NATURE'S SPIRIT

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Introduction by Mrs. Tran Thi Lanh – founder of TEW-CHESH-CIRD and SPERI

At one point in my life I fell in love with nature, human nature as well as plants, flowers and animals alike and decided to dedicate my life and work to the natural diversity surrounding us. At about the same time I asked myself the meaning of social justice and a society without discrimination, where all members have the same opportunities, rights and responsibilities.

In an attempt to find answers I found that if people showed contempt towards nature around them, there could never be social justice. Social justice cannot be achieved without environmental justice. All people are equally responsible for caring for and protecting all natural resources like animals and plants while everyone should have equal access to the available natural resources for survival as well as for enjoyment and enrichment.

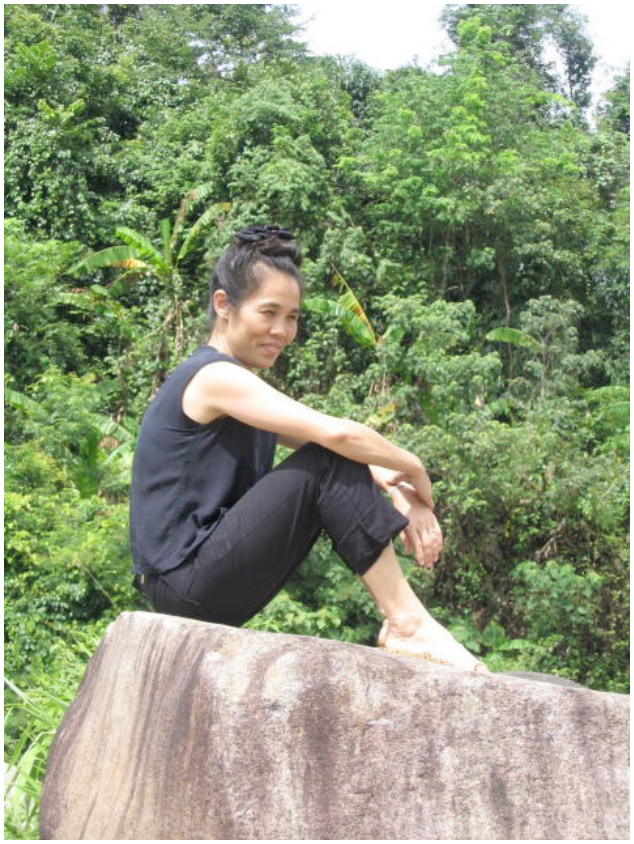
Social justice for the poor can be achieved through environmental justice, because the poor heavily depend on their natural environment for survival. If society does not take care of this environment, it takes away the means of survival of many poor, thus increasing social injustice. If big market players keep destroying nature for pure economic benefit of the happy few, a growing number of poor people have to carry the burden in an increasing and thus unfair way, creating an even bigger divide between rich and poor.

The first step towards environmental justice is awareness of the need to take care of our environment. Here we can learn a lot from indigenous people who carry knowledge gained over centuries on how to live in harmony with the surrounding nature, how to protect it, and how to nurture it. But protecting is not enough, to make sure future generations can also enjoy the beauty of untouched landscapes, we have to start nurturing the nature today.

Herbal medicine and traditional handicrafts are like the left and right hands of minority women. To the outside world they are a strong visual testament of an age-old knowledge that counters the idea that minority women are uneducated and thus backward. Herbal medicine allows minority communities to survive in isolated areas while minority people wear their traditional clothes with pride and dignity. Minority people have great respect for their natural environment that provides them with the resources for medicine and clothing.

Why can minority communities not be allowed to live in National Parks knowing they will not kill the mother that feeds and clothes them, and will nurse the forests. For minority communities the forests are like their ancestors, part of their history and the link between their past and future. Minority women picture the plants and animals that sustain them in the embroideries that adorn their clothes, seeing their natural surrounding with the hands that work the textiles. It is a way of saying thanks to Mother Nature for sustaining them throughout their lives. It shows how religion and traditional culture are intertwined with the land they inhabit.

SPERI - Nurturing Nature



Mrs. Tran Thi Lanh

FOREWORD

This book is an introduction to the work of SPERI (Social Policy Ecology Research Institute). SPERI is a Vietnamese grown NGO that started out in the early nineties as a small organization called TEW (Towards Ethnic Women). When TEW grew, it also diversified into different areas of specialization. Thus were born CHESH (Center for Human Ecology Studies of Highlands) and CIRD (Center for Indigenous Knowledge, Research an d Development). The fusion of two out of three organizations into a single umbrella NGO (SPERI) marks the conclusion of a first set of activities and at the same time precludes the start of a new vision for new growth for the next decade. We say that this book is only an effort to explain SPERI because it is almost impossible to bundle all the work done over the last ten to fifteen years and to honour all the achievements.

TEW started as an apartment room organization, and is the brainchild of one diminutive lady, with a large vision and ideology. Through the pages of this book, SPERI's founder, Mrs. Tran Thi Lanh, wants to share with the reader the insights she gathered from working during many years with minority tribes in Vietnam, Laos and other countries in the Mekong Region. What drives her is her sense of justice, her longing for social improvement and her persistence in front of obstacles.

SPERI appraises its work by judging the effects of all activities on the targeted people. Is social justice achieved? Have villagers' lives improved in a sustainable way? Have

traditions and cultural specificities been respected, enforced even? Lanh teaches her staff to walk through the tribal villages as if walking through a living library of traditional knowledge and to thread with utmost care and respect, as one would do when visiting a prized treasure in a prestigious museum.

Through the pages in this book, we sincerely hope that the reader will share the experience of all SPERI staff members, who invariably appreciate that, unlike in a museum, the treasures hidden in tribal villages are alive and present and worthwhile to be preserved.

"The spirit of nature is located in the forest,
If we destroy the forest,
Nature will lose its spirit."

"When I look at minority people, I see this poem reflected in their lives."
(Tran Thi Lanh)

Mrs. Tran Thi Lanh is born on August 19, 1959, in a small village called Tu My in Ha Tinh province. She is the second child of three, her brother Tran Quoc Hien, is seven years her elder, and her sister Tran Thi Hoa is four years younger. Lanh starts going to school at the age of six and because of the Vietnam-American war she spent part of her primary school years with her grandparents in Vinh city.

"*My grandmother always sang songs, nursery rhymes. I still vividly remember these poems. Later at the age of 8 or 9, when I returned to live with my parents in the village, my father sang the same rhymes in the evening when he came home from work."*

The war made Lanh "thirsty" for peace. As a child she asked herself countless questions about the war, and its cruel reality.

"I couldn't understand why the Americans were here, why they were bombing. I had a very good friend, with whom I went to school every day. One day I was still holding her hand, the next she was gone, killed by a bomb. I wanted to understand the reasons behind the realities that surrounded me. Ever since I was a child, nature fascinated me, and I wanted to understand the reasons why things happened as they did. Birds made nest in such intricate ways, collecting grass and twigs so that they could lay their eggs in it. I wanted to understand animals' behaviour. My longing for knowledge, my love for nature and my decision later on to study biology stemmed from those memories."

Lanh graduated in biology at the University of Vinh in 1981. Moving to Hanoi she started working as a researcher in the lab of Biology at the University of Hanoi. She felt unhappy during the three years she worked there and transferred to the Forest Institute in 1983 to work for FIPI (Forestry Inventory Planning Institute). This position allowed her to regularly travel up-country.

Minority children playing in a mountain stream

"During one of those travels I encountered ethnic minority people. I realized that these people had lived together harmoniously with the forest for more than a 1000 years already. This made me think about the existing connections between humans and their surrounding natural environment. While working for FIPI I saw that the government spent a lot of time, energy and money in training people to protect forest areas, while at the same time, minority people were living in the forests in full and sustainable balance with nature. I didn't understand why the government was not turning to those forest people to help preserve their natural habitats. "

Lanh stayed with FIPI until 1989 when she decides to take a total new direction in life feeling caged in the confines of traditional research.

"I studied a six-month course on Natural resource management and environmental protection at the Hanoi University. I learned a lot, especially from one German professor, who told me that if I wanted to understand environmental protection, I had to compare it to a pregnancy, and giving birth to a child. Nature had to be nurtured in the same ways as you would nurture a child."

Lanh continues her studies with a three-month course on Human Ecology at the East West Centre in Honolulu, Hawaii. Later during her work she briefly meets Dr. Robert Chambers from IDS Institute (Institute of Development Studies in the United Kingdom) who left a strong impression on her through his writings: "Putting the last first", meaning: Give priority to the poorest.

House of White Hmong in Long Lan village, Luang Prabang, Laos

During her PhD at the University of Hanoi, from 1992 until 1997, she developed her own human ecology theory based upon her research in Ba Vi National Park. In her paper she is critical of the government policies concerning the Ba Vi area. Her supervisors; Prof. Le Van Khoa and Prof. Nguyen Quang Ha told her it was impossible to include a politically inspired chapter in her paper. According to them, a PhD thesis could only be scientific in nature and any reference to politics had to be avoided. Not agreeing with their argumentation, Lanh insisted that the social and political are intertwined. Because of this one politically sensitive chapter Lanh never graduated on her PhD. Even so, other professors would later acknowledge the value of her theories and Lanh has over the years applied her human ecology theory in all activities of the NGO. *(For a summary description of Lanh's view on human ecology, especially pertaining to minority hill tribes in the Mekong region of S.E. Asia cf. below: "SPERI's Human Ecology Theory)*

"It was while working in Ba Vi that the idea to start up my own working group first appeared to me. I asked young people on the University where I was doing my PhD to join me. The group of students I worked with grew bigger and I considered starting my own organization. When I asked my professor for advice he told me it would be impossible. Under the existing law a foreigner would have to lead such an organization and take the decisions, not me. When in 1993 a new decree was issued (decree 35/CP) that allowed Vietnamese citizens to register individual organizations, I jumped to the opportunity"

In 1994 Mrs. Tran Thi Lanh established her first NGO and named it: 'Towards Ethnic Women' (TEW). TEW registered as a 'Science and Technology Association' under the watchful eyes of VUSTA, a newly erected socio-political umbrella organization. VUSTA has the power to accept or reject the registration any new organization and can deny them at any time the right to continue their activities. Although being a governmental organization, VUSTA is itself dependent on funding from international donor organizations to improve and expand staff and working capacity.

In its early days TEW focused on sustainable development of highland ethnic minority communities. The focus was on women. The NGO tried to increase their awareness of the inherent value of traditional knowledge, especially regarding natural resource management and community development. Through its projects, TEW attempted to balance the needs of women as individuals (gender equality) with the wider aspirations of the community as a whole.

During a trip across 16 provinces in 1992 visiting different ethnic minority areas some encounters left a lasting impression on Lanh.

" I visited Dak To Tan Canh village bordering Cambodia in Dak To district of Kon Tum province, where Ro Ngao (Ba Na) minority people lived. In the evening all villagers gathered at the central cultural house. They danced around me and drank corn wine. The next morning a woman came to the cultural house and invited me into her home. She didn't have any teeth left. She had almost no food left to survive on, only some sweet potato. She offered me one of her last potatoes and asked me: "Could you please tell the government, that they cannot ask us to abide to the family planning program. The law says we can only have two children but I gave birth to 14 children yet twelve of them died."

"I also visited a Hmong village in Chieng Tuong commune bordering Laos, 75 km away from Yen Chau district centre, Son La province in Northwest of Vietnam. When leaving the village I came across a woman going up the mountain. It was early in the afternoon. The woman was highly pregnant and was carrying a small naked child. The child was pulling and chewing a breast in an effort to get milk, but the women's breasts were empty. She carried a very heavy basket on the back and around her arms were two rolls of hemp thread she was spinning. Beside her walked a heavily loaded horse. On her head she wore a turban made of horsehair traditionally worn by Hmong women. The surface of the mountain was blackened and against that black backdrop stood some beautiful Ban trees carrying snow-white blossoms. I asked the woman if she felt tired but received no answer since she didn't speak any Vietnamese. She pointed up the hill as if asking me to come to her village. When I asked again she looked me up and down. I took a picture of her, which scared her. All the time she was smiling. How could she survive in these circumstances? I continued to climb down the mountain feeling similar as in Kon Tum province where I had met the Ro Ngao minority woman. In the evening I went out to eat in the district city of Yen Chau and being quite poor I looked for a cheap restaurant. In the restaurant men with fat stomachs were drinking 333 beer, laughing loudly. Seeing them laughing reminded me of the poor woman also smiling and this thought made me

very angry. I then decided to make a film about the different meanings of laughter. Mrs. Jennifer Smith, an English teacher, helped me to make that film in English and Vietnamese. The film was titled 'A laugh'. These two memories, together with my experience working with Xinh Mun people in Bo Ngoi village, were the main inspiration to dedicate my life working for the poor and especially minority people."

Minority woman carrying a heavy load

TEW focused very strongly on the plight of women, working with the poorest of the poor. Their financial poverty stood in stark contrast to their wisdom of herbal medicine for treating health problems or assisting with pregnancy and birth. They are the keepers of knowledge on age-old traditions and crafts and on the knowledge to live harmoniously and in balance with the surrounding nature. They use the available natural resources around them for dyeing their fabrics. They harvest cotton, hemp and silk, and use these resources to make beautiful products like scarves, bags, clothes, pillows, blankets and musical instruments and are able to make everything they need in life. The reality that such wisdom is no longer valued is underscored by the way that outsiders, society and authorities usually look down on these women.

TEW strived to empower these women but at the same time recognized that this was not enough. Women live together with their husbands and families and they are part of a community. TEW's focus therefore could not solely be on women, but had to be on all the members of the community and their interrelationship with nature. As a result of this new insight, TEW gradually shifted its focal point towards the balance between indigenous minority communities and the surrounding ecosystem.

Wishing to research human ecology, community structures and indigenous value systems in a more scientific way, a new NGO was established in 1999: CHESH (Centre for Human Ecology studies in Highland areas). CHESH is an organization for research, cooperation and networking. Its main goal is to improve the quality of life of the highland ethnic minority communities in Vietnam, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Yunnan province of China. Results obtained from CHESH's projects are used to influence government officials to push for improved policies that will benefit the poor.

CHESH expanded the work of the NGO to new countries like Laos and Thailand forming partnerships with RCSD (Regional Centre for Social Science and Sustainable Development of Chiang Mai University, Thailand), TERRA (Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance, Thailand) and IMPECT (Inter Mountain Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand).

Next came the establishment of regional offices in Vietnam. This was deemed necessary to bring the NGO closer to remote minority villages so that their approaches and strategies could be better adapted to the local cultural, social and geographical conditions of a certain region. TEW initially planned to open three regional offices, one in the North, one in the Centre and one in the Central Highlands of Vietnam. The first regional centre in Central Vietnam was realized in 1998 in Dong Le town, Quang Binh province.

The strategy worked and through the years the regional office in Central Vietnam grew bigger and better organized. It became 'home' to a strong and empowered key-farmers' network. This network or CBO (Community Based Organization) soon after reformed into a full-fledged new NGO and registered in the year 2000, under the name of CIRD (Center for Indigenous Research and Development).

CIRD was born out of the need to recognize, explore and valorise the traditional indigenous knowledge and with the specific aim of translating this knowledge into practical values that can be applied in modern society.

Unique is the establishment of the Farmers' School in Quang Binh, called CCCD (Centre for Community Capacity Development), which is run under the management of CIRD. CCCD runs training courses on agricultural and animal husbandry techniques, herbal medicine, vegetable and nursery gardens, bee keeping techniques, veterinary techniques, overall hygiene improvement methods on village level, like toilets and composting, and road constructions. CCCD uses different teaching techniques ranging from traditional class-room teaching over field practice on the grounds of CCCD in Dong Le and village farms to study visits, workshops, meetings and seminars. CIRD acts as coordinator for activities set out in the master planning for Ke village.

A crucial activity of CIRD is its involvement in land allocation programs in Central Vietnam. They organize communal meetings, train farmers on basic land policies, so that they can understand the importance of applying for land use rights and know what procedures to follow. These activities sometimes bring CIRD head to head with the authorities. Such was the case in Cao Quang village, where provincial authorities

intended to allocate village land to set up the Cao Quang forest enterprise. CIRD actively lobbied the provincial and district authorities and succeeded in having the land allocated to the individual households in the village.

CIRD does not work in a vacuum, it networks with other Vietnamese NGO's like RDSC (Rural Development Service Centre), RTCCD (Rural Training Centre for Community Development), CRD (Centre for Rural Development), CEPHAD (Centre for Public Health and Community Development), and CSDM (Centre for Sustainable Developments in the Mountains).

SPERI's HUMAN ECOLOGY THEORY
"**Every step leaves a footprint.**"

Human ecology explores not only the influence of humans on their environment but also the influence of the environment on human behaviour, and the adaptive strategies humans take as they come to understand those influences better.

Working with ethnic minority people, Lanh realized that some of the theories human ecologists adhere to when describing human and natural ecosystems, do not fit with what she sees when working in minority communities. As a reaction she developed a new human ecology concept. Her theory is deducted from the lessons she received from Professor Terry A. Rambo, an American human ecologist and her teacher at the University of Hanoi and the East West Centre in Hawaii.

As Lanh sees it, an indigenous society is structured in three concentric circles, resembling a human cell. Human cells contain three major building blocks: the nucleus, the cell interior and the cell membrane. The nucleus harbours the genetic material in its DNA and acts like the information centre. The cell interior or cytoplasm contains the mitochondria, which function as cellular power plants converting organic material into energy. The cell membrane acts like a barrier that protects the interior from exterior forces and serves as a filter and communications beacon.

In relation to this model, the centre or '**nucleus**' of an ethnic minority community is made up of its traditional cultural values. The essence of these values is captured into religion, spiritual behaviour and moral attitude. This system of values has over time (over hundreds of years) become '**the genetic imprint**' of each indigenous group. By 'genetic imprint', we mean both the truly genetic (hereditary) features (like facial features, genetically susceptibility to certain diseases, aptitude to certain skills etc) and non-hereditary features that in an "acquired" sense, still belong to the 'genetic imprint': i.e. values that are omnipresent in the village. The villagers are themselves not fully conscious of the traits that define them as a certain ethnic group. For the most part (religion is maybe the exception), parents do not actively teach their children about these unique traits, since children acquire them simply by living and following the 'way' their parents live in the community. This value system or 'genetic imprint' defines the cultural identity of a population and it is strongly linked both to the lands they have inhabited for decades or even centuries and to their ancestral origins, the region from where they originally had to emigrate, hundreds of years ago.

Kho Mu elders playing traditional music

The second circle, designated by the '**cell cytoplasm**', is what we call '**customary law**'. Based on their values, ethnic groups create a set of formal and informal laws to regulate all human interactions within communities and between different clans. This system creates positive energy because it is aimed at preventing and resolving conflicts and it creates peace and coherence in society. Two purposes are thus served: Customary law provides a legal framework for people to adhere to, and at the same time provides a tool to protect traditional values from eroding.

The third circle or '**cell membrane**' is the best described of all three building blocks because it consists the most visible of the ethnical features, namely the '**expression of their cultural traits**'.
Peoples' genetic imprint, combined with their specific value system will define a set of regulations that they will agree to live by (customary law) and all this together will culminate in the way these people typically 'behave'

Young Hmong men on Hmong New Year

This behaviour is what outsiders see and makes up their perception of the identity of a specific minority group. These cultural traits are expressed in visible characteristics like make-up, traditional clothing, housing style, traditional music, ceremonies and rituals, and, not to forget, language. By these expressions, people communicate their culture to the outside world and also by this way, they differentiate and delineate those who belong to their community from outsiders. Up until today many minority communities have been able to ward off changes from outside by keeping to their traditions.

Conventionally, and this where Lanh disagrees, many anthropologists and sociologists define characteristics like traditional dress or language as the cultural identity of minority people. Lanh found out that this was doing injustice to the complexity of the real identity of ethnic minorities. She claims that these characteristics are only a minute part of their cultural identity; actually, she says they are nothing but just the behavioural part, the outer circle. The real identity lies in deeper building blocks.

An example to illustrate this: The basis of the religion of the Dao people is the worship of spirits and ancestors mixed with certain aspects of Taoism. Based on this religion, Dao people practice the ritual of 'Cap Sac', an initiation rite for young Dao men. To comply with it, a valuable contribution, like a pig or a chicken is needed. It is religion (inner circle) that defines their cultural identity, resulting in a ceremony where their customary law (medial circle) tells them to contribute something valuable. What we see during the ceremony is only behaviour (outer circle) that is the result of their cultural identity and values. The most important consequence of this theory is the understanding that you do not automatically rob a people from their identity- although you do threaten and impoverish it- by taking away the outer circle, but you do effectively kill their identity when touching at the genetic imprint of the population. If a minority group does for instance not wear their traditional clothes anymore, this does not automatically mean they have lost their cultural identity, but if you take these people out of their natural habitat (e.g. the sloping hills or the rain forests) and put them in an artificial environment where they can not connect with their inner circle features (e.g. big trees, a herbal medicine doctor, house spirit poles…) they may be truly lost. Likewise, it is not by just restoring the production of traditional clothes and artefacts that you can hope to revive their cultural roots or value system. You can teach a monkey to walk with a cane, but you cannot ask him to think like a gentleman. In the same way, it is shameful to ask or force certain tribes to revive old traditions (e.g. for the sake of tourism or misplaced anthropological research) without at the same time trying to also revive the original circumstances from where these traditions were born. Would it not be more beautiful to see a young Hmong woman live in her grandfathers priceless wooden pole house, on her own priceless ancestral land, wearing a pair of designer jeans and a sports jacket while tapping away on a laptop computer, rather than to see the same woman in traditional throngs, dancing a traditional dance for a busload full of Korean tourists in a forest tourist resort? Unfortunately however, the latter sight is far more common than the first.

In practice we have to learn to classify behaviour, in order to understand it. The right (correct) behaviour will enforce customary law, which in turn will nurture the value system. For this reason alone, the NGO's staff members are requested to first learn the right behaviour, with respect for the cultural identity of minority people where they work. This behaviour includes the correct way to greet people, what clothes to wear, where to sit with elders of the village etc. From learning the customary regulations and by using the correct behaviour, over time, they will recognize the characteristics that define the specific minority culture under study.

Another important consequence of Lanh's theory is that, when working with minority people, we are not allowed to touch to the fabric of the minorities' identity or change it, simply because it is not ours to change. The minority people own their identity and only they should be allowed to adjust, modify or change it. Therefore one needs to learn to tread lightly when integrating in a foreign community. This may seem an impossible task because, like the title suggests, every step leaves a footprint.

Lanh expanded her human ecology theory to the natural environment humans inhabit. Nature's biomass is divided into sub levels of species and plants. Biomass refers to the accumulation of living matter. It can be defined as the total of all biological material in a given area or of a biological community or group. Biomass is dependent on the kind of soil, climate and different kinds of trees and plants growing in the designated area. Biomass is built up of all levels of fauna and flora, and the more levels we find in a biomass system, the larger the biodiversity of this system. Moreover, these levels are not without interaction with each other. Each level will compete with the others for survival, in cycles of competition and unity leading to evolution, all this according to and following the principles of Darwin's evolutionary theory. If we find a lot of levels in biomass it means that the biodiversity in the system is large and hence also quite self-sustainable. Forests are known to accumulate high levels of biomass due to the fact that trees can grow too much larger sizes than other plant forms and forests therefore have the potential for a wide variety of structures and spatial arrangements.

People living in such a biomass system will position themselves in between their own human ecology system and the ecosystem surrounding them. Both systems will learn to co-exist in a harmonious (symbiotic) way. This is contradictory to what is often believed by outsiders, who commonly think that the co-existence is non-symbiotic, i.e. that only the human community gains from the environment and not the other way around. To illustrate that the opposite may also be true, we can mention the behaviour of Hmong people who believe wholeheartedly that the old big trees are inhabited by spirits and as a result of that believe, they regard these trees as the spiritual protectors of all Hmong people. Consequently, they worship and protect the old trees and find it their responsibility to protect the natural environment to ensure the survival of the big trees. Hmong people thus have created a bond between themselves and nature based on trust and dependency.

Lao Loum village leader blessing a tree to protect it from loggers

That explains again, as mentioned above, why resettlement is such a destructive factor in the lives of minority people. It severs the link of trust and dependency between humans and their environment. This fact is understood, confirmed and acknowledged by all academics, but rarely taken into consideration by those involved in land developing projects. After resettling more than 56.000 people, largely Thai, Hmong, Muong and Dao ethnic minorities to make way for the Hoa Binh dam on the Da river, built between 1979 and 1994, a second dam, the Son La dam was completed in 2012. This project led to the displacement of 91.000 minority people, the largest resettlement in Vietnam's history. In both cases, the Vietnamese Government resettles many different minority groups and by doing so, the government is liable for the complete cultural destruction of as many distinctive minority cultures, and as a consequence, liable also for the impoverishment of cultural diversity in Vietnam. With one stroke of a pen, a decision was made, unwittingly destroying an accord between humans and forests that took hundreds of years to build. It is the environment that defines what you worship. It is what you worship that defines how you live. It is how you live that defines what you eat, how you dress, how you house yourself. All this so much characterizes your identity that, over time, it becomes your roots and settles into your cultural DNA. By uprooting the first building block, the environment, all the rest is also destroyed, and people's identity and values are killed. Lost values lead to a loss of customary law, which brings a society into crisis and makes it to lose direction.

This brings us to the next step in SPERI's philosophy: "**In order to preserve cultural identity and natural biodiversity and the link between both, you have to legalize it.**" One of the imperative tasks of SPERI (as should be for any NGO working with landless people) is to secure the rights to the use of land. Such 'land-use rights' can be allocated to individual households or to entire communities, or still to specific organizations, like for instance a Women's Union, a Youth Union or an Elder council. Community rights to land are one of the most important tools to settle land disputes and it is a powerful weapon in the face of all-destructive resettlement programs. For as long as a country abides by the rule of law, and none withstanding the possibility of corruption on any level, if a

community has possession of ‘rights to land’ documents, these right cannot be ignored. At least a consultation with the owners of the documents is necessary, and if in disagreement, these rights can only be taken away by a court decision.

Creating a legal framework by giving ownership of the land they live and work on is the first step for minority people to survive and stay in their natural surroundings. Strengthening minority people in their awareness that protecting their natural environment will in the future bring them more stability and secure them an economically viable life in contrast to the option of selling the land or the trees on it is the second step. It is sad that this second step is necessary, because, as mentioned before, originally, the minorities had this knowledge already embedded deep in their social awareness as they were intimately linked with the natural environment they inhabit.

Herbal medicine forest in Pa Kim village, Nghe An province

SPERI can pride itself on many successes during the last fifteen years, securing land rights for individuals and communities. The coming years they want to continue on this path, but also specifically focus on creating possibilities for minority people to valorise the land they now own. In other words, investigate with the people how they can earn an income from protecting their environment and from strengthening their cultural identity. It is only fair that the owners become aware of the economic value of their natural habitat. The philosophy is simple but immense in its implications: One big tree can buy them the one TV set they would love to have, but one protected big tree can give them an income for life (dead wood for fire, a complete micro-ecosystem for food and shelter). If tourists want to pay to look at this big old tree, it will not only buy them a TV, but also a fridge and even new TV when the old one is broken. It is not hard for them to understand this. It should not even need a lot of explanation. But it is almost impossible for them to apply this knowledge if not given the first bit of help to secure their immediate needs (hunger alleviation).

When given the opportunity, they easily see that the value of a protected area of forest is many times higher than the value of the timber they can sell from cutting the forest down. Minority people do realize that the place where they live is one of the most beautiful of the world and that they have a task to protect it. Given a helping hand with the ground work and when allowing minority people to fully experience the value of the land they own, will give them the power to fight off the outside threats to their natural surroundings.

MAP OF VIETNAM AND LAOS

OVERVIEW OF THE AREAS WHERE TEW/CHESH/CIRD HAS WORKED OR IS STILL WORKING

LAOS

1. Long Lan Village, Luang Prabang, White Hmong minority group
2. Xien Da Village, Luang Prabang, Lao Lum minority group
3. Nam Kha village, Luang Prabang, Kho Mu minority group

VIETNAM
CENTRAL VIETNAM

4. Lam Trach commune, Bo Trach district, Quang Binh province, Kinh majority group
5. Lien Trach commune, Bo Trach district, Quang Binh province, Kinh majority group
6. Vinh Thuy Village, Xuan Trach commune, Bo Trach district, Quang Binh province, Kinh majority group
7. Ngon Rao village, Xuan Trach commune, Bo Trach district, Quang Binh province, Kinh majority group.
8. Tran Trach commune, Quang Binh province, Kinh majority group
9. Thuong Trach commune, Quang Binh province, Kinh majority group
10. Cooc and Cu Ton villages, Thuong Trach commune, Bo Trach district, Quang Binh province
11. Ngu Hoa commune, Tuyen Hoa district, Quang Binh province, Kinh majority group
12. Cao Quang commune, Tuyen Hoa district, Quang Binh province, Kinh majority group
13. Kim Hoa commune, Tuyen Hoa district, Quang Binh province, Kinh majority group
14. Kim Tien village, Kim Hoa commune, Tuyen Hoa district, Quang Binh province, Kinh majority group
15. Kim Lich Village, Kim Hoa commune, Tuyen Hoa district, Quang Binh province, Kinh majority group
16. Le Hoa commune, Tuyen Hoa district, Quang Binh province, Kinh majority group
17. Ke Village, Lam Hoa commune, Tuyen Hoa district, Quang Binh province, Ma Lieng minority group
18. Kreng village, Dan Hoa commune, Minh Hoa district, Quang Binh province, Kinh majority group
19. Bai Dinh Village, Dan Hoa commune, Minh Hoa district, Quang Binh province, Kinh majority group
20. Ba Looc Village, Dan Hoa commune, Minh Hoa district, Quang Binh province, May minority group
21. Y Leng Village, Dan Hoa commune, Minh Hoa district, Quang Binh province, Khua minority group
22. On Oc Village, Dan Hoa commune, Minh Hoa district, Quang Binh province, Khua minority group
23. Ta Leng Village, Dan Hoa commune, Minh Hoa district, Quang Binh province, Kinh majority group
24. Yen Hoa commune, Minh Hoa district, Quang Binh province, Kinh majority group

25. Minh Hoa commune, Minh Hoa district, Quang Binh province, Kinh majority group
26. Hoa Phuc Village, Minh Hoa commune, Minh Hoa district, Quang Binh province, Kinh majority group
27. Hoa Thanh commune, Minh Hoa district, Quang Binh province, Kinh majority group
28. Hoa Phuc commune, Minh Hoa district, Quang Binh province, Kinh majority group
29. Hoa Son commune, Minh Hoa district, Quang Binh province, Kinh majority group
30. Thuonh Hoa commune, Minh Hoa district, Quang Binh province, Sach and Ruc minority groups
31. Luu Thuan village, Dong Le Town, Tuyen Hoa District, Quang Binh province, Kinh majority group
32. Khe Sot, Son Kim commune, Huong Son district, Ha Tinh province
33. Nasai Village, Hanh Dich commune, Que Phong district, Nghe An province, Red Thai minority group
34. Coong Village, Hanh Dich commune, Que Phong district, Nghe An province, Thai minority group
35. Chom Put Village, Hanh Dich commune, Que Phong district, Nghe An province, Thai minority group
36. Mut Village, Hanh Dich commune, Que Phong district, Nghe An province, Black minority group
37. Phom Om Village, Hanh Dich commune, Que Phong district, Nghe An province, White Thai minority group
38. Pha Kim Village, Hanh Dich commune, Que Phong district, Nghe An province, White Thai minority group

NORTH VIETNAM

39. Lao Chay Village, Quan Than San commune, Simacai district, Lao Cai province, Flowery Hmong minority group
40. Sa Pa district, Lao Cai province, Dao, Hmong and Nung minority groups
41. Thon Sa Seng Village, Ta Phin commune, Sa Pa district, Lao Cai province, Red Dao and Black Hmong minority groups
42. Bac Ha district, Lao Cai province, Hmong minority group
43. Muong Khoung district, Lao Cai province, Dao minority group
44. Bac Giang province – Nung minority group
45. Than Uyen district, Lao Cai province, Nung minority group
46. On Oc Village, Muong Lum commune, Yen Chau district, Son La province, White Hmong minority group
47. Lum Village, Muong Lum commune, Yen Chau district, Son La province, White Hmong minority group
48. Chiang Pan commune, Yen Chau district, Son La province, Thai minority group
49. Ban Then Luong Village, Yen Chau district, Son La province, Black Thai minority group
50. Bo Ngoi Village, Phieng Khoai commune, Yen Chau district, Son La province, Xinh Mun minority group

51. 7 villages: Khuon Khoam village, Ta En Village, Huoi Xai Village, Keo Buong Village, Cuon Hut No 1 Village, Bo Rom Village, Pha Bin Village, Phieng Khoai commune, Yen Chau district, Son La province, Xinh Mun minority group
52. Yen Son Village, Ba Vi district, Ha Tay province, Dao Tien minority group
53. Nan San Village, Can Chu Su commune, Simacai district, Lao Cai province, Flowery Hmong minority group
54. Mu Trang Phin Village, Quan Than San commune, Simacai district, Lao Cai province, Flowery Hmong minority group
55. Ban Chin Village, Quan Than San commune, Simacai district, Lao Cai province, Flowery Hmong minority group
56. Xin Village, Quan Than San commune, Simacai district, Lao Cai province, Flowery Hmong minority group
57. Su Pa Phin Village, Quan Than San commune, Simacai district, Lao Cai province, Flowery Hmong minority group

TAY NGUYEN (CENTRAL HIGHLANDS)

58. Ia Ka Commune, Chu Parh District – Gia Lai Province – Mnong minority group (Chu Parh district PRA-survey concerning resettlement program for Ialy Dam)
59. Kenh Village, Nghia Hoa Commune, Chu Parh District, Gia Lai Province, Gia Rai minority
60. Yut Village – Ia Mnong commune, Chu Parh district, Gia Lai province- E De minority (PRA)
61. Buon Ma Tuot City, Dak Lak province (TIRD office)
62. Um Village, Eapah commune, Eakar district, Dak Lak province, Ede minority group
63. Soc Trang town, Soc Trang province – Khmer minority group (saving and credit)
64. Dac Rao commune, Dac To district, Kon Tum province, Ro Ngao minority
65. Ninh Thuan province, Raglay, Champa and Khmer minority groups (scholarships)
66. Lieng Ke Village, Dak Phoi commune, Lak district, Dak Lak province (PRA)
67. Ja Village, Bong Krang commune, Lak district, Dak Lak province
68. Dong Duong District – Dalat – Lam Dong Province- Chil minority (part of Mnong or Co-Ho minority)
69. Ho Chi Minh City – Champa minority group (scholarships)

PROBLEM SETTING

The three organizations that are the main actors in this book: TEW, CHESH and CIRD are the response to the challenges its founder encountered in the rural and mountainous areas of Vietnam. Where most NGO's looked at improving the economic status of their target subjects, Lanh's organizations prioritized the restoration of harmony between the subjects' spiritual and material values. In the same way, they did not appraise the results of their projects in terms of materialistic improvements but much rather in terms of enhancement of people's spiritual stability.

While they would endeavor to reduce poverty, they did not measure poverty in terms of clothing, food or health, but rather in terms of spiritual satisfaction or restored values of the target group. This may seem overly naïve and overly simplistic, but its importance cannot be underestimated. A woman can feel rich because she has her children surrounding her, she can feel happy because she feels part of the social structure of the village in which she lives. A woman with materialistic wealth can feel poor for lack of children, lack of self-confidence, lack of status or self-consciousness. Finally, anybody, rich or poor feels helpless if lacking 'hope' for a better future.

Kho Mu child in Laos

When TEW visits a poor rural community for the first time they encounter people in a state of crisis, facing grave problems like hunger and extreme poverty. Before starting any activities TEW seeks out the underlying reasons that caused the crisis. They might find villagers who have lost all trust not only in themselves and in each other but also in any outsiders and in every aspect of the political system.

The individual causes and reasons for such state of mind are very diverse and vary from case to case. But in general, it can be said that, for many years, almost until 1975, the Vietnamese people, even the poorest, the most scared and the most bereft ones, were united in confidence because they lived a common struggle and therefore shared a common goal: fighting the Americans! After that terrible war, the country, North and South, was reunited and new powers started to govern the country. For many, this new beginning offered new opportunities. But as always, where there are winners, there must also be losers. And without a common goal left to strive for, many of these 'losers' gradually started to sink into a deep personal crisis, losing direction and losing hope.

Mrs. Tran Thi Lanh identified three important reasons that contributed significantly to create this state of crisis in her target populations. (i.e. the hill tribe minority people)

1. (Forced) resettlement programs. These programs are imposed on minority communities for a variety of reasons (dam building, forest exploitation etc) by a government that perceives the inhabitants as landless, primitive and unadapted to 'normal' life.

2. Cooperative farming. This system has replaced the traditional farming methods, and although more liberal regulations have now reinstigated private farms, much of the traditional farming knowledge and structure is lost.

3. Conservation policies. Typically, these policies are aimed at establishing large national parks in watershed areas. Although the establishment of national parks is definitely a laudable nature conservation effort, the direct negative effect of this is the same as for the first point, namely the relocation of large populations of forest dwellers who are chased from these areas and relocated outside the park.

As a result many minority communities are overcome by a sense of loss and destitution. These negative sentiments are exacerbated by following overlapping conditions:

1. Sense of isolation: Isolation in a broader meaning than only geographically. Isolation from society and its policy-making processes. Isolation and lack of access to any sources of information. Finally, isolation from the educational system.
2. Sense of inferior social status: Minorities suffer from being treated as backward and inferior. This abuse leads them into a mindset by which they become increasingly passive and which incapacitates them from taking any action to reverse their situation.
3. Acute sense of lack of ownership; No ownership of their own identity, no ownership of their own philosophy, no ownership of opinions and no ownership of their own future. They do not dare to take any political position and are not able to critically analyze their own life or society around them.

These social conditions have pushed minority people between 1975 and 1990 gradually into a downward spiral of material and spiritual poverty from which escape seems impossible.

Minority people who through resettlement lost their ancestral land also lost their direct link to the beliefs, traditions and rituals that were connected to this ancestral land. The knowledge they have built up from the land they live on suddenly has no value anymore when applied to their new natural surroundings. Suddenly ignorant, they are left full of fear and uncertain on how to adapt to their new environment. Cut loose and uprooted, they find it difficult or even impossible to find a new foundation to rebuild their community, because this new foundation, these new surroundings are strange and unknown to them. On top of this outsiders tell them they are backwards, ignorant and uncivilized. As sociologist Peter Berger aptly observed: "The most terrible thing that prejudice can do to a human being is to make him tend to become what the prejudiced image of him says that he is." [1]

Resettled Ma Lieng village in Quang Binh province

Through governmental development programs they are offered 'a new life', adapted to new standards in line with the culture and lifestyle of the nominal majority. Soon enough they become convinced that their 'own ways' must therefore be backward. As a reaction, they turn away from everything that has ever defined their ethnicity leading to the gradual loss of spiritual values and in parallel to a loss of self-esteem. After useless attempts to 'fit in' and for fear of being called 'primitive' and 'superstitious' they abandon the worship of nature spirits and forsake their ancient beliefs. As soon as religion goes, the 'cement' of the society starts crumbling, the formal rules and the informal laws that regulate society slowly dissipate and are replaced by a sense of lawlessness. As a result, traditional social structures between clans in a village or between neighboring communities are not maintained and this creates distrust and insecurity. People in such situation must feel like living on quicksand or like driftwood floating on open sea, not knowing where the wind is blowing them, not knowing if they will survive.

[1] *(Source: Berger Peter L. (March 1, 1963)*

Confronted with this reality TEW decides to follow its own course, working independent from governmental approaches and programs. ‘Empathy’ becomes a key aspect of their approach, and instead of just remediating the most obvious needs like hunger, diseases and illiteracy they start by learning from the people first. They study their way of life, they try to understand their longing and desires, try to understand the individual dramatic stories that has led so many people into such desperate situations. They sit down with the villagers, talk to them and most of all listen.

Not only do they listen, they receive new insights. Slowly Mrs. Tran Thi Lanh realizes that indigenous and poor people are not as helpless as one would believe. Even small people can accomplish great achievements if they are given the chance and the right tools. For minority people these tools are their traditional values and social dignity. If these can be nurtured, indigenous people are capable enough to fight against any wrongdoing or interference.

Hmong children sharing a village meal

What often struck the TEW workers was the sense of solidarity between the poor. When someone in the community needs help, he or she can always rely on others, even if there is very little to spare. This convinced TEW that, even if most of the social fabric breaks down, a basic solidarity between many villagers persists. Here was a starting point for hope! So TEW tried to bolster this solidarity by bringing people together, and by encouraging them to discuss their problems together. The discussions often became very intense and they uncovered the most basic and urgent needs of the community. These group meetings became the essence of what was later coined as ‘participation’ and ‘participatory approach’. It made people feel involved and therefore responsible for the outcome. Instead of just passively accepting aid, TEW involved people in deciding which aid was most suitable and most needed by the recipients of that aid. TEW encouraged

those recipients to actively take part in the implementation of the aid programs and to become stakeholders of the programs themselves. The participatory approach worked. It rendered a feeling of self-esteem, being able to remediate their own situation, and it rendered a feeling of responsibility towards the positive outcome of the projects.

Participatory approach is not an invention of TEW and it has by now become a standard approach in any worthy development program, but when TEW started working in the early nineties, this way of thinking was still very new and unheard of in most of the political and social environment of Vietnamese society.

Members of the handicrafts network studying natural dyes

Women suffering similar burdens and problems were brought together in discussion groups. Being able to share makes the weight of you problems lighter while talking about them can help you find solutions. TEW started to observe individuals within the discussion groups (or 'interest groups' as these were called.) Within the interest group people felt free to voice their opinions and all people have equal right to speak. It became clear that some had more ability than others to clearly translate the concerns and issues of the community. Also, some farmers showed a genuine concern and responsibility towards improving the community as a whole rather than looking for individual gains. Finally, some individuals received, through their knowledge and charisma, the respect of the listeners. These farmers were identified and asked to represent their community. That is how TEW introduced the concept of 'Key Farmers'. Key farmers (representatives) from the different interest groups (communities) met on regular bases in 'network meetings'. Networks were formed around certain topics, like herbal medicine, handicrafts, gardening and saving & credit projects. Through the networks TEW managed to maximize the available human resources, knowledge and social capital. Moreover, through the networks, TEW attempted to restore and cultivate the sense of solidarity that traditionally exists in all farmer societies.

A direct consequence of restoring confidence in farmer societies is that these societies immediately start to revive what is left of their knowledge of the old traditions and crafts. One of the most treasured traditional riches in any rural society is in the secrets of **Herbal medicine**. By virtue of restoring this source of wisdom returns also the respect for the

master healers. These herbal doctors are invariably elderly people, which in turn enhance the respect that youth once showed towards their elderds in society.

Among other crafts, **working the textiles** always held a special place in most communities. Revalidating the 'art of stitchery' elevates the image of women in society. That on its own is already a great achievement, but on top of raising women's stature, the diversity and variation in weaving and embroidery patterns ranks as one of the most distinctive ethnic markers of any group of people. Finally, as a non-negligible bonus, the revalidation of women's handicrafts is also a source of pride for the husbands and can tighten the coherence within families.

Further on the list of traditional village wisdom is the **art of gardening**. Promoting small-scale diversified gardening is invariably met with enthusiasm as it reconfirms villagers in their knowledge of ancient farming techniques that contrasted stark with the methods they were made to follow on the large farm cooperatives.

It is an old saying among the poor that 'some people are made for money, and others are just made for working'. The introduction of **saving and credit activities** shows them that they are capable to manage money and even able to make it grow! It taps into the conventional sense of solidarity between poor farmers, and restores traditional behaviors often lost over the years and multiple changes.

In parallel and intricately linked to the above activities comes the reattachment to the land they work and inhabit. Attachment entrails responsibility and it is precisely these feelings of responsibility towards the land that constitute the best assurance for protecting its resources for the future. Furthermore, making farmers assume responsibility for their land is but a small step away from leading them to requesting ownership or right of long term usage. Fighting for and obtaining land rights is a crucial step in the process of sustainable development. It neutralizes the vicious spiral that has led communities to destitution. Landownership, together with renewed respect for the traditions of the community are a fertile breeding ground on which slowly, ancient rituals, beliefs and religion can reemerge. Thus the circle is closed.

Never, such success could be achieved by merely focusing on aspects like hunger alleviation or improvement of material wealth. Poverty and starvation are mere symptoms of a disease called hopelessness. They are not its cause.

TEW made it their task to force outsiders to listen before passing judgment.
Showing the outside world (i.e. the government and decision makers) that minority people are fully able to understand their own situation and fully competent to make a fist or shake a hand, induces these decision makers to listen to minority communities, rather than turning a deaf ear and making decisions on their behalf.

For this reason, TEW has set up a number of pilot models on the different topics and in the different regions they are working. These pilots are living proof of the capacities of

the minority communities. Visitors directly talk to the villagers, who have themselves constructed and worked their projects and who also own them.
Giving ownership to the villagers also means a decentralization of power. TEW, CHESH and CIRD have tried to hand over the power of decision, of implementation, ownership and appraisal to the target communities from as soon as they deemed that such empowerment was viable.

THE FIRST STEPS

XINH MUN MINORITY PEOPLE IN BO NGOI VILLAGE

Tran Thi Lanh with minority children

Lanh took to the mountains many times, even before starting her ill ventured Ph.D. studies in Ba Vi. One of her first stories dates back to the late 1980's and from the way she tells it emanates her passion for fighting injustice. In a way this story makes it clear why she decided to dedicate her life to help the weakest in Vietnamese society. During her earliest years as a researcher she got interested in the life of hill tribe societies. One such tribe lives in the Northwest of Vietnam, in the hilly province of Son la. This tribe goes by the name of Xinh Munh and very little anthropological study is done on them. Little is known about where exactly they came from, why they had to abandon their home countries or at what period they finally settled down in Vietnam. What is known about them is that they live in very rudimentary housing (a heritage of their nomadic past), dress similarly to the Thai minorities and speak a language that belongs to the Mon-Khmer language group. Besides corn and rice, their staple food consists of hunting and gathering forest fruits (they dig up a particular forest root called Cu Mai or Yam (*Dioscorea persimilis*), a typical staple food comparable to the Western potatoes). For hundreds of years the forests gave them food and shelter. But as in countless other stories about countless other communities, the Xinh Munh were not spared the upheaval of modern society encroaching into their lives. First they had to face resettlement and all the challenges that come with it. It must be said that also the Ethnic Vietnamese majority (a.k.a. the Kinh) were not spared the devastation of displacement, and following the Vietnamese population redistribution policy of 1985, these two populations met head to head, competing for the same piece of land. The clever Kinh quickly overtook the shy and ill prepared Xinh Mun communities and claimed over two thirds of the available land

for themselves, for settlement and agricultural purposes. The Xinh Mun were poorly adjusted to the lowland life and not familiar with modern agriculture techniques. They quickly became impoverished and dependent on handouts for survival. Unable to survive from their land, the Xinh Mun continued to gather and hunt in the surrounding forests. It was in this state of destitution that Lanh visited one of their villages, called Bo Ngoi.

Lanh witnessed firsthand how unscrupulous traders abused the ignorance and naivety of the Xinh Mun villagers. She saw a fifty kilogram sack of corn being exchanged for a small amount of MSG (monosodium glutamate, a chemical used to flavour up food.) The arrogance and impunity with which these traders managed to steal from the villagers left a deep mark in Lanh's mind, and for one of the first times in her life, she felt deeply ashamed of being Vietnamese Kinh.

In 1994 Lanh initiated a study on the habits of the Xinh Mun and identifies their immediate needs. Bo Ngoi village suffered from water shortages and villagers were unable to grow enough food. She also came to understand the decisive role women played in the households and in daily governance of the village. This is how Lanh understood the importance of the women in the tribe. Not because she wanted to prioritize one gender, but simply because she saw that the women were shouldering the burden of the household together with many other important aspects of village life. Mrs. Vi Thi Dong, an elderly woman of Bo Ngoi village, was chosen as key person representing the community to act as pioneer and coordinator for new ideas and activities. The first project steps focused on improved land-use planning using diversified agriculture introducing new crops and vegetables. These steps did not need any financial input but were based on participatory approach in which the villagers took their destiny into their own hands. They took decisions after group discussions and learned to implement them. For the sake of cross-pollination with other groups, study tours were organised. After one tour to Ba Vi, Mrs. Vi Thi Dong commented: "There is no such thing as inferior land, there are only people who do not posses the knowledge how to turn it into fertile land." During these pilot projects, the villagers were trained in agricultural techniques, in making there own home gardens and in animal husbandry. They could once again start to take care of themselves and reduce their dependency on outside aid.

Later on with a small fund donated by CARE Australia, the project built a school, a water supply system, a fishpond and a road. The funds were donated but the implementation was carried out for the greatest part by the villagers themselves. Technicians provided the villagers with basic training after which the villagers gradually took over.

As their will to survive and their self-confidence picked up again, TEW. started to educate them on land rights and on the long and winding path that leads through the administrative mills and through the inevitable red tape, but that eventually could end up in increased protection from outsiders vying on their land. Land was allocated to every household with a land-use certificate for a period of 50 years. And contrary to the official regulation that at the time allocates land only to the husband, for the Xinh Mun households the certificates were allocated to both husbands and wives. It informally strengthened the position of women in the family and community.

It is no surprise to Lanh, that Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank, and 2006 Peace noble price winner saw the same effect when he established his micro-credit banks in villages in Bangladesh. These saving projects worked best when handled by women. It is in this light that, in 1993 Lanh set up her first NGO and called it TEW (Towards Ethnic Women). Her intentions in setting up this organization were unambiguous and clear. She would give a helping hand to hill tribe populations living in poverty, and she would work through the women of these tribes in order to reach the whole community. It took four years before the results of her efforts started to show. Four years may seem like a long time for most development organizations to work on one project, but to Lanh it was just a beginning. She knew however that she would not be able to work on long term projects without the support of donors and she therefore brought TEW's work to the attention of international organizations operating in Southeast Asia. Next to CARE Australia, one of the early organizations that recognized the value of TEW's project came Mrs. Jill Jameson from IWDA-AusAID, who, in 1993-1994 helped her set up a pilot project in Bo Ngoi village that later expanded this to seven surrounding Xinh Munh villages from 1996 to 1998.

It was a first step; one that had taken up almost a full ten years, but it had paid off. The Xinh Mun project was a significant first victory for the villagers, for Lanh and for her staff. More than just a victory, it was also a signal that, with much work and with much patience, entire communities could be saved from slow but certain disintegration, thereby not only saving peoples' lives, but also giving their culture another chance to survive.

THE WHITE HMONG OF ON OC VILLAGE - If there is a will to succeed, the way will be found.

White Hmong woman from On Oc

Through the initial positive results, TEW members slowly made a name for themselves in the Vietnamese development environment. In 1995, they received funds from the Dutch Embassy for a project in Ban Dao, a Hmong village (Muong Lum commune, Yen Chau district, Son La province). The Hmong are one of the most important and most well organized ethnic minorities in Vietnam and TEW had long wanted to get a chance to do research on Hmong culture. The project had as its objective to install a water supply system and execute gardening activities. Unfortunately, failure loomed around the corner. Apparently, the villagers were biased against the project. Some way into the participatory process it became clear to both parties that expectations could not be met so the whole project was stopped. As a matter of fact, the village leader had been hoping for an organization with a larger fund to install a big dam higher up in the mountains! Aside of disappointment, Lanh was trapped in an uncomfortable situation because she had already spent part of the funding in the initial steps of the project. She now had two options; either return the funds or quickly find a new purpose for the leftover money. TEW contacted the Embassy to inform them about the failure, but also to obtain permission to move the focus of the project to On Oc, a smaller village Lanh had encountered on her way to Ban Dao. On Oc was also a Hmong village and as it turned out, it was far more in need of help than Ban Dao. After receiving permission from the embassy, TEW requested a meeting with the village elders of On Oc. Lanh informed them about her misadventure in Ban Dao and inquired about their interest in accepting help and cooperation from TEW to make best use of the remaining funding. Mr. Lênh; the village elder, a smallish unassuming man in his fifties, looked at Lanh for a while and then replied in a clear voice: “We are people in need. How could we turn down a helping hand? My dear lady, even if the hand that you offer is holding nothing more than a

broken bowl, I would still accept it and would be grateful for it." This meeting became the start of a very long and intensive cooperation between the villagers of On Oc and TEW. The Dutch money was well spent and more than once, it seemed to TEW staff that they received more from the On Oc Hmong than they were ever able to give. The Hmong talked proudly about their culture and traditions. TEW staff also experienced firsthand the close ties Hmong had maintained with nature. It struck them that the Hmong were living with the forest in a definite balance. (cfr. Chapter 'The spirit lives in the forest') It surprised them because they knew very well that normally people and nature can be like water and fire.

As for Mr. Lênh, the village leader, his way of managing his village and his people was so appealing that TEW often requested his insights and advice when working in other villages. Now, more than ten years later, Mr. Lênh is still an indirect key player in the organization as advisor on approaching elders, giving insights in Hmong culture and promoting education for young minority boys and girls.

Mr. Lenh from On Oc village

We want to mention one last story involving On Oc village, to illustrate the importance of the close-knit partnership between the NGO and target community:
In 1997 Lanh unexpectedly received a telephone call from Mr. Lênh. He told her of two men trying to convince the villagers to agree to the construction of a new road to their village. In return the villagers had to give the men timber from the forest. Mr. Lênh asked Lanh for advice. Lanh, taken by surprise asked him why he had phoned her. He answered: "Because I trust you."

While asking more details, Lanh realized that some form of corruption must be behind the strange story. The forests around On Oc are home to rare timber species that are only found in limestone areas. Lanh decided to visit the village in an attempt to find out the

truth. Legally, the district army (program No 327) managed the forest around On Oc village. Lanh's guess was there had to be a link between the army and the two men planning to build the road. Mr. Lênh gathered all village women for a meeting with Lanh. The issue was complicated and opinions were divided. For the women, a road would be a real improvement. The women regularly descended to the valley to sell products in the market. Now they had to walk a long and narrow path across mountains to reach the district city (Moc Chau). On the other hand, giving in to the proposal of the construction of the road would mean that all the forest of On Oc could disappear. The forest is important for food, for building materials, medicine, shelter and so on. Even more crucial, the forest is an essential part of Hmong culture and religion. Without it, they might see themselves forced to leave the area because of lack of resources. The Limestone Mountain forests had been there for ages and its destruction was unthinkable. Lanh begged them to stand strong and protect the forest. In the mean time she would try her best in finding a solution to build a road for them. The women were very quiet. Suddenly they asked; "How can we trust you?" Lanh gave them her passport. They could keep it until she honoured her promise.

On her return to Hanoi she immediately called Kees de Ruiter, a Dutch man who lived in Hue and worked for ICCO, a funding organization from The Netherlands. Kees understood the urgency of the case and contacted the Tropical Environmental Protection team of ICCO to see if he could get funds from them. He introduced Lanh to the Dutch Embassy and she handed them a straightforward written proposal requesting help and money. The waiting began. Lanh waited three months, after which a Vietnamese embassy officer, Mr. Huong, who handled the proposal only asked more questions and details and sent her home with the comment that it would be very difficult to get approval. Waiting another three, four months brought no solution. Several times the women from On Oc travelled to Yen Chau district centre just so they could phone TEW and ask for news. One day, Mr. Lênh travelled all the way to Hanoi to meet Lanh. Embarrassed and frustrated, Lanh phoned the Dutch Embassy requesting an appointment with the Ambassador. When Lanh, Mr. Lênh and Mr. Sy, a staff member of TEW, met the Ambassador, he had nothing but excuses for them.

This was a big disappointment for them all. Feeling she had no other choice, Lanh took all the money she had left in her bank account and asked for more money from her family. She could gather seventy million dong (app. 5.000 USD) to bring to the village. She communicated her action to Kees De Ruiter and Heleen Broekkamp from ICCO, who requested to join her to On Oc, saying that they would try to find a solution. The villagers organized a big party for them. On their return, Heleen spent night and a day writing a new proposal to the attention of ICCO. On her next trip to the Netherlands she defended her submission and on her return to Vietnam she brought good news: ICCO supported the proposal with 10.000 USD.

When the project was ready for signing, the paperwork reached TEW office precisely during a seminar at which Mr. Lênh was present. Without hesitation, he signed the English language contract. This prompted a reaction from one of the group who jokingly said to Mr. Lênh that he had just signed away his village to the Dutch government.

Again, Mr. Lênh kept his calm and retorted that his trust in Mrs. Lanh had grown to such extent that he would not hesitate to sell the village to the Dutch or anybody else as long as she gave her backing to it.

Everyone present was so happy at that time they were hard to calm down. Could it really be true that a small village like On Oc had successfully taken a stand against unscrupulous developers and even more, that they had themselves found the money and the support to take development into their own hands? The contract was returned so that they could receive the project funds. Lanh telephoned the Yen Chau district officials asking them to prepare a ceremony to hand over the money to the villagers. The district officials could decide on the date and the number of invitees. The project fund was to be officially handed to Mr. Lênh. The district official agreed to the ceremony, but when the day arrived and TEW (i.e. Mr Nguyen Van Sy) showed up with a box filled with 144 million Vietnamese Dong, they found to their surprise that only the On Oc village leader was present. It turned out that the district officials did not want to give such a big amount of money directly in the hands of the villagers. This was quite upsetting for TEW, but eventually they agreed to deposit the money on a bank account in the district provided that Mr Lênh had full authority to the fund.
This anecdote may seem of little importance to the reader, but few things are harder to secure and safeguard than money labelled for grass root development projects.

The work could begin. TEW translated the drawings of the villagers into a technically correct road map. Mr. Lênh gathered all neighbouring communes to discuss the construction logistics. The village elders from On Oc and also Ban Dao (the village that had first turned down the help of TEW) would cooperate. They decided to start the construction in Yen Chau district centre, and build towards their own village. This way, villagers would feel energized when their homes got in sight. The villagers were divided into four groups. The young men up to the age of 35 were responsible for the heavier work. The women would cook and serve food to the workers. The children would serve drinks. The elders would supervise, help in taking decisions, negotiate terms with authorities and busy themselves with the many administrative procedures. To everyone's astonishment, in only 10 days the villagers had cleared bush and build the foundations of 10,2 km of road! This was unexpected and it had the district officials dumbfounded. Again it was proven that people can move mountains if motivated by a common objective. The entire road was finished and ready for use in record time. When the district officials announced that they would come to inaugurate the road, the villagers decided that it had to be the TEW car and none other, to travel first over the road to On Oc village. This request was graciously honoured, and when the TEW car reached the village, villagers crying with joy welcomed it. The car was surrounded, touched and hugged. One woman curiously asked: "What to feed this iron buffalo?"

A cow was slaughtered and the evening culminated in a big party. In front of everybody, Mr. Lênh produced Lanh's passport and handed it back to her saying: " It is time we return this down payment to a very special friend of our people." The gesture was grand and full of symbolism. Little did it matter that Lanh's passport had in the meantime expired.

Mr. Vu A Giang, On Oc villager at a key farmers' meeting

Indeed, it was the start of a great friendship and collaboration. Years later, Mr Lênh's son (Mr. Vu A Giang) received a scholarship offered by TEW, to help him through basic schooling and through the Vocational Technical School for Forestry studies. Mr. Vu joined TEW in different projects bolstering his experience. He also joined Lanh on a visit to Geneva in 2000 where he met members of indigenous societies from all over the world. In 2006, Mr Vu started studying psychology at the University in Hanoi.

THE TARGET GROUPS

TRADITIONS DEFINE IDENTITY

When an old man dies, a whole library disappears. (African proverb)

According to the current classification since 1979, Vietnam counts 54 different ethnic groups, divided into 5 main linguistic groups being: Austro-Asian (Viet-Muong and Mon-Khmer), Austronesian (Malay-Polynesian group), Thai-Kadai, Sino-Tibetan (Han and Tibeto-Burman) and Hmong-Dao.[2] Ethnic minority people are defined as those who have the Vietnamese nationality and reside in Vietnam, but who do not share their identity, language and other cultural characteristics with the Kinh people.[3] On Vietnamese identity cards the ethnic origin of the individual is specified.[4]

The Kinh or Viet make up the majority in Vietnam and account for 87% of the population. Each major minority group can again be divided into different sub-groups who can often be recognized by differences in traditional dress, housing style or the language dialect. The Hmong for instance are divided into the Black Hmong, White Hmong, Flowery Hmong and Blue (or Green) Hmong. Among theThai there are White Thai, Black Thai, Thai Thanh and others. So rather than 54 different minority groups in Vietnam there are in fact over one hundred. In Laos there are more than one hundred different minority groups, but they have never been correctly identified or catalogued making it difficult to give an exact number.

White Hmong woman and Red Dao woman

Minority groups have migrated to the Mekong region in different periods of history. The Thai-Kadai language groups have already established the first settlements and Kingdoms in Vietnam as far back as a thousand years ago, and the Malayo-Polynesian group had established the Kingdom of Champa in the first century AD. The kingdom of Champa

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[2] *(Source: Dang Nghiem Van – Chu Thai Son and Luu Hung, 2000)*

[3] *(Neefjes Koos ,Crumpton Bridget, Schumacher Dagmar, van Koesveld Ernst, Nguyen Tien Phong (UNDP) (June 2002) Poverty task Force, 2002a, WHO)*

[4] *(Health and Ethnic Minorities in Viet Nam, Technical Series No. 1, June 2003, WHO)*

controlled what is now south and central Vietnam from approximately 192 to 1697. Champa was established through a rebellion against the Chinese authorities in 192, in the region of Hue, by an official named Kiu-lien. At its height in the 9th Century, the kingdom controlled the lands between Hue and the Mekong Delta. Champa included the modern provinces of Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, Khanh Hoa, Binh Thuan and Ninh Thuan.

Many other ethnic groups followed, in consecutive waves, coming down from China, often chased by oppressive Chinese regimes or as fugitives from war and famine. Irrespective of their different cultural backgrounds, all of these groups eventually adopted Vietnam as their new home, but at the same time kept to their old traditions within the boundaries of their village or communes as a last link to their origins.

The indigenous knowledge of these groups is stored in peoples' collective memories and is expressed through stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, dances, myths, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, community laws, local language and taxonomy. It is further expressed in specific agricultural practices and crafts equipment, in knowledge on local plant species and animal breeds. This collective memory is transferred through generations by oral communication and by example. Indigenous forms of communication and organization are vital to local-level decision-making processes and to the preservation, development, and spread of Indigenous knowledge.[5]

Although there is a growing awareness worldwide on the values of indigenous knowledge, biodiversity and cultural diversity, these systems are under constant and growing pressure from the ever-changing world. It is not an exaggeration to say that they are on the brink of oblivion.

Through a number of examples, we will describe some of the traditions that are typical of the various minorities.

[5] (Louise Grenier, 1998)

The Thai

White Thai woman

The Thai belong to the Thai-Kadai language group. Very early in history, over a thousand years ago, the Thai had managed through an ingenious system using mountain streams and diversionary dams and canals to irrigate rice crops. By using a complex division of labor they could establish high yield wet-rice cultivation. This ensured a reliable rice production with surpluses and, ultimately, a well-fed and growing population, causing groups of Thai to migrate from their region of origin to other, geographically similar areas favoring wet-rice agriculture.[6]

Many believe that the Thai originated from Yunnan Province or the middle Yangtze River region in China, but other research indicates they originated in the Guangxi-Guizhou region of China.[7]

Towards the beginning of the first millenium B.C., the Thai (Tai) left their old places of settlement and moved southwest, reaching southern Yunnan and the west of the Indochinese peninsula. Towards the same period they came into contact with groups speaking Tibeto-Burmese dialects coming from Central Asia of Northwest China.

Later on, the same migratory current brought them in touch with the expanding Han, a vanguard group who came down the valley of the Hwang Ho (Yellow River) in the southwesterly direction. Further south, they began to cohabit with the Mon-Khmer groups who had settled in the region for a long time. After many historic events, towards the start of the last millenium, a number of Thai (Tai) states were set up, spreading from

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[6] *(Source: O'Connor, R. 1995)*

[7] *(Source: Hartmann, J. 1998)*

the upper reaches of the Irrawaddy, Salween and Mekong rivers to the border regions between Yunnan, Upper-Laos and the northwest of Vietnam.[8]

According to documents written in traditional Thai (Tai) script; Kwaam To Nhay (The Great Tale), the cradle of the Thai (Tai), the Lue and the Lao were situated at the confluence of nine rivers: the Nam Tao (Red River), Nam Te (Black River), Nam Ma (Ma River which waters Thanh Hoa province), Nam Khoon (Mekong), Nam U, Nam Man and three other unidentified rivers of Yunnan. These small "states" or rather seigniories commonly called Muong were set up under Thai (Tai) chieftains: Moung Om, Muong Si, Muong La, Muong Bo Te, Muong Oc, Muong Ac, Muong Tum Hoang, Muong Then. Researches over the past years have identified most of those places as present-day localities of southern Yunnan. Muong Then or Muong Theng alone belong to another region which comprises part of the Lao province of Phong Sa Ly and the northwest of Lai Chau province of which the centre is the plain of Muong Thanh, the theatre of the Dien Bien Phu battle.[9]

The Thai people in Nasai call themselves Thai Thanh, and are thus most probably descendents from the Thai living in Muong Thanh. This is confirmed by the meaning of the word Tai that means: “originating from”. Thai Thanh therefore literally means “people originating from Muong Thanh”.

In Vietnam most Thai are still found in Northwest Vietnam as well as the North and Central border regions with Laos. Most Thai groups in Vietnam can be classified as Black Thai (Thai Dam), White Thai (Thai Kaaw) and Red Thai (Thai Deng).

[8] *(Source: Dang Nghiem Van, 1972)*
[9] *(Source: Dang Nghiem Van, 1972)*

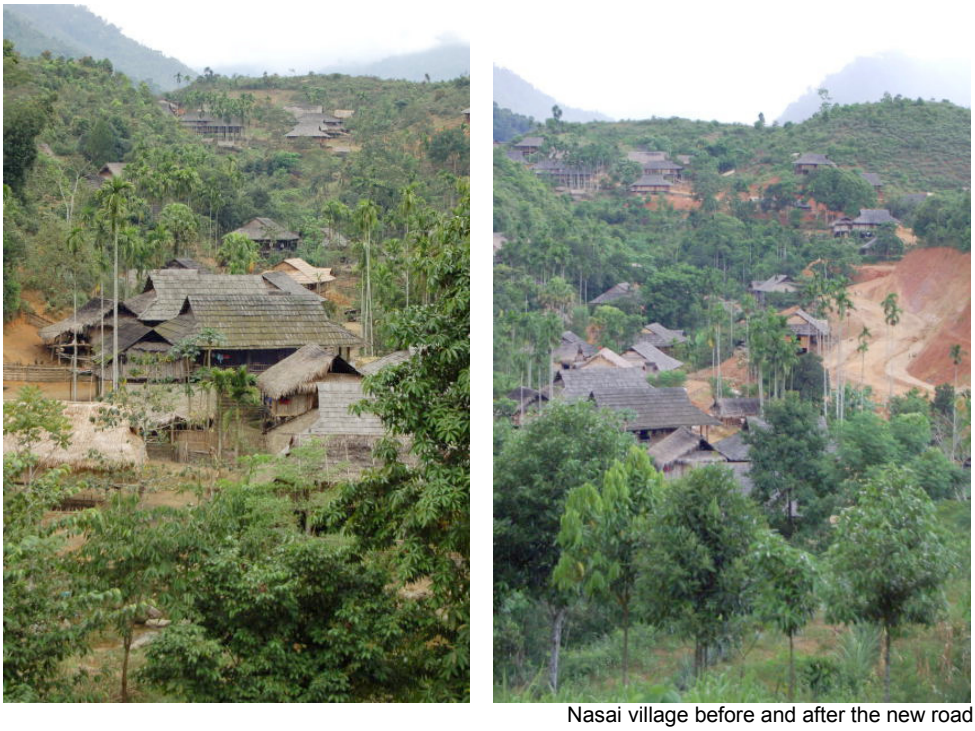
Thai Thanh

Thai Thanh woman from Nasai

In Nasai, an isolated village in Nghe An province (Que Phong district) the Thai Thanh still hold strongly to their traditions. For agricultural purposes they still use an inventive irrigation system where huge water wheels are placed in the river that can irrigate even the farthest fields through a system of bamboo piping. This irrigation system allows them to have two rice harvests a year. Next to rice as a staple crop, they grow a wide variety of vegetables, raise different farm animals and collect herbs and other non-timber products for daily survival. By exchanging labour between clans, they are able to transform large areas of farmland into beautiful terraced rice paddies and they can effectively cover all work on their extensive farms in periods when the workload is heavy. Just like more than 3000 years ago, the Thai in Nasai do not suffer from hunger and are able to live in a stable way

Geographical isolation means that they have been left relatively undisturbed by the outside world. This is about to change. A new road now cuts right through the village. The road 'just happened' upon the village. Nasai was never consulted about its construction, but it will have many effects on daily live in Nasai. It will drastically shorten travel time to the district town and therefore improve the villagers' access to the markets, schools and health centres. Pretty soon, the village will be supplied with electricity and radio and television will follow. Homeless people will trickle in, looking for land, and traders will come with offers and propositions. The road to Nasai, a blessing or a curse?

The villagers are divided. They understand the opportunities the road brings, but they can only guess and try to prepare against the risks. Foremost, they worry about safety. At present, houses in Nasai stay unlocked and cattle roam freely, nothing is ever stolen.



Nasai village before and after the new road was built

And they worry about traditions. Mrs. Thanh, who coordinates the handicrafts group in Nasai worries that outsiders may persuade villagers to abandon the tedious process of making traditional textiles in favor of preprinted garments. Textile making requires a delicate cooperation from man and nature. Silkworms eat only mulberry leaves, silk and cotton threads need plants for natural dyeing, woven cloth need skillful and patient hands to work the looms. It is so easy to break this cycle. Thanh worries what would happen if precious plants get lost, if trees are cut, if the forest loses its diversity and if villagers loose interest.

Nasai is made up of different areas. Central to the village is the residential area. Each household has a main building, surrounded by a small vegetable garden where cattle, pigs and chicken roam and shelter beneath the traditional stilt houses. Unlike most more 'modern' houses in the area with corrugated roofs, the Nasai skyline is adorned with beautiful traditional wood tile rooftops that, collect warmth in winter and stay comfortably cool in the summer.

The houses, while conceived for convenience, are constructed with elegance unequalled. Each house has one main accessing stairway and spacious balconies on either side to provide ample room to enjoy the cool evening breezes. Each house has a family altar, always placed in the main room, on the left side of the entrance. The room contains very scant furniture, except for beds in the sleeping area and a fireplace with low rattan chairs and a single table. Split bamboo stems that are smooth and soft to sit and sleep on cover the floors.

There are prescribed ways where the beds should be placed in a Thai house. The grandparents take the first bed; the parents take the next. If a brother or sister is living in, they are next. The daughter in law has to sit on a chair in the house if she lives together with her parents in law, she cannot sit on the floor. Only if her parents or parents-in-law die is she allowed to sit on the floor.

The main crops in Nasai are white rice and sticky (glutinous) rice. Both crops are harvested twice a year. Cassava and maize are also grown. During planting and harvesting season grandparents take care of the toddlers and school-aged children. At this time, they are effectively the only inhabitants of the central village area as the parents and older children stay at a smaller dwelling built next to the paddy fields.

Besides growing crops and raising livestock, the women raise silk worms in the close vicinity of planted mulberry trees. Making colourful traditional textiles is an integral part of their lives. Because this region is also rich in bamboo forests, the villagers are also very skilled at making bamboo baskets, trays, tables and mats.

Thai Thanh woman spinning cotton

In Nasai most women, old as well as the young, still wear their traditional dress daily; consisting of a long black traditional tube skirt with patterns woven at the bottom and a red part at the top, a short tight vest with a small Mao collar closed by a row of silver buttons in the front, often made from old French coins, and a belt made of a thick bundle of cotton threads, that keeps their middle warm and holds up their skirt.

Young Thai woman in Nasai village

Festivities are always accompanied by traditional dance and music. In Nasai the whole village can hear the music produced by three big gongs, a drum and cymbals. Women sing traditional songs and perform the harvest dance, the circle dance and a dance between long bamboo poles beaten together rhythmically. Everyone present drinks huge amounts of homemade rice-wine brewn in a large ceramic jars. The ingredients are steamed glutinous rice mixed with yeast and left to ferment, after which rice chaff is added and left to ferment further for about one month. The guests sit around the huge jars and drink through long bamboo straws while a master of ceremony pours water into the jar using a cow's horn. The wine tastes slightly sweet and is low in alcohol. In most Thai villages as well as many other minority communities a clear home-distilled spirit is also brew from rice with a distinct higher alcohol percentage of about 20 to 30%.

Western medicine was introduced only very recently and people rely for the most part on traditional herbal medicine when faced with health problems. Traditionally the healers are also shamans or priests who will preside over all traditional rites and religious ceremonies. For example, when a year is perceived as negative for some individual a ceremony will be performed to ward of possible bad omens. Before the festivities can start the healer will come to the house of the family and perform a ritual to make sure their life will continue in a prosperous way. The healers collect their plants and herbs in the forests around the village, which are still abundant with a large variety of plants.

The Hmong

"A very long time ago, the whole universe turned upside down. The earth tipped up, and the sky rolled over, and the whole world was flooded with water. All living things were killed, except one brother and his sister, who had ran and taken refuge in an unusually large wooden funeral drum. The brother and his sister married and lived together as husband and wife. Later, they gave birth to a child. This child was like a round smooth egg. They cut the round egg-like child into little pieces. Then they threw the pieces in all directions. Two pieces fell on the goat house and these became the clan Lee. Two pieces fell in the pig pan became the clan Moua. Two pieces that landed in the garden turned into the clans Vang and Yang. This is how they founded all the Hmong clans."[10]

Flowery Hmong child, Simacai, Lao Cai

The Hmong are classified under the Hmong-Dao language group and have Chinese origins. In Vietnam the Hmong are categorized into four main groups: White Hmong (Mong Do), Flowery Hmong (Mong Lenh), Blue or Green Hmong (Mong Sua) and Black Hmong (Mong Du).

Chinese historical records mention that the ancestors of the modern Hmong may have lived along the lower reaches of the Yellow River and the middle and lower reaches of the Yangtze River around 2500 BC. Due to their long history in China, and their eventual migration into Southeast Asia and beyond, the identification of the exact group or groups of people from whom the Hmong descended remains uncertain.[11] A Chinese origin does

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[10] *(Johnson, C. and S. Vang 1992) A legend about the creation of the world and the origin of the Hmong clans*

[11] *(Reilly 1987)*

seem quite likely for the Hmong, as there are many religious and cultural similarities between the Chinese and the Hmong that would suggest that the Hmong have always been in close contact with the Chinese, rather than any other people.[12] They migrated to Vietnam in three main waves: The first wave was 300 years ago, when the Hmong struggled against the policy "Land Reform and Ethnic Resettlement" from the Ming to the Qing Dynasty (17th-18th centuries). The second wave was 200 years ago. This time Hmong from China came to Vietnam following two paths. The first lead to Dong Van, and the second through Bac Ha in Lao Cai. From there some of them moved northwest. Most of them came from the Kuichou and Yunnan areas where they had been defeated during a revolt in Kuichou (1776-1820). The third wave, around 100 to 140 years ago, brought the largest group. They came from Kuichou, Yunnan, and Guangsi and settled in Ha Giang, Lao Cai, and Yen Bai. This period corresponds to the uprising of the Hmong in response of the movement "Taiping tiengo" (Peace in the Heavenly Kingdom) against the Manchou's Qing Dynasty from 1840 to 1868. In general the main reason for the waves of migration was their defeat against the Chinese government after which they chose Vietnam as a refuge.[13]

Hmong baby in Simacai

Traditionally, Hmong society is structured around the clan (ib xeem) and lineage (ib tus dab qhuas) system. The clan system is based on the surname used by one's paternal kin group. A lineage is based on membership in a descent line, which can be traced to a known ancestor, and shares a common set of ancestral rituals, while with a clan no exact links can be traced beyond the sharing of a surname.[14] Hmong are divided worldwide into fifteen to twenty different clans identified by their surname.

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[12] *(Dr Gary Lee and Dr Nick Tapp)*
[13] *(Hong Thao, 1995)*
[14] *(Dr Gary Lee and Dr Nick Tapp)*

There is a strong sense of solidarity between Hmong members of the same clan, not only within one village or country but worldwide. Within a clan people are like family and they share a responsibility towards each other. Bloodlines are very strong, and there is a lot of respect for all elders within the same extended family. Members of three or four different generations often live together under one roof. Boys and girls from the same clan are considered as brother and sister and can thus not marry.

The Hmong have no written language but a rich tradition of legends, songs and proverbs that are passed orally from one generation to the next while other stories are commemorated in embroidery on textiles. Traditionally, musical instruments play an important role in Hmong society. The Qeej, a wind instrument made out of six bamboo reeds and a mouthpiece held together with tree bark is unique in that it plays spoken words and communicates with the spirit world. However, unlike most sacred instruments, it is neither mimetic of the sounds and rhythms of the natural world nor does it communicate in symbolic or metaphoric terms. It is an unusual instrument because of its ability to express musically the innate lyrical qualities of the tonal Hmong language.[15]

Within one community all members should follow certain conventions and rules and violations of these rules are harshly punished. A respected elder or a council of elders together with the village leader governs the village. During the yearly Nao Song ceremony, a gathering of village elders from different neighbouring villages, the rules and conventions, forming customary law system are discussed and if necessary revised or changed with villagers' approval. The ceremony is celebrated with a collective meal for all villagers.

Traditional White Hmong skirts

Hemp is a very important resource for Hmong people. Hmong women weave hemp textiles while hemp is also used as a medicine. Hemp continues to play a central role in most traditional ceremonies such as funerals.
Throughout their long history, the Hmong built up a rich tradition of hemp weaving.

[15] *(Gayle Morrison, 1998)*

Whenever a family settles in a new place, the women will locate a piece of damp and fertile land on which to grow hemp. They burn off the bushes and grass, mixing the resulting ash with the soil as a primitive fertilizer after which seeds carried from their last settlement are planted. When the hemp is mature, they spin yarn and weave jackets, skirts and trousers for the whole family. If a woman cannot spin and weave, the family will have no clothing. These are valued and well-cultivated skills among young girls and even after several thousands of years of development and change modern Hmong women still spin and weave hemp fibres by hand. Growing hemp and fashioning it into a pleated skirt can take up to two years or more, depending on the complexity of the decorations. With markets coming closer to remote Hmong villages where one can buy cheap clothes, the tradition of weaving hemp is slowly falling out of use especially since the processing of hemp from sowing until the finished skirt or jacket is time-consuming and complex. After harvesting the hemp stalks have to be dried and the bark has to be stripped off. The strips have to be beaten to remove all woody parts and twisted into long ribbons by hand and spun into thread coils. The threads are then stretched, bleached and washed to make them soft and smooth. The thread is woven into hemp fabric of about 30 cm wide and dyed indigo using the Cham plant as a natural dye. In some areas the fabric is batiked before dyeing. The indigo hemp is sewn into jackets, pants, pleated skirts, belts, baby-carrying cloths, turbans, bags and funeral clothes. The clothes are decorated with colourful embroidery.

The Hmong do not only wear hemp in life but also in the after-life. When an elderly Hmong woman dies, her corpse must be dressed in a hemp jacket, a hemp skirt and hemp leggings while the Hmong man must wear a long hemp robe and they both wear hemp shoes. The Hmong believe that when a dead person wears hemp shoes, they can "ford the caterpillar river and cross the green worm mountain safely, to reach their ancestor's resting place".[16]

As with many other minority groups, the Hmong practice an animist religion, worshiping spirits found in nature, in trees, in rocks, mountains or streams. These beliefs provide the basis for the protection of the forest and its wildlife.

[16] *(Clarke, Robert C. and Wenfeng Gu 1998)*

Red Dao (or Yao, also called Mien in Thailand)

Red Dao and Black Hmong women from Ta Phin village, Lao Cai

The Dao whose language is closely related to Chinese are also part of the Hmong Dao language group. The Dao started migrating to Vietnam about 200 to 300 years ago.
The Dao's (or Yao or Mien) origins are still under debate but they most likely originate from the Eastern part of southern China about 2,000 years ago. Dao culture is closely related to that of the Chinese, evidence of which is the sacred Taoist-origin script-texts written in Chinese while the Dao today still write using Chinese characters. These sacred written scriptures adapted from Taoism function as their guide in life for rituals and ceremonies. The Dao dialect is highly tonal and closely related to Mandarin Chinese.[17]

The Dao people have a strong belief in the spirit world. Their "Animist-Taoist" religion, worshipping the "zu zong mienv" or their ancestors' spirits combined with Taoist religion play an important role in the life of each Dao family. The Red Dao and other Dao groups in Vietnam worship their ancestors and forefathers as far back as their one communal forefather, and they belief in the many nature spirits that assure them a stable life with enough resources for survival. The Red Dao in Ta Phin (near SaPa) have a small temple in a cave in the middle of the fields. There they will pray for good luck, health and abundant harvests.

[17] *(Cardeinte, A., 2006)*

Although the Red Dao live in the same village as the Black Hmong in Ta Phin commune of Sa Pa district, their culture and traditions differ strongly from those of the Hmong.

Dao woman embroidering in Ta Phin, Lao Cai

HERBAL MEDICINE
In the footsteps of Lan Ong – Le Huu Trac

"Rich men do not lack physicians, but the poor can rarely afford good ones. We must pay special attention to them."[18]

Healer from Pom Om preparing medicine, Nhge An

The origin of Vietnamese traditional medicine practice can be traced back as far as 2000 years B.C. under the Hung Vuong dynasty. Vietnam's most famous physicians and founders of Vietnamese traditional medicine are Tue Tinh (14th century) and Hai Thuong Lang Ong Le Huu Trac (18th century). Hai Thuong Lan Ong Le Huu Trac, a scientific humanist, was the author of ""Y tong tam linh" an medical encyclopaedia on traditional medicine containing 28 volumes and 66 manuals written over a period of 40 years. Lan Ong laid the foundation of a medical practice based on observation of clinical facts, climatic conditions, and the properties of local plants and products. Lan Ong also laid down the principles of a humanistic medical deontology.

In Ba Vi, Hay Tay province, the Dao women healers are renowned far and wide for their extensive knowledge of more than 300 different herbal plants and their medicinal properties. Elder healers teach the young throughout their life on recognising herbal plants, preparing medicines and treating patients. Before their resettlement the Dao in Ba Vi lived quite isolated and lacked access to any official health care system. They relied solely on herbal medicine for small medical interventions as well as more serious illnesses. The forests around their villages were rich and diverse in plants providing them

[18] Le Huu Trac, Hai Thuong Lan Ong (1720-1791)

with resources for almost any cure. Plants were not named by their official plant name but had a name that reflected the illness they could treat. “La tia to” means the plant that cures light colds. In the years from 1955 to 1957 the Dao faced hunger due to a mice infestation that destroyed most crops. In search for an alternative income the Dao started selling their herbal medicine plants and cures in the district, exchanging herbal medicines for rice, meat and vegetables. Very soon their knowledge of herbal medicine was known far and wide, and Dao people sometimes travel as far as Hoa Binh and Nghe An provinces to sell their medicines. Since the Dao are prohibited to access the forests after the establishment of the Ba Vi national park in 1977, they gradually set up herbal medicine gardens to replace the plants normally harvested from the forests. But the plants harvested from the gardens are a lot smaller and of inferior quality compared to the forest plants. Many herbal plants prefer shaded areas, rich forest soils and some plants can only grow in symbiosis with certain forest trees, conditions which cannot be reproduced in garden areas. The available stock of herbal medicine plants has dramatically decreases for these and other reasons. The herbal plants in the forests that still belong to the Dao community are small in quantity and many have disappeared due to over-exploitation. Most garden areas are too small to hold enough plants both for household and commercial use.

Dao female healer

Tran Thi Lanh sees herbal medicine and handicrafts like the left and right hand of minority women. Their skills in herbal medicine reflect the amazing knowledge ethnic women living in isolated conditions nonetheless possess. Lacking access to conventional medical services, the knowledge of women on herbal medicine secures the community’ well-being and allows them to safeguard the health of their family members.

Since 1993, TEW worked on different small-scale projects with healers from Dao, Xinh Munh, Ga Rai, Thai and Hmong minority groups. Creating contacts between healers from the different areas resulted in a network leading to growing positive results.

In 1994 TEW started a pilot project in Yen Son village supporting Dao healers to build herbal medicine gardens. The project ran until 1998 through a network of 11 skilful female Dao healers, called the Ba Me group. They constructed 83 household herbal gardens and a one-hectare community herbal garden. The use and commercialization of herbal plants was further developed via saving and credit programs. The Ba Me group expanded and culminated in the Herbal Association counting 110 Dao women members.

Herbal medicine gardens were built in many other areas that belong to the herbal medicine network: in Bo Ngoi village and On Oc village in Son La province and Quan Than San commune in Lao Cai province. The gardens are used as a tool to promote the use of herbal medicine at household level, preserve local plant species, exchange plant species with other members of the network, and act as learning areas for local people and network members alike. Communal herbal forest gardens will later be complementary to these household gardens.

Through herbal medicine preservation projects TEW focuses on natural resource management and biodiversity preservation. Herbal plants are harvested in forest areas that are managed by local healers. TEW is discussing withlocal authorities the possibility of creating a kind of semi-legal framework for local healers. The NGO also encourages local authorities to support healers in setting up Herbal Associations at the communal level. Over the years the Health Ministry stipulated a 10-point regulation charter for local health clinics in mountainous areas. The two main principles are that traditional healers should be involved and included in these health centres and the health centres should offer traditional herbal healers a treatment room. This way, patients can choose between western or traditional medicine. The big disadvantage of these new regulations is that local herbal healers are not allowed to treat patients at home like they traditionally do because they lack any form of certificate or diploma. It is one of the big frustrations of many local healers and specialists that are voiced during the conference in Hanoi.

To preserve their extensive knowledge and huge resources of herbal plants in Que Phong, Nghe An province, the healers established a network following the examples of Quang Binh and Lao Cai provinces. During meetings healers exchange knowledge on plants species and medicine recipes. The healers decided to set up a herbal forest garden to protect the herbal plants in their original environment. The natural environment where herbal plants grow offers minority communities a wide range of spices, vegetables and fruits, natural dyes, plants for herbal teas and plants that act as natural pesticides or insecticides, and protecting the forest areas has wider implications than only protecting medicinal plants.

For the first time (2005) local authorities legalized two community forest areas for two groups of healers in Pa Kim and Pom Om village in Hanh Dich commune. The People's Committee of Hanh Dich issued a decision to allocate the forests to the Herbal medicine network and approved their regulations on plant protection. All people in Pa Kim and Pom Om villages helped in making fences around the forest and the healers erected a notice board with the regulations written in Vietnamese and Thai. Most other healers in Vietnam are still waiting for formal land use rights for the herbal forests like those in

Hanh Dich. Mass organization like Youth Unions or Women's Unions can receive land use rights to herbal forests, but for ethnic minorities, real community rights to forest areas are even today only a faraway dream.

The healers in Hanh Dich installed a small treatment area within the local health care centre where they have their own treatment room. Here traditional healers offer consultations for patients three times per week. At other times they treat patients on home visits. The diseases most commonly treated are traumas and wounds, chronic stomach diseases and respiratory problems.

Herb in household herbal garden, Pom Om, Nghe An

The healers produce a range of herbal medicines that are kept on stock and which can be reproduced on a larger scale.

The older healers educate young students to prevent their knowledge from disappearing with them. The healers use the designated herbal forest areas and herbal gardens as studying areas. The herbal gardens next to their house act as an emergency stock in times of medical urgencies. In Hanh Dich and Nasai there are 2 communal herbal gardens, 7 individual household herbal gardens and 4 forest herbal gardens spread over 4 villages.

The healers in Hanh Dich are conscious of the value of the raw materials they need to continue their profession. They realize the dangers of over-exploitation, and unequally distributed profits. The issue of intellectual property rights of herbal medicine knowledge of minority healers is a very new concept in a country like Vietnam and therefore an urgent one. Foreign businesses are entering this still unexploited market looking for profitable opportunities while local people and authorities are often ignorant on the dangers. The healers are looking for ways to establish local enterprises, owned by minority people, to the produce herbal medicines. They ask for training courses for local villagers in sustainable exploitation of raw materials and resources, and herbal medicine production techniques. It is their way to prevent the traders and businesses from disadvantaging the local population.

In ethnic minority societies, traditional healers also use rituals and praying ceremonies to strengthen the effect of a herbal cure. These reflect the close relationship between herbal medicine and religion, and most herbal healers are also spiritual leaders in their society. The Thai in Nasai will perform a spirit tying ceremony for the gravely ill and those who

suffer traumas. Spirits leaving the body causes sickness and they should therefore reunite the spirit with the person. A healer or spiritual leader presides over the ceremony and slaughters and cooks one chicken. All parts of the chicken are placed in two bowls, and placed with two bowls of white rice on a table. A piece of clothing belonging to the patient is placed next to the table. The sick person sits in between the window and the healer who sings and prays in front of the table. Close to the window the village women prepare indigo dyed threads and when the shaman finishes his praying he invites the sick person to sit down at the table, take a bowl of rice and eat three parts of the chicken chosen from both bowls as well as some rice. The women and other important persons from the village tie three threads on each wrist of the person reuniting the spirit back to the body wishing them good luck and health. After the ceremony everyone present will eat the rest of the chicken during the meal. (I myself underwent this ceremony after having suffered a large wound on the sole of one of my feet in Nasai village in April 2007. A large piece of skin and flesh was cut out of my foot by a cracked bamboo pole during the traditional bamboo pole dance. The wound was treated with herbal plants to stop the bleeding, disinfect the wound and start the healing process. The cure by herbal plants was re-enforced by the Thai ritual for sick people. My wound healed well.)

HANDICRAFTS
Silk, cotton and hemp-thread woven dreams.

About 2800 B.C., the Empress Xi-Ling-Shi, wife of the Yellow Emperor, was having tea in her garden one afternoon. As she sat there, a white cocoon fell from the mulberry tree into her steaming teacup. When she fished it out with her chopsticks, it unwound into soft, strong, shiny threads, and the clever Empress realized that it could be fashioned into thread for weaving. (Chinese legend)

Hmong woman embroidering, Simacai, Lao Cai

When I first met Tran Thi Lanh in 1994, we shared many ideas on issues concerning the lives of ethnic minority people. I had studied arts and crafts in Thailand and she worked with ethnic minorities in Vietnam. Being a graphic artist the beautiful handicrafts of many minority groups in Vietnam and Thailand intrigued and appealed to me.

Lanh had just recently registered her own NGO, TEW, and was still struggling to find necessary funds for the many projects she had already on paper. One such project focused on the preservation of minority handicrafts as a tool to promote and strengthen minority values and their cultural identity. Lanh's enthusiasm was infectious and I easily took to her visions and was soon adding my own ideas to complement hers. She introduced me to a village of Hmong and Dao minority people in Lao Cai province in August 1995 and we decided to write out a project proposal and submit it to the Belgium Embassy for possible funding. We eventually received a micro-fund of 7.250 USD for a period of one year. With the funds we would purchase raw materials and train village women. The project would buy the finished products at a fair price and sell them in a small fair trade shop in Hanoi to further finance the project. The contract was signed on October 17th 1995 in Sa Pa district. The title of the project: was: "Training courses for Hmong and Dao ethnic

minority women, on the preservation of traditional textiles in Ta Phin commune, Sa Pa district." For the implementation TEW cooperated with the Women's' Union of Sa Pa.

The picturesque commune Ta Phin lies on an altitude of 1700m and is surrounded by mountains. It is 13 km away from Sa Pa and could in 1995 only be reached by a dirt road, of which the last kilometres had to be walked. Of the 1689 inhabitants 60% are Hmong and 40% are Dao whom live mainly from agriculture growing rice and maize as staple crops.

The project officially started in November 1995 with 83 enthusiastic women who made an amazing number of 217 pieces of embroidery during the first two months. The women worked in small working groups each lead by one women who could help and guide them and who regularly met with two Dao women; Mrs. Ly May Chan and Mrs. Chao Su May who managed activities on village level. For each piece of embroidery the amount of raw materials and labour time was counted. The quality and complexity of the embroidery were also taken into account when deciding upon a correct and fair selling price. It was a gradual learning process both for the women and for the NGO staff members. The minority women soon showed increased appreciation for their own handicrafts and textiles, and some women even started to worry about the final destination of their products.

During the second phase (from January 1996) no less than 143 women participated, almost doubling the initial number of women. Slowly the women took to TEW's working methods and with it their interest in the project grew. Biggest proof was the growing number of women showing up at the project meetings were villagers felt free to share and express their ideas and opinions.

Next was a small pilot program producing hemp and traditional baskets. A tailoring course for a group of women in the village was in the pipeline as a first step towards handing over the project in the women's hands. An important milestone was the establishment of a management board in the village to oversee and manage all project activities with one Hmong and three Dao women acting as representatives for the villagers.

In April 1996 the shop "The Calabash" opened its doors in Hanoi. A calabash is a common vegetable used in a variety of ways in most minority villages. Besides being a vegetable, it can be made into water containers, spoons and plates.

"The squash told the calabash: "Please try to understand, although we may be very different, we are bound together by the same soil." It is a beautiful metaphor for the co-existence of people of different cultures and backgrounds on the same soil.

The aim of the project is broader than the obvious economical one. Next to creating additional income for minority women, it taught women the right attitude towards the free market system. It showed them the importance of their traditional values and their

cultural identity and offered them ways to enter the free market economy and its modern lifestyle without giving up on their old traditions.

Calabash shop in Ta Phin village, run by local women

Fair trade is much more than a fair price for a product. The Calabash was a place where customers could meet and learn about minority culture, and where the focus was almost solely on the minority women producers. It brought the buyer closer to the producer, hoping the customer would not just buy a souvenir, but a whole concept, thereby creating a feeling of buying something unique and long lasting.

Equally important were the indirect spin-off goals. Minority people traditionally depend on their surrounding natural resources for all their daily needs. With development their needs grow and pressure on resources often increase beyond what is sustainable. One of the resources for handicrafts is natural dye. Already many dyes are replaced by imported Chinese chemical dyes more convenient in use. By promoting natural dyes and other natural resources for handicrafts, the NGO could indirectly show minority people the importance of preserving and protecting these natural resources. It restored their responsibility towards the surrounding natural biodiversity. Not by not touching it, but by using it in a sustainable way.

When we look at this very small handicrafts project, we see that the aims are still as up to date today as ten years ago. Now, more than twelve years later decent anthropological research on the minorities in Vietnam is still almost inexistent. Vietnam counts more different ethnic minorities then almost any other country in South-East Asia, with 54 groups being identified. Quite some books have been published, mainly inside Vietnam, but most of them draw on the same poor and outdated information, collected years ago. These publications only scratch the surface and never really get to the heart of minority values, cultural history and cultural identity. It shows what is easily identified; their clothes, their houses, their most known festivals and rituals, without any real understanding of what being a minority person really means, especially in a diverse country like Vietnam. Minority people do not live on a separate planet, they live in a country, influenced by other ethnic groups, by the majority population, by the government, by the climate and geographical characteristics of this country.

In 2006 I asked Lanh why she chose Ta Phin to start up a handicrafts project. She linked it to a story in 1991. “With the first secretary of the Australian Embassy and his parents, I visited Sa Pa. We stayed two nights and two days during which we visited Ta Phin commune. This trip upset me because I saw Hmong and Dao women who came to the day and night market in Sa Pa, trying to sell very valuable products. I then decided that if I would have the opportunity to work on handicrafts I would like to work here, because this area was very promising and would probably attract many tourists in the future. When she met me in 1995 her idea for a project surfaced again. “I really wanted people to recognize the valuable knowledge of women on weaving, embroidery and dyeing using natural colours.”

Weaving in Nasai village, Nghe An

When working with minority textiles and handicrafts we sense the age-old heritage. The patterns used are centuries old as is the dress code defining every-day and festive wear. This code not only regulates which pieces of clothing they should wear but also the colours and designs that should be integrated in each piece. Some pieces are only worn once in a lifetime on the occasion of a wedding or a funeral. Children and adults dress differently and so do men and women. Sometimes people also have to dress differently before and after marriage. One can tell a person’s origin by the colours and patterns in their clothing. Textiles are strongly related to the important stages within a lifetime and it is the responsibility of women to supply these necessary items.

Black Thai women from Son La province weave very beautiful patterns on their pillows which each evoke a specific meaning. A pillow is offered to guests who stay overnight and the heart and crab symbol are a sign of hospitality. Each pillow represents a person having a heart and a head and the tree, with two branches on each side in two different

colours, symbolizing the strength of the household and family ties. In the middle of the pillow stands a mountain as a sign of strength.

Dao women use specific colours in their embroidery that go back centuries. The pine tree ensures happiness and should be incorporated into the girl's headscarf and on her shirt or jacket and on the boy's headscarf. The pine tree is found in the embroidery of all Dao minorities in Vietnam. In the North of Vietnam where the Red Dao people live pine trees are commonly found. Other designs represent a worm, a snail or the paw print of a cat. Being able to embroider is imperative for a girl to get married. When a couple decides to get married, the girl will receive from the boys-family enough silk thread and indigo textile to embroider her own wedding clothes as well as wedding clothes for her husband and her mother in law. If she is skilled enough she will embroider clothes for all family members of the groom with the help of her mother. During one year the girl will embroider in preparation of her wedding. All girls therefore learn to embroider from a very young age.

Red Thai women making a thread coil

Red Thai people from Nghe An province use designs of people and dragons in their traditional weaving. If there is a funeral in the village, all women in the village have to take of their headscarf, and the men are not allowed to wear a hat. The daughter and daughter-in-law should take of all jewellery when parents die and they are not allowed to weave, dye or raise silk worms during a mourning period of six months or one year. White Thai people from the same area incorporate a lot of animal designs in their weaving patterns; very popular are tigers and butterflies. Traditionally every family should own a piece of textile with a butterfly on it.

Hemp, a natural fibre, has a very important religious connotation for the Hmong people. When the Hmong die they will dress the dead in hemp clothes. In Ta Phin if the dead wear one skirt they have to wear three shirts, with two skirts they have to wear six shirts and three skirts go with nine shirts. More layers mean more happiness in life for their children.

Network on traditional handicrafts

In 2006 SPERI took up the thread of handicrafts again. Ethnic minority women from different areas in Vietnam were brought together for a workshop from March 22 to 24 of that year. The women decided to network around handicrafts, exchanging knowledge on products, design and natural dyes, with the aim of marketing their products together in the (near) future. They asked SPERI for support on product design, product placement, marketing and identifying retail outlets. This time SPERI wants to put all steps of producing and selling in the hands of the women, economically empowering them and teaching them the tricks of the trade all at the same time. SPERI wants to adhere to the principles of fair trade but defines it broader than a fair price for the producer. Fair trade is a fair price, a fair share and a fair say, meaning the producer will not only get a fair price for its products but also a fair share of the profits and a say in all decisions concerning the way his products will be put on the market. Gradually minority women will be trained towards managing all steps from producing to selling their traditional textiles and handicrafts. This project wants to honour the minorities' 'poverty right' by giving them the decision-rights over what and how products will be sold and by giving them the full benefit of these sales.

In order to further develop handicrafts as commercial activities it is important that land allocation happens for land where the women can grow the necessary raw materials like cotton, mulberry trees for sericulture, hemp and natural dyeing plants.

Communal weaving house in Xieng Da village, Luang Prabang, Laos

POVERTY ALLEVIATION AND HUNGER ERADICATION

Thai woman working the rice field

Farming addresses the most basic goal in life and is key to relieving hunger and poverty. Traditionally, ethnic minorities are self-subsistent through diversified farming. They have always used organic farming systems, without pesticides, herbicides or industrial fertilizers. When their traditional lifestyle is challenged through relocation or when their land is replaced by inferior farmland, they often change their life style as well as their farming habits and turn to mono-crops, using fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides. Sometimes they are even forced to leave the profession of farming altogether and have to find other ways to survive.

During the first years of TEW's existence the focus lies on relieving the most basic needs of the poorest people in rural Vietnam. Basic infrastructure like bridges, small dams for irrigation, water supply systems or roads are built. It was a first step in solving hunger, sickness and lack of hygiene. Better roads give better access to nearby villages and cities, and to clinics and schools. A decent water supply system offers clean water close to people's homes, improving hygiene and reducing the occurrence of water born diseases. Small dams help farmers to grow wet rice and other crops leading to an improved diet.

Thinking in a holistic way, TEW always looked further than just these basic interventions. With the right tools people can help themselves with profound and long lasting results.
The focus soon shifts towards improving agricultural techniques. TEW shies away from introducing mono-crop systems on a semi-industrial scale because it often keeps farmers dependent on the banks they take loans from, as a pre-finance.

Traditional Thai water wheel for irrigation

Mrs. Tran Thi Lanh initially studies the traditional way of farming used by many minority people in mountainous regions. She realizes that the methods they use to cultivate the land are best adapted to the environment they inhabit. The only drawback is that it is often done in an inefficient way, with low yields and little variety as a result. Most of the arable land in minority villages is sloping and thus labour-intensive and susceptible to erosion.

A huge misconception is that minority people only farm using slash and burn techniques causing the loss of forest coverage and severe environmental degradation. Swidden agriculture or slash and burn are only one of the farming techniques used in mountainous areas. In valley and lowland areas minority farmers usually grow wet rice crops while many minority groups in the Northern mountainous provinces of Vietnam converted whole hillsides into beautiful terraced fields for wet rice. Swidden farming is mostly used on sloping upper land areas and is in these circumstances often the most effective way of farming with lowland models being completely inappropriate for upland areas.

"Shifting cultivation", "swidden agriculture", or simply “slash and burn” is an ancient form of agriculture practiced by between 200 and 500 million people around the world today. The two key components of slash and burn agriculture are the use of fire to prepare fields for cultivation and the subsequent abandonment of those fields as productivity declines. The inevitable decline in productivity is a result of the depletion of soil nutrients and also a result of the invasion of weed and pest species. Once abandoned however, fields are allowed to return to a more natural state as native plant and tree species reclaim the field. As a result, over time soil nutrient levels can recover to predisturbance levels, although the resulting ecosystems often retain a preponderance of plant species used by humans. While recovering, abandoned fields (also known as "swiddens"), are used as a source of fruits, nuts, fibers, medicinal plants, and game. Once ecosystem recovery is sufficiently advanced, the field may be used again for cultivation. Farmers begin to prepare a field by cutting down many of the trees and woody plants. Trees that provide fruits, nuts, building materials or other useful products may be spared. The downed vegetation or "slash" is allowed to dry until right before the rainiest part of the year, at which time the slash is burned converting biomass into nutrient-rich ash.

Burning also temporarily eliminates most pest and weed species. Seeds and cuttings are planted directly into the ash-covered soil. Farmers may add additional slashed vegetation from offsite as mulch that further enhances soil fertility while protecting the soil from erosion. Fields may be weeded one or more times, but inevitably, weed and pest species take their toll on productivity. Depending upon location, fields may be cultivated for three to five years, and again, depending upon location, be allowed to recover for as little as five to over twenty years before being cut and burned again.

Swidden agriculture is generally sustainable as long as the land and population density remains in balance. Slash and burn agriculture is particularly important throughout the tropics where, when done properly can provide people with a secure source of food and income and has been shown to be sustainable over long periods of time.
But in areas of the tropics that have experienced a rapid influx of settlers, slash and burn agriculture has contributed to the rapid loss of forest cover. The problem here (and in most places throughout the tropics) however is not slash and burn agriculture itself, but the rapid increase in the number of people cutting and burning the forest in order to produce food for themselves and their families. In addition, new settlers often lack several key resources and skills needed to successfully and sustainable use slash and burn agriculture. In contrast, in areas which have not experienced rapid population growth and where sufficient land exists, slash and burn agriculture has proven more sustainable and about as productive as more modern, energy-intensive agricultural methods. When done properly over a sufficiently large area, slash and burn agriculture results in a mosaic of agricultural, secondary (i.e., abandoned), and primary (i.e., relatively undisturbed) ecosystems that mimic more closely natural disturbance regimes than does mechanized, modern agriculture. For example, slash and burn farmers typically plant or retain dozens of crop species in each field along with useful trees. In contrast, modern mechanized agriculture often results in large areas planted in a mono-crop and requires the removal of almost all trees in order to use farm machinery.

By combining traditional agricultural techniques used by minority people, and farming methods found in permaculture, TEW develops a farming method suitable for sloping land. The Sloping Agricultural Land Technique: SALT helps prevent erosion, increases yields and uses a large variety of crops by mixing different vegetables, fruit trees and cash crops on one and the same field. Crops can be harvested alternately, and by mixing different species many diseases can be warded off naturally. In between the crops nitrogen fixing plants are grown to improve the soil, which is prone to lose its nutrients quickly in tropical climates. TEW builds small pilot plots where they test these farming techniques, with growing success. The first pilots are built in 1991 in the Ba Vi area where Dao minority people live and later on in Bo Ngoi village home to the Xinh Mun. The Sloping Agriculture Land Technique is taught in all areas where TEW-CHESH and CIRD apply land allocation programs. Land allocation is always combined with training on land use planning and agricultural techniques on sloping land are part of these trainings. Farming and Agriculture techniques on sloping land are not just fixed techniques that can be reproduced anywhere. It is important to first study the specific landscape, seasonality, locations of streams and rivers, and design the different land use systems following nature. It is important to work with the nature and not against it. The

resulting land use plan will be different in every location, not only because of the different environmental landscape but also because every minority has different traditional farming methods, and these will also have an influence on the final land use map of the village.

Household garden

When in 1998 TEW acquires a large piece of land in Dong Le town, Quang Binh province to build up a vocational school, they decide to build a model farm here to practice the techniques taught in the school. Using the farming methods they have experimented with, a complete farm rises on this plot of land. They grow crops on sloping land next to wet rice fields, dig a fish pond, plant fruit trees, design a herbal medicine garden, place bee hives, use traditional irrigation systems, reserve areas for composting and keep animals like chickens and ducks. Homes are built where farmers can stay for longer periods of time to take care of the daily work on the fields, and dormitories and a large kitchen and restaurant can house visiting students. In the centre you find a teaching area and offices.

Over the years many farmers from different areas of Vietnam pass through the Vocational school to learn new farming techniques they then apply at home. Whenever staff members of the NGO encounter new farming techniques in the field that can be useful for others, they incorporate it in the Dong Le farm for others to learn from. The practice farm is therefore partly the result of farmers sharing knowledge through the networks. Whenever something new is built here it is often done using voluntary work offered by member farmers of the network.

Mr. Nhat, farmer of Nasai village

Since 2006 SPERI cooperates with the Permaculture Institute of Australia. The Australians where very impressed with the way the Vietnamese traditionally farm using many techniques similar as in permaculture. The Permaculture Institute introduces new techniques during their training courses that can greatly improve soil conditions and help farmers to use organic growing methods in a more systematic way. Minority people traditionally farm organic but are unaware of the added value that it gives their products not only on the market but for their own consumption as well, while protecting and improving their natural living environment at the same time.

Permaculture; nurturing nature through agriculture

Permaculture, or PERMAnent CULTURE, is the conscious design of agriculturally productive ecosystems and energy conserving settlements that have the resilience, dynamic stability and diversity of natural systems, like forests or grasslands. Such systems provide for their own needs, do not pollute or exploit, and are therefore sustainable in the long term. (Bill Mollison)

House and garden in nasai village

The philosophy of Permaculture is to reduce the impact that human settlements have on non-renewable and renewable natural resources, while creating an abundant living environment, catering to the needs of all living creatures.

Permaculture is a science developed through the observation and analysis of natural systems. Through this analysis set structural patterns common to all natural systems emerge. Permaculture design then applies these "Patterns" to the development of sustainable human settlements, harmoniously integrating landscape and people while providing food, energy, shelter, and other material and non-material needs in a sustainable way.

Since these ways of farming show striking resemblance with the traditional way of farming by minority people (without using pesticides or insecticides, using natural predators instead of insecticides, using mixed crops, diversified agriculture, small gardens...) it seems very logic to make people aware of the value of organic farming by introducing them to the principles of permaculture.

To the reader who is not familiar with permaculture, it could seem as if permaculture is putting more pressure on farming communities (by pressing them to abandon the use of pesticides etc). However, the opposite is true. For instance, Permaculture gardens are designed to maximize the efficiency of the garden and bring a maximum of products to the gardener with a minimum of extra work.

Next to the model farm in Quang Binh province a second farming model annex school is developed in North Vietnam, in Simacai; an area home to Flowery Hmong people. A third area where SPERI develops farm models is called HEPA in Ha Thinh province.

Integrated garden of Mr. Nhat, Nasai village

In Nasai village, one enthusiastic Thai farmer, Mr. Nhat, has transformed one area of sloping land, bordering the river opposite his traditional wooden house on stilts, into a real garden of Eden. Until a few years ago, he used mainly traditional Thai farming methods, which are in se one hundred percent organic, to grow rice and a wide variety of vegetables and fruit trees. He had also dug a fishpond that doubled as an irrigation reservoir for the terraces he had built on the slopes above. When SPERI saw his efforts, they invited him to join some of the farming courses in Dong Le town and HEPA farming schools. The lessons proved to be a real asset, and he immediately applied all new techniques in his own gardens and fields. He introduced new crops, and brought all seeds or plant siblings he could lay his hands on during the courses or study visits home. He planted nitrogen fixing trees between his crops on the terraces, introduced pineapples and passion fruit, planted herbs between the cracks of the stones that fence off his territory, and he is the only villager with a real bathroom next to his house. He in turn also shared his knowledge with trainers and trainees in the field schools, and he built one Thai style irrigation wheel in the field school of Dong Le. Mr. Nhat puts a lot of emphasis on education the young so that future generations improve agricultural practices and protect the natural environment. “We should teach them every day during breakfast, lunch and dinner, and in between we should show them the practice in the garden.”

SAVING AND CREDIT PROGRAM
Solidarity based economy.

Hanging bridge built with support from SPERI in Quang Binh

"When my husband left to do contract work in the South he took a loan from a bank of 6 million dong. He failed to gain enough money and since then we live in debt with the bank. I myself suffer from pains in my leg which unable me to work on the fields. It became very difficult to survive with 4 children of which the oldest is now 16. I decided to take a loan from the savings and credit group to overcome my difficulties. Many people disagreed with me, including my husband, afraid of failure. When I met Mrs. Ba who was responsible for the saving and credit group, she also said it was risky for me to take a credit since we already were in debt and my husband had a drinking problem. Mrs Hoa from the management board, who is vice-leader of the commune, eventually offered me a group guarantee for a credit. I received 1,5 million dong to buy one cow. It was very difficult to find a good cow for that amount of money, since I could not pay an expert to choose the right one. I eventually bought a cow for the price of 1,3 million dong. My decision caused a lot of tension and arguments in my marriage. I started to lose confidence because everyone told me I would fail. The cow got a calf, but since the mother cow had no milk I had to feed the calf. I sold the grown-up calf for 1,85 million dong. I paid back part of the loan and convinced the bank not to take my house. I invested some profit money into pigs and later in buffaloes. One buffalo died but I also sold two more cows. Today I still own 4 pigs. I bought a machine to process rice and maize and I grind grains for other villagers to use as animal feed (from the husk) And I now have 6 children. Over the years I have asked to divorce my husband twice, but the Women's Union talked with us both and convinced us to stay together. I still have to repay part of the loan to the bank, but my life improved a lot. I will sell some pigs to get medical treatment for my leg this year. My relationship with my husband and family has stabilized."

(Excerpt of an interview in February 2006 with Mrs. Loc from Kim Hoa commune in Central Vietnam)


Mrs. Loc and her pigs

Quite some years ago Mr. Song worked as a trader. He initially traded in bare gold and had 25 people working for him. His business failed and he became a timber-trader. He travelled from the border with China to Laos and Cambodia. But trading timber proved to be no success. He had debts at the bank but thanks to some gold he had saved he was able to repay what he owed the bank. He returned to his village and decided to work as a farmer as a last resort. He reclaimed some farmland (before the land-law of 1993) and sowed wet-rice and vegetables. Thanks to the instalment of a dam (funded by ICCO) it was possible to irrigate more land to grow wet rice. His wife attended a training course on farming techniques for sloping land at CCCD and joined some study tours organized by CIRD. Mrs. Lien decided to apply for a credit to buy two buffaloes. She asked the saving and credit group of Mrs. Ha to lend her 3 million dong. Normally they do not hand out loans of more than 2 million dong, but Mrs. Lien refused a lower amount since it would be insufficient to buy two good buffaloes. The credit was eventually granted and they managed to buy two good buffaloes. The animals reproduced well and they had them vaccinated twice a year. They sold two buffaloes for a good price and with the profit they can now build a new big house for them and their four children. They still own three more buffaloes.

Mr. Song prefers the credit from the saving and credit group in the village over one from the bank, being entitled to a much bigger loan than from the bank with lower interest rates. Big advantages are the additional support from the group offering training courses and the solidarity within the village.

(Excerpt of interview in February 2006 with Mrs.Lien and her husband Mr. Song of Kim Hoa commune in Quang Binh province)

House built thanks to saving and credit progrram Quang Binh

These two stories clearly indicate that the impact of development work cannot always be captured in numbers. The actual impact of the credit program is much broader than the pure financial one. Mr. Song now highly values the profession of farming, a profession he used to look down while claiming he will never go back to trading. With the loan from the saving and credit program Mrs. Loc not only solved her financial problems but also saved her marriage.

Many saving and credit programs have been set-up over the years, and are continuing independently on village and communal level, lead by local villagers, who coordinate the activities, and manage the flow of money. On village level the villagers choose a coordinator, and a small board that can decide who receives credits, the amounts they can ask for and the purpose for the credit. Credits cannot be used to buy luxury items, but should be invested into something that can grow and give profit, like seeds or animals. With the profits generated from these activities, farmers can buy goods or build houses. This way the credit can revolve and many farmers can make use of it. Initiatives like pig farms, cow farms, duck and chicken farms, fish ponds, vegetable gardens and nursery gardens, have been implemented in 6 different communes in Quang Binh, based on saving and credit programs. In these communes local people also cooperate on veterinary services for the different animal farms. These farmers are able to continue without direct aid from SPERI. Some key-farmers are involved in managing and training farmers in other areas sharing their knowledge and experience.

The organization tries to encourage green production methods. SPERI wants to launch a kind of farmer award for farmers using credits in a creative or ecological way, as an encouragement and example to others.

TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE
Study the past if you want to define the future (Confucius)

Poor people have been able to survive over time by adapting to local circumstances. By interacting with the surrounding nature people built up knowledge that enables them to co-exist in a harmonious way with the surrounding eco-system. Acknowledging and using this traditional knowledge has over the years proven to be successful. Traditional knowledge may be apparent on subjects like herbal medicine and handicrafts but is equally important when it comes to nature protection and diversified agriculture. It is important to demonstrate the value of this traditional knowledge to government officials and authorities as well as to the younger generations.

The Ma Lieng

Ma Lieng woman and child

The MA LIENG are a distinct minority group but are classified together with the Ruc, Sach, May and Arem under the CHUT minority group ever since 1975. The governments' aim was to improve the living conditions of these very poor groups through exchange of knowledge. Unfortunately this move denied the recognition of Ma Lieng as a separate group with a distinct culture and language. The risk is that in the long run their culture will disappear altogether, since Ma Lieng people are generally very poor and socially very weak, their numbers low (only 206 families or a little more than 1000 people in seven villages in Quang Binh and Ha Tinh provinces) making it very difficult for them to stand their ground. Already their own distinct language has partly disappeared

and many Ma Lieng have forgotten a lot of their historical background as well as cultural practices. It is SPERI's aim to revive and strengthen the Ma Liengs' traditional culture.

Ma Lieng girl in Ke village

Ma Lieng traditionally call themselves "Mo Lieng" meaning: people living and working on sloping land. Their religion is based on their close ties with nature, its seasons, and its spirits. Ma Lieng believe they were born from the same calabash that created other minority groups. A mythical story tells about a deity who created light and fire, as well as the first human beings on earth. This god used rattan to link the earth with the other planets for communication. As remembrance the Ma Lieng keep a rattan branch on their altars. Central in the house, in the husband's room, stands the sacred spirit pillar of the house. The pillar connects Ma Lieng people with their ancestors and it links death parents and grandparents with their children. It is forbidden to touch this pillar. The front window of the husbands' room is the spirit window. Through this window ancestors are welcomed into the house. When a family member dies, its body will be passed through this window before burial. One shouldn't stick their hands or feet through this window.

If someone dies in the house or has a serious illness, Ma Lieng people will move to a new house, taking the house pillar with them to incorporate into the new house. It guards them against bad luck. When moving to a new house they celebrate a " Groundbreaking ceremony" on a carefully chosen prosperous day. This ceremony involves tossing a coin asking for yin and yang.

The elaborate beliefs and ceremonies related to the Ma Liengs' homes explain why new houses offered through the resettlement programs have been so unpopular. Many families left these new houses after just a few months.

Ma Lieng gave up agricultural cultivation on sloping land in favour of lowland crops following their forced resettlement from the forest to lowland areas. Lacking experience with lowland cultivation created hunger and the resettlement was also the cause for the loss of many traditional and cultural practices.

Since 1997 TEW and CHESH study the lifestyle, religion and culture of the Ma Lieng in Central Vietnam. The Ma Lieng live by strict rules that regulate daily life and social structures inside the community. Before building a house, permission has to be asked from the clan leader. The clan leader will report this question to the spiritual leader and ask for advice. The spiritual leader will gather all the clan leaders and together they will decide on the location for the new household. During a worshipping ritual, Ma Lieng people will ask the land and forest spirits for their permission to build a house.

Ma Lieng boy with down syndrome

The lives of the Ma Lieng have been challenged in many ways, sinking them in a vicious circle of poverty that pulls them down, creates hunger and health problems, social instability and insecurity and erodes and destroys their traditions and culture. The Ma Lieng live isolated not only geographically, but also socially, feeling inferior and backward, and unable to push for change. Since only a few small groups are left, inbreeding becomes more frequent, adding more health problems. The Ma Lieng are very short in size. An average male adult only weighs 42 kg and his back spinal colon is noticeably shorter than that of an average Kinh male.

Ke village counts for 35 households or 139 Ma Lieng people in 2004. The Ma Lieng have settled in Ke village since 1993 following a resettlement program. The in 2002 finished Ho Chi Minh highway passes very close to Ke village and soon brought micro-traders into the isolated village. They started selling liquor and cigarettes to the villagers in exchange for rare timber, forest products and land. Many younger men got addicted to alcohol and cigarettes. Illiterate as many of them are, they had no idea of the real value of the products they bartered and eventually paid a very high price for their addiction. They started borrowing from the traders, who took advantage of them. When the last spiritual leader of the village dies in 1999, the new village leader is unable to lead the village and since he also was indebted with the micro traders received no respect. Traditionally the village leader is chosen informally through the respect he deserves from the villagers.
The Ma Lieng in Ke village come to a point where they are unable to change their situation without outside aid and are completely dependent on development programs to overcome their increasing poverty.

In 1999 TEW decides to help the village find the right balance again. They gather all addicted young men and other villagers and discuss the existing problems with them. The villagers decide to stop trading in exchange for TEW's help. TEW settles the existing debt with the traders and starts implementing development activities in the second half of 1999. One of the first activities was establishing household vegetable gardens to remediate hunger problems. Next came improving the hygiene and sanitation situation of the village. Between 2000 and 2002, three pilot gardens were set up. At the end of 2002 another seven household gardens were built and slowly villagers became aware of the advantages of a garden. Roaming cattle in the village keeps destroying crops though. Villagers learn to build fences around the gardens to keep the cattle out. Later projects include a fresh water system, improved agricultural techniques like ploughing, animal husbandry techniques, a veterinary program, a new community house and a housing program. The communal house built between January and July 2003 is a tool to promote and preserve traditional culture, revive traditional ceremonies, play traditional instruments and have village meetings.

Old and new house standing side by side in Ke village

To implement the housing program called Ngoi Hoa, local authorities allocate each household in the village with 700 m2 of land while TEW provides money and materials like bricks and tiles. To construct the houses the workmen are divided into four groups. Group one is responsible for cutting the trees with respect for the forests' biodiversity. The second group saws the wood in planks while the third group constructs the houses. TEW provides teachers and guidance. After some time the men change groups to learn the other skills as well. A fourth group consists of the village elders whom together form the Council of Elders. After the death of the former eldest, there had been a gap of leadership. The village elders had discussed on how to preserve their cultural identity and how to revive customary law so the Council of elders was set up based upon a need of the villagers. The council replaced the traditional role of one village elder taking important decisions, since at that time no one person was capable enough to take on this role.
The council consists of five village elders, representing the different clans in the village. Those five men have prestige and a convincing social and political voice in the village. One of the five members, Mr. Cao Ngu, also becomes the spiritual leader of the village.

In the beginning, the council met in a rather emotionally and awkward way. After three months though the council had proved its capability. When a decision affects the whole community they seek approval from villagers as well as the village leader.
As part of the project three men from the village are selected to get an education at the vocational technical school.

CIRD reclaims 3 ha of fallow land on the other side of the river for Ke village in June 2002 followed by training sessions on cultivating sloping land. Instead of using far off pieces of land for growing crops, villagers can gradually cultivate land directly surrounding the village.

Kinh farmers from the network use their expertise to help teach Ma Lieng farmers in Ke village on how to improve their farming and animal husbandry techniques. They teach them how to cultivate nuts, rice and beans, how to build pigsties and how to take care of their livestock. In 2005 the key farmers network helps the Ma Lieng to plant 575 fruit trees in Ke village as well as 20.000 pineapple plants. They also construct 3 fishponds and prepare 17 plots for wet rice cultivation. Kinh and Ma Lieng farmers from Ke village try to include other Ma Lieng villages from Cao and Chuoi villages in Lam Hoa commune and Ca Xen village in Thanh Hoa commune into their network. At the end of 2005, Ke villagers share their newly acquired knowledge and use their buffaloes to help Chuoi villagers to plough their fields. It indicates a strengthened community spirit and a growing solidarity within the Ma Lieng community.

By taking small steps Ke village finds its balance again while leadership is restored. People cooperate more closely by building houses together and are increasingly self-subsistent through agriculture. But the end of the road is not yet in sight. Even in 2005, one of the main concerns for Ma Lieng people in Ke village invariably stay food security and hunger eradication. The villagers still face a shortage of rice and maize for several months a year. One of the causes is that land for cultivation is still insufficient to meet their daily needs all year round. They also do not cultivate enough vegetables to create a diverse diet. They have buffaloes to plough and cows for meat and milk, but the cattle roam around freely and destroy many crops. The villagers do not seem to care enough to really solve the problems. Some households also started raising pigs.

For activities like caring for animals, building pigsties, veterinary support, fencing off fields, weeding and fertilizing crops, harvesting, ploughing and building terraced fields a lot of support and training is needed from CIRD and the network. The housing program takes up a lot of labour time that cannot be put into growing food. To supplement their meagre diet villagers still go out to hunt and harvest in the forest but these resources are gradually depleted leaving too little to cover their needs. Kinh people from nearby villages encroach on forestland belonging to the Ma Lieng adding to the gradual but rapid depletion of forest resources the Ma Lieng so much need. Irrigation is sometimes a problem since they find it hard to regulate the level of water through dams and to canalize the water to the fields. In general the Ma Lieng are completely ignorant when it comes to agricultural techniques and are also discouraged very quickly when the results are not instantly visible as hoped for.

In 2005 the Ngoi Hoa program changed its way of working slightly, involving more people. The workforce is now divided into 6 teams lead by a coordination team that communicates for decisions with the Elders' Council. The teams are: A team collecting wood, a team sawing wood, a team transporting the wood, a carpentry team, a team responsible for road construction and a team responsible for serving food and drinks. The coordination board decides who to assign the work to as well as the timing for building the houses.

For building a house the villagers have four different ceremonies: a breaking ground ceremony, a starting the woodwork ceremony, setting the house ceremony and entering the new house ceremony. The spiritual leader (elder Cao Ngu) leads everyone from elders to youth and children in observing and participating in these ceremonies. It offers to all involved the opportunity to understand the values behind these customs. Every new house in Ke village has an altar for worship.

The decision on who deserves a new house is taken based on the needs of the family and agreed upon democratically by all villagers. The council of elders will then carefully take the final decision. The family receiving a new house is responsible for cooking and serving meals to all people constructing the house. It takes at least 3 days to prepare for such a big event that includes the different ceremonies as well as the construction itself. Traditionally Ma Lieng would move to a new house whenever someone is gravely ill or if someone dies, taking the ancestral pillar to incorporate into the new house and worshipping the fire spirit. With the Ngoi Hoa program where the Ma Lieng build strong and decent houses it is not realistic anymore to just break down a house whenever someone falls ill or dies in the family. Now they have adapted this ancient ritual and instead of building a new house, they leave the house during five days, and on the fifth day they re-enter their house and worship the fire spirit. This way ancient rituals can evolve into a modern form without betraying traditional culture.

It shows that through knowledge of traditional culture and beliefs of minority people, sure failure of development programs can be avoided.

Traditional Ma Lieng storyteller

SPERI has developed a master plan for Ke village to become a Human Ecology village. This overall program will be implemented in seven steps:

1. PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) and action research on traditions and the social, political and economic situation and development of Ma Lieng people.
2. Ngoi Hoa housing improvement program.
3. Land Allocation program and livelihood security through community health care and nutritional support.
4. Master plan on natural resource use.
5. Master plan on animal husbandry and grazing.
6. Household economics and Social micro-enterprises.
7. Construction and infrastructure.

After the first two years the Human Ecology promotion program starts to have an effect on other villages. Ma Lieng from nearby villages are curious to learn from Ke village and are eager to apply the lessons learnt. This became the foundation for a larger Ma Lieng network. The Council of elders suggested setting up a forum to exchange information between the leaders and elders from different villages. The Ma Lieng network was established in June 2005 of which five Ma Lieng villages are member: Ca Xen and Bach Tai (Thanh Hoa commune, Tuyen Hoa district), Cao, Chuoi and Ke villages (Lam Hoa commune). They elected 10 members for the coordinating board and 4 members for an acting board; Mr. Cao Dung (Ke village, leader of the board) and Ms. Cao Thi Lam (Cao village), Mr. Ho Ai (Ca Xen village) and Mr. Cao Hung.

Two Ma Lieng elders from Ke village participated in the appraisal visit to Rao Tre village in 2006. Having researchers and villagers cooperate has proven to be a great asset since villagers share the same culture, identity and language leading to a bigger and quicker flow of information. During the research in Rao Tre village in June, two elders from Ke village assisted CIRD staff collecting data on the Ma Lieng' value system, community structure and possible causes of change. The Ma Lieng participants of Rao Tre spent three nights talking freely about their needs, desires and emotions. Researchers alone would not have gained so much substantial information in such a short time, even if they would have stayed a week or longer.

EDUCATION

I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand (Confucius)

Education is often key to successful development. Poor communities as well as ethnic minority groups usually score very high on the scale of illiteracy. Being illiterate often hampers their full integration into society and reduces their chances of economic participation. TEW-CHESH-CIRD has put a lot of emphasis on different forms of education for poor and ethnic communities.
The training courses SPERI offers are often non-written, very practical and hands on. Priority is given to subjects that can improve students' basic living conditions like gardening, agriculture, permaculture, animal husbandry and veterinary techniques.

Education is so much more than getting a certificate. TEW not only teaches but also gains knowledge from the minority women they work with. Indigenous knowledge is very valuable on issues like traditional herbal medicine and handicrafts. To offer the best-adapted education one needs to get a better understanding of the existing knowledge of its students. The three field offices in the North, Centre and Central Highlands are not just administrative offices but places where indigenous minority knowledge is collected and re-applied. At the field offices staff live close to the minority people and have the opportunity to research their wisdom and know-how. The different minority groups often meet at the field offices and learn from each other. The field offices double as teaching areas for the younger generation who is often denied an education. Short and mid-term courses are organized on different subjects while practice areas are built close to the classrooms. In 1997 three field offices are opened: NIRD (Northern Indigenous Research and Development centre) in Yen Chau in Son La province, CIRD (Central Indigenous Research Development centre) in Dong Le town in Quang Binh province and TIRD (Tay Nguyen Indigenous Research and Development centre) in Buon Ma Tuot City, Dak Lak province.

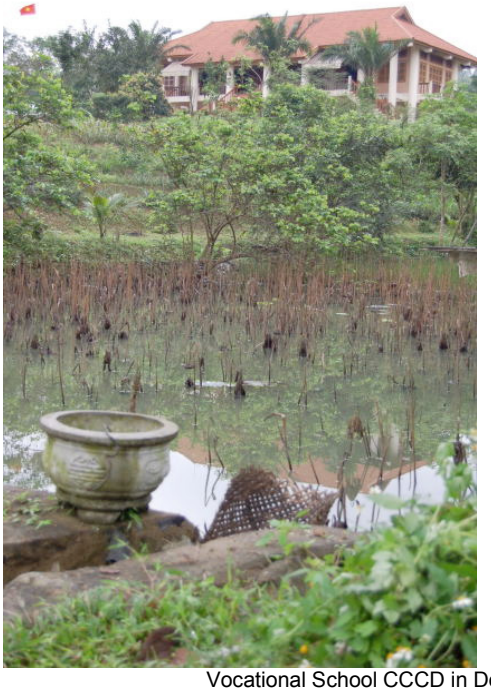
In 1999 TIRD was handed over to the Youth Union in Dak Lak province who continue the different activities. In the same year the Northern office NIRD is relocated from Yen Chau in Son La province to Simacai district in Lao Cai province in Simacai.

Learning during a study tour

The vocational technical school CCCD in Dong Le town, Quang Binh province, was officially opened in 2002. From April to December 2002, CIRD staff carried out pilot training activities in CCCD as a first step into developing a farmers' training centre. Those pilot activities included integrating fruit trees and short annual crops, gardening activities, land use design, cultivation on sloping land, terrace cultivation, animal husbandry (bees, chickens, dogs, pigs, a cow and pigeons), using nitrogen fixing plants, herbal gardens, veterinary techniques, fish ponds, mushroom cultivation and earthworm cultivation. This first trainings and practical field experiments were not only a learning experiment for farmers but for CIRD staff as well, in teaching as well as in running the field school. In that same year necessary accommodation was built like an office, a water system and an electric station.
CCCD offers scholar-ships to young students (with preference for ethnic minority pupils) of different villages to continue their education, often in cooperation with local schools.

Dang Tu Kien teaching land use possibilities

On the grounds of CCCD one large centrally built traditional house on stilts holds an office and classrooms. An open patio runs around the whole second floor. A little further, between the terraced fields, smaller wooden buildings accommodate visitors and students and annexed is a large kitchen and dining area. In 2005 fish ponds and an irrigation system were installed as well as an improved husbandry area and a nursery garden. On terraced fields several annual crops are planted in a mixed way to provide the training centre with the necessary vegetables to feed students, workers, trainers and office staff. Beehives stand in the fields while the herbal garden counts over 200 different species and is managed by local healers. Mr. Geoff Lawton from the Permaculture Institute in Australia offers short-term training courses on organic agriculture techniques like composting, revolving crop system and prevention of soil erosion on sloping land. Students learn the different techniques through practice on the grounds of the school. Usually only the key-farmers receive training and they transfer their acquired knowledge through TOT (training of trainers). The teachers encourage their students to build similar agricultural models on their farms. These agricultural models can then double as learning spaces for neighbouring farmers and can be visited by interested farmers from inside and outside the community. SPERI calls these areas “field schools”.



Vocational School CCCD in Dong Le town, Quang Binh province

The Vocational schools (CCCD in Quang Binh, HEPA in Ha Tinh and NIRD in Lao Cai provinces) provide several advantages above the formal educational system.

1. The three centres are strongly rooted in the local communities and provide educational as well as development functions;
2. The centres offer education for farmers living in remote areas;
3. The teaching methods are practical and participatory; approaches also used in community development;
4. The centres provide education and capacity building for the poor, especially ethnic minorities, who often have low levels of education and high levels of illiteracy. The formal educational system often requires grade 9 and thus excludes the most vulnerable population.

Flowery Hmong student at CCCD vocational school

For more specific courses the training centres cooperate with formal vocational schools. The (field) offices of TEW-CHESH-CIRD in Lao Cai, Ha Tinh and Quang Binh provinces share facilities with local vocational training centres. This leads to a closer cooperation between development organisations and the official educational system.

In the near future the three field schools wants to expand on three themes:

1. Customary law and indigenous and local knowledge on environmental protection.
2. Traditional knowledge and approach of traditional herbal medicine.
3. Know-how on organic farming systems.

APPROACH

TEW-IDEALS

Go to the people
Live with them
Learn from them
Start with what they know
Build with what they have
With the best leaders
When the work is done
The tasks completed
The people will say
"We have done this ourselves"

Lao Tu – 700 BC

TEW – Tâm Niêm

Dên voi dân
Sông cung dân
Hoc tu dân
Bat dâu tu nhung gi dân biêt
Xay dung trên nhung gi dân co
Nguoi dây to cua dân
Phai la nguoi
Khi su hô tro bên ngoai kêt thuc
Nguoi dân tu noi rang
Ho da se tu lam
Bang chinh ban than ho

Lao Tu – 700 TRCN

Key words in the NGO's approach are: Participation, Decentralization and Networking.

Sharing a meal with villagers

Minority people are not backward or ignorant and thus deserve due respect as equal partners. Even as this may sound obvious or evident and is primordial to the success of any development activity, it is too often forgotten. Time and again, this simple truth is quickly brushed aside with a few ceremonial empty words during a villagers' meeting, with the only purpose of remaining politically correct but without any real intention to let villagers' opinions get in the way of 'the project'.

Participation basically means that the NGO first actively consults and listens to the needs and concerns of the people before any action is planned or undertaken. They will then try to include as many target people as possible in all steps of the decision making process as well as the implementation. It is only when this approach is practiced to the fullest, that you can expect real buy-in from the villagers and as a result their long lasting loyalty to the project.
The eight-step approach to poverty alleviation and sustainable development developed by TEW clearly illustrates how the NGO tries to honour the principles of participation, decentralization and networking.

Lanh with minority child in HEPA

Step 1: **Immerse into the local culture** through research and study of the local language and traditions, customs and regulations, local knowledge and wisdom, religion and beliefs of the target community.

Step 2: When we have defined the framework of the planned activities (through participatory meetings), the next step is to find enough common ground between the different parties and stakeholders, so that conflicts can be avoided from the start. To this effect, we try to facilitate **contacts between the local village leaders and the local government authorities.** The aim is to obtain an agreement from all sides that traditional values and government regulations will be respected throughout the effective period of the project.

Step3: Widen the participatory approach to **involve the largest possible community**. This will add to the pool of interesting ideas and it will also avoid that some groups feel snubbed or left aside. Instead of isolating communities by having separate meetings per community, it is better to bring different ethnic minority groups together whenever possible, because such cross pollinations are a first step towards establishing interest groups and this leads to further networking down the road.

Step 4: Of course, all talking and no action are of little use. The participatory meetings ultimately result in a set of action plans. Most often, the ideas drafted up in these plans will have to be tested on a small scale to assess feasibility of the idea. These **Pilot activities** should also be used to convince the local authorities, so that they will give their consent and protect the project through the provision of a legal framework.

Step 5: Promote the most enthusiastic farmers to **'key-farmers'**. These people will receive extra training so that they can help to monitor and evaluate the ongoing development activities.

Step 6: Key farmers from different projects are brought together to share experiences and to receive additional training and guidance. This is the start of an effective **network of key farmers**. To adequately train these people, the right facilities to operate from need to be provided (this is where the farmer-schools come in.)

Step 7: Key farmers and farmers' networks are offered the right support in order to implement planned activities independently. This can go from logistical support, over training and advise to the right legal framework. Since every step is achieved through full transparency and with consent of the authorities, the network can operate under the security of staying within the legal confines of the law. Gradually key farmers and networks become independent organizations or **Community Based Organizations: CBO's**.

Step 8: The networks, later CBO's, become a platform, a jumping board from where members can start to formulate their own goals and express their own entrepreneurial ideas. The networks slowly become a self-confident thinking tank and **a voice for local target communities**. The networks can draft and communicate policy proposals for submission to local government officials and central policy makers. (The network creates a vertical link between the target farmers and authorities)

Mrs. Tran Thi Hoa with women of the handicrafts network

Eight steps to climb the ladder

Walking through this flexible eight-step program, NGO staff members evolve from being studying anthropologists to mediators and facilitators, after which they become project managers and coordinators and they invariably will end up as lobbyists and advisors on policy making. Each new situation brings challenges and opportunities and for NGO workers to succeed in their job, it is crucial to keep an open mind, unlimited patience and unrestricted flexibility to adapt to new situations. Ninety-nine percent of all development projects get stuck in phase one and two, because NGO staff is ill prepared and/or ill informed about the job at hand and also because most projects are only budgeted for a few years, just enough to take the first few stumbling steps.

SPERI aims for farmers to become key farmers and later coordinators, and helps them to establish interest groups and networks that evolve into peoples' organizations or CBO's (community based organizations). Farmers learn to identify their problems as well as the causes and to formulate solutions. Key farmers analyze these problems and solutions and are able to manage people and coordinate micro-activities aimed at solving identified problems. As coordinators they are able to integrate different activities, monitor and evaluate these activities, discuss and exchange visions and experiences within the network and establish new interest groups. The network defines its own orientation and strategy, looks for appropriate approaches and is able to challenge new situations. A CBO operates like a proper organization with their own structure, personnel, program and working strategy based on philosophy and vision.

NETWORKING - THE BACKBONE OF DEVELOPMENT - Strong leaves wrap up damaged ones

The first threads of a web

The Dao, subject of Tran Thi Lanh's PhD, migrated a long time ago from China into Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. Some settled in the Ba Vi area around the beginning of the 20th century (circa 1910). The Dao in Ba Vi belong to the Dao Quan Chet (Dao with tight pants) and Dao Deo Tien (Dao with coins) sub-groups. They initially settled at an altitude of about 600 to 1000 m above sea level, in mountainous caves and along the many streams running down from the three mountaintops that form the Ba Vi mountain range. Prior to 1938, 26 households containing 130 people survived on agricultural crops like mountainous rice species, maize and other vegetables, collected edible and herbal plants from the forest and occasionally hunted forest animals. In 1959 the Dao had to leave their ancestral lands and were resettled downhill at about 100 m above sea level. The government aspired to improve minority people's lives by having them convert to lowland agriculture growing wetland rice and giving them access to the centralized educational, cultural and health care systems. The Dao also had to make way for the establishment of the Ba Vi National Park since it was commonly accepted that slash and burn practices were one of the main causes of deforestation. The Dao were allocated land in the so-called buffer zone of the Ba Vi National Park. The relocation of 130 people took more than three years and they did not receive any training on how to grow wet rice until 1980. Not only didn't they have any say into the decision or mapping of their relocation, the authorities also failed from the outset to give the resettled families their land certificates. As the Dao faced increasing food shortages they started encroaching on the forestland higher up to grow mountainous rice crops and harvest forest crops like medicinal plants as they used to do in the past. They had to wait until 1985 before the authorities finally addressed this situation and their allocation was officiallized.

In 1977 the Government officially declared 2.144 ha of forest land of Ba Vi to be a Nature Reserve (Decision No. 41/TTg of the Prime Minister)[19], prohibiting the Dao to harvest plants or grow crops in this area, putting the Dao people in a position of illegality almost overnight. In 1994 TEW did a PRA (Participatory Rural Appraisal) in Yen Son village. They wanted to help the Dao community find new ways to live sustainable of the land without having to encroach illegally on the forestland for survival. It soon becomes very clear that the land available to the Dao community is too small to survive on. At the time of resettlement Yen Son consisted of about 150 people in 30 households. They received about 1200 to 1300 ha of land, of which 47 ha was agricultural land, 400 ha was for plantations and 8 ha for cultivating wet rice. Thirty years later the population has grown to 782 people living on the same 47 ha of land with still only 8 ha for cultivating wet rice.

The Dao in Ba Vi are famous for their extensive knowledge on herbal medicine, but they face increased difficulties since their access to herbal medicinal plants is gradually reduced. Harvesting in the National Park is illegal and the allocated forest areas are small and almost depleted of many herbal plants. In 1994 TEW conducts a survey on the use of herbal medicine plants in Yen Son village and decides to set up a pilot project to revive and strengthen the use of herbal medicine. They also develop some pilot activities on household economics, agro-forestry and gardening.

A group of 11 skilful Dao women is selected who form a Herbal Medicine Club going by the name of “Ba Me”. The “Ba Me” group sets up herbal medicine gardens in Yen Son village as an alternative source for herbal plant resources. TEW uses a savings and credit program to further develop the use and commercialization of herbal plants. The network members receive training while they help and support each other in implementing learned techniques. The Dao healers get a chance to broaden their knowledge during a training course given by Doctor Nguyen Thi Ngoc Lam, a herbalist from the Association of Traditional Medicine and Mr. Nguyen Luong Thuan, a pharmacist from the Vietnam Institute of Medicine.

The “Ba Me” herbal medicine club is the earliest inception of a network around a certain theme among minority people in Vietnam. By 1998 the Ba Me group evolves into the Herbal Association gathering 110 Dao women.

[19] 7.377 ha of forest in Ba Vi was officially declared to be a National Park in 1991 (Decision No. 17/CT, dated 16 January 1991) *(Gilmour and Nguyen Van San 1999)*

Healer from Nghe An on a study visit sharing knowledge

People start networking 'naturally' when converging on lines of common interest and common issues affecting their lives. Within a network people exchange information and create new interactions. Networking draws on the communal spirit as well as the solidarity and voluntarism existing between farmers in rural villages. As a tool it has proven to be very effective in strengthening community power and creating strong social ties on grassroots' level. Farmers take matters into their own hands improving their lives.

Configuring the web

A first step towards the formation of a Key Farmers' Network is taken in 1994 as an outcome of the first workshop "Approaches of mountain sustainable development at communal level" organized by TEW in Hanoi.
Between 1995 and 1997 TEW selects old and respected leaders from different communities and brings them together to voice their opinions on the centralized government system and its policies, and to formulate their communities' problems and needs. These "key-farmers" act as fence-breakers for the communities they represent.

In 1997, from February 14 to April 15, TEW carries out a rural appraisal through 13 communes of Minh Hoa, Tuyen Hoa and Bo Trach districts in Quang Binh province in cooperation with the Women's' Union, the Farmers' Union, the Youth Union and CRD from Hue University, to get a better insight into the living conditions of poor Kinh and ethnic minority farmers, their problems and the causes. The outcome is a program for development cooperation where key farmers from the different target communes play a central role. Key farmers will receive training and on their turn become trainers for others in their community. Thanks to the confident social position of many Kinh farmers, the Key Farmers' Network in Quang Binh soon grows into a solid and confident group becoming a model for networks in other regions of Vietnam and Laos. Some key farmers also monitor and evaluate activities, report to the NGO and become real representatives

for their communities. Until 2000, the networks function regionally and on specific topics like farming or herbal medicine.

The different networks require a space to openly meet and talk. In 1997 TEW decides to build 3 field offices in the North (NIRD), Centre (CIRD) ad Central Highlands (TIRD) of Vietnam. Local authorities allocate the necessary plots of land and allow the offices to function independently. In parallel with the farmers network, the office in Quang Binh province in Central Vietnam develops very strongly and evolves into an NGO that is registered in the year 2000 under the name of CIRD; Centre for Indigenous Research and Development. The Key Farmers' Network in Central Vietnam already counts 1.349 members in 2005. Local interest groups appoint a coordinator to take seat in local Management Boards centralising the management of activities on gardening, husbandry and veterinary or savings and credit. They take care of all accounting and reporting tasks, coordinate activities between different communes and organize trainings for farmers in other communes.

Meeting of the key farmers' network in Dong Le town

Representatives from the local management boards take a seat in the National Board of Coordinators (NBC) as of December 2001. They represent different thematic networks on issues like herbal medicine, infrastructure, land and forest management and agriculture. The National Board receives a permanent field office in HEPA. The board implements activities like pilot models on herbal medicine, nurseries and green fences using native species on the bio-diversity farms of HEPA. After being managed by TEW for ten years, the farmers network, through its National Board asks for funds independently through a proposal in 2004.
The key farmers' network is a positive answer to policies issued by the Government to have local people participate in the countries' global development, (Decree 29/1998/ND-CP of May 11, 1998) and promote democratization at communal level. (Decree 22/1998/TC-TTg of May 15, 1998)

Achievements based on the strength of numbers

The chief purpose of the Key Farmers' Network is to improve the quality of life of poor farmers and give them the tools to solve their problems by their own means.
To reach this goal farmers are given access to information, resources and technology, and the opportunity to exchange knowledge on management and use of natural resources, saving and credit systems, use of herbal medicine and agricultural techniques. Not only do they learn to manage the allocated land and its resources or have access to education and health care they are also given the opportunity to develop and preserve their ethnic culture and language.

To teach farmers negotiating skills, presentation skills, coordinating and facilitating skills, network members are encouraged to organize or co-organize meetings and workshops, and are expected to coordinate and preside over discussions and meetings during workshops. They are expected to formulate needs and present these in the form of work-plans. For this they not only have to be able to voice their problems but they have to be able to defend the necessity of attention to these problems. They need to formulate possible solutions as well as ways to implement proposed activities and divide the responsibilities for these activities between themselves and the supporting organization. It teaches the network members through practice the skills they need to actively play a role in society. For farmers this often stands in stark contrast to meetings organized by government officials were farmers only take the role of an audience without any form of participation.

Networking is put to practice during the study visits to other villages and communes where similar concerns live or are being addressed. During these visits knowledge is exchanged in both directions, and farmers not only gain confidence from sharing problems, needs and solutions, but they learn from each other in an informal way. Often these learning sessions proof to be very effective as the participants act and communicate on an equal level. There is not the teacher-student relationship, but an informal sharing of knowledge between equals, where participants feel very confident to display their knowledge and are not intimated like they would often be with a professor, scientist or consultant. The knowledge is exchanged in a very practical way, often by example, learning by seeing and doing.

Saving and credit programs are activities that are managed locally by the farmers' networks. The philosophy of the savings and credit program is to give small loans to overcome fundamental poverty. The Networks' members manage savings and credit activities independently. They establish a kind of small agricultural bank that accredits loans to farmers who have little or no access to traditional funding sources.
When farmers wish to expand their activities beyond the basic investments in seeds or animals and plan a communal seed-bank or a communal veterinary service centre offering vaccination programs to its members, they can apply for a loan from the program. As a result of this kind of secondary investment, the veterinary service in several Quang Binh communes in cooperation with governmental vaccination programs reached an all-time high vaccination rate of 86 to 90 %. The success of this kind of

undertakings highly depends on a strong network and a good cooperation with government vets.
In Laos an animal husbandry network and joint veterinary practice between Nam Kha and Xieng Da villages has resulted in an increase in the raising of domestic animals in the region. The veterinary practice operates independently as well as professionally and is financially solvable. It buys and sells medicines and implements vaccination programs. Moreover, their activities spontaneously expanded to different neighbouring villages in the Nam Thuom region. More recently, the veterinary network is officially considered part of the Nam Bac District Animal Husbandry and Veterinary Office.

Meeting of the handicrafts network

Networking on land rights can be called an even larger success. Many member communes received land rights leading to long-term income security. Securing land rights not only restores the dignity of many poor farmers but safeguards sovereignty of their cultural identity. Ownership of ancestral land assures the continuation of age-old rituals and beliefs as well as the use of traditional farming methods or continued access to forest products to meet their daily needs. Land allocation programs facilitate peaceful resolution of conflicts over land, not only between neighbouring villages but with outsiders as well (very often government officials or local authorities). With forestland becoming scarce, land use rights are a first step towards sustainable management and use of the remaining natural resources.

Building bigger and stronger webs

In 2006 TEW, CHESH and CIRD challenge the Key Farmers' Network with the possibility of reduced or complete absence of financial aid in the near future. It forces the network to re-think their long-term financial survival. The farmers discuss possible solutions for future management and financial independency during several regional meetings. These meetings culminate in a National workshop in Dong Le town from February 22 to 24, 2006 discussing the reform of the National Key Farmers' Network and its National Board. They conclude to find new sources of income to financially support the networks' working and running costs. Membership fees from farmers and income from small-scale enterprises are some of the proposed solutions to generate income. They also recognize the need to internationalize their network since country borders are irrelevant on issues that matter to local farmers and ethnic minorities. Internationalizing the network broadens the networks' platform of action and influence. Farmers in neighbouring developing countries share similar concerns as well as the same ecological and cultural heritage. These new directions ask for new regulations for the whole network to abide by. When discussing an independent network in the future with less dependency on funds from SPERI/donors the key farmers realize it is important to stay rooted in their local communities. The National Board of Coordinators decides to focus on their home communities, become 'example farmers' and strengthen trust and activities locally. Coordination between the thematic networks is needed, so a 'light' coordination structure in the form of a farmer advisory board is set up.

This drastic reform asks for a strong reply from the organizations TEW, CHESH and CIRD. The NGO's realize they too need to adapt to meet the new needs formulated by the network. The networks shift from basic development issues like hunger eradication and poverty alleviation towards issues like land allocation, small enterprises, education, self-determination and participatory decision-making. These issues have a strong social, economic, ecological and political character. The farmers ask the NGO to assist and guide them to face these new challenges. TEW, CHESH and CIRD decide to fuse into one new organization named SPERI where the focus will be on offering professionalized consultancy and advise and conducting research on social, political and ecological issues in development. Many activities previously implemented by the NGO will gradually be handed over to CBO's; Community based organization. These CBO's are a result of key farmers taking initiatives on different levels and subjects.

The network will act as a channel to voice problems and needs as well as achievements. It can give farmers the means to be part of society as a whole, be heard by policy makers and become equal partners in the social and political life of their country. Over the years some key farmers have climbed the social ladder and taken up posts as local authorities. By the year 2005, eight key farmers from Quang Binh province are leaders in the People's Council and two other key farmers are chairmen of the Communal People's Committee. Others are able to negotiate with local authorities whenever the circumstances ask for an intervention. Local authorities increasingly recognize the importance of farmers' networks and take part in local discussion and meetings. These

successes are promising but just as often key farmers' networks are still perceived as a threat to the existing political system, not taken seriously or even hindered in their work. Local as well as higher ranking authorities are often invited to attend workshops, seminars and meetings co-organized by the NGO in the hope they will recognize the possible benefits of the network.

The biggest future challenge for the key farmers' network is a legal framework that is for the moment non-existent. The network cannot register as an independent organization. As a registered community based-organization they would be able to look for funding and cooperation, act as a pressure group for the people they represent and organize meetings and seminars without depending on the NGO. As active representatives for their communities in society, key farmers are best placed to defend their communities' needs and concerns, and negotiate solutions. Networking helps key farmers to recognize their rights as well as their responsibilities. It encourages the marginalized to participate and can help bring about better social equity while contributing to the democratization process. Networking ultimately leads to grassroots social and political empowerment.

Networking meeting April 2006

DECENTRALIZATION

Another keyword in the approach of the NGO is decentralization.

Decentralization of land is achieved through land use allocation programs. Although indigenous people all over the world and in Vietnam have proven in the past to be staunch protectors of the natural biodiversity they inhabit, governments and local authorities often fail to recognise this. Time and again indigenous communities are forced to leave their ancestral land without any say in the matter. In other cases outsiders, individuals and companies encroach on land that for decades or centuries has been the home and supply of resources for the people living there. This creates conflicts over land in which the indigenous minorities often lose out because they lack the legal means of defence and are ignorant of their rights. With poor access to information channels and struggling with an image of being backward, poor and uneducated, minority people are strongly disadvantaged in such conflict situations.

Decentralization of power happens when farmers take up local government posts. Decentralization of power is the confirmation of the right to self-determination.
The right of self-determination of people is a fundamental principle in international law. It is embodied in the Charter of the United Nations and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights as well as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Common Article 1, paragraph 1 of these Covenants states that:
"All people have the right of self-determination. By virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development."

Decentralization of decision-making processes is attained through the many farmers' networks. The key farmers' networks are a perfect example of decentralization of decision-making processes regarding development aid. By consulting the key farmers, who represent the local communities, on possible development issues, and planning activities in a participatory way, the NGO honours the fundamental right of poor and indigenous people to decide what and how aid will be distributed in their community. The key farmers' network usually does not decide alone, but will consult their communities on issues brought up at the networks' meetings.

Last comes **the decentralization of implementation of** development aid and funds. When CBO's can implement development activities, decentralization of development work and activities is achieved. Once the NGO together with the network decides on possible activities, the implementation will wherever possible be left in the hands of local people. Being the main beneficiaries of all activities, they have a strong interest in striving for success.

Decentralization still is a though issue in a country like Vietnam which is illustrated by the following encounter between a Ma Lieng elder named Cao Ke of Ke village and a forest official:

One day, the elders of Ke village had to choose new land plots to build houses. The Council of Elders appointed Mr. Cao Ke to go to the forest to choose the right piece of land. He found an area of interest of about 300 square meters for which the villagers already possessed the land use right certificate. He cleared the land from grass and other wild plants to prepare it for the house. One forest official heard the news and quickly ran into the village to investigate. He went to the forest to look for the village elder. He saw Mr. Cao Ke and right away shouted at him, "Who allows you to build a house here?" The elder immediately responded "This is our land so we have the right to build a house on it." Still the forest official continued, "Who gave you the permission to claim that this land belongs to the Ma Lieng people?" Cao Ke then angrily replied, "If you want to know who allowed me, go and ask the Council of Elders in the Communal Culture House!" The forest official eventually left without saying a word.

Water supply system in Long Lan village, Laos

The water supply construction in Long Lan village in Laos clearly shows how decentralization can lead to success. In 2003, the district's technicians designed a water supply system budgeted at 110 million Kip. A technical company is traditionally hired for the design and financial estimate of any approved government construction and does not allow the participation of villagers in the planning or construction. In 2004, CHESH asks villagers to assess their water supply and they make a design for a new water supply system costing only 50 million kip. CHESH decides to hand the management of funds and construction to the villagers. During the 30-day construction the villagers manage and divide the many tasks at hand. It results in 2 reservoirs located at the water source, 1 tank 200m above village level and 7 water stations in the village. The system supplies the whole village with enough water throughout the year. Long Lan men know how to adjust the valve located at the water source in the different seasons in order to have the right water flow assuring enough water for the whole village. They also voluntarily set up regulations for use as well as maintenance and repairs.

PARTICIPATION
If you wish to know the mind of a man, listen to his words.

"Participation is involvement by a local population and, at times, additional stakeholders in the creation, content and conduct of a program or policy designed to change their lives. Built on a belief that citizens can be trusted to shape their own future, participatory development uses local decision making and capacities to steer and define the nature of an intervention." (Ray Jennings)

Participation is not a hollow word in the approach of the NGO towards its development activities. Attending a meeting of key farmers shows this very clearly. The farmers are familiar with the participatory way of working, and openly discuss and question issues on the agenda. At the same time they will look for common ground honouring the tradition of solidarity between farmers, and the notion that they represent a whole community. It is a holistic approach were problems are never addressed as an isolated case but were farmers and NGO staff members are very aware of the social, cultural and political interrelations and implications.

Lanh first came into contact with the meaning of participation during her cooperation with foreign development workers in the early nineties. From a Western point of view participation means involving local farmers in all decision making processes. While studying the matter she realized that the concept is not unfamiliar to most Vietnamese. During the war the army took decisions with the participation of all men, women, children and elders. She realized that to explain participation to the farmers she would just have to remind them of the wartime.
By using alternative ways to explain new concepts makes them easy to understand and increases the farmers' self-confidence.
The NGO teaches her staff not to treat minority people as backward but as equal partners and with respect for their knowledge and advises them to discuss problems as well as solutions in a participatory way.

PARTICIPATORY LAND USE MAPPING

Mapping is another concept farmers learned during the war. Farmers brought messages from one village to another at nighttime. To find their way they had to visualize the roads to get to their destination, and use mind mapping. By using this parallel it is easy to explain the theory of mapping to illiterate villagers.

Participatory Land Use Mapping is a tool used by SPERI in its land-allocation programs. The mainstream procedure where government officials put a stamp on a document allocating a piece of land to a household, often leads to conflicts for different reasons. The allocation of land is sometimes based on outdated data stating the number of households in a village and the available land for housing and agriculture in the community. In other cases some households have already left the village but still own a plot of land or new households have entered the village officially claiming land before the original inhabitants did, taking away land that informally belonged to them. And in other cases conflicts over land occur between neighbouring households or villages because the official allocation of land was not meticulous enough, creating overlapping pieces of land belonging to different owners. Through a participatory approach many of these inconsistencies can be avoided.

Participatory Land-Use Mapping is a technique that involves the members of the community in exploring local and regional land-use. Residents are, in effect, put in the driver's seat and challenged to map out the available land according to their needs while protecting the community's economic, environmental, and social wellbeing.

By involving all stakeholders from within the community as well as from neighbouring communities, together with local authorities, a consensus can be reached before the plots of land are officially allocated to individual households or the community. At the same time the process can be made to fit with local cultural and agricultural traditions, customary regulations, and the need to protect certain ecological fragile areas like forest areas, sources of water and streams. The participatory approach also leaves room for traditional decision-making processes within ethnic minority communities, like elders councils, while SPERI as a facilitating NGO can try to get more stakeholders from the community involved into the discussions, like women or youngsters. The mapping process can then double as a learning process for a community to adopt a more democratic way of working by helping other members of the community raise their voices.

Household garden and nursery in HEPA

Many issues are to be considered during mapping: type of soil, rice and food sufficiency, forest protection, sustainable use of forest resources and household and village boundaries. Only when these issues are solved effectively when allocating land, will the community be able to sustainably develop and protect its natural environment. An ever-increasing population also puts more pressure on arable land. While some minority groups are resettled to make way for hydroelectric dams, forest protection or economic enterprises, the Kinh population is increasingly encroaching on minority owned land in search of available fertile farming land for survival. This leads to rapid land use changes. When implementing a land allocation program it is necessary to update data on the number of households living in a certain area or community and the land used for agriculture to avoid conflicts over land between earlier and later settlers.

The Xinh Mun community in Bo Ngoi was the first case were TEW applied land use mapping for a land allocation program. TEW bases itself partly on the theory learned during the courses on natural resource management and environmental protection in combination with the NGO's human ecology theory and the analysis of the existing natural environment and land-use divisions of the target village. TEW starts by taking soil samples that are brought to Hanoi for analysis. Based on the soil properties one can make appropriate land-use decisions. The available land per household is then divided into different parts: the lowland plots for growing a diversified range of short term crops like rice, vegetables, soy-beans, corn and peanuts in combination with raising livestock and maybe a fish-pond. On the slightly sloping terrain just above the valley-area nature can partly regenerate in between the fruit trees and other mid- and longer-term crops. Houses and small household gardens are usually built on this level. One level higher up the hills, forest is left to regenerate mixed with native forest crops that can be harvested for food security and timber for household use. On the mountaintops the forest is left in its natural state and protected. The forest area becomes the responsibility of the whole the community who join forces to protect it. It prevents soil erosion and degradation and protects available water-sources. In this area native species can be protected and the forest is like a living seed-bank. Officially these forest areas are not allocated in the households' Red Book. As part of the land allocation and land-use program TEW trains villagers on the importance of these forest areas and trains villagers in efficient land use strategies and techniques. In 1997 Bo Ngoi village and the seven surrounding Xinh Mun

villages received their Red Books allocating land to each household. TEW also managed to convince the Chairman of Yen Chau district at that time to write the names of both husband and wife in the Red Books of each household. The allocated land for each household together with efficient management, secured enough output for each household to become self-sufficient in covering their daily needs in term of food and other needs.

One of the most impressive achievements of TEW is the registration of land use certificates in name of the husband and the wife since 1997. Land use rights in name of both husband and wife are only formally acknowledged in the Land Law of 2003.
These land use certificates give women equal rights to the land for which they carry a lot of responsibility and workload. Women can also use the land certificate as collateral for a loan from the bank. In such a way, women get stronger decision-making capacity since men cannot decide unilaterally anymore.

But they did not always succeed in including the name of both husband and wife into the Red Book. They fail to have both names in the land certificate when allocating land in Nghia Hoa Commune, Chu Parh district in Gia Lai province. Over the years they allocate land in Quang Binh province, Hmong villages in Son La province, then Nghe An province, Ha Tinh province and in Luang Prabang in Laos. Together it counts for about 35.000 ha allocated to about 10.000 households.

In Laos the 1997 Land Law regulates the allocation of land to individuals, families and organizations. The farmer gets rights of use, usufruct, transfer and inheritance rights on the allocated land but must use the land according to centrally outlined land use plans. After a temporary period of three years during which the farmer shows he manages the land well, a 30-years ‘permanent’ land use right is granted. In the mid 90’s, the Laotian government develops a Land Use Planning and Land Allocation program (LUP/LA) transferring the allocation of land plots to local levels.

Hmong child in Long Lan village

A good example of a participatory land-use mapping program is the case of Land and Forest allocation in Long Lan village, a Hmong village in Luang Prabang, Laos. The land and forest allocation program started in the year 2003. In the initial set-up there would be cooperation between FIPI (Forest Inventory and Planning Institute) from Vietnam, PAFO (Luang Prabang Provincial Agro-Forestry Office) and PRDFA (Programme for Rural Development in Focus Areas under Laos's Agriculture and Forestry Ministry) from Laos while CHESH would act as facilitator. CHESH quickly recognized that there were enough technically skilled people in Laos and that there was no reason to spend a large sum of money to hire FIPI. FIPI was also not very well placed since they had no knowledge of Laotian culture or the political sensitivities in Laos.

CHESH then decided to change the model for cooperation. PAFO would become the project implementer and manager, while CHESH took the role of consultant. This reduced the budget from 3.6 billion VND to 2.9 billion VND and decentralized all decisions into the hands of PAFO. Technicians from PAFO would map and make the plans, while the villagers would implement the plan designed by the technicians. This approach pushed villagers on the passive side though. And while the technician would learn many new skills it deprived villagers from any learning opportunity.

Evaluating this second approach, CHESH recognized the need of the villagers' involvement. Villagers should map out the allocation of land plots in their village while the technicians could then work according to the villagers' plan. This approach would stimulate villagers to take initiative and makes them co-responsible for the success of the program. CHESH organized two 3 day-training courses on land use planning and land

and forest allocation for 48 participants including 15 technicians, 14 representatives of three villages and provincial officials. The land and forest allocation in Long Lan village first took place in the field during one and half month (from Feb 27 to April 7, 2004). CHESH staff, provincial authorities and villagers implemented an 11 day- evaluation trip on the results of land and forest allocation in this first stage. A first workshop on land and forest allocation to close this first stage and to prepare for second stage was organized.

As a result of the land allocation program 8,439.24 ha of land within the Phu Sung watershed area has been allocated to Long Lan villagers. Of that, 341 ha of agricultural land have been allocated to 69 households of Long Lan. Indigenous land use planning and Hmong customary law in natural resources management in Long Lan has been recognized by the local authorities. Thirteen villages in the Phu Sung area have for the first time voluntarily established a forest protection network while the Luang Prabang district authorities gave power of decision to this network. Villagers, especially women are empowered by the recognition of customary law in natural resource management. As a result the traditional structure of Long Lan village is strengthened. One of the biggest achievements of the participatory approach is the absence of conflicts during or after the project implementation.

FORESTS
The spirit lives in the forest

A scary story is being told in Hmong households in Laos about a bad spirit or ghost causing death among villagers: One day a Hmong man went to hunt in the forest. The moment he aimed and shot at an animal in a tree, he saw a big red light engulfing the whole forest like a fire. There was a very scary cry, like that from a monkey. Now a ghost monkey, big with long red teeth comes to haunt people at night and already two people died simply of fear! Hmong people say the ghost is a punishment for hunting forest animals. In a bizarre way it helps Hmong people protect the forest and its wildlife.

Healer sitting next to sign at the entrance of medicinal forest

The forest is the traditional habitat of many of the highland minorities. These people are natural born forest guards. They need to be given an opportunity to show that they can be the best guardians, even if they may have been poachers at one time.

Until now forest areas have often been treated like areas, segregated from the living habitat of people and in need of protection against those people. Therefore, to 'preserve' the forests, they needed to be guarded against everyone, villagers and tourists alike. Alternatively, to 'preserve' meant 'to be left unmanaged', wild zones without clear legal status or ownership. This left forest areas very vulnerable to illegal over-exploitation (e.g. logging, hunting and other kinds of illegal harvesting.) Farmers looking to expand their land could easily 'cut corners' into the forestland and landless dwellers would encroach on the forest as a means to their daily survival.

If villagers receive land rights to agricultural land, on household and communal level, they assume clear responsibilities for the received land. Likewise, in cases were forest land is given in the hands of villagers, communally; we see a growing responsibility for managing this resource in a sustainable way.
Minority communities traditionally depend on resources from farming combined with forest resources. Forest resources are used for housing, for utensils, for food, for

firewood, animal feed, herbal plants, natural dyes, religion and beliefs. Forests are an integral part of their daily habitat that allows them to be self-reliant. Forestland also allows them to practice organic farming and permaculture. Organic farming is based on a balanced eco-system and on diversification. Forest areas are an integral part of organic-permaculture farms.

Hmong people have strong spiritual beliefs. They worship spirits that live in forests and nature as a whole. In Mu Trang Phin village, where flowery Hmong minority people live, one forest area is designated as spiritual forest. (A Hmong custom) Several other plots of forest in the village are also protected areas. People are not allowed to cut any trees in these forest plots. Hmong people believe these forests are necessary for keeping water in the soil, water they need to irrigate the terraces where they grow rice. Only for some ceremonies like weddings or funerals are people allowed to cut some trees for wood, to make a stretcher for instance. If villagers violate the law prohibiting them to cut down trees, they will be fined. They have to pay back the weight of the tree (including trunk and leaves) in pork meat. Up until today no one violated the rule!

HEPA
HUMAN ECOLOGY PROTECTION AREA

HEPA is an area of 300 ha primary rainforest located in Ha Thinh, Huong Song district, a region bordering Laos. It is part of a larger forest area covering about 110.000 ha of the "Truong Son" mountain range running further into Laos. The district has about 65% of forest area and only 8% of agricultural land. Huong Son's population consists of about 130.000 people (2004). Residents are mainly Kinh (the Vietnamese majority) people and there are some ethnic groups (Lao people and Man Thanh) in the communes Son Kim 1 and 2. The district has a poverty rate of 18% of poor households.

The objective is to preserve the forests in HEPA as an intact ecosystem and to actively involve the local Community Network in its protection and valorisation.

The government promotes mono-crop and cash crop farming in the area. Although it increases farmers' income in the short term, it also leads to soil erosion and environmental pollution in the long term due to unsuitable farming methods for sloping land. The forests are overexploited leading to forest degradation. Most of the forests in Huong Son district are under the management of the Huong Son Forestry and Services Company and local people are not allowed to access large parts of the forest.

A the model farm in HEPA

On June 5th, 2002, CHESH received an official land-use certificate for 50 years for the 300 ha forest area. In 2004 CHESH set up the Human Ecology Practice Area (HEPA), a vocational training centre in Son Kim 1 commune. CHESH uses the area to experiment with ecological farming systems like permaculture and innovative ways of protecting the natural biodiversity in harmony with human settlements. The outer parts; called buffer zones, next to the access roads and bordering the river; are divided into different living and working areas. Sixteen different traditional houses from Northern and Central Vietnam have been rebuilt in HEPA as a means of promoting ethnic minority culture. The different traditional houses serve as a reception area, five model farms, sleeping rooms and bathrooms, two offices, a kitchen area and restaurant, learning areas and a carpentry studio. On the land surrounding the houses we find vegetable gardens, a recreational area, a nursery garden and a herbal medicine conservation forest of 5 ha. CHESH has set up office in HEPA in February 2003. Since there were no supply lines for electricity, CHESH built two electricity-transmitting stations, to supply electricity to the upland and lowland areas of HEPA. They have constructed a drinking water supply system, water drainage and internal roads, all with respect for the natural landscape. The roads are bordered with a green belt consisting of different tree species, rattan and acacia.
On the farms, the NGO experiments with different farming models based on permaculture and organic farming methods. Each farm combines different cash and other crops, vegetables, fruit trees and other trees, fishponds and farm animals. An ingenious system is used for irrigation that maximizes the available water supplies. Composting is used for fertilization and adding nutrients to the poor sandy-clay soil that is so characteristic for tropical forests. Sun warmth is used to heat water for bathing. Chickens also fertilize the soil of the vegetable gardens. On one farm they use a large bamboo chicken den, which they move to a different spot every 10 to 14 days to fertilize the soil. It is aptly named “the chicken-tractor”. On another farm the irrigation water from higher-up garden runs over the soil where the chicken live, taking the manure with it to fertilize the lower lying rice fields. In the nursery garden many indigenous trees are reproduced for reforestation, and vegetable seedlings are grown to supply the different model farms in HEPA.

Teaching about compost as a soil improver

HEPA is coordinated and monitored by a Management Board. The board consists of representatives of the district, Son Kim I commune and CHESH staff.

HEPA will in the future become home to the Regional Mekong Field School, where young farmers from the region can come to get an education. There will be accommodations, a headquarters and an information centre, meeting areas, a research centre on traditional knowledge and culture and a research centre where National and International scholars can have a place to work.

One of the traditional style houses in HEPA

HEPA is also meant as a field area for researchers looking for a space to study organic farming, environmental protection, fauna and flora, minority culture, development issues and approaches. People can come and experience organic farming and permaculture by working on the model farms and getting their hands dirty. It is also a model on sustainable and ecological tourism. The farms can cover all nutritious needs while tourists will be encouraged to help out on the farms. Whenever possible renewable energy is used, pollution avoided and resources recycled. At the same time HEPA is a living museum on traditional Vietnamese housing styles, traditional handicrafts, herbal

medicine, organic farming and Vietnamese species in fauna and flora. It will be a place for meditation, a place with a spiritual connotation, where people from all religious backgrounds can find a place to meditate and pray.

CHESH/SPERI also closely cooperates with the Truong Son Forestry Cooperative, an initiative of farmers on community forest management. In 1995, 14 households decide to form a working group when they are confronted with water shortages caused by unplanned logging in the forest areas located on the mountain top that hold the water resources they use to irrigate their farmland. They decide to take action trying to protect and manage the forest with the aim of restoring the water supply they depend on. They plant trees, mainly acacia species that grow well in this area and which give good return. They also harvest renewable forest resources (NTFP) for household use and set up an internal forest protection regulation. TEW initially helps the farmers on land allocation procedures. From 1997 to 2000 TEW together with the farmers apply for two Land Use Right certificates per household. One LURC gives them rights on their farmland and a second one gives them the right on a part of forestland. The household LURC's for the forestland are brought together under the cooperative to be managed communally. Under the guidance of TEW and CHESH the member farmers have diversified their farms following the agricultural principles taught at the farmer field schools. Many farmers grow orange trees, raise rare deer species and develop an integrated farming system that combines agriculture with raising animals, fish ponds and tree plantations. Now the group has expanded to 150 people divided over 32 households who manage 782 ha of forestland that is part of the Huong Son forest in Son Kim commune, Huong Son district in Ha Tinh province.

LAOS
Lan Xang: Land of a million elephants
Where minorities form the majority

Laos is a landlocked country sharing borders with Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar and China. Mountains cover seventy percent of the country, mainly in the North and the East. Fertile lowland plains on the border of the Mekong River make up the remaining thirty percent. More than 40% of the country is covered by forest. With ca. 6 million inhabitants the population density is low, and population pressure on the existing land is low as well.

Laos is a country of paradoxes. In remote areas people are able to live of the land in a sustainable way, but at the same time the country is developing but at a pace which is remarkably slow compared to Vietnam. Laos has no regulations that apply to local NGO's since it is most often the International NGO's that implement development programs.
Theravada Buddhism is accepted as the state religion by the Lao government. The interaction of Buddhist and Marxist values is unique in Laos.

Kho Mu children and offerings for a buddhist temple in Laos

The ethnic make-up of Laos is extremely diverse with only 60% of the 6 million inhabitants belonging to the largest group, the Lao Loum. The Lao Loum or lowland people are mostly of the Tai-Kadai linguistic origin who originally also migrated to countries like Thailand and Burma and can still be found in small groups in Vietnam. Belonging to this group are the ethnic groups Lao, Lue, Phu Thai, Tai Dam (Black Tai), and Tai Deng (Red Tai).

The ethnic minority groups inhabiting the Central and Southern upland areas are known as the Lao Theung, and are predominantly of Austro-Asiatic origin. In this group we find minority groups like Kho Mu and Lamet in the north, Katang and Makong in the Centre and Loven and Lawae in the far South.
The third group of minorities, originally inhabiting the highland mountainous areas in the North, are known as the Lao Soung and among them are groups of Miao-Yao and Tibeto-Burmese origin, like the Hmong, who are the largest group, the Mien (Yao or Dao), Akha and Lahu.
Officially Laos counts 68 different ethnic minority groups and is therefore known as the country with the largest ethnic diversity in its population in Asia. The exact number of different ethnic minority groups differs a lot depending on the source going from 47 to over 100 different groups. Because detailed ethnographic information about many groups is lacking there is until now no real consensus on the exact number of different minority groups or on the classification between main groups and sub-groups.

In the late nineties TEW-CHESH-CIRD became interested in expanding their working territory into Laos for different reasons. One reason is the many ethnic minority groups in Laos who live quite untouched from outside influences. This unique situation offers the NGO the opportunity to study minority people and their traditional values. At the same time they could research how outsiders and government policies affect these traditional values. When they come to Laos in 1999, it was unprecedented that a foreign independent NGO wanted to work and do research in Laos. The staff first talks with the Ministry of Agriculture. Impressed with the organizations' work in Vietnam the local Ministry of Agriculture in Luang Prabang eventually invite them to work in their area. Between 1999 and 2002 CHESH Laos struggles to find the most appropriate cooperation with its partners in Laos; namely: PRDFA: Project for Rural Development of Focus Areas and PAFO: Luang Prabang Department of Agriculture and Forestry Office who belongs to the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry. To facilitate cooperation, TEW-CHESH-CIRD invites high-ranking officials from the Laotian Ministry for a trip to Vietnam to introduce them to development activities undertaken in Vietnam. A participatory rural appraisal in Luang Prabang culminates into a proposal for development cooperation between CHESH Laos and Luang Prabang district and provincial officials. The focus is on community development based on minority culture values and identity.

CHESH starts researching the social structures and functioning of each village. The first two villages are Xieng Da; a Lao Loum village and Long Lan; a Hmong village.

To meet the needs of the farmers in the three target villages: Long Lan, Xieng Da and Nam Kha, a key farmers network on sustainable community development is established in the three villages. The network controls the program activities on village level, while PAFO plays a role as technical advisor and PRDFA is responsible for policy monitoring and evaluations.

In June 2002 CHESH Laos establishes a representative office in Luang Prabang. The office started running as of July 26, 2002.

Restoring a village's pride

The Lao Loum (Laotian of the valley), have been the dominant group in Laos, numerically, politically, and economically-since the founding of the Kingdom of Lan Xang in the fourteenth century. Since Lao Loum traditionally practice paddy rice cultivation they will settle near lowland rivers or streams. To avoid flooding in the rainy season they build their houses on wooden piles with the floor from one to two-and a half meters above the ground. This style not only keeps the living area above the mud of the rainy season but also provides a shady area under the house to work or rest during the day and allows the house to catch breezes for natural cooling. A separate rice granary on stilts using a similar construction as the house is built in the compound. Livestock is sometimes kept under the house. Since lowland Lao are almost all Buddhists, most villages have a wat (temple), which serves as both a social and religious centre. Villagers will assemble at the wat for prayers on the days of each lunar quarter and on days of major religious festivals. They also carry out more elaborate ceremonies or may organize a boun (religious fair) at the temple.

Before the development of a national educational system, boys and young men received basic religious and secular education at the wat. The wat is frequently used as a place for village meetings, because the hall is often the only building large enough to accommodate all villagers at once. Most villages have a small committee to oversee the maintenance of the building, organization of the fair, and the general welfare of the monks and novices. The committee members are selected by consensus on the basis of their morality and religious sincerity and usually have been monks at some time in their lives.

Lao Loum children in Xieng Da

Xieng Da is a Lao Loum village with the exception of some Kho Mu households and one Hmong family. Xieng Da means: “white stars in the sky”. The name was given to the village in earlier days when the women practiced weaving in the evening using candles as lights. From far away the village resembled a starry sky with all the little white lights against the black inky sky. It is a village of farmers who complement their income from farming with small-scale trade, handicrafts, herbal medicine, rattan and bamboo products and a small veterinary centre. When CHESH staff first arrived in Xieng Da in the year 2000, the village lacked strong leadership and a clear direction for development. They found the temple in a deplorable state, with garbage lying all around, and the building obviously not taken care of. For a Buddhist village this was out-of-the-ordinary and it was the most visible sign of eroding traditions and lost village customs. In other parts of the village rubbish and litter lay around while people did not seem to care. The women in the village still practiced weaving but only to make pillows and blankets using very simple weaving designs. Since the village was located at the roadside it attracted settlers from other areas creating conflicts over land with long-term residents of the village. The villagers recognized that a land right allocation program could solve these conflicts and give the residents of Xieng Da long-term security on the issue of land ownership and management.

During a first meeting with the villagers it becomes clear that in the past villagers were not indifferent to the state of their village and temple, and the elders sketch an image of a village in the past with strong social ties between villagers, an active cultural life and a temple famous for its monks.
In order to remediate the negative spiral the village has come into, CHESH staff decides to focus on restoring the temple grounds together with improving the overall hygienic situation of the village. The temple is usually the central and most important location in a Lao Loum village, where all the communal activity takes place and which brings old and young, women and men together on important occasions during the year.

Young monk at Xieng Da temple

A group of village elders decide to take responsibility for the temple and its grounds. The group visits other pagodas in Luang Prabang district and this generates ideas on how to restore the temple and sow the seeds for cultural activities. A group of elders plan the restoration and start fundraising activities. The area around an old tree on the temple grounds is cleaned up and a Buddha statue placed under it. The reconstruction revives village celebrations and religious traditions and a village music group is formed. Following the renovation of the temple, a communal water supply system is built; village roads cleaned up and small bridges built over the sewage canals. For these repairs the labour contribution of villagers is vital since CHESH mainly has funds for the materials needed like piping and for administrative paperwork like building licenses and the districts' approval to tap into the water source.

Water supply system at Xieng Da village

Through teamwork the social web between villagers grows stronger and the communal spirit is revived. Villagers start discussing further improvements of the village, and the women express their wish to recover and develop their weaving skills to produce products for sale. CHESH organizes a one-month training course on weaving techniques and traditional designs in cooperation with the Textiles Centre of Luang Prabang. Women build weaving looms and can very soon apply more complex weaving techniques retrieving traditional designs. The training course results in more women wishing to participate.

Woman working the cotton threads

In August 2004, ten women launch a handicrafts group but they lack space to work together and are forced to progress individually. During a study visit to Nam Kha village the women of Xieng Da are impressed with the women there weaving together, sharing their knowledge and experience. On return the women of Xieng Da decide to build a communal house where women can meet and weave together. The village leader agrees to give them a piece of land and together the women build a communal house from bricks and bamboo. Here the handicrafts groups can work on ten weaving looms, and they produce products like scarves, which they then sell on the market in Luang Prabang, generating money to expand their activities. In March 2006 a collective training course is organized on natural dyes using plants found in the immediate surroundings of Xieng Da village. Women traditionally grow cotton and they now dye the cotton using natural dyes while the woven cotton textiles are sold to outsiders who use it to sew clothing. Slowly they start making new products while improving the quality of the woven textiles to meet market demands.

Village women at a temple ceremony

The spirits of Pha Bua mountain

The Lao Theung (Laotian of the mountain slopes), make up about 24 percent of the population and consist of at least thirty-seven different ethnic groups ranging in population from nearly 400,000; the Kha Mu, to fewer than 100; the Numbri. Many of the groups have additional members in Thailand or Vietnam. Of the three main ethnic classifications, the differences among the Lao Theung groups are greater than among the Lao Loum or Lao Soung. Little is known about many of these groups, and reasonably complete ethnographic accounts are available only for a few. The Lao Theung use languages of the Austro-Asiatic family, and although some languages are closely related, such as Kho Mu, Lamet, and Sam Tao, others are mutually incomprehensible. None of the languages have developed a written script. Certainly within the last two centuries have all the Lao Theung been characterized as swidden farmers and semi migratory because they occasionally relocated their villages as swidden areas became exhausted. The Kho Mu and Lamet, who are found in northern Laos, have a different social organization and agricultural techniques than the ethnic groups in southern Laos. The houses are built on wooden or bamboo poles between one and two meters above the ground and are at least five by seven meters in size or larger. Construction materials include woven bamboo or sawn lumber for floors and walls and grass thatch or bamboo shingle roofing. A kitchen hearth is located inside the house, and an open porch is built on at least one end of the house. A separate rice barn, also built on piles, may be located in the village near the house (Kho Mu) or on the edge of the village (Lamet). Villages are commonly built near small stream for drinking and washing water, which is often diverted through a bamboo aqueduct to facilitate filling buckets and bathing.

Virtually all Lao Theung groups rely on swidden rice cultivation as the basis of their household economy. Lamet and Kho Mu prefer glutinous rice, but some other groups prefer to eat plain white rice. The Lao Theung are socially, economically, and politically the most marginal group of the three ethnic classes. Numerous Lao Thueng individuals have adopted lowland behavioural patterns and successfully pass as lowland Lao, but prejudicial attitudes attributed to many lowland Lao continue to negatively affect social and economic opportunities for many Lao Theung villagers.

Nam Kha village in Luang Prabang, Laos

Nam Kha is a Kho Mu village established in 1972 only a few kilometres from Xieng Da and close to Pha Bua Mountain. When building the water supply system in 2002 for Xieng Da, CHESH Lao comes in contact with the villagers of Nam Kha since the water source is located on Pha Bua mountain above Nam Kha village. As a result CHESH decides to also build a water supply system for Nam Kha village since the water piping would have to cross the village anyway. Although the village is located quite close to the road their living conditions are extremely poor. Nam Kha faces food shortages 50% of the year and for a large part of the population hunger is still a daily reality. After investigating the causes, CHESH finds that the village had in the past never received any outside aid because many consider them as backward. Although the village still lives following traditional social patterns, many traditions like traditional clothes have completely disappeared. Contrary to the situation in Xieng Da the communal spirit in Nam Kha village is very strong. The Kho Mu adhere to their traditional value system, celebrating the mountain spirits three days per month when nobody is allowed to work in respect of their religion.

Kho Mu girls

CHESH tries to create a link between Nam Kha and Xieng Da village during the implementation of their activities. Since Nam Kha villagers are aware of the social stigma on the Kho Mu community this proves at times very difficult. When the women of Nam Kha show interest in learning weaving techniques, CHESH offers them a visit to Xieng Da to learn from the women there. In 2005 a weaving group is established in Nam Kha village. The women in Nam Kha decide to first visit a Kho Mu village further away to learn some basic weaving skills to avoid been looked down upon by the women of Xieng Da.

Older Kho Mu woman making traditional bags

After a month training in Xieng Da the women in Nam Kha build weaving looms and slowly practice and improve their weaving skills. Soon they start looking for customers to sell their textiles. One day Mrs. Mon; a Kho Mu woman, exchanges some woven fabrics for one chicken with a woman from another village. She realizes that the chicken is in fact more valuable than the fabric and that selling her textiles can in fact be very profitable. Other villages start asking them not only for woven textiles but for finished clothing as well. CHESH Lao offers them a tailoring and sewing course. As a result Kho Mu women from other villages come to Nam Kha to learn how to weave and sew clothes. They sell traditional Kho Mu clothes as well as school uniforms to other Kho Mu villages in the area, adding to their monthly income. The women build a communal weaving house, weaving looms and buy sewing machines with the support of CHESH Lao. The handicrafts group shows interest in retrieving he traditional Kho Mu dress. Toilets are built in the village, and some students receive scholarships to study agriculture, veterinarian and medical studies.

Young Kho Mu girl weaving in the communal weaving house

Kho Mu farmers from Nam Kha participate in workshops and study tours on agricultural techniques, after which they implement many of the learned techniques. They improve their income through crop diversification growing new crops like garlic and maize, setting up small vegetable gardens and raising animals like buffaloes, cattle, poultry, pigs, fish and goats. The yields and variety in produce increase, they can grow two rice crops a year and there is a noticeable improvement in food supply for the villagers. Together with Xieng Da they establish a small veterinarian service centre close to the roadside where they offer veterinary services and sell veterinary medicines.

Guided by the forest spirits

The Lao Soung are the most recent migrants to Laos, who arrived from the north in a series of migrations beginning in the early nineteenth century. All Lao Soung settlements are located in the north of Laos, with only Hmong villages found as far south as Vientiane. Hmong houses are constructed directly on the ground, with walls of vertical wooden planks and a gabled roof of thatch or split bamboo. In size they range from about five by seven meters up to ten by fifteen meters for a large extended household. The interior is divided into a kitchen/cooking alcove at one end and several sleeping alcoves at the other, with beds or sleeping benches raised thirty to forty centimetres above the dirt floor. Rice and un-husked corn are usually stored in large woven bamboo baskets inside the house, although a particularly prosperous household may build a separate granary. Furnishings are minimal: several low stools of wood or bamboo, a low table for eating and kitchen equipment, which includes a large clay stove over which a large wok is placed for cooking ground corn, food scraps, and forest greens for the pigs. Almost every house has a simple altar mounted on one wall for offerings and ceremonies honouring their ancestral spirits.

Hmong woman winnowing rice

The Hmong swidden-farming system is based on white (non-glutinous) rice, supplemented with corn, several kinds of tubers, and a wide variety of vegetables and squash. Rice is the preferred food, but historical evidence indicates that corn was also a major food crop in many locations and continues to be an important crop for the Hmong. Most foods are eaten boiled, and meat is only rarely part of the diet. Hmong plant a large variety of crops in different fields as a means of household risk diversification. Should one crop fail, another can be counted on to take its place. Hmong raise pigs and chicken in as large numbers as possible, and buffalo and cattle graze in the surrounding forests and abandoned fields with little care or supervision. Hmong reckon kinship patrilineal and identify eighteen to twenty patrilineal exogamous clans, each tracing their descent back to a common mythical ancestor. There are several subdivisions in Hmong society, usually named according to features of traditional dress. The White Hmong, Striped Hmong, and Green Hmong (sometimes called Blue Hmong) are the most numerous. Their languages are somewhat different but mutually comprehensible, and all recognize the same clans.

White Hmong girls in Long Lan village, Laos

Long Lan is a White Hmong village established 100 years ago where seven different clans live together. (Today there are only six clans left.) When CHESH arrives in Laos in 1999 many International organizations working on poverty alleviation and rural development encounter difficulties working under the existing political and social framework of Laos. CHESH can on the contrary rely on their experience of working in ethnic minority areas in Vietnam, working under a similar political and social system. Before implementing any activity CHESH studies the traditional culture and values of Hmong people in Long Lan during one year from 1999 to 2000. During this time they discover that traditional culture is still very strong. The village is lead by elders whom rely on traditional customs to manage and protect their natural environment.

CHESH Laos first installs a new water supply system for Long Lan village. Instead of using the designs proposed by the district authorities, Long Lan villagers design their own water supply system, based on their own needs.

In March 2001 Hmong people of Long Lan travel to Vietnam where they undertake a study tour to Sa Pa district in Lao Cai province. The erosion of the Hmong cultural identity and way of life caused by the loss of rights on land in Vietnam leaves a lasting impression on Long Lan villagers. Back home in Laos the concerned villagers address the authorities asking them the allocation of land rights. From then on CHESH activities focus on land allocation both on household and communal level. At the outset the Laotian government officials have a very simple view on land allocation, reducing it to paperwork defining the outer boundaries of a village. To remediate this CHESH organizes a study tour for Laotian district and provincial authorities to Vietnam followed by a training course for district and provincial technicians on techniques for Land and Forest Allocation.

Hmong medicinal chicken soup

During the first phase of the program, land and forest areas are classified and the village borders between Long Lan and 12 surrounding villages demarcated. Plots for gardening are measured up and allocated to each household. Finally a survey about the socio-economic conditions as well as Hmong culture is conducted after which a plan for land use is developed. Despite this very rigorous implementation of land-use planning and mapping, conflicts still surface. Since the villagers had not been sufficiently consulted during the planning process Long Lan village and the neighbouring Kho Mu village; Huoi Luc, contest an area of 20 ha which both villages claim as their property. Discussions between representatives of both villages do not bring any solution so the authorities decide to cut the 20 ha in half, one part for each village. Villagers from both villagers disagree with the solution.

Hmong children in Long Lan

CHESH together with district and provincial authorities therefore decide to drastically alter the approach to a bottom-up approach. This time all villagers participate from the start in the decision-making process. Villagers get a chance to discuss issues like conflict resolution, land division and land purpose in small groups after which all villagers decide

in a democratic way. Traditional Hmong leaders like clan heads and elders lead these village meetings. Traditional methods used by Hmong people for classifying land are applied to divide the terrain in the village. The final mapping is based upon this Hmong classification. The final step is the approval of the land map by district and provincial authorities. The conflicts between the two villages are solved after bringing the concerned households of both villages together. They visit the concerned areas and can finally agree on a solution in which the households from Huoi Luc are allowed to further cultivate the 20 ha while the land itself stays property of Long Lan village.

Hmong young girl and baby

During the course of the land allocation program it becomes clear that customary law is an intrinsic part of land-ownership and management in Hmong society. When mapping out the different areas within the village borders, Hmong people rely on customary law to decide on the location and purpose of each land plot.

CHESH Laos starts doing research on customary law in Hmong society in Laos. The research shows that when new settlers arrive in a Hmong village they are welcome to stay but during the first ten years they have to show the community they can abide by the customary rules and live according traditional structures. After this ten year probation the community will allocate land to the new family for long-term use. In Hmong society a person cannot buy or sell land since their culture states that all land belongs to the spirits. National Laotian law on the other hand does allow the selling and buying of land, so as a compromise it is prohibited in Hmong society to buy or sell a piece of land in the core area of a Hmong village but one can buy or sell land in the border areas of a village provided the community approves.

According to Laotian National law, most watershed areas are protected areas, but within the Hmong law system all forestland is protected. In Long Lan the forest areas close to the limestone mountains are considered main water sources and are therefore strictly protected by Hmong customary law.

CHESH Laos realizes that if they want the program of land allocation in Long Lan to be a long-term success they will have to take the Hmong customary law system into account. The Hmong people are guided by two ancient customs: respect for elders and their opinions and authority and unwavering faith in animism or the "spirit world." The Hmong believe all natural things, both living and non-living, house spirits,: humans, animals, plants, trees, mountains, rivers, houses, and even doors. Furthermore, humans have many spirits, and there are times when a spirit or "soul" is not with the person's body. Only a shaman, a person chosen by the spirits to be their messenger, can contact and deal with the spirits in the "other world." Shamans, both male and female, receive "signs" from the spirits, sometimes as early as infancy, appointing them for this task. Their primary mission is to contact the spirits in order to heal the sick, locate souls for newborn children ("soul calling") and bring about good fortune for the village households. The names of the clans (18 - 20 clans worldwide) also serve as the last names of clan members. The most capable man of the largest clan is usually appointed village leader, or Nai Ban. The Nai Ban is in charge of trail maintenance, welcoming visitors and organizing defence against aggressions - military or political. He also serves as arbiter when settling disputes. His authority is limited, though, because all final decisions have to be taken with consensus of all villagers.

Following the land allocation program CHESH lobbies local authorities to legalize the customary law system within the boundaries of the Hmong village of Long Lan. The government eventually approves so that Hmong leaders can punish any violation of forestland use and management allowing them to preserve and protect their forestland according to their own traditional law-system.

Unfortunately the practical integration of customary law into state law is still ill defined and the implementation therefore tenuous. The State law does not support the follow up of violations of customary law, often failing to punish criminal acts, adding to the frustration of Hmong villagers and feeding conflicts over land between villagers from the different Hmong villages in the same area. In Hmong society the village elders decide on the implementation and punishments following the customary law system. Laotian authorities however do not recognize the Hmong elder council as a legal entity thus creating a legal void wherein the council has to operate. The next hurdle to take will be to lobby Laotian authorities to create a legal framework for the Hmong elder council to work under.

Next to installing a water supply system in the village, CHESH introduces a revolving credit fund to invest in raising cattle and pigs for several households. To replace the forbidden poppy cultivation CHESH introduces new cash crops like asparagus, which can be sold at high prices in the Luang Prabang market. Since 2002 opium cultivation in Long Lan is successfully replaced by other cash crops, following the call of the National Party Congress in 2001 to eliminate poppy cultivation by the year 2005. Villagers are encouraged to continue traditional agricultural methods avoiding the use of pesticides and herbicides and thus promoting organic agriculture.

View of Long Lan village

While researching Hmong and other minority cultures in Laos CHESH found that minority people have three big spirits they worship in nature: the spirit living in the big trees (Hmong), the spirits of the streams, and the mountain spirits (Kho Mu), often depending on their natural habitat. Depending on the spirit the villagers worship they will protect a certain aspect of nature, primary forests with rare timber species, rivers and streams or mountains. Instead of teaching minority people modern ways of thinking about nature protection it is obviously more effective to encourage them to follow their traditional beliefs automatically resulting in environmental protection.

Laotian staff runs CHESH Laos. CHESH only acts as an advisor and coordinator, leaving most work and decision making in the hands of Laotian people. The funding from ICCO is also directly donated in the hands of CHESH Laos. This way of working is very different from most other International NGO's working in Laos which are owned and run by foreign staff, supplemented with local staff for logistics like driving, translation or administration.

CUSTOMARY LAW
The law of nature

Customary law is generally derived from custom, meaning long-established practices that have acquired the force of law by common adoption. Tribal common law is based on the values, ethics and norms of a tribe and expressed in its customs, traditions and practices. In some tribes, the tribal common law has been set out in different court decisions and written opinions over time and has become case law.

Life in minority society is regulated by many unwritten and informal laws that regulate everything from choosing land for housing and for agriculture, marriage customs and traditional ways of forest protection, conflict resolution, inheritance rights and penalizing criminal acts. These laws are born out of certain needs and situations that require regulation to ensure a stable and peaceful society. For minority people it is not a law system but wisdom that the elders possess. The council of elders will judge in cases of conflict in the community. Minority laws can be universal found in communities worldwide. They are embedded in minority society for ages becoming part of their historical past and genetic imprint. Some are based on belief more than law and people follow these rules without ever questioning them. It creates peace and stability in the community helping people to behave towards others and go about their daily lives. If someone is in doubt they will ask advice from the council of elders who will take a decision for them, which everyone will accept out of respect for the elders' wisdom.

Customary law in Dao society

Dao people in Ba Vi used to practice shifting cultivation before resettlement to lowland areas. Plots of land where used for several cycles of different crops, often intercropping different species at the same time, after which they would leave the land fallow for 5 to 7 years to regenerate. To state their right of use to a certain plot of land, Dao farmers would put a strong wooden stick into the ground, with one sharpened end. They would decorate it with cloth to make it look like a person. This would be the sign for others stating that this plot of land was already taken by a Dao farmer. If after some years the farmer wanted to move to a new plot of land, he would take the stick away leaving the plot of land to others. Traditionally, the son of the family inherits the land. If a family has no sons, the son-in-law will inherit the land on the condition that he will live at his wives' house, take her last name and take care of his parents-in-law. If a daughter marries and her husband has insufficient land to build a house and grow food, she can ask her parents to donate some land to her family.

The sense of solidarity is very strong in Dao communities and is strengthened through customary law. In times when there is a lot of work on the fields, like harvesting or weeding, families will often help each other to finish the work on the field through labor groups that will rotate work between different plots of land in order to finish all the work in time.

Working the rice fields

Before resettlement, land belonged to the community as a whole, there were no individual land rights since they practiced shifting cultivation and would only cultivate a plot for a certain time after which they left the plot bare to regenerate. Land belonged to mother earth, and Dao people only borrowed the land to live on and cultivate. They would ask permission from the nature spirits if they wanted to use land or cut down trees. Their religion has grown in relation to their natural habitat; highland mountainous areas. This geography also defines their agricultural habits that in turn determine customary law that regulates their life and their religion. Everything is related to each other in a circular way. By resettling the Dao to lowland areas, one cuts all relations between man and its natural environment, and the religion and social regulations based on this interrelation. What before created peace and harmony in the community is suddenly replaced by chaos and disruption, since all social relations as well as agricultural practices, religious ceremonies and rituals and the regulations based on them have to be re-invented and replaced. This comes on top of the already precarious situation these people find themselves into, with increasing hunger, no access to medicinal plants for health care, decreasing incomes because they cannot sell forest products that usually fetch high prices. This progressively leads to distrust between community members, growing disbelief in the knowledge of elders who often cannot give the correct advise anymore.

Village shaman praying

Customary law is strongly intertwined with religion. Dao people worship nature spirits and will have ceremonies to ensure good harvests and food security by worshiping the different spirits in nature like the water spirit, the mountain spirit, forests or land spirits. Their respect and belief in nature and its forces is reflected in the customary rules that regulate daily life in Dao society. Dao people usually live in highland areas where they have to rely on mountainous streams for water. They divert and conduct the water from the streams with a bamboo piping system to the different households. It is strictly forbidden to cut or burn trees and plants in the watershed area, and if someone pollutes the water they might be heavily punished. The Dao are aware that the land will take care of them when they in return also take care and protect the land they live on.

Customary law in Laos

Highland tribal groups in the North of Laos follow unwritten laws and values to manage and use natural resources in a sustainable way. However, natural resources degrade quickly due to the increased pressure on land and the negative impacts of the market economy. Some development programs such as resettlement or cash crop stimulation have been an enormous challenge to local livelihoods, morals and values of the highland tribal groups, but are not yet recognized by the public as negative.

During the last decades, the Laotian government has attempted to allocate land use rights to households in order to prevent shifting cultivation and improve the economic life of local people. The implementation has shown several shortcomings. Empowering individuals by giving them rights but ignoring customary law and indigenous knowledge results in inefficient natural resources management.

Members of ethnic groups voluntarily use customary law to regulate common use of natural resources (e.g. land border commitment, animal hunting negotiation, forest product use and management, etc). Following the increased pressure by state law

mechanisms, we observe a strong decline in the voluntary use of traditional customary law.

The livelihoods of highland tribes in Laos depend heavily on forest and forestland. Subsistent economy based on ecological slash and burn farming, non-timber forest products, traditional weaving, herbal medicine, etc still play a substantial role in the material and spiritual life and sustainable natural resource management of local communities. This is gradually but surely changing. The traditional life of local people is disappearing but they don't get enough opportunities to participate in the market economy. Therefore, customary law in natural resources management and indigenous knowledge in traditional farming, weaving and herbal medicine is quickly eroding.

Young woman throwing balls at the Hmong New Year celebration

Yearly the Hmong In Laos as well as the Hmong in Vietnam celebrate the Nao Long ceremony. (In Vietnam it is called Nao Song ceremony and takes place about one month after TET) On Nao Long the Hmong from different villages in one area assemble in one place during at least three days. The Hmong elders will discuss common issues, review customary law and regulations and resolve conflicts. Environmental and forest protection are one of the main issues the elders will regulate during these yearly meetings. The yearly reunions also help strengthen traditional culture and folklore with villagers who wear their most beautiful traditional dress and play traditional music. It confronts the younger generation with their background. Young men and women look for a suitable partner during the ball throwing games or songs they sing. Elders tell stories and legends and villagers will worship the spirit forests of each village. Nao Long is a clear example of how networking between villages and communities can help villagers live peacefully together and can strengthen community spirit through shared responsibilities. Even though Hmong minority people strongly hold on to their traditions it might become harder in the future to keep the younger generations motivated to preserve them in face of the quickly changing society around them. The biggest challenge for NGO's like SPERI is to find ways for minority communities to benefit from the new market economy without betraying their culture and traditions completely.

Playing the qeej (hmong windpipe) at the yearly festival

SPERI
THE FUTURE

TEW and CIRD merged into one organization, the Social Policy Ecology Research Institute (SPERI) approved by the Ministry of Science and Technology on June 5, 2006, as an independent organization. In order to keep a direct link with VUSTA, CHESH remains registered under the umbrella of VUSTA. SPERI brings together the socio-political and ecological issues while CHESH follows the human ecology theory.

The grassroots development work that TEW-CHESH-CIRD has implemented for the last 10 to 15 years has resulted in key-farmer networks, which in turn have consolidated into community-based organizations (CBO's). The CBO's are now step by step taking over the facilitating and coordinating role of TEW-CHESH-CIRD for field activities.

Traditional Thai scarf – handicrafts network

With the key farmers network growing, the NGO also needs to evolve to keep up with the people in the field. The key farmers network will grow into the Mekong Community Networking and Ecological Trading (MECO-ECOTRA) generating ethnic minority products like handicrafts, herbal medicine and organic farming products as sustainable economic alternatives for minority farmers living in mountainous areas. In the coming 10 years, MECO-ECOTRA wants to become an independent network changing from a geographical based organization into a thematic organization.
MECO-ECOTRA will be SPERI's main partner but will also undertake activities independently. MECO-ECOTRA plans to work on six themes:

1) Human Ecology villages;
2) Herbal medicine;
3) Traditional Handicraft;
4) Sustainable organic farming;
5) Customary law and watershed forest management;
6) Vocational training field-schools for community development.

Where TEW-CHESH-CIRD were spreading itself thin trying to do all activities in all regions in the past, the new structure (SPERI) will focus only on specific professional services for the whole region. SPERI will develop advocacy and lobby, and research in function of these two topics, in order to scale up their approach to sustainable development, to influence policies on (inter) national level and to contribute to innovative models in working with ethnic minorities.
In the future, research and lobby will become the two main pillars of the organization. However in the coming years, SPERI and CHESH will continue to facilitate the MECO-ECOTRA network.
TEW,CHESH and CIRD staff members received in 2002 their first training on lobby from BBO; a Dutch experienced lobby organization. This course provided them with the basic concepts and methods on lobby and advocacy. After 2 years applying these lessons TEW,CHESH and CIRD staff learned analyzing case studies from different field activities during a follow-up course. These trainings provided staff with a better understanding on how to lobby local authorities and government organizations.

Lobby work already proved to be successful when CIRD implemented a land allocation program in Cao Quang commune, Quang Binh province. During the training on lobby key farmers of Cao Quang commune shared their problems on land and forest allocation with NGO staff. The land allocation program conducted by CIRD was based on a contract with local authorities that came to an abrupt end when provincial authorities decided to set up a new State Forest Enterprise using land that was to be allocated to local farmers.

During a seminar in Huong Son on October 14, 2004, key-farmers from Cao Quang and local authorities from seven communes and the district, investigated the possibility of retrieving land from the state-owned forest enterprise. The Son Kim farmers executed a survey in the three affected communes and advised local authorities to lobby authorities on district and province level. The key-farmers of Cao Quang followed the action plan set out by the key-farmers in Huong Son. In May 2005, the provincial authorities of Quang Binh issued a decision to dissolve the State Forest Enterprise. The province then continued the land and forest allocation and gave Red Book certificates to the Cao Quang farmers in September 2005.

The success in Cao Quang shows how key-farmers can be empowered through networking. They can lobby with success even on state projects and policies. On the other hand, the key-farmers also understand that working at that level takes time and effort. This requires more professional and experienced members on the coordination board.

SPERI's aim is to become a professional research and lobby organization, able to support and represent the interests of its target communities, acting as a partner for the MECO-ECOTRA network, standing by its side. SPERI will offer professional services to the CBO's and to other 'customers'.

During the past ten years TEW, CHESH and CIRD came to realize that individual rights to land are not always sufficient and that in some cases communal rights to land, like in the case of herbal medicine forests are a necessary next step. But up until now this goal still is difficult to reach because the political climate is not ready yet. Community rights to land are now an important issue for lobby and advocacy towards policy makers in Vietnam for an organization like SPERI. SPERI is a natural evolvement of the previous organizations TEW and CIRD, because the needs in the field have changed and therefore the goals of the NGO have changed with them. To be able to address these needs in the field, SPERI now focuses on:

1. Advocacy: collecting information and sharing it with the policy makers and arguing on behalf of a particular issue, idea or person in the field.
2. Lobby: mobilizing people and offering them the key to deal and address certain issues by analyzing the collected information and translating it in possible policy changes, in an effort of bringing about change.
3. Research at grassroots level and policy analysis on governmental level; analyzing existing or prospective policies with the intention of improving social welfare.

SPERI lobbies for the needs expressed by the network members and becomes a pressure organization for the people they represent in the field rather than only an NGO working on development cooperation. SPERI needs to cooperate with other players like VUSTA and MARD (Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development), commercial or business partners and scholars, researchers and Universities. From 1975 up to 1990 Mrs. Tran Thi Lanh devoted her time to research and study and from 1990 to 2006 activities were implemented following the problems identified during her research period. Now SPERI wants to translate these results into policy changes that can bring a more fundamental change to solving poverty in Vietnam and translate this to changes in the larger Mekong region.

Where in the past, the network and its members were mainly working on basic issues like food security and poverty alleviation, and where the key farmers represented and defended their needs and concerns towards development organizations and local authorities, with SPERI by their side, key farmers will today represent their network members towards policy makers and government representatives in order to change policies that affect their daily lives like policies on land rights, policies on minority rights and policies on environmental protection.

Where the networks and the key farmers before aimed at peaceful conflict and problem resolution, networks and key farmers now aim at a larger and more direct participation in the social and political life of Vietnam, giving minority people an equally strong voice in society, and thus slowly building at the road towards democratization.

Mrs. Ly May Chan from the handicrafts network

Where TEW, CHESH and CIRD have decentralized power and action into the hands of farmers and their networks, SPERI now also decentralizes it's social capital and know-how built up over the years into the hands of VUSTA, a governmental organization as well as their umbrella organization. In the year 2006 VUSTA and the SPERI field offices have been integrated and they now share field offices as well as human resources. This integration has shortened the distance between people at grassroots level and government officials.

It is SPERI's aim to connect the Key Farmers network and VUSTA with other National and International players in order to bring about lasting social and political change. It is SPERI's mission to help ordinary poor people influence the Key institutions and decisions that ultimately shape their lives. Partners can be MARD: Ministry of Agricultural and Rural Development, Professor Vo Qui from CRES (Centre for Natural Resources and Environmental Studies- Hanoi University) in Vietnam, ICCO and other donor organizations and other International NGO's and International Universities.

ABBREVIATIONS

CCCD: Centre for Community Capacity Development in Quang Binh, Vietnam
CBO: Community Based Organization
CEPHAD: Center for Public Health and Community Development, Vietnam
CHESH: Centre for Human Ecology studies in Highland areas, Vietnam
CIRD: Center for Indigenous Research and Development, Vietnam
CRD: Centre for Rural Development, Hue, Vietnam
CRES: Centre for Natural Resources and Environmental Studies- Hanoi University, Vietnam
CSDM: Centre for Sustainable Developments in the Mountains, Vietnam
ICCO: Interchurch organization for development cooperation, The Netherlands
IDS: Institute of Development Studies, UK
IMPECT: Inter Mountain Peoples Education and Culture, Thailand
FIPI: Forestry Inventory Planning Institute, Vietnam
HEPA: Human Ecology Practice Area, Ha Thinh, Huong Song district, Vietnam MARD: Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Vietnam
MECO-ECOTRA: Mekong Community Networking and Ecological Trading, Vietnam
NBC: National Board of Coordinators
PAFO: Luang Prabang Provincial Agro-Forestry Office, Laos
PRDFA: Program for Rural Development in Focus Areas under Laos's Agriculture and Forestry Ministry, Laos
RCSD: Regional Centre for Social Science and Sustainable Development, Chiang Mai University, Thailand
RDSC: Rural Development Service Centre, Vietnam
RTCCD: Rural Training Centre for Community Development, Vietnam
SPERI: Social Policy Ecology Research Institute, Vietnam
TERRA: Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance, Thailand
TEW: Towards Ethnic Women, Hanoi, Vietnam
VUSTA: Union of Science & Technology Association, Vietnam

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