

# **Sustainable Community Development in a Northern Mountainous Area of Vietnam - Experiences of the Muong ethnic group -**

Dr. Mayu Ino

Director of Seed to Table, NPO

## **Abstract**

After suffering long-term wars, Vietnam changed its economic policy from a state managed economy to a market economy in 1986 to pull itself out of economic recession. Since the 1990s, Vietnam has made a remarkable economic recovery, and agriculture has played an important role in the process of economical development. However, after 20 years, the economic disparities of rural and urban areas have expanded and serious environmental pollution and destruction has been a by-product of economic development. Seventy percent of the population in Vietnam is still living in rural areas, therefore, protecting natural resources and ecosystems are essential to sustainable living.

Vietnam is a culturally diverse country with 54 different ethnic groups. In recent years, with the improvement of infrastructure and the spread of broadcast TV, many ethnic groups living in remote areas have started receiving outside information. Through this contact, the lives of ethnic groups have been gradually changing. Many young people from ethnic minorities go to the cities in search of cash incomes. The valuable indigenous knowledge of utilizing and surviving on natural resources and the culture of local crop varieties are gradually being lost.

Within this context, I have been working since 2009 with the Muong ethnic group, one of the 54 ethnic groups living in Vietnam. My aim was to explore local natural resources and biodiversity, the wisdom of how to survive in a mountainous area, and the local food culture that the Muong have inherited from their ancestors. I wished to record all this knowledge such that it could be handed down to the next generation. In this article, I describe the current situation in rural areas of Vietnam and the work of Seed to Table, and posit what will be needed for sustainable community development in the rural areas of Vietnam.

**Keywords:** Vietnam, Muong ethnic group, Sustainable community development, indigenous varieties, community based eco-tourism

## 1. Introduction: Economy and Agriculture in Vietnam

Vietnam has a population of about 93 million people and some 329,000 square kilometers of land. It is an elongated country from north to south, rich in both natural resources and biodiversity. The country is home to 54 ethnic minority groups, each with their own lifestyle and individual culture. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Vietnamese people suffered great hardships from a long-term civil war, and ultimately established a Socialist country. Below, I describe the impact of more recent economic reforms on the lives and livelihoods of rural people.

## 2. After the 'DoiMoi' economic reforms

Along with many communist countries in the 1980s, Vietnam's economy was collapsing and faced long-term stagnation. People throughout the country were exhausted by the privations of the long-term war compounded by the shortcomings of the planned economy. In 1986, the Communist Party introduced economic change in the form of a 'Doi Moi' (or *renovation*) policy in order to improve the serious economic situation. This economic liberalization stimulated production and by 1989 Vietnam had switched from being a rice importer to a rice exporter.<sup>6</sup>

Since the implementation of the 'Doi Moi' policy, Vietnam has achieved remarkable economic growth and has rapidly entered the global economy. Vietnam officially joined the WTO in 2007 and economic indicators have shown continual growth. For instance, FDI increased from 4.8 billion USD in 1998 to 20.2 billion USD in 2014, exports increased from 9.3 billion USD in 1998 to 150.1 billion USD in 2014, and GDP per capita has grown from 359 USD in 1998 to 2,073 USD in 2014.<sup>7</sup> Since the 2000s the World Bank has considered Vietnam a middle-income country.

However, this rapid economic growth has also created economic disparity and resultant poverty. In order to improve the situation, the government set up a national target program for hunger eradication and poverty reduction. Along with many development programs implemented by international aid agencies such as the UN, and foreign NGOs, the Vietnamese government also spent a huge amount of money to improve infrastructure in the Northern remote mountainous areas that had the highest rates of poverty in Vietnam. After some decades, the poverty rate in Vietnam has declined from 37%<sup>8</sup> in 1998 down to 5.8-6%<sup>9</sup> in 2014. Conditions in the Northern mountainous areas were greatly improved and people were able to buy many commodities including materials and food like in the major cities. These changes are

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<sup>6</sup> 岡江(2009) p.57

<sup>7</sup> Website of Tổng cục thống kê, JETRO, World Bank

<sup>8</sup> The World Bank (2012) p.17

<sup>9</sup> BáoLao Động (Lao Dong Newspaper, Online, 17/1/2015)

impressive at a national level, but what is the reality of people's lives in local rural areas, especially in the remote highlands of northern Vietnam?

### **3. Agriculture during economic change**

In Vietnam, nearly 70% of the population live in the countryside, and around 50% of the population is engaged in agriculture. Agriculture is a central industry for many people in Vietnam. After Doi Moi, farmland was allocated to individual households. As a consequence, most farmers in Vietnam currently manage very small-scale land holdings. According to *Kết quả Tổng điều tra Nông thôn, Nông nghiệp và Thủy sản 2011 (Results of the 2011 Rural, Agricultural and Fishery Census)* of Tổng Cục Thống Kê (Vietnam General Statistic Office), some 69% of farmers manage less than 0.5ha of land, and half of those farm less than 0.2ha.<sup>10</sup> These small-scale farmers can only produce small volumes of agri-products, such as rice, vegetables, fruit and livestock.

On the other hand, expanding single cash crop cultivation, such as corn, led to the heavy use of chemical fertilizers and herbicides, which in turn led to natural resources such as drinking water sources becoming contaminated. In addition, non-timber forest products (NTFPS), such as wild flowers and medicinal plants, have been harvested excessively by local people and/or outsiders for cash incomes. These resources are still essential for the lives of ethnic minorities.

Traditional cultures including languages, food and local varieties are facing danger of extinction. Everyday children are watching TV programs in the official Vietnamese language. Some children no longer speak their own ethnic language. Young people are enamored by rich urban lifestyles and try to emulate it in rural areas.

In the 30 years since Doi Moi, many Vietnamese have enjoyed and benefited from economic growth. However, more recently, Vietnamese people have seen the negative impacts of economic growth clearly in environmental degradation and the lost of local culture and identity, which are also needed for sustainable development. In this paper, I introduce a case study of sustainable community development working with Muong ethnic people living in a Northern mountainous region to consider the future direction and methods of further sustainable development in rural areas of Vietnam.

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<sup>10</sup>Tổng cục thống kê (2012) p44

#### 4. Life of Muong people in Nam Son Commune, Tan Lac District, Hoa Binh Province

Nam Son Commune, Tan Lac District in Hoa Binh Province is located 130km north-west of Hanoi, at an altitude of around 900m. Nam Son Commune has seven villages with a population of about 1,600 people. Almost the entire population is of Muong ethnicity. Muong people traditionally plant rice, raise livestock and utilize natural resources from forests and rivers. They also grow a combination of traditional varieties of maize, millet and beans on sloping land and keep some traditional vegetable seeds such as pumpkin and leaf vegetables. Muong people are very good at using materials obtained from the forest to make tools, houses and have a good knowledge of medicinal plants and how to use them. Rich surrounding biodiversity has helped shape the Muong's food, culture and lives in Nam Son Commune.

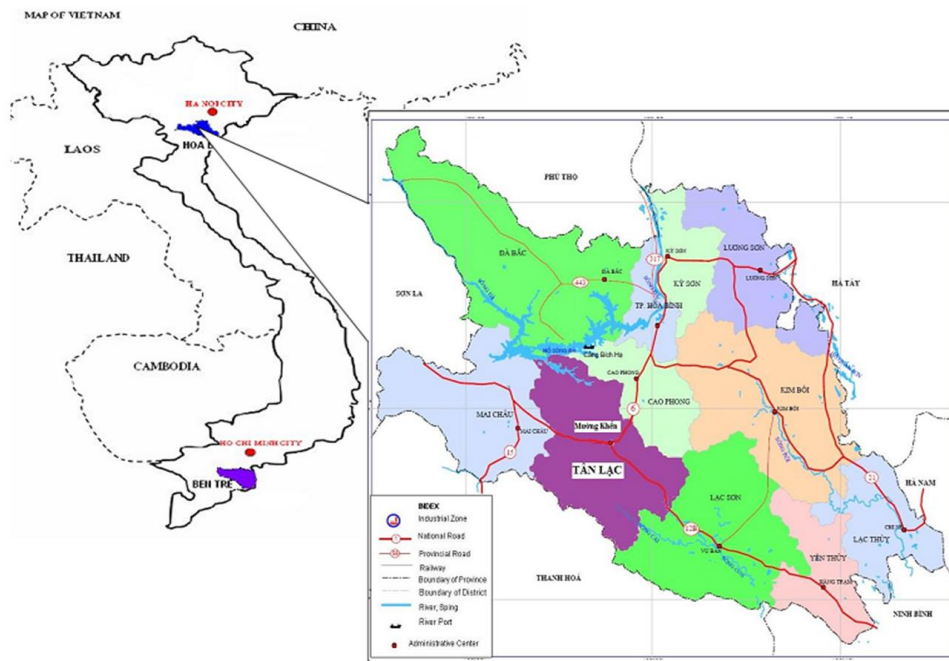


Fig. 1. Map of Tan Lac district, Hoa Binh province

I have been working in Nam Son Commune since 2003 through the activities of a Japanese NGO. When I visited Nam Son Commune for the first time, I was moved by the beautiful scenes I found. There was rich forest, terraced rice fields and streams. I could see many small creatures living in the clear waters and tall native species of rice tossed in the wind. In the evening, children harvested edible grasses in the paddy fields for an additional dinner dish. Children told me that they could harvest different types of edible grasses in each season. They had been walking through the forest and rice paddies following their grandparents and parents, and remembered which kind of plants or small creatures were edible or could be used as medicine.



Fig. 2. Beautiful landscape of Nam Son Commune



Fig. 3. Children harvested different types of edible grasses in Nam Son Commune

Meals in Nam Son Commune are one of the most attractive things for outsiders. Most food is made or grown with their own hands at Nam Son Commune, except for salt and nuoc mam (fish source) that villagers cannot produce in the village. There were many local varieties in the dishes, such as rice, millet, maize, leaf vegetables, legumes, free-range chicken and local pigs. Local chickens and pigs were fed with local vegetables, rice bran and maize, so the meat was delicious. When villagers cooked those high quality meats, they used the leaves of Mac Mat (*Clausenaindica*) and pomelo to wrap the meat and grill it. Other local specialties including rats, silkworm, wasp and the larvae of dragonflies were also served. In late spring,

villagers make pickles of bamboo shoots as preserved food. They also eat steamed papaya leaves, which are rich in vitamins. Villagers make rice wine and put 'chuoï hot rung' (a kind of wild banana) in it for good health.

When villagers organize a wedding party or funeral ceremony, not only relatives, but almost all the households in the village help the family. Guests usually bring rice, rice wine and pork for the family serving meals to the guests. Villagers also help each other build their houses. The villagers are very much united and help each other.

Agriculture is the main source of cash income for the people in Nam Son Commune. However, because of the mountainous terrain, villagers only have small pieces of land. Their main crops are rice and maize. They grow rice twice per year, the winter-spring crop and the summer-autumn crop. Most agricultural work is through human power and water buffalo or cow. Maize is planted with beans and millet on the sloping land. The average rice field area of each of household is 0.1-0.2ha, and sloping land area is about 0.2 ~ 0.3ha. After Doi Moi, along with farmers across the whole county, agricultural land allocation was carried out. In Nam Son Commune, the farmland was divided between the population of the time. Due to population growth, the farmland area of individual households has been getting smaller. In addition, since the forest protection law was enacted in the early 1990s, people in Nam Son Commune have not been able to exploit forest land to cultivate. Because Nam Son Commune is located in buffer zone of the National Park, villagers have to protect the forest areas. Villagers are required to make effective use of the small agricultural land area they have.

A change came to the lives of the people in Nam Son Commune in 2005. Through the National Poverty Reduction Policy, the Chinese-made F1 species of rice was introduced to Nam Son Commune. However, there were no trials before planting the new variety of rice so villagers did not understand the risks. Eventually disease was discovered and the villagers lost the harvest. The Tan Lac authority and plant protection office took three years to eradicate this disease. In 2009, another problem occurred. Villagers who had been using the Chinese F1 rice variety were not provided with any seed due to crop failure in China. Most villagers had just switched from local varieties to the Chinese F1 variety. Therefore, many villagers could not get the Chinese F1 seeds and had to give up one crop. After this incident, many villagers reevaluated the local varieties and some of them started planting them again.

Improvements in infrastructure have also brought changes to the villagers' way of life. Due to road construction funded by the poverty reduction policy, villagers expanded the areas of maize cultivation to earn cash incomes. There was no longer a 'muddy road' during the rainy season, and villagers bought motorbikes and went to paddy fields for work. The use of chemical fertilizers and herbicides were rapidly

accepted. But representatives of the local authority raised concerns about the pollution of water sources and asked Seed to Table to provide training on organic farming techniques.

Thanks to road construction, the Muong people of Nam Son Commune have access to more cash income. And the money economy penetrates into the life of the villagers; especially young people have been pressured to earn more. Many of the young previously went to Malaysia or the Southern areas of Vietnam for working the 2000s, however, the cost of living was high and they could not save enough money to bring home. Now young people don't leave their village for long-term work, but pick up seasonal labor work in nearby Hoa Binh Province.

In the current situation as previously mentioned, supporting the younger generation, effective use of narrow farmland to get cash income, reevaluating local varieties and protection of natural resources and biodiversity are all necessary for the sustainable development of the community and to provide a stable life for villagers.

## **5. Sustainable Community Development in Nam Son Commune**

In order to support the younger generation and achieve sustainable development in Nam Son Commune, Seed to Table cooperates with youth to conduct the following activities.

### **(1) Restoring indigenous varieties of rice**

This activity has been carried out since 2009 and three types of local rice varieties have been restored in Nam Son Commune so far. In this activity, young people ask the elderly to provide information about the many different varieties of local rice that were planted in the past. The results show that seventeen different varieties of rice, including sticky and non-glutinous rice, were planted in Nam Son Commune. We helped villagers to print profile books and provided copies to them. In the first year, only eight households participated in our activity, but after three years, the number of households increased to 50. We will continuously work with villagers to record information of indigenous vegetables, beans, maize and fruit. We also have a plan to organize guest seminarstovisit Nam Son Commune and introduce more local varieties and biodiversity in Nam Son Commune through an ecotourism program.

### **(2) Exploring and recording the natural resources and ecosystems of the village, and the installation of the "Nature and living museum"**

To understand the cause and effect of water pollution, we work together with young people and children to explore the flow of water in each village starting from a water source and examine whether there is pollution. If there is problem, youth and children discuss possible solutions and make an activity plan. Another activity is

discovering small creatures, butterflies and plants in the waters and forest to better understand the local ecosystem. After exploring the local ecosystem, youth and children catch some insects and collect the leaves of plants as samples.

They also collect tools and furniture, such as baskets and trays made from forest materials and exhibit them at the meeting hall in each village. We call each display a 'nature and living museum'. Through these activities, children have collected over 50 kinds of plants from the forest, 30 kinds of butterflies and 20 kinds of insects and small creatures from paddy fields and streams. Children and youth also asked their parents and grandparents about each kind of species they found, such as its lifecycle, predators and food, to make a 'profile sheet' to share this information with villagers and visitors. Young people knew there were 'lots of living things' in the paddy fields, streams and forest. But in the process of collecting this information, young people counted the specific number of small creatures and they found how rich their local ecosystems were.

In addition, through exchange workshops with Japanese high school students, younger generations in Nam Son Commune were encouraged and motivated to protect biodiversity and indigenous knowledge that had been handed down from their ancestors. The Japanese students were surprised by the richness of the biodiversity and local knowledge of the people that allow them to utilize natural resources sustainably in Nam Son Commune. Through this activity, the youth in Nam Son Commune do not use chemical pesticides and herbicides because they don't want to harm the beautiful butterflies, insects and plants.

### (3) Providing training on organic farming technologies and the adverse effects of chemical pesticides and herbicides

After planting and selling such cash crops as maize, villagers in Nam Son Commune have been able to get extra cash income. Therefore, many of the villagers began to use chemical herbicides and pesticides to reduce the amount of hard labor. The leaders of Nam Son Commune already understood that environmental protection and natural resource management would be necessary to maintain the quality of human life. So they asked us to provide training on organic farming techniques and talk about the harmful effects of chemical pesticides and herbicides.

First, I organized training on the benefits and adverse effects of chemical pesticides and herbicides. Then, I provided a quick test for the youth and examined whether water sources were contaminated with chemicals or not. Fortunately, the results showed that the water resources in Nam Son Commune were not contaminated. Through this activity, young people and other villagers decided to stop using chemical herbicides and pesticides. Also they started making compost instead of using chemical fertilizers. In near future, we hope that the number of households practicing organic



farming techniques will increase and that organic agricultural products will be introduced to outside visitors.

(4) Improving awareness of public health and sanitation

Traditionally, the Muong people do not use inside toilets. However, due of population growth and the demand to keep villages clean, the building of toilets has increased. We prioritized poor households and public places such as meeting halls in each hamlet to distribute funds for toilet construction. We provided funds for 50% of the budget for toilet construction and asked poor households to pay the rest. If we provide 100% of the budget, some villagers do not construct toilets and use the materials for other purposes. By applying this method, 52 toilets were constructed and 10 more toilets were built by the villagers themselves. Also, a training event was run to raise awareness of public health and sanitation. Youth performed a short play based on real stories from the village. They also made 'dresses' from nylon bags or natural materials like leaves to organize a fashion show. It was a lot of fun, but also reminded villagers about local environmental issues.

(5) Promoting community based Eco-tourism

In collaboration with the villagers in Nam Son Commune, we have conducted a lot of activities aimed at protecting natural resources and biodiversity. However, it is also necessary for villagers to get a cash income to maintain a stable lifestyle. We discussed with young people and leaders in Nam Son Commune the possibility of promoting eco tourism. The point was how to keep a balance between earning money and protecting nature and their traditions. Youth in each village started to make a tour plan to introduce the most attractive things in each village. They discussed what kind of activities could be introduced about the Muong people's life, traditions and local biodiversity. They also developed a seasonal menu to introduce the traditional food culture of the Muong people. In the process of developing their activity plan, young people found that their village was full of interesting activities and things that could be introduced to visitors, including walking to see beautiful landscapes and exploring the rich biodiversity, good quality food, experience in making bamboo or rattan tools, and good traditional singing and dancing. Also, young people discussed how to divide profits equally and use it for sustainable community development. In this September, Nam Son Commune will host its first guest group.

## **Epilogue**

Vietnam's economy is now in recession. Many Vietnamese cannot predict what will happen next. Creativity and taking action are necessary to revitalize the economy as well as maintain sustainable community development. There are many in the

younger generation who want to start a business with passion and ethics, including the youth of Nam Son Commune. We will connect young people in rural and urban areas, domestic and international, and help them to develop local businesses based on agriculture, their rural area and tradition.

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