been carefully monitored since. NGOs wishing to work in Vietnam have to go through a very thorough application process, he told me, and can be kicked out at any moment if they do not follow strict Communist guidelines.

NMA currently works with minority groups and handicapped children. Because the government is poor and there is no proper taxation system, there is less money for them to use on welfare and development, argues Jensen. He told me a story about how a girl with reduced sight was transferred against her will to a specialist school, even though she was managing in her class. In her new school which was far away from home, family and friends, she was placed in the back of the classroom, making her disability even greater. This story illustrates how there is a need for some adjustments in the Vietnamese development policy regarding education and the handicapped. Instead of lumping all children with all types of disabilities into one 'special' school as the government has done, NMA tries to integrate them into the normal schools which exist in their area, so they can have that social environment to support them.

Jensen also told me another interesting story he had heard. Apparently a Norwegian investor had come to Vietnam in order to survey the production process of a good he had invested in. As he came across the factory he noticed that none of the workers were wearing protective gear, even though they were working with paint fumes which were dangerous to inhale. The Norwegian investor decided to improve the situation by buying masks for them to wear, as he felt responsible for their well being seeing as they were making his product. The workers were thankful, but the next time the investor came by none of them were wearing the masks. "Why are they not wearing the masks I bought?" asked the investor. The supervisor told him they had sold them.

This story tells us about the hazardous environment which many Vietnamese work in. There is less emphasis on safety and more emphasis on productivity. The industry has boomed tremendously in recent years, due to heavily investment, both domestic and foreign. This is partly because Vietnam has such a cheap labour force, with no set minimum wage and few occupational safety and health regulations. It is also illegal to form trade unions, effectively curbing workers rights. Though this makes the labour market very attractive for foreign

investment, it does not make for a safe working environment, or bode well for the health of many workers.

The story also tells about an unforeseen consequence of gifts or aid. The way to think in the West, with an emphasis on 'rationality' may be different from how people think 'rationally' in other parts of the world. Though aid workers and donors usually try to think in the long term and therefore think they know 'best', the recipients might not share the same view. They might therefore choose to maximise their own situation as they see fit, as in mentioned scenario. Eriksen (1998: 348) describes this situation as follows: "The point is not whether this or that group acts 'rationally' or not, but that there are culturally specific ways to define rationality. ...But one condition which determines whether such projects succeed or not, is that the actors themselves believes that such a change will be of their own interest." Here follows another example of an unintended consequence of aid from my fieldwork.

Blankets for the Afterlife

When my parents visited me in Bình Đại province, they brought with them many blankets and other gifts bought in Ho Chi Minh City to give to the poor in the area. As I was going to travel with my parents for a while, I could not be present for the distribution of the gifts, but Mrs. Hanh said she would take care of that matter. By the time I came back to Bình Đại district all the blankets had been handed out, and Mrs. Hanh said that people had been very appreciative of my parents' generosity and that I should pass on their gratitude.

On one of our visits to the poor households we came upon an aged man, living alone in a small shack. The man seemed frail from old age and a little slow on the uptake, but had no serious disabilities. He walked out from the neighbour's house, where he spent most of his day, and crossed a log over a small stream on his way back to his small bamboo shack. Here he sat down on his bed where I was going to take a picture.

It was a very simple room, consisting of only some simple furniture and a bed with a mosquito netting on a dirt floor. Fortunately for him, his shack was so small that it had survived the storm. He had been all alone when it had hit, so his neighbours had to run over to

his house and get him, to make sure he was safe. This old man had no relatives to look after him, so the neighbours did as best as they could.



Mrs. Hanh told him that my parents had given him the blanket, and he smiled and nodded, but never said a word. As we left I wondered where the new blanket was, as I had not seen it on his bed and I asked Mrs. Hanh about its whereabouts. “Oh, he’s saving it”, she replied. “Saving it for what?” I asked to my amazement, and Mrs. Hanh replied:

“His burial”. To him, the new blanket was too pretty to be ruined by ‘everyday’ use, and he had chosen to rather be buried with it. This says something about the simple and tough lives of the rural poor, but it also says something about how they view the afterlife.

The afterlife is very important in Vietnamese tradition. Not only do you have to have a proper ceremony and well decorated coffin, you also need to bring material goods with you when you travel ‘down below’ as they call it. The ceremony is done not many days after the person is deceased, either by cremation or burial. With the burial they also burn miniature cars, toy cell phones, houses and other luxury goods, so that the deceased may have a rich afterlife. For a person who might have struggled and lead a poor life on earth, it is even more so important for that person to finally be happy when they have shed their mortal coils. Fake dollars bills, which are impressively similar to the genuine article, also exist which are burnt for the deceased to spend.

These stories about the seemingly odd saving of new blankets show that even for the very poorest, there is choice. They chose not to use the blanket, and they were free to do so. Even when a person or organisation has the best intentions for the poor, it is up to the recipient to accept the help or not, and if they do, they can decide what to do with it. Some would perhaps sell their gifts for a good meal, others actually refused to accept a blanket, saying they did not need one. Aid is usually depicted as a one way street, but these examples clearly shows that it

is not so. This leads the discussion to a well-known topic within anthropology, being community resistance.

I live here and I will die here! Community Resistance

Community resistance to government or corporations is not a new phenomenon, and has been the subject of many anthropologists such as Madhav Gadgil & Ramachandra Guha (1994) in India and Colin Filer (1997) in Melanesia. Both studies show that when a community is pushed, it will push back, sometimes in surprising ways. What the thesis shows to the reader is that community resistance to NGOs also exists, with examples from the field. The notion of the little village versus the big evil industry or government is a classical anthropological study, with biblical imagery of David and Goliath. I wish to present a more nuanced image of choice, where the outcome of the resistance is based on negotiations and testing boundaries between the actors.

Mr. Duong at Red Cross more than once told me about stories from his work out in the field, and several times we came upon the subject of community resistance. During a disaster, be it tropical storm or flooding, people might be forced to relocate due to their vulnerable location. However, some people, he told me very vividly, were very resistant to being moved, even when told about the imminent danger. They would often protest: “I was born here, I live here, and I will die here!”

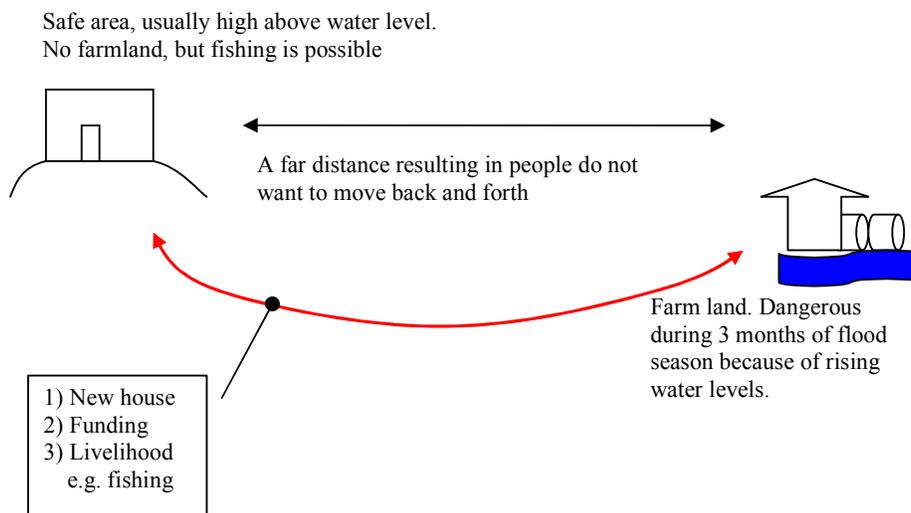
This was because the Vietnamese people were very attached to their land and homes, Mr. Duong explained, and if they lost that they would have nothing left. Mostly it was the male elders who presented this sentiment, and so part of Mr. Duong’s job meant persuading the elders that emergency evacuation was for their own good. If the elders agreed to being moved, the others would follow, because that was their ‘great decision power that you can not see’, explained Mr. Duong. Most likely he was referring to their patriarchal family structure.

With regards to evacuation from flooding, the Red Cross uses something called a Hazard Vulnerability Capacity Assessment (HVCA). Through this approach, the Red Cross could identify how the community was vulnerable, but also which strengths they had and how good

their capacity to cope was. When an HVCA had been done, Red Cross was better equipped to convince the community about their options.

There were more reasons to why people would not move in flood situations, one important one being the lack of alternative housing during the three flood months. Though people were informed about the danger, they had no place to go to and therefore they had to stay put where they were. The HVCA flooding projects focused therefore on providing them with three important things: 1) a place to live during flood season; 2) small funding to get the household economy starting; 3) a livelihood to support themselves. For the very poorest, houses were constructed in safe places, usually higher up in the terrain.

Here is an illustration made by Mr. Duong to show how the HVCA approach works. The red line shows what Mr. Duong called ‘the Big problem for poor people’, meaning the effort and time needed to move during flood season. Hopefully the Red Cross and community could come up with a solution through this approach.



One of the major concerns was that people needed new ways to make a living, and they were therefore taught new livelihoods, with fishing being a possibility during this period. The Red Cross would then give them fishing equipment, and this would hopefully make them self sufficient, but this transition was of course not easy and required many check-ups.

Another reason for the families staying put was that by leaving their usual home, they also left their farm plot, and many could not afford to do so. For the poor, their land or house might be their only valuable ‘possession’ and means of income, so it was understandable that people were reluctant to move. For the weak and elderly who have been living on the same plot for all their lives, movement would not only be physically challenging, but also psychologically, as their attachment to their land was so strong that they would rather die than leave their homes.

Some households showed resistance because they reckoned they had experienced many a flood before, and had ways of overcoming such situations using traditional knowledge. Mr. Duong told me about how he was impressed how useful this type of knowledge could be. Because each area has a different environment, the signs would vary, for instance in central Vietnam where flash floods²⁷ were more common, people would look at how the bamboo sprouts grow six or eight months before flood season to see if there would be flooding.

In the Mekong river basin, where river flood is the dominant type of flooding you would look at the amount of fish called Ca Linh. If there were a big amount, high flood would be certain. Another way was to look at a specific type of flower that grows in river banks and swamps. If it bloomed, high flood would again be certain. Also, if the river water becomes very muddy, there could be high flood. Finally, looking at bee’s nests or ant hills would give you clues, as they would be built higher up than normal if there was going to be a high flood.

When I asked Mr. Duong if any of these items of local environmental knowledge actually worked, he answered quite certain that after doing six years of fieldwork in flood prone communities, he could confirm their usefulness. Part of his disaster management program actually involved spreading the information of traditional knowledge about flooding. He admitted that many communities knew how to handle flooding through the use of traditional knowledge which had been learned over many generations. The problem was that even though people were prepared for it, the magnitude of the flooding has only increased in recent decades, making normal precautions less useful.

²⁷ Flash floods differ from regular floods in that they are usually triggered by intense rainshowers or thunderstorms, and can come very sudden, within six hours after the rainfall.

Fishy Matters

Another battle which Mr. Duong had to 'fight' was with the fishing communities along the coast. By law, every fishing boat needs a VHF radio to send and receive messages from the coastguard and other boats. Before storms arrive the warning is broadcasted on all channels, but some fishermen have elected to ignore these messages, thereby endangering their own lives, as well as the people who might go out in the storm to look for them. The reason for doing so was in fact understandable, but Mr. Duong had to strongly encourage them to pay heed to the warnings nonetheless.

Finding good fishing ground is vital in the lives of any fisherman. When the coastguard then orders all boats to state their position in order for them to see who might be in the storm's path, some remain silent in fear of losing a good fishing spot. As the transmission can be heard by anyone with a similar VHF radio, revealing your location could be costly indeed, as other competitors would come to your location. Some also ignore the storm warnings, thinking the storms were not severe and therefore manageable. Fishermen being lost at sea are a big problem, but thanks to an awareness campaign, the problem has been reduced somewhat. However, due to their tough occupation and the competitiveness, safety might not always be the highest priority for the fishermen.

Both the example of the fishermen and the flood prone communities show that people are active participants in their situations. They have agency, and will show resistance to outside forces, either NGOs or the government. At the same time, they are bound by their economic situation, and must think of how they can earn money if they can not fish or work on their land. This is a dilemma which has to be negotiated between the three actors, hopefully coming to a solution which works for all.

The relation between organisations, state, and people is complicated, sometimes working with one another, sometimes against. The NGOs need the cooperation of the community in order to do their work, but also the help of the state. In addition, NGOs must work within very strict guidelines if they wish to work in Vietnam, otherwise they are expelled. INGOs might not always agree with how the state treats its people, but they have to rely on and cooperate with them for logistics and permission to work in hard to reach areas of the country.

As NGOs have much close contact with common people and are helping the community, the government must be careful in not being undermined as the leading authority and beneficiary. It is easy to paint the state as in a black/white fashion when there certainly are deeper issues at hand. The state can be helpful, as it is a body which must coordinate all the development work in the country, and mobilise quickly in the case of disasters.

Trying to put Mr. Duong's work in a wider perspective, I asked him how the people, the NGOs and state functioned as part of the development industry. He answered:

We all have our part to do; NGOs, state and people. As for the work that the state does, I can not answer you, I can only tell you about what I do. Natural disasters are connected to global warming, which we all have to help reduce. The state has to do their job, we have to do it, civil society also. We have a responsibility for each other. I can only do my part, which is to help people in disaster areas. The big problems, the big issues, you cannot have capacity to deal with by yourself.

Local Disasters, Global Issues

This brings the discussion to a very important issue, being how the local and the global are inevitably related and mutually influential. Global issues like pollution and global warming can not be handled on a nation by nation basis, but must be solved through multilateral cooperation and agreement. The Kyoto Protocol agreement in 1994 was a step in a positive direction, but some countries have put the brakes on the process, demanding more research to be done before making further decisions. The latest meeting regarding global warming was at the Bali Conference in December 2007 when over 180 countries met to discuss how to reduce the world carbon dioxide gas output, but though the atmosphere was positive, no real agreement was made.

Not every country feels the effects of global warming the same way. Vietnam is unfortunate in being especially vulnerable to typhoons and tropical storms due to its tropical location and extensive shoreline. The consequences of global warming may not seem significant to people who only notice an increase in temperature but to the person who has just seen his house been blown away by the wind or carried away by a flood, global warming is indeed a very real and very dangerous threat.

Polluting is something everyone has done, but the connection between the thousand mopeds on the street in Vietnam and the storms is not always evident. This is an issue the Vietnamese government must try to tackle in the future, but similar to other developing countries, this might be a 'luxury problem'. In a country where the industry and efficiency is on the rise and has to continue rising, concerns for the environment might be shoved back in their race to catch up to the rest of the economic world. This is exemplified by a study done by Trond Berge (1997) in *Copsa Mica, Romaine*. Here he found out that the population is caught in a tough dilemma: the polluting industry that is giving them health problems is also their most important source of livelihood.

How a country decides to tackle the environmental crisis is up to them, but according to the Kyoto Protocol each country is supposed to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions significantly by year 2013. The theory about global warming is not absolute though, as sceptics claim the facts are still indecisive and demand more research. The debate also concerns the ways in which greenhouse gas emissions should be reduced. For a small country like Norway, riding your bike to work instead of using the car might not have such great of impact as the 1.3 billion Chinese living in a country which is becoming increasingly industrialised.

The problem though is that a global crisis requires a global solution, which might not be the easiest task in a world already divided by economic, political and religious strife. The United Nations have tried to unite the world in combating this threat. In 1989, the UN decided that the 1990s was to be the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction. The reason for doing so was the number of natural disasters not only increasing, but the magnitude of them as well, making it a threat not to be ignored. Now the decade has passed and although much valuable research was done, the work is far from over.

The UN named 2007 the year of disaster prevention, and special attention was therefore directed at ways to preventing and overcoming them in an effective matter. One of the methods was helping those who are the most vulnerable during a disaster, namely the children. The UN therefore devised a worldwide program called "Disaster Prevention begins at school"²⁸. Giving children the information they need to recognise the signs of an incoming

²⁸ http://www.unisdr.org/eng/public_aware/world_camp/2006-2007/iddr/2006-iddr.htm

disaster is of utmost importance. Rather than labelling them as simply a vulnerable group in need of protection, the UN seeks to empower them with the knowledge to take action and precautions on their own. No matter the disaster, be it earthquake, flood or typhoon, being prepared and knowing what to do is half the battle.

The issue of global warming often becomes manifest in a local setting, requiring local solutions, such as providing basic swimming lessons for children in the Mekong Delta area. New technological approaches to disaster management are always being developed, but getting it out to the most vulnerable regions will take time. For instance, after the 2004 Boxing Day Tsunami several governments have requested a better warning system against tsunamis, but many coastal communities have been unable to benefit from it²⁹. Implementing disaster management is therefore not a straight forward process as there are many regional variations which need to be taken into account.

The battle against climate change is ultimately one which must be fought on all levels. Green house gas emissions must be reduced through international agreements, forcing governments to switch from high polluting energy sources to greener and more renewable sources like solar, wind and hydro power. At the same time, people on the ground level, most notably in the West, need to think about and change their patterns of consumption.

Solving global warming is not only an ecological imperative, but an economic one as well. In a 700 page report written by Lord Nicholas Stern, it is estimated that the costs of climate change would reduce the near future average world GDP per person by five to eleven percent. Spending money to reduce the worst effects of climate change would on the other hand only cost one percent of world GDP yearly³⁰. His report would become known as the Stern Review Report and it has gained massive support as well as criticism.

If we as a species continue to use energy and pollute at the rate we are going now, more and greater natural disasters will only result. In Europe, flooding is a common disaster when the snow melts, as in autumn of 2005. In North America, bush and forest fire can destroy property and land worth billions of dollars as in California autumn of 2007. Though it would be revealed that the fire was accidentally instigated by a small boy, other factors contributed to

²⁹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/5191190.stm>

³⁰ <http://www.cicero.uio.no/fulltext/index.aspx?id=6257>

worsening the situation, like the long drought and strong winds which spread the inferno³¹. We must also not forget the New Orleans flooding in 2005, when the levees broke because of Hurricane Katrina, injuring tens of thousands and leaving even more homeless.

In Asia and Pacific region many natural disasters are related to rain, wind and water, such as the Boxing Day Tsunami of 2004 and 2008 Myanmar cyclone. What all these disasters have in common is that they are signs of worsening and more unstable climate conditions. Disaster management and mitigation on the local level is important in reducing the cost of lives and material, but solving the cause of the disasters on the global level is essential as well. Eriksen has this to say about our relation to the environment (Eriksen 1998: 272):

Our era of global environmental crisis, where it seems like the industrial society is about to destroy the foundation of its own existence, shows that societies can undermine the very ecological conditions of which they are based on. [...] At the same time it shows that we are dependent on a certain two-way communication with the ecosystem in order to survive in the long run; that there exists an exchange and mutual influence between society and nature. If processes brought on by society result in irreversible changes in nature, the result will have to be that society has to change, which again will result in nature changing. In other words, there is a mutual feedback process between society and ecosystem.

There are many developmental issues which pose a seemingly more immediate threat in Vietnam today, like malaria, HIV/AIDS and avian influenza. Not to mention traffic safety, which according to government statistics show traffic accidents claim about 12,000 lives every year, making it the leading cause of death in Vietnam³². During late 2007 the government introduced a law requiring all moped drivers to wear helmets, though whether or not this proves effective remains to be seen. In the countryside, people were coming up with all sorts of tactics to avoid wearing a helmet, like driving on side roads, or setting up rent-a-helmet shops where you could rent a helmet just for short distances where traffic controls were common. This shows that people can be both creative in solving new problems and stubborn in changing old habits.

Compressed Globalisation

The thesis now returns to a concept which was used at the start of this chapter. Compressed globalisation is as previously stated a concept used by Hviding (2003) to describe a 'hot-spot'

³¹ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2007/nov/01/naturaldisasters.usa>

³² <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/world/archives/2006/12/17/2003340777>

where local and global connections are especially evident in both space and time. This means that the people affected might suddenly have to deal with many outside actors and influences, be it state officials, NGO workers, or news reporters. The issue to be dealt with here is the representation of the disaster and survivors. How are survivors portrayed and for what reason? What is the Media's role in covering natural disasters? Because a natural disaster is such a huge and devastating happening, media attention is almost a certainty, but to various degrees depending on several factors, which will be described in closer detail.

The first factor is the proximity of the disaster to the people who are reading the news. A disaster in a Western country will receive more coverage because it is closer to their geographical area, which makes it all the more real. Another point worth noting about the proximity is that it is easier for the various news agencies to be on location, thereby increasing the coverage the disaster gets. A final point about proximity is that it does not necessarily have to be in close in spatial terms, but it can be close through social relationships. Perhaps the disaster area is a place which is frequented by certain tourists, increasing the chance that a person you know might be hurt or involved in some way.

The second factor is the magnitude of the disaster. A small disaster, though certainly significant for all those affected, will not get as much attention as a large one. This entails both the size of the disaster and the number of people affected. The shock-value of the news often increases with the number of people who have died. This helps the news agencies to play on the dramatic effect of making a disaster seem like the end of days. In a macabre way you could state that the larger the disaster, the better story it is, thereby increasing sales.

The third factor which I wish to point out is the relevancy of the disaster. If it is a very unique event, like a volcanic eruption, it is sure to get attention. On the other hand, if it is something which has happened many times before, the disaster might be downplayed a bit, and only receive a little notice in the newspaper corner. Lastly, relevance in the media is also affected by what people and politicians are talking about. Nowadays, disasters which are connected to global warming are put in the spotlight because it is such an important topic.

The reason why the media plays an important part in natural disasters is that they frame the disaster to the public. By creating a great story, the media can attract more viewers, which means revenue for them. The way the media frames a story can however make a crucial

difference, something Button discusses in ‘Popular Media Reframing of Man-Made Disasters’. He writes about how the media relies on individual stories for better narration and how disasters often are portrayed as singular episodes, rather than as results of long-term systemic forces (Button 2002: 154). Whose interpretations are heard and whose interpretation are excluded by the media also determines how the public frames the event. In this fashion, the media has considerable power in how the public perceives a disaster.

Media has another important role in disasters, being the key for support and donations from the public. Generating awareness about the disaster will increase the world attention into the various little pockets of the world for a short period of time, thereby helping to create the situation of compressed globalisation. More attention means more money for the NGOs and for the various news agencies.

What is important to remember is that the development industry indeed is an industry, geared towards raising money. This means awareness campaigns, advertisement in all media forms, political lobbying, and giving live reports from disaster zones. Because NGO already have presence in some hard to reach corners of the world, they are also most often amongst the first foreign actors on the scene, and are a common source of information for many journalists. Critics of NGOs say that this is a problem, as when does journalism end and an appeal for donations start?

The media has another role in regards to natural disasters. In the post-disaster period it is important for the government to be seen actively engaging with the people affected, which the media can help with. During the disasters which occurred during my fieldwork, I would always see the President or Prime Minister of Vietnam in a television segment, reaching out to the public by talking to people or holding hands. Though a devil’s advocate would say it was all a show for the camera, it could also be important for the public to know that the state leaders are concerned about what is going on in the country.

Back to the concept of compressed globalisation, we can see how the media and NGOs will give the viewers in the sofa a glimpse of what terrible reality it is for the people affected. Their reality is one turned up side down, from near-death experience to relief aid and hopefully project work. Through the television set and the internet the audience feels bound to their world and in some ways they are. They can see the destruction and pain in people’s eyes,

which might prompt them to give donations. However, that close connection is severed once they turn off their television sets and go about their daily lives. Compressed globalisation brings the audience up close and personal to the disasters, but for the survivors there is no ‘off’ button.

During autumn 2007 there was a massive bridge collapse not far from Bến Tre province. Because the bridge was still under construction, the only people who were injured were workers. In the following period there was much debate about the causes of the collapse and how much the families should be compensated. During the news report an official went around from hospital bed to hospital bed, handing out money checks, taking pictures with the injured. What struck me as odd was that some of the hospitalised were barely conscious, probably heavily sedated, and therefore unable to grasp the piece of paper they were handed. This did not deter the official though, as he kept on posing for the picture, put the paper on their bed and moved on.

The Future of NGOs in Vietnam

This chapter has shown some of the positive and negative aspects about NGO and project work. In relation to natural disaster, work must be done fast and efficient to save lives, but what is equally important is the development work which happens afterwards. Providing people with the skills and tools to be better prepared in the future is of utmost importance. Relief aid should not be used as band aid on the poor and marginalised, but as a springboard for project work and poverty alleviation, though this requires much more time and effort.

The interviews with the NGOs in the Mekong Delta gave me rich information about the background and theory of doing development work. Though I wished I had found some ongoing projects, it would have required more logistics and more time. As it is, I never saw any projects with my own eyes, nor did I talk to any project participants. I can only trust the NGO workers in that their work is benefiting the community. In a country like Vietnam where the government’s limited resources are stretched over a large population, NGOs have to step up to make a change.

I believe that NGOs in Vietnam have an important job to do, but they will need help from the government if they are to succeed. At this junction, there are many developmental issues to

deal with, from AIDS to traffic safety. Vietnam has to participate in reducing global greenhouse gas emissions whilst keeping the economy going strong, which can be a tough challenge.

The chapter has also discussed the issue of community resistance and people's agency. In Western countries, there is a tendency for people to think that the poor only have themselves to blame. This is not what I have witnessed, as I saw much ingenuity, sincerity and a strong mentality in the people I talked to. The poor can not change their situation by themselves though, as being trapped in the poverty circle severely limits their options. With the help of NGOs, hopefully they can improve their lives. We should not repeat our mistakes of the past by underestimating their strength and knowledge, as Eriksen writes (Eriksen 1998: 340):

But to consider the 'indigenous' or 'traditional' people as helpless victims of the tidal wave of modernity would be to underestimate their possibility for independent action. Even in situations of grave differences of power, people take initiative, make choices and try to make the best out of the situation.

Part of this resilience stem from deep-rooted Confucian and Buddhist values. In these values there is a willingness to overcome any obstacle, no matter how large it may be. It also emphasises helping your fellow neighbour, seeing as if you do good unto others, good fortune will eventually befall you. Their resilience has helped them through very tough times in the past, which I believe contributes to the humble Vietnamese outlook on life. This resilience helps them manage their everyday life demands, but when there is a crisis situation, such as a natural disaster, it becomes even more important to have something to hold on to. Risk situations bring with them much uncertainty, but with these values embedded in the Vietnamese culture, the people know they can depend on each other, and that even if their situation seems bleak at the moment, everything will eventually work itself out.

Perhaps this makes the Vietnamese people unique, seeing as they have a past filled with much conflict, but has managed to rise up again as a nation with much potential. Their history combined with their serious hard-work ethics and collective values make up for a survivor mentality which is essential to utilise, and not exploit. As evident from the economic progress, Vietnam is clearly on the way up. What is important is that NGOs, along with the state, now use the people's strength to build a better future for everyone.

CHAPTER 5: Thematic Threads

Chapter Introduction

What this thesis has described is the complex situation which arises when a disaster strikes in a place of previous little world attention. There is a myriad of actors on the scene, each with their own agenda, and in the middle of it all we have the local population trying to make sense of the sudden inflow of aid and globalisation. They must quickly come to terms with what has happened in their lives, and also deal with government officials and foreign NGOs. For people who previously might have had little contact with the ‘world outside’ this could be very much to take in, in a short period of time.

This chapter will sum up the thematic themes that have been presented in the thesis. As such, it will also summarise the key points of my research. The reader will hopefully see how this thesis fits into the research of the past, and how differences and similarities reveal important facets about disaster management.

The role of anthropology in understanding natural disaster and its aftermath is manifold, demanding research both on the ground as well as on the theoretical level. The chapter will conclude with a look at where anthropology of natural disasters and disaster management work in general might be headed in the future.

Thematic Threads

The anthropology of disaster has shown vast improvements since its start in the 1950s. Being a relatively new strand, we can only expect a greater build up of knowledge in the future. Seeing as there is little reason to believe natural disasters are going away, more research is both inevitable and imperative. That is, if the anthropological community seeks to pursue this knowledge.

In disasters, human relations to the environment, to society, to family and community, to insiders as well as outsiders are in a ‘in limbo’ stage where nothing seems certain. Such is the

devastating effect of natural disasters. They are more than physical happenings, they are processes of cultural, ecological and political-economic significance with pasts, presents and futures (Oliver-Smith 2002: 6). This makes them very complex events, requiring a holistic approach in order to see the many connections. Anthropology is known for this comprehensive approach, but disasters should also be studied within archaeological, historical, demographic and certain biological and medical studies.

A small community which usually has been self-sufficient and left alone may suddenly have to deal with the government, as it intervenes by performing emergency evacuations and deploying personnel to oversee relief work. In the aftermath of the disaster, the community might find themselves either disappointed or relieved over government intervention. Such is the relation between community and state when confronted, being constantly negotiated. Though there have been numerous studies of this relation in the past, what makes the anthropology of disaster so interesting is that this relationship is tested so thoroughly by the hazard at hand. This might result in the community taking action against the government for negligence, or form closer bonds through development projects. A disaster pushes a society or community to its limits (and sometimes beyond), revealing connections which usually might be hidden.

When the community pushes back on these external forces, anthropology is eager to be present to record the happenings. Community resistance is popular topic in anthropological circles, perhaps because it gives the anthropologist a chance to see how the power of the common people stands up against the power of the mighty elites. As anthropologists we are interested in how minority groups, indigenous people and marginalised sections of society cope with change and intervention. We study and learn from these groups because we wish to look into the human processes and linkages that bind us together as a community or society.

Disasters also present anthropology with the unique opportunity of studying globalisation in one of its more visible forms; aid and intervention. Aid is without a doubt a form of globalisation, as seen from chapter four. In the post disaster period aid will in most cases flow into the region, though we have seen examples of where aid workers are denied access, for reasons of mistrust of the Western world. These closed 'systems' pose a challenge to the development industry and multilateral organisations like the UN. Relief aid is a form of intervention which may trouble totalitarian regimes like Myanmar. They fear that too much

foreign influence and presence in their country will create social unrest and political instability.

Vietnam used to be such a system in the post-war period before the *Đổi mới* reforms, but has now opened its borders for investment, tourism, and foreign aid. Foreign NGOs and aid were therefore welcomed by the Vietnamese government after typhoon Durian. Though the post-disaster work could show some improvements, it seems that the most basic relief aid was well taken care of. Medicine and food was delivered, and people were safely evacuated prior to the disaster, though some were very reluctant. All in all, not many people perished compared to other countries like Philippines, and we can thank the government's quick and active response system for that.

Where the government is lacking is in the reconstruction period. Most people who were poor before the storm are still poor, if not even poorer. The compensation money were in some cases not enough or not given at all. Some had to struggle greatly with the state's bureaucracy in order to be processed for compensation. What I could witness with my own eyes was rural poverty. Because Vietnam is still a third world country, this is big problem which has to be solved over an extended period of time. Alleviating poverty is a development issue which requires change on many levels, and not a problem to be taken lightly. In order for it to work and be sustainable, the state needs to work with other actors like NGOs and mass organisations, and not least the people.

The role of the state has been discussed in this thesis to ask the question of what responsibilities a state has toward its citizens in today's world. This does not only include responsibilities regarding disaster management, but human rights as well. When a disaster strikes, the state suddenly comes under careful scrutiny from the world audience, which some states will not like at all. One of the hardest topics within political anthropology has indeed been the sovereignty of the state as written by Ferguson (2006) and Kapferer (1997).

What we are seeing then is not the relation between individual and society any more, but society versus the world in the form of globalisation and intervention. Eriksen writes that the global spread of the discourse about human rights has been one of the most important forms of political globalisation in the second part of the 20th century (Eriksen 1998: 227). I agree

with this, and can firmly state that this is something which is happening in Vietnam at this very moment.

Where Vietnam will head to in the future only time will tell. A best case scenario would be a peaceful transition to a democratic government through movements like Bloc 8406, but if not, social unrest and violent acts by the state is very much possible, as seen from countries like Myanmar, Nepal and China. The Communist government in Vietnam has already incarcerated several political activists, both of Vietnamese and foreign citizenship. However, they have surely understood by now that wrongfully imprisoning your citizens will raise international outcry. This damages their international reputation and economic relations, something they can not afford at this moment of economic growth.

Vietnam became the WTO's 150th member just in January 2007. This means increased trade and economic bargaining power in the economic world, which is positive for a country which is wrestling its way out of the third world. Tourism is another form of globalisation which is seeing increasing importance in Vietnam. Millions of people, including the *Việt Kiều*, travel to Vietnam yearly to experience its kind people, delicious food and exotic locations. Unfortunately, it has yet to catch up with other more tourist experienced countries like Thailand and Malaysia, as several tourists noted to me.

As the world becomes smaller in some aspects due to globalisation, we are left to wonder if we eventually are all going to speak the same language, eat the same food and dress in the same clothes. Though this is very unlikely to happen, we do see shrinkage in the world in terms of economic, political, cultural and human connections. Vietnam has certainly felt the effects of globalisation as the country has undergone many changes in the last decade.

Hopefully globalisation can be used for good purposes in Vietnam and other places that are vulnerable to natural disasters. We are all part of the world community and should combine our efforts in solving a global problem which pose a real threat to us all, regardless of race, gender, age, creed, wealth or social position. The question is, can we overcome our petty differences, or are we inherently at war with ourselves? We can only hope for the best, and as Mr. Duong said: "We all have our part to do...we have a responsibility for each other."

Future Research in Natural Disasters

Future research in anthropology of disaster should definitely be done, there is no doubt about that in my mind. The question is what should be the subject of study? I believe that thorough research into traditional knowledge and local coping mechanisms should be emphasised as they are a type of accumulative knowledge which has been passed on throughout generations, adapted to their specific environment. This type of knowledge is valuable because it is not written down, and if it is lost, it will be lost forever. Here anthropology has an important job to do.

In disasters as floods and tsunamis, traditional knowledge acts as warning signs which can be read ahead of time, saving many lives. This type of information should be spread wherever it is useful, as Red Cross has done in Vietnam. This does not mean that we should abandon technological innovations, as they are immensely important as well. Meteorology can help us predict fierce storms, giving us the time we need to evacuate. An amalgamation of old and new knowledge would be beneficial for all, I believe.

At the same time there are disasters which can not be foreseen, like earthquakes. These are hard to manage because they come so sudden and can be quite disastrous in that they affect so many people with so little warning. These can only be dealt with on arrival, but what can be done is research on the best ways to carry out such rescue and relief operations. That is why there are so many disaster preparedness and management conferences in the world. Information sharing is as important as the information itself, as has been mentioned.

My experience is that more research should be done on the bridging of relief aid with long term reconstruction and development. Relief aid has become more efficient and standardised, which is positive, but this is only short term help for people who are in a vulnerable situation. Decreasing their vulnerability and strengthening their capacity to overcome disasters in the future should be the key foci of anthropologists and NGOs.

Misunderstandings and overlapping during the reconstruction period have happened in the past, but I believe this is improving with more dialogue between the various actors. Without cooperation and trust between them project work will be doomed to fail, and ultimately the real losers will be the community. In non-democratic countries like Vietnam and Myanmar,

trust is of even greater importance because the state can do what it pleases. It is then the INGOs and world community that must be active in ensuring people are given the help and freedom they need through organisations as United Nations and Amnesty International.

Because natural disasters only seem to become a larger and larger threat to people all across the globe, I hope that disaster research will be more emphasised. This is not just in anthropology, but in all the sciences which can contribute to a better understanding of both the disasters themselves and the complex processes that surround them.

Anthropology provides a unique look at how the local situation relates to the global through the holistic approach. It is therefore important that anthropology uses this approach to better understand the complex local-global linkages in future research. Solid fieldwork on the ground level can show how the lives of the people involved are changed as a result of the disaster and the following intervention by foreign actors. The real effects of natural disasters, the ones that are felt intimately and which linger on long after the dust has settled, are best researched with anthropological methods which can take into account all the historical, economical, political and social factors that are involved in the making of a natural disaster.

My study in Bến Tre province has shown that though the government and the NGOs did a significant job in handling typhoon Durian, the real heroes were the people themselves, who helped one another in a time of great need. This can be attributed to their strong coping mechanism which has been mentioned several times in this thesis. They showed great courage, endurance and solidarity by overcoming this challenge. As such, it is perhaps no surprise that my study concurs with the many previous studies which state that disaster management is very dependent on the participation of the community, and their strengths and efforts can determine the outcome of the disaster. Credit must be given to the government and NGOs though, as their experience and role in disaster management should not be ignored or taken for granted.

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