

About the Dialogue Group

The idea for a citizen-to-citizen dialogue on Agent Orange was first explored in 2006 by the Ford Foundation. The idea was that a group of this kind could raise the awareness of people in the United States, including U.S. officials and business leaders, about this last and troubling legacy of the Vietnam war. It was formally established in February 2007 as an initiative of prominent private citizens, scientists and policy-makers on both sides, working on issues that the two countries' governments have found difficult to address. It is not an implementing agency or a fundraising organization.

Its role has been to call attention to the need for five key actions to be undertaken in a humanitarian spirit: to establish treatment and education centers for Vietnamese with disabilities; cooperate with the U.S. and Vietnamese governments to contain and clean up dioxin, beginning at three priority airport "hot spots"; set up a modern dioxin testing laboratory in Vietnam; foster programs for training of trainers in restoration and management of damaged landscapes; and educate the U.S. public on the issues.

By bringing attention to the issues and by serving as a forum for discussion, several activities have gained strength and significance:

1) Centers of rehabilitation have been created for people affected by Agent Orange to restore their abilities, support their families, and create favorable conditions for them to enjoy education and training. Health care and vocational training pilot programs are operating in Thai Binh, Da Nang and Quang Ngai within the "Support Network for People with Disabilities" program of the East Meets West Foundation. Children of Vietnam is working with local authorities in Da Nang on its "Hope System of Care" program. Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation provides health care, vocational training and social inclusion programs to raise living standards for people with disabilities and residents of dioxin hotspots in six provinces. Vietnam Assistance for the Handicapped is upgrading community-based care in Binh Dinh, Kon Tum and Da Nang. These and similar programs are valuable but further resources are needed.

2) Cooperation between the U.S. and Vietnamese governments has expanded on efforts to contain and clean up dioxin at three priority airport "hot spots." The first two of three environmental remediation phases are complete at the Da Nang airbase, one of the three most contaminated "hot spots." These are measurement of dioxin contamination in land and in food supplies, and containment of dioxin sediments in the northern part of the base. A cement cap now covers the most contaminated soils; a filter tank traps runoff carrying contaminated soils from adjacent areas; and a permanent wall along the airport's north side prevents people entering the area and using the ponds. The third phase is to clean up the dioxin. For this and for similar work at other hot spots, additional financial support is required.

3) Funding has been obtained for a high-resolution dioxin laboratory. The Dialogue Group attracted support from The Atlantic Philanthropies and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which recently agreed to contribute \$5.4 million toward the total of \$6.75 million needed to create a state-of-the-art

(more)

Vietnam Persistent Organic Pollutants Laboratory. The Vietnam government is funding the balance, and the facility is under development. It will be a cornerstone of Vietnam's environmental management efforts, allowing accurate assessment of dioxin and similar organic pollutants in soil, sediments, and human tissue. It will benefit future generations of Vietnamese as well as people currently affected.

4) Programs for training of trainers in restoration and management of damaged landscapes have begun. The Dialogue Group backed the idea of training programs on ways to restore and reuse lands degraded by the herbicide spraying. The Center for Resources and Environment Studies at Hanoi National University successfully introduced this approach with farmers, technical experts and officials in Quang Tri province and is now extending it to Thua Thien Hue province. This initial work may be replicated in more areas across Vietnam when new support is available.

5) In the United States, a humanitarian approach to Agent Orange/dioxin is gaining supporters. The Dialogue Group has convened five meetings that have yielded reports on various aspects of the situation in Vietnam. U.S. Dialogue Group partners are working to educate U.S. policymakers, Members of Congress, international organizations, businesses and others who might provide financial resources and expertise.

Current Status: U.S.-Vietnamese cooperation to address the impact of Agent Orange in Vietnam has increased in the past two years. In part as a result, Congress appropriated \$3 million for fiscal 2007 and again for fiscal 2009 and 2010 for Agent Orange/dioxin work in Vietnam. Financial support is also coming from the Ford and other U.S. foundations, UN agencies and other governments. Some \$30 million has been mobilized so far. But stronger bilateral cooperation and greater attention to this problem are needed.

With Dialogue Group support, the Vietnamese government and an independent expert firm, Hatfield Consulting of North Vancouver, Canada, conducted a series of independent assessments of dioxin residues in the environment around the Da Nang airport and in the blood and breast milk of current area residents. The results provided a clearer understanding of the problem in Da Nang, where the feasibility of bio-remediation efforts is being tested. Findings in 2009 indicated that the 2007 interim mitigation measures had succeeded in reducing dioxin exposure of people in the area.

The most recent meeting of the Dialogue Group took place in Washington, DC in June 2009. Dialogue Group members testified before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Asia and met with staff of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Next Steps: The Dialogue Group has approved a Declaration and Strategic Plan that specifies ways that cooperation can address the remaining problems of AO/D in Vietnam. It is intended to guide future action and cooperation and to strengthen the private-public partnership that has achieved the progress to date.

For More Information Contact: David Devlin-Foltz or James Hoppes, The Aspen Institute, One Dupont Circle NW, Suite 700, Washington, DC 20036. ddf@aspeninstitute.org, james.hoppes@aspeninstitute.org, 202-736-5800

April 2010