



## Building resilience for children in schools and communities in the Mekong Delta

By Vu Xuan Viet

For more than a year, To Trinh has watched as her parents struggled to make ends meet as the worst drought and salt water intrusion crisis in 90 years gripped her home village deep in the southern Mekong Delta province of Soc Trang.

The 10-year-old's small coastal village of Xung Thum, about 220 kilometres to the south west of Ho Chi Minh City - Viet Nam's biggest city, has been especially hard hit by the emergency.

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Before the drought and salt water intrusion took hold in late 2015, To Trinh's parents and neighbours were already struggling to survive by cultivating land for rice, onion, chili and vegetable crops along with shrimp farming.

Now To Trinh's and other families in Lai Hoa and neighbouring coastal communes have been left in a perilous state as a result of saline intrusion ruining successive crops and difficulties in accessing safe water for drinking, sanitation and other daily needs.

Many farmers have accumulated debts after consecutive crop failures.

In the case of To Trinh's father, he has been forced to work as a casual labourer in shrimp farms, with an unstable income barely sufficient to make ends meet to pay off debts and send To Trinh and her older brother to school.

Dreams of rebuilding the house with a proper latrine for the family have evaporated as the fields turned to dust, with crop failures having eroded their financial position and hopes of getting a bank loan. This has left To Trinh and her family to use an open toilet each day and risk disease as a result of unhygienic conditions.

On a personal level, To Trinh has felt less confident to use the open toilet than her parents and brother. The drought and saltwater intrusion crisis almost deprived To Trinh of some days at school, with her mother Ha requesting she stay home and sell drinks to villagers at her family's small stall.

However, To Trinh was determined not to miss any classes as she and

the other children in the village have a new type of thirst – one for knowledge and an understanding of why their lives have changed in the past year and their parents have sometimes struggled to cope.

The introduction of disaster risk reduction lessons at her Lai Hoa 2 primary school, which explain how to identify, prepare and minimize risks from natural disasters such as drought, is one of a number of ways UNICEF and its partners, with financial support from the Government of Japan, have enhanced the resilience of To Trinh's community to such threats.







At school, one of a number across six of the emergency response provinces in the Central Highlands, South Central and Mekong Delta regions to set up disaster risk reduction teams as part of this Viet Nam Red Cross-supported initiative, she joined other classmates and teachers in the visualization of likely disaster risks in her village, developed a school safety plan and drew a disaster risk map.

During such lessons her mind wandered to how her mother struggled for months to collect clean water from neighbours. Now, To Trinh and classmates know how to source and save clean drinking water to survive future droughts and saltwater encroachment periods.

UNICEF and the National Centre for Rural Water Supply and Sanitation provided a water filtration system to the school in late November 2016 and now 518 students and 31 teachers can drink safe water directly from 10 water taps.

"I can't express my joy. Having this water filtration system makes us so happy," said To Trinh.

Ly Hoang Ngoan, headmaster of Lai Hoa 2 primary school, also underlined the water filtration system's importance as "we were lucky no students got sick drinking bottled water [which can still be unsafe]. Now we don't need to buy bottled water, which helps the school save money [up to USD30 per month]."

UNICEF is working with the Government of Viet Nam to install 120 water filtration systems for more than 40,000 school children and nearly 4,000 teachers across six crisis-affected provinces (Binh Thuan, Ben Tre, Gia Lai, Kon Tum, Ninh Thuan and Soc Trang) to provide dependable drinking water all year round. Sixty schools are also sponsoring water tanks for safe storage and handwashing, to protect children's health when a natural disaster strikes.

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UNICEF-supported hand washing campaigns at school have also allowed To Trinh to improve her level of personal hygiene. Now she enthusiastically practices washing her hands with soap and encourages her school friends, brother and parents to follow her example.

These UNICEF and partner interventions in To Trinh's community and hundreds of others in 10 provinces overall, as part of a broader emergency response since the Government of Viet Nam requested assistance to address the El Nino drought and saltwater intrusion crisis in early 2016, are essential to meet the challenges of current and future climate change impacts and more extreme weather events.

"With this help, we are no longer afraid of natural disasters and are better prepared for the future," said To Trinh.



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