

# THE ORGANIC APPROACH

PHOTO: MICHAEL JONES



Ms Buachanh leads efforts to expand the number of farmers in the northern Lao province of Xieng Khouang that benefit from growing and selling organic vegetables.

In Lao PDR, an ACIAR project is helping women farmers spread the word about the multifaceted benefits of growing organic vegetables, including opportunities to increase income by selling in local markets

## KEY POINTS

- Women in Lao PDR villages are producing and jointly marketing a surplus of organic vegetables, increasing their family income while improving consumer health and environmental sustainability.
- ACIAR support is helping the women's association spread economic benefit by expanding its organised marketing from fewer than 30 women to include more than 160.

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In the northern Lao province of Xieng Khouang, nearly 30 women produce organic vegetables for sale in a dedicated, twice-weekly organic market in the provincial capital of Phonsavan. Sales are brisk, with each producer

selling out her produce in just a few hours of morning trading. Total sales volumes reach upwards of 15,000,000 kip (about A\$2,665) per month during the peak season.

For most families, income from organic vegetables was unanticipated but is highly valued, allowing important investments in the family's future. Education costs for children, capital costs and health care are among the top-mentioned expenses covered by this extra income.

So beneficial have been the outcomes that the women formed their own organic vegetable producers' association and are spreading the word across the district about the good health and environmental protection possible through organic production.

The farmers' own outreach efforts are supported by a Vientiane-based non-government organisation, Sustainable Agriculture and Environment Development Association (SAEDA), with funds from donors including Oxfam and Bread for the World. While activities are not designed to focus exclusively on women, more

than 75% of members are women and the association's management and board are almost all women.

Together, the farmers, the local agriculture office and SAEDA have reached hundreds of farmers who have been taught helpful techniques for growing organic vegetables in Xieng Khouang's unique high-altitude environment (greater than 1,000 metres above mean sea level). Farmers have also engaged in marketing activity, cultivating consumer interest in the locally produced organic vegetables.

Despite the support and interest generated over more than a decade, the association faces a major limitation. The number of farmers selling organic produce—and getting markedly better prices than conventional markets—is stagnant at about 30 producers.

Ms Buachanh, the elected president of the association's board of directors, expresses disappointment with this lack of growth. "The association has a goal of helping as many people as possible eat organic food to promote the health

of people and the land," she says. "But if less than 30 people produce organic vegetables for sale, then most of the people in Xieng Khouang are still consuming conventional produce."

According to the provincial agriculture office, more than 10 tonnes of vegetables is sold in the markets every week; the organic market sells less than that over six months.

To bump up the number of people who can buy and consume organic produce, Ms Buachanh wants to expand the number of association members that market organic vegetables. ACIAR has offered critical support to help Ms Buachanh and the general association membership create strategies and plan this new phase.

### EXTENDING THE MESSAGE

Leaders from two ACIAR projects are cooperating with the local government to improve the management of agricultural extension services. These same efforts are also promoting the participatory development of methods to better support farmer organisations.

One important shift in extension management introduced by the ACIAR projects is the concept of district-wide orientation replacing the common village-by-village focus within the local government District Agriculture and Forestry Office (DAFO) planning.

Previously, DAFO looked at one village at a time and was quite satisfied with the success of 30 families selling organic produce. However, when they used the project's tools they identified more than one billion kip (about A\$180,000) in

potential increased annual sales from organic vegetable production.

In that context, the small number of sellers no longer seemed impressive; annual sales currently amount to just over one hundred million kip (less than A\$18,000). At this point, DAFO leadership became serious about supporting the same kind of expansion Ms Buachanh aspires to achieve, albeit from a different perspective.

### EXPANSION RE-IMAGINED

A major challenge faced by both DAFO and the association's leadership was providing a framework for substantial expansion in activity. DAFO revisited its services to cover as many of the villages in the district as possible, rather than focusing on a few.

The association was similarly no longer thinking narrowly about helping a few centrally located farmers produce for the provincial capital. Rather, the thinking extended to involving women from across the district—especially those with larger production areas—in producing organic vegetables for local and possibly distant markets.

Important issues for the association members were ensuring that all new members maintained organic standards and that the market could handle increased production.

In response, the ACIAR projects coordinated a series of studies carried out by representatives of both the potential new members and association leadership in partnership with DAFO.

These studies identified organisational changes that would allow association members, working

together in teams, to monitor and coach new producers to ensure quality and organic standards. At the same time, by bulking their product at the village level, they have designed new ways for members to sell their product efficiently.

Willingness to take these steps was a major breakthrough; previously, the association remained wedded to the idea of each producer selling her own produce directly to consumers at the organic marketplace. Allowing women to sell through peer groups allows more distant and smaller producers to get their produce to market in a cost-effective way.

Once the study participants—and their friends and neighbours—analysed, discussed and understood these new mechanisms, more than 500 women and men indicated interest in joining the association to produce and sell organic vegetables.

Supported by ACIAR funds, the DAFO team has worked with association members to introduce nearly 200 families in 10 villages to the basics of organic farming and positioned them to join the ranks of association members producing for the market.

Ms Khamdta is a grower who has attended the technical training provided by the association and has turned her garden into a model of integrated organic farming. She grows onions, lettuces, Chinese cabbages, shallots, peas, mustard greens, cilantro, celery leaves, dill and lots more on a small plot behind her house.

She is producing a surplus, she says, but has been waiting for induction into the association to be allowed to sell at the dedicated organic market.

The association, working hand-in-hand with DAFO, is in the process of expanding membership by at least 160 households in the next six months. It is recruiting new members to produce vegetables with a strong focus on sale rather than consumption.

Changes in the way farmers market their produce are also being considered. Ms Khamdta, for example, would struggle to attend the twice-weekly market. If the new method of selling through a representative were adopted, she could concentrate on production and would happily pay a fee (to cover the marketer's time and costs) in order to benefit from greater sales of her produce.

If these milestones are achieved, the women will have made serious strides towards increasing the local economy by adding billions of kip in local sales of healthy, environmentally sustainable organic vegetables. ■

**ACIAR PROJECTS:** ASEM/2011/075 'Enhancing district delivery and management of agriculture extension in Lao PDR' and ASEM/2014/102 'Critical factors for self-sustaining farmer organisations in northern Lao PDR'  
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Mrs Khamdta (right) has turned her garden into a model of integrated organic farming. She is pictured with Ms Buachanh, the president of the board of directors of the organic vegetable growers' association, which is expanding market opportunities for farmers such as Mrs Khamdta.



Organically grown lettuce and onions in the northern Lao province of Xieng Khouang.



Mrs Pew and the son she supports in college in Vientiane with the proceeds from her organic vegetables.

PHOTOS: MICHAEL JONES