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Solar Serve News



Dear friends,

The first storms have been hitting the city, announcing a new season of typhoons. Our center is near the beach so we always face the full strength of a typhoon. Our windows do not always fit in their frames, so the wind can play through the cracks and holes which causes lots of noise throughout the building during a storm. Our director and his family live on the third floor. During a typhoon it is not always easy to stay calm during the noise, but till now they are thankful for a safe home.

Seven ethnic minorities

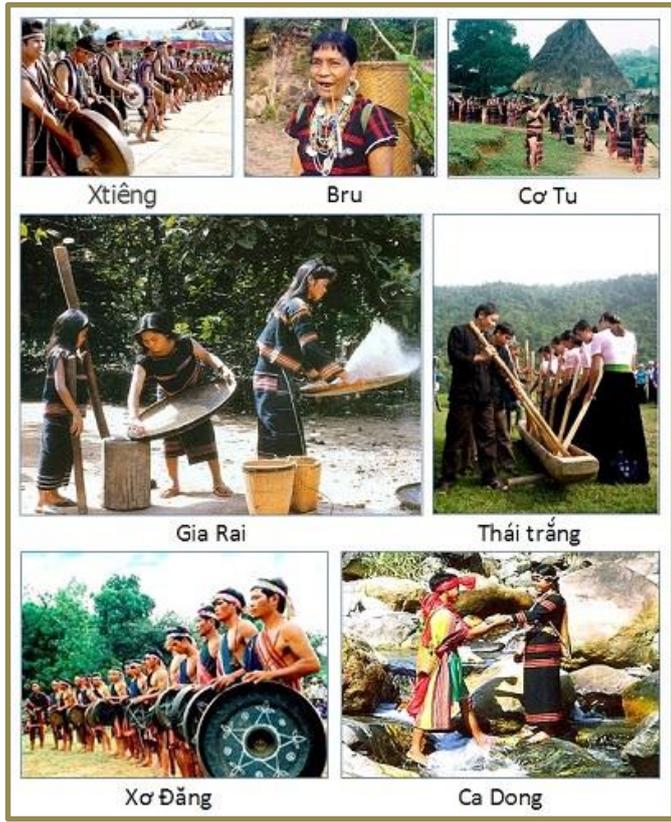
There are 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam. Most of the minorities live in the mountains and are hard to reach. Our solar cooker projects were not always successful with them. We needed open areas for sunshine, but this was not always possible with lots of trees. But since we helped them with our clean cookers, things changed. We already have been working with seven different minorities. We put their names and pictures together, and with the help of some websites we made a photo collage for you with all of the seven minorities together.

Eye-opener

In our last letters we told you about the training we have received from a Swiss consultant. After that he encouraged us to teach others, so we opened a course for young entrepreneurs. We used methods and teaching materials from the consultant and it was well received. While we were helping an ethnic minority with our clean cookers, we discovered they had lots of natural resources, but they did not know how to manage them well. Now we are teaching them our business training program too and it became an eye-opener and a great help.

Good result after test

For two months our clean stoves were tested by one of the ethnic minorities. In general, they told us that our stove lived up to their requirements. A little bit bigger would be preferable and they were wondering if our stoves were durable. At our center we are cooking with these clean stoves too and they are still good, so that seems to be no problem. Another company introduced their stove too but was advised to improve it. Too much smoke, and it was hard to add fuel. So, we were glad that our clean stoves were accepted.



Is there a missing link?

We are supporting and selling our products through our charity and social enterprise. We are not sponsored by big organizations and sometimes we have to wait for payments from customers after an order. This is very difficult when we have to pay salaries, electricity, transport, material, etc. Last month we could almost see the bottom of our financial resources. The last payment of a big order didn't come soon. It was one of these tests we had to face. It finally came but we were wondering if there was a missing link. The answer came after a trip to Kenya.

Understanding the missing link

Mr. Bich, our director, was invited to attend the SEED African Symposium in Kenya after he became one of the Low Carbon Awards winners in 2013. He was able to show the progress we made during a short presentation and he also received further advice. He also learned through an additional training program, how to approach investors and how to work with local authorities. He was surprised that many participants were helped by their governments. It helped them in making their products, and in having a major impact in their society. This was the missing link.



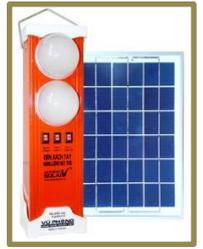


Sharing the missing link

After returning from Kenya our director joined a two-day gathering of Vietnamese government leaders, EU leaders and Vietnamese social entrepreneurs. They discussed a potential change in governmental policies to help social entrepreneurs to do their work more effectively. Till now there is almost no governmental support in Vietnam. The symposium and training in Kenya helped Mr. Bich to give an encouraging report. He was able to give some good examples, which helped the leaders to consider a change in policies.

Solar lights

One of our friends gave us an idea in helping minorities with small reading lights, energized by solar power. Very handy for individuals but we found a better model which can be used for a whole family. This solar light is manufactured in Vietnam according to Europe quality standards. With two Led bulbs the operating time can be from 5 to 7 hours. We showed this model in Kenya and people were very interested, especially that it was made in Vietnam. So, if we are going to start a project with solar lights, we will consider a lamp like this.



Leaving suddenly

One of our deaf workers decided to stop working after six months. His contract was for two years but that didn't mean anything to him. Another worker was ahead of him and also quit his job. His contract was also not finished. It was not easy to let them go after we spent a lot of time in training and helping them with health insurance and other new policies. How do you respond, when you need workers? We try to be fair with them, but pressures of others or financial greed can do a lot of harm. It is so sad to see workers falling in a trap, but we cannot stop them.

Not giving up

But we were encouraged by other workers like Nhat, who was looking for a job. For months he visited our center and asked us to employ him. We were not in a desperate need, so we could not help him. But Nhat, who is deaf, didn't give up and came back again and again. We saw how eager he was, so we honored his perseverance and now he is one of our new workers. While workers are leaving, others are filling the empty spots. We are very happy with all our workers today. They learned to be more creative and work better with our new equipment.



Exploring the world

The last 15 to 20 years, our Solar Serve family has been growing. Some of the workers got married and now we are surrounded by their grown-up children. It is great to see them exploring a new world. Occasionally they fall down but they are learning how to get up again. It is hard to prevent them from biking on busy roads or swimming in rough seas. The daughter of one of our workers had to learn that cosmetics can be dangerous too and was rushed to a hospital. Others had to learn that education is not coming by itself. For all of them, life is a great challenge!

Selling our truck

Our 10 year-old truck must be checked every three months. It is very hard to pass this mechanical test, if you do not leave an envelope with money in the cabin. We have never done this and now it becomes increasingly difficult to pass the test. We decided to sell the truck. To our surprise we found a buyer who eagerly wanted to pay a good price for it. Now we are looking for a new truck, more suitable for the mountains. This will give us some relief, because a new truck will not be tested every three months. It will also give us more room to expand.



Strength and weakness

In one of the last training sessions of our business course the students had to discover their abilities and character. The training included a character test, which was helpful for the students to know their abilities for running a business. For some of them it was an eye-opener and they responded well when they discovered their strengths and weaknesses. It also helped them to know their place in society. On September 26, all of the participants graduated at a special ceremony at our center and received their well-earned certificate from the Swiss business consultant office.



Finally

One of our Solar Serve friends supported our work by picking pears in a large garden. She wanted to help us in a good and practical way. It was hard work for two weeks but very rewarding! Here is a picture of our friend and we hope it inspires you. Be creative in helping others and you will be a great blessing!



That's all for now, and wherever you live, enjoy the coming autumn (for some of you spring) season!

Greetings,

Solar Serve team

Called to Serve

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