



HIGHLIGHTS from

“CONNECTING PEOPLE TO
SAVE LIVES AND IMPROVE
DISASTER RISK REDUCTION
IN THE MEKONG DELTA”
PROJECT



Table of Contents



Abbreviations	2
Background	3
ActionAid and Disaster Prevention and Relief	4
Microsoft Corporation	5
ActionAid Vietnam and Local Rights Programme in Soc Trang	6
Project summary	6
Project overall goals	7
Project specific goals	7
Introduction of MDG and its infrastructure	8
How to use MDG	8
How to set up and run MDG	8
Achievements from MDG usage	9
Impacts of the project	9
Conclusions	16
Recommendations	16

ABBREVIATIONS



AAV	ActionAid Vietnam
AAI	ActionAid International
CBDRM	Community-based Disaster Response Model
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
ECHO	European Commission’s Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection
EWS	Early Warning System
JANI	Joint Advocacy Network Initiative
MDG	Microsoft Data Gathering
PVA	Participatory Vulnerability Assessment
SPD	Supporting Program for Development

Background

Vietnam is one of the five countries most vulnerable to climate change and natural disaster in the world, which houses the low terrain and densely populated Mekong Delta region frequented by floods, flashfloods, storms, droughts, and salinization. When natural disaster strikes, the people living in poverty, the disabled, women and ethnic minorities are the most vulnerable.

The government of Vietnam has been taking action to improve national disaster preparedness. In 2009, Government Degree No.1002 was issued in order to deploy the new Community-based Disaster Response Model (CBDRM) in the country. In reality, at local level, the most vulnerable people are the least prepared. There are a number of reasons that lead to such fact, which include:

- Lack of sufficient data regarding risks and vulnerability, which renders any plans of disaster response and relief ineffective.
- Early warning systems and relevant information regarding natural disasters cannot reach the community due to inefficiencies in the current mechanism and process. There are no rapid response teams in many communities, and where there are, lack of necessary equipment and skills are found.
- Weak participation from the most vulnerable groups into the process of developing and deploying Disaster Preparedness plans.
- Lack of regularly updated information on diseases and extreme weather conditions.
- Disaster response and relief plans are not well regarded and not integrated into social-economic development plans of the government at all levels.

In Vietnam, raising community awareness about natural disasters as well as community-based disaster risk management have long been identified the most effective approach to reduced disaster impacts. However, these traditional methods do not focus on the provision of necessary information on a timely basis.

In order to solve the existing problems as well as promoting the use of available information technology in disaster response and relief (given the sizeable 120 million mobile telephony subscribers in Vietnam, of which 35 million using 3G), ActionAid Vietnam has cooperated with Microsoft Corporation and local authorities to implement the project of “Connecting people to save lives and improve disaster risk reduction in the Mekong Delta”.

❑ ActionAid and Disaster Prevention and Relief

ActionAid International in Vietnam (AAV) is a member of ActionAid International (AAI). Founded in 1972 in the United Kingdom, ActionAid International is a not-for-profit organization working to end poverty worldwide. In the last 40 years, ActionAid has been growing, helping over 25 million marginalized, disadvantaged people in 47 countries all over the world.

In Vietnam, AAV is one of the most active non-government organizations, dedicated to end poverty by promoting development of the people living in poverty, especially women and ethnic minorities. With the first program started in Son La in 1989, after 20 years, AAV has expanded its operation to more than 20 provinces and cities throughout Vietnam, supporting over 100,000 families through many long-term development programs/projects in partnership with local and community based organizations.

AAV work focuses on mobilizing and empowering the people living in poverty and marginalization to protect and exercise their own rights, thereby enhancing community capacity and collective voice towards policy advocacy and policy change. AAV also aims to hold policy makers and other development actors accountable to policies and decisions affecting people’s lives.

ActionAid has rich experience in the field of Disaster Prevention and Relief. Apart from emergency relief programs, AAV provides support to poor and vulnerable communities, building their capacity in disaster preparedness using the Participatory Vulnerability Assessment (PVA) tool. AAV is also an active member of the Joint Network Advocacy Initiative (JANI) founded in 2009 under a project initiated by the European Commission Humanitarian Office (ECHO) towards disaster prevention and relief policy change in Vietnam.



Microsoft Corporation

Founded in 1975, Microsoft is the world leading company in the field of computing and mobile computing. The mission of Microsoft is to empower every citizen and organization to maximize their potentials by using technology. In Vietnam, Microsoft has committed to provide technical advisories to the Government's information technology strategy in Information Technology infrastructure; small and medium sized enterprises and human resources training and development.

Microsoft has made considerable contribution to high quality IT expert training for Vietnam. Vietnam is now a stereotype of Microsoft's efforts towards diversity in the Asia-Pacific region, with an extended network of 500 local partners creating more than 25,000 jobs. The Partners in Learning Program, a Microsoft global initiative designed to apply IT in improving teaching and school management methods, has attracted more than 60,000 teachers to enroll.

The most notable program is the USD 3 million-worth YouthSpark project. This is an ambitious effort of Microsoft spanning from 2015-2018 to bring education, employment and business opportunities to Vietnamese youth through technology classes, job matching and entrepreneurship support. YouthSpark is expected to help millions of Vietnamese youth access digital resources, start up more than 50,000 new businesses, and provide support to 200,000 disadvantaged youths and 10,000 young people working in Microsoft factory.



The project in the field of disaster prevention and climate change resilience is a joint collaboration between Microsoft, ActionAid Vietnam and local authorities to provide a solution to the issue of climate change using technology, reducing disaster damages and risks towards better life quality.

Microsoft's support to communities in Vietnam has been honored with the AmCham CSR Recognition Award 2015 by the American Chamber of Commerce.

ActionAid Vietnam and Local Rights Programme in Soc Trang

Since 2006, AAV has been working in close partnership with the People's Committee of Soc Trang Province in its Local Rights Programme in three communes of Long Phu District, namely Chau Khanh, Tan Hung and Tan Thanh.

The People's Committee of Long Phu District directly manages and implements the programme through the Supporting Programme for Development (SPD13). The SPD has 4 full-time staff working under the management of the District People's Committee and is supported financially by AAV. During the duration of the project, AAV also provides training courses to build up capacity for SPD staff. With the total budget of 18 billion VND for the period of 2006-2015, the Local Rights Program focused on these following Program Priorities:

- Promote alternative livelihood and sustainable agriculture
- Advance accountability and people-to-people solidarity for social change, increase youth leadership and civil society credibility
- Promote equal access to quality education for children
- Respond to disaster and climate change impacts with people-centered alternatives
- Build social and political alternatives for women and girls

Apart from the 5 long-term goals above, AAV also supported SPD13 in conducting other short-term projects. One of those was the project of "Connecting people to save lives and improve disaster risk reduction in the Mekong Delta", hereinafter called the "Project", which has been implemented in Long Phu District from early 2014 until end of January, 2016.

Project summary

Project name:

Connecting people to save lives and improve disaster risk reduction in the Mekong Delta

Funding agencies:

Microsoft Corporation and ActionAid Vietnam

Implementing agency:

Long Phu District People's Committee, Soc Trang Province

Duration:

From January 2014 to January 2016

Total budget:

99,931 EUR = 2.702.425,430 VND (including management fee)

Location:

Chau Khanh, Tan Thanh and Tan Hung communes of Long Phu District, Soc Trang

Direct beneficiaries: 27.702 Indirect beneficiaries: 113.090

Project overall goals

The project “Connecting people to save lives and improve disaster risk reduction in the Mekong Delta” combined ActionAid Vietnam’s experience in community-based disaster prevention and relief with Microsoft’s information gathering solution - Microsoft Data Gathering system (MDG). The project is expected to enhance the capacity of the communities in disaster prevention and climate change resilience. On a broader scale, the project arguably contributed to the realization of Government Decree 1002.

Project specific goals

Goal 1:

Supporting communities and local government to collect accurate and up-to-date information using MDG for effective planning of disaster risk reduction and climate change resilience at community and local government levels.

In order to achieve the above goals, these following activities have been conducted:

- Establishing technical infrastructure for data gathering and distribution from local authorities to the communities via MDG
- Building capacity for communities and relevant officers about how to use the software
- Building information gathering and sharing procedure about weather conditions, diseases, growing seasons, market prices etc.

Goal 2:

Establishing disaster response and relief teams in each communities, setting up coordinating mechanisms, and providing adequate training for their members.

These following activities have been conducted:

- Establishing disaster response and relief teams in 16 wards of 3 communes with the participation of youth, women and ethnic minorities
- Building between-level cooperation mechanism in emergency situations
- Training members on emergency planning skills, including risk mapping skills
- Building disaster response and relief plans and integrating them in the socio-economic development strategies of the communities
- Providing first aid training and rapid response skills training

Goal 3:

- Promoting local authorities’ commitment to make plans for community-based disaster management and advocating for national policies regarding disasters risk relief and management
- Documenting and disseminating good practice and results for future reference
- Building networks and conducting policy advocacy at national level based on results of the project

Introduction of MDG and its infrastructure

MDG was developed by Nokia (now part of Microsoft Corporation). The software features open source code, therefore enabling expansion and modification to user needs. Necessary information can be collected and updated immediately anywhere the user is. Users can create surveys/polls and send information via internet using smartphones. The collected information can be stored as text, numbers, GPS coordinate and image, which can later be exported to word or excel files, enabling handy data analysis. The MDG has been applied in many countries and positively received. For instance, in Brazil, the software was used to monitor dengue spread, while in West Africa, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) utilized this software to conduct survey on water source and cattle; Plan International in Kenya also resorted to MDG to manage birth registration.

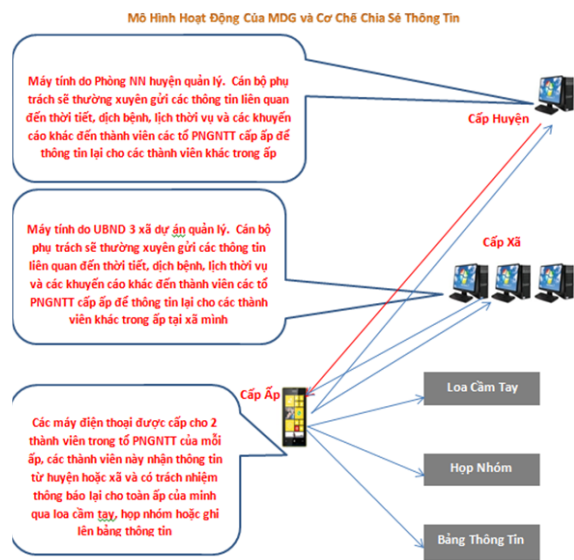
How to use MDG



How to set up and run MDG

Equipment requirements:

In order to use the software, a computer and a smartphone that can connect to the Internet are needed. To share information to many users, a network of multiple devices can be set up.



Achievements from MDG usage

- A technical infrastructure, a fully-functioning MDG network that connects all 16 wards to the district and an information sharing mechanism between the government and the people has been established.
- Partners at commune and district levels have mastered the usage of the software.
- A mechanism to gather and distribute information to the people was established. Gathered information is shared to the people through meetings, bulletin boards and public speakers.
- Knowledge of the communities regarding climate change and its effects has been greatly improved.
- Disaster response and relief teams were established at all 16 wards, attracting the participation of youth, women and ethnic minorities. Each team has 8 members and four of them are ethnic minority women. All team members were given first aid trainings and agreed coordinating mechanism during emergencies.
- Stronger engagement of women in the disaster response and relief activities as well as more access to information and other opportunities to improved livelihoods and social work were developed.
- Developed disaster response and relief plans at communal level were integrated into the socio-economic development plan at commune level. Local authorities have approved these plans and allocated budget for partial implementation of such plans.
- The result of the project has been shared to national and international partners so that they can further research the application of MDG in climate change and other fields.

Impacts of the project

1. Established disaster response and relief teams with a coordinating mechanism, and delivered skill training for team members.

The disaster prevention activities will be more effective if there is participation of communities in every stage of decision making, implementation and monitoring, combined with the approach of “4-on-the-spot” which includes on-the-spot commanding, on-the-spot personnel, on-the-spot resources and on-the-spot logistics. In reality, the Disaster Prevention and Rescue Committees are only established at communal level, thus limiting the participation of local people in the planning process. In order to improve their participation, the project has cooperated with local authorities to establish 16 disaster response and relief teams at all 16 wards of the project communes.



Image 1: Disaster response coordination map at Tan Lich Ward, Tan Hung District

Each disaster response and relief team has 8 members with at least 50% of them being women. Participation of the disabled and ethnic minorities is highly encouraged. The team meets up each month to discuss issues around disaster risk reduction in their ward. Team members also received training on how to establish Risk Map for disaster management planning and effective cooperation in emergency situations.



Image 2: Risk Map of Tan Lich Ward, Tan Hung District

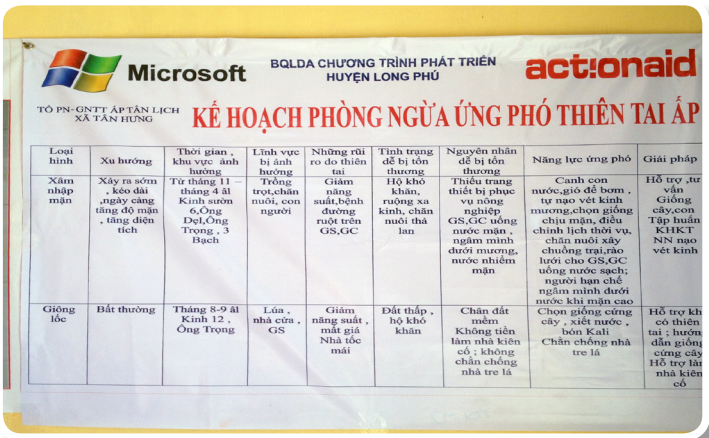


Image 3: Disaster prevention plan, Tan Lich Ward, Tan Hung District

Apart from training on coordination, planning, and implementation, team members were also trained on first aid skills and rescue practice. Remarkably, for the first time, the women had chances to attend these types of training which enabled them to deal with on-the-spot emergencies such as broken bone or drowning with confidence.



Image 4: The women are participating in a first aid practice.

Mr. Huynh Vinh Quang, President of the Red Cross in Long Phu District, shared his opinion about the project:

“Apart from the application of technologies and improving people’s knowledge of climate change, the project has greatly supported Red Cross’s mission of training the locals on emergency skills. However, as the current budget is not enough, our training is still limited in certain areas. Thanks to the project, people of all 16 wards are now well-equipped to deal with emergency situations at the community”.



Mr. Huynh Vinh Quang is teaching first aid practice to the people.

2. Improved adaptability of local people to climate change through better access to information

In addition to building capacity for communities in rapid response, first aid, and planning skills, the project focused on improving adaptability to climate changes, especially livelihood adaptability to reduce vulnerability during emergency situations.


A major factor that helps better adaptability to climate change is the ease of access to the most updated information of weather, diseases, growing seasons, market price etc. The information sharing mechanism at Long Phu District had a lot to improve yet.

To address this issue, the project has utilized the open-source data gathering tool developed by Microsoft. Thirty six Nokia smartphones installed with this software were distributed to all 16 disaster response and relief teams at 16 wards, three project officers at the three communes and one project manager at the district. These devices are connected to 4 computers also installed with the data gathering application. Using this system, the program coordinators can send information on disease, salinity, growing seasons, flood tides, breeding stocks etc. to the farmers at much higher frequency, thus enabling their active, updated risk mitigation planning. Moreover, officials from the communes can conduct surveys using electronic questionnaire distributed via the MDG-installed smartphone networks, thus the data can be collected almost immediately and not just in number but also in text and image format. This technology will greatly speed up the working process, and enable the coordinators to have recommendations and supports for the people in much less time.

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Image 5: Types of information exchanged via MDG

The data gathering software helps bring two-way effective, efficient, instant communication to the local authorities and people with a great ease of access. When members of the disaster response and relief teams receive emergency information from the communes and the district, they can immediately spread the news via hand-held speakers to all the villagers. If the information is not of urgent nature, team members can share it through monthly meetings or post it on the bulletin boards in each ward so that everyone can see it.

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3. Stronger role of women and ethnic minorities in disaster risk reduction

Before the arrival of the Microsoft project, disaster risk reduction planning was unknown to the local people. And if it was, the people had never had chances taking part in activities such as vulnerability assessment or risk mapping. Chances for women were yet smaller due to the popular patriarchy in Vietnamese society which attributed this type of activity to men. Yet, given the fact that women are the most vulnerable to climate change, women from all 16 wards, especially those from ethnic minorities, have been prioritized to join the disaster response and relief teams. Once they are in, they can receive training on risk and vulnerability assessment and discuss with their fellow villagers on risk reduction plans. Likewise, first aid skills training brought them confidence in dealing with on-the-spot emergenciesituations.



Mrs. Nguyen Thi Hao has been on the team for 2 years, proudly shared:



Image 6: Ms. Nguyễn Thị Hảo

“After 2 years participating, now I understand about the law on disaster prevention, I can perform first aid and prevent many kinds of diseases related to humans, plants and cattle. These skills and knowledge are highly valuable. Without them, we may even make things worse for someone with a broken bone if fixture is not done properly before moving away.”

4. Integration of disaster risk reduction plans into commune and district socio-economic development strategies

Disaster risk reduction activities can only be effective when the local authorities care to take specific actions, of which the integration of disaster reduction plans into socio-economic development strategies at all levels is crucial. Through the project activities, awareness and attention to disaster preparedness of the local authorities have been greatly improved. To name a few, the governments of the three communes under the project have assigned IT personnel responsible for distributing information to the people on a regular basis. Officers from the commune joined the meetings in each ward to discuss and agree on risk management plans and combine them into a general risk management plan of the commune. Such plans are posted at bulletin boards in each commune for implementation and monitoring.



Image 7: Tan Hung Commune risk management plan being posted at the Commune Disaster Prevention office for monitoring

The government attention did not stop at planning; all the three communes have mobilized and distributed budget accordingly to carry out the risk management plans. Budgets were spent to reinforce water canal systems to prevent salinization of farmland, repair manhole covers and improve the salinization prevention system with partial financial support from the project. Additional budgets have been allocated by the commune government for canal ditch dredging, with in-kind contribution from the people in form of labor for renovating the salinization prevention system.

5. Raising awareness on climate changes and disasters response and relief:

Raising awareness of the communities regarding climate change and helping the people understand the Law on Disaster Prevention to understand their statutory duties and rights are among the key deliverables of the project. Using various forms of communication (quiz, group meeting etc.), the project delivered knowledge on the law to the people. More than 30 communication events were held to this end.



“I feel a lot more confident taking part in the project”

Ms. Le Thi Le Hoa is living in Chau Khanh, Long Phu. Stopped weeding, she proudly showed the new Nokia smartphone that took her weeks of training to know how to use.

“I have never used a cell phone before, and all of a sudden I got a very hi-tech one. I can tell from the ringtone that the agriculture department has something for me, I can read and reply immediately.”



Mrs. Hoa is a worker while her husband is a mason. She shared: “Before, if it was raining, I would keep on working. If it rained too hard then I would simply take shelter beneath a tree. Sometimes I heard people got killed by lightning, but I didn’t care, just thought that it was destiny. But now, I stay home whenever there is thunderstorm. Money is important, but our lives are far more valuable. If it rains when I work, I will wrap up everything and immediately seek a shelter.” Even if it is just a simple practice, she only knows about it after joining the project. Now Mrs. Hoa is nicknamed “Thunder Lady”, as she knows all about rain and thunderstorm locations to inform others, and help them get to safety. She also confidently develops other skills.

Back then she didn't dare to raise her voice, but now she works as vice head of a disaster response and relief team. She encourages people to put up a few rain shelters out at the field as well as mobilize people to reinforce the dam to prevent landslides. She also knows more about good new plant types and fertilizers, growing seasons, etc., thanks to the information she received via the phone. She now talks like "an officer", and her house becomes a "rendezvous" for the women.

"I feel a lot more confident taking part in the project indeed", she said with a beaming smile.

"Having knowledge, our living conditions better off"



Image 8 Mr. Son Ky is sharing information with his wife.



Mr .
Son Ky has been
living in Tan Hung for 35
years. He said that the weather
has been changing drastically in recent
times. ***"There are fewer floods, but tornadoes
and drought occur more frequently. More
people get sick, more animals die, many
house are damaged due to
weather changes"***



Having joined the project, he now knows more about disaster, that even if it is impossible to avoid disaster it, proper preparation can lessen damages and loss. Mr. Ky is deputy head of the disaster response and relief team in his community. He usually announces news to the people via his assigned speaker: "Salt water is coming, everyone should consider doing a third season; it is about to rain hard, do not go to the field, there might be strong winds, consider reinforcing your house ..." To prevent dengue, his team discussed ways to treat waste water and encourage the people in the area to put covers on any open water containers so that mosquitos won't be able to develop. He just sold 300 chickens, but he waited until after the bird flu season to raise his new flock. Ky proudly shared: "Back then, I went about my business without knowing anything. Now thanks for the training, I can raise my chicken more efficiently." His wife also works as the head of the breeding cooperative of the commune, so they usually discuss business together, strengthening the family bond.

Taking part in the project, Ky knows more and does business better. As he is now trusted by the people, he encourages everyone to work together on maintaining bridges and roads. He now lives a better life economically and with adequate information sharing in the community.




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Conclusions



Disaster risk prevention should be closely associated with enhancing adaptability of the people to climate change. Provision of up-to-date information on a timely basis is an effective approach to achieve such goal. The advance of current technology and the increasing number of cell phone users in Vietnam should be considered as important advantages that the government and the regulators can make use for effective information provision to the local people. The Microsoft Data Gathering model of the project of “Connecting people to save lives and improve disaster risk reduction in the Mekong Delta”, implemented by ActionAid Vietnam and Microsoft in partnership with the People’s Committee of Long Phu District is an initiative tackling the threats of climate change. This project has proven the effectiveness of utilizing technology in disaster prevention and adaptability to climate change. It was demonstrated that people in rural areas, especially ethnic minorities living in remote, difficult areas, should have more access to latest technologies in order to improve their living conditions towards development.

Recommendations



- After the project, the MDG system will be handed over to the local authorities. In order to build on the achievements of the project, there should be a mechanism that best facilitates information sharing to all the people, especially those in the most remote areas so that the people are well informed of diseases, salinization, market price, extreme weather conditions.
- The local government should consider upgrading the existing system and expanding the coverage to other communes in the district and to other districts as this low investment ensures high level of accuracy and updatedness of information. This initiative can also be redesigned to apply in other fields.
- It is necessary to maintain and support capacity building for the disaster response and relief teams following the approach of “4-on-the-spot” to improve people participation in the work and further its effectiveness.
- Women should be encouraged to join disaster response and relief teams and take part in the planning and implementation process. Being the most vulnerable groups, women need to know their duties and rights in case of emergency.
- Disaster risk prevention plans should be developed by individual wards, and incorporated into commune plans. Afterwards, it is important to include the plan into the socio-economic development plan and assign budget for its implementation. There should be people participation into the planning process right from the ward level to best reflect their needs and capacity.