



Social Innovation in South East Asia programme

Case studies series: Active Citizens for a world without waste

April 2021

www.britishcouncil.org/society/social-enterprise

Are schoolchildren the answer to a world without waste?

A partnership between Coca-Cola and the British Council in Vietnam has motivated thousands of schoolchildren, their families and other members of their communities to tackle the country's mounting plastic waste problem. This UK-led project has inspired long-term changes in one province's education system.

Vietnam generates around 13 million tonnes of domestic waste every year. It is one of five countries dumping the highest amounts of plastic waste into the world's oceans. If it doesn't find its way to water, around 85 per cent of waste is buried in landfill without treatment, according to the *Vietnam Waste Management Market (2020-2025)* report.

Environmental pollution is a problem of such magnitude in Vietnam that it cannot be tackled by one organisation or institution. Instead, it requires a collaborative effort between government, local authorities, organisations, schools and all citizens.

Engaging every citizen in a mission to avert an environmental crisis is no mean feat. But the process starts with education. In 2018, the British Council embarked on an ambitious three-year project with Coca-Cola Vietnam, aiming to change deep-rooted attitudes towards waste and recycling.

'It was not only about awareness-raising among communities, but how young people might influence their parents to change their behaviour towards plastic waste,' says Gam Tran, the British Council's Senior Programme Manager of Education and Society in Vietnam.

While Vietnam faces a national environmental crisis, each community is distinct and may respond slightly differently to specific environmental problems. That's why the British Council decided to use its Active Citizens approach, a thoughtful process whereby those being directly affected by problems are empowered to become changemakers through learning about themselves, their strengths and weaknesses, before creating solutions that they feel will be effective in their own communities.



Eight students at Sa Dec City High School in Dong Thap Province of Vietnam formed an environmental group to tackle its plastic waste problem

Biodiversity under threat

The 'Active Citizens for the World Without Waste' project took place in parts of Hanoi, Thua Thien Hue, Ho Chi Minh City and the Mekong Delta. The project was centred around Coca-Cola's EKOCENTERS in these areas. An EKOCENTER is a community market that is run by local women entrepreneurs and provides safe water, solar power, internet access and more. Integrating Coca-Cola's sustainability priorities of well-being, women, water and waste management, EKOCENTER focuses on communities that are without access to basic utilities. It is an 'off-the-grid' modularly designed kiosk that becomes a hub of community activity.

One of the areas involved, Dong Thap Province, is teeming with flora and fauna and is particularly known for its pink lotus and paddy fields.

It is a 'natural gem', says Tran Anh Tuong, an English teacher at Nguyen Dinh Chieu High School in Dong Thap. But the treatment and dumping of plastic waste in the province is threatening its biodiversity.

As part of the project, Tuong was trained to be an Active Citizens trainer himself. 'Teachers should fully understand the environmental problems to know how to help students begin to adopt a more sustainable lifestyle,' he says. 'Waste management is not a single individual's issue, it is everyone's responsibility'.

As teachers cascaded their knowledge, with support from the British Council, hundreds of students were then encouraged to develop and implement their own environmental projects.

Nguyen Dinh Chieu High School projects focused on raising awareness about environmental protection and plastic waste, promoting the 'three Rs' (Reduce, Reuse, Recycle) – and it appears to have worked – plastic waste at the school has decreased by more than 30 per cent since the project started.

Up the road at Sa Dec City High School, the focus was on creating environmentally friendly products for the local community. As one of the 40 students involved in the project at the school, Year 11 pupil Nguyen Thi Thanh Thao explains that single-use plastic is a big issue. To replace plastic bags, her team developed handmade sustainable bags for shoppers to use. But her learning didn't stop there. She now knows how to 'reuse, recycle or repair household appliances' at home, she says, and intends to share her knowledge with her friends and family, 'so that we do not let them go to waste as we did before'.

Changing attitudes and behaviours

'All the students who have been trained are now the changemakers on waste management,' says Gam Tran of the British Council.

There is now a network of 30 trained teachers in Dong Thap Province, helping to expand the waste management programme through taking it to other schools in the province.

Although this UK-led three-year project ended in March 2021, its success has influenced policy. The Dong Thap Department of Education and Training has pledged to continue a similar environmentally focused extra-curricular programme for students in 43 high schools.

Huynh Thanh Hung, Deputy Director at the Dong Thap Department of Education and Training, points out that the province is facing a high level of environmental pollution with climate change leading to higher temperatures and sea level rises which push salt water into fresh water areas. The impact on daily life is made worse by a high level of plastic waste.

‘ This shows the legacy of our Active Citizens work in the Vietnamese education system ’

He says: 'The Active Citizens project has become very meaningful and practical in our province. Since the project ended, we encourage every school to come up with more ideas for reducing waste in our living environment. Every school needs to become a role model on cascading the education about environmental protection awareness among teachers, students and the community.'

Gam adds: 'This shows the legacy of our Active Citizens work in the Vietnamese education system.'

Teachers and students have become active citizens in their communities – and not only in initiatives related to waste.

'The impact is beyond waste management skills,' says Gam. 'The teachers and students take more responsibility for social issues and for those of the community they're living or studying in. They want to inspire other people too.'

This article was written by Sasha Gallick at [Pioneers Post](#) for the British Council.