



## Sowing the seeds of change in South East Asia's peppercorn industry

Peppercorn is a key agricultural crop contributing significantly to the economies of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. However, non-compliance with Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) standards on smallholder farms has threatened exports to high-value international markets due to food safety concerns. The **'Safer Spices: Boosting Food Safety and Market Access for the Peppercorn Value Chain in South East Asia'** project, funded by the Standards and Trade Development Facility (STDF) and implemented by CABI in partnership with local organizations, aimed to address these challenges through two key objectives:

1. To restore the confidence of the food manufacturing industry in peppercorn sourced from the South East Asia region; and
2. To support the consistent supply of high-quality, safe peppercorn from small-scale value chains.

To achieve these objectives, the project focused on improving quality and traceability in the production, post-harvest handling and processing of peppercorn by developing a Code of Practice (CoP) and locally adapted interpretation guides for peppercorn production in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. The project aimed to support the adoption of the CoP through a collaborative public-private sector approach, inspired by IFOAM – Organics International's Participatory Guarantee System (PGS).

### Leading the development of the CoP

Vietnam's Western Highlands Agriculture and Forestry Science Institute (WASI) took the lead in developing a CoP and a supporting interpretation guide, drawing from extensive experience as a major global producer and exporter of peppercorn. With support from an international CoP expert, this South–South collaboration began with an extensive desk study, interviews with key industry actors, and meetings with stakeholders across the three partner countries: Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. This resulted in a generic draft CoP, that aligned with Good Agricultural Practice standards, CODEX standards and key international buyer programmes.

The project teams collaborated with stakeholders to create country-level interpretation guides that considered different geographies. These were translated into local languages to increase accessibility. WASI experts conducted training of trainers to deliver knowledge to farmers and supported the implementation of the CoP with pilot groups. Two groups, each involving five farmer members, were set up in Vietnam's Cu Kuin district (Dak Lak province) and Xuyen Moc district (Ba Ria-Vung Tau province). One group of 30 farmers in Memot (Tbong Khmum province) was set up in Cambodia, and one group of 19 farmers in Pakse (Champasak province) in Laos.

Various private companies, including Simexco Co Ltd and Viet Pepper Co Ltd in Vietnam, Sela Pepper Co Ltd in Cambodia, and Etu Green Garden in Laos, were also involved in the project. Each group received the training modules developed by WASI and the feedback from the field was incorporated into revised interpretation guides.

Vietnamese farmers On Thanh Hoa and Nguyen Van Tien highlighted the cost savings achieved through the adoption of good pesticide management practices via the CoP, reducing pesticide use from 10 bottles per season to just two bottles, resulting in a 30% cost reduction.

## Empowering farmers through collaborative efforts at the village-level

The project co-created a collaborative public-private partnership model applicable to a wide range of supply chains and situations, inspired by the replicability of the PGS for direct sourcing of organic products in local markets. CABI, with support from international market system experts, collaborated with ministry departments in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, as well as participating private companies, and four different farmer groups, designing an approach that was later named “Grassroots Public Private Partnership”, or G-PPP.

The collaboration resulted in a five-step approach that built trust, forged relationships, and empowered participants to localize the implementation, monitoring, and accountability of a CoP. This approach specifically addressed local quality and safety risks while ensuring compliance with market SPS requirements.



Farmer group in Laos

### Success in Laos

Soumaly Phommahuk, Etu Green Garden's Director, in Laos, stated, *“the G-PPP brings farmers together to share good practices and to learn lessons from each other's experiences”*. This collaboration has empowered Soumaly and her newly formed farmer group.

Sipachanh Sengpathip, whose farm was chosen as the model for the project, expressed her appreciation for the project's demonstration of teamwork among farmers. *“Through collective teamwork, farmers can produce according to market demand. This translates into higher volume, which in turn leads to higher income”*. She also values the opportunity to share information on peppercorn production and management with other farmers.

Souliya Souvandouane and Phoumee Kanya both from Lao PDR's Department of Agriculture, praised the G-PPP model as *“an excellent way to connect buyers and sellers”*, while also teaching farmers to self-monitor peppercorn production and quality. They emphasize the collaborative work between farmers and Etu Green Garden in sharing experiences and challenges related to peppercorn farming.

As a direct result of the project, Lao PDR's Department of Agriculture and Etu Green Garden aim to sell Champasak peppercorn under the ‘One District One Product’ brand, showcasing the positive impact of the project. Additionally, the project has supported Etu Green Garden in establishing an international presence by facilitating connections with regional and international buyers and promoting Laotian peppercorn on the global stage.

### Success in Cambodia

In Cambodia, the project focused on village-level activities in Memot, Tbong Khmum province, which accounts for about 90% of the country's pepper production. CABI partnered with the General Directorate of Agriculture (GDA) and Sela Pepper Co Ltd, a private company that sources its peppercorn from 400 smallholder farmers in Memot, created a G-PPP group and established quality and supply criteria based on the CoP and agreements to further collaboration and achieve results.

Thy Keb, Operations Manager at Sela Pepper Co Ltd reported a decrease in the rejection rate of peppercorn bought from farmers from 7–10% in 2022 to 1.5–2% in 2023. Thanks to the project, Keb has seen improvements in technical knowledge among farmers, gained through the adoption of the CoP, helped by the increased collaboration and understanding between him and his farmer group. The G-PPP farmer group has begun producing high-quality peppercorn that meets international market standards. This has contributed to Cambodia successfully exporting the first 30 tonnes of black peppercorn from the country to China in May 2024. Sela Pepper Co Ltd is also looking to increase its exports to the EU from 60 tonnes in 2022 to 100 tonnes in 2024.



## Empowering farmers, enhancing livelihoods and ensuring food safety

The **'Safer Spices: Boosting Food Safety and Market Access for the Peppercorn Value Chain in South East Asia'** project has successfully restored confidence in peppercorn sourced from the region and supported the consistent supply of high-quality, safe peppercorn from small-scale producers to regional and international markets. By promoting food safety, market access and sustainable practices across the region, the project has enhanced the peppercorn value chain and improved the livelihoods of smallholder farmers in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. The collaborative approach and successful interventions serve as a model for future initiatives aimed at promoting sustainable and inclusive growth in agricultural value chains across South East Asia.



GDA's Rambo Mao (left) Thy Keb from Sela Pepper (next to him) and members of their farmer group on the right.

## Project partners

The project was funded by the Standards and Trade Development Facility (STDF). To deliver the project, CABI worked in partnership with:



Western Highlands Agriculture  
& Forestry Science Institute  
(WASI), Vietnam



Department of Agriculture,  
Lao PDR



General Directorate of  
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