

'Descendants of Hai Ba Trung' Podcast

EP. 03 – MS. TRINH THI HONG ENGLISH TRANSCRIPT

Produced by UNDP Viet Nam and Curated by Sen Nguyen

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Trinh Thi Hong is a former factory worker and manager of a garment company. For weeks when her neighborhood stunk of piled up trash, Hong dived into it, experimented with organic waste and managed to convert organic waste into cleaning products and mobilize her neighborhood to do it with her, in so doing providing jobs for 400 women.

Speakers	Transcription
Hook intro	<p>Sen: When you brought the garbage home, did you tell your family beforehand that, ok, from now on, you would start working with garbage? Did you tell them that?</p> <p>Hồng: Yes, I told my husband and my kid. My kid even said, "Why are you building castles in the sky at this old age, Mom?"</p> <p>(both laughing)</p> <p>Hồng: And my husband said, "You must be crazy, this is a job for professors and doctorates, not you." But no, they did not stop me from doing it, so no matter what they said, I still did it.</p>
Host Sen Nguyen	<p>Hello, I'm your host, Sen Nguyen, welcome to Descendants of Hai Ba Trung brought to you by the United Nations Development Programme in Vietnam. This is where we focus on women-led climate change initiatives in Vietnam and through their respective fields and journeys, explore the complexity and dimensions of gender equality issues.</p> <p>Now if you don't know Hai Ba Trung, they are these two elephant-riding sisters who summoned strength and bravery among local people to defend the country against the Dong Han Dynasty from China and briefly ruled in what is now known as Northern Vietnam in the early 40s decade A.D.</p> <p>But in the 21st century, women are no longer riding elephants fighting the invaders - this podcast is about redefining the Hai Bà Trưng tradition, it is about women from different backgrounds and various ethnic groups in Vietnam across the entire country have been mustering power and effecting change in the environmental pollution and climate change crisis, humanity's greatest threat.</p>
Nut graf	<p>Trinh Thi Hong is a former factory worker and manager of a garment company. For weeks when her neighborhood stunk of piled up trash, Hong dived into it, experimented with organic waste and managed to convert organic waste into cleaning products and mobilize her neighborhood to do it with her, in so doing providing jobs for 400 women.</p>
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Nut graf (cont)	<p>In this episode, the sky's the limit with Trinh Thi Hong who without any formal training in biotechnology, is now her own boss at Minh Hong Biotechnology company in Da Nang city where she turns household organic waste into toiletries, detergents, and dish soap. What exactly is her model of circular economy and what are the lessons here for women's economic empowerment and innovations in waste management?</p>
Ms. Trinh Thi Hong	<p>Actually, even though it is considered garbage, it's just organic stuff, vegetables and fruits, only when thrown away will they become waste. As long as they haven't thrown it away, it's still usable (laughs). I told everyone in my neighborhood not to throw it away but to bring it to my house and they did it. When I was at work, everyone just hung bags of it on my gate. When I came home, I took them down, sorted them out, then I washed them, and recycled them.</p> <p>Of course, it affects my family. When I came back home, I had to clear those bags from the gate. And then I prepared meals for my family. After everything was done, I started sorting out the bags at night. I threw away what had gone bad, and kept what is still usable, I washed and soaked them in sugar. I failed a few times at first because I was trying to figure out the formula, but after some time, I succeeded in turning them into cleaning liquid.</p> <p>It takes a lot of time to create the product, because this is not my expertise. So for people who are trained in this thing, if people were trained to do this, they could do it faster than me.</p>
Host Sen Nguyen	<p>Ok, but to really appreciate Hong's idea we gotta go back 10 years when it all began, when she saw trash piled up on the streets in her neighborhood at Hòa Minh ward in Da Nang because the trash collectors' trucks malfunctioned for days. She thought something should be done.</p>
	<p>I established the Youth Environmental Protection Team consisting of all children from kindergarten through 9th grade and the 9th graders as the team captain. On Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday afternoons, and Sunday mornings, the children gathered on all the streets in the residential area. If they saw anyone littering, they would advise them against it, and there are many funny stories. (laughs) The kids are very proud of the team when they talk to their families. Oh, the Youth Team is so much fun.</p> <p>Some people asked them, "what if you tell people not to litter but they don't listen?" They replied: "If people don't listen to us, we will tell Ms. Hong" (laughs).</p>
Host Sen Nguyen	<p>Good news spread far and wide. Her youth volunteers were active for a while when she was invited to a seminar in Ho Chi Minh City to talk about her community activities and from there invited to a 2012 conference about Asian urban poverty and community development in the Philippines. It was also the first time she went abroad. There, she heard about brewing waste to turn it into floor cleaners from a Thai environmentalist. And then an idea sparked and she began her own experiment like a scientist.</p>



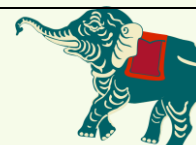
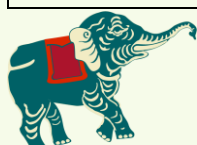
Ms Trinh Thi Hong	<p>Then I did my research and learned about biology through Google. For example how I should brew, what problems can occur during the brewing period, and when it works, what color and smell should the liquid have.</p>
Host Sen Nguyen	<p>In fact, when I came back from the Philippines, I didn't think of recycling waste right away. And I picked and worked with Panama berries, you know? Panama berries are already sweet and have a lot of sugar, so when I add sugar it doesn't spoil. It smells good and it works well together. So when that worked, I started bringing waste home, but at first I didn't ask people to bring waste to my house.</p> <p>I swept and collected flowers falling on the streets and brought them home to wash. I asked my niece to work with me. The waste on the street is very dirty, and washing it also consumes a lot of water. So I started asking 2-3 families nearby to bring me their waste. Actually the brewing part was very fast, but it took a long time to turn it into soap. Anyone who uses the cleaning liquid I made likes it, and they asked "Hong, how can you make it thicker and foamier?" Even though it cleans things, it doesn't foam. To people, without the thickness and the foam, they might think the liquid doesn't clean.</p> <p>Someone also told me to go on Google to learn how to make it thicker and add colors to it. You know, because it is organic matter and it gets precipitated, it's very hard for me to work with it. Once I managed to make the liquid thick, I Googled how to make the foam, without using inorganic chemicals. So I found organic coconut extract. Then I go back to my hometown to find myrtales that we often use to wash our hair and it makes foam, you know? There are many ways to do this.</p> <p>At some point when I brewed the vegetables and fruits with sugar and stuff, it got rotten and stunk like a sewer. There were many problems. And I didn't know why it stunk. Every time I failed, I went on my computer and found out why it was rotten.</p>
Host Sen Nguyen	<p>When Hong managed to create a somewhat finished cleaning product made entirely of organic waste, she wanted to see if it meets health and quality standards, and she brought it to the state-run Quality Assurance and Testing Center 2 in Da Nang to be tested. But it doesn't work like that - she was asked to list all the substances included, which she did not know.</p>
Ms. Trinh Thi Hong	<p>They told me to write down what was in it. Usually, people who are familiar with chemicals would know substance A, substance B, substance C, what's the percentage, but I was clueless. So I just said, "Gosh, I don't know what's in here, I just brought it down here for them to check if it's good or not, if it's safe for human health." So I had to bring it back home.</p> <p>But then I got lucky, you know? There was a journalist who interviewed me about what I was doing. He asked "What support do you need from the government?" I said, "Oh, I guess I need many things from the government, and I especially need them to set the standards for me to check the quality of my product". I didn't even know how to use the word "standard" back then. I just said "How can I test what's in it, and is it good for our health?" Maybe because of the journalist, after that, the Chairman of Da Nang City Committee told the Department of Science and Technology to call me. I also invited them to my house and gave the head of the development department two bottles of my product. She found it fine, and asked her leaders to come to my house: heads of the Department of Science and Technology and the Department of Health, then the People's Committee of Lien Chieu District. After that, they made a report, and a supporting letter for me. Only then did I have the standards for product testing. Now I am familiar with the process..</p> <p>So the whole process felt like I was walking on clouds every day. I had to get up at 2 AM and work on my computer and see where things went wrong and how I could fix it. It was not until 2016 that I managed to nail the product down.</p>
Host Sen Nguyen	<p>It took Hong 4 years to arrive at a complete formula of her cleaning product. The base of the product includes water, sugar and the fruits and vegetables, and their proportions vary depending on the types of fruits and vegetables used and what kind of cleaning products or toiletries she wants to make. When brewed for a set amount of time, the</p>



	<p>combination will generate micro-organisms that act as disinfection agents, the integral part of Hong's line of products including dishwashers, laundry detergent, floor cleaners, hand sanitizers and shampoos.</p> <p>But Ms. Hong's circular economy model stands out not only because she recycles organic waste but also because she gave this formula to about 400 underprivileged women in Da Nang so they themselves can make the base product, then bring it to her company and get paid about 3 million VND for every 1,000 liters of base liquid. After that, Hong's staff takes the base liquid into critically technical steps including decontamination before packaging.</p>
Ms. Trinh Thi Hong	<p>Many people's lives are just really difficult! Because I was the President of the Charity Association, I was looking for funding to support them. There was this family who only had 900.000 VND each month to feed 3 people. I cannot imagine how they could live with such little money. Like Ms. Nguyen Thi Tap, a 79-year-old with no money, she had to take care of her 2 grandkids because she lost her children. I have her produce the base product for me . That 3,000,000 dong a month won't make them rich, but at least it can help keep them from going hungry.</p>
Host Sen Nguyen	<p>The availability of a way to generate an income does not make impoverished people jump right into it. Hong talked about the multidimensional poverty of the women she approached.</p>
Ms. Trinh Thi Hong	<p>We have to be very realistic. Poor people are not only poor in terms of money but also poor in thinking. Rich people accumulate their wealth from earning 1000, 2000, 3000 dong, and poor people just want to get a lump of money instead of working for 1000, 2000, 3000 dong. So when I started running this programme, poor people were not willing to engage, only better off ones.</p> <p>So I had to get leaders of the residence and women groups, the farmers' union leaders, and veterans involved and told them to make the base product. When they picked up the money for their work, I called the poor to come and see. Only then did it start. Like when Ms. Ly, a wealthy leader of the residence made the base product for me and I told Ms. Tam, a poor lady next door, to come and watch and tell her, look, how fun the work was, and she saw Ly get paid and only then did she want to join. And after she did, many other poor people wanted to join too. And I often tell people that we don't work here to get rich, we work to make a living to pay for electricity, water, internet, and phone bills in the house, and then slowly we will climb up the ladder from there.</p>
Host Sen Nguyen	<p>Hong was speaking from experience - she herself rose from next to nothing.</p>
Ms. Trinh Thi Hong	<p>Back then, I only finished primary school because my family was so poor. My father passed away when my mother was six months pregnant with me. And then she passed away, too, when I was only 1 month and 8 days old. After that, I lost my family because of the war. When I was 2-3 years old, some soldiers found me and they brought me to the mountains and raised me. I traveled to the North, then the South. Because I was an orphan, I was admitted to Tam Ky boarding school, which later dissolved when I finished 5th grade. I started to collect aluminum and plastic, and made a living by collecting those (laughs). Until the end of 9th grade, I went to Da Nang to look for a job. I worked during the day, went to school at night, and when I finished grade 12th, I studied for an intermediate degree in finance, accounting, and business administration.</p> <p>My life has many ups and downs. Before I started doing community work, I was working as a director of a foreign company in the garment industry. There I worked for a month and a half as a garment worker, then I became a manager, and then two years after, to a department head, and three years later, I was promoted to director. It took me 15 years. Then I got sick, and it turned out that I had early-stage breast cancer. I was at the hospital for 2 years because of radiation therapy. When I came home from the hospital, I quit my job because I was not healthy enough to do it. I couldn't walk, I had to crawl. The treatment was quite harmful to my health. I even had to sell my house to afford treatment.</p>



	<p>But for some reasons, I think this whole thing is a godsend. Thanks to the environmental youth team with whom I cleaned up the street, I was in close contact with the garbage and then came up with this model.</p>
Host Sen Nguyen	<p>Up to now, the number of participants in Ms. Hong's circular economy model is about 400 people, divided into 2 groups. About 140 people make the product base using her formula in exchange for money, this group had a more challenging and urgent economic profile. This number fluctuates because the system is not built to keep them permanently, but the income from it will open doors into other opportunities. The rest of the group also makes the product base but in exchange for the final finished product to use. When I asked Hong why she chose to recruit only women for her model, she said..</p>
Ms. Trinh Thi Hong	<p>In fact, I often tell people that it is very tough for women. At home, they have to take care of the family's finances, worrying about every meal, even children's education is also a woman's job. The best most men can do is to make money and give it to their wives, but handling a family's spending is really tough. So I must prioritize women (laughs). In anything I do, I believe that being a woman is already very disadvantaged, so I try to help them as much as I can.</p> <p>No matter what we do, be it big or small (laughs), being a mother, wife, or grandmother is still the thing that comes first for a woman. If women have an understanding husband, a sympathetic mother-in-law, it will lessen the mental burden for them a lot.</p> <p>In our society, I think the idea of "valuing men above women" is still very prevalent. Even for me, when I was researching this, someone asked: "Did you do the research or your husband?" That clearly shows the notion that women can't do anything, they can only rely on men. That mindset makes many women lose their self-esteem, instill fears in them, resulting in them not wanting to thrive. I do it all for women and I want to prove that women do not lose to men in any aspect. I often say that "If women do not have the responsibility to be mothers, wives, and grandmothers, they can excel in things a thousand times better than men. The idea of "valuing men above women" has been a great pressure for women. When working in a government agency, or anywhere, we see when people shake someone's hands, they will shake the man's hands first and then the woman. Sometimes they don't even want to shake hands with women.</p> <p>Those are the pressures on women, and I wish that all women can fight back and get out of their shell so they can have an equal position in the family, not to mention society.</p>
Ms. Kim Le	<p>To accelerate the transition to the circular economy, I do so many things.</p>
Host Sen Nguyen	<p>Kim Le, like Hong, is a businesswoman pioneering the promotion of the circular economy as the CEO of CL2B Consulting Firm.</p>
Ms. Kim Le	<p>I meet with relevant stakeholders, from government agencies to manufacturers, then NGOs and organizations to connect and work towards sustainable development to bring all stakeholders together.</p>
Host Sen Nguyen	<p>Kim compares working in this field with the role: "a daughter in law of hundreds of families", a Vietnamese idiom that refers to the pressure to please everyone when a woman is married into a new family. Kim's job requires her to be flexible to adapt and work with many stakeholders across a diverse range of sectors: construction, clothing, accounting etc. to apply the circular economy model in Vietnam while this is still new here and in many other countries.</p>
Ms. Kim Le	<p>Environmental problems usually come with social problems, and the circular economy is usually related to the economic sector so as we work within these areas, we see that certain groups and issues closely intertwine and interact with each other. However, as a female professional, I find myself lucky because in the sustainable development sector, everyone respects each other, right?</p> <p>But when I work with people in different sectors to implement a project, you don't just work with one department in one company so it is difficult to convince all departments involved to go along with the project the deeper we go.</p>



	<p>For example, working in the construction sector is a challenge because it has its own characteristics and working culture. For example, when I worked with a technical person on how to improve the communication and the system, and I requested their data.</p> <p>Because everything needs data, with it, we can analyze what they have or not until now. Then it creates friction with the head of the departments, as they see it as a form of criticism. Even after reasoning with them and their superiors, they still have an attitude toward me because they see me as a young woman coming from a different sector, and lacking in technical capacity. In reality, I do not see myself as a technical person, because it is not my background, but I do have colleagues and employees with better technical capacities than me.</p> <p>However, better communication is important, because without communication there is no collaboration, which makes it more difficult to implement initiatives, ideas, changes, and generate improvements. We are just a consultant unit, not an implantation unit, we cannot go inside our clients' operation to monitor them or do the work with them. But I also come across stakeholders across sectors who do not understand why and how sustainable development and the circular economy are related to their production and technical maintenance side of things... and they find it bothersome and ignore it. So, they told me that I was young and a woman, and I had no right to talk to them. In situations like this, I was very sad, but I kept trying and doing my things.</p>
Host Sen Nguyen	<p>According to Kim, there are two levels of circular economy transformation: one is at micro level, two is systematic change. Micro level is about business, such as Hong's biotechnology company in Da Nang. But for systematic change, criteria for circular economy models has not been regulated by the state, and the legal basis for implementing these models is insufficient, and there are not yet specific regulations for each sector and industry to implement circular economy. This is a challenge for circular economy's advocates and consultants such as Mrs. Kim because ...</p>
Ms. Kim Le	<p>The challenge here is how to prove to our customers that ours is the best framework for them to work with when there is not yet a state-regulated framework. But like any system, we need to determine what needs to be changed from micro to macro level.</p> <p>For example, let's say in the case of Da Nang, we need to determine its economic characteristics, then raw materials required for its economic activities, what is the quantity, what products will be made, what is their life cycle ... Then we work with businesses within the supply chain to reduce waste, increase recycling and circular rate, and optimize the raw materials. Afterward, these businesses will set their strategies and targets toward circular economy goals. Every industry has its challenges, working environments, management systems, waste infrastructures... Ultimately, the government needs to devise a legal framework and set clear targets for circular economy, its orientation, and implementation across regions, provinces, and businesses.</p>
Host Sen Nguyen	<p>When system change is still in the making, people like Mrs. Kim and Mrs. Hong will still continue to implement grassroot initiatives and strategies to maintain the circular economy in their respective fields.</p>
Ms. Trinh Thi Hong	<p>Right now I have another project which helps farmers learn to grow herbs that can be used to produce beauty products. Because I come from the countryside and I work in Da Nang but I'm still yearning to go back to my hometown to help people who used to raise me. They are all dead, but their children and grandchildren are still there, and I think they need to innovate and have a different vision. First, the project will give them jobs. Second, growing herbs will cover the bare hills, protecting the cuticle of the soil.</p>
Ms. Trinh Thi Hong and Host Sen	<p>Hong: And I also want to establish a cooperative out of the herb-based beauty products...you see how beautiful my skin is, this is only one week after using it!</p>



Nguyen	Sen: Oh, you are advertising right now? (laugh) Hong: Of course! (laugh)
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