

US-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin

Highlights from the June 2009 Meeting

Washington, D.C.

The fourth meeting of the US-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin (the “DG”) was held in Washington D.C. June 1-4, 2009. Dialogue Group members came together for an informal dinner on the evening of June 1, but the principal outreach effort began at the Cosmos Club on June 2, at which time DG members engaged a broad spectrum of the policy community, which included representatives from non-governmental organizations, government and the academic community. Another highlight was the participation of three DG members in June 4 hearings on Agent Orange in Vietnam, conducted by the Asia Subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

This note summarizes the plenary and break out sessions of the June 2 conference, which resulted in recommendations for policy measures and public-private partnerships.

Opening Remarks

Ms. Susan V. Berresford, Convener of the US-Vietnam Dialogue Group, summarized the work to date of the Dialogue Group. She noted the humanitarian spirit that led to the formation of the Dialogue Group and that has enabled the DG to find a number of partners for collaborative efforts. By focusing a significant portion of the Ford Foundation’s work on the Da Nang area, the DG and Ford have been able to create momentum that, with focused action and increased support, can inform work in other areas of Vietnam affected by dioxin. In some areas, other donors are active in parallel or related work, and together these hold real promise for significant results. She remarked that strategies now need to move

beyond pilot programs that foundations can help fund to sizeable governmental investments that can address the issues on scale.

Ambassador Ngo Quang Xuan, Vietnamese Co-Chair of the Dialogue Group, detailed a number of activities currently underway. Decontamination and testing phases to remove dioxin from soil and water are in train, and some health services are provided to Vietnamese affected by exposure to dioxin. He added that the government of Vietnam has worked with various NGOs and other governments and has received commitments for both funds and technical assistance. In his assessment, Track II dialogues have helped to promote awareness of the issue and have supplemented other resources in the 30-year effort to help over 200,000 victims who have received support so far. He emphasized that this is a long and costly fight. Ambassador Xuan concluded that the remaining challenges will require that existing public-private partnerships be expanded and that new ones be established where possible.

A Generational Dialogue

A panel on varying generational views of the Agent Orange issue was both retrospective and forward-looking. Professor Marilyn Young from New York University, New York and Mr. Kelvin Vuong from the Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy in San Francisco were the primary presenters, with Dr. Charles R. Bailey, Director of the Ford Foundation Special Initiative on Agent Orange-Dioxin, serving as panel moderator

Professor Marilyn Young maintained that the Vietnam War was the most divisive war in American history since the Civil War and at no other point in U.S. history was governmental foreign policy so controversial. She described how her generation's anti-war movement used images of herbicide in their attempt to expose the injustice of U.S. tactics that harmed the Vietnamese as well as U.S. troops. Members of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, the media and Members of Congress urged the end to the use of chemicals. In addition, many members of the scientific community protested the use of chemical warfare through the creation of several studies of specific birth defects and petitions. Professor Young also suggested that there was a conscious decision to avoid mention of the detrimental effects of herbicides used during the war in the 1973 peace process, on the assumption (from the Vietnamese side) that this issue would be addressed in post-war reconstruction assistance.

Kelvin Vuong represented a later generation's perspective on these issues. He remarked that the issue of Agent Orange was not addressed by communities of older generations of Vietnamese-Americans around whom he was raised, and that it still has the potential to be polarizing. Assimilating into the American community was the main focus of the first generation of immigrants. However, as younger generation Vietnamese-Americans explore identity issues, a wide spectrum of health issues, including the impact of Agent Orange, have become more salient. He believes it is important and possible to engage youth on this issue, as well as to educate the broader Vietnamese-American community about it. He believes that younger generations have the advantage of not being limited by political positions on the war. He remarked that addressing the humanitarian issues related to Agent Orange will require both short and long-term solutions, and that real progress can be made over the next few years.

BREAK-OUT SESSIONS

Environment and Clean-Up

The Environment and Clean-Up break out session was moderated by DG members, Professor Vo Quy from the Vietnam National University and Dr. Vaughan Turekian from the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

The session began with a review of background and the important issues. On the issue of reforestation, participants in the session discussed the fact that millions of acres of forests were completely destroyed during the war from herbicides. Thirty years later, there has been very little re-growth. Vietnamese scientists have learned to make artificial forest canopies in order to encourage mangrove growth with more success. However, the process is time, labor and resource intensive. There are programs in place now to train local leaders, scientists and the general public in successfully reforesting the land and in proper maintenance and husbandry for the future.

Next steps needed on the issue of re-forestation include the need for more help for research to determine the "carbon sink" of reforestation. A recommendation was made for a joint governmental and academic expert dialogue group to develop the necessary science and improve training. This group could also develop an exchange track to get top students involved by building on EPA successes with the Watershed Academy and similar programs.

On the issue of dioxin containment and remediation, participants discussed the use of dioxins during the war that also resulted in chemical contamination of the topsoil and pond and stream-bottom

sediments in many locations in Vietnam. Over two dozen dioxin-contaminated “hotspots” have been identified in Vietnam. The three most contaminated hotspots, at Da Nang, Bien Hoa and Phu Cat are receiving priority. At Da Nang, bilateral cooperation and international aid have contained the problem and reduced human exposure, but full and final remediation is needed. Bio-remediation, involving the use of microbes to destroy the dioxin in topsoil and pond sediments, is the cheapest solution, but studies are still being done to determine its efficacy, with promising results to date.

Next steps needed on the issue of dioxin containment and remediation include a continued focus on Da Nang, building on successes with solid results. The group discussed a need to develop bio-remediation as a cost effective decontamination solution and to perform risk assessment on various potential strategies. The solution must also include public outreach to rekindle support for financial aid and cover serious funding gaps and an effort to enlist private sector stakeholders to help fund remediation programs.

The Vietnam Dioxin Laboratory funded by the Vietnamese government and two American private foundations—Atlantic Philanthropies and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation—has developed a detailed implementation plan. The Laboratory will be built in Hanoi and a timeline for breaking ground is under preparation. The Laboratory is an opportunity for both technical exchange with the U.S. and the international technical community in the short run and a locus for collaborative scientific studies once the facility is fully up to speed. Planners may wish to take these two promising possibilities into account.

Disabilities and Human Health Issues

The Disabilities and Human Health Issues break-out session was moderated by DG members, Lt. General Phung Khac Dang, Vice President, Vietnam Veterans Association and Ms. Mary Dolan, Vice President of the National Organization on Disability.

The session started with some guiding principles that have formulated an approach to the problem. The DG has recognized the need to identify things on the ground that should be happening now or are happening, but are in need of improvement or expansion. Solutions should address the widest possible definition to include mental and cognitive disabilities and recognize that disability occurs at all stages of life and affects not just the individual, but their family and community as well. When talking about the health affects of Agent-Orange and other dioxins, it is important to remember not just the Vietnamese, but also American soldiers and those who are still being affected today.

Dealing with disabilities is a long-term effort that requires advocacy and early identification. Building a strong disability rights movement in Vietnam is essential in advocating for change. Improving health monitoring and surveillance capacity will provide a better idea of the spectrum of disabilities and problems. Disabilities from Agent-Orange should be tied together with other disabilities in Vietnam to strengthen support groups and the advocacy community. If Agent-Orange is not considered a unique cause of disability, but as part of a larger disability community context, more funds can be raised.

Three groups have a large stake in advocacy: parents, families, and caregivers; people with disabilities; and health professionals. There is a huge dearth of social support for the Vietnamese disabled community. Stronger contact and cooperation among these three groups would be beneficial.

Participants called for greater advocacy on addressing disability needs in both the United States and Vietnam. Professional development and employment must be a focus in Vietnam for the disability community. And finally, there is a desire to hire disabled workers, but the disabled are not trained to work. Education of the disabled should be coupled with cultivating teachers and social workers to work with the disabled to help them become independent. Early testing for disabilities should become routine, perhaps by tying it to existing medical routines such as vaccinations.

Public-Private Partnerships and Policy

The Public-Private Partnerships and Policy break out session was moderated by DG chairs, Ambassador Ngo Quang Xuan of the National Assembly of Vietnam, and Mr. Walter Isaacson of the Aspen Institute.

The discussion began with overview points. A participant maintained that it was important to explore a wide range of progressive approaches from different institutions and try to prevent redundant efforts; nevertheless, institutions might end up competing with each other. Participants recommended a humanitarian approach which identifies and delivers solutions. Some participants also expressed the view that a humanitarian approach may not be sufficient, and that it may be necessary to press the US Government and Americans more broadly to accept more specific responsibility for the continuing impact of Agent Orange in Vietnam. Another participant pointed to a middle ground and observed that the problem is a shared one, and should therefore be addressed jointly.

One participant mentioned the basic lack of *recognition* of the problem has led to insufficient appropriation of federal funds towards this issue. A second discussant suggested that faith-based

organizations such as the Catholic Church did a credible job with post Katrina reconstruction and should be considered. One of the co-chairs suggested a FaceBook Group called “US-Vietnam Agent Orange Group” to be started immediately.

Three additional recommendations were made. First was assembling g a core group of 3 to 7 companies to provide financial support for Agent Orange activities. Marketing to the Vietnam veterans within these companies may be effective. Second was managing people-to-people contact through internet groups to coordinate with other nonprofits involved. Third, the group encouraged a US-Vietnamese military dialogue to share knowledge of other possible hot spots. Lastly, some participants called for a long-term strategy and master plan that is both sustainable and purpose-driven.

The day concluded with a press conference at the Aspen Institute with DG Convener Susan V. Berresford and the two Co-Chairs, Ambassador Ngo Quang Xuan and Walter Isaacson.