



## German Press Agency Interview with Charles Bailey, Director of the Aspen Institute Agent Orange Program in Vietnam

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### 1. Was it difficult to put the two sides together in 2007?

*I first started working on the Agent Orange issue in 1998, shortly after I arrived in Hanoi for what proved to be a 10 year tenure as head of the Ford Foundation in Vietnam. In those days the issue was so polarized and sensitive that nobody wanted to talk about it. I was however able to make a few grants get the ball rolling which contributed to a breakthrough in November 2006 when President George W. Bush visited Vietnam for APEC. A joint statement by Presidents Bush and Nguyen Minh Triet cited the value for the evolving bilateral relationship of U.S. cooperation in the cleanup of dioxin at former U.S. military bases. The statement however did not mention the impacts on people or indeed even use the term "Agent Orange." So we started in the corner of this complex issue where there was a kernel of agreement: We focused on assessing and containing the dioxin at the Da Nang airport. The Ford Foundation put up \$1.3 million for this work, the U.S. State Department contributed \$400,000 and the Vietnamese government covered the remaining costs. By January 2008 we had ended the public health threat to the people of Da Nang from the dioxin on the airport. This success built confidence in tackling not only the full remediation of the dioxin at Da Nang, which launched in August 2012, but U.S. government recognition of the need for health/disability services for people with disabilities. Since 2007 we have played a role in mobilizing \$91 million for cleanup and health/disability services in Vietnam--\$61 million of this has come through appropriations from the U.S. Congress and \$30 million from Ford and other U.S. (and German) foundations, other countries, UNDP, UNICEF and GEF.*

*The behind-the-scenes story here is the leading role of independent American foundations, beginning with the Ford Foundation. Not tied to the U.S. government, they provided the "early money" which launched the process of constructive discussion and action between the two governments. I'll forward you separately a link to a blog by Brad Smith, President of the Foundation Center, which succinctly describes how this has worked. For my own part I have to say that we would not be seeing the progress we find today on Agent Orange were it not for the initiative taken by American foundations.*

### 2. Have priorities and general attitudes among participants changed over the last six years?

*In recent times, in part because of the work of the Ford Foundation, the Aspen Institute (my current employer) and the U.S.-Vietnam Dialogue Group, relations between officials in Vietnam and the U.S. have become steadily warmer and more focused on practical accomplishments on Agent Orange. This 'movement towards the middle' accelerated after the August 9, 2012, ground-breaking of the Da Nang airport dioxin clean-up project. The project will clean up all the dioxin contaminated soils at the Da Nang airport by 2016. The ground breaking is a milestone in the relations between Vietnam and the U.S. on Agent Orange and a moment of great satisfaction and celebration for Americans and Vietnamese. Support, and even enthusiasm, for Agent Orange work has emerged and noticeably strengthened over the last 18 months within the U.S. Administration and the Congress. Following the*

release of the Dialogue Group's Declaration & Plan of Action in June 2010, subsequent public statements by Secretary Clinton encouraged this view. However it is also fair to say that there is not yet complete unanimity of views between the two governments. U.S. officials are still challenged in coming to grips with the core issue of Agent Orange—the need for health and disability programs. USAID has however supported health and disability services in Da Nang since 2008 regardless of cause and will launch an enlarged program shortly.

### **3. How important was the dialogue in starting the US dioxin clean-up project in Da Nang?**

Following President Bush's 2006 visit to Vietnam, Susan Berresford, then President of the Ford Foundation, a Vietnamese diplomat, Madam Ton Nu Thi Ninh and myself saw the need for a genuine two-way channel of information and ideas between the two countries. We formed the U.S.-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin with prominent private citizens on both sides—Walter Isaacson, President of the Aspen Institute (and biographer of Steve Jobs) and Madame Ninh as the co-chairs, Susan Berresford as the convener and eight other well-credentialed Vietnamese and Americans. In its first meeting in February 2007 in Vietnam the Dialogue Group agreed that the way forward was to adopt a humanitarian approach to dealing with the human and environmental legacy of Agent Orange. They prioritized services for people with disabilities, whether or not these were believed to be linked to dioxin exposure, and end to the public health threat posed by the dioxin at former U.S. military bases and restoring the agricultural productivity of the lands that had been subjected to spraying. In 2010 the Dialogue Group released a ten year plan of action laying out what needed to be done. And in 2012 they published a further detailed report with specific recommendations for the U.S. government and others. The overall impact? The Dialogue Group replaced ignorance, fear and anger—the lingering 'fog of war' which clouded the issue for 40 years—with solid information, constructive ideas and a map to the future.

### **4. How important do you think this clean-up project has been to bilateral relations between the two governments?**

It is of enormous importance (see #2 above). The Da Nang dioxin remediation project opens the door for further progress on Agent Orange in all its aspects. It also begins to remove a major impediment to fully normal relations between Vietnam and the U.S.

### **5. One of your priorities is the creation of rehabilitation centers for people affected by Agent Orange. How are these people identified? Is there a risk those most seriously affected (severely disabled in isolated, rural areas) are not included?**

We now have a known and tested three-part 'package' of services for children and youth with disabilities: surgery to improve mobility and rehabilitation at community-based centers; scholarships for inclusive education, special education, vocational training and school-to-work counseling; and family support through business loans and accessible housing upgrades. The Dialogue Group recommends that these programs include everyone with disabilities but they should prioritize provinces that were the most heavily sprayed during the war and where census data shows that there is an unusually high burden of disability. Of the 12 most heavily sprayed provinces, four surround Da Nang and four surround Bien Hoa where the majority of the spray planes were based. So it is a good idea to start in these places, include everyone (especially in the remoter communes of each province) and move on from there.

**6. Can the children of people exposed to Agent Orange be tested for dioxin levels? If they can, could testing lead to discrimination within the community? If not, is there any way to prove Agent Orange is affecting successive generations?**

*There are a couple of strictly scientific points here. Dioxin is a chemical and once it's in your system it can be detected through laboratory testing of your blood (and for women, breast milk). The tests are expensive, typically \$800-\$1,000 per test. If your test results show elevated levels, there's nothing that medical science can do about it. You live with it, though over the decades it may shorten your life through succumbing earlier than might otherwise be expected to various cancers, ischemic heart disease, Parkinson's, etc. You cannot physically pass on dioxin the chemical to your children however. The potential impact on them would be through whatever impact the dioxin has on your genetic make-up. It is thought, but not universally agreed among scientists, that dioxin can be a factor in causing birth defects in successive generations.*

**7. What are the primary goals of the high-resolution dioxin laboratory in Hanoi?**

*Dioxin remains dangerous even at very low concentrations, typically measured in parts per trillion or ppt. (To give you an idea, 1 ppt is equivalent to one molecule of water in an Olympic-sized swimming pool.) To ensure you detect the dioxin you need to test at the next lower order of magnitude, parts per quadrillion. This is very fine indeed and until the Dialogue Group pinpointed the need and found the funding, Vietnam did not have a lab with the technology capable of testing samples for dioxin down to parts per quadrillion. Clearly, it's advantageous to Vietnam to have such a lab close to hand for all the sampling and testing they need to do, rather than having to send samples abroad. But if you want more specifics I'm happy to introduce you to the director of the lab, Dr. Nguyen Hung Minh.*

**8. Could high levels of dioxin contamination found in soil impede Vietnam's agricultural exports? Does this issue affect the two countries' dialogue?**

*There is no evidence that soils in areas that were sprayed during the war have dioxin levels that exceed international standards. Dioxin in soils exceeds international standards (U.S., Canadian, Japanese, and probably German) only at a handful of former U.S. military bases—the dioxin 'hotspots'—of which the two of most concern are the airports at Da Nang and Bien Hoa. Fortunately, dioxin is not water soluble so it hardly moves from where it was originally deposited—the areas on these bases where the drums of Agent Orange were stored and the spray plane tanks were washed out after their missions.*

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**Charles Bailey, Director, Agent Orange in Vietnam Program, The Aspen Institute**



Charles Bailey joined the Aspen Institute in May 2011 to direct its Agent Orange in Vietnam Program. From 1997 to 2007 he was based in Hanoi, Vietnam, where he headed the Ford Foundation's grant making in, economic development, international relations, arts and culture, sexuality and reproductive health and higher education. In 1998 he began exploring ways to build a bi-national consensus between Vietnam and the US on how to address the legacy of wartime defoliants like Agent Orange, much of which was contaminated with dioxin. He contributed to the first milestone on this subject in November 2006 and then mobilized further support and action on Agent Orange beginning early in 2007. [Full biography.](#)