

Mother and child in Vietnam's north-western highlands.



# MADE IN VIETNAM BY WOMEN

PHOTO: PHAN THUY HIEN

Women farmers in Vietnam's impoverished north-western highlands are the essential ingredient needed to solve a set of inter-related nutrition, poverty and marketing problems involving vegetables

## KEY POINTS

- Vietnam's north-west provinces face a dual need for improved vegetable production systems and access to markets.
- An ACIAR project working to achieve both goals in ways that reduce poverty and malnutrition has found that the key to success is women.

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Lao Cai in north-west Vietnam is renowned for its spectacular mountains, stunning vistas and vibrant ethnic minorities.

Despite its strong tourism sector, Lao Cai continues to be one of the poorest regions in Vietnam, with 40% of the population below the poverty line.

Poverty is particularly rampant among the ethnic minorities that inhabit the region, with Mung, Nung and Dao peoples experiencing poverty levels greater than 70%. These communities face not only poverty, but also

chronic malnutrition, with one in three children under five years experiencing stunting.

Improving nutritional security through increased vegetable consumption and farmer access to market opportunities are vital to improving the livelihoods of these farming families.

Central to any assistance provided to the region is the recognition that it is women farmers who play important roles in horticulture production and marketing. This situation was clearly demonstrated in an earlier ACIAR research project (AGB/2006/112), which found women were

involved in the decision-making in all aspects of day-to-day farming life. Further, 62–93% of women were primarily responsible for marketing and selling produce (depending on the commune).

The prospects of these women farmers achieving nutritional and livelihood gains through improved productivity and marketing are high. Lao Cai, together with other north-west provinces, has the potential to be a major vegetable supplier to northern markets, mimicking Da Lat's role in the country's south.

The north-west provinces are well endowed with natural resources, enabling year-round vegetable production. The ability to produce in the off-season and a wealth of indigenous vegetable varieties also provides a marketing edge for smallholder producers. Further, research found that Lao Cai vegetables are perceived by consumers as safe and nutritious and are in strong demand, particularly during the off-season (summer).

Despite these opportunities the region has failed to fully exploit these advantages. Many of the reasons cited for this relate to an inability to effectively access lucrative market opportunities in urban and regional centres.

### MARKET ACCESS

In 2014, ACIAR commissioned a project (AGB/2012/059) to improve the profitability and sustainability of smallholder vegetable farmers in north-west Vietnam through improving market engagement and adopting integrated resource and disease management practices.

Led by the University of Adelaide and the Vietnam Women's Union, the project is focusing particularly on women and ethnic minorities who are engaged in horticultural value chains in Sa Pa and Bac Ha in Lao Cai province.

ACIAR's engagement with Lao Cai vegetable producers introduces a capacity to undertake targeted market research, so that constraints can be overcome and opportunities better exploited. With market development an important focus, research is helping us to understand how smallholder farmers can effectively access local, provincial, urban and regional markets.

The project uses a participatory approach—the collaborative problem-solving methodology—whereby supply chain stakeholders will determine the interventions to be tested. To this end, stakeholders are driving the R&D agenda.

In October 2014, two stakeholder workshops were held in Sa Pa. The first, for government officials at the district level, was organised to gain an understanding of policies that affect the vegetable sector and opportunities for the project to support existing government priorities, such as through the provision of technical information.

The second workshop was held with the suppliers of vegetables from farms to markets—including farmers, collectors, wholesalers and retailers—to identify priorities for future intervention, such as improvements in postharvest management. The workshop led to the formation of a steering committee to build linkages more effectively with the private sector and act as a sounding board for the project team.

The project's next phase will focus on market development initiatives.

Consistently meeting retailer and wholesaler volumes is a challenge that smallholder farmers face. Group marketing through cooperatives is one way to meet this demand and address logistics constraints such as transport.

In Bac Ha, a group of 43 women farmers has formed the Di Thang Cooperative to produce

and market their vegetables. The ACIAR project has supported the cooperative in providing training in vegetable production, pest and disease management and marketing, including participation in trade fairs, study tours and a restaurant challenge. For example, early in 2016, two trade fairs held in Hanoi were designed to link farmers and cooperatives with retailers and wholesalers in Hanoi.

The Di Thang Cooperative is also participating in some of the ongoing research to evaluate new crops and off-season production using low-cost protected cropping structures. Now the project is looking to work with other cooperatives in Bac Ha and Sa Pa to support similar marketing initiatives. Recently a new cooperative has formed in the Ta Chai commune in Bac Ha.

Working with women and the Women's Union (a sociopolitical organisation) is central to the success of the project. Women are the drivers of vegetable production and marketing, as they are involved in all aspects of the supply chain from farm to market.

The Women's Union draws from a membership of 13-million-plus members spread throughout national, provincial, district and commune levels of society. This network enables information and issues to be communicated in both directions. We anticipate that this network will be critical as we enter the scaling-out phase of the project. ■

**ACIAR PROJECT:** AGB/2012/059 'Towards more profitable and sustainable vegetable farming systems in north-western Vietnam'

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**MEDIA LINKS:** <https://youtu.be/CHKtaNkheYo>

Vegetable market in Sa Pa, Vietnam.



Women at a farmers' meeting in north-western Vietnam.



PHOTOS: SALLY INGLETON