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Promoting Social Justice, Human Rights, and Peace

Vietnam: Faces of Development

American Friends Service Committee (1995: 23 min.)

Transcribed by Darrell Gene Moen

David: We are Linda and David Blair. With our children, Anna and Sam, we arrived in Vietnam in January 1991. For two-and-a-half years, our family lived in Hanoi while we worked on rural development programs in two northern provinces for the American Friends Service Committee.

Linda: Vietnamese has no work for "Quaker." When people heard that we were American "Friends," they welcomed us warmly as friends from America. Often, they told us, "We're very poor" and asked when the embargo would end. We had no answer. Anna said, "The problem is, in America, Vietnam isn't the name of a country, it's the name of a war." For our family, Vietnam has become, not a war, but a face, the face of a friend.

David: Today, we'll share it with you, starting with our home in Hanoi, a gracious old city full of lakes, ponds, and serene temples. The lotus blossom pushes up through the mud, a symbol of purity and regeneration. We lived on a cobblestone street, with narrow rowhouses built during 90 years of French rule, and teeming with people. Our local street gang takes a break from marbles and firecrackers [photo], and our next door neighbor, Quinaing, always curious, peers through our gate to see older brother Sam and big sister Anna in the garden of our four-room office and home [photos]. Everyone breakfasts on the street. Half our neighbors buy, half sell. We call this the baby's MacDonald's, chicken soup, dumplings, even yogurt.

Our street has embraced the market economy. Hang a sign, open the door, and the family living room doubles as a shop or a sidewalk cafe, where our bicycle repairman presses sugar cane juice during the hot summer months. A few blocks away, three Buddhist temples cluster around a small lake, and early-risers practice tai-chi or badmitten in Lenin Park. In an overgrown corner of the park are reminders: missiles and a fallen B-52 bomber from the American War; a great jungle gym for toddlers with ballons on Sunday afternoon. The Vietnamese remember the war, but they don't dwell

on it. They focus on the present, immersed in a vibrant street economy that has flourished since economic reform in 1986.

Hanoi's sidewalks offer everything, from computers and coca cola to pots and pans. A woman leases curbside space to sell her pork; a barber hangs his mirror on this tree each morning and opens shop; this enterprising grandmother does a brisk trade in styrofoam dolls dressed in traditional garb. Hanoi now has Western boutiques, but we prefer family shops like this one selling temple drums, gongs for home alters, and wooden molds that shape the mooncakes eaten during the autumn festival. Vendors on foot or bicycle hawk mangos, brooms, hotbread, pottery, whatever you need, right on your doorstep.

Linda: Large families live in one or two rooms. Life overflows into the street. Here, we see quarrels and reunions. Here, we celebrate weddings and funerals. An oboe or a gong echoing from a house, or local grandmothers out in force with prayer flags, tell us a neighbor is facing the passage of a loved one. The widow in sackcloth, walks backward before the coffin. The family wears white headbands, and gathers at set times in the next months to mourn together. As Vietnamese honor their forebearers by tending their graves, they understand the grief of our MIA families. Yet, they still cannot find some 300,000 of their own missing from the same war. Holidays are both public and private. The old town turns into a flower market for Tet, the Lunar New Year. Each family seeks the best peach branch to welcome spring, or the finest orange tree. This behemoth travels by the petal-powered taxi of Hanoi.

Tet is a joyful season. Cooking, cleaning, and shopping are prelude to a full week of parties and visits to family and friends. It's New Year, yes, but also Christmas, Thanksgiving, and Easter, rolled in one and capped by Fourth of July firecrackers. Tet blossoms are pink in Hanoi, yellow in Saigon. North and south, with much in common, are yet, 2,000 kilometers apart. But New Year is time to settle debts and quarrels, to post good wishes like these banners in every home and heart. By lifting the embargo at Tet, President Clinton gave extra meaning to a partial reconciliation. To most Americans, Tet is a battle, not a time of harmony and new beginnings.

David: Maybe now, we can change this and recognize all that we share. This child has a lantern for Tet chun tua, an autumn festival a lot like Halloween. It's when children dress up in tiaras and masks of Disney and Buddhist characters. They play pranks, squirt water at passersby, and are treated to mooncakes and balloons by doting parents.

Linda: For extra cash, children sell snacks to holiday crowds in the park or at local festivals like this anniversary of a town's liberation from the French. The displays and contests remind me of a Scout Jamboree. Families pitch tents where they relax, drink tea, play guitar, and display photos or busts of "Uncle Ho," who is treated with

reverence tempered by playful familiarity. Just before this phot, "Uncle Ho" was sporting a jaunty cap to warm his bald head.

David: We passed this festival on route to projects in Thanh Hoa Province south of Hanoi on Highway 1, the main north-south artery. The road by-sects the rice paddies. We come to know the seasonal cycle, including flood time when farmers fish in their fields. On the narrow hardtop and crowded ferries, bikes, motorbikes, aging Russian trucks, and new Toyotas dispute right-of-way with barefoot farmers shouldering wooden plows or flocks of ducks. Highway 1 shows a slice of Vietnam's countryside; kilns baking bricks from paddy clay for the building boom and water buffalo swimming by a dike.

With the embargo lifted, loans will build bridges and widen roads, but for now, accidents are many as motor vehicles collide with bicycles and ox carts. Twice a year, all cooperate in the harvest. Rice is spread to dry where passing cars thresh it right on the highway. The Maw River runs past limestone bluffs in Komtwe Town, center of a midland district. Here, we provide training and revolving loans for poor fishing families, once itinerant but now settled on housecrafts where they raise fish in bamboo cages. Their children can finally attend school since home stays in one place. Many women in Komtwe want to raise hybrid pigs for sale.

We setp a breeding program and a loan fund for sows and piglets. But first, we sponsored a training program for veterinary workers and village women in the prevention and treatment of common pig diseases so that they can cooperate in public education to persuade farmers to invest the small fee for vaccination. No service is free in the market economy. Women practiced vaccinating - banana trunks.

Linda: And Komtwe has the healthiest bananas in Vietnam. In Son La, a mountain province northwest of Hanoi, a grant from Denmark funds our work with minority people of many languages and cultures. We travel, rains permitting, by jeep, ferry, dugout, and by foot. In Nam Knong, two days out of Hanoi, we often stayed with this White Tai family. Black Tai, called Tai Dom, wear their hair in a topknot after marriage. Zao women carry shoulder baskets, a day's walk from the high mountains to trade in a frontier town, home to Vietnamese settlers.

Mon women in Mok Cho do the same needlework as refugees in America, who have taught this technique at my quilting store [in the U.S.]. In Son La, minorities and Vietnamese live apart but interact through trade. This Mon sells fish to Vietnamese from his motorcycle. Project work begins with a round of ceremonial meetings ...

David: ... which may include drinking, or pretending to drink, wine through bamboo straws.

Linda: As soon as possible, we get out to the village where our real work focuses on women and their needs. We begin with a meeting in the evening since the women leave for the fields before dawn. It's frustrating working through two interpreters, but older women rarely speak Vietnamese. Here, our colleague Fung, AFSC's intrepid program officer and biggest asset in Vietnam, asks about seasonal tasks and problems.

David: In every village, water is women's first concern. Water is still plentiful in some mountain areas. Farmers in the valleys depend on irrigation to raise two crops of rice a year. They're ingenious in their use of water. A wheel lifts it from the river into an irrigation canal [photo]. Water tumbling downhill powers wooden mills that pound rice or runs through a small hyroplant housed in a tree trunk. The turbine inside lights a bulb in a nearby house.

Women and small children carry water long distances to their homes. These bamboo water tubes are heavy when full. The villagers of Nam Knong asked us to build a water system to irrigate their paddy and to bring clean drinking water into the village. The old dam, made of wood, stone, and dirt, washed out at least once a year, and everyone spent many hours repairing it. In its place, the villagers built a cement dam. We provided cement, steel, and skilled workers. They provided sand, stone, and local labor.

Most of the laborers were women. They dug and carried sand and gravel. The canal carries water to the rice paddies and, through a filter tank and metal pipe, to holding tanks in the village. Linda: Clean water promotes better health by reducing parasites and dysentery. We also worked with Vietnamese doctors and other agencies like Save The Children and the Red Cross to improve skills of village medical workers in malaria control, women's health, and family planning.

David: Women bathe children and wash clothes at the water tanks. This stand pipe saves hours for this Mon woman and her children. The children can go to school, and she can use the time for income projects supported by our loans. AFSC accomplishes water projects effectively, at low cost, because of capable engineers like Twuan, our consultant.

He develops projects with local people, and trains them in water management. Here, he climbs into a water tank to check the cement - with his penknife. Twuan's generation grew up with wartime hardship, as soldiers or civilian evacuees. They've planted rice and hauled manure themselves. Twuan doesn't mind mountain conditions, and he respects our minority partners.

Linda: Mountain agriculture, mixes paddy rice (often two crops) with swidden fields on the hillside for corn and cassava, last to grow on depleted soil. Small, terraced paddies nest in the hillside to retain soil, but sheet erosion from steep, planted slopes leads to flash floods in heavy rains. Despite family planning, hunger and large families

press farmers to cultivate the steepest hillsides with marginal returns. Men plow and harvest, but most upland work falls to women; planting, hoeing, weeding. Women bearing tools and nursing infants trek hours and days to far plots.

This harsh task exposes them to malaria, now epidemic without Soviet donations of chemicals and medicines. The girls grate cassava, bland but filling, when rice runs out. Food security dominates our village work. Between crops, a Nam Knong family may dig roots in the forest to fill empty bellies with empty calories. Hunger is an annual guest.

David: Men cut trees on the hillsides, and carpenters from the delta shape them into posts and beams to build the wooden houses, some high on stilts, seen throughout minority areas in the north. Women and children gather fuelwood from the hillsides to feed the three-stone fire. The hearth provides cooking, warmth, and light. For centuries, farmers have burned hillsides to clear upland fields. Once, the land rested [for] some years between crops. Now, many mouths to feed means burning the same fields yearly. Soil erodes, fertility flows into the rivers.

We introduced ally cropping to five villages. Farmers learned to mark contours and plant hedgerows that trap soil washing downhill. The tops of the woody hedge are trimmed to feed animals or [used] for fuel. Between rows, women plant food like soybeans, or cash crops like tung trees grown for their oil nuts and fruit trees. We brought seeds and Mr. Bae, an agronomist, to teach families to raise them in beds before transplanting to the hillside.

Linda: Training is the thread that binds our projects. Nurturing ideas and skills so villagers can take charge of changes and choices facing them. Crowds of all ages come to learn about dry season gardening. An active and fun training, hand-on, from digging the raised beds to manuring the soil, from planting to mulching, and fencing out the chickens. Next, we help the women's union lend vegetable seeds to all who prepare their own gardens. In two months, we saw plots flourishing. A workshop in revolving credit looks more formal, but sparkles with dancing, singing, and drawing. Trainer Mrs. Lun, in blue, studied Grameen Bank methods. Her spirited, participatory lessons inspire folk, with and without literacy skills, to go home and plan small, pilot projects for raising rabbits, ducks along the paddies, and especially chickens....

We hope these small pilot projects prepare village women to manage larger funds for more families and costlier ventures like digging a fish pond, or, on a smaller scale, silk worms. Once, only grandmothers made time to coddle the voracious worms, unravel, dye, and weave the silk for their bright sashes. Now, parents and children in Hun Chun, a Mon village, tend racks of ravenous silk worms. The new district silk factory sends trucks to buy cocoons, and lends capital to plant the mulberry. Mon women, never idle,

embroider or split flax even as they walk. They too seek alternatives to upland farming. They want our help to adapt traditional textiles for market.

A Tai tradition is spinning and weaving shirts and blankets from homegrown cotton, another chore for women in the evening after a long day's work. Colorful blankets for cool mountain nights and embroidered dividers for bamboo sleeping quarters are part of this girl's wedding dowry. Weaving at home, instead of upland work, would be a delight for her, if only there were a market for her homespun.

David: Young children work with their parents, spinning or cooking, tending buffalo, gardens, and babies. Boys and girls of three have a tiny sibling strapped on for the ride. Still, they find time for play, [such as] homemade games like mankala. But change has exploded into the mountains. Her grandchild will grow up in a world with electricity, schools for both boys and girls, prosperous cement houses, even television....

Linda: Change has many facets. My friend, Mrs. Lae here, a first-grade teacher, gave up her elaborate Mon blouse, and later, her batik skirt as well.... I imagined her caught between cultures, losing part of herself. She set me straight. It wasn't losing, but choosing. Choosing comfort, freedom of movement, and precious time liberated from needlework for choices like women's literacy classes. She sees herself setting an example for her daughters and students. If they dare to change, to adapt their dress, go to school, learn Vietnamese, reading, and numbers, they can go to market in town themselves without feeling conspicuous or dependent. Like Mrs. Lae, they can move in a wider world, taking home ideas to better their lives and aspiring to equality with their husbands in family decisions. But getting girls to school isn't easy.

In Hooatat, a nearby Mon village, no girls had ever gone. Mrs. Zae, head of the women's union, learned to speak and read Vietnamese in the army, but even she didn't send her daughters. They didn't want to go. The elders thought Hooatat needed a new school building. Mountain schools are spare; some little more than thatched roof and blackboard. But, as teachers ourselves, we saw other problems. Curriculum, books, and teacher are Vietnamese. All the children speak only Mon. So we underwrote a seminar to train minority people as first grade teachers for their home villages. For Hooatat, we found a magnetic teacher and role model, Mrs. Zae herself. She went door-to-door to recruit 16 girls for her class of 32 in the new school that AFSC helped build. The girls are having a ball learning Vietnamese, songs, and games.

David: And someday they may even join in tug-of-war with their brothers. Still, few girls or boys in remote villages study beyond second grade. For higher grades, they have to leave home. Among the 60 students in this district minority boarding school are three girls, sent to care for younger brothers. These schools are overcrowded and underfunded. Diet is poor, illness constant. These mosquito nets and sleeping mats came from an Iowa church group, including Tai and Mon refugees who approached

AFSC to help them help their homeland. Money raised by de-tasseling corn in Iowa goes far in buying pots and pans for this outdoor kitchen. Medicine, notebooks, soccer balls, their first crayons.

Linda: City children have access to more opportunities. Parents pay for extra classes in tai-kwon-doo, English, music, math, and art. Their artwork is valued. A friend from Australia organized a children's art exhibit which opened in Hanoi's Fine Arts Museum on last Children's Day. Back home, we hope to encourage exchanges with American schools, and to work on minority education for all ages. One project is bilingual books based on local folktales. We want to send our family in Nam Knong something to read at home, in their own language.

David: We loved our work and our new friends in this beautiful country of magnificent mountains and rivers. Many places may be gone in ten years, underwater, flooded by a new hydroelectric dam on the Da River. We hope that AFSC work in training in human resources will help our friends in the villages to develop the tools they need to deal creatively with a changing future. We left our work in good hands. A lot of people are working at the grassroots level, willing to get their feet wet and work to bridge the growing gap between those who are making their way in the market economy and those who are left behind.

Linda: For two-and-a-half years, we shared our family lunch with Hanoi's development community: Vietnamese, Russians, Europeans, Filipinos, and Americans. Our polyglot lunches were prepared and shared by Bakien, mother of our landlord. Bakien cooked for us, fussed over us, doused us with herbal medicines, and set a place for us at her family gatherings. We never had quite enough Vietnamese to talk with her deeply. Once our mistaken tones set her close to choking on laughter (tonal languages can be dangerous at mealtimes). Fortunately, with Bakien we often didn't need words.

Our third day in Vietnam was the anniversary of the death of her husband, killed in the last hour of American bombing over Hanoi at Christmas 1972. Bakien and her family prepared special red rice to take to the grave where they swept and tidied, lit candles and incense. That evening, Bakien came to our home with her eight grandchildren. They brought us some of the red sticky rice, and along with it, a three-tier cake, for Anna's birthday. For me, Vietnam is Bakien, and that's the face I'd like to leave you with, until you go there and find your own - faces of Vietnam.

Transcriber's note: Vietnamese place names and family names are most likely incorrectly rendered in English due to my lack of competence in the Vietnamese language.