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In 1954, when the Geneva Agreement ended French control and partitioned Vietnam into a communist North and a pro-Western South, a refugee flight began which in less than a year added 800,000 people to the war-scarred provinces of the south. They traveled on foot, by boat and ship, making their way to a strange new tropical countryside not knowing what was ahead. They came as individuals, or as families, but most, especially the peasants, followed village elders and priests, some carrying with them the name of their northern ancestral village to implant it in the south where greater freedom and opportunity beckoned. Some were students and businessmen, well educated and prosperous, but the great majority were rice farmers, fishermen, and semi-skilled craftsmen, makers of wooden shoes, charcoal, mats, baskets, pottery and the many other simple necessities of village life. As they left the ships in Saigon carrying what they could with them they overflowed out of the few buildings awaiting them, into the streets, and then into the countryside by the thousands, transported to tent cities in the surrounding provinces where their lives as refugees were to begin.

Although the new government's authority was not yet firmly established, with U. S. and French aid, it had managed to feed, clothe, and shelter the refugees as they arrived. The efforts of the Refugee Commission had prevented starvation and epidemics, but its work had of necessity been restricted to relief and as the migration slowed to merely hundreds daily, and then to a trickle, the great task of permanent resettlement remained. Lurking in the background was the danger of creating a permanent refugee body, unproductive, discontented, resentful and resented. For the new regime of the South, this difficult task was but one of many pressing problems which had accumulated during fifteen years of tension and fighting, economic dislocation and political turbulence.

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When the Michigan State University team began to arrive in Saigon in mid-1955, South Vietnam faced a major problem of refugee resettlement. The MSU Group came to Vietnam to assist the government, improve its administration. At the request of the new regime, the U. S. foreign aid program had contracted with the University to provide technical advisors to help organize and build up a training institution for future administrative leaders, and in various ways to help improve the on-going administration of government services. As University public administration advisors arrived, their first assignment, at the urgent request of the Vietnamese government and the U. S. aid mission, was to provide administrative advice to the refugee resettlement program, to assist in a reorganization which would change the Refugee Commission from a relief organization to an effective resettlement agency.

In several meetings, the problems were outlined for the team of three advisors assigned to the task. The refugee relief program was a drain on the government and on the U. S. aid program which to a great extent was paying the bill. All parties were seeking a humane and constructive means of ending the program by turning the refugees, roughly one-twelfth of the total population of the South, into normal, productive members of the community. To do this the Vietnamese and Americans were considering a village by village resettlement project approach, and this called for drastic reorganization and reorientation of the Refugee Commission. Commissioner-General Bui Van Luong, the capable and dedicated head of the refugee agency, clearly recognized the size of the administrative problem he faced and wanted advice and assistance.

Following preliminary discussions, the MSU advisors decided on a three-phase approach. First, they needed much more information about the Refugee Commission, its personnel, procedures, and organization. They also needed information about the refugees themselves, their numbers and location,

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their social and administrative organization, the values and attitudes of their leaders, and their relationship to the regular government services which were normally administered by provincial headquarters. This need for information called for digging as deeply as possible into the total refugee program, i.e., for a general research phase which could provide the information needed.

In the second phase the MSU recommendations would be presented. This stage would include the activity and persuasion needed to bring agreement on a feasible course of action. Finally, in the implementation phase, the recommendations would be put into effect by the Refugee Commission and resettlement projects accomplished. All of this was needed in the shortest possible time.

The research began within Commission headquarters through a series of interviews, interpretation of data and documents, and observation. At the beginning a small team of Vietnamese Commission officials was assigned to work closely with the MSU advisors and the Commission also assigned a small number of expert interpreters. Heading the Vietnamese team was Mr. Nguyen Van Bao, a close associate of the Commissioner General and a man of long experience in high administrative posts. Bao welcomed the opportunity to participate in the survey and with the other Vietnamese team members established a close working relationship with American colleagues. As the search for information and attitudes moved into the provinces, the government provided full entree into the refugee villages, the field offices of the refugee commission and the provincial headquarters. The general atmosphere at that time was one of urgency, cooperation, and friendliness. Americans were little known in many areas visited, and there were few outward signs of suspicion or hostility, although some of the countryside could only be traversed with the protection of armed guards because of guerrilla activities,

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the remnants of years of warfare.

The information and insights gathered during the first month in the field confirmed the desirability of the resettlement project approach, and began to jell into a set of recommendations which would provide workable procedures and organization. These evolved naturally and the Vietnamese team members, Mr. Bao and his colleagues shared in the thinking.

It was found that the refugee problem varied considerably from one province to another in size and complexity, but in almost all areas the refugees were well organized through traditional family and village structure. The Catholic priest in almost all villages provided general leadership, for the vast majority of refugees were Roman Catholic. In some cases fertile, unused land or other productive resources were nearby and could be used if some organized assistance was provided. In other cases the villagers could be moved again if land was available elsewhere. Province chiefs were willing to be of help, although somewhat grudgingly in areas where the refugees were already resented. Their special treatment by a special organization was viewed with disfavor. As Northerners and Catholics, the refugees were outsiders in the thinking of many Southerners, reflecting religious differences and long standing regional rivalries. These and many other factors entered into the thinking behind the recommendations which were placed before Commissioner General Luong by the American advisors and their Vietnamese colleagues.

The recommendations were not put in a written and formal document until after they had been discussed at length with the Vietnamese leaders of the Refugee Commission and their counterparts at the American aid mission. When they did appear in writing they were clearly acceptable and workable in the eyes of responsible officials. They called for a drastic reorganization of the Commission into two coordinated divisions, one to identify and define new resettlement projects and the other to carry them out. The plan emphasized

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refugee self-help. An increase in field personnel and a corresponding decrease in Saigon, establishment of survey teams to locate potentially productive sites in the provinces, and a program of retraining Commission personnel to new roles and training refugee leaders to develop their own resettlement plans were all part of the proposals. On the implementation side, the report stressed cooperative efforts with provincial services although clearly the Refugee Commission would have to provide much assistance on its own in some areas. Land clearing teams, road building crews and minimum community construction projects were all part of the plan. All of these recommendations were presented within the context of the Refugee Commission accepting as its eventual goal the task of working itself out of a job. If the Commission was no longer needed because the refugees were self-sufficient with their governmental needs tended by the normal provincial services, the Commission's efforts could be viewed as successful.

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As implementation began, the U. S. Aid mission insisted that the recommendations be followed as one of the conditions to further refugee support. This condition was not really needed, however, for the Commission began immediately to put the proposals into effect. The Commissioner himself aided by Mr. Bao and the others who clearly understood and accepted the new approach moved vigorously ahead with reorganization and the resettlement program.

The role of the MSU Advisors diminished considerably as the plan took effect. They helped to some extent in the new re-training programs which Commissioner Luong established, and one advisor remained with the Commission to assist on specific details and conduct evaluation surveys.

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Within two years the Refugee Commission had been abolished and its personnel and organization turned in new directions. By that time the province chiefs had absorbed the refugee villagers into their provinces and the refugees themselves were a productive element in the economy of the nation. In some areas resettlement problems remained, but in most places refugees were self-sufficient and, in some cases, at a higher level of living than they had enjoyed in the North.

In the months that followed the MSU specialists were asked to attack similar reorganization problems -- in the Ministries of Education, Interior, Agriculture and others. In each case the Government asked for proposals to improve administrative effectiveness and the advisors pursued a three phase approach consisting of the same essentials -- research and data collection, presentation of recommendations and, finally, assistance with implementation. However, in none of the other situations was the outcome as clearly successful and, on the whole, the results were mixed. Somehow the delicate balance of ingredients which provided success for the refugee technical assistance endeavor was partially lacking in the other efforts.

In this delicate balance, the outside advisor is only one of the elements, and not the most important. The clearly felt need of the Refugee Commissioner and his colleagues, the sense of urgency which prevailed, the "honeymoon" period of respect and warmth toward American expert advisors which existed in 1955 -- all of these were crucial. The inquisitive and receptive attitude of Mr. Bao, his close and secure relationship to Commissioner Luong and his wealth of personal administrative experience in France and Vietnam all contributed. Certainly, the general ability and personal qualities of both the Vietnamese and their American advisors were essential ingredients.

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In addition, however, the Refugee Commission problems, as far reaching and important as it was, did have a solution that was clearly needed, was relatively uncomplicated and could be found and accepted. This was rarely the case in other reorganization efforts which tended to involve far more deeply ingrained interests in a web of long standing and complicated relationships. In these latter cases no obvious emergency existed and administrative change could move quickly only with extremely strong, almost revolutionary, administrative leadership. In the Refugee Commission case, the situation was ripe for change and the outside advisors served as effective catalysts; in the long established ministries, reform and improvement called for much more skilled and concerted action by the expert advisor.

Americans and others involved in cross-cultural technical assistance face a variety of situations and experiences calling for qualities of intelligence, ingenuity, and personality which test severely the human resources of developed countries as well as those of less-developed areas. The Vietnamese Refugee Commission success and the resultant satisfaction is not often matched. Partial frustration is a more common pattern, in an activity whose complexity and difficulty is matched only by the great need and constant challenge.