

Vietnam: Farm School

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Tu is 21 years old, and has just graduated from University studying agriculture. At Lanh's invitation, her family has moved from their village where they were growing commercial rice, onto the farm school property to start up a sort of model farm.

Back at home they grew wetland rice - the rice grown in big flat lowland paddies. Now [that] they are in the mountains, they're struggling, because they don't know how to grow upland rice - the kind of rice they grow here - in terraced fields. So they have to buy rice, and the new organic farm that they're just beginning to get going here doesn't provide them with anything left over to sell. Her mother and father are thinking about going back to their village where they can grow enough rice to feed their family, while she and her brother run the farm here. But they're a very close family. She would miss her parents so much if they had to do that. She's really worried, and starts to cry during our interview. It's been a hard move.

After the interview I sit down with the rest of the students. These are a chosen few who are here for an intensive three year course of study. Lanh's goal is partly to teach these young students organic agricultural techniques that they will then return to their villages with, seeding regions throughout Vietnam and Laos with what she hopes will be create the core of a nationwide sustainable agricultural model.

The students are mostly talking about how their villages are growing just enough surplus to be able to buy the next year's worth of commercial fertilizer. If the promise of higher yields from commercial fertilizer worked at one point, they don't any more. Their villages are getting hungrier and hungrier.

The problems for farmers are the same everywhere: is there a way to grow enough food to eat, and some left over to sell for the things you need to buy, like clothes, gas, a motorbike? These kids are asking, can organic farming grow as much, or more, than commercial farming? Can a family grow enough food to sustain itself?