

SUSTAINING CHANGES, MULTIPLYING IMPACTS



At MI, we strive for positive change.

In the six-year run of the Regional and Local Economic Development-East-West Economic Corridor (RLED-EWEC) project, MI opened 4,252 farmer households and 36 SMEs' access to rice, maize, and coffee market value chains in Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam. It also facilitated expedient cross-border movement between and among countries along the EWEC corridor.

This created an environment for beneficiaries to thrive. As farmers and SMEs gained knowledge in farming and business management, they formalized groups and associations; secured low-interest loan rates; deepened trust towards government; initiated public-private partnerships; acquired seedlings and fertilizers; harvested higher quality yields; and expanded market clientele resulting to increase income and profits.

Instilled ownership among beneficiaries also prompted conferment of Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) certifications to 12 rice farmers' groups in Lao PDR, while businesses such as Vanida Rice Mill secured its Good Manufacturing Practices certificate—a first in Lao PDR. Through RLED-EWEC's concerted efforts, GAP validity was also extended to two years in the

country. These milestones helped farmers and business owners maximize return of investments as they improved the safety and quality of their produce, while at the same time protecting the environment and safeguarding the health and safety of their workers.

Deeper cohesion between government and business groups was also cemented. Through the project's dialogue-sustaining platforms, agriculture and cross-border policies were streamlined. These led to the closing of two checkpoints for ease of movement to and from Savannakhet; the installation of signboards on border fees and procedures for transparency in the Khammouane, Savannakhet, and Quang Tri borders; and the formalization of provincial government agreements to foster cross-border trade relations.



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At the root of these changes is RLED-EWEC's participatory approach to community development. At the onset, MI has capacitated its beneficiaries and worked with government and local partners so they can take charge of their development process, resources, decision making, and monitoring. Strong support from government and the private sector also ensured that market linkages were opened and maintained.

These achievements would not have been possible without the commitment of government officials, community leaders, and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation who were, and continue to be, invested in helping the Mekong region attain sustainable agricultural development.

RLED-EWEC's positive changes are paying forward. After the project closed in October 2019, farmers' groups continue to upgrade their produce, officials carry on training more farmers, lending companies still offer low-interest loan rates, private business groups remain in contract with SMEs and farmers' groups, and government officials maintain practical cross-border trade facilitation.

Much work remains to be done, particularly in advancing skills of more people in remote communities to maximize their resources, meet production standards and demands, and secure wider partnership agreements to stimulate deeper economic growth. But the foundation of skills building and networking has been set for other organizations to build on RLED-EWEC's gains. ■



Ms. Jutammas Thongcharoen was the Director of the RLED-EWEC from 2018-2019. Under her leadership, nine staff operated in Kayin State, Myanmar; Quang Tri Province, Vietnam; and Khammouane and Savannakhet Provinces, Lao PDR. Alongside project gains on the ground, the RLED-EWEC also strengthened MI's organizational development as it established a Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning Unit to systematize transparency and accountability in all of its project implementation.