



BUILDING A BUSINESS AND PRESERVING THEIR CULTURE

A small group of women in northern Vietnam harvest herbs and make traditional medicines for better health and new income.

BY CHRIS HUFSTADER | SUMMER 2026

Hoang Thi Hang made a commitment to help others in her community after growing up in a family that was beset by health problems in northern Vietnam. There were 14 children, only five of whom survived childhood. She remembers walking long distances while ill to reach a hospital, as there were no nearby health facilities at that time. “I wanted to pursue traditional medicine,” she says. “I was determined to follow this path.”

She studied herbal medicine and was able to participate in a learning tour to Thailand where she saw communities with similar resources as her village producing herbal products for sale. Hang, now 61, was convinced she and her neighbors could do this in their home, a hamlet called Dong Tien, a scenic community in Thai Nguyen province surrounded by hills, forests, and rice fields. She recruited several friends,

and they began gathering lemongrass, basil, and other herbs growing wild in the area. Together, they developed a brightly flavored sweet herbal tea for improving liver health and a special pillow stuffed with fragrant herbs designed to relieve headaches.

As members of minority ethnic groups in this part of Thai Nguyen province, Hang and her friends were interested in promoting their culture as well as their traditional herbal remedies. They recruited more members and formally established the Dong Tien Agriculture and Community-Based Tourism Cooperative.

The new cooperative received support from Oxfam and two partners: the Center for Agrarian Systems Research and Development (CASRAD) and the Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (iSEE).

Oxfam and these organizations helped the cooperative members begin sustainably cultivating their own herbs in raised beds, which prevents soil erosion in heavy rains and supplements herbs gathered wild in nearby forests, thus helping the cooperative withstand the negative effects of climate change. Support from Oxfam also helped the cooperative with business and leadership training specifically for women, with better marketing and promotion of their products, and promoting ideas from the different ethnic traditions into the cooperative and its leadership. Oxfam also provided technical support that helped the cooperative switch some of the product packaging from

plastic to paper containers, with labels designed by the co-op members.

"We are happy because although we only have eight members, we come from five different ethnic groups, and each has a different knowledge of medicinal plants," says co-op member Hau Thi Cuong, who is of the San Chay ethnicity. She says co-op members enjoy learning from each other, working together, and traveling to fairs and marketing events to sell their goods.

Cuong adds the experience makes her and the other cooperative members "proud and happy."

TURNING A PROFIT

Cuong also says that after just a few years, the cooperative is providing "a fairly stable source of income" selling herbal pillows, tea, an inhaler packed with fragrant herbs for easing sinus congestion, and an herbal footbath mixture at cultural fairs and other events. It is still a side job. All the cooperative members are subsistence farmers. The majority of their work is raising rice and vegetables, fruit, and livestock. However, the roughly two days per week they spend on their herbal product business is starting to pay off. At a meeting with visitors in March, co-op members estimated they had sold more than 700 herbal pillows in the past year, and they are currently netting 3 million Vietnamese dong (about \$115) in monthly profit.

Even when dividing this modest profit among all the members, it is still making a difference. Luong Thi Ngoc, a 57-year-old co-op member, says the extra income is helping her family improve their diet. "Now we can afford fried chicken occasionally," she says, noting that this meal is popular with her seven grandchildren. "We are even able to try new types of saltwater fish," she adds. Before, shrimp and other seafood brought from the coast were not affordable. Ngoc says she even has a little extra money to buy books and other school supplies for her grandchildren.



TOP: Members of the Dong Tien Agriculture and Community-Based Tourism Cooperative perform a traditional dance. The cooperative members represent all the local ethnic minority groups in this part of northern Vietnam. BOTTOM LEFT: Oxfam helped the cooperative members to sustainably cultivate local herbs and to switch their packaging to more environmentally friendly paper containers. BOTTOM RIGHT: Cooperative member Luong Thi Ngoc reports that the extra money she earns is helping her family improve their diet and pay for her grandchildren's school expenses.

Vu Quang Hieu/2AM Communications for Oxfam

SHARING THE EXPERIENCE

Ngoc says that as the co-op members are building up their herbal product business, they also see opportunities to invite tourists to Dong Tien to experience their culture and enjoy the herbal remedies. The co-op's headquarters, a house raised on stilts overlooking a small valley with green rice fields framed by wooded hillsides, would be a lovely place for visitors to soak their feet in an herbal foot bath, get a massage, and take in a traditional dance performed by co-op members and others from the community. This is all still being planned with assistance from iSEE and

Oxfam. Several members of the co-op said it could take years to make this part of their business plan pay off.

The cooperative is still in its early years, Hoang Thi Hang points out. "We're a small group, and it is still a slow process," she says. But she is encouraged by the co-op's initial accomplishments, and their commitment to promoting their traditional herbal remedies for the health of their community and preservation of their culture. As Ngoc notes: "It's important to preserve our cultural identity so that it does not fade away. We need to pass it on to our children."



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