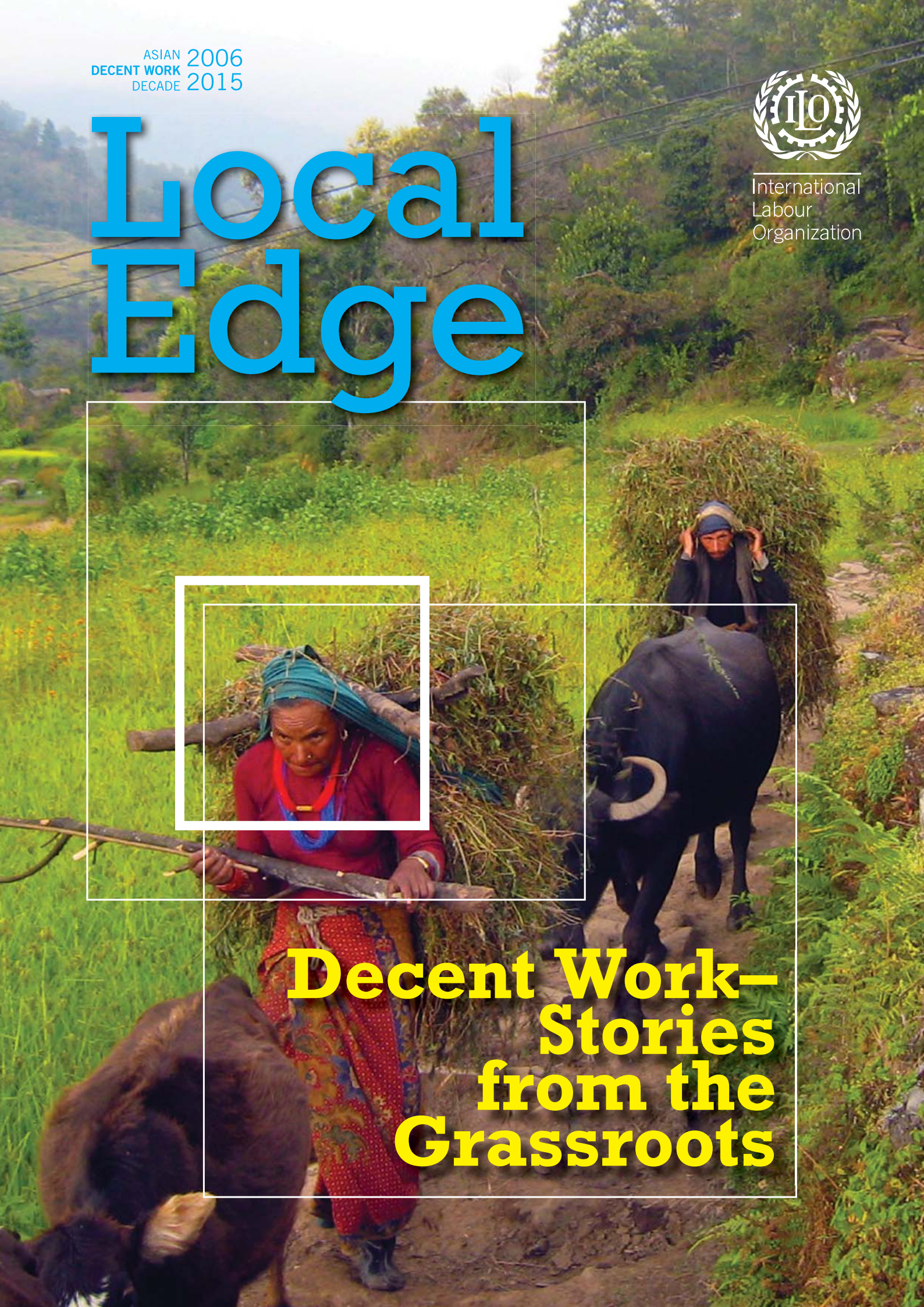
ASIAN DECENT WORK DECADE 2006 2015

Local Edge



International Labour Organization

Decent Work– Stories from the Grassroots

EDITORIAL

Stories from Asia on local employment strategies

In the Philippines a small community organizes to build footbridges and dredge canals to escape the yearly floods, and then becomes a licensed community contractor.

In Nepal a programme to promote indigenous tourism through home stays brings local governments, hoteliers, traders and communities together to boost the local economy.

Many stories can be told about how unemployed people – including war widows, out-of-school youths, indigenous peoples and persons with disabilities – have found new confidence and new futures through the creation of good jobs.

This collection features some of these stories, and shows how the achievement of personal goals and brighter futures is linked to local employment strategies based on the concept of "decent work". Supporting decent work is the principle that guides the programmes of the International Labour Organization (ILO) in Asia Pacific. Simply put, it means creating the conditions that allow people to achieve the aspirations they have for their working lives; that is, offering opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security, prospects for personal development, and the freedom to organize and participate in decisions and be heard.

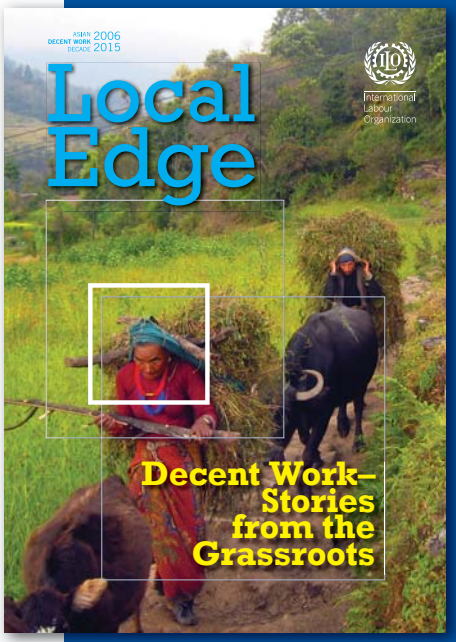
Local employment strategies are particularly important for reaching not only those registered as unemployed, but also those in the informal economy, which accounts for 60 per cent of Asia Pacific's workforce.

Informal workers not only do not enjoy the traditional benefits of formal employment, they are often out of reach of systems such as business licensing, vocational training and job centres, workplace protection, and public employment policies.

Effective local employment strategies seek to counter these disadvantages, for example, by creating appropriate systems, simplifying business regulations, or designing skills policies that can reach people like homeworkers and homestay providers. They may involve training the public health care system in giving advice on workplace safety, or reforming public works policies to allow small contracting groups to bid for remunerative formal contract work.

Local employment strategies call for collaboration between national and local institutions. The role of local governments and stakeholders is especially important and decentralization is taking place in many countries. No matter how well-designed national policies are, employment strategies, health services and systems for dialogue cannot work well unless local policies are inclusive and effective. In the same way, local initiatives will fail unless national policies are supportive.

ILO's work lies in planting the seeds so that communities, workers, employers, governments and other stakeholders can work together and support local job creation, so helping them achieve their overall aspiration of a progressive, peaceful and productive society. ■



Local Edge

Editors: Luz R. Rimban and Yvonne T. Chua
Artist: Eduardo A. Davad

This collection is published by the International Labour Organization Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific with the assistance of VERA Files, a Manila-based non-stock, non-profit media organisation. The stories and related photos in this publication were produced by writers from the Inter Press Service (IPS) Asia-Pacific network on behalf of the International Labour Organization's Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (ILO). The views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the ILO. For more information about reproducing any of the articles or photos please contact the ILO (Sandra Yu, yu@ilo.org, or Sophy Fisher, fisher@ilo.org).

http://www.ipsnewsasia.net
http://www.ilo.org/asia
http:// verafiles.org

Published 2012

Contents

Jobs, livelihood precious commodities

Text and photo by Amantha Perera

War widow Uthayaranjini Nathan offers daily prayers to the gods, but there was something very worldly in them as 2011 was drawing to a close. She was praying for the small rice mill in her village in Nedunkerni town to resume operations, and it finally did, on schedule, by January 2012.

Nathan knows her life in the village of Kanakarayankulam in Sri Lanka's former war zone, popularly known as the Vanni, will change for the better now that the mill has started churning out rice from parboiled paddy.

She lost her husband during heavy fighting near the north-eastern coast in February 2009, just months before the 25-year civil war ended in May. She returned to her village in mid-2010 and has had to follow a gruelling routine to eke out a living.

Getting up at 4 a.m., she prepares *vade* and string hoppers, local delicacies that she sells to shops in the village and nearby. "If they don't sell, I don't get money but the stale food is returned," she says.

Nathan is one of 36 female heads of households selected by the Office of the Divisional Secretary in the Vavuniya North district and supported by the Local Empowerment through Economic Development (LEED) project of the International Labour Organization (ILO) to benefit from a rice milling initiative that will integrate households with small mills supported financially by the organisation. Under the project, the women will parboil the paddy grown in the village and then deliver this for milling and selling to an established network of buyers.

The project has a special focus: to facilitate the inclusion of the most vulnerable—women, widows, youth and people with disabilities—in communities hardest hit by the conflict.

When the war ended, tens of thousands who fled the fighting returned. By September 2011, the United Nations calculated the returnee figure to be close to 400,000.

According to the Joint Plan of Assistance prepared by the Sri Lankan government and its donor partners earlier in 2011, nearly one-third of over 67,000 families that have returned are headed by women, who have had to try extra hard to secure regular income.

Economist Muttukrishna Sarvananthan of the Point Pedro Institute of Development that works primarily on the north estimates that at least 20 per cent of the Vanni population is unemployed while 30 per cent or more could be underemployed, earning less than a dollar a day.

Twelve-year-old Vidusha's mother, Ambikavadhi, is a war widow who takes care of four schoolgoing girls by what she earns from the vegetable plot near her home.

"Job creation is vital for this region's revival," Ravi Peiris, director general of the Employers' Federation of Ceylon (EFC), says.

The plan to help female heads of household is simple: identify and support small mills to acquire new machinery and repair the mills, and in the same vein provide funds for the women to buy simple appliances to parboil paddy and build storage areas. The women will sell the paddy to the mills which, in turn, will mill them and redistribute, at least for two years.

Already, six mills are in various stages of repair, like that owned by Vedaraniyam Lohanathan, a 34-year-old mill operator in the village of Olumadu. He received 800,000 rupees (around US$7,200) in assistance from ILO, which he has topped up with a bank loan of 200,000 rupees ($1,800).

"It will be good because paddy cultivation has picked up here," Loganthan says of the project.

ILO plans to support 10 small mills that will in turn support 60 female-headed households. The women will be provided assistance of up to about 75,000 rupees ($680) each, and they will make a profit of 5 rupees from a kilo of parboiled paddy.

The paddy sector is vital to the recovery of the North. All levels and stages within the sector need to be re-established. The ILO's role is to facilitate a process of recovery that links large and small mills with small entrepreneurs such as Nathan and the many small farmers who are struggling to get back on their feet.

Local milling, both small and large scale, plays a vital role in reviving farmers' incomes. Transport difficulties—the main roads that connect Nedunkerni to vital regional economic hubs like Kilinochchi or Vavuniya are still in need of major repairs—have given outside buyers an advantage.

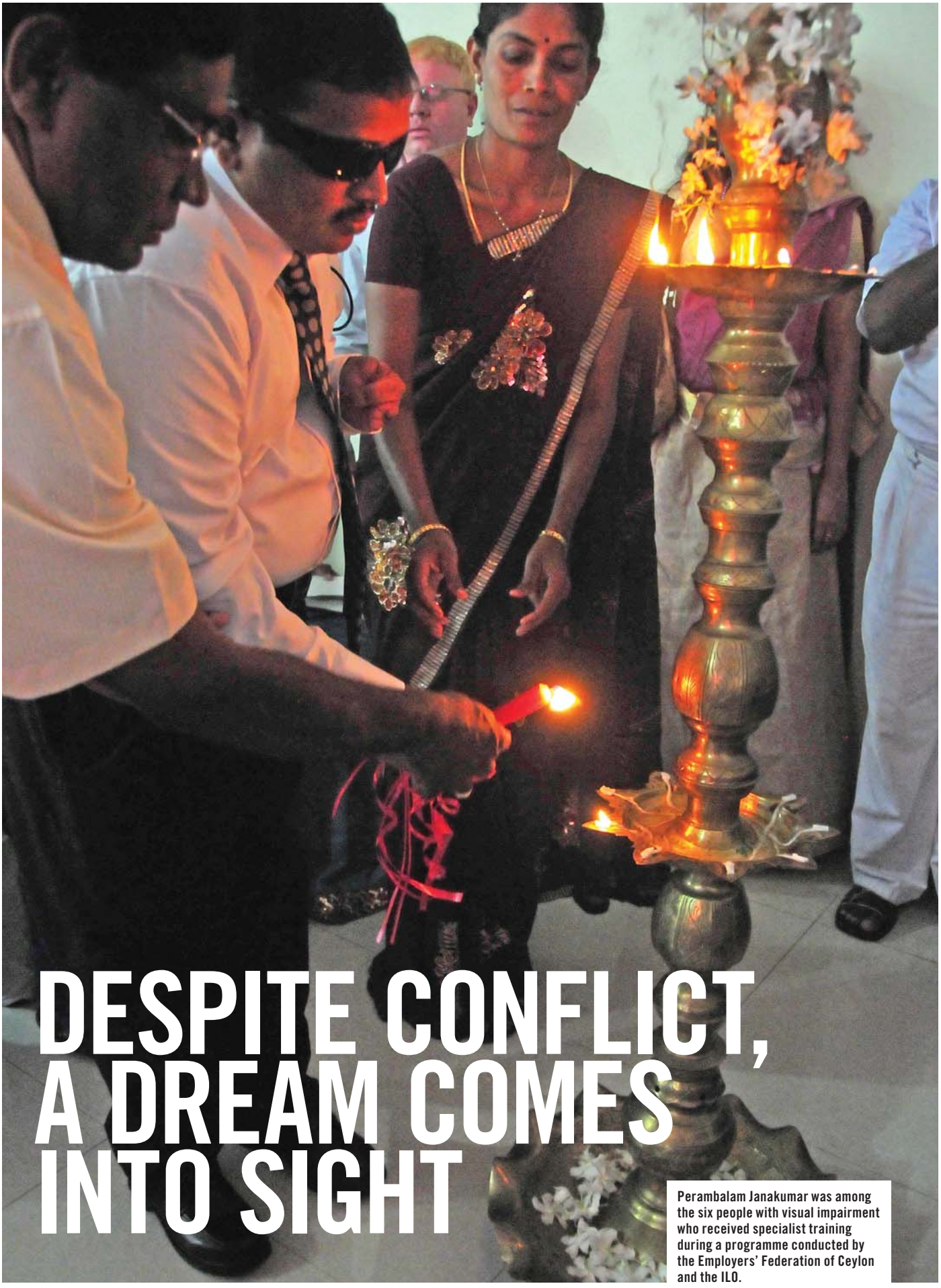
"They know that farmers can't keep the paddy forever and will try to push the prices down, especially immediately after the harvest," Krishna Thevarajapullai, the newly elected president of the Vavuniya North Multipurpose Cooperative (MPC), says.

With almost all buildings damaged during the war, the lack of storage space plays right into the hands of the buyers.

During the last harvest, buyers from outside the region took advantage of the farmers' lack of storage space. These buyers were able to buy the rice at 40 per cent less than what the farmers got from the MPC, which also could not buy the produce. "Our milling capacity was limited, restricting the amount we could buy," Thevarajapullai says.

The MPC has set up a large mill with an 11-million-rupee ($100,000) assistance, thanks to the LEED project which is financed entirely by the Australian government though Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID). The mill became operational by January, the deadline that Nathan and many other war widows prayed it would open. ■

SRI LANKA



DESPITE CONFLICT, A DREAM COMES INTO SIGHT

Perambalam Janakumar was among the six people with visual impairment who received specialist training during a programme conducted by the Employers' Federation of Ceylon and the ILO.

Text and photos by Amantha Perera

In 1994, students of the Hindu College in Jaffna, one of the most prestigious schools in northern Sri Lanka, were preparing for their secondary-level exam with one collective goal.

"The minimum was to be a teacher. We all wanted to study science for our university entrance exam," Subasudaram Pradeepan, now 32, remembers.

But the bloody civil war in this South Asian island nation was entering its second decade. Fighting was taking place in Jaffna between government forces and the Tamil Tigers, the armed separatist group, and fighting among the various armed groups worsened the situation.

Pradeepan's dream to become a teacher ended in one nasty blow that year. He does not mention dates, locations or even an indication of what type of an attack it was. He simply says, "I lost my sight when I was 14."

A decade of drifting for Pradeepan followed. His education disrupted irrevocably, friends and loved ones deserted him gradually, and he wandered from one place to another. In 2004, he ended up in Kilinochchi, then the administrative hub of the Tamil Tigers. A peace deal signed between the Sri Lankan government and the Tigers had already begun to unravel, but full-blown war was two-and-a-half years away.

It was during his stay in Kilinochchi that Pradeepan realised that despite his blindness, he could still work with computers, read and write. In 2004, a full decade after he lost his sight, he learned Braille.

"I learnt that I could work on my own, do things without any help," Pradeepan says.

Thousands have seen their lives altered irrevocably during the two-and-a-half decades of fighting in northern Sri Lanka.

But it would take another seven years for him to realise that he was actually so good with computers he could even seek gainful employment.

Earlier in 2011, he was picked as one of six visually impaired people who would get a three-month training on basic computer skills organized by the Employers' Federation of Ceylon (EFC). The EFC has been active in training and securing employment for the visually impaired since 2000, and was one of the partners the International Labour Organization (ILO) tapped to implement its Local Empowerment through Economic Development (LEED) Project.

The three-year poverty reduction initiative targets communities in Vavuniya and Kilinochchi districts, both hard hit by Sri Lanka's conflict. Funded by the Australian Government through the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), it supports the inclusive recovery of the North with special emphasis on assisting female-headed households and people with disabilities. The project facilitates partnerships between North and South entrepreneurs, large and small companies, producers and wholesalers, cooperatives and the private sector companies and public and private enterprises.

Prem Kumar, the area manager for Bank Ceylon, interviews Perambalam Janakumar. He later offered Janakumar a six-month paid training stint at the bank.

"They have received the best training possible," Ravi Peiris, EFC director general, says of the six visually impaired people trained by internationally educated trainers.

The EFC has so far succeeded in securing employment for more than 200 visually impaired persons through its training and network of companies throughout Sri Lanka. At the end of the training, the federation again tapped its network and asked five national companies to send representatives to the graduation ceremony to interview and possibly hire the trainees. One representative even took a seven-hour train journey to attend the ceremony from the capital Colombo.

In the morning of his graduation, Pradeepan was busy at work on his computer at the home for the disabled run by the Vanni Association for Rehabilitation of the Differently Abled, located just outside Vavuniya town. Pradeepan has been assisting Ronland Sujeewan, the Catholic priest who is also the caretaker of the house, by doing documentation and note-taking.

His computer is installed with screen recognition software where each character that is typed is relayed through speakers. "It is a totally new world," Pradeepan says as a robotic voice keeps pace with his typing.

Subasundaram Pradeepan lost his sight when he was caught in an attack in 1994. He was 14 years old then, with a dream of becoming a teacher.

A few hours later, he changes into a crisp white shirt, a dark trouser and a tie, neatly ironed. At the graduation, his trainers praise Pradeepan as one of the best.

Soon he sits down for an informal interview with two representatives from Singer Finance, one of Sri Lanka's oldest companies. The interview progresses slowly, through an interpreter. Pradeepan is obviously nervous, but he answers questions clearly.

The company has one major issue, however: transport. It provides its sales representatives with motorcycles, a benefit that is of no use to a blind man.

The company representatives approach Sujeewan, who assures them that should Pradeepan get some kind of employment, he would sort out the transport problem. They then inform Pradeepan and the priest that they would like to give Pradeepan a chance—as a telephone operator and a telemarketer.

Daily, the company will provide him with a list of phone numbers to call to canvass business. "We'll take it from there," the company representatives say. Pradeepan will get a salary of 10,000 rupees (about US$90), half of which will be contributed by the EFC initially. The trial period is six months.

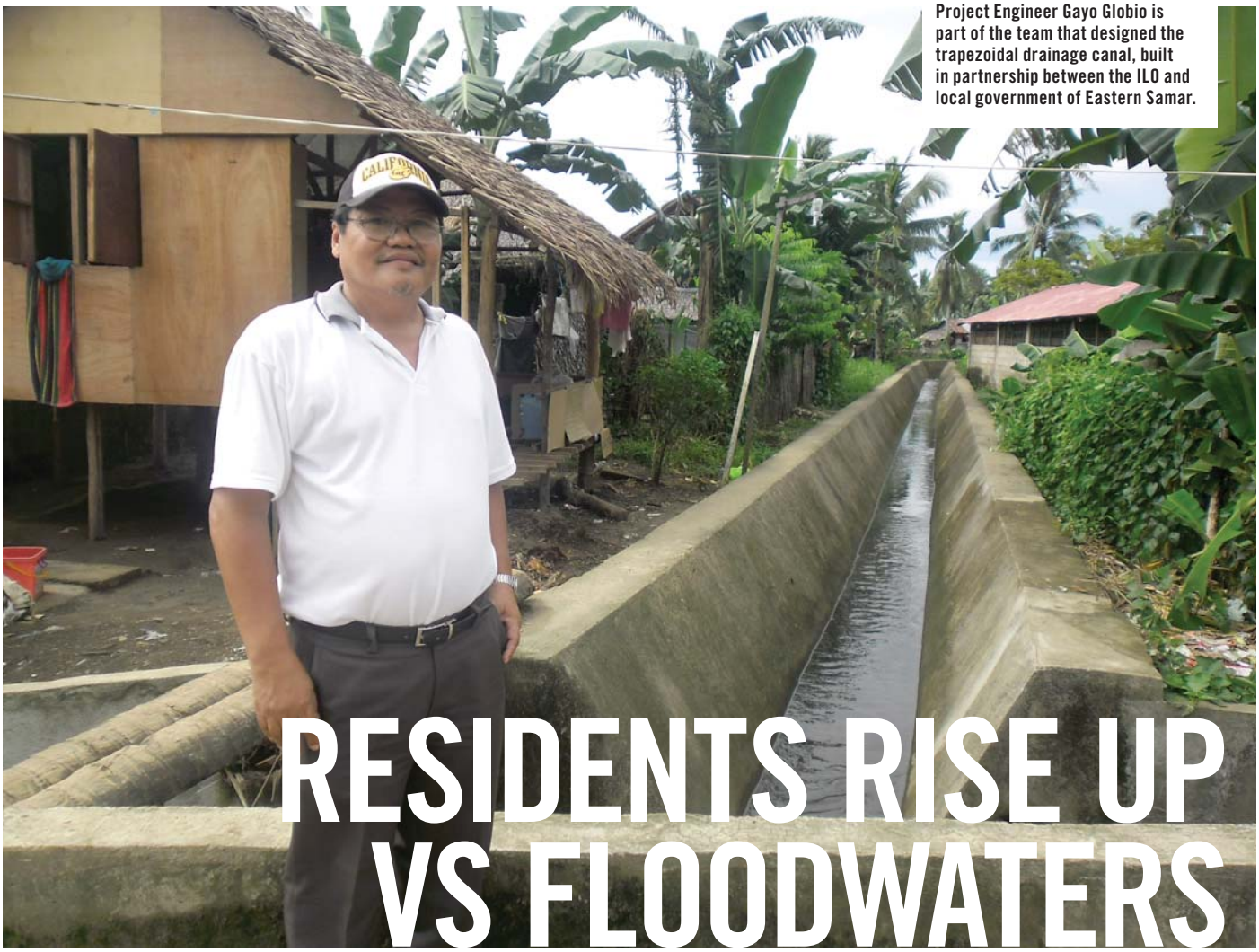
The disabled, along with single women heading families, are two of the most vulnerable groups in the north. It is not easy for them to get jobs, and society still looks at the disabled as a burden.

"It is a very long process, breaking down stigma to achieve social acceptance," says Cyril Siriwardene, secretary of Sri Lanka Foundation for Rehabilitation of the Disabled.

Small victories like Pradeepan's go a long way in breaking down those barriers.

What made Singer Finance hire him was the recommendation by his trainers and his exceptional memory. "It is good, now he can be a role model for others like him," Sujeewan says.

Pradeepan may yet achieve his dream of becoming a teacher. When the EFC/ILO partnership is carried forward, Peiris says, Pradeepan and others in the first batch of trainees would serve as trainers for the succeeding batches. ■



Project Engineer Gayo Globio is part of the team that designed the trapezoidal drainage canal, built in partnership between the ILO and local government of Eastern Samar.

RESIDENTS RISE UP VS FLOODWATERS

Text and photos by Lynette L. Corporal

Judith Nacino remembers the ordeal her three daughters endured each time floodwaters inundated their village in Dolores town in Eastern Samar province in central Philippines. To cross the murky waters from their house to higher ground, they used the trunk of a coconut tree as a bridge.

"My three daughters would often slip and fall into the thigh-high water on their way to school," recalls Nacino, a resident of Barangay (Village) 15. "Dripping wet, they would come back home to change. Since they only had two sets of uniforms each, there were times when they wouldn't have any dry uniforms and shoes left for the rest of the school week."

Nacino herself slipped several times crossing their makeshift bridge. "My husband, if he came home drunk, would end up swimming in the water," she says, smiling at the recollection.

Barangay 14 resident Jose Tegio, meanwhile, came home one rainy day to a flooded house with his family cooped up on the second floor. They were escaping not just the rising waters but something else the flood dragged in: a "huge snake".

"With my neighbours' help, we searched and found not a snake, thankfully, but a big, black eel, which we promptly grilled and ate as finger food," the 58-year-old father of five says with a laugh at the impromptu "happy hour".

One of the lateral canals built by the ILO to direct waters from various parts of the four affected villages.

Nacino and Tegio make light of their experiences now, but the situation was serious till 2009. For decades, every time the rains came, a five-hectare catch basin in Dolores overflowed and submerged four villages, affecting 5,300 residents.

Dolores, which means "sorrow" or "pain" in Spanish, is a coastal town of 33,000 people facing the Pacific Ocean. The second-highest rice-producing town in Eastern Samar, it had reeled from a lack of infrastructure, especially farm-to-market roads. The frequent typhoons and flash floods made matters worse, often resulting in landslides and loss of lives, property and livelihood.

Residents also faced the threat of schistosomiasis, a parasitic disease referred to as "snail fever", caused by flatworms in freshwater snails entering human skin pores and attacking internal organs.

Water from the five-hectare catch basin flows out to the open sea.

In January 2009, Dolores folk finally woke up from their nightmare. The International Labour Organization (ILO) had chosen the town as a beneficiary of its US$100,000 (4.25-million-peso) Community-Led Drainage Improvement Project.

After a six-month consultation with ILO representatives and local government officials, construction began in June 2009 and ended five months later.

Today, the swampy and muddy area that surrounds the affected villages is gone. In its place a 1.2-metre-deep concrete-lined and covered canal winds its way to the open sea. A 240-metre portion, which is part of the ILO segment, also serves as a pathway for residents and sometimes for the three-wheeled passenger vehicles called pedicabs.

"Of all the calamity-prone areas we considered, Eastern Samar had the most complete information base, which was one of our criteria for the project," says ILO national programme officer Honorio Palarca, who was involved in the project from conceptualisation to turnover.

Dolores' updated community-based management system details development plans and priorities at the village level. This allowed the ILO to see the priority issues, giving the town a huge edge over other provinces being considered for the project.

"The ILO provided funds to cover the rehabilitation of the old drainage line and the construction of a new line with laterals to prevent flooding and rid the place of the stagnant water where schistosomiasis-bearing snails thrive," Palarca explains. Lateral canals connect to the main line and drain the other pools of stagnant water in the area.

In a totally unexpected gesture, the local government committed about half of ILO's offer as counterpart, and the two partners divided the work — the 855-metre concrete-lined and covered main canal with 80-metre smaller laterals for ILO and the separate 120-metre trapezoidal concrete open canal for the local government.

But the "soul" of the project lies in its being wholly community-led and implemented. Senior members took active part in the discussions and in the construction of the canals.

"The initial meetings and discussions were quite intense, primarily because of the people's common desire to resolve the problem," says project engineer Gayo Globio, who designed the trapezoidal and concrete-lined canals.

Says Tegio, the head of Barangay 14's Community Development Association: "(The community) wanted to work to resolve the problem, but proper guidance and lack of funds prevented them from doing so, until the ILO project came along."

Some 3,900 households from Barangays 12, 13, 14 and 15 directly benefited from the project.

"There were enough skilled workers available, and community elders managed the whole project by democratically selecting and rotating the workers so everyone could benefit," Palarca says. "As a result, the local manpower pool was strengthened and the whole community acquired new skills on how to manage and run projects overall."

Those hired to do the manual labour were mostly young people, who learned new skills and earned from the exercise. Labourers were paid 200 pesos ($4.60) daily, masons 350 pesos ($8), and skilled foremen 400 pesos ($9.15).

"The women, who performed mostly administration work such as bookkeeping, were also paid accordingly," Tegio says.

Project engineer Globio walks along the 255-metre concrete-covered canal project segment managed and funded by the ILO.

Twenty-three-year-old Eladio Batinga Jr. of Barangay 15 was one of those who signed up as a member of the neighbourhood association, so he could help his community solve the drainage problem.

"I also wanted to learn new skills, especially in constructing canals. Plus, the income that I'd earn would greatly help my parents in buying basic necessities," says Batinga, the fourth of eight siblings.

Batinga never got to finish any formal education, but had taken vocational courses in driving and electrical wiring. He was hired as a labourer and paid 200 pesos ($4.60) a day, which he contributed to the household coffers. His job was to mix cement and transfer raw materials from the barracks to the job site using a tricycle the association rented.

Thanks to the project, the neighbourhood association became a licensed contractor eligible to take on future projects and employ its own members. Tegio says local officials have assured him of support should they pursue infrastructure projects. "The only barrier that we see in terms of working on a new project is to come up with initial funding," he says.

Winning bidders for infrastructure projects are required to have capital to advance project costs, which are later reimbursed by the government, something a small community organisation may not yet be ready for.

But what is important is that the project provided a template for community-based contractors who wish to implement development projects, and in the process provide work for members of the community, says Palarca.

Everyone does their share, especially after they witnessed how the drainage system saved the town from being badly battered when heavy rains spawned flash floods and displaced more than 100,000 families in parts of Eastern Samar in January 2010.

Today, the residents of Dolores all take part in maintaining the newly built drainage system. Each household would periodically check if their part of the canal is clogged and if the screens that filter out the waste matter need cleaning, says Nacino. ■

Evelyn Cafon sews traditional embroidery onto a blouse inside a T'boli home.

Tribeswomen earn from traditional skills

A blouse featuring traditional T'boli embroidery.

Text and photos by Kara Santos

Seventy-five-year-old Subi Nalon weaves thousands of strands of abaca into the unique patterns of *t'nalak*, a rough fabric that is the traditional textile of the ethnic T'boli tribe in South Cotabato in Mindanao. She has been weaving *t'nalak* since she was 15, having inherited the skill from her mother.

The *t'nalak's* red, black and white fabric has become synonymous with the tribe and is regarded as a symbol of its cultural heritage. But *t'nalak* is also a manifestation of their collective subconscious, because the designs are said to come to the weavers in their dreams. Legend has it that a goddess named Fu Dalu taught *t'nalak* weaving in a dream.

Though traditionally used for weddings and births, many women like Nalon now weave for *t'nalak* items that are sold as souvenirs, like bags, hats, vests, and wallets.

"It's the most magnificent thing I've seen. I haven't come across anything like it in my travels," says an American tourist visiting the souvenir shop of the Cooperative of Women in Health and Development (COWHED) in the quiet lakeside town where Nalon's wares are among those being sold.

The T'boli women of Lake Sebu town, one of the poorest in South Cotabato, are rediscovering that *t'nalak* weaving and other indigenous handicraft—embroidery, beautiful brass ornaments and complicated beadwork—could help uplift their economy and improve their lives.

Nalon and her neighbours used to produce and sell the indigenous crafts individually, a practice that did not earn them much. Things changed when COWHED stepped in.

The project, assisted also with a microfinance project by the Embassy of Finland and the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, aims to reduce poverty and promote human rights among indigenous peoples. One way is by improving employment opportunities through traditional livelihoods.

The only women-managed cooperative in Lake Sebu, COWHED has 217 members who have taken out loans ranging from 2,000 to 19,900 pesos (US$47 to $469) to help them start their businesses. A member who has repaid the loan can avail of a bigger amount.

Woodcraft items like tealight candle holders, plates, fish pen holders, miniature boats and *hegelung* (traditional T'boli guitars) are displayed as souvenirs at the Cooperative of Women in Health and Development (COWHED).

But the multipurpose cooperative does not just lend money to members like Nalon. It also equips them with proper skills to help them improve their businesses.

"We trained them in entrepreneurship and to put value on their labour and skills," says Gemma Galor, COWHED's microfinance manager. "Traditionally, T'bolis use the barter system. They tend to price their items very low because they would only compute their expenses and put a small mark-up, without really factoring the hard work that goes into production."

Nalon, a widow who lives alone, cried after attending the cooperative's business training. "She said she was a first-class weaver, so why wasn't she living a first-class lifestyle?" says Galor.

When she joined the cooperative, Nalon got a starting loan of 3,000 pesos that helped her buy rolls of abaca fibre, string, and fabric dye.

"I used to help harvest in the farms just to earn money to buy raw materials and buy rice for meals," Nalon says through a translator. Like other T'bolis, she traded her *t'nalak* for farm animals and food, so she was unaware of the monetary value of the products.

She learned to cost her products during the entrepreneurship training. Her *t'nalak* now sells for 300 to 800 pesos a meter. She supplies COWHED, as well as private buyers from Manila.

"I regret that I only attended the training last year. I wished I had known about it when I was younger," Nalon says.

Evelyn Cafon, who learned to embroider the intricate tribal designs of the T'bolis when she was 13, also attended a business training session where she learned to make a business plan, maximize her seed capital, and cost her goods.

A loan from COWHED helped Florita Ugak, a mother of two, buy more raw materials to produce wallets in the veranda of her bamboo hut. She says, "It's hard to rely only on farming, as the income is seasonal. You have to wait at least four months before harvesting crops, and pests and weather problems can affect the yield."

Lani Langgong, a mother of six, used her loan to subsidize the cost of hauling wood needed to make carvings of fish, boats, and *hegelung* (T'boli guitars). She also supplies wooden trays and figurines to resorts and other tourist sites in the area. Her family maintains a farm, but selling woodcarved products now accounts for 80 per cent of its income.

Nalon's and Ugak's *t'nalak* goods and Langgong's woodcarved guitars are sold at the COWHED office, a bamboo hut on stilts built T'boli style. The hut doubles as a souvenir shop, offering a wide range of home crafts made by T'boli women, from embroidered T'boli clothes, brass work, wood crafts, bead necklaces to *t'nalak* passport cases, chopsticks holders, cosmetic kits, and bags. The shop draws an average of 30 visitors a week, but tourists arrive in busloads during summer and Christmas.

Lani Langgong uses a knife to carve a wooden boat.

Beadworker Loreta Bongon, a mother of four, finds selling items through the cooperative an advantage. "I used to stay out all day to look for tourists to buy my bead necklaces and bracelets. Sometimes, I would end up selling them for really low prices just to make a sale," Bongon says. "Now, I just come in monthly to deliver new items and am paid for the items I made that were sold, based on their inventory."

Bongon now has more time to focus on quality necklaces, which are bestsellers at the shop. She has also set up a small store selling basic goods near her house. Income from her beadwork has put her eldest through college.

COWHED also runs a small savings programme. Its forced savings programme sets aside a portion of the member's earnings into an account they can access in case of emergencies. "They're also not ashamed to deposit money to us, even if it's just 20 pesos ($0.47)," says Galor.

Most tribe members used to just store their extra money in the bamboo posts of the houses, explains Galor. The tendency was to spend money unnecessarily because money was just lying around the house. Going to a regular bank is not an option for many, as the nearest one requires long land travel.

Though primarily a cooperative for women, COWHED has extended its savings programme to male clients such as brass workers and *habal-habal* or *skylab* (motorcycle taxi) drivers, the most popular form of transportation in the rocky, mountainous areas. Galor recounts how one *skylab* driver has a savings account of 17,000 pesos ($400), while others have managed to buy their own motorcycle to start a business.

"We're happy that our members have been able to improve their lives. But what's important is that the women now see the value and beauty in their traditional skills," says Galor.

In Nalon's case, she hopes she and other T'boli women would get more support. "So that I may leave a legacy to my children and grandchildren and they may be able to carry on the T'boli craft of *t'nalak* weaving," she says. ■

ETHNIC WEAVERS
TURN SKILLS INTO BUSINESS ASSETS

Text and photos by Kong Kea

Since her husband died six years ago, 34-year-old Cambodian Kloem Pun found it hard to raise her three children—two boys and a girl—on her own. But she had one asset she could use to survive: she knew how to weave the ethnic garments of her Kreung tribe.

Using that skill, Kloem Pun now produces traditional scarves, making US$30 to $40 a month on top of the income she gets planting rice and other cash crops. She has her own weaving loom and has a ready market for her products.

"I am now happy, as I have my own weaving business to earn money to support my family," she says.

Kloem Pun is one of the ethnic Kreung living in Ratanakiri province in northeast Cambodia, next door to Laos and Vietnam. Hers is one of about 300 indigenous families in Ratanakiri that have benefited from the Creative Industries Support Programme (CISP) aimed at developing ethnic handicrafts as a source of employment.

The CISP was jointly established by the International Labour Organization (ILO), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) and the United Nations, Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

Aside from Ratanakiri, the programme was implemented in the provinces of Mondulkiri, Kampong Thom and Preah Vihear with funding of more than $3 million from the Spanish Millenium Development Goals Achievement Funds (MDG-F). The three-year programme was launched in 2008 and closed in 2011.

More than 140,000 people in Cambodia belong to 24 indigenous ethnic minority groups

Yorn Cheang, 24, is one of the members of the Tumpoun tribe in Laaen Kren village in Ratanakiri who was trained by NGOs under the ILO 's Creative Industrial Support Programme (CISP).

in 2006, according to the Ministry of Planning's National Institute of Statistics and the Ministry of Rural Development. They constitute around 1.4 per cent of Cambodia's population of over 14 million, and are among the 35 per cent living below the poverty line.

An Chhev, 28, and Chhar Rakorb, 24, members of the Kreung tribe in Ratanakiri province, are among those who benefited from the ILO-funded CIS P.

Yin Sopheap, ILO's CISP national coordinator, says over 1,000 families from ethnic communities in the four provinces benefited from the programme.

Aimed at providing life skills and helping build indigenous peoples' capacity for generating their own employment, the CISP provided beneficiaries with training on traditional handicrafts and loans to set up local handicraft businesses.

In Ratanakiri province, two local non-government organisations, Cambodian NTFP Development Organisation (CANDO) and *Centre d'Etude et de Développement Agricole Cambodgien* (Cambodian Centre for Study and Development in Agriculture or CEDAC), implemented the programme in three districts, six communes and 15 villages where indigenous groups were concentrated. The three districts were O'Chhum, Voeun Sai and Kon Mom, home to four groups of ethnic minorities—the Kreung, Kavet, Tumpoun and Lao.

Kloem Pun was able to buy her weaving loom through the assistance she got from the CISP. "If there were no training from CANDO as well as financial support from involved sponsors, I would not be able to operate (my business)," she says.

Yorn Cheang, a 24-year-old member from the Tumpoun community in Laaen Kren village in O'Chhum district, received training from CEDAC on weaving baskets, saving money and other related skills in early 2010. He now produces many types of Tumpoun items: (baskets), sieves, hats, boxes or trunks made of palm leaves, and small shallow baskets formerly used as rice bowls.

Cheang can earn between $30 and $50 per month from selling his products to tourists in his community and in the province. "I am very pleased with CISP which has provided me skills in making money to support my family besides planting rice," he says.

Yin Sopheap says all the indigenous peoples who participated in the CISP were also trained in gender sensitivity and other issues. The programme has also been providing training on health and safety at work and on the establishment of indigenous networks to help preserve traditions, customs and cultures of Cambodia's ethnic communities.

Seam Vitha, CANDO's enterprise development facilitator based in Ratanakiri, says since the CISP was introduced and implemented by CANDO in its targeted areas, the living conditions and the local economy of the ethnic groups improved. They now have their own home-based handicraft businesses and can produce many kinds of traditional items. "They could also reproduce and preserve their ancient traditional materials which had disappeared for a long time," he says.

CANDO and CEDAC searched and found the markets for indigenous products, assisting the communities in marketing their handicrafts to shops in the provinces or in the capital Phnom Penh. They also lobbied with national agencies to encourage both local and foreign tourists to visit their communities.

Sovan Roleum, Ta Ngach village chief in O'Chhum district, says the programme indeed generated jobs and incomes for ethnic minorities in the province. He adds, "The programme has changed the mindset of ethnic groups, from their living in isolation towards grouping, networking or associating."

The village chief called on the four UN agencies to continue the programme because, he says, people in the communities still need help.

Yin Sopheap projects that the CISP needs to be implemented for a few more years to promote and sustain the local economy and improve living conditions of indigenous peoples. ■

CAMBODIA

Dreaming of a Tumpoun centre in Laaen Kren

Sitting inside her thatch-roofed house, 46-year-old Por Mach is busy weaving a traditional scarf.

She belongs to the Tumpoun tribe in Laaen Kren village, in Ratanakiri province's O'Chhum district. She is a farmer with six children—five daughters and one son—whose ages range from 11 to 25. Two of her daughters are married, but she still has four other children to raise.

Por Mach has been doing it singlehandedly since her husband, also a Tumpoun and former soldier who worked with the Royal Cambodian Armed Force, died of tuberculosis 11 years ago.

Since his death, Por Mach's family became impoverished. All her children were unemployed, and she was the only one who bore the responsibility of supporting the entire family.

Por Mach, 46, a member of the Tumpoun tribe, displays traditional products that she has produced for sale to tourists in the village.

Por Mach earns a living planting rice, seasonal vegetables and other crops. She also used to weave traditional Tumpoun clothes—a skill she learned from her mother when she was 13—but her products were of poor quality, she says.

Then she started participating in the Creative Industries Support Programme (CISP) of the International Labour Organization (ILO), which the Centre d'Etude et de Développement Agricole Cambodgien (CEDAC or the Cambodian Centre for Study and Development in Agriculture) implemented in her village in February 2009. Her two unmarried daughters later joined Por Mach in weaving products for sale to tourists.

"I decided to participate in the CISP because I observed that it is important for me to get professional about my weaving skills," she says, adding that it was a good opportunity for her to help preserve Tumpoun traditions and culture that have long been forgotten.

Por Mach now produces many types of Tumpoun traditional products—scarves, clothes, trousers, bags, pillows, luggage. She also designs and dyes different types of clothes and colours as tourists demand.

With financial support from CEDAC, she bought her own loom with which she weaves as many as five scarves a week, earning her at least US$50 a month in addition to her farming. "I can now produce ancient traditional scarves or clothes for sale and make more money to support my family," Por Mach says.

Since participating in the CISP, she has also been able to buy a 21-inch colour television set for her family, a machine for cutting grass at her farm and other furniture for her house.

For her achievements, her community chose Por Mach as a group leader in weaving clothes in Laaen Kren village. She now is busy not only producing her own items, but also working with her team members, non-government organisations, donors and other related government agencies in finding markets for their products.

To promote traditional Tumpoun items in the village, she works with her group members and other concerned people in designing the models and styles of the items they sell.

What Por Mach would like to see, though, is NGOs and donors helping the Laaen Kren village establish a centre where indigenous groups like the Tumpoun could exhibit and sell their traditional products. Such a centre would certainly help promote the local economy of the Tumpoun people and reduce poverty in their communities, she says.

(Text and photo by Kong Kea)

IP youths support community-driven participatory development

The "Kabataan (Youth): Jobs and Alternatives to Migration" brought together youths from around the Philippines who had taken part in local employment programmes initiated by the International Labour Organization.

Despite a degree in education, 20-year-old Jovy Canete-Navarro found it difficult landing a job as a teacher.

"Most of the jobs available in the area were not really related to my field of study," says Navarro, a member of the indigenous Manobo tribe that inhabits the remote reaches of the Caraga region in Mindanao, where social services like health, sanitation, housing and education are almost non-existent.

Navarro's search for employment eventually brought her back to where she started—her own tribe—as part of the community-driven participatory development (CPDP) approach espoused by the International Labour Organization (ILO).

Indigenous peoples (IPs) comprise at most 15 per cent of the Philippine population of more than 95 million. They are often vulnerable to discrimination, human rights violations and social exclusion, said the ILO, which has been working among IP communities in the country for a dozen years.

As a result of its involvement with IPs, the ILO has come up with the CPDP, an approach that supports the generation of income and employment by tapping local activities and skills, and helps provide for basic services such as education. "It is an approach that capitalizes on the innate capacities, indigenous knowledge systems and practices and development initiatives of the indigenous and tribal peoples," the ILO said in its concept paper for the Indigenous People Development Programme under which the CPDP falls.

Navarro fitted in perfectly with the CPDP, which gave her a chance to practice her profession and at the same time help uplift her community. She is now part of the Alternative Learning System (ALS) programme as a volunteer para-teacher, helping address the problem of illiteracy among indigenous peoples by teaching adult members of tribes living in far-flung ancestral domains. Some of the areas she is assigned to require two hours' travel through the mountains via a *habal-habal* (motorcycle fitted with extra seats), which is the only vehicle that can navigate the roads in the area.

Navarro's work has saved her from the fate of millions of young people worldwide who are finding it increasingly difficult to get jobs. According to the ILO, an estimated 75 million people aged 15 to 24 worldwide were unemployed as of 2010. In the Philippines, because of the employment crunch, 86 per cent settle for jobs unrelated to their college or university courses, a 2010 survey by the National Youth Commission (NYC) found.

In August 2011, Navarro flew to Manila as an ILO youth ambassador and spoke at the "Kabataan (Youth): Jobs and Alternatives to Migration" forum held in celebration of International Youth Day.

Interviewed on the sidelines of that event, Navarro describes the reaction of tribe members to the ALS: "A lot of them were eager to learn how to read and write, especially when they found out that I am a member of the tribe. They usually shy away from outsiders who don't understand the culture of the community."

A programme of the Department of Education (DepEd), the ALS uses innovative approaches to learning based on the condition of the learners, including activities for functional literacy.

"As an initial step, interested members of the tribe, mostly young people, volunteer as para-teachers," explains Domingo Nayahangan, programme manager of the ILO's Indigenous Peoples Development Programme (IPDP) in Caraga. "After receiving appropriate training from qualified ALS trainers of DepEd, they are assisted by DepEd and community development facilitators to organise functional literacy classes in specific locations."

A culturally sensitive module was developed to teach literacy among the indigenous peoples living in far-flung areas, and so far the results have been very encouraging. The programme also provides transportation and food allowance for the students, and educational supplies.

Although she does not receive a regular salary, Navarro says she finds fulfilment in her job reaching out to the community. Each ALS class targets only 25 students, the size of her classes has grown because of the community's eagerness to learn.

A number of her students are tribal women, many of whom, she says, marry and have children early, and never get a chance to go to school. "One of my students was an 80-year-old woman who wanted to learn how to write, so that she could actually vote during elections," the Manobo para-teacher says.

The community has been very supportive of the ALS programme. A tribal elder even volunteered her house when Navarro was looking for a venue for the learning centre.

"Even the village leaders and local government partners donate extra supplies like food items, security and school supplies," says April Joy Bebis, a community organiser from the non-government organisation SIKAP, which works on indigenous knowledge, culture, arts and tradition. "There's a convergence of community support."

Chiefly because of this, Bebis expresses confidence the community-driven participatory approach would be sustained long after the programme ends.

(Text and photo by Kara Santos)

Philippine president Benigno Simeon Aquino III sits with youth representatives from all over the country during a forum on employment and alternatives to migration for Filipino youth, held on International Youth Day in August 2011.

Programme opens up opportunities for disadvantaged youths

Text and photos by Kara Santos

Just a few months ago, 25-year-old Jayson Canete was a jobless out-of-school youth with hardly any options for employment in his hometown in Sibagat in Agusan del Sur province on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao.

Although his parents earned very little—his father as a farmer and his mother a domestic worker in Manila—he had graduated from high school and tried to pursue a degree in engineering. But Canete, the eldest of eight siblings, quit education at 19 to help support the family. With few options in his hometown, he went to the city and ended up in a string of contractual jobs.

"I became a laboratory assistant and fast-food crew, moving from one job to another as a contractual worker and regularly borrowing money to complete my pre-employment requirements," Canete says. "There were many times I felt hopeless and even paralysed because I could not get regular work."

In 2011, Canete learned he had other options. He was one of 30 out-of-school youths who participated in the Start and Improve Your Business (SIYB) course, the entrepreneurship training programme of the International Labour Organization (ILO), held in Agusan del Sur. The training aims to encourage youth to take advantage of the economic opportunities in their areas as an alternative to leaving their hometowns for work in the city or overseas.

The programme is one of the many interventions provided under the Spanish Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund (MDG-F) Joint Programme "Alternatives to Migration: Decent Jobs for Filipino Youth" implemented through the ILO, International Organization for Migration (IOM), United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), and the Philippines' Department of Labour and Employment (DOLE), the lead implementing partner.

The MDG-F was established in 2006 by

the Government of Spain and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to enhance efforts to achieve the MDGs and support UN reform efforts at the country level.

Programmes such as the ILO's training programme are needed in the Philippines where more than one-third of its 95-million population is poor and barely has access to food, education, shelter and health services. Many lack the means to finish school and find regular employment. Even college graduates are also often unable to find work in already crowded fields.

Like Canete, many of them shoulder the burden of helping feed their families and sending younger siblings to school. The search for employment often takes them away from their hometowns or countries.

Indeed, the Philippines ranks among the world's top exporters of labour. The Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) reported that in 2010, a total of 1.1 million land-based workers were deployed abroad, translating into roughly 3,000 workers leaving every day.

The National Statistics Coordination Board's (NSCB) Survey of Overseas Filipinos puts the total number of land- and sea-based overseas Filipino workers (OFWs) at 1.9 million as of 2009. Of this number, 72 per cent are below 40 years old. The ILO estimates that the youth—those aged 15 to 24 according to the official United Nations definition—comprise more than a third of all OFWs.

Canete now has the opportunity of avoiding the life of an overseas migrant. The entrepreneurship training programme provided him valuable knowledge on setting up a business, and will also provide start-up capital.

Robert Rodelas of the DOLE's Bureau of Workers with Special Concerns (BWSC), which implements the entrepreneurship training, says each beneficiary would receive a 15,000-peso (US$353) grant in kind to help them set up a microenterprise. "No cash will be involved. Instead, the needed inputs to start the project such as piglets, feeds and materials will be given," he says.

In August 2011, Canete and other youth supported by the joint programme flew to Manila to take part in "Kabataan (Youth): Jobs and Alternatives to Migration a forum held in celebration of International Youth Day, where he spoke about his experience.

"The programme helped me assess what kind of business would succeed in the area. I decided to put up a small piggery because I won't need to spend the whole day attending to the livestock and can do other work as well," Canete says in an interview.

Aside from piggery, other viable business plans include small convenience stores, fish vending, spare parts trading, mini-eateries, accessory stores, Internet cafés and gasoline retail shops, Rodelas says.

Local trainers trained by the ILO will provide counselling and consultancy or mentoring services for the beneficiaries during the implementation of their projects."They will also conduct the regular monitoring and evaluation of project operation," Rodelas says. "Our office will come up with an online tracking system to determine the progress of project implementation. Regular feedback among the local implementers, DOLE-BWSC and ILO will also be done." The programme focuses on four of the Philippines' poorest provinces—Masbate, Antique, Maguindanao and Agusan del Sur—where the incidence of out-of-school and poor youths is high and enrolment rates are low. It is also in these provinces where the MDGs—a set of targets that need to be met by 2015 to lift the country out of poverty—are least likely to be achieved.

"As an alternative to wage employment, young Filipinos need to embrace and embark on entrepreneurship at an early age," Labour Secretary Rosalinda Baldoz said during the International Youth Day Forum.

She attributed youth unemployment to lack of skills and educational attainment. Typically, children from poor families drop out of school during their adolescent years to look for work. Traditional childrearing and housekeeping responsibilities have also hindered young women from completing secondary education.

Helping Filipino youth finish secondary education, pursue entrepreneurship training or technical-vocational course, or enter university is the best step towards decent work within the country, Baldoz said.

The Labour Secretary called on private sector partners to promote entrepreneurship, support vocational training and adopt apprenticeships and on-the-job training programmes to address the issues of youth employment and migration.

The youth micro-entrepreneurship programme may be still in the initial stage, but DOLE's Rodelas says, "With the assistance from the ILO and the active support of our local partners, success is not far-fetched." ■

Thousands of young Filipinos flock to job fairs like this. The Philippines has one of the highest unemployment rates among the youth in East Asia and the Pacific, according to a 2003 World Bank Report.

Students look at job openings posted at the Job Centre in Battambang.

Job centres ease unemployment

Text and photos by Kong Kea

Sitting in front of bottles of sauces in a factory in Makara 13 village in the north-eastern province of Battambang, 27-year-old Vann Dara looks happy with his job.

For the past two years, Dara has been a marketing officer at the Entri Meas Sauce Producing Handicraft Co, a job he found through the National Employment Agency's Regional Job Centre in Battambang.

"If there were no Job Centre, I would be having difficulty getting a job because I am still studying and have no work experience," says Dara, who is in his fourth year of marketing studies at the University of Management and Economy (UME) in Battambang.

From a starting salary of US$50 a month, Dara now gets $80. He uses half of this to finance his studies and gives the other half to his parents to help support his six younger siblings through school.

About 300 Cambodians like Dara have found employment through the Battambang Job Centre, which was founded in 2009 by the National Employment Agency as a way of addressing the country's unemployment problem. Cambodia's five Job Centres – in Battambang, Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Kampot and Svay Rieng provinces –were established with technical and financial support from the International Labour Organization (ILO).

The Job Centres link jobseekers to potential employers as well as to existing vocational training institutions where they could upgrade their skills. Each Job Centre provides a Job-net service, an Internet-based registry that lists job openings, as well as library service, advisory and labour market information.

In Battambang, the Centre helps ease the 8.3 per cent unemployment in the province, which has a population of about 1.1 million.

Soeun Phikun, a 29-year-old graduate of the National University of Management in Battambang, also found work through the Job Centre in March 2011. She is now the assistant manager at the Korean-owned Kogid Cambodia PLC in Battambang's Rattanak Mondul district.

"I was unemployed for two years after my graduation from the university in 2009," she said. "I am very happy I found work via the Job Centre in my district and could get a good salary." Phikun earns $250 a month.

Kogid Cambodia PLC's general manager, Moon Jung Hoon, recalls the difficulty the company had recruiting Cambodian employees when it first set up shop in Battambang. To announce job openings at the company, he had to travel nearly 400 kilometres to the capital Phnom Penh to advertise with local newspapers or post them on job websites on the Internet.

In 2010, the Battambang Job Centre invited Moon's company to advertise job openings, free of charge. Moon says the Centre also helped screen applicants by matching the jobseekers' skills with the prospective employers' needs, sent the applicants to the companies for interviews and conducted follow-up procedures, such as inquiring after the employees' work and their safety.

In 2011, Kogid Cambodia PLC recruited 20 employees through the Job Centre and is planning to recruit more in 2012 as the company expands.

"The main objective of the Job Centre is to find jobs from local, private or foreign companies or non-government organisations (NGOs) for people in the province. It is also to promote economic growth, social development and poverty reduction," says Mom Pov, team leader of the Battambang Job Centre.

At least 60 people visit the Centre every day to get counselling from the staff, he says.

Since the Centre was established in 2009, more than 2,000 jobseekers have registered for possible employment. Of this, 300 have found jobs. More than 300 employers have posted job announcements with the Centre. Pov says he also advertises job openings over the radio.

"I hope that this project will help the Cambodian government boost the country's economic growth and reduce poverty," says Nuon Rithy, national consultant of the ILO's Regional Job Centres based in Cambodia.

Rithy says more than 7,600 jobseekers have registered with the first four Centres since 2009, and 800 of them have found employment through the help of the Centres. The Job Centre in Svay Rieng opened only at the end of 2011.

He emphasizes that before the creation of the Job Centres, Cambodians found work through local or foreign newspapers, radio, television or via the Internet. "I think that finding the jobs through newspapers or websites is difficult for jobseekers because they have to pay for a newspaper or Internet use, unlike current job centre is free of charge, especially for illiterate job seekers," Rithy says.

ILO's support for the Job Centres ended in December 2011. But Rithy says he hopes ILO would get new funds to be able to continue its technical assistance for the Centres' staff.

The Job Centre in Battambang was under the control of the Polytechnic Institute of Battambang, which will continue its support even after ILO funding ends, says Duong Vandeth, the institute's director. "We could not depend totally on the ILO or NGOs in funding or running its financial and technical support for our Job Centre here," she says. "We hope that we will able to run it in the future."

The NEA also plans to establish Job Centres in 24 cities and provinces across Cambodia as hubs of information to serve employers, jobseekers and training providers. ■

Vann Dara, 27, a marketing officer at a sauces company, landed his job through the National Employment Agency's Regional Job Centre in Battambang.

TREKKING
BOOSTS INCOME IN RURAL DISTRICTS

Text and photos by Damakant Jayshi

There was the usual buzz around Shivalaya bazaar in the north-eastern Ramechhap district one October evening, when buses carrying mostly foreign tourists arrived in quick succession. Nepal's best tourist season — October to December — had just begun, and the lodge owners, restaurant staff and tourist guides were excited.

The ILO and ADB helped build the innovative Potato Rustic Store at Rasnalu, Ramechhap.

A section on the Jiri-Dharapani Road in the Dolakha district that is vital to the transport of passengers and goods in the region.

Shivalaya boasts of mountains, a gushing river, a campsite, a tourist information centre and clean lodges, which also provide mountain guides and porters. It is also the gateway to a relatively new hiking trail up the Himalayan Mountains called Numbur Cheese Circuit (NCC).

Taking 14 to 16 days to complete, the trek begins in Shivalaya, which is also the first stop on the 25-day trek to the Sagarmatha (Mt Everest) Base Camp, and provides a shorter route to the popular Namche Bazar in the Everest region.

The NCC is part of a project called Employment and Peace-building through Local Economic Development (EmPLED) initiated in 2007 by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in partnership with the Nepal government, though it began a year and half after that. It aims to channel the tourist influx towards small locally run businesses that provide sustainable local employment, offering tourists unexplored trails, a chance to visit shops that sell indigenous products, and a taste of local life through the homestay programme.

"The homestay programme allows visitors to experience the rural Nepali household's life and the local community's culture," says Rokat Basnet, chairman of the NCC Tourism Development Centre (NCCTDC) and one of the key people behind the new trekking route. The ILO and government have handed over responsibility

to NCCTDC to promote the route.

Under the homestay programme, tourists lodge with the homeowners' family. The owners are not restaurateurs; their main source of living is farming or animal rearing. But their homes double as lodges for trekkers who want to stay with them after a hard day of hiking.

So far, 11 households in five villages on the circuit offer homestay lodges. In 2009, the ILO trained one person in each of these households on cooking and housekeeping. There are plans to involve more families and places.

"These initiatives under LED are niche in Nepal because they promote inclusive economic growth," says Gerard McCarthy who was closely involved in each of the ILO initiatives as the Chief Technical Advisor for EmPLED.

These initiatives come after the formal end of a decade-long Maoist insurgency in 2006 which "stalled growth," as ILO officials put it, and led many youths to leave for foreign lands to find employment. The initiatives are helping the people of rural places like Ramechhap tap local potential and provide an opportunity for sustainable development.

Some measures are simple and home-grown, such as prolonging the shelf life of junar, the locally available sweet orange, so that it could fetch better prices after the seasonal glut.

"We still have a lot of work to do, but the signs are promising," Basnet says while travelling from Shivalaya to the nearest homestay lodge in Khahare in the north. Travel lasts four hours and takes trekkers over a suspension bridge, a few other smaller concrete bridges, small settlements, forest-top mountains and a few rivulets. The hike is easy on the legs. A midway stop in Garjang allows trekkers to rest, and for some, even get a night's stay.

Tourists preparing to go on Everest Base Camp trek, a 25-day hike, after a night's stay at a lodge in Shivalaya.

"Before the new trekking route opened, we did not see any foreign tourist making it this way," says Nabarj Khadka of Lekali Trekking and Guest House in Garjang, the first stop on NCC after beginning a trek in Shivalaya. "Since then, the tourists have been passing through our village." Some 25 to 30 foreign tourists have stayed at his lodge in the last two years.

The NCC is the result of a joint effort involving locals of the region, government officials from the district, businessmen (hoteliers and traders) and the ILO, which provided two foreign consultants to find a feasible route in 2009.

Passengers waiting for the heavy truck to be repaired. The breakdown of vehicles is frequent on the Jiri-Dharapani road, as in most of rural Nepal, and can traffic movement for hours.

The consultants worked closely with locals, like lodge owners Ang Nima Sherpa of New Sherpa Guide Lodge and Valley Restaurant of Shivalaya, to map out the final route. Initially, the Ramechhap Chamber of Commerce and local government officials were also involved.

Ang Nima Sherpa, owner of New Sherpa Guide Lodge and Valley Restaurant at Shivalaya. Behind him can be seen the mountains that lead to the Everest Base Camp.

Basnet says the "virgin" route offers the breathtaking natural beauty of snow-capped Himalayan peaks, including Numburchuli, which is nearly 7,000 metres above sea level and the tallest in the circuit, and a view of glaciers closest to Kathmandu. Other attractions include alpine vegetation, the snow leopard, red panda, rhododendron flowers in the spring and summer, and yak cheese.

Another destination is Paanchpokhari and Jatapokhari Lakes, which not only have clear blue water but also have religious significance for both Hindus and Buddhists. A trekker can experience the culture of the ethnic Sherpa, their daily lives, fairs and festivals, the yak dance, and the Lhosar or the Tibetan New Year celebration in February.

One of those trekkers is Richard Wallas, a writer and photographer from Rapid City, South Dakota in the United States. In his fourth trip to this Himalayan country, Wallas stayed for seven days at homestay lodging in Khahare. "The experience was great," he says. "It was one of the best things to do in Nepal." ■

Rokat Basnet, one of the key persons behind the opening of the Trail on Numbur Cheese Circuit.

Women in My Loc My Loc district, Ha Tinh province, participate for the first time in a provincial trade fair.

Alternative income, values creation change lives

Text by Lynette Corporal

Women in the rural areas of central Viet Nam's Quang Nam province used to have few options but to grow rice, vegetables and other crops and stay poor, or go to work abroad and earn just a little more.

But since taking part in the Youth Employment through Local Economic Development (LED) project of the International Labour Organization (ILO), funded by the One UN Fund, they can remain with their families and also increase their earning potential.

"Rattan weaving is now an additional source of income for myself and other women like me," says Tran Thi Hong Anh of Thang Binh district in Quang Nam.

Hong Anh had convinced other women in her community to form a cooperative after she saw the possibilities rattan weaving offered. Together, they learned weaving skills under the guidance of and support from government agencies, nongovernmental organisations and local entrepreneurs.

Similarly, Le Thi Hoa and Tran Thi Thanh from My Loc district in Ha Tinh province are reaping the rewards of having undergone the Community-Based Training for Economic Empowerment (CB-TREE), a programme under ILO's Labour Market project funded by the European Union and co-implemented by the Vietnam government.

"I almost gave up and thought of leaving my family behind to work in Taiwan for a chance to earn more," says Hoa, a mother of three. "But the women I work with wouldn't let me go and convinced me to stay. So I stayed and now I have skills, and the work is very good."

Because Hoa and fellow bamboo weavers work at home, they are present to look after their children. The work also binds the women of the community together.

Hong Anh and the 40 members of her "Women in Charge of Households" Club know too well the experiences of Hoa and Thanh. Many

of them live with difficult life challenges, from physical disability to single parenting.

Struggling to make ends meet, they needed another source of income besides farming. In August 2010, Hong Anh and company took part in ILO's advanced skills training.

The home-based workers also got to work with Nam Phuoc Rattan, Bamboo and Wood Export Co., which is involved in ILO's rattan value chain development. Through Nam Phuoc Rattan, the chairs and bamboo lampshades the women's cooperatives in the two provinces produce reach a worldwide market, mainly through the IKEA chain of stores.

According to the firm's director, Le Hao, the fact that the ILO is helping them develop a manual for home workers will not only improve their working conditions but also develop awareness about good working practices, organisation and business management. The interconnectedness of the whole process of supporting the value chain is expected to help the 4,000 rattan weavers over the next couple of years.

"It will help workers improve the quality of the products they make at home and help increase their productivity levels," Le Hao adds. "This creates a passion for the rattan craft. The home workers see that their lives are better and more sustainable. This, in turn, helps the company to attract more labour."

The positive results of the ILO model have encouraged local authorities and private entrepreneurs to support more weavers. Apart from technical skills, the workers learn about social security and rights issues, such as child labour, ideal working conditions, and health and safety measures.

So successful is the CB-TREE programme in My Loc district that about a hundred migrant workers returned to take part in it.

A trainer demonstrates to women in My Loc district how to make a lamp shade from bamboo materials.

"I'm very happy for the stable work this project offers," says Hoa. "There'll be no need to migrate far away."

It's not only the women who have benefitted from the ILO programme. Menfolk also brought home lessons that proved useful in agriculture, which remains the main economic activity of rural Vietnamese communities.

"In the past, we ate to fill our stomachs," says 60-year-old Le Dong Sang, a vegetable farmer in Duy Phuoc district. "Now, we eat to protect our health and nurture the health of our children and grandchildren."

A group of women in My Loc district build a fence from the local artemisia plant, to be sold to and assembled by a company for export.

Le Dong is putting into practice what he learned about the proper use of pesticides according to the rules set by VietGAP from the ILO's Quang Nam LED Project. VietGAP is the official standard for Good Agriculture Practices and brand for clean agricultural produce in Vietnam.

"In the old days, we overused pesticides and waited only four days between spraying and consumption. Thus, chemical residue levels were so high and adversely affected our health," he explains.

The introduction of the VietGAP standard taught Le Dong and fellow farmers good practices in farming, including the use of special protective clothing and partnering with traders who have proper processing and packaging machines.

Trader and agricultural engineer Truong Nhu Son, who is actively involved in community efforts to improve vegetable farming in Quang Nam, says, "We have the same business goals with farmers and the focus is on the consumer."

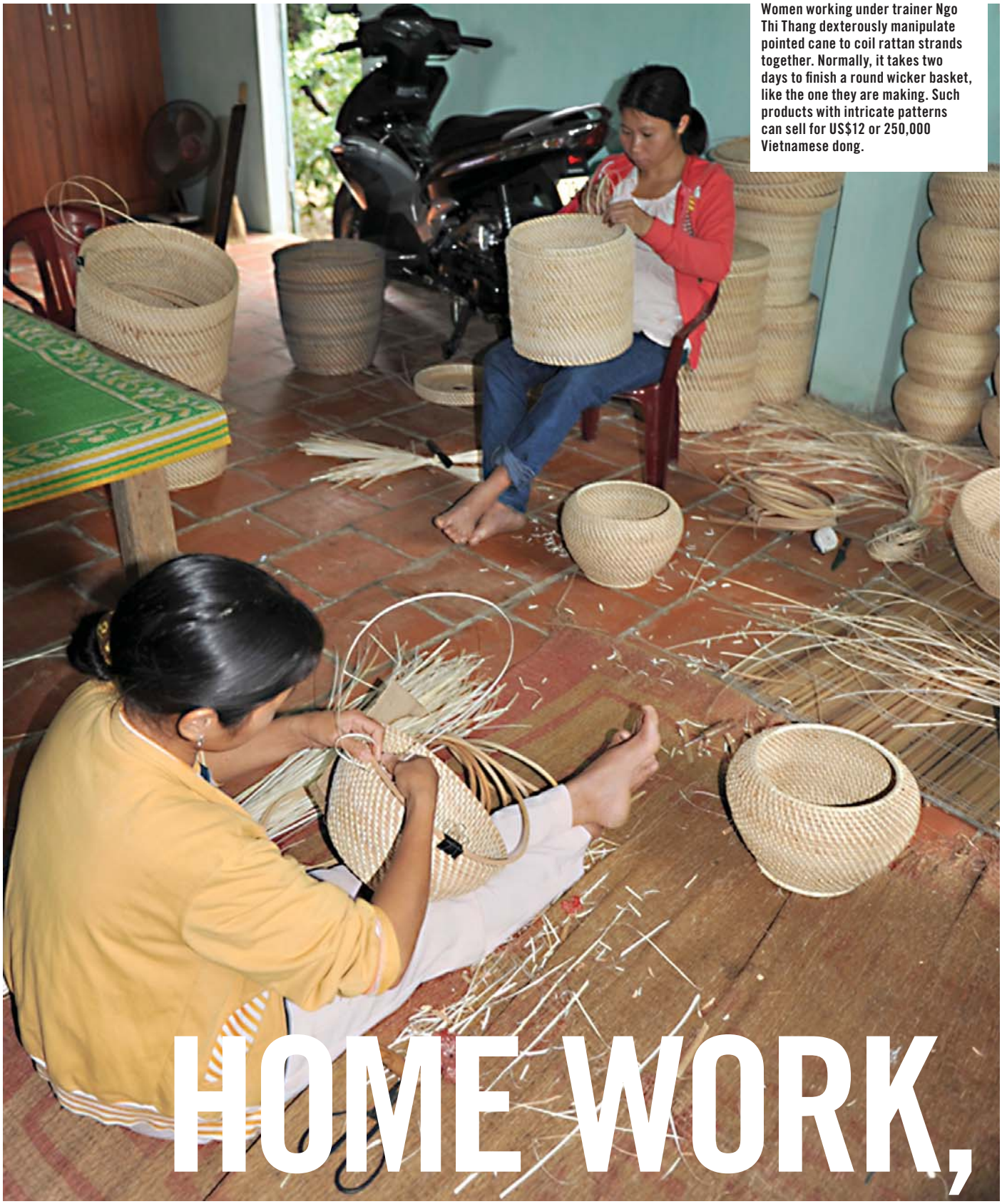
Son owns an ozone machine that can disinfect up to 500 kilogrammes of vegetables per hour. He also has machines that hygienically pack vegetables.

"Vegetables are often left on the dirty ground in the market each morning and consumers unknowingly are exposed to risks like liver flukes, intestinal disease and diarrhoea," says Son.

Vegetables certified as VietGAP-compliant admittedly sell for 50 per cent higher than non-certified vegetables, but offer consumers long-term protection.

"Sustainability is more important than short-term gains. Farmers should never cheat consumers," says Le Dong. ■

VIET NAM



Women working under trainer Ngo Thi Thang dexterously manipulate pointed cane to coil rattan strands together. Normally, it takes two days to finish a round wicker basket, like the one they are making. Such products with intricate patterns can sell for US$12 or 250,000 Vietnamese dong.

HOME WORK, BETTER WORK

Text and photo by Le Quynh Anh

Ngo Thi Thang is a trailblazer of sorts in her village in Lien Son commune in Luong Son district in the northern Vietnamese province of Hoa Binh. Ten years ago, she was among the first to make a living weaving handicrafts from bamboo and rattan, an occupation that supplemented her income from traditional activities like farming.

Now in her forties, Thang again finds herself breaking new ground. Since the beginning of 2011, she has participated in a community-based initiative to improve the conditions of people working at home. In December, she formally became a trainer, teaching fellow workers the value of a clean and conducive working environment.

"When I was introduced to a set of steps to make our workplace better just by using things we already had, I was all like, 'Oh, it's so simple. I should have done that before,'" she says.

Thang is among some 320 local producers in four provinces – Hoa Binh, Phu Tho, Thanh Hoa and Nghe An – who were trained to run workshops instructing workers how to improve work conditions at home.

The workshops are part of a programme called Work Improvement for Safe Home (WISH) initiated by the International Labour Organization (ILO) to improve the working conditions of home workers using locally available resources. WISH uses participatory approach, putting local people at the centre.

The programme is a component of a UN initiative called Joint Programme Green Production and Trade to Increase Income and Employment Opportunities for the Rural Poor supported by the Spanish Millennium Development Goals Achievement Fund (MDG-F).

The four provinces were selected because they all had high poverty rates but also had potential for developing a handicrafts industry to supplement agriculture as a source of livelihood. About a decade ago, Thang's village went through economic restructuring that resulted in reduced land available for farming. Local residents, mostly farmers, took "sideline" occupations to diversify their sources of income.

Back then, Thang attended a short course organised by local authorities to teach local women to weave baskets from bamboo and rattan. However, she only became serious after she visited Chuc Son village, her birthplace 20 kilometres away.

"During that trip, seeing my hometown become prosperous by making handicrafts for export, I asked why shouldn't I give it a try. I already knew the basic techniques and I could spend some time acquiring more advanced techniques here," she says.

Her decision to start making bamboo and rattan products could not have come at a better time: There was an influx of orders from abroad. For the first time, Thang not only earned enough to cover the usual expenditures but also had some money left to save. Other residents quickly followed her lead, relying on basket weaving to gain extra income.

Now, bamboo and rattan are conspicuous in the whole village. Thang herself runs a business that collects products from 60 individual producers. These products are then sold to companies where they will go through the final processes of drying or fumigating before being sold to the public.

Just like other informal workers, Thang used to pay little attention to her working conditions because she did not see the benefits of improvement, and any change, she assumed, would cost money.

But after taking part in the WISH initiative, Thang started to see immediate changes. She pointed to a newly installed multilevel rack in her workshop where she could store and display items. "These racks are all home-made so it virtually doesn't cost a penny, but they end up saving a lot of space for such a small workshop like mine," she says.

Thang then proceeded to another work area where five young girls were adroitly weaving baskets. Beside them were smaller baskets to keep frequently used tools within their reach. These were new additions to their work spaces.

In December, Thang held a training session to pass on the knowledge to a group of six home workers, using her workplace as the laboratory. Each participant was given a pictorial checklist containing 35 measures for improving the home workplace. They went through the list item by item, and put a blue sticker next to measures they thought were worthwhile.

After that, the participants discussed in detail how to implement these measures, using a special training tool—a photo book containing plenty of "before" and "after" pictures—that made it easier for them to understand.

At the end of the hour-long activity, one home worker asked, "Could I bring this book home? I want to show it to my sister. She's also a basket weaver like me."

"It's all voluntary participation. We can't force them to change. We help them realise the benefits and they will decide on their own," says Dr Ton That Khai, ILO specialist on occupational safety. "And the important point to make here is that improving the working conditions results in increased productivity, which in turn brings in more profits."

Khai says there is no better method than informal learning when it comes to training home workers. They identified their own problems. They called the shots. And they implemented the solutions compatible with their resources.

The method also spared them from attending a multiple daylong course, which may discourage home workers because it interferes with work. "The training can happen right here at the workplace to which they belong," the ILO specialist says.

Khai, who compiled a 120-page pictorial booklet, finds it better to explain the procedures in visual formats. In addition, people can use the booklet for reference virtually everywhere, unlike other methods that could not be implemented without the use of multimedia devices.

The book contains examples of rattan bamboo weaving, sericulture, sea grass, lacquer and handmade paper, which are the most common secondary occupations in rural Viet Nam. It simplifies and illustrates technical subjects like ergonomics, materials handling, physical environment and welfare facilities that were thought to be known only to factory safety engineers.

During the first phase of the project, Khai trained 40 trainers who then transferred the practical methods to grassroots volunteers. Thang was one of them.

"It is of critical importance to select the right people to formulate the volunteer team at grassroots level because they are change agents," Khai explains.

In early December 2011, this network of trainers gathered in Hoa Binh province to set performance targets, including the number of volunteers they planned to recruit and train and the number of home workers who will receive training from these volunteers.

They have six months to roll out their plans. In June 2012, representatives from these four provinces will showcase the "before" and "after" conditions at their workplaces and share their stories. ■

VIET NAM

Q&A 'THE OUTCOMES HAVE BEEN VERY PROMISING'

In 2011, the International Labour Organization (ILO) trained 40 Vietnamese home-based workers to advocate for a safe and healthy working environment. These trainers, in turn, fanned out to four provinces in Northern Viet Nam to share the benefits and by the end of the year, they had trained hundreds of other workers engaged in the manufacture of crafts, small-scale household growers, and owners of small and medium-scale enterprises.

The activities were part of a training programme called Work Improvement for Safe Home (WISH). WISH is carried out by the ILO, one of the United Nations (UN) agencies implementing the Joint Programme on Green Production and Trade to Increase Income and Employment Opportunities for the Rural Poor, which aims to raise the incomes of those engaged in crafts producing and trading enterprises in 25 target communes in 14 districts of four provinces in Northern Viet Nam. Other participating agencies are the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), International Trade Centre (ITC), United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD).

One of the prime movers of ILO's work improvement programmes, Dr. Ton That Khai, ILO specialist on occupational safety and health, discusses the programme and its impact on Viet Nam's informal sector.

Q: How do you see the role of the informal sector in Viet Nam economy?

Ton That Khai (TTK): The informal sector is playing an increasingly important role in Viet Nam's socio-economic development. This rapidly growing sector reflects the national policies and regulations for poverty alleviation and socio-economic development.

Many workers have found employment in the informal sector. According to the Labour Force Survey conducted by the General Statistics Office in 2007, Viet Nam's informal sector accounts for almost 11 million jobs out of a total of 46 million. It was estimated the informal sector could account for up to 20 per cent of the total gross domestic product.

Q: Are the labour rights of informal workers adequately fulfilled?

TTK: Just like in many countries, informal workers' rights in Viet Nam have not been yet covered by the relevant existing policies. While providing an important source of employment opportunities to many Vietnamese people, the life of workers in the informal sector in Viet Nam is generally characterised by low incomes and by precarious labour conditions. That's why improving occupational safety and health (OSH) in the informal sector is an important prerequisite for further strengthening their active roles and realising decent and safe work for all workers.

Q: What can be done to improve this situation?

TTK: The informal economy workplace can use simple, low-cost actions to raise productivity while improving working conditions. Participatory–based training has shown effective ways to facilitate OSH improvement actions in the informal sector.

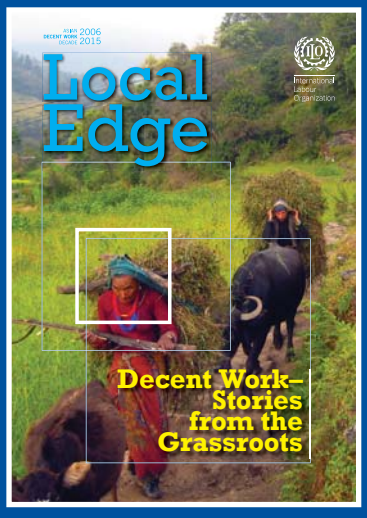
I have been involved with this method since the first days it was put in practice in a number of countries – and I have to say its outcomes have been very promising. More countries are getting interested and have invited me to deliver training sessions on this method.

The Work Improvement for Safe Home, based on the participatory-based approach, was the first such training programme on occupational safety for home workers in the informal economy in Viet Nam. Before this project, there was a similar ILO-led initiative implemented in Viet Nam from 2009 to 2011 to improve occupational safety and health in small and medium-sized enterprises.

Q: What will ensure the success of this programme?

TTK: The participatory action-oriented methodology mainly focuses on the motivation of people to take continuous actions using available local resources and skills. After all, the programme is all about advocating for change, so there would be little or no progress if relevant stakeholders were too set in their ways. The community has to feel the urge to change and start taking actions.

That's why the development of a local network to assess the actions of the community and to conduct follow-up activities is vital to sustaining the programme. A connection from the provincial level through the network of local trainers in the grassroots level based on the network of WISH volunteers has been essential. ***(Text by Le Quynh Anh)***



ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific
United Nations Building, Rajdamnern Nok Avenue,
P.O. Box 2-349, Bangkok 10200, Thailand
Tel.: (66 2) 288 1234
Fax: (66 2) 288 3062
Email: BANGKOK@ilo.org

www.ilo.org/asia