FoVO

Friends of Vietnam Orphanages Inc.

Helping disadvantaged communities in Vietnam

Report to Donors

2026 Financial Year

REGISTERED CHARITY · acnc.gov.au/charityregister



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

REPORT TO DONORS 2026

Our Donors

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

Monthly and Large Annual Donors

We are particularly grateful to the family and friends who made monthly or substantial annual contributions during the year:
Clive, Jennifer and Brett, Michael & Adrienne, Geoff & Rachelle, Franziska, Hayden & Yến, Helen & David, Leo, Patrick H. and Richard Jackson.

We also greatly appreciate the friends and groups who made one-off donations:
Dennis, Brett, Spiral Group, Rotary Club of Murrumbidgee Canberra Inc, Amanda, Julie & Jan, Paul & Suzette, the Aranda Men's Group, Kim Huỳnh and "Anon".

Every contribution, large or small, helps make these projects possible and encourages us to keep going.

Tax-Deductible Donation Receipts

As before, 100% of donations made directly to the FoVO charity account are used for assistance in Vietnam, with no administration costs deducted.

Donors who would like a tax-deductible receipt can now donate through Myriad Australia, which charges a 5% administration fee.

Administrative Changes

After 15 years of FoVO operation, 2025 – 26 was a good time to review how the charity was organised. This came partly from preparing our application for membership with Myriad, and partly from recognising that a small charity which had been running for 15 years needed a succession plan and some younger Board members.

When FoVO was incorporated in 2011, we used the standard constitution then provided for incorporated associations. In 2012 we broadened the charity's name and objectives and registered as a charity with the Australian Taxation Office (ATO). In 2013 our charity registration transferred to the newly established Australian Charities and Not-for-profits Commission (ACNC). After that, our basic administrative arrangements remained much the same for more than a decade.

During 2025 – 26 we kept the incorporated name Friends of Vietnam Orphanages Inc, while adding "also known as FoVO" to our ACNC record. We updated our governance documents and broadened our objective to: **"To work alongside disadvantaged communities in Vietnam to reduce poverty, improve quality of life, and support children, people with disabilities, and vulnerable families."**

The new wording better describes what FoVO has gradually become. Our early work concentrated on orphanages and children's shelters, but over the years our projects have expanded to include village water supplies, food security, education, health, housing and practical assistance to disadvantaged families and communities.

We also updated our letterhead, report format and website, and began a succession process by bringing five younger members onto the Board. Our website coordinator, Sam, continues to help with the website and related changes.

Although these changes may look substantial on paper, the way FoVO works in Vietnam has not really changed. We remain a small, volunteer-run charity working through trusted local partners, with our funds going to practical projects in Vietnam.

REPORT TO DONORS 2026

FoVO Board

FoVO has long been supported by a small group of Board members. During the year, as part of our succession planning, we welcomed five additional, younger-generation Board members.

- Julie Kulikovski OAM — President; retired Bereavement Counsellor, Clare Holland House.
- Dennis McManus PSM — Vice-President; retired Senior Heritage Officer, NSW.
- Geoff Stannard — Treasurer; Director, Protective Security, ACT Government.
- Clive West — retired Solicitor, Supreme Court of NSW.
- Thi Nguyen — Fieldworker; International Student.
- Sam McKeon — Website Coordinator; Assistant Director, Department of Agriculture.
- Rasa Kabaila — Director, Broadleaf Holistic Nurse Practitioner Services.
- Patrick Hourigan — Paramedic, ACT Ambulance Service; Registered Nurse; retired Army Officer.
- Rev Kyle Moffitt — Minister of the Word, Uniting Church in Australia.
- Dr Peter Kabaila — FoVO Founder, Public Officer and Field Worker; Heritage Consultant.

Our Board members provided practical help, advice and encouragement throughout the year. We are also fortunate to work alongside a network of trusted project partners in Vietnam. They are introduced in the individual project reports.

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

REPORT TO DONORS 2026

Project Summary

How Your $25,000 Was Spent

NO.	PROJECT	AUD	MILLION VND
1	J'rai unemployed day labourers — breakfast and coffee	**$30**	0.5
2	Shelter for mentally ill men on a farm — food and medicines	**$1,000**	17
3	Dr Trong's medical mission to lepers and villages; medical check -ups and treatment for Vinh Son 5 shelter in Kontum	**$1,600**	27
4	Dak Ro Nga village, Kontum — chickens and vegetable growing	**$1,300**	22
5	Kon So Lak Village homestay, Gia Lai — chickens, food and girls' dormitory improvements	**$3,970**	67.5
6	Eleven households on a city fringe — chicken raising	**$1,000**	17
7	Three projects in Phat Diem villages — bicycles for 15 women and girls, chickens for 20 households, and rice for 20 households	**$2,975**	50.5
8	Nursing home activity by Danang student group	**$600**	10
9	University Student Camp at Kon Xom Luh Village, Kon Tum Province	**$600**	10
10	Inspection of a proposed community water supply, Tu Mơ Rông District, Kon Tum Province	**$100**	1.7
11	Community Water Supply for Three Ba Na Villages, Gia Lai Province	**$2,230**	55
12	Ten student bicycles for three villages, Gia Lai	**$825**	14
13	Study Materials for 220 Students at Summer Study Camp, Angleh Village, Gia Lai Province	**$3,235**	55
14	Medicine Supply for the Community Clinic, Angleh Village, Gia Lai	**$700**	12
15	Ma Lieng Community Projects, Rao Tre Village	**$2,600**	44
16	House Roof Replacement and Bicycles at Kon So Lak Village, Gia Lai	**$2,235**	38
	TOTAL	**$25,000**	**423.5**

Totals are rounded. Exchange rate used: approximately 1.7 million VND = AUD $100.

REPORT TO DONORS 2026

1. Breakfast and Coffee for J'rai Day Labourers, Pleiku City

$30 (0.5M VND)

Description

The first FoVO activity of the 2025 – 26 financial year was also one of the smallest.

Travelling overnight by sleeper bus through the mountain passes from Da Lat, I arrived in Pleiku, the capital of Gia Lai Province, at 2.30 am and eventually found a hotel room shortly after 3 am.

Early the following morning, while waiting to meet my interpreter, I walked through a small city park beside the hotel where groups of local people had already gathered.

Two government lottery ticket sellers were working nearby. In Vietnam these licences are commonly issued to people unable to undertake other employment because of disability. Both men carried visible, untreated injuries from previous motorbike accidents — one walked with a pronounced limp, while the other had permanently lost the use of one hand. Nearby, a man with an apparent intellectual disability spent his morning on a children's swing, calling out with goat-like bleats.

Soon afterwards, eleven Indigenous J'Rai men arrived on motorbikes and gathered at one end of the park.

They were waiting in the hope that someone would offer them a day's work during the rice harvest. If successful, they might earn the equivalent of only AUD $5 – 10 for a day's labour.

My interpreter and I purchased vegetarian food from a nearby Buddhist temple together with fresh coffee and invited the men to join us for breakfast. Initially they hesitated because, as Catholics, they were concerned that food prepared at a Buddhist temple might somehow conflict with their faith. After some reassurance — and seeing that I was happily eating the same food — they accepted the invitation. We shared breakfast together before they returned home, still without finding work that morning.

The total cost of the project was approximately 0.5 million VND (AUD $30).

Observation

The encounter highlighted the precarious nature of casual employment for many Indigenous day labourers in the Central Highlands. Work is uncertain, incomes are very low, and many families rely on seasonal agricultural labour.

It also illustrated how religious and cultural boundaries can influence everyday decisions. What initially appeared to be a simple offer of breakfast carried unexpected cultural meaning. Once trust had been established, however, the shared meal became a relaxed social occasion, with conversation and laughter replacing hesitation.

The smell of the men's work clothes unexpectedly reminded me of another time in my life. As a sixteen-year-old volunteer with the St Vincent de Paul Society in Sydney, I spent Friday evenings visiting homeless men living in

derelict buildings, offering sandwiches, coffee and conversation. More than fifty years later, the circumstances were different, but the human need for dignity and companionship felt remarkably familiar.

Reflection

FoVO cannot solve structural poverty through projects costing a few dollars.

What small charities can do is recognise people who are often overlooked and create moments of human connection.

Over the years this has become one of FoVO's quiet philosophies: not every project needs to be large to be worthwhile. Sometimes the greatest value lies in a simple act of kindness, respect and companionship.

I have often described this as the "five minutes of sunshine" approach. Years ago, when an interpreter wanted to raise money for a neighbour dying of cancer, my advice was not to spend everything on medical bills that would make little difference. Instead, I suggested taking her out each day for coffee and conversation — to give her five minutes of sunshine while she still could. Sometimes that is enough to remind someone that they have not been forgotten.



Vegetarian rolls (goi cuon) at temple



Local J'Rai unemployed day labourers at the city park





REPORT TO DONORS 2026

2. Shelter for Men with Mental Illness, Gia Lai Province

Food and Medicines — $1,000 (17M VND)

Description

During this year's visit to Gia Lai Province, I again met with Dr Trong, who introduced us to Phuoc, founder of a small farm-based shelter for men living with severe mental illness.

Phuoc had himself previously experienced mental illness and had been treated in a state psychiatric hospital. Following his recovery, he established the shelter, drawing on the institutional care model he had experienced. Today he manages the facility with the support of a hospital psychiatrist who advises on treatment and supplies medications.

At the time of our visit, approximately 120 men were living at the shelter.

Some residents were free to work around the farm during the day or sit outdoors in the grounds. Others, however, required much closer supervision. Around forty men were housed in a secure communal hall. Several had restraints attached to their wrists while resting on their sleeping mats, apparently to reduce the risk of harming themselves or others. Other residents occupied individual or shared secure rooms, each measuring approximately 3 × 3.5 metres and containing a simple sleeping area and squat toilet.

For this year's project, FoVO provided one tonne of rice (12 million VND) together with medicines purchased under the direction of the supervising psychiatrist (5 million VND).

Observation

The visit illustrated the complexity of caring for people with severe mental illness in rural Vietnam.

Although the accommodation was basic, there appeared to be different levels of care depending upon each resident's condition. Some men were able to move freely around the farm, while others remained under close supervision.

One resident approached me carrying a neatly handwritten note with his contact details, smiling as he presented it and said, "This is my carte de visite." Another spoke several sentences in clear English.

Among the individual rooms, one resident lay quietly on the concrete floor and appeared largely unresponsive. Another man, who staff explained had previously been involved in serious criminal offending, was receiving treatment at the shelter rather than serving a prison sentence. Through my interpreter I was told that, in some cases, courts and families may agree to psychiatric care where serious mental illness is involved. Whether this forms part of the shelter's operating model I was unable to determine.

I also recognised two men from my previous visit who had made sufficient progress to move freely during the day. They proudly showed me the room they now shared.

One of them, Ngọc, spoke about his life. His father had served as a captain in the South Vietnamese Army and was later imprisoned in a re-education camp. Ngọc himself had studied at a sports college, while his younger brother now worked in surgery at Quy Nhơn Hospital. When I asked why he no longer lived with his family, he

gave no answer. Asked whether he was happy at the shelter, he smiled and replied:
"Yes. I have my good friend who shares this cell with me."
His companion, Siu Ep, a J'Rai man, appeared much more withdrawn.

Reflection

This project reminded us that caring for people with severe mental illness is demanding, expensive and often hidden from public view.

Whatever one's views of the shelter's methods, there is no doubt that feeding approximately 120 adult men every day represents a considerable challenge. The tonne of rice provided through this project may sound substantial, but at an estimated daily consumption of 20 – 30 kilograms, it represents only a few weeks' supply.

FoVO's contribution was modest. Rather than attempting to influence how the shelter operates, our aim was simply to support the immediate welfare of the residents through food and essential medicines.

One lesson from visits such as this is that charity work often involves entering situations that are complex and imperfect. Rarely are there simple solutions. Our role is not to resolve every underlying issue, but to provide practical assistance where we can while continuing to observe, ask questions and learn.

FoVO often works in grey areas, where projects are not ideal, information is incomplete, and there are ethical complexities. Rather than pretending everything is straightforward, these reports acknowledge those realities.



At night two men stay in this 3m x 3.5m cell. The toilet is in the far corner.



Through the bars of this group enclosure holding 40 men, man offers his “carte de visite”.





Gang member “drying out” after drug use.







We provided a ton of rice, which seems like a lot, but the men easily eat 20-30 kg/day.

REPORT TO DONORS 2026

3. Supporting Dr Trong's Volunteer Medical Outreach

Medical Equipment, Medicines and Shelter Medical Clinics — $1,600 (27M VND)

Description

During this year's visit to Gia Lai Province, we again met with Dr Trong to discuss his volunteer medical work in remote leprosy settlements.

Before studying medicine, Dr Trong trained for the Catholic priesthood and lived with a priest who became an important mentor. Together they began visiting people affected by leprosy in isolated Indigenous villages throughout the Central Highlands. His mentor, Father Dong, also supported the Vinh Son network of homestay shelters for Indigenous children, and the two ministries often complemented one another.

In those early years, resources were scarce. Dr Trong recalled making padded footwear for people with damaged feet by cutting and sewing discarded United States Army uniforms left behind after the Vietnam War. The multiple layers of canvas provided durable protection for feet that had lost sensation through leprosy. He also fashioned walking crutches from salvaged materials.

Although he later chose not to continue towards the priesthood, Dr Trong completed his medical studies and now works as a specialist surgeon at the provincial hospital, performing gastroscopic surgery for bowel cancer. Outside his hospital duties, however, he continues the volunteer work he began many years ago, travelling by motorbike, car or van to isolated Indigenous communities where people affected by leprosy continue to live.

FoVO supported two complementary aspects of his volunteer work during the year:

Remote medical outreach

- portable field medical kit – 10M VND
- medicines for village clinics – 7M VND

Medical clinic at Vinh Son 5 Shelter

- medicines for examination and treatment of children and staff – 10M VND

Observation

Medical outreach to leprosy settlements

The accompanying photographs were taken during an earlier visit with Dr Trong's volunteer team to Lan 2 Village, a small Indigenous settlement where sixteen households include residents affected by leprosy.

The village consists of simple timber houses constructed approximately fifteen years ago by Franciscan missionaries. A small corrugated-iron church was later built by a Baptist congregation, while the Franciscans also constructed a modest treatment room, approximately four metres square, where Dr Trong's team establishes its temporary clinic during each visit.

The settlement appeared to receive little visible government support.

One photograph shows a woman whose hands had been severely affected by leprosy carrying home a FoVO food parcel along the village's main street. Another illustrates the simple but functional houses in which many residents continue to live.

Medical clinic at Vinh Son 5

Later in the year Dr Trong and a pharmacy volunteer travelled from Pleiku to Kontum to conduct a full day's medical clinic at Vinh Son 5 Shelter. Children and staff queued throughout the day for routine examinations, treatment of minor illnesses, wound care and advice. Common presentations included respiratory infections, stomach complaints, skin conditions, sports injuries, motorbike injuries and dental problems. Medicines were dispensed where appropriate and referrals made when hospital treatment was required.

Reflection

Dr Trong's work illustrates another principle that has gradually emerged through FoVO's field experience. Rather than attempting to establish our own health programs, we achieve more by strengthening capable local professionals who already have the trust of the communities they serve.

FoVO has neither the expertise nor the resources to operate medical clinics. Instead, we seek opportunities to strengthen the work of people like Dr Trong, whose long-term commitment and professional knowledge enable assistance to reach communities that might otherwise receive very little support.

His story also illustrates an interesting intersection between faith, medicine and community service.

Although his vocation ultimately became medicine rather than the priesthood, the values that first drew him to volunteer work continue to shape his practice today.

For FoVO, this remains one of the most effective forms of partnership: helping capable local people continue doing what they already do well.

Whether treating people in isolated leprosy settlements or conducting medical clinics for children at Vinh Son shelters, Dr Trong's work demonstrates how relatively modest assistance can multiply the impact of an existing volunteer service.





Woman returning home with a FoVO food parcel. Typical village house, Lan 2 leprosy settlement.

Leprosy has severely affected her hands, yet she remains active within her community. The simple timber houses were constructed by Franciscan missionaries approximately fifteen years ago and continue to provide modest but secure accommodation.



Feet wounds being treated



Leper house interior: prosthetic legs on bed; Uncle Ho next to Virgin Mary and Christ.









Lang Tang village has 20 lepers. We met villagers and dropped off food parcels.



J'Ri has 22 indigenous lepers attached to a coffee farm as labourers.



Checkup at Vinh Son 5 shelter. The medicine supply will be used in the village clinics.

REPORT TO DONORS 2026

4. Dak Ro Nga Village, Kon Tum Province

Chicken Raising and Vegetable Growing — $1,300 (22M VND)

Description

Dak Ro Nga is a Sê Đăng Indigenous village in the mountains of Kon Tum Province. The village has received some government investment, including a school, a traditional community meeting house and a concrete road that is still under construction. Local people suggested that recent anti-corruption campaigns by the national government have encouraged local authorities to complete long-delayed public works.

We were welcomed by village leader Phuoc and Sister Oanh, who has lived and worked in the community for more than fifteen years and knows the local families well. Initial requests for assistance centred on improving housing, although this was beyond FoVO's available budget. Instead, we spent the day inspecting the village and discussing practical projects that could strengthen household food security and provide opportunities for modest income generation.

The projects eventually agreed were:

- Chicken-raising program: 30 young chickens, one bag of feed and a heat lamp for each of ten experienced families.
- Vegetable-growing program: seed packs, fertiliser and bird netting for ten additional households.

Rather than simply providing livestock or seed, FoVO established clear conditions before assistance would proceed. Families were required to prepare suitable chicken pens or vegetable gardens before receiving support. Households unable to prepare were not excluded permanently, but assistance would instead be transferred to another family that was ready to participate.

Detailed household lists, photographs of completed preparations and purchase receipts were requested so that accurate reports could be provided to donors.

FoVO support for 2025 – 26 comprised:

- Chicken-raising program for ten village households and the student homestay: 17 million VND (approximately $1,000).
- Vegetable-growing program for ten households, including seeds, fertiliser and bird netting: 5 million VND (approximately $300).

Observation

Dak Ro Nga left a strong impression as a community that has retained much of its traditional social structure despite increasing economic change.

Much village life centres on a group of community facilities, including a large timber-framed church and meeting shelter approximately fifteen by fifty metres in size. Nearby are gathering rooms, the priest's residence and a convent-operated homestay providing accommodation for around sixty Indigenous students from more

remote villages. The children appeared healthy and content, benefiting from regular meals, study time and a stable environment while attending school.

The convent also operates a simple water filtration system that supplies treated drinking water to local families at a nominal cost. Although some households have electric pumps connected to wells, many villagers continue to wash in the nearby river.

Walking through the village, we observed children playing freely while adults gathered to share meals and conversation. During our visit, much of the community had assembled for a memorial feast marking the first anniversary of the death of a young man aged twenty. The gathering demonstrated the continuing importance of family and communal obligations within village life.

Housing reflected the community's changing circumstances. Traditional bamboo houses with earth floors stood alongside older timber-framed houses, small government-built concrete dwellings and more recent brick houses funded by family members working in the cities.

Like many Indigenous communities throughout the Central Highlands, however, much of the surrounding agricultural land has gradually passed into outside ownership. Many villagers now earn wages working on coffee plantations established on land once occupied by their own communities.

Reflection

This project reinforced one of FoVO's most important operating principles: assistance works best when communities contribute their own effort.

Preparing a chicken pen or establishing a vegetable garden before receiving support may seem a small requirement, but it demonstrates commitment and increases the likelihood that the project will continue after FoVO's involvement has ended.

The visit also reminded us that successful projects often emerge gradually rather than from the first request. Although housing was initially identified as the community's greatest need, careful discussion revealed smaller, affordable projects that could benefit a larger number of families while remaining within FoVO's limited budget.

Several additional ideas also emerged during the inspection. The children's homestay had an unused chicken enclosure that could potentially become part of a future training program. We also explored the possibility of supplying hardy local mountain piglets, although local prices appeared likely to rise significantly once outside funding became known. Improved water supply also remains a long-term priority, with additional communal wells potentially benefiting clusters of fifteen to twenty households.

Perhaps the most important lesson was that good community development begins with listening. Rather than arriving with predetermined solutions, FoVO seeks to work alongside trusted local partners and village leaders to identify practical projects that communities are willing and able to sustain themselves.



With children at the homestay.



Huge timber frame church with 10 truss bays.



Post scarf joint.



Typical truss framing.



Carpenter tradition and inventiveness.





Typical timber/bamboo house. It lasts until the next storm or up to 5 years.



Bamboo thatch door panel



Frame for bamboo thatch wall panels



Cooking is as much outdoors as indoors



Village carpenter joinery





Typical solid, carpenter-built (1990) timber house in coffee plantation.



Mountain pigs. A hardy breed and easy to raise. But possibly too costly for our project.



Modernisation: Typical local government-built “housing commission” house. It lasts for 10-20 years.



Husband patching concrete near the door – a lot of patching to be done.





A feast for the whole village to commemorate the anniversary of a family’s 20 -year-old son’s death.







Altar to commemorate the deceased son.

The intelligent and hardworking mother of 10 children who has
made a prosperous family but Tearing down the hillside lost her son. on borrowed bike with no brakes, I recognise this girl from our first client family.

REPORT TO DONORS 2026

5. Kon So Lak Village Homestay, Gia Lai

Food, Chickens and Dormitory Improvements — $3,970 (67.5M VND)

Kon So Lak is home to a small Vinh Son homestay run by two Xơ Đăng indigenous sisters for approximately twenty Ba Na secondary school girls from remote villages.

The girls stay at the homestay during the school term so they can attend secondary school safely without travelling long distances each day. Without accommodation close to school, many would struggle to continue their education.

This was the third consecutive year that FoVO had visited the homestay.

FoVO Support

During 2025 – 26 FoVO committed to:

- 50 chickens with feed to establish a small poultry enterprise for food and supplementary income — 2.5 million VND (approximately AUD $150).
- Food support valued at 10 million VND (approximately AUD $600).
- Dormitory improvements valued at 55 million VND (approximately AUD $3,235).

The existing girls' dormitory was a simple corrugated-metal lean-to with no insulation. During the hot season, the low metal roof absorbed intense heat, making sleeping conditions uncomfortable. Because the work was scheduled during the long school holiday, the girls had already returned to their home villages to help their families with seasonal farm work.

Rather than constructing a completely new building, FoVO worked with the sisters to identify practical improvements that would achieve the greatest benefit within the available budget. The agreed solution was to raise the roof, improve natural ventilation and install insulation to reduce summer heat. The work also included ceiling panels, wall panels, repainting, electrical rewiring and new lighting.

The costs were:

ITEM	COST
Ceiling panels	**10.1M VND**
Metal cladding	**4.2M VND**
Wall panels	**6.5M VND**
Additional steel, paint, fixings, gutter and electrical materials	**11M VND**
Refreshments for village labourers	**0.3M VND**
Two village builders — 28 person-days @ 0.6M/day	**17M VND**
Return transport	**4M VND**
Food for meals	**2M VND**

ITEM	COST
Total	**55M VND (approximately AUD $3,235)**

Local Project Team

As with many FoVO projects, the work depended upon a small team of local people rather than outside contractors.

The project partners were:

- Sister Y Mar, a 73-year-old Xơ Đăng nun.
- Sister Y Hoi, a younger sister responsible for the daily care of the students.
- Anh Sy and Anh Tuan, two village builders from Thạch Long fishing village.
- A'Phoi, A'Huoi and A'Tam, three Ba Na fathers of the girls who assisted with raising the roof.
- Thi, FoVO's fieldworker.

Building materials were sourced through a small local general store. The builders lived on site while undertaking the work, and the sisters provided their meals. FoVO covered village labour rates together with the cost of materials and transport. Men from the local village also helped raise the roof and shared a meal and beer at the end of the day.

Once the overall scope had been agreed, the local team managed the project themselves. Although I remained available if needed, I deliberately avoided directing the work. Successful community projects are strengthened when local people retain ownership of both the decisions and the outcome.

Observation

Several observations from the visit remained with me.

Delivered to the homestay was a row of brand-new bicycles, still wrapped in their original packaging, donated by another charity. Nearby, a storeroom contained enormous piles of donated clothing from city donors.

The contrast was striking.

Vietnam is itself one of the world's largest clothing manufacturers, and almost every rural market sells inexpensive, good-quality second-hand clothing. In many villages, clothing is no longer the priority that outside donors might imagine it to be.

By comparison, practical improvements to accommodation, food security and education often have a much greater long-term impact.

The sisters themselves illustrated another important lesson. Their first request was for an entirely new dormitory building with a television. After discussing the available budget together, they accepted a more modest solution — improving the existing building while also providing food support and establishing a small chicken enterprise that could continue generating benefits after FoVO's funding had been spent.

Observation – Appropriate Technology

Stored in one corner of the homestay was a commercial bakery oven together with bread-making equipment that had been donated by another charity.

The equipment had originally been installed at the parish church with the intention of producing bread for the local community. After the project failed to become established, the oven and associated equipment were transferred to the homestay, where they also remained unused.

The equipment itself appeared to be in good condition. The challenge was not the machinery but the resources needed to operate it. A commercial bakery requires reliable three-phase electricity, gas, ingredients such as flour and yeast, regular maintenance, and people with sufficient time and organisational capacity to coordinate production and sales.

By contrast, another Vinh Son homestay visited by FoVO had developed a successful small bakery. There, baking takes place one day each week. Students learn to prepare dough, operate the ovens and sell bread rolls around the local community. The activity provides practical life skills as well as a modest income for the shelter.

The comparison illustrated an important lesson: successful projects depend not only on what is donated, but on whether the recipient has the capacity and resources to use it over the long term.

Reflection

This observation reinforced FoVO's preference for projects that are simple, practical and capable of being maintained locally. The observation was not really about a bakery. It was about appropriate technology and matching projects to local capacity — one of the central issues in development work.

Many charities make exactly this mistake. They donate impressive equipment without considering whether the recipient has:

- the infrastructure;
- the technical skills;
- the ongoing operating costs;
- the management capacity; and
- the market

needed to make the project sustainable.

A modest project that local people can operate confidently may achieve more lasting benefit than sophisticated equipment requiring ongoing technical support, infrastructure and management.

Over the years, FoVO has increasingly favoured projects that build upon existing community strengths rather than introducing systems that depend on resources beyond the community's reach.

The current project of adapting the building to suit current needs reinforced FoVO's gradual shift away from simply responding to requests towards working collaboratively with local partners to identify practical and affordable solutions.

A new building would undoubtedly have been welcome. However, by improving the existing dormitory and supporting food production, the available funds benefited both present and future students.

The project also highlighted the importance of local ownership. Rather than managing every detail ourselves, FoVO increasingly relies on trusted local partners who understand their own communities and are capable of adapting projects as circumstances change.

Sometimes the most valuable contribution a small charity can make is not directing the work, but enabling capable local people to do it themselves.

The lesson that reflects FoVO's “working alongside” philosophy is that the best project is not necessarily the one people first ask for, but the one that provides the greatest long-term benefit within the available resources.



Newly donated bicycles awaiting distribution to indigenous students.



Donated clothing stored at the homestay. In rural Vietnam, clothing is often plentiful; projects supporting education and infrastructure may have greater long-term benefit.



productive use of the limited open space



for practical support, including food and poultry.

The small courtyard herb garden, making Thi, FoVO's fieldworker, discussing priorities with the sisters



Students from the homestay with Sisters last year.





Our project partners (left to right): Sister Y Mar, Sister Y Hoi, Anh Tuan and Anh Sy.





Girl's dormitory before the work and after completion, with ceiling raised and new insulated internal linings.

REPORT TO DONORS 2026

6. Eleven Households on the Outskirts of Hà Tĩnh City – Chicken Raising

$1,000 (17M VND)

Description

This project supports eleven disadvantaged households living on the outskirts of Hà Tĩnh City through a small-scale chicken-raising program.

Compared with the Indigenous villages of Gia Lai and Kon Tum, this community appears relatively prosperous. New two-storey houses are being built, schoolchildren ride to school in clean uniforms — many on electric scooters — and much of the local economy is supported by family members working overseas.

Migrant workers in Japan, South Korea, Thailand, Eastern Europe and elsewhere regularly send money home, allowing families to improve their homes and support relatives.

Yet this prosperity is unevenly shared. Our local project partner, an experienced leader of the village women's association, introduced us to households that had not benefited from this economic growth. Some had already been identified by the Vingroup Foundation as requiring assistance and had received modest concrete houses. Others continued to struggle with illness, disability or the responsibilities of caring for family members.

FoVO inspected eight of the eleven participating households during this visit. The families selected were already experienced in raising poultry and had suitable yards or chicken pens. Each household will receive approximately thirty young chickens, vaccinations, one 25-kilogram bag of starter feed and a heat lamp. The total project cost is 17 million VND (approximately AUD $1,000). Once the chickens are established, families continue the enterprise using their own labour and experience, creating an opportunity for ongoing household income.

Observation

Although the village appears comparatively affluent, the visits reminded us that disadvantage often exists alongside prosperity.

Many of the project households were headed by elderly people living alone, single women, or carers supporting family members with chronic illness or disability. One young mother was caring for five children while her husband travelled regularly for kidney treatment. Another woman was supporting her adult daughter with an intellectual disability. One elderly man was already welding together a new chicken enclosure when we arrived, eager to demonstrate that he was prepared to make the most of the opportunity.

Several homes reflected the families' resilience and resourcefulness. Chicken runs had already been prepared, sheds adapted for poultry housing and simple household equipment carefully maintained.

Throughout the village, Christian shrines occupied places of honour alongside ancestor altars, while traditional timber rice chests — often the family's most valuable possession — were carefully protected above flood level and preserved for the following year's planting season.

The careful inspection of each household before approving assistance has become an important part of FoVO's approach. Rather than simply distributing livestock, we try to ensure that participating families have both the experience and commitment needed for the project to succeed.

Reflection

One lesson from this project is that poverty is often relative.

Compared with the remote Indigenous communities of the Central Highlands, households on the outskirts of Hà Tınh generally enjoy better housing, roads and access to services. Nevertheless, illness, disability and limited employment opportunities continue to leave some families vulnerable.

Livelihood projects such as chicken raising work best where families already possess the necessary skills.

By supplying the initial stock and feed, rather than creating long-term dependence, FoVO hopes to provide a modest opportunity that households can build upon using their own knowledge and labour.

The project also reinforced the importance of careful local selection. Trusted community partners know which families are most likely to benefit and which have demonstrated the determination to make a small enterprise succeed. For FoVO, this local knowledge is often as valuable as the financial assistance itself.



1 Lanh is a 79-year-old single woman with a good chicken run in the garden.



Her hut has a Christian shrine on the back wall and large poster of Jesus on the side wall. The bed is raised on concrete blocks to remedy any flooding. Her traditional ao dai (Sunday dresses for going to church) hang beside the shrine.



2 Ong Hieu and Ba Thanh are an elderly couple living in a converted shed (under construction).



The couple use a bicycle for transport. But they have invested in a cow and a raising a calf.



Their shelter is very basic, with

winnowing baskets stacked over an open fireplace and a mattress laid on the concrete floor.



In one corner is a common feature in the village: the most valuable property is the large timber dowry box with enough of the previous year's rice harvest to sow the rice crop for next growing season. The rice box is raised on bricks above the floor to protect from flooding and discourage vermin.



3 Triu is a mother who is the carer for Suong, her grown-up daughter who has an intellectual disability.



Vingroup charity house plaque on the house.



Inside, a son's primary school "graduation" photo hangs level with Jesus on the Christian shrine on the wall.



Mother and daughter in the shed at the rear, where they raise chickens.



Their six-week-old chickens appear well cared for.



Inside the house the mother has set up a simple kitchen.



4 Kinh is a single woman with mental illness who was cared for by her parents. They have dies and the villagers have built her a small house of her own, beside the ruins of her parents' house.



Adjoining her house is her deceased parents' dilapidated house which she will use for chicken raising.



The parents old house is being also used as an ancestor shrine with photos of the woman's father in army uniform and a photo of the woman's mother. Above the ancestor shrine is the Christian shrine.



5 No town water in this village. Luong is a young mother with 5 children and is subsistence farming on the small block. Her husband is ill and travels each month to get hospital kidney treatment. She is photographed beside the water tank. This marks the house as one of the original local government housing scheme houses, dating from c1980s.

(To me, the tank bears an uncanny resemblance to the 2,000-year-old stone megaliths of the famed Plain of Jars site in Laos. I wonder if this was a designer's nod to the French archaeologist's Madelaine Colani's "discovery".)



6 On arrival, Khue, our client, an elderly single man, was increasing his chances of being offered chickens by hurriedly welding up a frame for a chicken cage made from steel scraps.



30-day old chickens already clustered in a few laundry tubs, seemingly waiting for their new accommodation to be completed.



7 Chung is a single elderly woman.





Yard already set up with a chicken run with some full-grown chickens.



8 Doan is a single woman just returned from Gia Lai Province. She had moved to Gia Lai to live with her grown up children but it didn't work out and is now back in her home village.



The yard is set up for a chicken run.



A small shed with wood pile and outside cooking area will be converted into a chicken coop.

REPORT TO DONORS 2026

7. Three Community Projects in the Phát Diệm Villages

Rice, Chickens and Bicycles — $2,975 (50.5M VND)

(Bicycle project funded by a $1,000 donation from the Rotary Club of Murrumbidgee Canberra Inc in 2025.)

Description

The famous stone cathedral and temple complex at Phát Diệm attracts pilgrims from throughout Vietnam and increasingly from Europe and Asia. Investment from Hà Nội is also evident along the approach road.

On Sundays, the traditional cathedral bell still sounds before dawn while, later the same day, tourist buses may arrive carrying visitors eager to photograph one of Vietnam's most remarkable churches.

Yet only a short distance from this growing religious and tourist centre, many village families continue to experience significant hardship.

FoVO again worked with Sister Kinh, one of our principal local project partners in northern Vietnam. Sister Kinh spends much of her time visiting villages, identifying elderly people living alone, people with disabilities, carers, widows and families experiencing financial hardship. Through years of regular visits, she has developed an intimate knowledge of the people living across the seven villages surrounding Phát Diệm.

Three complementary projects were undertaken during this visit:

- Rice for households experiencing food insecurity.
- Chickens for families capable of generating modest income through poultry raising.
- Bicycles for disadvantaged women and school students.

Project expenditure comprised:

- Rice for 20 households – 10 million VND
- Chickens, feed and vaccinations for 20 households – 18.5 million VND
- Fifteen bicycles – 22 million VND

The bicycle project was made possible through a generous grant from the Rotary Club of Murrumbidgee Canberra Inc., with FoVO contributing the remaining balance.

Observation

While waiting for the day's work to begin, our fieldworker shared a childhood memory that has remained with her throughout her life. As a young girl she had been mauled by a German Shepherd near the cathedral entrance. She escaped by climbing onto one of the carved stone corbels, but the dog attacked her again as she ran home. More than thirty years later she still carries the scars and remembers neighbours who later died from rabies.

That evening the story unexpectedly became relevant.

Sister Kinh arrived after completing her village visits with a badly bitten ankle. She too had been attacked by an unrestrained German Shepherd. In rural Vietnam, where rabies still occurs, dog bites cannot be dismissed as minor injuries. We immediately arranged hospital treatment and covered the cost of the post-exposure vaccinations.

The following morning, despite the previous night's events, Sister Kinh quietly resumed her work.

Watching her move from household to household explained why she has become such a valuable FoVO partner. She seemed to know every family personally. Conversations were relaxed and respectful. Distribution was organised efficiently and without fuss. Rice was allocated to those with the greatest immediate need, chickens to households capable of raising them successfully, and bicycles to people whose mobility or education would benefit most.

Rather than simply distributing goods, she was visiting neighbours whose circumstances she understood through years of personal contact.

Many of the rice recipients were elderly women living alone, carers supporting family members with disabilities, widows and people unable to cultivate sufficient rice because of illness or lack of land. Several lived in former ancestor houses that had gradually become their only accommodation. Others occupied modest post-war village houses built under Vietnam's former VAC (Garden – Pond – Livestock Pen) development model (Vườn - Garden: vegetables and herbs to eat or sell; Ao - Pond: fish to farm and water for crop; Chuồng - Pen: chickens or pigs for meat and fertiliser).

Although intended to provide household self-sufficiency, many of these small holdings proved too limited to support a family, leaving residents dependent upon casual work, roadside trading or family support.

The chicken project focused on households capable of converting a modest investment into continuing food production and supplementary income. For many recipients, poultry functions as a form of household savings. Birds provide eggs, improve nutrition and can be sold quickly to meet unexpected expenses such as medicines or school costs.

The bicycle project supported fifteen recipients across five villages. Most were school-aged children from families affected by illness, disability or the loss of a parent, although several elderly women who relied upon bicycles for shopping or collecting food were also included. In rural northern Vietnam, a bicycle remains one of the most practical and affordable forms of transport, requiring neither fuel nor electricity and allowing access to schools, markets and employment.

Reflection

This project demonstrated once again that effective community assistance depends upon trusted local partners.

FoVO did not select the recipients. Those decisions were made by Sister Kinh, whose detailed knowledge of the villages had been built through years of regular visits rather than through surveys or formal assessments. Her familiarity with individual households ensured that assistance was directed towards people who genuinely needed support and who were most likely to benefit from it.

The project also illustrates how several modest forms of assistance can work together.

Rice addresses immediate food security. Chickens provide an opportunity to generate continuing food and income. Bicycles improve access to education, employment and community life. Individually these are relatively small projects; collectively they strengthen household resilience.

Perhaps most importantly, the work reminded us that community development is ultimately about relationships. Sister Kinh never appeared to be delivering charity to strangers. She was simply continuing relationships that had been built over many years through quiet service, practical help and mutual respect. For a small organisation like FoVO, these long-term local partnerships remain one of our greatest strengths.

Rice project



The trademark 1983 concrete water tank for VAC village houses.



Fishpond component of the VAC village house.



Polish pilgrims gathering behind the famous stone church



With Sister Kinh (my hero).



Sister Kinh arriving after being bitten by a dog — with rabies present, dog bites are no small matter.



Some of the ten homeless elderly women boarding in a charity house



Two-speed economy — a client carrying her rice bag beside a car



Transporting a rice bag on an electric bicycle.



A mother caring for her intellectually disabled adult daughter, standing before her ancestor and Holy Family shrine



An ancestor house converted into shelter for a disabled daughter.



Mother caring for her disabled son.



Wheelchair and bicycle parked at the house



A widow standing at her family shrine



Her deceased husband in People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN) uniform



A woman beside her rice bag; wire netting secures the roof after storms



Neighbouring house collapsed during the storm, killing one occupant. Adjacent house being rebuilt from donations.





A woman caring for her elderly mother, who repeatedly asks, "Can I go home now?"



A poor rice harvest stored for replanting after floods.



Tools used to dry rice grain on paved roads.



An elderly woman paralysed by stroke, cared for by relatives



Small prayer altar prepared beside the bed.



A woman tending her small quinine herb garden for income.



This labour-intensive crop brings limited cash, while a 20 kg rice bag provides 4 – 6 weeks of food

Chicken Project



The livestock seller taking time and care with each household.



First recipient proudly showing her chickens.



A physically disabled street seller with his two sons



. Younger son helping push his father's wheelchair home



Local nuns treating their disability shelter as one household.



A woman transporting chickens using her electric wheelchair.



Walking home.



Wheelbarrowing home.



Pushing the bicycle home.



Riding home on a motorbike, child seated on a rice bag.

Bicycle Project

Recipients



1. Phạm Thị Hằng Nga (13)

Father deceased. Mother supports three children by collecting plastics and cans for recycling. Chát Bình Village



2. Đinh Ánh Tuyết (13)

Mother has cancer but discontinued treatment due to lack of funds. Tuyết has two brothers. Lai Thanh Village



3. Trần Thị Mai Trang (14)

From a family of six children with no stable income. Father is alcoholic. Đông Hương Village



4. Nguyễn Thị Hồng (13)

Mother deceased. Father is a casual labourer raising three children. Như Hòa Village



5. Trần Thị Thanh Hiền (12)

Both parents deceased. Living with grandparents. Chát Sơn Village



6. Phạm Yến Nhi (15)

Living with her single mother, who has a disability. Chát Sơn Village



7. Nguyễn Thị Vinh (62)

Lives alone. Has been unwell for a long time. Lai Thanh Village



8. Trần Thị Khanh (70)

Lives alone. Supports herself by selling vegetables at the market. Group 15, Kim Sơn Village



9. Trần Thị Mão (72)

Lives alone. Collects snails and crabs in rice fields for income. Group 15, Kim Sơn Village

10. Phạm Duy Khánh (14)

From a family of five children. No land or house; living in a small rental. Kim Sơn Village

11. Phạm Minh Đức (13)

Father deceased. Mother unwell. Living with grandmother. Chát Sơn Village

12. Trần Thị Quỳnh Nhi (12)

Father absent. Mother works in a factory in Saigon. Three siblings living with grandparents. Chát Sơn Village

13. Cao Đại Dũng (13)

Parents working as labourers on coffee farms in Đắk Lắk. Living with grandmother. Chát Sơn Village

14. Phạm Thị Hùng (67)

Carer for two adult children with disabilities. Lai Thanh Village

15. Nguyễn Thị Thiểu (75)

Unwell but still collects snails and crabs in rice fields for income. Hưng Đạo Village

REPORT TO DONORS 2026

8. Student Activity Day at a Nursing Home, Danang

$600 (10M VND)

Description

FoVO supported a day-long activity organised by a university student volunteer group at a small residential home for homeless elderly women operated by the Sisters of St Paul de Chartres in Danang.

The Sisters of St Paul de Chartres are an international religious congregation with a long tradition of education, health care and community service. In Vietnam they operate schools, kindergartens and social welfare programs. The nursing home supported through this project is located on valuable land near Danang's tourist precinct, yet continues to operate solely as a not-for-profit home for elderly women who have nowhere else to live.

Approximately 20 – 25 residents are cared for by seven Sisters who receive no personal income and have dedicated their lives to community service. FoVO's support is directed towards improving the quality of life of the residents.

Working within our budget of 10 million VND, the student group and the Sisters identified several practical priorities. Together they provided:

- a special celebratory lunch for all residents
- birthday cake and entertainment
- three sturdy wheelchairs
- a blood-pressure monitor
- commonly used medicines and personal supplies.

Observation

The most memorable aspect of the day was not the equipment but the interaction between the students and the residents.

About a dozen university students — roughly equal numbers of young men and women — spent the day assisting wherever needed. They helped residents into the dining room, served meals, sang songs, chatted, took photographs and celebrated birthdays with cake and music.

The atmosphere was relaxed and full of laughter. Residents who normally spent much of their day quietly watching television found themselves surrounded by energetic young visitors eager to listen and help.

The visit also provided an unexpected break for the Sisters. Rather than carrying all the responsibilities of the home themselves, they were able to spend time talking with the students while the activities unfolded around them.

Towards the end of the afternoon, the newly delivered wheelchairs were assembled and tested, group photographs were taken, and — as so often happens in Vietnam — the day concluded with a succession of cheerful selfies.

Reflection

One of the strengths of small projects such as this is that they bring different generations together.

The practical items purchased through the project — wheelchairs, medicines and medical equipment — will continue to benefit the residents long after the students have returned to university. Equally important, however, was the simple companionship provided during the visit. For many elderly residents, conversation, music and shared meals are as valuable as material assistance.

The project also illustrates FoVO's preference for working through capable local organisations. Rather than organising activities ourselves, we supported a partnership between an experienced religious community and a university volunteer group. Each contributed different strengths: the Sisters understood the residents' daily needs, while the students brought enthusiasm, energy and companionship.

We hope this partnership will continue in future years, creating opportunities for young volunteers to develop a lifelong commitment to community service while improving the lives of some of Danang's most vulnerable older people. The project isn't really about providing wheelchairs or a meal. It's about connecting young volunteers with isolated older people. The lunch, cake and equipment become the means rather than the end.



Street entry to the shelter.



Residents gathered at the TV room.



Sample of commonly used supplies we provided.



Lunch being served.



Lunch being served.



Singing Happy Birthday.



Birthday Cake served.



Greetings from the lively Sister Tham.



Assembling and testing a wheelchair.



Meeting Sister Tham from Quang Nam, who has studied in Rome, worked in Australia and speaks both fluent Italian and Australian English.





It's selfie time (yet again).

REPORT TO DONORS 2026

9. University Student Camp at Kon Xom Luh Village, Kon Tum Province

$600 (10M VND)

Description

One of FoVO's most rewarding projects during the year was supporting a three-day community camp organised entirely by students from the University of Danang in partnership with the Ba Na community at Kon Xom Luh Village, Kon Tum Province.

Unlike many charitable projects, this initiative was conceived and organised by the students themselves. Rather than simply delivering gifts, they aimed to spend time living alongside the community while raising most of the project funding through their own efforts.

The student group comprised approximately twenty volunteers who travelled by bus from Danang, bringing food, educational activities and gifts. They prepared their own meals, stayed in simple accommodation and worked alongside local families throughout the three-day visit.

The total project cost was approximately 40 million VND. The students raised 30 million VND themselves through donations from former students and fundraising activities such as flower sales on Teachers' Day and International Women's Day. FoVO contributed the remaining 10 million VND (approximately AUD $600).

During the camp every family received a bag of rice. Children participated in games, songs, educational activities and performances. Evenings concluded with campfires, student sketches and traditional Ba Na dancing involving both villagers and students.

Observation

The atmosphere throughout the camp was one of genuine partnership rather than charity.

Students and villagers cooked together, shared meals and participated equally in the activities. Rather than arriving briefly to distribute donations, the students became temporary members of the community.

One of the most valuable aspects of the camp was the interaction between village children and the university students. For many children from this remote Indigenous community, it was their first opportunity to spend time with young adults studying at university. The students became informal role models, demonstrating educational pathways that many village children had never previously imagined.

The experience was equally significant for the students. For many, it was their first extended stay in an Indigenous village of the Central Highlands. Living alongside village families challenged assumptions about rural life and provided a deeper appreciation of both the resilience and the daily challenges faced by these communities.

Reflection

This project illustrates several principles that FoVO has come to value over many years.

Community development is often strongest when local people become active participants rather than passive recipients. The university students conceived, organised and largely funded the project themselves. FoVO's role was simply to strengthen an initiative that already demonstrated commitment and local ownership.

The project also showed how relatively modest financial support can leverage much larger contributions of time, energy and goodwill. Our contribution represented only one quarter of the total project cost, yet enabled a much larger community activity through the students' own fundraising and volunteer effort.

Perhaps the most enduring outcome, however, was not the rice or the organised activities, but the relationships that developed between the students and the village community. The children encountered university students who encouraged educational aspirations, while the students returned home with a far deeper understanding of Indigenous life in the Central Highlands.

For FoVO, these exchanges demonstrate that successful community development can enrich both those who receive assistance and those who offer it.



Meeting people – sharing a secret



Bringing rice bags to each family



Gathering together after a flour throwing competition



Meeting families



Group photo in front of village meeting house



Gathering at the campfire

REPORT TO DONORS 2026

10. Inspection of a Proposed Community Water Supply — Tu Mơ Rông District, Kon Tum Province

Independent Technical Assessment — $100 (1.7M VND)

Description

FoVO was asked to consider supporting a new community water supply for Đăk Siêng Tea Xia Village above Tu Mơ Rông in Kon Tum Province.

At first glance the proposal appeared straightforward. The village requested assistance to drill a new well because the existing water supply becomes unreliable during the dry season.

Rather than committing funds immediately, FoVO undertook a site inspection.

Travelling from Kon Tum City, we visited the village and met with local residents, church leaders and an independent hydrologist, Toa, who travelled more than 200 kilometres from Gia Lai Province on his day off to provide professional advice. FoVO contributed a modest honorarium of 1.7 million VND (approximately AUD $100) in recognition of his time and expertise.

Our Fieldworker spoke with local women about their daily water collection and walked to the crest of the hill above the village to investigate visible surface water runoff. A meeting then followed involving the village's senior Sedang priest A'Khuong, visiting priest Phong, Sedang nun Sister But, local resident Y'Huyen, ourselves and Toa.

Together we inspected the existing hand-dug well, examined the surrounding landscape and discussed possible options with village representatives.

Observation

The inspection quickly revealed that the original request was only part of a much larger story.

The village relies on a single hand-dug well approximately seven metres deep. During the dry season the water supply becomes unreliable. However, immediately above the village sits the district's treated town water storage tank, supplied from a mountain reservoir.

The issue was therefore not simply one of finding water.

After examining the local geology, Toa explained that the upper soil layers overlying volcanic basalt would make drilling a deep production bore expensive and uncertain. He concluded that constructing another well was unlikely to provide good value.

Instead, he recommended that the community pursue access to the existing town water supply and, if successful, establish a local filtration and distribution system.

Village representatives explained that obtaining permission to connect to the government supply would involve complex administrative processes that they would need to pursue themselves.

For FoVO, the site inspection transformed the project from an engineering question into one involving engineering, local governance and community organisation.

Reflection

Although no construction resulted from this visit, the project achieved exactly what it was intended to do.

The original proposal had been to fund a new village well. Independent technical advice demonstrated that drilling another bore was unlikely to be the most effective solution. A relatively small investment in professional assessment may therefore have prevented a much larger expenditure on infrastructure that offered little long-term benefit.

The visit also reinforced several principles that have become central to FoVO's approach.

Initial requests often simplify more complex local issues. Careful site inspection frequently changes both the understanding of a problem and the most appropriate response.

Perhaps most importantly, the project illustrated the limits as well as the strengths of a small international charity. FoVO can assist communities to investigate options, obtain independent technical advice and support locally driven initiatives. Decisions involving government infrastructure and public utilities, however, must ultimately be negotiated by the communities themselves.

This turned out not to be a routine site inspection visit. An assessment better reflects what actually happened — FoVO commissioned expert advice, evaluated alternatives, and concluded that a different solution should be pursued. This is a strong story for donors as it demonstrates stewardship of their contributions.

Sometimes the most successful project is not the one that builds something, but the one that helps local people make a better-informed decision.



Banner reads: OFFICIALS AND PEOPLE OF KON DAO COMMUNE ARE DETERMINED TO BUILD CON DAU COMMUNE INTO A RAPID AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (a little reminder of who is in charge of the Central Highlands).



With my mate Uncle Ho in the communal meeting house (nha rong). “LONG LIVE THE GLORIOUS COMMUNIST PARTY OF VIETNAM!” banner above.



Tu Mo Rong highlands landscape



Farm motorbikes line the village street when people arrive.



Gathering at church on the village saint's day.



Coming out to get ready for the children's dance performance.



Anticipation before the performance



Traditional dance performance



Littlies enjoying performing the “chicken dance”



Parked outside, not a prop from a Mad Max movie, but something similar: a home-made motorbike with fuel tank on top, rigged for climbing steep tracks and carrying farm loads.



Twon water storage tank above the village.



What we've come here for. To see how some of the houses get their water. Hand excavated, concrete pipe lined well, 7-8 metres deep with pump, electrical supply, retrieval rope and hose going out to the water tanks. Supply becomes unreliable in the dry season.

REPORT TO DONORS 2026

11. Community Water Supply for Three Ba Na Villages, Gia Lai Province

$2,230 (55M VND)

Access to reliable drinking water remains one of the greatest practical challenges for many indigenous communities in Vietnam's Central Highlands. During 2026, FoVO supported the construction of a deeper community well to improve water security for the three Ba Na villages of K'Lot, Kop and K'Tu in Kon Gang, Gia Lai Province.

In the volcanic terrain of the Central Highlands, groundwater commonly occurs within fractures and weathered zones in the basalt rather than as large underground rivers. Consequently, drilling success depends on intersecting water-bearing fractures, and even deep bores may produce only limited yields.

The project sought to augment an existing community well that had become increasingly unreliable during the dry season. Local experience suggested that while the existing well reached approximately 28 metres, a depth of around 100 metres would be required to obtain a dependable year-round supply.

Following discussions with our local project partner, Sister Nang, the proposal appeared to be a relatively high-risk project.

Several important questions remained unanswered.

- Would a deeper bore actually find sufficient water?
- Would the water be suitable for drinking, or contain excessive minerals or salts?
- Could drilling penetrate the underlying volcanic rock?
- Would increasing the village water supply unintentionally alter traditional patterns of community life centred around collecting water?

The last question arose from an observation made several years earlier by anthropologist and planner Jaco Terblanche, who described an African village where a well project had unintentionally disrupted long-established social interactions that occurred while women collected water each day. His story reminded us that development projects should always consider possible cultural consequences alongside technical solutions.

Before proceeding, FoVO also considered whether improving the village water supply might unintentionally alter existing social practices associated with collecting water. Although no such concerns were identified at K'Tu, a later observation at a community spring near Pleiku (see Field Note: Meeting Women Collecting Spring Water) reinforced that water sources may serve important social as well as practical functions.

The final total contract cost of drilling both wells and fitting out the second well was 55M (approximately $2,230).

Site Inspection

The existing communal well is located on church land at K'Tu Village. The site already included a pump, a functioning filtration plant and several taps where villagers could fill water containers. The filtered water is distributed locally for a small contribution towards operating costs.

Before inspecting the village, we spent a day with Toa, the hydrologist assisting the project. He demonstrated his drilling equipment at a nearby farm and explained the geological conditions typical of the region.

At K'Tu we met the villager Ba Na villager Ti, the community responsible for supervising the drilling works, who first showed us one of the traditional hand-dug wells previously used throughout the area.

The well had been excavated entirely by hand.

Teams of six men worked in rotating pairs, digging a shaft approximately 1.5 metres in diameter through the deep red mountain soils until reaching solid basalt at a depth of around 28 metres. Once the rock surface was reached, they carefully constructed brick lining walls by hand before progressively backfilling around the outside. Temporary ladders made from timber poles inserted into the walls provided the only means of access.

The work was dangerous.

Following the death of one villager who fell while constructing a well, communities largely abandoned hand excavation in favour of mechanical drilling.

Toa explained that the shallow soil-rock interface generally provides only a limited water supply. During extended dry periods these wells frequently fail, leaving insufficient water for growing communities.

Drilling Operations

By the time of our visit, FoVO's commissioned bore had already reached approximately 80 metres.

Unfortunately, the drilling team had encountered massive basalt that proved largely impermeable. The solid volcanic rock contained very few cavities through which groundwater could flow.

The crew had therefore replaced the standard 200 mm soil drilling equipment with specialised rock-drilling tools. Core samples retrieved from the bore confirmed that the basalt was dense and relatively unfractured.

Based on local geological experience, Toa expected drilling to continue for approximately another 20 metres, much of it through expensive hard rock, before eventually reaching deeper water-bearing limestone containing interconnected cavities capable of producing a sustainable water supply.

Once drilling is completed, a 130 mm perforated PVC casing will be installed within the bore, allowing groundwater to enter while stabilising the shaft. A stainless-steel submersible pump with three-phase electrical wiring will then be lowered into the completed bore.

Well Drilling Profile

The drilling contractor described the geological profile encountered at the original well site as follows:

- 0 – 20 m: Red basaltic soil.
- 20 – 45 m: Clay mixed with weathered material.

- 45 – 75 m: Soft weathered rock.
- 75 – 80 m: Soft blue basalt.
- 80 – 105 m: Hard fractured blue basalt.
- 105 – 110 m: Weathered rock, grading into a sand-bearing layer.

The first bore reached 110 metres, but the water yield remained insufficient for the needs of the three villages. When a sand-bearing layer was encountered, the contractor continued drilling in the hope of intercepting a more productive aquifer. Despite reaching this depth, however, the supply remained inadequate.

The first bore was therefore abandoned and drilling commenced at an alternative location near the entrance to the church grounds, approximately 120 metres from the first bore.

The geological conditions at the second site were different. The hydrologist described the profile as follows:

- 0 – 40 m: Red soil.
- 40 – 60 m: Soft blue rock, with vesicular or honeycomb-like rock encountered at approximately 60 metres.
- Below 60 m: Hard, solid blue rock, together with fractured blue rock.
- At approximately 90 m: The drilling encountered a significant change in the geological conditions.

The second bore proved successful, with a good water supply encountered at approximately 92 metres. The bore was then cased, a submersible pump installed, and the supply line connected to the existing filtration building.

This outcome illustrates the uncertainty inherent in groundwater drilling in the volcanic terrain of the Central Highlands. Although the first bore reached 110 metres without finding a sufficient supply, a second bore only 120 metres away encountered a productive aquifer at 92 metres. The project therefore ultimately succeeded, but only after the initial drilling proved unsuccessful.

Why This Project Matters

FoVO has previously supported a similar community water project at Song Ngọc fishing village in Nghệ An Province, contributing approximately one-third of the project cost towards a pipeline, filtration plant and communal water supply serving several villages. At that time, it had been the largest cost single project undertaken by FoVO and seemed risky. But from that time, these fishing villages have had a reliable and safe water supply.

The K'Tu project is similarly significant because it will provide a safer and more reliable water source for three neighbouring communities.

Although Gia Lai has become one of Vietnam's most productive coffee-and pepper-growing regions, intensive agriculture has also increased the use of fertilisers and pesticides. Shallow groundwater may therefore be vulnerable to contamination from agricultural chemicals, organic matter and disease-causing organisms.

A deeper groundwater source combined with the village's existing filtration system has the potential to provide substantially safer drinking water for local families.

FoVO Contribution

FoVO funded construction of this deeper community bore, supporting a project expected to improve long-term water security for three indigenous villages.

Observation

Several lessons emerged from this project.

Successful water projects depend as much upon local geology as engineering. Local technical knowledge proved invaluable in assessing drilling risks and determining realistic expectations before committing charitable funds.

The project also demonstrated the importance of combining technical expertise with community ownership. Even with advice, deep bores may produce only limited yields.

The existing filtration plant, local management arrangements and modest user contributions suggested that the community already possessed the organisational capacity needed to operate the completed system.

Finally, the project reinforced that development should always consider possible unintended consequences. Infrastructure that appears universally beneficial may alter social practices in unexpected ways. Asking these questions before construction begins is part of responsible community development.

Reflection

Perhaps the most memorable part of the visit was not the drilling rig itself but the old hand-dug wells scattered through the villages. They were reminders of the extraordinary effort previous generations invested in obtaining water with little more than shovels, bricks and determination.

Nearby hung another reminder of the region's history — a village bell fashioned from a Vietnam War, spent 203 mm M15 howitzer shell, suspended from a tree branch and struck with a hand-welded steel hammer to call villagers to Mass and community gatherings.

Once manufactured for war, this Vietnam War artillery shell turned church bell now serves as a simple instrument bringing people together. Like much of the Central Highlands, it quietly reflects a landscape where memories of conflict have gradually been adapted into everyday community life. It symbolises the broader transformation from conflict to community.



The church bell is a repurposed Vietnam War artillery shell casing, still used to call people to community gatherings.



Existing 28-metre hand-dug village well at K'Tu.





The existing community water filtration plant at K'Tu village. Water from the communal well is filtered before being distributed to local households.



Well drilling in progress. One of the drilling crew climbs barefoot up the six-metre tripod to loosen and disconnect a section of drill pipe.



Temporary camp used by the drilling crew while working at the village well site.



Soil drilling bit (approximately 200 mm diameter) beside the completed bore. The larger diameter allows installation of the permanent well casing.







Rock drilling pipe with a core sample of dense volcanic basalt recovered from the borehole.



Recovering the drill string by hand. Each section of pipe is disconnected individually to retrieve the rock drill from approximately 80 metres below ground.







Installing the PVC well casing. Lowering the stainless-steel submersible pump. Pouring filtered water.

REPORT TO DONORS 2026

12. Ten Student Bicycles for Three Villages, Gia Lai

$942 (16M VND)

Description

For many indigenous students in the Central Highlands, simply travelling to school can be a major barrier to education. Long walking distances, poor roads and family poverty all contribute to irregular school attendance and, in some cases, early school dropout.

This project provided ten new bicycles for disadvantaged Ba Na students from the villages of Đê Lanh, Đắk Lơn and Angleh. The project was generously funded by the Rotary Club of Murrumbidgee Canberra Inc, which specifically wished to support students through the provision of bicycles. The choice was particularly appropriate, as several members of the club are keen recreational cyclists themselves.

Rather than FoVO selecting the recipients, we asked our local project partner, Sister Nang, to identify the ten students who would benefit most. Having worked closely with families in these villages over the previous six years, she was well placed to assess each family's circumstances and educational needs.

The project budget was 16 million VND was spent on 10 bicycles, each around AUD $85.50 per bicycle, with the remainder of this project cost spent on a set of repair tools and parts that the people could use at the parish centre for repairs. Standard bicycles were deliberately chosen because they are affordable, durable and can be repaired locally. With the permission of the students and their mothers, I photographed each recipient together with their bicycle, providing a record for our donors.

Observation

The bicycles were received with quiet excitement rather than ceremony. For many families, a bicycle represents much more than a means of transport. It reduces the daily effort of travelling to school, increases independence and makes regular attendance more achievable.

One of FoVO's recurring observations is that local partners are usually far better placed than outside organisations to decide who should receive assistance. By relying on Sister Nang's knowledge of the families, the bicycles were directed to students who were genuinely most in need.

Reflection

This project illustrates FoVO's preference for simple, practical assistance that removes an immediate barrier to education. A bicycle is a relatively modest investment, yet for a student living in a remote village it can create opportunities that extend well beyond the classroom.

The project also demonstrates the value of partnerships. Rotary Club provided the funding, FoVO coordinated the project, and Sister Nang identified the students. Together, each partner contributed different strengths towards the same goal of helping more children remain at school. FoVO did not just give ten bicycles. The outcome depended on three partners — Rotary, FoVO and Sister Nang — each playing a complementary role. That is true to how a small charity actually operates.

















	Danh Sách Các Em Nhận Xe Đạp		
1	Em Linh.	Lớp 7	Làng Đe Lonh
2	Thơm	7	11
3	Hoàng Châu	6	Đak Toh.
4	Yi	5	11
5	Hồng	7	Anghèo.
6	Điệp	8	11
7	Thuk	6	11
8	Thơm	7	11
9	Vũng	7	11
10.	Luân	4	11





REPORT TO DONORS 2026

13. Study Materials for 220 Students at Summer Study Camp, Angleh Village, Gia Lai Province

$3,235 (55M VND)

Description

Project

Education remains one of the most effective long-term ways of reducing poverty in Vietnam's remote ethnic minority communities. During 2026, FoVO supported a summer study program by providing educational materials for 220 indigenous students from Years 1 to 12 in Gia Lai Province.

Approximately 60 students attended a summer study camp at Angleh Village, a Ba Na indigenous language area, where FoVO had previously completed community projects in 2022 and 2024. A further 30 students came from the D'Lanh Homestay Shelter, one of the indigenous Vinh Son shelters operated by local nuns. The remaining students lived in the surrounding villages of Angleh, D'Lanh, D'Tun and Kon Gang.

The camps are organised during the long school holidays and provide children with an opportunity to strengthen their reading, writing and mathematics while enjoying games, sport and cultural activities with friends. Classes are taught by Vietnamese volunteer teachers who donate their time during the holidays.

Why Summer Study Camps Exist

For many children growing up in the Central Highlands, simply attending school presents significant challenges.

Government schools have been constructed in many remote districts, but maintaining qualified teachers in isolated communities has proved difficult. During our travels through the Vong Chep Valley in Gia Lai, we visited a newly constructed government school building that had stood unused for over a year because no teaching staff had been appointed. By then, many of its windows had already been broken.

Even where schools are operating, indigenous children often begin their education at a disadvantage.

Vietnamese is the language of government education, yet many children speak an indigenous language at home. In multilingual communities this can be especially complex. A child may speak Gia Rai with one side of the family, Ba Na with neighbours and Xơ Đăng with relatives through marriage before beginning formal education in Vietnamese. For some children, Vietnamese is effectively a third or even fourth language.

Learning to read, write and study in an unfamiliar language inevitably slows educational progress.

Not surprisingly, some students leave school early to help their families with farming or seasonal labour. Others later move to industrial areas in search of employment, where they may encounter a very different set of social and economic pressures, including insecure employment, poor housing, isolation from family support networks and the challenges of adapting to urban life.

The Homestay Shelters

Many of the participating students live during the school term in one of the Vinh Son homestay shelters, a network established by indigenous Catholic sisters to support children from remote villages.

The shelters provide more than accommodation.

Children share household responsibilities by helping prepare meals, cleaning communal areas and caring for younger residents. Older students may also assist with activities such as farming or bakery work, learning practical responsibility while contributing to the life of the community.

Like similar residential care systems throughout the world, homestay shelters are not without challenges. Children living away from their families may experience separation, emotional difficulties or the effects of earlier disadvantage.

At the same time, they often develop remarkably strong social bonds.

One recurring observation is the loyalty that develops among children raised together. If one child is bullied at school, other shelter residents frequently rally in support. A similar pattern was recalled by a former Cootamundra town resident who said of Cootamundra Aboriginal Girls Home "if you fought one Home Girl, you fought them all."
While such loyalty can occasionally create difficulties for staff, it reflects the strong sense of belonging and mutual protection that develops among children sharing similar life experiences.

FoVO Contribution

FoVO contributed 55 million Vietnamese đồng (approximately AUD $3,235) to purchase educational materials for primary school students.

Primary school children received:

- a school backpack
- small textbooks
- ten exercise books
- handful of pens
- an eraser
- a box of 30 coloured pencils
- marker pens.

Secondary students received a more expensive school bag instead of textbooks and a correction fluid pen instead of colouring pencils.

These supplies reduce the financial burden on families while ensuring that students begin the new school year equipped with the basic materials needed for learning.

Observation

Families began arriving gradually along the farm tracks leading to the church at Angleh. Most groups consisted of women accompanied by their children. Rather than entering the church grounds immediately, they gathered

quietly outside the gateway while more families arrived. Eventually, as the gathering reached full capacity, and with rain beginning to fall, the community entered together.

While food assistance addresses immediate needs, education expands future opportunities. Even relatively modest assistance — such as providing school materials or supporting holiday tutoring — can improve school attendance, confidence and educational achievement.

The study camps also demonstrate the value of community partnerships. The camps depend upon volunteer teachers, local religious communities and village families working together to create an environment where children can learn while remaining connected to their own culture and community.

One small observation during the distribution of school materials was particularly interesting.

The scene reminded me of observations made elsewhere. When I designed the Aboriginal community building at Lake Cargelligo in New South Wales, local people naturally gravitated towards the side entrance with its large sliding doors rather than approaching through the formal front entrance.

Whether these similarities reflect cultural preferences is difficult to say. They do, however, suggest that people often use communal spaces differently from what designers or administrators expect.

Once the distribution began, the children immediately organised themselves into their own friendship groups, much as they would in any school playground.

The youngest girls proudly compared their new pink school bags decorated with Disney characters. Primary-aged boys gravitated towards backpacks featuring superhero-style designs. Older secondary students all selected plain, dark-coloured bags with little comment before quietly heading home.

Meanwhile, many of the younger children remained in the church grounds, enthusiastically examining their new exercise books, pencils and textbooks, adjusting straps and comparing bags that, in some cases, seemed almost as large as the children themselves.

Reflection

One of the most striking features of these study camps is that they are filled with laughter.

Despite the economic hardship faced by many families, the children arrive eager to learn, play games, sing, dance and spend time with friends. The atmosphere is one of optimism rather than disadvantage.

Watching children carry home a new school bag and a set of books may seem a modest outcome by international development standards. Yet for many families these simple items remove a financial burden, encourage school attendance and reinforce the value of education.

The day also provided a reminder that community life is often revealed through simple observation rather than formal interviews.

Before the distribution began, families naturally gathered outside the church grounds until enough people had arrived to enter together. Once inside, the children quickly sorted themselves into friendship groups, proudly comparing their new school bags and supplies. Such moments offered a glimpse of the community's own patterns of organisation and social interaction — patterns that outsiders can easily overlook.

Over the years, FoVO has found that some of its most useful lessons have come not from asking questions but from quietly watching how people live, gather and support one another. Understanding these everyday interactions helps us design projects that work with existing community strengths rather than simply delivering material assistance.

Over fifteen years, FoVO has learned that some of its most valuable insights have come not from formal interviews but from quietly observing how people live, gather and support one another. These everyday interactions reveal community strengths that are easily overlooked.

Supporting education therefore means more than providing school supplies. It is an investment in the next generation, but it is also an opportunity to understand how communities organise themselves and how small charities can work with existing social structures rather than around them.



Ba Na community gathering along the road and farm tracks.





This is a big community event.









The books are a big load to carry.



Girls testing out loading up a bag.



Mother unpacks for daughter and older sister unpacks for her brother.



The young girl cartoon character group.



Girl group who decided to stay with pink.





Boys loaded up with their study books and materials.



Couldn't see any study materials in this young boy group, but they seemed to be having a good time.







Mother helping daughter: getting it right is a serious matter for secondary students.



Here the secondary school students, just prior to leaving as a group to go home.



Friendship group.





Some bags look as big as the student. Sometimes you can't even squeeze through an opening.





It's a good occasion for boys to compare experiences.

REPORT TO DONORS 2026

14. Medicine Supply for the Community Clinic, Angleh Village, Gia Lai

$700 (12M VND)

Description

Access to basic medicines remains difficult for many remote Indigenous communities in the Central Highlands. For common illnesses that do not require hospital treatment, the local parish clinic at Angleh provides an important first point of contact.

Sister Nang has received pharmacy training and operates a simple community clinic serving several nearby Ba Na and Gia Rai villages. Normally the clinic medicine cupboards are almost empty. This project substantially increased the available supply.

The medicines are primarily intended to treat common household illnesses and include paracetamol (in several dosages), children's worming tablets, multivitamins for malnourished patients and saline eye wash. Other commonly requested items include menthol oil ("Buddha Oil"), ginseng preparations and glucosamine. A limited range of prescription medicines, including antibiotics and anti-inflammatory tablets, is also maintained where appropriate.

The clinic also performs an important triage role. Where symptoms suggest more serious illness, Sister Nang advises patients to attend the provincial hospital or dental clinic for further treatment.

Patients contribute according to their means. Some leave a small donation towards the medicines, while others assist the parish through farm work or other practical help.

FoVO contributed 12 million VND (approximately AUD $700) towards replenishing the clinic's medicine supplies.

Observation

The Clinic in Action

I arrived at the clinic to photograph the distribution of bicycles and school materials. Once those activities concluded, people began arriving steadily from surrounding villages.

The children came first, followed by mothers carrying younger children. Later came grandmothers, and finally the men, many of whom appeared reluctant to seek treatment until persuaded by family members.

Throughout the afternoon the clinic dealt with a constant stream of patients presenting with everyday problems: coughs and colds, headaches, muscle aches, skin infections, sore eyes and back pain.

One woman carefully unfolded an X-ray of her injured foot, hoping Sister Nang could recommend pain relief while the injury continued to heal.

An elderly man, identifiable by an old military tattoo, quietly waited to have his blood pressure checked.

The clinic became much more than a dispensary. It was a place where people sought advice from someone they trusted.

A Familiar Face

FoVO doesn't simply deliver a project and disappear. I unexpectedly met someone whose life has continued to improve, showing the value of long-term local partnerships. Among the patients waiting outside the clinic, I recognised Dao and her mother. Both appeared noticeably more relaxed and confident than when I had first met them three years earlier.

Dao is a young Ba Na girl who had developed a serious leg infection that, without specialist treatment, might ultimately have resulted in amputation. Through Sister Nang, FoVO assisted by sponsoring travel for Dao and her mother to Ho Chi Minh City, where Dao underwent several months of hospital treatment.

It was encouraging to see her now walking comfortably and returning to normal village life.

Following her recovery, FoVO also arranged for Dao and her mother to visit a private boarding school for indigenous students in Đắk Đoa to explore whether further educational opportunities might be available.

After speaking with Dao and conducting a brief assessment, the principal explained that, although she was of primary school age, she had not yet developed the basic literacy and numeracy skills needed to participate in the school's classes. He encouraged her to continue building those foundations before attempting to enrol in a more demanding educational environment.

Although the visit did not lead to a place at the school, it was nevertheless a memorable experience for both Dao and her mother. Travelling by taxi to a nearby town, meeting the school staff and seeing children from similar indigenous backgrounds studying in a supportive environment broadened their understanding of what education could offer.

For FoVO, the visit reinforced an important lesson. Educational disadvantage often begins long before children reach secondary school. Improving opportunities therefore depends not only on scholarships but also on helping children develop the basic literacy, numeracy and confidence needed to benefit from those opportunities.

Seeing Dao again was a reminder that some of the most rewarding moments in community development are unplanned. Rather than measuring success only by the completion of a project, it is often these chance encounters, months or years later, that reveal whether assistance has made a lasting difference.

The Clinic Team

Working beside Sister Nang were two local indigenous women who had become indispensable members of the clinic team.

Denh, a Ba Na woman, had begun studying for a community care qualification in Danang before returning home to marry and raise a family. Throughout the day she unpacked medicines, organised supplies and carefully dispensed each prescription.

Hyao served as interpreter. Working fluently between Vietnamese and Ba Na, she explained how each medicine should be taken, answered questions from patients and ensured that instructions were clearly understood.

Together the three women worked continuously until both the clinic staff and the queue of patients were exhausted.

FoVO didn't simply fund medicines — it supported an existing network comprising a pharmacy-trained nun, a local dispenser and an indigenous interpreter. That combination of skills is arguably the real asset. The medicines will eventually be used up, but the trusted local team remains. Local capability is not often discussed – but should be.

Watching the clinic operate reinforced another important lesson for FoVO: successful community projects depend as much on capable local partners as they do on funding.

Reflection

Watching the clinic operate reinforced an important lesson for FoVO.

We did not simply fund medicines. We supported an existing local network comprising a pharmacy-trained nun, a local dispenser and an Indigenous interpreter. That combination of knowledge, trust and community relationships is arguably the project's greatest asset. The medicines will eventually be used, but the local capability remains.

Over the years FoVO has found that effective community development depends as much on capable local partners as it does on funding. Projects succeed because local people understand their communities, earn trust over many years and continue their work long after our visit has ended.

This project isn't really about buying medicines. It's about supporting a functioning community health system. This is one of the projects that best explains FoVO's philosophy: investing in capable local people rather than trying to provide services ourselves. (See Field Note: Choosing Local Project Partners.)





Angleh is in a coffee plantation region and is remote from hospitals



People arrive with ailments to get advice from Sister Nang and medicines



Sister Nang consulting with a village patient at the community clinic, Angleh.




GUCCI



Denh (Ba Na) unpacking medicines and checking patients.





Hyao interpreting treatment instructions from Vietnamese into the Ba Na language.



A familiar face: with Dao, the Ba Na girl who had recovered from a serious leg infection, now older and more confident.

REPORT TO DONORS 2026

15. Ma Lieng Community Projects, Rao Tre Village, Ha Tinh Province

Chickens, Cooking Pots and Ethnic Costumes — $2,600 (44M VND)

Rao Tre is a small settlement of Ma Lieng people in Huong Khe District, Ha Tinh Province. The Ma Lieng are one of Vietnam's smallest Indigenous language groups, with an estimated population of approximately 1,200 people. Under Vietnam's official ethnic classification system, they are included within the broader Chut ethnic group, although the Ma Lieng have their own language, culture and identity.

FoVO first supported the community in 2023 with chickens and household cooking pots. During our 2026 visit, we were able to see how the earlier project had worked and discuss possible further assistance with local families.

The second-stage project was developed around three relatively simple needs identified during the visit:

- restarting small-scale chicken raising for 14 households and the village kindergarten;
- providing ethnic costumes for 18 kindergarten children for festivals and special occasions; and
- replacing some of the household aluminium cookware with more durable stainless-steel pots.

The project was again organised with the assistance of our local partner, Hiep, and the local border-post community management team.

Chickens

FoVO provided 30 chickens, feed and chicken medicine for each of 14 households and the kindergarten, at a total cost of 24M VND.

Chicken raising was not traditionally part of the Ma Lieng way of life. The community's earlier economy was based much more heavily on hunting, gathering and the use of forest resources. Nevertheless, some families have now become familiar with keeping livestock.

During our visit, one of the households previously assisted by FoVO had approximately 30 chickens. Another family had constructed simple animal pens for pigs or cattle, suggesting that livestock raising is gradually becoming part of household life.

The purpose of the chicken project is modest. Chickens provide food and, when numbers increase, a small reserve of household wealth that can be sold when cash is needed. The project therefore builds on a form of livelihood that some families are already beginning to adopt rather than introducing a more complicated enterprise.

Household Cooking Equipment

FoVO also provided a set of three stainless-steel cooking pots for each of the 46 households and the kindergarten, at a total cost of 11.5M VND.

The previous 2023 project had supplied aluminium cooking pots. These were still being used, but the women we spoke with agreed that stainless-steel pots would be more durable and easier to clean.

The kitchens we inspected were notably well organised. Most houses have a simple enclosed addition used as a kitchen, with a fire on the floor and a basic metal frame supporting the cooking pot. Electricity is available to the houses, although cooking over an open fire remains part of everyday household practice.

The new stainless-steel pots were therefore a relatively small but practical improvement to equipment that is used every day.





Ethnic Costumes for Kindergarten Children

The third component was the provision of an ethnic costume for each of the 18 children attending the village kindergarten, at a cost of 5.4M VND.

The costumes are intended for festivals, cultural activities and special occasions. The women we spoke with explained that ethnic costumes are stored at the local army post and are made available to the Ma Lieng for such occasions.

For the children, having clothing associated with their community may provide an opportunity to participate in cultural events with a visible connection to their own identity.

At the same time, the project raised a broader question for FoVO about the difference between preserving a culture through locally maintained traditions and representing that culture through externally designed costumes. This question is considered further in the accompanying Field Note.



Local Participation

As with other FoVO projects, the intention was not simply to arrive with supplies and distribute them.

Our fieldworker spoke with local women (Ho Thi Tinh, Ho Thi Coo) and about the condition of the previous chicken project and the cookware, and discussed the proposed assistance with the local community.

The project also depended upon our local project partner Hiep, the local border-post officer in charge (Anh Tiep), and teacher (Hoai Mo) who are closely involved in the administration of the settlement and know the households.

FoVO's role was therefore relatively small: identify practical needs with local partners, provide the funding, and allow the local team to organise distribution.

Project Cost

The total cost of the project was 44M VND (approximately AUD $2,600):

- 30 chickens, feed and medicine for 14 households plus kindergarten: 24M VND
- Ethnic costumes for 18 kindergarten children: 5.4M VND
- Three stainless-steel pots for each of 46 households plus kindergarten: 11.5M VND
- Contribution to transport and delivery costs: 3M VND

Observation

The project provided an opportunity to look more closely at how the Ma Lieng community is adapting to life in the resettlement village.

The houses are small government-built brick dwellings raised above the ground, generally with an enclosed under croft and a simple attached kitchen. Electricity has been provided and the village has a communal water supply. Concrete outdoor toilets have also been constructed, although the toilets we observed appeared to be unused, with residents continuing to use the surrounding fields or forest.

The village is therefore connected to basic modern infrastructure while remaining extremely cash-poor.

Some families continue to raise chickens or other livestock, while men from some households have left the village to seek employment in industrial areas. The women we spoke with were largely occupied with children, household activities and the small amount of gardening possible around the houses.

The contrast between the infrastructure provided to the village and the continuing economic dependence of many households was striking.

For FoVO, this reinforced the importance of looking beyond the physical provision of houses, roads, water and other infrastructure to ask whether people have sustainable ways of supporting themselves within the new settlement.

Reflection

This second-stage project reinforced FoVO's preference for modest assistance that can be used immediately by households and does not require complicated infrastructure or outside management.

The chickens, cookware and children's clothing are simple interventions. They do not attempt to transform the community. Instead, they respond to needs identified during a return visit and build upon things that families are already doing.

The project also raised a more difficult question about cultural identity.

The Ma Lieng language remains spoken by some people in the village but is not a written language and is under threat. During our visit, discussion of the language appeared to attract little attention from some of the Vietnamese staff responsible for the kindergarten and settlement administration.

This is potentially more significant in the long term than the provision of household goods. A community can receive houses, electricity, water and other material improvements while simultaneously losing aspects of the language, knowledge and cultural practices that distinguish it.

For this reason, FoVO is considering whether a future project might support the preservation of Ma Lieng language and cultural knowledge, working with local people rather than attempting to define their culture from outside.

The experience at Rao Tre therefore illustrates one of FoVO's broader principles: practical assistance is most useful when it is accompanied by an effort to understand the people, culture and circumstances of the community receiving it.

The Rao Tre project also prompted wider observations concerning Indigenous resettlement, livelihood and cultural preservation. See Field Note: "Rao Tre: Development, Resettlement and the Ma Lieng."





Chicken crates being unloaded.









Discussions with Ho Thi Tinh (left) and Ho Thi Coo (right) 2 helped provide context to the project.



Some of the 8m x 4.5m concrete houses (in two village groups) at Rao Tre. People generally use the under croft and build a small lean-to for cooking and eating. The village pumped spring water tank is behind.





Abandoned contractor-built toilets and livestock sheds behind some of the houses. The timber chicken houses are mostly still in use.





One particularly well organised and hard-working family have built a shaded entry with kitchen annex and a series of livestock pens.





At the front gate and at the chicken house





hatchery.

This time the chickens were a good large size, with a good chance of surviving the truck trip from the Hanoi





View of the kitchen (left) inside the small shed addition (right). The kitchen is typical of the village, an open fire on the floor, pots and kettle from our last project still in use, a small chair, usually made from some timber boards offcut, for minding the fire. After a good harvest, the family's rice storage chest (right) keeps sufficient rice for sowing the next crop.





Left: A particularly well organised kitchen. All the washed bowls have been stored off the floor and soot has been laboriously scrubbed off the pot lids. Right: a more typical well-used kitchen, with smoke charred shelves and pots.

REPORT TO DONORS 2026

16. House Roof Replacement and Bicycles at Kon So Lak Village, Gia Lai

$2,235 (38M VND)

Earlier in the year, FoVO established a small project team to provide practical support at the Kon So Lak Village homestay, including chickens and food for the residents and improvements to the girls' dormitory.

A subsequent inspection of Kon So Lak village revealed a different opportunity. Several traditional houses had originally been roofed with lightweight sheeting to replace leaking thatch, but the sheets had subsequently rusted through. The houses still retained important traditional elements, including timber framing, thatched walls and log steps.

Rather than replacing these simple houses with concrete buildings, FoVO considered that the most practical approach was to retain the surviving traditional fabric and simply replace the deteriorated roofing. This would provide weather protection while preserving as much as possible of the character and construction of the traditional houses.

The houses selected for this project were particularly suitable for repair because much of their traditional construction and original pitched roof form remained intact. Other houses in the village have evolved differently, including some largely self-built dwellings with successive flat or skillion roofs, which raise different questions about repair, safety and the retention of traditional building character.

Project Cost

The total FoVO contribution was 38 million VND (approximately AUD $2,235):

- Roofing materials — 10 million VND
- Supervising builders: 2 days × 0.6 million VND — 1.2 million VND
- Food parcels for village construction workers — 5 million VND
- 11 bicycles — 16 million VND
- Bicycle repair tools and parts — 2 million VND

The bicycle component was generously funded by the Rotary Club of Murrumbidgee Canberra Inc. from a $2,000 donation in 2026.

The 11 bicycles cost approximately 16 million VND in total, or about AUD $85.50 each. The additional 2 million VND was used to purchase repair tools and spare parts to be kept at the Kon So Lak Homestay for use by the community.

The Local Project Team

The project again involved the FoVO fieldworker and two experienced builders, but this time the village community itself played a much greater role.

The local team consisted of:

- Y'Mah and Y'Hoi, the two local nuns, who provided meals and accommodation for the supervising builders and helped identify suitable houses.
- Anh Sy and Anh Tuan, experienced builders from another village, who supervised the roofing work and contributed specialist knowledge of steelwork and weatherproof roofing.
- Men and women from Kon So Lak Village: Hu, Hot, Reng, Tru, Tran, Hnep, Tron, Byem, Yen, Hung, Cu, Boh, Hun, Run and Krek.

The two houses selected for repair were approximately 8 metres long by 4 metres wide.

The nuns, who live in the village, identified houses where the surviving structure could be retained and discussed the proposed repairs with the owners, their neighbours and relatives. The village families then agreed to participate in the work. Before we describe the house repair project, below is FoVO's bicycle project for some students in the village, that

Bicycles

Our project partners, the nuns at Kon So Lak Homestay, discussed the project with village families and identified 11 school children — ten girls and one boy — from disadvantaged households that would benefit from a bicycle. For these families, a bicycle is not only a way for a child to get to school. It is also useful household transport and can be shared with other family members when needed. The following names are reproduced from the list provided by our local project partners. The children and their families are Ba Na, and their names are recorded in the form used locally:

1. Y Kuăn — Father: Kuech; Mother: Chonh

2. Mă — Father: deceased; Mother: Kai

3. Bôk — Father: Khui; Mother: Yen

4. Xô — Father: Phưc; Mother: Phiên

5. Luyến — Father: Dnging; Mother: Iem

6. Xoai — Father: Ril; Mother: Hngang

7. Yuă — Father: Brưm; Mother: Hngưt

8. A Thành — Father: Yap; Mother: Yap

9. Công — Father: Khưi; Mother: Keng

10. La — Father: Thui; Mother: Khang

11. Kham — Father: Khiên; Mother: Hnhưi

For each child, the bicycle provides practical help getting to school, while also becoming a useful means of transport for the whole family.














Description – Repairing the Houses

The work followed the traditional village practice of neighbours and relatives helping one another with major events such as building huts, funerals and weddings.

The two houses selected for repair were approximately 8 metres long by 4 metres wide. Both retained much of their traditional construction, including hand-made timber and bamboo framing, bamboo wall panels and thatched walling, traditional roof framing and log steps.

From a heritage perspective, these houses have considerable cultural value. If examples of this type of traditional indigenous house survived in a museum or historic village elsewhere, they would likely be regarded as important buildings to conserve. Here, however, they are still ordinary homes, and their owners may quite understandably prefer the comfort and durability of a modern concrete house if one were offered to them.

FoVO's objective was therefore not to preserve the houses as museum pieces, but to find a practical way of keeping the existing houses useful as homes while retaining as much of their traditional construction as possible.

The original lightweight roofing sheets had rusted through. Rather than demolishing the houses and replacing them with concrete structures, the decision was made to retain the entire house and its surviving roof structure and replace only the failed roofing.

The nuns, who live in the village, identified houses where the surviving structure could be retained and discussed the proposed repairs with the owners, their neighbours and relatives. The village families then agreed to participate in the work.

The local group first removed the rusted roofing sheets from both houses. The two roofs were stripped in a single day, exposing the original roof timbers. These had been heavily blackened and charred by many years of smoke from the open hearth on the floor of each house.

The following day, Anh Sy and Anh Tuan arrived with power tools, structural steel and the new roofing materials. They worked alongside the villagers, retaining the existing timber roof framing wherever it remained sound and adding steel only where additional support was needed because timber elements had deteriorated. The new roof sheets were then fixed to the supporting structure and properly capped at the ridge.

This was an example of appropriate technology. The intervention was deliberately limited to what was necessary to make the houses weatherproof again. The whole house was retained, including its traditional walls and framing, and the original pitched roof form and roof structure were retained rather than replaced by a new building.

The specialist builders brought an important skill to the project. While villagers were familiar with constructing and repairing their traditional houses, not everyone was familiar with modern methods of fixing steel supports and achieving a properly weatherproof roof.

Both roofs were completed in a single day. One of the builders continued working despite having a bandaged hand after being cut while lifting a roof sheet.

Observation

The two houses selected for repair are modest permanent family dwellings rather than temporary shelters. They retain much of their traditional construction, including hand-made timber and bamboo framing, bamboo wall panels with thatched infill, pitched roof structures and log steps.

By Australian standards, the living conditions are very basic. The houses have electricity but no reticulated water or conventional toilet facilities. Water is obtained separately and sanitation remains rudimentary. Nevertheless, these are established homes in which families live their everyday lives.

The houses illustrate a continuing traditional building practice based on locally available bamboo and timber and the practical skills required to assemble and maintain such buildings. Although many residents would understandably welcome a modern concrete house if one were offered, the surviving traditional houses have cultural value beyond their immediate practical function.

From a heritage perspective, the situation is particularly interesting. A traditional house of this type preserved on a museum or cultural heritage site would almost certainly be regarded as an important example of vernacular indigenous construction. Here, however, the buildings are not museum objects: they remain living

houses occupied by families. The challenge is therefore to improve their weatherproofing and durability without unnecessarily destroying the traditional building fabric and character that survive.

The repairs demonstrated that modern materials do not necessarily have to mean the loss of a traditional building. The surviving timber and bamboo structures were retained, including the traditional roof framing, bamboo and thatched wall panels and log steps. The intervention was concentrated on the failed roofing, with steel introduced only where necessary to supplement deteriorated timber. The houses therefore remain recognisably traditional while gaining a durable and weatherproof roof.

There is an interesting distinction between heritage value and contemporary housing aspirations. To an outside observer, these houses may have obvious cultural and heritage significance because they embody hand-made building traditions that are increasingly disappearing. To the people who live in them, however, they are simply homes. A concrete house with modern amenities may understandably appear more attractive than maintaining an old bamboo-and-timber dwelling.

FoVO was not attempting to impose a heritage conservation objective on the community. Instead, a relatively inexpensive practical repair made it possible to retain the houses without preventing their owners from using them as ordinary homes. In this sense, the roofing work was an example of appropriate technology: it used modern materials where they provided a clear practical advantage, while retaining as much of the existing building as possible.

The project also demonstrated the value of local participation. This was not simply a case of FoVO arriving with contractors to repair someone's house. Families, neighbours and relatives worked together according to an existing tradition of mutual assistance. The village supplied much of the labour, while the two supervising builders contributed specialist knowledge of steel framing, roofing and weatherproofing techniques that were less familiar to some local workers.

The house owner subsequently thanked the construction group by following village custom and hosting a small gathering with traditional ruou can rice wine.

FoVO also followed local practice in thanking the village workers. Rather than paying each person a cash wage, the charity provided a food parcel according to the size of each worker's household. The parcels included rice, cooking oil, fish sauce and seasoning powder. This form of assistance was closer to the village's own customs than introducing a cash payment system.

The project therefore brought together several forms of knowledge: the villagers' knowledge of their own houses and traditions, the builders' knowledge of modern steel and roofing techniques, and FoVO's role in identifying a practical solution that could be achieved within limited resources.

Reflection

The project reinforced an important FoVO principle: the most appropriate technology is not necessarily the newest technology.

In this case, there was no need to replace an entire traditional house simply because its roof had failed. The house itself, including its hand-made bamboo and timber construction, remained a useful and culturally significant resource. Replacing the roof while retaining the existing structure achieved the immediate practical objective — weather protection — at a fraction of the cost and without destroying the building.

It also provided a useful example of how heritage conservation can work in a living community. The houses were not treated as museum objects. They remained ordinary homes occupied by ordinary families. Their cultural value lay precisely in the fact that they continued to demonstrate traditional building knowledge and construction methods.

The project therefore brought together three forms of knowledge: the villagers' knowledge of their own houses and traditions, the builders' knowledge of modern steel and roofing techniques, and FoVO's role in identifying a practical solution that could be achieved within limited resources.

Rather than preserving the houses by freezing them in time, the aim was to keep them alive through modest adaptation.

This may provide a useful model for other traditional houses in the region. Where the basic structure survives, relatively small interventions may sometimes be enough to extend the useful life of a building while retaining much more of its cultural character than would be possible through complete replacement.

House 1



Typical features include the log ladder entry, ventilation under croft, lightweight thatched bamboo walls, and nailed roofing.



the floor are not in this view).

Typical interior features are the rust holes in the roof, objects such as the traditional woven basket hanging off the roof frame, floor cooking fire (causing roof timbers to be smoked black). Typical sleeping mats on



Group of villagers who removed the rusted roof. Roof timbers above the cooking hearth are smoke charred.



Supervising builders Anh Sy (cutting steel) and Anh Tuan (broad-brimmed hat)



The villagers at work. All neighbours and relations.



Roof install construction team at completion. Left to right: Tuan, Việt, Lan, Ngát, Sy, Đyưm, Reng, Đơ, Hen, Trí, Khim.



Owner serving refreshment, to thank the builders after completion. Features in this photo include the framed picture of “Uncle Ho” hanging on the wall, wine served in a ceramic pitcher with communal drinking straw, home grown or foraged vegetables served in bowls, steel strengthening of deteriorated timbers (two roof battens and two rafters).

House 2





Couple with youngest child at their main house, linked by breezeway to an adjoining storage hut.





Views of the roof frame with sheets being removed. The roof junction over the breezeway an obvious flaw.





Vietnamese hat on the back wall.

Interior after roof removal. Features in this photo include the fire pit in the timber floor, bamboo framed loft for storing winnowing baskets and woven bamboo backpacks, wine pots against the wall and military style



Village roofing removal crew. All neighbours and relations. From left to right: Hu, Hơt, Reng, Trıu, Trân, Hnep, Tron, Byem, Yên, Hưng, Trinh, Cư, Bôh, Hun, Rưn, Krek.



Progress photos of new roof sheet installation.





Roofing crew.



Household in front of their re-roofed house.