

The US-Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin

What is the U.S. Vietnam Dialogue Group on Agent Orange/Dioxin? The idea for a citizen-to-citizen dialogue on Agent Orange was first floated in 2006 by the Ford Foundation to raise the awareness of people in the United States, including U.S. officials and businessmen, of this last remaining issue from the Vietnam war. It is a non-partisan initiative of prominent private citizens, scientists and policy-makers on both sides, working on issues that the two governments have found difficult to address. It is not an implementing agency, nor does it accept or receive funds.

What does the Dialogue Group do? Its role has been to call attention to the need for five key actions: to establish treatment and education centers for Vietnamese with disabilities; cooperate with the U.S. and Vietnamese governments to contain and clean up dioxin 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.

What are the achievements of the Dialogue Group? The Dialogue Group’s work has helped broaden acknowledgement of the situation in both Vietnam and the United States. It has supplemented other channels of discussion and served as a bridge to connect people affected by exposure to Agent Orange/dioxin with sources of humanitarian assistance. In the last three years, the Dialogue Group has seen important accomplishments under all five of its priority tasks:

1) Sponsor centers of rehabilitation for victims of Agent Orange that will 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 framework of the “Support Network for People with Disabilities” by the East Meets West Foundation. Children of Vietnam is working with local authorities in Da Nang on its “Hope System of Care” program. 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) Cooperate with the U.S. and Vietnamese governments 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, the Dialogue Group is seeking financial support.

3) Launch 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 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) Foster programs for training of trainers in restoration and management of damaged landscapes. 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 farmers in Quang Tri province and is now extending it to Thua Thien Hue province.

5) Increase public awareness in the United States. The Dialogue Group has convened five meetings that have yielded reports on various aspects of Agent Orange/dioxin in Vietnam and its consequences. 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.

What is the current status of the Dialogue Group's work? U.S.-Vietnamese cooperation to address the impact of Agent Orange in Vietnam has increased in the past two years. Congress appropriated \$3 million for fiscal 2007 and again for fiscal 2009 and 2010 for this purpose, although most of this has not yet been allocated. Financial support is also coming from the Ford and other US foundations, UN agencies and other governments. 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 West Vancouver, Canada conducted a series of independent and influential assessments of dioxin residues in the environment in and around the Da Nang airport and in the blood and breast milk of current and former area residents. The results provided a clearer understanding of contamination in Da Nang, where the feasibility of remediation efforts is being demonstrated. Findings in 2009 indicated that the 2007 interim mitigation measures had succeeded in reducing dioxin exposure of people near the Da Nang airport.

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

What are the next steps for the Dialogue Group? The Dialogue Group has committed to a Declaration and Strategic Plan [See text in this information kit] to address the legacy of Agent Orange/dioxin 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.

Dialogue Group Members

Susan V. Berresford, Convener

Walter Isaacson, American Co-Chair; President & CEO, The Aspen Institute

Amb. Ngo Quang Xuan, Vietnamese Co-Chair; Vice Chair, Foreign Affairs Committee, National Assembly

Christine Todd Whitman, President, Whitman Strategy Group

Prof. Vo Quy, Center for Natural Resources & Environmental Studies, Vietnam National University

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Mary Dolan-Hogrefe, Vice President and Senior Advisor, National Organization on Disability

Lt. General Phung Khac Dang, Vice President, Vietnam Veterans Association

Dr. Vaughan Turekian, Chief International Officer, American Association for the Advancement of Science

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