

SECTOR BRIEF

MEDICINAL PLANTS IN SON LA

About GREAT

The Gender Responsive Equitable Agriculture and Tourism (GREAT) program is building the resilience of ethnic minority women in Northwest Vietnam through improved social and economic outcomes. GREAT partners with the private sector, government agencies and civil society to create opportunities for women within the agriculture and tourism market sectors. Funded by the Australian Government, GREAT is delivered in partnership with the Provincial People's Committees of Son La and Lao Cai provinces. GREAT began in 2017 and is a 10-year program with an investment of AUD 67.4 million.



Emerging opportunity for economic growth and women's empowerment in Son La

Son La province is home to a diverse range of medicinal plants, with more than 560 identified species, including rare and high-value varieties such as angelica, five-leaf ginseng, and purple amomum. The province's varied terrain and climate, stretching from fertile valleys to high mountain plateaus, create ideal conditions for cultivating medicinal plants. These natural advantages are reinforced by strong policy support, with provincial plans to expand cultivation areas from 1,200 hectares in 2024 to 15,000 hectares by 2030. Growing market demand, both domestically and internationally, further strengthens the sector's potential, especially as interest in natural health products has increased since the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite its potential, this sector faces significant challenges. The primary obstacle is the insufficient investment from both public and private sectors. This has limited the adoption of advanced standards like GACP-WHO (Good Agricultural and Collection Practices), crucial for ensuring consistent quality needed to access higher-value markets. As a result, production remains small-scale and fragmented, lacking the organised cooperatives and robust supply chains needed to compete effectively with imports. This disorganisation also leads to unsustainable practices, such as the over-collection of natural plant resources, threatening rare species and the long-term viability of the sector. Addressing these gaps is vital for building a strong medicinal plant sector that contributes to Son La's economic growth and creates a resilient, sustainable commercial market.

Importantly, medicinal plant cultivation also represents an opportunity for women's economic empowerment, especially among ethnic minorities. These women often play a central role in the sector, as they are primarily responsible for both collection and the marketing of products. Active participation in medicinal plant cultivation can significantly increase their income, with earnings estimated to be much higher than from traditional crops like maize and tea. There are opportunities to build their skills in farming, finance, and marketing, helping them become more self-reliant. For example, through leadership in cooperatives, women will gain confidence and influence key household decisions such as education and business investments.

GREAT AND THE MEDICINAL PLANTS SECTOR IN SON LA

Lessons from GREAT 1

Building on the experience gained from implementing medicinal plant projects during Phase 1, the following key lessons have been identified:



The final quality of medicinal plants is heavily dependent on the cultivar quality.



A sector will not succeed with fragmented production, inconsistent quality, and weak buyer commitments. To attract private investment, it is crucial to establish a more organised system.



Combining annual and perennial plants ensures producers get quick returns from short-term harvests while they wait for more valuable, long-term crops to mature.



A strong and smooth-running partnership requires identifying the right partners with clear needs and commitments. Clearly defining the rights, obligations, and responsibilities of all parties from the beginning is vital for success.



Encouraging and promoting the role of women, and enabling their participation in all stages of the value chain—from cultivation to processing and sales—will help stabilise their income and enhance their position in the community.

Moving forward

GREAT is taking its growing market knowledge of the medicinal plant sector and continue to work with the Son La Provincial Government and other partners to support the inclusive development of the sector. This will be done through the following three intervention areas:



Building capacity for collective groups/cooperatives in the production, cultivation, and collection of medicinal plants according to GACP-WHO standards

This includes surveying and selecting new cultivation areas, providing training on farming and harvesting techniques, and investing in new infrastructure, all under GACP-WHO standards. The final project target is to have 35 hectares GACP-WHO certified, ensuring a high-quality and sustainable supply of medicinal plants.



Enhancing the management and coordination capacity for cooperatives, including overseeing production, purchasing, preliminary processing, and seed production for the cooperatives

This includes supporting cooperatives in supervising production, establishing a one-hectare pilot medicinal plant seed production and preliminary processing model, and improving their preliminary processing and business management skills.



Documenting and organising workshops to disseminate the medicinal plant production model

This provides stakeholders opportunities to acquire information and lessons learned about the medicinal plant production-consumption linkage model.



PARTNERS

GREAT is working with VietRAP Son La and other businesses to build and strengthen the medicinal plant sector.

As the lead technical co-facilitator, VietRAP Son La will:

1 ✓

Supply farmers with high-quality medicinal plant seedlings and other essential materials.

4 ✓

Facilitate the transfer of best-practice techniques for cultivation, collection, processing, and storage from expert institutions.

2 ✓

Commit to purchasing 100% of the medicinal plants produced by the cooperatives.

5 ✓

Lead overall project management and reporting.

3 ✓

Work collaboratively with cooperatives to build processing and storage facilities on their contributed land.



KEY EXPECTED RESULTS



300 farmers have improved technical capacity in medicinal plant production

15% increase in the number of women participating in household expense decision-making

59 hectares of medicinal plant cultivation area are developed, of which 35 hectares are GACP-WHO certified

105 farmer households have increased income from medicinal plant production

10% increase in the number of women having shared workload from husbands/other male family members



Environment and climate change

Environmental risks associated with sustainable medicinal plant production will be mitigated through well-planned production areas, cultivating, harvesting and processing techniques to manage and minimise its ecological footprint. This involves using environmentally friendly farming methods to protect soil, water, and biodiversity. It is important that the sector actively reduces the use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, favoring organic alternatives instead. Additionally, waste treatment systems will be implemented for all production activities to prevent environmental pollution and protect local ecosystems.



Contact information

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