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Faces of Mine Action: AEPD’s Nguyen Thi Thanh Hong

Nguyen Thi Thanh Hong has a personal connection to her work at the Association for the Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities (AEPD). Her schoolmate was killed by an item of unexploded ordnance (UXO) while going to work, and Hong’s six-year-old brother died from a cluster munition explosion during the Vietnam War.1 Inspired by these losses, Hong works diligently at AEPD to improve the lives of persons with disabilities including landmine survivors.

As the vice chairwoman of AEPD, Hong provides support to the chairman and advocates for disability awareness within the community. Additionally, she works on fundraisers and collaborates on proposals with outside organizations. Irish Aid and the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs are two of AEPD’s largest donors and supporters.

AEPD aims to improve the social and economic well-being of disabled people, including those affected by landmines. Formerly known as Landmine Survivors Network-Vietnam, AEPD is a local, Vietnamese nonprofit organization that has worked in the Quang Binh province since 2010.2 Instead of exclusively working with landmine survivors, AEPD assists all PWDs, including victims of Agent Orange, an herbicide sprayed in Vietnam from 1962 to 1971. Exposure to the herbicide led to the formation of many diseases and congenital disabilities among the Vietnamese population.3 Founded in 2010, AEPD has worked with nearly 3,000 landmine survivors and 2,000 other PWDs.

AEPD uses the peer-support model to help persons with disabilities, focusing on five key areas: livelihood, social
integration, health care, climate change and advocacy. AEPD also provides disaster-management services for disabled people in Vietnam, because they are the most vulnerable citizens during natural disasters.\(^4,5\)

According to Vietnam’s Ministry of Labor, War Invalids and Social Affairs, Vietnam’s latest population and housing census conducted in 2009 shows that 7.8 percent of the population age 5 or older is disabled. This is equivalent to 6.7 million people. Of these persons with disabilities, approximately 53.8 percent are female and approximately 75 percent live in rural areas. Explosive remnants of war (ERW), Agent Orange and congenital disabilities account for a significant amount of the total number of PWDs.\(^6\) As a result of the Japanese occupation of Vietnam (1940–1945), the First Indochina War (1946–1954) and the Vietnam War (1955–1975), the nation remains contaminated with landmines and ERW, including cluster munitions. An estimated one-fifth of Vietnam’s total land area, including all 63 provinces and cities, is contaminated. In May 2013, Vietnam released the National Mine Action Plan for 2013–2015, which calls for a national mine action center and the clearance of 1 million sq m (386 sq mi) per year of contaminated land.\(^7\)

**PWDs in Vietnam**

Additionally, disabled persons face many mental and physical challenges. According to Hong, 80 percent of disabled people live in urban areas and 70 percent of disabled people living in rural areas depend on their families for their physical well-being, which includes financial support. Less than 10 percent of disabled persons have jobs, hence the strong need for humanitarian support from organizations like AEPD. The government enacted the Law on Persons with Disabilities in 2010; however, many disabled people are unaware of their rights under the law.

The pathway to self-sufficiency is long and difficult for ERW survivors and persons with disabilities. AEPD helps individuals understand their rights and build the skills to support themselves and their families. To facilitate their education, AEPD organized training courses in advocacy skills and rights education for persons with disabilities.\(^8\)

Although the government has tried to support all persons with disabilities, it has limited resources.\(^9\) Since there have been many policies to support Vietnam’s war veterans, AEPD especially works to support female PWDs to limit their disadvantages.\(^10\)

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\(~\) Chloe Cunningham, an editorial assistant at the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery (CISR), interviewed Nguyen Thi Thanh Hong when Hong attended the 2013 Senior Managers’ Course (SMC) on ERW and Mine Action at James Madison University (JMU). The SMC was organized by CISR and funded by the Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State’s Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA).

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**Endnotes**

1. In Vietnam the Vietnam War is called the American War.
7. Email correspondence with Nguyen Thi Thanh Hong. 10 September 2013.