

The Farmers Club, Viet Nam

The club that changed Son's life

The Farmers Club of Thoi Quang commune in Viet Nam's Kien Giang province is a living demonstration of the remarkable improvements in livelihoods, hygiene, farm safety practices and general well-being that can come about when poultry farmers become empowered through dialogue and sharing experiences. Although the Farmers Club started with USAID funding, it really began to grow when the project ended and the farmers decided to continue on their own by pooling resources and mobilizing support from the local government and private companies.



With fewer ducks dying from disease thanks to better nutrition and biosecurity, Danh Son's ducks yield more eggs now. Coupled with a larger flock size and a better market price for eggs, his daily income from egg sales has gone up from 200,000 dong to 2.4 million dong.



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A quick guide to Viet Nam's Farmers Clubs



Danh Khung
Chief of Go Quao District
Veterinary Station

'We realize how important these clubs are to farmers. The district authorities now plan to set up three more such clubs in the district'

What are they? How did they start?

Farmers Clubs are forums where Vietnamese poultry farmers regularly meet with each other, technical experts, poultry feed and drug manufacturers and local government officials, to share experiences, knowledge, and practices, as well as discover new opportunities for trading and expanding their livelihoods.

Viet Nam's first poultry Farmers clubs were set up in 2008 as part of the Avian Influenza Behavior Change Communication (AI.BCC) project funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in Viet Nam. The project was implemented by the erstwhile Academy for Educational Development (AED) in technical collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Its focus was on farmers who owned between 100 and 2000 birds. By 2009-end, when the project closed down, about 45 Farmers Clubs had been set up in three provinces in Viet Nam.

What is so special about the Farmers Club?

Many Farmers Clubs closed when the project ended, but the members of the one at Thoi Quang commune, in Kien Giang province, not only decided to keep the club going, but also introduced changes such as inviting local veterinary experts and poultry feed and drug manufacturers that improved its functioning and usefulness to poultry farmers. The Thoi Quang commune Farmers Club is now an example that others can emulate.

What has been its impact?

1. Improved biosecurity and nutrition in the poultry

farms of Thoi Quang commune.

2. Deeper understanding of poultry health and disease prevention.
3. Increased reporting of outbreaks and closer cooperation with local disease control authorities.
4. Dramatically improved livelihoods and higher incomes from better poultry keeping practices.

What makes the Farmers Club work?

1. The Club is driven and sustained by the interest of poultry farmers. The local government and donors play a supporting but not managing role.
2. Apart from invited technical experts, the farmers learn from each other through dialogue and sharing experiences.
3. Each farmer-member makes a financial contribution to a core fund which sustains the club, in addition to mobilizing funds for activities from local poultry feed and drug companies.
4. The Club offers loans from the core fund to its member farmers on a rotating basis. This has helped many improve their livelihoods.
5. The Club is a successful public-private collaboration between poultry farmers, local poultry feed and drug manufacturers, the local government and technical experts.
6. The Club's agenda is determined by the farmers, with inputs from technical experts. As a result, it always remains interesting to them.
7. The Club's chairman is chosen carefully for his vision, local experience and political and other contacts.



Farmers understand now that it is safer to buy only certified ducklings.



Farmers are learning from each other that better biosecurity and nutrition leads to larger flocks, less sickness and greater profits.

SHORTLY AFTER THE SUN RISES over the Thoi Quang commune in south Viet Nam's Go Quao district, Kien Giang province, farmer Danh Son (pronounced *Zahn Zern*) lets his ducks out for the day. He has about 1,500 of them on this farm, and their quacking fills the air like a radio's static. As Son steps aside, the first few birds dart past him, and the exodus begins as the ducks begin flowing out of their enclosure, one fluid white and orange mass of feathers and feet. In minutes, they are splashing in the canal, where they will paddle all day.

The pen is empty. Well, almost empty.

Strewn over the silty mud is the day's harvest of duck eggs, about 200 of them, like muddy pearls. These days, Son not only gets more eggs than he ever has but they also fetch him a better price than before because they are no longer covered with feces that could carry viruses such as those that cause highly pathogenic avian influenza, H5N1 HPAI.

In 2009, Son was also losing as much as one-fifth of his small flock of 500 ducks and 100 chickens to diseases he neither understood nor knew how to prevent. He did not take avian influenza seriously, despite what he had heard on radio and television. After all, he thought, he and his family had been raising poultry for generations. Surely they knew all there was to know.

Son will tell you that everything changed for him when he joined the Farmers Club of Thoi Quang commune in 2010. Since then, not only has his poultry farm increased almost fourfold in size, but his ducks hardly ever fall sick and die, thanks to his attention to a more hygienic and biosecure environment on the farm. Augmented by better prices for eggs, his daily income from egg sales has increased from 200,000 dong to 2.4 million dong, leading to a much improved standard of living for him and his family. Best of all, Son's success is inspiring other farmers to emulate his practices.

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Nguyen Thanh Duc
 Director of Kien Giang
 Sub-department of Animal Health

'Sustaining this club model can help us to prevent disease in the province, and support the animal health sector to better implement interventions down to the commune level'

How the Farmers Club evolved

Interpersonal dialogue and sharing were helping the farmers. And they didn't want the clubs to stop

Viet Nam's first poultry Farmers clubs were established in 2008 as part of the USAID-funded Avian Influenza Behavior Change Communication (AI.BCC) project in Viet Nam by the erstwhile Academy for Educational Development (AED) in technical collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO). Focused on farmers owning between 100 and 2,000 birds, the project promoted good poultry farming practices, and measures to prevent poultry disease and sustain Farmers livelihoods. About 45 Farmers Clubs were set up in three provinces of Viet Nam in 2009, the first year of the project.

During its early days, the Farmers Club at Thoi Quang commune, Go Quao district, had only 20 members, but they did not take the monthly meetings and discussions very seriously. These gatherings, held in the commune's meeting hall and facilitated by veterinary professionals from Hanoi, tended to be like lectures, focused on avian influenza, biosecurity and safety for poultry. Attendance was generally poor; it was said that some members came only to collect the travel allowance.

Moving towards dialogue

Over time, however, the discussions improved, becoming more like dialogues. Not only did more local technical experts show up to share information, but the farmers were sharing their experiences and offering advice and tips to each other. In an unexpected side benefit, farm-



At a meeting of the Farmers Club, participants work in group and develop a map of activities the club intends to undertake in the years ahead



Farmers in the district now understand the value of following the correct vaccination schedule



Chiem Duy Sang

Party Secretary of Thoi Quang Commune; former Chairman of the Thoi Quang Farmers Club

'When the project ended, the members kept the Club going with their own funds. Today, we get poultry farming credit from the Viet Nam Bank for Social Policies. We mobilize feed companies to support meetings and workshops and also give some financial assistance to the Farmers Club.

The club plans activities for preventing diseases like blue ears in pigs, and other diseases caused by a virus, like foot and mouth disease'

ers began bypassing middlemen and selling their produce such as eggs, ducklings and chicks directly to each other. As word spread that the clubs were useful, more farmers applied to join.

But as 2009 drew to a close, so did the USAID project. Farmers realised that the clubs that had proven so worthwhile were at risk of being shut down because of the end of donor support. Would they be able to survive on their own? Would they want to?

Determined not to let their club die, farmers contributed their own money to set up a revolving club fund. Inspired by Club Chairman Chiem Duy Sang, they also decided to reach out for technical and other support. Provincial and district veterinary staff were invited to share technical inputs.

The commune authorities strongly endorsed the continuation of the Farmers Club, and appointed the community's chief animal health worker as the club's new Chairman. Membership grew, reaching 33 by the end of 2010. Club members began to reach out to the private sector, mobilizing animal drug firms and feeding companies to raise financial support for activities such as workshops. The Viet Nam Bank for Social Policies offered poultry farming credit to farmers.

"I see important changes in our Farmers awareness and practices," says Mr Sang. "Sick and dead birds are no longer eaten, nor are they thrown away like before. Instead, farmers alert the authorities. Most farmers in the Thoi Quang commune have bigger farms now, with over 1,000 birds, and that has come about through club discussions that increased their knowledge of better practices for keeping poultry well-fed and safe. We need to make sure that qualified vets and successful poultry farmers continue to contribute to the discussions and keep them useful."

How a good idea spreads

In Club discussions, Son learned how to prevent disease through safe and effective practices such as keeping the poultry pens clean, buying only certified ducklings, following the proper way to feed day-old chicks and adhering to the correct vaccination schedule. "The egg trader is no longer allowed into the duck enclosures but collects the duck eggs at the front yard," he says. "My new fence separates ducks from chickens. In the old days, all the birds would mingle in one large enclosure in my garden."

Son has learned from other farmers at the club where he can buy the best chicks and duck-



Danh Phuong, poultry farmer

'My wife and I used to earn only 1.5 million dong a month. We now earn over to 3-4 million dong each month. Our lives have really improved'



Nguyen Thanh Nhan
Poultry farmer

'I knew that Son was once poor. Better duck farming practices have improved his livelihood. He has more ducks and they are healthier'

lings and maximize poultry sales prices with middlemen.

Taking a loan from the club, he recently increased his layer duck flock to 1,800 birds. Even though he may not know what exactly a virus is, Son understands better today that avian influenza threatens not only his poultry but also his family.

Noticing how well Danh Son was doing, his youngest brother, Danh Phuong, and a neighbour, Nhan, were the first to get interested. "As I shared my knowledge with them, they decided to start keeping layer ducks as well, which they'd avoided earlier not knowing how to prevent sickness and deaths in their flocks. Phuong's flock now is 600 layer ducks and Nhan's is over 600 layer ducks as well."

The Farmers Club of Thoi Quang is a vibrant demonstration of how poultry farming practices and disease prevention can be enhanced by a community-led multi-sectoral partnership that actively engages civil society, the private sector and the local government.

"Seeing how well the Farmers Club has taken root in Go Quao district, authorities recently made a decision to start three more clubs in the area so that effective poultry farming practices with poultry disease prevention measures can spread further," said Mr. Danh Khung, Chief of Go Quao District Veterinary Station.



Even though he may not know exactly what a virus is, Son understands today that avian influenza threatens not only his poultry but his family too

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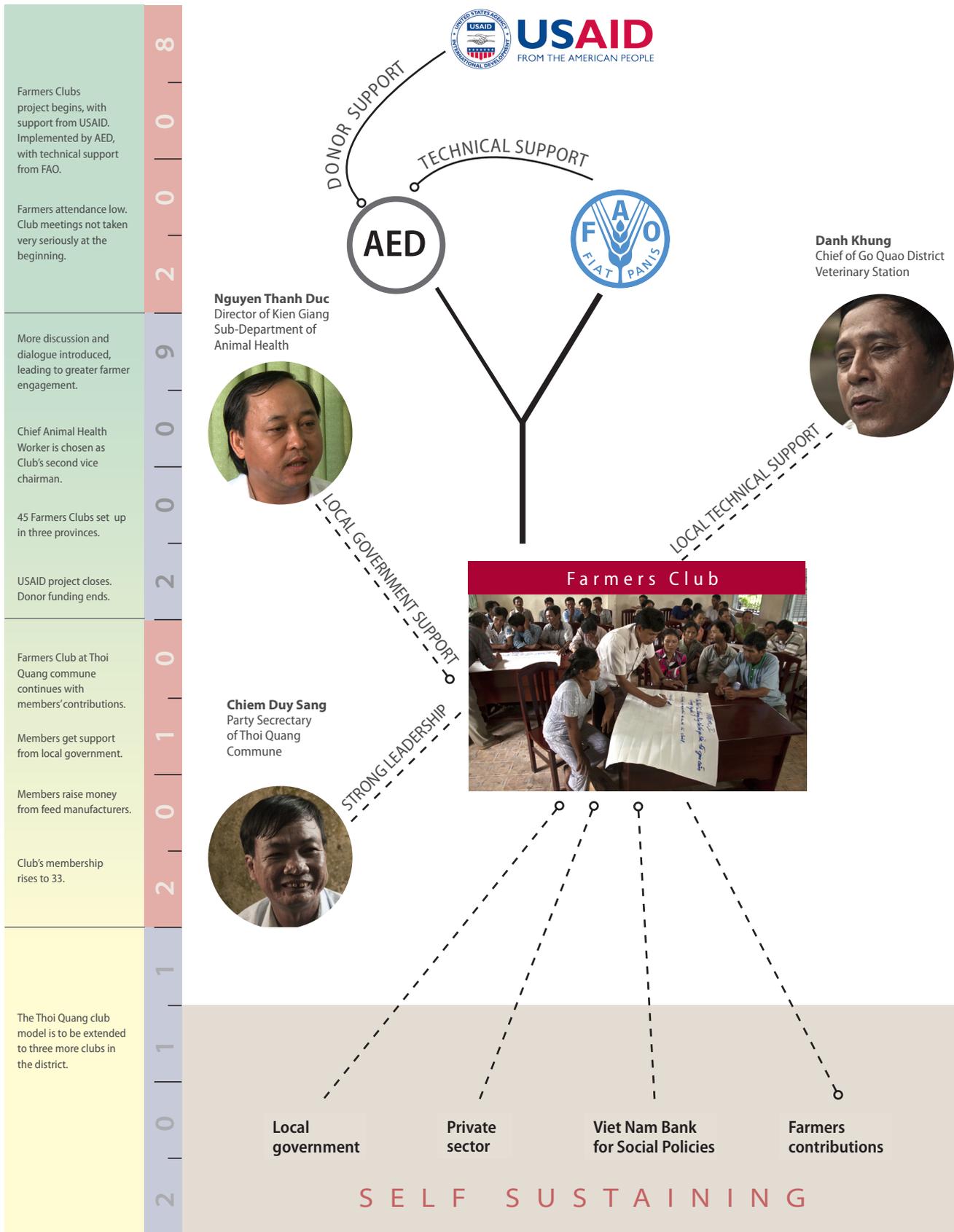
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