

# **DISASTROUS LOSS OF RIGHT TO REPRODUCTION AND DAMAGED REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH**

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Being one of non - Governmental Organizations (NGOS) established early in Vietnam, ever since its foundation in 1993, the Center for Gender, Family and Environment in Development (CGFED) has been pursuing social studies in areas of its focus, which are Gender, Family and Environment (Environment here focuses on the impacts of social environment on the natural one, and vice versa). Within these studies, CGFED has paid special attention to the reproductive health/right to reproduction and the quality of the population. It is this work that has led CGFED researchers to an increasingly constant contact with the target group of Agent Orange/Dioxin victims. Through our listening, observation and stinging obsession, we realize that nobody can afford or should be allowed to appear indifferent or unsentimental to the unspeakable pains suffered by the victims' families, including people working in social sciences and humanity. CGFED immediately started with the collection of documents, books, papers, films, photos, etc. in this regard. Simultaneously, we have been trying to find out more, and contact more with the families affected by Agent Orange/Dioxin. It is obviously seen that whichever place we get to, we can easily find families who are suffering from the war aftermaths, not only in the Central and Southern Vietnam, where herbicides were sprayed directly, but also in all cities and provinces in the North, where veterans from the battlefields returned to after the war.

On occasion of the field trip in four areas in Hanoi, Ha Nam, Hoa Binh and Quang Ngai in 2000, CGFED carried out a study over a considerable number of Agent Orange/Dioxin affected families. In May 2001, another study on the social consequences caused by Agent Orange/Dioxin was done, this time in A Luoi, Thua Thien-Hue, which is known as the most sprayed area with chemical hazards. The results from the friendly talks, in-depth interviews with the Agent Orange/Dioxin affect families, and from the secondary information during those two studies clearly identify the problems of population quality, serious violations to reproductive health, the right to reproduction, cultural and social consequences that the victims' families are suffering.

In the initial steps to approach this complicated and challenging issue, CGFED was fortunate to have met and worked with late Professor Le Cao Dai, who had devoted many years studying the impacts of Agent Orange/Dioxin from the view angle of a natural scientist and social activist. It was Professor Dai who helped us to access relevant documents and led us to A Luoi in the first place.

And thus, an indispensability has led CGFED to establish a task for its activities: to study the impacts of Agent Orange/Dioxin on all aspects of life in the victims' families: sentiment,

culture, health, economy, education, etc., from the angle of social sciences, especially from angle of reproductive health and right study; and based on that to recommend measures of intervention, assistance and support to those families, women and disabled children. Those measures must be carried out in consideration with the unique sentimental, cultural and social features of the community and the ethnicity. In fact, the deeper we go into the study, the heavier consequences of serious violations of human rights we find, and an end to that can hardly be seen.

After the two studies in 2000 and 2001, CGFED continued to do other studies on the family of Agent Orange/Dioxin victims, integrated in the research projects on population and development, at the same time, conducted some specific projects in collaboration with scientists from Sweden and France. It is possible to say that these studies were the initial steps in the methodology used in the field study. CGFED researchers have applied variously specific research methods of social sciences: *The reproductive lifeline* which was instructed by our Swedish colleague, have been used in all the case studies. All information regarding the reproductive life over different time periods of the husband's and the wife's families will clearly identify the links between the families history and the disease/disability situation of the Agent Orange/Dioxin victims. Our French colleagues, psychologists, sociologists have also trained CGFED researchers on a research methodology called "recite de vie" - "life story". With this methodology, the studies have not only achieved the objective of collecting reliable information, but also performed certain psychological therapy. In most field studies samples had been selected randomly out of the list of families supposed to be affected by Agent Orange/Dioxin ("supposed" because they had not gone through blood test). In the most recent study in October

2005, which focused on the objective of finding out about the specific expectations of the victims and their families, CGFED researchers had met and talked with families whose members had been tested and detected to have dioxin content in blood.

The results of the studies done by CGFED in 17 cities and provinces throughout the country are very concrete documents, which can surely assist a part to the *Analysis of Agent Orange impacts*, not only among Vietnamese veterans<sup>1</sup>, but also among the ordinary people who are facing the dangers of exposure, since the hazards are still present in many residential areas. From the angle of a social sciences study on the impacts of Agent Orange/Dioxin on all aspects of its victims' life, the study results have strongly and deeply shown the sorrows, miseries and suffering both physically and spiritually that cannot be measured by any simple measurement.

Over 30 years after the US troops were forced to stop the spraying of herbicides in the Central and Southern Vietnam, millions of families are now still facing with the nightmare of genetic disability and deformity, not only among their children but also among their children's children. For the majority of those families, caring for the disabled members has exhausted both their economy and their energy. Those are the tangible consequences that we can see, meanwhile it still exists numerous intangible consequences - mental pains, which are caused by the physical suffering and can be several times more serious.

In Vietnam, a country with very unique features of an oriental paddy-rice culture, family culture standards are highly valued. One of the basic family culture standards is the *filialness*, which is the standard value to judge a person.

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<sup>1</sup> Recommendation by Dr. Nguyen Van Tuan (Australia), the Labor news 15 March, 2005.

Filialness, which in the traditions of Vietnam means that a child must take care of their parents and grandparents when they become old. There is a Vietnamese proverb, which says: “*When you’re young, you depend on your father, at old age, you depend on your child*”, with the thinking that the older a person becomes, the more precious they should be considered, and the more respect their children should pay to them. The children must repay their parents’ enormous caring and nurturing when they were small. The children must listen to and follow the advice of their parents and grandparents, and they are not allowed to fall into a self-indulgent life... Attached with this standard is a religion in the Vietnamese family and family line, which is *the worship of ancestors*. “*Father’s deserts are as high as Thai Son mount, mother’s love is as endless as spring water*”; each family has an ancestors’ altar, and the whole family line has an ancestors’ worshipping house. This custom of “drinking water, remembering the source”, like a continuous development flow of Vietnamese cultural features, is the national spirit, the soul, characters and determination of Vietnamese people. But these sacred features were cruelly destroyed during the deadly operation of the US troops namely Ranch Hand. The number of victims of Agent Orange, the most toxic and the most used chemical, has reached, and certainly will not stop at 4.8 million people. How many of them are not able to perform their sacred duty of caring for their parents and grandparents, looking after the worship of their ancestors. On the contrary, “*his grannies are so old, and they still have to work to earn money for his nurturing*”<sup>2</sup>, and the parents “*live the rest of the life just to earn some little money to buy medicine for him*”<sup>3</sup>, and they are constantly haunted by the worry and concern of “*now we are alive, we can look after him, but when we*

*die, who will?*”<sup>4</sup>. Can filialness be expressed by the act of “*the boys sometimes beat their father, scold their mother, asking them to leave*”<sup>5</sup>? But it is not their fault, they understand nothing. They were ripped off the ability to have normal consciences when they were just embryos! Those who have had children are suffering like that, but those who cannot have any children are feeling constant pain of “stopping the line”, that is the pain of “*not perform the ethic*” to family kinship and “*unfilialness*” to ancestors. The unhealable destruction of the cultural foundation, of human virtues, has led to the heart-felt pains of “*no blessing*”, “*unfilialness*”, which cannot be soothed. More terrifyingly, the destruction does not stop with one generation, but will continue for the next, and next generation...!

None of those living with a conscience can easily accept the defending claim by the US chemical firms that *dioxin concentration of about 366kg present in around 100 million liters of chemical mixtures*<sup>6</sup>, which was sprayed by the US troops in the Central and South of Vietnam, is within allowable levels. Not mentioning their destructive impacts on human health, hundreds of thousands of hectares of natural forests was destroyed just as the purpose of “clearance”. That clearing did not merely destroy the flora habitats, breaking the ecological structure, but also destroyed the religious beliefs of the ethnic minorities in Vietnam, those whose life had been strongly attached to the forests for thousands of years. The sacred gods of the ethnic minorities often stay inside the tree-roots and among the branches to protect and shelter human life. The sacred forests were destroyed, and so were the sacred gods to expect and worship! What a disaster that chemical war, which is proved by the national and international scientists to be “*the largest in mankind’s history*”, has caused to

<sup>2</sup> Interview with AO/Dioxin victims in Ha Tay

<sup>3</sup> Interview with AO/Dioxin victims in Hanoi

<sup>4</sup> Interview with AO/Dioxin victims in Ha Nam

<sup>5</sup> Interview with AO/Dioxin victims in Thai Binh

<sup>6</sup> The Nature, volume 422, dated 17 April, 2003

the spiritual life and a whole culture of a nation?!!!

All of the above suffering in terms of cultural life are corollaries of the direct impacts of Agent Orange/Dioxin on human health, not only on the health of Vietnamese soldiers and citizens, but also more or less on the health of US and Korean troops... Nobody can deny the fact that “*Dioxin is the most toxic and persistent content among the chemicals used by US troops during the Vietnam war. Dioxin is believed to be associated with an increasing list of diseases, including a variety of cancers, congenital backbone disease, diabetes type II, neuropathology, immune system failure, endocrine disorders, etc. The researches affirmed by the world have also mentioned the possible links with many other inborn deformities and reproductive disorders.*”<sup>7</sup>

In all the cases approached by the CGFED for information, either directly or indirectly, we have heard heart-broken stories regarding the destruction of health, particularly reproductive health. There were wives who underwent unspeakable pains, because whichever birth she gave, it was a deformed child. There were fathers who had to bury his newly-born with inhuman figures. There were parents who had to swallow their own tears to have the courage to look after the children who had lost all their senses, consciences and awareness since birth, who could do nothing for themselves, or even better, do not have the ability to learn, to create awareness or work. There were parents who had thought they were living in happiness when suddenly their normally-well children got ill and nothing could be done to help...

According to rough statistics from research documents of CGFED on over 200 families affected by Agent Orange/Dioxin, there are 291

cases of disability at birth (including 138 male children, 125 female children, 28 cases lack information about sex); 32 cases of prenatal death; 18 cases of still birth and 56 cases of miscarriage. There is a special case of one family, which suffered from 10 prenatal death and giving birth to monsters and 3 miscarriages.

All of those fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, always keep inside one biggest wish, though they know that it cannot never be fulfilled: “*giving birth to a normal child*”. That most legitimate right of theirs has also been ripped off!

What is wrong with those fathers and mothers when they want to hold on to the glimmer ray of hope that the next child would be luckier? Nobody could expect that they would have the toxic inside their body! They had no other options, no comfort to enjoy the right to happiness as they should do. Many couples have had to suffer that fate But own many more will continue to suffer the same unexpected fate up to as long as 2050s<sup>8</sup>?

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In recent years in Vietnam, expressions like “Agent Orange Family”, “Agent Orange Village”, “Agent Orange Commune” have become common use, simply because such families, villages and communes are present everywhere.

Observing the situation of “Agent Orange Families” who are “having no single peaceful day” and constantly exhausted by working hard to support the family and care for their disabled children, the neighbors and the whole community always show the sympathy, comfort

<sup>7</sup> Stockholm Declaration on “War Consequences in Cambodia, Lao and Vietnam”, approved on 28 July, 2002 in Stockholm, Sweden.

<sup>8</sup> Professor Hoang Dinh Cau: “*Vietnam bears the consequences of American chemical warfare at least until the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> century*” in Hoang Dinh Cau, 2003, Environment and Health in Vietnam (30 years after Ranch Hand campaign).

and assistance which can mainly be spiritual support. The incentives from the Government is also like a drop in the ocean, and can only give “little comfort”, or “little encouragement. What those “Agent Orange Families”, “Agent Orange Villages” and “Agent Orange Communes” are expecting request lots of warm-heartedness and *immediate and urgent action!* The expectations expressed by the victims’ families are not at all unreachable and are very concrete: a wheelchair to help with the transportation, a roof to cover them during rainy weather, a certain amount of capital to help with the livelihood, an amount of money for medication, and rehabilitation centers, vocational training centers for the disabled, centers for disabled people’s care...<sup>9</sup>

What should social scientist do in response to those expectations? Deliver concrete and feasible recommendations, based on results of studies? Conduct research that would assist intervention and humanitarian activities to be more effective and appropriate to psychological,

cultural, social, educational and health features of each Agent Orange/Dioxin victim case?

How about natural scientists? Reliable and correct information/data will contribute in time to find solutions in preventing possible exposure of toxic remaining in nature, in protecting human health and the future generations.

Humanitarian activists will certainly be pioneers in direct response to the needs of victims and their families.

Bearing in mind the common tosses and turns about the victims of chemical warfare that have and have been taken away their human rights, including reproductive rights, we all together should make great efforts to act immediately in order not to feel ashamed in front of the veteran who have said bitterly: *“Even if we win the lawsuit, until the time the US firms agree to give compensation to Agent Orange victims in Vietnam, among my four disabled kids caused by Agent Orange/Dioxin, ...three will have been dead...”*<sup>10</sup>



**The water source for living of the Van Kieu in A Luoi district, Thua Thien- Hue province**

*Photo: Source of CGFED*

<sup>9</sup> CGFED, 2006, *Voices of AO/Dioxin victims in Vietnam*, Hanoi: The gioi Publisher (the English and French versions)

<sup>10</sup> Mr. Huynh Ky, living in An Xuan commune, Tam Ky townlet, Quang Nam province, a rural area heavily affected by the war before 1975, a target of AO/Dioxin spraying by US troops.