

# Business

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## Farmers' market aims to sell top quality produce

Times Reporters

The first Good Agricultural Practice (GAP) market marquee, provided with JICA's assistance, officially opened last week for the sale of farm produce to the people of Nongkhouay village and other communities in Viengkham district, Vientiane province.

The new market is currently opening three days a week (Monday, Wednesday and Friday) at the Viengkham market place which is located in the grounds of the provincial Department of Industry and Commerce, alongside the main road. This area will soon become a permanent market.

District authorities say a wide range of vegetables, including lettuce, morning glory, tomatoes, chillies and long beans grown by farmers in Nongkhouay village are available for sale to anyone passing by.

Head of the GAP farmers' group Mr Bounorm Southammavong told *Vientiane Times* on Monday the prices of their vegetables are similar to those on sale in general markets. Most of the vegetables grown and sold in the market are produced using fertiliser which has been certified by the Ministry of Health's Food and Drugs Department.

He said many buyers have told him that vegetables such as long beans, garlic, tomatoes, morning glory, cucumbers and cabbages were clean and healthy even though fertiliser had been applied.

"Over the course of a week

will always keep better than those bought from general markets," Mr Bounorm said.

Nongkhouay village farmers' group was one of the first pilot farm groups to be granted GAP certification.

The project aims to increase the number of certified GAP groups while upholding GAP certification standards in Vientiane and Vientiane province.

The agricultural component of the Laos Pilot Programme for Narrowing the Development Gap towards Asean Integration collaboratively operated by the Clean Agricultural Development Centre and JICA has been making efforts to introduce the Lao GAP since 2012, to be aligned with the Asean GAP standard. The Asean GAP is a voluntary standard for good agricultural practice during the production, harvesting and postharvest handling of fresh fruit and vegetables in the Asean region.

Practices in the Asean GAP are aimed at preventing or minimising the risk of hazards occurring. The hazards covered by the Asean GAP include food safety, environmental impacts, worker health, safety and welfare, and produce quality.

A GAP demonstration farm was established at the Clean Agricultural Development Centre and fully utilised for the practical training of officials and target farmers.

Under GAP's initial activities, 26 groups comprised of 738 farmers have been organised as pilot GAP farm

## Rural financial services access to 'BCOME' reality

Times Reporters

**B**anque Pour Le Commerce Exterieur Lao Public (BCEL) is extending its services through a new product "BCOME" which will help provide poor rural families with greater access to appropriate financial services such as transferring their money.

BCEL Community Money Express (BCOME) has been achieved through cooperation between the Bank of the Lao PDR, BCEL and MAFIPP (Making Access to Finance more Inclusive for Poor People – a 4 year joint UNCDF sector programme) supported by the Australian government providing technical assistance to financial services operators to develop a business case and pilot service.

Deputy Managing Director of BCEL, Mr Nanthalath Keopaseuth said at the recent BCEL official launch that the new service would help rural people transfer money more conveniently through the bank's agents who showed the new logo in their community.

For example, people in rural areas can transfer money to their families anytime through a smartphone, tablet and computer or utilise over the counter services at the bank's local agents. Customers transferring money just need



Mr Nanthalath Keopaseuth (first left) Ms Vathana Dalalay (centre) and Mr Dave Vosen cut a ribbon to officially open the BCOME service.

to fill in sender and receiver account numbers and are then issued a confirmation for the transaction.

"This service will help people to save money and travelling time rather than transferring money at the bank," Mr Nanthalath explained.

At present, most financial services from banks focus on larger towns which rural people can't access, so Vice President of the Bank of the Lao PDR, Ms Vathana Dalalay believed BCOME could respond to the people's needs.

BCOME is also much safer for rural people compared to transferring money via the black market that often involves exorbitant charges.

"Access to financial services can help poor people and rural families set up small businesses and save in case of illness or disaster, so it will be necessary to extend the frontiers of markets to low-income households," according to Charge d'Affaires of Australia Embassy to Laos, Mr Dave Vosen.

Through BCOME

becoming available within a village, there is no need to go to the district town to deposit or withdraw cash, to make payments or transfer funds.

Digital financial services are a new frontier and encouraging the commercial sector in Laos to participate and engage for the benefit of society.

BCOME is launching pilot projects with 10 of the banks' agents in Vientiane and Vientiane province before it will be extended to other provincial rural areas.

Overseas home buyers to be targeted