



Quarterly Bulletin Programs in Vietnam & Cambodia Period 10-12/2008

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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>



We invited sustainable development at the Beaux-Arts (Brussels)!

1 Highlights

A new year has started, we wish it will be a happy and fruitful for you, even though it has started under difficult omen for most. In Cambodia like in Vietnam the economic crisis has consequences even in the remotest villages: many factories fire their workers, they return to their village. Instead of bringing food or money back, they arrive empty handed and must be fed.

Vietnam

- The bad payers of Tánh Linh reimburse their loan, at long last
- Less waste, more compost
- With Vy Thiên Chí raises its funds directly

Cambodia

- A new project

Belgium

- Sustainable development invited at the Beaux-Arts



2 Vietnam

Summary of the situation : *Thiện Chí* –www.thienchi.org (“Good will”) and Anh Dương –www.anhduonghq.org (“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 Phung 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.

Good news in Tánh Linh: many programs had been suspended in a few communes because the authorities had failed to put adequate pressure on the people who had not refunded their microcredit. These are households who clearly have the capacity to pay – for a long time, but who tried not to. In Vietnam everyone depends a lot on the local authorities for every aspect of day to day life. If the authorities want to exert pressure on a person, they just put all applications on standby: no land can be sold, people cannot move or even leave the commune, the children have no access to the school, access to the clinic and hospital is stopped... The determination and patience of the team has been rewarded. The people of these communes became very upset, and the schools as well because they would receive no scholarships, most programs were suspended. 3 communes have repaid in full –so the programs resume there, only one is still left.

How to measure the impact of microcredit and of the technical support on the income of the poorest households is crucial. Every month an evaluation is done, covering several hundred households, when they refund their microcredit. We generally observe an increase of 25, 30, or even 40% on average, over the last 12 months. But we must analyze the results further as inflation renders the results very misleading. It is globally above 25% now! But specifically on pig meat at the farm gate? For vegetables at the beginning of the season or during the rains (the more it rains the lower the market price)... The fluctuations are enormous, prices quadruple and then fall again.

As a complement to monetized estimates, each team work also on how the volumes change: how many more tons of rice, how many more chicken or pigs... Without wasting too much time on paperwork and on looking at the statistics, it is important that our key program –more than 5200 households are assisted today and 655 have already graduated out of poverty, be measured accurately.

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.

The snails are a plague in most paddy fields. They eat the stem of the paddy which dies afterwards. How to get rid of this pest? Huong is a young agronomist of the Đức Linh team. A frail woman but she knows how to speak to the farmers, they listen to her because she spends so much time in the field with them. She took the initiative to work with the Chau Jrô ethnic minority, who are much poorer than the others in the district. Training, technical advice and support



in the field, regular follow-up of a few demonstration plots implemented by pioneer farmers. Her emphasis is to reduce the quantity of chemicals: she uses papaya leaves, waste from jackfruits etc. Huong has succeeded in reducing the pest by 99%. The yields followed with an increase of 20%.

The Long Mỹ team has proposed to a few volunteer farmers to raise a new variety of ducks, well adapted to the region but still unknown in the district. Thanks to a good training, very practical technical support, and especially very regular follow-up, they have succeeded to make a 45 € profit, after an investment of 78 €, after 3 months.



The vegetable gardens protected by a net are a model which is more and more accepted by the farmers, in spite of the relatively high investment (a few hundred euros, depending on the surface). The protection allows good yields in spite of the heavy monsoon rains, which otherwise destroy the plants. One can reduce the herbicides and pesticides because the garden is protected from surrounding diseases. But a white or a black net? The cost of a white net is higher. The garden must be protected from the wind: the tireless Mister Khai has seen his nets fly away with the storm. A detailed analysis is under way.

The vegetables are sprayed with juice from the worms, raised in a simple bin, fed with cow dung (their favorite!) or pig dung. This is a great organic fertilizer with high yields at virtually no cost.

A few farmers, -too few, raise... snakes. This is not a hobby but perfect recycling! A chicken dies on the farm? It is given to the snakes who gain weight rapidly. They are sold for a few dozens euros after a few months. See the short [video about Quoi](#)¹: how to use absolutely everything on a very small plot of land.



Besides a terrible bureaucracy, a slow reactivity to market price fluctuations, the FLO (Fair Trade Label Organization) is also very expensive; we have received a new bill of 1137 € (12 months). The harvest looks bleak because of the persistent and exceptional rains even in December. We are evaluating the option of pursuing with certified "fair trade".

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.

No luck for Lan. 4 children, her husband died. 2000 m² of paddy and a few pigs. Wounded in an accident she cannot do heavy work anymore, but she tries as a daily laborer to complement the meager resources of the small farm. With technical advice and microcredit, the team could help her double her income. But the bad luck continues: her bus turns over, a very serious accident, she is badly wounded. Quickly the village mobilizes support and collects 450 €. A villager calls the project office: could you complement with 270 €? Las has now regained consciousness and has been carried back home.

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.

One remembers that traditional artists in the Mekong delta, offered to support the program with sang theatre. One [first show](#)² has been set up and shown in a number of villages. The results are not good. Sang theatre is very much liked by the elders, but not

¹ http://mekongplus.eu/images/stories/videos/2008-12-16_quoi_en.wmv

² http://mekongplus.eu/images/stories/videos/2008-09-22_cailuong_en_512.wmv

so much by the youth. Our priority is of course the youth because to change a society they are the most important people. Furthermore the number of spectators has never been higher than at our action-theatre shows.

We thus return to our theatre program, with proven results; we have 2 groups who share their time between the 5 districts.

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.



The inclusive education program shows good progress. The approach is well illustrated by the video "[Hằng super star](#)"³. Tuấn is another example. The teacher can now teach him mathematics which he likes very much, thanks to the special lessons and the adapted pedagogy taught by Mekong Plus. The support given by his class mates is very moving as well. Tuấn salivates a lot, they help him to clean his mouth and desk. Finally his family has become more involved also. His father is the president of the parents with handicapped children association.

2 Dutch volunteers will join the team in March. They are specialists in education for children with special needs with a long experience. The goal is of course to help these children to reach their best potential and to have a good social life.

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.

³ http://mekongplus.eu/images/stories/videos/2008-06-11_hang_en_256.wmv

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

The computer classes continue to expand and the performances are really good. However much depends on the school director. In Đức Linh for instance, out of 5 schools, 2 are at risk of closing the computer class, the directors say they do not have the resources. In fact they are not motivated enough and fail to convince the parents. There are extra costs: 7-10 €/semester, but outside of the school the cost is double⁴.



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.

For [Vietnam-Quilts](http://www.vietnam-quilts.org) (www.vietnam-quilts.org) November and December have been 2 excellent months, thanks to the multiplication of selling sites: in parallel with the 2 shops there have been a number of fairs, school events etc. Much more work for the teams of course, but the results have been really good.

With the global economic crisis, many shops complain about the lower number of tourists (-20%?). Our sales have not been affected much and we try to compensate with online sales, which are lower than expected. Clients can now pay with Paypal; but delivery delays are long – up to 3 months by boat. With a special carrier it is faster, the costs are higher, yet the total cost is still very attractive compared to the prices in Australia, in the USA etc.



Vietnam-Quilts has launched... Mekong-Quilts! We are preparing to open a shop in Phnom Penh with the support of a local partner. House rents are much lower than in Hồ Chí Minh City (up to 100 €/m2/month).

⁴ There are sometimes Internet shops.

[Terre d'Oc \(www.terredoc.com\)](http://www.terredoc.com) has increased its orders for incense, rattan, bamboo. This is really an excellent partnership in every sense. The different fair trades of Mekong Plus have become a very substantial source of income to fund a good share of our 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.



At long last we have received the green light from the authorities, to increase the capacity of the Lac Tánh recycling unit. We will now produce 8 tons of compost per month, instead of 4 tons, and almost waste at this dumping site will be sorted and recycled. There is a request for a second unit, 25 km away, for which we are still waiting for the funding, several applications are pending.



Disappointment for the biogas program. We had hoped to join the CO2 compensation program, with the support of the Swiss organization My Climate. Polluters pay a compensation which is given to “green projects”. The farmers with at least 4 pigs, equipped with a biogas, would have received up to 20\$/year, equivalent to the profit they make with one pig. Unfortunately, even if one regroups hundreds of farmers, the scheme is still too small to cover the big overheads.

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).

Vy is in charge of fund raising at *Thiên Chí*. She is very active and is fluent in English. She plays a crucial role for the development of the organization. Since the creation of Việt Nam Plus - Mekong Plus, our annual growth has been 25% on the average. With



the high inflation added as well, and a budget of 800.000 € for 2009 (Cambodia and Vietnam) we cannot manage anymore. We had 3 options: limit the growth of the operations, increase our fund raising capacity in Europe by establishing an office with more staff, or increase our capacity in Vietnam, namely through our local partners. The last option has been chosen, as funds are for a large part raised worldwide through the Internet. The costs are much lower than in Europe. And most important it is good that our partners gain independence. The target is 15% of the 2009 raised by them, and 5 more points every year afterwards.

At the very long last, the local authorities have accepted that English native teachers be posted in Đức Linh and Tánh Linh. We will thus have classes like in Long Mỹ. It took not less than 9 years of constant lobbying to achieve this. The classes are for the local English teachers, the cadres, the Mekong Plus staff, and all interested.

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.



CFED has improved its governance very much, and has diversified its funding as well. Its future seems assured now, while only one year ago it was dying. Fortunately the board was alerted by the 2 disastrous audits requested by Mekong Plus, and took corrective measures. 2 accountants have also received good training.

PTEA has always been considered as one of the best managed local NGOs in the province. There are about 50 of them, but only maybe 15 are operational. However technically PTEA has made little progress, the activities are scattered and poorly integrated.

Mekong Plus is thus setting up its own program, with Khmer staff. Sarethhan has joined us, after 10 years with various organizations in the province. He speaks little Vietnamese, so that he can get training from Vietnam, and the programs between the 2 countries will be well

coordinated. No copy-paste, no Vietnamese team telling the Khmer what to do, but exchanges and coordination.

With Sarethan we have visited many villages, and have finally chosen to start in Rumdoul. In Svay Chrum there are up to 6 NGOs for a small commune of 5000 people! Rumdoul instead is more remote, much poorer, even though the good road goes up to the district head quarters.

4 In Belgium, France and Montréal!

2 big events took place in Belgium: a Brel concert, and a Mozart concert. Twice full house, the latter at Les Beaux-Arts in Brussels, 1900 people! To gather so many people is each time a huge challenge but Les Beaux-Arts was definitely a totally new dimension. The policy is to all expenses covered by sponsors, so that no risk is taken with the funds collected to support the projects. A fantastic success has rewarded the volunteers and the over 100 artists. The profits will reduce our anxiety to cover for the 2009 budget. A slide show followed by a video presented the projects in Vietnam on both occasions. True, this time we had the feeling to match up to dynamism of the Vietnamese.

Mekong Plus is not established in Montréal, yet a group of friends decided all takings of their concert would go to Vietnam, in programs supported by Mekong Plus. Our thanks!



Mekong Plus has managed to get the “grand Jacques” back for one evening. Below: Vietnamese artists from LA and Montréal gave 2 concerts. Big success, so they decided to give the takings for the projects.



Bernard KERVYN, 08-Jan-09