

CASE STUDY

EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH RESPONSIBLE INVESTMENT IN AGRICULTURE AND FOOD SYSTEMS

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GEOGRAPHICAL COVERAGE

Thongmung Organic Agriculture Cooperative was created as a Farmer group in 2016 and became a Cooperative in 2020. Women are the key target beneficiaries of the cooperative as they appointed female staff to support female villagers in managing Cooperative funds and supporting youth in implementing agricultural activities. In addition, the cooperative supports women in creating a home garden and helps female members sell their agricultural products to organic markets in Vientiane Capital and CP (Thai company). All agricultural activities of planting organic crops and raising poultry, goats, and cows are conducted in Thongmung village, Xaythany district, and Vientiane capital.

The motivation and purpose of creating this Cooperative is to produce adequate food for better living conditions for women and provide organic food for the healthy consumption of local villagers.



STAKEHOLDERS

Thongmung Organic Agriculture Cooperative is a group of farmers created to improve women's lives in suburban areas. It was formed by **Mrs. Khammon Luanglat**, who wants to empower women to play a role in the family economy and strengthen widows' capacity in the agriculture sector. The livelihood of widows and women in the village is very difficult, as they must seek income and food to raise their children and support their education.

The farmers' group has an executive committee and the founders of this Cooperative. Associated government offices and NGOs have provided technical support initially but have not yet played a leading role in supporting the Cooperative. For instance, the District Agriculture and Forestry Office in Xaythany district came to raise awareness on growing organic vegetables in 2015 and provided greenhouse plastic-covered 15 houses in 2016.



CONTEXT

Before the group's formation, most members were engaged in agriculture, using chemicals that were harmful to health and soil quality and had high production costs. Moreover, villagers planted crops individually without working with each other and were highly competitive, making the price of agricultural products low. Women and widows in the village had no income, no motorbike, and no cooking materials. They lived in temporary houses that were easy to get wet with heavy

rain and easily destroyed by a storm. Thus, the lives of women and widows were tough, and they consumed unhealthy food from their gardens and earned little income from agriculture.

The founder decided to create this Cooperative because she knew that the living conditions of women and widows in the village were challenging. She sees women's ability in agriculture work as they are patient and work very hard to support families with a focus on planting vegetables and raising animals. Similarly, the founder aims for gender equality for women to get fair benefits from agriculture, to better the quality of lives of poor rural women, and to increase the value of agricultural products for women and widows.



TARGET BENEFICIARIES

The primary beneficiaries of this Cooperative are women, particularly widows and older adults in the village. There are 44 core members and 20 reserve members. The number of women is about 80% of group members because women are keen and active in joining the group at the initial stage. On the other hand, only 20% of men are group members, and few men play a crucial role in group management.

The members of this Cooperative are aged between 25-70 years old. This cooperative provides an excellent opportunity for disadvantaged women, particularly widows and older women. Therefore, they are more income-independent and self-reliant. The main activity of women farmers is growing vegetables for daily consumption, and then some group members can extend their activity to raising cows, goats, ducks, chickens, and fish.



OBJECTIVE

The objective of the Cooperative is to support women who are scattered, without income, poor, and facing gender discrimination. The Cooperative also consolidates production for sale at a reasonable price and protects the farmers, particularly women, from being taken advantage of by middlemen. Lastly, they aim to produce enough food and vegetables for inside and outside communities and minimize chemical use in agriculture.

It is expected to improve the skills of women in agri-business implementation, for women have more power and play an essential role in the cooperative, as one of four inspection members is a woman, four of five management board members are women, and the Cooperative's president is also a woman. It also seeks opportunities for access to funding for women, solidarity in the village, and exchange lessons together.



PROCESS / METHODOLOGY

In the initial phase, the group members of the cooperative planted for family consumption after the rice planting season. In 2015, the District Agriculture and Forestry Office of Xaytani district (DAFO) mobilized



all the villagers to plant organic vegetables. They gathered 20 families, but only 12 (seven women and five men) decided to participate in the project. DAFO organized training on organic standards for the group members. After that, it was implemented only for six months, and some families continued using chemical fertilizers because the production was not good. The vegetables did not meet the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) standard due to the use of chemicals. The group broke up and could not continue according to the standards set by MAF.

By 2016, Xaythani DAFO had returned to mobilize the group's ideas again with 12 families and supported building 15 greenhouses with equipment to make compost for the group. In 2016, the group rented land of 1.6 hectares to make it easier for the members to work and manage together. After nine months of promotion, group members can sell organic vegetables at That Luang market and Pha Ngum at a high price. In 2017, the group became a member of the Lao Farmer Network, which works with the Department of Promotion and Cooperatives of MAF.

Poor women and widows in the village gathered themselves first because they would like to grow vegetables for sale. Then, DAFO supported this group to start organic planting for healthy consumption. In the beginning, seven women joined the group as they were their families' representatives, and only a few were young women. Then, the group continued to grow

because of the work and initiative of these 12 members.

Recently, all group members of the Cooperative meet monthly to discuss and update each other about income, challenges, and ways to improve the group's activities.



RESULTS / PERFORMANCE INDICATORS

The members of the Cooperative are active and have solidarity by supporting each other. For instance, group members help low-income families who lack labor. The savings fund is created, and all members can save 10,000 kip/1 dollar per family per week. The savings fund can also support group members to invest in small activities.

The members are growing yearly from 12 to 44 families, and the farming area also increased to 40 hectares. The Cooperative regularly discusses problems and expected results. Their family members similarly understand growing organic vegetables, and they labor enough to help with the gardening.

Earlier, people did not buy organic vegetables because of the infestation of pests. However, they discovered that the vegetables purchased in the general market rot

quickly compared to organic produce. Subsequently, the Cooperative promoted organic vegetables at the village and traditional temple events and gave them for free. The promotion succeeded as more people in the communities started consuming organic vegetables. As a result, Cooperative members earned income and started acquiring animals, motorbikes, cars, and permanent houses.



IMPACT

Some of the long-term impacts are as follows:

- Increase in income for the Cooperative members
- Safety food for Cooperative members and consumers
- Living condition is improved (women involved)
- Cooperative fund for members to save and borrow money

Marketing is available and requires more agricultural products from the Cooperative, such as supplying the Vientiane Center 3 days/week, Lao market two days/week (a total of 5 days per week), and sales to CP Thai company in Laos 2 days/week. The members gained an income of 5 million per month/family (before the Covid-19 pandemic). Currently, the Cooperative cannot produce to meet the market demand.

Each family saves 10,000 kip/week/family for the saving group. If members would like to borrow, interest is collected from the agreement of the Cooperative members at 0.5%/month. The family borrows about 5-6 million kip/person or family, payable in six months with a minimum of three months. The organizational structure of the savings fund is five members of the management committee, four women members of the inspection committee, two women members for inspection of finance and standard of vegetables, and two women members of finance.



SUCCESS / FACILITATING FACTORS

The main lessons learned from this experience are below:

- The living conditions of Cooperative members are better. There is proper management and solidarity, stable income, and business partners. Less educated people can have their businesses,

calculate capital and interest and prepare a simple business plan with a good marketing network.

- All members are proud to produce safe food for consumers
- All members also get good experiences planting vegetables several times per year. For instance, morning glory has seven cycles/year, cilantro has six cycles/year, and the prices are very high.
- Rich people in the village support poor families in the Cooperative because this produces a good reputation for the village and district. In addition, rich families allow Cooperative members who have no land to use the land for free.
- In 2018, the group surveyed and found that only rich families consume organic vegetables; therefore, the group made the price more appropriate for all target groups, especially the poor.

Young people in members' families are more interested in joining the group because they see the benefit of the Cooperative. For example, the daughter of Khammone, who works in the city, would like to return to work in the village to help her mother. The new idea popped into her mind when she visited her family during the holiday.

However, there is still a need for improvement in the following:

- Seek funding sources with a 2-3% low-interest rate per year when the Cooperative members want to borrow. Unfortunately, the interest of 12% per year from the bank is very high, and members need help to afford it.
- Currently, each member has about five old wooden greenhouses that need to be renovated and made of iron for permanent use.





CONSTRAINTS / CHALLENGES

The constraints are listed below:

- After the COVID-19 epidemic, the market demand decreased, so members' income was lower by about 2 million per month/family. As a result, the income of each family has reduced by 50% compared to before.
- Lack of funds to improve the quality of greenhouses and make permanent greenhouses.
- The group wants to buy plastic covers from China that are eight meters wide and 120 meters long. The price is about 7 million kips and must be ordered from the market to import because this type of product has limited users.
- No specific activity to promote RAI and international regulations (ASEAN RAI and VGGT), which means the cooperative members implement organic

farming and sell their products in the organic market. They do not know any regulations related to RAI, particularly the promotion of women in RAI.

- Before, there was no information about responsible investment, but now representatives of the group have attended meetings and training from LaoDHRRA and other NGOs 2-3 times and understand RAI. The RAI information was shared with group members, particularly some relevant policies.



TESTIMONY

Ms. Keo Pomudom is a widow, and she joined this group. "My livelihood was tough when I started because my husband passed away. I decided to continue planting with this group because I want to earn money to support my children.

"After my husband passed away, I can extend to 16 greenhouses. I do it alone because it's not heavy work, I am more independent, and there is no pressure".

First, my husband and I borrowed money from my relative to build six greenhouses. After my husband passed away, I can extend to 16 greenhouses. I do it alone because it's not heavy work, I am more independent, and there is no pressure.

I work based on my ability. My children help me after school time. I am so proud to be a group member as I can earn a good income, and market demand is also high. Recently, I have had no debt and am very happy with my small business."

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