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Brickmakers to build a cleaner future

by Livia Willi

NAM DINH — "My kiln doesn't have a bad impact on the environment. Have a look! All the trees around my property are growing," says Do Huy Toi defiantly.

Many people wouldn't agree with Toi, the owner of an old-style brick kiln in Nam Dinh Province.

In 2001, the Government decreed that by this year, the 10,000 or more traditional brick-making works throughout the nation should be eliminated because they emitted high levels of toxic gases.

"But it's not only vegetation, brick workers themselves are also exposed to toxic gases, such as carbon dioxide and sulphur dioxide," says Khuat Quang Hung, National Programme officer of the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation (SDC).

The agency is involved in the transition of traditional brick-making methods to environmentally friendly production. Nam Dinh provincial authorities and their Swiss advisers have developed a co-operative effort named the Viet Nam Sustainable Brick-making Project.

Hung says that toxic ventilation gases, such as fluorine and sulphur, often wipe out crops around the kilns. This leads to conflicts between kiln owners and farmers.

In addition, the brick industry uses large amounts of coal. Every brick produced by old methods consumes up to 500 grams of coal. It all adds up. The brick industry in Viet Nam consumes 2.2 million tonnes of coal per year, according to agency studies. Nam Dinh brick makers, including Toi, have raised the height of their chimneys to lessen the impacts of kiln fumes, but this has little effect.

The elimination of old-style kilns is not easy and involves considerable costs. Since Toi's kiln was established in 2004, it has produced 5 million bricks a year and provides seasonal work to 30 to 40 people. Seventy-five per cent of the workers are women. It is in the heart of a thriving brick industry in the Nam Dinh region. More than 600 kilns dot the landscape along the Red River delta, which is rich in clay deposits.

The Swiss-backed project, which started in 2005, aims to help kiln owners produce bricks in an environmentally sensitive way - and to make their operations more efficient. About 80 per cent of Viet Nam's bricks and tiles are produced by small-scale enterprises. Most are not mechanised and are inefficient, according to the Swiss agency.

If Toi, 55, decides to build a modern kiln, he has the money to do it. "But I don't see why I should, it's been very profitable so far," he says. It seems obvious that he won't change anything until he has to.

But not every kiln owners thinks like Toi. Tran Duc Hoang has been involved in the brick-making business since the 1980s. One day, he decided to start his own business. "We didn't want to use the traditional method, because the smoke destroys the trees and the environment," says the 48-year-old director. In 2006, Hoang established a sustainable kiln. "I realised that making bricks doesn't involve much financial risk, because the demand continues to grow," he says.

In fact, Vietnamese brick production has been expanding as fast as the economy. Today, Viet Nam consumes more than 20 billion bricks a year, which rounds out to almost 250 bricks per head, according to the SDC studies. Despite the focus on modernising brickworks, it was not possible to get confirmation of these figures from official sources.

Together with a friend, Hoang invested in the construction of a small-scale, modern brick kiln designed by project engineers. A modern kiln can be built for as little as US\$60,000 - and make an annual profit of about \$10,000.

The project provided Hoang with legal support, technical know-how, kiln operating instructions and a mechanical system to lift the bricks in and out of the kiln.



Workers at a traditional brick kiln in the northern province of Nam Dinh. Brickmakers are being encouraged to use more modern kilns that reduce negative impacts on the environment. — VNA/VNS Photo Livia Willi

But the most time consuming part of the whole exercise was getting a land-lease certificate from the Department of Construction. The project helped him with this process. "It would have cost him a lot of money if he had to do it himself," says Hung, national programme officer for the Swiss agency.

But Hoang and his business partners want to move on and grow. They have just completed construction of a tunnel kiln which fires a continuous line of bricks moving through. Construction of traditional kilns costs only \$10,000-35,000, while the cheapest low-cost modern tunnel kilns cost \$500,000. Paid with profits from his first modern kiln venture and investments from new business partners, its main characteristic is the continuous flow of bricks loaded on carts through a tunnel. After Tet, Hoang and his partners will produce their first batch of bricks with the new tunnel kiln.

The Swiss-backed project will end by mid-year. "I think that we managed to create a good model for Nam Dinh, but the knowledge and experience we gained will also be helpful for other provinces," says Ha Thu Huong, project coordinator. — VNS

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