

# From Agent Orange to GMO's in Vietnam

*By Alison Caldwell, MA*

Upon exiting the Agent Orange exhibit at the War Remnant Museum in Ho Chi Minh City, stop, exhale and take a deep breath of fresh air to leverage the unease in your stomach. Proceed 600 meters down the street past the farmer in the bamboo hat selling her mangostenes and sugar cane, make a quick right, then left turn, and find yourself at the doorstep of the American chemical and seed giant, Monsanto, at 72-74 Nguyen Thi Minh Khai Street in the trendy 3<sup>rd</sup> quarter. If this doesn't strike your core as odd, then perhaps the fact that both Monsanto and Dow Chemical (original producers of Agent Orange) are open for agribusiness in Vietnam should.

It's been a handful of weeks since I returned home from an incredible month in Vietnam. While I crave every meal I ate almost every day, and reminisce about the wonderfully warm people, beautiful beaches, and lush green land, I can't shake the haunting experience that has awakened my heart.

While in Hanoi, I had the honor of visiting the [Thanh Xuan Peace Village](#) rehabilitation center with [Kids Without Borders](#). The patients are children, with the exception of a few in their thirties. Everyday, beautiful and loving kids with blood disorders, physical deformities, down's syndrome, and other birth defects get dropped off to learn, socialize and rehabilitate. What

they all have in common is excessively high levels of dioxin in their systems that is claimed to be traced back to [Agent Orange](#) exposure in their parents and grandparents during the Vietnam War.

It seems the legacy of Monsanto and Dow Chemical runs through the blood of third generation post war victims. Dioxin is a precarious and invasive toxin, known to skip generations, and appear in ruthless ways. Every year on August 10<sup>th</sup> the Vietnamese remember the day Agent Orange was first aerial sprayed by U.S. troops on its land in 1961, poisoning soil, farmers, and soldiers on all fronts. They call this Agent Orange day. Hence, the question eerily prevails: Why is the Vietnamese government allowing American biotech and chemical giants, Monsanto and Dow, entry back into Vietnam with the intention of propagating controversial GMO's and other agri-chemicals throughout Vietnam?

Vietnam is no stranger to pesticides. I traveled from north to south and found the local agri-chemical and conventional seed advertising in every corner of the farming intensive country. While I did visit a handful organic farms, and witnessed rural home gardens as far as the eye can see, it was apparent that chemical agriculture is seen as a western commodity that many Vietnamese farmers have eagerly adopted as a solution to what they think creates greater yields and profit. So clearly, one answer is money, for farmer and agribusiness; and can be traced back to global free trade agreements of the late 90's that breathed life into a devastated

Vietnamese economy. Yet, we know this myth all too well. Costly agricultural inputs ultimately tax the farmer and the land, and decline is inevitable. Knowledge is lost and soil left dead with an already poor farmer in debt. Meanwhile, next generation farmer's lose an indigenous connection to the land that had once taught them what it needed for thousands of years, for free.

A [New York Times article](#), by Lien Hong, has revealed some clues. In it, Hong reports, "Jeffrey Smith, director of the Iowa-based [Institute for Responsible Technology](#), told me that government officials he met [in Hanoi in 2011](#) seemed troubled by the dangers of genetic modification — and of their colleagues' disregard for their concerns. The people Smith talked to, he said, worried that some members of the government "were basically taking dictation from Monsanto" and ignoring information that genetically modified foods are "potentially damaging to the economy and food sovereignty." Hong also reported Monsanto's response: "Of course, we are interested in the

opportunity to introduce biotechnology seed to Vietnamese growers in the near future when the Vietnamese government has completed its regulatory framework."

Agri-politics are clearly business as usual here. I would imagine it's the seed giants themselves assisting in regulating this framework. While it is comforting to learn that there is a voice of opposition in the ranks, it seems the Vietnamese government may be taking its cues from the chemical giants. If they do acquiesce, the outcome may be inevitable.

Traveling from the Bay of Tonkin in the north to the heart of Saigon in the south, I learned one thing that is for sure. The Vietnamese have a resilient legacy who, adamant in their beliefs, remarkably resisted the Chinese, the French and the American's to preserve their identity. So why stop at Monsanto?



*Chen (left), seen here at Thanh Xuan Peace Village, Hanoi, where he had grown up attending. Chen was born with a severe birth defect, leaving him with two prosthetic legs. He is pursuing a college degree in finance in Hanoi. Nga (right, with Chen on left) is a teenage medical student in Hanoi. Nga was born to a father who was a victim of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War. She was born with a chromosomal disorder, one symptom being dark blood spots all over her body. She is a member of the World's Children's Prize Child Jury where she represents children with functional disabilities; children that have been affected by poisonous substances used in war.*