

MPED SUCCESS STORY — VIETNAM

This article is part of a series written to highlight some of the success stories from FCM's Municipal Partners for Economic Development (MPED) program. MPED projects seeks to improve local governance and economic policy development around the world while, at the same time, emphasizing the importance of gender equality and environmental sustainability. From 2011 to 2014, the City of Victoria, Canada, worked with the City of Thai Nguyen, Vietnam, to support and improve local economic development in Thai Nguyen.

Canadian municipal cooperation helps promote sustainable community development in the City of Thai Nguyen, Vietnam

Since the late 19th century, Thai Nguyen has had a successful but small tea-growing industry. The climate and soil of the highland district are conducive to the production of aromatic teas, especially the Tan Cuong variety for which Thai Nguyen is famous.

With support from MPED and the City of Victoria, B.C., Thai Nguyen developed a model for community-based tourism around its regional specialty industry. The tea producers hoped to develop a homestay service through which tourists could stay in a resident's house, have a traditional meal, and learn about local teas.

The idea arose from dialogues with experts from Royal Roads University in Victoria which, in turn, led to a study tour to the community of Sapa in northwestern Vietnam. Sapa has developed homestay tourism around its rich, colourful ethnic communities, and the tour was instrumental in making the case for an overarching community-based tourism strategy, which Thai Nguyen City completed in 2014.

The partners worked with the tea producers to find out what was needed to set up this new economic model, generating ideas from the bottom-up. From the initial small-scale idea, it became clear that promoting other cultural activities would attract more tourists and help grow the industry. "As we were preparing our tourism development project, the City developed an 'ecosystem' to pursue sustainable community-based tourism," says Mai Anh Kiem, vice chairman of the People's Committee of Thai Nguyen.

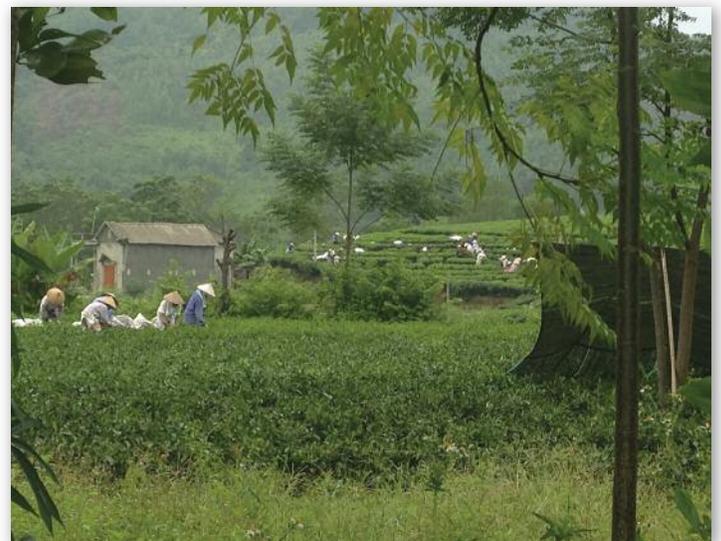
"One of the most important things we did to develop our strategic plan for tourism was to work from the bottom up," says Mr Kiem. "We went from practice to theory, instead of from theory to practice. We tried our ideas before putting them in a plan. I think this is a good approach."

The City helped develop two cultural associations where people can learn and practice traditional music and dance. It also supported various other cultural

activities — including tea-making, cooking, and singing — and organized festivals. English language training was also provided to stakeholders in the tourism sector.

In 2013, representatives of the City travelled to Ukraine with the Association of Cities of Vietnam (ACVN) to learn how municipalities there promote tourism. "The mission provided us with lots of new ideas," says Mr Kiem. "We were particularly interested in how they branded and marketed their cities."

The study trip to Ukraine consolidated the knowledge learned from Sapa, and following the mission, Thai Nguyen made significant progress in developing an overarching sustainable tourism strategy. The City also made investments in local infrastructure: these include the paving of some three kilometers of road around the Tan Cuong tea plantations and the construction of a further two km of new roads; 10 villages being connected to the electricity grid; a city-wide clean up, and; the opening of cultural houses. "Study visits are one of the best ways to change perceptions and foster change," says Mr Kiem.



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There has been considerable growth in the tourism industry in Thai Nguyen — and the benefits have been felt throughout the city. Tea producers are now working together to produce more diverse and better quality tea, which is grown in accordance with Vietnam Good Agriculture Practice (VietGAP), and there has been increased interest in culture.

According to Mr. Lich, a local music teacher who supports the two cultural associations, young people used to be more interested in modern music than traditional songs and dance, but this is now changing. “One of the young men was learning a traditional dance with bamboo sticks,” he says. “He found that the dance reflected the production habits of his community and became very enthusiastic about it. He has now simplified the dance and is teaching it on stage to tourists, including people from overseas.”

Lich believes that this increased wave of tourism is sustainable — especially as Thai Nguyen is welcoming many domestic tourists. “Culture and economic development go together,” he says. “Business without culture can be very boring. What we are doing is providing excitement, culture and good value for tourists, whether they come from Vietnam or from abroad.”

