

# Capacity building for sustainable farming development in the hill land areas of northern Vietnam

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## Introduction

The production of food to feed a growing population is a high priority in Vietnam. Parallel to the increasing food requirement, the natural resource management is also very important for developing the agricultural production in the long term and developing the social economy in Vietnam. So it is necessary to develop the capacity to promote sustainable farming systems, especially in the highly eroded hill land areas of northern Vietnam. The Mountainous Resources and Environment Centre (MREC) is part of a resource poor University, which services the sixteen provinces of the mountainous region of northern Vietnam. It is committed to meeting the challenge of developing economically and environmentally sustainable farming systems for this poor region of the country.

## Background

In 1995 MREC began a small project in Cuong Loi commune, Bac Kan province, northern Vietnam. The purpose of this project was to introduce new farming practices to the community aimed at increasing food production and household income, and enhancing protection of the environment. As a result of the Cuong Loi project MREC identified key gaps in their knowledge, relating to social research skills and organic agriculture practices. A partnership between MREC and the International Global Change Institute (IGCI) in New Zealand was established aimed at strengthening MREC's capacity in these areas. Some of the main outcomes from this partnership are discussed below.

## Outcomes

The development of social research skills initially focussed on an evaluation of the Cuong Loi project (Nguyen, 1998). This research identified a number of factors that influenced the uptake of new practices, including: levels of education; ethnicity; family support; availability of labour; and risk. An important outcome was an identified need for a more participatory approach to the development and implementation of projects in the hill lands of northern Vietnam. This led to a capacity building project aimed at developing MREC's skills in participatory rural appraisal (PRA) and gender analysis. The first stage of this work has been completed, which involved a detailed review of the Cuong Loi project and a new project at Khang Ninh commune, field visits to gain hands-on experience with PRA and gender analysis methods, and establishment of next steps (including a monitoring and evaluation system) at Khang Ninh aimed at facilitating a more participatory approach for the remainder of this project. In parallel with these developments awareness has been raised of organic production methods through a visit to organic properties in New Zealand by MREC staff, which led to the establishment of an organic plot at Thai Nguyen University. Further work on organic practices will be founded on the participatory process that has already been established with MREC.

## Conclusions

MREC and the College of Agroforestry, Thai Nguyen University have identified the need for improved knowledge on organic agriculture practices that are compatible with the traditional knowledge-base and the economic conditions of farmers, to ensure the long-term sustainability of food production in the hill land areas of northern Viet Nam. In order to facilitate the adoption of such practices they have also recognised a need to adopt a more participatory approach to working with communities. In particular, it is clear that future projects need to address the needs of women and the poorest and least educated ethnic minority groups.

## References

Nguyen Thi Mao, (1998). Sustainable farming development in the hill land areas of northern Viet Nam. MPhil. Thesis, University of Waikato, New Zealand.