

# **LEARNING TO WORK IN VIET-NAM**

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**by Lady Borton**

1993

**Published by**

**U.S.-Indochina Reconciliation Project  
220 West 42nd Street, Suite 1801  
New York, NY 10036  
tel: 212-764-3925  
fax: 212-764-3896**

## Part I

When people ask how long I've been working in Viet Nam, I sometimes say "A year," but more and more often I answer "Twenty-five years." Everywhere I've gone in the last year, I've been struck by the misunderstandings, missed opportunities and work losses occurring because expatriates do not understand basic principles essential to working effectively in Viet Nam. I'll summarize some of what my Vietnamese friends have taught me in the hope that the expatriate and Vietnamese communities can work together with greater ease.

♦ Vietnam is not like any other country. Program and relationship models that worked successfully elsewhere will not transfer completely and may not transfer at all. A common fallacy is the assumption that Viet Nam is like Laos and Cambodia.

♦ Right Relationship and Respect. The Vietnamese language has some twenty pronouns for "I/You." These change according to the relationship between the speakers' ages and social status. Many of these pronouns name family relationships -- senior uncle/niece; older sister/younger brother. This is one reason Vietnamese will often ask your age in a way that, for a westerner, may seem intrusive. The Vietnamese person is only trying to apply the proper pronoun when thinking in her own language.

Vietnamese pronouns change as functions change and as intimacy grows, but always the underlying premise is that of respect. To be polite, one always enlarges the respect given to the addressee and diminishes the respect applied to the self. By giving respect, one gains respect. The English language has no structural equivalent to this complexity. You can best compensate for the deficiency in English by hand gestures of respect and courtliness and by adding graciousness to your language. Be more generous in your use of "thank you," "please," "if you agree. . . ." If you begin to feel as if you're sounding flowery, your tone will be about right.

♦ Donor or Partner. It's helpful to remember that the Vietnamese spent generations fighting for their independence and that the U.S. embargo made it hard for Vietnamese to act as equal partners in the world community. Expatriates, businesses and NGOs who project themselves as donors create a power differential, placing Vietnamese in a lesser role. For the Vietnamese, this is a deeply painful dynamic, for it can make them feel as if they are beggars.

Expatriates can work more effectively if they think of themselves as partners. As partners, when we remember that the Vietnamese went through a grueling process to gain independence, we can begin to understand Vietna-

mese frustration when expatriates insist on giving unsolicited advice. This is particularly true vis a vis internal political matters, which Vietnamese think of as their domain. To Vietnamese, well-intentioned expatriate efforts may be reminiscent of colonialism.

♦ Indirectness. As throughout much of Asia, Vietnamese seldom speak directly about a problem or issue. Indirectness is a question of style, not sincerity. But for a westerner, indirectness may require patience since the process of sharing information is often the opposite of that used in the West. In the West, the main point comes first and the details follow; in Viet Nam, you're more likely to hear a story and details, which will lead to the main point.

The Vietnamese have an expression: "When entering a family, follow its practices; when entering a river, follow the flow." If you can speak in an indirect style, whatever advice you would like to give is more likely to be heard. One beginning I find useful is "I don't know how it is in Viet Nam, but in my country (or wherever) . . ." I then go into a full account of how the issue I want to address in Viet Nam at the moment plays out elsewhere. I build slowly to the main point--to the topic sentence someone from the United States would normally say first. That topic sentence may be unsolicited advice; however, it's more likely to be heard.

♦ Belonging. Viet Nam has created its own cultural norms that have evolved over the centuries from a base in Confucianism. The concept of "belonging" --expressed by the word "*cuu*" in Vietnamese--begins in this long history but has changed through years of socialism. "Belonging" indicates Right Relationship and the primary channel of responsibility. NGOs, for instance, "belong" to the People's Aid Coordinating Committee (PACCOM). An expatriate company "belongs" to its partner in their joint venture. "Belonging" in terms of NGO work is partnership. Partnership implies equality, respect and complete consultation, expressed by "*xin phep*" in Vietnamese.

♦ Complete Consultation--*xin phep*. Vietnamese always *xin phep*, which is usually translated as "ask permission." This unfortunate translation makes westerners bristle and causes needless misunderstanding. To a westerner, asking permission implies relinquishing power; for a Vietnamese, asking permission shows Respect. *Xin phep* has little to do with the "yes" and "no" of power and control. Rather, it has everything to do with Respect and Right Relationship. A more accurate translation is "Complete Consultation."

Complete Consultation is important in the details of relationships. I would never leave a Vietnamese friend's house without "asking permission" to leave. I never leave the badminton group that gathers early in the morning in the park without "asking permission." I *xin*

*phop* with my Vietnamese colleagues about anything and everything that affects them. Because I do this, I have been able over the years to break a number of barriers -- the first and only American to live with a family in a village and to work in the paddies; the first American allowed to ride a bicycle; the first to eat at a friend's house in Ha-Noi—all because of Complete Consultation.

In Viet Nam, Complete Consultation is common courtesy and essential behavior for effective work. Keep your contact person at the Vietnamese institution where you "belong" informed about your work, plans and your extra-curricular activities. A phrasing I find useful in Vietnamese or English is "If you agree, I thought I/we might. . . ." Then I give a complete description of what I would like to do, including why I would like to take this step and where my proposal fits into the overall scheme of our shared work. I give much more detail than I would ever give in the west so that all parts of whatever I plan are known. I do not take any of the proposed steps until I'm satisfied that my Vietnamese partner and I are both comfortable. Expatriates who do not take the time for the crucial process of Complete Consultation often find themselves embroiled in hours of minutiae that feel like obstruction.

◆ **Permission.** Every society has its rules and regulations for expatriate guests. In Viet Nam, in some situations, permission in the sense of "yes" or "no" is necessary. Situations requiring permission change constantly as the country opens. For that reason, it's all the more important to consult with your contact person. Pay particular attention to the kind of visa that you have been issued. A person with a tourist visa, for instance, does not have permission to do NGO, journalistic or business work.

◆ **Bureaucracy.** We all come from bureaucracies, whether these be government, NGOs, businesses or academic institutions. When working overseas, we westerners may act arrogant. We often forget that the behaviors essential to working in a bureaucracy at home still apply. In fact, chances are, these courtesies are even more important. In any bureaucracy, the worst thing you can do is create a situation where your contact person -- who should have known about your activities from you -- finds out from someone else. It's particularly painful for your contact person if, ignorant of your activities, she is questioned by a superior. When that happens, the contact person loses face.

In Viet Nam, it's even more important than in the West to pay close attention to Complete Consultation within the bureaucracy. Everything is changing so fast. The sudden changes create anxiety for administrators, who are not sure which rules must be followed and which no longer apply. They understandably fear making a mistake and then being held responsible for their

oversight. As in the West, there is the crush of cut-backs. We all know how this fuels anxiety. In such a setting, loss of face becomes even more serious.

◆ **Loss of Face.** Loss of face is painful in any society, but it is unbearable in Viet Nam. The Vietnamese have an expression: "It's better to die than to lose face." For this reason, it's all the more important to respect Right Relationship and apply Complete Consultation.

◆ Vietnamese are truly gracious people, friendly and open and, in my experience, anxious to please. This is their country; they have fought for generations to make it their own. The way will open faster for expatriates wanting to work with Viet Nam if, as we enter their river, we begin to follow the Vietnamese flow.

## Part II: Program and Project Development

By now scores of foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and many more foreign businesses are working with Viet Nam. They naturally hope to facilitate good working relationships with their Vietnamese partners. The stunning changes in Viet Nam during the last eight years challenge us all—Vietnamese and expatriates—as we look for ways to mesh our work values and styles.

### I. HOW CAN WE BEST WORK TOGETHER?

As an expatriate field director for a small NGO, it's my job to see that our donors' and contributors' funds are used in the most effective way possible to assist impoverished people living in rural areas. I'm aware that much of my job can be done just as well, if not better and certainly at far less cost, by my Vietnamese partners. The few parts they can't yet do as well as I are skills I've learned. I can give my colleagues the opportunity to learn those skills and reduce the reliance on expatriates.

Part of my challenge is also to find ways that our organization's values can mesh with customs in Viet Nam. Although it's not my role to change the Vietnamese system, it's important to let Vietnamese colleagues know the parameters by which our organization works. Our experience is that these are quickly accepted and help expand the discussion of our partnership. I'll describe these parameters in Part III. But first it may be helpful to Viet Nam newcomers and old

timers alike to identify some factors affecting Vietnamese society as it moves from a command to a market economy and also to define some assumptions and practices common in Vietnamese culture.

### **A. The Change Towards a Market Economy:**

*Doi Moi* or "Renovation", which includes Viet Nam's shift towards a market economy, began with the Sixth Party Congress in late 1986. In 1988, the government cut its subsidies for departments, institutions, factories and cooperatives. Each institution became responsible for supporting itself; as a result, institutional incomes were not able and have not been able to meet operational costs.

The same process occurred for government employees. Their incomes, now devoid of previous subsidies and benefits, cannot realistically cover their needs. These major policy changes have led to a variety of adaptations of customs that a westerner may at first consider deceptive, corrupt or dishonest. However, for Vietnamese who understand their own system, there may be no deception involved.

### **B. Some Assumptions Vietnamese May Make:**

NGOs and private businesses are new concepts in Viet-Nam. The government is in the process of studying legislation used in other countries as it drafts appropriate laws. In Hanoi, the meaning of "Non-Governmental Organization" is a topic that elicits heated discussion in both the expatriate and Vietnamese communities.

Expatriates say Vietnamese organizations that still rely on government funding are not "real" NGOs. How then, the Vietnamese ask in reply, can an expatriate organization relying on foreign government grants call itself an NGO? With a few exceptions, Vietnamese do not have the frame of reference to understand NGO qualities we expatriates take for granted. They find it surprising that different NGOs may have widely differing values. The same is true for businesses. For this reason, it's important to help your Vietnamese staff partners and colleagues understand the values that define your organization. This is crucial because your staff partners and colleagues will interpret the work to the wider Vietnamese community.

## **II. WORKING LOCALLY**

In Viet Nam, each NGO and similarly every foreign business "belongs" somewhere. This is the point where the foreign organization connects to the Vietnamese system. For NGOs, the usual connecting point is PACCOM (the People's Aid Coordinating Committee;

Mr. Hoang Dinh Hanh, Director; 105 A Quan Thanh Street, Hanoi; Phone: 84-4-264856; FAX 84-4-252007). For businesses, this point is usually the business partner, Chamber of Commerce or the International Relations Department of a city or province.

It's important to keep your contact person in the unit where you "belong" informed about your work and about any unusual roles you assume. Your contact can facilitate the work; also, s/he is not caught in the awkward position of possibly being asked by a superior about something s/he doesn't yet know but should have heard from you.

On the Vietnamese side, every partner institution or unit "belongs" somewhere in the larger governmental bureaucracy. In Viet Nam, you must step through each layer of the bureaucracy to cross from Hanoi to a commune. As the Vietnamese say, you must pass through many "doors."

To work on the commune/village level, you need first to work with the organization to which you "belong." That organization will introduce you to the province, who will introduce you to the district. The district will in turn introduce you to the commune. All the layers may seem onerous, but the meetings involved in passing through the doors are opportunities to clarify your organization's parameters.

It's important to repeat the process of checking in with the province and district either in person or by phone, as appropriate, for each site visit by expatriates and/or Vietnamese project staff. As your working relationship strengthens, the checking-in process becomes quicker and more informal. However, even when you have resident local and/or expatriate staff, regular check-in with provincial and district authorities can help keep a good working relationship going well.

## **III. STAFF**

### **A. Expatriate Staff and Consultants:**

Often expatriate staff and consultants have experience in other developing countries but may have little knowledge of Viet Nam and may have no Vietnamese staff partners.

They may tend to live in their own community, building their social lives and soon their work lives around each other. They ask each other for advice more often than they ask Vietnamese. When a staff need arises, they naturally think of looking for consultants among expatriate friends who are "experts." The same dynamic can also happen among Vietnamese.

But let's look at this from a Vietnamese point of view. Expatriate consultants may visit for a month or two

at great cost, then write a report. Some Vietnamese say that often the Vietnamese partners/interpreters do the research and analysis and even do much of the report writing, for a stipend of \$15 or \$20 per work day when the expatriate consultant receives ten times as much for the same work.

Viet Nam has a large number of people with extensive training both inside Viet Nam and abroad. Whenever we hire expatriate staff and consultants, we must also hire Vietnamese trained in the specialty to translate. In many cases, with a little additional training and direction, the Vietnamese experts can do the job better and faster. They can certainly do it for less cost; further, their salaries or consultant fees stay in Viet Nam, where they help build the economy.

Vietnamese friends tell me that often only 50 to 70% of NGO project funds reach the intended recipients. They report the same "losses" among businesses. When there's a large expatriate staff as is common with businesses, U.N. programs, bi-lateral agencies and large NGOs, the amount of the budget reaching intended recipients may drop below 50%. In many cases, the Vietnamese point out, up to 40% of the budget leaves Viet Nam in the form of expatriate salaries.

Upon meeting an expatriate for the first time, Vietnamese tend to ask the same initial questions which, in their culture, are considered polite inquiries in their culture. These questions include age, marital status, number of children and salary. Before this last question about salary is even raised, expatriates may want to ponder what effect Vietnamese perceptions of their income (or maintenance costs for volunteers) will have on expectations, motivation and on the working relationship with Vietnamese staff earning so much less.

Vietnamese know that expatriate salaries (and savings for volunteers) are often deposited directly into overseas banks, that these salaries are based on the living standard in developed countries and that often these monies are untaxed. They also know that many of their expatriate colleagues receive additional in-country living allowances to cover all expenses. Vietnamese may see these salaries as "profit." In this light, the expatriate "profit" can seem something like a Vietnamese "commission," a VERY LARGE commission. Thus, the large outflow to expatriate salaries may even encourage slippage on the Vietnamese side.

Vietnamese also watch their expatriate colleagues play the "introduction" game. They're aware that NGO expatriate staff often bring in expatriate friends as consultants. Since Vietnamese usually handle the accounting for NGOs, U.N. programs, bi-lateral agencies and businesses, they know a consultant's costs (travel, housing, food, etc.) are often covered and that, in addition, the consultant receives a fee (often including

Sundays and holidays) of, on an average, \$200 per day. That's equivalent to Viet Nam's annual per capita income for one day of an expatriate consultant's work.

## B. Vietnamese Staff and Consultants:

Your most important program decision will likely be the hiring of your first Vietnamese staff person. This staff partner will lead you to others who can help with the work you share, and s/he can keep you from making mistakes. However, s/he will do this only if you listen. No matter how good your Vietnamese language skills, you will miss subtleties; no matter how long your relationship with Viet Nam, you are not Vietnamese. That's the reason your crucial task is to find someone whom you can trust, someone whose advice you can follow. The key qualities to look for are honesty and motivation. Skills can be learned.

There are many highly skilled and committed Vietnamese with time on their hands. You can find potential staff partners by talking with Vietnamese whose values and work you admire. Ask them for suggestions, for "introductions." If you don't yet have Vietnamese friends, you can start with expatriates whose values and work you admire; ask them to introduce you to Vietnamese. Explain in detail your organization's needs and values. Even more important, listen to the responses.

The large pool of skilled and motivated Vietnamese with extensive training makes it possible for organizations to provide funds directly to Vietnamese project partners since Vietnamese can do much of the project work. This high absorptive capacity makes Viet Nam an exciting place to work on development and in business. The rapid rate of change throughout Viet Nam adds to the excitement.

## C. Expatriate/Local Staff Interaction:

What roles are there for expatriates? One role for me is helping Vietnamese staff partners learn what I've already had a chance to study. This may include computer word-processing and accounting skills, project management, program planning, budgeting, and proposal writing.

Another expatriate role lies in the "training of trainers." Vietnamese are motivated; they learn quickly. Six years ago, for instance, few Vietnamese had seen a computer; now, just in Hanoi, thousands are computer literate in several languages. Although most training can best be done by Vietnamese in Viet Nam, expatriates are still needed to help the Vietnamese trainers improve their skills.

Project evaluation is another area where an expatriate

is useful and often required by donors. Evaluations are a splendid learning opportunity for team and project-partner participants in both technical skills and evaluation techniques. In that way, an expatriate evaluation team leader can also become a trainer of trainers.

There's also a role for expatriates in management and administration, particularly in transparent accounting, as Viet Nam makes its transition to a free market system. Once again, expatriates are most helpful when they share skills with their Vietnamese partners and gradually work themselves out of a job.

#### D. Consulting With Staff Partners:

Your Vietnamese partners can facilitate the organization's work only if you consult together openly and often and only if you share the skills you have. A viable project must be built together. This takes time; it takes listening. If you hold onto all the information (that is to say, the power), you'll receive little or no information in return. The resulting mistakes can be (I assure you, mine have been!) huge and haunting.

I was told years ago that Ho Chi Minh never wrote a major public document to be presented to the people without talking first with his cook and driver. Maybe this is legend, but I will pass it along as, in my experience, good advice. Household staff and drivers know a great deal about your program from simply being around. They're thinking all the time their hands and feet are busy. They will have wisdom to offer.

During project site and business visits, drivers may be free when you and project staff are involved. Further, they are not "in a role." When encouraged, drivers will gather information different from program staff and assume other aspects of the work. They, household and office-support staff can provide useful ideas and contacts in addition to those suggested by program staff.

### IV. THE WORK PROCESS AND MONEY

#### A. Introductions:

At the center of the Vietnamese work process is the introduction. In our own countries, we expatriates may use the slang phrase, "It's who you know." As elsewhere in the world, a Vietnamese colleague who has a "friend" can open doors that might otherwise be closed.

Because I have great confidence in my Vietnamese colleagues, I often use the "friend" approach. "Whom do you know," I may ask, "who can help us with this veterinary problem?" "Whom do you know who has access to old photos?" "Do you have a friend who works in education for minorities?" "Who can help us with a hydrology evaluation?" "Who can give us a

good price on cement?"

In order to be sure we find the person who best suits our program needs and not just a relative who needs a job, I try to curb my American tendency to make such requests directly. Instead, I try to explain the reasons I want the information and how my colleague's contribution fits into a larger picture. The person I'm asking then becomes a partner to the process. There's wonderful strength and warmth in "Do you have a friend who...?" However, the process is fraught with dangers, for favors you request may bring with them obligations.

#### B. Commissions:

When subsidies were removed during Renovation, commissions became more common within the bureaucracy since institutions, departments and government employees could no longer cover their costs. Although usually apparent to Vietnamese, these commissions may not be obvious to expatriates. However, in some proposals they may be listed as a 5-10% "management fee."

The first indication of commissions may come when a project is three-quarters finished. The local partners in the commune come to you, saying the money is all gone. But the school you are building together still has no roof. I have listened to any number of expatriates tell versions of this tale. What has gone wrong? Is this corruption?

The loss may well be the result of "commissions," a percentage of the project funds charged by each level of the bureaucracy involved. United Nations projects may involve a higher commission—usually up to 10%—and often begin at the national ministry for a total budget shrinkage of nearly 30%. Here is a possible scenario for commissions as they have appeared in some NGO projects.

Let's say, for ease of arithmetic, that the new NGO commune school building costs \$10,000. The province may take 5% for introducing the project to the district; that leaves \$9,500. If the district takes 5% for introducing the project to the commune, that leaves \$9,025. Suppose the remainder is divided equally between bricks, mortar and reinforcing bar, roughly \$3,000 for each. If three people (perhaps local officials relaying the orders to merchants) each take 5%, that's \$450. By now, a total of \$1,425 has been "lost"—nearly 15% of the budget. The amount left for the school, budgeted at \$10,000, is \$8,575, enough to build the foundation and walls but not enough to complete the project.

The scenario can be much the same, whether the individual project be bricks and mortar, training, or income-generation. Commissions may appear in connection with an "introduction" or may involve steering an order to a given vendor, as above. They may include a

monthly percentage of rent for introducing prospective leasees to owners of houses and may even include a monthly percentage of the salary of a newly "introduced" staff member. Commissions are customary practice in Viet Nam. Unless you are explicit that you have a policy to the contrary, a staff person's taking a commission is not necessarily a betrayal of trust.

### C. Envelopes:

In Viet Nam, there is also the custom of presenting "envelopes" with cash inside. Envelopes are given to friends and employees for Tet and weddings; they are given by parents to teachers on Teachers' Day. There are envelopes for attending political training sessions, even for attending office meetings. Envelopes are often expected by participants at training sessions organized by NGOs, bi-laterals and businesses; such compensation may be essential for some of the poorest trainees (and for women), who otherwise may not be able (or allowed) to attend.

Envelopes may be given publicly or privately and can be thought of as similar to the personal gifts sometimes used in the corporate world. They are given with sincerity; not accepting an envelope can make the presenter feel as if she "loses face." In recent years, the use of envelopes has moved into the area of fee-for-services particularly to supplement the low wages of government employees. For example, officials giving interviews to expatriate press are often provided envelopes for their time; similarly, organizations seeking coverage on television may present the camera crew with envelopes.

As one friend working in government says, "In the past, getting things done depended on knowing the right person. Nowadays, you have to pay, too." You may be asked to "pay for an envelope," and, since your staff will likely be offered envelopes, it will be important to work out a policy about receiving them. As with commissions, unless you have a policy to the contrary, accepting envelopes does not imply a betrayal of trust.

All of this—the obligations arising from introductions that translate into commissions, the expectation of envelopes and some consequent loss of revenue is completely understandable once we know how the Vietnamese system works. These are customary, accepted practices.

The Vietnamese would be the first to say that introductions, commissions and envelopes can quickly tilt into nepotism, bribes and kickbacks. In an effort to use donor's funds effectively, we have developed work parameters that incorporate the experiences of Vietnamese and expatriates from other organizations with our own.

## V. CONCLUSION

How can we—expatriates and Vietnamese—exchange our ways of working so that more of our project funds and energies reach the intended recipients? Some of the answers may be simple, though difficult to face. It may be that both expatriates and Vietnamese can acknowledge the issue of "profit" made from projects designed for the poor. Maybe in a loving way, we can ask each other some hard questions.

It would be helpful if donors and project administrators scrutinized proposals and budgets, questioning the use of expatriate staff and expatriate consultants. Is this expatriate necessary? Are there competent Vietnamese with these skills? If not, should we train them? Are there competent Vietnamese trainers available?

We expatriate staff and consultants might want to ask ourselves and each other the hard questions that expose our "introductions" and "profit." How many Vietnamese could be trained for the money spent on an expatriate air fare? How many street children could sleep in our living space? How many Vietnamese can eat on the street for an expense-account dinner?

Perhaps our Vietnamese colleagues can ask similar questions as they screen expatriate contracts for monies from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. These loans must be repaid by Viet Nam's children. How much money will leave Viet Nam in expatriate salaries and consultant fees for jobs that could be done by Vietnamese? How much money will leave the project in Vietnamese commissions and envelopes?

Perhaps we can all begin to talk together about these questions in an honest but loving way.

## Part III: Project Design And Implementation

*Part I of "Learning to Work With Viet Nam" gave an overview of Vietnamese cultural assumptions; Part II dealt with program development. This section addresses the finer points of project design and implementation. Vietnamese and expatriate colleagues have generously shared their ideas and experiences for this article, as they did for the other two.*

### I. Contemplating a Proposed Project:

As an NGO or business staff person working in Viet Nam, you'll likely be inundated with proposals for

projects people want your agency or business to fund. You may want to examine these with care to check that the concepts are appropriate. Many will not be; sometimes the people writing the proposals let themselves dream because they know foreign organizations and businesses have money. Several times we've found ourselves joining such a dream when a far simpler project would have been more effective.

For example, localities may submit plans for a huge water tower that could serve a large city when a small tank with a series of taps will do; a hospital may ask for an electric wheelchair (guaranteed to break in the first week) when more serviceable devices are locally available; a community may suggest a large training program with hundreds of participants when intensive training of Vietnamese trainers makes more sense.

You may find that the quantities and prices used in any appropriate proposal deserving your serious consideration are wildly inflated. This is one place corruption may enter and project monies disappear. Here's one reason you need Vietnamese staff partners whom you trust. As a foreigner (and this includes overseas Vietnamese), you won't find out the current prices, and you won't be able to secure the best deals.

I suggest retaining outside Vietnamese technical consultants with no ties to the locality and no chance of personal benefit from the project to examine the design on construction and development projects. As with your Vietnamese partner staff, these consultants need to be honest and motivated. It is a common and accepted practice for government workers to "moonlight," working as consultants for NGOs and businesses during regular business hours. Their consultant fees from NGOs and businesses are usually split with their employing institutions.

After encountering problems in their projects, many NGO and business staff and consultants—both expatriates and Vietnamese—have learned to ask their own common-sense questions: Is there enough reinforcing bar in the bottom of that tank? What about the sides? Is the cement top quality? Is there enough cement in proportion to sand? We try to apply the same common-sense process to any development project, whether dealing with training, education, family planning, agroforestry or credit.

We also try to examine every proposal to see who might be disadvantaged. As occurs everywhere else in the world, groups and individuals tend to think of their own needs. They may not be looking beyond their own locality. From hard experience, we have trained ourselves to examine the larger picture for potential negative effects. Who stands to lose from the project? Who else uses that spring? Who is downstream of that proposed dam? If we give these middle-income people tools, will

they grow richer and buy up the land now owned by the poor?

## II. Negotiating Locally:

As you negotiate a project with commune leaders, there should be a person from the International Relations Department of the province and the district with you. Expatriates may feel as if they are travelling with an entourage; such a large group may seem cumbersome and controlling. However, it's important to remember that local people may have no context for your work and values just as you may have little understanding of theirs. Province and district officials can help provide a crucial interpretive link.

We who are from the United States may want to keep in mind that, even with its regulations, the Vietnamese government is more open to us than our government is to Vietnamese. And all of us may want to remember that NGOs and private businesses are new concepts in Viet Nam. It can be helpful to think of the province and district officials as colleagues with whom you can clarify your organization's parameters. These are the people who can most help you implement the project.

## III. Corruption:

The Vietnamese would be the first to say that their system of introductions, commissions and envelopes can quickly tilt into nepotism, bribes, and kickbacks. Viet Nam's switch in the late 1980s to a market economy and the end to the State subsidy system has put additional pressure on the customs of introductions, commissions and envelopes. There is now a large grey area between custom and corruption.

When you add the effects of corruption onto the Vietnamese system of commissions and envelopes, the losses can be profound. An American friend with many years' experience working with Viet-Nam uses the image of moving a 50-kilo cake of ice from Hanoi, without refrigeration, to a destitute rural community in July: you arrive with an ice cube. This is the reason it's so important to define your organization's parameters with your project partners.

## IV. Some Possible Working Parameters:

Here are ten parameters we have developed in our small NGO office in Hanoi to describe our organization's values and work process in Viet Nam. They have come about as the result of hard lessons from projects we wish we had done differently.

I'll list the parameters starkly. However, when we're negotiating with local partners, we try to work in a Vietnamese manner, which is to say, we circle in on a



point. We develop a context for each parameter. Then we may say, "This is the reason we...." Then we repeat the parameter. Only when the entire discussion is finished, do we summarize the ten points starkly as below.

1. "We cannot do this project until we have secured funds. Then, we'll work out a written contract together." If you are not clear on this point, you (and your successors) are likely to be haunted by "But you promised..." or "So and So promised...."

2. We only do one project of a kind in a district (or a commune, if you prefer) at a time. In order to control corruption, you must control project funds, and you must organize the work in a clear, orderly way. If you do several projects of a kind in the same geographical area at once, you may lose your ability to monitor. Because many Vietnamese are not yet acquainted with the western systems of accountability, the projects may meld and the money disappear so that you will have a series of half-finished/half-quality projects. You can control quality by insisting on completion of one project before funds are released for another.

3. We insist on access to overall broader-scale project planning materials including long-range plans, comprehensive surveys, designs, maps, and proposals. Full information is essential to answer the larger questions of appropriateness and to test a project's design. You should know how and where your specific project fits into a larger program. You will want to know which other groups are working in the same area and what those groups are doing. To prevent double-dipping, you need to know whether another agency has been asked to fund the same project.

4. We divide all our projects into three or four stages and a final payment. We advance funds for the first stage. Funds for each subsequent stage are released only after the previous stage is completed, monitored, all monies accounted for and all receipts in. The final payment is made only after the entire project is completed and every receipt received. By withholding some funds for that final payment, we retain some control.

5. We advance funds directly to the people implementing the project. Although we understand Vietnamese customs, we do not give commissions and we do not pay for envelopes. Our Vietnamese staff and consultants do not accept envelopes. We stop our project work if commissions and envelopes occur because we feel that accepting envelopes compromises the ability to monitor. We make this point about commissions and envelopes without judgment about Vietnamese customs, but rather as a requirement by our organization and its contributors. Here's an example of where it's helpful to have provincial and district officials with you. Everyone hears this; everyone knows.

However, we do provide compensation for training participants, and we often give a small payment to specific commune staff for their time administering small-scale credit projects. We also retain government employees as consultants at an agreed fee. However, these are costs written into the project budget from the outset. Instead of commissions to the province and district, we may provide training, supplies or equipment. We have learned that it is usually not wise to provide vehicles since they are seldom used by the intended staff.

We ask that gifts (an important Vietnamese custom) presented to any of our staff or consultants be public, small and locally produced. To lessen the need for commissions or "management fees," we cover our own costs (housing, food, etc.) while making project visits. These costs include meals for any provincial and district colleagues travelling with us.

6. We insist on quality. Here, we add specifics that relate to the proposal at hand. "When we agree on P-400 cement, we mean P-400." "When we talk about three days of training, we mean hard work, not receptions. And we mean three days." This is another area where slippage may occur. A training project may be budgeted for ten days, with a per diem for trainers and participants for those ten days. However, the actual training might last five days. The extra days' per diems may then go into a kitty to be applied to "other uses."

7. We are ferocious about monitoring. All work is monitored by our staff. Here, again, it's crucial to find Vietnamese staff who are honest and motivated. We've learned that we need to have our staff or Vietnamese consultants monitor the entire project (including construction, training sessions, whatever), from beginning to end. If we don't, everything may be fine for the monitoring visit. But as soon as we leave, . . . If we monitor only at the end, we may find the specified P-400 cement but, like stucco, it may be only on the surface.

Monitoring protects our local colleagues. Vietnamese have a concept, *nho*, which, loosely translated, means "to lean on," "depend on," "ask." It carries the connotation of "call in a favor." Our local colleagues may be *nho*-ed by their friends and relatives for a share of project supplies. The *nho*-ing can feel insistent; this puts intense pressure on local counterparts.

Monitoring with outside consultants can protect local counterparts. It gives them an out. They can then say, "I can't. She checks." Vietnamese partner staff—no matter how honest and caring—may be under the same *nho*-ing pressure from friends and kin. It's important to set up transparent accounting systems that protect Vietnamese partner staff so that they also can say, "I can't. She checks."

8. We require a local contribution from all project

partners. This may include a contribution from the province and district as well. Depending on the project, local contributions may be locally available materials (sand, gravel, stone), unskilled labor, ongoing maintenance, training, administration, record-keeping, etc. A local contribution helps insure local project ownership and project sustainability.

9. Project beneficiaries make a contribution. We are learning to build into projects at the outset ways that those benefiting from a project make some contribution to the wider community. The interest on borrowers' loans in credit schemes can create income the commune then lends to new borrowers. Those benefiting from an irrigation system may pay fees that the commune can accrue for other capital projects. Those receiving training pass their knowledge onto others, and a system is created for this.

10. What else? Actually, we only have these nine parameters. But Vietnamese have an admirable sense of order; they would come up with ten. So, we leave a space open for something crucial to a specific project. For an irrigation or clean-drinking-water project, this point might be, "Can we agree there will be no cutting of trees, foliage or underbrush on the watershed around the site?" For training programs, we might quote a recent sanction by the prime minister against all kinds of extravagant receptions. For credit and savings projects, we might remind our partners that we want to reach the poorest of the poor. And so on.

## V. Conclusion:

With the end of the U.S. embargo, expatriates might assume they can work in Viet Nam purely on their own terms. The opposite is true.

The U.S. embargo against northern Vietnam lasted thirty years. Despite the embargo, Viet Nam managed to win its independence, unify the North and South and, in recent years, change from a command to a market economy without social upheaval. The Vietnamese are not about to abandon decision-making control of their country to foreigners rushing to Viet Nam after the embargo's lift.

Administrative decisions in Viet Nam must now be scrutinized through the new lens of the lifted embargo. To expatriates who have worked with Viet Nam for years, these necessary post-embargo administrative changes may feel like a season of tightening. But thirty years is a long time. It's reasonable to assume that this current transition on the Vietnamese side will take some time.

And so, as of the summer of 1994, it becomes even more important than in recent years for expatriates wanting to work with Viet Nam to be attentive to

Vietnamese customs. This caveat particularly applies to the practice of complete consultation and to the core administrative assumption of "belonging," which includes abiding by Vietnamese laws and regulations.

Lady Borton first worked in Viet-Nam from 1969-1971 at the American Friends Service Committee (Quaker Service) rehabilitation center in Quang Ngai province. She travelled to North Vietnam in early 1975 as head of the first American delegation of educators. In 1980 she spent six months as Health Administrator for Pulau Bidong, the largest refugee camp in Malaysia for Vietnamese Boat People.

She wrote about her experiences in Viet-Nam and Malaysia in her first book, *Sensing the Enemy: an American Woman Among the Boat People of Viet-Nam* (Dial/Doubleday, 1984). During the 1980s she travelled to Viet-Nam, leading delegations and staying in villages to gather material for *After Sorrow: an American Among the Vietnamese*, to be published by Viking/Penguin in April 1995. Lady Borton returned to Viet-Nam in 1990 to establish the AFSC office in Ha-Noi, and in 1993 began a two-year assignment as AFSC's field director. AFSC Viet-Nam, c/o UNDP Viet-Nam, P.O. Box 618, Bangkok, Thailand 10501. FAX 84-4-236-819.

"After Sorrow" <sup>ca</sup> poster 230 hr.  
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*Many Vietnamese and expatriate friends and colleagues read drafts of this article and offered their suggestions. I appreciate the time and energy they gave and am grateful for the wisdom they shared.*

-- Lady Borton