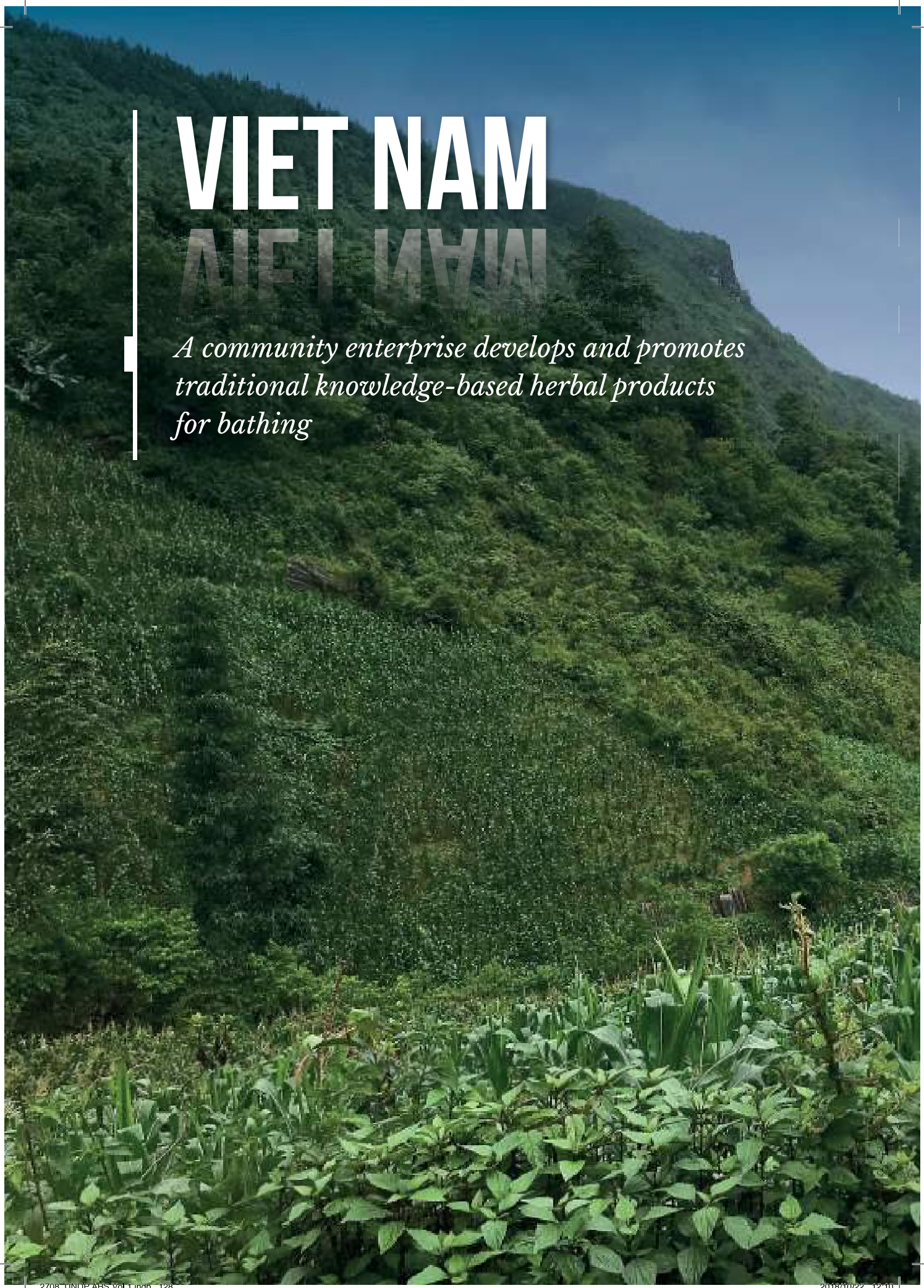

VIET NAM

A community enterprise develops and promotes traditional knowledge-based herbal products for bathing

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SETTING THE SCENE

Owing to its long history and specific geographical location, which includes complicated topographical, ecological and social features, Viet Nam is one of the most biodiverse countries on the planet. Thousands of years of prosperous cultural development and agricultural practices by 54 ethnic groups have enriched the national traditional knowledge (TK) about the use of genetic resources, especially in traditional medicine.

Lao Cai province is located in the mountainous north-western region of Viet Nam, with the Sapa district being in the western part of this province. The terrain of Sapa is very complex, with stratified high elevations and fragmented lower levels. The province includes the Hoàng Liên Son mountain range, which is at the eastern extremity of the Himalayas. This range includes Viet Nam's highest mountain, Fan Si Pan, at a height of 3 143 m above sea level.

The forest in Sapa can be classified as belonging to three types: sub-montane dry evergreen forest, tropical montane deciduous forest and sub-alpine forest. Annually, the mountain experiences a dry cold climate from October to March, with tropical monsoons during the rainy season, which lasts from April to September. The geographical location and ecological features make it a unique place for many interesting plants, which contribute to the rich diversity in natural medicinal plant genetic resources in Viet Nam. Among the many ethnic groups residing in the Lao Cai province are the Hmong, Dao, Kinh, Tay and Giay. Each group maintains valued knowledge on the medicinal uses of plants. This makes this province an attractive place for bioprospecting for the pharmaceutical industry.

Biodiscovery case

The bath medicine of the Red Dao ethnic group is well known and has been remarked upon by almost all visitors to the Sapa district of the Lao Cai province. It is an old tradition of the Red Dao people to use wild plants for bathing. These bath medicines consist of herbal remedies made from mixtures of various plants collected in the mountains. The herbal plants are cooked with water and then they can be used for soaking the body in medicinal water at 40-degrees Celsius for 15–30 minutes. An example of one use is for women to bathe with herbal plants several days after delivering their babies. This helps them recover their health and prevent diseases. In this way, women can work again in the forest or fields only a week after giving birth. Bath medicine is also used for children and men. It is used for relaxation, relieving sore feet and pain, skincare, and the treatment of diseases such as rheumatism, arthritis and headaches. The understanding of these practices and the identity of the plants has become valuable TK maintained by generations of Red Dao families. Normally it is the women who collect and maintain the remedies and the knowledge and transfer them to their daughters. In 2006, SapaNapro Company – a community enterprise – was established with the support of Hanoi University of Pharmacy (HUP) and the Centre for Research and Development of Ethno-Medicinal Plants (CREDEP), to commercialize traditional bathing medicines of the Red Dao ethnic people. Their main products are bath medicines for women after pregnancy based on TK of the Red Dao ethnic group. The SapaNapro Company is a community-private model for conserving and developing medicinal plant genetic resources and associated TK on bathing medicine. It engages the Red Dao people themselves in the protection of their genetic resources and TK, through the sharing of accrued company benefits from commercialized products back to the Red Dao communities. These benefits include monetary benefits to the holders of TK ("*bà mẹ*" in Vietnamese), and the company also pays the collectors of medicinal plants according to the value of the plant species collected. In addition, the company contributes a proportion of company profits to the communal development fund for the community's socio-cultural activities. The model contributes both to the improvement of the local community's livelihood and to biodiversity conservation.

With their successful bath medicine, the case of SapaNapro Company is a good example of an ABS-like mechanism where the benefits of all involved stakeholders are taken into account. For that reason, SapaNapro Company and the Red Dao people in Ta Phin ward, Sapa district, have been chosen as the core of the project's demonstration activities, with the aim to produce a new pain-relief product for which a proper agreement will be established between the TK holder, genetic resource providers and the company.

EYEWITNESS STATEMENT

Mr Ly Lao Lo is a member of the Red Dao ethnic group and director of the SapaNapro company. He is the son of Mrs Ly Mei Chay, who is a famous master in the Red Dao community in Ta Phin commune, Sapa district. He is a typical young ethnic man who helps his community protect the herbal plants available in their locality and promote their uses, for example, as traditional bath medicines.

According to Mr Ly Lao Lo, the Red Dao people have been familiar with bathing using leaves, flowers, roots or fruits of plants from the forest to protect their health for thousands of years. This ancestral knowledge has been handed down for generations. The bathing techniques combine various herbs that have a particular influence on the nerves, respiratory system, skin, muscles, bones, joints etc. He added,

"The bathing remedies normally use tens of plant species and there are even bathing medicines that use more than 100 herbal species. There are also different processing methods for each kind of plant species, for examples, dried parts or fresh parts. The Red Dao masters make different mixes as cures for different symptoms and pains. Before, the Red Dao people only collected herbs for their own private uses. They have now participated in the commercialization of many products. In recent years, the SapaNapro company's revenue has significantly increased, which has helped improve the life standards of local communities."



In fine focus: SDGs implemented by the biodiscovery case

The aforementioned ABS case has surely contributed to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It directly supports SDG 15.6, which promotes fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources. In this case, local communities, particularly the Red Dao ethnic people in Ta Phin district, benefited from their medicinal plants and bathing remedies, which are used by the SapaNapro Company. The community-private partnership under the SapaNapro Company, where local people are both provider (owner) and user of genetic resources and associated TK, is a good example for promoting equitable benefit sharing and biodiversity conservation.

In addition, the local people are shareholders of the company; they collect and grow medicinal plants and provide bathing remedies and materials for SapaNapro. This creates livelihoods for local communities. It is very meaningful for ethnic groups who used to be very poor to now make their livelihoods by collecting wood and herbs and selling them. Therefore, the project contributes to SDG 1 (No poverty), SDG 2 (Zero hunger) and SDG 8 (Decent work and economic growth).

Furthermore, the women from the Red Dao ethnic group in particular, are the masters and repositories of the techniques of bathing-product development. They play key roles in the company activities. This helps to enhance their participation as well as their voices or influences in the community which contributes to SDG 5 on gender equality.

Legal and political enabling environment for ABS and the Nagoya Protocol

Viet Nam set up the national ABS legal framework under the Biodiversity Law in 2008; however, the implementation of the ABS requirement in the Biodiversity Law is in its early stages. After adoption of the Nagoya protocol in 2014, Viet Nam has made progress in creating an enabling environment for research and development activities that involve the utilization of genetic resources originating within the country. The scheme 1141/QD-TTg for capacity building on ABS was adopted by Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc in 2016. It identifies key areas of focus to enhance capacity and increase awareness on ABS for different target groups. Later, Decree 59 was enacted by the Government on 12 May 2017 with the aim to regulate all activities related to research and development using genetic resources, and activities to transfer them out of the country.

The UNDP-GEF ABS Project ("Capacity Building for the Ratification and Implementation of the Nagoya Protocol on Access and Benefit Sharing in Viet Nam") supported the development of the legal framework on ABS, in which, the Decree 59 on ABS management was issued. It should be noted that TK associated with genetic resources has not been mentioned fully in the current Decree due to the lack of its management experience on the ground. Regardless, the project is piloting the private-public community partnership on ABS in the Sapa district, where an abundance of valued medicine are plants and associated traditional knowledge. By doing so, an understanding of TK management and experience on managing genetic resource sustainable utilization will be built up.

A framework in alignment with international standards of the Nagoya Protocol has been established. This includes requiring PIC for access to genetic resources and negotiating MAT between the holders of genetic resources and potential users of these resources. The process and procedure for the issuance of an Access License has also been defined. To date, a number of applications for Access Licenses have been submitted to the National Competent Authorities and are being handled. Twenty decisions allowing the transfer of genetic resources out of the country have been granted to national research institutions.

MESSAGE FROM AN SDG ADVOCATE

"The SDGs adopted by world leaders in 2015 have opened new avenues for a more integrated development in Viet Nam and worldwide. The SDGs envision a development path where environment and biodiversity are better protected and sustainably managed to benefit poverty eradication, economic prosperity and cultural diversity.

The country's legislation and policy environment offer a great opportunity to localize the targets for SDG 14 and 15 – corresponding to life below water and on land – and to mainstream biodiversity concerns throughout the socio-economic development agenda. To achieve this level of ambition, it is important that development partners and civil society organizations working on biodiversity issues, including responsible utilization of genetic and indigenous resources, join hands to support Viet Nam in formulating and enacting a truly progressive legislative framework. In the meantime, as 1 of the 16 top biodiversity-rich countries, Viet Nam needs to tap into indigenous knowledge about the responsible utilization of genetic resources. Mobilizing the participation of sectors, including public and private as well as other concerned stakeholders and community people, in the implementation the SDGs in general and the SDGs 14 "life below water" and 15 "life on land" is essential."

MS AKIKO FUJII, UNDP Deputy Country Coordinator, Viet Nam.