

Agent Orange and 'Compassion Houses'



GLOBAL COMMUNITY
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At first glance the Ba Long Valley is a beautiful place, a scoop of deep earth covered in forest, traditional houses on stilts built by ethnic minority communities shaded by banana trees.

But like many areas of Quang Tri province in central Vietnam it suffered a violent past during the 'American War' in the 1960s and 1970s.

Elders remember living in caves as American warplanes bombed and virtually defoliated the entire region, liberally using, among other weapons, the devastating Agent Orange.

The foliage has quickly regenerated, hiding many of the scars of war, but longer lasting problems remain. Many Montagnard families survive on less than the equivalent of 25 dollars per month and, at best, share homes with relatives.

The Global Community Service Foundation, a non governmental organization headquartered in Washington, has worked in the region for many years, and among its projects is one to provide what it calls "compassion houses" for needy families.

In the village of Ba Rau one such home is nearing completion. It is a simple structure with a concrete framework which will eventually resemble a traditional home. In western terms the cost of the entire home is minimal, around \$1,500.



A compassion house under construction and the new occupants.
Photo: Ray Wilkinson



A traditional ethnic family home.
Photo: Ray Wilkinson

Pa Muong, his wife and four children are happy to pose outside their new home. They have been living next door in his brother's house and they survive by growing cassava, a local root crop.

"We are going from no house to our own home," he said. "When you have a home you can do anything."

There is a long waiting list of hundreds for such homes (GCSF has built around 30 of them) and to qualify at least one member of the family suffers some kind of disability. In this case, one of the sons is physically and mentally disabled, the after effects of Agent Orange, according to local officials.

It is only been in the last few years that the effects of the defoliant have been publicly recognized and it has affected untold numbers of both American servicemen who operated in defoliated regions, and more widely, Vietnamese citizens living there.

One of the most terrifying effects is that the effects can strike randomly, affecting one member of a family, but not others, and emerging years later.

"This boy is 20 years old," says Hu Thi Thanh, chairwoman of the local people's council, as she pointed to the disabled youngster. "Why now, so long after the war? Maybe this is just the beginning. Maybe the real tragedy has just started."