

United Nations Volunteers

UNV helps disadvantaged farming communities in northern Viet Nam

by *Markus Wagner*

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To a farmer in rural northern Viet Nam, Hanoi must seem further away than just 150 miles. The country's bustling capital is one of the most vibrant places in Asia, and the economic liberalization and opening to the West, called *doi moi*, has fundamentally changed life there.

However, relative prosperity has yet to reach the more remote parts of the country: in the three mountainous provinces of Hoa Binh, Lai Chau and Son La, life is an altogether different experience.

This is the region that is considered to be the most remote and poorest area of Viet Nam. Hoa Binh, for instance, has the highest percentage of poor people in the country: 53 per cent. It is much quieter in these rural provinces than in the sprawling Asian cities: usually, villages do not have electricity or running water. Roads are poor and transport difficult — Hanoi is a day away, by bus. In Hoa Binh, Lai Chau and Son La, malnutrition among women and children is widespread, mainly because the villages are having difficulties in developing a stable, sustainable agriculture.



This is where Ghulam Kibria, a UN Volunteer from Bangladesh, is trying to make a difference. He is the coordinator of the "Northern Upland Development Project", which aims to reduce poverty in the three provinces by strengthening aquaculture. By the time the project finishes, Mr. Kibria wants to have achieved significant progress in helping the communities improve their quality of life. He would like to see people in all pilot areas participating more in the development of their local economies. By increasing the production and consumption of fish, the rate of malnutrition among children and women is expected to decrease.

Aquaculture is farming of fish, shellfish and some aquatic plants to supplement the natural supply. Fish are a major source of protein in Asia, and consequently, aquaculture is highly developed in many Asian countries like China, India, Japan, South Korea and Indonesia. So far, Viet Nam has not exploited this resource as much as its neighbours.

Hoa Binh, Lai Chau and Son La have an tremendous potential for aquaculture. Freshwater is plentiful, and it is a valuable aquacultural

resource that is not being used nearly as much as it could. In the northern mountainous and midland regions of Viet Nam, only 45 per cent of the potential freshwater culture resources have been exploited to date. The raising and eating of fish, however, is a traditional part of the culture of the regions where this project is underway. For the villagers who live in the mountainous areas of northern Viet Nam, it is important to have food security: they must be able to have a reliable and steady supply of nutrition. Aquaculture could increase food security.

"However, the development of aquaculture in these three mountainous provinces is facing many constraints," Mr. Kibria says. For one, he elaborates, not enough quality fish seed is produced in the region itself, and it is difficult to transport it there from other areas because the roads are poor and the provinces far away from economic centres. The villagers are not very well educated and have little technical knowledge of aquaculture. Furthermore, the local inhabitants do not have easy access to credit or training provided by the government or non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This would be essential to build up small firms that could survive off the freshwater resources.

Mr. Kibria is helping to remove the villagers' difficulties in increasing their use of aquaculture. His project aims to improve the quality of the seed production and the efficiency of the delivery system. Furthermore, it sets up microcredit and savings schemes to improve and enhance the aquaculture activities of minority farmers. The project also instructs farmers in fishing techniques. The involvement of farmers, especially women, in the planning and implementation of aquaculture programmes is emphasized. Mr. Kibria coordinates all field activities in the three provinces and visits many of the farms himself. He works together with many Vietnamese organizations to facilitate the implementation of the project. He is also involved in capacity-building: he teaches the project staff English so that they can write reports, proposals and other correspondence.

The project began in April 1999 and is expected to end in 2003. It is being implemented by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The United Nations Volunteers programme (UNV) has been active in Viet Nam since 1990 and has grown steadily ever since. In the first year of the programme, there were only three UN Volunteers stationed there; today, this number has grown to over 40 UN Volunteers, all of whom work with local communities to overcome poverty. At the moment, Viet Nam is trying to extend its economic progress to even the remotest corners of the country. UN Volunteers are helping in this process.

To find out more about the UNV programme in Viet Nam, visit:

[United Nations Volunteers in Viet Nam.](#)

To read more about this project, please visit

[Aquaculture Development in Northern Uplands.](#)

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