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AGROECOLOGY LEARNING ALLIANCE IN SOUTH EAST ASIA

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ALiSEA Practice Brief

ALiSEA Small Grant Facility 2023

DEVELOPING AN INCLUSIVE BUSINESS MODEL WITH SMALL-SCALE FARMERS IN THE VEGETABLE VALUE CHAIN OF HAM YEN DISTRICT, TUYEN QUANG PROVINCE

HIGHLIGHTS

- Inclusive business models integrate smallholder farmers into formal supply chains, offering stable demand and fair pricing.
- Sustainable practices are promoted by minimizing chemical use and enhancing resource efficiency.
- Targeted inclusive programs uplift women and ethnic minorities through access to resources, skills and markets. Digital tools increase transparency, reduce costs, and streamline supply chain operations.
- Collaborative partnerships across sectors ensure long-term impact and drive system-wide innovation.

Expanding Regenerative Vegetable Markets through Improved Production and Distribution

📍 Location: Ham Yen, Tuyen Quang, Viet Nam
📅 Duration: March 2024 - May 2025
🤝 Implemented by: Rikolto & the Tuyen Quang Provincial Agricultural Extension Center and local partners

- Agricultural system: Horticultural system
- Altitude: 100 -1500 meters above sea level
- Rainfall & temperature: 1,500 - 2,300 mm/ year (May to October)
  Hottest Month: June, ~ 34.2°C
  Coldest Month: January, ~ 13.9°C

Agroecology Principles:

- Recycling
- Input Reduction
- Soil health
- Animal Health
- Connectivity
- Biodiversity
- Economic Diversification
- Synergy
- Co-creation of Knowledge
- Land & Natural Resource Governance
- Social Values & Diets
- Fairness
- Participation

ALiSEA Knowledge Product Categories:

- Animal health
- **Biodiversity**
- Climate
- **Collaboration**
- **Economy and income**
- **Equity**
- Input reduction and recycling
- Integrated systems
- **Knowledges and values**
- Natural resource governance
- Nutrition and diets
- Seed management
- Soil health
- Supportive policies
- Sustainable food system
- Water management

CONTEXT

Located in northern Vietnam's Tuyen Quang province, Ham Yen district covers over 90,000 hectares, with nearly 24% used for agriculture. With a population of 125,405 - over 60% from ethnic groups (the Tay is the largest ethnic group in the district, followed by the Dao, Hmong, Nung, Cao Lan, and San Diu) - and a poverty rate of 29% (2023), agriculture plays a vital role in local livelihoods, engaging 70% of households.

Known for its diverse vegetable farming systems, the district blends traditional methods with VietGAP standards, organic practices and advanced technologies. Major crops are cucumber, tomato, bitter melon, sweet melon, kohlrabi, cabbage and cauliflower. Covering 1,200 hectares of the total farmland, vegetable cultivation produces around 42,000 tons annually. This contributes 180–216 billion VND to the local economy, with farmers earning 150–180 million VND per hectare and 18–27 million VND per household annually. Most vegetables are sold wholesale at market fairs (70%) or to traders, retailers and OCOP (One Commune One Product) stores (30%).

Local and national policies are promoting sustainable, market-oriented vegetable production. On 4 March 2024, Tuyen Quang's Plan No. 47/KH-UBND focused on developing traceable, high-tech vegetable zones. Ham Yen's authority is guiding safe production tailored to local needs. Nationally, Decision No. 167/QD-TTg (2022-2025) supports cooperatives and farmers with access to capital, technology, and markets.

VietGAP (Vietnamese Good Agricultural Practices) is a set of standards promoting safe and sustainable practices in crop cultivation, livestock, and aquaculture. It provides guidelines to ensure product safety and quality throughout production, harvesting, and processing.

Vegetable Production and the Vegetable Value Chain In Ham Yen District

Figure 1: *Capital and training limits hinder Ham Yen farmers' adoption of new techniques.*

Vegetable production: Ham Yen's agriculture combines traditional, VietGAP, organic and high-tech methods. While traditional farming offers flexibility, it often results in inconsistent quality. Standardised models often incur high costs and lack local certification, while organic farming is challenged by pest management. Although the diversity of practices offers some risk mitigation, it simultaneously creates market obstacles for market access, underscoring the need for comprehensive support. The farming practice diversity leads to difficulties in standardizing produce, which buyers often prefer for efficiency. Additionally, varied production methods can make it harder for small-scale farmers to meet the specific quality and quantity demands of larger markets. Farmers, especially ethnic minorities, face challenges with limited capital, inadequate training and labor shortages. Women lack marketing skills and high-tech solutions are too costly. Climate change and unpredictable weather reduce yields, compounded by volatile markets, increasing production risks.

Vegetable value chain: Ham Yen's vegetable value chain is characterised by small-scale, often within specialised zones. While most produce is sold through local traders, accessing larger distribution channels is difficult. Farmers encounter issues like price fluctuations, competition from imported vegetables, and limited demand for certified produce. Market access is limited by small volumes purchased by supermarkets and delays in payments from buyers like public kitchens. Despite existing support policies, weak coordination among market actors and inefficient procedures further impede progress.

METHODOLOGY

A HUGE RANGE OF INCLUSIVE MODELS AND OUTCOMES

Inclusive Business and key principles: Inclusive business models, as defined by CISL's LINK Methodology, integrate low-income communities into value chains to create shared value while addressing poverty. Key principles include shared value, scalability, collaboration, local capacity building and financial viability. These models foster systemic change, benefiting businesses and underserved communities by improving food security, promoting gender equality and enhancing resilience to climate change in agricultural value chains.

CISL's LINK methodology focuses on building inclusive and sustainable trading relationships that connect small-scale farmers to modern markets within the vegetable value chain. It aims to empower producer groups to engage effectively while enabling buyers to act in ways that benefit these smallholder farmers.

Inclusive business with smallholder farmers: Key inclusive business models for smallholder farmers encompass contract farming (formal agreements securing market access, price stability, and technical support) (IFAD, 2019; World Bank, 2020), cooperative/aggregation models (enhancing collective bargaining power, economies of scale, and access to premium markets) (FAO, 2021; ILO, 2018), farmer outgrower schemes (linking farmers to processors or exporters through training, input provision, and guaranteed product offtake) (OECD, 2019; CIAT, 2017), digital platform-based services (enabling access to finance, real-time market prices, extension services and e-commerce via mobile technology) (GSMA, 2020; World Economic Forum, 2021), and fee-for-service models (providing affordable inputs, machinery rentals, or precision agriculture tools on a pay-per-use basis) (CGIAR, 2018; UNDP, 2022).

The LINK methodology, developed by the Sustainable Food Lab, aims to foster inclusive trading relationships between farmer organizations and formal markets (Sustainable Food Lab, 2023). This approach involves adapting business practices to meet smallholders' needs, creating durable and

Figure 2: *Farmers joined a training on inclusive business and the LINK tool by Rikolto and partners.*

profitable trading relationships (Sustainable Food Lab, 2023). Governments can support these models by investing in local infrastructure and strengthening business services (MEAS, 2014). Additionally, public-private partnerships can enhance market access for smallholders, reducing rural poverty and hunger (MEAS, 2014).

Agricultural value chain: The agricultural food value chain approach optimises production, processing, distribution and consumption stages to enhance efficiency and value. FAO (2021) highlights its role in integrating smallholder farmers, improving market access, offering training and promoting sustainability. The World Economic Forum (2023) notes it improves livelihoods and rural development, while Guarin et al. (2022) show it enhances incomes, environmental outcomes, and women's empowerment.

The approach of developing an inclusive business model with small-scale farmers in the vegetable value chain of Ham Yen is grounded in two complementary methodologies: the agricultural value chain and inclusive business with smallholder farmers. By integrating these frameworks, the project aims to strengthen market linkages, enhance smallholder engagement, and promote inclusive and sustainable development in the agricultural sector.

APPROACHES

The approach has being implemented in 4 communes of Ham Yen District, Tuyen Quang Province (Thai Ninh, Thanh Long, Duc Ninh, Thai Son) from March 2024 to May 2025. It aims to integrate around 200 small-scale vegetable farmers into inclusive value chains by establishing connections with buyers and formal supply chains in local and surrounding markets. This integration is designed to enhance farmer's market access, availability and quality of vegetables, to secure better pricing and mitigate risks associated with local market volatility. It may enhance incomes and livelihoods of all actors in the value chain, especially small-scale farmers.

PARTICIPATORY MARKET ANALYSIS FOR THE VEGETABLE VALUE CHAIN

This study gathered input from 69 participants (38 women) via group discussions and in-depth interviews, including a diverse range of stakeholders such as farmers, traders, market officials, businesses, and government representatives. In addition to direct input, the study also collected existing documents related to policies, plans, and development initiatives for the vegetable value chain in Tuyen Quang province and Ham Yen district. This two-pronged approach allowed for both firsthand insights and a review of the existing regulatory and strategic landscape.

Significant human capital deficits (over 70% of small-scale farmers having only primary/secondary education, and illiteracy among ethnic minorities), weak leadership and production linkages, and a labor shortage driving a shift to fruit trees due to youth migration. Additionally, the chain suffers from ineffective high-tech adoption, unstable and volatile markets that depress prices for bumper crops, and low returns for certified products like VietGAP and organic vegetables, which often sell at conventional prices. Other challenges include cumbersome procedures for alternative sales channels like the OCOP store, climate change impacts causing crop losses, a lack of food safety monitoring in traditional markets, and barriers to accessing support policies for ethnic minorities.

One Commune One Product (OCOP) stores belong to a national program that encourages people to buy local goods.

DEVELOPING AFFORDABLE PRICING OPTIONS FOR VEGETABLES

The approach aims to reduce costs by optimising the supply chain and promoting regenerative agriculture. Solutions included: (1) collective procurement and utilising a platform like Zalo to cut transaction costs and (2) using PGS for farmer-led quality control, avoiding expensive third-party certification. These strategies collectively ensure competitive and safe vegetables while maintaining farmer profitability through lower input costs and stable productivity.

Zalo is a messaging and social networking application popular in Vietnam that allows users to message and make calls to other users on both mobile and computer platforms. Zalo's core feature is its messaging service, supporting text, voice, and video calls.

Leveraging Zalo, Vietnam's dominant messaging app, within an inclusive business model for small-scale vegetable farmers aims to facilitate direct communication among farmers, traders, and businesses, enhancing market access and transparency. This approach also supports capacity building by easily disseminating training materials and agricultural advisories, while strengthening linkages and coordination within farmer groups for activities like bulk purchasing.

Ultimately, the Zalo approach seeks to bridge information gaps, streamline processes, and foster more direct, trusting relationships across the vegetable value chain. Around 125 farmers in Thanh Long and approximately 1,500 users across Ham Yen district are actively using Zalo to exchange information with buyers, highlighting the platform's expanding role in local agricultural communication.

Figure 3: *Mr. Do Van Dung, Director of An Hoa Cooperative, updates farmers in the Ham Yen group on cucumber production and consumption via the Zalo platform.*

To build consumer trust and increase demand for regenerative vegetables, the project promoted transparency and verifiable quality through traceability systems by using a farmer-led Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) in Thanh Long Cooperative for farmer-led quality control, avoiding expensive third-party certification. Farmers kept detailed field diaries aligned with standards like BasicGAP, while VPGs conducted regular cross-checks to ensure compliance. Distinctive labels and stamps were also introduced, enabling consumers to identify and trust vegetables produced with verified sustainable practices.

The Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) is a local, peer-driven alternative to expensive third-party organic certification for small-scale farmers. It builds on **trust and shared knowledge,** with farmers and consumers collaboratively setting standards, inspecting farms, and verifying organic practices. This approach reduces costs, empowers farmers through collective learning, and provides credible assurance for safe, organic produce in local markets.

PROMOTING AN INCLUSIVE VALUE CHAIN FOR VEGETABLES

Establishing a short value chain: The project supported the creation of two short value chains for regenerative vegetables by linking farmers and VPGs directly with cooperatives like An Hoa, reducing intermediaries and increasing farmers' profit margins. Streamlined logistics

helped optimizing transportation and storage costs, while cooperatives provided inputs, technical support, and guaranteed produce purchases at competitive prices. This approach enhanced production efficiency and ensured stable market access for farmers.

To build collaboration in the short value chain, the approach started with small pilot models to assess productivity and income, involving farmers, traders, and local authorities. As results proved positive, peer learning encouraged more farmers to join. Formal contracts were then signed between individual farmers and buyers, defining roles, quality standards, and minimum prices. Buyers provided inputs oncredit and technical support through visits, calls, and Zalo groups. Seasonal or annual review meetings helped evaluate outcomes and maintain trust.

Collective procurement contracts: Collective procurement contracts lower transaction costs by streamlining buying and selling. This is demonstrated by credit and technical support through visits, calls, and Zalo groups. Seasonal or annual review meetings helped evaluate outcomes and maintain trust

Streamlining is the process of making a system or process more efficient and effective by simplifying steps, reducing unnecessary complexities, and optimizing resource flow. In a supply chain context, this involves identifying and removing bottlenecks to ensure smoother operations, faster delivery, and reduced costs.

The project helped VPGs collectively aggregate regenerative vegetables to reduce input costs and improve market access. By pooling resources and selling in bulk, farmers enhanced their bargaining power and secured better prices through connections with larger buyers. The PGS was introduced to ensure regenerative standards and quality, enabling peer monitoring. This model allowed groups like Thanh Long VPG to sell 0.2–0.5 tons of vegetables daily at more competitive prices through formal supply chains.

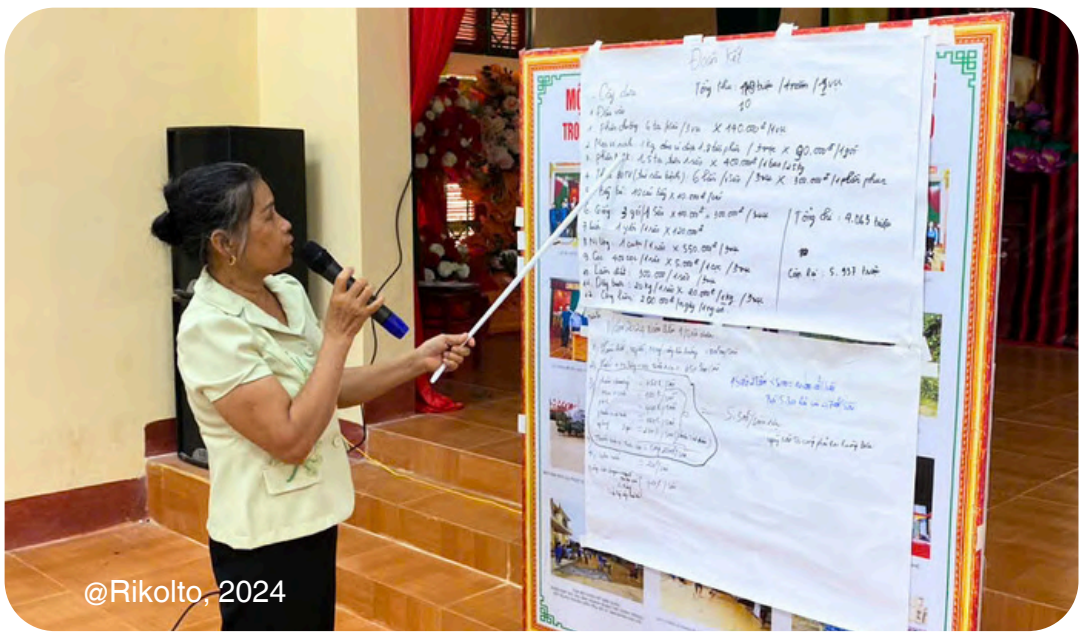

Figure 4: *With resources, skills, and market links, farmers join agricultural markets more actively.*

Support and services from cooperatives: Beyond providing essential inputs and technical advice through regular field visits, monitoring sessions, and via Zalo platform, especially for low income and young farmers, participating Cooperatives leverage PGS to enhance production control, improve traceability and reduce transaction costs.

ENHANCING MARKETING CAPABILITIES FOR VEGETABLE FARMERS

The project trained over 200 vegetable farmers, including women and youth, enhancing their ability to make informed decisions on variety selection, harvest timing, pricing and distribution in a competitive market while also improving their understanding of market dynamics and business efficiency. Farmers learned to analyse market trends, assess product demand using pricing, supply-demand, trade data, branding, labelling, advertising, and customer engagement, enabling them to build marketing strategies.

Three training courses were conducted entirely in Vietnamese, with an average of 67 participants per session. Handouts were used as pedagogical materials. A preliminary assessment using the LINK tool was conducted to identify cooperatives with market development potential.

INITIAL RESULTS

By connecting to three formal distribution channels - supermarkets, processing companies and public kitchens - 200 farmers have secured higher prices for their products, earning approximately 10% more than before. This revenue increase has not only enhanced household finance but also reduced the risks associated with market price fluctuations, providing farmers with more stable income opportunities.

Through inclusive business models, the project has equipped farmers with marketing skills and market access tools, enabling them to adapt better to market changes. This capacity building has led to expansion into four new markets across provinces of Ha Giang, Bac Giang, Hai Duong and Bac Ninh. Total consumption has increased by 30% to 1,200 tons, increasing household income by 20%. This income growth allows farmers to reinvest in production, enhancing their sustainable livelihoods.

Across 30 hectares of cultivated land, averaging 0.15 hectares per household, the project has promoted regenerative farming practices, including the use of organic fertilisers, crop diversification and biological pest management. This approach has enabled farmers to cultivate and sell 10 different types of vegetables through formal market channels, while protecting the environment, improving soil health, and minimising harmful agrochemicals, thereby promoting long-term sustainable agriculture practices.

By adopting sustainable farming practices and leveraging high-quality inputs from cooperatives, farmers have reduced production costs by 15% through techniques like on-site organic fertiliser production. This shift away from inorganic fertilisers has made products more competitively priced without compromising quality, creating a win-win for both producers and consumers.

The project has promoted gender equality and social inclusion by empowering 150 women and 160 ethnic minority individual with training in sustainable farming, management, and marketing skills. This support has enabled them to actively participate in production and business, thereby increasing income and enhancing their social standing within families and communities.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Inclusive business models offer an opportunity to enhance the participation of smallholder farmers in formal agricultural supply chains. This participation facilitates access to predictable demand trends, thereby reducing farmers' vulnerability to market fluctuations. Furthermore, these models can establish fair pricing mechanisms, ensuring that farmers receive equitable returns for their produce, which stabilizes income and encourages sustained engagement in the agricultural sector.

- By prioritizing resource efficiency, minimizing agrochemical inputs, and promoting ecological balance, inclusive business practices significantly accelerate the implementation of sustainable farming. This transition not only improves environmental outcomes but also increases the marketability of agricultural products, as consumers increasingly seek ethically and environmentally responsible options.

- Targeted inclusive programs hold the potential to uplift marginalized agricultural community members, particularly women and ethnic minorities.

Figure 5: *Demonstration plots and hands-on guidance helped farmers see and trust the benefits of regenerative practices.*

- Specifically, by ensuring access to critical resources, facilitating relevant skill development, and establishing robust market linkages, these programs enable more active and substantive engagement in agricultural economic activities. This, in turn, fosters improved individual livelihoods, advances social equity, and builds community resilience.

- Leveraging digital technology strategically can significantly optimize agricultural supply chains and strengthen inclusive business models. Digital platforms improve access to critical information, including market pricing and expert advice, enabling farmers to make informed choices. By streamlining transactions, lowering costs, and enhancing supply chain transparency, technology facilitates scalability and maximizes the positive impact of these models.

- The successful implementation and long-term sustainability of inclusive business models depend on establishing diverse and effective partnerships among stakeholders. This requires active engagement and collaboration between farmers, the private sector, government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and community groups. By fostering a supportive ecosystem, these partnerships can tackle systemic challenges, leverage collective knowledge, and drive innovation throughout the value chain.

Figure 6: *By applying inclusive business models, the project has helped Vietnamese farmers adopt regenerative agriculture, improving both their incomes and the environment.*

CONCLUSION

STRENGTHS

The inclusive business model implemented in Ham Yen District has demonstrated strong potential to integrate smallholder farmers into formal value chains. Key strengths include the promotion of regenerative agriculture practices, the use of Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) for quality assurance, and the adoption of digital platforms like Zalo to enhance transparency and reduce transaction costs. These approaches have empowered marginalised groups, particularly women and ethnic minorities, by improving their skills, increasing incomes, and fostering greater social inclusion. Demonstration plots and early engagement with buyers have also proven effective in building farmer trust and showcasing the market potential of sustainable practices.

CHALLENGES

Despite these gains, several challenges remain. Traditional farming habits, such as reliance on agrochemical inputs, are deeply ingrained and difficult to shift without sustained support. Access to capital, training, and affordable, eco-friendly inputs (e.g., bio-fertiliser and pesticides) is still limited for many farmers. The high cost of certification and new technologies further restricts broader adoption. Moreover, weak coordination among market actors could hinder the expansion of regenerative practices beyond the initial project participants.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address these challenges and scale impact, a multi-pronged approach is essential. This includes providing seasonal refresher trainings and expanding demonstration sites to reinforce learning and encourage the adoption of regenerative practices. Promoting cooperatives to provide consistent access to affordable, eco-friendly fertilisers is also critical. Strengthening market linkages through long-term buyer contracts and branding initiatives, such as traceability systems and farmer success stories, will help build consumer trust and demand. Leveraging digital tools like Zalo can enhance communication, transparency, and coordination across the value chain. Finally, scaling successful models through multi-stakeholder collaboration will ensure broader adoption and long-term sustainability across the farming community.

The project employed a comprehensive approach that includes market research to analyze the challenges and opportunities in the vegetable value chain. It provided farmers with tailored training in regenerative agriculture methods to improve soil health and crop productivity. By establishing direct connections between farmers and buyers, the project optimized supply chains and ensured fair pricing. Additionally, it offered targeted support to women, ethnic minorities, and smallholder farmers through transparent contracts and skill building programs. All these efforts are designed to increase the economic viability and ecological sustainability of vegetable farming while improving local livelihoods.

The **"Expanding Regenerative Vegetable Markets through Improved Production and Distribution" project** is co-funded by the **Agroecology and Safe Food System Transitions (ASSET)** and the **Belgian Directorate-General for Development Cooperation (DGD)** and led by **Rikolto.** The project was executed in partnership with the **Tuyen Quang Provincial Agricultural Extension Centre, the Ham Yen District Agricultural Services Centre, agricultural cooperatives, and local community organisations.**

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Date of publication: June 2025

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Supported by: Agroecology and Safe Food System Transitions

Coordinated by: GRET, cirad

Funded by: In partnership with RÉPUBLIQUE FRANÇAISE, AFD, Co-funded by the European Union, FONDS FRANÇAIS POUR L'ENVIRONNEMENT MONDIAL

This document has been produced with the financial assistance of the French Development Agency (AFD), the European Union (EU) and the French Facility for Global Environment (FFEM). The views expressed herein can in no way be taken to reflect the official opinion of the AFD, EU and FFEM.