

SOCIAL POLICY ECOLOGY RESEARCH INSTITUTE - SPERI

Yearly Narrative Report

July, 2007- June, 2008

**Department of Community Development - Network of Traditional
Handicraft Textile- THAN**

1/15/2009



This report refers to efforts of the LVTHAN to obtain the right to indigenous knowledge, cultural identity, security of local livelihood and natural resources. The achievements mentioned in this report are in line with the networking methodology advised by SPERI since the yearly 1990s

Acronyms

CBOs:	Community Based Organizations
CIRD:	Center for Indigenous Knowledge Research and Development
DECODE:	Department of Community Development
LVTHAN:	Lao-Viet Traditional Handicraft Textile Network
LVCBO:	Lao-Viet Coordinating Board of LVTHAN
MECO-ECOTRA:	Mekong Minority Community Networking for Ecological Trading
OD:	Organizational Development
ID:	Institutional Development
FFSs:	Farmer Field Schools
HEPA:	Human Ecology Preservation Area
SPERI:	Social Policy Ecology Research Institute
TEW:	Towards Ethnic Women
THAN:	Network for Traditional Handicraft Textile

Network for Traditional Handicraft (THAN) is one of the themes of Mekong Minority Community Networking for Ecological Trading (MECO-ECOTRA) under the facilitation of Social Policy Ecology Research Institute (SPERI). THAN shares the common philosophy with other thematic networks among MECO-ECOTRA. The aim is to promote the traditional civil society towards a harmonious life, equity and democracy among indigenous minority communities in Mekong region.

THAN started from the program pilot of Towards Ethnic Women - TEW (being merged with Center for Indigenous Research and Development - CIRD to become SPERI) in supporting the female Dzao and Black Thai in northern Vietnam since the early 1990s. As a result, CALABASH initiated by TEW becomes a well-known trade mark for handicraft products of the small scale community based groups of minority women. The CALABASH aimed to recover and maintain values of minority groups in weaving, embroiling and dyeing natural colors for fair trade strategy and security of local livelihoods and natural resources.

March 2006, a cross border network, namely Lao-Vietnam Traditional Handicraft (LVTHAN) appeared with involvements of Dzao, Black Thai, Lao Lum, Hmong and Kho Mu representative women who live in the sensitive border highland areas. The LVTHAN become a live forum for indigenous minority groups to share and exchange knowledge and skills in handicraft production, and deal with the un-fair trade situation in Mekong region.

Since then, the LVTHAN has promoted across exchanges and studies among members, and between members with other networks in Laos, Thailand and Vietnam who have the same philosophy, interests and concerns. Yearly objectives of the LVTHAN from July 2007 to June 2008 are to:

- ✚ Strengthen capacity of LVTHAN's group members (CBOs) in organizational development (OD), institutional development (ID) as well as knowledge generation;
- ✚ Build up pilot models in indigenous knowledge preservation for handicraft production chain (e.g. weaving, embroiling, dyeing natural colors, designing and marketing); and
- ✚ Linking LVTHAN members and knowledge with Farmer Field Schools (FFSs) via practical training on traditional handicraft production.

This yearly review will answer three main questions: i) what are achievements of the LVTHAN so far in terms of OD, ID and knowledge preservation and generations? ii) Where would be the LVTHAN currently? iii) In what extents to which SPERI could continue with these above achievements?

Traditional Handicraft Textile Projects

Since the yearly 1990s, HAN with the CALABASH pilot has gradually scaled up from small groups of indigenous minority women to national and across border as LVTHAN level of interests and concerns. Currently, the LVTHAN has group members located in the sensitively ecological highland areas as following. They vary in terms of interest, concerns and level of development.



Small-scale community enterprise in traditional natural handicraft textiles of Black Thai women in Chieng Dong commune, Yen Chau district, Son La province - Northern Vietnam. The enterprise has been developed from a small group of women who are interested in recovering the traditional handicraft textile craft, income generation and fair trade via the CALABASH pilot since the yearly 1990s.

Small-scale community enterprise in traditional natural handicraft textiles of Dzao women in Ta Phin commune, Sa Pa district, Lao Cai province - Northern Vietnam. The enterprise has been developed since the early 1990s with the aim of preserving indigenous knowledge and cultural identity through traditional handicraft textile production, income generation and fair trade via the CALABASH pilot.

Handicraft textile group of Black Thai women in Hanh Dich commune, Que Phong district, Nghe An province - Central Vietnam. This group started since 2004 with the voluntary involvement of ten Black Thai women. Their initial effort is to maintain their traditional silk products as well as designs via raising silk worms, growing mulberry and making natural colors.

Handicraft textile groups of Hmong women in Can Chu Su village, Can Cau commune, Simacai district, Lao Cai province - Northern Vietnam. This group started from 2005 with the voluntary involvement of nine Hmong women. The initial concern was how to recover Hmong knowledge and skills in growing hemp, weaving traditional clothes and creating a fair trade for their products.

Handicraft textile groups of Hmong, Lao Lum and Kho Mu people in Luang Prabang province, Laos were set up in the middle 2004 after several study-exchanges with minority women in Vietnam. They have two main concerns. The first is how to get back their indigenous knowledge in making traditional handicraft textile products. The second is how to create a fair trade market for their products to contribute to improve household

incomes.

Preservation of Indigenous knowledge in handicraft textile production chain

For a year (Jul 2007-Jun 2008), the VLTHAN has successfully promoted its members as CBOs¹ to recover and preserve their knowledge and skills in producing natural materials, traditional designs, weaving, embroiding, making weaving frames and dyeing natural colors. Villagers are really aware of important values of traditional handicraft products in material and

spiritual life.

Hmong women at Can Chu Su village, Can Ho commune, Simacai district, Lao Cai province - north of Vietnam successfully recover their knowledge and techniques in growing hemp for weaving. These techniques and hemp varieties has been lost for 15 years. Currently, women could make their own traditional clothes, dresses for both females and males. Five different types of natural colors i.e. indigo, yellow, black, brown and violet are being practiced. Indigo plants are being re-grown for dyeing the traditional natural indigo color of Hmong. Further, with the support of their husbands they recovered weaving looms. Importantly, these above indigenous knowledge and native species are recorded as manuals and transferred to younger generations through practical training young minority students in Farmer Field School (FFS) in Simacai-Lao Cai province.

Growing hemp and preserving indigenous heritages become a strategic policy of Lao Cai



province in terms of eco-tourism promotion, hunger alleviation and poverty reduction via income generations from handicraft production. Denmark Development Aid (DANIDA) takes Can Chu Su model as an example for the handicraft program in Simacai district. This project asked Hmong women in Can Chu Su to provide practical training courses on how to growing hemp, making products form hemp and indigo plants for

¹ i.e. Hmong women group at Can Chu Su village, Can Ho commune, Simacai district, Lao Cai province, small scale community enterprise of Dzao women in Ta Phin Commune, Sa Pa district, Lao Cai province, small scale community enterprise of Black Thai in Chieng Dong commune, Yen Chau district, Son La Province, Black Thai women group in Hanh Dich commune, Que Phong district, Nghe An province, Lao Lum, Kho Mu and Hmong womens group in Luang Prabang province, Laos

their target groups (e.g. Hmong, Tay, Nung and Thu Lao, etc).

Black Thai women in Hanh Dich commune, Que Phong district, Nghe An province - central Vietnam successfully recovered their knowledge and skills in producing traditional silk products through raising native silk worm species, weaving, dyeing natural colors. Compared to other minority groups in Vietnam, Black Thai is well-known and skillful in making silk products i.e. dresses trousers, pillows, mattress, blankets, etc. One of the reasons caused a reduction of raising silk worms for making silk products is the availability of Chinese industrialized textile products in local market. 60/80 households in Na Sai village, Hanh Dich commune currently grow mulberry trees for raising silk worms. Every month, one family could product from 1 to 2 kg of worm silk. Members of the women handicraft group in Hanh Dich have provided practical training in growing mulberry trees for minority youths (e.g. Black Thai, Hmong, Kho Mu and Tay) in Farmer Field School (FFS_HEPA), Ha Tinh province - Central Vietnam. This is seen as long-term strategy of Black Thai women to maintain local knowledge in handicraft production.

Black Thai women also raise awareness of villagers for preserving native plants in forest which are used to make natural colors (e.g. indigo trees, saffron, wild mango, etc). Currently, they already recovered and are able to make 8 different types of natural colors. They also closely cooperate with herbal medicine group in village to grow these above plants in their home and forest gardens for long-term usage.



Moreover, with the help of their husbands, the traditional style weaving frames are recovered. Every household has from one to three frames available for the wife and daughters to weave silk clothes.

Lao Lum women in Xieng Da village, Nam Bac district, Luang Prabang province, Laos are very skillful in making weaved products from cotton and silk, and knowledgeable in using forest plants for dyeing different types of natural colors (e.g. black and light indigo, light brown, black, yellow, violet, etc). However, the same situation with other minority groups, the small scale handicraft textile production is overwhelmed by industrialized textile products, especially from China available in local market. By networking methodology (e.g. study tours, study-exchanges, practical training, etc), the LVTHAN helped Lao Lum women to recover and maintain their local knowledge heritage in handicraft textile creation. They already re-make over 20 types of natural colors from native species in the forest as well in their home gardens. These colors are durable and not harmful to human health. They moreover mobilize women in village to grow cotton instead of buying the chemical and industrialized cotton in the market.

Such above indigenous knowledge and skills of Lao Lum women in traditional handicraft textile production are recorded as manuals for sharing with other minority groups in the network (e.g. Black Thai in Hanh Dich, Dzao in Ta Phin and Hmong in Simacai). They also become curriculum for teaching in FFSs (e.g. techniques in growing stikclac trees for the light brown color). Traditional natural colors of the LVTHAN are being quickly multiplied by a wonderful integration of knowledge and skills initiated by women coming from different minority groups.

The first time ever, Kho Mu people in Nam Kha village, Nam Bac district, Luang Prabang province, Laos proudly wear on their own traditional clothes and dresses. Kho Mu women are now able to grow cotton, weave clothes and make traditional dresses for their families. This is a surprised event for not only villagers in Nam Kha village, but people in Luang Prabang province, especially authorities. They thought that Kho Mu people are ‘backward’ and ‘unable’ to make things changed.

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 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, USA).

Organizational Development of Traditional Handicraft Textile Networks

Organizational development (OD) of the traditional handicraft textile network is understood as a process of capacity self-enhancement to i) maintain the organizational value, direction, structure and, ii) capably dealing with internal and external changes.

For the former, the fact shows that members of handicraft groups (e.g. Can Chu Su, Na Sai, Ta Phin and Chieng Dong) have the same consensus to address common values and directions towards cultural identity, indigenous knowledge, security of local livelihoods and natural resources and fair trade of the traditional handicraft textile products. This is mentioned by clear indicators in these above parts.

Almost groups are able to self-identify strengths and opportunities in the production chain. Types of product, materials, designs, sizes and consumers are topics which are normally discussed among members before production. Then, they make a six monthly and yearly plan for the group. Normally, products are made in accordance very much with traditional designs, natural materials and understanding of women-makers. For instance, Kho Mu women in Nam Kha village focus on baskets made from barks of the tree. They are skillful in this production, and consumers like their products. Black Thai women only make silk products with natural colors. While strengths of Hmong and Dzao

women are hemp products. Since they are living nearby tourism areas (e.g. Sapa and Can Cau), their products are very much interested by tourism-consumers.



Organizational structures of almost handcraft textile groups are diverse, from micro to small-scale, loosing, and cultural and ecological attachment. The above values and direction are basic for handcraft textile groups to shape the organizational structure which are flexible and attached to contexts where they are located. As objectives of handcraft textile groups of Black Thai in Hanh Dich and Hmong in Can Chu Su are to maintain traditional values and indigenous knowledge; so that there are only two members in group management board. This allows the flexible and less-structurism.

It is different to micro enterprises of Black Thai in Chieng Dong and Dzao in Ta Phin. These two groups have to deal with several tasks in the same time: a) balancing cultural, ecological and economic values, and b) dealing with market challenges.

Therefore, there are two main parts in the structure. The first is a leadership board which deals with relations among members, maintains organizational values and direction. This task is normally done through regularly meetings, exchange-studies among members. Leaderships play an important role in maintaining group values and direction, and harmonize relations among members. Normally, they are prestige; so that selected by all members. The other part focuses on marketing, designing, quality control, cost-benefit calculation.

Handcraft textile group of Lao Lum and Kho Mu women in Luang Prabang province, Laos have changed the structure from more fixed (e.g. leadership board, accountant, members and regulation) to loosing organization. Every Kho Mu woman are now equal to access to use weaving frames and tailor machines which used to be assets of the handcraft group. As the most important for this group is how to help women in village to be able to make clothes and dresses for their families, but not for selling at the moment. The handcraft textile group of Lao Lum women has divided into different smaller groups initiated by one or two people. There are three main reasons. First, the big group is hard to adapt with new changes, harmonize relations among members and, have to deal with high overhead costs. The second, competition for handcraft products in Laos market is very tension. Therefore, small flexible groups are the way to deal with marketing strategy. The third, the group division would allow more women in village to involve in making handcraft textile products.

Sustainability is still a question for almost small scale production groups. To deal with this situation, handcraft textile groups have set up own development fund and LVTHAN's fund which is mobilized from different sources. The main source comes from the deduction of benefits of selling products. Percentage of the deduction varies according to common consensus of groups' members. For instance, Can Chu Su and Ta

Phin groups agree to deduct 10% for group's development fund and 5% for the LVTHAN's fund. Groups of Lao Lum, Hmong and Nam Kha in Luang Prabang province subtract 15% for the groups' fund and 15% for community development fund. As a result, small scale enterprises of Black Thai in Chieng Dong, Dzaio in Ta Phin, and Hmong group in Long Lan are able to self-operate the handicraft production chain by their own fund.



The VLTHAN has its coordinating board (LVCBO) including three country representatives (e.g. one coordinator and two assistant). These two representatives have clear functions and responsibilities to maintain and develop the VLTHAN. However, insofar role of the LVCBO is still rather weak in terms of coordinating across border activities i.e. exchange-studies related to handicraft textile production. There are two reasons. One is that they are very far from each other; so that it is difficult for communication. In other hand, the VLTHAN's direction is

to strengthen local group members in the first year (2007-2008). Hence, there are not many activities for the LVTHAN at Laos-Viet level.

Institutional Development of Traditional Handicraft Textile Networks

Institutional development of the traditional handicraft textile network (ID) is understood as capability to improving or changing the structural system at larger scale. The system here refers to: a) government policy whether at local or central levels, b) market at all levels (e.g. local, national, regional and international).

The fact shows that traditional handicraft textile networks have somehow contributed to changes to awareness and action of local authorities, villagers and small sellers at in the market.

With effectiveness and impacts of Can Chu Su women weaving group, Lao Cai provincial People's Committee and Simacai district People's Committee have set up a policies to preserve indigenous heritages of minority groups i.e. Hmong, Tay, Nung, Thu Lao, etc in terms of traditional handicraft textiles. This becomes a strategic policy of Lao Cai province for eco-tourism promotion, hunger alleviation and poverty reduction via income generations from handicraft production. DANIDA takes Can Chu Su model as an example for their handicraft program in Simacai district. This project asked Hmong women in Can Chu Su to provide practical training courses on how to growing hemp, making products form hemp and indigo plants for their target groups. Traditional and cultural handicraft products become an alternative for local people in dealing with the situation of soil degradation because of overused chemical and abusing mono crops in

sloping land. Instead of growing mono/hybrid crops which require high consumption of chemicals, hemp will be a locally adaptable alternative. Moreover, the Simacai district People's Committee decided to allocate over 1,000 m² of land in the central point of tourism area - Can Cau market for the Can Chu Su women weaving to set up a demonstration of Hmong people in traditional handicraft production.

Que Phong district People's Committee decided to set up Na Sai community of Black Thai people to become a human ecology village. One of the reasons for this decision is the long historically cultural heritage of Black Thai there in making traditional worm silk products. Na Sai becomes a practical forum for many other Black Thai in villages nearby to exchange and study.

The traditional handicraft textile enterprise of Dzao women in Ta Phin successfully lobbied Sapa district People's Committee and functioning district offices (e.g. land, taxation, commercial chamber, etc) to agree to allocate a plot of land in Sa Pa tourism market for selling products of the LVTHAN.

Several handicraft textile products of Lao Lum women in Xieng Da village, Luang Prabang province, Laos such as dresses, scarf, pillow, and shirts which made from cotton, natural dyed colors and traditional designs are highly appreciated by customers in Luang Prabang and Vientiane markets, and exhibitions in Vientiane - Laos, Chiang Mai-Thailand and Tam Dao and Hanoi-Vietnam. These products are now available in Luang Prabang market.

Farmer Field Schools (FFSs) in Simacai and HEPA actively cooperate with the handicraft textile networks to provide practical training for minority youths in growing and processing hemp, mulberry trees for making handicraft products. This training is an obligatory topic for all students to study and integrate in ecological farms.

At the village level, traditional handicraft networks have significant contributions to changes in awareness of villagers. Currently, the number of Black Thai in Hanh Dich, Hmong in Can Chu Su, Lao Lum in Xieng Da involving in handicraft production is significantly increasing. Instead of weaving on industrialized and modern clothes, many people prefer their traditional ones. Especially, it is different to the past, the husband are currently quite active and supportive in helping their wife in handicraft production. They involved repairing or making new weaving frames, grow and preserve plants for dyeing natural colors, raising silk worms, etc. Normally, these tasks used to be carried by only females traditionally.

However, the plan of handicraft textile groups, unless the small scale enterprises of Black Thai in Chiang Dong and Dzao in Ta Phin, are almost standing for preservation. Their productions are at micro-scale level. Their capacity in terms of marketing, business plan, designing, etc is still weak. Questions of fair trade, ethical production and how to balance between cultural, ecological and economic values are challenging them. Therefore, market for their products is mainly in local scale or for family usage only.

Partners of the Traditional Handicraft Textile Networks

- ❑ Independent experts: Ms. Karin van Veen from The Netherlands and Veerle Vandenhende from Belgium. Advising for the traditional handicraft textile networks in terms of organizational development, fair trade market promotion, designing and looking for suitable markets in EU and others. However, it is very difficult for the network to keep contact and get advices in time, regularly from these two experts.
- ❑ KWEN is a fair trade and civil society promotion organization of Korean women. This organization is a potential partner for the network. Insofar, the network has regularly contacted for exchange ideas and products' designs with KWEN.
- ❑ HRPC is a Vietnamese Handicraft Exported Company. Their products and markets are mostly in EU and USA where require strict and high volume of products. Therefore, connection the network with this company is to looking for market information, possibilities for suitable markets of the networks' product.
- ❑ Nhat Thang Exported Company is a Vietnamese company which has large volume of exported products to Germany, Japan and USA markets. The company is willing to cooperate with the traditional handicraft textile network. However, it is still the question of strict quality control, high volume of production while the networks' groups are micro/small scale of production. It is hard to meet their demands.
- ❑ The Handicraft Promotion Project in Que Phong is a local partner of Black Thai women group in Hanh Dich in terms of: a) providing practical training courses for members, b) buying silk products to sell in local market in Laos.
- ❑ CRAFT LINK is a traditional buyer of the handicraft products of Black Thai – Chieng Dong and Dzao - Ta Phin small scale enterprises. However, it is still the question of fair trade and ownership of knowledge and production chain.
- ❑ Therefore, the VLTHAN strongly strategizes its group members to be self-sufficient via promotion of local markets, local consumers, and cultural-ecological preservation focus.

In what extents to which SPERI could continue with the LVTHAN?



With the new capacity and needs of the Lao-Viet Traditional Handicraft Textile Network, it requires SPERI's approach more holistic, programmatic and cultural-ecological economic sensitivity.

For the first achievement - preservation of indigenous knowledge in handicraft textile production chain: The fact shows

that SPERI's approach is quite appropriate to advise and facilitate the LVTHAN to address this value. However, SPERI's staff still need to be improved in terms of capacity and skills in linking such achievements by theoretical and policy research for the lobby and advocate purpose at national and international levels. In this case, linking and coordinating skills are also rather necessary. It is clear that the LVTHAN has significantly contributed to the policy both Vietnamese and global i.e. UN levels on bio-cultural diversity preservation. However, at the moment such LVTHAN as well its group members /CBOs are yet recognized legally. So that, traditional handicraft CBOs should be recognized in legal documents as a strategy not only in income generation, but bio-cultural diversity preservation.

For the second achievement - organizational development of the traditional

handicraft textile network: Currently, almost handicraft textile groups in the LVTHAN are from micro to small scale operation. In order to have more effective and impacts, we should consider the way in which handicraft textile groups could be scaled up at larger extents i.e. traditional handicraft association of indigenous minorities at national and Mekong regional level. Because of that, SPERI is recommended to review its approaches and strategies to support the LVTHAN in the years to come. Handicraft textile groups would be equipped more skills in facilitation, coordination as well as lobby and advocacy. Fundraised skills are optional because it is important to support handicraft textile groups to obtain more independent, bargaining power and sustainability. SPERI's role now should be more focused on research, capacity building and linking.



For the third achievement - institutional development

of the traditional handicraft textile network: The question with SPERI to date is how to advise the LVTHAN to self-balance three values: tradition, ecology and economic. In other way is how to help the LVTHAN to change the system i.e. legal frames and markets fairly, transparent and democracy. It is frank to say that SPERI is not too strong in market skills. Even though, its staffs are quite strong in terms of community development, research and lobbying for over ten years. Therefore, there are three options for SPERI at the moment. The first, SPERI must self-improve its skills and knowledge in marketing which refers to ecological cultural and economic sensitivity. The second, SPERI should looking for and hand over for suitable partners who are able to advise the LVTHAN in accordance with the practical fair trade values. The last but not least is to set up a CENTER FOR SOCIAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP STUDIES AND DEVELOPMENT (CENDI) to support the LVTHAN in the next coming years. Social entrepreneurs, social enterprises and approaches for social changes would be outcomes of CENDI.

1. Evaluative report of the traditional handicraft textile network (SPERI.2007)
2. Six-monthly reports (July to December 2007, and January to June 2008) of the traditional handicraft textile network (SPERI: 2007-2007)
3. Six monthly reports (July to December 2007, and January to June 2008) of DECODE, DES, DELOBBY, DEFO (SPERI: 2007-2008)
4. Yearly reports (July 2007 -June 2008) of DECODE, DES, DELOBBY, DEFO (SPERI: 2007-2008)
5. Minutes of evaluative meetings of the LVTHAN's group members (e.g. Simacai-Hanh Dich, Luang Prabang) - July 2007-June 2008
6. Related articles posted in SPERI's website: <http://www.dolame.speri.org>