



IMAGE BY LE NGUYEN TUONG UYEN

# Bridge the Gap

Promoting a new culture of giving in Vietnam

TEXT BY **NPD KHANH**

“IT IS DIFFICULT to give meaningfully. To not only feel good about what you do, but actually create an impact on those you want to help,” says Dana Doan, co-founder of LIN ([www.lin.vn.org](http://www.lin.vn.org)), an intermediary organization that bridges donors, grassroots VNPOs (Vietnamese Nonprofit Organizations) and volunteers. LIN’s (Listen, Inspire, Nurture) goal is to develop, nurture, learn from and educate a healthy local community of nonprofit participants capable of cooperating and taking on deep and complex Vietnamese problems. It acts as a community center, a supplier of financial, technical and human resources. It prepares local volunteers with specific skills required for specialized problem solving and connects these skilled volunteers to the nonprofits most suitable for them. It enables donors who want to not only provide money but also to actively participate and help create long-term solutions that target the root causes of problems.

One problem, according to Dana, is that VNPOs are being neglected and underfunded because of a lack of exposure,

often getting overlooked for internationally recognized NGOs. And while international NGOs may be better funded and suited to respond to large scale crises such as natural disasters and diseases, they lack the local perspective to tackle more nuanced Vietnamese socioeconomic problems and do not cater to local volunteers and donors.

“International NGOs naturally favor the international side of communication. They put out English materials which most locals can’t read and their programs cater more to corporate volunteers searching for an outlet for their social responsibility,” says Dana. “A lot of the time, these programs receive good feedback from the corporate volunteers and create a lot of good feeling for the givers, but don’t actually do anything to really help the ones who receive.”

Adding: “Simply having good intentions does not cut it. It takes more to close the gap between the giver and the receiver. We live in a complex society today and our social problems are becoming increasingly complex. It is the people that live here for good that understand the problems the most

and know the best way to solve them.”

After five years of operation, LIN has connected with 138 local nonprofit partners (which include disability groups, minority rights groups, children and homeless shelters, and wildlife preservation funds) offered 46 Narrow the Gap grants, matched 209 skilled specialist volunteers to the appropriate VNPOs, and trained countless more.

## Give & Receive

In this day and age of transparency, prioritizing lean organizations, shortening the money stream from donors to receivers, and avoiding misuse of charity funds, the concept behind LIN, which on paper creates another intermediary between donors and end receivers, may be a difficult one to understand, but to Dana, it is not only fully justified but also vital to the long-term development of VNPOs.

“It is true that most people, when they are giving or volunteering, prefer to have as few in-betweens as possible. They want to be able to get into direct contact with

IMAGE BY LENGUYEN TUONG UYEN



IMAGE BY ADAM ROBERT YOUNG



## “As it develops, Vietnam is becoming less eligible for international aid.”

the receivers. Having one organization in between the donors and receivers already opens up chances for misuse of funds. Going by that rationalization then going through two organizations instead of one would probably be worse. But that argument generalizes and oversimplifies the issue at hand. If donors were to give money directly to the people who need them, will it really solve the problems at their root cause?” Dana argues. “I do not think so. What it does instead, is provide a short-term solution that does little to the root cause.”

She cites Pakistan and other unpopular NGO destinations. “These are countries that naturally have many problems but the money doesn’t come pouring in until something really bad happens or somebody gets killed. It is important to do charity but we have to solve problems. Money flows in when a bridge collapses or a typhoon occurs. We definitely need charity money after such disasters, but what about making sure that the bridges are stable enough? Or working on a coastal alert system?”

LIN believes the important part of solving the problem is to think proactively, to act before things get so bad nothing can be done. Naturally, this is something that takes the effort, knowledge and funding of an entire local community, not just individuals or any single nonprofit group for the simple reason that they do not possess the required resources. Additionally, large international NGOs may not possess the local insight to see the problems from the start.

“The handouts will stop at some point,” says Dana, referring to time frames

that most international NGOs have to work within. “As it develops, Vietnam is becoming less eligible for international aid. This year alone, many international groups have announced their plan to gradually shift their attention and funding to countries that need it far more than Vietnam. At which point, it falls to the community to decide what to do to make our society better and how to do it.”

LIN’s longest running program is their Narrow the Gap grants which are offered three times a year. “Every year we hold surveys to update ourselves on the current issues and let the community choose which one requires our immediate attention. We also invite experts on the issue into our forums,” explains Dana. “It is a chance for us and the community to educate ourselves on deeper issues and to discuss on the best way to solve them.”

The best proposal, judged by the community, receives the grant as well as LIN’s active assistance in carrying out their proposal. “Partnership with LIN is free. There is no hidden fee. The purpose of this partnership is involvement, commitment, narrowing the gap between the people who give, the people who receive, and the people who make it happen.”

This year the theme was education and, because of the generosity of an anonymous donor, the size of the grant tripled to VND600 million for the first prize winner and VND400 million and VND200 million for the second and third prize winners respectively. “With this money, we can do much more. We can take on bigger, more ambitious projects. We can solve more, do more, call on more people, open more doors. Gradually, this will get us more attention, more people coming and adding to the community.” ■

### WINNERS OF THE 2014 NARROW THE GAP GRANTS

#### YOUR UNDERSTANDING LIGHTENS OUR LIFE (VND600 MILLION):

A project to narrow the gap between the community and visually disabled people (by Thien An Shelter - MATA)

#### DESIRE TO INTEGRATE (VND400 MILLION):

A project to foster communication skills, raise awareness about rights and offer art classes to the hearing impaired (by Deaf Community of Ho Chi Minh City)

#### ENHANCING EDUCATION FOR MIGRANT CHILDREN (VND200 MILLION):

A project to improve the physical state and capacity of migrant children so they can improve their lives (Cau Han Project by Ho Chi Minh Child Welfare Association)