

'Descendants of Hai Ba Trung' Podcast

EP. 02 – MS. CHAU THI XEO ENGLISH TRANSCRIPT

Produced by UNDP Viet Nam and Curated by Sen Nguyen

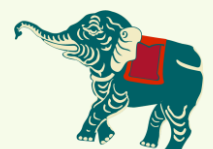
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Chau Thi Xeo is a farmer of the Cham ethnic minority. Since 2016, the pioneer woman has been making waves for being the first person in her commune to grow asparagus and come up with a unique growth system for it on semi-desert sandy soil in Ninh Thuan province in southern central Vietnam.

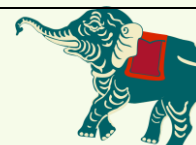
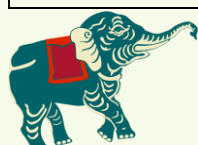
| Speakers | Transcription |
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| | You are listening to the English version of a Vietnamese podcast to share with the world part of our work that focuses on the intersectionality of women-led climate change initiatives and gender equality. It has been edited for length and clarity. |
| Hook intro | When I brought the asparagus to the sandy soil here, everyone said this lady was crazy, asparagus cannot be planted in sandy soil! I told them I would grow it as an experiment because it can be profitable. People can earn 70-80 thousand for only one kilogram of asparagus. So despite what people said, I'd do what I wanted. |
| Host Sen Nguyen | Chau Thi Xeo is a farmer of the Cham ethnic minority. Since 2016, the pioneer woman has been making waves for being the first person in her commune to grow asparagus and come up with a unique growth system for it on semi-desert sandy soil in Ninh Thuan province in southern central Vietnam. |
| Host Sen Nguyen | <p>Hello, I'm Sen Nguyen. You are listening to Descendants of Hai Ba Trung, brought to you by the United Nations Development Programme in Vietnam.</p> <p>It is where Vietnamese women from diverse backgrounds and professions – farmers, researchers, climate advocates and others – share their experiences of tackling the stereotype which says that women are more often seen as victims of climate change and less so as changemakers. Their fierce action in addressing and adapting to the impacts of climate change with indigenous knowledge, scientific evidence, community values, justice, and empathy inspire a more sustainable world for us all.</p> |
| Nut graf | In this episode, Cham farmer Chau Thi Xeo shows us how unstoppable she is with her asparagus idea despite all sorts of everyday life and systemic challenges that female farmers, especially those from ethnic minority backgrounds like her, face. Now, the founder and director of the Chau Re General Agricultural Service Cooperative, how has this woman mobilized other Cham women farmers and radicalized the agricultural landscape in her community? |
| Host Sen Nguyen | When Xeo gave me a tour, it reveals the cool lush greenery that stretches her 1.7-hectare farm. You see the influence of asparagus all over, not because it covers her farm, but because of earnings from growing it, Xéo has been able to color her farm with coconuts, bananas, and papaya trees which also provide shade for her cattles and livestock. The strong wind rattled her asparagus as she pointed at them. It's a reminder of the harsh climate, how blisteringly hot and super windy it is in Ninh Thuan Province. |



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| Host Sen Nguyen | Xeo first came up with the idea because there was another farmer in a nearby commune growing asparagus and she began visiting them and asking them all sorts of questions. The weather where she is is not kind, forcing both farmers and the asparagus to work with scarce natural resources, like water, which is even more challenging especially in the context of increasingly erratic droughts exacerbated by climate change. |
| Ms. Chau Thi Xeo | <p>Growing asparagus here is very difficult since we don't have favorable weather conditions. The water is also scarce since it's cave groundwater, forcing people to install an economical irrigation pipe. So we should only plant a small number of asparagus to ensure the irrigation process.</p> <p>In the past, there was more rain so it was easier for farmers. But now, there are more sunny days than rainy ones, which makes it difficult for us to farm.</p> <p>Where I live is all abandoned land and full of cactus thorns, no one came here, only I did. So whatever I grew on this land was very unstable. I also get haggled hard when I do business with private traders. I can only earn 2-3000 VND for every 10.000 VND they sell. But with asparagus, I can earn so much more. With this one pack of asparagus alone, I can earn 50.000-60.000 VND.</p> |
| Host Sen Nguyen | The sprouting of asparagus piqued the interest of fellow farmers and spelled the beginning of the Chau Re cooperative and a community of Cham people growing asparagus together. But convincing people to form a cooperative was not easy. |
| Ms. Chau Thi Xeo | <p>If I hadn't followed the cooperative model, the state wouldn't have supported me to plant asparagus. Then I took a class on cooperative law in 2012 and held a meeting to inform farmers about it. At first, people didn't understand, they said that if they join the cooperative, their land will be taken, like in the subsidy period. So people didn't really like it. It took me 2-3 times to explain that this cooperative would not take land or take anything from them. We only needed 7 people or more to form a cooperative. This cooperative is self-made, self-sufficient, nobody's land will be taken.</p> <p>Then we got it registered. Initially, there were 37 households, then I went to the state to register to establish a cooperative and then we started to plant asparagus.</p> <p>At first, only those who had money could plant asparagus. After that, the cooperative financially supported those who could not afford it. I personally borrowed money from the bank. There was a district chairman who helped me borrow 500 million from Ninh Phuoc Agricultural Bank.</p> <p>Up to now, there are 30 households that grow asparagus, and the other 73 households plant melons, peaches, and other things. Some households have benefited from the cooperative by borrowing money to buy seedlings, and others who have not had the capital will join later. I want to help all of them, but I don't have the money either.</p> |
| Host Sen Nguyen | The asparagus success is not a flick of a finger. The very first row of asparagus takes at least 6 months of meticulous care. Farmers in rural areas like Xeo are not only concerned by the financial resources needed to grow asparagus and the conditions of the plants themselves. They also have to arrange an entire infrastructure for them to grow and be distributed sustainably. That includes building roads and borrowing electricity from her neighbor. |
| Ms. Chau Thi Xeo | It was very, very difficult. There was no road and the land was not even and we rented bulldozers to level the land. Then we mobilized people to donate land to make roads. We did everything. The commune gave us 350 million VND to build the road, and the Tien Tien farm gives us electricity from solar energy. Ever since the cooperative establishment, we have had roads and electricity. |
| Host Sen Nguyen | On top of a rough start, global crises like the Covid-19 pandemic that we are all trying to recover from, are a huge blow to the Cham farmers of Chau Re Cooperative. |
| Ms. Chau Thi Xeo | But when Covid came, some people started to chop down asparagus. I tried to buy it to feed the goats and cows, and then I tried to encourage people not to chop it anymore, |



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| | and I spent about 300-400 million in 3-4 months just to buy their asparagus from them. They finally stopped chopping it, and since this January, they have resumed growing and harvesting it again. Everyone was demotivated at that time of covid. Now that the road is clear, covid is gone, they can go back to it again. There is nothing like asparagus. |
| Host Sen Nguyen | Her community's area in Phuoc Hai commune, according to Xeo, is 100 hectares, while asparagus has only been planted on about 1/3 of the land. Asparagus farmers plant the crops around the same time and come up with strategies for strong and uniform growth. |
| Ms. Chau Thi Xeo | Here, people are encouraged to use organic fertilizers: goat manure, and cow dung. Every household in this area has goats and cows. We can utilize every part of the asparagus and feed it to goats and cows. The cows and goats eat them and then produce manure, then we can use it to fertilize the asparagus. But when we had no experience, a lot of plants died because of chemical fertilizers, NPK fertilizers with a lot of urea. So now people don't do that anymore. Now, most people use manure. When it's sick, we cut the plant and then spread lime on it. Now the asparagus here is very clean. When the people here harvest the asparagus and find a broken one, they eat it right away right on the spot as breakfast. Because that is how clean our asparagus is. |
| Host Sen Nguyen | Xeo is a decorated farmer. Her office is embellished with certificates of merit given to her by the Chairman of the province's People's Committee and the Women's Union for her achievement with asparagus and mobilizing Cham farmers to join in and increase their economic profile. Their produce not only creates jobs for the Cham farmers in Ms Xeo's commune but also enriches the meals of people elsewhere after being sold in the wholesale markets in Saigon, Da Lat, Hanoi, and in restaurants and supermarkets in her locality. But 20 years ago, Xeo chose the land where she is now living, about half an hour by motorbike from the main village, not because of its fertility or asparagus potential but for a very personal reason. Her husband was an alcoholic at the time, and she decided to move out to this barren land and hoped that distance and space could help him recover. |
| Ms. Chau Thi Xeo | I brought my husband here to quit drinking. I drilled a well, and I saw how beautiful the water was so I liked it here. The land here was original and unexploited. When I came here alone, I also grew melon trees for seeds. People left the wasteland, I came to live on it. I plowed the land to grow melons. I grew black beans, I grew so many things. Everyone who came here also asked me why I didn't go back to the village, why I lived in such sandy soil and hot weather. Everyone came here to tell me to go back to the village, but I didn't go back. Before we grew asparagus, the people who worked on the fields were all men. And since planting asparagus, women also join the men. Early in the morning, couples go harvesting asparagus, removing lawn weeds, doing everything together. Because now both the husband and the wife work on the asparagus together, I call it the plant of happiness. When there was no asparagus, men worked little and got drunk throughout the day. Now they have to drive their wives to harvest the asparagus at 3-4-5 AM and work until 8-9 AM. Then they have to take care of the cattle and pluck the weeds as well. Now wherever women are participating, asparagus are clean and beautiful, and a lot can be harvested. Asparagus that is cared for by only men and without the participation of women have low productivity. |
| Guest and Host Sen Nguyen | Sen: Ever since you grew the asparagus, has it also been your plant of happiness? Ms. Xeo: Yes! My husband didn't work on asparagus before, so he had time to drink alcohol. He was already drunk early in the morning. Now my family is a role model, together we are committed. He used to have too much free time, so he kept going out to drink alcohol. Now my husband and I work together, and do everything together, he stopped drinking. I just named the plant the happiest plant of my life! |



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| | <p>Sen: (laughs)</p> <p>Miss Xeo: (laughs)</p> <p>Sen: A big smile you got there!</p> |
| Ms. Chau Thi Xeo | <p>My husband and I always work together, everything together. My husband used to be free to drink alcohol or that. Now my husband and I work together, do everything together, and my husband stops drinking. I just named the tree the happiest tree of your life.</p> <p>Sen: (laughs)</p> <p>Miss Xeo: (laughs)</p> <p>Sen: You smile so brightly!</p> |
| Host Sen Nguyen | <p>But the plant of happiness for couples in her community, as Ms Xeo calls it, is not an equalizer. Not despite but because of her initiative, the Cham woman was subjected to sexism, even in the matriarchal system of the Cham ethnic group.</p> |
| Ms. Chau Thi Xeo | <p>When I first opened the cooperative, the men sat at the café and talked badly about the women. They doubted that women could do anything and said like how could women run a cooperative? They did not have faith in us women. When we succeeded, they were rooted to the spot. They were so surprised at what women could do.</p> |
| Host Sen Nguyen | <p>Women stick together in Xeo's asparagus cooperative. One of the women she attributed to her success is Trần Tú Anh, now a specialist on climate change and women's economic empowerment at the UNDP Viet Nam.</p> |
| Ms. Tran Tu Anh, UNDP Viet Nam | <p>The matrilineal and gender stereotypes vary from place to place, but in matriarchal localities, by default people think women hold great power and there is nothing to be worried about when it comes to gender equality.</p> <p>So what does Xeo's story show us? It is the belief that because women have more power in the localities, men do not have to do anything. Therefore, so much burden has fallen on the women's shoulders.</p> |
| Host Sen Nguyen | <p>For many people, empowerment often starts with access to knowledge and resources. Xeo told me she met up with SNV Netherlands Development Organization, a Dutch non-profit who provided her and other farmers with gender equality workshops and training on how to manage a cooperative. But the empowerment mechanism requires many actors to work together.</p> |
| Ms. Tran Tu Anh | <p>When UNDP went to Ninh Thuan to implement a project, the Program Planning and Monitoring Unit of Ninh Thuan Province were all men with no experience in women's economic empowerment or in how to include gender equality and the role of ethnic women in activities. They probably know the quantitative aspect of things, for example, the percentage of women who need to attend a training class, but they did not have insight into the real substance of women's empowerment.</p> <p>So when we were in Ninh Thuan, we took the unit to visit a wonderful model, which is only 15 km away from where the unit was. And that was the first time they met Ms. Xeo in her field and worked with her. The male officers, for example, the head of the department were very enthusiastic. And they said: Oh wow, this is so great, how come I did not know about this before? So from then on they started to invite Ms Xeo to different capacities.</p> <p>In my opinion, it is also the province's idea and determination, not just the efforts of the UNDP and others. The province also sees that the work like that of Xeo needs to be replicated and be heard and learned from, like how she mobilizes people, how ethnic minorities can have initiatives to cope with the difficulties of drought, water shortage, and diseases like covid, for example.</p> <p>That's the first step, then it's not about keeping the opportunities to your province but also sharing them to others and Xeo was also involved and she is also very enthusiastic</p> |



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| | <p>because she feels that she is a person who can contribute a lot. That's the point that I think is important, especially considering what she has gained from and been enriched by her experience. The results of these projects come not just from organization staff but also by ethnic women. They want to share it with many others.</p> <p>On one hand, we want farmers to take the initiative. But on the other hand, I also wish that farmers do not suffer too much. I think the mechanism of sharing risks and responsibilities is a very important thing for organizations to think about when they develop programs. We often integrate ideas that have been successful elsewhere into a local community and ignore the responsibility of sharing farmers' burden in trying something new.</p> |
| Host Sen Nguyen | <p>Xeo belongs to the Cham that is one of the 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam. While it is important not to paint all minority ethnic groups with the same brush, it is common that ethnic minority women in remote and rural areas lack equal access to land and capital, and this makes it difficult for them to make decisions and solve problems that they live close with and have deep understanding of. Discrimination and social isolation also reduce their access to legal representation or protection. Tú Anh told me Xeo's example challenges the typical stereotypes of ethnic minorities in Vietnam and provides a more nuanced understanding of their lived experience.</p> |
| Ms. Tran Tu Anh | <p>How did Xeo become such a role model? That's because when we invited her to conferences in Hanoi, the PRECOP conference, she brought the voices of real ethnic minorities. After all, she is Cham. Her husband is a Cham. She lives in a community of 100% Cham people. People listen to the stories of ethnic and indigenous people with great interest. Their stories are special, because before the prejudices against ethnic minorities meant they would be thought of in association with their cultural identity and the beautiful mountains they live in.</p> <p>But people tend to forget that being an ethnic also comes with great energy and initiative, not just a matter of culture, landscape, or nature. It is a social norm that people just assume that they wear distinct ethnic clothes, have special dances and particular musical instruments, and that is all there is to ethnic people, but that is not what Ms. Xeo or the Cham community brings.</p> <p>They can do things that bring profit to the economy, they can bring ideas that affect policy from the point of view of the ethnic people that have great meanings that go beyond contributing their voices.</p> |
| Host Sen Nguyen | <p>Xeo became a household name because of her asparagus initiative and her efforts in empowering other Cham women in her community. But to the 61-year-old woman, the ups and downs with her asparagus cooperative is part of a turbulent life where she survived wartime poverty.</p> |
| Ms. Chau Thi Xeo | <p>If I didn't go to school, I wouldn't have been able to do it. At that time, I went to a socialist school and thanks to them, I tried my best. At that time, thanks to the government, I was taught farming techniques to make a living. I want to do something to repay the country, for my people to benefit from it. Uncle Ho said that "No job is hard if one's will is enduring; even digging down the mountain, or filling up the ocean can be done by one's will". No matter how hard it is, we have to try our best.</p> <p>I am very poor. My family has many brothers and sisters, but I do everything with empty hands, so that's why I work hard.</p> |
| Host Sen Nguyen | <p>Thank you Châu Thị Xéo and Trần Tú Anh for your incredibly infectious energy!</p> |

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