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Introduction

“Startup” and “Industry 4.0” have been the buzzwords of Vietnam in 2018. No doubt technology holds the key to the future, but in rural Vietnam, a different, quieter kind of change led by small and medium enterprises (SMEs) has been materialising at the same time.

This book is a collection of 12 stories about that little-noticed change. While not all entrepreneurs featured here are running young companies, their initiatives deserve to be seen as startups, for they challenge local conventions: from saying no to toxic fertilisers and pesticides, to reviving old and dying traditions, to building unique, export quality Vietnamese products, all of these projects have succeeded by taking bold risks.

The companies’ journeys have been rocky. Many founders recalled being labelled crazy for risking their savings, career, and even

family to launch a business in remote areas, working with poor and often unskilled locals. Others were forced to take the lead of a company after unexpected life events and had no choice but to learn and innovate to keep the business afloat.

They have persevered and managed to overcome challenges to this day for a variety of reasons. For the director of a loss-making fish sauce company, it was his ability to take risks by using his private land as collateral for a loan. For the owner of safe vegetable company Vinh Ha, it was, in her own words, destiny – each time she wanted to give up, “friends came out of nowhere” with new buyers. For the couple owning a tea company, it was perseverance, as they spent years looking for Vietnam’s finest tea and building trust among local ethnic minority farmers.

But to grow, these SMEs needed a makeover. Many of them are family-run with owners having no formal training in business management. So they joined Enterprising for Development (EFD), a project launched in 2014 by Oxfam in Vietnam and CSIP that offers tailored training and consultancy packages on sustainability and business management.

EFD, which aims to increase income or access to better goods and services for smallholder farmers, poor women and youth from disadvantaged areas, also became known as a network of social impact businesses. Interestingly, most entrepreneurs featured in this book had no idea they were running a social impact business prior to joining EFD. Today, they see the network as empowering. They realised their so-called “crazy initiatives” are actually inclusive businesses, making positive changes in their communities. In fact, these companies have become partners, incorporating social impacts into their business plans while also attempting to measure their effectiveness.

These 12 entrepreneurs, however, shouldn't be treated as from zero to hero stories of success. In fact, it would be too early and naive to hail any of them as examples of how one should go about running a company because if these stories tell us anything, it is that running an SME requires the leader to constantly learn and adapt to new and unique sets of challenges.

Instead, as you turn the page, we hope you'll be inspired by these entrepreneurs' dedication, see how SMEs are uniquely placed to solve local issues and continue the discussion on ways to support their work.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



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Authors



I. TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE



Restoring farmers' faith **IN AGRICULTURE**



In the past, whenever Pham Van Dao, who prefers to be called Minh, sprayed his guava orchard in Soc Trang province in Vietnam's Mekong Delta with pesticides, he had to evacuate the entire family. "The stench made me dizzy," he said.

"The worst time was when I was spraying in the paddy field, some seven years ago," said Minh. "After spraying, my body turned purple and I fainted on the way back. People had to carry me home."

Minh's case is typical of farmers in the Mekong Delta, known as Vietnam's rice basket. Since the late 1960s, the area has led Vietnam's transformation from a country suffering from food shortages to the world's third-biggest rice exporter by volume.

The productivity miracle follows Vietnam's switch to high-yielding crop varieties, which needed to be supplemented with fertilisers and pesticides, allowing farmers to achieve three crops per year, compared to the standard two crops. Dependence on chemicals intensified particularly in the last 20 years as farmers were attracted by promises of quick and easy profits.

Now, however, the delta is feeling the strain after decades of intensive farming.

With no time to rest and recover, the soil has seriously degraded, the water system is polluted and the safety and quality of rice and other crops have been going downhill.

"At the time, [spraying pesticides] was the only way I knew existed, so I just sprayed," Minh said of his addiction to chemicals. "Whenever something was off with the trees, I went to the shop and they'd sell me the stuff to spray."

"But I'm not afraid of spraying this," said Minh, referring to biofertiliser. The substance, which he's been using for about two years, contains living microorganisms that promote plants' growth by adding nutrients through a natural process, which restores the soil's nutrient cycle and builds soil organic matter.

Minh is one of thousands of farmers who use biofertilisers produced by Vua Vi Sinh Ltd, or Bio-King in English, established by Nguyen Hoang Cung in 2011. The scientist-turned entrepreneur developed his biofertiliser formula, which can be used as a supplement or replacement to traditional fertiliser, after years of working at Can Tho University's agriculture department and a big international fertiliser company.



It was during business trips abroad that Cung learnt that farmers could actually have a comfortable life and that pesticides weren't the only means to obtaining a good yield. "When I saw different technologies used in other countries, I realised how backward Vietnam was," Cung said, speaking of the automation and scientific precision with which fertiliser was applied in Thailand and New Zealand as opposed to Vietnam, where everything "was done by instinct".

His eureka moment came when he met biologists. Initially, the former soil researcher was skeptical, thinking there was no way biotechnology could beat chemistry. But after his new colleagues gave him samples to test, he was amazed. "If we continue to go along the chemistry path, we won't be able to catch up with the world even in 100 years," Cung recalled thinking.

Cung saw biofertiliser as the potential replacement for chemicals. By facilitating the natural process that enriches and restores the soil, he saw it as the way to revitalise and make the most of Vietnam's

natural conditions that could produce tastes no other country could ever reproduce. Take the pomelo native to Vietnam's Mekong Delta, he said. "If done right, it would be of great value. China, Japan, the U.S. can't grow [similarly flavourful pomelo]."

The early days of Bio-King, however, weren't easy. In the beginning it was a nameless company against giants – foreign fertiliser companies. Farmers were also wary of scientists and could not afford to wait season after season for their experiments to finally bear fruit.

That's when Cung saw his farming background as a blessing. Growing up among the paddy fields of the Mekong Delta in the 1970s, all he wanted was to escape the hardships of farming his parents had endured all their lives. It was farming that drew him to books, a career in research and sales for a fertiliser company.

And it was farming that helped him find a common voice with farmers. It was as if fate was doing its work. "Such a blessing that

at the time I realised I loved agriculture so much,” he said.

So Cung went out to the field, borrowed a small plot of land from farmers and started cultivating with them.

“When I could prove to farmers my method was better, they followed suit.” Then, the convinced farmers became his ambassadors.

Today, Bio-King’s biofertiliser is sold at 500 outlets, 80 per cent of which are run by women and 30 per cent by low-income groups.

But that is just half of the story behind the success of Cung’s biofertiliser. The other lies in Dai Thuan Thien Ltd - a company he founded in 2015 to bring his bio-farmed produce to consumers. Cung sees this as the final step to creating a bio value chain, connecting farmers, merchants and scientists.

To Minh, who belongs to one of the 500 households with whom Dai Thuan Thien has a commitment to buy all of their output, the scheme was an extra assurance that the biofertiliser he had never heard of before would work. The arrangement “makes farmers believe that using [biofertiliser], the trees will bear fruit,” Minh said.

Initially, Dai Thuan Thien acted as both a wholesaler and a retailer so that many people could try the bio-farmed products and word about the company could spread far and wide. The sheer scope of the operation, however, was starting to strain Cung’s resources. With 20 staff members working around the clock at a two-storey



shop on one of the busiest streets of Can Tho – the Mekong Delta’s biggest city – operations felt like a mess.

At the time, Cung was already well known among agricultural entrepreneurs. Seeing Cung’s operational struggles, colleagues recommended he apply to Oxfam’s EFD programme – a decision that Cung later credited with facilitating critical changes to his business.

EFD’s consultants advised him to drop the retail section to focus resources on his wholesale business. Indeed, after restructuring, work not only was smoother, but the specialisation also boosted revenue four-fold to VND 1 billion (US\$ 43,000) per month.

Recently, Cung’s fruits also found their way to South Korea and he is negotiating export deals to Europe. This new milestone was achieved after Cung connected with DACE, a fellow participant of the EFD programme that was already exporting goods to South Korea.

“That’s what makes EFD different,” Cung said. **“It has created an ecosystem.”**

Given the progress both of Cung’s companies have made so far, he is very optimistic about Vietnam’s agriculture. He’s now eyeing investors who could help him expand the wholesale business even further, for he needs sufficient cash to pay farmers on the spot.

Cung doesn’t want to see yet another generation eager to leave the countryside like he did 30 years ago. He strongly believes that biofertilisers hold the answer to transforming farming into a job that pays well, and lifting Vietnamese agriculture to be on par with, if not better than, that of Thailand.

Lam Giang





Breaking THE CYCLE OF UNSAFE FOOD



You don't need a master's degree in Business Administration to sell vegetables in Vietnam. But since 33-year-old Pham Thi Bich Lan chose to use her qualifications to work in agriculture, businesses at struggling organic farms in Dak Lak and Lam Dong provinces have quickly seen changes for the better. With her establishment of the vegetable distribution company Rau Cui Viet Nhat, or Vietnamese-Japanese Smiley Vegetables, Lan has secured a stable output for dozens of dedicated farmers who had been suffering from seasonal fluctuations in vegetable prices and yields. And what's more, Lan and her partners along the way helped better the lives of over 200 underprivileged kids living in the Central Highlands while teaching them about sustainable all-natural agriculture.

Perfect timing, perfect match

It was hard for Lan to explain to others why she had quit her job at a top bank in Ho Chi Minh City in 2012. By that time she had already been promoted to a manager position, secured a high salary and just finished a two-year master's programme, which she had enrolled in to climb even higher on the finance career ladder.

"Everyone kept asking, 'You have just had a kid, why give up a stable job to, well, sell vegetables?'" Lan recalled, giggling.

But a short summer trip to France at the end of her master's programme steered her life onto a completely different path.

"There, I saw people buying and eating fresh fruits and vegetables without any fear or question of where those had come from or whether they had been soaked with toxic preservatives," Lan, a self-proclaimed veggie lover, said. "And I just wondered why we couldn't have the same thing in Vietnam."

So on the flight back home, Lan prepared her resignation letter, and started to plan her safe food odyssey.

With her toddler wrapped in her arms, Lan scoured the hilly and muddy roads of the Central Highlands. Vietnam's veggie hub, which supplies most of the country's green demand, had just a few organic farms.

Vietnam is over 60 years into the adoption of intensive agriculture, characterised by preference for high-yield crops and subsequent abuse of pesticides and fertilisers to further boost productivity. The practice escalated in the past 20 years, followed by public concerns over food safety. Newspapers and television have been flooded with news of dirty, chemical-soaked and health-threatening food, including vegetables, fruits, poultry and meat. And to make matters worse, the number of cancer cases has seemed

to rocket, with public perception linking the cases to toxic food, alarming even most carefree consumers. As Lan saw it, the diseases didn't spare anyone, whether they were rich or poor, factory workers or people chained to their desks.

"We live in constant fear of what we take in everyday," Lan said, "in every meal we have and every breath of air we breathe."

Lan wanted to break the cycle. "Well, you might not choose the air, but you can choose the food," she added.

After all, I could not even handle a hoe," she laughed. "I needed farmer partners on this, people who are as committed as I am."

And that proved a tough task from the beginning. Lan tried to get into contact with all "clean" vegetable growers she could find, mostly from the Internet and from the address box printed on organic brands in grocery stores. Few welcomed her to visit their farms. Of those that did, none actually pursued the standards of absolute organic farming as they claimed.

For instance, some simply did not apply pesticides to their crop, while leaving the soil and water exposed to chemical contamination in the neighbourhood. Others even devoted only half of their land to the non-chemical treatment, and practiced the conventional methods on the other half.

"As the realisation dawned on me, I felt my spirits already dampened from the start," Lan said of the exhausting rainy months she spent in 2014 climbing up slippery roads, only to return home with disappointment.

Then she came across a 1.5 hectare farm of the Farmer's Union Venture, a company run by a group of Japanese agriculture engineers in the suburbs of Buon Ma Thuot City.

When she simply introduced herself as a concerned mother and a curious consumer, Lan was surprised by the reception she got.

"They took me in instantly," Lan recollected. "Unlike others, they were enthusiastic about showing me their garden, their farming techniques and all the hard work involved."

Takano Motoyuki, an engineer at the farm, still remembers Lan's eyes from their first encounter. "They were wide open whenever she concentrated on something," Motoyuki



said as he sat in the shade of the farm, camping 9 kilometers from the city centre. Around him, butterflies flew in groups in the air. They must have emerged from the larvae sneaking into the vegetable beds, a farmer in the company explained. As no pesticide is applied, insects there are controlled manually, picked by hand early in the morning, another farmer added.

Just as its name indicates, the company employed the strict and labourious all-natural methods of Vietnam's Central Highlands, which Motoyuki and his colleagues found boasted many favourable conditions, from the tropical weather to the vast fertile soil. They also teamed up with several local Children's Homes run by nuns in the Highland's largest monastic order, who have been growing organic gardens to supply food for the hundreds of underprivileged kids they took in. The nuns had such great knowledge of native agriculture that most of the time they harvested more than they needed.

Together the team developed their own safe cultivation techniques that combine both countries' traditional agricultural knowledge.

But by the time of their meeting with Lan, the Japanese engineering team had been struggling for a while: although their patience and effort in non-chemical farming had born fruit in high yields, they were having a hard time selling their products.

"They were skilled farmers on their field, but inexperienced businessmen in the market," Lan realised after several visits, watching her new friends throw away more vegetables than they could sell, while their debt mounted.

Drawn by the shared passion for sustainable agriculture, she decided to team up with the Japanese engineers, taking charge of the distribution of the products.

Using the savings from her banker days, Lan established the Ho Chi Minh City-based company, naming it Rau Cuoi Viet Nhat, in 2015.

"Here is where my background in finance and business management came in handy," she said.

Lan chose to shelf the goods at supermarkets and high-end convenience store chains, where it is easier to find customers willing to pay over VND 100,000 (US\$ 4.3) for a kilogramme of clean vegetables, 10 times the price at a local market. The farmers and nuns work extra hard for them, she argued, so the price needs to at least compensate for their efforts.

"The clean crops, since they use zero fertiliser, take three times longer to grow, and are always at risk of plant disease exposure," she added.

Still, the veggies, even though they're organic, usually aren't as shiny-green and appealing-to-the-eyes as ones displayed at other stalls. Many customers frowned at the price tag.

"I was looked at as if I was an alien," she said of the early days of the business.

Lan went all out, standing for hours in front of Rau Cuoi's section in supermarkets in the company of a Japanese engineer from the group and sometimes of her daughter, to convince market-goers to try their organic products.





“Many quickly realised the difference once they tried them,” she said of the first regulars. “They told me they found the slightly sweet taste, nectarous on the tongue, of the authentic flavour they had thought was long lost.”

After a few months, Lan let the quality of the vegetables do the rest. As more customers were enticed, more grocery stores and supermarkets got in contact, asking Rau Cuoi to provide them with the organic food.

The company now has 27 employees rushing to deliver as many as 800 kilogrammes of leafy veggies, tomatoes and beans a day to the city’s large self-service shops

and grocery chains, including Aeon Malls, Coop-mart, Family-Mart, Emart and more.

From time to time, Lan organises company outings to the farms with her Rau Cuoi team, most of whom are women from low-income families in the city. The trips aim to not only create the team bonding, but also give the members a glimpse of the hard work and intensive care involved in producing the chemical-free beans and leaves they handle everyday. “Before I could convince customers anything about our clean vegetables, I would need my team to appreciate them first, for them to understand the responsibility and impact they have with those small packages at the store,” she said.



It takes a village

The sales also benefit children hundreds of miles away. Every month Lan transfers at least VND 300 million to the Children's Homes in Buon Ma Thuot City for the vegetables they grow.

The sum doesn't just pay part of the costs of raising 200 children in need, all from different ethnic minorities and poverty-stricken areas across the country.

"It helps us teach the kids that we can afford life by growing clean vegetables," sister Thuan, who heads the Teresa Children Home, said about the education impact of the cooperation.

Everyday the teenage children at the Home spend one hour after school in the gardens, learning basic natural farming techniques, from sprinkling lime to clean off harmful bacteria in the soil to spraying fermented soybean juice to prevent insect attacks.

"We hope they are best prepared for any kind of work they want to do in the future, farming included," sister Thuan added.

For that purpose, Rau Cui Viet Nhat in the last two years has been acting as a partner to the Teresa Home not in trade but in education, the sister said. The money helps buy books and school supplies, and teaches students the value of their hard work.



“It takes a village to raise the kids,” sister Thuan added.

Bich Lan herself is aiming to magnify the efforts of the village by helping some of the children earn an internship at her Japanese partners’ farms after their high school graduation.

“It is part of the company’s far-reaching plan to make sure our social impact is long-lasting for the years to come,” Lan said in the Rau Cuoi storage facility in Ho Chi Minh City.

It was not until very recently, however, that she considered operating the social mission as a serious long-term business.

“Previously I thought of it more like a charity project,” she explained, “something that we did in our spare time, simply contributed what we had, but were unsure of how long we could keep up.”



With the help of coaches from Oxfam’s EFD programme, which Lan and Rau Cui Viet Nhat joined in 2017, she was able to review her business’ impact in the past and build a development plan and a monitoring system for its social values.

“I can now, for instance, detail how many jobs we have and will help to create in any given phase in the present and the future,” Lan elaborated. “We now have a blueprint for our social impact, specifying everything from who the subjects of our social effects are to what the problems are that we can help solve.”

The impacts are no longer spontaneous side-effects, but part of the development plan in the long run. And that helps the company’s contributions become more sustainable, Lan concluded.

At the end of the conversation, when asked what reaction she has received the most

often during the whole journey, Lan cited the response she used to get from her friends: “You are insane!”

“But now they have become our regular clients,” she said. “Even my former bosses are having these clean vegetable packages delivered to their doors.”

“Sometimes, though, I think they are right,” Lan added, giggling. “It takes an insane person to jump into the adventure I have had with Smiley Vegetables.”

Phuong Nhung

Growing Safe Veggies

WITH FAITH



When Nguyen Thi Mai was accepted to university in Hanoi, she told her mother she wasn't coming back to the countryside. The daughter of Mrs Dong Thi Vinh, a school dropout and farmer-cum-part-time tailor turned brick-maker and seller, envisioned a career vastly different from her mother's. Her ambitions took her far. Mai joined the Communist Party, got a job at the Ministry of Information and Communications and settled down with a banker. In the eyes of her father, a disabled war veteran, she was the epitome of a perfect Vietnamese woman: a homemaker and a civil servant.

But the countryside never really let Mai go. Back in Mai's student days, on one of Mrs Vinh's visits, she discovered the horrifying state of the morning glory Mai was getting from a nearby market. The staple greens of a Vietnamese diet were inedible. When boiled, they hardened, while the soup was an unappetising and ash-like grey.

Mrs Vinh took matters into her own hands by growing vegetables for the entire family on her 600m² plot in Hanoi's suburban Phu Xuyen district. At the time, farmers in the area grew only corn or simply left the land untouched, an ironic turn for an area in the Red River Delta, known for its rich alluvial soil.


Farmers Mrs Vinh spoke to didn't know how to grow without using hazardous chemicals to increase crop yields. While traditionally manure was widely used to fertilise land, dung has been harder to come by nowadays thanks to modern toilets and greater specialisation in agriculture.

In 2012, Vinh Ha safe vegetable production household was born. A year later, it became a joint stock company. The start was tough, however. After a year of losses, Mrs Vinh's co-founder quit.

Left alone, Mai started to support her mother's business until eventually she was faced with a decision: Should she quit her job at the ministry to focus on Vinh Ha full time? After 10 years of monotonous office work in front of a computer, Mai wanted to do something more challenging. It wasn't a big dilemma. When she submitted her resignation, she joked, "I'm moving to the Ministry of Agriculture."

Mai hadn't really considered the prospects of her mother's business when she quit. "Clean vegetables" was still a novel concept with just a handful of shops selling them in the capital.

Nor did she possess any business skills or knowledge. So although a shop she opened on the ground floor of an old apartment building was an instant hit among residents, costs escalated, and with market fluctuations, planning was hard.

 **Each time I wanted to give up, someone would turn up with a new opportunity,"**
Mai said.

It was during one of those downtimes that a friend introduced Mai to the first big client, a primary school in Hanoi — "as if fate was doing its work," as Mai put it.

By February, 2015, Vinh Ha had signed contracts with three schools. By May, 2017, they were supplying vegetables to 10 primary schools, two hospitals, and three food companies. The year before, Vinh Ha's vegetables were certified by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development as following Vietnamese Good Agricultural Practices (VietGAP).



But the biggest challenge to Vinh Ha's survival wasn't a lack of business acumen or skills. In recent years, NGOs have been providing plenty of support in that area, including Oxfam's EFD programme, which offered Vinh Ha training in management and branding.

It was objections from family that threatened not just the existence of Vinh Ha but also Mai's marriage. Formerly a traditional wife who woke up at 5am everyday to make breakfast for the family, including the in-laws, Mai couldn't go on like that when she was overwhelmed by the new responsibilities that came with running a company. Tensions intensified to the point that Mai's husband once told her to choose between her family and a hut in a field.

All this first appeared normal to Mai, who comes from a conservative family in which a man is the head and a woman assumes household duties. To this day she remembers a recurring image from her childhood: her mother would fan her father to cool him down during lunch and only start eating once he had finished his meal. Naturally, he was also enraged that Mai quit a ministry job to work with farmers and

even threatened to take away the land they used to grow vegetables.

But like mother, like daughter. Both love a hard but fulfilling job.

Over time, Mai's husband, who grew up in a period of economic reforms, learned to share housework with her. Even Mai's niece — her father's favourite granddaughter — managed to change her stubborn granddad by simply asking why he didn't help grandma with cooking.

"You've got to learn to maintain a balance."

During lunch at a vegan restaurant in central Hanoi that sources vegetables from Vinh Ha, Mai kept returning to one topic: faith. Buddhism and Feng Shui logic of maintaining balance have been Mai's guiding forces, not only in her diet but also through family drama and business hurdles. Donating some of the vegetables grown at Vinh Ha to a local pagoda gave Mai a sense of calm and conviction that she was doing the right thing, especially given the frequency of food scares that make headlines in Vietnam on a regular basis.



Friends and acquaintances “coming out of nowhere” with new opportunities and support only strengthened Mai’s belief that Vinh Ha is meant to be. Recently, when Mai’s brother asked her to abandon Vinh Ha and join his new venture that promised much higher returns, she just listened and said nothing.

To Mrs Vinh, the driving force behind Vinh Ha is simpler. This woman, now in her 60s, who worked hard all her life, sees no point in stopping because “work means happiness”.

But work at this age, when all her children now have families of their own, also means giving back to the community Mrs Vinh holds dear.

Vinh Ha does it by employing 20 local women who can’t find jobs due to their age. Though the pay is just VND 4 million (US\$ 171.5) per month, about VND 1 million less than what younger women earn in a nearby textile factory, the job is less demanding, requiring only harvesting vegetables and



weeding. The most labour-intensive parts are done by machine.

Now that Mai manages Vinh Ha, Mrs Vinh works mostly with farmers. Everyday, she arrives at the field before everyone else at 5am with bottles of vegan milk for the workers so they can stay healthy.

Each day, Vinh Ha produces on average two tonnes of vegetables from the 5ha of land it owns and from more than 30 other households in Phu Xuyen. While Vinh Ha has schools as regular customers, sales at a local market are down because neighbours, realising her vegetables tasted better, started copying her and growing their own greens.

Recently, Mrs Vinh has acquired a new hobby. She’s on the lookout for tree lovers with some time to spare, hoping to persuade them to set up vegetable gardens in their homes.

Lam Giang

Oranges

THAT TASTE OF HOME

Nguyen Thi Le Na was a PR professional in Hanoi when her father begged her for help over five years ago. He had made a six-hour journey from Nghe An in central Vietnam to Hanoi to deliver 1.5 tonnes of oranges, only to be tricked into believing he would be paid later.

Le Na subsequently confronted the scammers and with the help of friends, managed to retrieve and sell 900 kg of oranges.

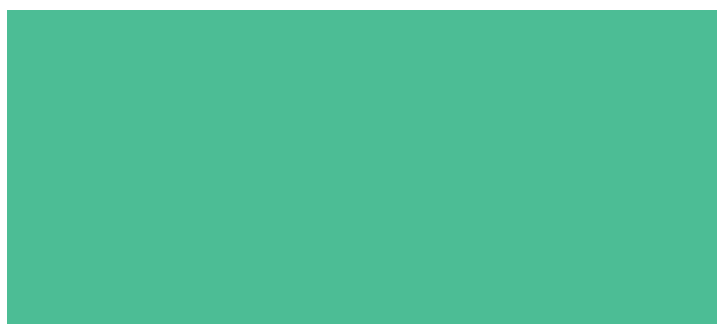
The incident wasn't isolated. Le Na's parents had been struggling to find buyers and often had no choice but to dump the fruits of their labour due to low prices or a bad crop.

Once again, the daughter reached out to help. In 2013, she founded Phu Quy Agricultural Farm JSC so her parents could finally have stable sales. Young Le Na, who was doing her masters in political economy, had no idea she would soon abandon her political ambitions to sell oranges full-time. The more she helped, the more issues emerged for her to resolve.

There were customers who would "forget" to pay or who said the price was too high. Sometimes oranges could fetch as much as VND 140,000 (US\$ 6) per kilo. But then there were days when prices dropped to just VND 2,000 per kilo – too little for farmers to bother selling.







“Many stories of Vietnam’s agriculture can be found in my own story” - Nguyen Thi Le Na.

Left with more questions than answers, Le Na decided to take another leap of faith. She buried herself in books, spoke to farmers and bought 5ha of land from parents and neighbours to conduct experiments. That’s when she learnt about organic farming, industrialised countries’ response to problems that mirror those Vietnam is facing now: toxic fertilisers and pesticides, soil degradation and loss of good seedlings.

But in the backyards of some families that were no longer farming full-time, Le Na managed to find a few remains of Xa Doai oranges, named after a village in Nghe An. This local delicacy is so good, it has even inspired folk sayings and poems.

**Juicy Xa Doai oranges
Drops golden as honey,
Cut open in the front yard
The scent drifts inside.
- Pham Tien Duat -**

Nowadays, Xa Doai oranges are so rare, every fruit is reserved months before harvest. Most other oranges in the area, on the other hand, have become bland. Trees are only fruitful for 10 years, compared to 20 years in the good old days, when nobody knew what industrial fertilisers and pesticides were.

Now, nobody remembers how to farm without chemicals, a phenomenon for which Le Na blames the media and big corporations who for years have instilled in farmers’ minds the idea that chemicals are necessary to achieve high yields and pretty produce that consumers want. Meanwhile, “agricultural engineers are not trained in organic agriculture but rather in what to spray for which worm or disease,” Le Na said.

Indeed, organic farming is still relatively novel in Vietnam, where a decree laying the groundwork for a national organic certification system was passed only in August, 2018.

The dependence on chemicals “is like a religion, a belief” to the point that Le Na’s parents, relatives and neighbours have expressed pity for the journalism graduate and called her “crazy” for trying out organic farming practices she read about in books.

“They [farmers] just need to read in the paper a story about someone earning a billion dong from oranges and they’d grow oranges. Perhaps if [journalists] write that bio oranges sell for VND 50,000 each, they’ll follow suit,” Le Na jokingly said. And while such an article is yet to be seen in the news, Le Na actually did manage to sell her bio oranges – a term she uses to describe her products, which aren’t organic but are certified safe – for that price quite early on. All she needed to do was to package them into a gift set.

So, left alone, Le Na experimented on her own, learning from the last remaining growers of Xa Doai oranges and drawing from Japanese natural farming philosophy, syntropic agriculture that regenerates soil by imitating the Amazon rainforest, and permaculture, which uses the laws of nature to offer applications that work even for urban farming.



Hard work paid off. After two years, in 2015, the Ky Yen oranges Le Na grew in her forest-like orchard were trademarked and certified as in line with Vietnam’s Good Agricultural Practices (VietGAP).

Faced with the next big decision of whether to expand her own orchard or reach out to other farmers, Le Na joined Oxfam’s EFD programme.

“At first, I thought [social enterprise] meant simply doing some charity,” Le Na said. But after working with EFD, “I realised that it’s not like that, but an economic model where you share [risks] with vulnerable people - the most sustainable way to grow and connect with farmers.”

It was a win-win solution for Le Na, as going it alone would have been too risky given the unpredictability of the weather, while

farmers would be more willing to partner with a company that was ready to support them with cultivation and guarantee them a stable output.

And partner they did. After building a loyal customer base in Hanoi, Le Na’s VietGAP-certified oranges made it to reputable supermarket chains. Contracts with credible buyers who paid good prices, visits by EFD’s consultants and an orange processing factory she’d built using foreign grants finally did the trick. Le Na’s company now sources from four VietGAP-certified households and has convinced another 23 to pursue this path.





As farmers took on greater responsibility for the quality of oranges, the “sustainability lesson” remained in Le Na’s mind when she returned to the old dilemma of what to do with “misfits” – perfectly good oranges that aren’t “the right size and shape” by supermarket standards. She was already making orange-inspired products at home – dried oranges, marmalade, soap, essential oils and even mooncakes – but the problem was how to preserve and bring them onto the market. Le Na did what she always has. After a year of trials and tests with Dutch food processing experts she had found through EFD, a new brand emerged to sell the wide range of products: Melorange.

While it’s too early to judge a brand that just launched in 2017, Le Na hasn’t forgotten about the core of her business. She is confident in her approach of working for gradual and simultaneous expansion in the demand for her Melorange products, oranges and her network of VietGAP farmers.

Not only that, Le Na knows exactly where she’s headed. Instead of exporting her products, Le Na wants to invite tourists to her hometown to get a true taste of Xa Doai oranges, the type that inspire people to write poetry.

Lam Giang



II. REVIVING OLD TRADITIONS



When Old Meets New:
**KEEPING
THE FISH SAUCE LEGACY**



Vo Van Dai has been at the forefront of the transformation of the decades-old fish sauce company of Van Phan. He's taken it from a crippled state-owned enterprise to a shining example of a local private firm, providing stable jobs and promoting local branding that pays homage to history and tradition.

He can tell you exactly where the name of Van Phan fish sauce is honoured in Dai Nam Nhat Thong Chi, Vietnam's largest official collection of historical and geographical records, written during the Nguyen dynasty. In fact, the craft region of Van Phan for hundreds of years could claim the top-notch sauce presented to the Kings as a local delicacy.

Van Phan also has a long and proud history as a state-owned company. Founded back in 1947, when Vietnam had just earned her independence from the French, Van Phan was tasked with the vital role of providing economic and financial resources for the social and economic development of the North throughout the Vietnam War.

Yet by the time Dai took over the business in the early 2000s, the legend had almost been lost on the country's fish sauce map.

Instead, what was left for him was a decades-old, crumbling factory that had been designated to be "taken care of" by the government, from its fish inputs to its payroll. ("All we knew was just making fish

sauce on command," Dai said half-jokingly.) And suddenly, the company was scrambling to find buyers and sellers for the product, while the facilities, and labour, too, had aged and proven indifferent to innovation.

And before the company could bend to the joint-stock model, the young engineer found himself voted in as its Deputy Director.

"That took me completely off-guard," Dai, now 54, recalled, "and not in a good way."

Dai had started to work at the Van Phan Fishery Company in 1987, holding the modest position of a security guard. Prior to his first job, he spent four years studying fishery processing in Vietnam's largest port city of Hai Phong.

With his professional expertise, he was quickly promoted to a worker position one year after his recruitment, before being elected deputy manager of the company's workshop in 1992.

But the hardest years were yet to come as Van Phan became the pilot facility of the equitisation model in Nghe An Province in 2000.

Launched in the early 1990s, the economic plan, locally known as equitisation or partial privatisation (cổ phần hoá), transformed a series of SOEs into joint-stock companies to create a more equal playing field in the market.

The early policies built around it were lacking in strong planning for equitisation and ushered in without any support or funding for the transition phase.

“We were literally being thrown into a battle without being armed,” Dai recollected. As the new deputy director, Dai was now in charge of sales and marketing for Van Phan joint stock company.

Being thrown into fierce business competition for the first time, the engineer-turned-deputy-director realised that the old bitter, burning taste of the sauce made it unpalatable to customers, who had started to be presented with a much wider range of choices than they had had in the subsidy era.

Naturally, the first reform decision involved applying new fermentation processes that Dai learnt and developed from other prominent fish sauce makers across the country. Dai was hoping to offer an outstanding product for the upper-end market.

And then, he hit the first road bump.

“The customers were not used to the sweeter taste and the lighter color of the sauce,” Dai shook his head as he revisited the “chaotic days”. “And we failed so many times with the new recipe, our products got sent back for their inconsistent quality. That in turn hurt revenue.”

There were days the business could only earn VND 3 million (US\$ 129) in sales, bringing in a mere VND 90 million a month for its 70 employees.

The shareholders, most of whom were unfamiliar with reforms, questioned the new strategy and demanded the managers steer back to the decades-old “safe” production process.

But Dai, together with a few colleagues in the management board, persisted. The new technologies, he argued, were more efficient and if implemented properly resulted in a better quality sauce with much higher protein content, and hence had higher value and could command a higher price.

To prove his point, Dai went the extra mile by riding his bike across the province for months, to the furthest corners of Nghe An, to convince stores to put the new Van Phan bottles on their shelves.

His effort bore fruit the following year, when Van Phan experienced phenomenal growth of 28 per cent in 2002. Dai took on the role of its director.

Right when he felt everything was getting back on track, Van Phan was hit hard by another turn of events: The factory was forced to spare one hectare, a third of its land, to the municipal government for the construction of a new fishing port. And with it, 2,000 sq meters of Van Phan’s workshop and 500 built-in fermentation tanks were demolished completely.

Production dropped almost immediately, and so did the revenues. The company lost VND 800 million, outnumbering its total share value.

“Many of my key staff left. Nobody believed we could recover,” Dai recalled of the time of devastation.

“But I knew I had dozens of workers’ livelihoods to take care of. I could not just turn my back and leave them.”



From here Dai decided to make the riskiest bet of his life. Against his wife's will, he pledged his own property, 100 sq meters of land in the nearby Dien Chau town, for loans from the bank.

The modest loan, as it turned out, helped him renovate the factory. And piece by piece, Dai revived the company from rubble.

The new fish sauce-making facilities came into shape, designed to promote good hygiene practices, which Dai believed would be a good selling point.

And the better taste and higher quality fish sauce extracted from the new production process helped Van Phan fish sauce sell faster for a higher price, despite the quantity drop during the first few turbulent years.

Trademark registration for the products was the next move for the business. The legendary fish sauce of Van Phan, Dai insisted, was a local specialty everybody could be proud of, and he didn't want to see it fall into the wrong hands.

From a company on the verge of bankruptcy, Van Phan has become the largest traditional fish sauce manufacturing enterprise in Nghe An, producing up to 1.5 million litres a year and sold at 800 stores and supermarkets nationwide.


Meanwhile, its yearly growth has jumped by billions of dong in revenue. In 2014, revenue reached a record of VND 12 billion, and has rocketed to VND 18 billion at present. Dai now has his eye on earning VND 20 billion by 2020.

In 2015, Van Phan fish sauce became a national representative of industrial-agricultural products.

Shortly afterwards, Dai was introduced to Oxfam's EFD programme.

"The programme's experts came all the way to visit the company," he said, stretching out his arms as if to convey the distance, "and helped us develop not only detailed development and management plans, but the organisational culture needed to implement them."





Dai and his workers were encouraged that Van Phan could become more than a local, small-scale business - that they can make an impact on the community.

At the top of the director's agenda is the number of jobs Van Phan can provide, with two thirds of them assigned to female workers.

The manufacturing company has downsized its administrative personnel to ensure efficiency, and most of the 70 employees are instead in the workshop. They enjoy a stable income of a minimum of VND 6.5 million a month.

Dai has also encouraged his former and retired workers to become Van Phan's salespeople in stores in and outside of Nghe An province. "That would reduce work pressure for them, while guaranteeing their livelihood even when some of them are above working age," he said.

The network so far has expanded to nearly 150 people.

Not only women formerly working for Van Phan have benefited from the business. A few years ago, Dai undertook another unique distribution initiative via local women's unions in Nghe An Province.

It started when the union of a neighbouring commune of Dien Tho came to him for help with their funding.

"I decided to support them with our available resource: our products," Dai said.

The company signed a contract with the union, providing them tens of millions of dong worth of fish sauce with zero deposit required. For every bottle the union could sell, they would get to keep 12 per cent of the value.

"For the first batch they were able to raise VND 5 million, an amount their accountant said she had never held in her hands," Dai recalled.

The union's fund now collects on average of VND 30 million a year, compared to the modest annual budget of VND 2 million, from the sale of Van Phan products, helping them sponsor programmes supporting women.

"It's a win-win for everyone," Dai said. "These unions have a sustainable source of funding while we have access to more local customers."

Dai's next mission is to revive the seemingly lost reputation of the Van Phan region as a giant in the fish sauce industry.

"I want everybody to mention Van Phan as a source of delicious and distinctive fish sauce, like Phu Quoc," Dai said of his ambitious plan. "And we do have the potential to become one, as we have always been one."

Phuong Nhung





The FAMILY CRAFT



In the district of Nga Son, the downtown area consists of an unfinished bridge, a largely empty two-storey market, concrete houses with closed doors and streets roamed by middle-aged farmers and their grandkids. Although there are no house numbers and Google Maps isn't much of a help here, getting around couldn't be easier. Every facility is the only one of its kind – “the hotel”, “the market”, “the school”, “the big street”.

This tiny concrete hub, Nga Son town, is the capital of a 150-square-kilometer area covered by rice paddies and seagrass meadows in north central Thanh Hoa province. Though it has eight kilometers of coastline, Nga Son district boasts not pristine beaches but rather swamps and agricultural land permeated with saline water. For over 100 years, seagrass and rice have been its two main crops. While rice struggles to thrive in this coastal swamp land, the seagrass grows to be the best of its kind – coi bong trang with its white roots, even round stems and great plasticity.

Most residents of this coastal district have been part of the seagrass trade, and although some own a few acres of rice, the fear of famine never really leaves Nga Son farmers. Seagrass, apart from being a plant sensitive to diseases, weather changes and degrading soil health, belongs to a niche market that is also vulnerable and challenging for Vietnamese farmers. From the time they are born, Nga Son residents are left with just a few unsavoury choices: plant low-yield rice, gamble with the seagrass trade, risk their fortune in the morbid scams of rural tontines, or leave their hometown.

A handicraft guru born in Nga Son who has never left the land for 66 years, Tran Thi Viet has lived through it all. Daughter of migrant northerners who held onto their seagrass fields through the violent days of the French resistance, Viet grew up mastering the art of splitting seagrass strands and weaving sedge

mats. As the government lifted the ban on private businesses in 1986, Viet jumped at the chance to open her seagrass exporting company and flourished within five years trading with a single market – the Soviet Union. But as risky as planting a monocrop, relying on a “monomarket” soon took its toll on Viet and other Nga Son farmers. In 1991, the Soviet Union collapsed, leaving Viet with tons of unsold mattresses and a giant sum of debt.

“People were desperate. Back then losing money to tontine scams already made things difficult, and losing the Soviet Union market meant losing their bowl of rice,” Viet recalled on a scorching afternoon in her home and handicraft workshop. Unlike her farmers, Viet had no one from whom to collect money, so she paid back her debt to the seagrass growers with everything she had. “I was so surprised they took my chairs and tables, pots and pans, even a broken bowl,” Viet chuckled. Across Nga Son, farmers chopped off their seagrass hoping low-yield rice would save them from starvation. It couldn't. In 1991 Nga Son still lacked a proper irrigation system, so famine loomed large. Viet recalled an exodus out of some villages across Nga Son following that fateful year. “It was the first and heaviest blow to our industry,” she said.

That same year, Viet gave birth to her fifth daughter, Mai Anh Dao. The backbone of a family of seven, five daughters and a disabled veteran husband, Viet quit trading seagrass to sell pork and cement, hoping to scrape by until she could find a new market. Two years later, Viet got back into the trade with a contract selling sedge mattresses to the Vietnamese army. “I was alive again,” Viet recalled.

In Nga Son, seagrass was back in a few people's backyards. A year later the trade was revived as some traders in the region, including Viet, were able to connect with

Chinese traders. The whole district, once again, relied heavily on a single market. Prices fluctuated most of the time, and despite forming a seagrass handicraft association to deal with price pressure, Viet and Nga Son traders still failed to escape the manipulative hands of Chinese importers. The second blow came during the global recession in 2007-2008. Once again, Nga Son farmers were forced to chop off their seagrass. In one commune where rice can't be grown, Nga Tan, the local authority had to come to rescue with charity food.

"People pretty much lost their faith in seagrass," Viet remembered. "When the Chinese market dropped the price too low, both farmers and traders quit." According to Viet, there were up to 36 seagrass companies in Nga Son at the industry's peak. Now she's left fighting the battle alone.

Viet is now entering her 32nd year in the seagrass trade, longer than anyone who's ever lived in Nga Son. She calls herself an entrepreneur, an artisan, a farmer, an accountant, and sometimes a security guard. In both her home and her company, Viet has been a woman of many roles – many she was born with, some she's taken on along the way, and some she went out of her way to learn. In early 2010, her company Viet Trang was the first in the region to export handicrafts directly to Japan, the first step towards escaping the danger of single market. Viet has taken on the position of her Vietnamese middleman, who passed away, to trade directly with her Japanese partner – which means all the export duties now fall on her shoulders.

“I didn't even know what an invoice or a CO [certificate of origin] was,”

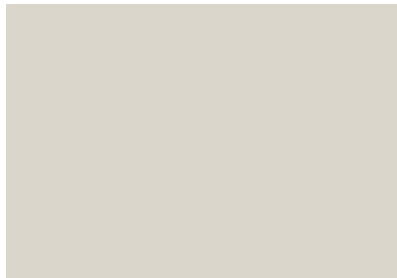
Viet chuckled, recollecting days walking to the customs office asking for help with English customs documents, about which the 58-year-old knew nothing whatsoever. But she learned and became her own clerk, and so it was with accounting, design, customer service, marketing, sales and everything else that needed doing at the company.

At 66, Viet has now mastered the definition of invoices and certificates of origin, as well as thousands of code names for handicraft goods. Her mats, rugs, poufs and baskets are now exported to 14 countries worldwide, including Italy, the Czech Republic, United Kingdom, Netherlands, Spain and the United States. Thanks to the recent help of her three daughters and one son-in-law, who were inspired by their mother's perseverance, Viet no longer has to play every role like she used to. She's still the housekeeper, the farmer, the director, the production overseer and the designer. She lives, cooks and works everyday with 25 full-time workers and a network of over 500 seasonal weavers, who are mostly in their 50s and call her by the affectionate nickname 'grandma'.



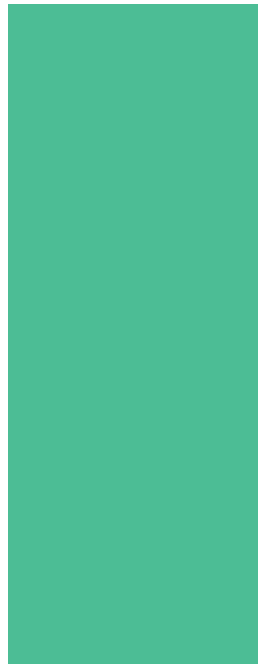


Viet is growing old, and so are other skillful artisans in Nga Son. She will teach anyone who wants to learn the craft for free and encourages villagers to become strand splitters or weavers to earn more side money. “Grandma would buy anything from craftspeople, even when it rains for days straight and the baskets get moldy,” said Hien, a 40-year-old worker. Nowadays a full-time worker and a seasonal weaver for Viet Trang earn approximately VND 4 million (USD\$170) a month, near the average national income. But the fear of a crash in the industry, though lessened by the expansion of Viet Trang’s markets, still lingers, and most families now cultivate rice crops as a



backup source of income. The biggest challenge for Viet and her company remains unchanged: creating stable jobs and regaining farmers’ faith.

As Viet’s three daughters just stepped up their roles in 2016, the company is still taking baby steps in business management, which is crucial for maintaining smooth operations and attracting more skilled workers. For Viet, EFD’s training came at an important time — it paved the way for her company to become a synchronised and stable operation, and her daughters, as the company’s future leaders, benefited greatly. In 2016, the Oxfam programme supported Viet Trang with intensive





export business management training, which helped Dao, Viet's youngest daughter and market strategist, successfully connect Viet Trang with markets in the EU and the US and increase the company's profits by 20 per cent.

Viet Trang is now the last seagrass business standing strong in Nga Son, which Viet admits is a journey not all farmers and rural entrepreneurs in Vietnam are lucky enough to take. Yet the journey is possible for women of many minds like Viet, and possible for the underdogs of the handicraft trade in Vietnam.

Minh Trang



Resurrecting **A CENTURIES-OLD SILK VILLAGE**



For centuries, women in Nam Cao village of Thai Binh province in the Red River Delta have been weaving tussar silk, which has a rougher texture and is more durable than the popular and softer mulberry silk. Thanks to these qualities, Nam Cao's silk has been used to make clothes, first for locals and then expanding abroad, from France during the colonial period, to the Soviet Union in the 1980s, to Thailand, Laos and Cambodia in the 1990s.

After the turn of the century, however, Nam Cao's industry went quiet. The village's signature sound – the pounding of pedal-powered looms – was fading into oblivion. What was once every woman's job became a past-time for just a few elderly women. Young people were leaving for factories or city jobs that provided better pay. With demand seemingly gone, nobody saw any future in weaving silk.

Nobody but Luong Thanh Hanh, the owner of a furniture business in Hanoi, who in 2014 travelled to many famous artisan villages in Vietnam in search of new fabric. Hanh was hoping to launch her own brand for curtains and bedding, after encouragement from clients who noticed her knack for design.

Nam Cao village was her favourite. “The village had a spirit and people were absorbed in their work because it was their passion. They didn't do it just for the money because the daily pay was very low,” Hanh, 34, said of her first impression of Nam Cao, which eventually led her to establish Hanh Silk in 2014, a brand for Vietnamese silk products.



“Also, the ladies have really dexterous hands,” Hanh added. In Nam Cao, it is customary for mothers to pass the art of weaving silk down to their daughters. The ladies whom Hanh first met, some in their 40s, 50s and even 80s, had been weaving silk since they were teenage girls.

But with the next generation of women away, Hanh had to act fast to save the tradition. First she needed to save the tools and looms that were being thrown out or used as firewood to cook *banh chung*, a traditional Vietnamese new year cake.

Then came the hard part: building the value chain. While the women had the weaving skills, their output didn't have consistent quality due to the absence of a comprehensive standard. The cocoons they used were also of questionable quality and sources.



The easier path at that stage would have been to simply import good quality silk. Yet the designer-at-heart found real inspiration in the rustic Nam Cao village, which she felt should be preserved.

“I want my customers to really know where my products come from,” she added.



Her instincts were right. Just last year, trust in Vietnamese products hit rock bottom when the country’s renowned high-end silk brand turned out to be a scam. Inspectors found no silk in its products, which were actually Chinese counterfeits.

Back in Nam Cao, step by step, Hanh restored locals’ faith in the village’s silk. She teamed up with the Vietnam Sericulture Research Centre and 20 households farming silkworms to deliver good quality cocoons. For Nam Cao artisans, Hanh introduced new specifications for threads and through a cooperative, pledged to purchase all the silk.

It worked. Inspired by Nam Cao women’s dedication and Vietnam’s natural beauty, Hanh’s creative process flourished. Together with a painter, they transformed the silk into not only curtains and beddings, but also expanded into fashion, making one-of-a-kind dresses and suits. Nam Cao fabrics also found their way back onto the export market and have been sold in Thailand, South Korea, Japan and The Netherlands.

Today, the good old sound of weaving can once again be heard from afar during the cocoon season, when 100, sometimes even 200 households get together to make silk. Elderly women once again can supplement their incomes from farming with weaving, which pays VND 2-3 million (US\$ 86-129) each month.

But as Hanh Silk started to grow, so has the sheer volume of work. Hanh started to realise it was no longer a passion project and if she wanted the brand to survive, it needed a business makeover. That's how she learned about Oxfam's EFD programme, which offered her training in human resource management, business strategy and finance.

Staffing had been an especially critical issue for the company. Since day one, building Hanh Silk was a lonely and somewhat spontaneous undertaking for Hanh, who struggled to retain staff because she didn't know how to allocate work. She only hired a project manager just before joining EFD in 2017, to later add an accountant, a designer and a salesperson.

As the company is being restructured, Hanh, who is full of ideas, will have the resources

to launch new products in 2019: a cocoon spa, silk shoes and a collaboration with a fashion designer.

Hanh will also have more time for the women of Nam Cao and its future as an artisan village. Weaving remains just a supplementary income source for mostly elderly women who stay at home. To keep the craft alive, Hanh needs to be able to attract the younger generation, which means being able to compete with factories that pay double what one currently earns in a good month weaving silk.

"This means my business needs to keep growing," said Hanh, dressed in one of her own designs, an abstract pattern inspired by the sunset in Nam Cao. "I want [weaving] to become a proper job."

Lam Giang





INDIGENOUS REVIVAL

Growing up in a Muong community, Dinh Thi Huyen always wondered why her people were so poor. The third-largest minority group in Vietnam, the Muong inhabit the better part of Hoa Binh, a northern province rich with timber, medicinal plants and wild fisheries. Yet it remains among the provinces with highest poverty rate, 13.4 per cent, while the national rate is only 5.8 per cent.^[1]

There is no easy answer to Huyen's simple question. As her uncle once put it, "We know that we can be rich, we just don't know how." The "how" question has haunted the 36-year-old entrepreneur since she first moved to Hanoi for college. She chose to major in social sciences and soon got in touch with a circle of agricultural researchers and NGOs. She was determined to find a way to lift her homeland out of poverty. Yet around the time of graduation, the idea of starting something on her own was still too overwhelming, so she took the common path for Vietnamese college graduates: get a job in PR and start a family.

It would take Huyen another 10 years to ditch her corporate dresses and taxi rides for a "street ninja" suncoat and motorcycle carts full of grapefruit. "I remember thinking everyone would laugh," Huyen chuckled. "Even my husband is so used to me being clean and ladylike, it was difficult for him to see me

in the tacky clothes of a farmer." In 2015, Huyen quit her PR job at a corporate firm to start Farm Food, a social enterprise backed by Northwest Cooperation Development Centre (NWD), an NGO she also founded in 2011. "My main job is basically finding specialty indigenous seedlings, restoring traditional farming methods which are often maintained by ethnic minority communities, and trying to sell the organic products to environmentally and socially concerned customers," Huyen explained.

Huyen's quest to find out how to help her people get rich had really begun in 2011 with the NWD, when trips to impoverished northern provinces to work on the NGO's development projects gave her the very first clues. The northern mountains, including Hoa Binh, her hometown, are known nationwide for several specialties – for example, the Hmong people's tiny wild pig, the Dao people's soft Seng Cu rice and the bamboo shoots of the Dien Bien forests. Huyen's trips showed her there were many more. From the giant cyprinid fish ca dam xanh that only appears in Da River, the hundred-year-old seedless persimmon in the northern province of Bac Kan, to the katuk leaves grown in higher mountains in Phu Tho, 100 kilometers from Hanoi – these one-of-a-kind specialties are easily worth 10 times more than their staple versions sold in Hanoi supermarkets.



“These specialty foods already have a reputation. I believe the goal here is how to expand the market and not get caught up in a development crisis like tourism in Sapa^[2],” Huyen explained. What these specialties all have in common is that not just that they are rare, but that most are exclusive to one or two ethnic minorities, who know the ins and outs of the mountains and rivers they have inhabited for centuries and have developed their own traditional farming methods unknown to the majority Vietnamese ethnic group. For example, only Tay people who call the Da River home know exactly when and where to net the giant cyprinid fish ca dam xanh, a kind that only eats seaweed and tastes unforgettable when prepared on the grill. Decades before chemical fertilisers arrived, Thai people in Yen Bai province picked varieties from their own rice fields, stored them dry at home so the special rice types could increase their disease resistance over generations, and created the famous Seng Cu rice of today. The tiny wild pigs lon cap nach are also raised exclusively by Hmong people, while ancient seedless persimmon trees have been preserved and nurtured for centuries by Thai people in Bac Kan.

For a moment, Huyen believed she had the key to her childhood question - these local products could lift ethnic communities out of poverty. Then her trips also taught her the ugly truth: many native species are disappearing. “Farmers, for example in the northern border province of Lai Chau, don’t want low rice yields, even if it’s the highly sought-after kind like Seng Cu,” Huyen explained. To maintain their high value, most specialty products can’t be adapted for large-scale farming, not to mention they often require extra labour and intensive care. “It’s disheartening to see that from paddies on the outskirts of Hanoi to remote northern rice fields, native rice is being replaced by Chinese - or Thai-origin plants,” Huyen exclaimed. “In Lang Son, one of the





home provinces for Seng Cu rice, we even saw farmlands abandoned, but people are still willing to buy vegetables from [Red River] Delta provinces.”

With high-yield, foreign-origin crops come foreign fertilisers, pesticides and international certificates.

“When you are too dependent on foreign products, you are extremely vulnerable to even a tiny shift of price in the market,” Huyen remarked. “You can’t build a strong, independent agriculture sector.”

Having been in the agriculture business for almost 10 years, she partly blames the presence of foreign corporations and the government’s prioritisation of intensive, large-scale farming. “Up until now with propaganda and advertisements, I think Vietnamese farmers, especially vulnerable communities like ethnic people, have lost faith in themselves and their centuries-old farming methods,” Huyen concluded. “After constantly being told one thing, they forgot what is right and what is wrong.”

“I’m not undermining mass production,” Huyen claimed, “but I think there should be someone around to save these indigenous species.” Huyen believes there’s still a niche market for organic food produced by a network of vulnerable communities and not only by large corporations, though she has been told that it’s suicidal to pursue the goals

she's set for herself. Luckily, Huyen has her seniors' support. "Several elders in remote villages are actually eager to come back to their traditional farming methods, providing that I could guarantee their output," Huyen told me.

Today Huyen's Farm Food partners directly with 60 households in Yen Bai, Lang Son and Hoa Binh; all are ethnic minorities. Farmers provide indigenous specialties like Seng Cu rice, seedless persimmon or rare fish and seafood, which are then distributed through two channels - first, wholesaling to schools, organic shops and supermarkets and secondly, retailing through Farm Food's organic shops in densely populated areas in Hanoi.

Years of doing social work put Huyen on a sustainable track – limiting the role of third parties as plant breeds are taken from trusted agricultural research centres, fertilisers are prohibited in organic products and a developing self-certification system, PGS, is introduced to farmers. FarmFood is taking on all the packaging, sales and marketing as a third party – and that's where EFD training came in handy. "Without marketing and sales, which we're still very weak at and for which Oxfam's training was very much needed, everything would just be a dream," Huyen admitted.


For Dinh Thi Huyen, there's always a thin line between helping and exploiting when it comes to development. While organic farming is now in fashion, it still poses the danger of putting farmers in the same outsourcing cycle they experienced with intensive farming, in which foreign companies provide the seedlings, fertilisers and certificates and just rely on local labour. In local communities where vegetables, meat and fish can be sold directly to local markets, Huyen is carrying out training to help reduce the imbalanced distribution of imported goods, while increasing access to safe local food starting with local consumers. "Deep down inside, it is also my selfish concern, as a mother, that I don't want my kids to eat tainted food that could cause infertility or cancer in the future," Huyen shared.

Answering the "how" question, in a sustainable and socially responsible way, is still a complex challenge for Huyen, but this is certainly a start.

Minh Trang

^[1] Vietnam General Statistics Office Data, 2016.

^[2] A popular trekking destination located in the Hoang Lien Son mountains of northern Vietnam



“Deep down inside, it is also my selfish concern, as a mother, that I don’t want my kids to eat tainted food that could cause infertility or cancer in the future.”





III. MAKING A NAME FOR VIETNAMESE PRODUCTS

Building trust

FOR COCONUT-FIBER CARPETS FROM TRA VINH



A diesel-powered boat laden with thousands of coconuts waltzed over the milk-chocolate surface of the Cai Hop River one early morning in July.

“It must be heading to Ben Tre,” one worker at Ut Mung factory said, staring out as he stood on the cement floor of its port built on the bank. “Every single coconut boat passing this area sells the fruits to Ms Thuy here. Those that don’t must be doing business for factories in the other place.”

“The other place” the man referred to is the country’s coconut capital of Ben Tre, which for decades has been mass-producing all kinds of commodities made from the fruits, from candies to handicraft souvenirs and cosmetics.

But here in neighbouring Tra Vinh, the above-mentioned Nguyen Thi Kim Thuy has established her own empire of coconuts, setting up by herself the largest coir carpet manufacturer in the province. Her family-run business everyday loads off at least 36,000 coconuts to its backyard port, and sends out nearly 300 tons of thick brown rugs every month.

“Yet just three years ago I almost shut it down after my divorce,” Thuy said, her voice surprisingly soft for a woman who shoulders the livelihoods of hundreds of families across the province.



Thuy married young at the age of 19 to Ut Mung, a man four years her senior. Her parents decided years earlier that she, being a girl, had little prospect of having a career or even making a living of her own, so Thuy quit school at the age of 13 and started learning the home-based job of clothes tailoring instead.

Even in the 1990s, it was common for women like Thuy in the Mekong Delta to be destined to play a supporting role to their husbands, who would work as the breadwinner and act as the family’s head.

The couple spent their first 10 years of marriage zig-zagging on a wooden boat around the Mekong Delta rivers, buying and selling everything they could to put food on the table. Their two daughters were born on board during those years of life on the water.

In 1996, after the couple were tricked by several wholesalers and eventually lost all the money needed to keep trading, Ut Mung came up with a new business idea. Several coconut carpet manufacturers in Ben Tre told him the demand for the material was high, and anyone could make a fortune by joining the supply chain.

Tra Vinh, although less known than its neighbour for the hard-shell fruit, was also covered in vast coconut plantations. In fact, it is the country's second-largest coconut-growing province, but little of the fruit is put into local production. Instead most of the harvest is loaded on boats to be sold elsewhere as raw material. And as traders were busy hunting for the inner part of the fruit for the juice and pulp inside, the outer coats usually got discarded.

"We would buy the husks and harvest the coir only," Thuy said of their first day in business. The couple invested all their savings into extracting coconut fiber to sell to workshops in Ben Tre.

But it was harder than it looked; and things stumbled at the start. Sellers unloaded thousands of husks, but the numbers they reported to the couple were much higher. With so many husks, the couple couldn't count them all to confirm what they were getting. They soon found that the numbers didn't add up as they suffered losses deal after deal.

The couple switched their strategy to control the input: instead of buying the outer coats only, they purchased the whole fruits, and could verify the number of husks by the number of seeds they sold later to traders.

What's more, Thuy and her husband could profit from the trade of coconut seeds as well.

By the time they established their small family-owned workshop out of the fiber extraction business in 2001, they had been able to recruit a dozen of locals to work for them.

"My husband took charge of what I call 'external works', like finding and meeting clients, while I was at home running the factory operation," Thuy said.

A few years later, they moved up the supply chain of the carpet industry. Thuy learnt and then taught several of her neighbours the making of coconut yarns to better secure the output for her factory. Manufacturers in Ben Tre agreed to take in their products as materials for the warp and weft of rugs and mats.

In 2009, Ut Mung Ltd Co. was opened with VND 6 billion (US\$ 267,000) in charter capital. And from 2015, the company was no longer a material supplier, but became a coconut carpet manufacturer itself, sending the products to exporters in Ben Tre.

It was a risky move on Thuy's part. While the price of the final product is usually fixed, that of the coconuts constantly jumps up and down. "Whenever the Chinese traders come to mass-purchase the fruits, the demand inflates in no time," Thuy said. "I would struggle finding the input to fuel production."

Yet she was determined to push forward in the business adventure, as moving up the value chain means higher profits for the company and better-paid jobs for locals.

The carpets, she heard, are used in South Korea as coverings for floors, staircases and



even garden paths, to stamp down the grass growth and to make walking surfaces less slippery during the winter.

The brand laid dormant for the following year, however. Thuy's husband became aloof from his external tasks of finding clients, leaving her to battle with a large amount of unsold carpets piling up in the storage unit.

In 2016, their 27-year marriage ended suddenly, leaving Thuy quivering. The business was hit as well when one of its two owners pulled out. In the following three months, profits plunged by hundreds of millions of dong and the company almost went out of business.

Thuy, after years in the back seat of what she thought of as her man's success car, had a hard time adjusting to finding herself behind the wheel.

The new role, however, also presented the 46-year-old with life-changing opportunities: as one of a few women in business in the

province, she was selected by the municipal authorities to go to Canada for a short course on entrepreneurship empowerment.

"I was in awe seeing women in the host country's startups speaking with confidence, showing how they run their company to success," the Mekong Delta-born businesswoman recalled of her first overseas trip (and in fact, her first time flying) with evident excitement. "And I thought, 'What the heck have I been doing in those last months?'"

Returning home, Thuy committed to pull her trembling business back from the verge of closing down.

“I knew nothing of those external works, but I was willing to learn from the start,” she said.



Resuming the work at the factory, Thuy spent more time at expo manufacturing events to introduce Ut Mung's products and tried to get in touch with prominent coconut carpet importers in the Mekong Delta.

To make her brand stand out in the market, which for years has been dominated by Ben Tre manufacturers, Thuy offers closer-knitted rugs with longer durability. "I made the best out of the fact that I can control the quality at every phase of the production, from the fiber to the yarns,"

Thuy said. And indeed, she found use of her understanding of the production as leverage in business negotiations. "One can easily see our products are denser, weighing on average 65 kilogrammes each, while others' can be only 60 kilogrammes at max." The quality difference soon drew in South Korean clients, who travelled all the way to visit Ut Mung factory, and left with signed contracts.

Thuy recruited more local workers to increase production in response to new demands. As each hand-woven carpet



requires the heavy manual labour of two people, Thuy asked her workers, most of whom were female, to convince their husbands to join them as a team. “Some men presumed the weaving was a ‘women’s job,’” Thuy said, “so it was not easy to persuade them at first.” Couples that eventually chose to work for her currently earn a salary together ranging from VND 8 to 17 million at the end of the month. Aside from the 200 in-factory workers, Ut Mung Company also outsources and offers stable income for 115 households around Tra Vinh, the Mekong Delta’s most

impoverished province. Among them are a dozen Khmer families in the neighbouring commune of Binh Phu, for whom Thuy went the extra mile to help them obtain yarn weaving machines for their work. “If needed, we now can fill two 40ft containers in just two days, the quickest in the Delta,” she said.

In 2017, Thuy started to adopt major changes in management, starting from assigning tasks to her other family members and trusted employees. “That was the first lesson I learnt from the business management coaching of the EFD programme,” she said. “Just a few months earlier, I couldn’t even leave the house for one day or the company would fall apart.” Thuy also practiced accounting software to track the business’ financial health, from invoices to expenses to day-to-day dealing. Her next goal is to enhance her brand identity, working on the slogan and more distinctive packaging. “I am aiming to find more overseas customers, and the tag of ‘Made in Vietnam’ attached to the rugs is obviously not enough,” she said, explaining that she plans to supplement the small label with a new Ut Mung logo.

Thuy also dismissed the idea of changing the company’s name from that of her husband, saying that that could potentially hurt the branding she has worked hard to put on the expo map.

But by early 2018 when the divorce process was completed, Ut Mung company was registered under Thuy’s sole management, with 30 billion Vietnamese dong in charter capital.

Phuong Nhung

*Special
Vietnamese tea*

FOR VIETNAMESE PEOPLE





The road to Ta Xua, home to Vietnam's 10th highest peak, reaching 2,865 meters above sea level, is not for the faint-hearted. The six-hour journey northwest of Hanoi becomes windier and steeper as one gets closer to the destination, with each turn promising a surprise. It could be a vast view of paddy fields and green mountains, a line of buffalos led by a H'Mong farmer or, if it rained recently, a mud hole that takes a skilled driver and a special kind of engine to overcome.

Youngsters take the journey for the thrill and the breathtaking view that has earned the area the title of cloud's heaven.

Nguyen Thi Tham makes the Hanoi - Ta Xua journey regularly for a different reason: a tea factory. She's been in the business for two decades, running one of Vietnam's biggest tea export companies. The tea in Ta Xua in Son La province, however, is Tham's special new venture that officially kicked off in 2015. Unlike most Vietnamese tea, the final product isn't headed for the Middle East to be processed, repackaged and sold without a trace of its origin.

“This [tea] tree is very precious. A treasure of Vietnamese people should be enjoyed by Vietnamese first.” - Tham.

The tea sourced from Ta Xua belongs to rare centuries-old snow shan trees that can only be found on top of mountains in northern Vietnam and southern China. These ancient trees, hidden behind clouds at the elevation of 1,200 meters or higher, are among the few plants in the area able to survive the frost that comes every year during harsh winters.

Come spring and summer, in the early mornings H'Mong ethnic women native to Ta Xua head up to the highest and farthest points with baskets on their backs. Inside is a lunch box containing glutinous rice and fermented young bamboo sticks. Their journey of several kilometers along dirt-filled rocky paths, up and down steep slopes takes them to the snow shan trees that have been passed down in their families for generations. They spend the day climbing up shan branches covered in white bark to hand pick the youngest tea leaves. Only buds with one or at most two leaves are accepted, for they deliver the most refined taste.

“It's light, very sweet, and especially, when you drink it, your body just relaxes,” said Tham as she poured the shan tea into tiny cups from a teapot, all made of clay, which is said to enhance the flavour. The sweetness Tham speaks of is not from sugar, but an aftertaste that lingers in the mouth for as long as half an hour.

The tea is no hidden gem. On the other side of the border, Chinese farmers have long capitalised on the ancient shan tree. Vietnamese tea companies have known about it all along, but given that the trees grow in some of the country's most impoverished and remote areas, with limited to no electricity, investing there was not seen as worth the effort.

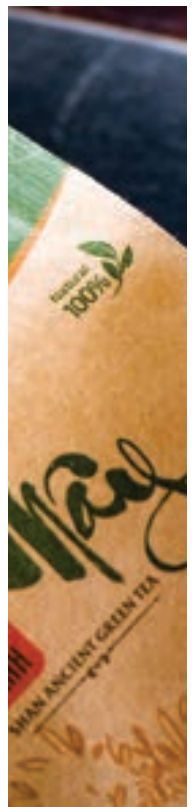
Like other commodities, Vietnamese tea is mainly cultivated for export as raw material. To stay profitable, companies bet on quantity, shipping 20-40 tonnes of tea each week to Middle Eastern countries. Dependence on just one region is risky, however. The market collapsed in 2003, when the U.S. invaded Iraq, previously Vietnam's largest export destination.

Without a brand, there's no way for Tham to know who her end customers are, what they think about the tea and whether they'd purchase it again. Tham sees no sustainable

future with such a model and believes Vietnamese companies, sooner or later, will need to find ways to build their own brands and a loyal customer base in new, more demanding markets. With an already well-established export business, Tham felt she could afford to take the risk with snow shan tea to benefit from the first-mover advantage.

Tham and her husband-cum-business partner Khanh spent seven years surveying potential tea-growing areas, from the northern to central highlands, to find Vietnam's most exquisite tea. They estimate Vietnam has around 7,000 ha of snow shan tea growing naturally up in the northern mountains. But they set out for one of the highest and most remote spots in Ta Xua. Tham was confident that with her experience, the family should leave the "easier" areas for other investors.

Khanh, her husband, has in fact been living among the H'Mong tribes and other



ethnic minorities in Son La province for 17 years, getting to know the people, learning their language and studying tea varieties to identify the purest species. He recalls acquaintances questioning his choice to leave Hanoi for a hut on top of a mountain. Perhaps he was secretly growing opium poppies, they joked, referring to the H'Mong people's main source of income before the practice became illegal.

The long incubation period was absolutely necessary, the couple said. Everything costs four times more up in Ta Xua than in the plains. Gaining the support of the local government was vital, for the road up the mountain was unpaved and there was no electricity until two years ago, when Tham and Khanh finally built a processing plant – one year after the couple officially established North West Tea and Specialty Limited Company (TAFOOD) dealing exclusively in snow shan tea.

But the remoteness of the site also meant

employees for the new company had to be recruited entirely from locals, as no one from the plains would be willing to make a move. Meanwhile, there were virtually no locals who were “qualified” in the traditional sense, i.e. people with the right experience or even education. Not only do most villagers in Ta Xua not study beyond high school, many are illiterate and speak little Vietnamese.

The H'Mong people's philosophy of life also differs vastly from the more profit- and efficiency-oriented majority Kinh people. “Work is not a serious undertaking, their life is more important,” Tham said. One could call it a coping mechanism for the hardships of living in the mountains. The cold weather and rocky terrain allow only one rice harvest each year, leaving households susceptible to hunger. To this day, some families still have to rely on government rations.

“Why do I have to pick tea today? Can't it wait? The leaves will still be on the tree tomorrow,” was a common response Tham heard during trainings. H'Mong people have been harvesting tea for years on an ad hoc basis for additional income. The 25-year-old Mua Thi Tong, who grew up picking tea leaves with her mother, remembers walking down 13 kilometers to the nearest town to sell excess tea. Sometimes unknown merchants would come directly to them, but not always with good prices or intentions. Scams and bogus seedlings have led to growing distrust against newcomers.

Tham and her husband had to go to great lengths to earn locals' trust. They had to demonstrate different varieties of teas and different development stages of tea buds to show the resulting differences in taste. They also paid more than other traders. A harvest consisting of buds with one leaf fetches VND 60,000 (US\$ 2.6) per kilo while a harvest of buds with two leaves fetches VND 40,000. Before, merchants would pay only VND 12,000 per kilo of fresh tea.



Step by step, they proved that they truly cared for snow shan tea and wanted to protect it. When TAFOOD was founded in 2015, Tong, then a recent graduate of a college for kindergarten teachers, was at the crossroads. There was no teaching vacancy in or around Ta Xua. Tong could either harvest tea like everyone else or try managing the tea factory.

Tong's decision to eventually join the factory was monumental. As one of the few H'Mong people in Ta Xua who spoke fluent Vietnamese, she became a bridge between TAFOOD and locals, entrusted with training farmers and monitoring output and finances.

The language barrier was no longer an impediment to employing additional people to operate the factory and run the kitchen that serves tourists staying at a recently opened hostel next door. So after three years, the factory team expanded to include three other H'Mong locals.

Now that TAFOOD buys tea from 300 households covering an area of 200ha —

enough to produce two tonnes of tea per day up from just 20 kg in the early days — the prime concern for Tham is marketing. With 20 years in the business, she was initially confident, until she joined Oxfam's EFD programme, which she jokingly compares to a tailor-made solution for businesses.

"Many businesses don't actually know their weak points. Initially, I thought I wasn't that bad, until I started attending [EFD] classes. Then I realised how clueless I was," Tham said.

After consultation sessions on management, branding and marketing, the tea company operations are running more smoothly; branding and packaging plans for snow shan tea varieties are all done.

For marketing, Tham wants to take it slowly. She doesn't have the funds for a flashy TV commercial. Instead, she wants to get the tea to supermarkets and organise tea tasting events, with her office as the starting point.

"I'm sure people will buy the tea once they taste it," Tham said.

A buyer from Hong Kong recently expressed interest in importing the snow shan tea. But Tham, determined to succeed in Vietnam first, declined.

Lam Giang



*Helping Vietnamese Cinnamon
and Star-aniseed*

TAKE OFF



Vietnam's spice trade is lucrative. The country has consistently been among the world's top five exporters of cinnamon and, together with southeastern China, is the native land of star anise. But the success hasn't translated to prosperity for farmers in the northern highlands, who have been cultivating the trees for generations.

Most of the profits have been going to merchants and export companies. Farmers have spoken of merchants who capitalise on their desperate need for cash to pay below-market prices, with tricks including high-interest loans the farmers take out to invest in new plants. The lack of long-term contracts has also exposed farmers to market fluctuations.

Authorities and development organisations saw a solution in building quality local brands that could command higher prices for everyone along the value chain. That meant transforming the way the businesses have operated for decades, from cultivation practices to processing and packaging to meet strict international specifications.

Most companies have been reluctant to change, which requires million-dollar investments. But in the northern highlands, life has recently taken a new turn for the Dao and majority Kinh people growing cinnamon in Yen Bai province and the Tay and Nung ethnic minorities growing star anise in Lang Son.

They have teamed up with spice export company VINASAMEX to go organic.

It all started in 2015. At the time, VINASAMEX was trading cinnamon and star anise like any other spice exporter in Vietnam. Sales were going strong, but by the end of the year, then-26-year-old CEO Nguyen Thi Huyen realised the company was running a loss. It was a wake-up call: reliance on only two low-end markets, Bangladesh and India, was too risky.

Around the same time, Huyen discovered at international expos a vast high-end market for her spices in the EU, USA, South Korea and Japan... It opened a whole new world to the former English major, who parted with her childhood dream of becoming a teacher to establish VINASAMEX in 2012 with her husband Nguyen Que Anh.

The key to entering these high-end markets was understanding the product, delivering only the highest-quality spices and obtaining organic certification. So Huyen, previously unaware of her products' applications beyond cooking, developed a new sense of pride as she learned that cinnamon and star anise were in high demand in the medicine, cosmetics and food processing industries. In fact, Vietnamese cinnamon is prized by international buyers for having the highest essential oil content among all cinnamon species.

How to deliver the highest-quality spices was a much tougher task that required cooperation with farmers, who had a reputation for being “difficult” to work with. Colleagues from other spice companies found Huyen’s plan ridiculous. They saw her efforts to work with farmers as an attempt to fix something that wasn’t broken.

But getting out of her office in Hanoi’s suburban Gia Lam district to meet ethnic minority farmers opened her eyes once again. Huyen had heard of the hardships and occasional accidents endured by farmers, but couldn’t fully grasp the risks their work entailed until she went up the mountains and into the jungle to see with her own eyes how farmers climbed 15-meter tall star anise trees using archaic equipment that offered little protection.

Instead of feeling resentment, Huyen started to empathise as she saw the spice trade from the farmers’ point of view. She wanted to help them.

Huyen started looking for external support to implement her strategy and her company was selected to participate in Oxfam’s EFD 2015-16 programme. The timing couldn’t have been better. The family business needed to be transformed into a professional company with management,

regulations and policies that aligned with international standards.

But the biggest impact of joining EFD lay elsewhere. It showed Huyen she wasn’t the only “crazy” entrepreneur who wanted to work with farmers. She no longer felt alone and her conviction only strengthened when EFD experts confirmed that VINASAMEX’s produce had a good chance of obtaining organic certifications.

Entering the world’s most demanding spice markets was no longer purely a business decision. It was a pathway towards sustainability that gave Huyen a greater sense of purpose in her work. It was a matter of national pride – getting Vietnam’s high quality spices the respect they deserve, and affording farmers better pay and working conditions.

Still, the hardest part was convincing and training farmers to follow strict organic processes. It wasn’t the no-pesticides rule, as poverty and the remoteness of her partners’ farms meant that acquiring chemicals just wasn’t worth it anyway. It was about trimming and harvesting customs that have been upheld by ethnic minority farmers for generations, but which conflicted with the requirements prescribed by organic certifications.

“When I help and share the burden with farmers, I see the point of the model and understand that I’m doing the right thing, something useful despite the difficulties that come with looking for new buyers.”

With perseverance, Huyen and her husband gradually gained the trust of locals who had by that time come to distrust merchants and were also seeking to protect themselves from opportunists.

The key was to share risks with farmers. This gave rise to cooperatives whereby members could share resources and receive compensation in case of accidents. Through a contract with VINASAMEX, the cooperative guarantees the purchase of all output at 10 per cent above market price.

“There’s no company like this one [VINASAMEX]. This company paid for farmers’ technical training. If farmers experience difficulties, they’ll be subsidised and the company will buy at a slightly higher price.” - Pham Van Tien, Chairman of Cinnamon Farmers’ Cooperative of Dao Thinh Commune, Tran Yen district, Yen Bai province.

By 2016, VINASAMEX’s star anise and cinnamon were certified organic. Today, the dream of exporting to the EU, the USA and South Korea... has been achieved.

From a handful of households in the pilot phase, VINASAMEX now boasts 914 ha of organic-certified farms and has signed contracts with 237 star anise households and 202 cinnamon households. Additionally, the company purchases cinnamon from 2,000 to 3,000 other households and regularly trains around 500 households.

Farmers are already seeing higher incomes now that buying prices for cinnamon and star anise have doubled since the organic scheme started. Nowadays, farmers earn VND 30 million (US\$ 1,290) a year – an increase of around VND 5 million compared to the pre-cooperative era.





Nowadays, Huyen is busy getting Vietnamese spice exporters to form a national association that would protect their interests in the global market. The very companies that initially laughed off Huyen's strategy to go organic are now also considering the move.

"It's an inevitable trend," Huyen said from her office, speaking over the deafening sound of machines cutting cinnamon sticks on the floor below.

Her next big challenge? As surprising as it may sound, it's penetrating the Vietnamese

market, a task Huyen admits is even harder than the export business.

While cinnamon and star anise are widely prized internationally for their diverse qualities, there's little awareness of their wide-ranging applications beyond the kitchen in Vietnam.

Huyen is taking steps to change that by building a new local spice brand.

Lam Giang

*Bringing
Agricultural products to Russia*

WITH NINH BINH FARMERS



In the rural town of Yen Khanh, a hundred kilometers from Hanoi, young and middle-aged men like 34-year-old Dao Van Tuyen don't have a lot of choices. Unlike their young female counterparts who qualify for employment in the newly established fabric factory, Tuyen can only grow rice, make joss paper at home or join the wave of rural construction workers to industrial towns as far as Binh Duong, a southern town 1600 kilometers from Hanoi.

Tuyen didn't like being far away from home, so for his whole adulthood he stayed at home making joss paper, earning less than his wife who makes \$200 a month as a fabric factory worker. Being alone at home drove him crazy, so he joined a crew of retirees to grow cucumbers, tomatoes and chilli – a new job opportunity in town.

On his third day at work, the sun was scorching across the hazy cucumber field. Tuyen looked like an outsider among the seniors, but he was happy. He finally earns the same amount as his wife, and he has people to talk to during the day. He's also close to home, where he grows his own melons and vegetables for side income.

Tuyen is not the only young man who has a sudden interest in growing vegetables. According to Nguyen Truong Nghia, director of Viet Xanh company, he works with at least a dozen young men who returned from industrial jobs and wanted to make a living in their hometown.

“I hope this eases the burden of rural migrants on cities and industrial towns,” Viet told me in his office. “At the same time, it brings the work force back to villages like Yen Khanh, which are normally only inhabited by elders and children.”



At Nghia's farms in Yen Khanh, which produce canned vegetables for overseas markets, workers are mainly female retirees and a growing number of returning young men like Tuyen. Each worker is paid VND 150,000 (US\$ 7) for an eight-hour work day, from 7AM to 6PM, with a three- to four-hour rest in between. Nghia employs over a hundred workers in the cultivation area, 90 per cent of whom are elderly women, so the work is flexible whenever anyone needs to leave to care for their grandchildren or their own field work.

"It's handy and relatively easy for old souls like me," said 70-year-old Pham Thi Ky who has a three-year-old grandson to care for at home. "He has a mental illness so I can't leave him alone all day."

"It's my side job but actually my primary income source," said 56-year-old Bui Thi Man, whose main income used to be \$700 a year from a rice crop for her whole family. With her 58-year-old husband working alongside her in the field, each earns up to \$2500 a year, above the national income average, enough to lift the burden off their children's shoulders and allow them to afford wedding gifts for their neighbours.

Nguyen Truong Nghia, the man behind over 200 new farming jobs in the little town of Yen Khanh, started his agriculture business in 2010, but only in 2016 did things begin to look bright for him. A Russian-educated student who planned to return to Vietnam as an engineering lecturer, Nghia never thought he would enter the farming business when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991. The government couldn't pay for his return flight ticket, so Nghia stayed and worked for a friend's company in Russia for 10 years. In 2010, he made a visit home, took a ride with another friend to rural Ninh Binh, and found himself buying a dying agriculture factory from an acquaintance.

"I didn't even know where Ninh Binh was at that time," Nghia recalled, still astounded by his life's turning point.

It was mainly his curiosity for farming, Nghia said, that made him venture into such unknown territory, despite everything that looked bleak for him around that time. His secondhand facility was worn down, his waste management system wasn't working, the better part of his facility was going to be confiscated by the government for a highway project, and the global market had just recovered from the depression in 2008. Yet Nghia knew he had a solution for one weak spot of the former owner: the foreign market. By the time he took over, the business was simply collecting vegetables and producing canned food for Vietnam's market. Nghia transformed it to an export enterprise, working mainly with Russian connections he had collected during his college years.

Slowly but steadily, Viet Xanh broke into the Russian market as one of the main suppliers for Russia's major canned food brand. Nghia admits his success is certainly not an overnight breakthrough, but one that was carefully planned and stimulated by new ideas. In 2016, his company was the first in Ninh Binh to create an organic farming area, renting farmers' land and hiring them to work in a process that met international quality standards.

"It is a controversial thing to rent farmland for your business purposes," Nghia disclosed, "but for inefficient land where farmers live too far away to care for it, let alone develop a proper farming process and find the market for their goods, I do think my company can help create jobs and use the land more efficiently."

That means a farmer who earns \$700 a year from a rice crop, like Bui Thi Man, could receive the same amount in compensation without having to grow rice, while earning up to \$2,500 a year as full-time worker for Nghia on her own land. "It was a successful concept that made farmers in the northern province Moc Chau rich, so I wanted to do the same for Ninh Binh, although it's a fairly new concept," Nghia revealed. He

now rents 60 hectares of farmland, where he experiments with new types of chilli, cucumber and corn – all of which haven't been tested in Ninh Binh before. At the same time, he works closely with 70 cooperative farmer households, who adopt his farming methods but on their own land. If a new type of crop succeeds on his own farm, Nghia holds instruction courses for these cooperative households, in order to ensure qualified and stable production across the region, which he admits poses a great challenge for any large production effort.

"I only let myself fail on my own farms, not on cooperative farms," Nghia said. "But on the other hand, I have to be strict with quality and cooperative farms must abide by the quality control rules." In Vietnam, controlling pesticides and fertilisers is no new challenge for agricultural businesses, especially exporting enterprises, as the misuse of hazardous types is rampant. Some of Nghia's partners are tempted to fall back on the old ways. "There will always be traders who offer a slightly higher price for less regulated vegetables, but they do not guarantee a stable output for any farmer –

and that's when people easily veer off the track they committed to," Nghia explained.

For now, Nghia's favourite farmers to cooperate with are young people who are aware of the importance of organic farming. "It's great to see young people staying in their rural, poor hometown to build a life, but also great to see them receptive and committed to quality control," Nghia concluded.

After nearly eight years in the business, Nghia admits he and his wife have become true farmers, although he was born and spent half his life in the metropolis. Nghia rarely leaves the peaceful rural town except for business occasions and takes pride in every square meter of the large-scale production field he helped transform. "I didn't think I was able to make a social impact," Nghia confessed, "until I attended EFD and found out there was actually a framework to do that properly."

His next step? A Vietnamese canned vegetable brand in Russia.

Minh Trang







HUMANS OF EFD

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