



## HOW PUBLIC-PRIVATE COOPERATION HELPED UNLOCK US ASSISTANCE ON AGENT ORANGE

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On Aug. 10, 1961, the United States began spraying aerial herbicides over South Vietnam. The spraying continued for 10 years. Agent Orange, as the herbicides became known, is the [most intractable](#) legacy of the Vietnam War. While cooperation on identifying American soldiers' remains and removing unexploded ordnance started before normalization of relations in 1995, only in 2006 did Washington begin acknowledging responsibility for Agent Orange. It was public-private cooperation that helped break the deadlock and unlock US assistance. Addressing the Agent Orange issue can further advance US-Vietnam bilateral relations and should be a priority for Washington.

### Public and Private Progress

Following US President George W. Bush's 2006 visit to Vietnam, the two countries issued a joint statement in which Washington officially recognized the need to

address Agent Orange's consequences. Six months later, the US Congress approved the first annual funding for dioxin remediation in Vietnam. As of 2021, [the amount](#) reached \$381.4 million, 75% for environmental clean-up and 25% for disability assistance.

The State Department tasked the US Agency for International Development (USAID) with administering the appropriated funds. USAID collaborated with Vietnamese authorities in environmental remediation of dioxin contamination at Da Nang Airport, completed in 2017. Clean-up efforts are underway at the Bien Hoa Air Base, the principal remaining dioxin hotspot.

Separate funds for health and disability programs were appropriated in 2011, starting at \$3 million but with increased financial support from Washington in subsequent years. In 2019, USAID and Vietnam's Ministry of Defense signed a five-year memorandum earmarking [\\$65 million](#) to assist people with disabilities. The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2021 provided [\\$14.5 million](#) toward this goal, channeling American assistance to Vietnamese with severe disabilities in 10 heavily sprayed provinces.

A network of transnational actors, led in part by the Ford Foundation, was key to these developments.

In 1994, the Vietnamese government agreed to a Canadian proposal to search for residual dioxin in sprayed areas and assigned the work to the 10-80 Committee in the Ministry of Health. Funded by the Canadian government, the 10-80 Committee and Hatfield Consultants, Ltd. conducted the first comprehensive long-term [research](#) on dioxin residues in Vietnam. The study confirmed dioxin remained in the soil at a former American base, finding its way up the food chain and into people who returned to the area—the first empirical evidence of residual dioxin's continuing threat to public health. These findings gave rise to the "dioxin hotspot hypothesis"; that former American bases were the most likely contaminated sites.

However, the Canadian government declined further funding, and the United States and Vietnam [stalled](#) in their attempt at a joint epidemiological study. Instead,

in 2002, the Ford Foundation offered the 10-80 Committee a grant to test the dioxin hot spot hypothesis on all 2,735 former American bases in Vietnam. The 10-80 Committee-Hatfield [2006 report](#) demonstrated that dioxin contamination was concentrated at three former bases, in Phu Cat, Da Nang, and Bien Hoa. This identified the scope of the environmental hazards and focused US-Vietnam discussions on remediation.

Hanoi had invited the Ford Foundation to Vietnam a decade earlier, and Ford became a grant-maker in several important fields. Still, Charles Bailey, the Ford Foundation representative in Vietnam (one of this article's co-authors), soon realized progress on Agent Orange was paramount. From 2000 to 2011, Ford approved nearly a hundred grants worth \$17 million to Vietnamese ministries and research centers, UN agencies, and Vietnamese, Vietnamese-American, and other American NGOs for pilot programs to develop best practices of direct assistance to Agent Orange victims, locate dioxin hotspots, launch clean-up projects, and continuously raise the issue in the United States. Ford's initiatives and their partners' work rekindled interest in some US leaders, encouraging them to channel money to USAID for use in Vietnam.

In 2007, Ford helped establish a track-2 channel, the US-Vietnam [Dialogue Group](#) on Agent Orange/Dioxin. Ford Foundation President Susan Berresford convened the Group, which comprised eminent citizens, scientists, victims' supporters, and policymakers from both countries. In 2010, the group published its 10-year comprehensive [Plan of Action](#). The plan set goals and detailed the required steps on disability assistance and clean up, calling for \$300 million from the United States and other donors. In 2019, US assistance surpassed that benchmark, and many of the goals were being achieved.

This story in Vietnam is told mainly as a government matter, but philanthropies such as the Ford Foundation can play a role in such circumstances. When government-to-government cooperation was at an impasse, Ford acted as a facilitator and trust-builder. It had the freedom, resources, and courage to help solve the problem.

## Public-Private Cooperation

Still, support from US leaders was critical. The most prominent advocate is Sen. Patrick Leahy of Vermont, who used evidence from the 10-80 Committee-Hatfield dioxin hotspot studies to push for US involvement in environmental remediation and aid to Agent Orange victims. His seniority in the Senate led him to spearhead these initiatives, and in 2015 he [said](#) that the United States had "a moral obligation to do something about [the Agent Orange legacy]."

Tim Rieser, Leahy's foreign policy advisor, and Michael W. Marine, US ambassador to Vietnam from 2004 to 2007, led the effort to arrange funding on the ground. Having witnessed first-hand the damages of Agent Orange in Vietnam and talked to Vietnamese representatives, they were determined to bring about joint US-Vietnam actions in mitigating consequences of dioxin and helping impacted Vietnamese.

Without such leadership, US assistance to Agent Orange victims would not have been possible.

[Charles Bailey](#) worked closely with Vice Foreign Minister Le Van Bang and his colleagues, Dr. Le Ke Son (head of the Vietnam government's coordinating committee on Agent Orange), as well as Rieser, Marine, subsequent US ambassadors, and the Dialogue Group to ensure continuing progress. Last July, at the launch of the [Vietnamese Wartime Accounting Initiative](#), Deputy Minister of Defense and Senior Lt. General Hoang Xuan Chien [thanked](#) the Ford Foundation, and President Nguyen Xuan Phuc expressed [appreciation](#) for the "practical support from philanthropists at home and abroad" in his letter to Vietnam's Agent Orange victims on Agent Orange Awareness Day.

## What's Next

Problems remain. USAID-sponsored activities remain limited and do not reach all potential victims inside or outside priority provinces. Many victims and advocates are [bitter](#) that the US government recognizes dioxin-related illnesses suffered by American war veterans but not among Vietnamese. A

recent [lawsuit](#) against former American Agent Orange producers is a reminder that it is critical to pay more attention to victims' needs and concerns. Also, the Agent Orange legacy in Laos and Cambodia remains [unaddressed](#). The lessons from US-Vietnam cooperation in this regard could inform future US efforts in helping these two countries mitigate dioxin consequences.

Overcoming sensitivities will not be easy, but while the same was true two decades ago, Hanoi and Washington now have even greater incentives to remove barriers to closer bilateral relations. A [victim-centered approach](#) requiring US direct assistance to the victims and recognition of their plight will not only address the Agent Orange issue and promote justice for the victims but can also increase confidence and cooperation between Vietnam and the United States.

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