

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 District of North Vancouver, Canada, worked with the City of Soc Trang, Vietnam, to support and improve local economic development (LED) in the City.

“Developing organic farming is not enough. We have to be pragmatic and develop access to markets” —City of Soc Trang

For many years, the issue of food safety has been a major concern for both central and local government in Vietnam. In 2008, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development issued a decree to establish the Vietnam Good Agriculture Practice (VietGAP), which provided standards and guidelines for the safe production of fruit, vegetables and other crops.

It was hoped that implementing VietGAP would strengthen existing associations of farmers and cooperatives; however, the cost and complexity of implementing the practice proved to be beyond most Vietnamese farmers. Farmers have to work together to make VietGAP work.

With support from MPED and the District of North Vancouver, the City of Soc Trang explored ways it could help build the capacity of its farmers to comply with VietGAP standards, and ultimately to improve the quality of their produce and increase their income.

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Within the framework of its Local Economic Development Strategy, developed with support from the District of North Vancouver, the City of Soc Trang provided technical and financial assistance to a group of 13 farmers, who received VietGAP certification for their vegetable production.

“We were already thinking about VietGAP when the project started in 2011,” says Mrs. Ngoc, head of the City's Department of Economics. “However, it wasn't enough to simply certify farming as being organic. We had to work on the value chain and be pragmatic about farmers' access to markets. Our initiative can only be sustained and expanded if we can continue to find markets for the higher-quality produce from our farmers and sign contracts with buyers. Our collaboration with the District of North Vancouver forced us to think more broadly about our actions.”

The City has helped set up a market outlet in Ward 2, where people can go to buy vegetables from the group of farmers that have produced vegetables in a more sustainable and organic way. Individual farmers have

secured contracts to provide a pre-established quantity of produce. Whatever they grow above and beyond this quota, they are free to sell on their own.

Before selecting Ward 2 for the market outlet, the City had tried unsuccessfully to implement the scheme in other wards. Mrs. Ngoc believes the reason for the outlet succeeding in Ward 2 is that people working in the area tend to be more educated. “Other cities and districts have tried and failed before to promote this sort of more sustainable, organic produce,” she says. “Our success is the result of good analysis, and the capacity to learn quickly from our experimentation.”

Mrs. Ngoc believes it is too soon to help farmers register as a formal cooperative or to expand the size of the group; this should only be done as the demand for more organic vegetables grows. This is the current focus of her team. Indeed, short television programs have been created to promote the consumption of produce from Soc Trang. And the City has made contact with a cooperative in Ho Chi Minh City to try and find a new market for Soc Trang's vegetables.



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