



Quarterly Bulletin Programs in Vietnam & Cambodia Period January-March 2009

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Working for Mothers' day in France!

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



Launch of the eye sight screening program

1 Highlights

Vietnam

- Organic cassava leaves for organic fish
- eye sight screening
- marketing campaign at Vietnam-Quilts: sales have doubled
- Vy, at Thiện Chí, wins a large grant.

Cambodia

- The new Mekong-Quilts shop in Phnom Penh
- Building the team.



2 Vietnam

Summary of the situation : *Thiện Chí* –www.thienchi.org (“Good will”) and Anh Dương –www.anhduonghg.org (“Sun ray”) are 2 Vietnamese NGOs been set up by the Vietnamese team of Việt Nam Plus - Mekong Plus. Thiện 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.

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.



One more well

Below:

Ngoc Anh's technique: just what is needed...



Proconco promotes animal feed for organic fish and is thus looking for cassava leaves which abide by strict non chemical criteria. A training has been given to a group of farmers and to the team of agronomists. Whether the price offered for the farmers is attractive enough remains to be checked.

Cassava is the poor farmer's crop. Therefore farm gate prices have a significant impact on this crop as it is the crop of last resort. Even more so for the cassava leaves, which the people often do not bother to harvest when they have better employment opportunities, for instance when the price for corn is high enough. It has been the case this year, very small quantities of cassava leaves have been collected and sold after drying & grinding. Cassava leaves are a nutritive component for animal feed.

In Hàm Thuận Nam the dragon fruit has really invaded the region. Strange enough, it is the only region in Vietnam where it grows so well. It is 10 times more profitable than paddy. But it requires vast amounts of water. The farmers need to dig their well deeper and deeper every year. The water table is lower and lower. To accelerate the

maturing of the fruit and to be able to sell when the prices are at their highest, they planters illuminate their fields all night long. Of course not everyone can do so, especially because of the many powercuts. People who have enough capital buy a generator. Inequalities are very visible in the villages. Beautiful villas are next to small wooden huts with no water or electricity.

Ngoc Anh, agronomist, promotes a watering technique which saves a lot of water. The drop by drop system is too expensive an investment but a well directed little spray saves half the water and reduces costs

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.

Inflation has fallen, so that evaluating the impact of our economic support to the poor households is a little easier. On the basis of a sample, an in depth analysis on quantities (not values) is done every month. For instance how many more chicken, pigs, tons of paddy etc. In each case we observe a significant increase, both in income and in quantities.

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.

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.

A visitor observed that virtually no child was wearing glasses. How could we miss such a thing? Some obvious facts we do not see. Children in the large towns, better off and with access to better health care, wear glasses, maybe up to 10%. We have thus launched a screening program to cover close to 50.000 children, all primary schools. Glasses only cost a few euros, and we will subsidize the poorest families only. Some children who were labeled as “slow”, “not fit for school” in fact had only a poor sight.



The very beautiful film “5 fauteuils pour l’Egypte” has been translated and adapted for the Vietnam context, with the permission of the author. It shows how people with severe cerebral palsy may suffer from other people’s attitudes about them and how unfair it is. The 5 people in the film are astonishingly courageous and strong. The film is now used in our inclusive education program which aims at adapting the school to the handicapped. It is also available on our website¹.

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.

¹ http://www.mekongplus.org/images/stories/videos/2009-02-23_5xelandiaicap.wmv

[Mekong-Quilts](#) has opened its 3rd shop in Phnom Penh! The location has been very carefully chosen, it took a great deal of patience. Experience in Vietnam has shown a good location is a crucial factor for good sales. In this big city of over a million inhabitants, we focused on 2 sections of 200 meters only! After 2 months and with good luck, we found a good place. Rents in Phnom Penh are 5-10 times cheaper than in Hồ Chí Minh city. As soon as the shop was open, without any publicity, a large number of clients poured in. Enthusiastic comments on the quality of the products and the reasonable prices (3-5 times cheaper than in the rich countries) are a good sign and our optimism is confirmed. The goal is to sell large volumes to create many jobs.



This new shop generates profits right from the first month, they will go to the community development programs in Svay Riêng (Cambodia). But regarding a local production for quilts, one must be very patient. The strategy has been from the start to aim at the highest quality. In Svay Riêng the people are much poorer than in Vietnam. It will be difficult to find a house with a very clean floor; the women have tough callous hands... A lot of training will be needed. Besides the model of Mekong-Quilts is to be part of an integrated community development program, it is definitely not just a "quilt program". The quilters must send their children to school, they must endeavor to improve the sanitary conditions of their house. They must progressively diversify their sources of income. Mekong-Quilts wants the quilters to become less dependent, they cannot depend only on quilting. A real diversification of the sources of employment and income is the safest way out of poverty.



In Hồ Chí Minh city and in Hà-Nôi a special promotion has allowed the shops to double their sales and also to sell older products. Shop space is extremely expensive in Vietnam (up to 80 €/m² monthly). In the quilters villages the increased sales were most welcome with much joy.

[Terre d'Oc](#) is really a fantastic partner. In the context of the economic crisis and vast losses in employment, they develop new products –incense sticks, rattan, bamboo... with us to create new and more jobs. Hundreds of factories have closed².



It is not easy. There are misunderstandings, one must translate from French to Vietnamese including the very technical parts, be creative and very quick. There are unexpected delays, especially for new products while the French company prepares for... mothers' day in France! How big a gap between 2 worlds so different from each other. Several times the Hàm Thuận Nam has worked during the night so that the sample could be put on the first bus in the morning; in Hồ Chí Minh city someone picks it up to rush it to the Federal Express agent. Terre d'Oc is grateful: "Many thanks to all of you, we are each time amazed by your motivation and energy. It is very very much appreciated!"

The cooperation with Terre d'Oc and Mekong-Quilts is also a source of substantial profits which funds the projects and constitutes a reserve fund for all the essential items which no funder has yet accepted to support. In 2008 our fair trades have generated funds equivalent to 20% of our total budget. Like the private donations, they provide the indispensable flexibility so that the programs could run smoothly.

Many NGOs must close projects and fire staff, at the very moment their support is needed the most by the poor. Therefore the security provided by our fair trade programs is a real asset for all programs. The teams are confident as they know they will continue their long term program in an efficient and sustainable way.

1.8. Waste recycling

² Including Nike, throwing thousands of workers on the streets and back to their village.

Summary of the program: invited by the authorities to help resolve the growing problem of waste, *Thiện 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.

The capacity of the Lac Ha recycling unit has been doubled and a new unit, in Mang Tô, is being built, 25 km away from the first. This program has received the support of the prestigious Ford Foundation, for 2 years. We envisage to do an in depth analysis of the market for organic fertilizer in the region. Some enterprises sell compost of higher quality at a very high price. What is it that the farmers want, what product can be sold in what quantity and for what price? Is it still necessary to subsidize sales to ensure a quick promotion among the poor farmers?

What a pity that the other districts do not follow the Tánh Linh model. They claim they have no land available, but without a sensible waste management program, the many illegal waste dumping sites multiply.

1.9. Capacity building for the local partners

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

Congratulations to Vy –in charge of fund raising at *Thiện Chí*: she has obtained a 80.000\$ grant from the Ford Foundation! *Thiện Chí* is the local NGO set up for the programs in Bình Thuận province. Vy is very serious, responsible, patient and looks into the details. She has been rewarded, as well as anh Tốt (director of *Thiện Chí*) who has answered the many emails. The target for *Thiện Chí* is to raise 15% of its budget independently from Mekong Plus. Not an easy target in a period of economic crisis. However *Thiện Chí*, like Mekong Plus, has a reputation for efficient and very low cost programs. This may be a valuable asset during these times.

Anh Dương is the equivalent of *Thiện Chí* but in the Mekong delta. Trinh has the same job as Vy and is starting. The draft of the beautiful story of “Nhi, first in her class”, was written by her³. The *Anh Dương* program is largely funded by ALCOPA (a Belgian company). Alcopa requests a short story on the program every month, to inform its employees. Nhi’s story is now on “Team Spirit”, the company website!

1.10. The biennial evaluation

³ http://www.mekongplus.org/doc/2009-03-30_nhi_premiere_de_classe.doc

The mission of Mekong Plus is community development, i.e. many different programs proposed and chosen together with the population. It is impossible for one expert to be competent in all areas at the same time, to provide sensible advice on every topic. The programs are so diverse: from inclusive education to agriculture, action theatre, health and waste recycling... we thus proceed to sectorial evaluations whenever there is a specific need. During the last 10 years not less than 20 evaluations have thus been conducted and all are put on the website for the sake of transparency and sharing: see <http://www.mekongplus.org/lang-en/evaluations> . Besides the evaluation of specific programs, we also conduct global evaluations every second year. They are based in part on the sectorial evaluations and are also important to check the global strategy, impact and coherence of our action in every region.



Too often evaluations are ordered for or by a funder and are less useful for the teams in the field. This time we have asked Dr.Trí, one of the most renowned experts in Vietnam, to evaluate us with as main goal to mobilize and encourage the teams further. This followed almost 6 months of Most Significant Change evaluations, where the population is asked to tell what has changed in their life, from their own perspective, instead of focusing on the program.

After several weeks in the field, a dozen meetings took place to analyze the draft report with the participation of all teams. The motto was made clear: either we agree with the conclusions of the report and we will implement its recommendations, or we disagree and we must convince the evaluator why we think we are right. The discussions have often been difficult but everyone participated with passion hoping to reach a consensus. The final report is much better than what we had hoped. Many of the recommendations are being implemented already. On the issues where the team still disagrees with the evaluator, its point of view is explained as well.

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.

Our 2 Khmer partners: CFED and PTEA, have considerably improved during the last 2 years. Better governance, much stronger financially, a regular audit... but when the budgets are prepared the choices seem too difficult to make. Both partners have proposed a budget with a huge increase compared to the previous year (+100%). They also remain much too dependent on Mekong Plus for essential components. The CFED salaries are almost exclusively funded by Mekong Plus. We have to explain how we have managed our own growth: progressive, depending on the capacity of the teams, never risking a lower quality for the programs. We refuse funds we cannot manage

properly. A budget is also a function of the funds one can reasonably expect for the following few years, because only long term programs are really effective.

This is a difficult dialogue because Mekong Plus is a funder and an adviser at the same time. We do not want to impose our strategy, while at the same time we do not like to answer by just yes/no!

Local NGOs in Cambodia have a reputation for looking for funding in all directions and be dependent on the funders for their strategy, they lack a vision of their own. PTEA had to stop its agriculture program for instance, because the funder has changed its strategy; the same funder now proposes a “peace building” program in the next province, and PTEA follows suit...



Under the terrible heat, she collects cow dung for the kitchen

Mekong Plus builds a new team by recruiting Khmer people who understand Vietnamese. Several have graduated from universities in Vietnam and are now on probation and on training on the Mekong Plus programs in Vietnam.

One must be very careful as the 2 people are very different and have a tendency to dislike each other. Salaries in Cambodia are higher than in Vietnam, while the Khmer are often less competent and less hard working than the Vietnamese. Difficulties lie ahead for sure but we have the best card: we take our time, there is no hurry. Mekong Plus does not need to work in Cambodia and the quality of our work there must be similar to the quality in Vietnam.

For the last 3 months we have waited for the permission to operate in one district of Svay Riêng. The local administration changes its mind, launches new procedures... and finally ask for a payment to proceed. It would be a very bad start indeed. Our answer: we are extremely busy in Vietnam, when the province of Svay Riêng will want us to come and work, they just need to give a signal.

A few visits could be done in the villages though, while still making sure the district and commune authorities were not worried by our presence. They hesitate between their impatience, they want us to start as soon as possible. On the other hand they also need to have a green light from the province. Poverty is terrible: especially during the dry season. Nothing grows, there is no work and virtually every single household sends its male members to Phnom Penh for work. Many are HIV positive. Our priority will certainly be to identify possible economic activities for the dry season.