It’s a dazzling afternoon, the clear skies a contrast to the heavy winds and rains that hit Cao Quang village in October 2020. A group of 35 people are working on the road, repairing damage from storms and resulting landslides that destroyed homes and roads in Quang Binh province, on Vietnam’s central coast.

Nguyen Thi Phu is checking the list of workers with Oxfam staff to ensure everyone will be paid for their work on the road reconstruction project. “Morning shift is from 7 to 11, and the afternoon shift is from 2 to 5 every day,” Phu explains. “While the other participants are working, I monitor and complete the time sheet for them.”

To assist communities like Cao Quang, Oxfam and the Ha Tinh Centre for Community Development (HCCD) paid local people to work on the road, a cash-for-work program to create jobs and help people recover.

MASSIVE STORMS, EXTENSIVE DAMAGE

In October 2020, a succession of typhoons swept across the South China Sea and hit the central coast of Vietnam. Every week there was a new storm, each dumping massive amounts of rain and lashing the region with high winds, destroying homes and agricultural fields, and triggering mudslides and flooding in the 14 river systems crisscrossing the region. It was the worst weather in 20 years, triggering what Oxfam staff described as an “unprecedented multidimensional crisis.”

“Hundreds of thousands of homes were damaged or collapsed,” explained Vu Xuan Viet, Oxfam’s humanitarian program manager in Vietnam, to the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. “This has been so devastating; people are going to need long-term support because the prolonged flooding exceeded their capacity to cope.”

By the end of October 2020, Vietnam’s Disaster Management Authority estimated that seven million people in 12 central provinces were affected by the storms, and 1.3 million were in need of humanitarian assistance. One hundred and thirty people died, and more than 274,000 homes were damaged or destroyed, along with more than 22,000 acres of rice and vegetable crops.
In Quang Binh province, Oxfam and the HCCD delivered assistance in the form of hygiene kits (with soap and other items), water tanks, and buckets to hold clean water, and we promoted good hygiene practices like hand-washing to help people avoid diseases, including COVID-19.

In collaboration with HCCD and Quang Nam Red Cross, Oxfam’s response has reached 80,000 people in four central coastal provinces. Working closely with the people affected by the storms, we have rebuilt more than 12,000 meters (7.45 miles) of roads and dredged 29,000 meters (18 miles) of irrigation canals. These projects have helped 9,000 flood-stricken households return to work in their agricultural fields and farms. Of 3,345 households participating in the cash-for-work projects, nearly half (48 percent) of the participating workers were women.

GETTING TO WORK IN RECOVERY

In Quang Binh, HCCD prioritized helping the poorest people in the worst-affected villages, especially households led by single women as well as those of ethnic minorities and disabled people.

When the road repair project started in Cao Quang, Nguyen Thi Phu was enthusiastic about getting involved, but she was also hesitant. She’s a single mother raising two children, and she lives with congenital impairments in her legs and eyes. Although unable to take on the hard physical labor involved in repairing roads in a mountainous area surrounded by rocky terrain, Phu nevertheless saw an opportunity to get involved. “Before the project started, HCCD staff announced that it was necessary to have a local field monitor to support the cash-for-work activity,” she says. “That morning, all the households in the program had a meeting to discuss it, and they deemed this job suitable for me.” When the community members held a vote for who they wanted to monitor their work, they unanimously elected Phu.

Serving in this type of role was new for Phu, who says that her mobility and vision challenges make her “afraid of communicating and socializing.” She was worried the job would be too difficult. “I doubted myself, and I was scared.” She says she kept asking the village head, a woman named Mrs. Hang, if she could do it. “She positively encouraged me, and affirmed my ability,” Phu says. “She also advised me to ask for instruction and support whenever it gets difficult.”

For the first time in her 40 years, Phu had an opportunity to be a leader in the community. “I took the chance, and became more confident,” she says. She gratefully accepted a ride on Mrs. Hang’s motorbike to travel to the site of the road work, and she dove into her job.

She learned quickly that her duties were just as challenging as she anticipated. “Other households can take turns to work, and take time off,” Phu says. “But I could not [take any days off], as I had to complete the daily time sheet correctly so everyone can receive money for their efforts.”

In total, 36 people repaired 770 meters (almost half a mile) of the road in Cao Quang. Phu says it is easier for farmers to get to their fields, and they all appreciate the money they earned, about $9 per day. “We now can have both money and a nice road to go to our agricultural fields,” she says.

Phu is proud of her contribution to the road project, saying the experience left her “tired at times, but happy to work with my neighbors.”

HOW OXFAM IS HELPING PEOPLE IN VIETNAM

ASSISTING 80,000 PEOPLE in four provinces

DREDGING 18 MILES of irrigation canals

REPAIRING 7.45 MILES of roadway

PAYING WORKERS FROM 3,345 HOUSEHOLDS participating in cash-for-work projects (48% of workers are women)