

Viet Nam: Safer homes, safer communities

Context

Viet Nam is one of the most disaster-prone countries in East Asia, exposed to hazards, such as floods, typhoons, drought, landslides and forest fires. According to the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters, between 2010 and 2015 an average of 1.5 million people per year were affected by floods and storms in Viet Nam. A 2007 assessment report of the World Bank lists Viet Nam as one of the five countries in the world most affected by climate change. It estimates that one metre rise in the sea level would partially inundate one commune out of five.¹

The Viet Nam Red Cross Society, together with other international non-governmental organizations have developed and promoted a community-based approach to disaster preparedness and risk reduction since 2000. The Viet Nam Red Cross Society, in collaboration with the Swiss Red Cross, has implemented a two year community-based project that was completed in October 2015. This project builds upon the existing achievements of the government and the National Society's experience in implementing the community-based disaster risk reduction (CBDRM) model (adopted in 2009). Communes undertook disaster risk analysis, developed risk mitigation options and last but not least, improved their existing disaster preparedness plans.

The two year CBDRM project was implemented in Ben Tre, one of the seven most vulnerable provinces of the Mekong Delta, prone to disasters and the impacts of climate change. The project concentrated on seven inland communes – Vinh Binh, Hoa Nghia, Tan Thien, Tan Phu, Tien Long, Son Phu and Hung Phong. In spite of their vulnerability, none of these communes have previously benefitted from substantial disaster management and risk reduction interventions.

The project reached an estimated 75,000 people, including approximately 2,100 families living under the government indexed poverty line. The most vulnerable families were given priority and actively engaged in implementing the project.

What is participatory approach to safe shelter awareness?

Participatory approach to safe shelter awareness (PASSA) is a method of disaster risk reduction related to shelter safety. It has been modelled after the participatory hygiene and sanitation transformation methodology and officially launched by the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) in 2011. The aim of PASSA is to develop local capacity to reduce shelter-related risk by raising awareness and developing skills in joint analysis, learning and decision-making at community level. Its purpose is to raise awareness of the “everyday vulnerable” of the “everyday risks” related to the built environment and foster locally appropriate safe shelter and settlement practices.

PASSA is a tool that strengthens both the “software” (knowledge and skills within the community) and the “hardware” (physical improvement of housing and infrastructure). It is a powerful approach to employ when working towards increased community resilience.

The Viet Nam Red Cross Society in close collaboration with the Swiss Red Cross undertook a pilot PASSA component within a two year community-based disaster risk reduction model (CBDRM) Project. The pilot PASSA component was implemented in the Province of Ben Tre. The aim was not only to increase safe shelter awareness and work towards making improvements to existing houses but also to understand and advocate that future programmes for the Viet Nam Red Cross Society consider PASSA as a sub-component in projects, tailored to the local context and needs.

1. GFDRR Country Profile for Vietnam. Available at: <https://www.gfdr.org/sites/gfdr/files/region/VN.pdf>

Adopting an integrated approach to address complex risks

The CBDRM model works towards strengthening resilience in communities to be able to better mitigate, prepare for and respond to a complex set of inter-connected risks. Some of the improved mitigation and emergency response interventions and planning are focussed at community level, involving existing networks and institutions such as schools and clinics.

To ensure a holistic approach, following consultation and planning with the communes, a targeted mitigation measure, aimed at improving the safety of housing, for vulnerable households, was proposed.

The Viet Nam Red Cross Society has a wealth of experience in implementing *owner-driven housing programmes*, particularly in the context of supporting recovering households in reconstruction efforts following disasters. However, it was for the first time that the participatory approach for safe shelter awareness (PASSA) was introduced in Ben Tre to enable families identify potential hazards and make improvements to their homes to ensure that the structures were resistant to the impact of future disasters. Hence, prior to rolling out PASSA in the identified communes, the Viet Nam Red Cross Society staff received training in this approach.



The targeted households participated in PASSA training and learned about safe and unsafe housing structures.

PASSA: Safe shelter awareness and implementation

To ensure the successful roll out of the PASSA pilot project, key documents were translated and templates developed in Vietnamese. In May 2014, with the support of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), a training was carried out. The training focussed on providing 20 key staff with the necessary knowledge and skills to guide and facilitate target families in understanding and implementing PASSA. Planning and implementation of PASSA's eight steps at household level was undertaken between late 2014 to early 2015. To ensure understanding of the approach, key stakeholders, such as local authorities, engineers, artists and carpenters were engaged in the orientation and implementation of the approach.

Eight activities of PASSA:

- ✓ *Activity 1: Historical profile*
- ✓ *Activity 2: Community mapping and visit*
- ✓ *Activity 3: Frequency and impact of hazards*
- ✓ *Activity 4: Safe and unsafe shelter*
- ✓ *Activity 5: Options for solutions*
- ✓ *Activity 6: Planning for change*
- ✓ *Activity 7: Problem box*
- ✓ *Activity 8: Monitoring plan*

The Ben Tre chapter in cooperation with local authorities, including the People's Committees selected 416 households to take part in the pilot project. To ensure fairness and transparency, a selection criteria was developed, 53 hamlet meetings held and a voting system was introduced. Community members in each hamlet were invited to attend PASSA meetings and engaged in the selection process. The selection criteria required that families were:

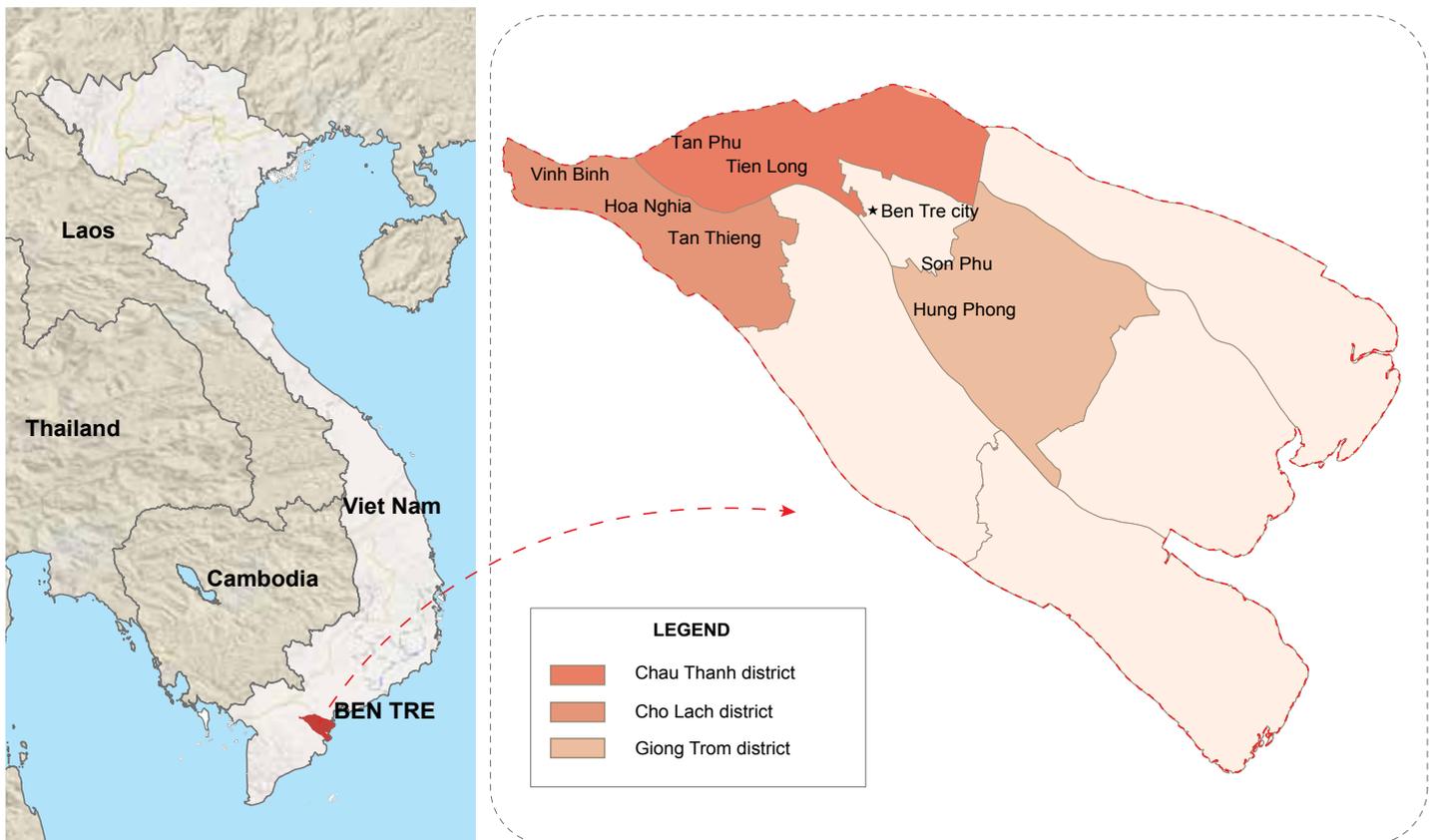
- living in the most disaster-prone areas
- living in temporary shelters or grass houses that were in need of improvement
- able to prove ownership of the housing that required improvement

- identified as households living close to or below the poverty line and included in the official list of People's Committee 2014
- if within their means, willing to contribute with cash to make improvements to the structure of the house
- committed to actively participate in project meetings at commune level.

Families with pregnant and/or lactating women, children under six years of age, persons living with a disability, older people, unwell family members and female-headed households were given priority.

Following the selection process, trained staff orientated families on the PASSA process. The families prepared their individual plans of shelter improvement and submitted these to the project staff for consideration, support and approval. To ensure awareness about safer houses, the project team set out to translate the standard *Shelter safety handbook and PASSA manual* into Vietnamese, and develop a series of related materials, including a poster and flipcharts. This included illustrations depicting safe and unsafe shelter practices to withstand common hazards such as high winds and flooding. To fit the local context, messages were adapted from the principles highlighted in these two publications.

As part of the project, each family received 4 million Vietnamese dong (VND), i.e. approximately 175 Swiss francs. Each family was required to produce a written plan outlining how they envisaged spending the conditional cash grant. This plan outlined the activity together with the cost of the materials and labour needed to make the improvements. While this process was time consuming, it was an important step to ensure that the submitted plans were realistic and within budget.



Ben Tre is located in the low-lying coastal area of Viet Nam. Seven most vulnerable communes to disaster risks and the impacts of climate change across three districts in Ben Tre were selected as project area.

Stronger foundation and concrete flooring

Mrs Hoai of Hoa Nghia commune is of the many families who opted to use her cash grant to improve the foundation and flooring of the house. Mrs Hoai attended the PASSA training since her husband is often away – he works as a casual construction labourer. Based on the training and grant received, she and her family decided to use recycled clay tiles to construct a strong foundation and re-do the floor using concrete. Prior to this, the family had mud flooring that would easily erode during floods, weakening the support for the timber frame. Mrs Hoai was able to obtain the used tiles locally from a demolition site within her

commune. Hence, the recycled and improved floor cost her only VND 1 million (45 Swiss francs). She spent the remaining grant on timber beams and corrugated metal sheets for the roofing. She was able to top up the grant received to fully cover the roof with metal sheeting and pay for skilled labour. She and her husband planned out and undertook the repairs together. Mrs Hoai said that since improvements had been made to the house she has noticed that the children fall sick less often. This is mainly because rain water no longer comes into her home.



Nghĩa Nguyễn Trọng/Viet Nam Red Cross Society

Mr Vo Trung Hau – The Vice President of Ben Tre Chapter is monitoring the house repairing process.

Starting early December 2014, the Viet Nam Red Cross Society staff made the necessary preparations for the distribution. An agreement was signed with the People's Committee of each commune, who committed to work with local suppliers to provide beneficial pricing for building materials and to support the monitoring of the activity in order to enhance the quality of the implementation. Selected households were briefed on the kind of documentation (ID cards and coupon information) they would need to present at the distribution points to avail the cash grants. Distributing cash in envelopes was the most practical solution for families living in these communes, since they have limited usage and access to banks and other forms of electronic transfers. The Ben Tre chapter informed the local construction material suppliers of the time and venue of the various distributions, so that

they could arrange the supply and delivery of materials to the families. A distribution team was established in each commune with specific tasks assigned to each member. This included checking coupons and IDs, guiding families to sign the list, distributing cash grants and collecting cash intake forms. A helpline was set up to receive feedback from the target households and respond to any queries following the distribution.

The families used the first cash instalment of VND 3 million to select and purchase the required construction materials. Staff started visiting the families to monitor the progress of the works, 30 days from receiving the initial grant. Consequently, those households that had used the grant to improve their house, received a second cash grant of VND 1 million. Families who had not used

the first cash instalment as per agreement, had to pay back the initial amount received. In total, 401 out of 416 households received support. Fifteen households opted out of using the support offered. This was mainly because certain families had already repaired their houses using other funding sources, while others received support through another programme.

A stronger roof structure and covering



The sheeting hook bolts secure the new metal sheeting at Mrs Sech's new house.

Mrs Sech Doan Thi of Hoa Nghia commune, like some of the other families opted to utilize the grant she received to replace the grass roofing with corrugated metal sheeting and reinforce it with timber supports. Mrs Sech and her family spent VND 6 million on replacing the roof. She used labour from the community to help her fix the timber supports and sheeting and paid them in-kind by cooking for them. The VND 2 million top-up to the grant was provided by her son. It took her one month to have the work completed.

The timber supports are well connected and the sheeting hook bolts secure the metal sheeting safely. All main timber connections on the roof are also bolted together. Mrs Sech shares that the new metal sheeting does not move like the old grass roof and is much safer during high winds and heavy rainfall. Her house is substantially safer than before.

Post-distribution monitoring was undertaken to screen how the cash grants had been used. Fifteen to twenty per cent of the targeted families were randomly selected for this purpose. Structured questionnaires and direct observations were used to inform this process. Findings from the monitoring, established that the vast majority of the families had used cash to make the necessary improvements.

The post-distribution monitoring revealed that:

- Most of the families interviewed were dependent on cash-for-labour or agriculture activities as a source of income. They engaged actively towards building safer houses.
- Many of the families fell in the group of those living close to or below the poverty line, as set out by the government. The set value of VND 4 million was not sufficient to carry out all the necessary improvements. This meant that cash grants needed to be topped-up.
- All families had attended PASSA awareness and training sessions.
- Most families agreed that PASSA selection had targeted the most vulnerable families for assistance.
- The majority of families used the funds to purchase roof sheeting, timber for roof and wall support, materials for walling and to improve floors and foundations.
- The three main repair options used were roof beams and sheeting, wall supports and walling, and floor construction. Some families utilized part of the funds towards hiring skilled labour.
- Based on the improvements made, most families considered their houses to be safer.



Mr Duan Le Van – Beneficiary of Tan Phu commune.

Learning from the PASSA pilot

Stronger walls

Mr Duan Le Van of Tan Phu commune opted to use the cash grant to improve the walls of his house. He and his wife attended the PASSA training sessions together. Mr Duan and his wife have two children. They all live together with his wife's sister and brother-in-law and their daughter. From the grant received, he and his family decided to buy a few trees from the community and had them cut into boards. Once delivered to the house, Mr Duan fixed the timber boards to the house himself. The family opted to do this because the VND 4 million meant they could replace all four walls of the house with new boarding. Before this, the walls were a mix of old boarding and grass matting. The new walling is much safer and keeps strong winds and heavy rain out.

In October 2015, field visits were undertaken in the communes of Hoa Nghia, Tan Phu and Hung Phong to assess the impact the project had made. During the field trips, focus group discussions and individual household visits were carried out. These overall consensus was that the PASSA pilot had multiple positive impacts.

All houses visited exhibited good examples of how PASSA training had enabled people to make small but significant improvements to make their homes safer. Local and recycled materials had been used to keep the costs to a minimum. Households used their social networks to mobilize further funding or to get the work done. These experiences provide a strong impetus for future safe shelter programming in Viet Nam.

From stakeholder meetings, focus group discussions and household visits, one of the key lessons learnt was regarding the value of the cash grants. The sum of VND 4 million per family was not sufficient and as such, many families opted to top-up the cash grant with funds lent from friends, families and institutions such as the Women's Union and in a few cases, commercial banks. In future, if PASSA is to be integrated into projects, technical and social analysis should be undertaken prior to setting the cash grant amount. This will help establish an appropriate grant amount. This will minimize the need for households to mobilize further funding from families and taking loans. This will also assist in defining a baseline for the improvements required within the agreed amount.

Furthermore, careful consideration should be given to budget allocations for PASSA within designated projects. There is a strong need to balance the budget allocated to PASSA activities against what can be realistically achieved to have a lasting positive impact. It is better to determine the allocation per household based on actual need. Only assist households that the budget can accommodate, rather than selecting the number of households and simply dividing the funding equally between them. In order to achieve more realistic figures for repairs that will lead to making homes safer, it is advisable to engage technical expertise prior to determining the allocations. The experts should help establish the baseline criteria and undertake cost analysis. The process of household selection and setting different payment amounts to different families based on need and circumstances will also need extensive process consideration, communications, decision-making and transparency.

Stronger walling and reinforcement of the timber frame

Mr Mot Cao Van of Tan Phu commune decided to use his cash grant to reinforce parts of the house with additional posts, beams and bracings (junctions). Mr Mot and his family purchased two coconut trees from the community. These were cut into timber sections to reinforce old timber posts in his home and add additional bracings. In addition to this, Mr Mot purchased some durian trees locally and had these cut into boards to use for the walling. He incurred a total cost of VND 5 million. Mr Mot's wife attended the PASSA training as at the time he was away working. The carpentry work was undertaken by Mr Mot and his son.

While participants benefitted from the PASSA training, many of those who were directly involved in repairing their own homes, already had existing skills in this area. In addition, some community members felt that there were too many meetings. For some people it was difficult to attend all eight meetings. In order to address this issue, the number of meetings can be condensed without compromising the learning.

With technical assistance throughout the programme cycle, instead of only at the beginning, training should be tailored and key messages developed to suit the local context. This can be done through the employment of a local skilled carpenter to monitor activities at the commune level. Securing the support of a shelter expert along the entire extent of a PASSA process or safe shelter component of an integrated programme, will enable better

outputs during implementation. However, bear in mind that to keep costs down and to harness local expertise, community-based technical assistance and monitoring is preferred.

PASSA should not be seen as a separate component of the integrated CBDRM model. In future interventions, the most vulnerable families should be given the option to seek repair assistance from the project to build back safer. Key messages should be distributed to all families within communes and hamlets and not just to selected families who are receiving PASSA hardware support. To make families aware that simple techniques can substantially reinforce the strength of the house to withstand strong winds and flooding, key messaging for safer house construction should be integrated into messaging around health, water and sanitation and emergency evacuations. Key message should be integrated into school safety campaigns and PASSA for youth initiative should be considered.

All partners were in agreement that the PASSA pilot was of added value. It empowered the targeted families to make small improvements to their homes, making them safer from the impacts of extreme weather events. This in turn had a positive impact on the health and wellbeing of the community members. The process was also useful for raising general awareness in the community about safe shelter and provided practical instruction to communities on simple and practical repairs that may be undertaken to improve the safety of their homes. From an institutional capacity perspective, this project provided Viet Nam Red Cross Society with an opportunity to engage with a new participatory tool and add a flexible dimension to the work they have already undertaken in supporting vulnerable families within Viet Nam to build back safer and stronger.



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