



**Speech by Susan V. Berresford, Convener**  
U.S.-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin

Dialogue Group 2014 Roundtable on Agent Orange/ Dioxin  
April 21, 2014 Bien Hoa, Vietnam

Thank you for this opportunity to speak today as convener of the US-Vietnamese Dialogue Group on Agent Orange Dioxin in Vietnam. In my brief comments, I want to make just three points.

The first is that we must always look back to take account of what we have accomplished. Reform campaigners don't do this enough, mostly because they are always concentrating on the newest challenge. Why do I stress this now?

In the effort to address the effects of Agent Orange in Vietnam, it is easy to forget how insoluble the problem seemed, not so long ago. At first, the Agent Orange/ dioxin issue was very controversial and "off limits" as our two nations cautiously explored a post-war relationship. Then when it became a topic of cautious discussion, and when the Dialogue Group was founded, the problem still seemed insoluble. It appeared to be too large, affecting too many places and people, and lacking scientific certainty about causality and cure. And even later, when the actual dioxin hotspots were located and prioritized, there was no certainty about how to lessen dioxin's horrible harm to humans. And finally, when measures to stop the harm to people were developed, the question of cost hindered progress.

Today, we can be proud that our countries have, in varying ways, solved these puzzles that seemed so difficult just a few years ago. We have prioritized the hot spots, we have several technologies and measures to deal with dioxin, and we can now estimate costs and time frames with enough accuracy to get started. Moreover, the problem is now an accepted topic in bilateral discussions. It is not that all problems are fully resolved, all costs are known, or all that is needed is underway. No one would say that. But we have enough knowledge and experience to see a pathway forward. We know that if our two countries and others continue to collaborate on the dioxin clean-up, we can get that job done.

My second point is that there is another reason to look back. Often, lessons from success in one effort can guide us through the next set of puzzles. In fact, I believe we can apply the lessons from the environmental clean-up strategy to the remaining issues of dioxin-related disability. These disability issues are our unfinished business. Vietnamese families struggle with them hour after hour, day after day.

Until recently, when US and Vietnamese officials considered how to help the families struggling with dioxin related disabilities, the problem seemed huge, costs uncertain, and reliable remedies hard to identify-- just as it had seemed with the environmental issues. In addition, it seemed possibly unjust and immoral to focus only on dioxin-related disability when so many other kinds of disabilities exist and need urgent attention in Vietnam. As a result, we were urged to work together to assist persons with disabilities, regardless of cause. Regardless of cause meant that we would not target Agent Orange/dioxin-related disability directly.

But now I see the issue differently. There is a way to keep our focus on Agent Orange/Dioxin-related disability and not be overwhelmed or run into a moral dilemma. We can apply the same decision principles that led to the beginning of success in the environmental clean-up with the identification of Danang, Phu Cat and Bien Hoa as priorities. We need to identify those families and individuals with the most serious and profound Agent Orange/dioxin- related disabilities. Recent research by Charles Bailey tells us that they are most likely to be people with very serious mental capacity and mobility problems, living in poor communities and families, and somewhat remote from larger population centers.

These families are unlikely to be helped very much by the generalized disability assistance provided "regardless of cause." Generalized assistance targets people with sight or hearing loss, or people with damage to a limb, or those with emotional distress. These are serious problems for many people, and they are increasingly addressed by services and self-help groups already growing here. I hope our countries will continue to collaborate on broad disability work. However it is the severe dioxin related disabilities that need special attention. And I believe that this is the priority area that Vietnamese people most want the U.S. to understand and address.

We already have a few examples of how to do this, and we can estimate costs based on this experience. This knowledge begins to show us a pathway forward on disability issues. My colleague, Charles Bailey, whom I have had the honor to encourage and support for many years, will say more about recent research that helps us see this pathway. The work he has done now suggests both how to identify and prioritize those in greatest need. It stresses ways to help parents with respite time, family safety and family investment all delivered through locally managed and accountable case management.

Third and last, I want to make a personal point. I believe each of us anywhere in the world shares at least one very personal responsibility. Each of us should do our very best to leave the world at least a little better than how we found it. For me, this means trying to understand suffering and trying to do something about it.

I found myself with the great honor of working in the Ford Foundation for much of my professional life. Before that I also worked in government, for an NGO, and for a small business. In part because I was taught by my parents to see and react to suffering, I have always asked myself how I could use the resources of my employers to help people in need. I came to believe that ways of working together helped make the greatest contribution to social good and the reduction of suffering. We were most effective when we supported

people who were optimistic, people who had good ideas, and people with a sense of urgency about creating positive change. We needed to support their trial and error processes, not require rigid strategies with metrics. Successful results came from trust and partnership, rather than control.

As we have worked together on Agent Orange/dioxin issues, I have tried to follow these principles. The Ford Foundation, Charles Bailey and I supported people working on Agent Orange/dioxin who had promising ideas, who were ready to take risks and try new things, and who were impatient to get change going. We tried to support and not thwart them.

Most of us in this room are here because we care about ending the scourge of Agent Orange/dioxin both for the environment and for people who suffer from its effects. We can now not only commit to continuing on the environmental cleanup pathway, but also to starting down the road of help to those with profound Agent Orange/dioxin-related disability. As Charles Bailey will explain, the latter task is doable and ultimately affordable. It is what the Vietnamese have always emphasized in discussions with the US. It is what anyone naturally wants to do when they see the courage and needs of families who have children with severe Agent Orange/dioxin related disabilities.

I hope that as our Dialogue Group winds down its work, we will all see the pathways for both environmental and disability related to Agent Orange Dioxin as our shared priority. That dual approach is consistent with the concept of a comprehensive partnership that our governments now jointly embrace.

Thank you.