

In Vietnam, poverty and poor development, not just floods, kill the most marginalised

August 29 2017, by Jason Von Meding And Hang Thai T.m.



Most groups affected in northwestern Vietnam are heavily dependent on crops.
Credit: MM/Flickr, CC BY-SA

Flooding and landslides in northwest Vietnam have caused widespread devastation since the start of August. The disaster crippled the provinces

of [Son La, Dien Bien, Yen Bai and Lai Chau](#), situated within one of the most disadvantaged regions of the country.

Tragically, [at least 27 lives have been lost](#), many more are missing and almost 1 trillion Vietnamese Dong (US\$43m) of damage [has been reported](#). The already poor infrastructure of the region has been badly impacted.

Pictures and videos posted online and across different media channels have shown [terrifying and dramatic scenes](#). In [some footage](#) we can see the rapidly moving flood water sweeping through residential areas.

Disasters are widely misunderstood in Vietnam – as they are elsewhere – as "natural" occurrences. As a consequence of this, there is little open discussion about the [social, political and economic factors](#) that are inextricably linked to the issue. It is of particular concern that the voices of those most affected, Vietnam's ethnic minorities, are not heard.

Minority groups most affected

Ethnic minority groups, predominantly the Tay, Thai and Hmong peoples, compose approximately [80% of the population in the region](#). It is one of the poorest parts of the country. The [poverty rate among ethnic minorities](#) in the region is 73% and the extreme poverty rate 45.5%. By comparison, the extreme poverty rate among the Kinh majority (88% of population) nationwide is 2.9%.

Ethnic minorities in Vietnam are [terribly disadvantaged](#) due to the lack of access to education, infrastructure, transportation, health care and other services. These factors have contributed to wide-ranging social and economic disadvantage - and therefore, increased vulnerability.

In the northwestern part of Vietnam, these groups are also often

subsistence farmers – crops are critical to their existence and flooding brings devastation.

Beginning in June, [forecasts indicated that serious flooding was likely](#) in the region, and there were [widespread instances of flooding](#) in early July. These messages were disseminated across media platforms. However, it is unclear whether this message was actually received by those most at risk.

Even more problematic is the way in which [disasters](#) are perceived and discussed in Vietnam. The focus is invariably on the "natural" quality of disasters, as referred to by the [Law on Natural Disaster Prevention and Control](#) (No. 33/2013/QH13), which to an extent defines the scope of narrative regarding disasters in Vietnam. This language, repeated by the media, leaves many people blind to the social and political aspects of catastrophes.

The official narrative

When disasters happen, the focus of Vietnamese media is consistently on reporting the death toll, loss and damage figures, and [stories involving search and rescue](#) operations by [the government](#) and [non-government organisations](#).

In the wake of this tragedy, the government initiated a major [disaster relief fundraising campaign](#).

Lieutenant Lo Thi Sao Chi, who was organising the military response to the disaster, [told the VOV5 news site](#) that the government "participated in the search for missing people, relocated households in dangerous areas, cleared soil and rocks from the flood and helped people resettle their lives."

Pretty much the same story - year after year. Deaths From Vietnam Floods Rise to 23 <https://t.co/5jsstKeozJ> [#flooding](#) [#disaster](#) [@ICFM7](#)

— Slobodan P Simonovic (@SP_Simonovic) [August 6, 2017](#)

But the media has failed to actually ask the right question: why were the victims living in such [unsafe, vulnerable living conditions](#) in the first place?

How come [the poverty and inequality issues plaguing ethnic minorities](#) have not been addressed? Little progress has been made among these most marginalised groups, despite significant improvements across the country as a whole.

Unfortunately, a serious critique of the [root causes of disasters](#) like this one is almost completely absent in the media.

Devastating development

What has been conveniently forgotten is the fact that communities affected by flooding are often particularly vulnerable because they have been subjected to [forced resettlement](#) due to development agendas.

Article 3. Interpretation of terms

In this Law, the terms below are construed as follows:

1. *Natural disasters* means abnormal natural phenomena which may cause damage to human life, property, the environment, living conditions and socio-economic activities. Natural disasters include typhoon, tropical low pressure, whirlwind, lightning, heavy rain, flood, flashflood, inundation, landslide and land subsidence due to floods or water currents, water rise, seawater intrusion, extreme hot weather, drought, damaging cold, hail, hoarfrost, earthquake, tsunami and other types of natural disaster.

2. *Natural disaster risk* means damage, which natural disasters may cause to human life, property, the environment, living conditions and socio-economic activities.

3. *Natural disaster prevention and control* means a systematic process involving the prevention of, response to, and remediation of consequences of, natural disasters.

4. *Vulnerable group* means a group of people who, due to their characteristics and circumstances, are likely to suffer more adverse impacts of natural disasters than other groups in the community. Vulnerable groups include children, elderly people, pregnant women, women nursing under-12-month children, people with disabilities, people suffering from dangerous diseases and poor people.

5. *Natural disaster prevention and control works* means works, which are built with investment funds of the State, organizations or individuals, including meteorological, hydrographical, oceanographic and seismic observatories, disaster warning stations; dikes, reservoirs and dams, anti-inundation, anti-drought and anti-landslide facilities; storm shelters for ships and boats, evacuation houses and other facilities serving natural disaster prevention and control.

Article 3 of the Law on Natural Disaster Prevention and Control.

Over the past 30 years, the government has been developing hydropower capacity in the affected region. Hydropower projects in [Lai Chau](#)

(completed 2016) and [Son La](#) (completed 2012) were designed to maximise profit. Unfortunately, in many cases of such development, [environmental and social impacts](#) are secondary concerns.

The projects have [displaced numerous communities](#). International Rivers reports that the Son La project alone, in the northwest of the country and 320km from Hanoi, may have displaced 91,000 people.

Those forced to move have been thrust into ever more vulnerable living conditions.

In many cases they have lost access to the river that sustained livelihoods and essential services such as water and electricity. As a result, poverty and inequality have been exacerbated.

Reduce risk, listen to the people

Yet, people in northwest Vietnam continue to demonstrate a remarkable level of resilience in spite of systemic disadvantage. Those who had been displaced by flooding almost immediately began to clean up the area after this latest tragedy, [salvage materials](#) and rebuild their lives.

Although rural Vietnam has historically experienced extreme disaster impacts, [climate change threatens](#) to act as a risk multiplier.

The government officially advocates for the decentralisation of [disaster risk management](#), but Dutch NGO CORDAID [reports](#) that, "the involvement of vulnerable groups is still limited and in effect the plans are still managed in a top-down manner."

It is possible to reduce disaster risk through policy decisions and development plans. However, in reality the more common outcome of development is the [creation of additional risk](#).

More often than not, vulnerable people are ignored and decisions are made based on the potential for economic gain.

Those on the margins of society always suffer in disasters. If we truly aspire to build a better society, their needs must now be prioritised.

Change cannot come quick enough. Northern Vietnam continues to suffer this summer, most recently as [Typhoon Hato brought further flooding](#) to the already stricken region.

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