

Improving the livelihoods of marginalised groups in Vietnam

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SOCIAL



ECONOMIC



CULTURAL



ENVIRONMENTAL



POLITICAL



TRAINING

SUMMARY

How do particularly vulnerable groups in Vietnam strive to make a meaningful and sustainable living under rapidly changing economic, social, cultural, and environmental circumstances? Dr Christine Bonnin studied this question while living with ethnic minority (Hmong and Yao) communities in Vietnam's mountainous border region with China. By being immersed in these communities, she has gained an emic understanding of the challenges they face and how they cope with these pressures.

Her research and experience informed the project design and research approach of the Aus4Equality programme of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs.

The programme seeks to promote gender equality, the economic empowerment of ethnic minority women in Vietnam, and more socially inclusive policies in the agriculture and tourism sectors. She is also involved in projects funded by Irish Aid in Vietnam, taking a participatory approach to assessing climate change risk and resilience among ethnic minority communities. This enables the development of joint educational and research initiatives between UCD and partner universities in Vietnam. Both programmes support communities' ability to communicate their needs to decision-makers and ensures that climate change planning is locally informed.

RESEARCH DESCRIPTION

Vietnam is widely hailed as an economic success story of the transition from a centrally planned to a socialist-orientated market economy. Due to market integration and globalisation, the economic environment is rapidly changing. It has been a middle-income country since the late 2000s, with sustained economic growth and GDP. However, these achievements are spatially and socially uneven. There is social and economic marginalisation of some of the country's 53 officially classified ethnic minority groups, and the gap between those groups and the ethnic majority continues and is widening in some cases. Ethnic minority women and girls face even more limited access to education, productive assets like land, and livelihood opportunities. Additionally, Vietnam is currently predicted to be one of the countries most severely affected by climate change.

Over the last 15 years, Dr Bonnin has used a research methodology called 'ethnography' to learn about Hmong and Yao ethnic minority communities who live in the border region with China. She spends time living with and talking to people, to get a deep understanding of their social life and culture. Her research focuses on understanding local approaches to livelihoods, food security, small-scale markets, and cross-border trading, with an emphasis on gendered aspects.



Dr Christine Bonnin

"I am inspired by the people I work with and by the incredible things they do with their lives in very challenging circumstances. It frustrates me when they are being stereotyped and misunderstood, and I want to contribute to promoting a more positive and respectful attitude towards ethnic minority people."

She finds that ethnic minority residents navigate, rework, contest and appropriate specific facets of identity, modernity, market integration and nation-state building to create resilient life-worlds and everyday livelihoods. Her research also shows that although women are responsible for everyday household food provisioning, they are being pushed out of decision-making on food production due to interventions and services that are more accessible to men. However, women's innovative market activities have created new avenues for income generation that are vital to purchasing agricultural technologies. Food security concerns remain crucial due to land squeezes, climate change and limited off-farm opportunities, while political-economic processes are impacting household gender dynamics.

Her collaborators at UCD, Dr Ainhoa Gonzalez del Campo and Dr Eoin O'Mahony, supported the Irish Aid projects on the development of digital mapping and analytical skills for development studies and climate change applications. In Vietnam, she works with Hanoi University, Thai Nguyen University of Agriculture and Forestry, and the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT), and her work also led to establishing collaborations in Eduardo Mondelane University and Lúrio University in Mozambique.

"A lot of my (women) friends in Vietnam who work as trekking guides and homestay operators were employed by hotels or tourism companies and used to get paid poorly. They were being taken advantage of and they felt like they were locked out.

They figured out how to use technologies such as Facebook, social media, cell phones, to communicate directly with the tourists instead. At first, they started up informally, on their own. Now, some of them have organised, and one group runs a very successful social enterprise, which is owned and operated by Hmong women."

Rice fields in Lao Cai province, Vietnam



RESEARCH IMPACT

Social, economic, cultural and political impacts through the GREAT program for women

Based on her research findings on gender and ethnic minority livelihoods in upland northern Vietnam, Dr Bonnin was invited by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to review and contribute to the design of a programme called *Aus4Equality Gender-Responsive Equitable Agriculture and Tourism (GREAT)*. Later, she also contributed as the project's Ethnic Minority and Research Adviser.

The programme is planned for 2017-2021 and provides support of over \$AUS33 million dollars. It aims to empower women in Vietnam to better engage with agriculture and the tourism markets, to enhance women's voices in decision-making, to promote partnerships with the private sector, and support more inclusive government policies and services. More specifically, the programme will:

- Impact the lives of 10% of the total adult female population in the two target provinces
- Improve the incomes of 40,000 self-employed women farmers and small entrepreneurs
- Contribute to the creation of 4,000 full-time equivalent positions for women in fulfilling and safe-waged employment
- Increase the self-reported confidence, enthusiasm and self-esteem of 80% of women beneficiaries
- Increase women's profile and roles in policy, management and strategic decision-making and allocation in the agriculture and tourism market sectors

Dr. Christine Bonnin and her Hmong research assistant having lunch with friends at a canteen in Lao Cai province.



Social, environmental, and training impacts through the Irish Aid programme

Dr Bonnin's research also led to two projects with Irish Aid in Vietnam, under the *Irish Aid's Vietnam Ireland Bilateral Exchange Program (VIBE)*, planned for 2017-2022. She is developing a more bottom-up and holistic understanding of climate change challenges and resilience in the northern uplands of Vietnam. As part of this project, there is an emphasis on enabling universities in Vietnam, students, governments, and communities to adapt an approach which is more participatory and focused on people's experiences, understandings, and adaptive strategies. The aim is to inform and ensure the relevance of climate change mitigation planning.

Adopting a people-focussed and participatory approach to investigating climate change vulnerabilities and resilience in upland ethnic minority communities recognises the important social and environmental contexts of climate change. For instance, local adaptation and resilience approaches, often based on indigenous environmental knowledge, are not well understood, and may therefore be undermined through well-meaning interventions. By working closely with local people and governments, this project ensures that research findings and outputs (e.g. participatory community mapping) can be used by communities themselves to help bolster their requests for needed supports. It will also help to promote climate change mitigation planning based on local realities and requirements.

Fieldwork with ethnic minorities through joint student research projects builds cross-cultural understanding and global engagement. As of February 2020, 40 masters and undergraduate students have co-designed and carried out joint field-based research on various topics relating to upland development in Vietnam and Hanoi city's urban environment – research findings developed into 11 theses. It is especially important for challenging negative stereotypes that are pervasive in Vietnamese society regarding ethnic minority groups. The social inclusion of ethnic minority students in the research activities to ensure that they are driving the research in their own communities is a key priority of the project. It strengthens the visibility of ethnic minorities in academic research and higher education in Vietnam. The development of new university networks within Vietnam between the rural northern mountainous region and the capital city Hanoi have also been established. This supports a model of universities acting as development partners with the towns and cities where they are based (Irish Aid 2017).

Geographic Information Systems (GIS), which allows for the rapid study and use of spatial information for sustainable development and climate change applications are increasingly important skills for students in these areas of study. With their ability to examine and communicate geographic information, they have the capacity to reveal new insights, better inform decisions and make decision-making a more participative and transparent process. One of the project's activities included the design and delivery of an online GIS module for development studies applications. Hanoi University staff participated in a GIS training-of-trainers capacity building workshop at UCD. As a result, a GIS module was formally incorporated into the BA programme at Hanoi University for development studies students. More than 70 students have participated in the GIS for development module. The module is currently being adapted for climate change applications and will also be offered at Thai Nguyen University. These educational activities support the approach of preparing university students for careers or actions in sustainable development.

Real-world career experience for university students is supported through internships for UCD and Vietnam partner university students. Qualified UCD postgraduate students have an opportunity to undertake university teaching internships at Hanoi University and Thai Nguyen University to support undergraduate GIS learning. Hanoi University and Thai Nguyen University students who have successfully completed GIS training have an opportunity to undertake a research assistant internship at the project's partnering research institution, the International Centre for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT).

Additional scholarly academic sharing and learning

- Thus far, two co-authored academic journal articles and one book chapter linked to the project have been prepared.
- To date, two student-led conferences and one international conference on the internationalisation of education were hosted at Hanoi University, UCD's partner university.
- An additional impact is expected by sharing the experience and knowledge through new connections with universities in Mozambique. Based on the success of the projects in Vietnam, DFA/Irish Embassy supported a scoping visit from a UCD Geography to Mozambique in December 2019, to investigate the possibilities of working together with prospective partners on related projects in Mozambique. Dr Bonnin is planning to host a workshop in UCD, bringing together partners from Vietnam and Mozambique, to support further collaborative research on livelihoods and climate change.

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Hanoi, 2017. UCD School of Geography and Hanoi University's Faculty of International Studies in Vietnam awarded funding through DFA/Irish Aid's Vietnam Ireland Bilateral Exchange Programme (VIBE). From right: Ambassador of Ireland Cait Moran, Ireland's Minister for Education Richard Bruton, Minister Phung Xuan Nha, Hanoi University's President Nguyen Van-Trao, and Dr. Christine Bonnin. Photo courtesy: Embassy of Ireland in Vietnam.

Dr Christine Bonnin and Dr Eoin O'Mahony from UCD School of Geography debriefing with the Minister of State for the Diaspora and International Development, the Director of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Africa, and the Ambassador for Ireland during a scoping visit in Mozambique.

