



Photo: The Lai - Hoa family

## Happiness

is not just about

**a beautiful appearance**

**A daring experiment to build a happy village is on-going in a poor village in the mountainous region of Bac Kan. It is the first step that is troublesome, however, each villager is silently making joint efforts for their hometown to be more spacious and worth living.**

### **Green, clean, and beautiful village roads**

From his house in the highest and furthest position, Trieu Van Lai looks down to Tong Vu village where he is currently living with his wife - Ly Thi Hoa - and their two kids. Being far from the inter-communal road, the landscape is so quiet and full of cool green colour. The apricot flowers are gradually sprouting pale purple flower buds on both sides of the road. Not like the usual scene in many places in Vietnam, the roads here are spotless without a single piece of rubbish detected.

This is the result of the efforts of 16 Dzaio and Nung households in the village for the sake of jointly building their very own happy village. To have such beautiful and clean roads, twice a month, village members spend several days to take care of the plants, to give the area a spring-clean, and to clear the roadsides.

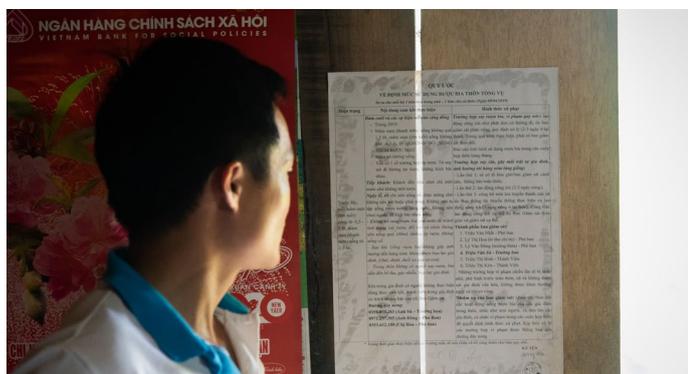
*"It's not because they have time to kill, but rather they want to live in such a beautiful village, thanks to their own work with their own hands,"* said Dong Thi Nhi, cultural officer of Mai Lap commune, Cho Moi district, Bac Kan province.

Things started in 2018 when some villagers in Tong Vu (Mai Lap commune) and Na Don (Thanh Van commune), including Mr. Lai, joined a funded study tour to a special village in Lai Chau province. Mr. Lai fondly remembered the first sight when he entered the village roads there: *"They were spotlessly swept, the village was so beautiful."*

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## Determination to limit alcohol and beer drinking

Apparently, Mr. Lai and Mrs. Hoa both understand that the happiness is not only about the beautiful landscape. Lai was strongly impressed by the study tour to Lai Chau as *"All village members did not drink alcohol. They only drank soft water in wedding or other ceremonies. They had been maintaining that for about ten years ... That day when we had lunch, there were only soft drinks too."* Being half an hour riding motorbike away, Mr. Toa in Na Don village (Thanh Van commune – adjacent to Mai Lap commune) felt the same when he recalled the trip.



*The village's regulations on limiting alcohol usage was carefully stuck to the house's door by Mr. Lai as a self-reminder.*

Mr. Nguyen Dinh Toa, born in 1962, who used to be the head of Na Don village for years, described that people in his village previously drank alcohol "uncontrolledly". *"Normally on rainy days [we] could not go to work, [we] gathered and usually drank alcohol. At times [we] sat and drank for half a day. On holidays, in the past, in each table<sup>1</sup> [we] drank 2-3 litres of alcohol,"* added Lai.

The situation of drinking alcohol and beer in remote regions like Tong Vu and Na Don was not very different from the overall picture nationwide. Yet after jointly developing the regulations on limiting alcohol intake, local villagers drink alcohol dramatically less. The men themselves feel less pressure since the force-to-drink protocol is no longer as extreme as it was before. Especially, people in Tong Vu village no longer store up lots of alcohol in their houses.

The results of interviews with individuals and groups of people conducted by CARE in May 2020 show the men's reduction in drinking alcohol and reduced situation of being drunk, which in turn have led to reduced family conflicts and generated various positive effects such as reduced physical and mental violence. Some even said this helped men to have more time being in sound mind to work.

*"After the discussion sessions, I and my husband talked and [I] said "so they told not to drink alcohol, ... know the evils of alcohol..." At that time he did not say anything, yet later [he] changed. The biggest change is reduced drinking. That's a huge change,"* said Trieu Thi Pu - born in 1990.

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## Family-based happiness

The idea of developing this Happy Village model was initiated when the staff of CARE International in Vietnam, ADC<sup>2</sup>, and Bac Kan provincial Women's Union implemented the Project "Enhanced Women's Economic Empowerment and Social Inclusion in Agricultural Value Chains in Rural Vietnam" (WEAVE) funded by the Australian Government<sup>3</sup>. Mr. Le Xuan Hieu, Portfolio Manager of CARE International in Vietnam said:

*"Happiness is the final goal that every family aims at. To have a happy village, then all the village's families must have happy lives; to have a happy family, then each woman and man in the household should understand, respect, and support each other. To make this happen, both men and women need to change their prejudice and norms which have been rooted for many generations. With this thought, the project focused on developing two pilot villages. These villages will be a model for the others to refer to, learn and replicate."*

Being different from other discussions which are rigidly designed, Mr. Hieu tried applying the informal sharing method, with familiar talks, instead of presentations or on-spot exercises provided for participants. This way of doing has left a deep impression on the community members. Particularly, almost all men interviewed said that, they felt happy and pleased when taking part in the discussions thanks to the attraction by the facilitators. There are discussion sessions separately for male participants, and for both wives and husbands. Some villagers recognized that letting a non-villager facilitated the discussions about their local issues helped the issues to be mentioned in an open manner. As they said, this helped the pending issues to be "commented in a skilful way" whereas if a local member facilitated such discussions, it would be easy for that person to have regards for others and hesitate in commenting/criticising on other members' issues.

1 Seven persons per party table.

2 The Agriculture and Forestry Research and Development Centre for Northern Mountainous Region (ADC): <http://adc.org.vn/>

3 <https://www.care.org.vn/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/WEAVE-flyer-2018.pdf>



And the discussions for local villagers to self-identify their own issues and together develop their shared regulations on the Happy Village, in combination with other WEAVE's enduring activities during the past three years, have made some men who had previously never done housework now recognise their wives' hard work and be more active in housework. They also realised that there were no reasons for being embarrassed when they did housework.

The couples, in general, become open in their thinking and worry with each other, they make more family decisions together.

*"In the morning, I and my husband both do house chores: he cooks, I wash clothes, then we both go to work. Regarding decisions on procurement, we both discuss, only when we both agree that the procurement is necessary then we would proceed. In terms of meetings, he usually attends the meetings, I also attend meetings. Coming home from the meetings, I usually share the meeting contents with all of my family members,"* said Nong Thi Thom, a 45-year-old Nung ethnic woman, when asked about the changes in her family after she and her husband joined the discussions related to the happy village in particular and the discussions of the WEAVE project in general.

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## It's doable if villagers are united

Villagers of Tong Vu and Na Don villages understand that they are on the first steps to turn their living places into the Happy Villages. Lai, a 30-year-old man, wishes that he and his wife increasingly understand each other, that their children are healthy, and that their household economy gets better so that they can afford their two children's schooling until they are mature. He also wishes that husbands and wives in other surrounding families love and support each other too. Meanwhile, Mr. Toa believes that in order to build a happy village, then all comprehensive aspects including socio-economic, security and national defence conditions must be good.

That whether they could reach the end of the road or not depends on local villagers and government. Mr. Le Xuan Hieu himself clearly recognises the project's limitations. For example, there are only some villagers who physically visited Lai Chau model, which means that those who did not have such experience need more encouragement and inspiration. It is not easy for some households having extremely difficult economic condition to take part in the joint activities of the village. And the project's resources do not allow many mass discussions for everyone to attend; or some domestic violence cases remain stingingly without appropriate solutions.



Photo: The Toa - Cuu family

According to Mr. Hieu, the changes in deeply rooted prejudice existing for thousands of years could not be immediately sustainable via the activities in the project's short duration only. *"Maintaining the 'gender equality environment' must be conducted daily and hourly in all activities of the families, communities and government. Therefore, the heads of the communities and government play crucial roles in frequent integration of gender messages into daily lives so that local members would have an opportunity to take a dip in that environment frequently,"* said he.

Mr. Toa, with experience of an ex-village head, believes that when WEAVE ends, Na Don village would still maintain such village lifestyle. *"It depends on the leader, on the village development board. Only if they have good thinking and management, villagers would still listen to them, still like to communicate and exchange, etc. then villagers can unite. If each family cares about themselves only, then the movement would be lost in oblivion. The leaders must have a good thinking to promote [the movement],"* said Mr. Toa.

**\*\*The end\*\***

Photos in the story: © Le Minh Duc/CARE



The Women's Economic Empowerment through Agricultural Value Chain Enhancement (WEAVE) project is funded by the Australian Government and implemented by a partnership of three international non-governmental organisations - CARE International in Vietnam, Oxfam in Vietnam and SNV in Vietnam. WEAVE supports ethnic minority women's economic empowerment in pork, cinnamon value chains in Lao Cai province and banana value chain in Bac Kan province. This will be achieved by promoting equality between women and men within households and producer groups, strengthening women and men producers' skills and bargaining power, and working with business and government decision-makers to improve the policy environment to support producers.