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Better Sanitation Leads to New Career

Success making toilets in Vietnam

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Access to sanitary water is only part of the solution to improving health and sanitation in countries like Vietnam. Good hygiene practices are also necessary.

by Dick de Jong

"No one can see their reflection in running water. It is only in still water that we can see."
Taoist proverb

The story below was excerpted from a study conducted 2½ years after a pilot project had been implemented to encourage rural residents in Thanh Hoa and Quang Nam provinces, Vietnam, to improve sanitation. The IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre from the Netherlands and ADCOM Consultants in

Hanoi conducted the study. Dr. Christine Sijbesma of IRC and Dr. Truong Xuan Truong of ADCOM were the team leaders.

Thuy Thanh Ky is a mason in the Quang Nam province of Vietnam. He is 43 years old and has completed secondary school education. He has a wife and four children. Thuy, from Binh Trieu Commune in the Thang Binh District, was a poor farmer until he took up part-time masonry in 1996 to make some extra money. His business went well, and after two years he became a full-time mason. Until 2001, he worked with a group of seven or eight other masons, mostly close friends and relatives.

They started with some small contracts to build houses, and at the beginning, most of the houses did not include toilets. In 2003, the demand for sanitary toilets in the home began to increase, so Thuy decided to concentrate on building them.

Thuy and his fellow masons learned their trade through the Rural Sanitation Marketing Project and International Development Enterprises (IDE), the nongovernmental organization that ran the project. Even though Thuy did not participate directly in the program, he benefited indirectly from its existence.

Thuy obtained a copy of the project's manual and studied the recommended models. He also learned from masons who had received training. As his contacts in the commune and his technique improved, he got more contracts for building toilets, not only in his own commune, but also in others.

Success after the Program

Customers choose Thuy because his skills are good and he offers a good mix of price and quality. He has built a business network and can draw on other area masons if he needs to share work.

He also is part of a working group of about 20 masons who build about eight toilets per month, working in pairs. His family income has increased and his life is better. Some customers are late in paying, but as they are people from his own commune, he is not worried. To his great happiness, his oldest son is following in his footsteps and has also become a mason.

The World Bank Water and Sanitation Program and the Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Partnership in the Vietnamese Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development sponsored the pilot project. International Development Enterprises ran the project between January 2003 and December 2006. Dick de Jong is an information and communication officer with the IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre.

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