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# SPERI YEARLY REPORT



MECO-ECOTRA & SPERI

SOCIAL POLICY ECOLOGY  
RESEARCH INSTITUTE

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**MECO-ECOTRA PROGRAM - VN102011**

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***Part II: Yearly Report of MECO-  
ECOTRA's Thematic Networks  
and SPERI's Departments***

# Laos-Thailand-Vietnam Network in Traditional Handicraft

*Laos-Thailand-Vietnam Network in Traditional Handicraft established by the end of 2006 promoting the three values: voluntary among female members (e.g. Black Thai, Dzao, H'mong and Lao Lum), preservation of cultural values by revival of traditional designs and integrating indigenous knowledge in making natural handicraft products.*

*Over the last three years, the network has contributed significantly to the continuation of traditional handicraft production of different ethnic minorities in Laos and Vietnam. More importantly, the network has increasingly cooperated with farmers field schools (FFSs) of SPERI to provide practical training on skills in handicraft production for minority youths.*

*The network also creates grassroots-based multi forums for members to share and exchange skills, knowledge and information in handicraft production and marketing. This initiative has considerably contributed to improve income generation for women.*

*An emerging need of the network is how to set up and operate their community-based handicraft enterprises to deal with market challenges and the speedy decline of natural resources.*



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## Introduction

Lao-Viet network in traditional handicraft was established in late 2006, with the goal of maintenance, conservation and development of traditional handicraft production of minorities<sup>1</sup> who are members of MECO-ECOTRA<sup>2</sup> facilitated by SPERI.

From 2006 to 2008, the network has organized many practical training, study tour-exchanges on how to dye natural color, weaving-embroidery, producing natural materials, designing, skills in marketing and management for the members. As a result, skills in making handicraft products, market and capacity in coordinating activities of the network and group members increase significantly. Especially, aware of the members as well as people in communities in the conservation of traditional textiles improved.

In the long-run, objective of network is to: i) enhancing the role of ethnic women in management, use of types of natural resources, practice grassroots democracy through group's activities, and ii) preserve the values and experience of indigenous peoples in the textile-dyeing-color embroidery and making traditional handicraft products.

From January 6 / 2008 to April 4 / 2009, the network concentrated to develop some pilot models of: i) conservation of traditional handicraft production<sup>3</sup>, ii) improving quality of the existing handicraft products and ii) access to Farmer Field Schools (FFSs<sup>4</sup>) of SPERI to providing practical training, transfer of values and skills for minority youths in villages.

Report of this period is primarily mentioned summary of trends and output, effectiveness and impact of the group members in networks related to conservation of values and indigenous knowledge of traditional handicraft production of minority groups. Some challenges and recommendations are also mentioned in this report.

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<sup>1</sup>Lao Lum, Khmu, Hmong in Nam Bac and Luang Prabang district, Luang Prabang province, Laos; Black Thai in Hanh Dich commune, Que Phong district, Nghe An province; Hmong in Can Cau commune, Simacai district and Dzaio in Sa Pa district, Lao Cai province, and Black Thai in Chieng Dong commune, Yen Chau district, Son La province.

<sup>2</sup> Mekong Community Networking for Ecological Trading

<sup>3</sup> Pilot models on growing hemp and traditional weaving of Hmong in Can Chu Su village, Can Cau commune, Simacai district, Lao Cai province, and preservation of silkworm raising-weaving of Black Thai in Na Sai village, Hanh Dich commune, Que Phong district, Nghe An province.

<sup>4</sup> Farmer Field School (FFS) locates in Human Ecology Practice Area (HEPA) in Son Kim I, Huong Son district, Ha Tinh province and in Nan San commune, Simacai district, Lao Cai province.

## **Results and trends**

### **Women weaving group of Lao Lum people in Xieng Da village, Nam Bac district, Luang Prabang province, Laos**

The group is well-maintaining activities of weaving, natural dyed colors and making products sold at Luang Prabang City market. Number of members increases compared to the last year. Currently, three women voluntarily join the group. Monthly, the group has organized activities to maintain the value of sharing, helping each other information relating to market, design and new skills.

One of the trends ahead of the group is not as working in group as the previous 2007. The group self-divides into smaller group with the participation of several women. Now, role of the group's leader is mainly organizing a regular meeting among members. By this way, they can be flexible in operation and sensitive for changes in preference of buyers to their products. Also, small size of group creates more conditions and opportunities for access to external partners to get more resources, market information, designs and opportunities for employment.

Currently, these groups are having contracts with external partners to make handicraft products. By this way, groups could increase the diversity of designs, promote positive competition and further enriching the quality of products. Handicraft activities have contributed significantly to the income of women's families. Daily average revenue per producer is up about 30 thousand Kips. Development fund of the whole group is increased to more than 3 million Kips.

### **Women weaving group of Black Thai people in Na Sai village, Hanh Dich commune, Que Phong district, Nghe An province - Vietnam**

In addition to the activities such as growing cotton, raising silkworms, and weaving handicraft products to serve the community and share with outside markets, the group also has some new direction for conservation and educating minority youths.

Firstly, the group has closely associated with farmer field schools at the human ecology practice (HEPA) in Huong Son district, Ha Tinh province (FFS\_HEPA) to provide practical training for K1A class<sup>5</sup> on basic skills related to traditional weaving of Thai. Contents of the training is of how to make tools related to traditional weaving and techniques on growing cotton. The training is carried out at the ecological model of FFSs, as well as through the study - tours, field learning at families of the groups' members in Na Sai village. This is one of the strategic activities to gradually transfer and maintain traditional handicrafts through generations.

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<sup>5</sup> Including minority youths such as Thai, Hmong, San Diu in Laos and Vietnam



Secondly, towards the self-determination of ethnic minorities in remote areas, advice of dependency on the market, the group identified traditional handicraft production is one of the main activities in gardening at villages. Therefore, in the previous years, groups have cooperated with members of gardening group to share experiences, skills in traditional handicraft production. And that the proposed open for incorporating practical training courses on traditional handicraft production with other contents on ecological agriculture in FFSs. The objective is how families in the village are able to grow mulberry, raising silkworms, cotton, textile fabrics and the traditional clothing for family members. In 2009, on average, one member grown about 2 kg of seeds of cotton. Estimatedly, 1kg of seeds could give from 7 to 10 kg of cotton. Most families in the villages are growing mulberry, and raising silkworms. On average, each member has about 2 kg of processed silk fabrics.

Thirdly, to be effective in practical training, contribute to conservation of traditional handicraft production, women in the group also recorded values and techniques of making traditional designs of Black Thai. These records not only be shared for people in village, but also are curriculum for practical training courses in FFSs in the future.

Fourthly, with the above results and orientation, women in the village increasingly want to join the group. Totally, member of the group is 12. Activities of sharing, monthly exchange under the coordination of the group leader are maintained regularly. This activity is to strengthen the process of learning, sharing not only related to handicraft production skills, but also emotions and houseworks in members' families. Therefore, the solidarity, mutual support between women are more durable. In addition, the group has been formed a development fund via member fees and sale of products.

The group's products are highly appreciated by the criteria of quality, design, materials, safety in use, including sitting buffer (35 units), scarf (15 units), and silk (20 cm x 60 cm), wiper (10 units), and cotton clothes (10 cm x 60 cm).

### **Women weaving group of H'mong in Can Chu Su village, Can Cau commune, Simacai district, Lao Cai province-Vietnam**

In addition to the activities such as conservation of traditional designs, restoring weaving and embroidery tools and indigenous knowledge in growing native hemp, the group also has approached to local authorities to ask for supports (financial and land rights), and implementing a show-selling area of handicraft production and trading. Incorporating activities of the group with practical training of ecological agriculture for local young ethnic minorities were also concentrated in the previous years.

To advertise widely to get trademarks for handicraft products contributing to improve the income status of members, with the advices of SPERI<sup>6</sup>, the group has approached with local authorities and functioning governmental offices at district and communal levels<sup>7</sup> to

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<sup>6</sup> SPERI consulted skills of developing small scale projects, and planning the landscape and lobby to the local government and agencies

<sup>7</sup> District People's Committee, Chamber of Commercial and Trading, and Office of Land Management

set up a show-selling area of handicraft products in Can Cau Eco-Cultural Market<sup>8</sup>. Presently, Simacai district People's Committee has issued a decision No.489/UBND-TNMT on 9/12/2009, allocated right to use of 812 m<sup>2</sup> of land for the women weaving group of Can Chu Su village to set up the show-selling area.

Together with the strategy of lobbying the local authority for land use right, SPERI also consults the group to develop a project proposal, namely 'conservation of traditional handicraft production'. Also, the group approached People's Committee at commune and district levels to ask for financial support for operation of the project. Currently, the communal People's Committees have agreed that proposal with total budget of 300 million VND from funds of poverty reduction (Program 135 of Vietnamese Government). Expectedly, the project will be started in late 2009 after finalized by the district People's Committee.

Like Thai women in Na Sai, the Can Chu Su weaving group, for over a year, has closely cooperated with Farmer Field School in Nan San, Simacai district. The idea is how, after graduated, minority students in addition to knowledge of ecological agriculture, know more the values and skills of traditional handicraft production. Therefore, the group has held several short courses of practical training in growing native hemp for minority students of H'mong, Tay, Nùng, and Thu Lao in the K6B classe.

In addition, FFS\_Nan San and the group has been established process / curriculum in the growing and processing of hemp products for sharing with SPERI's FFSs, especially the H'mong communities and Dzao in the LVTHAN. Moreover, FFS\_Nan San also organized practical training for the groups members the values and basic techniques in ecological vegetable growing. The above exchanged activities between FFS\_Nan San and the Can Chu Su women weaving group will be continued in the coming period.

Besides, the women weaving group associated with the elders, prestige people in village to restore the weaving and embroidery tools. Specifically, three drawing pens of traditional designs on clothes and dresses and five loom has been restored and is being used effectively. These initial results has significantly encouraged women in village, especially of youths in making traditional handicraft products.

As the meaningful values of native hemp and traditional handicraft production of H'mong, not only in terms of culture<sup>9</sup>, but significantly contribute to improve household incomes. Therefore, the group launched the movement of recovery and development of

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<sup>8</sup> Can Cau eco-culture market is at Can Cau commune, located about 7 km south of Simacai town. This market opens 2 days per week (Saturday and Sunday) for local people in the area to exchange and share farming products. Currently, the market also becomes a destination for domestic and overseas visitors to gaze with the beauty of landscapes, naïve of local people and unique features of traditional cultures of different minorities in region.

<sup>9</sup> Hemp crop and its products have spiritual meaning to H'mong people. In occasion of traditional festivals H'mong people must wear the uniforms originated from Hemp fibers. Death must be wearing in traditional clothes made of hemp fibers. If not, their soul will not be accepted by ancestors; they will be wandering, not helpless. That makes life children not happy.

growing native hemp towards the strategy of self-autonomy of making materials in the process of traditional handicraft production. From 2008 to 2009, the group has restored and sowing-processing 33 kg of seeds of hemp. Since then, the group has made more than 200 m of the clothes from hemp fabrics (40 cm width) and dyed in natural colors for making bags, towels, pillows and dresses. In terms of the quality, safety in use, design and size, handicraft products is highly appropriated by market and having potential in preferences of consumers. In term of self-usage in families and community, products from the hemp origin in the past years have been met: a) values of spirit and traditional culture of H'mong, b) self-consumption / autonomy of clothing for families.

In term of policy, local government has taken the results of the Can Chu Su women weaving group as a good example to expand to other communes in Simacai district. DANIDA project of Denmark has agreed with SPERI a program of action to strengthen the Can Chu Su group, through FFS\_Nan San to provide practical training in growing and processing native hemp for minority women in other communes.

The Simacai district People's Committee recognized the traditional handicraft production and growing native hemp is a potential strategy in the development of traditional craft-villages. This strategy is appropriate to the level and skill of local people as it is traditional handicrafts of ethnic minorities in the district. This strategy has been reviewed by the Simacai district People's Committee and taken into the direction of development in the coming years with the purpose of poverty reduction and stable life of the local people, maintain the traditional cultural values of minority groups towards strategies eco-cultural tourism of Lao Cai province.

### **Women weaving group of Hmong in Long Lan village, Luang Prabang district and Khmu in Nam Kha village, Nam Bac district, Luang Prabang province, Laos**

Before the middle 2007, purpose of the group is to restore and improve skills of members and other women of villages in making traditional handicraft products of Khmu and Hmong people. Therefore, the group gathered in the community house to make products and sharing skills for each other. Also, by such a way women in villages have more opportunities and conditions to learn and apply. During this time, members also made some samples of handicraft product to sell at Nam Thuom<sup>10</sup> and Luang Prabang markets.

From 2007 to present, when the purpose of recovering skills for traditional handicraft production achieved, the women weaving group of Long Lan village does not choose the way in which all members gather in the community house as before. Handicraft production is operated individually or in smaller groups. The role of the community house become an open forum of different advanced training or sharing skills for women in village. For Long Lan, handicraft production for income generation is not its potential strength. Currently, villagers focus mostly for planting and selling eco-localized fruits and vegetables. Revenue from this activity make up 60-70% of the total economic

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<sup>10</sup> Development zone of Nam Bac District, Luang Prabang province. Nam Kha is one of villages in that area

structure of family. Therefore, time for handicraft production is very little - mainly happening in spare or leisure time. Or, a few cases having more time for embroidery-tailoring mainly are those who do not have enough health for field working. Therefore, trend of handicraft production in Long Lan is to serve for family members.

Similarity to Long Lan, the activity of women weaving group in Nam Kha is being spreading to all families in village. The main purpose is how to help families to be self-autonomy for their handicraft products - not to buy clothes in the market as before, especially the traditional clothing of Khmu people (has been lost for more than 70 years). Currently, 200 Lao Lum women in Xieng Da regularly make handicraft products in their home. Women take the handicraft production (e.g. cotton and silk products) as the main activity for income generation in their home. Monthly, they could earn approximately 600 thousands Kip. Moreover, some women are confident to make contracts in making and selling products with shops in Vientiane and Luang Prabang City. Also, they regularly organize meeting among members to share market information and new skills in handicraft production. Some women organize training for women in other villages in terms of making a new designs.

Textile-garment and marketing skills is not strength of Khmu women in Nam Kha. Their products (excluding bag with threads made of forest trees) may be difficult to compete with the specialized groups in traditional handicraft textiles. Therefore, trend of this activity is mainly serving for family and community. Some, in spare time, made products of the nature characterized by Khmu people such as towels and bags to exchange with or sell for Khmu people in Nam Thuom region, Nam Bac district, Luang Prabang province.

### **Women weaving group of Dzao in Ta Phin commune, Sa Pa district, Lao Cai province and Black Thai in Chieng Dong commune, Yen Chau district, Son La province - Vietnam**

In comparison with other groups, Dzao women in Ta Phin and Black Thai in Chieng Dong have longer time in recovering and preserving their indigenous knowledge in handicraft textile production via supported by Towards Ethnic Women (TEW) through the original pilot - CALABASH. This knowledge becomes comparative and competitive advantages for their traditional natural products not only in local markets i.e. Sapa-tourism area and Hanoi, but also in the larger market chain (e.g. Japan, EU and USA).

Moreover, handicraft production of Dzao women in Ta Phin and Black Thai in Chieng Dong is at scale of cooperative enterprise. They have been involved in the chain of large fair trade market, such as Japan, Europe and America. Their products ensure a balance of ecological values, culture and economy. Therefore, two groups have to choose for themselves the strategic market (competition, design, quality, materials, partners, pricing, etc) accordingly. Structure of the groups is divided into different specialized sectors which meet democratic principle. Firstly, group's leader has the role of mediating relationships between members, maintaining values and direction of the group. This task is maintained through the meeting of members regularly, study-exchange and advanced training for skills-awareness of members. The leadership is elected democratically. The

second specialized sector focuses on skills related to market, design, quality control, calculating profits, customers / partners, etc. The fact is that market has many 'fake handicraft products' which are copied from handicraft textiles of Dzao. However, the product quality of Ta Phin weaving group is still well maintaining<sup>11</sup>.

Activities of the Chieng Dong group in recent years have no more big changes in organizational structure and strategy. Due to advantages of the world famous tourist area famous - Sapa, the Ta Phin has tendency to add more values into their handicraft products via many channels. One of the channels is to integrate traditional handicraft production with ecotourism. The group had connections with some companies and worldwide projects to open ecotourism tours which incorporate local unique factors, such as landscapes - traditional culture - herbal medicine - handicraft products<sup>12</sup>. At present, Ta Phin has become 'traditional handicraft village' and known by many visitors worldwide.

### **Some challenges**

After 3 years (2006-2009) of experimenting fair trade strategy through strengthening of the Lao-Viet network of traditional handicraft (LVTHAN), a number of questions related to sustainability appeared.

First: How to have suitable approaches to advice the LVTHAN to be in harmony of the two indicators: Conservation and Development. In other words, how can ensure three values in traditional handicraft products, including ecological, cultural and economic?!

Second: the fact is that trend of companies in different levels (local, country and across countries) focused on investment for traditional handicraft production has been increasing. So that, the level of competition is more strong. While groups of the LVTHAN are almost at micro and small scales; many do not have much managerial experience and market networks. So, what are market shares and road ahead of the network to help producers and minority communities not being too dependent or increasing pressured by large companies?!

Third: Chinese garment products with cheap prices have overwhelmingly spreaded everywhere. These products are popular to most minority youths. The traditional clothing is gradually replaced with either modern styles or traditional styles but made of industrial materials. This situation leads to the fewer young people interested in learning and maintaining the traditional handicraft production. So, how is traditional handicraft production of ethnic minorities preserved and transferred through generations?!

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<sup>11</sup> See at:

[http://www.webdulich.com/index.php?act=area\\_link&act2=article\\_detail&category\\_sub\\_id=57&article\\_id=17361](http://www.webdulich.com/index.php?act=area_link&act2=article_detail&category_sub_id=57&article_id=17361)

<sup>12</sup> See at: [http://sapanapro.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=13&Itemid=1](http://sapanapro.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=13&Itemid=1)

## Planning

1. Based on the challenges and new needs, continuously monitoring, consulting the women weaving groups in LVTHAN, including:

- a) Gradually transferring this activity to the local government to support the conservation and development of traditional values and indigenous experience of the Thai-Na Sai, Dịch Hanh commune, Que Phong district, Nghe An and H'mong-Can Chu Su, Can Cau communes, Simacai districts, Lao Cai province and;
- b) Seeking for suitable partners to assist in forming community enterprises for handicraft production associated with culture-ecology tourism of Dzao in Ta Phin commune, Sapa District, Lao Cai province Cai and Black Thai in Chieng Dong commune, Yen Chau district, Son La province.

2. Continue to advise the group of Hmong women in Can Chu Su village, Can Chau commune, Simacai district, Lao Cai province in term of access to external supportive sources to carry out the model on show-selling of traditional handicraft products in Can Cau eco-culture market.

3. Organize action researches of technical processes related to producing natural materials, weaving, embroidery, natural colour and marketing for traditional eco - handicraft products to develop curriculum aims to: a) sharing and expand to other communities, b) for practical training of ecological agriculture in FFSs.

4. Connect with the Farmer Field Schools (FFSs) on ecological agriculture to organize practical training short-courses on values and skills of handicraft production for minority students. Therefore, in the coming years, the LVTHAN needs to be incorporated closely with Network for Ecological Farming of MECO-ECOTRA.