



# Hung's story

A profile from  
Young Lives in Vietnam

*"I'm afraid that if I talked about my dream,  
it would never come true."*

# Hung's story

Hung is now 17. Since we last visited, his family has suffered a series of disasters. Their orange crop was ruined by floods, their pigs contracted foot and mouth disease and had to be put down, and then his older brother fell ill. Hung has had to leave school and find work...

Hung has just turned 17. He lives with his mother, father, older brother and grandmother. His parents are farmers. He is friendly and easy-going and often cleans the house and cooks dinner for the family when his parents are out working. Hung says he talks to his mother quite a lot but rarely talks to his father. He buys things for his grandmother because she is old and going to the market to on her own is difficult for her.

In the evenings, Hung says he does not often spend time with friends even though his parents encourage him to. He says he prefers to stay at home listening to the Voice of Vietnam on the radio and playing games on the computer. He goes to bed around 9pm and wakes up at about 6am.

“Why don't you like going out?

*Because I am tired, I don't want to go.*

What is the most important reason?

*Because I have worked hard and I want to play computer games.”*

Hung may have a reason to be tired. He and his family have not had an easy few years. His mother explains that they lost their crop of orange trees in a flood in 2008.

*“The oranges were on branches close to the ground. In the afternoon, it rained slightly. My husband came to take care of them and stayed until the evening because of the rain. The following morning, the trees were all flooded. I felt very sad because all the oranges were rotten. After the flood, we only got one million dong (48 dollars) from selling the one tonne of oranges left on the very top of the trees. The others all dropped from the branches and the wind swept them to the edges [of the fields] in a big heap. It was a terrible sight.”*

And then in 2010 there was another disaster. They lost their pigs to foot and mouth disease.

When we last saw Hung, he was 13 years old. He lived in a village with his parents and older brother. His parents had a smallholding and Hung had been helping them on the farm since he was 10. He was going to a school three kilometres away, which meant getting up very early in the morning. His parents were keen for him to continue his studies because his older brother had already dropped out of school.

*"We had 45 pigs; each of them weighed about 50 to 60 kilogrammes. [They] were very big and as long as a shoulder pole.<sup>1</sup>*

Can you estimate how much you lost?

*About 120 million dong (5,715 dollars), not including the pigs' food. I burst into tears when counting how little money we earned that year."*

Hung's mother has had a hard life. She was one of eight children and staying at school was never really an option even though there were government subsidies for pens and books and other supplies.

*"Because I had so many brothers and sisters, I didn't have the chance to study. My family was poor. My parents tried their best to bring up all their children but they couldn't afford for all of us to study."*

When she got married her situation did not improve. She says:

*"We were extremely poor. When I got married, there was nothing in this house. It is very hard to imagine. I had to borrow money to buy food at a high rate of interest. If I borrowed a bucket of rice, I had to give back one and a half of buckets. It was a miserable life. I had to earn money to make ends meet even though I was pregnant ... However, God doesn't want to torture anyone. My children grew up healthy, and I sold groceries in the market in Hanoi. But I had to go on my bicycle at three o'clock in the morning..."*

Hung's mother has had her fair share of disasters. But she took courage from her son after the pigs died:

*"He told me that I didn't have to worry about anything because the most important thing is good health. A healthy man can do everything and earn a lot of money easily. I thought that he was right and it was no use worrying. They [her sons] behave even better than daughters. Although they were born in a farmer family, they are well behaved and hard-working. If at that time, I also had had to worry about my children's bad behaviour, I would have died of sorrow."*

But then Hung's brother, who had never been a healthy boy, fell ill and needed surgery. This was worrying and costly. Hung had just failed his high school exams so he dropped out of school and started looking for a job. He says a number of his friends left school at the same time and that it was his decision and not his parents'.

He did a number of jobs, including sewing shoes, but work was not always available. Finally he found a job with a construction company. At first he was on an apprenticeship wage, but now his salary has improved and he is doing well.

"How much money do they pay you per day?

*120,000 dong [just under six dollars].*

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1 A yoke used for carrying a load, usually in baskets or pails.

How does this compare to the other people in your construction team?

*I am in the second-highest wage group.”*

Hung has become a skilled construction worker. According to his employer, he is a sensible worker and knows how to learn from other workers to improve his own skills. He says he always obeys the rule of not drinking alcohol when working: “Construction work is kind of dangerous. If you don’t drink alcohol during lunch, it is OK. If you drink some, it could be very dangerous because sometimes you have to climb high and the sun can dazzle you.”

But Hung has other plans for his future. He says he doesn’t want to work as a construction worker all his life. “Many people said construction work is a hard job and we are exposed to many types of weather. Driving is a relaxing job so I want to become a driver.”

His mother says she has faith in her children. “Maybe they will not become rich, but they know how to manage their own finances.” But she is worried about his plan to be a driver because there are so many traffic accidents. She also doesn’t want him to get married too young: “Getting married early easily leads to an unhappy life. It means he must give up playing. It’s crazy to get married early because having a family often makes people tired.” Hung says he doesn’t want to get married yet and only wants one or two children.

He is reluctant to talk about his future, and says that his plans may be disrupted because he will have to do compulsory military service.

“What is your dream? What do you hope to achieve in the future?

*I’m afraid that if I talked about my dream, it would never come true.”*

### Families’ experiences of crises

We found that although Hung’s family has had a particularly hard time, the majority of Young Lives families said they experienced adverse events or disasters, sometimes known as ‘shocks’. These included the effect of food price rises, and environmental crises such as flooding or typhoons. Around 25 per cent also experienced an illness or death in the family.

#### The rise in food prices

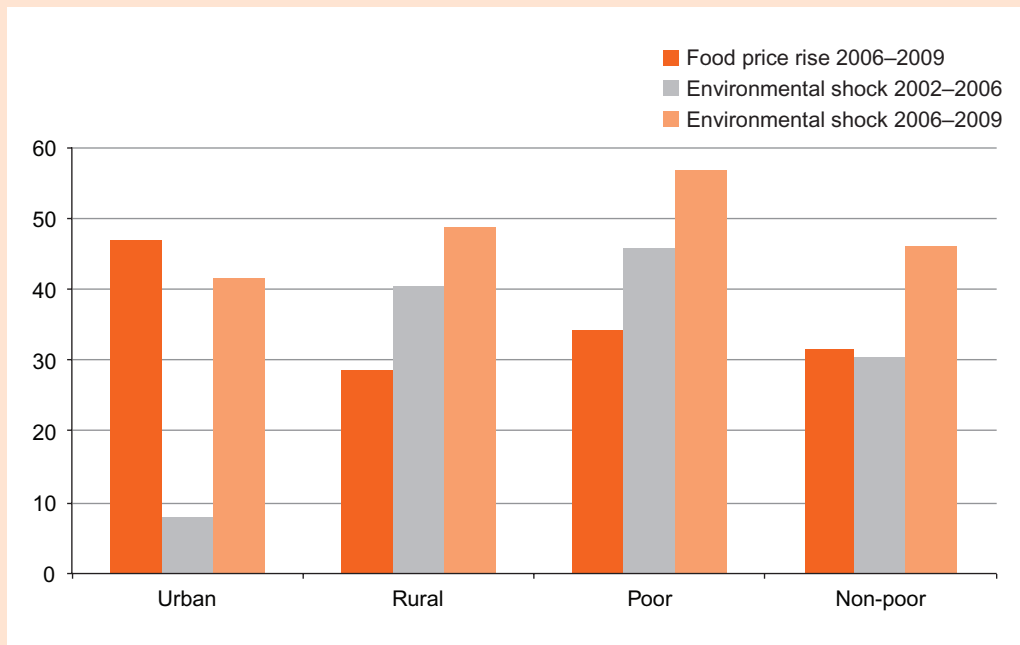
Despite huge improvements in health, life expectancy and income for the majority of Vietnamese people since the mid-1980s, the global economic recession and world food price crisis after 2008 led to a big increase in food prices. Nearly a third of all Young Lives families said that this had had a negative effect on their households. This varied considerably from region to region, with 57 per cent of families in the rural Central Coast area affected but only 15 per cent in the Northern Uplands.

## Families' experiences of crises *continued*

### Environmental crises

Between 2006 and 2009, there were also a higher number of environmental crises. Urban households in the Young Lives study are largely situated in the Central Coast region, often regarded as the 'typhoon belt', and this region was the worst affected. In other regions, poorer families were more likely to be affected than those which were not so poor, perhaps because better-off households had more resources to prevent their health or property from being damaged.

### Families experiencing adverse events (%)



**Source:** Le Thuc Duc et al. (2012) *How Do Children Fare in the New Millennium? Initial Findings from Vietnam*, Young Lives Round 3 Survey Report.

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## Country context: Vietnam

Over 88 million people from 54 different ethnic groups live in Vietnam. For most, living conditions have steadily improved since the 1990s. Vietnam is now considered a 'medium human development' country, and ranks 128 out of 187 in the United Nations Human Development Index. Average life expectancy is 75.

The Government has been gradually moving the country from being a centrally planned Communist state to a market-oriented economy. It has introduced a number of programmes to address poverty and social deprivation, and much foreign aid has also been targeted at poverty reduction.

The country was badly affected by the global recession in 2009. Food prices increased and exports went down. There are widening gaps between rich and poor, and between the majority ethnic Kinh and the country's many minority populations.

- The number of people living below the official poverty line continues to decline, from 16 per cent in 2006 to 11 per cent in 2010.
- This masks a big gap in poverty rates between majority and minority groups. In 2008, only 9 per cent of the ethnic majority population was poor, but almost half the ethnic minority population.
- Gender discrimination continues to undermine the well-being of women and children.

### Children

- About 2.6 million children are classified as being in need of special protection, including those with disabilities, orphans and those in poverty.
- The Government has made efforts to improve healthcare services for women and children, and Vietnam now ranks 90th in the world for under-5 mortality.
- Among under-5s, 5 per cent are underweight, 8 per cent are wasted (thin for their height) and 32 per cent stunted (short for their age).
- Enrolment rates at primary school are 97 per cent. In Vietnam, boys are more likely to drop out of secondary school than girls.

**Sources:** [www.younglives.org.uk](http://www.younglives.org.uk); UNDP (2011) *Human Development Report 2011*; Le Thuc Duc et al. (2011) *How Do Children Fare in the New Millennium? Initial Findings from Vietnam*, Young Lives Round 3 Survey Report; UNICEF (2012) *State of the World's Children 2012*.

Young Lives is a unique international study investigating the changing nature of childhood poverty in Ethiopia, India, Peru and Vietnam. By following the lives of 12,000 children and young people over 15 years, we aim to improve understanding of the causes and consequences of childhood poverty and provide evidence to support effective policies for children.

The profile presented here is one of 24 taken from the interviews we did with the children individually and in groups. Each one is accompanied by a theme of some kind that emerged from the material and which illustrates the issues that children are having to contend with, but also gives a sense of the wider context of their lives. These range from education and schooling, to inequality, health and illness, violence in school and at home, early marriage, the effects of migration, families' experiences of crises, government schemes to help poor people, and children's views and experiences of what it is to be rich or poor.

The children and their families who are participating in the Young Lives study willingly share with us a great deal of detailed personal information about their daily lives, and we have a responsibility to protect their confidentiality and ensure their identities remain protected. For this reason, the children's names have been changed here. The accompanying photos are of children in similar situations to the children within our study sample.

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An International Study of Childhood Poverty