

# Letter & responses

September 13, 1997

To: Friends of the Vietnam Highlands Steering Committee

From: John Taylor

Subject: Future Directions

Thanks to Bill and Hilary for their thoughts and instigation. I have been struggling with the same issues myself, albeit with no recent in-country experience to guide me. As I read the various visitor reports, I am gradually forming some thoughts to share -- still disjointed but hopefully coherent.

1. We must clarify our values before we embark on any group projects involving donated money. If we want to improve things, how do we define improvement? Does it mean significantly bettering the lives of some people in a community and necessarily ignoring others. Or does it mean making a small but more widely felt difference to the community? By what cultural frame of reference should we define "improvement?"

2. What are our goals? Are we involved to preserve Montagnard culture? To assist Montagnards in general? To assist Central Highlands residents in general? To personally reward coworkers of 25 years ago? To foster improved health of a population? To improve the economic well-being of a population? What do we want to occur in the next 5 years? 10 years?

3. Realistically, our monetary impact will be very small for the foreseeable future.

4. Our greatest potential asset relates to our credibility with the locals and our knowledge of Montagnard culture of 25 years ago. Sporadic trips by individuals don't make us experts on the current culture or what the true needs are. Our greatest impact may be as glue to help coordinate efforts, as a knowledgeable and trusted bridge joining:

- A beneficiary population with various short and long term priorities
- A government understandably suspicious of outsiders
- Western organizations wanting to help

5. We must be extremely cautious, given our limited short term impact and our need for long term trust and credibility. Of course we run the risk of being too cautious and not doing anything, but maybe this is preferable to raising false expectations or offending the many in our token efforts to help the few.

6. We must be cautious about who we link up with so as not to undermine our long term goals. Partners must share our values. (Pleiku Trust seems a good candidate in my opinion.) I would advise caution about linking with out-of-country adoption efforts until we know how this is viewed culturally and officially by the government. I suggest we also

be careful about connections with the Catholic church. The Kontum diocese has obviously done much for the area, but a tight linkage may not be our best strategy for the future. This is a very different world than we knew, with different people holding the key cards. If I were in a stewardship role for Vietnamese government funds, I would be very cautious about non-Indigenous religious groups. We must avoid any perception of religious colonialism. I am concerned that the AAMEV analysis that was circulated may not reflect true needs. For example, what is really the impact of teaching about personal hygiene?

7. What kind of project will be successful in the present climate? Are we just going to catch a few innocent people in the middle in our naive, distant but well-meaning efforts to help? Perhaps we should develop an Acid Test: Could we likely get consensus approval of a project from a panel consisting of the involved NGO's, the clergy, the beneficiaries, the rest of the community, the local government, the national government? Examples might include:

- Projects that have a chance to bring in external capital (such as handicrafts exports), perhaps via a microcredit enterprise mechanism.
- Proven public health efforts such as immunizations or clean water. We may be able to serve as a bridge with US agencies such as CDC, etc.
- A school supplies project may be simple in the short term, but may show us as lightweight, naive, not truly understanding the needs of the area. What will be its impact five years from now?

I would propose some strategic guidelines:

1. We should get engaged, but in a way that sets the stage for meaningful future projects. We need a long-term focus.
2. We must be fully open and transparent in all our efforts, being extremely careful to communicate our objectives and steps to all who may be interested. This takes time but is nevertheless vital to long-term success. We must resist an "emergency" mind-set.
3. We need to spell out project criteria specifically. I feel we should not preferentially direct personal rewards to previous workers. (This is a recurring theme as I review prior newsletter issues and correspondence within the group.) Their present-day role in the society may be very different from that we remember. Focusing on individuals is divisive and likely to breed resentment among others. It also is really not likely to contribute to the general welfare. Again, what are we trying to accomplish?

4. We must consider the opportunity costs of everything we do. For example, a project that spends \$1000 to help families improve personal hygiene may truly cost \$1000 plus 5 measles deaths and considerable additional morbidity because the money wasn't spent in a more effective immunization effort instead.
5. We must be vigilant to ensure that all our partners hold common values, and that those values professed are consistent with values shown in practice.
6. Our leverage for now is not via money but via credibility. We must be careful that anything done in the name of FoVNH not jeopardize that credibility.
7. If it grows, our newsletter may expand our influence as other NGO's may want to reach a wider audience through it.
8. It may be better to use our meager resources as glue to help locals network around the world to develop higher impact projects, perhaps via grant applications to agencies with deeper pockets. One such project might be a rigorous survey of health needs, rather than a walk through with first impressions that merely state the obvious but do not form the basis for planning priorities.
9. Our immediate objective should be to carefully lay the groundwork for gradually building trust. We might get our foot in the door now with simple projects that are well thought out and carefully introduced.

Many of these same strategy issues arose at the reunion, but we're no closer to resolution. There may not be agreement possible within the FoVNH group, so what do we do then? We must resist a need to "do something" immediately when our objectives are not yet clear. Around the world there is a long history of well-intentioned but unfocused efforts at cross-cultural assistance without full understanding of local needs and priorities. This can have disastrous consequences, interfering with future efforts.

Who speaks for the Kontum community? Over 50 years of war gives the locals (and especially the government) the right to decide priorities. We must respect that.

\*\*\*\*\*

Is this suitable to put in the newsletter to solicit feedback and opinion? Should it be worded differently? Does anyone mind if I send a copy to Julian Platt?

Pat Smith  
Bill Rose  
Leon Wit  
Kerry Heubeck

Hilary Smith  
Marie-Therese McCann  
Susan Little