

# SCHOOL OF YOUTH FOR SOCIAL SERVICE

VIETNAM

AN EFFORT BY THE BUDDHISTS IN VIETNAM FOR  
RURAL RECONSTRUCTION AND FOR THE RELIEF  
OF WAR-INDUCED SUFFERINGS

Village children helping student workers





# SCHOOL OF YOUTH FOR SOCIAL SERVICE 415-417 BA HAT STREET, CHOLON SOUTH VIETNAM

**Director : Thich Nhat Hanh**

**Vice Director : Thich Thanh Van**

The School of Youth for Social Service was born out of the anguish of the present war, the failure of repeated government-sponsored programs of aid to the villages of Vietnam, and a decision by the leadership of the Unified Buddhist Church to respond to this situation. It must be seen in the context of the war, but also in terms of the permanent needs of the Vietnamese people. It combines work for the immediate relief of war-induced suffering with the establishment of longer-range programs designed to deal with other problems that have been intensified by the war but not created by it: problems of rural health and sanitation, the improvement of agricultural techniques, illiteracy, etc... Similarly it combines careful and intensive training of the youth volunteers who are its student workers with an immediate and continuous effort in the villages themselves.

The work of the school began before the school itself existed. In January 1964 Thich Nhat Hanh was summoned home to Vietnam from his post at Columbia University, New York, to help with the development of a full scale Buddhist response to the Vietnam crisis. Within ten days of his return the first volunteer student workers had been recruited and were beginning operations in some of the neediest villages.

A new village school built by the SYSS students with the cooperation of the villagers





Such centers are in all parts of South Vietnam and the problems vary between each area. In Dalat, for example, where it is cold, the rebuilding of homes is the most urgent task, where as in Hue, procuring food is the crucial matter. There, the basic distribution is 10 tons every six months.

Such conditions are prohibitive, but by the organization of teams of student workers, some progress has been made in relieving the intensity of these problems. Operating on a rota system, workers from less desperate areas are sent to points of most immediate urgency. Able refugees assist in the carrying of food-stuffs and construction materials. Medical equipment is bought to treat the wounded and diseased, and refugees learn the rudiments of First Aid.

### MEANS OF SUPPORT

At the end of 1965, the School had 1200 Vietnamese families as supporters, each gave its monthly donation to support the work of the School. By the end of 1967 the number had increased to 3400. In 1968 however, a number of those families became themselves victims of the war and the School had to come to help them. As the war goes on, the number of families capable of supporting the School financially has been decreasing.

The School has now a chicken farm in Phú Tho and an agricultural farm near Dalat which serve at the same time as experimental farms for the students as well as means of self support. These farms, however, are still in their first stages and need more time and funds for their development.

Some of the still pressing needs of the School are: a few more dormitories, scholarship aid, busses for transportation, teaching equipment, books, facilities for duplicating teaching materials, funds for travel to and from the villages as well as for living expenses on the projects and for reasearch. Funds are also needed for the maintenance of students who graduate from the School

The villagers contributing to the health center funds





and become social workers serving in the Youth For Social Service movement also led by the School Board of Trustees. As far as the work to relieve war induced sufferings is concerned, the School is in great need of funds for supplies of medicine, food and all kinds of materials needed in every refugee camp.

The School has received gifts and donations from individuals and from religious, humanitarian and pacifist organizations abroad (among them the **International Committee of Conscience on Vietnam**, the **Fellowship of Reconciliation**, the **Generale Djakonale Raad der Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk**, the **Christliche Friedens Konferenz Regionalauschaus**, the **Clergy and Laymen Concerned About Vietnam**, the **AFSC**, etc...) along with their strong moral support. In order to stand firm as a pacifist and progressive organization in a situation like the one in South Vietnam and to continue its good work, the School still needs much moral as well as financial support.

Contributions to the work of the School are being sent either to the International Committee of Conscience in Vietnam in your country or directly to the Overseas Office of the School in Paris. Cheques are made to:

~~Ecole de la Jeunesse au Service Social~~

~~Banque Industrielle et Commerciale~~

~~No 4114-044055~~

~~Agence Gobelins, 64, rue Monge, Paris-5<sup>e</sup> - France.~~

For more informations, write either to the Director of the School at ~~415-417, Ba Hat Street, Cholon~~ (South Vietnam) or to:

Miss Nguyễn Thi Cấn Thơ

Overseas Office, School of Youth For Social Service

~~11, rue de Vénus~~

~~94 - Maisons-Alfort - France~~

~~Tél. 207-45-28~~

**88 GAMBETTA, STUDIO 6**



A SYSS student showing a villager how to install a latrine



A SYSS student at work







The first day inside a refugee camp run by student workers

"How to grow fish"

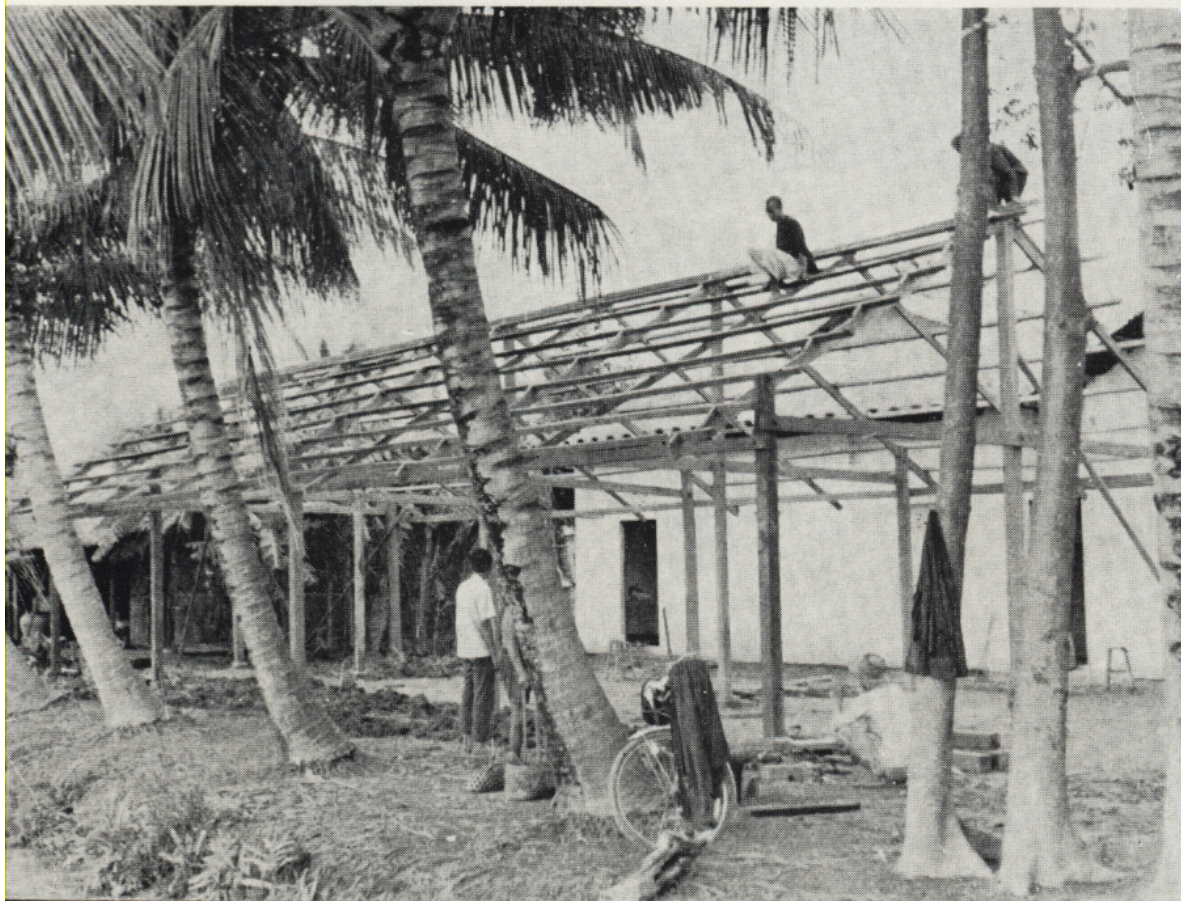




The school was formally organized in August 1965. During its first year its institutional life was housed in three pagodas and in the spring of 1966 it acquired four acres of land on the outskirts of Saigon on which the students have built dormitory rooms, classrooms, auditorium and supporting facilities. The school is a wholly autonomous organization though loosely connected with Van Hanh University of which Thich Nhat Hanh was one of the founders and is a trustee. Its autonomous nature is derived principally from the conviction of its leaders, based on their experience with the villagers, that the school must remain entirely independent of financial support from either the government of South Vietnam or official American sources. The history of government-supported teams of "social workers" has been such as to convince the peasants that their primary objective is anti-Viet-Cong and pro-Saigon propaganda rather than genuine help to the peasants themselves. These government cadres have been poorly trained, carry arms, and in general are seen by the peasants as primarily a part of the American-supported war effort. An important step in the process by which the school's student workers identify with the villagers is the fact that they are volunteers and that there is no financial or other connection to government agencies.

The school trains young workers who help the villagers to apply modern methods of rural development for the improvement of life in the villages. More important, however, than the actual physical work that the school is able to accomplish is the sense of identity and hope that the existence and work of the school give to the young people who volunteer for its operations and to the villagers who benefit from them. The school's students are expected to become the real friend of a rural community that wishes to improve and develop itself. There has existed for a long time a wide gap between the villagers and the intellectuals in Vietnam. Those graduating from overseas universities, for instance, bring back with them academic degrees but no know-

A new school is rising





ledge of how to live with the villagers and understand them. The intellectuals' training and experience do not enable them to meet the needs of a growing rural society making up 90 % of the country's population.

The directors are trying to train a generation of young people who will be inspired with a sense of love and patriotism, and who will dedicate themselves humbly and realistically to serving the needs of the villages and helping them to find their own leaders. It is significant that the first examinations for students to be enrolled, with a maximum quota of 100, attracted 500 applicants. This seems especially impressive when it is realised that there is no compensation attached to the work, that no degree or certificate is awarded, and that living costs must be at an absolute basic minimum.

The objective of the school is a force of several hundreds of young workers with two years training combined with actual work in the villages. At the present time, along with the emergency relief work done as needs are discovered, there are several "pilot villages" in operation throughout the country, with teams of student workers and supervisors in each.

### SELECTION AND TRAINING

In the selection of students it is stressed that good will and dedication are even more important than educational achievements. In the School of Youth for Social Service a leaving certificate or a B.A. degree may be useless if their possessors lack understanding and dedication. And many gifts are valuable; for instance a gift for telling stories, singing, or playing with the village children.

The school student has to be trained in the techniques of socio-economic surveys in order to discover the village's needs.

Sharing experience about crop protection with an old farmer



Demonstrating to the villagers the pro





He must also understand the religious and cultural background and present practices of the Vietnamese villagers, and learn how best to approach them to win their confidence and avoid giving offence. In order to appeal to them the student is also trained in story telling, singing, performing and entertaining.

In addition to this, the students take specialized training in at least one of four categories: education, health, agriculture and social organization.

All of these are directly related to the practical needs of Vietnam, and, while they take advantage of established Western social work techniques, do not attempt to apply textbook theories that have not been derived from similar practical situations.

Thus a team of from four to ten student workers going into a village makes its base of operations the local Buddhist pagoda, and may spend the first week or more doing nothing but becoming known to the villagers. This is the period during which the villagers learn the non-governmental and unpaid aspects of the program, and in which they discover both the hard-working nature of the student workers and the entirely voluntary, non-political nature of their own participation.

### EDUCATION

Education includes more or less standard elementary education that may begin with a student worker sitting in the street with a village child and grow from that into a class which the villagers themselves then decide to house. It includes also a variety of forms of adult education, from a direct assault on illiteracy, through training classes for mothers, basic medical training for villages that are remote from any medical help, and the like.

er way to grow mushrooms



“How to preserve manure properly”





## HEALTH

Health operations usually involve the establishment of a health center and the training of villagers to operate it, the development of pure drinking water by the drilling of wells (a vital need for Vietnam), the development of appropriate sanitation facilities including the building of sanitary toilets, and education in the prevention of disease and simple treatments available without medical training.

## AGRICULTURE

Agriculture is also related to the particular geographical and physical needs of the area but includes the expected elements of improvement of crops, development of use of fertilizers and compost, creation of seed banks, encouragement of chicken and pig raising, aspects of marketing and the development of crop unions and cooperatives.

## SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

In social organization the student workers and supervisors develop such social activities as are appropriate, including sports, youth organizations and church activities, drama groups, a reading center, festivals and fairs, etc...

In all of these, a team begins its work under the direction of a supervisor who stays with the team until it is well established and then resumes his traveling to another village and continues a constant circuit of this sort. The team itself finds out very quickly from experience how to recruit corps of assistants among the young people in the villages themselves, and some of the most promising and committed of these are sent back to the school from time to time for a few days of intensive training.

The first "health center" of a village





Thus there is a constant link between the workers in the field and the leadership of the movement itself. The school is also in the process of developing a further refinement of this in the establishment of a permanent resident in each of the pilot villages who can first identify with the team and then carry on the team's work when it has been sufficiently established for the team to move on to another village.

### RELATIONS WITH OTHER GROUPS

The school of Youth for Social Service is related directly to, but not dependent on, the Unified Buddhist Church. Through this it has direct contact with many social organizations that are a part of that church, including the Society of Buddhist Students, Buddhist women's societies, the Buddhist Boy Scouts (70,000 at present), The Young Men's Buddhist Association, etc... But because it is not limited to the Buddhists but includes those of other religious groups in its student-worker body, it has working relationships also with such secular groups as the associations of University Students, Young Teachers, etc...

### REFUGEE RELIEF

At the beginning, the relief of war victims was not the primary task of the student workers. However, with the intensification of the war and its propagation into urban areas, the student workers have been forced to invest the greatest part of their energy and time in the task of maintaining life. Refugees crowd into centers set up by workers from the School, which range in size from an approximate total of 780 refugees (Tu Nghiem Center) to that of 26,000 (Ha Thanh Center). The Campus of the School itself once served as a temporary refugee camp for 11,987 persons during six months beginning May 1968 to October 1968. Hundreds are still living there waiting for facilities to resettle.

Teaching village children games

