



Success Story: Community Leader in Vietnam Tells How USAID Empowered His Community to Protect Forests

My name is Blup Phu. I was born and raised in A Ho village, a mountainous commune on Vietnam’s border with Laos, near Sao La Thua Thien Hue Nature Reserve. Our Ta Oi ethnic people have lived here for many generations and have generated income from the surrounding forests. The forest has always been our source of life. We did not understand that the things we took from it like saw logs, honey, rattan, medicinal plants, or wild animals could one day disappear forever. So, we went deeper and deeper into the wild forest over time to take more and more. Our lives became difficult as resources depleted.

Then, the Vietnamese government allocated more than 80 hectares of natural forest to our community and we established a community-based forest management board in 2014 with 35 members, 15 females and 20 males. I was assigned the Chief position in 2016. Initially, village members were unaware of the role we played and uninterested in forest patrolling.

We gradually learned that allocated forest lands were not meant to be left untouched—that we could generate resources from them. Previously, we did not know what to do, so we took away

natural resources until nothing remained. Now, with the support of Green Net Co. Ltd in Hue City and the USAID Green Annamites Project, we know how to utilize forest land under canopies efficiently to grow Homalomena Ocutta, an herbal plant. This was a turning point for us all.

In earlier times, Chinese traders arrived here to buy this herbal plant at really low prices. Seeing monetary benefit, people exploited the forests to produce as much of it as possible. Homalomena Ocutta was easy to find and very popular in the forest, and if we did not harvest it, the old roots perished. But because people harvested



Photo credit: USAID Green Annamites Project

“The revived forests have increased our wellbeing and helped us earn more money. They serve as a haven for us to enjoy their cool shade and avoid the hustle and bustle of life.”

– Blup Phu (Farmer in A Luoi District, Vietnam)

USAID Green Annamites Project

Period of Performance: September 2016 – December 2020

Value: \$24 million

Client: United States Agency for International Development (USAID)

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carelessly, they took both mature and young parts of the plant without knowing that this would lead to its extinction. Long ago, Homalomena Ocutta were all over the forest. Now we can only find it in remote areas of the forest.

Training by Green Net Co. and the USAID Green Annamites Project taught us how to sustainably harvest Homalomena Ocutta to avoid extinction and how to grow it under natural forest canopies. The trainings consisted of classroom instruction in the morning followed by practice in the field in the afternoon, which helped us to apply all that we learned. We established a collaborative group, for which I was the representative, to connect local people with the company. In April 2019, we signed an agreement with Green Net Co, in which the company committed to purchase fresh Homalomena Ocutta from us at the rate of VND 4,000 (20 cents) per kilo. We were very satisfied with this price because traders previously bought 1 kilo at VND 2,000-3,000 (10-15 cents). Once the agreement and this price were finalized, members of our community were very enthusiastic to participate, including a number of women, as growing Homalomena Ocutta is less physically demanding than harvesting other products from the forest.



Photo credit: USAID Green Annamites Project

For me, the biggest impact was increasing community awareness about forests. Today, people no longer burn down the forests for paddy fields; they use natural resources in an effective and sustainable way. We now know how to protect forests, and acknowledge them as a source of life that provides us with oxygen, clean water, and non-timber forest products. Not only do people participate in forest patrolling, households in our communities also contribute their own money to a community forest protection fund. For example, each month, a family will contribute VND 10,000 (US\$5) to replant forests that have been affected by erosion, lightning strikes or disasters. This change in their attitudes surprised me and left me very satisfied.

The forest, which was previously overexploited and depleted of resources, is thriving and rich in carbon. Trees are big again. People cut down big trees to sell, but today, the community preserves the forest and its many big plants. Our community members no longer change anything in the forest; we just use forest land under canopies to grow rattan and Homalomena Ocutta. The only damage that occurs is from natural disasters, and as a result, forests are in much better condition. Community members go more often into the forest to harvest, patrol, and take care of planted plants. These activities have helped reduce the threat of deforestation from loggers and other illegal activities.

The revived forests have increased our wellbeing and helped us earn more money. They serve as a haven for us to enjoy their cool shade and avoid the hustle and bustle of life. We are relieved and happy. Many people, regardless of their different occupations, enjoy going to the forest. It might take 20 kilometers of trekking, but they prefer this sporting time, which helps them achieve better health, to staying at home. Nowadays, people know that forest protection is not only a responsibility but also a way to enhance our lives and the lives of our children.