



Contact in Vietnam/Cambodia

Bernard Kervyn
 19/30 Tran Binh Trong
 P5 Binh Thanh
 Ho Chi Minh City
 Tel : +84 (0)9-13.10.51.89
bkervyn@pmail.vnn.vn

Tôt Trần Văn
Thiên Chí
 317 Bui Thi Xuân, Xuân An
 Phan Thiết, Bình Thuận
 Tel : +84 (0)9-03.98.95.01

Contact in France
 Robert Eberhardt
 26 Allée des Erables
 77310 Boissise-le-Roi
 Tel : +33 (0)1-60.65.73.66
info@vietnamplus.org
www.vietnamplus.org

Contact in Belgium
 Claire Thibaut
 avenue des 4 Bonniers, 6
 B – 1348 Louvain-la-Neuve
 Tel : +32 (0)10-45.23.02
 Fax : +32 (0)10-68.13.76
claire.thibaut@mekongplus.org
www.mekongplus.org



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(For partners & friends)

Highlights

Vietnam

- Fair prices for the farmers?
- Faire trade: organic agriculture is not profitable
- Restructuring the action theatre program
- Further progress for Vietnam-Quilts

Cambodia

- PTEA is replanting more trees



2 countries, the partners:

In Vietnam with Thiên Chí : NGO set up by our local team, it takes over the programs. We contribute for part of its funding, Thiên Chí finds the rest to become independent. We also provide technical support. Page 2. **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 - Mekong 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. Since then access to bank loans has improved for almost everybody. *Thiên Chí* assists the Women's Union to run a microcredit program in several communes. In parallel *Thiên Chí* provides individual microcredit to extremely poor households and to small enterprises which generate employment locally.

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.



Tin, horticulturist of the Hâu Giang team, is proud of « his » pomelos, the trees are bending under their weight !



After the paddy, the mushroom, then the vegetables

A young French agronomist has produced an interesting evaluation of the agriculture programs¹. Among other findings she insists on the great importance of training: often the trainer is too dependent on the computer & projector. We use them a lot because the peasants want to see practical images for a better understanding. But in case of power cut, the trainers are lost and do not what to do! The training documents distributed at the end of the session must be prepared more carefully. More time should be spent in the field, if possible after each training. But impact is good: one observes many of the proposed innovating training techniques have been picked up by the farmers.

Grafting of pomelo trees: this technique allows to save many years before the first harvest, the fruits are bigger and nicer. The technique is not well known in Hâu Giang, too remote an area. A pilot farmer now seems to be very successful, he should be followed by others. However it is not really within the means of the poor, but once it will be well known in the region they will be encouraged to use it as well.

On the different programs there are continuously about a hundred pilot sites. The young agronomist could evaluate to what extent they have an impact in the villages, depending on the season and other factors. Globally the impact is significant.

The cultivation of mushroom is an unchallenged success. Grown on paddy straw just after harvest, it is a tradition in many regions, but not often efficiently and

with profit. Thanh, agronomist from the Khmer minority in Vietnam, has achieved a tremendous success: his many trainings and support to pilot sites have an obvious impact, and the peasants make a profit while the investment required is really minimal. A secondary benefit is the excellent fertilization of the land. One can even collect the

¹ http://www.mekongplus.org/mp/fr/doc/2007-09-09_evaluation_agriculture_arielle_garnier.pdf in French, also available in Vietnamese: <http://www.thienchi.org/tc/vn/tailieu.html> . The English version will be online soon.

juice which flows from under the straw beds. In the villages Thanh is proud to show the many mushroom beds along the small roads, without any further contribution from the program.

The young agronomist also noted the higher yields of the cashew trees. Traditionally they are planted on rather poor soils and with little care, no fertilizer. Yields then average 800 kilos per hectare only. Yields now average 1,5 tons in Dúc Linh. Duoc, Tuu and Nghia, the agronomists on the 3 programs in Bình Thuận have pilot sites where yields attain 3 tons!



Sowing onto the paddy straw beds

For the last 2 years we have tried to help the farmers in the marketing of their crops. For cashew nuts they get only about 15% of the price paid by the ultimate Western customer. This product is shipped without difficulty and storage is not a problem neither. Nghia, agronomist in Tánh Linh, has not spared any effort to help the cooperative of Dúc Phú to be certified as “fair trade”, which should guarantee better prices. Việt Nam Plus has contacted many importers, in preparation of the forthcoming harvest which could be of about 10 tons of processed nuts (the next harvest is in January-March).

Many prefer nuts which are certified as “organic” but the proposed price is only a few cents more than for normal nuts! With GAP² certified techniques (Good Agricultural

Practices), that is not organic but with a balanced and limited quantity of chemicals, the yields are quadrupled and the profits trebled!

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.

² One of the international certifications, which Việt Nam Plus aims at.

The bird flu has decimated the village flocks, not directly because of the virus, but because of precautions imposed upon the peasants: they were forbidden to transport



Trung a bien du mal à convaincre des avantages économiques du cochon traditionnel

their birds, and have thus stopped raising them. One estimate there are 20% less birds, thus a direct loss of 500.000 euros per year in the 5 districts where we operate. Trung, one of our senior veterinary doctors in Hâm Thuân Nam, has helped several farmers to start afresh with extra precautions: the high profits are guaranteed thanks to the splendid market prices. The government veterinary services are part of the program.

Trung has a passion for the traditional black pigs raised in certain regions, namely by ethnic minorities. He helps a few farms as a pilot but the team is skeptical: even though these animals are more resistant to diseases and although the meat is better with a bonus of 20% in market price, these pigs grow very slowly. After 8 months they weigh only 60 kilos, compared to 100 kilos in 4 months for the white pigs!



Les anguilles!

Loan promotes eel farms in Hâu Giang, and nobody challenges her success. She helps the poorest to make the minimum investment –just a dozen euros for a bamboo frame and a strong plastic sheet, eggs collected from the surrounding, but very careful care. One must change the water every day –which is not a serious problem in the delta. There a number of important tricks that she teaches, if you follow her advice well, you end up with a profit of 200 euros after just 6 months. The eels are fed with snails, and the farmers are so happy to get rid of these because they are a serious pest for paddy. These techniques

are in fact nothing new but most farmers have failed before because of their lack of know-how, the simple advices of Loan make the difference.

For many years we have had excellent results with rabbit farms but during the last few months a combination of epidemics and low market prices have discouraged the farmers. So we must discourage the poorest farmers to pursue with rabbits, which used to be so profitable, in spite of a small investment and a quick cycle.

A major problem is that the farmers are often cheated when they sell their produce. We have carefully studied the option of selling directly to the consumers, in Hồ Chí Minh City: while the farm gate prices fluctuate a lot, the urban consumers always pay increasingly high prices. However after a detailed analysis, we must conclude the margins are less than expected and the risks too high. Besides no doubt we would be target of the powerful profiteers of the present system.

Then, what could be done?

1. For pigs for instance one observes wild fluctuations, but they do not last more than a few months. The team will thus examine the option of stop-gap micro loans, which would allow the farmers to be more patient and wait till the market prices retrieve more attractive levels. A piglet consumes about 2 euros/month of feed, careful calculations must thus be made about whether to sell or to wait further.
2. When one sells a large quantity, usually one obtains a better price too. So we could try to regroup farmers who want to sell. The great network of farmers' groups and of the many village workers could be used for disseminating the information quickly to many farmers, and at virtually no cost.
3. Thân, veterinary and also program director for Tánh Linh, contacts a number of large enterprises buying pigs on a regular basis. They want visibility for market prices at a horizon of 6 months, and area ready to offer a premium for this. Because the teams have regular contact with so many farmers, they could act as in-between and pool the produce of many farmers together. They could thus guarantee the wanted volumes in time.
4. The best solution is however to diversify the sources of income at the farm level (see more below).



Thân has a fantastic field experience of over 10 years with Việt Nam Plus, and he is deeply motivated to work with the poorest.

1.4. Program for the very poor

Summary of the program: deep poverty (4-6 euros/month as per capita income) has receded in Vietnam, from 30-40% to approximately 10% in our districts. *Thiên Chí* puts the priority on the poorest 2-5%: 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 number of extremely poor households (with a yearly income of less than 100 euros) assisted by the different teams has increased further to 3200. Quality should increase as well, and so one must monitor the impact of micro credit and technical support, at

least as much as how the loans are repaid; at the same time one cannot let the local authorities and the villagers believe the reimbursements are not important. This is a very difficult balance to keep indeed. At the monthly meetings one should spend more time to measure the ultimate profit for each loan cycle, as well the progress made by the household in increasing its income –usually one observes an increase of about 25% per year.



This poor household uses a metal detector. It collects fragments of bombs from the war and earns 1 à 2 euros/jour.



In September tens of thousands pupils and adults were mobilized to prove their solidarity with the poorest: they were almost 40.000 and they collected 2380 euros as a contribution to help the poorest continue their education. In October 2 more districts will do the same. 2000 children will thus receive a small scholarship. These children are extremely carefully selected by the schools and the commune authorities. It is then a huge task for the teams to visit each household as a cross check, and to see what else, besides the scholarship, can be done to help the people in a more sustainable manner. Often micro credit is part of the solution. Often also a medical examination by a specialist; if a better treatment can be done

and if it is expensive, the team looks for a contribution from the community.

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. 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.

Miss Huong has done an in depth evaluation of the program. The conclusion is that it plays such an important role, it cannot be stopped. But it is difficult to manage so that it is better to put the 3 groups together, and the actors will play each on her/his turn, in the different districts. The quality will be improved by letting the best actors guide the others. The drawback is tiring and expensive transport between the programs. Distances are sometimes a heavy burden: 3 hours between Dúc Linh and Hàm Thuận Nam, and 12 hours down to Hậu Giang!

The theatre groups must be better integrated with the teams. This is easier said than done: the actors are strong characters, they are noisy people, and tensions develop inside the small program offices. The dynamic of a program team is quite different as well, they have “more serious” issues to handle! The evaluation report is available in Vietnamese³, it is being translated in English and in French and will be put online soon.

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.

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.

In Hâu Giang a pharmaceutical company was selling deworming tablets at too high a price to the pupils: 0,025 euro against 0,03 in our other programs. As a result a large number of pupils were not covered. In agreement with the authorities the schools now follow the same protocol as in Bình Thuận: first dose provided free by the program, the second subsidized at 50%, and afterwards the parents pay them all. 100% pupils are then covered against worms.

The computer centers meet with a constant success, but 9 computers have been stolen from one of the schools. As agreed in the contract the college will pay for their replacement. A second hand CPU costs between 40-50 euros (Pentium III). A similar incident had happened last year, the college paid for the stolen items to be replaced.

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*

³ http://www.thienchi.org/tc/doc/Bao%20Cao%20luong%20gia%20kich_130907.doc

endeavors to promote handicrafts. Temporary jobs are also created by repairing roads and small bridges, by planting trees, by building dykes etc.

Vietnam-Quilts (www.vietnam-quilts.org) is such a regular success! A second shop has opened in Hà-Nôi and has made a profit from its month of operation. Its sales are getting closer to the sales of the well established Hô Chí Minh City shop.

Every square meter rented in the center of these cities is extremely expensive, and space is congested by huge bags full of quilts to be sent to Hà-Nôi, others just delivered from the villages and which must be checked for their quality... the accountants must step over the big bags and quilts towards the computers! More people would be needed, although young Vietnamese as well as expatriate volunteers give precious help. But more people means more space! The atmosphere in the shop is always extremely busy and joyful: a booming business after all!

Our partnership with Terre d'Oc (www.terredoc.com) is really rewarding. For the incense sticks a second group of producers has been set up, thus making the production more regular and safe. The rattan sticks have passed the Terre d'Oc quality tests and Thiên Chí will now deliver 500 kilos a month. Rattan must be almost totally disappeared from the region, but it grows slowly and will be replanted because it has almost totally disappeared from the region, but it grows slowly and will be harvested after several years.

Yet another product: incense small cones, its production could start soon. The widely circulated catalogue of Nature & Découvertes features the project with splendid photographs.



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 but since then fresh funding has been difficult to obtain.

Successes and new hopes in sight: costs are reduced further and new clients have shown up: local rubber tree planters, but also an organic fertilizer company looking for organic waste. In October several tons of improved compost (with cow dung and other agricultural nutrients) will be distributed to pilot farmers in 3 districts.

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.

Mekong Plus aims at the long term reinforcement of a few local NGOs, who could improve their own vision and strategy as well as their governance. This is not an easy exercise. It seems some are not so keen to improve. One discovers that for RADE the



Poch Man a un charisme certain



director is the brother of the accountant. For another the land on which the office has been built is in the director's name (CFED). The audit of CFED, funded by Mekong Plus, has been a disaster, fortunately, the team and board realized the situation and are now taking steps to correct this. We have promised to be strict, patient and decided for the long term. Certain experts in Cambodia predict that most local NGOs cannot, in fact, be reformed. Still it seems we have started with the few best local organizations in Svay Rieng province (which borders Vietnam).

PTEA seems to be of a different sort. Founded by Poch Man, who was a monk in a local pagoda for 23 years, it has a strong team, with a solid spirit and honest as the audit has shown. Poch Man warned us: he has problems to get support because the office is 1:30 away from the provincial town. The roads are terrible, only motorcycles go through. When we arrive at the office, worn out, then the real trip begins, to villages 40 kilometers farther. No electricity of course and extreme poverty. The school is free but the people need immediate income... most

children stop before their 5th grade and many leave for Phnom Penh. The villagers have lost their traditional forest, source of income, employment and life. PTEA helps them to protect whatever is left and they replant thousands of trees. PTEA also assists a few families to develop alternative sources of income: a sow and a few chicken. Unfortunately the Khmer hate to hear about the experiences in neighboring countries. In Vietnam we have some good programs to train para vets for instance, they have reduced the mortality for pigs to only 5%. In PTEA's villages it is up to 40-50%! They are then sold in a rush, at discounted prices.

Bernard KERVYN, 07-Oct-07