

**VIETNAM**



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**Rural and Indigenous Women  
Combating Disasters  
and Unmasking False Climate Solutions**

# Vietnam: Rural and indigenous women combating disasters and unmasking false climate solutions

*This country brief is based on the Climate Justice Feminist Participatory Action Research (CJ FPAR) journey of the women in Quang Nam province from 2019 to 2021. The Centre for Social Research and Development (CSR), a women-led organisation working with rural communities threatened by climate crises took the FPAR journey together with Co Tu women in A Lua and A So villages and the Kinh women in Dai Hong commune focusing on the impacts of climate crises and hydropower project on women.*



## Vietnam at a glance

Vietnam is a lower-middle-income country located on the Indochina peninsula in Southeast Asia. The country's diverse topography consists of hills, mountains, deltas, coastline and continental shelf making it vulnerable to various natural calamities. Most of its 1,800 mile-long coastline is facing the East Sea and witnessing tropical storms and typhoons traverse every year. The mountainous far north is prone to landslides and flash flooding, while the flat Mekong Delta in the deep south is among the most vulnerable regions in the world to the rising sea level. The Mekong Delta's vulnerability is an especially significant problem due to its economic vitality. According to the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the fertile region produces roughly 70 per cent of Vietnam's agricultural products, including around 55 per cent of rice and 70 per cent of all aquaculture. Most of these products are exported, and in 2017 agricultural exports earned Vietnam USD 37 billion, nearly 17 per cent of its total domestic production.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, many provinces and cities in Vietnam have been affected by natural disasters such as typhoons, intense heat, floods, droughts and harsh climates, causing great damage to human lives as well as property. The sectors that are vulnerable to climate change include agriculture, water resources and health, affecting most the poor including rural and indigenous women.

Recognising its vulnerability to the climate crisis, Vietnam is a signatory to and has ratified many international agendas such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), including the Kyoto Protocol (KP) and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. In fact, Vietnam is the ninth country to submit its updated Nationally Determined Contribution<sup>2</sup> (NDC) to the UNFCCC.

<sup>1</sup>New climate change report highlights grave dangers for Vietnam (2018). Retrieved from <https://news.mongabay.com/2018/10/new-climate-change-report-highlights-grave-dangers-for-vietnam/>

<sup>2</sup>Socialist Republic of Vietnam Updated Nationally Determined Contribution (2020). Retrieved from [https://www4.unfccc.int/sites/ndcstaging/PublishedDocuments/Viet%20Nam%20First/Viet%20Nam\\_NDC\\_2020\\_Eng.pdf](https://www4.unfccc.int/sites/ndcstaging/PublishedDocuments/Viet%20Nam%20First/Viet%20Nam_NDC_2020_Eng.pdf)

## Co Tu and Kinh women and the NDC

Vietnam submitted its updated Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) in line with its commitment to the Paris Agreement in 2020. The updated NDC features stronger mitigation and adaptation commitments, including economy-wide mitigation measures that span energy, agriculture, waste, land use change and forestry, and industrial sectors. Vietnam commits to decrease emissions from industrial processes by 27 per cent by replacing construction materials.



Vietnam's updated NDC also includes robust adaptation components. The national climate plan identifies targets and pathways to improve adaptive capacity, enhance resilience and reduce risks caused by climate change. The updated NDC is directly linked to the National Adaptation Plan (NAP), and includes loss and damage, health, gender equality and child protection. In addition to the strengthened mitigation and adaptation components, the updated NDC features new elements and significantly improves the means of implementation.



Although the document mentions gender and climate change, there is no concrete vision on how gender issues will be integrated into climate-related policy frameworks. The gender equality content in the NDC document only briefly compares the role of men and women and the differentiated impacts of the climate crises on women. The role of hydroelectricity was also not highlighted in the NDC report, even in the climate change adaptation component. While having gender equality referenced in the NDC is an important step, the more critical step is the implementation across mitigation and adaptation initiatives to actually make a difference in rural and indigenous women's lives.

The Co Tu and Kinh women have high levels of exposure and vulnerability as marginalised groups living in poverty; they are often at risk from extreme weather conditions; mainly engaged in agriculture and rely on nature for food and income; and patriarchal social and cultural norms put them at an even greater disadvantage. While these impacts are all considered in Vietnam's NDC, the specific impacts of hydropower projects on women and their communities are not mentioned and addressed in the NDC report.



For the Co Tu women in A Lua and A So villages and the Kinh women in Dai Hong commune who have lived in agricultural communities for their whole lifetime and are heavily dependent on the environment, climate change makes it difficult to survive, and this is even made harder with the challenges brought upon by the false climate solutions including the hydropower plant projects.



## Co Tu and Kinh women's realities amid the climate catastrophe

The mountainous Quang Nam province in Central Vietnam is home to the Co Tu and Kinh women groups whose main source of income is from agricultural production. This region suffers from frequent droughts, storms, floods and unpredictable cold spells that damage their homes and other infrastructure, and pose dangers to their health along with their crops and animals. Quang Nam province is facing a higher poverty rate than the rest of the country. With the climate induced damages, their forest products are increasingly scarce, further impacting their survival.

Rural and indigenous women are particularly hard hit by the climate crisis' impacts on their health, living conditions and livelihoods. To begin with, Co Tu and Kinh women do not have decision-making power in their homes and communities as they are thrust into the culturally-determined role of homemakers at a very early age. Very limited opportunities for formal

education and being saddled with a lot of unpaid care work for the family, participation in social activities and community life for the women is almost nil. Speaking only their local language, many women in the villages do not understand the information provided by the government, especially on weather and disaster updates, which are provided in the national language of Vietnam. Women's mobility is also severely restricted as they have to rely heavily on men who know how to drive motorcycles, the main means of transportation for the communities. Severe weather conditions coupled with cultural and social norms that deprive women from access to information and opportunities for education and mobility make them even more vulnerable in the face of climate crises.

The Co Tu and Kinh peoples are also among the communities severely impacted by the government's hydropower projects. Through the CJ FPAR journey, the women were able to highlight their particular story and a situation where a 'clean energy initiative' promoted by the government is negatively impacting their already-marginalised communities. Hydropower is classified as renewable energy with relatively low emissions, but the rapid construction of hydropower plants often harms communities, brings serious negative impacts to the peoples and destroys the environment.



Hydropower projects in the Vu Gia River that started in 2009 have had devastating effects on Quang Nam province. In the case of the A Vuong hydropower plant, A Lua and A So villages are used as resettlement areas for the displaced communities, while Dai Hong commune is downstream of the hydropower plant catchment.

The Co Tu and Kinh women said that since the hydropower plant started operating, they have experienced landslides and sedimentation of sand and gravel into the rivers, which affected their agricultural production to the point where they had to move and abandon their crops. Fish populations decreased and many other aquatic species disappeared when the river's water levels were much lower than before. The hydropower plant also has every resident living downstream in constant anxiety especially when the rainy season comes because they do not know when the dams would release water and bring flash floods.



*CJ FPAR women designing a community based early warning system matrix.*

## Rural and indigenous women taking action

The FPAR journey of the Co Tu and Kinh women was meaningful and rewarding on many levels. Before the FPAR, women were able to attend village meetings only when the men did not want to attend. And for meetings convened by hydropower companies and local authorities to discuss relocation and compensation, women did not have a voice. Through the FPAR, women are able to understand the impacts of climate crises and the hydropower project on their lives and livelihoods. Despite many challenges, the women groups are able to advocate and coordinate with local authorities and other actors to facilitate conversations in the communities regarding climate crises and the impacts of hydropower projects.

Women groups in A Lua and A So villages and Dai Hong commune are able to analyse their situation and identify the problems they face. FPAR has created a safe space to exchange their views, experiences, visions and proposals to build resilience by increasing their knowledge about climate change. Women's leadership was instrumental in bringing the community members together in training courses that led to the development of disaster maps, formation of disaster response teams, and a decentralised and localised early warning system (EWS) that communities use to warn people of possible flooding, mudflow and other disasters. In order to raise the collective response capability, the communities found it necessary to invest in relevant equipment, especially life jackets and boats. A Lua villagers offered solutions related to infrastructure upgrade and renovation while Dai Hong commune saw the importance of providing swimming skills training and emergency drills.



*FPAR women exercising social and resource mapping of their villages.*

Climate change adaptation and resilience as well as recovery from disasters is closely linked to the communities' economic conditions. Women are leading the development of sustainable livelihoods plans for their respective communities. In A Lua village, this means the promotion and cultivation of climate resilient indigenous rice varieties; while for A So village, the women are proposing to revert to native livestock and plants that adapt to the local topography and changing climate.



## What do we want?

The rural and indigenous women in A Lua and A So Villages and Dai Hong commune embarked on the FPAR journey with the hopes of being able to analyse their situations and suggest solutions in the face of the climate crisis and the exacerbation from hydropower development. The FPAR was a powerful experience that accompanied the Co Tu and Kinh women in their journey towards self-realisation and bolder actions to assert their rights.

Realising that development must never be at the expense of the safety, livelihoods and welfare of the peoples, the women put forward their demands to different actors at different levels.

**At the local level,** district and provincial governments must:



Work with women's groups in the villages to integrate peoples' traditional knowledge and needs in the design, implementation and monitoring of policies and projects that build climate resilience;



Provide resources to: (a) upgrade the local early warning systems, including strengthening peoples' capacities to enhance disaster preparedness especially during the flood season; and (b) support local communities' sustainable agricultural livelihood models, prioritising the use of indigenous animals and plants;



Ensure that the communities are supported in accessing the National Target Programme on Sustainable Poverty Reduction (NTP-SPR) which supposedly aims to support vulnerable communities.

**At the national level,** the government of Vietnam must:



Take concrete measures to ensure the realisation of gender equality in the NDC and other actions and programmes to tackle climate crises;



Ensure that communities at risk from the impacts of climate change are adequately supported in their adaptation plans. Strengthen disaster preparedness including through skills development, purchase of new equipment, as well as maintenance and upgrade of the existing infrastructure;



Ensure that private actors uphold the rights of rural and indigenous communities, and conduct gender and environmental impact assessments for any development projects. Corporations in violation of the peoples' rights to land, territories and natural resources must provide compensation and remedies.

**Non-governmental organisations and social movements,** must strengthen solidarity and support for the struggles and resistance of rural and indigenous women by amplifying their voices to demand feminist climate justice.



### **About APWLD**

The Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) is the region's leading network of feminist and women's rights organisations and individual activists. For 35 years, we have been carrying out advocacy, activism and movement-building to advance women's human rights and Development Justice. APWLD worked with and supported seven partner organisations from seven countries to conduct a Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) between 2019 and 2021. This FPAR is part of APWLD's Climate Justice Programme.

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