



# Starting the agro-ecological transition among Hmong farmers in Nong Het, Xieng Khouang

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[www.xaoban.com](http://www.xaoban.com)





# Introducing ourselves



Nongnut Foppes

- Founder of Xao Ban Group
- Studied in Thailand, Netherlands
- Thai national, living in Laos for 25 years, mother of 2 daughters
- Expert on dairy production and local food processing



Laut Lee

- Independent farmer/entrepreneur
- Authentic Lao farming tourism experiences (formerly with Living Land)
- Partnership with Xao Ban
- Lao National, Hmong ethnic, father of three daughters and one son





# Introducing the Xao Ban Group



## Enterprise Profile

- Registered since 2004
- Producing yogurt 5000 liter/month
- Also producing: fruit juices, jams, bread spreads
- Providing employment for 25 staff
- Buying ingredients from over 50 local households (inclusive business)



## Enterprise Philosophy

- Green Business
  - Safe and clean production
  - Quality Control Systems
- Social Enterprise
  - Employing marginalized people
  - Social fund helping rural communities
- Inclusive Business
  - Buying from local suppliers
  - Strengthening their standards





# The farmers: Hmong in Nonghet, Xiengkhouang

## Strengths

- Hmong culture values hard work, thrift, community collaboration
- Transition from very poor to wealthy within 10 years through maize farming
- More wealth has created better living conditions (electricity, mobile phones, health, sanitation)
- People are eager to try new out new livelihood options







## The farmers: Hmong in Nonghet, Xiengkhouang

### Challenges

- ▶ Malnutrition remains widespread among children
- ▶ Indoor pollution from wood ovens threatens women
- ▶ Girls remain uneducated
- ▶ No employment options for young people, depression





## The landscape

- ▶ Maize cultivation dominates the landscape
- ▶ Not sustainable on the long term
  - ▶ Chemical pollution from herbicides
  - ▶ Soil fertility losses
  - ▶ Erosion
- ▶ Forests and forest products becoming less available
  - ▶ Conversion to maize fields
  - ▶ Depletion of wild fruits
- ▶ High altitude (1,000-1,200 m) good for high value temperate fruits







# The market

- ▶ Maize dominates the economy
  - ▶ Easy to grow, sell
  - ▶ Price is coming down
  - ▶ Production not sustainable
- ▶ Maize buyers come to the village
- ▶ Villagers have difficulty to access value chains for other products
  - ▶ Remote location, bad road
  - ▶ No connections to traders and transporter





# The agro-ecological transition

1. Moving from unsustainable agriculture to sustainable horticulture
2. Producing temperate fruits and oil seeds for niche markets
3. Using local products for better nutrition
4. Restoring/protecting forests







# Products with niche market potential

## Temperate fruits

- ▶ Local cultivated fruits: local pears, plums, peaches and apricots
- ▶ Local wild fruits
- ▶ Exotic fruits: strawberries

## Oil Plants:

- ▶ Sesame
- ▶ Perilla
- ▶ Sasha Inchi



## Local wild fruits:

- ▶ *Chie Ta Dai*, wild variety of "Loquat" *Eriobotrya* sp.
- ▶ Wild berries
- ▶ Mushrooms
- ▶ Chestnuts





# Xao Ban trust building approach

- ▶ Getting to know each other through partnerships with aid projects: Helvetas-UDIN, TABI
- ▶ Building trust by visiting farmers, buying their products, discussing their plans in their own language
- ▶ Setting up a local road-side collection unit
- ▶ Employing young Hmong people
- ▶ Partnering with the Xieng Khouang Vocational Training School
  - ▶ to build capacity for new crops (strawberries)
  - ▶ To disseminate good agricultural practices (organic)







## Outlook for the future

- ▶ Provide a stable income to horticultural producers by buying their products
- ▶ Develop new products for urban markets (jams, dried fruits and mushrooms)
- ▶ Develop nutritious foods for local markets (healthy snacks, micro-packaging)
- ▶ Introduce smoke-free stoves to improve indoor environment
- ▶ Develop culinary tourism:
  - ▶ Homestay, collecting, cooking and tasting wild foods with villagers, sharing good life
  - ▶ Experience the landscape, cherry blossom season, bicycle tours







THANK YOU!