

Small plants offer protection against a raging white elephant

When a raging white elephant swept through coastal communities of Vietnam devastation was indeed widespread, as was to be expected.

However, hard work beforehand meant that the effects of Typhoon Damrey (the Khmer word for 'white elephant') were somewhat less than if communities had simply sat back and done nothing.

Damrey, which struck in September 2005, proved to be one of the most destructive for a decade or so in East and South-East Asia with its combination of great force and slow movement.

Indeed, in Vietnam, 68 people died and thousands were left homeless and without livelihoods. But early warnings and good preparedness enabled almost 600,000 people to evacuate their homes safely as the typhoon reached the coast with winds of up to 133 km per hour.

Investment in risk reduction in the Red River Delta, such as planting and protecting mangrove forests, limited the overall impact of the typhoon.

'To us, the mangroves are a shield against the many storms that ravage our country, since the trees become wave-breakers, reducing potentially devastating 1.5-metre surfs into harmless, centimetre-high ripples,' explains Cao Van Loan, the Red Cross mangrove inspector, as he skips his boat through these green billowing forests outside the coastline.

'In addition, the mangroves provide work such as the harvesting of shrimps and crabs which reside in the vegetation.' More than 7,750 families are estimated to be making their livelihoods as a result of the planting of mangroves.

Over the past 10 years, the Red Cross of Vietnam, with the support of Danish and

In 2005, some 56 million people were affected by windstorms, according to the World Disasters Report 2006.

Between 1996 and 2005, the number of windstorms increased from 61 to 124 annually, accounting – now – for one-third of natural disasters.

Japanese Red Cross, has planted 22,349 hectares of mangroves, 366 ha of casuarina species and 64,800 bamboo trees in eight provinces along 110-km of coastline.

This successful risk reduction programme is also linked to maintenance of the centuries-old dykes system to reclaim delta mudflats for agriculture.

In Vietnamese, a dyke is sometimes called 'a knife to protect the people'. And so it does; it shields homes and infrastructure, and functions as a footpath, road and evacuation site.

During Typhoon Damrey, sea water penetrated inland three or more kilometres. More than 130,000 hectares of rice fields were damaged, resulting in almost 200,000 people facing hunger. But the destruction was far higher when mangroves did not protect the dyke.

In financial terms alone, the mangrove project proves that preparedness and mitigation pay. The planning and protection of 12,000 hectares of mangroves has cost around US\$ 1.1 million, but has helped to reduce the cost of dyke maintenance by US\$ 7.3 million a year.



Economic and physical regeneration: More than 7,750 families have found work as a result of the planting of mangrove forest in Vietnam.

