



# DISASTER INFORMATION PROVIDERS IN VIETNAM



International Development  
Australian Broadcasting Corporation



## Background

This report has been prepared by the International Development Unit of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABCID) based on background research, and discussions held between July and August 2014 with media organisations, disaster management authorities, and local and international non-government organisations. The overall focus of consultations was on community resilience, how citizens get information during disasters and opportunities to improve two-way communication between affected people and support providers via the media.

### **Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)**

As Australia's national broadcaster the ABC functions as Australia's emergency broadcaster. The ABC uses its radio, television and online services to deliver timely, accurate and relevant information to affected communities during fires, floods and other natural disasters and emergencies. The ABC also plays an important role in building community resilience and the ability to prevent, prepare, respond and recover during times of adversity. Local radio (54 stations across the country) has an estimated national penetration rate of 99.4 per cent and is often the only source of vital weather and emergency service information for regional and rural Australians.

This emergency broadcasting role is supported by agreements with all state and territory emergency services. The ABC has formal and informal arrangements allowing emergency agencies and recovery specialists to use the local radio network to deliver emergency warnings. Local radio managers are active members of most state and local emergency management committees.

The ABC provides emergency broadcast training for its local radio staff to ensure that they are adequately prepared for emergency situations. In recent years, local radio has provided emergency broadcasting for fires, cyclones, flooding, storms, tsunami warnings, heatwaves, equine flu outbreaks and locust plagues. The ABC has provided emergency broadcasting in every state and territory, on numerous occasions.

Radio and television broadcasting are very effective methods of communicating important information to large groups of people before, during and after emergency situations. Local radio services are particularly effective, as broadcasters have established relationships with local communities and detailed local knowledge that may assist listeners.

# Acknowledgements

ABCID appreciates the assistance provided by Australian Aid and all organisations that shared information during consultations.

This report is not intended to be an all-encompassing exploration of the many disaster related projects that have been, and are being, conducted in Vietnam. We acknowledge the work of the organisations dedicated to decreasing disaster related risks within the country.

While it was not possible to consult all relevant actors, discussions were held with a range of organisations in the media, government information, disaster management and humanitarian support sectors to establish an overview of the major challenges facing the delivery of emergency information to citizens.

This report is based on the opinions and perspectives of the participants and does not reflect the views of ABCID or Australian Aid.

## Acronyms

<b>ABCID</b>	Australian Broadcasting Corporation International Development
<b>CBDRM</b>	Community Based Disaster Risk Management
<b>CCSFC</b>	Central Committee for Storm and Flood Control
<b>DM</b>	Disaster Management
<b>DMC</b>	Disaster Management Centre
<b>DRR</b>	Disaster Risk Reduction
<b>DRRM</b>	Disaster Risk Reduction and Management
<b>MONRE</b>	Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment
<b>NHMS</b>	National Hydro-meteorological Service
<b>UNOCHA</b>	United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
<b>VOV</b>	Voice of Vietnam (radio)
<b>VTC</b>	Vietnam Television Corporation
<b>VTV</b>	Vietnam Television
<b>WEBC</b>	Weather and Emergency Broadcasting Centre



## Country context

Vietnam is the eastern-most country on the Indochina Peninsula in Southeast Asia, bordered by China to the north, Laos to the northwest, Cambodia to the southwest, and the South China Sea to the east. Located in the tropical monsoon area in South East Asia, it is one of the most hazard-prone areas in the Asia Pacific region. Over the past two decades, extreme weather events have caused more than 13,000 deaths and property damage in excess of \$6.4 billion in Vietnam. More than 70% of the country's population is at risk of natural hazards, particularly the rural and urban poor.

Vietnam is a multi-ethnic society that consists of 54 ethnic groups, of which Kinh Vietnamese accounts for 86% of national population.

Government reforms have transformed Vietnam from one of the world's poorest countries 25 years ago to a lower middle-income country (LMIC) (2011 per capita income of US\$1,260) and many urban and rural Vietnamese have high levels of access to television and mobile phone technology. Despite higher average incomes, figures from the World Bank indicate that inequality is increasing. This is particularly the case for ethnic minorities who are more likely to live in the rural and mountainous areas of the country with poor access to infrastructure, health and educational facilities and to have lower living standards than the majority.

The media in Vietnam is lively and active, but is still majority government owned and controlled. As disaster management (DM) is a priority area for the government, this has led to several dedicated and creative approaches to the media's role in disaster risk reduction (DRR), including a TV channel dedicated to the topic. In general, Vietnam's media has a well-resourced, advanced approach to disaster management and they play an active role before, during and after disasters.

The central body for disaster management in Vietnam is the Central Committee for Flood and Storm Control (CCFSC) and has representative bodies at provincial, city, district and ward/commune levels.

The CCFSC, under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, coordinates disaster management activities like the Department of Dyke Management and Flood and Storm Control, the Disaster Management Centre, the Hydro-meteorological Service, and the Vietnam Red Cross.

## Major disaster risks

Typhoons and floods are the most frequent and most devastating hazards, however Vietnam is also susceptible to droughts, landslides, forest fires and occasional earthquakes. The storm season lasts from May to December with storms hitting the northern part of the country in May to June and moving gradually south from July to December. Given the massive concentration of population along the coastline and in the low-lying deltas, disasters can be devastating to communities and to livelihoods.

Three quarters of the population of Vietnam live in areas of 'high mortality risk' according to research by the Global Risk Hotspots project which assessed the global risks of two disaster-related outcomes: mortality and economic losses. Vietnam is also one of the five countries in the world most vulnerable to climate change; a one metre rise in the sea level would partially inundate one in five communes leaving the Mekong River Delta most seriously affected.

**Summarised Table of Natural Disasters in Vietnam from 1900 to 2014**

		# OF EVENTS	KILLED	TOTAL AFFECTED	DAMAGE (000 US\$)
Drought	Drought	5	–	6110000	649120
Flood	Unspecified	7	836	1150175	13400
	Coastal flood	6	804	4353316	749000
	Flash flood	10	377	893428	201700
	Riverine flood	51	3607	24977543	2792127
Landslide	Avalanche	1	200	38000	–
	Landslide	5	130	1074	2300
Storm	Unspecified	9	298	36780	1035
	Convective storm	8	160	4513	10100
	Tropical cyclone	79	18595	47274614	6206425

Source: "EM-DAT: The OFDA/CRED International Disaster Database, [www.em-dat.net](http://www.em-dat.net) - Université Catholique de Louvain - Brussels - Belgium"



## Media consumption

Vietnamese are avid news consumers. Research from the Broadcasting Board of Governors conducted in 2013 reported that 89 per cent of Vietnamese say they access news daily. Televisions are widely available, 99 per cent of the urban population and 97 per cent of rural households own a television and it is the most popular source of news and information<sup>1</sup>. Among Vietnamese with at least a high school education, weekly use of radio to access news is less common; with only 28 per cent of urban and between 27.7 and 34.3 of rural respondents tuning in for weekly news.

More than three quarters of the population own a mobile phone and close to 100 per cent have access to one. More than one in four Vietnamese (26.3 per cent) say they have used the Internet in the past week. Internet use is more common in Vietnam than in several neighboring countries — including Burma (1.4 per cent), Cambodia, (4.9 per cent), and Laos (6.1 per cent).

Voice of Vietnam (VOV) transmissions reach close to 98 per cent of the country. Despite radio's falling audience numbers, the medium is widely followed during disasters as access to power is unreliable. VOV, the government's national radio station, is a member of the Central Committee for Flood and Storm Control (CCFSC) and has six national stations. VOV1 focuses on current affairs and politics, VOV2 – VOV6 include cultural and artistic programming, music and entertainment, ethnic minority programming language programming and foreign language programming. Across the country there are 64 provinces, each with a provincial broadcaster. They broadcast locally, except for taking hourly news and four main current affairs programs from VOV headquarters in Hanoi.

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<sup>1</sup> Broadcasting Board of Governors (2013) Media Use in Vietnam keep link below  
<http://www.bbg.gov/wp-content/media/2013/12/Vietnam-research-brief-final1.pdf>

## Observations on media as disaster information providers

The major broadcasters of disaster information are the national radio service VOV and the two government owned television networks Vietnam Television (VTV) and Vietnam Television Corporation (VTC) .

Vietnam is saturated with lively entertainment media, and well-produced television and web products are popular. However, all Vietnamese media outlets continue to be government owned and run, therefore sensitive topics such as being critical of government are rarely covered and content calling for greater religious or democratic freedoms is subject to official retribution. Reporting considered to be against the national interest can be charged under the criminal code and anti-defamation provisions.

In this context, disaster reporting is more likely to focus on the facts of what has happened, for example death toll or houses lost, rather than any in-depth analysis of government preparedness and response.

Section 2 of the new Disaster Management Law clearly defines the national broadcasters as having a crucial role in warning communities in a disaster scenario<sup>2</sup>.

***“Vietnam Television and the Voice of Vietnam shall transmit and broadcast natural disaster forecasts and warnings of the agencies specified at Points a and b, Clause 3 of this Article.”***

and

***“Central and local television and radio stations shall broadcast news reports on the direction and command of response to natural disasters.”***


Article 21 of the law also legislates the role media should play in educating the community about disasters:

***“Information, communication and education about natural disaster prevention and control must be conducted in various forms suitable to different target groups, including:***

***a/ via websites of ministries, ministerial-level agencies, government-attached agencies and localities, and in the mass media”***

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<sup>2</sup> The Socialist Republic of Vietnam (2013) Law on Natural Disaster Prevention and Control [https://www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/IDRL/Law%20on%20Natural%20Disaster%20Prevention%20and%20Control\\_No%20%2033\\_IFW.pdf](https://www.ifrc.org/Global/Publications/IDRL/Law%20on%20Natural%20Disaster%20Prevention%20and%20Control_No%20%2033_IFW.pdf)



A 2013 research project looking at disaster awareness conducted by the UNDP found that many people still rely on the experiences from the previous generation to understand the causes of disasters, as well as using traditional methods of predicting an oncoming disaster such as watching the behaviour of the birds and ants. Similar traditional methods of predicting disasters are seen in rural areas of Indonesia, Cambodia and Laos.

The research also found that due to the high number of disasters that occur every year in Vietnam, the public does not pay significant attention to warnings and disaster preparation messages from the government because they have 'been through disasters before'. This could contribute to increased fatalities and damages. Additionally, culturally it is seen as the man's role to listen to government warnings and forecasts broadcast on the village speaker systems and women are often disengaged from this as an early warning method.

Vietnam recently introduced a new Internet law, known as Decree 72, that bans bloggers and social media users from sharing news stories online. While these blogs generally do not garner large followings, they were one of the few arenas where citizens could play a role in questioning government preparedness and response to disasters.

VTC Multimedia Corporation is a government owned business that produces television and mobile TV, newspapers and video games amongst other subsidiary companies. The organisation has 20 digital channels focused on news, international affairs, sports and entertainment and other interest areas.

It operates VTC14, a 24/7 channel dedicated to emergency information including natural disasters and traffic, DRR information and educational material relating to climate change. The channel has 8 dedicated weather forecasts per day and scrolling weather information on a 'ticker' all day. VTC14 is one of the 10 channels deemed 'vital' or 'essential' by the government.

VTC14 places an importance on incorporating audience generated content into programming and have a 25 minute program called 'Views of the Audience', which consists of images, footage and information sourced from the viewers.





## Media coverage of disasters

Broadcasters receive weather related warnings from the National Hydro-meteorological Service (NHMS) and national broadcasters VOV, VTV and VTC have systems in place to respond to that risk.

According to VOV's emergency broadcasting plans, if the disaster risk is severe, VOV will take over broadcasting control of all 64 radio provincial stations and broadcast continuously with preparedness information and interviews with authorities and experts. VOV news and emergency information is also broadcast through village level speaker systems.


VOV plays an important role in linking the audience with disaster response authorities. In the event of a disaster, lines usually used for talkback will become an 'Emergency Hotline' and listeners are encouraged to call the station if they need assistance. VOV staff will then connect the caller to Search and Rescue, the Army or Red Cross for assistance.

This system has worked well in the past. For example, two years ago when a severe storm affected central Vietnam, the hotlines were used to notify authorities of 20 workers trapped when the floods came. The workers were then subsequently rescued by the military and rescuers were interviewed about the event live on air. As Vietnam does not have an emergency response number for the public, this service is vital to assist recovery agencies in reaching those who need assistance. However, as the broadcaster is also very busy during a disaster, phone lines could be overwhelmed or this increased work load could lead to mistakes being made either on air or in the delivery of emergency information to authorities.

VOV delivers regular DRR messages to the audience, in particular in the lead up to the wet season when they will often organise a forum to discuss disaster and preparedness issues. During a disaster they provide effective coverage and after the event they provide information regarding relief and recovery.

Vietnam Television (VTV) is one of two major government owned TV providers in the country. Along with international and cable channels, VTV operates four terrestrial channels that focus on current affairs, science and technology, sports and entertainment, and a youth channel.

VTV has a dedicated Weather and Emergency Broadcasting Centre (WEBC) which opened in October 2013. The center broadcasts 23 weather bulletins a day produced by editors trained to interpret meteorological information sent from NHMS and regional meteorological services.



The team at the WEBC has produced several educational DRR videos in conjunction with the DMC. Members travelled to the Philippines to learn from its disaster broadcasting techniques as well as producing coverage of the devastation of Cyclone Yolanda/Haiyan. They have also been researching examples of emergency broadcasting from China, Japan and Cuba. They wish to explore how to improve work-flow in the office when news is breaking and how to develop a story in a creative manner.

WEBC has developed a subscriber based short message service (SMS) for delivering weather reports to the audience. However, at this stage the system does not automatically send information to subscribers, the user must text a registered number and the system replies. This system is widely used by parents to determine if the weather is affecting school schedules as classes are canceled when the temperature drops below 10 degrees Celsius. In the future, developers plan to investigate modifying this system so that it could act as an early warning for severe weather.

VTC runs a 24/7 disaster and environment channel called VTC14. This channel runs documentaries as well as disaster preparedness information and eight dedicated weather bulletins a day. Reporters working for this station have been well trained in DM and DRR issues and produce factual and engaging reports. When a warning is issued, the station will begin a 'breaking news' format with presenters, interviews and updates and live crosses to a reporter at the scene. The station has found that when there is a natural disaster their audience notably increases.

However as this channel is digital, consumers need to purchase a set-top-box to view it. The government has a strategy for all TV stations to go digital in 2015, however this plan will take longer to roll out to regional areas.



## Observations on disaster managers as information providers

Over several decades Vietnam has developed a consistent approach to disaster risk management. It is well understood and supported by infrastructure and defined processes. Decentralisation of disaster prevention, response and mitigation which mobilises resources to support the philosophy 'the State and the people working together' has shown increasing effectiveness.

The Vietnamese government last year released a new Disaster Management Law to better clarify roles and responsibilities of stakeholders before, during and after disasters.

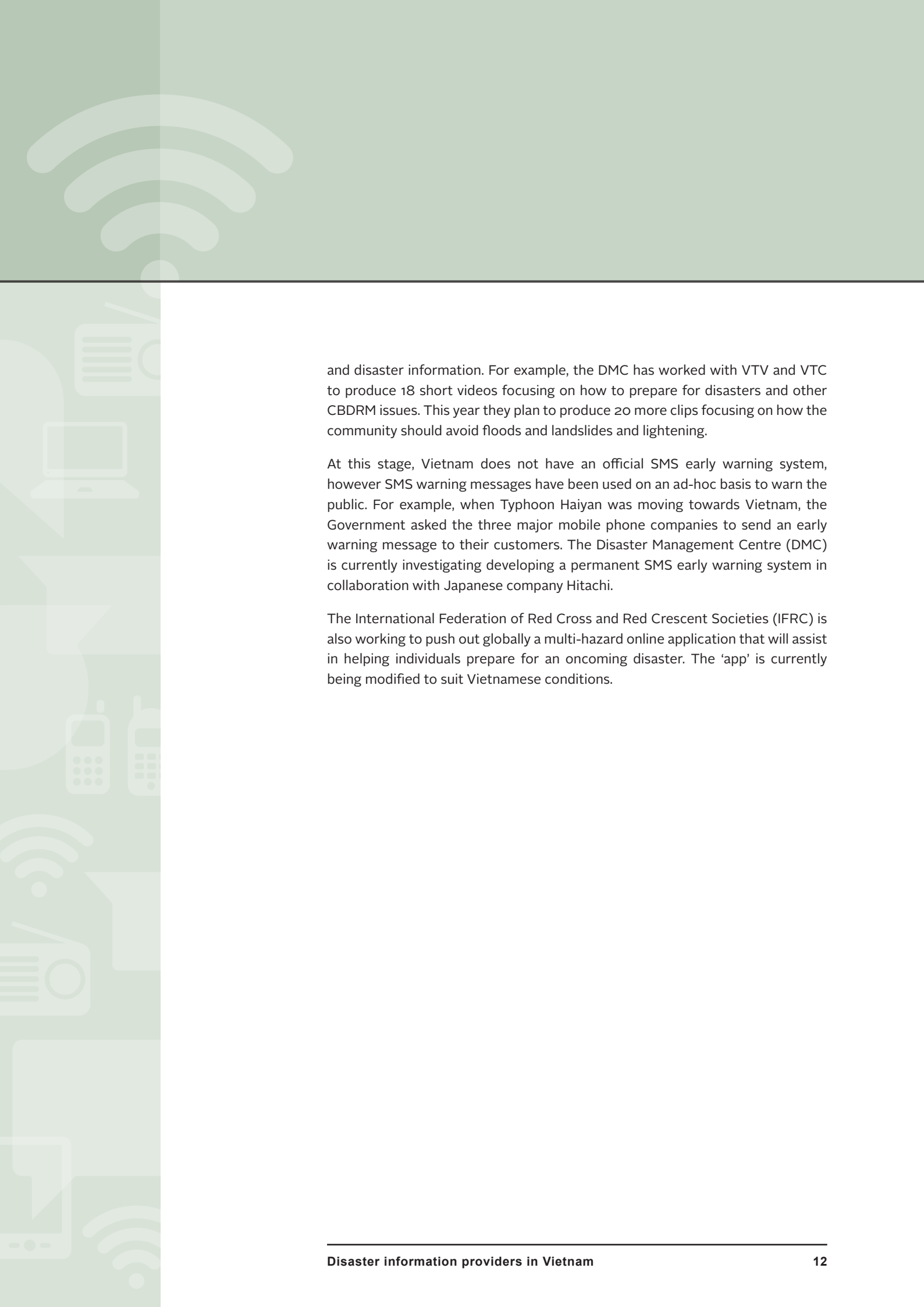
The law, passed in June 2013, placed Vietnam at the forefront of legal preparedness for disaster management and response in the Mekong region. It applies to "Vietnamese agencies, organisations, households and individuals; foreign organisations and individuals and international organisations that are residing or operating or engaged in natural disaster prevention and control in Vietnam".

In terms of DRR, the new law encourages the participation of citizens, civil society, community leaders and the private sector in DRR and Community Based Disaster Risk Management (CBDRM) policy-making processes at all levels.

While there have been improvements in disaster related communications in recent years, the country relies on a very 'top-down' method of communication with warnings and disaster related information originating from the central disaster management offices and filtering down to the village level. According to some participating INGO's this system can sometimes be slow, bureaucratic and lack participation from the commune disaster management committees.

When the CCFSC is informed of a disaster, most likely from the NHMS, the steering committee will meet and determine how frequently warning messages should be broadcast on government media.

Government disaster management agencies have also built a solid relationship with the nation's media and work collaboratively to disseminate preparedness



and disaster information. For example, the DMC has worked with VTV and VTC to produce 18 short videos focusing on how to prepare for disasters and other CBDRM issues. This year they plan to produce 20 more clips focusing on how the community should avoid floods and landslides and lightening.

At this stage, Vietnam does not have an official SMS early warning system, however SMS warning messages have been used on an ad-hoc basis to warn the public. For example, when Typhoon Haiyan was moving towards Vietnam, the Government asked the three major mobile phone companies to send an early warning message to their customers. The Disaster Management Centre (DMC) is currently investigating developing a permanent SMS early warning system in collaboration with Japanese company Hitachi.

The International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) is also working to push out globally a multi-hazard online application that will assist in helping individuals prepare for an oncoming disaster. The 'app' is currently being modified to suit Vietnamese conditions.

## Observations on international actors

Many international humanitarian agencies are actively involved in disaster risk management but engagement with media as a key actor appears limited, despite its mass communication role in the three phases of disaster. The focus is more on managing the media's pursuit of information while seeking profile for the agency.

While INGO's and UN agencies continue to support DRR and DM activities in the country, there has been a reduced role in these agencies supporting Vietnam's capacity to provide humanitarian aid. For most disasters in the last two years, needs assessments produced by these agencies have showed that the government was capable of responding and completing relief activities without 'on the ground' assistance. This is a significant achievement.

The Disaster Working Group is a collaboration of 10 UN agencies, NGO's and INGO's working in DRR and DM in the country. This group has been working closely with the Central Committee for Storm and Flood Control (CCSFC) to improve their information management systems and to improve capacity.



### Summary

There are opportunities to increase community resilience, improve how citizens get information during disasters and enhance two-way communication between affected people and support providers via the media. This can be achieved by improving strategic connections between all information providers, and remembering that disaster prevention is as important as response and recovery phases.

Vietnam has an opportunity to be a mentor in relation to emergency broadcasting, especially within the Mekong region where flooding is a regular, common threat. While disaster managers coordinate with each other and work well with media to engage with citizens on disaster management, there are still some areas within media where support could improve content.



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Further information:

[www.abcinternationaldevelopment.net.au/research](http://www.abcinternationaldevelopment.net.au/research)