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LESSONS FROM HELVETAS MORE THAN 12 YEARS OF PROMOTING ORGANIC FARMING IN LAO PDR



The starting point - PROFIL



Project Title:	Promotion of Organic Farming in Laos
Project Duration:	2004-2007 (Phase I) 2008-2011 (Phase II)
Implementation agencies:	HELNETAS Laos Department of Agriculture (DoA)
Project areas:	Vientiane Capital, Champasak, Bolikhamxay and Xiengkhouang Provinces
Funded by:	Helvetas (own funds) Happel Foundation
Key activities:	Establish organic standards for Laos Develop certification capacity Farmer training and group development Establish organic farmer market

PROFIL - What worked



Sustainable Model

- Continued to function after project support ended
- Expanded in size, frequency and eventually to additional locations
- Inspired similar initiatives in other places

Influence on Policy makers

- Market became “place to be seen” for elite
- Raised awareness of organic and sustainable agriculture issues by key decision makers
- Gave momentum to capacity and institutional development

Latest efforts - LURAS



Project Title:	Lao Upland Rural Advisory Service
Project Duration:	2014-2017 (Phase I) 2017-2021 (Phase II)
Implementation agencies:	HELNETAS Laos Dept of Agric Extension and Coops (DAEC), PAFOs, Lao Farmer Network (LFN)

Organic Vegetable activities supported by LURAS 2015- 2017

Activity	OUD	XK	LFN
ICS certification training	✓		
Establishing local market outlet	✓		✓
Community managed small infrastructure	✓	✓	
Farmer-to Farmer (F2F) training and exchanges	✓	✓	✓
Residue testing	✓	✓	
Business-matching / connections	✓		✓
Facilitation of production planning	✓		

LURAS - What worked



Local capacity building

- PAFO Oudomxay has ability to certify groups with ICS
- Two PAFOs are able to carry out basic testing (eg. GT test kits for pesticide residues)
- Establishment of organic outlet *within* existing wet market

Making food safety a cross cutting issue

- Greatly increased evidence of contamination of the Lao food system
- Links between agriculture, health, education and commerce now being explored

What are we learning?

A key issue is *trust*

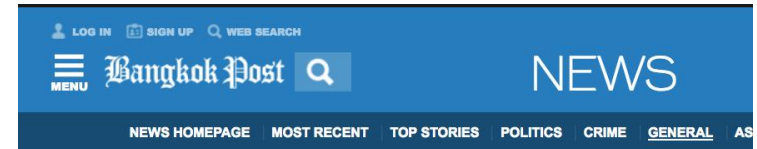
- Trust between producers and consumers
- And trust between those two groups and value chain intermediaries such as vegetable traders and retailers
- Without this trust organic farmers will not get premiums

A key question is *how to create and sustain trust?*

- In Helvetas experience, trust arose from direct interaction between farmers and consumers, ie. 'talk & touch'
- But it was assumed that certification was needed for scaling up
- Next question: does certification generate sufficient trust?

Some challenges

- Traders are mixing produce, so that the benefits of certification are lost
- Even with a farmers market, premiums for organic vegetables are not sufficient to cover the cost of re-certification
- The lack of an independent certifying body may create doubts about the integrity of the system
- There is a lack of reliable testing facilities in Laos
- Evidence from elsewhere in the region suggests that proliferation of food standards is confusing, and labels can't always be trusted
- Other systems of certification – eg Fair Trade Laos – have failed. Why?



NEWS > GENERAL

64% of veggies 'unsafe' due to pesticides

25 Nov 2017 at 07:32 44,268 viewed 31 comments

NEWSPAPER SECTION: NEWS | WRITER: PENCHAN CHAROENSUTHIPAN

1.8K

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A member of Thai-PAN arranges produce at a press conference held yesterday to alert consumers to the widespread use of harmful pesticides. (Photo by Pattarapong Chatpattarasill)

Over 60% of popular vegetables sold at shopping malls and markets are contaminated with a cocktail of pesticides farmers use to boost yields and ensure year-round sales, a food safety network warned Friday.

The Thailand Pesticide Alert Network (Thai-PAN), a non-governmental organisation, conducted a survey on nine vegetables and six types of fruit in Bangkok and four other provinces in late August.

Something to consider

Maybe provenance is more important than certification

- Consumers want to know *where* a product came from, *who* produced it, and *what* their affiliations are. This knowledge generates trust.
- The details are important. People and places can't be reduced to an abstract assessment of quality.

Maybe stories are more important than standards

- Helvetas is also working with coffee in Laos. When we look at the experience of Sinouk, Jhai or Saffron, we see they have given more attention to brand identity and customer relations than to any system of certification.
- Also with coffee globally, we see a rise in single origin products.
- These companies don't want to sell a standard product, they can charge more by selling a unique product!

A final call for action

We need to save the flagship!

- The organic farmers market in Vientiane was the first in Laos and it continues to have huge symbolic importance
- Some farmers have dropped out because it is not financially viable
- The authorities have allowed commercial traders to participate. Are they organic?
- The issue of the venue is also unresolved after years of lobbying by the farmers

If this market doesn't survive...

- If farmers give up because they can't get a decent premium...
- If consumers lose trust in what they are buying...
- ... it will be a major setback for the development of the organic sector in Laos.



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