

Participatory rural development for sustainable livelihoods in central Vietnam

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Abstract: This paper describes a three-year field project implemented jointly from September 2006 by Hue University of Agriculture and Forestry and the Graduate School of Global Environmental Studies, Kyoto University. The project uses a participatory approach to enhance community resilience, environmental conservation and household economy in three project sites in Hue province in central Vietnam. Project activities currently taking place in just one of these project sites are the focus of this paper. The project is ongoing: its activities will come to an end in September 2009. What lessons have been learned so far and what challenges lie ahead for the project's facilitators?

Keywords: participatory approach, JICA, rural development, environmental conservation, international development project

1. Background of the project

The Graduate School of Global Environmental Studies (GSGES), Kyoto University has implemented a Japan International Cooperation Agency Partnership Programme (JPP),¹ entitled “Enhancing Community Resilience and Livelihood Security to Cope with Natural Disasters in Central Vietnam”, in collaboration with Hue University of Agriculture and Forestry (HUAF). GSGES has worked together with HUAF through seminars, partner research and student exchanges since communication with the Centre for Agricultural Forestry Research and Development (CARD)² at HUAF first began in 2003.³ The JPP is the first implementation project to be undertaken by the two academic institutions. Its focus — to work towards improvements in people's livelihoods at the grass-roots level through small-scale activities — represents a marked departure in terms of aim from the collaborative research and exchanges conducted in the past between GSGES and HUAF.

2. Project overview

2.1 Project members

Preparation for the project began in 2005 when GSGES drafted a project proposal with the help of HUAF and JICA. The three-year project in place today was initiated in September 2006. For the duration of the project, one Japanese coordinator resides in Hue full time to manage the project and coordinate efforts between Vietnamese and Japanese team members when the latter visit Hue — as they do frequently — to contribute ideas and expertise to the project. On the Vietnamese side, a full-time project coordinator oversees the entire project, while five full-time project assistants and around 15 part-time researchers facilitate project activities and provide local expertise. The Japanese team is staffed by members of GSGES. The Vietnamese project team includes both researchers and administrative workers at Hue University.

2.2 Project objectives

The project's goal, pursued by all project members, is defined as follows:

To improve community resilience, environmental protection and living conditions for better welfare and human security.

The above mission statement may be understood in terms of three main objectives:

- 1) To enhance community resilience;
- 2) To enhance environmental protection;
- 3) To enhance household economy.

Underlying each objective, and thus the project itself, is the goal of enhancing the overall welfare and security of the people living in the three communities targeted by the project. Overlap between these objectives suggests that they must be pursued in concert for the overall success of the project. This is perhaps best shown by example. Villagers in Hong Ha commune, one of the project sites, take trees illegally from the protected forests because they do not have stable jobs and need an immediate income. In this case, people confronting the harsh realities of poverty cannot always afford to prioritise the potential future scarcity of natural resources over imminent need. It follows that the problems faced by the people concerned cannot be easily solved by conventional single-focus

initiatives. Schemes to plant trees or provide environmental education are of benefit, but these benefits are reduced when pursued in isolation. Instead, a more holistic approach to community welfare is required: one that enables people to gain a stable income at the same time as conserving natural resources. The holistic perspective is essential for a project such as this, which incorporates economic, social and environmental goals into welfare and human-security oriented activities.

2.3 Project concepts

Project concepts are common notions or approaches shared by all the stakeholders participating in a given project or activity (in this case, members of the local community, project members and any persons related to the project activity). Two concepts summarised below are particularly important to the project under discussion in this paper.

2.3.1 Participatory approach

The participatory approach underpinning this project departs from the top-down approach frequently employed in project work in Vietnam. Top-down approaches to community-based project work provide ideas and initiatives to local people uni-directionally. Project guidelines are sometimes uninformed by knowledge of a local system or culture and there may be little scope for local people to share their opinions with project managers during the planning and implementation stages of a project. The participatory approach used in the GSGES-HUAF project attempts to reverse this process by encouraging the involvement of local people in every aspect of the project's management. The villagers living in the three communes targeted by the project are the main actors in planning and implementing project work. They are assisted by researchers, whose main role is to facilitate the participation of the local people by finding solutions they deem acceptable.

2.3.2 Understanding locality

Understanding the local situation is considered vital to both the planning and implementation of this project. Identifying and planning effective project activities depends on a deep understanding of local realities and the needs and potential of the location. Project members sought to understand the local situation in various ways before discussing what activities might be appropriate for each of the project sites. To do this, they used household surveys, group discussions and community walking, for example. These efforts to understand local context are ongoing and continue long after a given activity has been implemented. This

way, project activities remain flexible when new issues or concerns arise over the course of their implementation.

2.4 The project sites

Vietnam is a country of 83 million people. Over 70 per cent of its population is agrarian, with livelihoods based on agricultural cultivation and production, forestry and aquaculture. Kinh, the main ethnic group in Vietnam, accounts for 87 per cent of the population. The remaining 23 per cent belong to 52 ethnic minority groups, which live predominantly in the country's uplands (Dang 2000: 1). Twenty years have passed since Vietnam's government first implemented wide-ranging economic and social reforms under the *doi moi* innovation policy. Significant economic development has been achieved in this period. The economic gap between urban and rural populations has widened over the same period, however, and poverty remains a pressing problem, particularly in the country's mountainous areas.

Vietnam is located in the monsoon climatic zone and is often affected by natural disasters such as flood and typhoons. The central part of Vietnam is particularly at risk. Poverty and natural disasters pose a constant challenge to the development of this area.

The project sites are located in varied landscapes in upland, midland and lowland areas of the Bo River watershed in Thua Thien Hue province, central Vietnam (see also Mizuno in this volume). Figure 1 shows the location of the three communes in which the project activities are focused. These are 1) Hong

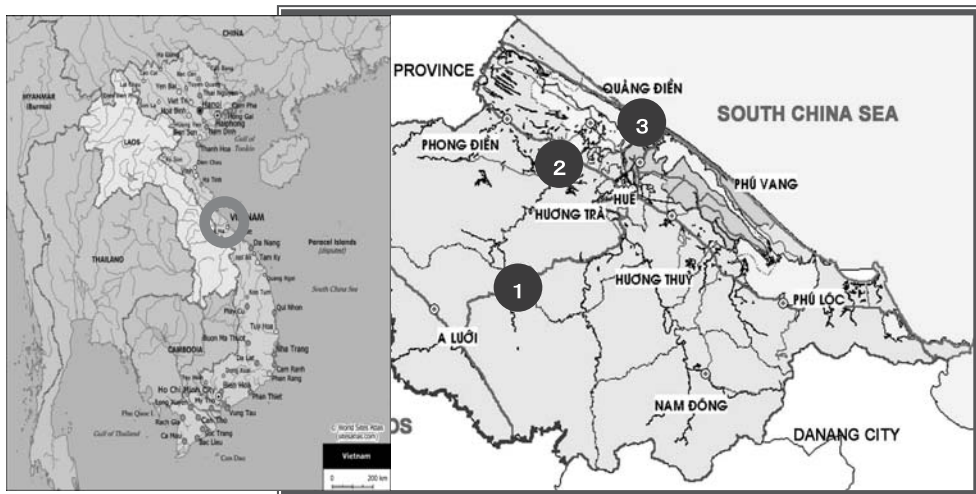


Fig. 1 The three project sites: (1) Hong Ha, (2) Huong Van and (3) Huong Phong
(Source: Tanaka)

Ha, an upland commune, 2) Huong Van, a plain commune, and 3) Huong Phong, a coastal commune.

2.4.1 Hong Ha

Hong Ha is a mountainous commune in A Luoi district, located 45 kilometres to the south west of Hue city. The commune is divided into five hamlets — Con Tom, Pa Hy, Can Sam, Pa Ring, and A Rom — which together provide a home to 1,332 people (Thua Thien Hue Statistical Office 2007: 58). Over 90 per cent of the population of Hong Ha belongs to one of four ethnic minority groups, namely Co-Tu, Ta-Oi, Pa-Hi, and Pa-Co.⁴ People of Kinh ethnicity number as few as 15 families, most of which are engaged in business sectors. Hong Ha is one of the 16 poorest communes in A Luoi district and among the 1,581 poorest communes nationwide, according to national poverty criteria (Hoang and Le 2006: 161).

2.4.2 Huong Van

Huong Van is a plain commune in the Huong Tra district, located 20 kilometres north west of Hue city. There are 6,892 people living in the five hamlets of Lai Thanh, Long Khe, Son Cong, Lai Bang and Khe Trai (Thua Thien Hue Statistical Office 2007: 55). Most residents are of Kinh ethnicity, although a small minority of people of Van Keu ethnicity live in Khe Trai hamlet. The people make a living by cultivating vegetables, fruit and rice and raising pigs. Huong Van's location renders it particularly prone to natural disaster: the commune is severely affected by floods between September and January every year. Significant flooding in 1999, 2004 and 2007 devastated housing, social infrastructure and livestock.

2.4.3 Huong Phong

Huong Phong is a coastal commune in Huong Tra district, 12 kilometres north of Hue city. There are 10,824 people living in the six hamlets of Thuan Phuoc, Thuan Hoa, Tien Thanh, Van Quat Thuong, Van Quat Dong and An Lai (Thua Thien Hue Statistical Office 2007: 56). The commune's residents, all of whom are of Kinh ethnicity, engage in aquaculture, fishing, rice production and animal husbandry. Livelihood depends on geographical location: many residents of Thuan Hoa and Van Quat Dong, located near Tam Giang lagoon, engage in aquaculture, whereas the inhabitants of other hamlets are more typically engaged in rice cultivation and animal husbandry. Huong Phong's coastal location makes it vulnerable to strong winds, flooding and typhoons. In October 2007, two people died when their fishing boat was caught in a strong whirlwind.

3. Project focus: activities in Hong Ha

Small-scale activities are implemented in each of the project sites described above in accordance with the local needs and potential of each commune. The remainder of this paper presents a report on the progress of activities currently under way in Hong Ha commune.

Hong Ha commune is the most economically deprived of the three described above. A succession of assistance programmes provided by the Vietnamese government and overseas non-governmental organisations working in the region have struggled to improve the livelihood of the ethnic minorities living in the commune over recent years. HUAF itself spearheaded a research project named Community-Based Upland Natural Resource Management in Hong Ha from 1998 to 2003, designed to improve income levels and access to land and forest for local people in Hue province. The project achieved considerable success in economic terms: income levels for local people — many of whom lived in dire poverty — rose as new technologies and crops such as cassava and rice were introduced to their communities and new lands were opened up for farming. Its facilitators nevertheless concluded that there was scope for improvement, if the villagers' quality of life were to improve in sustainable ways. An emphasis was placed on the use of local resources, for example, and new efforts were made to reappraise the role of indigenous knowledge among ethnic peoples whose lives are deeply rooted in their own culture. These approaches were deemed particularly important to future project activities and these insights provided the basis for activities now under way as part of the HUAF and GSGES project.

3.1 Understanding local needs and context in Hong Ha

Before any specific project activities were undertaken, the first critical step of GSGES-HUAF joint work in Hong Ha was to understand the locality. The information used to determine what activities are suitable for a given locality can be collected in a variety of ways, including statistics, reports, interviews and in-depth discussions. Information was collected in Hong Ha commune by means of 1) a baseline questionnaire survey, 2) a series of group discussions, and 3) community walking.

The baseline questionnaire survey was conducted at all 273 households in Hong Ha commune in August and September 2006. Researchers from HUAF visited houses and talked to household members, using a prepared questionnaire form. The purpose of the survey was to form a general picture of life in the commune by gaining an understanding of natural resources, agriculture, livestock,

education, sanitation and experiences of disaster. Subsequent analysis of the questionnaire made it possible to identify a number of characteristics common to the entire commune.

These issues formed a starting point for consecutive group discussions held in December 2006 for the purpose of learning about the needs and assessing the potential of local people (Figure 2). The discussions were held in all five of Hong Ha's hamlets between project facilitators and Hong Ha residents, who had been divided into six social groups per hamlet. The organisation of the six groups reflected different social groupings within the community: young women, elder women, the poorest members of the community (lacking land or resources), the disabled poor, village leaders, and villagers living on an average income. These divisions revealed the project members' attempt to take into consideration local hierarchies based on aspects such as gender, age, social status and geography, and to listen to all the members of the Hong Ha community, in particular those groups whose voices were not always heard. Groups of five to 10 people organised in this way were able to discuss freely the problems and possibilities of their specific situations with the project facilitators. It is unlikely that accurate information on local realities for the individuals living in Hong Ha would have been collected had people not been organised into these groupings or included in the discussion process.

The information obtained through the questionnaire survey and the group discussions provided a basis for community walks with local people. These walks served two main functions. First, they gave project members a clear and visual understanding of issues raised by local people during the questionnaire survey and discussions. For instance, people who lacked land because of soil erosion could show project members exactly where the damage was taking place by



Fig. 2 A group discussion among young women in Pa Ring hamlet on 9 December 2006
(Source: Iizuka)

leading them to the site. Second, they offered project members an opportunity to explore the feasibility of a proposed activity in cooperation with the villagers, through practical assessment of on-site conditions. The feasibility of boosting income by raising goats, for example, could be checked over the course of a community walk examining the availability of grasses or land.

3.2 Identification of project activities in Hong Ha

Project members compiled a list of problems mentioned by local people over the course of the information collection activities described above. Meetings were subsequently held among researchers to consider the listed problems in more detail. Analytical problem trees were used to reveal the causes and effects of each problem under consideration. Listing problems simply shows what kinds of difficulties local people are facing. Building problem trees helps researchers look at how the problems interrelate and establish their cause. A consideration of the specific needs and potential of each social group was a central part of the analysis.

The findings were presented to the villagers of Hong Ha in a feedback workshop held in the commune in January 2007. The results of the baseline questionnaire survey and problem analysis were shared with the local people during the workshop and residents were invited to give their suggestions and comments. Finally, they were asked to prioritise the activities they wanted to implement in their village.

The process of identifying suitable activities for project work is invariably lengthy, consuming both time and human resources. In Hong Ha, the process took about six months. Many meetings and discussions with local people were held during this period, when researchers spent a lot of time identifying problems for analysis and discussing potential solutions with villagers. This raised expectations, some of which were disappointed later, when the proposed activities did not make it to the implementation stage. While deeply unfortunate, it would appear that some degree of disappointment is inevitable owing to budget limitations or the capabilities of project members. Without effective problem analysis and consultation, however, project activities cannot meet local needs.

3.3 Implementation of activities in Hong Ha

Six activities were eventually identified for implementation in Hong Ha commune as a result of the processes described above. One of these, a proposal to create a local market for the commune, has yet to be implemented because its feasibility has not yet been determined. The other five activities are already being put in place. The following offers a brief introduction of each of them.

3.3.1 Traditional community house

One of the primary wishes of the local people was that a community house be built in their village. Hong Ha has lacked a community house for some decades: years of war and a scarcity of construction materials are just two of the reasons why the commune has been unable to build one until now. Mr Thanh, the chairperson of Hong Ha commune, expressed his feelings as follows on the occasion of the opening ceremony of Hong Ha's community house, held on 15 September 2007 (Figure 3):

This traditional community house is an important symbol of our people. It stands for the unity and the spirit of our community. In past decades, we could not gain an opportunity to build it, therefore it was our responsibility to build it by ourselves this time. We local people have worked very hard to build it together. We are very happy to achieve it because this traditional community house is the cultural pride of our people.

This speech was made to more than 300 local people, the district chairperson, the presidents of Hue University and Kyoto University, the rector of HUAF and 20 university researchers. Mr Thanh's words clearly reveal the significance of the traditional community house and the satisfaction he shares with his fellow villagers in the building they have created together.

i) Discussion and planning

Discussions to build a community house began in July 2006. Many villagers



Fig. 3 Dancing in celebration at the opening ceremony of Hong Ha's community house
(Source: Iizuka)

expressed their eagerness to build it and voiced ideas as to its design and interior during group discussions held in December 2006. The consensus was that the house should be built in a traditional style, reflecting the ethnic cultural background shared by most of Hong Ha's residents. Many people wanted to decorate the inside of the house with items crafted locally, such as traditional musical instruments (drum and gong) and tools for hunting and cultivation (shovels and knives).

Many opinions about the community house emerged during these months. Project members favored a more durable design that would combine traditional and modern elements. Many local people wanted to build traditional community house with concrete pillars, departing from the traditional style that uses only natural resources. Some villagers said it would be difficult to find suitable timbers in the commune and time-consuming to locate them in the mountains and transport them by buffalo to the centre of the commune. Only after repeated discussions were people able to come to the same conclusion: that the community house would be built in the traditional style using materials available in the commune.

This decision was followed by the creation of a Community House Management Board, comprised of commune leaders and the respective heads of Hong Ha's five hamlets. The board confirmed the design of the house and determined the type and quantity of materials for construction in participation with village elders and leaders of the women's union, youth union, commune police, Communist party and veterans' organisation, etc. The board also allocated the work across each hamlet, some specific groups and individuals having a specific expertise required for its construction.

ii) Implementation

Bamboo, rattan, palm leaves and kien⁵ timbers were determined to be necessary materials for building the house. Every household in the commune was asked to collect a specified quantity of bamboo, rattan and palm leaves. Kien timbers were cut in the forest and transported by a group of young men with a buffalo.

Collecting materials was one of the most difficult tasks in this activity. The mountain commune of Hong Ha is today surrounded by secondary forest — the area's primary forest cover was decimated by the use of the herbicidal defoliant Agent Orange during US attacks on Vietnam in the late 1960s. Finding 18 kien trees for long pillars (5.7 metres in length and 20–25 centimetres in diameter) and 20 kien trees for short pillars (3 metres in length and 20–25 centimetres in diameter) was therefore a formidable task. Collecting the materials for building took longer than either the villagers or the project members had anticipated. Its

accomplishment is a credit entirely to the huge and concerted efforts of the local people.

Building work on the community house started on 24 July 2007 after elders from each hamlet met to hold the traditional ceremony of Arohh Alloong on 22 July in order to worship the materials to be used for making the pillars. In this ceremony, the elders informed the pillars that they now belonged to the local people and not the forest. Once the ceremony was complete, carpenters started work on creating the pillars. A second traditional ceremony, Choh, was held in the presence of 80 local people on 14 August. In this ceremony, elders prayed for the longevity and resilience of the community house and the safety of its construction process. Local people started work on the house immediately afterwards, with 30 villagers volunteering to work every day of the construction process, supervised by two or three village elders, who shared the traditional techniques of building a community house with the younger men under their instruction. Ideas varied widely with regards to the technical aspects of construction between the older and younger generations. Work progressed only through a process of compromise, achieved after some very heated debate. The house was finished in six weeks. Its completion was followed by a traditional opening ceremony, Pa Chien, which included music, dancing and sacred sacrificial rituals. This ceremony was attended by the entire village and lasted for three days.

iii) Future plans

The long-term effective use and management of the community house presents as many challenges as its planning and building. Group discussions were held in October and November 2007 to discuss how it should be used. The talks were organised among groups of young women, young men, elder women, elder men, village leaders, schoolteachers and pupils. The groups focused on issues such as:

- 1) the management and maintenance of the community house
- 2) the rules and regulations by which it would be run
- 3) the kinds of activities that might be organised inside and outside the community house
- 4) interior equipment and decorations
- 5) landscaping (such as planting trees outside the house)

These group discussions have enabled many villagers, who had not had an earlier opportunity to contribute their ideas, to have their say. Opinions from a broad range of people are considered vital if the house is to be used and maintained

sustainably with the participation of all the different generations and sectors of the community. The ideas and requests that came out of these discussions have been recommended to the Community House Management Board and are being incorporated into a set of guidelines being drawn up to regulate the long-term use and management of the house. All the members of the Hong Ha community are expected to participate in running and using the building. In this way, they make the house they built for themselves truly their own.

3.3.2 Goat-raising activity

The natural environment in Hong Ha commune is conducive to raising livestock such as buffalo, cows, chickens and fish. Livestock is an important commodity for the villagers because as well as providing food it can be traded for income. Incomes from animal husbandry remain low in Hong Ha because the villagers lack the financial capital and experience needed to improve their stock, and their animals are vulnerable to a variety of infections and viruses.

i) Discussion and planning

Goat raising was first identified as an appropriate activity by villagers in group discussions held in December 2006. Project members subsequently met with villagers to discuss their proposals further and visit a number of sites to analyse the effectiveness and feasibility of raising goats. High motivation on the part of residents, ample land for grazing and a high level of local demand for goat meat were three main factors that recommended goat raising as a suitable activity for enhancing livelihoods in Hong Ha.

The selection of households to participate in raising goats was critical to this activity. Households were chosen on the basis of five criteria, listed below. These required that participating households should:

- (1) be motivated to learn and participate in the activity
- (2) have ample grazing for the goats and adequate animal feed⁶
- (3) be able to spare the time and labor to raise goats
- (4) be able to build goat pens by themselves
- (5) agree with goat rotation (billy goats, principally, for the purposes of breeding)⁷

Five households were found to meet the above criteria over the course of detailed surveys and discussion. Final selection reflected the efforts of project members to ensure that a number of poorer households were included in the activity, thus enhancing the household economy of those most in need.

ii) Implementation

A training course and study tour was organised for all the households participating in the activity. On the training course on 19 May 2007, participants visited the homestead of Mr and Ms Vuong, where goats were already being raised in Hong Ha commune on a small scale. The next stage of the training period comprised a study tour on 23 May to visit Mr Nhuan, a veterinary surgeon raising goats on a larger scale in Huong Tho, a neighbouring commune. In each case, the individuals leading the training were local practitioners, rather than outside experts, with hands-on experience of raising goats under circumstances similar to those the trainees could expect to face. This was an important factor for the trainees, who rapidly absorbed information on practical aspects of goat raising, such as how and what to feed the animals, how to build goat pens and shelters from local materials, how to graze goats and how to keep them safe from disease.

The construction of pens and shelters followed the training period, with the five households showing a great deal of craftsmanship and initiative in using bamboo, rattan, palm leaves and acacia foraged locally (Figure 4). A total of 19 goats were allocated among the five households, who have since tended to the goats carefully. A series of goat farmers' meetings have enabled the five households to share their experiences and offer solutions to any problems that have arisen. While a number of goats have been lost to disease since the start of the activity, several kids have been born and weaned successfully.

iii) Future plans

Project members continue to observe the goats and encourage meetings among the households. Future meetings are planned, which will enable the five house-



Fig. 4 Mr Son's goat house
(Photo taken by Iizuka, 12 July 2007)

holds to meet a veterinarian surgeon and other practitioners skilled in animal husbandry. Training sessions held in the past have focused on the basic aspects of goat raising and management. The next stage is for the households to study how to breed, deliver and rear goats, keeping them free of disease and treating simple diseases where these occur. The participants have a much clearer idea of what they need to ask in these meetings, having already started to raise goats. In addition, they have a great deal to share.

3.3.3 Zeng weaving activity

I have two daughters and I would like to teach them how to weave traditional zeng when my skill improves and my daughters are old enough to learn.

These words were spoken in October 2007 by one of the women learning to weave zeng in an activity initiated in Hong Ha in April 2007. The activity was set up in response to wishes strongly voiced by women in December 2006 in two group discussions held between the project facilitators and women of the village. The women had been divided into two discussion groups — one for younger women, and one for older women. Women in both groups asserted that they were interested in learning how to weave zeng textiles, traditionally produced by women of the Ta-Oi minority group, among whom skill in weaving is passed down from mother to daughter (Figure 5). Such textiles are traditionally worn as clothing, given as part of a wedding dowry to a groom's family and used to decorate houses. Yet few women living in Hong Ha today can weave zeng.



Fig. 5 Ms Nang, a weaving student, with her daughter

(Photo taken by Iizuka, 1 October 2007)

Decades of war, coupled with evacuation from and migration to the village, have eroded the generational links by which skill in weaving has been passed on. Changes in lifestyle and the increasing popularity of cheap machine-made western clothing have also eroded local demand for zeng for use in making clothes.

Activities across the three project sites focus typically on income-raising strategies designed to build markets, raise animals and plant cash crops. The zeng weaving activity provides a cultural dimension not explicit in the rubric of other project activities and affords the women of Hong Ha an invaluable opportunity to preserve and use the indigenous knowledge that is one of their most precious “natural” resources.

i) Discussion and planning

The women explained that they were highly motivated to learn how to weave if a teacher could be found for them. They would also need equipment and materials. They listed both financial as well as cultural considerations for their high levels of motivation. Purchasing zeng at A Luoi market — located 15 kilometres from Hong Ha commune — is both time consuming and costly: the fabric needed to make up a skirt costs between 15 and 30 US dollars, which accounts for a large part of a household’s expenses in Hong Ha terms. By learning how to make zeng, the women hoped to reduce their expenses at the same time as restore tradition and cultural pride in their village.

The first task in meeting the women’s wishes was to help them find a teacher. This task was facilitated by Ms Lam, the leader of the local women’s union, who introduced project members to Ms Kan Tam, one of the few women in Hong Ha commune who knew how to weave. Reluctant at first to share her skill with the other women, Ms Tam agreed to teach the weaving class after some discussion. Next, Ms Lam oversaw the selection of five learners to participate in the weaving activity. Learners were sought who could 1) participate throughout the learning process despite other demands on their time, 2) share their learning experiences with other women, and 3) attend the classes without reimbursement.⁸ Over the course of several discussions with the women learners, their new teacher and project members, Ms. Lam identified when, where and how often classes should take place.

ii) Implementation

The tuition started in April 2007, with four learners making daily visits to the house of Ms Kan Hong — one of the participants — in order to study weaving. The activity received a great deal of attention from other women in the village, attracting large numbers every day to observe the class. Class numbers quickly

expanded to allow six of the most eager observers to join in. The teacher offered to teach them at the same time as the first intake, on the grounds that the first group was already able to weave more or less by themselves and she was able to provide supervision when they needed it. In this case, and on other matters such as changes to when and where classes would be held, the learners and the teacher have been entirely self-organised, managing their classes capably, without the need for intervention from project members.

The women have needed a great deal of motivation and initiative. Village life involves long and hard days of work from the women of Hong Ha. Time for weaving would ordinarily be sought at night or on rainy days, in the hours not needed for farming or housework. Holding the weaving activity during the day, therefore, prevents some learners from taking the class regularly, when the needs of farmwork, housework and childcare intervene. Other women are obliged to walk long distances — as far as one hour each way in some cases — to attend class. The progress of the learners thus varies greatly in accordance not only to the ability of the individual but also her personal circumstances. On the whole, however, the group is progressing well. All the women mastered the technique of weaving patterns with colours in the first six months of the activity. Eight of them were able to incorporate the use of glass beads into their weaving — a level of skill that tests even the proficient zeng weaver — by January 2008.

iii) Future plans

In October 2007, a meeting was organised between the teacher, learners and project members to discuss the activity's future. Learners confessed to needing more practice in setting up the looms at the beginning of the weaving process. The teacher agreed to teach the group on a part-time basis for a further three months. It was hoped that the extension would enable all the women to become proficient enough to set up, weave and finish off without any assistance from their teacher. This would allow the women to continue weaving beyond the end of the activity, should they wish to do so.

A major challenge to the sustainability of this activity is whether or not learners will be able to buy wool without assistance in the future. Wool and looms have been provided to the women for use throughout the duration of the weaving activity: there is every indication, however, that many women will not be able to afford the wool they need, once classes have finished. One of the women expressed herself as follows:

I like to weave very much and want to continue after classes have finished. However, I do not have money to buy wools, nor do I own the

equipment I need. Well, I will wait for the season of selling cassava and try to buy wool with any income I can make at that time.

The women are not confident enough in the quality of their work to expect to be able to sell and obtain an income from weaving any time soon, nor are they convinced that there is a market for their products. While certain items are purchased in Hong Ha from vendors coming to the village from the city, most transactions in the village are carried out on the basis of giving and exchange rather than selling and purchase. Acquiring a skill in weaving is unlikely to generate income directly for the learners. This by no means reduces its importance for the women: the activity still offers them the chance to reduce their household expenses if they can make cloth for their personal use to give as gifts, and in addition, it promotes the conservation of their ethnic culture. These gains are at risk if the women cannot afford to buy wool after the activity ends. What initiatives may therefore be considered to help them meet the costs of buying wool? Could they learn to make wool or at least dye it themselves in an attempt to reduce their costs? Resolving the wool issue is clearly vital to the sustainability of this activity and should be discussed carefully among learners and project members in the future.

3.3.4 Environmental learning activities in Hong Ha's schools

Villagers living in Hong Ha depend for their livelihoods on the natural resources of the forests, fields and river in and around their commune. They are, therefore, vulnerable to any deterioration in the natural environment.

i) Discussion and planning

Environmental education activities are initiated and planned at Hong Ha's primary and secondary school⁹ in accordance with the motivation of teachers at the two schools. Mr Tan, the principal of the primary school, emphasises the need to enhance levels of environmental awareness in the commune if environmental issues are not to become a problem in the future as transport and communications between mountainous Hong Ha commune and cities intensify.¹⁰

All environmental learning activities carried out to date in the two schools have been planned over the course of successive joint meetings between school teachers and project members.

ii) Implementation

The schools implement activities by engaging the participation of their students and local people in various organisations such as the youth union and the hamlet

health centre.

A tree-planting activity took place in March 2007, during which 30 indigenous trees were planted in the yard of the primary school. Ten more trees were planted at the secondary school. In each case, the teachers and students took responsibility for digging the holes, planting trees, and making protective fences. Each class in the year group was then assigned a tree to look after. The aim of the activity was to enhance pupils' awareness of the importance of trees by planting and taking care of them at the school, where they can see them every day. Many projects focus on planting trees over an area of many hectares in order to conserve the natural environment. The much smaller scale tree-planting activity carried out at the schools focuses instead on raising the awareness of the individual student to excite their interest in broader conservation work later on. Naturally, it is difficult to assess the change of awareness for an individual. The schools' teachers have every hope, however, that their pupils will discover a new sense of relationship with their living environment by planting and taking care of the trees themselves.

A second environmental education activity was organised by the two schools in May 2007, when 100 pupils took part in a painting contest on the theme of "environment and people". In this activity, the pupils had an opportunity to think about their attitudes to the environment and express their perceptions and ideas through their paintings. All students submitting pictures were also required to make a speech explaining the concept behind their paintings. A great deal of effort went into the paintings and the colourful and beautiful works submitted by the students vastly exceeded the expectations of their teachers (Figure 6). Students were less expressive when called upon to speak — they were more than a



Fig. 6 A young boy shows his picture at the "Environment and People" painting contest hosted by his school on 12 May 2007
(Source: Iizuka)

little shy to be expressing their thoughts in front of so many people.

A third activity took place in August 2007 in Pa Ring hamlet, whereby 50 local residents and students joined forces to clean the hamlet, sweeping the road with brooms and collecting rubbish from the bushes and shrubbery by the roadside. Members of the commune's youth union formed a special corps to dig holes in which to bury the collected rubbish.

The latter highlighted a problem that affects the commune as a whole: there is currently no disposal site in Hong Ha for non-organic refuse. Rubbish in Hong Ha is generally organic in content; garbage of this kind is therefore buried in holes such as those dug by the youth union during the cleaning activity in Pa Ring. A certain amount of rubbish made of non-organic matter such as plastic and nylon is reused within the commune. Plastic oil, food and drink cans and bottles are recycled daily by the local people, for example, since these items are relatively expensive. Not all non-organic rubbish can be reused, however: nylon bags and plastic wrappings used for dried or convenience foods, for example. At present, rubbish of this kind is generated only in small quantities in Hong Ha commune. These levels can be expected to rise if, or rather when, communication and transport between the village and urban areas become more frequent in the future. Problems of rubbish disposal and recycling will increase at the same time. Project members and school teachers are already consulting over what might be done now to prepare for this.

iii) Future plans

The schools are already planning a number of environmental learning activities for students, such as environment protection-focused camping trips and study tours, in an effort to maintain the momentum they have created. Their efforts are driven by two challenges common to all environmental education campaigns and activities, wherever they are carried out. First, how to maintain people's level of interest in environmental issues reached after the success of a given awareness-raising activity, and second, how to persuade people to translate any change in their awareness into action on a daily basis.

For example, follow-up cleaning activities based on the model implemented in Pa Ring were originally planned to take place in the other hamlets of Hong Ha. This did not happen. In Pa Ring's case, the enthusiasm of the schools and their students combined with the participation of local residents to make the activity possible. Without intervention on this scale, the activity simply did not catch on. Persuading residents to incorporate environmental actions into common practice will be the real challenge for environmental education activities in Hong Ha for the remainder of the project's duration.

3.3.5 Vanilla planting activity

Vanilla is an orchidaceous plant that thrives in a wide range of tropical climates. The vanilla bean is a highly valuable export commodity and major producers include Madagascar, Mexico and Indonesia. Vanilla is not indigenous to Vietnam and the vanilla bean requires intensive husbandry, laborious processing and strategic marketing to make it profitable. A primary trial to examine the plant's growth performance and suitability as a new crop species to be grown in Vietnam's central highlands is currently under implementation in Hong Ha commune. This is a part of the livelihood improvement programme focused on product diversification and the use of home gardens.

i) Discussion and planning

The vanilla planting initiative in Hong Ha was proposed by a Japanese project member in early 2006, prior to the launching of the project. Since the introduction of any new crop requires careful testing over a period of time, it was determined that trials should begin early so the first results would emerge during the project period over the course of discussions between project members at HUAF and GSGES. Previous studies on vanilla plant husbandry and processing techniques carried out in other growing regions such as East Africa and Indonesia formed a basis for the Hong Ha trial. The provision of source plants and seedling vines was planned among project members, and an import permit for bringing vanilla plants into Vietnam was secured from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development by HUAF.

Vanilla-growing trials in Hong Ha were organised through discussions between the village leaders and project members. In all, eight farming households in the hamlets of Pa Ring and A Rom were selected to take part in the trial. Each was advised to prepare a plot in their home garden, in advance of the trial.

ii) Implementation

In July 2006, a project member visited a village in South Sulawesi Province, Indonesia to collect vanilla seedlings under cooperation with a local non-governmental organisation. A total of 150 vines were carried to Hue after customs and quarantine procedures were cleared in both Indonesia and Vietnam. The vines were distributed among the eight participating farming households and the planting procedure was demonstrated to the farmers by project members. Project members monitor the growth and conditions of light and shade for each of the plants in the farmers' care and collate these details — along with any problems or aspects of husbandry reported by the farmers — during regular visits to each of the participating households (Figure 7). The plants' growth

performance is measured carefully during each of these visits. Plant measurements show a period of slow growth during the winter and spring seasons (from November to March), followed by a rapid increase in the growth rate in the summer months (from April to July). These measurements vary widely owing to differences in location, soil and surrounding conditions.

Overall levels of compatibility for the vanilla plant in the area have proved high. For this reason, additional seedlings were imported from Indonesia in July 2007 as part of an expansion of the trial experiment. Plants have since been distributed to 10 households in Hong Ha, three newly participating farmers having joined the activity. The project has also expanded its vanilla trial to a second project site, Huong Van commune, where 30 vines were planted in four households on 31 July 2007.

iii) Future plans

Confirming the compatibility of the vanilla plant for growing in Hong Ha is only the first step in a long process before the plant's introduction into Vietnam's central highlands may be deemed complete. The first flowers will begin to bloom two to three years after planting. At this time, the participating farmers will need to study skills such as hand pollination, harvesting and propagation in order to procure a good crop. A successful harvest will give rise to yet another stage in the learning process; curing vanilla beans requires a number of complicated techniques as well as some special equipment and facilities. This somewhat lengthy process will allow ample time for the formulation of marketing strategies such as developing export channels and creating local demand for vanilla products, to ensure that vanilla planting will generate income for farmers in the future.

Expanding the trial to other project sites — a process that is already under way — naturally offers opportunities for vanilla planting activities. The plant can be reproduced easily by cutting: farmers in the pilot project may, therefore, take the initiative to spread the plant among other villagers or to neighboring villages in the future. Close observation and documentation of any such expansion of activities are another important aspect of this activity because the process of expansion is vital to the indigenisation of any crop introduced into a region for



Fig. 7 Ms Ha beside her vanilla vines. (Photo taken by Iizuka, 28 July 2007)

the first time. It is important to observe any changes to the husbandry, production and use of vanilla in the local economy because such adaptations are all part of the indigenisation process.

4. Mid-term conclusions: lessons learned to date

The first year of the project was spent understanding local conditions, undertaking discussions and consultations with local people and initiating project activities. What lessons have been learned at this stage of the project? Some lessons have been explored already in the Hong Ha-focused activity sections discussed in this paper. A summary of the lessons raised presents a guide for better project implementation in the project's remaining years. It is hoped that the practical lessons that emerge may be relevant to anyone involved in project work elsewhere.

4.1 Participation of all community members

As outlined in Section 2.3.1, the application of a participatory approach is fundamental to this project. Such an approach necessitates the inclusion of all the members of a community in every aspect of planning and implementing project activities, regardless of any social, economic or physical disadvantages that may compromise an individual's situation in his or her community. It has become evident over the course of past project works carried out in Hong Ha that not all farmers have the same capacity to participate equally in activities. Too often, richer farmers and those who enjoy a higher social or economic status in the community participate more fully, while women and poorer farmers are rarely involved. The members of this project began with the premise that measures must be taken to encourage the participation of these individuals. An understanding of local context is vital in this context, as aspects such as social and financial status and special characteristics such as age, health and ethnicity all influence people's livelihoods.

The group divisions determined in December 2006 at the time of group discussions reflect the project members' attempts to be sensitive to local context. By dividing residents into the six social groups described in Section 3.1, project members could hear the voices of individuals who rarely have the opportunity to speak out. Interesting ideas were raised from each group over the course of these talks and many of these were incorporated into project activities once their feasibility had been ascertained. The zeng weaving activity is one such example: it began as an idea expressed by both young and elder women speaking out in their respective groups. It is unlikely that the proposals for a zeng weaving

activity would have been either made or heard had discussions not been divided up into groups organised on the lines of specific characteristics, in this case, age and gender. This is because the results of general discussions cannot reveal the needs and potential of certain groups, particularly marginal ones.

4.2 Importance of understanding locality

Project members' efforts to begin all project work from a position of understanding local realities have proved essential to the implementation of all the activities described in this paper. Efforts to understand local context benefit local people and project members alike, when a better understanding of the way people live is used to develop steps and interventions that might be taken to improve their situations. In the case of building a community house in Hong Ha, a year elapsed between the start of discussions and the building's completion. The construction took less than two months. However, long months were spent reaching conclusions about aspects such as architectural design, the use and collection of materials and work allocation. It would arguably have been quicker for project members to circumvent the discussion process and bring in a construction team from outside the village. Yet the process of understanding locality — time consuming though it was — has proved essential to the activity's success both after as well as during the process of building the house. The long-term positive impacts are substantial, in that the local people now feel a sense of ownership and accomplishment with regard to the house they planned and built with their own hands.

In September 2007, when the house was almost complete, Mr Hoa, the Communist Party secretary in Hong Ha commune, commented in a meeting with officials from the Japan International Cooperation Agency that project members had listened to local people's ideas and expectations over the course of countless discussions held before and during the building period. This, he said, was rare: other organisations had tried to build a community house in Hong Ha in the past, but their initiatives came to nothing when project leaders imposed their ideas on local residents, who were subsequently unable to follow them up. Mr Hoa's remarks underline the importance of repeated discussion in the process of coming to a conclusion on any project activity.

4.3 Using local resources

The importance of using local resources has become evident over the course of the project work described in this paper. It promotes sustainable development without a dependence on outside factors. The goat-raising activity is a good example of how local materials can be mobilised. Participating households have

built shelters and pens for their goats using materials accessed locally, such as bamboo, and the goats are fed on special grasses that can be found or grown around the village. If households had needed to buy in materials from outside — to make concrete, for example — in order to build the facilities for the goats, or if they had needed to purchase feed, they may not have been able to afford to participate in the activity, and its sustainability would have been compromised.

Activity work in Hong Ha reveals that people are as important a local resource for the community as nature. Mr and Ms Vuong were invited to lead the goat-raising training workshops because they were experienced in raising goats successfully in Hong Ha. As fellow villagers, they could communicate easily with the new goat-raising farmers: their ability to communicate in the local language spoken by their trainees, rather than in standard Vietnamese, proved particularly advantageous in easing communication and making concepts easily understood. The process of teaching and learning would not have proceeded so smoothly had experts been brought in from outside the village. The mobilisation of local skills can be seen again in the case of the zeng weaving, in which a local woman drew upon her own experience of weaving and communicated it directly to the women under her instruction. Utilising and encouraging her capacity — or rather affording her the means to mobilise her own capacity — was essential to the success of the weaving activity. Just as teaching optimises the teacher's local potential, learning encourages and boosts the potential of the women in her class. Here, as in the goat-raising training and many of the activities in the project, adaptive learning between local people is strongly encouraged by project members. It is the adaptive learning process, ultimately, that enables local people to be the driving force in the activities taking place in their community.

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Notes

¹ The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is an implementation agency that administers Japan's efforts to provide overseas development assistance in developing countries. JICA Partnership Programmes (JPPs) support projects implemented by a variety of Japanese organisations and institutions in developing countries. Recipients of JPP support include Japanese and overseas non-governmental organisations working with local communities, local governments and Japanese and overseas academic institutions.

² Established in 1993, CARD implements a number of research projects with an aim to improve the livelihood of local communities and better protect natural resources and environments currently being degraded by economic development in central Vietnam.

³ Three years of exchanges of scholars and students between GSGES and HUAF were followed on 15 September 2007 at Hue University by the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding by the presidents of Kyoto University and Hue University. This document expresses the commitment of both institutions to further academic exchanges and cooperation at the university as well as departmental level.

⁴ Pa-Hi and Pa-Co cultural customs closely resemble those of the Ta-Oi people: for this reason, these three groups are commonly classed as Ta-Oi by Vietnam's administrative bodies. This classification approach is not shared by the people in Hong Ha, who consider these three groups as culturally and socially distinct from one another.

⁵ Kien is one of the best timbers in Vietnam. It is very scarce and used for making pillars. Palm tree leaves are used as roofing materials. Bamboo is used for building walls, floors and sometimes door frames. Rattan is used for binding materials together.

⁶ Research into a number of grass varieties, such as elephant grass, lemongrass (broad- and small-leaved varieties) and indigenous ruzi, is currently being conducted by project members as part of a farm experiment to explore local feed options for Hong Ha goats.

⁷ Older goats capable of reproducing (billy goats in particular) are rotated among the five participating households for breeding purposes. The older goats remain the property of the project, while any offspring become the farmers' property.

⁸ It is usual for participants in projects and programmes organised by government and non-governmental organisations in Hong Ha to receive reimbursement. Reimbursement is believed to provide an incentive for participation and to compensate participants for time lost from farmwork or domestic chores.

⁹ Hong Ha primary school currently has 10 teachers and 172 students and Hong Ha secondary school has 19 teachers and 266 students.

¹⁰ Radical changes in government economic policy (renovation or doi moi) implemented in the mid-1980s allow Vietnamese to buy and sell their products anywhere when, in the past, markets and prices were strictly regulated. For this reason, non-organic and convenience products today find their way into villages such as Hong Ha from the cities. In the past, villages would have sustained themselves almost entirely on produce grown or raised locally.

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