



Cocoa Growing Transforms Life in Vietnam's Central Highlands



Mrs. Buon standing by her cocoa plant. Photo: USAID

Mrs. H Kem Buon, an ethnic minority woman in the Central Highlands province of Dak Lak, recalls a time when things were not easy for her family; they did not make enough money to cover basic expenses. The whole income of her family with four children was then around VND20 million (\$950) a year, which came from maize, rice and corn crops on their 1.4 hectares of farming land. Her family's most valuable assets were an old house and an obsolete motorbike.

"Our family used to face so many difficulties. We worked very hard to earn a living but could not make enough for foods, not to mention school fees and hospital expenses for our children," said Mrs. H Kem Buon, who is now known as a successful woman in Buon

Chua village, Yang Tao commune, Lak District.

When cocoa was introduced in the province in 2009 by the Sustainable Cocoa Enterprise Solutions for Smallholders (SUCCESS) Alliance program supported by USAID and its industry partners, Mrs. H Kem Buon was among the first farmers to participate and received 300 free seedlings from the project. In addition to being trained on essential techniques on cocoa cultivation and development, she learned about harvest and post-harvest practices.

"At the beginning, we had difficulties since I did not know much about farming technique, also with no money to purchase fertilizers and insecticides to grow and develop cocoa trees," Mrs. H Kem Buon said. "Then everything got better and better. The project provided me with a lot of training, knowledge and assistance and our cocoa trees have been growing well and bearing fruits. Now I collect cocoa pods every week and sell them to pay for daily expenses for my family. We will try to work very hard to become one of the best smallholder farmers in the community and ensure that our children are able to obtain a good education. The cocoa crops have transformed our life."

With her savings coming from her enhanced income thanks to cocoa cultivation and other crops after several years, she is also going to finish her new house valued up to VND500 million VND (around \$24,000).

Through her involvement in the project, she was also taught to become a training facilitator where she learned enhanced social skills such as organizing skills, teaching skills, presenting skills and how to work with community members. These skills made her more confident and active as she attended a cocoa growing farmer club in her commune. She has become more open and more positive through community activities. She became a member of her village's Women's Union in 2011 and later selected as the leader of a borrower group who supports farmers to deal with procedures of loans from People Credit Fund of Lak District.

Holding different positions in the community helps enhance her prestige with farmers and in the whole community. Now she can support farmers by giving technical knowledge on cocoa and connecting them to sources of financial support for their farming.

“Many people come to visit our house and ask me about farming techniques, pruning, integrated pest management, market access and information,” she said. “I am ready and willing to help them with information on how to grow cocoa so that they can improve their standard of living. I am very happy to see that other cocoa gardens in the commune growing well also and many people earn decent incomes from cocoa. I wish my house will become a cocoa learning center where local people can discuss cocoa growing techniques and share valuable experience.”