

Country profile Vietnam

World Vision

GEOGRAPHY

Vietnam is a long narrow country stretching from China to the Gulf of Thailand. There are seven geographical regions, including the Red River delta, the Mekong River delta, narrow coastal plains and north western and central highlands. Approximately 75 percent of Vietnam's land area is mountainous, with only 22 percent available for crops, mostly in the river deltas.

The climate is shaped by monsoons, which bring rain from May to September (until November in the central and southern areas). December to February are cooler months, providing some relief from heat and humidity.

PEOPLE

Most Vietnamese are Kinh, yet there are more than 54 minority ethnic groups. The national language is Vietnamese. Vietnamese life reflects a blend of Buddhist, Taoist and Confucian beliefs. There are small groups of Muslims, Christians and the Cao-Dai and Hoa Hao sects.

HISTORY

One thousand years of Chinese rule ended in 938 AD, but Vietnamese rulers had to repeatedly repel Chinese armies in later centuries. France colonised Vietnam in the mid-19th century, maintaining control until the Japanese invaded in 1940. Although attempts were made to re-establish control after World War 2, the French were ultimately repelled in 1954 by a Communist revolutionary movement, led by Ho Chi Minh. In the wake of independence, the Geneva Accords of 1954 temporarily divided Vietnam into two zones (the Communist north and the anti-Communist, US-supported south). This division quickly turned to armed struggle, prompting the United States and other countries, including Australia and New Zealand, to commit combat troops in 1965. The Paris Peace Agreements, signed in



Map courtesy of The General Libraries
The University of Texas at Austin

1973, provided an immediate ceasefire and signalled the withdrawal of Western troops. The southern capital of Saigon fell to Communist forces on 30 April 1975.

Over the next five years, more than a million people fled the political purge against the anti-Communists and harsh economic conditions. The Communist Party dominates the five-yearly elections for the National Assembly.

ECONOMY

Vietnam's economy was crippled by years of fighting, narrow economic policies and trade bans by the United States. The loss of financial support from the old Soviet Bloc and a rigid, centrally planned economy created further problems. Economic reforms called Doi Moi (introduced from 1986) and the lifting of trade bans in 1994 opened up greater opportunities for foreign investment. In recognition of this fact, the government of Vietnam is working with its international partners, including Australia, on ways to create legal systems and a deregulated environment, which will improve the activities of the private sector.

Although the Asian economic crisis affected Vietnam, its economy has recovered well and the rate of poverty has declined steadily since 1993. This has been achieved through economic reform, redistribution of agricultural land and job creation in the private sector. Although employment has become more varied, agriculture remains the dominant economic sector. Vietnam is the world's third largest exporter of rice, after Thailand and the United States.



These Vietnamese children learn about sanitation and the importance of washing their hands.

Vietnam also has a vibrant seafood industry. Other export products include coconuts, coffee, tea and rubber. Farmers also grow corn, tropical vegetables and fruits, cassava, potatoes, sugarcane, cashew nuts, soybeans and groundnuts.

Vietnam's oil reserves, estimated at 1.7 billion barrels, are among the largest in the world and production is increasing. Natural gas, coal, bauxite, iron ore, copper and tin reserves remain largely untapped.

The industrial sector employs about 12 percent of the country's workforce. Light manufacturing includes food processing, textiles and footwear. Government investments in heavy industry have included power stations, telecommunications, coal mines, shipyards, engineering, steel, and fertiliser, chemical and cement plants. High-tech industries, such as electronics, are also receiving increasing attention. Tourism has a high rate of growth. While the number of people living in poverty has steadily reduced, many households are still vulnerable.

LIVING CONDITIONS

Most Vietnamese live in rural areas. Their homes are often simple one or two room dwellings made of timber and thatch. In urban areas, housing ranges from squatter settlements to large multi-storeyed brick apartments. Often families share sanitation facilities, while others do not have access to a clean water supply or safe waste disposal.

Many Vietnamese meals are based on rice, vegetables and small portions of meat or fish. Poor families often have insufficient food. Illnesses such as malaria, tuberculosis and dysentery occur frequently, made worse by malnutrition.

To help combat this, the Vietnamese Government has been supporting nationwide nutrition supplement and education programs. Cases of HIV and AIDS have been identified throughout the country. Improved healthcare services and preventative programs have reduced mortality rates. Fees for health services have increased funding for the health system, although many poorer people struggle to pay.



World Vision focuses on education in remote communities in Vietnam.

Comparatively speaking...

CATEGORY	VIETNAM	AUSTRALIA
Population	89 million	21.5 million
Urban population	30.4%	89.1%
GNI per capita (\$US PPP)	\$2,995	\$38,692
Population living on less than US\$1.25 (PPP) a day	21.5%	0%
Population with an improved water source (2006)	94%	100%
Adult literacy rate	92.5%	99%
Life expectancy at birth	74.9 years	81.9 years
Under five mortality rate (per 1,000 live births)	14	6

Source: United Nations Development Programme
Human Development Report 2010

Women have equal legal rights in marriage and property ownership, although traditional culture often means they bear the triple burden of farm work, household duties and child rearing. The government strongly encourages couples to limit their families to two children.

EDUCATION

The Vietnamese value education highly. This is reflected in high literacy and primary school enrolment rates. School buildings are being upgraded and essential textbooks and materials supplied.

The challenge for Vietnam is to balance economic development with the provision of essential services and opportunities for its rapidly growing population.

WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA IN VIETNAM

- provides an Early Childhood Care and Development program for children from poor families to help reach their full potential
- supports teacher training to improve education
- trains communities in primary healthcare and HIV and AIDS awareness
- provides training in innovative agricultural methods to introduce new crops, increase yields and help farmers grow crops in inhospitable terrains
- generates opportunities for communities to access clean water, education and healthcare services and improve incomes
- teaches communities to prepare for and respond to natural disasters
- builds the ability of local partners to take over development work for their community.

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