

Effects of Warfare on Social Environments: The Exposure of Vietnamese Veterans to Agent Orange and Other Herbicides

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1. Introduction

The concern about the post-warfare environmental effects began already during the American war in Vietnam, during which the U.S military sprayed 79 million litres of herbicides and defoliants over a large area of South Vietnam. *The Committee on the Assessment of Wartime Exposure to Herbicides in Vietnam, National Academy of Science's Institute of Medicine (IOM)*, issued some reports on the exposure of American veterans to Agent Orange and other herbicides used in Vietnam. However, there have been only a few researchers working on the environmental effects caused by these chemicals. Vietnam's media had debates on the effects of the war for the environment, especially by the already mentioned chemical weapons. Based on collecting articles about this topic on Vietnam's media, especially articles and documentary films by Minh Chuyên, a well-known Vietnamese journalist and writer, this paper shows that chemical weapons like Agent Orange and other herbicides not only destroyed and intoxicated environment and rural population in the South but also damaged the health and future of an entire generation of Vietnamese combatants.

What are the environmental effects of chemical warfare? What harm Agent Orange and other herbicides like Agent White and Agent Blue inflicted on American and Vietnamese soldiers and on the rural and urban population? Ironically, this important issue had until recently mainly been researched for the natural environment and for American soldiers. Already in 1974, the *National Research Council* had conducted a study about the effects of herbicides in South Vietnam. In 1982, the *Office of Air Force History* also studied the involvement of the American Air Force in the spraying from 1961 until 1971. In the same year, 1982, Paul Frederick Cecil published *Herbicidal Warfare: The Ranch Hand Project in Vietnam*. The *History Institute of Medicine* had also evaluated the exposure of

American veterans to Agent Orange and other herbicides in 1997 and 2003.¹ The usage extent and patterns of toxic agents as well as the exposures of ground troops was researched by some authors as Stellman and Young et al.² The problem however is: Not only American veterans, both Air Force and ground troops, but also Vietnamese people, including veterans and non-combatants, were effected by spraying, even to a far higher degree than American soldiers. However, their interests were advocated not sufficiently in the beginning, and there was not enough research to base their claims on scientific evidence. Therefore, this paper tries to fill a gap: it focuses on the effects of chemical warfare on Vietnamese veterans, combatants who originated from Northern Vietnam, specifically through analysing Minh Chuyên's stories.

This paper mainly uses text analysis and participant observation methods as well as in-depth interviews. Most of the materials and data were collated from reports or articles appearing in Vietnamese journals and newspapers, especially articles and books written by Minh Chuyên. One in-depth interview was conducted with the writer, Minh Chuyên himself who focused in his journalistic work on the fate of combatants during the post-war times.

My paper depicts how the effects of the Vietnam War were discussed in Vietnam's media, and analyses the influence of the American war on the further lives of veterans through the works of Minh Chuyên. The war greatly impacted Vietnam's natural and social environments. The toxins sprayed during the war destroyed the forests, and destroyed health and lives of those soldiers who fought often for years on the Southern battle-fields.

- 1 Institute of Medicine (1997): Characterizing Exposure of Veterans to Agent Orange and Other Herbicides Used in Vietnam: Scientific Considerations Regarding a Request for Proposals for Research. Washington. Institute of Medicine (2003): Characterizing Exposure of Veterans to Agent Orange and Other Herbicides Used in Vietnam. Washington.
- 2 Stellman, J. M./Stellman, S. D./ Christian, R./Weber, R./Tomasallo, C. (2003): The Extent and Patterns of Usage of Agent Orange and Other Herbicides in Vietnam. In: Nature 422. 681–687. Young, A. L./Giesy, J. P./Jones, P. D. (2004): Environmental Fate and Bioavailability of Agent Orange and its Associated Dioxin during the Vietnam War. In: Environmental Science & Pollution Research 11. 359.

2. Theoretical background

This section aims to provide the readers with the theoretical background that this paper based on – *agenda setting theory*. This theory describes a very important function of media – the ability to tell us what issues are important. As far back as 1922, the newspaper columnist Walter Lippman was concerned that the media had the power to present images to the public. The theory was further developed when McCombs and Shaw investigated the American presidential campaigns in 1968, 1972 and 1976.³ In their research conducted in 1968 they focused on two elements: awareness and information. They concluded that mass media exerted a significant influence on what voters considered to be the major issues of the election campaign. The core assumption of agenda setting is the creation of public awareness and concern of salient issues by the news media. According to this theory, media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other ones. One of the most critical aspects in the concept of an agenda setting role of mass communication is the time frame for this phenomenon. In addition, different media have a different agenda setting potential. Bernard Cohen stated

“The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about.”⁴

Agenda setting occurs through a cognitive process known as “accessibility.”⁵ Accessibility implies that the more frequently and prominently the news media cover an issue, the more the issue becomes accessible in audiences’ memories. When respondents are asked to rate the most important problems facing a country, they answer by repeating those news issue which are the most accessible in their memories typically the same issue the news media focused on the most. The agenda setting effect is not the result of receiving one or a few messages but is due to the aggregate impact of a very large number of messages, each of which have a different

3 McCombs, M. E./Shaw, D. L. (1972): The Agenda-Setting Function of Mass Media. In: Public Opinion Quarterly 36. 176–187. Shaw, D. L./McCombs, M. (1977): The Emergence of American Political Issues: The Agenda-Setting Function of the Press. St. Paul.

4 Cohen, B. (1963): The Press and Foreign Policy. New York.

5 Iyengar, S. (1990): The Accessibility Bias in Politics: Television News and Public Opinion. In: International Journal of Public Opinion Research 2. 1–15.

content but all of which deal with the same general issue.⁶ Mass-media coverage in general and agenda setting also has a powerful impact on what individuals think that other people are thinking,⁷ and hence they tend to allocate more importance to issues that have been extensively covered by mass media. In addition, media also influence policymakers as government officials and politicians take the amount of media attention given to an issue as an indirect expression of public interest in the issue.⁸ As agenda setting theory has been further developed, scholars recently point out so called second-level and third-level agenda setting. The most recent agenda setting studies explore “the extent to which the news media can transfer the salience of relationships among a set of elements to the public.”⁹ That is, researchers assume that the media can not only influence the salience of certain topics in public agenda, but they can also influence how the public relate these topics to one another. Based on that, Guo, Vu and McCombs bring up a new theoretical model called *network agenda setting* which they also refer to as the third-level agenda setting. This model shows that “the news media can bundle sets of objects or attributes and make these bundles of elements salient in the public's mind simultaneously.”¹⁰

Hence, the most import point of this theory is that it describes a very powerful influence of mass media – the ability to inform the audience which issues are important. The effects of herbicidal warfare on the natural environment and on Vietnamese combatants and non-combatants are mainly known because of their appearance in Vietnamese newspapers, and dependence on the emphasis with which the media report about the effects Agent Orange on veterans and civilians and the entire environment.

6 Rogers, E. M./Dearing, J. W. (1988): Agenda-Setting Research: Where has it been? Where is it going? In: Anderson, J. A. (Ed.): *Communication Yearbook 11*. 555–594.

7 Noelle-Neumann, E. (1977): Turbulences in the Climate of Opinion: Methodological Applications of the Spiral of Silence Theory. In: *Public Opinion Quarterly* 41. 143–158.

8 Rogers/Dearing (1988).

9 McCombs, Maxwell E./Shaw, Donald L./Weaver, David H. (2014): New Directions in Agenda-Setting Theory and Research. In: *Mass Communication & Society* 17. 781–802.

10 Guo, Lei/Vu, Hong Tien/McCombs, Maxwell E. (2012): An Expanded Perspective on Agenda-Setting Effects. Exploring the Third Level of Agenda Setting. Una extensión de la perspectiva de los efectos de la Agenda Setting . Explorando el tercer nivel de la Agenda setting. In: *Revista de Comunicación* 11. 51–68.

3. The Environmental Effects of Herbicidal Warfare

“For ten years (1961 to 1971), the US military sprayed about 80 million litres of toxic chemicals; 61 percent of which were Agent Orange (containing 366 kg of dioxin) down to 26,000 villages, with an area of over 3.06 million ha (86 percent of area sprayed more than 2 times, 11 percent of area sprayed more than 10 times). Nearly a quarter of South Vietnam’s area was sprayed with Agent Orange /dioxin; about 86 percent of the toxic spray sprayed in the dense forest, the remaining 14 percent went down to the orchard farms.”¹¹

The US military conducted in Vietnam the largest chemical war in world history so far and gave rise to the concept of *ecocide*, the deliberate destruction of the environment as a military strategy. The US Army used Agent Orange during the Vietnam War to defoliate the forests and to “neutralize the camouflage of the Viet Cong;” it contained one of the most toxic substances at all, a dioxin (TCCD) in a concentration of 3 to 4 mg/l. As large quantities of TCCD and other toxic chemicals were sprayed in high concentration and repeatedly, the damage had not only the short-term effect of killing plants and animals; the environment in Vietnam’s South was polluted for a long time, the entire natural ecosystem was severely devastated. According to *The Bertrand Russel Tribunal*, as well as the *1970 Paris Conference*, both accused the US of chemical warfare in Vietnam with disastrous results: “the war destroyed the environment, destroyed the ecosystems and the people.”

Before 1956, forest land in South Vietnam was 10.3 million ha, accounting for 60 percent of its total area. Especially the Mid-Central region, the Central Highlands, the Southeast, and coastal mangrove areas were densely wooded. During the *Ranch Hand campaign*, the Southern inland forests were targeted the heaviest, accounting for 86 percent of the total number of spray missions. The mission focused on the forests from the high mountains to the coastal lowlands, from wet areas to dry areas, stretching from the 17th parallel to Cà Mau.

The dioxin in Agent Orange contaminated a large area of South Vietnam. 73,000 cubic meters of soil and sediment were polluted with dioxin at Đà Nẵng Airport alone. Traces of dioxin can still be found in the soil of the most heavily contaminated areas – in the so called 25 *hot spots* where dioxin has a terrible impact on the environment and the local population in particular. Research conducted at some *hot spots* such as A Sho airport

11 National People's Defense Review (2011).

(Thừa Thiên – Huế), Đà Nẵng, and Biên Hòa shows that dioxin continues to affect the health of people living in these areas.

As a preliminary result, more than 3.3 million ha of natural land was sprayed with toxic substances (with a width of about 1,000 m), in which domestic forests were severely impacted at varying degrees, resulting in a loss of an estimate 100 million m³ of wood, especially in the South East region where over 50 percent of the natural area was damaged. However, War Zone D, War Zone C, Bờ Lời Forest, Củ Chi Forest etc. were not only sprayed with millions of litres of poisonous substance; they were also attacked with millions of tons of bombs and ammunition, leading to the de facto annihilation of areas such as Mᾶ Đà district (Đồng Nai province), Phú Bình, and Bù Gia Mập district (Bình Phước province).¹²

The consequences of American chemical warfare have also led to other environmental damage and biodiversity losses. The process of piling leaves has resulted in nutrient overflows, and 10 to 15 million bomb crates accounted for about 1 percent of South Vietnam's forest area, causing top-soil to overturn and promote soil washing. The consequence directly hinders forest restoration and causes negative impacts on watershed protection forests for 28 river basins, including:

- 16 basins with 30 percent of the basin area sprayed with poison;
- 10 basins have 30–50 percent of the basin area sprayed with poison;
- Two basins have over 50 percent of the basin area sprayed with poison.

Most of these watersheds have short rivers, complex terrain, many slopes, with direct currents flowing downstream. Typically, basins of Hương River, Thạch Hãn River, Hàn River, Thu Bồn River, Trà Khúc River, Côn River, Vệ River, Cầu River, and Ba River have been devastated by floods for years.¹³

Map 1 below gives an overview about the density of spraying of Agent Orange in South Vietnam. Toxic chemicals were utilized for warfare all over South Vietnam, from the 17th parallel to the Cà Mau cape, but the operation concentrated in areas of high military relevance such as McNamara fence area (Quảng Trị province), A Lưới (Thừa Thiên Huế province) Sa Thầy (Kon Tum province), Càn Giờ area (Hồ Chí Minh City) and Đồng

12 <https://www.maxreading.com/sach-hay/viet-nam-moi-truong-va-cuoc-song/hau-qu-a-cua-chien-tranh-hoa-hoc-doi-voi-rung-11353.html>.

13 <https://www.maxreading.com/sach-hay/viet-nam-moi-truong-va-cuoc-song/hau-qu-a-cua-chien-tranh-hoa-hoc-doi-voi-rung-11353.htm>.

Nai, Cà Mau. Herbicides sprayed in high concentrations not only destroyed the nutrients in the soil, making the soil barren, but under the conditions of tropical monsoon climate like in South Central Vietnam, the forest was very difficult to recover.

Map 1: Density of Agent Orange Sprayed in South Vietnam



Source: The Vietnam Association of Victims of Agent Orange/Dioxin (VAVA)

Millions of inland forests hectares and coastal mangroves were sprayed with Agent Orange many times. Immediately after the herbicides deployed in high concentrations for the first time, 10–20 percent of the plants belonging to the top floor (accounting for 40–50 percent of forest biomass) died. Consequently, the low-altitude climate was altered, as the humidity decreased, and the intensity of solar radiation increased, so that surviving young trees were also difficult to grow.

4. Warfare Impact on the Social Environment

The destruction done by the U.S military's spraying of deadly chemical herbicides containing the poison dioxin to the Vietnamese natural environment was disastrous. However, the social environmental effects of dioxin, the most common of which was Agent Orange, was another tragic legacy of the war.

“These chemicals exposed almost 5 million people, mostly civilians, to deadly consequences... The Vietnamese exposed to the chemical suffer from cancer, liver damage, pulmonary and heart diseases, defects to reproductive capacity, and skin and nervous disorders. Their children and grandchildren have severe physical deformities, mental and physical disabilities, diseases, and shortened life spans.”¹⁴

Therefore, this paper also deals with two social environmental effects of herbicidal warfare as there were depicted by Minh Chuyên in his articles: *Firstly*, Agent Orange deprived women who were young volunteers during the war of their motherhood. *Secondly*, it inflicted combatants with persistent suffering from the long-term consequences of exposure, chronic pain and horrific birth defects for children and grandchildren.

Firstly, Agent Orange denied many women who volunteered during the war the opportunity to give birth to children. The end of the war and the liberation of the South very often also terminated their youth. Back to their villages, partly because of the same age boyfriends became martyrs, partly due to sickness, injuries, malaria, and the effects of Agent Orange and other chemicals, affected women often became nuns in pagodas. Minh Chuyên has come up with his famous article *Vào chùa gặp lại* (Come to

14 Mirer, Jeanne/Cohn, Marjorie (2018): US Chemical Warfare: Agent Orange in Vietnam, Global Research. <http://vava.org.vn/us-chemical-warfare-agent-orange-in-vietnam.html>.

the Pagoda to Meet again) in which the fact that two districts (Kiên Xương and Tiên Hải in Thái Bình province) alone have more than 37 women who were female youth volunteers during wartime. During the interviews with him the question was raised to Minh Chuyên: “For Vietnamese women, family and children play an important role in their life, why did they come to the pagoda?” He replied:

“They entered the pagoda for some reason: (1) the war ended, they survived. However, most of their boyfriends were martyrs or passed away; (2) many people were infected with poison and did not want to give birth to children with disabilities, for example teratogenicity. (3) Because of their illnesses, they wanted to stay at the pagoda, praying for themselves, for their old teammates, friends, and to do charitable work. Many pagodas nowadays nourish children suffering from Agent Orange and old people who no one is taking refuge, such as the pagodas of the Minh and Đàm Thân nuns which nourish 10–15 children.”¹⁵

The article *Vào chùa gặp lại* (*Come to the Pagoda to Meet again*) tells the story of the nun Đàm Thân, who returned from the war severely disabled (62 percent disability). Đàm Thân thinks that her boyfriend is dead. She has a dream one night: hundreds of soldiers, youth volunteers, and other people without heads, legs, or arms are sitting like statues, listening to Sutras and occasionally bow down the head as if expecting people to pray for them, so she decides to become a nun to pray for her teammates.

But her boyfriend did not die, and one day he comes to the pagoda to find her, and begs her to leave the pagoda and go back to her family. Đàm Thân must tell her lover the secret that she has not revealed to anyone: due to sequelae of war, she cannot deliver babies. However, the story of Đàm Thân is not the only one about the misery of one women after the war. Many nuns among the more than 37 nuns in the two districts of Thái Bình share the same suffering, such as Ngọc Hân, Đàm Lộc, Nguyễn Thị Chiêm, Thích Đàm Nhuân and so on. Injured, infected with toxic chemicals, they are deprived of the right to be wife and mother. Minh Chuyên is the first journalist who has written stories about women who have suffered from the late effects of war and have become nuns. In the pagoda, they look for relief, pray for health and do good deeds.

The poet Phạm Tiến Duật writes:

“Reading the article ‘Come to the pagoda to meet again’ written by Minh Chuyên on newspaper *Văn nghệ* no. 1/1997 made me be sleeplessness. I

15 Interview with Minh Chuyên, 4th October 2017.

couldn't believe in my eyes. Less than two pages, Minh Chuyên has revived in me many flame years with so many lively personal circumstances, the great sacrifice of the youth generation for the independent cause and the reunion of the country. Only one of these writings has shown our writers that the topic of war is not old but also hot with great social significance.”¹⁶

More than 20 years later, on *Vnexpress*, the Vietnamese electronic newspaper with the largest readership, the article *The young volunteers who find peace in the door of the Buddha* refers to Minh Chuyên's writing.¹⁷

Secondly, another horrible late effect of the deployed toxic chemicals is that victims exposed to dioxin pass their health problems to the following generations. Very often, those exposed to Agent Orange have children and grandchildren born seriously ill and disabled. Minh Chuyên had a series of articles on the sequelae of Agent Orange for Vietnamese veterans, published in newspapers and collected in the books.¹⁸

He writes:

“The war is over, but the human suffering, the pain caused by the consequences of war in their body, remains forever. Only in Thái Bình, a small countryside in the lower delta of the Red River, there are 50,000 martyrs, and hundreds of thousands of people suffering from war consequences. There are consequences for three generations. This is the result of people who were infected with dioxin poisoning by the United States to the Southern battlefield. A kind of wound, without shrapnel, without bleeding, but persistent, painful and quietly has devastated their children's lives for several decades.”¹⁹

The family of Đặng Văn Minh in Tiền Hải district has two daughters, in their 20s but appearing as women in their 70s. Their eyes bulge out, the lips are torn, the skin is wrinkled, the head is big, the head is bold, and the tongue is always sticking out; people call them aliens. Mr. Minh has been raising his children for twenty years, but he has never heard them calling 'Daddy, Mummy' because they cannot speak. During the war, Đặng Văn Minh was in Quang Tri, Khe Sanh over 7 years, and poisoned there. Sometimes he wishes if he died there, his children weren't like that.

16 Minh Chuyên (1998), *Di họa chiến tranh* (War Sequelae), 288.

17 VnExpress (2017).

18 *Di họa chiến tranh* (War Sequelae), quyển 1 (vol. 1, 1997), quyển 2 (vol. 2, 1999), *Hậu chiến Việt Nam* (Post-war Vietnam), quyển 1 (vol. 1, 2005), quyển 2 (vol. 2, 2006), *Những linh hồn da cam* (Souls of Orange) quyển 1 (vol. 1, 2009), quyển 2 (vol. 2, 2010), etc

19 Minh Chuyên (1997), *Di họa chiến tranh* (War Sequelae), 21–22.

Đỗ Đức Thoát, a veteran in Thái Thụy district, was in the Quảng Nam/Đà Nẵng battlefield during the resistance against the Americans, and was heavily poisoned. “I couldn’t imagine that the American poison was so horrible”, he said: “if it only destroyed my body, I could suffer. But it infected my children; it was so hard for them.”²⁰ All four of his children suffered from his exposition to Agent Orange, of which two died at age 5, the youngest has four legs. Đỗ Đức Thoát passed away because of his intoxication.

Nguyễn Văn Thắng’s family in Thai Bình town has two children, the girl with black and bristly hair, like the fur of an animal. The son was born handicapped and died at the age of 7. Thắng fought on the battlefields of South Vietnam and Cambodia, where the United States sprayed toxic chemicals.

Nguyễn Văn Bầu in Tiền Hải district left the army after 10 years as a soldier on the Ninth road, Khe Sanh, but the war still followed him to the countryside that very far from the front. His first child died at birth. 3 more children died at the age 7, 9 and 10. After 10 years, he and his wife continued to have three children, and all of them were blind and deaf and passed away soon. He became crazy and begged everyone he met to help him to find his children.²¹

The family of veteran Lại Văn Hăng in Vũ Thư district has only one child but raise it in a cage. Minh Chuyên describes:

“When I stepped into the yard, I was amazed: the first scene caught my eye, a naked 20-year-old ‘girl’, clinging to the cage, buckling, shaking hands, pushing legs, screaming, like the gibbons swinging in the shed in the park. Sitting outside, a skinny woman, dry eyes, was waving hands to motion the girl to be quiet. That woman was Hoàng Thị Ngoãn, her mother.”²²

In response to the author's question: Why do you raise her in a cage, the mother cries and says otherwise she would have died a long time ago already. When Hà was young, they discovered that she had unusual signs. Hospital examination found that Hà's blood had a concentration of dioxin, exceeding the limits by more than 80 times. At the age of eight, she became 'wild'. Hà did not lie in bed, but crawled around everywhere. She crawled to the yard, to the lane, into the pond to drink water. At night, Hà

20 Minh Chuyên (1997), *Di họa chiến tranh* (War Sequelae), 26.

21 Minh Chuyên (1997), *Di họa chiến tranh* (War Sequelae). (“Nuốc mắt làng” (Tears of village)).

22 Minh Chuyên (2005), 113. (“Chiếc cùi trần gian” (The Cage on the earth)).

crawled out into the yard under the rain, even into the water tank. Hà ate anything that she could grasp: locusts, grasshoppers, worms, crickets, leaves, weeds, even green potato worms and caterpillars. “There wasn’t another way, my wife and I discussed and decided to make a sturdy bamboo cage and feed her there, so I could keep her and she could live until now,” Hà’s father says. He was a soldier who participated in the historic Ho Chi Minh Campaign, then went to help Laos, living in the forests of Muong Phin, Xieng Khouang and Chum fields. The Americans spread toxic chemicals by aircraft there. Four of the 9 members of his squad suffer from contamination by Agent Orange too. The ‘ghost’ of Agent Orange haunts their blood, pursues them to the villages, gnaws their bodies, and eats the ‘soul’ of their children. Some of them are insane, they live like sleepwalkers, some are afraid of the sunlight, all day long just laugh or cry in the dark, some have tumors in their whole body. It is even more tragic because innocent children are born from their blood.

Mr. Lê Văn L López from Hung Hà district, a veteran of the Tiên Phuoc battlefield in Quang Nam, had felt fortunate to return to his homeland after the war, as many of his comrades died. But he did not foresee the after effects of the war waiting ahead. His wife, a beautiful girl from the village, gave birth to his first child in 1977, a headless figure, with no legs but eyes. Seeing her baby, she screamed and fainted. She delivered another baby, but again gave birth to a monstrous shape. Each time when his wife delivered, Lê Văn L López quietly buried the child. After his wife’s sixth delivery, he became completely blind. They still hoped to have a healthy baby, and 7th, 8th, and 9th were born. He couldn’t see the newborn, but he heard his wife screaming, so he could imagine the freakish shape of the fetus. He cried, groped the corpse sack and has someone buried the children. The pain of losing 9 children drove his wife crazy. Meeting everyone, she asked “where are my children, give my children to me” and screamed to find children in the cemetery. After 2 years of treatment, she recovered from illness, and thought that the nine stillbirths were her fault. She decided to find him a healthy wife in 1995. Six months later, Lê Văn L López’s second wife became pregnant. The wife cried when giving birth, and the midwife said to him:

“The baby was like a cat, hairs wrapped around him, no eyes, nose or anything. Just born, it was not breathing then. It is said that you were genetically infected for the baby, it must be true.”²³

The second wife left him, and he intended to commit suicide because he thought he had lost everything. But his first wife returned, taking care of him. Even, to make him see again, she suggested to the hospital to donate one of her eyes to him. Of course the hospital could not do that, but he was deeply impressed by his wife's heart. He says:

“The image of 10 children could not be human, and my eyes have been submerged in the dark, many times I want to leave the world, but then love and faithfulness of my wife, the feeling of my comrades and neighbors are clinging to me, it warmed my life.”²⁴

Because of Agent Orange, many veterans have no children or disabled ones. Even more harrowing, the generation of the grandchildren is affected too. In some of his articles, Minh Chuyen writes about families which are poisoned for three consecutive generations, such as the families of Trần Ngọc Nghê, and Đỗ Văn Cử in Thái Bình. The soldiers did not cry on the battlefield, but now they cry for the disabled grandchildren.

“I'm sorry my dear grandson. Because of me, you must suffer the pain. Please sympathize for me. Grandpa went to fight the enemy, when the war over, grandparents gave birth to your father. Because I was infected with Agent Orange on the battlefield, your father was also mentally ill. I just thought that only grandpa and your father bear the consequences. I did not expect you to suffer as well,”²⁵

says Trần Ngọc Nghê to his grandson and cries. I raise the question to Minh Chuyên:

“As witness to the pain of Vietnamese veterans' families, to whom three generations have suffered from Agent Orange, do you see how can they tolerate and adapt to that situation?”

He replies:

“At first I thought how they could overcome. A father in my article said: Although peace was already there, but in my house there wasn't a night without war. Perhaps because of their fate, they have to suffer. There are families of three writhing children, they still have to raise, have to live up. Children live

23 Minh Chuyên (1997), 73. (“Mười lần sinh tử” (Ten births and deaths)).

24 Minh Chuyên (1997), 78. (“Mười lần sinh tử” (Ten births and deaths)).

25 Minh Chuyên (2005), 136. (“Ba đời nhiễm độc” (Three poisoned generation)).

in poverty, without medicine, and slowly die. So far, according to the statistics of the Association of Agent Orange, more than 200,000 children born in the first and the second generation died, and the characters in my articles, mostly died. For example, all children in *Tears of the village* are dead, and Hằng's daughter in *The cage on the earth* is still living in a cage.²⁶

One consolation for veterans exposed to Agent Orange is that relatives and villagers have absolutely no discrimination against them, but always are close and support them. In the article *Ten births and deaths*, the first wife of the veteran after 9 stillbirths even decides to find a new wife for her husband to deliver healthy children. When the second wife leaves him after another stillbirth with severe defects, the first wife returns to him, taking care of the blind husband, even offering him one her eyes. The Agent-Orange victim in the article *Tears of the village* can survive due to blood donations from the villagers and their day and night care. It did not save his seven children, but soothed the pain of his heart.

5. Conclusion

It is not easy to return from such heart-breaking narratives to a theory like agenda setting again. But even in this case, the theory gives valuable explanations for importance and impact of communication on public and policy makers, because Minh Chuyên's articles on Agent Orange victims set a new agenda for the discourse on the American War in Vietnam's society and politics.

Minh Chuyên published his first articles about the exposure of Vietnamese veterans to Agent Orange between 1975 and 1985. Prior to his publications, neither society nor government paid attention to this issue, or even cared for victims of Agent Orange. This changed with his articles: for example, after the publication of *War sequelae*, delegates told the National Assembly that some writers have addressed the issue. This affected social policy as well as public concern. Nowadays, almost all members of the Vietnamese society have joined activities to support victims of Agent Orange. Up to 2004, *Association of Victims of Agent Orange* was just established at national, provincial, district and wards level, deploying policies to support Agent Orange victims, then Vietnam Association for Vic-

26 . Interview with Minh Chuyên, 4th October 2017.

tims of Agent Orange/dioxin Foundation was founded in 2009. The poet Vũ Quần Phương told Minh Chuyên:

“Maybe you are one of the first to discover the Agent Orange victims, because after 20 years, your findings are just socially recognized.”

Answering the question why he just focuses on the post-war topic in his writing, Minh Chuyên says:

“My obsession is the fate of many unfortunate soldiers, although they have fought to defend the Fatherland. That motivated me throughout my life to write almost no topic other than the post-war, which includes chemical toxicity, war invalids, martyrs, disabled people, suffering people. I think it is the responsibility of the writer. If we do not reflect, how can society know the facts which remain in the reality of a part of the soldiers after the war Millions of people are suffering so much.”²⁷

Nowadays many policies to overcome the consequences of the war are promulgated by the Government of Vietnam.²⁸ The basic objective is to tackle the effects of toxic chemicals on environment and people by:

- decontamination of particularly hard-hit areas;
- social policy for poisoned persons and their relatives in so far as they participated in the resistance against the USA;
- a program of afforestation of 300,000 ha of fallow land and hilly areas, which are particularly contaminated.

The war is over, but its after effects persist and become social problems which require be resolved. The damage by chemical warfare on Vietnam's natural environment will take a very long time to overcome. But the impact on the social environment which the paper points out through analyzing the effects of toxic chemicals on veterans in Minh Chuyên's articles,

27 Interview with Minh Chuyên, 4th October 2017.

28 Decision No. 16 dated February 5, 2004 on Supporting for households with two or more people who unable to serve by themselves because of toxic chemicals; Decision No. 120 dated July 5, 2004 on Number of policies for resistance participants and their offspring affected by toxic chemicals used by the United States during the war; Decree No. 54 dated May 25, 2006 on Guiding conditions to serve as basis for considering and settling policies for resistance war participants infected with toxic chemicals and their offspring ... Especially, on June 1, 2012, the Prime Minister issued Decision 651 on The plan of action to overcome basically the consequences of toxic chemicals used by the US in the war in Vietnam until 2015 and orientations to 2020.

are another big issue that is demanding multi-faceted involvement to be surmounted.

Firstly, the participation of the Party and the State of Vietnam in order to adopt policies and monitor the implementation of social policies for veterans and their children should be further promoted.

Secondly, the United States, which sprayed toxic chemicals in Vietnam, should be held responsible for these actions. In the recent years, the US has donated some funding to overcome the consequences of Agent Orange/dioxin in Vietnam already. The aid has been increasing since 2007: 3 million USD per year (2007, 2009), 15 million USD (2010), 34 million USD for the detoxification of Đà Nẵng airport, which used to be the distribution center for Agent Orange during the war in Vietnam; 44 million USD to continue the handling of Agent Orange/Dioxin Hotspots (2012, 2013).²⁹ However, the funding is too small compared to the huge damage that the US military inflicted on the people of Vietnam. Moreover, the American supports focuses so far on solving environmental problems, while financial compensation, or provision of health care and social benefits for victims of Agent Orange are still extremely limited. Victims of dioxin-affected households have not received any direct assistance from the US so far. Millions of people are still living with pain and enormous emotional suffering.

Thirdly, the attention to the issue by the international community must further be attracted. Developed countries such as Germany can assist in the implementation of environmental surveys in Vietnam, and help to detect landmines and clear affected areas, to finance and organize natural regeneration as well as to support community health care and further policy implementation for Agent Orange victims.

Finally, the involvement of the entire society in overcoming the consequences of the war, both for the natural and the social environment is very crucial. As indicated above, Minh Chuyên's writings on the fate of veterans in Vietnam have affected the perception of the society and forced policymakers to issue social policies for Agent Orange victims. To overcome the consequences of Agent Orange/Dioxin in Vietnam nowadays, there are still many big problems to be solved – such as continuing investigation and evaluation of the consequences, searching for appropriate technolo-

29 <http://www.tapchicongsan.org.vn/Home/The-gioi-van-de-su-kien/2013/23031/Nuoc-My-voi-viec-giai-quyet-hauqua-chat-doc-da-camdioxin>.

gies for decontamination especially in hard-hit areas, and reducing the number of new exposures. Another important issue is how sequelae for following generations can be dealt with, how aid programs for Agent Orange victims can be improved, and how compensation can be called for. All these tasks require more participation from Vietnam's to fulfil their important function of communicating this issue and thereby set an agenda.

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