

Lives of ethnic people improve

Households now have access to clean water from tap

By Bích Hương

CAO BẰNG – Lý Văn Cường's stilt house in northern Cao Bằng Province's Hà Quảng District looks similar to other traditional houses inhabited by people from the Nùng ethnic group except for the cement cooking stove inside and a water tap outside.

Cường said his family shares the tap system with four other households. It cost them about VNĐ50 million (US\$ 2,400) to install last year.

"Thanks to the taps, 26 households now have access to clean water in our hamlet instead of travelling 2-3km everyday to fetch water," he said.

Cường's sister Lý Thị Mai, 50, said that children were the happiest with the new tap because they enjoy taking baths. Women like the tap because it made their work day easier.

"People in highland areas like ours, mostly women, usually have to walk in search of wood and water," she said, adding that the combination of farming and searching for wood and water was very exhausting.

"Now we don't have to travel to seek wood for cooking and heating as much as we used to," she said proudly. "Our new cooking stove burns less firewood."

Cường said that he and other residents were able to build the facilities in the last five years with support from a foreign organisation and the local authority.

"They [the supporters] created a model to teach us how to build the stove and gave us steel to make the frame. We collected bricks and cement to complete it," Cường said.

Đình Văn Lâm, chairman of the commune People's Committee said the hamlet had faced a water shortage for years.

Under a project by the Swiss Agency for Development and Co-operation, also known as Helvetas, four clean water systems worth VNĐ 200 million

Nùng ethnic woman Lý Thị Mai (left) does the washing at the tap in front of her house. Life is much easier for ethnic minority people in northern Cao Bằng Province since a Swiss group provided tap water to 120 households. — VNS Photo Bích Hương



(\$9,500) were built in the last four years, providing tap water for about 120 local households.

In addition, about 10 households in the commune benefited from a new type of cooking stove. The number has been growing as many other households want to construct a new stove.

Each stove cost about VNĐ500,000 (\$24), which Lâm said was not much and helped reduce firewood consumption and forest degradation.

Lâm added that local residents also had the opportunity to improve their farming skills through Helvetas' Farmers Field School programme, in which experts and agriculture officers provided instruction and demonstrated techniques in the farmers' fields so they could witness the skills first hand.

One member of every family attended classes on growing corn, raising pigs and making feed for cattle.

Cường said the classes helped farmers to master the

skills more easily, resulting in higher production.

Bản Kéo Commune, about 60km away from Cao Bằng Town, is still poor with two-thirds of its 240 households living in poverty. The average personal income is VNĐ 1 million (\$47) per month.

It is one of 24 communes in the province's eight districts that benefited from the Swiss organisation's project.

The Community-based Governance-Extension-Market Project launched five years ago aimed at helping highland ethnic minority groups better exercise their right to participate in policy making, administrative reform and agriculture extension. It also gave them more understanding about the market.

The project disbursed \$2 million in total, 40 per cent more than initially approved.

Programme director of Helvetas Việt Nam Daniel Valenghi said the project was sustainable because the local contribution in many of the

project activities was quite high, from 30 to 70 per cent, which created community ownership and thus they were more responsible in the management and protection of the facilities.

"We give them things they don't have, such as technology, a portion of the money they need or building materials. We try to mobilise their contribution as much as possible and take advantage of what they already have," he said.

"Local residents and authorities participated in the early stages and we listened to their needs and designed suitable models for particular localities," he said.

Helvetas recently helped to establish a local non-governmental organisation in the province called Cao Bằng Development Centre (DECEN) which is run by Vietnamese people.

DECEN will work independently in the next four years and mobilise funds to carry out activities for the development of local communities, including ethnic minority groups. — VNS