

Interview with Cao Thi Thien, Chairwoman of Hoang Phong Commune Women's Union, Vietnam

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Can you tell us something about your organization?

Our organization, the Hoang Phong Commune Women's Union, is an aquaculture association. We have about 100 members who support each other in terms of sharing experience, culture techniques and product output. We are based in Hoang Phong, which is in Hoang Hoa district in the Thanh Hoa province of Vietnam's central coast. We have approximately 255 hectares for aquaculture, and, in line with the government's aim of increasing the efficiency of prawn farming through diversification, we use 138 hectares of the land to rotate crops and practice multi-cropping.

What changes have taken place in aquaculture in your province?

Earlier, shrimp farming required large investments. You needed to invest anywhere between 30 million dong (USD 1,345.2) to 90 million dong (USD 4,035.6) per hectare depending on the type of shrimp farm you were setting up—improved farm, semi-intensive, or industrial aquaculture. Then, you needed further resources to look after the farm and prevent disease outbreaks. At the end of the harvest, you would barely recover your costs. Today, with the support of local extension services, we exploit the advantages of tidal saltwater and brackish water for diversified aquaculture, which means cultivating a number of species and rotating multiple crops seasonally. So, in a farm where prawns and crabs are the main species, you could also expect to find nipper shrimp, fish and seaweeds, and towards the end of the farming cycle, you might find tilapia in ponds to secure an income during the stormy season. This way, households are making more profits. In the case of my own household, we have secured an approximately 15 per cent increase in profit margin from multi-rotation crops.

What are the main challenges you face?

Aquaculture is vulnerable to certain problems, mainly erratic climate variations. For women, aquaculture also means an increased workload. It can be successfully pursued only if the work is shared between husband and wife. Husbands need to take up farming and domestic work responsibilities, especially if the woman's health or family situation is poor, or if the production process is challenging and laborious as is most often the case. Although I myself have had the good fortune of getting funds for production and also access to training and capacity development, most women still lack these opportunities. We need education, credit and loan services; training for decision making skills; and a voice in development policies and planning. Further, our local and national authorities should undergo gender-awareness training. ❏