

LAO PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC

Phonexay (pronounced Pornsai) Thammavong

Sometimes, a bit of skepticism can be a good thing. About a decade ago, when sales people showed up in Phonexay Thammavong's hometown selling chemical fertilizers and pesticides, she was suspicious.

Phonexay's small village is located in one of the more isolated areas of Lao PDR. Farming was conducted at a subsistence level. Nutrition was poor, and hunger was not uncommon.

So when the sales people said the chemicals would increase crop yields dramatically, providing more food and maybe some excess to sell, many jumped at the chance to buy them, even though they were expensive. Phonexay bought just a little because her neighbors were urging her to.

On her two-hectare farm, she set aside a small area where she would use the chemicals, but grow the rest of her rice and vegetables the traditional organic way.

On her farm, the chemicals did not produce higher yields. On some of her neighbors' farms they did. The next year, however, the soil on those farms was not as fertile. Her neighbors needed to buy larger amounts of chemicals and still did not get the same good results. Furthermore, they were accumulating debts.

Despite her skepticism, Phonexay remained open to new ideas. When the District Agricultural Office sent extension workers to her village, offering her an opportunity to participate in a Farmer Field School, she jumped at the chance.

Phonexay learned new ways to make compost and fertilizers. She learned about plants that she could use as natural pesticides, of which she had been unaware. She learned the system of rice intensification. All of it was organic, and the methods were natural. "This made me very happy. I gained so much knowledge and learned many new things," she says.

The results of this new knowledge were outstanding. The yields on her small farm increased on average 150 percent. Before she produced only four sacks of rice, now she was bagging ten.

Phonexay willingly shared what she had learned with neighbors, training eight other families. Then farmers from nearby villages came to see her and she trained them too. Now she's the Head of Organic Rice Production in her area.

Phonexay's hope now is that even more farmers will use sustainable methods. "They are good for the environment, good for health, and good for ending hunger," she says. Yes indeed.

Ms. Phonexay Thammavong, please!