

From Social Action to Human Rights Advocacy

A Note by Đoàn Thanh Liêm

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By profession, I am a lawyer, a jurist. But as a volunteer, I've spent much of my time in social work in Vietnam during the war and in human rights action at the time being in the United States.

In the mid-1960's as the war escalated, a lot of people from the insecure countryside flocked into the outskirts of the capital city of Saigon. They lived in slum areas in miserable conditions without basic facilities such as clean water, toilet, electricity or medical care etc..., let alone school for their children.

That is why a group of young urban folks like us got together to start an action program called “The Saigon District 8 Development Project” in 1965 to help these war victims help themselves in the most underprivileged area of Saigon. The youngest volunteers were then about 20 years old and the eldest about 30.

To begin with, we submitted a request to the government asking to be allowed to set up a community development program for the benefit of the local people in the slums - most of whom are war victims coming from the adjoining countryside. Thereupon, the Prime Minister agreed to our proposal and even provided us with a little fund for the operation of the program.

And right away, by mid-August 1965, we came to district 8 and wholeheartedly launched ourselves into the long term social action aiming at serving the people in the community. Details of the running of this cooperation between us the volunteers and the administration can be summarised as follows:

I – The key success to the experience : “The Three With Approach”.

As volunteers, the only thing we had in common that is the high morale of deeply motivated and dedicated young people. But to put it frankly, we were all naïve and inexperienced facing the enormously hard problems of poverty, insalubrity and even illiteracy in the area. With sheer perseverance, we had to practice the “Three With Approach” (Tam Cùng) - that's to Live With, to Eat With and to Work With the local population – thus sharing with them all hardships in their daily life.

As time went by, we were gradually seen and accepted with sympathy by the local residents as “good guys”, “well educated folks”. And that favorable

attitude opened up to the sincere and close cooperation between the community and our group of volunteers all coming from outside of the locality.

With the suggestion and encouragement from local leaders, at the initial stage we carefully proceeded with little projects intended to upgrade the material environment of the area such as clearing the sewage system, enlargement of inroads of the hamlet, building new primary schools etc... All these works were being done with the voluntary and enthusiastic participation of the local people as they are themselves the main beneficiaries of the improvement. So that our role was chiefly an yeast, a catalyst in the fermentation and mobilisation of the local masses toward that community development process.

The rhythm of collective action increased marvelously as more and more people joined in the practical solution of the more complex problems in the area such as housing, sanitation and schooling. And next step, at the second year in 1966 our development program was permitted to expand into 2 neighbour districts 6 and 7 to serve the population totalling 500,000 persons in the whole area of southwest of Saigon.

In 1968, the war intensified with heavy attack by communist forces even inside Saigon, causing colossal damages in our area of responsibility with as much as 25,000 houses destroyed. That took us a lot of effort in the reconstruction and in 3 years we had to help the victims to rebuild altogether about 8,000 housing units in 20 separate sites that were most heavily devastated in the 3 districts 6,7 and 8.

The program lasted 6 years as we got an order from the government to close down in 1971. Meanwhile, with the ardent participation of several thousand of local residents, hundred of projects small and big had been realised all contributing to improve the living conditions in the area. Just to name some most impressive achievements: Two community highschools in district 6 and 8 with about 3,000 students attending in the school year 1973 – 74; four vocational training centers in districts 6,7,8, all being operated by buddhist or catholic religious with the support by our program; a couple of hundred improvement projects inside poor, dark hamlets either in drainage or road pavement etc...

In other words, this program can be considered as a typical partnership between an unit of the Civil Society and the State to serve the underprivileged

people in the outskirts of Saigon during that most atrocious wartime in the late 1960's. And as volunteers, we had played quite a successful teamwork.

2 – The respect of human dignity is conducive to human rights advocacy.

After 1975, the victorious communists established a most severe totalitarian dictatorship upon the whole country of Vietnam from North to South. The communist party maintained monopoly in practically all aspects of human life such as in political, economical and even cultural, religious and spiritual sphere etc... All civil liberties are strictly restrained, notably there are no freedom of assembly, of speech, of religion etc...

That is a gross violation of standard human rights values as adopted globally in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed by the United Nations in 1948 and in subsequent international covenants on civil, political as well as on economical, social and cultural rights.

That was why in early 1990 I wrote a document entitled “Five Points of Basis Consensus” to serve as a guideline for the discussion on an eventual new constitution for Vietnam. But as panicked by the collapse of the communist regime in Eastern Europe in late 1989, the paranoid administration in Hanoi furiously launched a series of arrests of dissidents like myself. And in a trial before the Saigon court in 1992, they sentenced me 12 years of prison for “disseminating anti-communist propaganda”.

But fortunately, thanks to the favorable intervention of various international human rights organisations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and especially of the American government, in 1996 I was released from prison and brought directly to the Saigon airport to be resettled together with the family in the US where I have been living since.

As my age advances, I'm now devoting the remaining energy to the noble cause of human rights by joining the work of friends in Amnesty International USA and especially in the Vietnam Human Rights Network. That is the most appropriate way to pay my dues to my beloved people in Vietnam and elsewhere as a token respect for human dignity and contribution to the human rights advocacy as a whole./

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