

SEEDS OF AN ORGANIC FUTURE

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“People in Laos know the benefits of organic vegetables:
that they taste better, last longer and are more nutritious.”

“We have changed already since CDAIS started working with us,” said Khammone Luanglath. “Because of the project, we have for example divided our responsibilities within the group and our profits have increased.” The CDAIS project is working with a group of organic vegetable growers in Tongmang village in Vientiane province, who produce for local markets. It has helped them to better identify their needs, and is supporting their capacity development so that they can improve their functional skills, to help them to better invest, organise and increase production and sales.

“People in Laos know the benefits of organic vegetables: that they taste better, last longer and are more nutritious. And our members have an unlimited supply of the very best – and we make a good profit from our sales” – Khammone Luanglath of the Tongmang organic vegetable growers group, is proud of her achievements. CDAIS became involved in 2017, to help to strengthen the group, and facilitate them in identifying challenges and solutions, with some immediate successes.

From small seeds...

The market for organic produce is growing and, in response, the Tongmang organic vegetable farmer group was set up in 2015 by the government District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO). The 12 founding village members were initially trained to produce organic compost and bio-extracts for pest control. Later, a site was found for them, with 12 shade houses on two hectares, rented from private individuals for US\$60 (€51) per year on a three-year contract from May 2015 to June 2018. Then a second two-hectare plot was rented for a ten-year period from Lavone Philasaypitak, Head of the group, who was also able to loan seeds and inputs to group members who do not have the means to buy them outright, to be repaid after vegetables are sold.

At the beginning, the group built 15 simple shade-house structures from bamboo poles, and covered them with plastic sheets provided by DAFO. In 2016, they joined a Lao farmers network, which provided training on strengthening group capacities in management, finance and marketing. The group then expanded to 43 members, including 16 youth, who together now farm four hectares with shade houses and an adjacent 18-hectare site of orchards and private plots. The group grows 45 different types of vegetables, along with mushrooms and various fruits from the orchards such as banana, papaya, dragon fruit, lemon and tamarind.

Group members pay monthly fees which are used to buy tools, seeds and other inputs, and to support the marketing of produce. But this money is not enough to allow for the much-needed new investment in new shade houses, to dig boreholes for irrigation or to buy machinery for land preparation, cultivation and mixing organic fertilizers.



Khammone Luanglath, Deputy Head of the Tongmang organic vegetable growers group

...to identifying capacity needs

The ‘capacity needs assessment’ workshop for the organic vegetable growers groups took place in April 2017 in Tongmang village, with 43 farmers including 16 youth – and 39 of them were women. The group identified three main ‘hot spots’ where they wanted support from CDAIS to develop their capacities. These were to help them to obtain credit or investment, produce vegetables and fruit in the rainy season, and improve their ability to market their produce. The skills required for each were determined, and a list of activities were agreed that would reinforce their capacities in these areas. These were then combined into a plan of action in a fully participatory process.

Youth in agriculture

“Growing vegetables is not as difficult as you think,” a girl in the youth group told Khanthanou. “I know how to do everything as I have helped my parents in all the steps – sowing seeds, transplanting, watering, weeding and harvesting.” The youth in the group were certainly keen, and they saw a great opportunity. They met, and first agreed on what crops they were going to grow, but they also agreed on what they did not know, and therefore what training they needed. This included how to make organic fertilizers, and the best pest and disease control methods. They also agreed to divide certain tasks. The boys said that they would work on land preparation and watering, the girls said they would sow and weed, and they would work together on transplanting. They prepared daily work schedules for before and after school, and for weekends. Khammone said children really enjoy growing vegetables, “and they are very happy to earn some money that helps a lot in paying for their educational needs and to contribute to family savings.”

Expanding markets

“Before we had four vegetable markets where we would sell our produce” added Khammone, “but at the CDAIS ‘marketplace’ event we made new contacts, and now we have eight markets where we can sell. The new problem is that we can’t produce enough to meet this additional demand! Though at least we know that every extra we can produce, we can sell.”



The group use only organic fertilizers, and government inspectors come from time to time to ensure that what they put in the garden follows organic rules and procedures.

The group’s markets are also growing thanks to social media, and help from the youth. Adult farmers thought that they could sell their fruit and vegetables in weekly food baskets, if only the youngsters could help them to advertise this ‘offer’. Then, thanks to training from the Lao Farmers Network, two youths learnt how to take attractive pictures of their vegetables and gardens using their mobile phones for posting on the group’s Facebook page. Now the group sells four different vegetable baskets each month to make traditional recipes: bamboo-shoot soup, sweet-and-sour chicken soup, fish sukiyaki, and salad. They are also testing their new underground cold storage unit that works without any electricity, and which they hope will allow them to store some vegetables for up to a month.

What the future holds

Khammone Luanglath was clear about the anticipated benefits: “At the end of next year when we have carried out the action plan, we expect to have diversified and increased our production, we will be stronger in our marketing, and we will have transformed from a farmers group into a fully functioning farmer cooperative.”

Developing an action plan

Khanthanou Lorsavanh, the national innovation facilitator who leads this innovation partnership, said the greatest need of these farmers is to increase their ability to grow vegetables in the rainy season. The monsoon conditions are so different that most vegetable farmers find it especially difficult during this period and, because of this, the price of vegetables is very high as compared with the dry season. “So,” said Khanthanou, “I planned to provide them with training on how to test their soil, how to make appropriate organic fertilizers and, most importantly, what were the best pest and disease control methods to apply during the monsoon period.” Khanthanou explained that his support

was not just as a provider of technical information, and that CDAIS had equipped him with many other skills that he was now passing on to the farmers. “Besides being trained as a facilitator, I also learnt, for example, how to teach farmers about calculating costs of production.” He went on to explain that after this knowledge was transferred, eight farmers had the confidence to take out loans, being newly assured that they could repay them. And each of the farmers was able to repay the one-year loans within seven months. This success has inspired others and, in 2018, 15 vegetable growers plan to increase their production by taking out loans from the same microfinance institute to build more shade houses. “I am so very happy to see the progress that they are making,” he added, with a smile.



The group identified key stakeholders who they had to collaborate with to make progress on dealing with the three main hot spots.



“Our farm is like
a school for us –
we learn something
new every day.”

Khammone Luanglath Deputy Head of the Tongmang
organic vegetable growers group





Tongmang organic vegetable growers group.



The Tongmang youth group identified their capacity needs and developed and agreed a work plan for their vegetable production.

In 2018, they are planning to expand production onto individual members' land, leaving the original two-hectare plot as a demonstration and experimental site. They also plan to build offices and a new organic-vegetable store. And as their successes are being increasingly acknowledged, thanks in part to the social-media coverage, they are receiving more and more visitors. Attracting locals and foreigners, the Tongmang organic vegetable gardens are even starting to become a bit of a tourist attraction!

“Before, we grew some rice and little else, but since we joined this group, now we have lots of fresh vegetables for our family and make a good profit too.”

Members of the Tongmang organic vegetable growers group

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Organic vegetable production is one of five innovation partnerships in Laos being developed as part of the CDAIS project. For more information, visit <https://cdais.net/home/pilots-countries/laos>. CDAIS is implemented in Laos by Agrinatura (represented by Centre de coopération internationale en recherche agronomique pour le développement), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Laos and the Laos National Agriculture and Forestry Research Institute, along with other partners for other partnerships.

