

A close-up portrait of an elderly woman with a warm, smiling expression. She is wearing a traditional Vietnamese conical hat (nón lá) with red and blue decorative tassels. Underneath the hat, she wears a bright yellow headband. Her face shows signs of age with visible wrinkles. She is dressed in a blue traditional garment with a white beaded necklace. The background is softly blurred.

WE EFFECT VIETNAM





Photo: Giang Phạm

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We Effect Vietnam

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We Effect is a development organization, with no political or religious affiliation, established in 1958 by Swedish cooperative organizations with the vision of "promoting a just and sustainable world without poverty". Its mission is to strengthen the capacity of democratic and member based organizations to enable low-income women and men to improve their living conditions, defend their rights and contribute to a just society.

We Effect subscribes to the cooperative values of mutual aid, responsibility, democracy, equality, equity and solidarity and works with those organizations that practice and promote them. The support is mainly aimed at organizations in the social and solidarity economy sector that associate and represent grassroots groups in different areas of each country and technical organizations specialized in the topics it promotes.

With this publication We Effect wants to share its successful cooperation with organisations in Vietnam and honor the hard work of individuals, families, communities and organizations who have made a difference in fighting poverty and building a better future. It has been as much learning for the Swedish participants as it has for our valued partners. We have made friends and seen business blossom, and we are sure that the future for cooperative organisations is bright.

Thank you.

"Vision: promoting a just and sustainable world without poverty"

30 YEARS OF JOINT LEARNING

The Swedish cooperative movement has been engaged in Vietnam for three decades. It started in the early 1990s, when Swedish consultants supported the Vietnam Cooperative Alliance to train their membership in export economy. As the story goes, one of the courses was attended by Madame Nguyen, who was running a small consumer retailing cooperative called Saigon Coop. Over time, Saigon Coop developed from a modest business to what is now Southeast Asia's largest cooperative company, with 150 stores throughout Vietnam.

The 30 years that have passed have seen several success stories and even if all are not listed here, we can be assured that many of them were based on challenges that were overcome through joint learning. What will be mostly remembered, however, is not the trainings, reports, or projects, but the people behind them. Every single person interviewed in this booklet mentions the commitment of the Vietnamese people they have had the privilege to work with, not least the women. Sometimes we describe our work as “coming to Vietnam”, when in fact, it was the Vietnamese cooperative movement that opened its doors to our collaboration. We Effect never came or left; instead, we formed part of a continuous development where we had the privilege to sit alongside, take part in the discussions, share experiences, and celebrate joint results. Thank you for welcoming us in and thank you for letting us be part of your journey!

In 2019, We Effect decided to close its operations in Vietnam. Although this was a painful decision, we feel great satisfaction when we look upon the important results achieved by our partner organisations. We know that you stand stronger and wish you the best of luck in your future travels.

It is also with the greatest pride that we thank our colleagues for years of hard work and commitment. We will remember you for what you have achieved, but also as our friends.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. Tibblin'.

Anna Tibblin,
Secretary General of We Effect



Le Thi Chin. Photo: Marcus Lundstedt

KF PROJECT CENTER

The KF history of providing development aid to Vietnam actually started as something else – a purely commercial venture. It goes back to 1986 when the Swedish Co-operative Union (Kooperativet Förbundet, KF) a federation of consumer cooperatives and grocery retailing group, opened a subsidiary called KF Project Center. The new center was headed up by Stig-Håkan Lindhé, an economist who traded products and services on behalf of KF with various Eastern European countries and China. This was before the fall of the Berlin Wall, a time when business dealings with the East were often conducted via barter arrangements – that is, the exchange of goods and services without using money.

“At that time, KF was Sweden’s largest corporate group,” recalls Stig-Håkan Lindhé. In addition to operating a nationwide chain of retail stores, KF owned a lot of industrial companies and other enterprises. Among various assignments Stig-Håkan Lindhé’s helped a KF-owned truck factory in Mjölby, Sweden establish subsidiaries and a network of distributors in Southeast Asia.



Stig Håkan Lindhé.
Photo: Private

“Within KF and all of Sweden, it was widely considered that companies should export services to other countries. This was supported by a government inquiry that encouraged the export of Swedish know-how. At the time, many companies, including state-run enterprises, had separate departments for export services. This was an area where KF could draw upon a broad range of experience in many different areas,” says Stig-Håkan Lindhé.

The whole idea behind the KF Project Center was to make money for KF. The aim was to sell the expertise of KF-ow-

ned companies in Sweden to other cooperative-style enterprises abroad. Stig-Håkan Lindhé’s first major assignment was to develop a new business strategy for a cooperative food chain in Singapore called Fair Price. It was a purely commercial assignment: Fair Price paid what it cost, and they were happy with the result. “Fair Price was in a crisis situation,” says Stig-Håkan Lindhé. “With our help, they were able to turn the tide and are today the largest grocery chain in Singapore.”

“Within KF and all of Sweden, it was widely considered that companies should export services to other countries.”

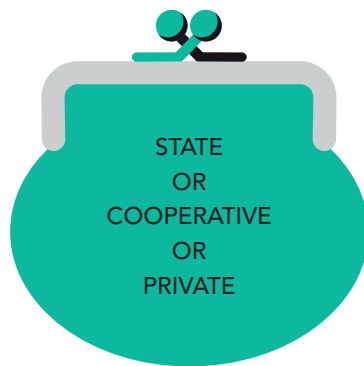
But the world was to be turned upside down in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall and subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. Suddenly, the former state companies in Eastern Europe had to operate in a commercial market. All of these countries had “cooperatives” that were more or less completely dependent on the government. Helping them move from a planned economy to a market economy became a mission for Western aid.

In Sweden, the then-aid agency BITS (Committee for International Technical and Economic Cooperation) and several EU funds contributed financing to KF Project Centers’ business development projects in the Baltics, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary. In those days, KF Project Center still worked mostly commercially, but that would soon change. In 1991, KF began selling off its industrial companies, eroding the underlying commercial platform for KF Project Center’s operations, which ultimately disappeared. For example, the truck factory in Mjölby was sold to Toyota.

“What would we do?” Stig-Håkan Lindhé wondered. “Shut everything down, or find a new area of operations? In the end, the focus became development aid. And

our first assignment was to arrange a symposium for Swedish companies in Malaysia to support fruit exports.”

In 1992, the KF Project Center came to Vietnam. As early as 1986, the Vietnamese Party Congress announced that it would abandon its strict planned economy model in favour of a “socialist market economy.” In the aftermath, three entrepreneurial spheres emerged in Vietnam: state, cooperative and private. However, initial efforts to kick-start and navigate a market-based economy proved slow going.



In the early 1990s, the KF Project Center, backed by funding from the Swedish International Development Cooperation (Sida), embarked on its first assignment in the country – a collaboration with the Vietnam Cooperative Alliance (VCA) to provide export training for various types of cooperatives, mostly within the handicrafts sector.

One of the courses was attended by Madame Nguyen, a well-connected Vietnamese businesswoman who was running a small consumer retailing cooperative called Saigon Coop. Liking what she saw, she requested business development courses for her own staff.

“Saigon Coop had a few of its own stores in Ho Chi Minh City but they were extremely modest outlets,” says Stig-Håkan Lindhé. At the same time, Saigon Coop functioned as a local umbrella organization that supplied the local cooperatives with goods. In addition, they owned shares in foreign companies such as Pepsi Cola and Gillette.



Madame Nguyen Thi Nghia.
Photo: Private

“Madame Nguyen requested a meeting with me to discuss the future of her company. Should Saigon Coop become a pure wholesaler, a partner in foreign companies or invest in stores, she wondered. I was totally convinced that they should concentrate on retail. At the time, there were only three supermarkets in all of Vietnam and

most of retail activity occurred in the open markets or tiny shops.”

“Clearly, retail is your big opportunity,” Stig-Håkan Lindhe told her.

With that bit of advice and a fierce determination to develop and grow, Saigon Coop’s management took an educational field trip to Sweden. There they would witness, first-hand, how KF planned and operated its own COOP department stores, shops and warehouses.

“In Sweden, we held a strategic seminar with their management team to discuss various scenarios for future development,” says Stig-Håkan Lindhe.

“All the shops were tiny and extremely modest

Upon returning to Vietnam, Madame Nguyen sold off her shares in multinational companies and used the proceeds to invest in stores. Over the next three years, she and her team opened five new stores in the Ho Chi Minh City area.

The fact that KF employees in Sweden have an unmatched knowledge in food and grocery distribution proved to be a crucial resource for the KF Project Center. Areas of expertise range from production and wholesale to retail, including logistics and distribution.



Photo: Magnus Fond



Conny Svensson. Photo: Private

Conny Svensson is one of those KF experts. A logistics and supply-chain specialist, he has held various roles, including managing KF's warehouse center in the Northern Swedish city of Umeå. Between 1997 and 2007, Conny provided hands-on training to his Vietnamese counterparts on how to successfully run a cooperative retail chain. His areas of expertise, which include the flow of goods, warehousing, supply chains and more, were rather foreign to the Vietnamese colleagues he first met at Saigon Coop in 1997.

Recalling those early days, Conny Svensson says: "When something ran out in the department store, they simply sent an employee away on a motorcycle to buy what was missing. Or they called a supplier who came

with some boxes on his motorcycle."

When Conny Svensson criticized the motorcycle model, the Vietnamese said that it worked well, and was cheap. As they put it, "when the supplier gets on his motorcycle, the transport is free."

"It took me awhile to explain that you still paid for that transport, it was just included in the price, so to speak, which thus became unnecessarily high," says Conny Svensson. "Since Saigon Coop was Vietnam's largest retailer, it should be possible to negotiate much better prices, and afford to build its own warehouse."

In those days, supermarkets were a novelty and not widely accepted. One person who remembers the local attitudes very well is Anneli Leina, Regional Director Europe for We Effect, who is currently based in Northern Macedonia. From 2001 to 2006, she was actively involved in supporting a small consumer cooperative near Hue in central Vietnam.

“All the shops were tiny and extremely modest,” Anneli Leina recalls. “When I argued for supermarkets, where shoppers could walk about and fill their own baskets, my local cooperation colleagues were highly sceptical: ‘We do not like such shops in this city.’”



Anneli Leina. Photo: We Effect

“Then I took them to Ho Chi Minh City to visit to the supermarkets of Saigon Coop. They all started shopping like crazy and couldn’t stop. Afterwards, they admitted that this new form of retail seemed promising, but of course new things take time to become accepted.”

Saigon Coop proved to be a resounding success story. During the ten years that Conny Svensson visited the chain, it grew from four stores to just over ten. The main store had to be expanded four times in just two years, and the cooperative’s chairman was named “Entrepreneur of the Year.” Saigon Coop continues to grow today and is now Southeast Asia’s largest cooperative company, with 150 stores throughout Vietnam.

It’s important to understand that the word “cooperative” in Vietnam is viewed differently in many ways than in Sweden – and even more so today.

Following the post-war reunification of North and South Vietnam, the government established close ties with the cooperatives that had existed earlier there. The largest groups were agricultural cooperatives, but there were (and still are) cooperatives in many business areas: fisheries, energy, taxis, retail, etc. Such cooperatives were more independent than the state-owned companies, while also offering many advantages over purely private operations.

“When KF Project Center began its development work in Vietnam, the goal was to make the cooperatives more market-oriented and competitive,” recalls Claes-Göran Norell, who trained leaders in the Vietnamese cooperati-

ve movement from 2001 to 2009. A 40-year veteran of the Swedish cooperative movement who has held many roles, he brought with him a depth of valuable experience. Most notable and relevant for this particular assignment was his experience as headmaster of KF’s own grandiose and extensive training centre, Vår Gård, in Saltsjöbaden outside Stockholm.

Still, his first advice to the Vietnamese was that they should not do as they did in Sweden: “Do not build a large school!”

To this day, Claes-Göran Norell still believes that both Sweden and Vietnam would have been better served by smaller-scale investments in local and regional cooperatives. He never encouraged the building of a fancy training compound where people from all over the country would be sent to learn exactly the same thing.

Unfortunately, that advice came too late, both in Sweden and Vietnam. KF’s mansion-like training compound in Saltsjöbaden had already been inaugurated as early as 1925 for another era. It was well established and continued to be expanded and refined over many years, despite some challenges. However, efforts to replicate this “big school” model 50 years later in Hanoi proved costly and ineffective. The project soon ran out of money leaving the school with little power or influence. Sadly, the content of the educational curriculum was also under-prioritized to a large extent.



Nonetheless, the main task for the KF Project Center and Claes-Göran Norell was to produce valuable, hands-on educational material for Vietnam. “It was about eve-

rything needed to run a business: finance, marketing, logistics, leadership development and more,” recalls Claes-Göran Norell. “In total, we developed material for 12 different courses. Each course was translated into Vietnamese and tested on course participants and then revised and improved. Those who attended the courses were leaders in the cooperative sector who, in turn, trained other leaders. The Vietnamese were always very willing to learn new things.”

Claes-Göran Norell says that he is a generalist, not a subject expert, which is why he hired experts in their respective fields to support him.

“Initially, I mainly invited guest teachers who worked in the cooperative sphere, but I soon learned that I could hire almost anyone. It was very tempting to go to Vietnam for a week. The consultants’ trips to Vietnam were combined with other KF Project Center assignments in the Philippines and Indonesia. In the Philippines, the focus was on small local village banks; in Indonesia on retail. Together with the Swedish funeral business Fonus, we attempted to start a cooperative funeral home in the Philippines. And we worked with the Swedish Cooperative Housing Association (HSB) and the Riksbyggen organisation to become more involved in supporting housing

cooperatives in Vietnam and the Philippines.”

The large school in Hanoi that Claes-Göran Norell once criticized no longer exists. It has been merged with another school, but the underlying business has survived. Today, 3,000 students still receive a business education every year. The whole idea behind a consumer cooperative is that it is owned by its consumers, managed democratically and takes on social responsibility. How is this concept working out today in Vietnam?

“Well, maybe it works as well as it can,” says Stig-Håkan Lindhé. “There’s actually not such a huge difference today between Coop in Sweden and in Vietnam.”

Although the years have flown past, Vietnam continues to hold a special place in the hearts of everyone involved in supporting their cooperative journey: Claes-Göran Norell, Stig-Håkan Lindhé, Conny Svensson and many others. They’ve all returned to the country many times, even since the missions ended, experiencing impressive new developments with each visit.

“I’ve worked in about 20 countries,” says Stig-Håkan Lindhé, “but no country has been as much fun to work in as Vietnam. The people are incredibly committed, and hardworking,” he concludes.



Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Myanmar and Vietnam) programme meeting. It includes all programmes partners of the three countries and We Effect SEA programme staff. Photo: We Effect



Tan Ta May, Lao Cai. Photo: Giang Pham

Tan Ta May – “Our hands now hold our life”

Tan Ta May recalls one of the most memorable moments in her life. This was when May and her colleagues participated the workshops about gender equality organized by Lao Cai Cooperative Alliance. The very first time for many women in her Red Dao community, an ethnic minority group in the Northwest region of Vietnam. May's hometown, Ta Phin commune, is an extremely disadvantaged commune in Sa Pa district, Lao Cai province with more than 60 percent of families living in poverty.

She was among the first 7 women in her community to establish a cooperative back in August 2015. Her incentive was simple: Dao women would no longer go peddling on the streets with the tourist or struggling to sell their herbal medicine at a cheap price, which often led to disposal when they could not earn much while the medicine was precious and natural. The Red Dao Community Cooperative hence was founded in order to give Dao women in the community a stable job: herbal medicine cultivation. Dao women in the community, in May's opinion, need an organization to cover their crops, increase its value by using their own traditional knowledge to produce medicine and find the market for the final products.

They started receiving support from Lao Cai Cooperative Alliance soon after the establishment of the cooperative. Together with other women in the community, May took part in trainings from agricultural technique, such as how to keep their livestock warm or when to prepare their food in the winter, which supports cooperative members in increasing their income with livestock raising beside the herbal gardens, to daily tips like how to arrange house chores in the family. Neighbors and relatives soon followed them. After 5 years, the cooperative has opened a community bath house using their traditional Red Dao recipes and sold products from these recipes to faraway land, in carefully designed packages supported by the Alliance. Incomes from herbal gardens are increasing, a family can earn up to 1 million VND (around 45 USD) per day, which is considerably high comparing to the

average regional income. At present, every day May receives continuous calls from her members asking her to collect their crops. From the first 7 members, Red Dao Community Cooperative at the moment hosts 120 participants and connects to another 209 households in the region for medical herbs supply.

But there is something more than that. The cooperative has brought May and her sisters a stronger voice. Workshops on gender equality were provided in the agenda, requiring women to bring their husband into the room.

“When we women can earn money, our husband won't look down on us anymore. We gain our stand in the family. Before, I and other sisters took care of everything in the family, we did not know that men also have to share responsibilities in the household. Whenever there were guests coming, while our husband enjoyed their time drinking, women got stuck in the kitchen and even suffered punches when our men got drunk. But now we understand ourselves, and we make our husbands understand us too. We started to argue and brought them to the workshops too.”

Yes, May describes how quiet her husband was at the gender equality workshop, although he was annoyed and reluctant to let her join at first. Now housework is fairly assigned between her family member. If she does the laundry, her husband must take care of the kids. Even her kids now can have their own chores.

“Just spend your time with the cooperative, I will take care of the house” – that's what May's husband said after his time at the workshops.

Perhaps that explains why when asked about the most important change for her and the community, May said: “Our hands now hold our life. Social position. Able to earn money”



Hoang Van Nhiep, Bac Kan. Photo: Giang Pham

Farmers in Bac Kan – An expanded groupwork

When Hoang Van Nhiep, a young Tay man, established Toan Thang cooperative in May, 2017, he never thought that the cooperative would follow a totally different direction.

The initial product that Nhiep and his co-workers wanted to promote were orange and tangerine, the local fruits that farmers in his commune had been planting for a long time. However, their sour taste was unlikely favorable in the market. Business hence was not as expected. In 2019, CHIASSE Center, who was advising Nhiep about fruit gardening, suggested the cooperative an alternative: chicken.

From a subordinate source of income for the fruit gardens, chicken has become the main product of Toan Thang cooperative. During almost 2 years, CHIASSE has provided a full package of support to help Nhiep move to the birds. Flocks of new chicken breeds were delivered with an egg-incubator and poultry feed. All materials were handed together with technical guidelines from agricultural experts invited by CHIASSE to help Nhiep in the beginning phase. These experts, traveled back and forth to Cho Don, Bac Kan to instruct him in every single step of chicken raising, from how to hatch the eggs using the incubator to how to protect them from diseases. For a person who never learn how to raise poultry like Nhiep, this is a whole new world comparing to the traditional method in his community.

From the first batch of 100 chickens, the number has risen to nearly 2000. Broiler mortality rate is significantly decreasing. For every batch of chickens, Nhiep now can keep 90 percent of them alive at the harvest in comparison to the number of 70 percent when he started. Eggs pro-

duced by the main flock at the cooperative are hatched by their incubator into breeding flocks then delivered to members of the cooperative to increase their flock. Poultry feed now is also bought and provided by the cooperative based on registered from members. This practice saves a great deal of money and ensures the quality of the broiler batch. Reaching this milestone, Toan Thang cooperative is now able to control the whole quality of their own chickens, instead of depending on external providers. For the next step in the near future, Nhiep and CHIASSE are looking for stable customers in order that the cooperative's member will not have to sell their chickens at the wet market but to the cooperative. Everything is improving little by little. At this moment, Nhiep is busy expanding the main farm.

However, it is not only 9 members of Toan Thang cooperative to receive breeding flocks but also Ma Thi Dep and other women from the VSLA groups in different hamlets in Cho Don, where CHIASSE deploy their projects. Like members from the cooperative, Dep has been raising chickens from same breeding flocks provided by Nhiep. Connected and suggested by CHIASSE, Dep has been using the loans from her VSLA group, another outcome from CHIASSE in her community which currently includes 26 women after one year in action, to purchase breeding chickens from Toan Thang cooperative. Her collaboration group, Nhiep's cooperative and some other groups have built a strong network where they can help each other, from sharing experience to supporting with their own advantages. Dep's chickens at harvest are looked forward to being sold back to Nhiep when they find the customers in the future.



Ho Thi Tanh, Thừa Thiên, Huế. Photo: Giang Pham

Ho Thi Tanh – “Now I know which to spend first”

Located 70 kilometers from Hue city, Quang Nham is a small commune in A Luoi District, Thua Thien – Hue province, the border region between Laos and Vietnam. Known as the poorest area of Thua Thien – Hue province, A Luoi has a low education level among residents, who mostly are ethnic minorities and not fluent in Vietnamese. The mountainous region also regularly suffers natural disasters like typhoon or flood which heavily impact the livelihood of locals. This is where we meet Ho Thi Tanh, a member of the first VSLA (Village Savings and Loan Associations) group that HOPE Centre organized in Quang Nham Commune in 2015. Tanh is from Pa-Ko group, the local ethnic minority in the region.

Like other people in her community, a community where the majority live under the poverty line, the mindset of saving had never existed in Tanh even after the first few years after she got married. By that time, no matter how much Tanh and her family earns, they spend all the money. She even did not determine which to spend first.

“I was from a poor family. Every day, I made ends meet doing hired farming jobs for my neighbors. At the end of a day, I spent all on whatever I wanted. I had money on my hand, I could eat whatever I like without saving money for the day after. Therefore, some days I and my family had nothing to eat but rice and ended up borrowing money from others. Even when I got sick, I used not to have money to pay for my hospital bills because all money went away.” – Tanh reflected on her past days, before she joined the VSLA group.

Then HOPE Center came and provided her VSLA group trainings on individual and family finance. Although at that time Tanh already participated in a saving group from the Women’s Union for a while, she and other members did

not really understand how to manage the group efficiently, not to mention the mindset of saving. The knowledge from HOPE Center finally filled the gap, Tanh started to save some money, though a little amount.

“If I make 120,000 VND a day (around 5 USD), I have to save at least 20,000 VND (around 80 US cents) for my children’s education or occasions like sickness.”

Tanh eventually realized which are important to spend her income, which expense needs to be prioritized. Loans from the VSLA group allowed Tanh to pay the school fee of her kids as well as some fund to farm fish. Although her family owns little land, they have gradually been able to buy a new fridge, a new motorbike and new materials to rebuild their house. That changed her husband, from a daily drunk man who never stayed home and paid attention to his wife, he is now taking care of housework, having much fewer drunk nights and showing more care to Tanh. She is also now involved equally in deciding her family expenses, which used to lie in the hand of her husband. Tanh now found her confidence, she started encouraging other sisters to join her in the VSLA group. Lessons from the workshops were brought into Tanh’s sharing during her community meetings. When receiving positive reactions from the women in her village, Tanh consult HOPE Center about support to organize other VSLA groups.

The VSLA model has been a great success. It has gained credibility among local women and more and more VSLA groups are on their way. Now the number of VSLA groups in the region has increased to 7 with 134 members. The model has received appreciations from the provincial level and Tanh is getting busier with her community leader’s work as the Chairwoman of Farmer’s Union of Quang Nham Commune.



Photo: Marcus Lundstedt

SWEDISH COOPERATIVE CENTRE

Flashback to 2008, the year of the Great Depression. The management of KF begins to assess its various aid commitments across the globe. In addition to KF Project Center, it also runs an aid organization called Swedish Cooperative Centre (SCC, in Swedish Kooperation Utan Gränser) together with other Swedish cooperative companies and organizations. Initially, when the KF Project Center first started its development aid activities in Eastern Europe and Asia, it made a lot of sense. In those days, SCC was not active in Asia, concentrating instead on Africa and Latin America. But in 2008, Swedish Cooperative Centre had matured enough in size and mandate to encompass the projects run by KF Project Center.

“Although women’s rights are not a sensitive topic as such, there are certain topics you simply are not supposed to discuss

Both organizations received funding through the Swedish International Development Association (Sida). In the case of KF Project Center, via Olof Palme’s International Center, which felt that a merger would be advantageous. Even before the merger, SCC had joined forces with the Federation of Swedish Farmers (LRF), an agriculture and forestry cooperative with 70,000 members. LRF had an initiative in place called “Sweden Farmers Help” (“Sveriges Bönder Hjälp”) to promote growth and sustainable profitability.

Against this background, in 2011, SCC started a Europe-Asia division where some of the projects inherited from KF Project Center were incorporated. It was also decided to open an office in Cambodia. The funding came from Sida’s department for supporting civil society and fighting poverty. Increasingly, however, the business focus was on “help for self-help” and many of the earlier partner organizations were replaced.

Overseas trips by Swedish experts to share their know-

ledge largely ceased. Instead, funding was channeled to small local farmer members of the cooperatives and other organizations. The focus was increasingly on rural development, boosting productivity and increasing the sales of the products in the market. Supporting women’s rights also became an increasingly important goal. The projects often turned out quite well even though the involved partners were relatively small. The Vietnam Cooperative Alliance, which was a partner for the KF Project Center, is no longer among We Effects’ partner organizations.

“Although women’s rights are not a sensitive topic as such, there are certain topics you are simply are not supposed to discuss,” says Inga-Lill Hammer who worked alongside women in small agricultural and handicraft cooperatives in the Vietnamese countryside. “To break through, we had to change languages ??and start by discussing structural organization and increased efficiency. But no matter how much happened in just one week, the women dared to start talking, sharing experiences and organizing.”



That experience is common to all those who worked with aid in Vietnam: the Vietnamese are extremely curious and interested, they listen and learn and reshape the advice so that they work in the Vietnamese context.

“And they came!” recalls Anneli Leina. “When we held training sessions with a capacity for 25 people, 100 still came, no matter how clear we were with the restriction.”

Magnus Persson was appointed regional manager for the Asia region in 2014, based in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. By then, Swedish Cooperative Centre had changed its name to We Effect.

“I remember that we worked closely with agricultural cooperatives with a focus on business development,” says Magnus Persson. “In both Vietnam and Cambodia, there are many small farmers with their own small plots of land. They needed to collaborate better to be able to coordinate services such as irrigation, marketing and selling their products.”



Magnus Persson.
Photo: We Effect

For better or worse, cooperatives have long existed in Vietnam. There is a legacy and structure to work with and they have certain legal advantages. The government’s policy on fighting poverty has also helped us to reach out through various support programs. The new cooperative law that came into

effect in 2014 was also more modern and business-oriented, facilitating our work. Then and as now, We Effect focuses on poor rural districts with several ethnic minorities – the groups that still needed to catch up in Vietnam’s record-breaking development.

“Sometimes we experienced a degree of resistance,” remembers Magnus Persson. “They challenge us and ask: Why should your project be based right here? But thanks to our ability to show clear results and strong local ownership, it’s easier to win them over.”

Between 2017 and 2019, Marcus Lundstedt served as communications manager for We Effects Asia Office, based in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Remembering that time,



Marcus Lundstedt.
Photo: We Effect

he says: “The fight against poverty doesn’t reach everyone. For example, the most vulnerable minority groups in the mountainous areas of the north, are often left out. Engaging and working closely with them felt very meaningful.”

Although aid only accounts for a few percentage points of Vietnam’s total GDP, the government has shown great interest in the scope and impact of the projects. At a national level, results are often more difficult to demonstrate. However, at the local community level, it has been possible to spark positive change with a more modern model that opens up new business opportunities and services while maintaining a focus on empowering women and integrating environmental issues. New opportunities to save and borrow money together also gave good results. We helped with the modernization of the cooperatives’ accounts, making it more transparent and clear to members how their funds were being allocated.

The focus in Vietnam has primarily been on community savings and loan groups that can finance investments for smallholder farmers, helping women-run organizations, encouraging sustainable production and supporting ethnic minorities. In this way, we’ve been able to conduct business without experiencing any problems from the strong government.

Anniqa Nygård from LRF was previously Vice Chairman of We Effect and participated in 2016 in a board trip to Vietnam and Cambodia.

“Among the various places we visited was an agricultural cooperative run by women and I remember being totally impressed,” says Anniqa Nygård. “The women described how their lives have improved in every way – productivity, sales and organization. We were met and shown around by women only. This was not always the case when we met central organizations that were completely dominated by men.”



Photo: Marcus Lundstedt



Pham Thi Huyen & her daughter, Yen Bai. Photo: Giang Pham

VSLA group in 9th hamlet, Tan Thinh commune, Van Chan district, Yen Bai province – More than a VSLA group

When the first VSLA (Village Savings and Loan Association) group was founded in her hamlet in 2015, Mai did not participate. She just did not trust the initiative. She thought there was nothing to be safe to put her money in a collective box. Mai kept that thought until a year later,

when she saw her village sisters were getting benefits from the initiative, Mai decided to give it a try. She soon realized the group is more than a VSLA group.

The operating mechanism of the group, first of all, had taken Mai's concerns away. Everything takes place

in a transparent and egalitarian procedure. Every data is reported clearly and easy to understand. All interest and savings are paid in time without any delay. To avoid risks in the future, whenever there is someone who wants to get a loan, they consider her situation carefully. Based on the assessment of the capability to pay the loan, the women decide how much money that person can loan. And there has never been any bad debt in the group, no one has ever been late to pay their loan.

Priorities also come along. In every monthly meeting, there are maximum 3 members to get the loan. The considerable discussion among members play the vital role to decide who will get the fund, who will have to wait and the amount of money for every case. Not all loaners are given same amount. Instead, the biggest sum is for the one who need most. In total, by September of 2020, 137 loans were given with the entire mobilized fund for 5 years reaching ... 1,504 billion VND. These funds assisted many women to overcome their temporary difficulties from paying the school fee for their kids or investing plants into their garden. Savings from the collective fund also brought breaths of relief to many women when they need expenses for Tet holiday or in emergency cases. Mai herself already experienced how useful her savings in the group was when they helped her during the time she got sick 4 years ago. Mai still recalls when her husband broke his arm, the group came to visit and voluntarily helped her with all field work. And that happens whenever a member falls into trouble.

In addition, in each monthly gathering at the first day of the calendar month, every member contributes at least 5000 VND into the Social Fund, which is not meant to be included in the normal credit fund. This fund is only used for community purposes: such as weddings, funerals, community events or contributions for social welfare like the playground for kids or the construction of community hall. Dung, one of the oldest women in the group, is an enthusiastic supporter of the group. With the 10 million VND loan from the VSLA group, she had enough the necessary capital to raise her herd of pigs and thereafter got 10 million VND of interest, which was used to reinvest into the next herd and pay the loan. This was something impossible for Dung 4 years before. Beside the loan, Dung also received a warm care from her VSLA group when they

visited her at the funeral of her father in another province and when she broke her arm in June 2020. Such these occasions are when their social fund came in handy.

"If I had not participated in the VSLA group, I would not have lived in such this caring atmosphere" – Dung reflected

After 4 years, at the moment Mai is the leader of that VSLA group. The reason for her to become one of the most proactive members was no other than the benefits she got not only from her neighboring sisters but also from support provided by Yen Bai Cooperatives Alliance. From a shy woman who used to be reluctant to raise her hands, thanks to practical trainings by the Alliance, Mai is now able to monitor the monthly meetings in her VSLA group confidently. She also became the one who is able to speak her voices out loud whenever she wants. Especially her husband, the direct participation into monthly meetings of the VSLA group with Mai also kept him there afterwards as an official member.

Moreover, seeing the success of the VSLA group, the credibility of women in their neighborhood is enforced. Given this credibility, they have been entrusted to take the management role in special community occasions. By the time of writing this story, the group were occupied with the Mid-Autumn celebration for the children in their village. The mutual support between group members in difficulties correspondingly encouraged others to join the group. From one group at the beginning, now there are over 3 groups in the hamlet with a total of 75 participants, including women, their husbands and other members in the family, even elders are eager to join, too.

"When people trust us, we women must always be the pioneer in everything" – Mai affirms.

The stable foundation of this VSLA group is moving the women in Tan Thinh to the next step. Early 2020, a collaboration group was established by almost all members of the VSLA group to mutually support the collective production of oranges and teas in the area. A cooperative will be the next milestone to reach.



HOPE Center, Hue. Photo: Giang Pham

HOPE Center – “We Effect is our first long-term partner”

The HOPE Center, a local NGO based in Hue, Vietnam, focuses its efforts on assisting disabled and disadvantaged people by providing them with vocational training and employment in garment manufacturing, weaving, and handicraft production. The Center also works with several ethnic minority groups in A Luoi District, which situated in the mountainous region approximately 70 km from Hue near the Lao border, to support vocational courses, work opportunities as well as assistance with marketing and sales of products. HOPE Center and We Effect were partners during the period 2013 – 2016.

“Before We Effect, we only had short-term partnerships. We Effect is our first long-term partner”

Hong Nguyen, Vice Director of HOPE Center, recalls the time when both parties started working together in 2013. Previously, the longest partnership that HOPE had only lasted for 3 years, mainly focused on vocational trainings in short terms with limited budget. Since the partnership with WE started, they have been involving in many things else, a long-term series of activities with a greater budget.

Vocational training courses, agricultural technique workshops, farming models, VSL (Village Savings and Loan) groups, communication campaigns on gender equality in communes etc. are just among activities that HOPE have been organized with the sponsorship from We Effect. Following the requirements from We Effect with the funding, HOPE Center also established A Co Textile Cooperative, a vocational training center for young women of Ko-Tu, Pa-Ko, Ta-Oi, Van-Kieu and Pa-Hy ethnic groups in A Luoi district to train them into skilled workers and create jobs for them by making fashion products with aspirations from their own ethnic identity. During 5 years from 2013 to 2017, funding from We Effect did enable HOPE Center to diversify their support to communities in A Luoi, especially ethnic minorities.

But there were more in this collaboration beyond the money. Based on what people at HOPE themselves think they were lacking of, We Effect support workshops and

trainings in various subjects such as strategic planning, networking, financial management or system building. 30 people, including staff, local experts and even their vocational students who had potential were brought to the training room. Changes came soon after.

“We started seeing the vision of our future, then we started to build a long-term strategic plan with a clear mission. We were able to build a persuasive working schedule. We even produced a management guidebook for internal use as well as communication” – Hong said.

Understanding the context in their localities, at the beginning HOPE focused on raising the awareness of self-reliance and commitment of the local ethnic minorities. Locals were required to participate in trainings seriously or stay out of the entire program. For areas that were hesitant join, they chose women who were current local officials at that time to provide funds. This triggered the curiosity and ambition in people’s mind after they saw the benefits. By being asked why only public officials got the support, HOPE encouraged other people to participate. The explanation from Hong is simple: local people would not rely on support from outside and take responsibilities for themselves.

And the results?

Accounted for 85 percent of beneficiaries, women are the one who enjoyed most benefits, improving their life quality. In some cases, men were required to follow their wives to gender equality seminars. Less and less spontaneousness in local farming practices. Workshops with participants exceeding the required number and so on. For these encouraging results, HOPE has become an important partner to the authority of A Luoi district for further collaboration in the future. And Hong herself also had the chance to speak her voice when delegation from Vietnamese National Assembly visited HOPE Center to explore their achievements.



Hoang Te Hoa. Photo: Marcus Lundstedt

WE EFFECT

After the historical focus on business development with KF Project Center, the development of grassroots organisations, sustainable livelihoods and poverty reduction became more in focus for our partnerships. Today, We Effect supports partner organisations in their work for democratic development, business development and social responsibility. Vietnam has been part of a South East Asia Program together with Cambodia and Myanmar. The strategic working areas, rural development and housing, aim to promote and support a rights-based approach and specifically:

- **Equal rights** for women and men, girls and boys,
- **The right** to land,
- **The right** to financial inclusion and access to financial services, and
- **The right** to a sustainable environment and ecological balance.

We Effect works with a rights-based approach, which means all our programs are developed in dialogue and collaboration with partner organisations. Programs are based on the principles of transparency, meaningful participation, accountability and non-discrimination. This approach focuses on the remedy of structural causes of poverty and injustices, not only their symptoms. Only when people are active participants in the work do they have the opportunity to increase their autonomy and strength and thereby improve their living conditions and their opportunities to influence society. In practice, this means that women and men living in poverty are active subjects who push themselves to improve their own lives. This can be done, for example, by increasing people's knowledge of their rights and supporting their organization to influence decisions. But it is also about demanding responsibility from those who are obliged to respect, promote, protect and fulfill these rights (duty bearers). Therefore, many of our efforts are about strengthening the rights holders to jointly demand this responsibility, as well as running

advocacy campaigns. The agricultural cooperative model is the centre of the community business development, empowers community socio-economic and political aspects as well as the promotion of grass-root democracy included gender promotion.

OUR MAIN STRATEGIES IN THE SOUTH EAST ASIA PROGRAM:

- ▶ **Promote** sustainable and climate-resilient agriculture production
- ▶ **Improve** access to gender-sensitive and inclusive financial services
- ▶ **Promote** women entrepreneurship
- ▶ **Strengthen** farmers' organisations in market linkage and representing member rights
- ▶ **Farmers' rights** protected by an enabling policy environment
- ▶ **Strengthen** local partner organisations to be active human rights based actors and agents of change

STRENGTHENING FAMILY ECONOMY BY VILLAGE SAVINGS AND LOANS ASSOCIATIONS (VSLA)

Creating small savings and loans groups, VSLAs, is a method that has spread throughout WE Effect programs in the world. Introducing this fairly simple way of improving farmer families' economy, including training on economy, has become a success. Almost 97 percent VSLA members, of which 73 percent are women, reported having benefit from their membership. This again proves that the programme is on the right track when spreading the VSLA model to local communities. This model fits well with the target farmers.

The VSLA model has proved its outstanding role in the local communities with the fact that 83 new VSLAs were formed during 2018 to facilitate the needs of saving and getting loans of the target farmers, especially female



farmers. The spread of VSLA model has contributed to the impressive results obtained in the South East Asia programme.

WORKING WITH ENVIRONMENTAL AND CLIMATE CHANGE ISSUES AND PROMOTE DISASTER RISK REDUCTION

Conducting capacity building activities for farmers has been necessary in the program for rural development; all agricultural technical trainings, which were provided to farmers, included environment improvement (e.g. waste made by human being and production) and good agriculture practice (GAP). The projects also provided training on climate change concepts including causes, impact, and adaptation of climate change to farmers.

We Effect also supported the development of eco-friendly agricultural methods, limiting the use of pesticides and pesticides: projects introduced botanical pesticide and fertilizers (organic based agriculture practices) or good agriculture practice (GAP) to farmers; to protect forest by applying agro-forestry techniques, which might maintain forest to stock carbon or to minimize greenhouse gases. Besides, projects instructed and facilitated for the farmers to expand organic vegetable models that follow criteria of

eco-friendly, non-toxic and good for health.

Furthermore, the projects guided farmers classifying organic and non-organic wastes at sources. Organic garbage is used to make organic fertilizer, saving cost on fertilizer and discharging garbage into the environment. On the other hand, the projects instructed farmers, who raise pigs and chickens, to manage livestock waste and follow up them to make sure their businesses did not negatively impact the household and community environment (air and water pollution). The positive results achieved in short time have shown that the climate resilient agriculture has been consolidated for the target farmers. Climate change is a big challenge in our world, especially for farmers in the South-east Asia countries. The programme together with its projects have tried to consolidate the target farmers in facing this big challenge as much as it can.

Training on climate change and disaster risk reduction has been conducted for beneficiaries. When people understand the cause and effect of their daily behaviours and the disasters, it will help to positively improve their awareness and behaviours.

We Effect emergency response for rehabilitation after disaster in Yen Bai province in 2017 and 2018 had provided the fertilizer, seedlings and materials for re-building houses for the farmers who suffered from the flood and get serious damage. That helped the farmer to improve the cultivated land after the impact of floods and storms, repair houses, overcome the difficulty and gradually overcome to develop the livelihood.

GENDER EQUALITY

In later years, the gender equality component in We Effect partnership has been strongly promoted and supported. There are so many success factors connected to equal rights and women's empowerment – it couldn't be ignored any longer. During the years, we can see very concrete results like increased family income and better economy, lower rates of gender based violence and more sustainable farming, all resulting from the inclusion of women in decision making, business training and capacity building on farming techniques and marketing of agricultural products.

Some of our areas of work with partners:**Support to women's access to entrepreneurial capacity development programs**

Thousands of women have accessed capacity development programmes during the operational years in Vietnam. They have improved capacity and proactively participated in relevant agricultural value chains, were trained in smart agriculture techniques; trained and/or educated on enterprise development using manual of ILO and Oxfam. Also, training in organizational development and Business Plan Development has been highly appreciated

We Effect supported female members' business development and women empowerment initiatives

During the programme years, hundreds of business initiatives led by women were set up. We Effect also supported initiatives for developing a comprehensive gender/ women empowerment action plan including women access to entrepreneurial capacity development programmes, women empowerment initiatives recognized and implemented by Farmers' Organisations and community.

Our programs have actively sought out local duty bearers (men, community & local authorities) to improve their promoting women leadership and gender equality

This includes promoting gender-responsive policies weighing in benefits for women. We have, together with partners increased awareness and skills to prevent genderbased violence (GBV) at home and in the community. During the year 2018, the partners provided training and meetings for 749 farmers (343 female farmers) to raise their awareness on the gender equality issue and GBV in local communities. This will still be a long journey for the partners and local beneficiaries to achieve the target and make a better place for both genders in their local communities.

Women need stronger voice in decision making and control over economic resources in household and community (Women leadership in Farmers' Organisations promoted)

Hundreds of women participating in the We Effect supported projects reported their active participation in decision making in their farmer organisations, farmers groups, local communities and households.

ADVOCACY

Our partnership has led to capacity building for advocacy in our partner organisations. examples of advocacy results:

CHIASSE is a member of two CSO networks in Vietnam; Sustainable Agriculture and Natural Resource Management (SANRM) working group, in which CHIASSE is co-chair; and the Ethnic Minority Working Group (EMWG), where CHIASSE is the core member. These working groups are national level networks. Under these networks, CHIASSE and other members have had a lot of multi-stakeholder dialogues at national level for policy changes. For ex-

ample, during the last three years, these groups influenced and changed different policies under the National Target Program for Poverty Reduction; the National Target Program for New Rural Development, and other policies for agriculture, green growth, especially for the ethnic minority communities.

Yen Bai Provincial Cooperative Alliance actively engages in its cooperative network, in which they raise ideas on development strategies for the cooperatives at the conference of the Vietnam Cooperative Alliance (VCA) at national level, while also contributing to the strategic policy development at provincial level.



CHIASE Center – “No other organizations in Vietnam has such a strategy for women empowerment like We Effect”

Center of Help for Indigenous value promotion And Sustainable Environment (CHIASE) is a Vietnamese non-governmental organization which focus on sustainable improvements in livelihood security and voice of disadvantaged and natural resource-dependent people, especially ethnic

minority, who lack access to resources and influence over decisions that affect their lives. CHIASE has been working with We Effect since the end of 2017 on the project “Cho Don Women’s Economic Collaboration for Development” at 8 communes in Cho Don district, Bac Kan.

With the funding from We Effect, CHIASE was enabled to provide an extensive support to the targeted beneficiaries – the farmers. Farmers were trained not only with agricultural techniques from experts but also materials for production like breeding flocks or machineries. This is especially essential for member cooperatives who needed to transform their production into another appropriate product upon advices from CHIASE. Sufficient funding also plays the role in the multiplication of VSLA (Village Savings and Loan Associations) in Cho Don from 1 to 19 groups after only 2 years of implementation.

Along with the funding, capacity building is an indispensable aspect within the collaboration between two organizations. Self-assessed shortages in organizational competence of CHIASE was fulfilled throughout specific trainings. Up to now, the capacity in finance management was improved and equipped with an accounting software while reporting procedure is updated. The awareness in using multimedia tools in documentation for communication is set within the center, which is also included in the training agenda of CHIASE for their local partners. Networking events organized by We Effect for South East Asian (SEA) programme's partners were also a turning point for staff of CHIASE when they found a useful reference for their program in Cambodian cooperative models and particularly the Law on Agricultural Cooperatives in Cambodia.

For CHIASE, a strategy to advocate policy for women empowerment in the future, a tool for cooperative capacity assessment and the LANN model for future are among the most important results from the collaboration with We Effect. As a veteran expert in development in Vietnam, Nguyen Van Anh, Director of CHIASE, understands the important role of We Effect in the project implementation in Bac Kan, as well as in the development of CHIASE in their capacity:

"The advocacy strategy for women empowerment is essential for us. No other organizations in Vietnam has such a strategy for women empowerment like We Effect. Strategy is hard to build. But now thanks to We Effect we have a strategy with a 10-year vision until 2030 in which specific tasks are described. Besides, we also add one indicator into our assessment system taken from the

requirement of We Effect in their financial report: the money spent for women, which I think is very specialized. People often talk about numbers of participating women or how women make decisions but the expenditure for women over the total budget is a brilliant idea.

The advocacy strategy for women empowerment is developed under the support from We Effect. Women Empowerment Framework from We Effect has been used as important tool for analysing and developing the strategy. At the strategy level, CHIASE's strategic direction to empower ethnic minority women at community level more than national levels, by strengthening their economic and participation capacity and educating community for more equal relationship and better recognition of women value and contribution.

Besides, as a focal point for local cooperatives, we have also building a tool for cooperative capacity assessment, which I think we could not achieve without We Effect. Based on the outline sent by We Effect, we are building ourselves the tool to assess the capacity of the cooperatives using useful indicators from there. And through this project, we were enabled to experiment the LANN model¹, something we had wanted but never been able to. The funding, management support and networking efforts from We Effect made it possible for us to implement the LANN model."

And Van Anh also pointed out how come the collaboration could produce such impressive outcomes:

"Whatever problem we had, we always received thorough support from We Effect. There is a certain mutual understanding and trust between us. We felt secure in this partnership. What a pity to see We Effect leaving too soon!"

1. Linking Agriculture, Natural Resource Management and Nutrition (LANN) is a community-based capacity building approach to family nutrition for remote areas with low access to public health services. LANN aims at optimizing food acquisition (addressing inadequate food security) and improving food consumption (addressing low nutrient intake) so it can apply for everybody, not only malnutrition children.



Hoa Loi Cooperative, Lao Cai. Photo: Giang Pham

Lao Cai Provincial Cooperatives Alliance – Benefits for the member cooperatives

Supporting farmer organizations, especially the cooperatives benefiting their farmers who are ethnic minorities, and empowering women. That was the common goal bringing Lao Cai Provincial Cooperatives Alliance and We Effect together on their first encounter in August 2018. And only 2 months later, the two partners started working hand in hand with the main agenda in this partnership is to promote market linkages and value chains for agro-products for mountainous ethnic minority communities in Lao Cai province. In this agenda, 5 target cooperatives were chosen as the beneficiaries, covering about 650 households. Throughout 2 years, the Alliance and its members have already received considerable benefits, regardless of the short duration of the program.

As the Vice-chairwoman of Lao Cai Cooperatives Alliance, Nguyen Thi Loi's take on the collaboration between two organizations are fairly positive. Given the idea from We Effect about gender equality, the Alliance suggested the solution: gender equality equals a stable financial status for women. This led to various trainings about women empowerment in economy and approaches organized by the Alliance with experts provided from We Effect. Though these trainings were mostly for leaders from member cooperatives and staff of the Alliance, Loi thinks this will be the starting point when she saw the change in the mindset of these leaders, especially women leaders. When they bring the lessons back to their cooperative, they will be the one who continue the work of the Alliance. Besides, Loi praised



From left to right: Dam Xuan Thang, Tan Ta May, Nguyen Thi Loi, Nguyen Ngoc Thuy, Hoang Thi Lan, Lao Cai. Photo: Giang Pham

the improvement of staff capacity in the Alliance. Thanks to the support from We Effect, the staff of the Alliance now are able to write proposals for projects. Loi herself also learned how to understand foreign partners, this is a good experience for her and the Alliance in the future.

Another noteworthy result from this cooperation is the new approach to market of member organizations. Members of the Alliance are now all introduced on a newly opened website, which is an opportunity to expand their market. An assistance in package design was available as well to help products from member organizations more attractive to the customers.

Newly designed packaging is highly appreciated among target organizations such as Hoa Loi Cooperative or Tien Phong Muong Vi Cooperative. Their respective products of chilies sauce and Seng Cu rice now enter the market with more eye-catching packages and a variety of package selections to suit the demand from customers. Tien Phong Muong Vi Cooperative now even have a specialized marketing staff in their leadership who solely focus on searching new customers. Cao Xuan Dien, Director of Tien Phong Muong Vi Cooperative, also stated the important lesson of maintaining the quality of the Seng Cu rice product to improve the business that he learnt from the program.

That abovementioned lesson is essential for Dien to continue the benefits to his members. Tran Thi Xuan, a farmer partnering with Dien's cooperative, was given trainings on agricultural techniques as well as a specific rice cultivar from her cooperative, same as other members. What changes did she have afterwards?

"One-variety rice fields", a field without mixed varieties, better and consistent quality from a new practice: "simultaneous and regular care" to ensure the concurrent growth of rice.

In return, better rice quality will go hand in hand with better income for the farmers like Xuan and greater market reach for the cooperatives. Everyone is benefited.



Pham Thi Phuong Dong, Yen Bai. Photo: Giang Pham

Yen Bai Cooperative Alliance – “Everything is measurable”

Yen Bai Provincial Cooperative Alliance (YB PCA) is a socio-economic organization voluntarily established by the member cooperatives, operated under the Law of Vietnam and the By-laws issued by Vietnam Cooperative Alliance which was approved by the Prime Minister of Vietnam.

Its strategic networks and partnerships include 318 co-operatives, 60 enterprises and other institutional members. YB PCA has a vision to develop the collective economic sector into being strong, sustainable and having substantial contributions to the provincial economy. YB PCA has been in partnership with We Effect since 2010.

"The most important lesson from this partnership is that the local people in general and our member cooperatives are now clearly aware of benefits from the development of cooperative economy. The support from We Effect also taught our farmers how to work collaboratively for the future production in larger scale while ensuring the required high-quality standards".

That is what Mr. Do Nhan Dao, Chairman of Yen Bai Cooperative Alliance, appreciates the most when being asked about the partnership with We Effect. As one of the longest standing partners with We Effect, for Yen Bai PCA there are more than just lessons from this partnership...

"I remember in 2011 when the Swedish delegation from SCC (Swedish Cooperative Centre – former name of We Effect) visited us for the first time, we had to cross a small bridge to get into a cooperative with an old SUV borrowed from our partner. But when they got into the car and found out there was no seatbelt inside, they refused to travel with it because it does not follow the safety rules. We were impressed by how disciplined they were though they were not in their home country. This was a thoughtful lesson for us because we had never thought of it before."

This is the first impression of We Effect in Ms. Pham Thi Phuong Dong, the former project director of Yen Bai Cooperative Alliance. During her 11 years working closely with We Effect, this is not the only lesson she and her colleagues learnt from the organization. Dong had been directly involved in the collaboration between two partners since beginning in 2010 when the support from We Effect was mostly for cooperatives and staff from the Alliance until the second period from 2018 when the support was expanded to cooperative members and other beneficiaries. Dong has witnessed how the collaboration with We Effect transformed her organization.

From the organizational to the individual level, the capacity of Yen Bai Cooperative Alliance has been improved considerably. Internal working procedure has become more democratic when everything is open for discussion between members and decisions are only made when consensus among members is reached instead of depen-

ding on the leader. This is something totally different with the common practice in Vietnamese working environment. Moreover, everything is measurable. Projects are planned in detailed with clear priorities according to monthly, weekly and even daily goals. And all the goals are measurable with specific data by using indicators for every task. In the past, the Alliance used to design projects with not-too-specific indicators and hence found difficult when assess their own project.

"Everything is measurable", Dong emphasizes the term several times. Perhaps that is the most important improvement in the capacity to consult for the Alliance.

This enhanced capacity also led to the transformation at the individual level, several staff gradually work with their clear weekly plan, even build indicators to measure efficiency within their working groups. Cooperative executives working directly with the Alliance started changing their mindset, the traditional practices are being replaced by technical solutions and several initiatives are being incubated. Although not everyone is at the same level of change, all is moving forward.

The transformation did not only come to the Alliance but also the process of the Alliance supporting local communities, mostly ethnic minorities and poor farmers. "Study Circle" may be a good example. This practice of sharing between participants is among requirements from We Effect for the establishment of VSLA groups (Village Savings and Loan Association) in Yen Bai. During the monthly VSLA group meeting, beside the common procedure, members are open to share everything from their own experience like farming, child raising or family management. This strengthened the bonding and increased mutual trust between members, which is an essential element of a VSLA group. Additionally, strict regulations required by We Effect regarding anti-corruption and transparency set the clear regulations of the Alliance in implementing their project. Gradually, there are similar practices now in every project of the Alliance.

And last but not least, Yen Bai Cooperative Alliance thinks no other institutions have given them a more helpful and timely support than We Effect. It is, like a family member.

We would like to acknowledge
and respectfully thank
all our partners in Vietnam

Center of Help for Indigenous value promotion
And Sustainable Environment (CHIASE)

Lao Cai Provincial Cooperative Alliance

Yen Bai Provincial Cooperative Alliance

Ho Chi Minh City cooperative alliance

Sai Gon COOP

Vietnam Cooperative Alliance

Gia Lai Provincial Cooperative Alliance

Dong Thap Provincial Cooperative Alliance

Human Ecology and Sustainable
Development Institute (HESDI)

Hue Hope Center

Vietnam Farmer Union

Vietnam Institute for Economic and
Policy Research (VEPR)

Bac Kan Women Union

