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Cows and Courage Keep Agent Orange at Bay in Vietnam

Dioxin poisoning tests the resilience of caregivers and communities

Dong Hoi, Vietnam: For [Mai Thi Loi](#) it all began during the Vietnam War, when her future husband Nguyen Van Tri was exposed to the defoliant Agent Orange. Mr Tri absorbed dioxin poison and passed it on to his three sons, leaving his family to struggle with a nightmare that persists to this day, long after his death



Mai Thi Loi with her son Hung and Opportunity the cow into tears recently as she reviewed her options. The nearest hospital is in Hue, but she hates the idea of her sons being so far from home. Here at home, however, they pose a threat to her safety. Adding to the pressure, her father is 103 years old.

Mai Thi Loi's oldest son Kien turned violent in his twenties. He attacked his mother, ripped off his clothes, and tried to set fire to neighboring houses. It got so bad that even doctors were afraid to treat him. Eventually, Mai Thi Loi decided to chain Kien up for his own protection and for hers. Earlier this year she reluctantly decided to chain up her second son, Cuong. Relieved neighbors put up money to build the room.

Mai Thi Loi's third son, Hung, is forgetful rather than violent but she clearly fears for the future and burst

Such is the bitter legacy of Agent Orange, which was sprayed over South Vietnam between 1960 and 1972 by American planes to clear the jungle. Over 3 million Vietnamese may be affected and the poison has penetrated deep into the villages of Quang Binh province, where Mai Thi Loi lives. Quang Binh was only lightly sprayed in the war but has registered over 19,000 Agent Orange survivors.



Mai Thi Loi is comforted by Peace Fellow Ai Hoang. Her son Kien is chained up in a back room.

The crisis is particularly severe on care-givers like Mai Thi Loi, many of whom are ageing widows. This is troubling to the [Association for the Empowerment of Persons with Disabilities \(AEPD\)](#) a leading advocate and partner of The Advocacy Project (AP).

But at least the financial pressure is easing for some families. Mai Thi Loi is one of three caregivers to have benefited from an appeal by [Ai Hoang](#), who is serving as an AP Peace Fellow at AEPD. AP has just launched [an appeal for the fourth family](#).

Mai Thi Loi has purchased a buffalo, named Opportunity, and she was able to thank Ai in person when they met recently at her home near the border with Laos. She explained that she rents out the animal for \$30 a day and has doubled her income in a month. The relief showed on her face as she embraced Ai while Opportunity munched on grass.

Ai's family left Vietnam fifteen years ago and she expressed delight at being able to help. "It's definitely a very awesome feeling," she said. "When you see situations like this, you really can't turn away."



Community Support: Mr Hoc the outreach worker, and Mr Van from the self-help group, advise Mai Thi Loi

AEPD will check up on Mai Thi Loi regularly through an outreach worker, Mr Truong Minh Hoc (left) who was himself wounded in the war and exposed to Agent Orange. Peer support from veterans like Mr Hoc, who understand the challenge of disability and have credibility in the villages, is central to AEPD's model of assistance.

Mai Thi Loi can also count on support from community leaders like Tham Tuen Van, who heads a self-help group set up by AEPD. Mr Van suffered from a serious accident that damaged his spine but has built a successful business that employs seven people with disability. At one stage

he even employed Cuong, one of Mai Thi Loi's two sons, and he is deeply distressed to see Cuong chained and humbled. "When I visit Mai Thi Loi I try to lift her spirits and tell her to keep going. There are always ups and downs with disability."



Pham Thi Do and her daughter Lien

The two other families supported by AP have also responded to the tragedy of Agent Orange with great courage. [Pham Thi Do](#), tiny but energetic, uses her new cow to work the family plot of land and grow rice. She is caring for a husband, two sons with hemophilia and her daughter Lien (left).

[Le Than Duc](#), the third beneficiary, plans to keep pigs and chickens in his backyard, where he can also keep an eye on three daughters who can neither speak nor move. His wife has suffered a nervous breakdown and Mr Duc's first business - selling fish sauce - collapsed

after a chemical company released poisonous chemicals and killed off fish for years to come.

But Mr Duc remains undaunted and looks forward to his new venture. "There's no point in being sad any more," he says with a grin.

- AP is seeking funds for Agent Orange caregivers. [Read their profiles here](#)
- Please donate to our fourth appeal on behalf of the Dung family [here](#). **Thank you!**
- Watch this AP [video about the Phan siblings](#), one of the selected families
- Read the [blogs of Ai Hoang](#), which include profiles of AEPD outreach workers
- Read about [AEPD's work with other forms of war disability](#).

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