FoVO

Friends of Vietnam Orphanages Inc.

Helping disadvantaged communities in Vietnam

Report to Donors

2023 Financial Year

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FoVO Vietnam Field Trip Key Map Red circles indicate some project locations.

REPORT TO DONORS 2023

Our Donors

On behalf of the Friends of Vietnam Orphanages Inc (FoVO) Board, thank you to everyone whose donations helped us support disadvantaged people and communities in Vietnam during the year.

Monthly Donors

We are particularly grateful to the family and friends who made monthly contributions:

Clive, Michael & Adrienne, Geoff & Rachelle, Hayden & Yến, Helen & David, and Patrick H.

Other Donors: We also greatly appreciate the friends, groups and organisations who made donations during the year:
Amanda, Dennis, Karna, Julie & Jan, Paul & Suzette, the Aranda Men's Group, Anna & Ashley, Kim Huỳnh, Beyond Bank through its Community Reward Scheme, and others.

Every contribution, large or small, helped make these projects possible.

Board, Volunteers and Project Partners

Our Board members — Julie, Dennis, Geoff and Clive — provided practical help, advice and encouragement throughout the year.

In Australia, Loan and Tiệp continued to provide advice on Vietnamese culture and language.

In Vietnam, our volunteer interpreters and local contacts included Thi, Tam, Hiệp and Xoan. They helped us visit communities, understand local circumstances, negotiate projects and deal with problems along the way.

We also relied on local project partners who contributed their time, knowledge and practical help:

- Yến and Quế — Thiên Ân children's shelter, Cần Thơ.
- Bích Hường and Kim Anh — Sisters of Charity, Mai Ấm Tình Mẹ single mothers' and children's shelter, Bình Dương.
- Bắc Ái Vinh — Vinh Sisters of Charity, working with villages around Phong Nha.
- Hiệp — Hương Khê, Hà Tınh.
- Legion of Mary women's group — Thạch Long and Thạch Sơn villages, Hà Tınh.
- Lành — 19.5 Shelter for Severely Disabled People, Xã Đoài.
- Kính — Phát Diệm Holy Cross order, working with disadvantaged households around Phát Diệm.
- Ngoc Nu — Sisters of St Paul de Chartres, working with disabled and disadvantaged people in Saigon.
- Loan — Sisters of St Paul de Chartres, Buôn Ma Thuột, associated with the Vi Nhan School for Disabled Children.
- Dr Trong, Oanh and Cong — medical volunteers working in Gia Lai Province.
- Danang university Christian student volunteer group — Child Centre No. 5.
- Br Phat and the Franciscan monastery — working with leprosy-affected communities in Gia Lai Province.

Their local knowledge and voluntary time allowed relatively small FoVO grants to achieve considerably more than the money alone could provide.

Our Approach

FoVO is a small charity with no paid staff. We try to keep our projects simple, direct and adapted to local circumstances.

During 2023 I again travelled by motorbike through Vietnam, visiting shelters, villages and communities and meeting the people who helped us organise projects. These visits allowed us to see conditions for ourselves, talk with local partners and decide where relatively small amounts of money could be useful.

We sometimes describe this as our "barefoot" approach to charity: small, direct and responsive to what we find on the ground.

Visiting projects also allows us to follow up earlier assistance and sometimes to decide that no further help is needed. During 2023, for example, we revisited an earlier pig-raising project near Buôn Ma Thuột and found the pigs growing well and being properly cared for. At another shelter near Kon Tum, we found good facilities and no obvious need for FoVO assistance, so no project was undertaken.

During the 2023 financial year, FoVO received $20,040 in donations and spent $20,000 on projects in Vietnam. Projects ranged from food and practical assistance for shelters and disadvantaged households to medical support, livelihood projects and the rebuilding of homes at Lang Lan 2 in Gia Lai Province.

Every dollar donated directly to FoVO was used for assistance in Vietnam. No administration costs were deducted from donations.

Peter Kabaila
Public Officer
Friends of Vietnam Orphanages Inc (FoVO)

REPORT TO DONORS 2023

Project Summary

How Your $20,000 Was Spent

NO.	PROJECT	AUD	MILLION VND
1	Food Support for Disabled Households — Saigon	**$1,880**	30
2	Supplies for Thien An Children's Shelter — Can Tho	**$625**	10
3	Beds for Single Mothers' and Children's Shelter — Binh Duong	**$625**	10
4	Desks for Disabled Children's School — Buon Me Thuot	**$940**	15
5	— — Follow-up of Previous Pig Project — Buon Me Thuot		
6	Support for Family with Disabled Child — Buon Me Thuot	**$380**	6
7	Medical Care and Supplies — Vinh Son 2 Shelter, Kontum	**$880**	14
8	— — Needs Assessment — Vinh Son 3 Shelter, Kontum		
9	Pigs and Supplies — Vinh Son 4 Shelter, Kontum	**$760**	12
10	Supplies — Vinh Son 6 Shelter, Kontum	**$380**	6
11	Student Volunteer Project — Child Centre No. 5, Danang	**$380**	6
12	Chickens, Kitchenware and Blankets — Rao Tre Village, Ha Tinh	**$2,150**	34.3
13	Chickens for Low-Cost Student Housing — Vinh	**$250**	4
14	Rice and Bicycles for River Families — Vinh	**$965**	15.4
15	Supplies for Disabled Shelter — Xa Doai	**$750**	12
16	Chickens and Household Assistance — Phat Diem	**$1,785**	28.5
17	Refrigerator for Hoa Mai Children's Shelter — Danang	**$700**	11
18	Lang Lan 2 Leprosy Treatment and Village Renewal — Gia Lai	**$6,550**	67.9
	TOTAL	**$20,000**	**319.4**

Amounts are rounded. Exchange rates varied, generally around 1.597 million VND = AUD $100.

REPORT TO DONORS 2023

1. Food Support for People with Disabilities, Saigon

$1,880 (30M VND)

Description

During the Covid lockdowns in 2021, FoVO worked through the Sisters of St Paul de Chartres to provide food assistance to 70 disadvantaged households in Saigon. In 2023 we again asked the Sisters to identify households needing assistance, this time concentrating on people living with disabilities. Sister Nu and volunteer Ngoc identified 60 households. Many of the people visited were living in small rented rooms and earning what income they could through activities such as selling lottery tickets. Some used adapted tricycles or motorbikes for mobility.

FoVO provided 30 million VND (about AUD $1,880) for 60 food parcels, each costing about 500,000 VND. Each household received 10 kg of rice, 30 packets of instant noodles, cooking oil, fish sauce, soy sauce, condensed milk, sugar, seasoning and small cakes.

Observation

The Sisters and volunteers purchased and sorted the food before delivering the parcels to individual households. The photographs record both the preparation of the parcels and their delivery, including the use of a xe ba ga, a three-wheeled vehicle used to carry goods through the city.

Visiting the households also gave us some indication of people's living circumstances. Several recipients lived in very small rented rooms or tenements, while the adapted vehicles used by some people showed one practical way in which they maintained their independence and mobility.

Reflection

The project reinforced the value of working through local people who already knew the households. FoVO provided the money, but Sister Nu, Ngoc and the other volunteers identified the recipients, purchased the food and organised its distribution.

For a relatively modest grant, 60 households received practical assistance delivered directly to where

they lived.



Food parcels being sorted.



Little rental motorcycle taxi truck (xe ba ga) used to deliver our food parcels.



Disabled people leaving their tenements.



Typical tenement for factory workers, students and disabled people.





Man at his rental room.





Two lottery ticket sellers chat.



Some of our clients with Sister Nu.



Receiving a food parcel at the rental room.

REPORT TO DONORS 2023

2. Supplies for Thiên Ân Children's Shelter, Cần Thơ

$625 (10M VND)

Description

FoVO has visited Thiên Ân children's shelter in Cần Thơ over many years. The shelter cared for more than 100 school-age children and was run by the lay nuns Yến and Quế. Some support also came from Vietnamese people living in France.

During our 2023 visit, the shelter asked for practical food and household supplies rather than a larger project.

FoVO provided 10 million VND (about AUD $625) for 20 cartons of instant noodles, fish sauce, tomato sauce, chilli sauce, cooking oil, shampoo, soap, meat and eggs.

Observation

Thiên Ân was a shelter FoVO had known through earlier visits, with an emphasis on keeping children in school and providing a safe social environment. The assistance requested from FoVO was consequently very ordinary: food, cooking ingredients and hygiene supplies needed for the day-to-day operation of a large household. During the Covid period we could not visit this particular project ourselves, so the shelter or another local partner provided a photograph as evidence that the assistance had been received.

That is more accurate and, importantly for the reconstruction, preserves the distinction between what FoVO knew from previous visits and what was actually observed during this particular project.

Reflection

Not every FoVO project needed to introduce something new. At an established shelter such as Thiên Ân, a relatively small contribution towards everyday running costs could meet an immediate need while allowing the people running the shelter to decide what was most useful.



Thiên Ân shelter provided this photograph to FoVO following the purchase of food and household supplies for the children.

REPORT TO DONORS 2023

3. Beds for Single Mothers' and Children's Shelter, Bình Dương

$625 (10M VND)

Description

FoVO had been visiting Mái Ấm Tình Mẹ, a shelter for single mothers and children in Bình Dương, for several years. Located in a major factory-worker area about 30 km north of Saigon, the shelter housed around half a dozen single mothers and more than 100 children. Ngoc, a former Huế University English student and one of FoVO's local project partners, organised the project on our behalf and provided the information and photographs used in this report.

In discussion with Ngoc, the shelter identified a need for 50 stackable children's beds, in two sizes: 60 × 120 cm for kindergarten-age children and 60 × 140 cm for junior primary-age children. FoVO provided 10 million VND (about AUD $625) for the beds.

Observation

This was another example of the shelter itself identifying a very specific practical need. Stackable beds allowed sleeping accommodation for a large number of children without permanently taking up the floor space during the day.

The project was organised through Ngoc, continuing FoVO's practice of using local contacts who knew the shelter and could discuss directly what was needed.

Reflection

The project was small and uncomplicated: the shelter needed beds and FoVO was able to provide them.

It also illustrates something that can disappear behind the word orphanage. Mái Ấm Tình Mẹ accommodated both single mothers and children, and the circumstances of individual children were not necessarily the same.









Four boys left by their single mothers at the orphanage.

REPORT TO DONORS 2023

4. Desks for Vi Nhân Disabled Children's School, Buôn Ma Thuột

$940 (15M VND)

Description

In Buôn Ma Thuột, FoVO visited Vi Nhân School for Disabled Children, managed by Sister Liên. The school provided education and residential care for children with a range of disabilities. Sister Liên identified a need for new desks that could be arranged in a curved layout for some of the specialised classrooms.

Rather than buying ready-made plastic furniture, FoVO agreed to have the desks made locally. We paid for the materials and our local fieldworker found a fabricator who agreed to donate his labour.

A prototype was measured and made first, followed by production and lacquering of the remainder. FoVO provided 50 desks for 15 million VND (about AUD $940).

Observation

The photographs provide a particularly good record of how the project was carried out: the prototype desk, measurements taken from it, fabrication and assembly, and some of the completed desks after lacquering.

The donated labour meant that FoVO's contribution could be concentrated on materials, allowing the school to obtain 50 purpose-made desks for less than the cost of comparable commercially supplied furniture.

Reflection

The project also reminded us that donated assistance needs to remain practical. After the desks had been made, the school initially complained that the locally made furniture was not of the more expensive standard they were accustomed to.

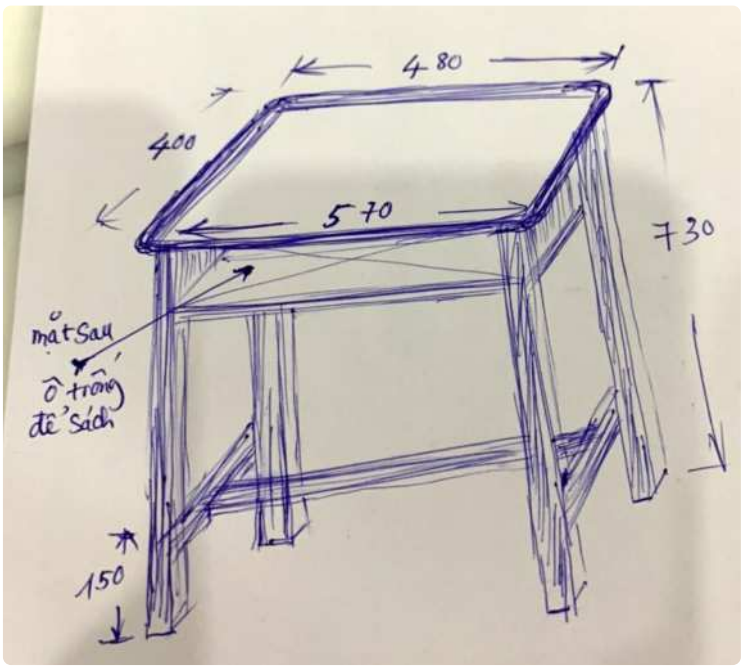
Thi explained that, if the desks were not suitable, FoVO could provide them instead to a village parish school where they were genuinely needed. The school then accepted the desks.

For FoVO, the lesson was simple: we are happy to respond to an identified need, but assistance

should be useful and wanted. If it is not, there are usually other communities where it will be.



Prototype and measurements The prototype desk was measured before local production began.



Measurements from prototype



Desks under construction A local fabricator donated his labour while FoVO paid for the materials.



Completed desks Some of the 50 purpose-made desks assembled and lacquered for Vi Nhân School

REPORT TO DONORS 2023

5. Follow-up of Previous Pig Project, Buôn Ma Thuột

$0

Description

Not every FoVO project visit resulted in spending money. While in the Buôn Ma Thuột area, Sister Hương took us back to an Ê Đê village where FoVO had previously provided mountain pigs as a small household income project.

We wanted to see what had happened after the pigs were distributed. We found them properly housed, being looked after and growing well.

No further assistance was requested or considered necessary, so the follow-up visit became Project 5 with a cost of $0.

Observation

The visit provided something more useful than another handover photograph: evidence of what happened after FoVO's earlier assistance.

The pigs had survived and were being cared for rather than having been immediately sold or eaten. The households had constructed pens and were continuing with the project.

Reflection

A successful follow-up visit does not have to produce another project.

In this case the earlier assistance appeared to be working, and there was no reason for FoVO to provide more money. The visit gave us confidence that the original project had been worthwhile and allowed the households simply to get on with it.



Household/pig pen context Follow-up visits allowed FoVO to see what happened after the original assistance was provided.



The pigs and their housing Mountain pigs provided through an earlier FoVO project were growing well and being properly cared for.

REPORT TO DONORS 2023

6. Support for a Family with a Disabled Child, Buôn Ma Thuột

$380 (6M VND)

Description

Near Buôn Ma Thuột we visited a family living in a simple camp on other people's farmland. The mother was the full-time carer for her 15-year-old son, who had a disability. Her younger son was also described to us as having a condition translated at the time as “white blood disease.” Her husband worked as a labourer on a nearby coffee farm.

FoVO provided nappies, medicines, food and other supplies for the older boy. Following our visit, Sister

Hương agreed to continue visiting the family and provide nappies, food and other necessities.

We also wanted to give the family a small opportunity to increase its own income. The husband agreed to build a pig pen and FoVO provided two mountain piglets for the family to raise. If successful, the idea was that the project could later be expanded.

FoVO provided 6 million VND (about AUD $380): approximately 1.5 million VND for nappies, medicines and food, with the remainder used for the pigs.

Observation

The visit showed how much the boy's disability affected the whole household. His mother needed to care for him full-time while the family's cash income depended largely on the father's work as a coffee-farm labourer.

The project therefore had two parts: immediate assistance for the boy's care and a small livelihood

project for the household.

Sister Hương's willingness to continue visiting was also important. FoVO could provide some money, but she was close enough to maintain contact with the family after we had left.

Reflection

This was deliberately a very small project.

The nappies, food and medicines responded to an immediate need. The two pigs were an attempt to help the family generate some additional income rather than relying entirely on continuing assistance.

Whether the pig project succeeded could only be established by returning later — which is why follow-up visits such as Project 5 were useful.



The family camp The family lived in a simple camp on farmland near Buôn Ma Thuột



Mother and son The mother was the full-time carer for her 15-year-old son.



Sister Hương bringing supplies Sister Hương brought nappies and milk purchased through the FoVO project and agreed to continue visiting the family.

REPORT TO DONORS 2023

7. Medical Care and Supplies — Vinh Sơn 2

$880 (14M VND)

Description

The Vinh Sơn shelters are a network of homes in the Central Highlands run by an order of Indigenous nuns, principally for Indigenous children. Although some children have lost a parent and the homes also take younger children and children with disabilities or behavioural problems, their main role is closer to a homestay for schooling than a conventional orphanage.

Many children come from farming villages where distance and family circumstances can make continuing at school difficult. They live at Vinh Sơn while attending school and, like others in the monastic community, share in cooking, cleaning, farming and other work needed to support the household.

The homes take their name from St Vincent de Paul — Vincent becoming Vinh Sơn in Vietnamese — and each is identified by a number.

In 2023 I visited Vinh Sơn 2, which had 173 children. I met medical volunteers Dr Trong and Oanh, who joined us to provide a day of medical checks and treatment. Sister Nguyệt, the energetic young director of the shelter, organised the children and staff for the medical session.

Medical checks

Sister Nguyệt presented children who were unwell and explained their symptoms. Where necessary she interpreted into J'rai while Dr Trong examined the children and prescribed treatment. Oanh dispensed the medicines, while a young J'rai man wrote instructions explaining how they should be used.

During the day about 50 children and staff were examined and treated. Much of the work involved relatively ordinary illnesses — ear and throat infections, respiratory infections and fungal skin conditions — which might otherwise simply have been endured.

Before leaving, Dr Trong also provided medicines and instructions so that the shelter could continue treating minor illnesses from its own medicine cupboard.

FoVO paid 8 million VND (about $500) for medicines. The following day we purchased another 6 million VND (about $380) of useful supplies requested by the shelter. Total cost: 14 million VND — AUD $880.

Observation

This was one of those projects where being present mattered.

The medical checks took place in the middle of normal shelter life. Preschool children crowded around to watch. Sister Nguyệt moved between organising the consultations and interpreting. Children and young people were also preparing meals and carrying out the ordinary work of the home.

The medical problems were mostly not dramatic. That was partly the point. Serious cases could be taken for medical treatment, but minor infections and skin conditions could easily remain untreated when there were 173 children living closely together.

Reflection

The project showed the value of combining different kinds of local knowledge.

Dr Trong and Oanh brought medical skills. Sister Nguyệt knew the children and could identify those needing attention and interpret where necessary. The young J'rai assistant helped ensure that instructions went away with the medicines.

FoVO's role was relatively simple: bring those people together and pay for the medicines and supplies.



Close contact and casual hygiene of the little ones causes them to live in a constant state of reinfection.



Rapt attention from the pre-schoolers.



Sister Nguyet getting a sore jaw from having to remind every toddler, “Say “Ahhh”.



A prematurely born 2-month old gets a check for her respiratory infection.



All meals are prepared by the kids. There's nobody refusing to eat their food at meals.



Medicine supply we provided to the shelter.





Children with the supplies provided by our charity.

Our meds included beautifully coloured vitamin tablets. Most children got some as supplementary medicine. The breakfast diet of instant noodles and candy in most shelters does not provide the protein or vitamins children need at the start of the day.

REPORT TO DONORS 2023

8. Needs Assessment — Vinh Sơn 3, Kon Tum

$0

Description

While visiting the Vinh Sơn homes around Kon Tum, I also visited Vinh Sơn 3, about 5 km outside the city.

The home appeared comparatively new and had substantial facilities. After looking around, I could not identify any obvious need where a small FoVO grant would be particularly useful, so we did not undertake a project.

Observation

The visit was interesting partly because of the contrast with some of the other Vinh Sơn homes. Vinh Sơn 3 appeared well provided with buildings and infrastructure. This fitted a pattern we had begun to notice over repeated visits to Vinh Sơn: substantial overseas support meant that new buildings and facilities could appear quite rapidly.

The original report recorded a small scene from the visit: some of the children were entertaining themselves with disco music while the nuns were praying in the chapel.

Reflection

A needs assessment does not necessarily have to result in a project.

FoVO's purpose in visiting was not to find somewhere to spend money regardless of need. At Vinh Sơn 3 we saw a comparatively well-resourced institution and decided our limited funds would be more useful elsewhere.

That is why this remains a numbered project in the 2023 record, but with a cost of $0.

REPORT TO DONORS 2023

9. Pigs and Supplies — Vinh Sơn 4, Kon Tum

$760 (12M VND)

Description

Vinh Sơn 4 was about 10 km outside Kon Tum and accommodated around 130 children with four nuns.

Unlike Vinh Sơn 3, this home had a large area of productive land. It raised pigs and chickens and had vegetable gardens, coffee and rubber plantations. The nuns told us that its more remote location meant the home relied heavily on the farm for income. Relatives of some of the children also helped with harvesting the coffee and rubber.

After discussing the farm with the nuns, FoVO offered to provide another 10 locally bred striped piglets. The piglets cost 6 million VND.

We also provided 6 million VND of practical household supplies requested by the home: children's sandals, washing powder, shampoo, dishwashing liquid, laundry baskets, colanders and kitchen knives.

Total cost: 12 million VND — approximately AUD $760.

Observation

Vinh Sơn 4 appeared well organised and busy. Children were helping with cleaning and other everyday work, while the surrounding farm was clearly an important part of the home's economy.

The farm was also visually striking. Seminary students, organised by a teacher, had painted long boundary walls with colourful rural scenes. One mural created a trompe-l'œil landscape beside the vegetable garden.

Elsewhere, an image of St Martin de Porres stood against an idyllic painted landscape on a boundary fence topped with razor wire.

The photographs also recorded less picturesque parts of communal life: girls cleaning the laundry area and a group of children picking lice from one another's hair, described in the original report as a weekly routine.

Reflection

The project was a good fit for FoVO's small-scale approach. Rather than contributing to another building, we added to an income-producing activity the home was already operating successfully.

The piglets were a modest investment in an existing farm, while the sandals, cleaning materials and kitchen equipment met ordinary needs in a household of 130 children.

The visit also helped us understand that the Vinh Sơn homes were not simply residential institutions supported by donations. At Vinh Sơn 4, farming, children's and nuns' work, help from children's relatives and overseas donations all formed part of the system that kept the home operating.



The trompe-l'œil mural and vegetable garden — Vegetable gardens at Vinh Sơn 4, with a trompe-l'œil boundary mural painted by seminary students.



Our project — children and supplies — Children with household and cleaning supplies provided by FoVO. The project also funded 10 locally bred piglets.



Girls cleaning the laundry area — Children shared in the everyday work of running the Vinh Sơn household.



Vietnam is a land of contrasts. Here, St Martin De Porres (who is the patron saint of mixed race people and has a loyal local following) stands next to the idyllic mural scenes of this razor wire topped boundary fence.



Picking out lice is a weekly routine



Our project — children and supplies — Children with household and cleaning supplies provided by FoVO. The project also funded 10 locally bred piglets.





in the everyday work of running the Vinh Sơn household.

The shelter's rubber farm Girls cleaning the laundry area — Children shared

REPORT TO DONORS 2023

10. Supplies — Vinh Sơn 6, Kon Tum

$380 (6M VND)

Description

Vinh Sơn 6 was about 17 km outside Kon Tum and accommodated 77 children and three nuns.

Like Vinh Sơn 4, it had a substantial farm, including pigs, chickens, cassava, rubber and coffee. The farm appeared well established and the director could not identify any particular major need when we visited.

Rather than invent a project where none was required, FoVO simply provided useful food supplies for the household: instant noodles, cooking oil, sugar and milk.

Cost: 6 million VND — approximately AUD $380.

Observation

The visit reinforced what we had seen at the other Vinh Sơn homes. The children lived within a substantial monastic household that combined accommodation and schooling with farming and other productive activities.

Vinh Sơn 6 appeared relatively well established. There was no obvious reason for FoVO to fund another livelihood project or capital improvement, so our contribution was deliberately modest.

Reflection

Sometimes the appropriate response to a visit is simply to provide something useful and move on. FoVO's small size allowed us to do that. We did not need to turn every visit into a substantial project. At Vinh Sơn 6, $380 of ordinary food supplies was enough.



Children at Vinh Sơn 6 coming out to see the foreign visitor.



Food supplies provided by FoVO for the 77 children and three nuns at Vinh Sơn 6

REPORT TO DONORS 2023

11. Student Volunteer Project — Child Centre No. 5, Danang

$380 (6M VND)

Description

Child Protection Centre No. 5 was one of a number of children's shelters in Danang originally built with assistance from French charities and later operated by local authorities.

Our local fieldworker organised about 20 students from Danang's architecture and medical universities to spend a day at the centre. The students planned the project themselves, combining activities with the children and practical work around the buildings. FoVO provided the money for prizes for the children, materials to repair doors and windows, cleaning, hygiene and cooking items requested by the centre, and ingredients for a group lunch.

The students organised educational activities and games, cooked lunch and carried out a working bee repairing doors and windows and cleaning the buildings.

Observation

The value of the project was much greater than the relatively small FoVO contribution.

Instead of simply delivering goods to the centre, the university students contributed their own time, energy and skills. Architecture and medical students worked alongside the children, organised games and activities and tackled useful maintenance and cleaning jobs.

The photographs show a lively day rather than a conventional donation handover: students and children playing together, working at tables, presenting prizes and gathering as a group.

Reflection

This was a good example of FoVO acting as an enabler rather than simply a donor.

A small amount of money provided the materials and activities, while the students provided the labour, organisation and personal involvement. It also introduced young Vietnamese university students to practical volunteering in their own community.

The project produced some immediate benefits for the centre, but its more interesting outcome was the involvement of the students themselves.



Danang university students organised games and activities with children at Centre No. 5



The student volunteers combined activities with practical work around the centre.



Joy of being awarded a personal prize.



Students and children at the end of the day's volunteer project

REPORT TO DONORS 2023

12. Chickens, Kitchenware and Blankets — Rao Tre Village, Ha Tinh

$2,150 (34.3M VND)

Description

Rao Tre is a small, relatively isolated settlement in Hương Khê District, Ha Tinh Province, near the Laos border. Its residents are Ma Lieng people, officially classified within the broader Chứt ethnic group.

Our local contact Hiệp had introduced us to the community and helped arrange the project with local authorities and the border army. The settlement contained 46 households.

After discussions about what would be useful, FoVO provided assistance in two parts. All 46 households received a winter blanket and a set of kitchenware. In addition, 12 households considered able to raise chickens received 30 chickens each, together with 25 kg of feed and medicine.

The chickens cost 12.8M VND and the household supplies 21.5M VND, making a total project cost of

34.3M VND ($2,150).

Observation

The visit gave us an opportunity to see how people actually lived rather than simply delivering assistance.

Cooking was generally over open fires using basic aluminium pots. Houses contained few possessions. Water was collected from a spring and stored in bottles and containers. Households had basic farming tools and some already kept chickens.

The surrounding landscape was changing through plantation development and construction of a nearby dam.

The project therefore combined something useful to every household — blankets and kitchenware — with a productive activity for those households that had the space and capacity to raise chickens.

Reflection

The project reinforced a simple lesson: fair assistance does not necessarily mean giving everybody the same thing.

Every household could use the basic household supplies, but chickens were only useful to families able to look after them.

More importantly, the chicken project built on something people already knew how to do.

Rather than beginning with what FoVO wanted to give, we began with what people were already doing and asked what modest addition might help them do more of it.

Photos below help explain why these particular forms of assistance were chosen. They are evidence of household life rather than merely evidence that goods were handed over.

Further observations about the Ma Lieng community, changes seen on a later visit and the role of local intermediaries are recorded in 2023/FN-05 — The Ma Lieng at Rao Tre.





The Chut people have been settled in a scenic part of their traditional lands, although the jungle and river have been replaced by plantation forest and a dam.



Volunteers Hiep and Thi distributing chickens.



Our project was at the meeting hall, with local army and police and the usual ceremonies (getting people in lines, taking photos etc).



Traditional Chut people's open fire kitchen.

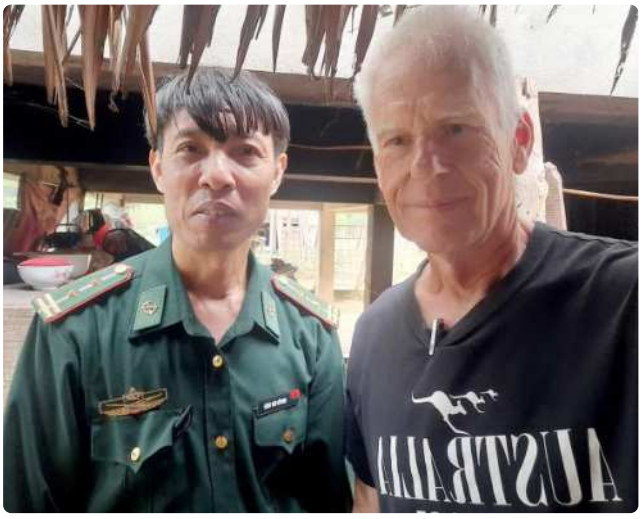


Typical chicken house design with new chicks.





Our charity's supply of winter blankets arrived at the meeting hall.



The kindly army officer-in-charge of the border post helped manage this project. His family lives only a few hours drive away so he gets to visit his children regularly.



People wait patiently while the army and police do important stuff (read names off lists).



Typical rice chest in a house. This holds rice for sowing next year's crop.



Visit to typical kitchen storage area.



Inspecting the roof of the chicken house.



Owner at the open chicken hatch to give water



Bottles for water from the village spring.



Very basic farm tools: saw, pick axe, crow bar.



The kitchenware set that we provided to each household in the village.



Man shows eggs from his chickens.

REPORT TO DONORS 2023

13. Chickens for Low-cost Student Housing — Vinh

$250 (4M VND)

Description

The Carmelite sisters in Vinh City provided low-cost accommodation for 25 university students from surrounding farming areas.

The students paid about 1.5M VND ($100) a month for accommodation, weekday meals, internet, study facilities and utilities. The five Carmelite sisters prepared their weekday meals. The students also contributed to running the household. They worked in the vegetable gardens, cleaned their accommodation and cooked on Sundays. A free-range chicken run supplemented their food supply, but had been partly damaged in a recent storm.

FoVO provided 1M VND for materials so the students could repair the chicken house and 3M VND for

100 chickens — a total of 4M VND ($250).

Observation

This was already a working system rather than something FoVO needed to create. The sisters provided inexpensive accommodation and meals, while the students contributed their own work to gardening, cleaning and cooking.

The chickens were part of that household economy. Repairing the damaged chicken run and replacing the flock helped restore something the students were already using to supplement their food.

Reflection

This was a very small project, but a useful example of FoVO working alongside something that was already working.

Rather than creating a new program, $250 helped the students repair and restock an existing food-producing activity to which they themselves contributed labour.

Sometimes a small amount of assistance is enough when people already have the organisation, skills and willingness to do the rest.



Carmelite vegetable garden worked by the students



Free range chicken run that was the focus of our project.

REPORT TO DONORS 2023

14. Rice and Bicycles for River Families — Vinh

$965 (15.4M VND)

Description

On the outskirts of Vinh we visited a small community of 12 families whose lives were closely connected with the river. Some lived on boats while others occupied very basic dwellings on the riverbank. Fishing provided an important part of their livelihood. Our local contact Nguyệt helped us visit the families and understand something of their circumstances.

FoVO provided each of the 12 households with a food parcel containing 30 kg of rice, cooking oil, fish sauce and seasoning.

We also provided six bicycles for schoolchildren from the community.

The total cost was 15.4M VND ($965).

Observation

Visiting the families showed us much more than we would have learned from simply distributing rice and bicycles.

Fishing was central to everyday life. We saw small canoes and a fish trap extending about 50 metres into the river. Domestic life, work and the river were closely connected.

The boats and small dwellings contained kitchens, sleeping areas, family possessions and places where children studied.

We initially thought that a 30 kg bag of rice represented a substantial period of food security. Nguyệt explained that in a household of seven people — including five growing boys — it might last only seven to ten days.

That was a useful correction to an outsider's assumption.

The bicycles were a different kind of assistance. Unlike the rice, which would soon be eaten, a bicycle could help a child travel to school over a much longer period.

Reflection

This small project provided both immediate assistance and something with a longer useful life.

The rice helped families with an everyday expense. The bicycles supported children's access to school.

But the visit also raised a larger question. In 2023 we were told that government authorities were considering resettling the families onto land.

At first sight, replacing a boat or rough riverside dwelling with a house on land might appear an obvious improvement. But fishing was not simply an occupation carried out somewhere else. Home, river and livelihood were closely connected.

A better house is not automatically a better livelihood.

That became more significant when we tried to find the community again in 2026. The older residents had died and the remaining families appeared to have been resettled, but we could not establish exactly where they had gone or what had happened to their river-based way of life.

The fuller record is preserved in 2023/FN-06 — The River People of Vinh.

Because the community appears subsequently to have disappeared from this location, photographs that originally seemed incidental have become a record of an unusual way of life shortly before it changed. In this case, the photographs of the context may ultimately be more important than the photographs

of the project.



Some boats are on the water.



Some boats are stuck on land.



Dogs living on a raft



Man cadges a cigarette from a relative on a boat on land while the women relax and chat.



Prow of a boat. The boat hulls are reinforced concrete with air chambers.



Poor but happy. One wonders whether resettlement into huts on land will destroy this particular way of life.



Geese live on rafts.



Neighbour greeting, “Catch fish today?”



Catch of the day.



Girl paddles past us in the family fishing canoe.



Steadying my canoe for boarding.



Greeting local guide and volunteer from onboard.



Front of the house boat has father's belongings and a shrine for good luck.



Rear of the house boat has kitchen, study and sleeping areas.



Year 3 girl at her study area. Here are her school books, kindergarten graduation photo and study table.



Family kitchen behind the study area.



Ngoc lives in this hut with 7 relatives.



Ngoc with her daughter Tho



One elec supply branches out to every boat



Family fishing line with multiple hooks.



Shack built over the old river pump site.



Many children = too many mouths to feed.



Our guide Nguyet lived on the boat with parents, her 3 sisters and her 3 children.



Man smokes his thuoc lau water pipe: Hut thuoc lau nang cao suc khoe (“smoke thuoc lau for better health”).





Dividing and distributing the rice involved all.



Nguyet divided up the food parcels.



Arrival of the school bikes is a big event.



Girl happy with her school bike.



Boy examines his school bike.



Girl stands proudly next to her new transport.

REPORT TO DONORS 2023

15. Supplies for Disabled Shelter — Xã Đoài

$750 (12M VND)

Description

FoVO had visited this shelter at Xã Đoài over a number of years. Run by Sister Lành and her local religious order, it accommodated around 35 young people with severe disabilities.

As in previous years, we provided practical supplies needed for their everyday care: nappies, rice, milk, eggs, minced meat, noodles, cooking oil, fish sauce, laundry powder and fabric softener.

Cost: 12 million VND — approximately AUD $750.

Observation

The shelter was doing difficult work. Many residents required continual assistance with feeding, washing, toileting and other basic needs. Some of the more capable residents also helped care for those with more severe disabilities.

Our annual contribution therefore concentrated on ordinary consumable items that directly benefited the residents.

During the visit I also suggested giving each resident a personal washable soft toy or similar object of their own. The idea received little enthusiasm. I was told that toys were already kept packed away in a storeroom.

Reflection

This was one of the institutions where FoVO's role remained deliberately limited.

We could provide nappies, food and hygiene supplies that we knew would be used by the residents. We could also make suggestions about care. But we could not change the way the institution itself operated.

The personal-toy suggestion was a tiny example. Having toys somewhere in a storeroom is not the

same as a child or young person having something of their own to hold, use and enjoy.

For FoVO, the practical response was to keep our assistance close to the residents themselves and concentrate on things that met their immediate everyday needs.







Older boy feeding younger one



Downe syndrome boy feeding smaller resident



Restraint on a boy to prevent skin scratching



Older inmates care for more severely disabled



Inspection of medical cupboard.



REPORT TO DONORS 2023

16. Chickens and Household Assistance — Phát Diệm

$1,785 (28.5M VND)

Description

FoVO again worked with Sister Kính of the local Holy Cross order, who regularly visited and supported disadvantaged households in about seven villages around Phát Diệm.

For this project, Sister Kính identified 20 households able to raise chickens. Each received 30 chickens and a bag of feed. Some project funds were also used to provide different assistance to households that were not in a position to raise chickens.

Observation

Chicken raising was already familiar to rural households and required little new infrastructure or training. The chickens provided a modest productive asset rather than simply a one-off gift of food.

Importantly, the project did not assume that chickens were suitable for everyone. Sister Kính knew the households and could distinguish between families with the space and capacity to raise them and those who needed another form of assistance.

Reflection

This reinforced a lesson seen in several FoVO projects.

Fair assistance does not necessarily mean giving everybody the same thing.

Thirty chickens may be useful to a household with space, time and the ability to care for them. The same chickens could be a burden to an elderly person, somebody with a disability, or a household without suitable space.

Working through someone who knew the families allowed the assistance to be matched to their circumstances rather than imposing one standard package on everyone.





REPORT TO DONORS 2023

17. Refrigerator for Hoa Mai Children's Shelter — Danang

$700 (11M VND)

Description

FoVO met Arthur, who was fundraising and working with a group of foreign volunteers to improve Hoa Mai Children's Shelter in Danang, a government-run shelter caring for about 30 children.

The volunteers were contributing their own time and labour, including repairs and landscaping around the shelter. FoVO decided to encourage their efforts by purchasing a refrigerator for the shelter kitchen, at a cost of 11 million VND (approximately $700).

Observation

Rather than starting another FoVO project at the shelter, this was an opportunity to support useful work already being undertaken by others.

The refrigerator met a practical need, while the volunteer group provided considerably more through its own fundraising, labour and continuing involvement.

The relationship between the volunteers and shelter management later broke down following disagreement over the care of a seriously ill child, and the volunteers began looking for other projects.

Reflection

This project showed both the value and the limitations of supporting another volunteer group.

A small FoVO contribution could help people who were already contributing their own money, time and labour. In this case, our $700 refrigerator formed only one part of a much larger volunteer effort.

But goodwill alone could not guarantee a lasting relationship with the institution.

Supporting people who are already volunteering can make a small donation go much further, but it is still important to understand the organisation in which they are working.

Further observations on FoVO's encounters with other small volunteer and charity groups are recorded in Field Note 2023/FN-07.



Arthur's volunteer group photo, repairing and landscaping the orphanage fence.



The Vietnamese brand "Kangaroo" refrigerator we purchased for the shelter.

REPORT TO DONORS 2023

18. Lang Lan 2 Leprosy Treatment and Village Renewal — Gia Lai

$6,550 (67.9M VND)

Description

FoVO's largest project of 2023 was undertaken at Lang Lan 2, a small, informal and remote settlement about 55 km from Pleiku in Gia Lai Province.

The settlement had 24 households, including 16 people affected by leprosy. Over time, relatives and other coffee plantation labourers had also settled there.

The project developed in three stages:

- medical treatment — FoVO funded medicines used by Dr Trong and his volunteer medical group for wound treatment;
- verandah repairs — five unsafe and badly deteriorated verandahs were replaced with steel-framed structures;
- house repairs and rebuilding — houses were repaired, extended or partly rebuilt, with new roofs and steeper roof pitches to withstand tropical storms.

FoVO principally provided the money for medicines and building materials. Dr Trong combined our medical funding with assistance from other charities and volunteer labour. Brother Phat, a Franciscan monk and experienced builder, managed the building work, combining FoVO funding with other support, paid and volunteer labour, and work by Lang Lan 2 residents themselves.

Observation

Lang Lan 2 had an unusual history.

According to local recollections recorded during the project, the settlement began when a person with leprosy, followed by his brother who was developing symptoms, was rejected by neighbouring communities. They settled beside a remote track surrounded by coffee plantations, where isolation also provided access to casual farm work.

Other people affected by leprosy later joined them. Families followed to support relatives. Different religious and charitable groups gradually added houses, water supply, toilets, a treatment room and a small church.

By our March 2023 visit, some of this earlier infrastructure was still working well, including the water supply and treatment room. The immediate problem was the housing. Roofs were leaking badly over beds, clothing and stored bags of rice.

The rebuilding was therefore not simply cosmetic. Walls were raised, roof pitches steepened to shed tropical rain, ventilation improved, and steel was used for verandah framing. One house was extended by four metres and divided to provide separate rooms for a family and grandmother.

Reflection

This was one of the best examples in 2023 of FoVO funding local capability rather than trying to manage everything ourselves.

Brother Phat knew building. Dr Trong knew medicine. Residents knew their houses and contributed to the work. Other charities and volunteers added resources. FoVO supplied money where it could make those existing skills and relationships more effective.

The original report made another important point: local people, including residents affected by leprosy, gained paid or volunteer work from the rebuilding and some ownership of what was being done. FoVO could remain largely a silent funding partner, while Brother Phat and the residents received the credit.

The strongest projects were not necessarily those in which FoVO did the most. Sometimes our best contribution was to put resources behind people who already knew what needed to be done.















Foot bandaged during our visit.



Verandahs before rebuilding. People are poor but happy. If people get extra money they are more likely to spend it on a showy motorbike than on education.



Verandahs after rebuilding



Mother stands inside her home. Stacked clothing and stockpiles of charity-donated bags of rice are particularly vulnerable to water damage from the leaking roof.



Large verandah/awnings were completed in termite proof steel framing with new roofing. Separation walls between units provide individual identity to households.



Family huts had walls raised. This allowed redesigned roofs to shed water and improve internal ventilation.



By raising the walls an additional metre the roof pitch was able to be steepened to weatherproof during heavy tropical storms.



Before rebuilding



After rebuilding



This hut extended by 4m at the rear then divided into two rooms for family and grandmother.