



Quarterly Bulletin Programs in Vietnam & Cambodia Period 7-9/2008

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Running for solidarity : tens of thousands have joined

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This report covers the most important and recent developments.
For a global view see: <http://mekongplus.eu/lang-en/quarterly-bulletins>



1 Highlights

Inflation has hit, suddenly and hard: 25-30% on average but +72% for rice in Vietnam! People are now confused, one does not know what the money is worth any more. Our budgets explode, and we must struggle harder to find complementary funding.

Vietnam

- Running for solidarity, to provide scholarships: see page 4
- Open day at Vietnam-Quilts: see page 6
- Diversification of our fair trade products: see page 7

Cambodia

- Recruitment of a Khmer Mekong Plus team: see page 9



2 Vietnam

Summary of the situation : [Thiên Chí](#) (“Good will”) and [Anh Dương](#) (“Sun ray”) are 2 Vietnamese NGOs been set up by the Vietnamese team of Việt Nam Plus - Mekong Plus. Thiên Chí takes progressively over all programs in Bình Thuận. Anh Dương takes over the Long My and Phụng Hiệp programs. We contribute for part of their funding, they find the complement independently. We also provide technical support.



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. 3 programs: women's groups for saving and credit. Microcredit to extremely poor households. Microcredit for small entrepreneurs who generate significant employment locally.

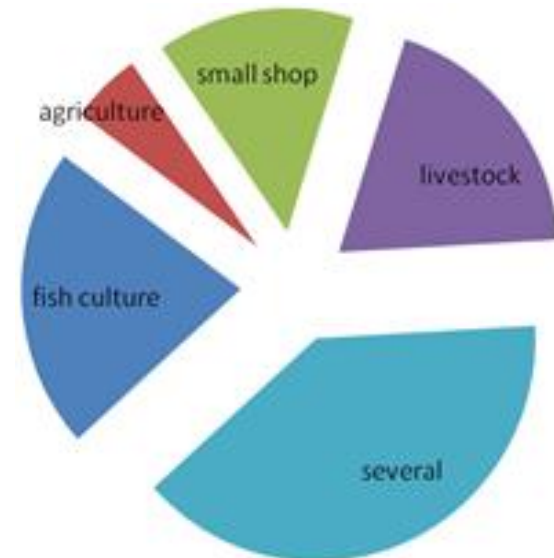
Microcredit for the extremely poor has increased substantially and serve now more than 3000 households. Because a number of households also get support for health care, housing and/or a scholarship for the children, over 5000 households participate in one form or another.



Microcredit for the very poor are individual loans, used for various purposes:

We encourage diversification because when several activities are conducted in parallel, the family is likely to get out of poverty much faster and the risks of failure are less. So from the second loan the matter is raised with the household, but for the third loan is becomes compulsory to invest in another activity.

The second diagram shows how the loans are used in the delta only: fish culture is more common, at the expense of agriculture. Fish culture is also more profitable.



Besides economic support, 144 households have been helped for health (a proper diagnosis, and sometimes also to cover part of the treatment or surgical intervention costs), and 15 to build a new small house. A well off family in Hô Chí Minh City has given 14 bicycles which have been distributed to deserving pupils living very far from school.

Microcredit to small local enterprises –who create a lot of employment, is less after we increased our interest rate to 1,5%/month (instead of 1%) to adjust for inflation.

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. TC-AD set 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.

We have been fortunate enough to be able to recruit a few more agronomists and veterinary doctors, first to respond to the many requests for training and technical support coming from the farmers' groups, to follow-up the many pilot sites and model farms –about a hundred at any point in time. And of course mainly to support the currently 2581 extremely poor households who get support in agriculture, livestock and fisheries.

More problems with FLO (Fair Trade Label Organization) regarding the cashew nuts from the cooperative of Dúc Phú. There is a new inspection every year: this time requested documents were given to the inspector in front of everyone, she has probably lost them and imposes to the cooperative to supply new ones. She has seen 4 children around the factory (children from the manager apparently), after working hours!, and claims the factory employs child labor, while the agreement with the cooperative forbids it clearly. The cooperative is discouraged because on the one hand the inspection and FLO bureaucracy is well beyond what anyone can bear, and on the other hand the FLO prices are very slow to adjust to market fluctuations, thus offering sometimes a very small incentive, if at all, compared to the “normal” market price. This year the bonus was less than 4 cents/kg! The team tries its best to fulfill all conditions as so much has been done and spent already for FLO.

1.3. 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* and *Anh Dương* put 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.

The number of households included in the program is over 5000. Because we are short of funds we must slow down the increase in this program, which has been up to 100



more households/month. This looks like a lot, but as many village workers and pilot farmers support this program, it is just about 1 more household/worker/month. The decision not to expand is difficult to accept by all teams who meet with desperate situations every day, which they clearly could help resolve.

In this context additional efforts will be done to improve the quality and the monitoring. With high inflation now it is even more difficult and



The banner: Together for the future, all children to school!

important to measure impact, not only in financial terms but in terms of yields etc.

September is our traditional moment to mobilize everyone to show solidarity: all records broken! 78.889 people joined and contributed 5.023 euro to the scholarship fund, much more than last year. Taking into account the purchasing power of a Vietnamese villager, it is as if our Western sympathizers had contributed 50.000 euro!

Besides the figures, one must consider the festive impact as well. There is a lot of joy, a massive celebration, and the people are proud of the psychological impact on their community. See the video on our home page: <http://mekongplus.eu/lang-en/home-in>.

1.4. Theatre

Summary of the program: The team 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.

In the Mekong delta there is a strong tradition of sang theatre, well attended by all. Several groups have contacted us in Hâu Giang, interested to set up shows to support the program. These are enthusiasts who play and sing as a group every week or so, in their community. They also sell drinks to earn a little money. Giang's group rehearses a show on waste management: the fish complain they have nowhere to go, water has become toxic, encumbered with plastics. Look at the short video: http://mekongplus.eu/images/stories/videos/2008-09-22_cailuong_en_512.wmv.

1.5. Health

Summary of the program: The team 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, The team has trained the teachers in new pedagogy: no more top-down learning, but practice, group work and teeth brushing together on the school playground.

Following the training of trainers to better adapt the school to children with disabilities, one enters the second phase: the training of all teachers. 4 schools have been involved and 130 teachers trained. The first step is about adjusting the pedagogy to the limited capacities of these children. Too often they are excluded from school, which only deprives them from social and affective life. Till now the teachers were left with almost no training or specific tools.

The next step will be to invite out of school children to join. Over 150 households have been visited; the villagers and neighbors quickly provide help to go and see the families forgotten in the official lists and statistics.



Disability is often the cause of acute poverty

1.6. 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.

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

[Vietnam-Quilts](http://www.vietnam-quilts.org) (www.vietnam-quilts.org) has recruited a local “manager” and becomes an even more sustainable local social enterprise. Till now Thanh (founder) together with volunteers had to share the workload and responsibility. 2 new groups have been set up in Đức Linh, bringing the total number of employed women to 200. Sales must thus increase as well: Internet sales are growing (several quilts/week) and as soon as a manager will be found for a new shop in Phnom Penh, we will open a shop there as well. The profits will help fund the projects in Cambodia.



Open day at Vietnam-Quilts

Vietnam-Quilts have organized 2 “open days”, in Hô Chí Minh City and in Hà-Nôi, which have boosted sales and make the program known to more and new people.



Della, Wendy and Sue, 3 experimented quilters from the USA, came to provide training to the 18 best quilters. They were enthusiastic after their visit to the quilters groups. One estimate our quilts could fetch prices 4-5 times higher in the US.

See the new video: Ca’s group of quilters.
http://mekongplus.org/images/stories/videos/2008-08-03_ca_en_256.wmv



After the incense sticks (1,5 ton/month) and rattan (0,5 ton/month), Terre d’Oc has added orders for bamboo: 3000 cups (soap holders). The production process requires to dry them several times under the sun and heavy rains have slowed down the production. Than is looking for an incubator as an alternative: finally his veterinary background is helpful for for this program as well!

The perfumed sticks are tested at Vietnam-Quilts in Hô Chí Minh City. The shop is the ideal outlet to have the opinion of foreign customers. The goal is not to compete with the local incense sticks which are sold a few cents per hundred! We aim rather at the affluent who look for sophisticated products; Terre d’Oc helps for this again, with expertise and in supplying quality perfumes.



In face of the sudden increase of our budget (inflation) and the difficulties to raise funds in the middle of the economic crisis in the West, fair trade plays an increased role. In 2008 profits on fair trade have contributed to about 20% of the total budget.

1.8. 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.

After several months of hesitations, the authorities have finally requested the program to be expanded to recycle up to 100 tons/month, 2-3 times the volume today. A second site is proposed in Tánh Linh to cover other distant markets and small towns.

1.9. Capacity building for the local partners

2 local NGO partners in Vietnam : *Thiên Chí* (which takes over the programs in Bình Thuận) and more recently *Anh Dương* (which will take over the programs in Hậu Giang).

Thiên Chí could finally recruit new staff to assist its director, namely for fund raising. Because of the increasing budgets it is very difficult for Mekong Plus to raise enough funds. On the other hand it is also important that both *Thiên Chí* and *Anh Dương* become more independent financially.

1.10. Develop the cadres

Since the beginning of the year 38 new staff have been recruited. One must train more cadres for the future and experience shows this takes between 3 to 6 years. A pool of motivated employees with high potential is necessary to identify the future directors and train them on the job.

3 Cambodia

Mekong Plus has 2 partners in Cambodia, all in Svay Rieng province: CFED and PTEA: agriculture extension through farmers groups, community organization to protect the forests.

VBK held one more seminar to train our 2 partners. One observes substantial improvements in the consolidation of the 2 organizations from an institutional and governance point of view. The 2 partners are very happy about these trainings and ask for 4 sessions instead of 2 per year.



But Mekong Plus wants their operational capacity to improve as well which VBNK does not seem in a good position to achieve. This requires continuous support and field presence which can only be done by a team with practical experience itself.

Mekong Plus has tried to set up a local team. Many people were interviewed but either the candidates do not understand a word in Vietnamese, which would render collaboration with the Vietnamese teams quite difficult, or they ask for relatively expensive salaries and other benefits, which would create a huge gap between them and the villagers (read for instance: http://mekongplus.org/doc/2008-06-20_whyitworks.doc). Mekong Plus wants to expand its operations in Cambodia but by following similar quality standards as in Vietnam, even if this requires much more time.

4 Communication

We have asked a few sympathizers to comment our communication. The conclusions can be summarized as follows:

- The “short stories” are appreciated for their content (certain stories have covered touchy topics) and their format. They are short and should not be longer than one page with pictures.
- The videos are good too but should be shorter, never more than 2-3’.
- The website is praised: nice and clear.
- The quarterly bulletins: the appropriate length, they summarize the recent developments. The green boxes which provide a quick introduction and summary are useful.
- Generally, the frequent mentions of the local partners are confusing. It is better to present all programs in the name of Mekong Plus.
- We have 2 more questions regarding the bulletin: should they be published 4 times/year as now, or would 3 or 2 issues per year be enough? It takes 2-3 days to produce one bulletin in 2 languages. Second, it is proposed to include a short section about the activities in Europe. What is your opinion?



Children in a village in Svay Riêng, Cambodia

5 In Belgium and France

- Meeting with sympathizers, preceded by a board meeting, on 21/08 in Louvain-la-Neuve (Belgium): about 35 people participated.
- Board meeting in France at Boissise-le-Roi on 1/09, followed by a meeting with a group who just visited the programs in



Vietnam.

- Participation at the Jyva'Zik festival which had chosen Mekong Plus as partner NGO. Over 1500 visitors. Read <http://mekongplus.org/lang-en/in-belgium/129-jyvazik-festival>
- presentation of Mekong Plus at Euronext on the 29/09, in Brussels
- Participation and presentation at the Symposium on Philanthropy organized by the King Baudouin Foundation, the 30/09 in Brussels. Read <http://mekongplus.org/lang-en/in-belgium/134-symposium-philanthropie-frb>
- Preparation of the concert in memory of Jacques Brel on 3/10 (which was a great success –read <http://mekongplus.org/lang-en/in-belgium/12-in-belgium/127-hommage-a-brel>) and the Mozart concert, a major event at the Beaux Arts, Brussels, on 21/12 (read <http://mekongplus.org/lang-en/in-belgium/12-in-belgium/124-concert-mozart>).



Our approach in one word

6 Financial situation

Inflation has exploded our budgets. We had a rather sound funding and suddenly we are short of funds to allow the teams to work at their full potential. Expenses are now curtailed so that the most essential parts of the budget, namely the teams, are preserved –till today Mekong Plus had never to fire good staff, even though its employees had to voluntarily accept their salaries not to be increased for inflation and performance on a few occasions.



Bernard KERVYN, 07-Oct-08