

Roots of Peace: Cluster Munitions to Crops

By facilitating the removal of explosive remnants of war in rural Vietnam, Roots of Peace (ROP) aims to restore contaminated farmland to a safe, productive state. ROP encourages economic empowerment by training farmers in the production of cash crops, such as black pepper and taro.

by Tucker Kühn and Heidi Kühn [Roots of Peace]



Black pepper produced in Vietnam on formerly contaminated ground.
All photos courtesy of Roots for Peace.

Fifty years ago, Operation Rolling Thunder began when U.S. troops were first sent into Vietnam in March 1965.¹ The year 2015 marks both the 40th anniversary of the end of the Vietnam-American War and the 20th anniversary of normalized relations between the United States and Vietnam.² Yet countless explosive remnants of war (ERW) such as cluster munitions and other unexploded

ordnance (UXO) remain, preventing farmers from accessing their land. According to the Vietnamese government, more than 80 percent of the land in Quang Tri, a province in the former demilitarized zone (DMZ), remains riddled with these legacies of war.³ This contamination continues to place communities at risk, restricting safe access to land required for housing, agriculture, infrastructure and



Nguyen Dinh Thu is a Vietnamese farmer and UXO survivor living in Quang Tri. While working in the fields one day as a teenager, he saw a shiny object that appeared after a heavy rain. As he tried to excavate it, the UXO exploded, throwing Thu forward and causing the loss of both of his arms. After several surgeries, he had no option but to return to the same land where he was injured. Despite his injuries, he forged ahead to pursue an agrarian livelihood on his family farm.

ROP offered Thu the opportunity to participate in the SHADE program, as pepper is a traditional crop in Son Ha village where he lived. MAG and ROP cleared the land of 11 more pieces of UXO, enabling Thu and his family to plant pepper trees and safely earn a living. In total, MAG cleared 9,721 sq m (2.40 ac) of land at 17 ROP SHADE pepper farms from May to August 2012, finding and destroying 69 pieces of ERW.

community development. Central Vietnam, particularly provinces located on either side of the former DMZ, was the scene of multiple ground battles and was subject to intensive air and naval fire.

SHADE

In 2011, ROP expanded the SHADE program to work with farmers in provinces located along the former DMZ—Quang Tri, Quang Nam and Quang Binh provinces—establishing commercial farming for the high-value crop black pepper. SHADE provides more than 1,000 farmers with modern-day farming techniques such as disease prevention as well as

harvest and post-harvest production. To ensure quality and that quantity standards are met, SHADE focuses support on every aspect of crop production and handling and aims to help farmers develop their businesses. Although this region is among the poorest in Vietnam, farmers contribute 50 percent of the cost of trees. This initial investment endows farmers with a sense of propriety and pride in the land they work.

Partnership

MAG (Mines Advisory Group) and ROP have collaborated on area clearance in support of ROP agricultural projects since May 2012. During this time frame MAG cleared 54 sites



Formerly contaminated land in Vietnam now used to produce black pepper plants.

(a total of 37,839 sq m [9.35 ac]), which provided farmland to a total of 322 small-scale farmers and their families under the ROP program.

In October 2014, ROP raised US\$134,000 for SHADE. The Office of Weapons Removal and Abatement in the U.S. Department of State's Bureau of Political-Military Affairs (PM/WRA) provided a matching grant to ROP to clear the land of UXO in preparation for more farms being released for black pepper production. These efforts will complement phase two of the SHADE Project, which will be centered less on providing technical inputs to already existing project participants and focused more on ensuring the pepper produced is of a high enough quality to sell on international markets for higher prices. Expansion of the project will also continue according to the SHADE model of equipping farmers with the necessary knowledge and techniques for successful production. MAG is currently recruiting, training and preparing to deploy four five-person clearance teams to support ROP agricultural projects. The clearance teams will conduct land-release activities on sites identified by ROP throughout Quang Tri. In total, 276,000 sq m (68.20 ac) of land will be

released for pepper planting, production, harvest and sale according to the SHADE model. In addition, the Rotary Club of San Francisco generously donated \$10,000 in January 2015 to support this next phase of the project. ©

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Black pepper ripening on the vine.



Tucker Kühn joined Roots of Peace full-time in 2008 after serving part-time for several years in various positions. In 2013, after spending three years in Vietnam as the ROP country director, Kühn returned to ROP headquarters in California to take the role of director of operations. Leveraging his experience and perspective gained from his work in the field, Kühn is responsible for managing home-office operations while overseeing worldwide operations. A graduate of the University of San Francisco, he has worked in several countries including Afghanistan, Cambodia, Colombia, Croatia, Kazakhstan, Laos, Vietnam and Yemen.

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Heidi Kühn is the founder and CEO of Roots of Peace, which began in 1997. A graduate of the University of California at Berkeley in political economics of industrial societies, Kühn has been recognized by numerous awards including the Cal Berkeley Alumni Award for Excellence and Achievement, the National Jefferson Award for Public Service and the World Association of Non-Governmental Award for Peace and Security.

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