



Quarterly Bulletin Programs in Vietnam & Cambodia Period 10-12/2006

(For partners & friends)

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Highlights

Vietnam

- Waste recycling: new challenges
- Focus on the extremely poor: target 3000

Cambodia

- Seminar on governance



2 countries, 2 partners:

In Vietnam with **Thiên Chí**: NGO set up by our local team, it takes over all the programs. We contribute with part of its funding, **Thiên Chí** finds the rest to become independent. We also provide technical support. Page 2



PTEA

In Cambodia with 3 partners:
Rade, CFED, PTEA, page 10

1 Vietnam



Thiên Chí

Vietnamese NGO :
Community development and training

This report only covers the most important and recent developments. For a global view see: <http://www.vietnamplus.org/en/documents.html> & <http://www.thienchi.org/en/publications.html>.

Summary of the situation : *Thiên Chí* has been set up by the Vietnamese team of Việt Nam Plus - Mékong Plus. First as a non profit private company, and now as an NGO. It takes progressively over all programs and becomes independent.

Summary of the on-going programs:

Dúc Linh : the program was started in August 1999 and has expanded upon the suggestion of the authorities, from 2 to 5 communes and subsequently to 13. The region is inhabited mostly by immigrants from the North and the Center. The cooperation with the authorities is pretty good; new activities are added and the contract is extended.

Tánh Linh : In March 2001 the province has proposed an expansion to the neighboring district of Tánh Linh, which is poorer.

Ham Thuan Nam. New extension in the same province, since April 2006.

Long Mỹ: new program, in Hậu Giang province (Mekong delta) since October 2004.

Phung Hiep. Extension of the Long My program started in June 2006.

1.1. **Savings-credit**

Summary of the program: difficult access to credit with a reasonable interest rate was at the centre of our strategy until 2004. The priority was put on solidarity and savings, more than on credit. The recovery rate was excellent and the savings rate is one of the highest in the country. Since then the dumping of easy cheap credit by the agriculture bank has convinced *Thiên Chí* to progressively reduce the program or to transfer it to the Women's Union, with our support. *Thiên Chí* has launched a micro credit program for the extremely poor households and to small enterprises which generate employment locally.

Micro credit to the extremely poor now reaches 1085 households, a regular increase. The capacity of the teams is probably 3000 households thanks to their experience and new skills. This is much higher than expected, provided the funds can be found. The reimbursement rate is 99% but the energy and time required for each family is huge, as they all combine several tremendous difficulties. But the outcome is really good and the reward for all immense. When a former extremely poor family succeeds, it inspires and helps others. See the new video: "[Thu, how she made it](#)" (5'30").

In Dúc Linh 515 women conduct their savings - credit group with success. Without any other financial support from *Thiên Chí* than the initial capital of 10.000 euros, they have doubled their membership and more than doubled their capital (accumulated interests and savings included) in less than 18 months. 2 more communes have applied to follow their example. The groups are monitored by the women commune cadres trained by *Thiên Chí*. All costs are covered by the interests.

1.2. Agriculture

Summary of the program: all programs are located in agricultural regions and the peasants are eager to improve their techniques, obtain better seeds etc. The government services do not fulfill the needs of all and their training is not easily understood by the poorest. *Thiên Chí* sets up farmers' groups: the best to provide advice to the others; as they have more credibility than agronomists with a salary. Technicians have been trained in each commune.

The intense activities in the field have not let as many peasants as usual to attend the meetings and trainings. Several pilot sites have given very encouraging results: taro, vegetables, paddy (seed multiplication), dragon fruit, water melons... an evaluation is planned to monitor to what extent the many new techniques successfully tried by pilot farmers have indeed been followed by how many farmers.

For dragon fruit for instance, a small dose of a specific fertilizer allows to avoid electric lighting. An early harvest is much more profitable and clients in Singapore or Korea love it. To achieve this the farmers lighten their fields all night long, but the many power cuts can provoke a disaster: 2 consecutive nights and the crop will fail altogether. Only the better off can afford to have backup power supply.



The green dragon, which is... red in fact!

Thiên Chí has trained village technicians in each commune. They relay all programs to the farmers and alert *Thiên Chí* with new suggestions or requirements from the field. But contrarily to the para vets who have no major difficulty to convince the farmers to pay them for the services they render, especially when the animals get better and are saved –this is known within hours, the agriculture technicians can never claim clearly the better results are thanks to their advice. So many different factors may influence the quality of a harvest. As a result, the technicians are also less regular at our meetings and follow-up sessions.

A FLO (Fair Trade Label Organization) inspector has examined the cooperative of the cashew tree planters. The outcome seems positive and the final verdict is awaited with much impatience because the harvest has started already. Several clients have shown interest, they should pay at least 7,2\$/kilo against 4-5\$ normally. *Thiên Chí* will be compensated for its support by taking a percentage of the difference in price thus obtained. *Thiên Chí* has indeed spent a lot of time in training the farmers, translating the FLO documents into Vietnamese, visits, in negotiating contracts for the processing of the nuts and with the forwarding agents for the export of the processed nuts etc.

The harvest of cassava leaves looks promising this year. There is plenty of cassava and leaves. There are also more companies who contact us to buy the harvest at a better price than last year. Once again, patience has paid off: *Thiên Chí* always aimed at quality and to fulfill the contracts, the clients remember this. This year's bottle neck is the grinding capacity. The leaves must be transformed into fine powder which saves time for the clients and saves on transport (it allows to treble the load on the trucks). Three phase electricity is required for the cheaper and more powerful mills but it is rare and installation of three phase electricity is expensive. Last year we had terrible problems with the largest mill: a contract had been signed with the owner of the three phase electric supply but constant quarrels with a competitor led to a dismal harvest: $\frac{3}{4}$ of the leaves could not be milled! To prevent this to happen again, *Thiên Chí* has thus bought a small machine running on regular electricity, which is also mobile.



The FLO inspector questions the planters



One of the 3 mills struggling with the cassava leaves

The small mills run at their maximum, to reach a maximum of 1,3 ton/day. They work day and night, especially at night when electric supply is better. When one of them starts, all TV sets in the neighborhood tend to shut down because of insufficient supply. When the mill runs at normal speed the electric supply becomes sufficient again!

The problem with the cassava leaves is their small value and the short season. This discourages the investors. *Thiên Chí* maintains this program because it

clearly benefits the poorest who can harvest the leaves after the farmer has taken the cassava roots from the field.

Thiên Chí has a project: setting up a “Direct from the farmers to the customers” shop. Between the rural market and Hồ Chí Minh City, the difference is on the average +70%. But the team is overloaded with urgent tasks, it is postponed. A small fund (5000 euros) must also be found. The principal interest of this project is to protect the farmers from speculators. For instance hundreds of extremely poor farmers have not made any profit after 4 months of raising their pigs, only because market prices had fallen. But the housewives continued to pay the normal price though!

1.3. Livestock

Summary of the program: before the *Thiên Chí* program, in the remote villages about 1/3 of the animals used to die from various diseases. The program has trained “para-vets” with emphasis on practical and real cases; that have originated from the villages nearby and they are paid, after the training, by the peasants themselves for the services provided. To train one such “para-vet” costs 170 €, but once trained, the savings in the community are an estimated 200 € per month. It is then easier to mobilize the farmers for better prevention and for improving the breed of their livestock. The farms develop and multiply.



While raising pigs is a tradition, the risk of incurring losses is always there. If the market price is lower by 10 cents/kilo there is no way to make any profit.

This quarter has seen a brutal fall in market prices for pigs, plus a foot and mouth epidemic. Usually this epidemic comes and goes for some time, but for once it reappeared almost immediately after a few weeks only. *Thiên Chí* has proposed mass vaccinations, at cost price, and free for the extremely poor. Hundreds of farms could thus be saved. But the local authorities in Tánh Linh (not elsewhere) decide, as a preventive measure, to forbid any sale (without any compensation of course), to discourage the farmers to raise pigs for a while. There is no danger for the consumers though, but well to let the disease spread when the sick pig is carried, slaughtered etc. the farmers in that district have thus suffered severe economic damage.



There have been epidemics affecting rabbits, but as a whole this is a better option for the very poor: low investment, stable prices.

One hears regularly about the bird flu and *Thiên Chí* continues to provide training and to spread preventive messages. In all 4 districts where it operates there has been not a single report of bird flu victims. In the neighboring province to Hậu Giang however there has been one incident and the fact that everyone knows about it, is re-assuring. If farmers continue to raise chicken, it is only on a very small scale, for local consumption.

The best recommendation is always to diversify the activities and sources of income on the farm. When *Thiên Chí* provides micro credit to the very poor, starting from the 3rd cycle of 4-6 months the loan is conditional to a diversification of activity.



This image is used in training and meetings. The pigs produce dung which is useful to raise worms. The worms are fed to chicken, eels, or even... pigs. A good way to increase farm income.

1.4. Program for the very poor

Summary of the program: deep poverty (4-6 euros/month) has receded in Vietnam, from 30-40% to approximately 10% in our districts. *Thiên Chí* puts the priority on the poorest 2%: scholarships, medical assistance, housing, and whenever possible, economic assistance. In every case help is provided only when the community participates. Mobilize local solidarity is the team's main task.

The extremely poor are of course the most vulnerable in case of disaster. This year they have had the exceptional monsoon rains, pest destroying much of the paddy, the fall in market prices... A tornado hit hundreds of fragile huts on the 5th December. *Thiên Chí* helps them to repair, for some to build a new small house in concrete, and to take a new economic start, often by raising animals as they do not have much or any land. Our appeal for support has met with a good response. It is so encouraging their courage in face of adversity: see our latest story, [“Thu, the reward”](#).



The fragile huts close to the sea side did not resist the tornado.

1.5. Theatre

Summary of the program: *Thiên Chí* provides a lot of training, in various forms. Sometimes the training must be fun and reach larger numbers. 3 theatre groups have been set up and they produce 4 shows a week each. This is action theatre which encourages people to participate by getting on stage! The themes are: the importance of hygiene, alcoholism, Aids. About 60.000 people watch the shows in one year.

7 actors have completed a 2-month tour in Europe as part of the [Action theatre International Festival](#). It has been a success almost everywhere, and also a fantastic opportunity for these peasant actors, thanks to the training provided by the Belgian group Croquemitaine. After their return to Vietnam (at last! They could not wait longer to be home) one must put the lessons learned together and take the best out of it. Their return has had its part of problems: among those who had to remain in Vietnam some were too jealous, misunderstandings emerged. The male actors resent that in Europe they have had to do their share of dish washing! In January a meeting is planned to prepare for the heavy 2007 program (infra).



The Vietnamese theatre group in Belgium

1.6. Health

Summary of the program: *Thiên Chí* does not provide curative services but prevention and training. Generally, the public services are good: vaccinations, anti-malaria programs etc. but often the information is insufficient. Thanks to the many groups who meet every week the program has a fantastic network to provide training and disseminate information. Incentives are made available to help the people to build

latrines, wells, or to buy a water filter. Deworming tablets are sold at cost price. Mosquito nets are impregnated with insecticide.

In primary schools, *Thiên Chí* has trained the teachers in new pedagogy: no more top-down learning, but practice, group work and teeth brushing together on the school playground.

With the support of the Belgian group BNBT we launch a 5 year program against tuberculosis and respiratory diseases. Officials estimate that up to half the tuberculosis victims are out of control, they fail to report, thus spreading the disease further. Respiratory diseases affect most young children. In every district thousands of people suffer from asthma which is very difficult for peasants used to hard physical work. In January *Thiên Chí* invites local expert trainers to enhance the skills of the local medical staff. The Dúc Linh theatre group will be the first to propose a theatre show on this topic. It will then be shown in all 45 communes where we operate. Women group meetings are included, as well as sessions in kindergarten and primary schools, after a specific new training of the teachers.



Feeding the fish ...

In Long Mỹ and in the delta in general, the lack of hygiene is a huge problem. But often medical staff in the region, like other civil servants, continue to use the traditional latrines above the fish pond “to feed the fish”. This practice is strictly forbidden

by the government as it spreads dangerous worms. How could they motivate ordinary people then, when everybody knows they do not change this themselves first? In agreement with the health district authority, we launch a competition among all communes of Long Mỹ first, for the commune which has the highest number of health cadres equipped with a clean latrine. A reward of 50 euros is promised for the winner, to be used to improve the commune health center.

1.7. Education

Summary of the program: since 2002 scholarships of 2 x 8 euros/year are given to very poor families. They have committed themselves not to drop out from school.

Computer training centers have been equipped with second hand computers, which allow the students to improve their qualifications and hopefully reach university.

Large expansion of the program during the quarter: all teachers of Hàm Thuân Nam and the new communes covered by the program in the delta (+6) have been trained, the books supplied. The program thus covers an extra 20.000 children. In total it reaches 52.651 pupils and 2.224 teachers. This is also a very sustainable program, as the costs regularly go further down. The trainings are for

instance provided by senior teachers who have practiced this program in former districts. Their input as practitioners themselves is excellent.

1.8. Employment

Summary of the program: agricultural prices fall regularly and the peasants, who cannot diversify their production and sources of income, are losing out. To help them, *Thiên Chí* endeavors to promote handicrafts. Temporary jobs are also created by repairing roads and small bridges, by planting trees, by building dykes etc.

The [Vietnam-quilts](#) program has done wonders once again, by selling for over 20.000 euros in December. 140 women are employed full time. In 2006 the program has generated healthy profits to allow further investments and expansion, to make small loans to the producers so that they could improve their work place, plus it has sent 13.500 euros for the school program in Đức Linh! The team works in a joyful atmosphere, young or not-so-young volunteers provide extremely useful support. The plan is to expand as many women want to join the program.

1.9. Waste recycling

Summary of the program: invited by the authorities to help resolve the growing problem of waste, *Thiên Chí* proposes to recycle 80% of it, thus creating new jobs. This proposal has been chosen amongst the most innovative in a competition organized by the World Bank.

The problem of waste is becoming more and more important, especially around the major cities but in fact everywhere. Hồ Chí Minh City pays 16\$/m³ to any contractor who can take the responsibility to dispose of them, provincial smaller towns are paying up to 8\$. Sooner or later rural districts must find a solution corresponding to their resources which are much more limited. A rural district collects about 30 m³ of waste daily, thus a sizeable budget indeed.

The team tries to find a better and cheaper way to sort the waste. Big progress has already been made. But all of a sudden the State enterprise (200 km away) which is contracted to buy organic waste from our project has declared it would pay 60% less. The waste decomposition catalyst which it sells seems to be mixed with water, it does not function anymore! One must work harder to find a solution on these 2 issues.

The compost we produce has been tested to a number of peasants, after a series of laboratory tests. Finally, they are the people who will decide of the future of this program: unless they decide to buy the compost the waste recycling program will never be sustainable. We are hopeful: it is of equivalent or higher quality than the competition, and cheaper.

2 Cambodia



Mekong Plus has 3 partners in Cambodia, all in Svay Rieng province:
RADE: cow bank (micro credit), irrigation and vegetable gardens.
CFED: agriculture extension through farmers groups.
PTEA: community organization to protect the forests.

All 3 NGOs have a strong village base as they originate from the same area. This is why Mékong Plus has chosen to work with them, knowing at the same time that, considering their limitations, it should be a long term partnership. In full agreement with them, we organized a 2 day seminar on governance: 1 day in November, a second in December. Only PTEA has a reasonably good board, but it is still weak compared to its charismatic director and founder who, after 23 years as a Buddhist monk in a local pagoda, decided to mobilize a team for development. It is extremely difficult to mobilize volunteers to form a board, while the action is taking place in remote villages, 2 hours from the little town of Svay Rieng.

CFED has a virtual board, as most members are far away, even abroad for some. RADE has a board which has declared itself as only “advisory”, thus leaving a free hand to the director.

The 3 Khmer NGOs agree they must improve, otherwise their future will be at risk. On the financial side it is not easy neither because a formal audit is extremely expensive compared to their small budget. Mekong Plus has funded a « financial review » of Rade, 3 times cheaper than a formal audit. Several suggestions for improvements have emanated from this useful exercise.

Mekong Plus considers it can act complementarily with other larger partners. Most funders use small Khmer NGOs as subcontractors for their own agenda. The Khmer NGOs are thus always anxious to please them, a condition for mere survival. They must fire their staff far too often, due to a lack of funds. Mekong Plus hopes to strengthen them as local groups with their own vision.

Bernard KERVYN, 1/3/2007