

Dutch young man blowing fresh air for Vietnamese agricultural products

In his story, Siebe van Wijk always used images to illustrate such as: farmers on the paddy field, harvester in green house, fish seller in the market. All of these images contain a poor life, a smile, sad eyes and lament when there products are broken or reject. The young Dutch man talks about agricultural product of Vietnam as if it was the story of his family.



Tomato farm in the form of Don Duong, Lam Dong – photo: T-Hung

6 years ago, when he for the first time visited Vietnam, he fell in love with this country because there were quite some similarities with the Netherlands. For example by doing so well in agriculture, produce the value to feed the people, and the very high population density. Despite being a small country the Netherlands manage to be the second largest country in the world in terms of the value of exports of agriculture products, with a value of about \$ 50 billions. Like the Dutch, Vietnamese like business, earn money, become the owner and develop. Each household farmer want to have progress, take risks, effort to get rich... but quite a large majority is still poor.

Vietnamese agricultural products “ cù bơ cù bắt”

In 2006, Metro asked Fresh Studio to assist to develop Metro GAP project – generally, this project is to produce vegetable at Metro standard, apply good practice by using Metro standard. That means monitoring, management, traceability...this is a project that Metro pay to Fresh Studio to help farmers have a “ different vision”, effort and proud with their work.

Farmers are gathered together where they begin to approach the changes in their work: they begin to be instructed by consultant to be familiar with a small notebook recording all daily work, all type of fertilizer, chemical... used on each bed of tomatoes, vegetables. They begin to determine the amount of their work by noting the detail in their bed vegetable. It costs how much power to water, how many days out of the money, how much damage the loss of agricultural tool... all are for the effective of product.

Every week, they come together to compare the result on their each bed vegetable, compare their garden to neighbour's garden and find out loss and profit. Especially, everything from basket containing vegetable, tap water irrigation was also “ of the standard”. Farmer begin to collect each wrap plastic bag, each empty bottle of pesticide by Metro GAP required to do so. All these small work are the great change for farmers.

Fresh Studio survey all the process including plant, harvest, retail, wholesale... until Metro sells directly to its customers and bring all suitable GAP to farmers. The standard contains 56 points and 10 most important items ensure traceability agricultural products. Boring recording dairy is replaced by the support of professional consultant sticking on the field. They collect all data in the dairy. By the end of the week in the meeting of farmers, specific number about harvest, profit, loss... of each house, each bed vegetable will be announced by the clear financial analysis.

Farmers surprise because in their entire life, everything is general and estimate end of the harvest. Result of business compare this house to other houses blowing all the desire, the passion for the efficiency of his land.

Siebe said “ during the meeting, , farmers discuss together why the result is low or high, they discuss and help each other. This way helps farmers in Netherlands success. In my hometown, there are many farmer clubs learning together. On Friday, they go to drink beer, bring their work dairy to compare and learn from experience. I brought that model to Vietnam and farmers in Dalat, Duc Trong, Don Duong (Lam Dong) applied it the most interested way.

To not loose way

"Like the story of traffic on the road, there must be the rules to guide in order not to get lost. Farmers business, too, if there is no instructions, they will think of themselves more, forget the others. So there is a story in the north, some farmers try growing small cucumbers for sale to Russian. In 2000 exported \$ 3 million, then pull up slowly to US\$ 45 million. Immediately many companies invest massively results: cheap price. Then each farmer use pesticides, melon bounced, many companies broke. Value chain for agricultural products in the absence of such places.

Farmers will improve traditional production practices, companies treat better to providers for their products ... When agricultural products of high quality, foreign investors invest Vietnam agriculture, then win-win all at it "- said Siebe drunk on his story.

Siebe explained several years ago, he received Metro GAP project and cooperated with Metro cash & Carry VN because they are one of the few companies who take the domestic market and their consumers seriously, and therefore invest into the fruit and vegetable safety standard. "While paradoxly Vietnamese companies focus mostly on exports".

Thoughtfully, he recalled an unhappy story. These are Vietnamese market stories, where Vietnamese people compete violently same product by reducing the price in order to emerge their company. While in his native Netherlands, there is a competition but also cooperation, but Vietnamese only ompete by low price. Why they don't know that Basa market in Euro decreased, the exporter in making price won't be supported. Netherlands wins because of famous in building his own image. It is defined that the advantage of Vietnam cheap fish, why not promote Vietnam fish good for cooking, contain more nutrients?

He said "many companies think that Vietnam is only interested in cheap fruit and vegetables without thinking of consumers. We observed many Vietnamese people now like to have safety and quality products. That is also the same for 500 millions people in South east Asia. If anyone want to succeed, it must be the standard for creating value for consumers who are interested in the product not by low price. If Vietnam can do that, we will have a big market in South east Asia. Now it is necessary to what the consumers want from fruit and vegetables".

Diary field

His parents are Dutch but Siebes was born in Kenya because his parents came to help African farmers. Perhaps the blood of agricultural impact him when he was born. When joining college, he chose agricultural sector and then master, then went to work for agricultural project in South East Asia including Vietnam.

Until one day, this man making agricultural economy brings a different perspective on the lack of Vietnam agricultural products. Lack of the product severely is not from the poor type or agricultural backwardness, it is the lack of insight about the value of agricultural products here. He and his friends formed Fresh studio Innovation Asia which is also "a multi-national" because there are Dutch, African, and Vietnamese. Their job is to help farmers make the "chain value", change normal product into famous brand, create high value commercial products in domestic market and export.

In Suoi Thong B hamlet, Da Ron commune, Don Duong district, there is a modern greenhouse managed by farmers. It is a model farm that Fresh Studio builds for farmers to visit, study and practice modern agriculture closely, less experience and more practical. Where all fruits and vegetable imported from Netherlands, farming, fertilization, irrigation automatically... began to appear in remote area in Lam Dong.

"Vietnam has over 80 million people, an extremely large potential that the Vietnamese people forget that. We survey, the average large urban population consumed fruit \$ 1 billion for the year. 28% population lives in urban Vietnam has a huge market, anyone would notice a bit of success. I saw in Vietnam, many people talked about but rarely consumers who talked about agricultural products. The I love talking about the phone rather than talking about rice, fish, mangoes, potatoes ... "

Siebe Van Wijk



Siebe Van Wijk was born in 1973 in Kenya. He graduated in agricultural economic sectors in the Netherlands. He is a general director of Fresh Studio Innovations Asia Ltd.. In addition to consulting projects in agriculture for the domestic market, he is also implementing more projects to bring Vietnam brand Fruit into the European market.