



# A Learning-by-Doing, Participatory Approach to Commune-Level Disaster Drills in Huế City, Vietnam

## Overview

ISET-International (ISET) worked with the Huế City Division of Water Resources and Climate Change (responsible for DRM so DRM agency afterward) to co-develop a consistent, participatory and standardized guidelines for disaster drills planning and implementation with active participation from commune level government, DRM officers, and mass organizations. The draft was piloted in Quảng Điền and Đan Điền communes, where ISET and the DRM agency mentored local officials to prepare their own drill plans, and mobilize local forces and residents to organize exercise simulating extreme disaster scenarios. All key actors, such as commune leaders, DRM response teams, mass organizations, and community members. Before the drills, participants received training in search and rescue, preparedness, and first aid so they can apply these skills smoothly during both the exercises and real emergencies. This learning-by-doing approach has strengthened and sustained local capacity for disaster response. The draft Handbook on Disaster drill planning and implementation is now being refined based on lessons from these pilots and will continue to be tested and applied in additional communes in 2026 before being finalized for city-wide use.

## Our approach

This initiative adopted the learning-by-doing, participatory approach to commune-level disaster response drills. Instead of one-off, expert-led exercise, commune leaders and DRM officers took ownership of the entire process, from planning and scenario design to implementation and review, with technical guidance from the city DRM agency and ISET. The approach helps building sustainable by enabling commune officers to plan and manage drills independently. The draft Handbook on Disaster Drills developed through this process will ensure future drills are conducted systematically and consistently across all communes, providing a strong foundation for city-wide application and long-term resilience.



## Facts and figures



**Cost of a commune-level disaster drill:**  
US\$1,500 (including equipment)



**Update costs**  
<10 local staff days (of disaster drill plan)



**Time to implement:**  
3 months



**Easy to replicate?**  
Yes, once the Handbook is finalized and officially adopted.

## The gap

Located in central Vietnam, Huế city is frequently exposed to severe floods and storms. Commune-level disaster response drills are therefore mandated but often poorly implemented due to limited capacity and experience at the commune-level, and the absence of standardized guidelines. Consequently, drills are conducted inconsistently, varying each time and largely dependent on the availability of external support. In previous projects, external experts typically led the exercises, resulting in a top-down approach that limited local ownership and long-term sustainability. These capacity and institutional gaps have hindered the regular and consistent drills, reducing the overall readiness of local governments and communities to respond to increasingly severe floods and storms.

## Our solution

To address these gaps, the project developed and piloted a standardized, participatory approach for planning and organizing commune-level disaster drills to ensure that drills were systematic, practical and aligned with real local risks. Using these guidelines, the pilot communes of Quảng Điền and Đan Điền were guided to design realistic scenarios and full drill plans tailored to their specific context, including extreme events expected under climate change. Commune staff were mentored throughout the drafting and organization process, gaining hands-on experience in planning, coordination, and implementation.

Local disaster response teams were also trained in search and rescue, first aid, and emergency preparedness skills, and the communes received basic equipment to support field exercises and future response. The project then organized participatory drills engaging commune leaders, DRM command

## Conditions for success

**Q:** Is this intervention appropriate for other communities?

**A:** Yes. Disaster drill planning and organization are beneficial and applicable to other communities thanks to the Handbook.

**Q:** What conditions are needed for the interventions?

**A:** Commitment from the DRM agency, commune level authorities and community members, and close technical mentoring.

**Q:** Was there anything special about the communities where interventions were effective?

**A:** The leaders of the two pilot communes were highly proactive and committed in directing and managing the activities, and the local communities also participated very actively.



*First-aid simulation for an injured person during the disaster response drill in Quảng Thái Commune*  
© Photo: Hue City DRM agency

and response teams, mass organizations such as the Women’s Union, Youth Union, and Red Cross, and community members.

Each full drill comprised three stages:

- a coordination meeting;
- a field simulation of storm and flooding response; and
- a debriefing to capture lessons learnt.

Insights from these pilot drills were used to refine the draft Handbook on Disaster Drills, which will continue to be tested and applied in additional communes in 2026 before being finalized to guide future city-wide practice.

## How it increases resilience

The initiative strengthened the capacity of communes and communities to plan, adapt, and respond effectively to disaster events. It provided a learning-by-doing opportunity for commune DRM officials to lead their own drill design and implementation, building confidence, problem-solving skills, and ownership of preparedness efforts. Close mentoring ensured drills were well-coordinated, practical and context-specific.

Through hands-on training in search and rescue, first aid, and emergency response, combined with targeted equipment support, local DRM teams became better equipped to manage real crises. The process also reinforced institutional systems by developing a draft Handbook on Disaster Drills, which helps ensure future drills are conducted systematically and consistently across communes. By actively engaging local leaders from the provincial to commune level, mass organizations, and community members, the project enhanced communication, trust and collective actions, enabling faster and more coordination responses when disasters strike.



## Climate Resilience Measurement for Communities (CRMC)

The Climate Resilience Measurement for Communities (CRMC) is a data-driven process, complemented by a web-based tool and mobile app, which helps communities to evaluate and measure how resilient they are to climate hazards. Using the results, they can identify and implement resilience-building interventions and run additional measurements to track improvements.

Find out more: [ZCRAlliance.org/crmc](https://ZCRAlliance.org/crmc)



Aquaculture cage safety protection simulation during the disaster response drill in Quảng Thọ Commune © Photo: Hue City DRM agency

## LIVED EXPERIENCE

“ I have been involved in disaster prevention and search and rescue work for more than ten years, but I have never participated in any drill like this one before. It was very meaningful, and for the first time, local people were deeply engaged. The drill was innovative and closely aligned with the real situation of our locality, helping people become more aware of disaster preparedness for the coming rainy and flood season.”

– Mr. Trần Lêu, Village Head of Phò Nam A, Quảng Thọ Commune

## LIVED EXPERIENCE

“ From this experience, we learned that a key success factor is the commune’s own leadership in developing and implementing the drill plans. When local officers design and test their own scenarios, they can clearly identify strengths and weaknesses in their preparedness, leading to more effective annual DRM activities.

Although the financial support from ISET and the ZCRA was modest in scale, it was highly effective, especially because the Handbook developed through this process will enable other communes to independently design and conduct their own drills in the future.”

– Mr. Lê Diên Minh, DRM official, Huế Division of Water Resources and Climate Change



Evacuation simulation during the disaster response drill in Quảng Thái Commune © Photo: Hue City DRM agency

## Co-benefits

The initiative also fostered a culture of shared responsibility and proactive preparedness, strengthening the ability of authorities and communities to anticipate and respond to extreme disasters. The Handbook developed through this process will help sustain these efforts by guiding other communes to design and conduct their own drills.



### Get in touch

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For more resilience solutions:  
[i-s-e-t.org/category/solutions](https://i-s-e-t.org/category/solutions)

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Left: House reinforcement simulation during the disaster response drill in Quảng Thọ Commune © Photo: Hue City DRM agency

Cover: Drowning rescue scenario during the disaster response drills in Quảng Thọ Commune © Hue City DRM agency



The Institute for Social and Environmental Transition – International (ISET) is a non-governmental organization committed to building inclusive and transformative resilience in the face of natural resource, environmental, and social challenges, especially related to climate change, natural hazards, and urbanization. Officially operating in Vietnam since 2010, ISET has an intimate understanding of Vietnam’s institutional landscape and its strengths and challenges, and has proven expertise in working effectively across levels to bridge the still significant divide between science, policy, and implementation. ISET is working in Huế City and Gia Lai Province, both coastal areas in central Vietnam and Cần Thơ city in the Mekong Delta.