

# Indigenous plants could herald new economy

Vietnam's native vegetables offer an empowering pathway to market for ethnic minority women farmers

BY GIO BRAIDOTTI

**T**he knowledge of indigenous plants among women farmers in Vietnam's ethnic highland populations may become the basis for a new agricultural economy able to improve the livelihoods of remote communities and the health of consumers.

The plants and the women who know how to cultivate them are the focus of a project initiated by the Vietnam Women's Union (VWU) to scale-up production and expand market demand for indigenous vegetables. The project is being undertaken in partnership with the NSW Department of Primary Industries (DPI) with the support of ACIAR.

The background to the partnership lies with concerns for the welfare of Vietnam's linguistically diverse ethnic minority groups, who make up one of the richest ethnic mixes in South-East Asia. An estimated 53 ethnic minorities, totalling 10 million people, account for 14% of Vietnam's population. Most are indigenous people living in rural communities that remain socially and linguistically apart from the urbanised lowlands favoured by the Kinh majority. Some are more recent migrants from neighbouring countries.

Also scattered throughout the hills and mountains are indigenous plants with a long tradition of cultivation for local use as vegetables, fruit, spices and medicines. They are cultivated primarily for home consumption but a trickle of produce finds its way to small, local markets. Many of these plants are rich in the micronutrients and vitamins known to help overcome malnutrition.

Key to their cultivation by ethnic minorities are women farmers, whose agricultural endeavours—despite not reaching large markets—contribute a formidable work force. Nationally, women in rural areas account for more than 80% of all female workers.

The link between the indigenous plants and the wellbeing of women agriculturalists, their families and communities recently inspired a scoping study to examine the possibility of undertaking a remarkable project. The idea is to empower the ethnic minority women to brand, market and manage the supply chain for selected indigenous produce ... and then, with the help of agronomists, scale-up their own production to meet the expanded demand.

However, the challenges facing such a project are formidable. Remoteness, linguistic barriers, a lack of agronomic information, local poverty, and cultural isolation could each, alone, have sunk a foreign aid project. However, the idea originates with the VWU, a network of 13 million women with a strong track record of enabling gender equality and supporting women's interests across Vietnam's central, provincial, district and commune levels.

Rather than pursuing the project alone, the VWU—through its vice-president, Ms Truong My Hoa, and project coordinator, Ms Tran Thi Hoa—approached ACIAR's Vietnam office in Hanoi. They also gained support at a very high level—Madame Truong My Hoa, the then Vice-President of Vietnam visited the chief executive officer of ACIAR in Australia to discuss the project. It was also supported by Madame Ha Thi

Khiet, the then president of the VWU.

In the process of obtaining ACIAR's support, they brought on board the agronomic expertise of the NSW DPI, with Ms Virginia Brunton heading the Australian and Vietnamese partners.

"We highly appreciate ACIAR's partnership model," says project coordinator Ms Tran Thi Hoa. "They are so cooperative, participatory and consultative. We feel happy to work in this way to assist women farmers, most of whom are our members."

For the project, the DPI adapted and applied participatory techniques that proved key to both the completed one-year



Vietnamese women are now profiting from growing indigenous vegetables.



Women are leading the cultivation of indigenous vegetables.

scoping study and the larger, follow-up project that began in 2008.

“A process known as participatory action research (PAR) is being adapted for this project,” Ms Brunton says. “PAR is an approach that involves active farmer participation in all stages of the research and skill development.”

Together, the partners set out in 2007 to visit the farmers and prepare the way for the project. Travelling to the remote mountain villages, the international team found that in addition to helping women improve farming techniques, opportunities definitely exist for the farmers to expand the market



This Central Highland Ede community is located in one of the plains, not too far from the city, a location where there is high competition for land after the Kinh and Thai moved in from the north.

PHOTO: ELSKE VAN DE FLIERT



## Vietnam

PARTNER COUNTRY: Vietnam

PROJECT/DESCRIPTION: CP/2006/113: Scoping study to investigate the role of women in the production and promotion of indigenous vegetables

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for their vegetables. On the agronomic front, the indigenous vegetables proved hardy, well adapted to local agro-ecological growing conditions, and are generally easy to grow, harvest and preserve.

With the findings assimilated, the partners are launching into the larger, ongoing project. Activities will take place initially in the north-west of Vietnam, beginning in Phu Tho province. In later stages, it will move to Lao Cai and Yen Bai provinces. These regions contain some of Vietnam's poorest people, many belonging to ethnic minorities who have, in the past, experienced barriers to participating in agricultural programs.

“Each project area will focus on one or two vegetables and build a reputation for those particular crops,” Ms Brunton says. “In the long-term, the group of women farmers might consider branding their varieties to enhance market appeal.”

Through all these stages, Ms Brunton stresses that the VWU's support is essential to the project's success. In particular, its strong communication and support networks are proving invaluable, as is its ability to rally women farmers' enthusiasm to participate in the project.

In the meantime, the VWU remains strongly committed and supportive of the ongoing efforts: “I am so impressed by this project because of the project ideas, its activities, approaches and the cooperation among related stakeholders,” Ms Hoa says.

“At all points in the supply chain, the skills of women will be developed. Women will be provided with opportunities to engage in business development, market research and supply chain management. By providing more efficient crops and farming practices, the lives of farmers will be improved through enhanced income and less time consumed in generating that income.” ■