

**EVALUATION OF THE ADVANCED TRAINING PROGRAM ON ECOLOGICAL FARMING
SYSTEMS SUPPORTED BY THE BREAD FOR THE WORLD (BFDW) ECUMENICAL
SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM (ESP)**

**FEEDBACK ON FARMER TRAINING AT THE HUMAN ECOLOGY PRACTICE AREA
(HEPA) UNDER THE SOCIAL POLICY ECOLOGY RESEARCH INSTITUTE (SPERI)**

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Introduction

The Social Policy Ecology Research Institute (SPERI) is an NGO in Vietnam dedicated to the betterment of indigenous peoples in the Mekong region by both influencing government policy and providing education in Permaculture and eco-farming through Farmer Field Schools (FFS). SPERI works in conjunction with CODE (Consultancy on Development) and CIRUM (Culture Identity and Resources Use Management) towards a society where indigenous people and ethnic minorities have equal access to social justice, gender equity, natural resources and fair social economic systems in the Mekong region. One major project where this work is being carried out is at the Human Ecology Practice Area (HEPA), a 420-hectare property of protected forest and experimental farms used for training young farmers from a number of indigenous groups in Vietnam and Laos.

HEPA is grounded in Human Ecology applied theory with connections to Permaculture design principles and traditional knowledge. Through the support of their experiences at HEPA young indigenous farmers can influence the uptake of ecologically sustainable methods in the wider indigenous communities and ultimately throughout the Mekong region and other parts of Asia. The broad aim is that practical changes, through ecological farming, may be carried out by these young indigenous farmers and SPERI may use these examples to lobby the Vietnam Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) and the Vietnam Ministry of Labor, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA) to make changes to policies for the promotion of eco-farming as a practical alternative for Vietnam and ultimately for the Mekong region. SPERI feels that MARD and MOLISA should be looking to the youth, hard working energetic small-scale farmers, for the future of agriculture in Vietnam.

The HEPA FFS training also works toward civil society empowerment for farmers groups and youth groups in the Mekong. Since 2006 there have been 151 youth group members throughout the Mekong region who have participated in training at the HEPA FFS program in eco-farming. The program is not recognized officially in Vietnam but the Permaculture Institute of Australia will issue a Permaculture Diploma Certificate for those students who pass the FFS program¹.

The 4 selected indigenous youth farmers, supported under the Bread for the World (BFDW) Ecumenical Scholarship Program (ESP), achieve a higher level of training with the aim to enhance eco-farming skills and capacity as well as build leadership skills. Each of them has been allocated a farm and given the chance to design, based on permaculture principles, and run the farms as a practical farm and as a training platform. They have also been part of Training of Trainers (TOT) and are responsible for teaching the skills to other young farmers. They do agricultural research in the communities where they come from to gain more knowledge about eco-farming practices. They also work toward guiding visitors to the FFS HEPA. They learn to be leaders in the Mekong regional and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) networks of permaculture and eco-farming. They make trips to extend eco-farming and permaculture².

¹ The first four are in process of being applied for.

² e.g. through the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB).

Objectives of the Evaluation

Through interviews with four BfDW/ESP scholarship holders: Mr. Ly Seo Vu, Mr. Giang A Su, Mr. Loc Van Vin, Ms. Giang Thi Chung, and educational staff at SPERI and HEPA, this evaluation seeks to examine the outcome and impact of the advanced training program on eco-farming run from August 2010 to May 2012. The evaluation will attempt to find if, and to what degree, skills and capacities have been improved and advanced³. It will examine the 4 selected students improvements in TOT skills, facilitation skills and leadership skills. It will also attempt to determine the impacts beyond HEPA, in other communities and within the larger permaculture and eco-farming movements. Furthermore, this evaluation will examine the relevance (and effectiveness) of the hands-on training method⁴ on eco-farming, and elaborate on the methodologies. It aims to help determine if the methods of teaching have been effective and useful⁵ and provide suggestions for improvement and comments about opportunities for duplication and expansion.

The evaluation is taking place now as the scholarship has just ended and there are a number of stakeholders who are interested in knowing about the training for possible duplication and expansion. SPERI and HEPA FFS stand to learn a lot from an external review and hope to see some critical and useful feedback.

Description of HEPA

HEPA has 400-hectares of regenerating forest and 20 hectares of small-scale agricultural land. It is located in Ha Tinh, near the center of Son Kim⁶, along the Rao An river. The closest town is Trung Tam. It is about 15km from the Laos border and is near a major road to the Nam Phao border crossing (the major route between Vinh city, Vietnam and Vientiane, Laos). This road is to become a part of the Asia Pacific Highway, which will put HEPA in a strategic location for easy access and opportunities for expansion of the education program and for getting more students to HEPA from all over the Mekong Region.

There are five experimental farms: Khe Soong, Cay Khe, Linh Moc, Poov Zoov and Thuong Uyen. Two of the farms (Cay Khe and Thuong Uyen) are currently run by scholarship-holders and all are managed and run by students in a learning-by-doing experiential hands-on environment.

HEPA is supported by the SPERI office staff and has three administrative staff⁷, five education staff⁸ (including two volunteers from Permaculture Australia⁹ and seven staff

³ Baseline: Grades for work from 1-10, personal impression, impression of staff.

⁴ In *teaching-by-learning & learning-by-doing* pedagogy

⁵ Based on feedback from students.

⁶ Lat. 18.421677°; Long. 105.220867°

⁷ Luu, luong, Thao

⁸ Chau, k1a, volunteers, Giang

⁹ Robert, Dave

working directly on the land¹⁰ including two staff dedicated to working in an on site nursery¹¹.

Definitions

Several very specific terms are used throughout the text and throughout the literature on HEPA and SPERI. In part these definitions are provided to offer a more structured view of the philosophical and scientific underpinnings of the training course in clarifying the rest of the text and the work of HEPA. There also may need to be a re-visiting of these definitions for a clearer understanding of the terms and the implications of use of these terms in the vision of HEPA and the education being offered there.

Eco-farming is a term with a special meaning here in the context of HEPA and within the vision for SPERI. It generally linked to permaculture principles and refers to a kind of Human Ecology based paradigm for farm management, an extension of indigenous culture, which places the human in nature and is conscious and active in that role. It recognizes and honors the spiritual connection of people to nature and makes that an integral part of the practice.

Farmer Field School (FFS) is a group-based learning process, which brings together concepts and methods from agroecology, experiential education and community development. The idea is to bring the education to the farmers and thus it generally happens on farmer's fields, through training and development within the agricultural context¹².

Organic farming is the form of agriculture that combines tradition, innovation and scientific techniques such as crop rotation, green manure, compost and biological pest control. It sustains the health of soils, ecosystems and people and relies on ecological processes, biodiversity and cycles adapted to local conditions. It seeks to benefit the natural environment, promote health, fair relationships and a good quality of life.

Permaculture creates sustainable household and agriculture systems, modeled after natural ecosystems, that minimize waste, human labor, and energy input through synergistic design and engineering. It emphasizes patterns of natural landscapes functions and species and organizes the various elements of farm and household systems to mimic them. It does this by looking closely at the relationships created among these elements.

¹⁰ Duc, Trung, Loc, Dung, Vu

¹¹ An, Duoc

¹² See: 'Farmers Field Schools (FFS): A Group Extension Process Based on Adult Non-Formal Education Methods' by K. D. Gallagher, Global IPM Facility (1999)

Scholarship Holders

All the students covered by the scholarship are from ethnic minority groups in Vietnam. Mr. Ly Seo Vu, Mr. Giang A Su, and Ms. Giang Thi Chung come from the Hmong community. Mr. Loc Van Vin comes from the San Diu community. Ly Seo Vu, Giang A Su, and Loc Van Vin have been at HEPA for a number of years and were a part of the K1A (The first class of HEPA which started in 2007). Ms. Giang Thi Chung joined HEPA from another SPERI FFS site at the start of the scholarship period in 2010. The common aims and skills of the students are in line with the SPERI and HEPA vision for their alumni.

Ly Seo Vu, Giang A Su, and Loc Van Vin were part of a progress evaluation in 2011¹³, which showed that the primary opportunities for improvement as eco-farming teachers were in delegation, team and individual time management, timing of activities, defining activities planning and preparation. They needed to work on communication as a group, to define roles and be flexible. They also needed to improve positive feedback for students and get more participation from the students as well as from the HEPA staff. This evaluation will go on to further describe the skills and competencies as well as the impressions and critiques of these three gentlemen and Ms. Giang Thi Chung.

The Selection Process

Candidates for the scholarship were chosen by SPERI from the HEPA and SIMACAI student body. All scholarship holders said that they felt that the selection process was open, fair and went well and that they knew what was happening. Vin said:

“After finishing the course from 2008 to 2010, we were chosen to get this scholarship, with the aim to advance eco-farming skills for each member. In that process, we met together and chose the topic that we expect to study.”

All the students felt that the process was gender balanced. They said that the selection process attempted to ensure a balanced gender. Chung, the female scholarship holder, says she was chosen as a candidate for the scholarship by Ms Lahn and SPERI because of the requirement gender balance, and was aided by SPERI for the application process.

Loc Van Vin

Loc Van Vin comes from the San Diu community of the Na Peo village, Bac Lang commune, Dinh Lap district, Lang Son province, Vietnam. Before starting the advanced training he was a student-participant in the training course on eco-farming systems at HEPA. He felt that his technical and methodological skills and experiences in eco-farming were lacking extremely. He also felt that his personality did not give him a strong basis for being an active change-maker. However, having spent some time at HEPA, he was able to offer a little help with the network development and construction of eco-farming by the time he started the advanced training.

Through the training he hoped to advance his English and computer skills. He hoped to gain more knowledge, experience and skills in eco-farming, to advance his education skills, TOT skills, to be better able to teach students and communities. He hoped to learn local knowledge (in e.g. agricultural cultivation, herbal medicine) from elders of different regions of the Mekong. He also hoped to learn more about ways to keep the surrounding environment clean.

¹³ A self-evaluation and teaching evaluation from September to November 2011 undertaken by Eva Saldana

He said he was most impressed by the training on traditional cultures, specifically the traditional customs on natural resource protection and the management of the community through customary law. He was also very impressed with the training on the use of herbal medicine. He said that in the training on the traditional uses of medicinal herbs by Thai minority herbalists from Que Phong, Nghe An, Vietnam:

“In my opinion, these are significant lessons for youth. These are not only herb knowledge but also valuable culture; those knowledge are priceless that were conserved and practiced by the previous generation. To maintain these knowledge, our generation need learn and practice to conservation for generation in the future.”

He said that since the training he and his classmates have been practicing by collecting and planting herbs for daily use.

He has learned a lot on the last two years. Notably: He has advanced his TOT skills by being able to share and to teach topics that he feels confident in.

He feels that his technical and methodological skills have increased significantly and that his skills and experiences are satisfactory. He feels that his personality gives him a strong basis for work in eco-farming. He feels that his role in helping the community is more-or-less satisfactory. His role in promoting the network development and furthering eco-farming as well as his role in TOT is considerably improved. He makes some use of the technical learning he received during the advanced training and considerable use of the methodological, social and personal learning.

He has increased his conversation-English through daily life interactions with foreign volunteers. His formal English has also improved through self-learning and through translating topics that volunteers come to HEPA to share with students.

His computer skills have improved. He is able to type with 10 fingers, which he learned through minute keeping at HEPA meetings, writing regular reports, and keeping a digital diary. He is also able to install windows and other software in a computer and is able to use the Internet easily (i.e. email, skype, search engines).

His practical skills have also improved. He has a better understanding of the eco-farming theory and is able to apply it, through workshops, meetings, and community activities etc.

He liked the education program, he said he enjoyed it and it worked for him. He feels that his teachers were efficient, very good in teaching the methods of eco-farming and able to teach specific topics well. He was assessed throughout his studies and got plenty of feedback from his teachers. He felt that SPERI always supported him in his studies.

As a teacher Vin inspires people, has good interpersonal communication skills, works well in a team and is very hard working. He makes sure his students are rested and enjoying themselves and keeps a diversity of activities. Pedagogically he is good at encouraging ideas and connections, good at working in consensus and he has a good conceptual understanding of the topics he is teaching. However, he could learn to better understand the needs and expectations of the education (i.e. more about specific eco-farming techniques). He could gain more confidence in designing activities and preparing for what is going to happen and in explaining what is going on and why. He could be firmer in his approach and utilize the resources around him to help in the education.

Vin's Next Step

He says that he would like to continue the advance study on eco-farming. He hopes to be able to share his knowledge through TOT. He thinks this training will help him get there.

He now works in eco-farming in an administrative position and as a farmer at HEPA. He would like to facilitate the growth of HEPA as a good demonstration site to facilitate teaching of eco-farming. He wants to work on community leadership for eco-farming and to help in his home bioregion with networks and contacts.

Suggestions: Vin said:

“Continue provide opportunities for new students, in order to advance their knowledge and skills. Help them confident enough and keep go on spreading eco-farming to their home communities and other communities in home and abroad.”

Criticisms: Vin said that during the advanced training program there were some operational problems. For example: he was hoping to learn how to drive and this training was not made available.

Ly Seo Vu

Ly Seo Vu comes from the Hmong community of Ngai Phan village, San Chai commune, Simacai district, Lào Cai province, Vietnam. Before starting the Advanced Training he had a high-school diploma and had spent 2008-2010 at HEPA practicing eco-farming where he gained a certificate in training of trainers (TOT) for growing Organic tomato. His goals were to find a lifestyle that would ‘feed the soil, so that the soil feeds the plants’, an environment that was ‘green, clear and beautiful’ and an employer with trust in him, working in the philosophy of nurturing nature.

What most impressed him during his time at HEPA was his experience in the cooperative designing of the farms and the village, and learning about the damage to the natural environment through the exploitation of natural resources. He was most impressed by the visit to Nasai village, ‘designed’ by Thai minority in Hach dich commune, Que Phong district, Nghe An province. The village is located under a large forest and above a terrace field system. He was deeply impressed to see that the people understand the natural system and use nature effectively. He said that life there is not separated from the forest; the forest provides for peoples needs and both the forest and the village provide nutrients for the cultivation system.

He expected to do a lot with the community surrounding HEPA and in his home community but has not had time to implement his ideas. He plans to implement them in the future when his farming skills have improved and he can demonstrate a farming system with good yields that protects the environment with practices that can be applied in many communities. He did have a chance to take his family to visit FFS-SIMACAI. His older brother was very impressed with what he saw and even said that he intended to apply some of what he saw there on his home farm.

He enjoys the training and feels that it works for him. He said that the student lead, student centered training method allows for deeply instilled learning. Students understand what they have learned very deeply. He feels that the hands on training helped him understand clearly and remember longer; He feels confident in his TOT abilities especially in working in hands-on-training.

Through studying and practicing eco-farming at HEPA he has become confident in TOT for students, staff and farmers. He is glad for the training and for the opportunity to teach as he feels satisfaction in sharing what he has learned with others.

He says that the primary support-staff were efficient and timely. He received enough support from SPERI and says that he was also strongly supported by his father.

After finishing the study he feels confident in planning and designing eco-farming and in teaching eco-farming management. He feels that his technical skills and experiences and personality give him a strong basis for this. His role in promoting network development and construction for eco-farming, as well as his role in TOT has grown considerably. He feels that his methodological skills and experiences and his social skills and experiences have improved more or less.

As a teacher he is confident and inspiring (a farmer with integrity) he is comfortable planning creative educational activities and exercises with clear objectives and a well-defined process. He has a high-functioning eco-farm, a good knowledge of all the farming systems and an understanding of local knowledge. However, he could work on his interpersonal communication skills and improve his openness to negotiation to embrace diversity and allow more collaboration, consensus and flexibility within the education. He could also offer more orientation and give more positive feedback, balancing firm with flexible.

Vu's Next Step

He would now like to help in the Development eco-farming and TOT for the broader community. This training will help him get there because he understands and feels confident about the techniques and philosophy. He has become a full time employee of SPERI at HEPA and is living and working on Thuong Uyen farm. He makes considerable use of what he has learned during the training. He says:

'I would like to find a minority student, directly teach him/her on Thuong Uyen farm during 3 – 5 years. After that, let him/her manage Thuong Uyen farm and also TOT for other people.'

Suggestions: Offer TOT and support for students who are poor. Offer an education to help them grow and have more opportunities to learn about eco-farming.

Criticisms: He has no critical feedback for the course because he feels it has been done so very well.

Giang A Su

Giang A Su comes from the Hmong community in Can Chu Su village, Can Cau commune, Simacai distric, Lào Cai province. Before participating in the advanced training course in HEPA he achieved a high school education and was a member of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union. He also joined for some studies at HEPA before starting in the advanced training. Through the training he hoped to improve practicing eco-farming skills, computer skills, English and TOT skills for the protection of the forest, soil and water resources; to 'keep them beautiful'.

Before starting the training he felt that he was not helping to promote the kinds of changes he wanted to see in his community. He had no role in TOT in his community. He felt that his social skills and experiences are were lacking extremely. He also felt that his technical and methodological skills and experiences were not very good and that his

personality did not give him a strong basis for promoting and teaching eco-farming. However, since by the time he started the advanced training he had spent some time at HEPA, he was more or less helpful with the network development and construction of eco-farming.

I think that the program is relevant and useful with me, because the method was “learning by doing” so after finishing the program, I confident enough to share my knowledge for other people: other Students, student groups from Hanoi University of Agriculture and visitors from home and abroad.

He found the following trainings most impressive over the last two years:

1. Technical raising black chicken of the Khmer in Cambodia
2. Technical production green vegetable (eco-vegetable) at Cay Khe farm
3. Plan and design eco-farming system in HEPA
4. Efficient management and use water skills at Cay Khe farm

These training programs worked well for him because they all involved intellectual investigation. Deep thinking is required in an eco-farming system, so it is very intellectual but at the same time, very personal and close to the farming life. For example: The efficient management and use water at Cay Khe farm is based on design made through through observation and study of the farm, it uses many many different solutions to exploit, use and manage water in the best way by learning from nature.

“Ecological principles are expressed by this system. It ensures connect, diversity, use resource available in nature; this system was designed with many different forms of gathering, storing water: sink, swale, pond, terrace field, plants... They connect together and connect with other systems: house, bathroom, terrace field, vegetable garden, fruit tree and other plants, to create a close system. This method is convenience for domestic use, irrigation, and also for treatment.”

He feels that his technical skills methodological skills and experiences and his role in the community have improved considerably. He feels that his current social skills and experiences are more or less satisfactory and that his personality gives him a strong basis for satisfactory work. He says that the concept of ‘student lead’ education has meant that when students have problems, they can discuss freely to get solutions. Through this education method he has been in a free environment and has had space to practice.

“Therefore, after finishing the course I feel that my autonomy, assertiveness are good and completely can own a eco-farm.”

He also feels that his role in TOT and in promoting the network development for eco-farming have improved very much. He has gained Management farm skills TOT skills especially in the process for integrated processing of pig feed.

Su says that he is a farmer, and that his practice skills are strong. Through the advanced training course, he has received many more, complimentary, skills and experiences. His education skills on eco-farming and his TOT skills have improved.

He likes the training because the method for teaching and learning are close to nature and to the landscape. He thinks this educational method is useful in the current context with degradation of both culture and environment and says that it helps him spread his vision about society and agricultural values.

He feels that he was supported strongly by SPERI, who always tried to find opportunities for him to join study trips, and aid him in developing his eco-farming skills.

As a teacher he has an organic management style and creates a positive participatory environment full of collaboration. His interpersonal relationships are good: he understands peoples needs, he is patient and good at listening, he is culturally sensitive, flexible and even asks students about any needs for changes to the plan. He also asks staff for opinions and advice when needed. However, he could use more work in his communication and facilitation methods and he could work on making plans that include more details with clear outcomes and uses for the tasks.

Su's Next Step

He makes use of what he learned during the training. Since finishing the course he has gained a profession in eco-farming as a permanent full-time employee at HEPA. He is a leader of construction and development, and works to demonstrate eco-farming through building up curriculum and managing the educational program.

"I want to construct a eco-farming, network and education for youth in villages in home and abroad."

He wants to have a well-run eco-farm with a good business plan for teaching eco-farming at HEPA. He is working on gaining more self-confidence, on evaluation and participatory techniques and designing and maintaining a good demonstration site. He wants to help create systems to organize the community and create a healthy effective and comfortable sharing environment in his bioregion for networks in eco-farming.

Suggestions: Su said that there are a number of issues that need to be worked out in the program. He hopes that the new students can learn from the experiences of his class.

"New student should define what is field you really expect to study in the education program. Find a teacher, who is knowledgeable about that field, to regular support you during studying."

Criticisms: Su says that there are still mistakes in the program that lead to loss of time and energy. He feels that these are slowly being worked out and he is looking forward to sharing and working on them.

Giang Thi Chung

Giang Thi Chung comes from the Hmong community of Hồ Sáo Chải village, Thào Chu Phìn commune, Simacai district, Lào Cai province. Before starting the training she had a high school diploma and intermediate vocational training in Lao Cai agro-forestry. She also had a certification of TOT on eco-farming and she was the Union Secretary of her branch the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth Union.

She felt more-or-less confident in her technical skills and experiences and in her role in promoting the development of eco-farming in her community. She felt that her social and methodological skills and experiences were not satisfactory.

Through the training she hoped to learn more about the importance of clean food and about her relationship to the environment. She wanted to find ways help mitigate environmental pollution, especially the harmful effects of plastic bags. She also came to HEPA to learn how to use a computer and to speak English.

After the training she is still a student of eco-farming systems at HEPA. She feels that, through this training she has made significant personal improvements, her personality now gives her a strong basis for satisfactory work. She feels that her technical skills, methodological skills, social skills, and her role in promoting the network development and construction of eco-farming have improved more-or-less.

“The advanced training was relevant/useful for my needs because I can combine learning and practicing the lessons, organized on the field.”

She was most impressed by:

1. The lesson about designing an eco-farming system at Centre for Community Capacity Development (CCCD) in Dong Le commune, Tuyen Hoa district, Quang Binh province;
2. The visit to Mr. Hoang Huu Phuoc’s demonstration farm in Lam Trach commune, Xuan Trach district, Quang Binh province;
3. The lesson about management and protection natural resources based on traditional custom laws in Long Lan village, Luangprabang province, Laos;
4. The lesson Mini pot experiments on rice;
5. The Forum of Youth and Sustainable Development organized every year by Live and Learn organization to make youth aware of Climate change, and ways to limit environmental pollution.

She said she has improved her skills and understanding of the principles on eco-farming design and the core values and steps to design eco-farming system. She now has an advanced ability in the practical eco-farming skills and TOT skills, especially in the process for integrated processing pig feeding systems. She said she has come to better understand the importance of forest resources: “it feeds our life”.

She said that she likes the training model and that she was always supported by SPERI for her studies.

Chung’s Next Step

Now she wants set up a farm to share the eco-farming practices and principles in her home community. She says she would like to design a demonstrate eco-farming at her home, to share the eco-farming knowledge with her family and neighbors. She says this training will help get her there, but that there are challenges:

“I believe that I enough eco-farming knowledge and experience, but farmers have been abuse chemical substances and chemical fertilizer therefore very difficult to change their behavior.”

She wants to help farmers overcome the negative effects of conventional farming practices but is not sure how to challenge the ideas of farmers and change their habits. She has not had many opportunities for practicing and training in general so she is not 100% confident in her teaching skills and says she needs to learn more before she can start. She is, however, very confident in her eco-farming practices, is comfortable in making small experiments with cropping practices and is able to transmit her knowledge to her students and follow through to the practice.

Suggestions: She hopes that the attention and energy of the training course will go on to support other people. She wants more young farmers to have opportunities to gain skills in eco-farming and other fields.

Criticisms: She said that the supplemental advanced subjects, such as English and computer skills, need significant improvement.

Education Program

HEPA follows a hands-on experiential education methodology with a strong emphasis on learning by doing and in cementing that learning through teaching. In farming practices, students are given room for exploring approaches based on their traditional, or other, environmentally and socially sound practices.

The rule system for HEPA is based on the permaculture ethic of ‘people care’, students relate these rules to their own community and discuss any beliefs or ideas in relation to their traditional ethics. Through this process they become familiar with self-regulation and accepting feedback two important aspects of learning at HEPA.

They are encouraged to be confident in addressing any personal or community issues and are encouraged to practice expressing ideas. They are invited to access community decision-makers at various levels to build up confidence in voicing issues, organizing meetings and dialogues.

Students are strongly encouraged to draw links between their experiences (thoughts, ideas, innovations and actions) at HEPA and the identity and cultural values of their home community. Drawing these connections maximizes their potential to expand traditional knowledge and action.

Training of the scholarship holder students has happened through visiting professionals to HEPA and through trips to centers outside of HEPA. In the end this training has promoted the scholarship holders to the position of trainers for visiting student farmers to HEPA.

Scholarship holders had varying impressions of what the structure of the training program was about. Chung said that the structure of the advanced training program is based on learning by doing on the field and some supplemental advanced subjects such as English and computer. Su felt that the hands-on-training is primarily about practicing and sharing skills. Mainly practicing on farms and in addition participating in TOT.

Chung said that the typical aspects of the training are about “learning by doing”. She said that the students express their passions and learn through work and study. She said that during hands-on training she practiced eco-farming lessons, primarily at Cay Khe farm, and participated in study trips at home and abroad.

Benefitting Eco-Farming

All the scholarship holders said that the activities in HEPA always directly benefit eco-farming. Vin said it was because HEPA follows the eco-farming philosophy of SPERI based on three core values: belief, customs and ethics; local knowledge; pattern and natural principles. Su said it was because the philosophy of HEPA is nurturing nature and following the beliefs and customs of the ethnic minorities. Thereby, the attitude and daily behavior at HEPA always leads to the protection of nature.

Vu said that the activities at HEPA always directly benefit eco-farming and more. He feels that the HEPA practices go beyond eco-farming to ‘nurturing nature’.

Learning from the Outside

Many of the trips to outside institutions have made significant impacts on the farming practices employed at HEPA. The Agriculture Development Denmark Asia (ADDA)

organic tomato training of trainers (TOT) has made tomato-growing commonplace at and the CEDAC training on birds has created a number of changes to the ways birds are raised.

Vin said that through study trips to various communities he has obtained knowledge about cultivation methods, customary law in natural resource protection and herbal medicine.

Chung said that she learned a lot during her excursions. Especially during the study trip to learn about forest management in Long Lan, Laos, she got to know a community with an excellent ecological balance.

Knowledge to the Outside

All the students are eager and interested in sharing their knowledge with the outside communities and with their home communities and are encouraged to do so.

Chung says she has been connecting with the surrounding community and her home community. She has also been connecting with the Đội 9 village in the neighborhood of HEPA. She shared some basic knowledge about eco-farming with a local farmer in Doi 9 village who is now working toward eco-farming with practices such as: composting manure before application, and non-use of chemical fertilizer.

Vin says that he has been connecting with his home community but only through some small activities. He shared with 1 local household, to help them understand the eco-farming cultivation system and he shared a bit about the 'classification of waste' with his family. He said that working outside has been difficult:

"Studying and practicing at HEPA took almost of time, so activities were carried out in the home community has been not much."

Su said that he has been connecting with Doi 9 village, Son Kim I commune, Huong Son district, Ha Tinh province, Hanoi and that he is making good contacts there for sharing ideas about eco-farming.

Feedback and Assessment

An education program should ideally have a built in feedback system to offer students an opportunity to learn from successes and failures from their own and from an outside perspective. This is especially true of a hands-on education where students spend more time working on their own and get more chances to experiment. Ideally, training should be followed with the learning-by-doing and then feedback, a chance to talk about how it went and to hear what the impressions of others were and where the strengths and weaknesses are for the work. However, feedback about the education program and the student progress and learning is not formalized and does not happen regularly. HEPA is working on making a system for this but at the moment the students are learning from doing, making mistakes is a part of the process but there is no function of the system to offer feedback about successes and failures.

One strength of this program is that students are highly encouraged to develop critical thinking, and learning through comments and feedback from each other. This kind of feedback happens in two meetings a week (Wednesday and Saturday), wherein students and staff share points about the functioning of the education program and the farming practices.

Students report to SPERI support staff once per month, and minutes are shared from each meeting. They keep a diary on all farming activities, course-work, any issues, or other HEPA related activities, and deliver this diary to SPERI when it is full (SPERI now has 30 or more of these). Reading through these and offering feedback could be an easy way to support students learning.

Vu says he was assessed by his teachers who, he says, made sure that he was *'implementing what he intended and what he wanted'*.

Su said that he received some feedback from teachers but chose his own way through the studies. In the first study year, he focused on farming practices and got positive feedback. In the second study year he focused on English and TOT skills and decreased the practice time on the farm and he received some negative feedback for this choice.

Su also complained that there were 6 months in the program with no professional teacher. He found it difficult to study by himself. He said that there was no one to ask when he had questions and this impeded his improvement. Near the end of the course he needed to write a report to get the diploma but had no support. Therefore, he says, he still hasn't technically finished. All the scholarship holders mentioned that they did not yet have the diploma.

Chung said she was assessed by fellow students and by staff. She said that practicing on the farm and learning TOT has a kind of built in feedback.

There are some critical questions to be answered about the model for the training that happens at HEPA. Primarily this is in the honing and clarifying the difference between the larger vision and the actual practice on the ground.

Opportunities for Growth

SPERI and HEPA

SPERI believes it is important to integrate aspects of community rules (customary traditions and regulations) with diverse development programs in the local community. Young farmers are the best hope in making this bridge. Genuine sustainable development can only happen if youth believe in, and practice, traditional customs with respect to community religion and nature. The *broad vision* is that HEPA alumni will act as catalysts for the mission of SPERI and the betterment of the Mekong region; they will play a role in making positive changes in their communities and the world; they will be confident and open-minded, share, learn, and engage in advanced positions for coordinating and facilitating eco-farming, community political action in their communities; they will encourage community members to engage in healthy dialogue.

The issues related to an NGO running a training center: HEPA is a training center for young farmers who want to learn about eco-farming, SPERI is a political oriented NGO with broad aims to change the political climate of the Mekong region for a shift toward more ecologically mindful practices. The differing missions and aims of the two entities needs to be better defined and described. This will help both to overcome inefficiencies.

It is highly recommended that the list of goals and ideas for HEPA be revisited and carefully rewritten and consequently followed. This will be instructive for the HEPA community and for SPERI as well. Making a distinction between the missions for HEPA

and SPERI will help both entities do a better job in striving for the ultimate joint goal of strong eco-farming communities and networks throughout the Mekong region.

Farmer Field School (FFS)

The HEPA education model differs from the FFS model in that training happens on a training center rather than in the actual field. HEPA could do more to get the training to happen out in the field or perhaps it could more appropriately be named a training center for young farmers.

Networking

The SPERI contribution to HEPA could do more to facilitate connections with land rights, community forest, and organic farming networks (among others) allowing students access to the practical resources and experiences of the larger activist community. Students are encouraged to study the examples of the practices of these networks for a comparison with their own communities, but could be better networked for connections and support. The variety of sources and actors in the SPERI can provide students more tools in shaping their own ideas¹⁴. Students could also be invited, where possible, to participate with SPERI in lobbying activities.

¹⁴ Landless Networking in Son kim, Mr Tran Quoc Viet (chairmen of 7 communities in Tuyen Hoa, Minh hoa, Bo trach who face a lack of land rights and are now facing livelihood insecurity).

Annex 1. Questionnaire

Was the advanced training (from August 2010 to May 2012) relevant/useful for your needs? Why or why not?

Was the selection process for students open, fair, and did it go well¹⁵?

Did you know what was going on?

Was it gender balanced?

List at least three to five lessons and units (field trips and internships), which were most impressive over the last two years? Why these?

Please expand on one of these experiences by telling more of the story and your impressions.

List one to three or three to five things that were not good in the training program. Why?

Please expand on a specific example of what was not good.

Impacts

Have you been connecting with the surrounding community and your home community (others)?

Where have you been?

Skills

What skills have you gained, or improved, in these past two years? Please explain (e.g. TOT skill, farm practice, field trip to community).

Any comments on this?

Advanced Training Program Structure:

What is the structure of the Advanced Training program (do you know what you were supposed to have learned in the last two years)?

Were your primary support people effective (not effective)? How did they support you?

Have you always been supported for your studies through SPERI?

How were you assessed and where did feedback come from?

Assessing the relevance and usefulness of the training:

How do you feel about the hands on training (like don't like)?

¹⁵ Not to worry too much about if it was efficient.

Did you enjoy it?

Did it work for you?

What are the typical aspects of the hands on training (i.e what does it mean?).

What are you doing during hands on training?

Can you get something out of it?

Does it benefit your learning?

Other Questions:

Do the activities at HEPA always directly benefit eco-farming? Why or why not?

What would you like to do now?

Do you feel like this training will help you get there?

Will this assist you in the next step?

Suggestions:

Any lessons learned through the student lead student centered training?

What are the major take-away things and what is the feedback for the program for new students?

Any other comments? Even confidential?