

## EVALUATION REPORT

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# Final Evaluation of the Systematic Mechanism for Safer Trade Project

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Independent Evaluation Unit

April 2024

This evaluation report makes reference to the following SDGs:



## **FINAL EVALUATION OF THE SYSTEMATIC MECHANISM FOR SAFER TRADE PROJECT**

*EU Contract Number FOOD/2017/391-858*

The International Trade Centre (ITC) is the joint agency of the World Trade Organization and the United Nations. ITC is the only international agency dedicated to the development of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises. Formed in 1964, ITC is the focal point for trade-related technical assistance within the United Nations system.

For all of ITC's interventions, evaluation is a key instrument to ensure accountability against expected results and to support organizational learning. Evaluations inform ITC's decision-making in policy, programme and project management, with the purpose of improving performance and enhancing ITC's contributions towards achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The ITC Independent Evaluation Unit has carried out this evaluation under its 2023-2024 Work Programme and is responsible for this publication. The evaluation was carried out by a team of three external evaluation consultants (Ganesh Rauniyar—International Senior Evaluation Specialist and Lead Evaluator; Viengsavang Latsachanh – National Evaluation Consultant, Lao PDR; and Tien Dzung Pham – National Evaluation Consultant, Viet Nam) and was managed by the ITC Associate Monitoring and Evaluation Officer (Marianne Schmitt). The Head of the ITC Independent Evaluation Unit (Miguel Jiménez Pont) provided oversight and quality assurance.

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## ACRONYMS

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ARISE+	ASEAN Regional Integration Support Programme
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
B2B	Business-to-Business
BTSF	Better Training for Safer Food (EU)
CADC	Clean Agriculture Development Centre (Lao PDR)
CODEX	Codex Alimentarius (FAO)
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease
DAC	Development Assistance Committee (OECD)
DAFO	District Agriculture and Forestry Office (Lao PDR)
DECI	Division of Enterprise Competitiveness and Institutions (ITC)
DG-INTPA	Directorate-General for International Partnerships (EU)
DG-SANTE	Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety (EU)
DOA	Department of Agriculture (Lao PDR)
ER	Expected Result
EU	European Union
EUD	European Union Delegation
EuroCham	European Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Lao PDR
EUROPHYT	European Union Notification System for Plant Health Interceptions
EVFTA	EU-Vietnam Free Trade Agreement
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
F&V	Fruit and Vegetable
GAP	Good Agricultural Practice
HACCP	Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point
IEU	Independent Evaluation Unit
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
ITC	International Trade Centre
IPM	Integrated Pest Management
IPCC	International Plant Protection Convention
LDC	Least Developed Country
LNCCI	Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry
MAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (Lao PDR)
MARD	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (Viet Nam)
MoH	Ministry of Health (Lao PDR)
MOIC	Ministry of Industry and Commerce (Lao PDR)
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
MRL	Maximum Residue Level
MSME	micro, small and medium-sized enterprise
NPC	National Project Coordinator
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAFO	Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office (Lao PDR)
PDR	People's Democratic Republic (Lao PDR)
PPC	Plant Protection Centre (Lao PDR)

PPD	Plant Protection Department (Viet Nam)
PPP	Public-Private Partnership
PRC	Project Review Committee
RASFF	Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SEC	Sector and Enterprise Competitiveness Section (ITC)
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises
SPS	Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures
SYMST	Systematic Mechanism for Safer Trade
ToC	Theory of Change
TOR	Terms of Reference
TWG	Technical Working Group
UN	United Nations
UNEG	United Nations Evaluation Group
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization

## Final Evaluation of the SYMST Project at a Glance

*The evaluation provides an overall independent assessment of the SYMST project performance based on the OECD-DAC evaluation criteria and the EU value addition. It offers key lessons and a set of recommendations. The project was supported by 2.0 million Euro from the EU and the evaluation covered project activities in Lao PDR and Viet Nam from December 2018 to October 2023.*

### Key conclusions

- The project contributed to raising awareness about plant health and pesticide use for food safety by strengthening regulatory framework and governance, enhancing the institutional capacity of plant protection agencies, and providing exposure to export markets. It focused on basil, chilli, rice and watermelon in Lao PDR and black pepper, dragon fruit, and pomelo in Viet Nam. It promoted the adoption of good agricultural practices by farmers and the controlled use of approved pesticides in the crops.
- The project addressed one of the critical aspects of agricultural value chain quality improvement. Strengthening the product value chains supported was necessary but not sufficient. Supporting market structure and productivity enhancement accompanied by costs-and-benefits analysis of recommended practices and dissemination strategy to scale up interventions was also needed.
- The project was internally and externally coherent. Further collaborations and synergies with like-minded agencies would have strengthened the project's performance.
- The project achieved all planned outputs but fell short of the intended outcomes. This was due to a heavy focus on completing activities, which was partly driven by a short implementation period caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The project's performance was also affected by a shortage of technical staff at the subnational level.
- Despite challenges posed by the pandemic, the project efficiently delivered outputs during the extended project implementation period. The balanced deployment of national and international consultants, along with the prudent use of project resources, helped cover the project costs during the two extensions. The knowledge-sharing opportunities between Lao PDR and Viet Nam remained limited.
- The effective project implementation period limited the delivery of the intended impact. Access to overseas markets for some of the agricultural enterprises was encouraging. Market segmentation in project design could have delivered sustained benefits.
- External assistance would be required to sustain the gains made by the project. There is a continued need for awareness raising, capacity building, and sustainable market development.
- The EU's support remained focused on a specific area, and it was guided by market entry requirements for products to the EU destinations. This would not have been possible without the EU support.
- Overall, the project was moderately satisfactory.

### Recommendations in brief

The EU or other future potential donors of similar projects:

1. Support inter-country collaboration based on a clearly defined strategy.
2. Support a holistic approach to the product value chain development in partnership with other development partners.

The ITC Quality Management Team:

1. Include a clear roadmap or mechanism for cross-country knowledge exchange and dissemination plans in multi-country projects. This should be supported by ensuring active collaboration with other relevant development partners.
2. Ensure active collaboration with other relevant development partners for synergies.
3. Take a holistic approach to the value chain development in conceptualizing, designing, and implementing projects. It is equally critical that ITC demonstrates the economic and environmental benefits of intended interventions for wider adoption and scaling up of interventions.
4. Demonstrate economic and environmental benefits of intended interventions to convince the actors in the value chains. These include producers, collectors, processors, and exporters.
5. Adopt a phased approach to project development and implementation based on prioritization of interventions and market relevance.
6. Support to reduce production and market uncertainties through providing reliable market information.
7. Work with a wider group of stakeholders and promote domestic, subregional, regional, and global markets for products.
8. Support capacity-building at the subnational levels.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Background

The independent final evaluation of the Systematic Mechanism for Safer Trade (SYMST) project was commissioned by the Independent Evaluation Unit (IEU) of the International Trade Centre (ITC) per the initial Description of the Actions of the project agreed upon between the European Union (EU) and ITC, and it is consistent with ITC's corporate evaluation policy and guidelines. The evaluation report is based on the terms of reference set for the evaluation through a consultative process and an approved inception report prepared by the evaluation team.

### Description of the object of evaluation

ITC implemented the project funded by the European Union (EU). The project had a budget of €2.0 million (USD 2.28 million equivalent); at project closing, 98.2% of the budget had been used for the project activities. The EU Delegation in Bangkok administered the project with the support of the EU Delegations in Hanoi and Vientiane. ITC partnered with the Department of Agriculture, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Lao PDR and Plant Protection Department, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Viet Nam. A project review committee and a technical working group (TWG) in Lao PDR and a TWG in Viet Nam provided the overall direction and guidance to the project. The project commenced in December 2018 and closed in October 2023. The project activities started only in the third quarter of 2019 in Lao PDR due to a delay in getting a response from Thailand. Activities in Viet Nam started in the third quarter of 2020. The project was officially launched in January 2020 in Lao PDR and in January 2021 in Viet Nam.

The overall objective of the project was to improve food safety through better governance in Lao PDR and Viet Nam by strengthening the regulatory framework for control of plant health and pesticides in the fruit and vegetable (F&V) sector and other plant products (e.g., rice in the case of Laos) through the application of norms and standards and improve market access. The project expected three results: (i) Improved awareness and knowledge of the private sector and authorities on plant health and pesticide issues in fruits, vegetables, and other plant products, (ii) Improved performance of the regulatory and control institutions and improved capacity of the fruits, vegetables, and other plant products supply chain actors to comply with plant health and pesticide control, and (iii) Strengthened market access opportunities and facilitated business linkages of fruits, vegetables, and other plant products actors from target countries to EU and regional target markets.

### Evaluation purpose, objectives, and scope

The evaluation was expected to provide (i) an overall independent assessment of the performance of the SYMST project, paying particular attention to its various levels of results measured against its expected objectives and the reasons underpinning such results [**Accountability**]; and (ii) key lessons, conclusions, and related recommendations to improve current and future interventions [**Learning**]. The evaluation assessed project design, implementation, and management, including processes, operations, and results. It covered the full project implementation period (December 2018 – October 2023) and included all project activities implemented in Lao PDR and Viet Nam. A logical framework guided the project, but it did not have an explicit theory of change.

### Evaluation approach, methodology, and data

The evaluation was conducted in four phases: (i) inception, (ii) data collection, (iii) validation, and (iv) reporting based on an ex-post theory of change developed for the evaluation and key evaluation questions stated in the evaluation terms of reference. The evaluation questions formed the basis for the design of a detailed evaluation matrix and data collection instruments. It adopted a mixed-method approach with qualitative and quantitative data from primary and secondary sources. It applied the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG) Norms and Standards and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development -Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC) evaluation criteria of relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, potential impact, potential sustainability, and EU added value. The report is based on (i) an in-depth review of project documents, outputs, and external literature on the subject, (ii) key informant interviews and focus group discussions with 122 knowledgeable persons in the SYMMST project products' value chains. In addition, a total of 158 farmers, 56 plant protection staff, and 17 representatives of current or aspiring exporters of target products participated in respective perception surveys. The findings from the document review, secondary data analysis, key informant

interviews, and responses to the perception surveys informed the assessment of project performance against each of the five key evaluation criteria.

### The major findings of the evaluation

Overall, the performance of the SYMST project is assessed as moderately satisfactory.

**Relevance.** *The project performance is assessed as “moderately relevant”, with a score of 4<sup>1</sup>.* The project design addressed one of the critical aspects of agricultural value chain quality improvement with a focus on food safety and plant health. The product selection in both countries should have been done based on comparative advantage analysis. A stocktaking exercise about other initiatives in the two countries would have strengthened project design. The design would have benefitted from a revisit to the project design after Viet Nam came on board and a differentiated approach to the two project countries would have been more useful. The focus on the preparation of Lao PDR for the EU market was somewhat premature. Furthermore, while SPS was an important aspect of the value chain, the project would have benefitted from consideration given to other aspects, such as market structure and productivity enhancement, accompanied by proper economic analysis to convince the stakeholders about the benefits of the adoption of improved/new practices. Also, a dissemination plan to promote project results for wider adoption in the project design would have been helpful. Further clarity in cross-country knowledge sharing and collaboration in the project design was also needed. The project performance in gender mainstreaming is assessed as “satisfactory” based on the achievement of outputs in both countries. The project did not have a target for disability inclusion.

**Effectiveness.** *The project performance is assessed as “moderately effective” with a score of 4.* The project delivered all intended outputs. It achieved two of the five outcome targets; two remained unsubstantiated, and one was partially achieved. The project should have focussed on achieving the outcomes by completing activities associated with outputs. The project could have benefitted from collaboration and synergies with other initiatives in the two countries. The implementation of project activities was staggered and required regular push from the ITC project team. A national country focal point independent of DOA and PPD in the two countries would have strengthened the project implementation by DOA and PPD in Lao PDR and Viet Nam. The officers in both countries had multiple responsibilities and could only give limited attention to the SYMST project.

**Coherence.** *The evaluation assessed the coherence of the project as moderately satisfactory, with a score of 4.* The project aligned with the mandates of both the ITC and the EU. Both Lao PDR and Vietnam became contracting parties to the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) and deposited their instrument of adherence. However, there were limited synergies in project design and implementation with interventions from other development partners, including the private sector. Cross-country collaboration between the two countries remained limited. Given the complexities in the value chains of the supported products, joint programming and implementation would have further benefited both countries.

**Efficiency.** *The project performance is assessed as “efficient” with a score of 5.* The project encountered almost one year of start-up delays, and some activities were adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. It had to be extended twice with a 12-month extension each time. However, these were factors external to the project and beyond the control of ITC, PPD, and DOA. Where feasible, the project supported virtual collaboration and delivery. The performance of the consultants was satisfactory, and ITC was able to mobilize a combination of international and national consultants. ITC also managed the project costs efficiently by combining activities in the two countries and/or combining activities in other projects/countries based on operational needs. Weekly meetings with the teams in both countries helped project implementation, but some stakeholders preferred smaller group meetings and less frequent ones (fortnightly or monthly).

**Potential Impact.** *The project impact is assessed as “moderately positive,” with a score of 4.* The project raised awareness about food safety and the harmful effects of pesticide residues among the participating farmers and other actors in the value chain. The individual and institutional capabilities also improved because of project support. The impact on the third result area (market access) was weak. The project would have explored opportunities within the subregion beyond the participation of selected businesses in the Thaifex trade fair. Due to the project’s limited scope, the impact in terms of a reduction in food-borne diseases could not be substantiated.

<sup>1</sup> Description of the rating nomenclature for the overall project and individual evaluation parameters are provided in Table 3 of the report.



**Potential Sustainability.** *The sustainability of project benefits is assessed as “moderately sustainable” with a score of 4.* The project achievements are likely to be partially sustained, primarily due to funding and human resource constraints. In Viet Nam, experts are spread across the country while there are only a few specialists who can support agricultural value chains. Difficult macroeconomic conditions in Lao PDR point to the public sector continuing to feel a squeeze in funding. Similarly, in Viet Nam, there are diverse initiatives launched by the government in the agriculture sector, and there is less certainty that the SYMST benefits can be sustained over time.

**EU Added Value.** The EU's support to Lao PDR and Viet Nam through the project is assessed satisfactory with a score of 5. The project design was well-intended for mutual benefits between a least developed country (Lao PDR) and a developing country (Viet Nam). The EU's support for the project raised awareness and knowledge about the requirements for agricultural products (F&V and other plant products) in the EU markets and enhanced institutional capacity in pest identification and proper use of approved pesticides on demonstration farms. EUDs also participated in TWGs in both countries and PRC in Lao PDR and guided as needed. These would not have been feasible in a systematic way without the EU's support. The knowledge-sharing opportunities between the two countries remained limited.

## Lessons Learned

The evaluation provides several lessons. Six key lessons are:

- (i) Cross-country collaboration requires formal agreement and resource commitments as well as mutual goals/interests/expectations and a common framework/forum for cooperation.
- (ii) Multi-country projects are better served with a differentiated approach and synergies. The intervention logic should spell out a clear rationale and objectives related to cross-country collaboration.
- (iii) A project design requires a holistic approach to value chain development based on partnerships.
- (iv) The project duration requires flexibility and permits scaling up and/or replications.
- (v) Institutional capacity building is a dynamic process that requires commitment and dedicated support from the highest government levels.
- (vi) Adequate due diligence is required in product selection for sustainable export.

## Recommendations

### For the European Union or other future potential donor(s) of similar projects

- 1. Support inter-country collaboration based on a clearly defined strategy.** The collaboration needs to demonstrate a win-win proposition for the participating countries.
- 2. Support a holistic approach to the product value chain development in partnership with other development partners.** The support for plant health and SPS compliance is necessary but it alone is not enough for project effectiveness.

### For the International Trade Centre (ITC) – Quality Management Team

- 1. Include a clear roadmap or mechanism for cross-country knowledge exchange and the dissemination plan in multi-country projects.** There needs to be a government-level commitment among the participating countries. Project focus should be on the achievement of project objectives (outcomes and impact) through relevant outputs and activities.
- 2. Ensure active collaboration with other relevant development partners for synergies.** The project formulation process should consider initiatives/activities implemented by civil society organizations, government agencies, private sector entities, bilateral and multilateral development partners, and research/knowledge institutions at the regional and country levels.
- 3. Take a holistic approach to the value chain in conceptualizing, designing, and implementing projects.** A project design should be based on proper mapping or stock-taking exercises and focus on strengthening or creating new synergies and collaborations across different initiatives and partners. It needs to be based on robust due diligence, including an assessment of institutional capacities of

implementing and partnering agencies, market research, and comparative advantage analysis for product, market, and geographical coverage. The SYMST project could have benefitted from the required preparatory work. Multiple country projects are successful with a clear understanding of cross-country commitments, required institutional capacity, and availability of resources. The support for food safety governance and SPS compliance is necessary but not sufficient. Also, the projects need to have a reasonable implementation period to test the concept and scale up or replicate it in other areas.

**4. Demonstrate economic and environmental benefits of intended interventions to convince the actors in the value chains.** These include producers, collectors, processors, and exporters. It is also important to ensure that the successful interventions can be scaled up or replicated in additional areas. It will also ensure the sustainability of project interventions. In the SYMST project, stakeholders did not experience tangible incremental benefits from SPS compliance and GAP adoption. While the project has increased awareness and knowledge among the participating farmers, there are significant gaps in their attitude and practice, largely due to uncertainties about the sustainable benefits.

**5. Adopt a phased approach in project development and implementation.** Countries are at various stages of development, and hence, they require different sets of interventions. For example, Lao PDR has the potential for the production and marketing of small-volume and high-value products. However, the country faces high freight and SPS compliance costs in shipping its products to distant markets. It may benefit from a differentiated approach – some products such as rice can have economies of scale, while others such as chilli and basil may be more appropriate for domestic and subregional markets.

**6. Support to reduce production and market uncertainties through providing reliable market information.** The farmers suffer from volatile product prices of their agricultural commodities due to external factors such as weather, market glut, or inefficient market structure. As a result, the smallholder farmers are more vulnerable to these uncertainties. In the SYMST project, a cooperative of green pomelo growers has experienced their strengths in negotiating better prices and maintaining product quality. Contract farming could be an option to stabilize price volatility and incomes of smallholder farmers to some extent. The private sector can play a key role with the support of clear government policy. Similarly, a crop insurance scheme could reduce the impact of weather uncertainties. While farmers are already seeking market price information using their mobile devices, it could be accurately assessed for efficiency and effectiveness and strengthened as required.

**7. Work with a wider group of stakeholders and promote domestic, subregional, regional, and global markets for products.** The SYMST project has been successful in disseminating information about the SPS import requirements for agricultural produce particularly in the EU markets. ITC can also tackle similar challenges confronting non-EU markets such as ASEAN, Australasia, and North America. Expansion of the product market is good in principle, but it should be guided by comparative advantage analysis and volume and quality of products produced in respective countries. Furthermore, there is a strong call from the SYMST stakeholders for linking producers and potential exporters with overseas importers.

**8. Support capacity-building at the subnational levels.** Based on the feedback during the data collection, the subnational agencies (province or district level) tend to have inadequate budgets, fewer staff taking multiple responsibilities, and limited analytical capacity. This applies to most of the countries but to a varying degree. ITC could also encourage tripartite collaborations among the public, private, and knowledge (research and academic) institutions.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

1. Pesticides are considered the easiest way to protect crops from insects, pests, weeds, and animals. These come in a variety of forms, but organophosphates, organochlorine, carbamate, and pyrethroids are the most abundant uses and have human and environmental concerns.<sup>2</sup> Due to pests, up to 40% of global crop yields are lost each year.<sup>3</sup> Their use has also been attractive in addressing labour shortage in farming as the rural population continues to migrate to urban centres in search of different lifestyles and better income opportunities. It is estimated that the global use of pesticides will reach 3.5 million tonnes in 2020 (Sharma *et al.*, 2019).<sup>4</sup> The authors also noted that the rapid increase in the use of pesticides in developing countries, especially in Southeast Asia, has been well documented. An annual increase in the import of pesticides is reported as 61% for Cambodia, 55% for Lao People's Democratic Republic (PDR), and 10% for Viet Nam.<sup>5</sup> It is estimated that Lao PDR, Thailand, and Viet Nam would have used 186 tonnes, 19,007 tonnes, and 19,165 tonnes of pesticides in 2023.<sup>6</sup>
2. Improper use of pesticides also poses health risks to farmers and farm workers. In addition, pesticides can also wash into the water supply, thereby harming livestock and human consumption (footnote 3). Sharma *et al.* paper (footnote 2) summarizes that "pesticides can possess grave consequences because of their biomagnification and persistent nature. Diverse pesticides directly or indirectly pollute air, water, soil, and the overall ecosystem which causes serious health hazards for living beings. In the present manuscript, an attempt has been made to critically review the global usage of different pesticides and their major adverse impacts on the ecosystem, which will guide a wide range of researchers in this area." Furthermore, Schreinemachers *et al.* (2019) noted that Southeast Asian farmers are spraying excessively and inefficiently.<sup>7</sup>
3. A recent paper notes that significant investment has been made in alternatives such as integrated pest management (IPM) to reduce the overreliance on hazardous chemical pesticides.<sup>8</sup> IPM programs have been pioneered for major crops, including rice, vegetables, cotton, and cassava. Besides resistant cultivars and biocontrol agents, biopesticides have emerged as a major component of IPM packages. Recently, considerable progress has been made in harmonizing regulatory procedures for registering biocontrol agents across Southeast Asia. The paper notes that a conducive policy and regulatory environment, increasing demand for safer food, and the ever-increasing area under certified production systems (e.g., good agriculture practices and organic) are expected to provide an opportunity for mainstreaming biopesticides in Southeast Asia. In an empirical paper on Thai agriculture, Praneetvatakul *et al.* (2024) found that Thailand has a biopesticide registration system that facilitates fast-track registration, but it is still relatively costly, considering the small market size.<sup>9</sup> The authors noted that while 65 % of the sampled farmers used biopesticides, most farmers still heavily relied on conventional pesticides as their main method to control pests. Education, farming experience, positive attitudes toward biopesticides, adoption of other integrated pest management (IPM) methods and contacts with government extension agents were positively associated with biopesticide use. The authors recommended that coordinated action was needed to stimulate the supply of a wider range of biopesticide products while promoting adoption among farmers.
4. A study in Viet Nam noted that there is a need for more systematic testing for contaminants and making test results publicly available as this is necessary to guide investments and regain consumer

<sup>2</sup> Pathak *et al.* Current status of pesticide effects on environment. Human health and its eco-friendly management as bioremediation: A comprehensive review.  
<https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/microbiology/articles/10.3389/fmicb.2022.962619/full>

<sup>3</sup> *Managing Pesticides for Greener Growth in Lao PDR – A Policy Note* World Bank and Korea Green Growth Trust Fund, 2021 cited Food and Agriculture estimates.

<sup>4</sup> Sharma, A., Kumar, V., Shahzad, B. *et al.* Worldwide pesticide usage and its impacts on ecosystem: A review paper. Worldwide pesticide usage and its impacts on ecosystem. *SN Appl. Sci.* 1, 1446 (2019). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42452-019-1485-1>

<sup>5</sup> Schreinemachers P, Afari-Sefa V, Heng CH, Dung PTM, Praneetvatakul S, Srinivasan R (2015) Safe and sustainable crop protection in Southeast Asia: status, challenges, and policy options. *Environ Sci Policy* 54:357–366.

<sup>6</sup> <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/pesticide-usage-by-country>.

<sup>7</sup> Schreinemachers *et al.* How much is too much? Quantifying pesticide overuse in vegetable production in Southeast Asia, *Journal of Cleaner Production* 244(2):118738 (2019).

<sup>8</sup> Srinivasan, R. and Schreinemachers, P. Commercialization of biopesticides in Southeast Asia: potentials and constraints, Chapter 12 in *Development and Commercialization of Biopesticides – Costs and Benefits, 2023*, Academic Press.

<sup>9</sup> Praneetvatakul, S., and Schreinemachers, P., Vijijsrikamol, K, and Potchanasin, C. Policy options for promoting wider use of biopesticides in Thai agriculture, *Heliyon* 10(2): E24486 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2024.e24486>

confidence in food safety.<sup>10</sup> There is also a clear need to strengthen the capacity of food safety authorities, both at national and subnational levels. Food safety management needs to be guided by a clear understanding of and focus on risk factors, systematic use of data, shared responsibilities between private and public sector actors, and preventive measures implemented along the value chain. In Lao PDR, it is observed that agricultural commercialization is driving a dramatic increase in pesticide use, overuse of pesticides on farms is common, and contamination is widespread. Hence, regular testing using strict protocols is necessary to provide accurate information to the farmers and consumers.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, addressing public concerns over vegetable safety in Southeast Asia will require an improvement in consumers' knowledge of food hazards and institutional trust.<sup>12</sup>

5. Several bilateral, multilateral, and nongovernmental development partners have been supporting the improvements in the quality and production of fruits and vegetables in Southeast Asia. The International Trade Centre (ITC) is one of them that has supported farmers, exporters, and policymakers by providing training and capacity-building support on GlobalGAP Certification and ISO/Hazard Analysis and Critical Control System (HACCP) Certification, designed to protect food safety and guarantee the safety of the global food chain.<sup>13</sup> It also provides training on export market requirements and physical and virtual trade fair preparations, targeted at sector associations and individual exporters. ITC supports micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) with training on export market requirements targeted at exporters; training organization and support on trade fair preparations; organization of study tours, organization of inward buyers' tours; and organization of business-to-business (B2B) for supported exporters.<sup>14</sup> ITC implemented the Systematic Mechanism for Safer Trade (SYMST) project financed by the European Union (EU). Section IV provides the project background.

## 2. PROJECT CONTEXT

6. Pesticide residues and runoff in waterways pose risks to human health and the environment. The prevalence of pests and diseases has also been challenging with climate change. The awareness about the harmful effects of pesticide use varies widely across different countries and different geographical areas within a country. Furthermore, a lack of a proper regulatory framework for the registration and control of pesticides, a lack of capacity to keep the existing pesticides under scientific review in line with the changes adopted by the importing countries, or a lack of resources to adhere to relevant Good Agricultural Practices (GAPs).
7. The European Union is an attractive export market for selected agricultural produce from both Lao PDR and Viet Nam. Lao PDR has been granted unilateral, duty-free, quota-free access for all exports – except arms and ammunition – from the European Union (EU); however, its exports are facing several issues and challenges in the sector of agri-food products. Thippavong *et al.* (2022)<sup>15</sup> found that due to a lack of export diversification, agricultural export products accounted for only 8% of the total exports to the EU in 2020. The authors noted that the critical requirements of the EU for Lao agricultural exports have become a significant market impediment, as many Lao exporters are not well-versed in the EU market, along with firms' limited ability to produce high-quality products in the required quantity to keep up with the EU standards. Most firms in Lao PDR are micro, small, and medium-sized businesses, and they cannot run their operations internationally on their own. Furthermore, a lack of technical support from relevant stakeholders, new EU rules and regulatory enforcement on agri-food imports, the COVID-19 pandemic, and high freight costs are all important challenges facing Lao exporters. Also, obtaining an organic certificate on product standards and safety requirements is another big issue facing Lao exporters, and the domestic business association does not function effectively in enhancing scale and helping with market negotiations.
8. Dung and Vang-Phu (2021) found that with the trend in lower tariffs and increased non-tariff barriers (sanitary and phytosanitary, technical barriers to trade etc.) Viet Nam's agricultural products are

<sup>10</sup> Asian Development Bank (2023). *Imperatives for Improvement of Food Safety in Fruit and Vegetable Value Chains in Viet Nam*, Manila. <http://dx.doi.org/10.22617/TCS230009-2>

<sup>11</sup> Pesticide Use in Lao PDR –Health and Environmental Impact: A Briefing Note, [https://ali-sea.org/aliseaonlineibrary/briefing-note-pesticide-use-in-lao-pdr-health-and-environmental-impact\\_version-lao-english/](https://ali-sea.org/aliseaonlineibrary/briefing-note-pesticide-use-in-lao-pdr-health-and-environmental-impact_version-lao-english/)

<sup>12</sup> Nguyen, T.V., *et al.* Consumers' risk perception of vegetables in Southeast Asia: Evidence from Laos, Cambodia, and Viet Nam (2020). <https://www.apn-gcr.org/bulletin/article/consumers-risk-perception-of-vegetables-in-southeast-asia-evidence-from-laos-cambodia-and-viet-nam/>

<sup>13</sup> <https://intracen.org/our-work/topics/food-and-agriculture/fruits-and-vegetables>

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Thippavong, V., Vanhnalat, B, Vidavong, C., and Bodhisane, S. (2022). The export potential of Laos agri-food to the EU market, Feed the Future Research Paper No.9.

confronted with a slew of significant challenges.<sup>16</sup> The authors noted that while the EU is a market with stringent quality standards, goods sold to this market are frequently more expensive than goods sold to other markets. They concluded that farmers do not undergo adequate instruction in properly handling vegetables and fruits. Furthermore, certain companies ignore initiative and honesty when it comes to applying science, quality, epidemiological, and phytosanitary criteria. Other issues, such as a lack of resources, infrastructure, human resource capacity, and supplier and exporter expertise, are also to blame for returned shipments.

9. The original intention of the project was that Lao PDR would gain from Thailand's experiences in food safety and the required governance mechanism. It remained a valid proposition with the replacement of Thailand with Viet Nam as a project beneficiary country. However, the progress in this area is limited due to the delay in the start-up of project activities in Lao PDR and the reduced implementation period in Viet Nam. Furthermore, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic posed a major obstacle to the movement of goods and people for an extended period, especially during 2020 and 2021. The last restrictions in Lao PDR and Viet Nam were lifted only in May 2022.

### 3. OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE OF EVALUATION

10. The initial Description of the Action stated that the project would be subject to an independent final evaluation. In 2022, it was agreed with the EU that the evaluation would be conducted by the ITC's Independent Evaluation Unit (IEU) at the end of the project in 2023. The evaluation was expected to provide (i) an overall independent assessment of the performance of the SYMST project, paying particular attention to its various levels of results measured against its expected objectives and the reasons underpinning such results; and (ii) key lessons learned, conclusions and related recommendations to improve current and future interventions. The evaluation assessed project design, implementation, and management including processes, operations, and results. It covered the full project implementation period (December 2018 – October 2023) and included project activities implemented in Lao PDR and Viet Nam. Appendix 1 contains the terms of reference for the evaluation.
11. The main users of the evaluation are the implementing organization – ITC, the EU Delegations concerned (to Thailand, Lao PDR and Viet Nam, respectively), the European Commission Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG-INTPA), EU Director-General for Health and Food Safety (DG-SANTE), the Lao PDR Department of Agriculture (DOA) at the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF), the Viet Nam Department of International Affairs at the Plant Protection Department (PPD) of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), and private sector associations in both countries responsible for trade in agricultural commodities. The evaluation findings are also of wider interest to the communities dealing with food safety, and sanitary and phytosanitary issues in agricultural trade.

### 4. SYSTEMATIC MECHANISM FOR SAFER TRADE (SYMST) PROJECT

12. The Systematic Mechanism for Safer Trade (SYMST) project was implemented by the International Trade Centre (ITC), Sector and Enterprise Competitiveness (SEC) Section of the Division of Enterprise Competitiveness and Institutions (DECI). The project provided support to developing and least developed countries (LDC) in Asia in the area of pesticide use and control of the Fruit and Vegetable (F&V) sector, as well as on other plant and plant products supply chains, building on the major work undertaken by the European Union (EU), Codex Alimentarius (CODEX), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and other partners on Maximum Residue Levels (MRLs). The project commenced on 17 December 2018 and ended on 16 October 2023. It had a budget of EUR 2.00 million (USD 2,277,400).
13. The initial agreement between the EU and ITC, signed in December 2018, covered Thailand (an upper middle-income country) and the Lao People's Democratic Republic (an LDC). Both countries continue to have agriculture and private sector development as focal themes for EU support. The project aimed to develop a systematic approach to assist the governments and private sector stakeholders in two target countries. It prioritized and addressed problems related to compliance with regulatory measures on plant health and pesticides in the Fruit and Vegetable (F&V) sector.

<sup>16</sup> Dung, L.V., and Vang-Phu, T. (2021). The effects of EU's sanitary and phytosanitary measures on Vietnam's agricultural products. *International Journal of Entrepreneurship*, Special Issue 25(4).

14. The two countries were selected considering the number of interceptions and rejections of F&V products due to SPS-related issues related to plant health and pesticides. According to the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) and the European Union Notification System for Plant Health Interceptions (EUROPHYT), between January 2016 and November 2018, there were 578 notifications. Of these, 50 notifications concerned Laos PDR, Thailand, or Viet Nam (e.g., unauthorised substance carbofuran (0.04 mg/kg - ppm) in yard-long beans from Laos, via Viet Nam). For the same period, the EUROPHYT database indicated 272 interceptions from Laos PDR, out of which 209 had harmful organisms and 988 were interceptions from Thailand, with 178 having harmful organisms. Thailand was included in the EU list of a third country subject to increased levels of official controls. Lao PDR had adopted a new pesticide management decree aimed at environmental and human health protection, and the National Nutrition Strategy to 2025 and Plan of Action 2016-2020 identified critical issues of contaminated food with illegal substances.
15. Consultations with the EU Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety (DG-SANTE) and experts in the two countries were needed to address their respective challenges. The potential to expand the export potential of F&V and other plant and plant products, such as Lao rice, was also considered. The Agriculture Development Strategy 2025-2030 by Lao PDR aims to support industrialization and export opportunities. The potential spillover effect on other major crops, such as rice, was also considered. Complementarities with other EU technical assistance programs, the EU-Asia cooperation on (Phyto) Sanitary (SPS) and Food Safety Regulation, and the Better Training for Safer Food (BTSF) programme were also considered. Synergies with other ITC's technical assistance programmes in the region and the countries (i.e., ARISE+, Environmental Hub) were also considered.
16. The agreement between the EU and ITC was amended in April 2020 due to meetings and consultations during the inception phase to confirm the project's two beneficiary countries (initially Thailand and Lao PDR). However, during the consultations, the Government of Thailand indicated its inability to join the project at the time. Consequently, the Vietnamese authorities were contacted and agreed to be part of the project in a meeting with the EU Delegation (EUD) and through a letter addressed to the EUD. Therefore, the two confirmed beneficiary countries for the project were changed to Lao PDR and Viet Nam. Despite the non-participation of the Government of Thailand in the project, it was agreed with the EUD to Thailand to ensure the possibility of involving Thai officials/private sector representatives in some activities in Lao PDR and Viet Nam at the regional level.
17. In addition, during the first Project Review Committee (PRC) Meeting in Vientiane, Lao PDR on 29 January 2019, members requested an extension of the project timeframe to accommodate production cycles of target crops. Further, Viet Nam joined the project in the second year of the implementation, and an adequate timeframe was required for the implementation of project activities. At the request of ITC, the EU approved a 12-month extension to the project closing date. The extension was justified because of start-up delays resulting from the time taken to get Thailand's response and onboarding of Viet Nam to the project. A second no-cost extension was requested and approved, extending the project to 16 October 2023.
18. ITC conducted capacity-building activities in both project countries. These included training in regulatory issues and institutional strengthening, EU and destination market requirements, GAP, food safety, the selection of products and geographical areas for project activities; TRACES; Quality for Trade Platforms for Lao PDR and Viet Nam with information on quality requirements for target sectors and markets, uploaded documents, profiles, and success stories; preparation and facilitation of selected current or aspiring exporters to the Thaifex exhibitions in 2022 and 2023; and webinars for the Lao PDR and Viet Nam teams.<sup>17</sup> The regulatory staff, quarantine inspectors, and food safety officers received training to enhance compliance with EU phytosanitary regulations and responses to non-compliance notifications who were responsible for issuing phytosanitary certificates and ensuring compliance with EU and ISPMs regulations for agricultural exports. The training workshops covered topics such as EU phytosanitary regulations, identification of priority pests and effective responses to non-compliance notifications. Additionally, gap assessments of

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<sup>17</sup> The webinars covered topics related to Thaifex participation (2022, 2023); training in the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) which is an EU-based network that provides information on food and feed safety issues and alerts on non-compliant products (in connection with Myanmar Arise Plus) in 2023; awareness about RASFF, FAO/WHO International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN) and ASEAN Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (ARASFF) (in connection with Lao Arise Plus); and introduction to Global GAP (in connection with the Philippines Arise Plus); and Quality for Trade Programme for Quality Champions.

plant health diagnostic laboratories and pesticide residue analysis laboratories paved the way for capacity-building initiatives and ISO 17025 accreditation improving pesticide residue analysis and pest identification capabilities. The development and dissemination of awareness material, along with the upgrade of relevant platforms, training and technical assistance aimed to ensure that agricultural products in both countries meet the stringent standards required for exports to the EU market. Additionally, technical assistance was provided to strengthen pesticide management regulations, aligning them with EU standards and importing countries' regulations. A series of practical workshops and awareness activities for farmers, exporters and other stakeholders were rolled out and complemented by onsite coaching sessions.

19. **Objective and result areas:** The overall objective of the project was to improve food safety through better governance in Lao PDR and Viet Nam. The specific objective (outcome) was to strengthen the regulatory framework for control of plant health and pesticides in the fruit and vegetable (F&V) sector and other plant products (e.g., rice in the case of Laos) through the application of norms and standards and improve market access. The project had three expected results (ER) (output areas) (Table 1)

**Table 1: Expected Result Areas of the SYMST Project**

Result Area	Expected Results
<b>ER 1</b>	Improved awareness and knowledge of the private sector and authorities on plant health and pesticide issues in fruits, vegetables, and other plant products.
<b>ER 2</b>	Improved performance of the regulatory and control institutions and improved capacity of the fruits, vegetables, and other plant products supply chain actors to comply with plant health and pesticide control.
<b>ER 3</b>	Strengthened market access opportunities and facilitated business linkages of fruits, vegetables, and other plant products actors from target countries to EU and regional target markets.

Source: Terms of reference for the final evaluation.

20. **Cross-cutting issues.** The project also aimed to address cross-cutting issues such as environment, gender equality, and sustainability. The control of harmful pesticides posed an opportunity to deliver health benefits to consumers as well as trade and the environment. The project was to promote the use of natural or organic pesticides. It was to seek the optimum possible involvement of women and women associations among the actors of the value chains. Furthermore, the project aimed to contribute to improving governance through better transparency and regulatory framework on the one hand and increased involvement of the private sector and consumer associations in the consultation process on the other.
21. **Alignment with SDGs.** The project design was aligned with the Agenda 2030, and it aimed to contribute to the progressive achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2, "Sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth", by increasing productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, ensuring sustainable food production systems and implementing resilient agricultural practices through safer pesticides use. It also aims to promote progress towards SDG Goal 8, "Decent Work and Economic Growth", Goal 9, "Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure", and SDG Goal 17: "Revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development".
22. **Partners and beneficiaries.** The project targeted policymakers, institutions, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and smallholder farmers. At the level of the policymakers, the project was to provide recommendations on the legal and institutional framework and encourage the development of road maps to address pesticides and plant health issues. At the institutional level, the project focussed on the main institutions dealing with food safety, standards, and plant health (e.g., Ministries of Agriculture, Health, Competent Authorities, SPS Notification Authority, National Enquiry Points). In the private sector, the main actors along the F&V and other plant products value chains (from smallholder farmers and farmers associations, collectors, storage facilities, traders, transporters, exporters, and PPP dealers) were expected to directly benefit from the project by enhancing their understanding and capacity to comply and demonstrate compliance with plant health standards and pesticides residues measures and good agricultural practices. Private sector institutions such as Chambers of Commerce, Export Promotion Agencies, and Sectoral associations were envisaged bringing the voices of the producers and exporters together on the table.
23. Consumer associations were also expected to be involved given their growing concern about pesticides in food and their critical role in ensuring that products are safe for consumers. National

and international buyers of F&V and other plant products were consulted to collect information on their current and new requirements on plant health and pesticides and the issues they have had with the exports from the two countries. Table 2 outlines key partners and beneficiaries in Lao PDR and Viet Nam.

**Table 2: Key Partners and Beneficiaries of SYMST Project in Lao PDR and Viet Nam**

Lao PDR	Viet Nam
Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Department of Agriculture (DOA)</li> <li>- Department of Planning and Cooperation (DPC)</li> <li>- Department of Agricultural Extension and Cooperatives (DAEC)</li> <li>- Clean Agriculture Development Centre</li> </ul>	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Plant Protection Department (PPD)               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Plant Quarantine Division (PQD)</li> <li>o Food Safety Division (FSD)</li> <li>o Southern Pesticide Control and Testing Centre (SPCTC)</li> <li>o Northern Pesticide Control and Testing Centre (NPCTC)</li> <li>o Post-Entry Quarantine Centre No. 1 and 2</li> <li>o The Plant Quarantine Diagnostic Centre (PQDT)</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Ministry of Health (MOH) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Food and Drug Department (FDD)</li> </ul>	Ministry of Health (MOH)
Ministry of Industry and Commerce (MOIC) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Department of Trade Promotion (DTP)</li> <li>- Department of Foreign Trade Policy (DFTP)</li> <li>- Department of Planning and Cooperation (DPC)</li> <li>- Department of Import and Export (DIMEX)</li> </ul>	Ministry of Industry and Trade (MOIT)
District Agriculture and Forestry Offices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Meuangsing, Vieng Phoukha, Sangthong, Pakgneum, Paksong, Soukumma, Phonthoung districts</li> </ul>	National Agro-Forestry Fisheries Quality Assurance Department (NAFIQAD)
Plant Quarantine Border Checkpoint <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Boten, Lao-Thai Friendship Bridge, Songmek,</li> </ul>	
Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Luang Namtha, Vientiane Capital, Champassak</li> </ul>	The Provincial Level- Plant Protection Departments (P-PPD)
Farmers and Sector Associations	Vietnam Gardening Association (VACVINA) Vietnam Pepper Association (VPA)
European Chamber of Commerce and Industry (EuroCham)	European Chamber of Commerce (EuroCham)
Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LNCCI)	Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI)
Plant Protection Centre (PPC)	Vietnam Trade Promotion Agency (Vietrade)
Excellence Environment Center	Vietnam Industry and Trade Information Center (VITIC)
Faculty of Agriculture, National University of Lao <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Planning and Coordination Division</li> <li>- Plant Quarantine Division</li> <li>- Regulatory and Agri Input Registration Division</li> <li>- Standard and Certification Division</li> <li>- Agriculture Processing Management Division</li> </ul>	
Private sector stakeholders that are part of the model value chains developed, e.g., farms, processors, exporters, packhouses	Private sector stakeholders that are part of the model value chains developed, e.g., farms, processors, exporters

Source: TOR for the SYMST Project evaluation, 2023.

**24. Implementation arrangements.** ITC implemented the project in both Lao PDR and Viet Nam in collaboration with the DOA of MAF in Lao PDR and the PPD of MARD in Viet Nam. The EU Delegation (EUD) to Thailand was responsible for the overall coordination and management of the project, while EUDs to Lao PDR and Viet Nam were responsible for coordination at the country level.

**25. The inception phase (January 2019 – January 2020):** During this phase, ITC identified SPS issues related to plant health and pesticides, the target products, and markets. It also outlined an action plan to address the crucial issues. Due to the late entry of Viet Nam into the project, the identification phase was extended beyond the inception phase as foreseen in the Description of Action. The project management structure was established in Lao PDR during the inception phase. The Project Review Committee (PRC) was set up as the project governance body, and its membership, roles and responsibilities were defined. The project Technical Working Group (TWG) was established to contribute to defining the work plans and monitoring the progress of activities. The TWG also



functioned as a coordination mechanism to address plant health and pesticide issues. In Viet Nam, the project management structure was established with a TWG identified as the body at the national level in charge of contributing to the development of the workplace. No PRC was established by the Description of Action (“Implementation Arrangements”).

26. *The implementation phase.* In Lao PDR, implementation started only in the third quarter of 2019 when the EU and ITC agreed not to put project activities on hold in the country further and to proceed with planned activities while waiting for the decision of the Thai Government about the project. In Viet Nam, the implementation of activities started one year later than in Lao PDR in Q3 2020 following the official confirmation of the EU and the Vietnamese government to join the project. In Lao PDR, SYMST was officially launched on 29 January 2020 at an official ceremony, while in Viet Nam, there was no official ceremony, and the project was presented to stakeholders during an EU webinar in January 2021. The project activities in both countries ended in October 2023.
27. A Bilateral Coordination Committee (BCC) among the three EU Delegations, ITC and the National Project Coordinators were also identified in the Implementation Arrangements for annual reviews of the overall progress of the project and to provide recommendations for the implementation and build synergies among countries. Regular PRC and TWG meetings took place in addition to ITC-EU bilateral meetings. The meetings involved the three EU delegations involved.

## 5. EVALUATION APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

### Approach

28. The evaluation adopted a mixed-method approach comprising a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection and analytical techniques. A comprehensive document review, key informant interviews, and focus group discussions comprised qualitative tools, while the project’s secondary data, ITC financial records and the project, and online surveys of project beneficiaries (e.g. farmers, exporters, and plant protection staff) generated quantitative data for the evaluation. The evaluation team triangulated information and data from more than one source, where feasible. The evaluation plan was consistent with the ITC Evaluation Guidelines.<sup>18</sup>

### Theory of Change

29. The project design primarily followed the logical framework summarized in Appendix 2. It did not have an explicit theory of change. The quality of intervention logic was deemed poor. Based on the consultations with the project team members and narratives in the project document, the evaluation team developed the project’s derived theory of change (Figure 1). The evaluation mapped out the value chain for each of the products supported by the SYMST project (Appendix 3). The value chain maps show key players in the value chain of the target products.

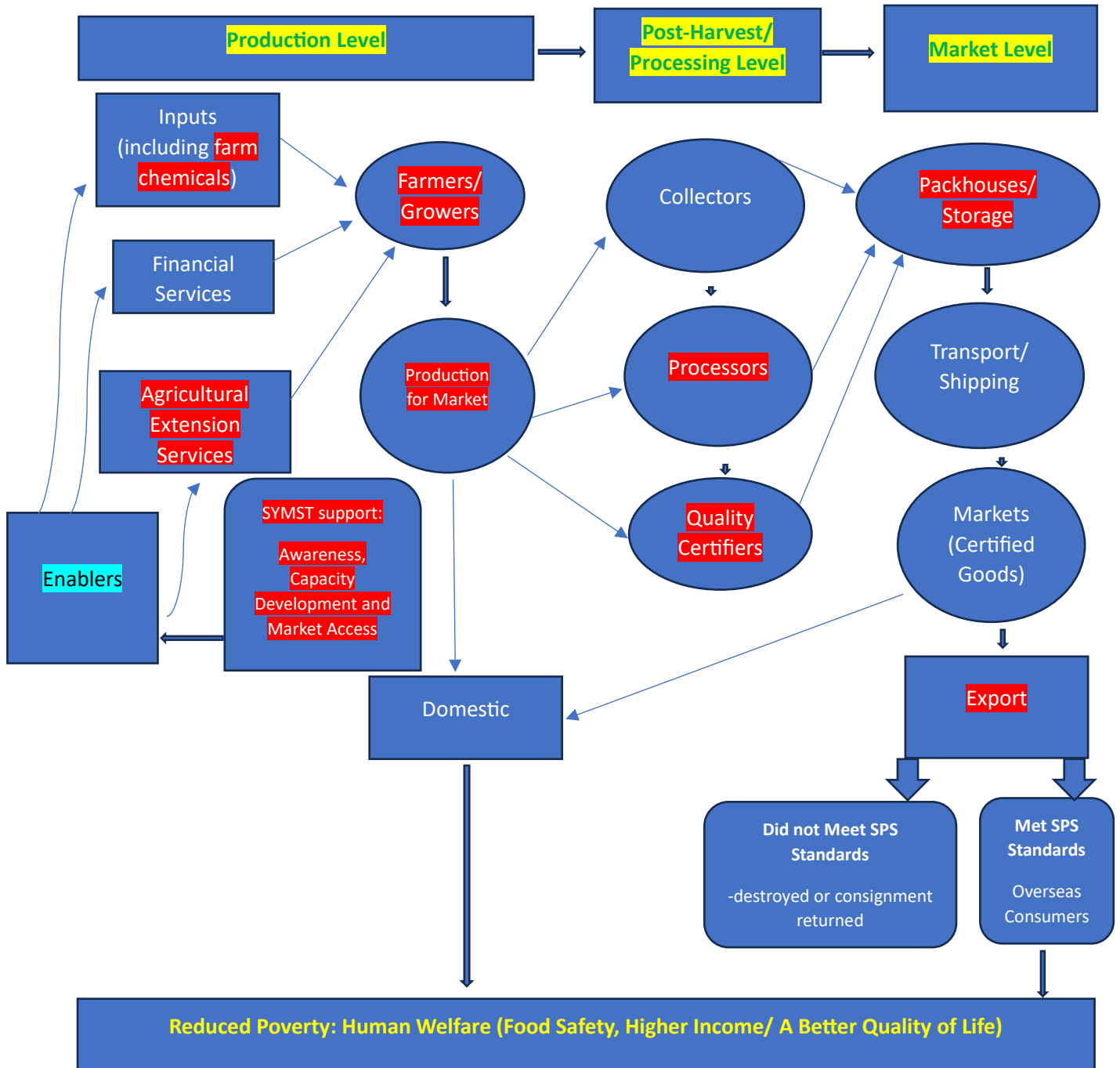
Figure 1 depicts the production, post-harvest, and marketing phases. The project support targeted enhancing awareness about food safety (through the reduction in the use of harmful pesticides and chemical fertilizers, promotion of the use of organic fertilizers and farm chemicals with biological agents, enhanced monitoring, surveillance capacity of responsible agencies in monitoring and management of pests, and access to export market particularly to EU for high-quality native rice, basil, and chilli (Lao PDR), pomelo, black pepper, and dragon fruit (Viet Nam). Also, the project planned to support watermelon model farms in Lao PDR to further increase exports to China. Effective enablers include access to agricultural inputs including fertilizers and seeds/planting materials, technology, and finance. It is assumed that the project catalysed complementing the standard enablers. Furthermore, it is assumed that most of the production of targeted products was destined for the domestic and export markets. The distribution of the production varied by commodity. Both basil and chilli were expected to enter the EU export market in dry and fresh forms, although the project’s support for chilli dryers did not materialize during the implementation period. The initial focus was only on fresh chilli (as agreed at the inception stage).<sup>19</sup> It should be noted that since the project focus was on plant pest control (e.g. control of white flies in basil and chilli) and related pesticides, the project did not foresee the provision of drying equipment.

<sup>18</sup> <https://intracen.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/ITC%20Evaluation%20Guidelines%20for%20WEB%205.7.18.pdf>

<sup>19</sup> As part of the market linkages support it was noted the demand for dried was higher than for fresh on the EU market and that drying would be a good idea. However, no project resources were dedicated specifically to the drying aspect as it was considered beyond the earlier agreed project scope, but farmers and exporters were encouraged to dry and were made aware of the opportunity

30. Three key post-harvest actors are collectors, processors, and quality certifiers (particularly for pesticide residues and pest identification) to ensure that inspection, regulatory control, and conformity assessment are conducted based on the requirements of the importing countries. A key player in the system, importers, is not shown in the Figure, but they also contribute through their internal quality assurance arrangements. A higher compliance translates into lower rejection rates of the exported commodities at the port of entry. It should be noted that the consignments not in conformity with the importing countries' regulations are returned to the exporting countries or destroyed at the destination port if perceived biosecurity is deemed to be serious. Ideally, one would expect that the importers' representatives are stationed in the exporting countries to ensure that the exportable goods adhere to their respective country standards and regulations.

**Figure 1. Derived Theory of Change of the SYMST Project (ex-post)**



## Evaluation Questions

31. The TOR for the evaluation (Annex 1) included a set of evaluation questions along the OECD-DAC criteria of relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, potential impact, and potential sustainability. It also included an additional criteria of EU's added value. The cross-cutting issues of human rights, gender equality, inclusion of youth and persons with disabilities, green growth, and social responsibility are covered under the relevance criteria.<sup>20</sup> The original evaluation questions in the TOR were slightly modified or edited for better clarity. An evaluation matrix (Annex 8) in the inception report formed the basis for crafting data collection instruments through document review and secondary data analysis, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, and perception surveys of project beneficiaries.

## Evaluation Performance Rating

32. The evaluation applied ITC's six-point evaluation performance rating system for evaluation criteria (relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, potential impact, potential sustainability, and EU added value), and considered a collective rating to determine the overall performance of the project. It used the following terminologies outlined below in Table 3.

**Table 3: Rating Nomenclature for the Overall Project and Individual Evaluation Parameters**

SIX-POINT RATING SYSTEM <sup>21</sup>	
Rate	Qualitative assessment based on each evaluation criteria
<b>6. Highly satisfactory</b>	Overwhelming positive results and no shortcomings.
<b>5. Satisfactory</b>	Some strong results and without material shortcomings.
<b>4. Moderately Satisfactory</b>	Clear preponderance of positive results (i.e. it may exhibit some minor shortcomings though these should be clearly outweighed by positive aspects).
<b>3. Moderately Unsatisfactory</b>	Either minor shortcomings across the board, or an egregious shortcoming in one criterion that outweighs other generally positive results.
<b>2. Unsatisfactory</b>	Major shortcomings clearly outweigh positive results.
<b>1. Highly Unsatisfactory</b>	Severe shortcomings and no material redeeming positive results.

## Data and Data Analysis

33. The evaluation team reviewed the project document and other reports produced by the project team in both project countries as well as retrieved literature available from open sources on various websites (Appendix 4). The project did not conduct beneficiary-level baseline or end-line surveys. As a result, the team opted to interview project stakeholders either in person or remotely. It also conducted focus group discussions with project beneficiaries. Appendix 5 shows a list of persons with whom the evaluation team discussed the project performance.

34. ITC fielded an evaluation mission to Viet Nam (4-12 December 2023) and Lao PDR (14-23 December 2023) and conducted key informant interviews with plant protection staff, national consultants, selected representatives of exporting companies, and pesticide and fertilizer suppliers, and farmer groups. Table 4 shows field sites visited by the evaluation team during the mission. Visits to selected project sites and discussions with key stakeholders in both countries enhanced the evaluation team's understanding of the project's performance at completion and prevailing challenges in respective product value chain development.

<sup>20</sup> The evaluation required that cross-cutting issues are assessed irrespective of the effective dates of respective guidelines or guidance documents.

<sup>21</sup> Modified from the ITC Evaluation Guidelines (2018) <https://intracen.org/about-us/governance/evaluation>

**Table 4: Project Areas Visited by the Evaluation Team**

Lao PDR		Viet Nam	
Product	Area	Product	Area
Rice	Pakngeum and Sangthong Districts, Vientiane Capital	Pomelo	Chau Thanh District, Ben Tre Province
Basil	Phonthong District, Champassak Province	Dragon fruit	Duc Hue District, Long An Province
Chilli	Samorlieb District of Champassak Province	Black pepper	Xuen Moc District, Ba Ria – Vung-Tau Province
Watermelon	Sing District, Luang Namtha Province		

35. The respondents comprised farmers, current/aspiring exporters, plant protection staff, project management team and consultants, and EUD staff (Bangkok, Ha Noi, and Vientiane). The list of farmers and beneficiaries was obtained from the list of participants at various events organized by the project, and in the case of Lao PDR, the evaluation team prepared a list of beneficiaries through consultation with the provincial and district staff of DOA and farmers interviewed during the mission. The survey participants were drawn based on a stratified random sampling method where applicable. The team ensured that the list of interviewees had a reasonable gender balance and covered those associated with all commodities supported by the project.<sup>22</sup> The team used a list of guiding questions during the field mission, and respective national consultants launched the survey using social media and telephone calls. The online surveys of farmers, exporters, and plant protection staff followed the data collection instruments provided in the inception report. Before the survey was launched, the instruments were pre-tested for appropriateness and translated into Laotian and Vietnamese, respectively. All respondents had access to the relevant survey instrument in a bilingual format. The evaluation team directly received the completed questionnaires. The evaluation team ensured the confidentiality of responses from the respondents.
36. **Lao PDR.** In total, 63 farmers/growers participated in the telephone survey (7 basil (2 males, 5 females), 8 chili (4 males, 4 females), 44 rice (32 males, 12 females), and 4 watermelons (all males)). The overall response rate was 81%. The evaluation team approached 9 exporters (3 each of basil and chili, rice, and watermelons) of which five took part in the survey (3 females and 2 males). The team also approached 45 DOA staff who had participated in the SYMST capacity development events/activities (30 males and 15 females), of which 24 (16 males and 8 females) responded to the survey (53%). Two rounds of follow-up improved the response rates. The total number of completed surveys accounted for 64% of the listed farmers who participated in the SYMST activities and events.
37. **Viet Nam.** The evaluation planned to survey 108 farmers (36 each for pomelos, dragon fruit, and black pepper), 12 exporting companies, and 36 PPD staff at different levels involved in the project. Additional farmers also responded to the survey. In total, 114 farmers (45 females and 79 males) responded to the survey, of which 95 (83%) were considered complete and usable for data analysis (30 black pepper (10 females and 20 males), 34 dragon fruit (15 females and 19 males), and 31 pomelos (14 females and 17 males) farmers. In addition, 12 staff members of exporting companies (8 males and 4 females) and 32 PPD staff (15 females and 17 males) at the national, provincial, and district levels also responded to the online evaluation surveys. Overall, the response rate was high, with 88% of the planned interviews with farmers, 100% of exporters, and 89% of the PPD staff. The analysis excluded responses from an additional 15 staff who were not randomly selected for the evaluation. The survey was launched on the social media platform Zalo®, which allowed completed Google form questionnaire to be directly sent to the identified respondents. The completed surveys were received directly by the evaluation team.
38. **Data analysis.** The evaluation team applied content analysis for document review and interview notes. It also analysed survey data using SPSS® software. Due to the small sample size, data was subjected to descriptive statistical analysis.
39. **Consultation workshop.** The evaluation team facilitated a virtual validation workshop with the Lao PDR stakeholders on 6 March 2024 and with the Viet Nam stakeholders on 7 March 2024. While a joint workshop was planned for the two countries, separate workshops were deemed appropriate

<sup>22</sup> The commodity groups supported by the SYMST Project were pomelo, dragon fruit, and black pepper in Viet Nam and rice, basil and chilli, and watermelon in Lao PDR.

based on the advice from the project team and EUDs. During the workshops, the team presented evaluation methodology and emerging findings, lessons, and recommendations. The report benefitted from rich discussions held during the two events.

## Evaluation Organization and Management

40. The evaluation TOR (Appendix 1) outlined roles and responsibilities. It was conducted by an international consultant (Team Leader) with the support of a national consultant in each of the two project countries. All three consultants were directly recruited by ITC and had no conflict of interest in the project. The lead leader brought experience as a senior evaluator with UN agencies (including ITC) and multilateral development banks and knowledge about the SPS compliance issues. He was familiar with F&V sector evaluation in Lao PDR, Cambodia, and Nepal. The national consultants were established professionals with experience with trade-related issues working for the UN agencies and multilateral development banks. They brought in-country experience to the evaluation and had a good understanding of independent evaluation. The Team Leader prepared the Inception Report, delivered the presentation to the consultation workshop(s), and prepared the draft final evaluation report.
41. The evaluation was conducted under the overall guidance and supervision of the ITC Evaluation Manager (a staff member of the Independent Evaluation Unit (IEU)). The TOR for the final evaluation was based on a consultative process involving project management and EUDs. The IEU provided consolidated comments on the draft Inception Report and approved the final Inception Report. The project management team supported the evaluation with access to documents and contact details of relevant stakeholders and provided feedback on the draft Inception Report, which helped complete the evaluation.

## Limitations in Evaluation and Mitigation Measures Adopted

42. The evaluation encountered the following limitations, but it addressed these where possible:
- (i) **Beneficiary level data.** The project design did not envisage beneficiary-level baseline and end-line data, which posed a major challenge to the evaluation. The evaluation relied on document review, stakeholder interviews, and perception surveys launched on farmers, exporters, and plant protection staff in both project countries.
  - (ii) **List of project beneficiaries.** The list of beneficiaries/participants at the events organized by the project was mostly available in jpg (picture) format. A consolidated digital list of beneficiaries would have helped determine the sampling frame and generate a random list of participants for the interviews and consultations more efficiently. In Viet Nam, the PPD team was able to put together a list from which samples for interviews were drawn. However, in Lao PDR, the evaluation team faced difficulties and had to resort to creating a list based on interviews with some of the key informants during the mission. Some farmer participants in the list provided by DOA were not known to the local communities. In the end, the evaluation team relied on the list of participants at the project closing event to draw a sampling frame of the DOA staff who had participated in the project in one or another capacity.
  - (iii) **Availability of respondents for interviews.** Most of the randomly identified respondents in Viet Nam actively participated in completing the online surveys within an extended response period. The national consultants played a vital role in mailing the links to the survey forms and sending reminders with the proviso that the responses were received directly by a member of the evaluation team. In Lao PDR, some of the farmers either could not be contacted or declined to participate in the surveys. Two rounds of reminders, however, boosted the overall response rates. The evaluation team adopted a flexible approach in scheduling or rescheduling interviews with key informants and opted for face-to-face or virtual meetings based on respondents' convenience.

## Ethical Codes of Conduct

43. The evaluation team complied with the ethical codes of conduct outlined in the evaluation TOR and with UNEG Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation.<sup>23</sup> The evaluation was conducted following the UNEG Norms and Standards for Evaluation and adopted a participatory approach. None of the three members of the evaluation team participated in the project in any form and at any stage of project

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.unevaluation.org/document/detail/2866>

design and implementation. The evaluation team maintained individual data and views confidential and ensured that the respondents' identities were not divulged. The evaluation report is based on aggregate qualitative and quantitative data analysis.

## 6. FINDINGS

44. The evaluation findings presented in this section draw on an in-depth review of project documents and external literature; discussions with relevant stakeholders during the field visits to Lao PDR and Viet Nam; feedback from the perception surveys; stakeholder interviews with key stakeholders including EUDs of Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam and ITC staff; and inputs from the project team during evaluation. The findings reported are summative and do not reflect any isolated opinions. These are discussed as per the evaluation criteria and questions outlined in the evaluation matrix (Annex 8).

### Relevance: Did the project support the right things?

#### Was a needs assessment conducted in each project country, and did the project design sufficiently consider the needs and priorities of the beneficiaries in the country?

45. The project design was based on a pillar-assessed grant agreement between the EU and ITC signed on 16 December 2018. Annex I of the Agreement included a Description of Action, and it highlighted the importance of the EU's support to a developing and a least developed country (LDC) in the area of pesticide use and control of the fruit and vegetable (F&V) as well as plant and plant products supply chain, building on the major work undertaken by the EU, CODEX, FAO and other partners on maximum residue levels (MRLs). The original selection of Thailand and Lao PDR as project countries was appropriate because of geographical proximity and socio-cultural similarities, including the languages of the two countries.
46. The Description of Action cited several justifications for selecting the participating countries. These included:
- (iv) interceptions/rejections of F&V caused by pesticides/MRL problems based on RASFF and EUROPHYT notifications,
  - (v) inclusion of Thailand in the EU list of third countries subject to increased levels of official controls,
  - (vi) need for regulatory reforms in Lao PDR to support the adoption of the National Nutrition Strategy to 2025 and Plan of Action 2016-2020 aimed at avoiding contamination of food with illegal substances,
  - (vii) feedback from consultations with DG SANTE and experts in the two countries on their respective challenges,
  - (viii) potential to further expand the export potential of the F&V as well as other plant and plant products sector of small-scale producers and adoption of a policy shift from a self-sufficiency economy to a market-oriented economy along with support for the foundation for industrialization and export opportunities,
  - (ix) potential to spillover effect to other major crops such as rice being affected by MRL,
  - (x) complementarities with other EU ongoing/upcoming technical assistance programmes, and
  - (xi) synergies with ITC's other technical assistance programmes in the region and the countries.
47. The project's overall objective of improved food safety through better governance in Thailand and Lao PDR and the associated specific objective of strengthening the regulatory framework for control of plant health and pesticides in the F&V sector and other plant products through the application of norms and standards and improve market access were appropriate at the time of project formulation and throughout the project implementation. The Description of Action noted several F&V and other plant products for the project's support (Table 5).

**Table 5: F&V and other plant and plant products identified in the Description of Action**

Countries	Product(s)
Both Lao PDR and Thailand	Guavas, mangoes, mangosteens, fresh and dried peaches, pears, papayas, and bananas (fresh and dried), and roots and tubers of manioc.
Lao PDR	Cabbage, kohlrabi, kale fresh, and sweet potatoes
Thailand	Fresh durian

48. The decision of Thailand to withdraw from the project and the inclusion of Viet Nam, nevertheless, did not affect the rationale and objective of the project. It further strengthened the project's justification as the EU and Viet Nam Free Trade Agreement (EVFTA) came into force on 1 August 2020, with the prospects of export of F&V and other plant and plant products becoming stronger.
49. **Lao PDR.** ITC commissioned a technical report<sup>24</sup> to define the scope of the project in Lao PDR, among other things. The report also served as a baseline report and included an in-depth analysis of the prevailing SPS situation in the country, identified project target crops and sites and provided an action plan to address the main SPS-related problems impacting exports of the identified products to their target markets. The report noted that the main opportunities for Lao PDR fresh products were the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Chinese markets. There was some, but limited, opportunity for export to the EU because of the high freight costs and the voluntary ban imposed by the Lao PDR government on exports of fresh produce to the EU to avoid reputational risk from consignment rejections. It reported that the lack of appropriate infrastructure along the export value chain and the growing demand for higher-value products in Lao PDR, it recommended not to focus on fresh produce exports to ASEAN.<sup>25</sup>
50. According to the technical report, the long list of products with the greatest export potential for the Chinese market based on exports to China at the time included watermelon, banana, pumpkin, and beans.<sup>26</sup> The report recommended the project cover watermelon in Luang Namtha province with a focus on resolving high pesticide residues and the SYMST's support was based on: (i) off-season crop with no negative impact on food security, (ii) strong potential to increase export volume by correcting decline in export volume due to high pesticide residues, (iv) MAF's MOU commitment to China to supervise production and packhouses to control diseases and insects, use of agricultural chemicals, control in MRLs, and promoting the implementation of GAP.
51. The report also cited high logistic costs for exports to the EU, and it identified nine low-volume and high-value products for export to the EU market, of which it recommended basil, chilli, and native rice for the SYMST project's support.<sup>27</sup> Other limitations noted in the report included (i) voluntary suspension of fresh produce export by the Lao PDR government to the EU markets, (ii) only one Pakse-based (Champassak province) company having approval to export to the EU, (iii) lack of appropriate facilities for packing and ensuring cold value chain compliance, and (iv) limited number of products currently exported to the EU. Basil and chilli exports to the EU had historically attracted a large number of interceptions due to pest infestations, although there had been a strong demand for fresh culinary herbs (basil followed by chives, mint, and parsley) and chilli peppers. Similarly, the report also recommended project support for native rice<sup>28</sup> grown in the Sangthong district (Vientiane Capital). Two companies had been exporting rice to the EU market.<sup>29</sup>
52. The evaluation findings suggest that the project design of demonstration farms based on one product in one district was broadly appropriate. However, the analysis of the selection of chilli, basil, and watermelon at the project design stage was inadequate. The justification that the project did not focus on the ASEAN market due to infrastructure deficit was weak. The project could have focussed on strengthening feasible infrastructure in partnership with other development partners.

<sup>24</sup> ITC. (Undated). *Systematic Mechanism for Safer Trade (SYMST) – Technical Report*, Geneva.

<sup>25</sup> The long list of products with export potential to ASEAN included asparagus, basil, bitter melon, bottle gourd, chilli (Fresh and dry), Chinese flowering cabbage, Chinese kale, chive, coriander, cucumber, ginger, green peas, green eggplant, baby corn, eggplants, lemon grass, lettuce, Long bean, mint, morning glory, napa cabbage, onion, okra, Pak choy, peanut, pepper, potato, pumpkin, squash, soybean, spring onion, spinach, and sweet potato, tamarind, papaya, banana, lemon, custard apple, coconuts, rambutans, durians, longans, mangoes, and banana.

<sup>26</sup> Other products with potential for export to China identified included bottle gourd, chilli, Chinese cabbage, coriander, cucumber, dill, flowering Chinese cabbage, garlic, mustard leaf, lettuce, onion, and phakkhadmone.

<sup>27</sup> The products for the EU market identified included asparagus, basil, chilli, coriander, eggplant, mint, parsley, sugar peas, and tomato.

<sup>28</sup> The attraction of natural rice varieties over hybrids is that they are pest and disease-resistant – thus requiring no pesticide use in their production.

<sup>29</sup> Agro Asia and Lao Farmer.

The ASEAN market remained a ready market for several F&V and plant and plant products. It would have been desirable to work with ASEAN member States to strengthen regional SPS capacity based on collaboration for knowledge sharing and capacity building.

53. The *modus operandi* of watermelon production and value chain system was not adequately assessed while formulating the project. It was expected that small farming households would benefit from the project's support. During the field visit, the evaluation team learned that the watermelon value chain in Luang Namtha is fully controlled by Chinese investors. The investors lease land from farmers through the head of the village (who signs the agreement with the investor) for watermelon production after their rice harvest on an annual, three-year, or five-year contract for a fixed amount (land rent). All farming decisions are taken by the investor's representative in the country with support from the technical specialists from China. Farm chemicals are imported from China and the bottles of these chemicals have labels only in Chinese labels, presumably recommended by their technical experts. The DOA provincial and district staff do not have an active role in the value chain other than issuing an SPS compliance certificate. The farmers (landowners) benefit from land rent and some of the poor farmers work on the farm as workers for a fixed daily wage.
54. The project design should have conducted a proper demand and supply analysis of the agricultural products before deciding on the selection of basil and chilli for the EU market. The evaluation team noted from the interviews with farming households that domestic demand for both basil and chilli was strong and the volume of production did not warrant access to the EU market. The team also noted that there was limited consultation at the local level regarding the selection of the products. The technical paper acknowledged the prohibitive logistic costs for the export of fresh basil and chilli preferred in the EU markets. However, the project's focus on native rice was appropriate and relevant because of the established exporters and modest quantity of rice available for the EU market and the significant demand from the EU consumers.
55. **Viet Nam.** Following Viet Nam joining the project, ITC commissioned a study for the identification activities, target beneficiaries, SPS issues associated with plant health and pesticides, prioritization of problems and development of a work plan to address the problems. The report was also expected to assess the support required for the assessment of plant health diagnostic laboratories to facilitate initial training. The findings were discussed during a validation workshop in May 2021.
56. The consultant's report<sup>30</sup> stated that, based on the results of the desk study and interviews with F&V experts, and producers, and the conclusions of a webinar on 19-21 January 2021, pomelo, dragon fruit and black pepper were selected as the SYMST target products. It also recommended demonstration sites in the Binh Duong, Ben Tre, Bac Giang (for Pomelo); Binh Thuan, Tien Giang (for Dragon fruit); Dak Nong and Dak Lak (for black pepper) provinces. The report contained area and production data as of March 2020 and the annual export data (2017-2020) for the three target products. The report formed the basis for product and province selection. The project activities focused on both food safety and plant health issues for pomelo and food safety issues for black pepper and dragon fruit.<sup>31</sup>
57. The evaluation noted that the report could have benefitted from a robust comparative analysis of all relevant crops considered and a clear rationale for the selection of the provinces before concluding the final selection. Also, it was not clear how the consultation, particularly with the producers and exporters, was conducted by the consultant. In Viet Nam's case, the project applied three criteria for the selection of target areas. These included (i) farms with a remarkable area and output for participating in export business, (ii) commitment of farm owners willing to share experience with other interested farmers, and (iii) farms located closer to the roads for easy access for other farmers to visit and learn. Hence, it would have been useful to explain how these farms would have helped or benefitted small farmers. A working definition of small farmers was also warranted in the report.
58. **Overall.** The project design addressed the needs and priorities of the beneficiaries in both Lao PDR and Viet Nam by raising awareness, building capacity, and improving access for target agricultural products to the EU market (and to China for watermelon) specifically food safety and plant health, both vital for domestic and overseas consumption. However, the effective project implementation duration was too short for the intended outcomes. The institutional and individual capacities in the two countries were at various levels, Viet Nam being at a relatively advanced stage than Lao PDR.

<sup>30</sup> ITC. 2021. SYMST End of Assignment Report prepared by SPS national consultant, Hanoi.

<sup>31</sup> ITC. 2021. SYMST Report on Work Plan and Validation Workshop, prepared by the SPS national consultant, Hanoi.



The focus on the EU SPS standard was appropriate and relevant for both countries' development priorities. The Action sought to give particular attention to those F&V and other plant products that have the biggest export potential and that are affected by plant health and pesticide issues. In both countries, it is not clear how the target products met the intent of the Action.

**Was the project design and theory of change (ToC) appropriately adapted to the contexts in each country?**

59. The Description of Action outlined an intervention logic (Table 6). It emphasized focus on those F&V and other plant products that have the biggest export potential and that are affected by plant health and pesticide issues. However, the quality of the intervention logic was deemed poor.

**Table 6: Intervention Logic of the SYMST Project**

Result Area	Planned Action
1	Address issues of lack of information, technical understanding, and sensitization of actors (notably smallholder farmers, exporters, and other stakeholders, including consumer and pesticide dealers) on priority pests and pesticides for the F&V sectors and other plant products. - Identify the specific problems associated with adopted and forthcoming MRLs applicable in the EU and the main changes related to the new EU Plant Health Regulation.
2	Identify specific problems related to regulatory control of plant health and the use of pesticides regulations, on how to adjust agricultural practices to avoid disruption in their F&V and other plant products exports as well as promotion of organic pesticide.
3	Support market links to engage and motivate farmers and exporters.

60. The project design followed the logical framework (Appendix 2), but it did not have an explicit theory of change. It had a limited scope with a focus on SPS issues. The evaluation team is of the view that the overall impact target (5% reduction in food-borne diseases) was not relevant in the project context as several other factors could have contributed to food-borne diseases. Also, a baseline value for the indicator was not specified and the task was deferred to the project inception. Also, the baseline values of the four outcome indicators were not determined during the project design and these were also deferred to the inception phase. One would have expected the outcome targets based on the baseline values, and the specification of targets without respective reference points (baselines) in the project's logical framework somewhat *ad hoc*. It would have been desirable to map out the implementable full value chain for each target product, identify critical bottlenecks in production and readiness for export, and address actions to resolve bottlenecks by stipulating meaningful indicators and associated baseline values and targets in the inception phase
61. The evaluation team prepared an ex-post theory of change for the project based on the consultations with the project team members and narratives in the project document, developed a derived theory of change (Figure 1) in the inception report for this evaluation which was refined based on feedback during the consultation process. A results framework based on a theory of change supported by relevant indicators with baselines would have enhanced the relevance of the project.

**Did the project align with and support the government's national development priorities and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2, 8, 9, and 17 as set out in the project document?**

62. Lao PDR's 8<sup>th</sup> Five-Year National Socioeconomic Development Plan (2016-2020)<sup>32</sup> expected that the country's capacity for monitoring of SPS procedures in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) was strengthened to facilitate trade. Similarly, the 9<sup>th</sup> Five-Year National Socioeconomic Development Plan (2021-2025)<sup>33</sup> recognized the role of SPS for improving trade environment and facilitation. The project was aligned with the Lao PDR government's Strategy for Agricultural Development 2011-2020<sup>34</sup> which recognized that regional cooperation was necessary to harmonize SPS measures (para. 105) and acknowledged consumer demand for a higher level of food safety

<sup>32</sup> Ministry of Planning and Investment, Lao PDR. 2016. *8<sup>th</sup> Five-Year National Socioeconomic Development Plan, 2016-2020*, Vientiane.

<sup>33</sup> Lao Peoples Democratic Republic. 2021. *9<sup>th</sup> Five-Year National Socioeconomic Development Plan, 2021-2025*, Vientiane.

<sup>34</sup> Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Lao PDR. 2010. *Strategy for Agricultural Development: Agriculture and Forestry for Sustainable Development, Food and Income Security*, Vientiane.

- (para. 65). It was also consistent with the government's Agricultural Development Strategy to 2025 and Vision to the Year 2030<sup>35</sup> acknowledging that *"the development of sanitary and phytosanitary system (SPS) and production standard system in Lao PDR is the first priority activity and shall be participated and supported from all concerned stakeholders"*. The project is also aligned with Lao PDR's National Green Growth Strategy and the EU Green Deal.<sup>36</sup>
63. Viet Nam's socio-economic development strategy for the period of 2011-2020 envisaged comprehensive development of agriculture towards the direction of modernity and sustainable direction.<sup>37</sup> Likewise, the socio-economic development plan for 2021-2025 sought to encourage the development of green, clean, ecological, organic, hi-tech, smart agriculture adaptable to climate change.<sup>38</sup> Viet Nam's agriculture sector review by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) noted that importing countries are increasingly seeking certificates of origin and sanitary and phytosanitary certification that must be addressed if Viet Nam is to keep competing internationally. The review concluded that the progressive reduction in protection required under this agreement has forced producers and processors to adopt more efficient production techniques and adhere to more demanding sanitary and phytosanitary requirements of quality-conscious importing countries.<sup>39</sup> Also, Viet Nam's Strategy for Green in the 2021 - 2030 period, with a vision to 2050 called to promote the agricultural value chain's market development, and strengthen the competitiveness of green agriculture, including using safe and organic products that meet international and domestic standards.<sup>40</sup> The project continued to remain relevant during the implementation is Viet Nam's Socio-Economic Development Strategy (SEDS) 2021-2030, Resolution of the Party Congress no. XIII approving the Socio-Economic Development Strategy 2021-2030, 63-QD/NXBCTQG, dated 3 March 2021.
64. The analysis suggests that the SYMST project design contributed to the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2's Target 2.4 "By 2030, ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help to maintain ecosystems,..." It also contributed indirectly to Target 2.1 through increased income to achieve "By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round." Food safety was expected to be addressed through Target 2.1. The project design also contributed to SDG 8 (Target 4) which stated "Improve resource efficiency in consumption and production by decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation..." The intent was to control the use of harmful farm chemicals run-off in waterways and soil contamination. Likewise, the project contributed to SDG 9 (Target 9.4) "By 2030, upgrade infrastructure and retrofit industries to make them sustainable, with increased resource-use efficiency and greater adoption of clean and environmentally sound technologies." The intent was to promote good agricultural practices (GAP) and the use of biodegradable plant protection chemicals. Furthermore, the project was designed to also contribute to SDG 17, more specifically (i) by increasing the export of Lao PDR and Viet Nam to the overseas markets (e.g. the EU and China) (Target 17.B); (ii) removing technical trade barriers to both project countries by enabling capacity in complying with the EU SPS regulations (Target 17.C; and (iii) promoting sustainable technologies in both countries through the integrated pest management (IPM) system and application of biodegradable plant protection technical (Target 17.7).
65. *The evaluation, however, noted that the Lao PDR's SYMST Technical Report, Viet Nam's Validation Report, or the Description of Action did not explicitly state the alignment of the project to the government policies and strategies and SDGs, except the inclusion of SDGs in the logical framework impact indicators.*

<sup>35</sup> Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Lao PDR. 2015. *Agricultural Development Strategy to 2025 and Vision to the Year 2030*, Vientiane.

<sup>36</sup> [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/laos/european-union-and-lao-pdr\\_en?s=183](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/laos/european-union-and-lao-pdr_en?s=183)

<sup>37</sup> <https://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/347151477448693952/pdf/Vietnam-SEDS-2011-2020.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> <https://vietnam.gov.vn/socio-economic-development-plans/socio-economic-development-plan-for-2021-2025-12056314>

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/institutional-document/763181/viet-nam-2021-2025-agriculture-sector-assessment-strategy-road-map.pdf>

<sup>40</sup> <https://apps.fas.usda.gov/newgainapi/api/Report/DownloadReportByFileName?fileName=Vietnam%20Issues%20Green%20Growth%20Strategy%202021-2030%20Vision%20to%202050%20 Hanoi Vietnam 11-02-2021.pdf>

**Were cross-cutting dimensions including human rights and gender equality, inclusion of youth and persons with disabilities, green growth, and social responsibility reflected in the design of the project? Has integrating these cross-cutting issues been relevant to achieving the goals and results of the project?**

66. The Description of Action document expected that the project would address three crosscutting issues – environment, gender, and sustainability. Effective pest control and management were assumed to reduce negative impacts on health, trade, and the environment. The project was also expected to promote natural or organic pesticides. The Action also sought the optimum possible involvement of women and women associations among the actors of the value chain. Furthermore, the Action was to contribute to improving governance through better transparency and regulatory framework and increased involvement of the private sector and consumer associations in the consultation process.
67. The content analysis of the Technical Paper (Lao PDR) outlined an action plan to address environmental issues by promoting GAP and organic farming practices. The governance issue was addressed by planning improvements to a series of administrative, procedural, and legal documents. Gender issues remained unaddressed. Similarly, the Validation Report (Viet Nam) extensively covered addressing environmental issues in the action plan by promoting environment-friendly technologies including IPM and organic production practices. The sustainability issue was addressed in terms of environment but not in terms of economic/financial and institutional dimensions. The Viet Nam Validation Report contained sex-disaggregated targets in the logical framework, but it was not reported in the Lao PDR's Technical Report. A clear gender action plan in both countries would have been helpful given the critical roles women play in the agriculture sector.
68. While the role of youth, persons with disability, human rights, and green growth were prominent issues, these did not feature in the Action, Technical Report, and Validation Report. Also, a strategy or approach to mainstream gender in the project was missing.

**Are the objectives and design of the project in line with the mandate and corporate objectives of ITC's Strategic Plan and EU's development priorities in the region? Did the project build on ITC's and EU's strengths and comparative advantages?**

69. The project design was aligned with ITC's mission to enhance inclusive and sustainable growth and development in developing countries, especially least developed countries, and countries with economies in transition by improving the international competitiveness of MSMEs. It focussed on raising awareness about food safety and plant health, building the capacity of national and subnational agencies to detect and remedy harmful plant protection practices on farms and enhancing the competitiveness of agricultural enterprises through compliance with SPS requirements for export and domestic markets. The project's focus on one of the LDCs (Lao PDR) was consistent with ITC's mandate. The focus on capacity development of the national and subnational plant protection institutions (DOA in Lao PDR and PPD in Viet Nam) and other related stakeholder groups was in line with ITC's goals of improved national business and trade environment for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), improved performance of trade and investment support institutions to offer high-quality, sustainable business services to MSMEs, and improved international competitiveness of MSMEs.<sup>41</sup>
70. The project was also aligned with the EU's development priorities in Southeast Asia, including Lao PDR and Viet Nam. It was consistent with Strategic Objective 1 (Improve Agricultural Practices) and Strategic Objective 3 (Improve Economic Efficiency) outlined in the European Joint Programming for Lao PDR (2016-2020)<sup>42</sup> and the Green and Inclusive Economy priority outlined in Team Europe Strategy in the Lao PDR for the Period 2021-2025,<sup>43</sup> with focus on agricultural development, natural resources and environment, and private sector development. Similarly, the project was also aligned with the EU's Green Development Agenda and Multi-annual indicative Programme 2021-2027 priority area on "Responsible entrepreneurship and enhanced skills for decent employment."<sup>44</sup> Furthermore, the project was consistent with the agricultural export to the EU in the context of the EU-Viet Nam Free Trade Agreement which was signed in 2019 and entered

<sup>41</sup> <https://sdgs.un.org/un-system-sdg-implementation/international-trade-centre-itc-24518>

<sup>42</sup> [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/laos\\_jp\\_report\\_web\\_31.03\\_0.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/laos_jp_report_web_31.03_0.pdf)

<sup>43</sup> <https://vientiane.diplo.de/blob/2520306/7186082b741d006aa3f488c4802ca0b6/pdf-datei---bruecken-bauen-mit-laos-data.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> [https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-01/mip-2021-c2021-8997-vietnam-annex\\_en.pdf](https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-01/mip-2021-c2021-8997-vietnam-annex_en.pdf)

into force in August 2020. The project was designed to address some of the technical barriers from the EU because agricultural products and foodstuffs had to comply with many requirements specified in the Law on Food, the Law on Veterinary Health, regulations on consumer health protection, regulations on toxic substances, antibiotic residues, pesticide residues.<sup>45</sup> The project is accorded high relevance to the EVFTA.

### **Coherence: How well did the interventions fit internally and externally?**

#### **Was the project compatible with ITC and EU's mandate? Did the project establish synergies and interlinkages with other interventions carried out by ITC? and EU?**

71. The project was compatible with the ITC and EU mandates. However, there were limited synergies between the project and EU-supported Lao ARISE PLUS and Viet Nam ARISE PLUS in terms of overall key results areas. In contrast to the project, LAO ARISE PLUS focussed on coffee and wood, both relatively high-volume products. ITC organized some joint capacity development activities on generic issues faced by the SYMST project and Lao ARISE+. The project also complemented the EU technical assistance programmes such as EU-Asia cooperation on (Phyto) Sanitary (SPS) and Food Safety Regulation, and the Better Training for Safer Food (BTSF) programme. ITC also consulted with the EU Director-General for Health and Food Safety (DG-SANTE) and experts in both Lao PDR and Viet Nam to address their respective food safety and plant health-related challenges. However, there was no joint programming with other initiatives launched by ITC and the EU in the two project countries.

#### **Was the project compatible and consistent with the interventions of other actors' interventions (including those of the EU and other development partners) in the same countries and sectors?**

72. Lao PDR became a contracting party to the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) on 29 February 1955 and deposited its instrument of adherence on 24 December 2006.<sup>46</sup> ADB had approved loans and grants to Cambodia and Lao PDR for the Trade Facilitation: Improved Sanitary and Phytosanitary Handling in the Greater Mekong Subregion Trade Project<sup>47</sup> in 2012 and with additional financing in 2017 which attained completion in 2022. The project envisaged its expected impact as "Cambodia and Lao PDR agricultural, food and forestry products are safer, more efficiently produced, and traded in greater quantities. The expected outcome was an enhanced SPS management system in both project countries. There was an overlap in crops and geographical coverage between the SYMST project and the ADB-supported project. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) provided support for a policy brief on Pesticide Use in Lao PDR: Health and Environmental Impacts. There has been support from other multilateral and bilateral development partners including the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Bank to strengthen Lao PDR's SPS system.

73. Viet Nam also deposited its instrument of adherence to the IPPC Convention on 22 February 2005.<sup>48</sup> In 2021, FAO launched the Support for Development of National Strategy and Action Plan for Integrated Plant Health Management Project to support the development and roll-out of the National Plant Health Strategy (NPHS) and its National Plan for Integrated Plant Health Management (NP-IPHM) during the 2021-2025 period. A private-sector partnership between an enterprise from the Netherlands and Viet Nam planned to establish the first professionally managed fruit chain for pomelo in Viet Nam including a state-of-the-art fruit warehousing model and farmer contract system in Southern Viet Nam.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, technical assistance from the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) enabled the export of the first batch of green pomelo to the United States in 2022.<sup>50</sup>

74. The Plant Protection Research Institute and staff from the Agriculture and Rural Development of Binh Thuan Province teamed up with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and FAO in a pilot project to test the effectiveness of implementing an IPM approach, including a form of insect pest control known as Sterile Insect Technique (SIT).<sup>51</sup> Using this technique, fruit flies are mass-produced and then sterilized using ionizing radiation before being released into the environment to

<sup>45</sup> <https://vntr.moit.gov.vn/news/evfta-agreement-and-problems-with-vietnams-agricultural-exports>

<sup>46</sup> [https://www.wto.org/english/thewto\\_e/acc\\_e/lao\\_e/WTACCLAO26\\_LEG\\_1.pdf](https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/acc_e/lao_e/WTACCLAO26_LEG_1.pdf)

<sup>47</sup> ADB. 2012, 2017. Report and Recommendation of the President to the Board of Directors: Trade Facilitation: Improved Sanitary and Phytosanitary Handling in the Greater Mekong Subregion Trade Project, Manila.

<sup>48</sup> [https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/legal/docs/004s-e.pdf](https://www.fao.org/fileadmin/user_upload/legal/docs/004s-e.pdf)

<sup>49</sup> <https://projects.rvo.nl/projects/nl-kvk-27378529-psi10vn21>

<sup>50</sup> <https://vietnam.un.org/en/210741-unido%E2%80%99s-technical-advice-enables-first-batch-vietnamese-pomelos-exported-us>

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/news/integrated-pest-management-to-boost-dragon-fruit-production-in-vietnam>

mate with wild flies, producing no offspring. Similarly, PPD under the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Vietnam Pepper Association (VPA) and the IDH Stitching Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH) introduced the programme on supporting exports of quality black pepper from Việt Nam to the EU in 2021.<sup>52</sup> The project is co-financed by the EU and IDH under the framework of the ARISE Pus Programme.

75. These are some of the examples demonstrating different initiatives implemented in both project countries. However, there was no evidence of inter-agency collaboration between the SYMST project and initiatives launched by other development partners and agencies.

**To what extent does the project respond to the trade and development strategies of Lao PDR and Viet Nam?**

76. The project focused on raising awareness about the SPS requirements for the EU market. Viet Nam was looking at expanding the export of agricultural products to the EU market and the project particularly after the EVFTA came into force. The project contributed to enhancing the institutional capacity of relevant plant protection agencies including laboratories specifically at the national and provincial levels. The requirements of the EU market were evolving and becoming stricter which the producers and exporters had to keep up with. The project also focussed on enhancing the capacity of Lao farmers and exporters to become export-ready, particularly for the EU market and for watermelon to China. The participation of selected enterprises at the Thaifex events in 2022 and 2023 was particularly a revelation for the participants and they acquired the basics of preparation for the export of their product. Due to a series of rejections due to non-compliance with SPS requirements, Lao PDR voluntarily banned the export of fresh produce to the EU market.

**Has there been complementarity, harmonization, and coordination with other entities? If so, to what extent did the project add value while avoiding duplication of effort?**

77. There has been various complementarity but inadequate harmonization and coordination among different entities. The project may have overlooked the initiatives of other development partners and agencies. It may have been due to focus on collaboration with one agency in each of the two countries. An effective mechanism to streamline collaboration and harmonization of efforts would have been more helpful for both countries. Individual institutional mandates and norms, different programming and planning cycles, dispersed project locations, and various products have limited the extent of collaboration and harmonization desired.

**Effectiveness: Did the project achieve its objectives? Did it do things right?**

**Have the activities and outputs been delivered according to the quality requirements and the work plans? Were baseline data established to measure progress?**

78. The project's logical framework contained output targets, and it assumed baselines for all output indicators were zero which may not have been an actual characterization of the prevailing conditions.<sup>53</sup> All target products have had some activities to a varying degree in both project countries. The targets appeared somewhat *ad hoc* rather than based on valid research. Except in one case, none of the targets had gender or country-level breakdown. Table 7 shows actual achievements at project completion. Data suggests all target indicators were fully achieved or surpassed targets.

<sup>52</sup> <https://vietnamnews.vn/economy/1086530/new-project-supports-exports-of-quality-black-pepper-to-the-eu.html>

<sup>53</sup> The evaluation understands that it is the recommended practice to have baseline 0 for targets where we are measuring number of outputs with the support of the EU intervention. This is, however, not a conventional practice in evaluation.

Table 7: Achievement of the SYMST Project Outputs

Output	Project Indicators	ITC Corporate Indicator	Baseline	Target	Actual Achievement			Remarks
					Lao PDR	Viet Nam	Total	
<b>Output 1: Improved awareness and knowledge of the private sector and authorities in Viet Nam and Lao PDR on plant health and pesticide issues in fruits, vegetables, and other plant products.</b>	Number of studies on plant health and pesticide issues	Number of publications, web applications or newsletters produced or updated	0	2	1	1	2	Achieved
	Number of information and awareness material in plant health, the safe use of pesticides and compliance with regulations	Number of publications, web applications or newsletters produced or updated	0	10	27	33	60	Achieved
	Number of male and female beneficiaries reporting greater awareness of plant health and pesticides	A1: Number of clients gaining greater awareness of international trade from using ITC's business, trade, and market intelligence	0	500 (150F)	922 (311F)	1,389 (478F)	2,311 (789F)	Achieved
<b>Output 2: Improved performance of the regulatory and control institutions and improved capacity of the fruits, vegetables, and other plant products supply chain actors to comply with plant health and pesticide control in Viet Nam and Lao PDR.</b>	Number of institutions reporting improved operational and managerial performance of the regulatory framework on plant health/pesticide	B1: Number of cases in which BSOs improved their performance and services for the benefit of their members/clients because of ITC support	0	2	3	2	5	Achieved
	Number of smallholder farmers (disaggregated by gender) trained and assisted to comply with plant health, pesticide residues regulations/adjust production practices	Number of participants in group training	0	400 (100F)	274 (124F)	590 (162F)	864 (286F)	Achieved
	Number of F&V value chain and other plant products actors assisted for	Number of participants to group training	0	30	49	57	106	Achieved

Output	Project Indicators	ITC Corporate Indicator	Baseline	Target	Actual Achievement			Remarks
					Lao PDR	Viet Nam	Total	
	better compliance with plant health/pesticides regulations							
<b>Output 3: Improved market access opportunities and facilitated business linkages of fruits, vegetables and other plant products actors from Viet Nam and Lao PDR to EU and regional target markets.</b>	Number of farmers/exporters (disaggregated by gender) who established contacts with the buyer	Number of participants in group training	0	10	11 (9F)	10 (6F)	21 (15F)	Achieved
	Number of B2B events/trade fairs organised/participated	Number of advisory services provided	0	4	2	2	4	Achieved

Source: The ITC SYMST project team.

79. The SYMST project supported the participation of nine enterprises/exhibitors from Lao PDR and ten from Viet Nam in Thaifex Anuga 2022 and 2023. They represented chilli, basil, watermelon, and rice from Lao PDR and black pepper, dragon fruit, and pomelo from Viet Nam. The nine Lao PDR enterprises had 186 and 185 contacts in 2022 and 2023, respectively. Thirteen (13) of those contacts (2 from the EU markets) have maintained contacts even after the fairs, representing about 7% of total contacts made. In Viet Nam, the ten enterprises had contacts with 377 and 205 in 2022 and 2023 Thaifex, and the businesses have maintained contacts with 56 of them (13 from the EU markets). Fewer contacts with the EU representatives are not surprising as the events were subregional with a focus on the Asian markets. Table 8 summarizes the achievements/results of those enterprises' participation in sales. For several enterprises, this was the first opportunity for exhibition participation outside their home countries. Their participation served as an exposure opportunity with needed preparation for participation in these events.

**Table 8: Expected Sales after participation in Thaifex in 2022 and 2023 ('000 USD)**

Results	Lao PDR (9 Enterprises)			Viet Nam (10 Enterprises)		
	Total EU Business	Total Non-EU Business	Total Business	Total EU Business	Total Non-EU Business	Total Business
Expected turnover during Thaifex in 2022 and 2023	n.a.	186	186	n.a.	1,424	1,424
Reported turnover in November 2023 after Thaifex 2022/2023	8	111	119	1,556	12,953	14,089
Expected future turnover future after November 2023	15	226	241	8,780	5,024	13,808

Source: ITC Consultant's report, 2023.

80. After the Thaifex events in 2022 and 2023, the ITC consultant gathered the views of participating representatives from Lao PDR (9) and Viet Nam (10). Responses from five Lao PDR and eight Viet Nam enterprises appear in Table 9. Overall, the Viet Nam respondents had a more favourable view about their attendance compared to Lao PDR participants. Data should be interpreted with caution as some of the participants joined Thaifex in 2022 virtually and not all participants responded to a

survey. The evaluation team's interaction with some of the participants revealed that they were better prepared in 2023 than in 2022.

**Table 9: Experience from Attendance at Thaifex 2022 and 2023**

Experience	Opinion and Number of Respondents				
	Exceeded Expectation	Completely Met Expectation	Met Expectation Somewhat	Expectation Not Met At All	No Response
Did the participation in the event meet your expectations?					
Lao PDR	0	0	5	0	4
Viet Nam	2	4	2	0	2
Are you satisfied with the quality of the companies you met at the event?	Exceeded Expectation	Completely Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Not At All Satisfied	No Response
Lao PDR	0	1	3	1	4
Viet Nam	2	3	2	1	2
Do you expect to conclude business with some of the companies in the future?	Definitely	Likely	Possible	Not At All	No Response
Lao PDR	0	0	5	0	4
Viet Nam	3	1	1	3	2

**Did the project achieve, or is expected to achieve, its objectives and its attributable results (such as institutional strengthening, estimation of trade impacts (exports) and interceptions/compliance) along the causal pathway, including any differential results across groups? Are the results distributed across different groups?**

81. The logical framework had five outcome indicators of which three related to ITC's corporate indicators) as summarized in Table 10.

**Table 10: Expected and Actual Outcomes of the SYMST Project**

Outcome	Project Indicators	ITC Corporate Indicator	Baseline	Target	Actual Achievement			Remarks
					Lao PDR	Viet Nam	Total	
<b>Outcome: strengthened regulatory framework for control of plant health and pesticides in the fruits and vegetable sector and other plant products (i.e. rice in the case of Laos PDR) through the application of norms and standards and improved market access.</b>	% of decrease in interceptions due to pesticide issues and plant health and diseases	Not applicable	0	10	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	Data unavailable
	Rate of non-compliance with international norms on pesticides and plant health	Not applicable	0	50	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	Data unavailable
	Number of policies/regulations which have been adopted/amended related to pesticides and plant health	A4: Number of policies, strategies, rules, or regulations, improved for the benefit of MSMEs with business sector input, and promulgated or implemented	0	2	1	0	1	Partly Achieved



Outcome	Project Indicators	ITC Corporate Indicator	Baseline	Target	Actual Achievement			Remarks
					Lao PDR	Viet Nam	Total	
	Number of enterprises having transacted business with ASEAN and EU markets in the F&V supply chain and other plant products (disaggregated by owned, operated, and controlled by women)	C3: Number of MSMEs having transacted international business, including national business transactions that are part of international or global value chains, because of ITC support	0	8	4	9	13	Achieved
	Number of enterprises owned, operated, and controlled by women having transacted business with ASEAN and EU markets in the F&V supply chain and other plant products	C4: Number of MSMEs led by women having transacted international business, including national business transactions that are part of international or global value chains, because of ITC support	0	2	3	6	9	Achieved

Note: n.a. = not available

82. Of the five indicators, the project achieved or exceeded two targets, while partially achieving one. Data on the achievement of the first two indicators against respective targets (i) a 10% reduction in interceptions due to pesticide issues and plant health and diseases and (ii) a 50% reduction in the rate of non-compliance with international norms on pesticide and plant health could not be assessed in this evaluation report. Participation in a trade fair (e.g. THAIFEX) in 2022 and 2023 along with entrepreneurs' independent efforts in seeking out export markets contributed to the achievement of the target for the number of enterprises having transacted business with ASEAN and EU markets in the F&V and native rice supply chain.
83. Viet Nam has several decrees and regulations to monitor and control the use of pesticides on crops. MARD signed and promulgated Circular No. 09/2023/TT-BNNPTNT<sup>54</sup> on 24 October 2023 on the list of pesticides allowed for use in Viet Nam and the list of pesticides banned from use in the country. The lists are reviewed annually and regulate all pesticides, including active ingredients and commercial products, allowed for use, or banned from use in Vietnam. The Ministry continues to review and remove types of pesticides with a substantial risk of affecting human health, livestock, the ecosystem, and the environment. The List of Pesticides Allowed for Use in Vietnam in 2023 was supplemented with 12 new active elements, of which six were biological pesticides (accounting for 50%), and the rest are new safe and effective active elements. The SYMST project supported a review, improvement and/or developing Viet Nam's legal regulations on pesticide management and allowable MRL levels in line with the EU and importing countries' regulations.<sup>55</sup> Lao PDR issued a Decree on Pesticide Management in 2017.<sup>56</sup> The SYMST project supported the preparation of ministerial guidance on measures for non-compliance of export plants, plant produce and regulated articles to the EU.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> <https://vietnamagriculture.nongnghiep.vn/promulgating-a-new-list-of-pesticides-in-2023-d366410.html>

<sup>55</sup> The SYMST project closure event presentation delivered in Ha Noi, October 2023.

<sup>56</sup> <https://www.maf.gov.la/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Lao-Pesticide-Decree-English-final-258.pdf>

<sup>57</sup> The SYMST project closure event presentation delivered in Vientiane, October 2023.

**Did stakeholders have a good understanding of the project? Do all beneficiaries have access to the project's deliverables (training, publications, events, etc.)? Are the project deliverables being used by beneficiaries as intended? Are there any factors that prevented beneficiaries from accessing the results or services of the project?**

84. Key project stakeholders participating in model farms in both Lao PDR and Viet Nam had good understanding of the project and expectations. They understood and accepted their roles in project activities. The project team put required effort to ensure that there were no undue expectations. Relevant stakeholders including (i) plant protection staff from the DOA (Lao PDR) and PPD (Viet Nam) participated in the national and sub-national level project activities, (ii) farmer groups, and (iii) representatives of the agricultural export enterprises. Appendix 6 lists project activities conducted by the project, and it is substantial including preparation and production of learning materials, conducting training/workshop events, participation in THAIFEX in 2022 and 2023, and a significant focus on SPS requirements particularly for the EU market. Enhanced awareness about the EU market requirements, acceptable list of pesticides, GAP practices for plant diseases, pests, and weed control had been communicated. The project outputs are also available in digital formats for use by the stakeholders. The evaluation team noted that the Vietnamese stakeholders were accessing SPS information in digital formats, but the Laotian stakeholders had a strong preference for printed materials. The team also learned that printed copies of SPS and GAP information were limited for distribution because of inadequate project budget. According to the project, over 4,200 copies were printed in Lao PDR, including manuals, posters for outside use and leaflets. Similarly, over 3,500 copies were printed in Vietnam in total. A request for 20,000 copies at the very end of the project could not be met as this had not been planned and there was also no available budget for such an amount of printing. A smaller amount was printed. According to EUD Viet Nam, recommendation these days is to always prefer electronic versions because of (1) possibility to modify in case of errors or legal changes (2) environment, (3) unlimited number of people can access. However, the preference tend to vary based on literacy level, digital penetration, and stability of internet connection, particularly in the rural areas.

**Are there any results related to cross-cutting issues related to human rights and gender equality, youth, persons with disabilities, climate change and environment and social responsibility?**

85. The project design included two specific gender targets associated with the outputs. First, it aimed to raise the knowledge and awareness of 500 beneficiaries (150 females, which is 30%). Against this target, the project was able to reach 2,311 beneficiaries, of which 789 were women (34%). The proportion of women beneficiaries was also 34% in both project countries. Second, the project intended to provide training to 400 smallholder farmers (100 females, 25%). At project completion, 864 persons received training of which 33% were women. The share of female training recipients was 35% in Lao PDR and 27% in Viet Nam. In addition, against a target of 10 farmers/exporters establishing contacts with the buyers, the achievement was 21 at project completion, of which 15 (71%) were women (81% in Lao PDR and 60% in Viet Nam). Overall, the project met the intended gender targets (Table 7).

86. The project did not set targets associated with human rights, inclusion of youth<sup>58</sup> and persons with disabilities, climate change, environment, and social responsibility. However, the involvement of youth was predominant in all target value chains. Disability inclusion was not reported. The reduced use of harmful pesticides was expected to benefit the environment, but the relevant agencies did not collect data, and hence the evaluation could not make an informed assessment. Based on key informant interviews, farmers were aware of harmful pesticides and had reduced their applications, particularly in Viet Nam. Likewise, the pesticide retailers particularly in Viet Nam expressed that the sale of pesticides with bioagents had steadily increased over last five years. Similarly, there is an upward trend in the adoption of IPM by the farmers in both countries, particularly for pomelo in Viet Nam and native rice in Lao PDR.

<sup>58</sup> According to the project, youth involvement was tracked in Year 4, but the numbers were not readily available at the time of the evaluation.

**Efficiency: How well were resources used in the project?**

**Did the project deliver results in an economical and timely way? Have inputs (funds, expertise, human resources, time, etc.) been converted into outputs, outcomes, and impacts (relative to the entire results chain) in the most cost-effective way possible within the intended timeframe?**

87. The EU had provided €2.0 million to ITC for the SYMST project. At its completion, the project incurred USD2,236,605 inclusive of indirect costs, and it represents 98.2% of budget utilization. The total direct eligible cost of the Action was USD2,090,285 for project activities in Lao PDR (63.8%) and Viet Nam (34.9%). Initial exploratory activities in Thailand incurred about 1.5% of the total eligible direct cost of the project. Table 11 shows budget and expenditure amounts in the two countries, although the project document had no breakdown of budget allocation by country. This allowed the project management for a flexible approach to conducting relevant activities.

**Table 11: Budget and expenditure of the SYMST Project in Lao PDR and Viet Nam**

Budget/Expenditure Item	Expenditure (USD), as of 16 February 2024				
	Total Budget (USD)	Total (USD)	Lao PDR (%)	Viet Nam (%)	Thailand (%)
Human Resources (1)	1,499,895	1,491,468	61.6	36.5	1.9
Travel (2)	165,112	168,147	84.8	13.6	1.6
Equipment and supplies (3)	79,636	70,373	70.7	29.3	-
Local office (4)	25,227	18,325	100.0	-	-
Other costs, services (5)	347,583	333,338	57.5	42.5	-
Other (6)	10,958	8,634	57.9	42.1	-
Subtotal direct eligible costs of the Action	2,128,411	2,090,285	63.4	35.1	1.5
Indirect costs (maximum 7% of direct eligible costs of the Action)	148,989	146,320			
<b>Total accepted cost of the Action (USD)</b>	<b>2,277,399</b>	<b>2,236,605</b>	<b>1,418,870.3</b>	<b>785,202.0</b>	<b>32,530.7</b>
Notes:					
(1) Gross salaries, including social security charges and other related costs of local and international staff/consultants (both technical and administrative/support staff); per diems for overseas and local mission travel of staff assigned to the Action and seminar/conference participants.					
(2) International travel and local transport.					
(3) Purchase of laboratory equipment.					
(4) Local office to cover vehicle costs, office rent, office supplies, other services, office furniture and computer equipment.					
(5) Publications, studies and research, grants to institutions, audit, evaluation, conferences/workshops, bank guarantee costs, and visibility of the Action.					
(6) Sundries – postage, telecoms, printing etc.					

88. The evaluation noted that in Viet Nam the project did not incur costs for the local office and PPD utilized its existing facilities. Human resources absorbed about 71.3% of total eligible expenditure, and 81.8% of the total human resources costs were incurred in mobilizing technical staff and consultants. Data also suggests that the expenditure for local transportation in Lao PDR was significantly high, presumably due to the high cost of air travel (\$95,238 in Lao PDR and \$14,857 in Viet Nam, with a total cost of \$110,096 against the provision of \$42,701 for the entire project).

89. Overall, the project resources were used efficiently. Since the project manager and the project administration assistant were funded by ITC's Regular Budget (RB), their salary costs were not charged to the project. Also, the quality component of Lao Arise Plus and other key events were typically lined up back-to-back to save on travel costs and events in Viet Nam were combined to the possible extent. Similarly, the project manager attended the Thaifex event in May 2023 as a part of her travel to and from the Philippines. The project did not charge her travel costs. ITC maintained synergies with other projects. For example, the travel costs of the ITC market linkages expert for training beneficiaries and exporters were not charged to the SYMST project. Furthermore, ITC staff and consultants were mobilized to cover activities in both countries for common activities after Viet Nam joined the project, which saved the project's international travel costs by 47%. International travel expenditure was far less than originally envisaged also due to the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic which restricted the movement of specialists and staff significantly. The

project was able to spread available resources over a longer implementation period necessitated by the pandemic restrictions and start-up delays.

90. The project maintained a good balance in recruiting and mobilizing national, regional, and international specialists in relevant areas. The stakeholders appreciated the breadth and depth of technical knowledge shared by the specialists. The international specialists maintained good collaboration with their national counterparts, both in government agencies and the national consultants recruited by ITC throughout the project and most importantly during the pandemic when international travel was not feasible.

**How well was the project managed to address operational efficiency within ITC and the local project coordination teams? How effective have the management arrangements been in the delivery of the project? To what extent were the project governance structures in Lao PDR and Viet Nam effectively supporting and guiding the project management?**

91. The Export Quality Management Unit of ITC managed the project which was led by a Project Manager and supported by three additional ITC staff members.<sup>59</sup> The team received periodic guidance from the Senior Advisor on Export Quality Management. Based on the project's operational needs, other ITC staff members including from the Division of Enterprise Competitiveness and Institutions provided technical support. The project resources from the EU enabled the team to mobilize subject matter specialists on the agricultural value chain, plant health and SPS standards for the EU market, and trade fairs. The specialists were identified and engaged by ITC to provide capacity development support to DOA (Lao PDR) and PPD (Viet Nam), produce knowledge products, and conduct training of trainers on relevant topics.
92. The project coordination in Lao PDR was led by the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF). A Project Review Committee (PRC) was set up and chaired by DOA. The PRC met once a year in 2020, 2021 and 2023 and twice in 2022, and it provided overall guidance for the project activities in the target products and provinces/districts and approved the work programme and budget. The project also set up a Technical Working Group (TWG) which met six times during the project implementation period. The day-to-day project coordination role was led by a senior DOA staff member, supported by an officer in DOA and plant protection staff at the Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Offices (PAFOs) of the Champassak, Luang Namtha, and the Vientiane Capital Provinces and the District Agriculture and Forestry Offices (DAFOs) of districts in which project activities were launched. At the field level, the DOA team maintained good coordination with the local authorities.
93. Viet Nam did not establish a PRC but formed a TWG. The TWG met three times between 2021 and 2023, although it had planned to meet quarterly as per the first TWG meeting minutes. The first TWG meeting served as a validation workshop, the second one was a book launch event, and the third meeting reviewed the progress of various activities/initiatives conducted by the project. PPD coordinated the project activities with the support of a lead national consultant who was a former senior PPD staff. Also, the project had one national consultant for each of the three products (black pepper, dragon fruit, and pomelo). The national consultants coordinated all activities associated with the six demonstration farms (two for each product) with the support of local authorities.
94. The evaluation is of the view that while the frequency of TWG meetings was fewer than originally envisaged, the project's operational efficiency was maintained through regular communication between the ITC team in Geneva and the national coordinators in the two project countries. The prolonged pandemic, however, contributed to the infrequent TWG meetings.
95. The project implementation capacity at the provincial and district levels in Lao PDR remained weak at project completion due to a shortage of human and financial resources. The Vietnamese national institutions and laboratories demonstrated good capacity and had the required equipment, staff, and funds to implement the project activities, including beyond project completion.

**Was the administrative cost comparable to that of other development partners?**

96. The project's administrative/support cost accounted for an overall 4.3% of total eligible expenditure. It was 3.9% in the case of Lao PDR and 6.4% in Viet Nam.<sup>60</sup> These figures are comparable to other similar development projects. It should be noted that project finance data did not have information on administrative/support costs incurred by participating national and provincial coordination

<sup>59</sup> The project team members had other duties and responsibilities within the Export Quality Division.

<sup>60</sup> These amounts do not include the 7% of the eligible cost of Action as an indirect cost charged by ITC for the project administration.

mechanisms. An ex-post imputed contribution of PPD to the project at the UN rates was estimated to be about USD 116,000, which is approximately equivalent to 14.8% of the cost of the Action in Viet Nam.

**Was a monitoring system put in place that enabled effective management, implementation, and accountability? Was the monitoring system revised or changed during the project's implementation?**

97. Almost one year waiting time for Thailand's decision regarding their withdrawal from the SYMST project contributed to overall implementation delays. The prolonged COVID-19 pandemic further compounded delays in timely commencement and completion of the envisaged project activities. Both factors were beyond the control of the project management. The national stakeholders in both countries also felt disruptions due to the time lag in the changes to the ITC project team. However, the new team was able to move in rapidly, and it brought the project implementation on track and maintained good coordination with the national teams. This helped in overcoming some of the communication challenges. The monitoring system in the project was largely activity-based, and it did not align with outcome reporting. The project could have clearly marked the targets for the two countries clearly which would have improved tracking and reporting. Key data on interceptions and compliance was available to the evaluation team for Viet Nam at the time of finalizing the evaluation report, but it was not available for Lao PDR.
98. The project team also corrected this limitation by institutionalizing weekly meetings with DOA (Lao PDR) and bi-weekly meetings with PPD (Viet Nam) which were also moved to weekly meetings. The consultants also participated in the weekly meetings with DOA. The weekly meetings continued until the project completion date. These meetings strengthened communication, provided monitoring information, and resolved solutions to emerging challenges. While these meetings were helpful, several interviewees for the evaluation also felt that the meetings were too long and could have been more effective if they were conducted on focussed topics in smaller groups and somewhat less frequently.
99. The evaluation noted that the private sector participation in both countries was limited.<sup>61</sup> They could have been better represented in PRC in Lao PDR and TWGs in both countries. Some of the stakeholders were informed about the meetings too close to the events and hence they could not participate. Better planning and information dissemination could have helped strengthen their participation and eventual ownership of the project.
100. The project engaged short-term international and national consultants to support the implementation of project activities. Twelve international consultants in Lao PDR provided capacity development in SPS including pest identification, training in TRACES<sup>62</sup>, EU SPS regulations and import requirements for agricultural produce requirements for the ISO 17025<sup>63</sup> accreditation, pesticide residue analysis at the Plant Protection Centre laboratory, and project coordination. The international consultants worked closely with 19 national consultants on topics related to plant health and pesticide management including pest and plant diseases curriculum development, extension system and farmer development programme, training on the maximum residue level (MRL) management and addressing export compliance with the EU regulations for agricultural produce, product quality research in rice and watermelon value chain development communication strategy, good agricultural practices, pesticide residue analysis, and project support and monitoring. In Viet Nam, international consultants provided support with training in TRACES and SPS regulation for the EU markets, SPS management, expertise in black pepper production, quality management research and materials development, graphic design, preparation for and participation in trade fairs (e.g. Thaifex), and overall project organization and coordination. The project engaged national consultants for six demonstration model farms of pomelo, black pepper, and dragon fruit (two each), communication materials on plant protection, food safety awareness, and SPS including pesticide management and plant health.
101. The evaluation noted that specific requirements for consultants' support were not adequately covered in the technical paper (Lao PDR), validation report (Viet Nam), and the project document.

<sup>61</sup> According to the project team, the private sector representatives typically joined all events (some individuals may have had challenges).

<sup>62</sup> TRACES is the European Commission's online platform for animal and plant health certification required for the importation of animals, animal products, food and feed of non-animal origin and plants into the European Union, and the intra-EU trade and EU exports of animals and certain animal products ([https://food.ec.europa.eu/horizontal-topics/traces\\_en](https://food.ec.europa.eu/horizontal-topics/traces_en))

<sup>63</sup> ISO/IEC 17025 is the international standard that sets out the general requirements for the competent, impartial, and consistent operation of laboratories (<https://advisera.com/17025academy/what-is-iso-17025/>)

The project should have taken a differentiated approach with support for value chain development in Lao PDR and export quality management in Viet Nam. Also, fewer, and longer engagement of consultants in both countries would have enhanced project efficiency, in terms of costs, consultant management efforts, and project coordination.

#### **To what extent did the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) impact the project deliverables?**

102. The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on project activities. Several in-person events had to be reprogrammed for online/virtual delivery and some had to be modified in their contents. The project team, nevertheless, demonstrated its strong commitment and adopted a flexible approach by supporting linkages between the international and national consultants in conducting project activities, including online collaboration, coaching, and preparing knowledge products. Weekly meetings between the project teams in Geneva and project countries also helped to reduce the adverse impact of the pandemic on project deliverables.

#### **Potential Impact: What difference has, or will the intervention make?**

#### **Has the project generated or is expected to generate significant positive or negative, intended, or unintended, higher-level effects, including as measured by the outcome-level indicators? Can observed changes be linked to the project's interventions?**

103. The evaluation found that the impact indicators in the logical framework were not meaningful. The project was too small to have tangible contributions to SDG targets (2.3, 2.4, 2b, 8.2, 9.3, 16.7, and 17.6). There would have been some impact indirectly because of multiplier effects, but in the absence of a tracking mechanism and baseline data, the evaluation could not assess expected contributions. In addition to the SDGs, the project expected a 5% reduction in food-borne diseases. The evaluation considers the indicator and target not relevant to the project as food-borne diseases could be linked to a multitude of factors other than residual pesticides. Moreover, the project did not collect data on the impact indicator.

104. The potential impact of the project and its achievement at the outcome level were affected by a relatively short project implementation period. There was not enough time to scale up or replicate project activities in other areas. In the absence of relevant data and a monitoring system, the impact on health outcomes could not be ascertained in the evaluation. Nevertheless, with a concerted effort by different agencies including DOA in Lao PDR and PPD in Viet Nam, consumers are better informed about the adverse health impact of pesticide residues over the last five years. Overall, there has been increased awareness and knowledge about approved pesticides, the importance of complying with MRLs, and GAP in target crops. There is also an upward trend in the number of farmers adopting IPM where feasible, either solely or in combination with other approved pesticides. Also, there is a general perception that the use of biodegradable pesticides and organic fertilizers in Viet Nam has been increasing steadily over the past three years.

105. Based on stakeholder interviews and perception surveys conducted by the evaluation team, the adoption of GAP in native rice and IPM practices in basil and chilli have contributed to reduced use of harmful pesticides in Lao PDR. However, this has not been triangulated using pesticide sales data, owing to a lack of data. The pesticide retailers in Lao PDR were not aware of the pesticides with biological agents. On the other hand, in Viet Nam, due to increased awareness about the export market requirements (including through the SYMST project), the farmers growing black pepper, dragon fruit, and pomelo and collectors/exporters are better informed. In Viet Nam, there is a steady upward trend in the use of pesticides with biological agents. This can be taken as an indirect indication of contributing to improved food safety in the country. There are also signages at the access points of the demonstration farms which reportedly have attracted other farmers to seek more information or learn more about the project, although visitation data was not available. The evaluation could not obtain data on the type and quantity of pesticides applied at the farm level, and hence the achievements in terms of improved food safety through better governance could not be established.

106. It should be noted that there are other efforts by the private sector and other development partners to address food safety concerns arising from the excessive use of pesticides in both countries. However, these initiatives have not been systematically mapped. Also, given the limited coverage of the project largely limited to the demonstration farms and inadequate time for wider dissemination of results, the outcomes cannot be properly established in the evaluation. Data from Viet Nam shows improvements in interceptions and compliance for overall F&V subsector, but it is

not clear from the products supported by the project. Data for Lao PDR compliance and interception are not available. Lao PDR produced four policy and regulations related documents on plant protection against an overall target of 4 documents. During the project period, 13 MSMEs transacted business with international value chain actors, which was substantially higher than the target of eight. Nine of these 13 MSMEs (three in Lao PDR and six in Viet Nam) were women-owned. The SYMST project has influenced the farming practices in both countries. The perceptions surveys with farmers and plant protection staff in both countries revealed that while project support was useful, more efforts were needed in promoting SPS, including IPM and GAP interventions. However, farmers are not aware of the economics of compliance with the SPS and plant health requirements. While this was not a focus of the project, attention to demonstrating benefits and costs during training and awareness raising would have encouraged a higher level of adoption of project interventions.

#### **Has the project strengthened the regulatory framework for control of plant health and pesticides in the F&V sector and other plant products?**

107. The project supported strengthening the regulatory framework for control of plant health and pesticides in the F&V sector in Lao PDR for the preparation of ministerial guidance on measures for non-compliance of export plants, plant produce and regulated articles to the EU (discussed above under the project effectiveness section). However, due to inadequate staff and resources, enforcing legal requirements and regulations to ensure proper use of approved pesticides in the country continues to remain a major challenge. There are no signs of a steady increase in the budgetary allocation for plant protection functions.

108. In Viet Nam, the project collaborated with PPD and supported the preparation and publication of a guidance document with a focus on Vietnamese fruits and vegetables exported to the EU.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, the document also serves as a reference material for exporters to the EU in the context of EVFTA which came into effect on 1 August 2020. It provides the producers and businesses, particularly small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and other stakeholders of the F&V production chain in Vietnam with an overview of EU legal requirements on food safety and plant health for imported plant products from outside the EU including Vietnam with a focus on fruits and vegetables intended to be exported to the EU. The guidance document is widely referred to and considered extremely useful resource materials by the PPD staff at the central and subnational levels. There is an understanding in the PPD that the document will be periodically updated with new data which can be availed by the public in digital format and in Vietnamese language. The project would have benefitted from a monitoring system aimed at tracking the uptake and use of an electronic directory launched under the project's initiative.

#### **Has the project strengthened compliance with quality and food safety requirements of the target export markets and built related capacity?**

109. According to the plant protection staff interviewed, the project contributed towards strengthening compliance with the quality and food safety requirements of the target markets by supporting the capacity development of plant protection laboratories. The laboratory staff valued the depth and quality of training offered and the equipment provided under the project. Lao PDR had suspended the export of F&V products to the EU market because of high rejection rates. The suspension has not been lifted as two target commodities (basil and chilli) still do not meet the EU standards in addition to the expensive logistic challenge to ship a small volume of the produce. Lao Native rice meets the EU standard and Champahom Company has secured export contracts.

110. In Lao PDR, the evaluation noted a high degree of complacency in fully adopting the pesticide and plant health management regime or GAP due to adequate domestic and/or ASEAN markets for their produce in addition to little knowledge about underlying profitability and environmental benefits. They did not see any incentives in seeking alternate markets and felt that fresh basil and chilli were not the right commodities for the EU market due to their short shelf life and high freight costs. There was also an inadequate understanding of food safety and health benefits. Watermelon is exported to China and according to PAFO, there has not been a single rejection of export consignments. According to PAFO, China's SPS requirements are not as strict as those of the EU and the watermelon production and value chain is fully managed by the Chinese investor's technical

<sup>64</sup> ITC/PPD/EU. 2022. EU Food Safety and Plant Health Regulations for Imported Plant Origin Food prepared by the SPS National Consultant for the SYMST Project Nguyen Xuan Hong, Hanoi. Available at [https://psav-mard.org.vn/upload/T%C3%A0i%20li%E1%BB%87u\\_EN/2022/22.04.12\\_Guidebook-EN.pdf](https://psav-mard.org.vn/upload/T%C3%A0i%20li%E1%BB%87u_EN/2022/22.04.12_Guidebook-EN.pdf)

team. Two partners of investors interviewed by the evaluation team opined that there was a sufficient market for watermelon in China, and hence there was no need for them to seek alternate or additional markets including the EU.

111. Viet Nam has been exporting all three products (black pepper, dragon fruit, and pomelo) to the EU market. While rejection and compliance data are not available for target commodities to the evaluation team, anecdotal evidence suggests that the dragon fruit consignment has encountered several rejections. The evaluation also understands that the capacity of PPD laboratories is limited and does not fully meet the market demand for quality testing.<sup>65</sup> The scope and coverage of private testing laboratories in Viet Nam are not known. In August 2023, the project provided a one-week training to 14 technicians (7 women) from PPD Control and Testing Pesticides Centre (Ha Noi and Ho Chi Minh city) aimed at improved capacity of technicians in using multi-residue homestead analysis in food safety. The project purchased 100 active substances to be used during the training course. The training also supported the laboratory to update analytical methods of pesticide residues, focussing on residues of commonly used pesticides on samples of three project-target products, e.g., dragon fruit, pomelo and black pepper. The guidance book prepared by the Vietnamese project team provides information on legal requirements for EU market access. The evaluation team sought data on compliance and rejection rates, but these were not available. The project would have benefitted from a monitoring system aimed at tracking the uptake and use of an electronic directory launched under the project's initiative. The farmers and exporters alike reported uncertainties associated with volatile product prices and increasing production and SPS and plant health compliance costs.

#### To what extent has the project contributed to SDGs 2, 8, 9, 16, and 17?

112. The logical framework expected that the project would contribute to SDG indicators 2.3, 2.4, 2b, 8.2, 9.3, 16.7, and 17.6. However, no specific target values were set. Overall, the assessment presented in Table 12 shows that the project's contribution to pre-identified targets and progress towards associated indicators was limited. There had not been any reporting with respect to the identified indicators and associated targets. However, with respect to SDG indicator 2.4, the use of biodegradable pesticides, approved pesticides and safe pest management as well as the adoption of GAP were important part of the training and coaching efforts in both countries. The produce of the model value chains and the exporters receiving support under the market linkages component were confirmed compliant with EU food safety requirements at the end of the project based on tests.

**Table 12: Contribution of the Project to the selected Sustainable Development Goals**

SDG Indicator	Description of SDG Target Indicator	Evaluation Assessment
2.3	<b>Zero hunger: Double productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists, and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment.</b>	The project did not monitor its contribution. Selected respondents during key informant interviews revealed that productivity would have increased from 10 to 20%, but depressed product prices had no significant impact on farm incomes.
2.4	<b>Zero hunger: Ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding, and other disasters and that progressively improve land and soil quality.</b>	The demonstration farms in both project countries had adopted sustainable farm production practices, including IPM for pest control, biodegradable pesticides for pest and disease control, and GAP for sustainable production systems. However, the project did not monitor and report.
2b	<b>Zero hunger: Correct and prevent trade restrictions and distortion in world agricultural markets, including through the parallel elimination of all forms of agricultural export subsidies and all export measures with equivalent effect, in accordance with the mandate of the Doha Development Round.</b>	The project focussed on non-tariff barriers to trade such as compliance with SPS and MRL requirements in export production. Reportedly, the EU regulations are becoming stricter and hence keeping up with compliance has been challenging. The project did not collect relevant data. Data received by the evaluation team in April 2024 shows that overall, the percentage of the EU destined F&V products intercepted due to plant health varied over the years but has declined

<sup>65</sup> Dragon fruit from Viet Nam is listed in Annex II of regulation 2019/1793 since the entry into force of the regulation (October 2019) due to the risk of contamination by pesticide residues. The official controls carried out by the member states showed improvement in compliance with the relevant requirements. However, consignments are still intercepted.



SDG Indicator	Description of SDG Target Indicator	Evaluation Assessment
		from a peak of 9.42% in 2017 to 2.44% in 2023. Similarly, the percentage of total interceptions had peaked in 2019 at 57.78%, but declined to 18.63% in 2023. However, the project could not determine the rate of interception and non-compliance with international norms on pesticides and plant health from Lao PDR.
8.2	<b>Decent work and economic growth:</b> <i>Achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading, and innovation, including through a focus on high value-added and labour-intensive sectors.</i>	The project did not focus on increasing productivity or diversification. The emphasis on SPS requirements for the EU market was dominant in the work plan.
9.3	<b>Industry, innovation, and infrastructure.</b> <i>Increase access of SMEs in developing countries, to financial services, including affordable credit, and their integration into value chains and markets.</i>	The project did not focus on improving access to finance, but it was highlighted by farmers in their response to the evaluation survey fielded by the evaluation team.
16.7	<b>Peace, justice, and strong institutions:</b> <i>Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels.</i>	The identification of product and geographical focus areas was based on the consultative process. Inclusion of women, the poor, ethnic groups, youth, and persons with disabilities was not explicitly covered by the project.
17.6	<b>Revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development:</b> <i>Enhance North-South, South-South, and triangular regional and international cooperation on and access to science, technology and innovation and enhance knowledge sharing on mutually agreed terms, including through improved coordination among existing mechanisms, at the United Nations level, and through a global technology facilitation mechanism.</i>	The project mobilized consultants from the region as well as from the EU member states. The international consultants supported national consultants periodically even during the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there was limited coordination with other development partners working in similar spaces in both countries.

### Potential Sustainability: Will the benefits last?

**To what extent are the net benefits of the project likely to continue after ITC support came to an end from the perspective of institutional strengthening? Are the financial, economic, social, environmental, and institutional capacities of the systems needed to sustain the net benefits over time in place?**

113. The benefits of the SYMST project support in both countries are likely to continue even after its completion in October 2023. Overall, there is increasing awareness and knowledge among consumers about food safety from pesticide residues, although the level of awareness and knowledge varies – more so in the urban compared to rural areas and among the high-income population than the low-income strata. Both Lao PDR and Viet Nam have required regulatory frameworks, but their enforcement differs between the two countries. The project's contribution in both countries has been institutionalized by improving the regulatory framework in Lao PDR by adopting regulations and the guidance manual and online platform and web-based tools in Viet Nam. The plant protection staff at the DOA (Lao PDR) and PPD (Viet Nam) are better informed about plant health and pest management issues and, more specifically, about the SPS requirements for agricultural exports with a focus on target products. The knowledge gained applies to other agricultural products as well, although the prospects of basil and chilli export to the EU market remain limited. The key informant interviews and perception survey feedback from the plant protection staff in both countries confirmed the added value of ITC's support, particularly in pest identification, IPM, GAP, and knowledge about banned pesticides in both countries. Both countries have access to Quality for Trade Platforms.

114. Efforts to further strengthen the SPS regime and plant health issues are likely to continue in the future based on domestic and export market pressure and potential economic benefits supported by interventions from other public and private agencies. Viet Nam is likely to continue to sustain project benefits with internal resources (funding, equipment, and technical staff). The private sector initiatives in the dragon fruit value chain for export to the EU market complement the SYMST project support. The EVFTA also serves as an incentive to continue to remain focussed on plant health and SPS requirements for the EU markets. Trade is a competence of the EU which provides an efficient mechanism for negotiations based on agreed rules and regulations. The evaluation team from its interaction with the technical staff found that the research institutes, testing laboratories, and technical specialists learned that there is required institutional capacity to continue to sustain

the gains from the SYMST project. However, the number of testing laboratories is likely to face constraints as demand from exporters and export requirements grow for product testing.

115. Lao PDR is likely to continue to face challenges arising from weak institutional capacity, particularly at the subnational levels. Furthermore, Lao PDR has been facing macroeconomic challenges for several years leading to limited support for the agriculture sector, including for strengthening plant health and SPS systems. The testing facilities are also limited in terms of numbers, locations, and capacities. Nevertheless, the focus on GAP including IPM is likely to continue in the future. Despite these limitations, the Champahom Company was successful in exporting 50 tonnes of Lao rice to the EU market, with Belgium as the first purchase destination for the first time in 2021, and it signed an agreement with Wech Gros Import-Export in France to sell 1,000 tonnes of glutinous rice each year for an unspecified number of years with the first shipment of 25 tonnes sent in 2023.<sup>66</sup> According to the project team, Champahom has also signed agreement to export rice to Germany.

**Has engagement of relevant agencies with stakeholders strengthened under SYMST? If so, what are the recommendations to improve this engagement further?**

116. The stakeholder feedback for the evaluation suggests that DOA in Lao PDR and PPD in Viet Nam have strengthened their capacity to respond to plant health and SPS, particularly for the EU market. However, there is a need for continuing the SYMST-led initiatives in the future either from the government's internal resources or support from the private sector and other development partners. The project's direct engagement with DOA and PPD provided the needed focus for project activities, but the project could have benefitted from wider engagement with other like-minded agencies. A proper stock-taking exercise during the inception phase would have helped to avoid some duplications and improved synergies for further effectiveness in delivering intended outcomes.

**How effective has the project been in establishing national ownership of food safety in each country?**

117. The project focussed on food safety on three fronts. First, it raised awareness about the list of banned pesticides in target products in both countries. In doing so, it promoted the application of pesticides with biological agents. Second, it promoted GAP including IPM. Third, it supported the capacity development of testing laboratories dedicated to the identification of pests and analysis of pesticide residues with a focus on MRLs. The national and subnational agencies in target provinces, districts, and local governments actively participated in the project activities. Food safety also featured prominently in the project's dissemination materials. The evaluation considers that *the project contributed to strengthening national ownership of food safety in both Lao PDR and Viet Nam.*

**What are the factors that may influence the achievement or non-achievement of sustainability of the project benefits including cross-cutting issues?**

118. Key factors influencing the sustainability of project benefits over the medium to longer term are likely to depend on several factors (Table 13). These may require collaboration among different actors. These are based on discussions with key informants and feedback from the perception surveys.

<sup>66</sup><https://laotiantimes.com/2021/10/04/laos-exports-50-tons-of-rice-to-european-union/> and [https://www.vientianetimes.org.la/freeContent/FreeContent\\_Laos\\_exports\\_194.php#:~:text=Laos%20exports%20first%2050%20tonnes%20of%20rice%20to%20EU&text=%E2%80%9C%20have%20observed%20the%20potential.is%20valued%20at%20US%2429%2C000.](https://www.vientianetimes.org.la/freeContent/FreeContent_Laos_exports_194.php#:~:text=Laos%20exports%20first%2050%20tonnes%20of%20rice%20to%20EU&text=%E2%80%9C%20have%20observed%20the%20potential.is%20valued%20at%20US%2429%2C000.)

**Table 13: Factors Influencing the Sustainability of SYMST Project Benefits**

Factor	Nature of influence
Climate change	Climate, including global warming, has influenced agricultural production with the emergence of new pests and diseases. Over time, pests and plant diseases may not respond to available/approved pesticides. Continued efforts will be needed to ensure pesticides are effective research and do not harm human health and the environment. Likewise, the IPM regime may also need to be updated regularly. Strong collaboration between the research institutions and policymaking and extension agencies can address emerging challenges.
Profitability	The producers in the product value chain need to be convinced that the adoption of recommended pesticides and GAP do not reduce their incomes. While it was not an objective of the project, it is critical for the steady uptake of technology by the producers.
Market and price volatility	The export products are prone to market price volatility and are governed by demand and supply as well as market organization. Products produced in small quantities face difficulties in leveraging price premiums and incur higher unit transportation costs. Market organizations such as a cooperative structure in Viet Nam for Pomelo could lower some degree of uncertainties in supply and reduce price volatility.
Market linkages	The project had a strong focus on the product quality for the EU market. There is also a need for a market segmentation approach depending on the product which could be sold domestically, regionally, or internationally. While the EU market offers premium market opportunities, domestic, regional, and other markets beyond the EU also need proper attention. Opportunities need to be explored for marketing high-value and small-volume products in relevant markets. For the export market, proactive linkages with overseas importers are critical.
Integration of women, youth, and persons with disabilities	Youth (both males and females) and women have played very important roles in product value chains, but their contributions are not well recognized. Efforts are needed to mainstream them in the value chain and recognize their enthusiasm and capabilities to absorb new ideas and technologies quickly. Similarly, persons with disabilities can also play important roles in supporting value chains. All these cross-cutting issues require a clear roadmap in the project design and implementation.
Choice of product	The project benefits are likely to be sustainable if the product selection is based on thorough comparative advantage analysis on both technical and economic grounds. Adequate upfront due diligence concerning national ownership, policy environment, institutional implementation capabilities, and commitment to reform.

### Was a specific exit strategy or approach prepared and agreed upon by key partners to ensure sustainability?

119. The project document was not explicit on an exit strategy for the project. However, the project team held discussions with both DOA in Lao PDR and PPD in Viet Nam to ensure the sustainability of the project benefits. The discussions covered activities to be pursued after the project closing. Both agencies had in principle agreed to the next steps discussed. The evaluation considers that PPD has the required capacity to continue with key agreed activities with internal resources. However, due to the lack of resources and limited institutional capacity, DOA would require additional continued support. It would have been useful for ITC to have prepared a time-bound agreed action plan with designated responsibilities.

### EU Added Value<sup>67</sup>

#### Could the identified results have been achieved without EU intervention? Were there clear benefits of EU-level action to Lao PDR and Viet Nam?

120. The support for strengthening plant health and food safety is limited in both Lao PDR and Viet Nam. Traditionally, these areas do not receive adequate attention from the policymakers. Targeted technical assistance in these areas is limited. Moreover, awareness and knowledge about the requirements for the EU market about agricultural products was limited. The EU support enabled

<sup>67</sup> EU added value: the extent to which the intervention brings additional benefits to what would have resulted from Member States' interventions only in the partner country. Under the principle of subsidiarity (Article 5 Treaty on European Union), the EU should only act when the objectives can be better achieved by Union action rather than by potentially varying action by Member States. It requires consideration of the value and improvements, which are caused by the EU rather than another party taking action. Further information can be found in the [EU Evaluation methodological approach](#).

the capacity development of DOA in Lao PDR and PPD in Viet Nam. Selected producers and exporters, as well as other actors in the product value chain, are better informed due to the support they obtained through the SYMST project funded by the EU. Training, workshops, knowledge products on SPS and the EU market access, and GAP were possible due to EU support for the project. The value chain actors envisaged greater benefits from potential export opportunities to the EU market in terms of a premium price for their produce and access to a large market because of compliance with high standards for SPS measures. Furthermore, they also saw benefits from EVFTA for agriculture exports. The evaluation notes that trade is an exclusive competence of the EU, and the EU is responsible for laws and regulations of traded matters as well as the negotiations and conclusion of trade agreements the EU Member States would not have been in the same position to provide support through bilateral or multilateral assistance programmes. These would not have been feasible without the EU support. The EU's financial support for the project was also instrumental in mobilizing ITC's expertise in value chain development, MSME development, market linkages, and access to a pool of specialists.

### **Was the assumption that the objectives of the intervention could best be met by action at the EU level valid?**

121. The action at the EU level ensured that the stakeholders in both countries were adequately advised about the importance of SPS and GAP directed to the EU market requirements. Overall, the assumptions of the objectives were valid. However, different country contexts would have required a differentiated approach with more focus on quality improvement in Lao PDR and export market orientation in Viet Nam. While the assumption that an LDC (Lao PDR) would benefit from knowledge and technology transfer from a more developed country (Thailand) as per the original project design was valid, it proved challenging when Thailand withdrew from the project and Viet Nam came on board. It would have been more effective if EU had supported country-specific projects – one for Lao PDR and the other for Viet Nam.

## **7. CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED**

### **Conclusions**

122. Focus on plant health and food safety is an integral part of agricultural value chain development for products destined for both domestic and export markets. With the EU support, ITC implemented the SYMST project which aimed to improve food safety through better governance in Lao PDR and Viet Nam. It focussed on strengthening the regulatory framework for control of plant health and pesticide use in selected F&V and other plant products. The identification phase (first year of the project) determined the selection of products (basil, chilli, rice and watermelon in LAO PDR and black pepper, dragon fruit, and pomelo in Viet Nam) based on the prevalence of pests and potential market opportunities. It emphasized the application of norms and standards which involved using approved pesticides not exceeding maximum residue levels, adoption of GAP including IPM, and preparation for access to the EU markets. Watermelon was included based on its potential in the Chinese market with particular focus on pest control and use of approved pesticides. The project was implemented by the ITC Quality Management Team in partnership with DOA in Lao PDR and PPD in Viet Nam.

123. The project contributed to improved awareness and knowledge of the technical staff at DOA and PPD and selected private sector entities in both countries including current or aspiring exporters and pesticide suppliers. The demonstration farm approach adopted by the project at the farm level was suitable, but its dissemination impact beyond the demonstration farms varied across products and countries. The private sector entities were relatively more active in Viet Nam compared to Lao PDR, partly due to prior knowledge and involvement in export markets. The perception surveys with project stakeholders confirmed that the project contributed to improved awareness and knowledge, but at the same time, they also felt that there were substantial gaps in the transition from knowledge to attitude and to practice. More efforts are needed to further enhance knowledge about SPS compliance and GAP in farming operations.

124. The capacity of regulatory and control institutions has also improved because of (i) access to information on market requirements, (ii) updates on evolving SPS requirements from the EU markets, (iii) information on MRLs, (iv) access to the list of approved pesticides including those with biological agents, and (v) capacity building training in the identification of pests and laboratory analysis of pesticide residuals in F&V. The government's focus on institutional strengthening in Viet Nam also stems from the perspective of EVFTA and increased resource allocation to SPS

compliance by strengthening institutional capacity supported by deployment of specialists and organizing training events. The project has also strengthened Lao PDR's regulatory environment by updating some of the key regulations. However, institutional capacity continues to remain weak, and enforcement of regulations is likely to be a challenge.

125. The project facilitated the participation of nine Lao PDR and ten Viet Nam aspiring or current exporters/enterprises to Thaifex in May 2022 and May 2023 (trade fair held in Bangkok) which served as an opportunity for them to prepare for trade fair events with enhanced presentation and communication skills as well as establish contacts for market opportunities. The events provided limited opportunities in linking with the buyers from the EU markets.
126. The evaluation conclusions suggest that the project was overall moderately satisfactory.
127. **Relevance.** The project design addressed one of the critical aspects of agricultural value chain quality improvement with a focus on food safety and plant health. The product selection in both countries should have been done based on comparative advantage analysis. A stocktaking exercise about other initiatives in the two countries would have strengthened project design. The design would have benefitted from a revisit to the project design after Viet Nam came on board and a differentiated approach to the two project countries would have been more useful. The focus on the preparation of Lao PDR for the EU market was somewhat premature. Furthermore, while SPS was an important aspect of the value chain, the project would have benefitted from consideration given to other aspects such as market structure and productivity enhancement accompanied by proper economic analysis to convince the stakeholders about the benefits of the adoption of improved/new practices. Also, a dissemination plan in the project design would have been helpful. Further clarity in cross-country knowledge sharing and collaboration in the project design was also needed. *Overall, the project performance is assessed as "moderately relevant" with a score of 4.*
128. **Coherence.** The project aligned with the mandates of both the ITC and the EU. Both Lao PDR and Vietnam became contracting parties to the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) and deposited their instrument of adherence. However, there were limited synergies in project design and implementation with interventions from other development partners, including the private sector. Cross-country collaboration between the two countries remained limited. Given the complexities in the value chains of the supported products, joint programming and implementation would have further benefitted both countries. *Overall, the project coherence is assessed as moderately satisfactory, with a score of 4.*
129. **Effectiveness.** The project delivered all but one output (B2B). It achieved three of the five outcome targets, two remained unsubstantiated and one was partially achieved. The project should have focussed on achieving the outcomes which completing activities associated with outputs. The project could have benefitted from collaboration and synergies with other initiatives in the two countries. The implementation of project activities was staggered and required regular push from the ITC project team. It would have been better if the PPD officer and a DAO Officer had better workload distribution to fully dedicate to the responsibilities of the SYMST. The responsible officers in both countries had multiple responsibilities and they could give only limited attention to the SYMST project. *Overall, the project performance is assessed as "moderately effective" with a score of 4.*
130. **Efficiency.** The project encountered almost one year of start-up delays and some of the activities were adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. However, these were factors external to the project and beyond the control of ITC, PPD, and DOA. Where feasible, the project supported virtual collaboration and delivery. The performance of the consultants was satisfactory, and ITC was able to mobilize a combination of international and national consultants. ITC also managed the project costs efficiently by combining activities in the two countries and/or combining activities in other projects/countries based on operational needs. Weekly meetings with the teams in both countries helped project implementation, but some of the stakeholders preferred smaller group meetings and less frequent ones (fortnightly or monthly). Furthermore, the project would have benefitted from country-level support rather than regional/subregional interventions. The knowledge-sharing opportunities between the two countries remained limited. *The EU's support and ITC's role in project implementation are assessed satisfactory and the project performance is rated "efficient" with a score of 5.*
131. **Potential Impact.** The project raised awareness about food safety and the harmful effects of pesticide residues among the participating farmers and other actors in the value chain. The individual and institutional capabilities also improved because of project support. The impact on the

third result area (market access) was weak largely due to the pandemic> The project would have explored opportunities within the subregion as well. Due to the limited scope of the project, the impact on human health could not be substantiated. *Overall, the project impact is assessed as “moderately positive,” with a score of 4.*

132. **Potential Sustainability.** The project achievements of the project are likely to be partially sustained, primarily due to funding and human resource constraints. In Viet Nam, experts are spread across the country while there are only a few specialists who can support agricultural value chains. Difficult macroeconomic conditions in Lao PDR point that the public sector will continue to feel funding squeeze. Similarly, in Viet Nam, there are diverse initiatives launched by the government in the agriculture sector, and there is less certainty that the SYMST benefits can be sustained over time. *Overall, the sustainability of project benefits is assessed as “moderately sustainable” with a score of 4.*
133. **EU Added Value.** The EU’s support for the project raised awareness and knowledge about the requirements for agricultural products (F&V and other plant products) in the EU markets and enhanced institutional capacity in pest identification and proper use of approved pesticides on demonstration farms. EUDs also participated in TWGs in both countries and PRC in Lao PDR and guided as needed. These would not have been feasible in a systematic way without the EU’s support. *Overall, the EU Added Value was assessed as “satisfactory” with a score of 5.*

### Lessons Learned

134. Cross-country collaboration requires formal agreement and resource commitments as well as mutual goals/interests/expectations and a common framework/forum for cooperation. Cross-border learning can deliver win-win results with sufficient buy-in from concerned authorities and countries. It was also an intent of the project which envisaged that Lao PDR would benefit from knowledge and technology exchange with Thailand under the original project design and with Viet Nam under the revised design. According to the project team, during the identification phase, initial consultation took place with exporters in Thailand. Also, the Thai Fruit and Vegetable Association had confirmed their interest in expanding links with exporters and farmers in Lao PDR. Due to Thailand’s withdrawal from the project, the collaboration did not progress except a field visit of Lao PDR laboratory officials to a Thai Laboratory and a draft memorandum of understanding between the two laboratories. . Furthermore, due to the short project implementation period and focus on the achievement of planned activities, meaningful collaboration between the agencies in Lao PDR and Viet Nam could not proceed. The project needed a mechanism for cross-country collaboration. A framework or mechanism for knowledge sharing is equally important.
135. **Multi-country projects are better served with a differentiated approach and synergies.** The intervention logic should spell out a clear rationale and objective related to cross-country collaboration.. Countries like Lao PDR and Viet Nam are at various stages of the development process. A single approach with an aim at a single market (e.g. EU or China) may not deliver the intended results. Countries would benefit from a market segmentation approach with targeted intervention based on products identified for the support. These can be progressively developed from domestic markets to subregional, regional, and global markets. Based on the quality and volume of production, it may take more time to be feasible for entry into the EU market. In the SYMST project, basil and chilli for the EU market were somewhat premature.
136. **A project design requires a holistic approach to value chain development based on partnerships.** The SYMST project had a narrow focus with a strong emphasis on pest control and plant health for food safety and export to the EU market for the most part and to the China market for watermelon. The project would have benefitted from robust consultations with stakeholders in the value chain of each product, including producers, traders, processors, packhouses, pesticide and fertilizer dealers, and exporters. As identified in the perception surveys of farmers, plant protection staff, and exporters (including aspiring exporters) support for the direct linkages with the importers and access to finance in both project countries were needed. The key informant interviewees also felt that focus was needed in addressing climate resilience and access to improved technology in pest management as well as GAP. There is also a need to demonstrate the economic and environmental benefits of pest and GAP management. The value chain actors are likely to respond when they see returns to their investments. A proper stocktaking of stakeholder activities and synergies across various stages in the value chain with like-minded national, bilateral, and multilateral partners can deliver better results. Moreover, the private sector actors need to be active players in project design and implementation.

137. **The project duration requires flexibility and permits scaling up and/or replications.** The SYMST project encountered start-up delays due to the time taken for Thailand's withdrawal decision and the prolonged COVID-19 pandemic. While the project twice received a one-year extension, it did not permit scaling up or replications beyond demonstration farms. Furthermore, projects that seek behavioural changes need more time to transition from awareness and knowledge to changes in attitudes and practice. While awareness and knowledge about pesticide use and GAP have enhanced markedly, there is still a significant gap between knowledge, attitude, and practice about the use of pesticides and the application of GAP. Additional efforts are needed to support the environment for completing the transition process and scaling up and replication to other areas and products.
138. Institutional capacity building is a dynamic process and requires commitment and dedicated support from the highest level of the government. The non-tariff barriers including progressively stricter SPS requirements from the overseas markets for agricultural products in response to consumer demand to protect human health and the environment are realities exporting countries would continue to encounter. To respond to the changing market environment, commitment and dedicated support from the government are needed and reflected in progressive policy reforms and resource allocations for human resources, infrastructure, and equipment. The need for regular review and updating of governments' regulations in responding to evolving consumer food safety concerns and internal and external market demand is likely to continue. Similarly, given the evolving nature of SPS requirements from different countries, need to focus on continuous competency development through training and experience sharing within the country and regionally. Countries can immensely benefit from practical knowledge and effective collaborations.
139. **Adequate due diligence is required in product selection for sustainable export.** The prospects for sustainable export over a longer period need to be guided by in-depth due diligence including market research, comparative advantage in production and value chain development, and institutional capacity development in both public and private sectors. This is demonstrated by the Champahom Company's success in exporting rice for the first time to the EU market with strong potential for the future. The success has been a result of strong collaboration and private sector leadership in Lao PDR. Appendix 7 shows the area, production and export data of the Viet Nam products supported by the SYMST project. Data provides a mixed picture with no steady growth for any of the three commodities, which are vulnerable to production and market uncertainties.

## 8. RECOMMENDATIONS

### For the European Union or other future potential donor(s) of similar projects

1. **Support inter-country collaboration based on a clearly defined strategy.** The collaboration needs to demonstrate a win-win proposition for the participating countries.
2. Support a holistic approach to the product value chain development in partnership with other development partners. The support for plant health and SPS compliance is necessary but it alone is not enough for project effectiveness.

### For the International Trade Centre (ITC) – Quality Management Team

1. Include a clear roadmap or mechanism for cross-country knowledge exchange and the dissemination plan in multi-country projects. There needs to be a government-level commitment among the participating countries. The project focus should be on the achievement of project objectives (outcomes and impact) through relevant outputs and activities.
2. **Ensure active collaboration with other relevant development partners for synergies.** The project formulation process should consider initiatives/activities implemented by civil society organizations, government agencies, private sector entities, bilateral and multilateral development partners, and research/knowledge institutions at the regional and country levels.
3. **Take a holistic approach to the value chain in conceptualizing, designing, and implementing projects.** A project design should be based on proper mapping or stock-taking exercises and focus on strengthening or creating new synergies and collaborations across different initiatives and partners. It needs to be based on robust due diligence, including an assessment of institutional capacities of implementing and partnering agencies, market research, and comparative advantage analysis for product, market, and geographical coverage. The SYMST project could have benefitted from the required preparatory work. Multiple country projects are successful with a

clear understanding of cross-country commitments, required institutional capacity, and availability of resources. The support for food safety governance and SPS compliance is necessary but not sufficient. Also, the projects need to have a reasonable implementation period to test the concept and scale up or replicate it in other areas.

**4. Demonstrate economic and environmental benefits of intended interventions to convince the actors in the value chains.** These include producers, collectors, processors, and exporters. It is also important to ensure that the successful interventions can be scaled up or replicated in additional areas. It will also ensure the sustainability of project interventions. In the SYMST project, stakeholders did not experience tangible incremental benefits from SPS compliance and GAP adoption. While the project has increased awareness and knowledge among the participating farmers, there are significant gaps in their attitude and practice, largely due to uncertainties about the sustainable benefits.

**5. Adopt a phased approach in project development and implementation.** Countries are at various stages of development, and hence, they require different sets of interventions. For example, Lao PDR has the potential for the production and marketing of small-volume and high-value products. However, the country faces high freight and SPS compliance costs in shipping its products to distant markets. It may benefit from a differentiated approach – some products such as rice can have economies of scale, while others such as chilli and basil may be more appropriate for domestic and subregional markets.

**6. Support to reduce production and market uncertainties through providing reliable market information.** The farmers suffer from volatile product prices of their agricultural commodities due to external factors such as weather, market glut, or inefficient market structure. As a result, the smallholder farmers are more vulnerable to these uncertainties. In the SYMST project, a cooperative of green pomelo growers has experienced their strengths in negotiating better prices and maintaining product quality. Contract farming could be an option to stabilize price volatility and incomes of smallholder farmers to some extent. The private sector can play a key role with the support of clear government policy. Similarly, a crop insurance scheme could reduce the impact of weather uncertainties. While farmers are already seeking market price information using their mobile devices, it could be accurately assessed for efficiency and effectiveness and strengthened as required.

**7. Work with a wider group of stakeholders and promote domestic, subregional, regional, and global markets for products.** The SYMST project has been successful in disseminating information about the SPS import requirements for agricultural produce particularly in the EU markets. ITC can also tackle similar challenges confronting non-EU markets such as ASEAN, Australasia, and North America. Expansion of the product market is good in principle, but it should be guided by comparative advantage analysis and volume and quality of products produced in respective countries. Furthermore, there is a strong call from the SYMST stakeholders for linking producers and potential exporters with overseas importers.

**8. Support capacity-building at the subnational levels.** Based on the feedback during the data collection, the subnational agencies (province or district level) tend to have inadequate budgets, fewer staff taking multiple responsibilities, and limited analytical capacity. This applies to most of the countries but to a varying degree. ITC could also encourage tripartite collaborations among the public, private, and knowledge (research and academic) institutions.



## Appendix 1: Terms of Reference

### Final Evaluation of the Systematic Mechanism for Safer Trade (SYMST) Project EU Contract Number FOOD/2017/391-858 Laos PDR, Viet Nam, and Thailand

#### BRIEF BACKGROUND ON THE PROJECT AND CONTEXT

The Systematic Mechanism for Safer Trade (SYMST) project is implemented by the International Trade Centre (ITC), Sector and Enterprise Competitiveness (SEC) Section of the Division of Enterprise Competitiveness and Institutions (DECI). The project aims to provide support to two developing and least developed countries (LDC) in Asia in the area of pesticides use and control of the Fruit and Vegetable (F&V) sector, as well as on other plant and plant products supply chains, building on the major work undertaken by the European Union (EU), Codex Alimentarius (CODEX), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and other partners on Maximum Residue Levels (MRLs). The 58-month project, with a total budget of EUR 2 million (USD 2,277,400), started on 17 December 2018 and will end on 16 October 2023.

According to the initial agreement between the EU and ITC (signed December 2018), Thailand and Lao PDR were selected as the two countries to benefit from the project, one as a more advanced developing country and one as a Least Developed Country (LDC), which have agriculture and private sector development as focal themes for EU support.

The project aims to develop a systematic approach to assist the governments and private sector stakeholders in two target countries among Lao PDR, Viet Nam and Thailand, to identify, prioritize and address problems related to compliance with regulatory measures on plant health and pesticides in the Fruit and Vegetable (F&V) sector.

The two countries were selected considering the number of interceptions and rejections of F&V products due to pesticides and MRL problems. According to the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) and the European Union Notification System for Plant Health Interceptions (EUROPHYT), between January 2016 and November 2018, there were 578 notifications. Out of these, 50 notifications concerned Laos PDR, Thailand, or Viet Nam (e.g. unauthorised substance carbofuran (0.04 mg/kg - ppm) in yard long beans from Laos, via Viet Nam). For the same period, the EUROPHYT database indicated 272 interceptions from Laos PDR, out of which 209 with harmful organisms and 988 interceptions from Thailand, with 178 with harmful organisms. Thailand was included in the EU list of a third country subject to increased levels of official controls. Lao PDR had adopted a new pesticide management decree aimed at environmental and human health protection, and the National Nutrition Strategy to 2025 and Plan of Action 2016-2020 identified critical issues of contaminated food with illegal substances.

Consultations with the EU Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety (DG-SANTE) and experts in the two countries were needed to address their respective challenges. The potential to expand the export potential of F&V and other plant and plant products, such as Lao rice, was also considered. The Agriculture Development Strategy 2025-2030 by Lao PDR aims to support industrialization and export opportunities. The potential spillover effect to other major crops, such as rice, was also considered. Complementarities with other EU technical assistance programs, the EU-Asia cooperation on (Phyto)Sanitary (SPS) and Food Safety Regulation, and the Better Training for Safer Food (BTSF) programme were also considered. Synergies with other ITC's technical assistance programmes in the region and in the countries (i.e. ARISE+, Environmental Hub) were also taken into consideration.

The agreement was amended in April 2020 as a result of meetings and consultations during the inception phase to confirm the two beneficiary countries (initially Thailand and Lao PDR) for the project. However, during the consultations, the Government of Thailand indicated its inability to join the project at the moment. Consequently, the Vietnamese authorities were contacted, and they agreed to be part of the project in a meeting with the EU Delegation (EUD) and through a letter addressed to the EUD. Therefore, the two confirmed beneficiary countries for the project were changed to Lao PDR and Viet Nam. Despite the non-participation of the Government of Thailand in the project, it was agreed with the EUD to Thailand to ensure the possibility of involving Thai officials/private sector representatives in some activities in Lao PDR and Viet Nam at regional level.

In addition, during the first Project Review Committee (PRC) Meeting in Vientiane, Lao PDR on 29 January 2019, members requested an extension of the project timeframe to accommodate production cycles of target crops. Further, Viet Nam joined the project during the course of the second year of the project, and an adequate timeframe was required for the implementation of project activities. A no-cost extension of 12 months was requested as there had been some delay in starting project activities in Lao PDR and the late confirmation of the second country. A second no-cost extension was requested and approved, extending the project to 16 October 2023.

#### Project Description

##### **Overall Objective and Specific Objective (Outcome)**

The overall objective of the project is to improve food safety through better governance in Viet Nam and Lao PDR. The specific objective (outcome) is to strengthen regulatory framework for control of plant health and pesticides in

the F&V sector and other plant products (i.e. rice in the case of Laos) through the application of norms and standards and improve market access.

### Outputs

According to the logical framework (see Annex I), the project has 3 expected results (outputs) as follows:

- ER 1: Improved awareness and knowledge of private sector and authorities on plant health and pesticides issues in fruits, vegetables and other plant products.
- ER 2: Improved performance of the regulatory and control institutions and improved capacity of the fruits, vegetables and other plant products supply chain actors to comply with plant health and pesticides control.
- ER 3: Strengthened market access opportunities and facilitated business linkages of fruits, vegetables and other plant products actors from target countries to EU and regional target markets.

### Cross-cutting issues

Cross-cutting issues related to environment, gender and sustainability were also to be addressed. Indeed, effective pesticide control and management reduce negative impacts not only on health and trade but also on the environment. As indicated above, the use of natural or organic pesticides were also to be promoted. Since women are the core of the agricultural workforce, the project was to seek to the optimum possible involvement of women and women associations among the actors of the value chains. The project aims to contribute to improving governance through better transparency and regulatory framework on one hand and increased involvement of the private sector and consumer associations in the consultation process on the other.

The project is relevant for the Agenda 2030. It aims to contribute to the progressive achievement of Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 "Sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth" by increasing productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, ensuring sustainable food production systems and implementing resilient agricultural practices through safer pesticides use. It also aims to promote progress towards SDG Goal 8 "Decent Work and Economic Growth", Goal 9 "Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure" and SDG Goal 17: "Revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development".

### Stakeholders and Beneficiaries

The project targets policymakers, institutions, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and smallholder farmers. At the level of the policymakers, the project will give recommendations on the legal and institutional framework and encourage the development of road maps to address the pesticides and plant health issues. At the institutional level, the targets are the main institutions dealing with food safety, standards, and plant health ( e.g. Ministries of Agriculture, Health, Competent Authorities, SPS Notification Authority, National Enquiry Points). In the private sector, the main actors along the F&V and other plant products value chains (from smallholder farmers and farmers associations, collectors, storage facilities, traders, transporters, exporters and PPP dealers) will directly benefit from the project interventions in terms of building their understanding and capacity to comply and demonstrate compliance with plant health standards and pesticides residues measures and good practices. Private sector institutions such as Chambers of Commerce, Export Promotion Agencies, and Sectoral associations are involved for bringing the voices of the producers and exporters together.

Consumer associations are also involved given their growing concern about pesticides in food and their critical role to ensure that products are safe for consumers. National and international buyers of F&V and other plant products were consulted to collect information on their current and new requirements on plant health and pesticides, as well as the issues they have had with the exports from the two countries.

**Table 1: SYMST Partners and Beneficiaries Lao PDR Partners and Beneficiaries**

Lao PDR Partners and Beneficiaries
Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF)
Department of Agriculture (DoA)
Department of Planning and Cooperation, MAF
Department of Agricultural Extension and Cooperatives (DAEC), MAF
Food and Drug Department (FDD), MOH
Department of Trade Promotion (DTP), MOIC
Department of Foreign Trade Policy (DFTP), MOIC
Department of Planning and Cooperation (DPC), MOIC
Department of Import and Export (DIMEX), MOIC
Clean Agriculture Development Centre (CADC), MAF MOIC
Meuangsing District Agriculture and Forestry Office
Vieng phoukha District Agriculture and Forestry Office
Sangthong District Agriculture and Forestry Office
Pakgneum District Agriculture and Forestry Office
Paksong District Agriculture and Forestry Office
Soukumma District Agriculture and Forestry Office

Phonthong District Agriculture and Forestry Office
Boten Plant quarantine border checkpoint
Lao -Thai friendship bridge - Plant quarantine border checkpoint
Songmek Plant quarantine border checkpoint
Luangnamtha Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office
Vientiane Capital Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office
Champasak Provincial Agriculture and Forestry Office
Farmers and Sector Associations
European Chamber of Commerce and Industry (EuroCham)
Lao National Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LNCCI)
Plant Protection Centre (PPC)
Excellence Environment Center
Faculty of Agriculture, National University of Lao
Planning and cooperation Division
Plant Quarantine Division
Regulatory and Agri Input Registration Division
Standard and Certification Division
Agriculture Processing Management Division
Private sector stakeholders that are part of the model value chains developed e.g. farms, processors exporters, packhouses

**Table 2: SYMST Partners and Beneficiaries Viet Nam Partners and Beneficiaries**

Viet Nam Partners and Beneficiaries	
Ministry of Agriculture and Rural development (MARD)	
Plant protection department (PPD)	
Ministry of Health (MOH)	
Ministry of Industry and Trade (MOIT)	
National Agro-forestry Fisheries Quality Assurance Department (NAFIQAD)	
Plant Quarantine Division (PQD) – under PPD	
Food Safety Division (FSD) – under PPD	
Southern Pesticide Control and Testing Centre (SPCC) - under PPD	
Northern Pesticide Control and Testing Centre (NPCC) - under PPD	
Post-Entry Plant Quarantine Center No.1 and No.2 - under PPD	
The North Regional Plant Protection Center – under PPD	
The Plant Quarantine Diagnostic Centre (PQDC) – under PPD	
The Provincial Level- Plant Protection Departments (P-PPD)	
Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS)	
Vietnam Gardening Association (VACVINA)	
Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI)	
Vietnam Trade Promotion Agency (Vietrade)	
Vietnam Pesticide Association (VIPA)	
Vietnam Industry and Trade Information Center (VITIC)	
Vietnam Pepper Association (VPA)	
European Chamber of Commerce (EuroCham)	
Private sector stakeholders that are part of the model value chains developed e.g. farms, processors exporters	

According to project document the SYMST communication and visibility strategy aims to promote the project and its results among beneficiaries, stakeholders, and a wider audience, increasing impact and visibility for the EU, ITC, and the pilot developing countries. It also aims to disseminate information on project activities, highlight non-compliance with regulatory frameworks, build awareness on EU regulations, and facilitate project management and monitoring among stakeholders. The table below sets out the SYMST target groups

**Table 3: Target groups**

Target Group	Description	Specific objectives for each target group
Project Partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Governments of target beneficiary countries</li> <li>- EU Delegation in Thailand and Lao PDR and Viet Nam</li> <li>- EU DG-INTPA and EU DG-SANTE</li> <li>- EFSA</li> <li>- ITC as implementing agency</li> <li>- Project Regional Steering Committee and National Coordinating Committee</li> <li>- Other technical partners and programmes</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Raise awareness on the roles of EU and project partners and ensure all key stakeholders acquire a full understanding of the project</li> <li>- Coordinate and monitor project implementation against project logframe and workplan and share information for forward planning and strategic guidance</li> <li>- Report progress on project implementation and results</li> <li>- Share information for selection of pilot beneficiary countries, value chains, identification of pesticides and products that may be highly affected by the SPS measures</li> </ul>

Target Group	Description	Specific objectives for each target group
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Build synergies and avoid overlaps with other EU plant health and pesticides related programmes and facilitate exchanges of technical knowledge</li> </ul>
<b>Direct Project Beneficiaries</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Beneficiaries in the pilot countries along the pilot value chains</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ensure that the beneficiary population is aware of the roles of ITC and of the EU in the SPS plant health and MRL area</li> <li>- Ensure direct beneficiaries' buy-in and support throughout project implementation</li> <li>- Provide regular information on the progress and share practical information about the benefits of the project</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Policy Makers and Regulators</li> <li>- SPS-related institutions dealing with food safety, plant and animal health, such as relevant departments of Ministries responsible for Agriculture, Health, Competent Authorities</li> <li>- SPS Notification Authorities, National Enquiry Points</li> <li>- Other national institutions</li> <li>- Contributing to the trade system (laboratories, certification bodies, inspection bodies, research institutes, academia, national standards bodies, and customs departments)</li> <li>- Private sector institutions such as Chambers of Commerce, Export Promotion Agencies, and Sectoral associations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improve capacities to better respond to regulations and changes in the regulatory framework of pesticides usage</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Actors of the Fruits and Vegetables supply chains</li> <li>- Farmers associations and farmers'</li> <li>- Collectors, Storage facilities, transporters, Traders and Exporters</li> <li>- Chemical companies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Improve knowledge and understanding of plant health, the use of pesticides and corresponding requirements of external markets</li> <li>- Improve capacity to comply and demonstrating compliance with plant health, pesticides residues measures and good practice</li> </ul>
<b>Wider audience and general public</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Final project beneficiaries: men, women and youth</li> <li>- Consumers associations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Increase understanding of food safety issues related to pesticides; access to information and sensitization of market access requirements with related impact on trade, health and environment.</li> <li>- Raise awareness of how the EU and ITC work together in the SPS area to support understanding and compliance with pesticides regulations</li> <li>- Build credibility</li> </ul>

## Project Organization and Management

### **Project implementation structure**

The EU Delegation to Thailand is responsible for the coordination and management of SYMST and closely coordinates with the EU Delegations in the respective countries.

The Project is implemented by ITC. In both countries, the main project counterparts and coordination bodies are within the respective Ministries of Agriculture. In Lao PDR, it is the Department of Agriculture (DOA) at the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF) and in Viet Nam is the Department of International Affairs at the Plant Protection Department (PPD) of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD).

The SYMST Project started its official implementation in Q1 2019 (signed on 16 December 2018), but the effective implementation was delayed and very different in the two countries. In Lao PDR, implementation started only in Q3 2019 when the EU and ITC agreed not to hold activities in the country further and proceed with activities while still waiting for the decision of the Thai Government about the project. In Viet Nam, the implementation of activities started one year later than in Lao PDR in Q3 2020 following the official confirmation of the EU and the Vietnamese government to join the project.

In Lao PDR SYMST was officially launched on 29 January 2020 at an official ceremony; while in Viet Nam, there was no official ceremony, and the Project was presented to stakeholders during an EU webinar in January 2021.

The inception phase started in January 2019 and ended on 30 January 2020; in LAO PDR, this phase coincided with the identification phase, where the main SPS issues related to plant health and pesticides and the target products and markets were identified and the action plan to address the main problems developed. Due to the late

confirmation of Viet Nam as the second target country, the identification phase in Viet Nam had to be extended beyond the inception phase as foreseen in the Description of Action.

During the inception phase, the project management structure was established in Lao PDR. The Project Review Committee (PRC) was set up as the project governance body, and its membership, roles and responsibilities were defined. The Project Technical Working Group (TWG) was established to contribute to define the workplans and monitor the progress of activities. The TWG also acts as a coordination mechanism to address plant health and pesticide issues.

In Viet Nam, the project management structure was established with a TWG identified as the body at the national level in charge of contributing to the development of the workplans. No PRC was established in accordance with the Description of Action (“Implementation Arrangements”).

A Bilateral Coordination Committee (BCC) among the three EU Delegations, ITC and the National Project Coordinators were also identified in the Implementation Arrangements for annual reviews of the overall progress of the project and to provide recommendations for the implementation and build synergies among countries. Regular PRC meetings have been taking place in addition to ITC-EU bilateral meetings and meetings involving the three EU delegations involved.

## **OBJECTIVES, SCOPE AND USERS OF THE FINAL EVALUATION**

### **Objectives**

As stated in the initial Description of the Action, the project would be subject to an independent final evaluation. In 2022, it was agreed with the EU that the evaluation would be carried out by the ITC Independent Evaluation Unit (IEU) at the end of the project in 2023.

The evaluation aims to determine if the intervention has been successful in achieving its goals and to identify its strengths and weaknesses. More specifically, the evaluation is expected to provide:

- an overall independent assessment of the performance of the SYMST project, paying particular attention to its different levels of results measured against its expected objectives and the reasons underpinning such results; and
- key lessons learned, conclusions and related recommendations in order to improve current and future interventions.

### **Scope**

The evaluation will assess all elements of the project design, implementation, and management, including processes, operations, and results. It will cover the period from the project implementation (December 2018) to the present. As the project will end on 16 October 2023, potential results related to impact and sustainability will be included. The geographic scope is Lao PDR and Viet Nam.

### **Users**

The main users of this evaluation will be the implementing organization – ITC, the EU Delegations concerned (to Thailand, to Lao PDR and to Viet Nam, respectively), the European Commission Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG-INTPA), the Lao PDR Department of Agriculture (DOA) at the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF), and the Viet Nam Department of International Affairs at the Plant Protection Department (PPD) of the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD).

## **EVALUATION CRITERIA AND SUGGESTED QUESTIONS**

### **Indicative Evaluation Questions**

The specific evaluation questions in Table 4 below are indicative. Following initial consultations and document analysis, the evaluation consultant will provide a complete list of finalized questions in the draft inception report. The evaluation questions should be tailored to the project and particular issues of interest. The draft inception report will be reviewed by the IEU and key project stakeholders (including the funders – the EU) before their finalization. A complete and finalized set of evaluation questions with an indication of specific judgement criteria and indicators, as well as the relevant data collection sources and tools, will be included in the final inception report.

The evaluation will use the [OECD-DAC evaluation criteria](#): relevance, coherence, efficiency, effectiveness, early signs of impact, and sustainability. In addition, the evaluation will assess the intervention through an EU-specific evaluation criterion, which is the EU added value. Furthermore, the evaluation will consider the extent to which the relevant SDGs and their interlinkages were identified; the [universal values of Leave No One Behind and the Human Rights-Based Approach](#) was followed during design, and the extent to which they have been reflected in the implementation of the intervention, its governance and monitoring.

Assessment criteria will integrate cross-cutting dimensions as set out in the [ITC guidelines on mainstreaming sustainable and inclusive trade](#), including human rights and gender equality, [inclusion of persons with disabilities](#), youth, green growth, and social responsibility.

The objective is to assess to which extent these have been reflected in the design, implementation and results of the project. To that aim, questions dedicated to cross-cutting issues are included as part of the guiding questions for each evaluation criterion.

**Table 4. Evaluation Criteria and Suggested Evaluation Questions**

Criteria and focus	Guiding evaluation questions
<b>Relevance: Is the intervention doing the right things?</b>	
<b>How did the project objectives and design respond to beneficiaries', global, country, and partner/institution needs, policies, and priorities?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Was a needs assessment conducted, and did it sufficiently consider the needs and priorities of the beneficiaries in the country? Do the project results respond to the needs of all stakeholders (including women and youth) as identified at the design stage?</li> <li>Was the project design and theory of change (ToC) appropriately adapted to the contexts in each country?</li> <li>Did the project align with and support national developments and priorities as well as Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2, 8, 9, and 17 as set out in the project document?</li> <li>Were cross-cutting dimensions including human rights and gender equality, inclusion of youth and persons with disabilities, green growth, and social responsibility reflected in the design of the project? Has integrating these cross-cutting issues been relevant to achieving the goals and results of the project?</li> <li>Are the objectives and design of the project in line with the mandate and corporate objectives of <a href="#">ITC's Strategic Plan</a>? Did the project build on ITC's strengths and comparative advantages?</li> </ul>
<b>Coherence: How well does the intervention fit?</b>	
<b>How did the project support internal and external coherence, complementarity, synergies, harmonization and coordination with other interventions carried out by ITC, and other entities including the EU?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regarding internal coherence, what is the compatibility of the project within ITC? Did the project establish synergies and interlinkages with other interventions carried out by ITC?</li> <li>Regarding external coherence, was the project compatible and consistent with the interventions of other actors' interventions (including those of the EU) in the same countries and sectors? To what extent does the project respond to trade and development strategies of Lao PDR and Viet Nam, and possibly Thailand?</li> <li>Has there been complementarity, harmonization and coordination with other entities? If so, to what extent did the project add value while avoiding duplication of effort?</li> </ul>
<b>Effectiveness: Is the intervention achieving its objectives?</b>	
<b>What has the project achieved in terms of its objectives, and have results be distributed across the different beneficiaries?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Did the project achieve, or is expected to achieve, its objectives and its attributable results (such as institutional strengthening, estimation of trade impacts (exports) and interceptions/compliance) along the causal pathway, including any differential results across groups? Are the results distributed across different groups?</li> <li>Have the activities and outputs been delivered according to the quality requirements and the workplans? Were baseline data established to measure progress?</li> <li>Did stakeholders have a good understanding of the project? Do all beneficiaries have access to the project's deliverables (training, publications, events, etc.)? Are the project deliverables being used by beneficiaries as intended? Are there any factors that prevent beneficiaries from accessing the results or services of the project?</li> <li>Are there any results related to cross-cutting issues related to human rights and gender equality, youth, environment and social responsibility?</li> </ul>
<b>Efficiency: How well are resources being used?</b>	
<b>What has been done to convert inputs into outputs, outcomes and impacts in the most cost-effective way possible within the intended timeframe?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Did the project deliver results in an economical and timely way? Have inputs (funds, expertise, human resources, time, etc.) been converted into outputs, outcomes and impacts (relative to the entire results chain) in the most cost-effective way possible within the intended timeframe?</li> <li>How well was the project managed in order to address operational efficiency within ITC as well as the local project coordination teams? How effective have the management arrangements been in the delivery of the project? To what extent were the project governance structures (BCC, PEC, PRC, etc.) in Lao PDR and Viet Nam effective in supporting and guiding the project management? Was the administrative cost comparable to that of other development partners?</li> <li>Was a monitoring system put in place that enabled effective management, implementation and accountability? Was the monitoring system revised or changed during the course of the project's implementation?</li> </ul>
<b>Potential Impact: What difference will the intervention make?</b>	
<b>What has been achieved by the project in terms of improved food safety through better governance in Viet Nam and Lao PDR?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Has the project generated or is expected to generate significant positive or negative, intended or unintended, higher-level effects, including as measured by the outcome-level indicators? Can observed changes be linked to the project's interventions?</li> <li>Has the project strengthened the regulatory framework for control of plant health and pesticides in the F&amp;V sector and other plant products?</li> <li>Has the project strengthened compliance with quality and food safety requirements of the target export markets and built related capacity?</li> <li>To what extent has the project contributed to SDGs 2, 8, 9, and 17?</li> </ul>

Criteria and focus	Guiding evaluation questions
<b>Potential Sustainability: Will the benefits last?</b>	
<b>What is the extent to which partners and beneficiaries are enabled, committed and likely to contribute to ongoing benefits?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What is the extent to which the net benefits of the project continue, or are likely to continue, in particular from the perspective of institutional strengthening?</li> <li>• Are the financial, economic, social, environmental, and institutional capacities of the systems needed to sustain the net benefits over time in place? Has engagement with stakeholders been strengthened under SYMST? If so, what are the recommendations to improve this engagement further?</li> <li>• How effective has the project been in establishing national ownership in each country?</li> <li>• What are the factors that may influence the achievement or non-achievement of sustainability of the project including cross-cutting issues?</li> <li>• Was a specific exit strategy or approach prepared and agreed upon by key partners to ensure sustainability?</li> </ul>
<b>EU Added Value<sup>68</sup></b>	
<b>What is the added value of EU support through the SYMST, at the sectoral level?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Could the identified results have been achieved without EU intervention? Were there clear benefits of EU-level action?</li> <li>• Was the assumption that the objectives of the intervention could best be met by action at the EU level valid?</li> </ul>

## METHODOLOGY

The evaluation process and methodological approach is expected to follow the principles set forth in the [ITC Evaluation Guidelines](#). Furthermore, it shall be performed in line with the [Norms and Standards for Evaluation](#), integrating [Human Rights and Gender Equality](#), and respecting the [Ethical Guidelines for Evaluation](#) and published by the United Nations Evaluation Group (UNEG).

According to UNEG guidelines, evaluations should be carried out in a participatory and ethical manner. The evaluation should take account of cultural differences, local customs, religious practices, gender roles, and age throughout the planning, implementation, and reporting of the evaluation. UNEG guidance also specifies that the chosen methodology for an evaluation should explicitly address issues of gender and under-represented groups and be in line with the UN system's commitment to the human rights-based approach.

The evaluation will involve four (4) phases through the evaluation process: (1) Desk Review Phase, (2) Data Collection and Analysis Phase, (3) Reporting Phase, and (4) Management Response Phase. The sequencing of the evaluation and roles and responsibilities are outlined below.

### **Desk Review Phase**

The selected external evaluation consultant reviews the relevant ITC policies, strategies, and project documents and conducts interviews (face-to-face or virtual) with the ITC Project Manager and project team members. The consultant will prepare an inception report. The inception report should clarify the evaluation approach, project ToC and corresponding results chains tailored for each of the projects under evaluation, evaluation questions, evaluation matrix<sup>69</sup>, data collection methods and instruments, major analysis and findings based on desk review, evaluation framework, key issues to be assessed, data gaps to be addressed during evaluation, and timeline of the evaluation. The inception report will include a contextual analysis covering each of the project countries and sectors to be used to identify the most appropriate methodological approach for each country, including mitigation measures should local data collection not be feasible. The inception report should also include an indicative evaluation communication and learning plan. The desk review phase, including the review of the draft inception report and its finalization, should take approximately 5 weeks to complete from the contract starting date (see Table 5 for details).

### **Data Collection and Analysis Phase**

The selected consultant will apply the evaluation methods agreed in the inception report, to answer the evaluation questions identified in the inception report and in the evaluation matrix, including triangulation of methods to ensure ideal coverage and assessment and the use of both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. Ideally, data collection would include obtaining data, including data collected through interviews with beneficiaries and stakeholders in the respective project countries. If certain conditions (such as travel restrictions, local health situation, or political instability) preclude on-site data collection, alternative forms of data collection must be considered. The evaluation will distil the findings that emerge from the data collected on the projects that contribute

<sup>68</sup> EU added value: the extent to which the intervention brings additional benefits to what would have resulted from Member States' interventions only in the partner country. Further information can be found in the [EU Evaluation methodological approach](#).

<sup>69</sup> An evaluation matrix is an organizing tool to help plan for the conduct of an evaluation. It is prepared during the inception phase of the evaluation, and is then used throughout the data collection, analysis and report writing phases. The evaluation matrix forms the main analytical framework for the evaluation. It reflects the evaluation questions to be answered and helps to consider the most appropriate and feasible method to collect data for answering each question. It guides the analysis and ensures that all data collected is analysed, triangulated and then used to answer the evaluation questions, leading to conclusions and recommendations.

to the SYMST project, and the analysis will examine the SYMST project from a synthetic perspective, assessing the project's relevance, coherence, effectiveness, efficiency, potential impact, and potential sustainability into a single and coherent final evaluation report. At the end of this phase, an update will be provided to the IEU, and the consultant will provide a presentation of findings and preliminary conclusions in a validation workshop. The data collection and analysis phase, including the validation workshop, should take approximately 6 weeks to complete (see Table 5 for details).

### **Reporting Phase**

Following data collection and analysis, the selected consultant will draft the final evaluation report. The draft should be shared with IEU for peer review and quality assurance. Thereafter, the IEU will share the revised draft with the project and other key stakeholders and partners, inviting comments. The comments will be acknowledged and addressed respectively by the selected consultant.

To ensure participation and ownership among key stakeholders, regular consultations will be conducted during the evaluation process. In concrete terms, this implies that key stakeholders (in particular, the SYMST team and the EU Programme Manager) will be consulted at the drafting stages of the (i) terms of reference, (ii) inception report, and (iii) evaluation report and will have the opportunity to provide comments. Moreover, it is envisaged to have a meeting with the SYMST team and the EUDs to present and discuss the findings before the conclusion of the final draft of the evaluation report. The reporting phase, including the review and approval of the draft evaluation report and its finalization, should take approximately 8 weeks to complete (see Table 5 for details).

### **Management Response Phase**

Upon completion of the evaluation, the SYMST project will prepare a management response and related action plan addressing each of the recommendations. In agreement with ITC management, project management, and other key stakeholders (e.g. EU), the IEU will be responsible for following up on the implementation of the evaluation recommendations and reporting the process of the implementation to the ITC Senior Management Committee.

## **TENTATIVE TIMEFRAME AND DELIVERABLES**

The evaluation is planned to be conducted in a timeframe of approximately six months, between October 2023 and March 2024. It should be noted that the estimated timeline is tentative; it is only to provide an indication as to the amount of time that should be expected for the evaluation process. If more or less time is required, it will be discussed between the consultant and the IEU. The evaluation process should be fully completed within 6 months after the end of the project. The timeframe identified in the table below is tentative; it is an estimate in order to provide an indication as to the amount of time that should be expected for each step. If more or less time is required for any of the steps, the timeline will be discussed between the Consultant and the ITC.

**Table 5: Tentative Timeframe and Deliverables**

Timeframe and Deliverables	Approx. Duration	Approx. Workdays
After the Consultant has been selected and hired, s/he completes an initial round of desk research and preliminary review of documentation of the project, including initial interviews to determine the methodology. IEU will review the Draft Inception Report to ensure its conformity with the TOR and quality requirements. Should there be a need for changes to the report, the ITC will request the Consultant to complete these changes. At the end of this period, the Consultant submits a Draft Inception Report (Deliverable 1) to the IEU.	2 to 3 weeks	10
The Draft Inception Report to all stakeholders for comments. Feedback and comments are sent to the IEU. At the end of this period, the IEU sends comments to the Evaluation Consultant.	1 week	
The Consultant answers questions, provides justifications, and/or incorporates changes into the Inception Report. At the end of this period, the Consultant submits the Final Inception Report (Deliverable 2) to the IEU, which includes the methodology, data collection instruments, and complete analysis of data collection methods, for approval. IEU circulates the Final Inception Report to stakeholders.	1 week	2
The Consultant carries out the evaluation according to the agreed methodology set out in the Inception Report. At the end of this period, the Consultant sends an update to the IEU on the collected findings.	3 to 4 weeks	15
The Consultant organizes and provides a presentation during a Validation Workshop (Deliverable 3), where the preliminary findings are presented and discussed, as well as preliminary conclusions and recommendations with key stakeholders.	1 to 2 weeks	1
The Consultant completes the write-up of the preliminary Draft Evaluation Report. At the end of this period, the Consultant submits the Draft Evaluation Report to the IEU.	2 weeks	10
The IEU reviews the preliminary Draft Evaluation Report to ensure its conformity with the TOR and quality requirements.	1 week	



Timeframe and Deliverables	Approx. Duration	Approx. Workdays
The Draft Evaluation Report (Deliverable 4) is completed and submitted to the IEU by the Consultant at the end of this period for circulation to stakeholders for comments and feedback.	2 weeks	10
The IEU circulates the Draft ER to all stakeholders for comments. At the end of this period, all stakeholders submit comments on the content of the draft report to the IEU for onward transmission to the Consultant.	2 weeks	
The Consultant answers questions, provides justifications, and/or incorporates changes into the Draft Evaluation Report. At the end of this period, the Consultant submits the Final Evaluation Report, Audit Trail, and a one-page evaluation highlights (Deliverable 5) to the IEU.	2 weeks	2
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>17 to 20 weeks</b>	<b>50</b>

#### ***Deliverable 1 – Draft inception report***

The inception report is a strategic and technical analysis that paves the way for the evaluation process. It will build on and be coherent with the TOR of the evaluation. It sets the context for the evaluation, particularly the conditions related to evaluability. The inception report defines what will be evaluated (evaluation questions and matrix) and how the process for conducting the evaluation will be deployed (evaluation methods, sources of data, and a workplan), and field visits (including a list of identified beneficiaries, with relevant contact details for interviewees and recipients of the questionnaire and focus group discussions, and interview schedules). Finally, the inception report will include an analysis of possible risks encountered during the evaluation process, together with a mitigation plan and a strategy for communication/dissemination of the evaluation report. The inception report will be based on the evaluation questions in the TOR, desk research, and early interviews. The inception report will address how the data is collected on each project, and its analysis will be distilled and synthesized to evaluate the SYMST project and produce a single and coherent evaluation report.

The inception report will include a contextual analysis covering each of the project countries to be used to identify the most appropriate methodological approach for each country, including mitigation measures should local data collection not be feasible. The consultant will submit the draft inception report one month after the contract has been signed.

The consultant completes an initial round of desk research and preliminary review of documentation to determine the evaluability of the project, including initial interviews to determine the methodology. At the end of this stage, the consultant submits a draft inception report.

#### ***Deliverable 2 – Final inception report***

The IEU will review the draft inception report to ensure its conformity with the TOR and quality requirements. Should these requirements not be met, the IEU will liaise directly with the consultant to rectify any issues identified. The IEU circulates the draft inception report to all key stakeholders (especially the funders – the EU) for comments and feedback. Comments and feedback are sent to the IEU, and the IEU will compile all comments and feedback and relay them to the consultant.

The consultant answers questions, provides justifications, and/or incorporates changes into the draft inception report. At the end of this period, the consultant submits the final inception report to the IEU, which will include the approved ToC, methodology, data collection instruments, and the complete analysis of data collection methods for approval. The IEU will circulate the final inception report to all key stakeholders.

#### ***Deliverable 3 – Update and Validation Workshop***

The consultant carries out the evaluation and implements the agreed methodology as set out in the inception report. At the end of this period, the consultant sends an update to the IEU on the collected findings and preliminary observations. In addition, the consultant will provide a presentation to be discussed during a validation workshop organized by the consultant. This workshop shall allow the consultant to present and discuss preliminary findings, conclusions, and potential recommendations with key stakeholders (project team and EUDs).

#### ***Deliverable 4 – Draft Evaluation Report***

Following the validation workshop, the consultant completes the write-up of the draft evaluation report, which will be the core product of the evaluation process. The draft evaluation report should be relevant to decision-making needs, written in a concise, clear, and easily understandable language, and of high scientific quality.

The final report should highlight the purpose, scope, and limitation of the evaluation and should contain an Executive Summary, a description of the applied methodology, evidence-based findings, conclusions, lessons learned, and recommendations directly derived from the evaluation findings and conclusions. The analysis should also highlight constraints, strengths on which to build, and opportunities for the SYMST project. Lessons learned should allow the users to know what is doable in the future and what should not have been part of the project and guide possible future phases on how development cooperation work should look when it comes to the F&V sector.

The report will be prepared in English and will preferably comprise not more than 40 pages, excluding the Executive Summary and annexes. The IEU will review the draft evaluation report to ensure its conformity with the TOR, the inception report, and quality requirements. Should these requirements not be met, the IEU will liaise with the consultant to rectify any issues identified. The IEU circulates the draft evaluation report to all key stakeholders for comments and feedback. Comments and feedback are sent to the IEU, and the IEU will compile all comments and feedback and relay them to the consultant.

***Deliverable 5 – Final Evaluation Report, Audit Trail, and Evaluation Highlights Summary***

The consultant will incorporate changes into the evaluation report and provide answers to questions and justifications, and account for these in an Audit Trail. The consultant will be responsible for the process of editing the text for finalization and transmission of the final report.

At the end of this period, the consultant submits to the IEU the final evaluation report, including the Audit Trail and a one-page summary of evaluation highlights to be used for dissemination purposes.

**ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES**

***Evaluation team and management***

The evaluation will be commissioned and managed by ITC's Independent Evaluation Office (IEU). The unit will hire an evaluation consultant, which will be managed by an ITC evaluation officer. The consultant is/are to be selected mainly based on expertise in the areas of evaluation, trade and development, and knowledge of the F&V sector. The consultant must sign a non-disclosure agreement to avoid possible conflicts of interest.

***ITC Independent Evaluation Unit***

The IEU will supervise and monitor the progress of the evaluation. The evaluation will be managed, and quality controlled by the IEU. The role of the IEU will be to provide guidance and oversee the evaluation process. The duties of the IEU will be to:

- Consult with key stakeholders to prepare for the evaluation;
- Prepare draft TOR for the evaluation, including key evaluation questions; circulate the draft TOR for comments and inputs from project management and funders;
- Manage the evaluation, including the hiring of the independent consultant; supervising the evaluation process; involving stakeholders in the process; ensuring the quality of deliverables; and conducting regular consultations and consensus-building activities;
- Establish all logistical arrangements for the evaluation regarding meetings and travel arrangements, when or if required;
- Provide technical comments to the draft inception report; ensure the draft inception report has determined the key evaluation questions the evaluation should answer;
- Circulate the draft inception report to key project stakeholders (i.e., project management team, funders, etc.); collect feedback and comments for review and onward submission to the consultant;
- Provide technical comments to the draft evaluation report;
- Manage the process of preparing the evaluation report, including the circulation of the draft report, collecting comments, and ensuring follow-up;
- Quality control the final evaluation report; send the final evaluation report to key stakeholders;
- Organize a stakeholder meeting to discuss the evaluation results;
- Ensure the management response is submitted and ensure proper follow-up on the recommendations and dissemination of results and lessons learned.

***SYMST Project Management Team***

The SYMST project management team will:

- Support implementation of the evaluation through collecting documentation and making it available to the IEU and/or directly to the consultant;
- Facilitate stakeholder meetings, including the provision of introductions required for the consultant to carry out meetings and interviews;
- Provide administrative, logistical, and practical support (including travel arrangements) to the consultant when required;
- Participate in the consultations during the evaluation process and provide feedback, comments and clarify expectations on accountability and learning issues;
- Provide comments and inputs to the draft TOR; the draft inception report; and the draft evaluation report;
- Be available to take part in interviews;
- Ensure proper stakeholder involvement in the entire evaluation process;

- Help to facilitate and organize coordination meetings with the government for official appointments.
- Provide a management response to the evaluation;
- Support the implementation of the accepted or partially accepted recommendations; and
- Support the dissemination of the evaluation through consulting with the SYMST country stakeholders on the evaluation findings and conclusions.

### **European Union (EU)**

The funders, EU will:

- Be available to take part in interviews; and
- Provide comments and inputs to the draft TOR; the draft inception report; and the draft evaluation report.

### **SYMST Country Stakeholders**

The SYMST national project stakeholders will:

- Be available to take part in interviews; and
- Provide comments on the draft inception report and the draft evaluation report.

### **CONSULTANT COMPETENCIES**

The consultant, or lead consultant<sup>70</sup>, will be responsible to coordinate and carry out the final evaluation. The evaluation consultant (or lead consultant) will conduct the evaluation and deliver all deliverables described in this TOR.

The selection of a suitable consultant will be based on the following criteria:

- No previous engagement/involvement in the design and delivery of the SYMST project;
- Advanced degree in the field of project management, social science, development studies, or another relevant field of study, with a minimum of 10 years of experience in project/programme evaluations;
- Demonstrated knowledge of and a strong record in leading or conducting evaluations (including both qualitative and quantitative evaluation methods) of development projects/programmes within the past five years;
- Technical capability to carry out the work required in the projects countries, namely Lao PDR, Viet Nam, and possibly Thailand, with preference for in-country residents or consultants who have in-country living experience.
- Experience in leading evaluations with the UN and knowledge of the UN evaluation norms and standards and its reporting system would be an asset;
- Knowledge of the UN project operations, with technical competency in trade issues, particularly Aid for Trade, and/or in private sector development approaches;
- Experience and knowledge in evaluating F&V sector and F&V value chain development;
- Knowledge of developing country economies in the region and in-country experience in any of the project countries would be an asset;
- Knowledge of other related local projects/programmes and associated local institutions and government structures in the countries where the project is being implemented will be an asset;
- Ability to bring cross-cutting dimensions into the evaluation, including design, data collection, analysis and report writing.
- Proficiency in English and excellent report writing skills, with the ability to analyse and interpret data from a range of sources and write clear and concise analytical reports;
- Ability to speak one of the local languages (Lao or Vietnamese) would be highly desirable.
- Ability to tap into a network or compile a team of country-based interpreters or translators who have had no previous involvement in the delivery of the SYMST project in their respective countries would be an advantage;
- Ability to communicate effectively with various stakeholders, including representatives from governments, donors, the private sector, and other beneficiaries; and
- Ability to be flexible and responsive to changes and demands and to be result-based and open to feedback.

The evaluation will be carried out in a participatory and ethical manner; it should take account of cultural differences, local customs, religious practices, gender roles and age throughout the planning, implementation and reporting of the evaluation. The Consultant should avoid conflicts of interest, the acceptance of gifts, and adhere to the highest

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<sup>70</sup>. In case there is a proposed team of consultants, it is expected that the team will be managed by a lead evaluation consultant is expected to manage the team.

technical ethical standards of evaluation. The Consultant should fulfil the criteria of professionalism, impartiality, and credibility, as well as:

- Ensure honesty and integrity of the entire evaluation process;
- Respect the security, dignity, and self-worth of the respondents, project participants, and other stakeholders with whom they interact;
- Articulate and take into account the diversity of interests and values and protect the rights and welfare of individuals and institutions involved in the evaluation; and
- Produce and convey accurate information about the project's merit and value, provide information in confidence, and report impartially.

#### **REFERENCES FOR THE EVALUATION**

The reference materials for the evaluation include the documents listed below, which will be made available to the Consultant. Additional documentation will be made available during the evaluation process.

- The Description of the Action (project document), including the project logical framework, which outlines the impact, outcome, outputs, activities, and corresponding indicators and assumptions;
- The Contribution Agreement with the EU and all subsequent addendums;
- MoUs with implementing partners; and
- Work planning, progress reports and other relevant project documents, such as evaluation forms and activity reports, are also key sources of information for the evaluation process.

## Appendix 2: Logical Framework Targets and Achievements

Impact/ Outcome/ Output	Project Indicator	ITC Corporate Indicator	Target	Achievement			Remarks
				Lao PDR	Viet Nam	Total	
<b>Impact: Improve food safety through better governance in Viet Nam and Lao PDR.</b>	Reduction of food borne diseases	N/A	5	N/A	N/A	N/A	Data unavailable
	Contribute to SDG 2.3	GOAL 2: Zero hunger - TARGET 2.3: Double productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women	0	N/A	N/A	NA	Data unavailable
	Contribute to SDG 2.4	GOAL 2: Zero hunger - TARGET 2.4: Ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	Data unavailable
	Contribute to SDG 2b	GOAL 2: Zero hunger – TARGET 2.b: Correct and prevent trade restrictions and distortions in world agricultural markets	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	Data unavailable
	Contribute to SDG 8.2	GOAL 8: Decent work and economic growth - TARGET 8.2: Achieve higher levels of economic productivity through diversification, technological upgrading and innovation	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	Data unavailable
	Contribute to SDG 9.3	GOAL 9: Industry, innovation and infrastructure - TARGET 9.3: Increase access of SMEs to financial services and integration into value chains and markets.	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	Data unavailable
	Contribute to SDG 16.7	GOAL 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions - TARGET 16.7: Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	Data unavailable
	Contribute to SDG 17.6	GOAL 17: Revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development - TARGET 17.6: Enhance North-South, South-South and triangular regional on and enhance knowledge-sharing	0	N/A	N/A	N/A	Data unavailable

Impact/ Outcome/ Output	Project Indicator	ITC Corporate Indicator	Target	Achievement			Remarks
				Lao PDR	Viet Nam	Total	
Outcome: Strengthen regulatory framework for control of plant health and pesticides in the fruits and vegetable sector and other plant products (i.e. rice in the case of Laos PDR) through the application of norms and standards and improve market access	% of decrease in interceptions due to pesticide issues and plant health and diseases	N/A	10	TBD	TBD	TBD	Data unavailable
	Rate of non-compliance with international norms on pesticides and plant health	N/A	50	TBD	TBD	TBD	Data unavailable
	Number of policies/ regulations which have been adopted/amended related to pesticides and plant health	A4: Number of policies, strategies, rules or regulations, improved for the benefit of MSMEs with business sector input, and promulgated or implemented	2	1	0	1	Partially achieved
	Number of enterprises having transacted business with ASEAN and EU markets in the F&V supply chain and other plant products (disaggregated by owned, operated and controlled by women)	C3: Number of MSMEs having transacted international business, including national business transactions that are part of international or global value chains, as a result of ITC support	8	4	9	13	Achieved
	Number of enterprises owned, operated, and controlled by women having transacted business with ASEAN and EU markets in the F&V supply chain and other plant products	C4: Number of MSMEs led by women having transacted international business, including national business transactions that are part of international or global value chains, as a result of ITC support	2	3	6	9	Achieved
Output 1: Improved awareness and knowledge of the private sector and authorities in Viet Nam and Lao PDR on plant health and pesticide issues in fruits, vegetables and other plant products.	Number of studies on plant health and pesticide issues	Number of publications, web applications or newsletters produced or updated	2	1	1	2	Achieved
	Number of information and awareness material on plant health, the safe use of pesticides and compliance with regulations	Number of publications, web applications or newsletters produced or updated	10	27	33	60	Achieved
	Number of male and female beneficiaries reporting greater awareness of plant health and pesticides	A1: Number of clients gaining greater awareness of international trade from using ITC's business, trade and market intelligence	500 (150 F)	922 (311 F)	1389 (478 F)	2311 (789 F)	Achieved
Output 2: Improved performance of the regulatory and control institutions and improved capacity of the fruits, vegetables and other plant products supply chain actors to comply with plant	Number of institutions reporting improved operational and managerial performance of the regulatory framework on plant health/pesticides	B1: Number of cases in which BSOs improved their performance and services for the benefit of their members/ clients as a result of ITC support	2	3	2	5	Achieved

Impact/ Outcome/ Output	Project Indicator	ITC Corporate Indicator	Target	Achievement			Remarks
				Lao PDR	Viet Nam	Total	
health and pesticide control in Viet Nam and Lao PDR.	Number of smallholder farmers (disaggregated by gender) trained and assisted to comply with plant health, pesticide residues regulations/adjust production practices	Number of participants in group training	400 (100 F)	274 (124 F)	590 (162 F)	864 (286 F)	Achieved
	Number of F&V value chain and other plant products actors assisted for better compliance with plant health/pesticide regulations	Number of participants in group training	30	49	57	106	Achieved
Output 3: Improved market access opportunities and facilitated business linkages of fruits, vegetables and other plant products actors from Viet Nam and Lao PDR to EU and regional target markets.	Number of farmers/exporters (disaggregated by gender) who established contacts with the buyers	Number of participants in group training	10	11 (9 F)	10 (6 F)	21 (15 F)	Achieved
	Number of B2B events/trade fairs organised/participated	Number of advisory services provided	4	21	2	4	Achieved

Source: SYMST Project

### Appendix 3: Value Chain Maps of SYMST Project Products

Figure A3.1. Native Lao Rice Value Chain Observed under the SYMST Project (Lao PDR)

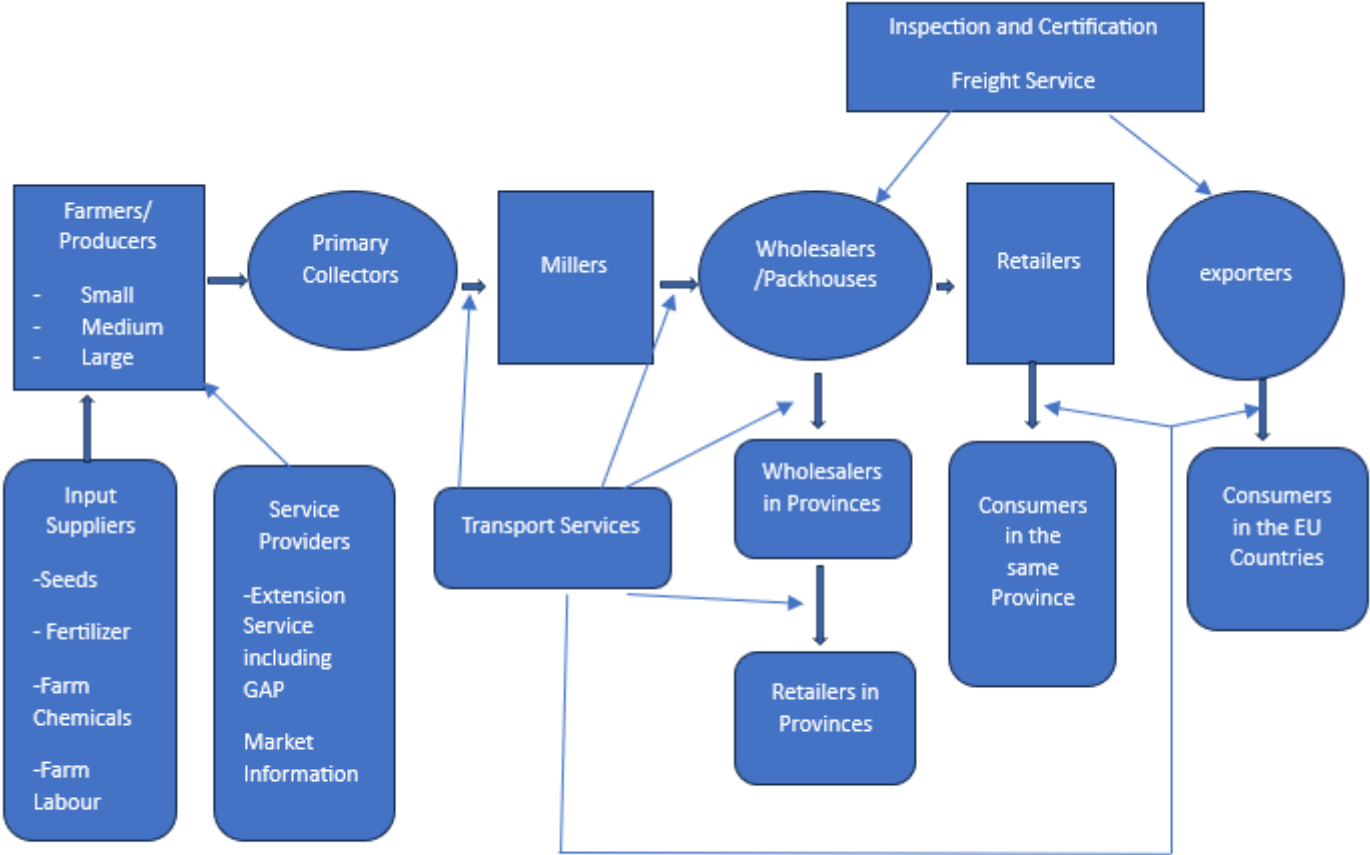




Figure A3.2. Chilli and Basil Value Chains Observed under the SYMST Project (Lao PDR)

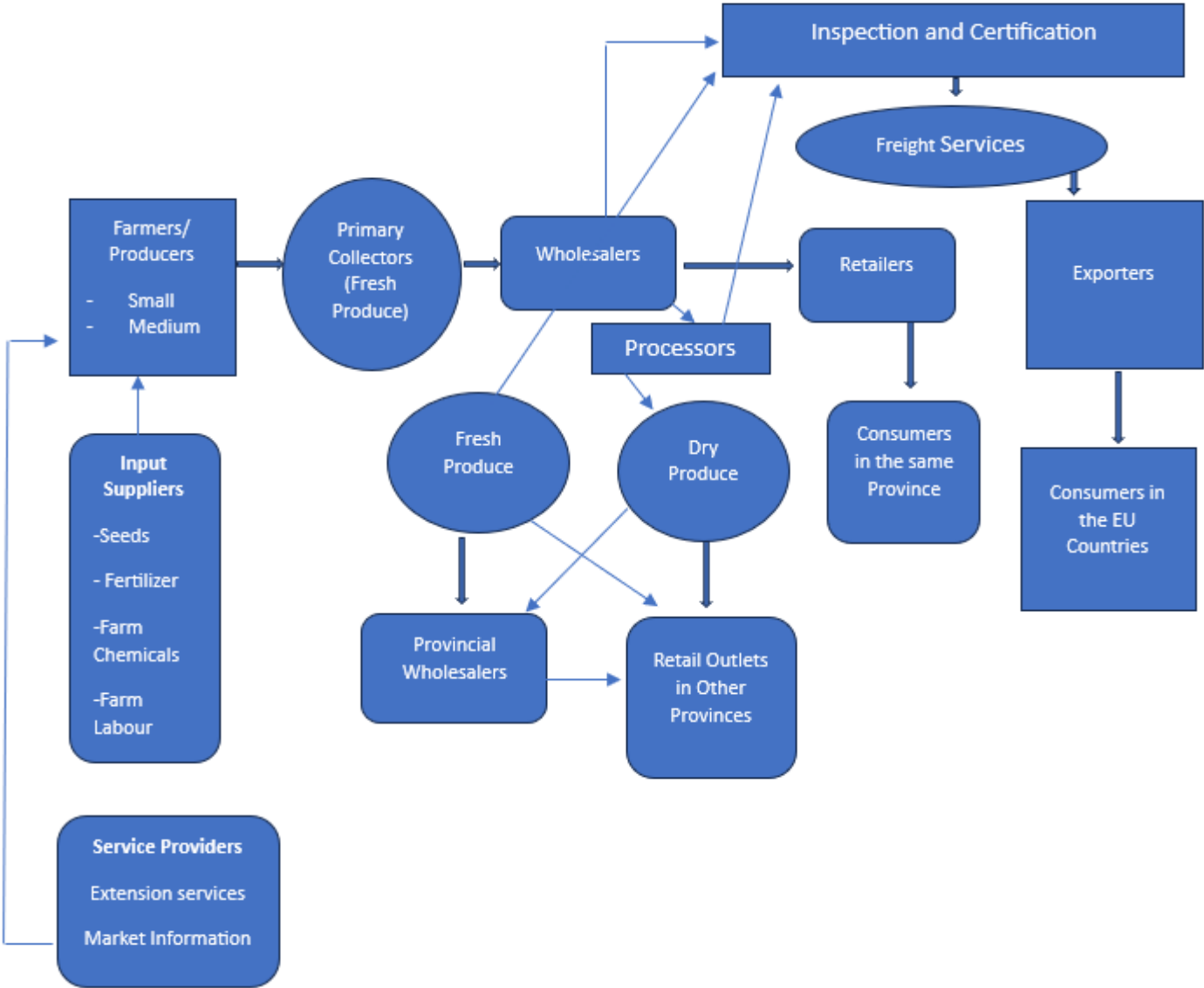


Figure A3.3. Watermelon Value Chain Observed under the SYMST Project (Lao PDR)

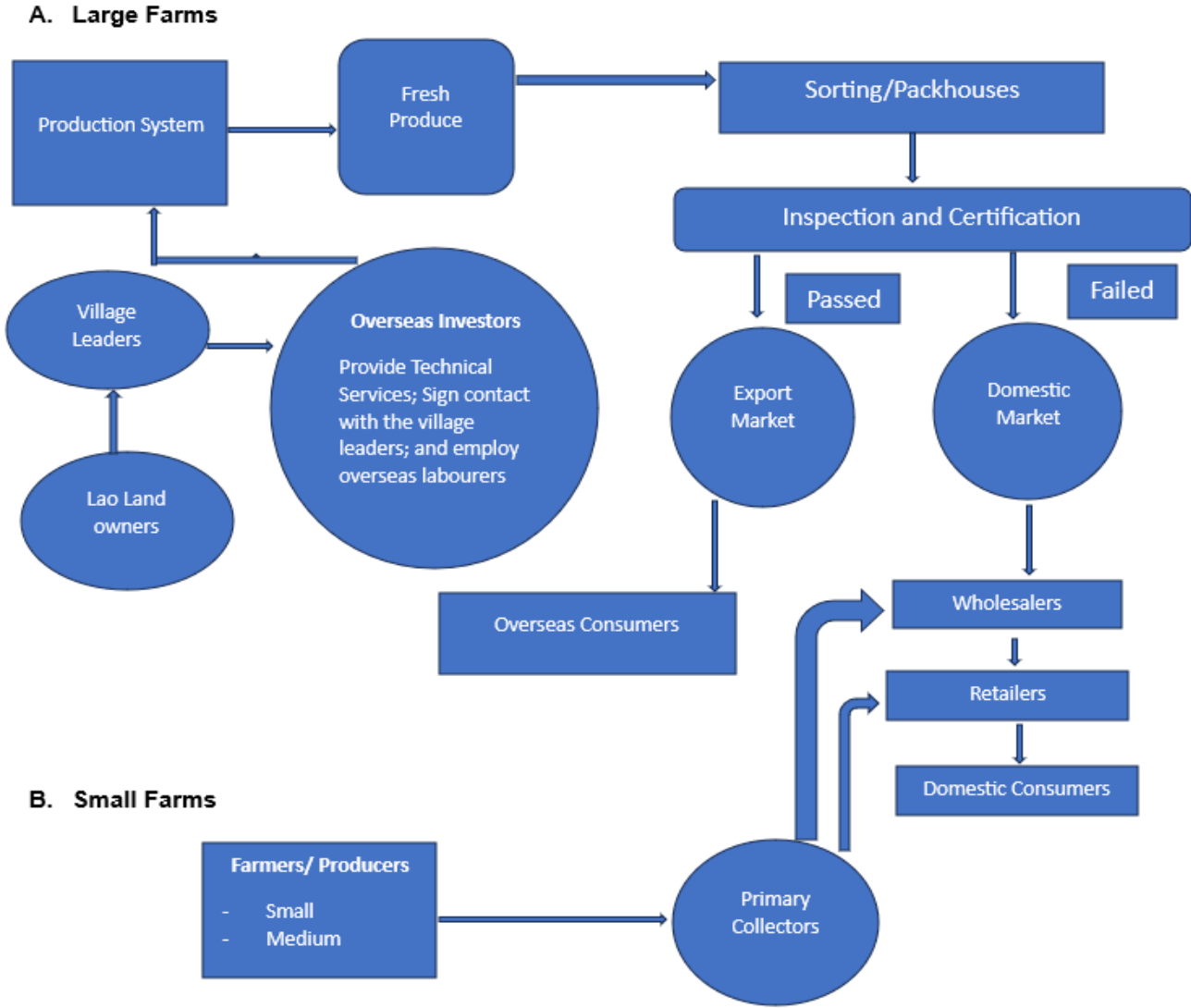


Figure A3.4. Black Pepper Value Chain Observed under the SYMST Project (Viet Nam)

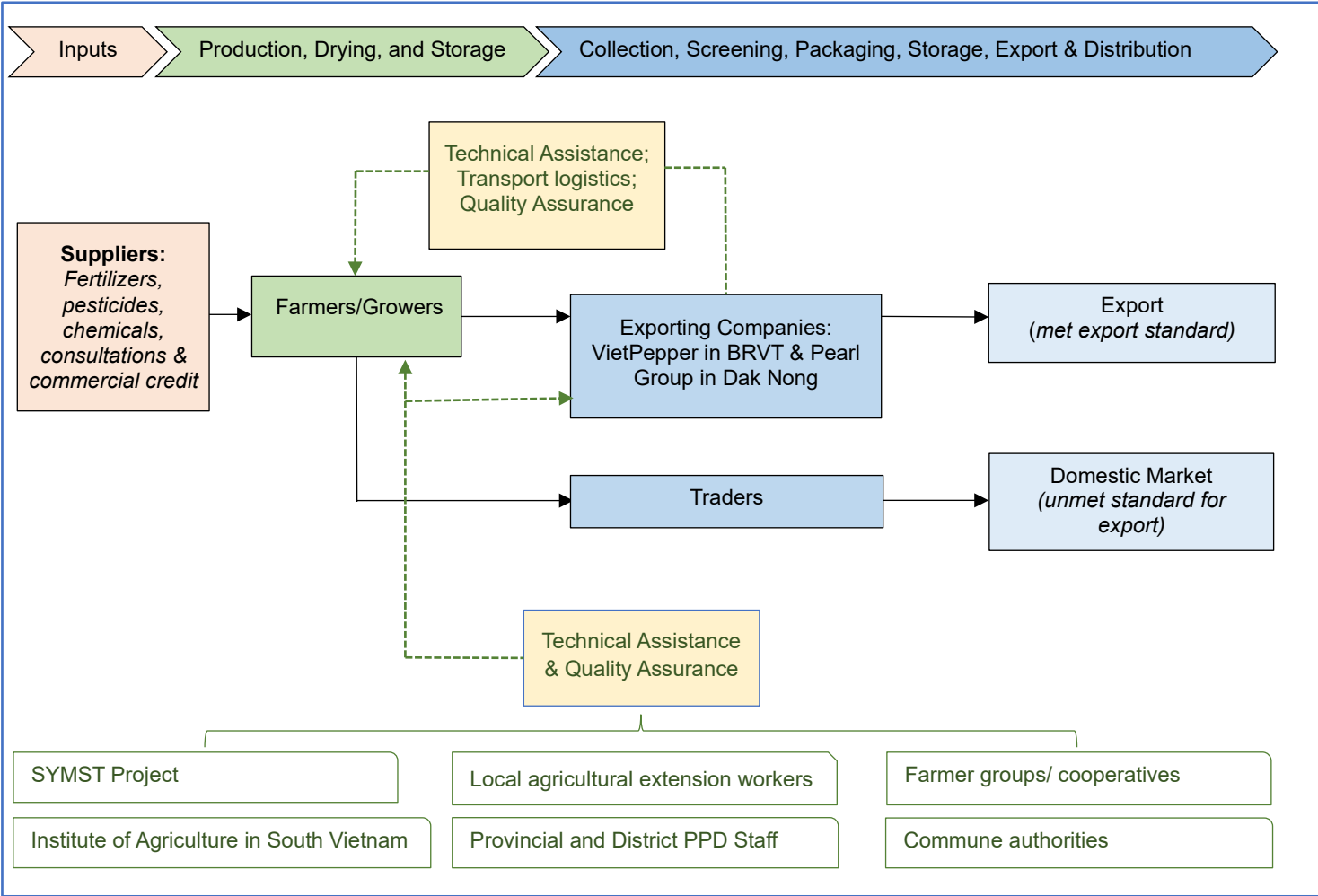


Figure A3.5. Pomelo Value Chain Model Observed under the SYMST Project (Ben Tre Province, Viet Nam)

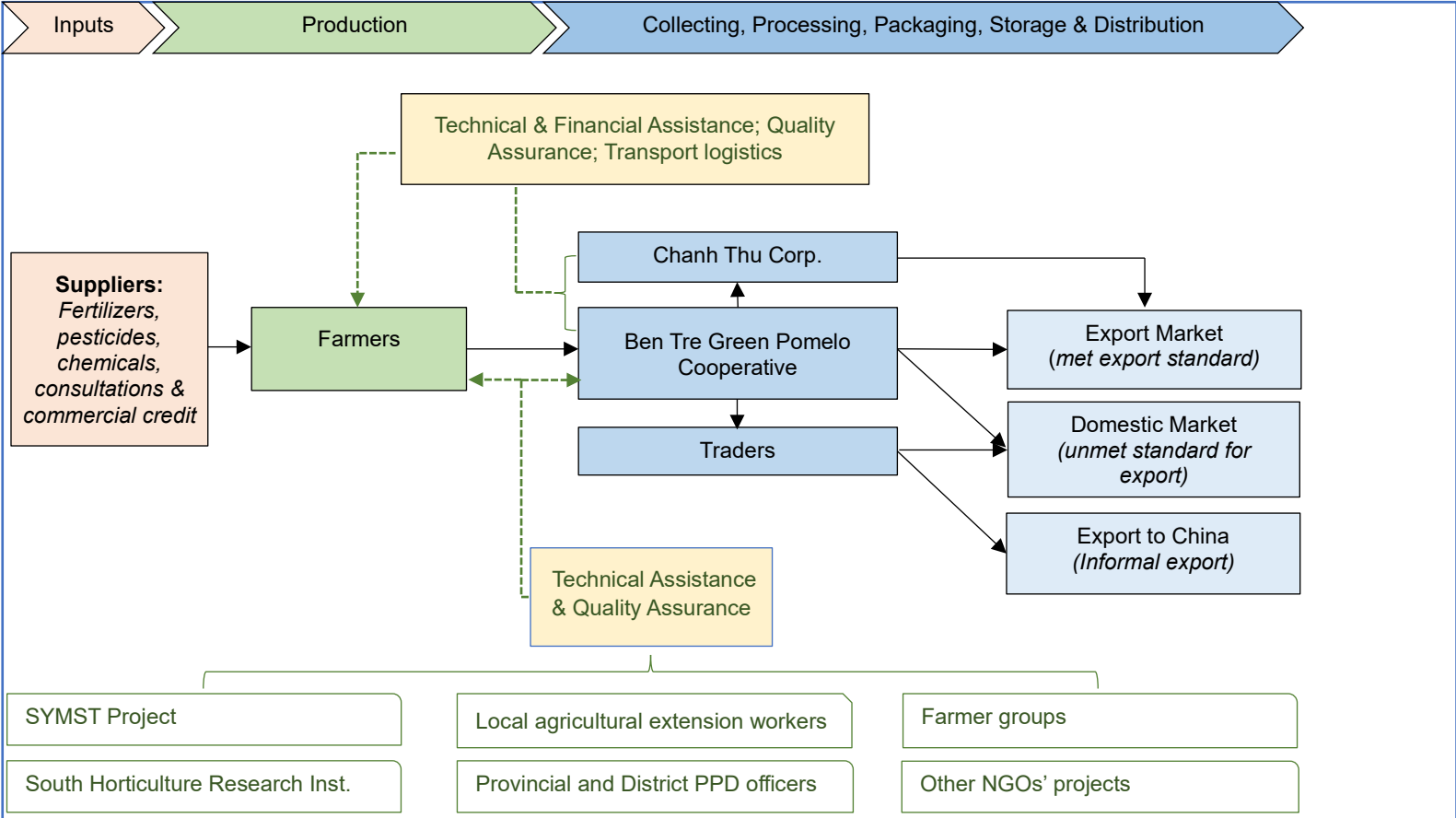
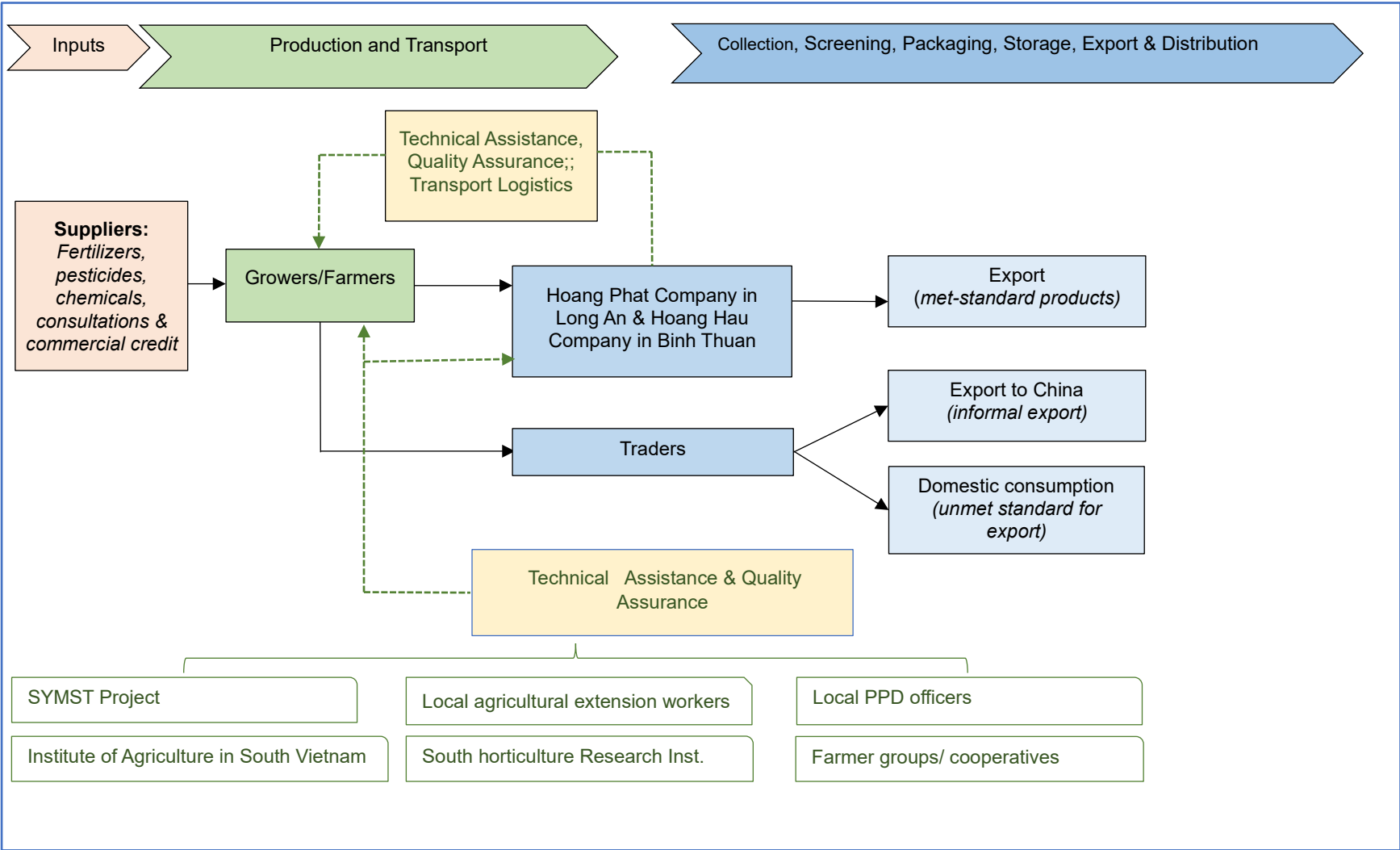


Figure A3.6. Dragon Fruit Value Chain Model Observed under the SYMST Project (Long An Province, Viet Nam)



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## Appendix 5: List of Persons Consulted

No.	Position and Affiliation
<b>ITC Staff</b>	
1	Senior Advisor, Export Quality Management, Geneva (virtual)
2	Project Manager, SYMST Project, Geneva (virtual)
3	Former Project Manager, SYMST Project, Geneva (virtual)
4	Programme Officer Agrifood Market Linkages Specialist, Geneva (virtual)
5	Technical Lead, Export Quality Management, SYMST Project, Geneva (virtual)
6	APO, Export Quality Management, SYMST, Geneva (virtual)
7	Administrative Assistant, SYMST, Geneva (virtual)
<b>Lao PDR, National Consultants</b>	
1	Pesticide residue analysis, pesticide use monitoring and training for detecting Maximum Residue Limit
2	Pilot Value Chain Development and Quality Champion Coach
3	Communication Consultant
<b>Viet Nam, National Consultants</b>	
1	Pomelo demonstration model
2	Laboratory Expert (Accreditation – plant health (virtual))
3	Dragon fruit demonstration model
4	Laboratory Expert on Plant Health (virtual)
5	IT Development of E-Directory and website upgrade (virtual)
6	SPS (Pesticides and Plant Health) and National Team Leader (former Director, PPD)
7	Laboratory Expert on Plant Health (virtual)
8	Black pepper demonstration model
<b>International Consultants</b>	
1	SPS and EU Regulations (virtual)
2	Phytosanitary and EU Regulations (virtual)
3	Market Linkages/Trade Fair (virtual)
4	Fresh produce and spices sector (written response)
<b>European Union Delegation</b>	
1	EEAS-Bangkok (virtual)
2	Programme Officer (Economic Governance), EEAS-Hanoi
3	EEAS-Vientiane (virtual)
<b>Stakeholder - Viet Nam</b>	
1	Deputy Director, Division of International Affairs and Public Relations, Plant Protection Division, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
2	SYMST National Project Administrative Assistant (individual contractor)
3	Vice Chairman, Viet Nam Garden Association
4	Deputy Director, Post-entry Plant Quarantine Center No. 1
5	Staff of Quarantine Diagnosis Dept. Post-entry Plant Quarantine Center No. 1
6	Staff of Quarantine Diagnosis Dept. Post-entry Plant Quarantine Center No. 1
7	Deputy Director, Plant Quarantine Diagnostic Centre
8	Manager, Pest Diagnosis Department, Plant Quarantine Diagnostic Centre

No.	Position and Affiliation
9	Staff, Pest Diagnosis Department, Plant Quarantine Diagnostic Centre
10	Business Development Division Manager, Vietnam Pesticide JSC.
11	Director, Southern Pesticide Control and Testing Center
12	Technician, Southern Pesticide Control and Testing Center
13	Technician, Southern Pesticide Control and Testing Center
14	Director, Post-entry Plant Quarantine Center No. 2 - In Ho Chi Minh City
15	Manager, Testing Department, Post-entry Plant Quarantine Center No. 2 - In Ho Chi Minh City
16	Farmer, Black pepper model of VietPepper Co. in BRVT
17	Farmer, Black pepper model of VietPepper Co. in BRVT
18	Farmer, Black pepper model of VietPepper Co. in BRVT
19	Farmer, Black pepper model of VietPepper Co. in BRVT
20	Economic Officer, Bau Lam Commune People's Committee, Xuyen Moc District, BRVT
21	Quality Control Staff, Viet Pepper Co.
22	Owner, Dao Dieu Agricultural Inputs Supplier
23	Farmer Member, Ben Tre Green Pomelo Cooperative
24	Farmer Member, Ben Tre Green Pomelo Cooperative
25	Farmer Member, Ben Tre Green Pomelo Cooperative
26	Farmer Member, Ben Tre Green Pomelo Cooperative
27	Farmer Member, Ben Tre Green Pomelo Cooperative
28	Farmer Member, Ben Tre Green Pomelo Cooperative
29	Farmer Member, Ben Tre Green Pomelo Cooperative
30	President, Ben Tre Green Pomelo Cooperative
31	Director, Ben Tre Green Pomelo Cooperative
32	Shop Owner (including Pesticides), Hanh Thuy Agricultural Material Supplier
33	Technician, Provincial Plant Protection Department Ben Tre
34	Technician, District Plant Protection Department, Chau Thanh District, Ben Tre
35	Director, Hoang Phat Fruit Company
36	Farmer member of dragon fruit model, Duong Xuan Hoi commune, Chau Thanh district, Long An province
37	Farmer member of dragon fruit model, Duong Xuan Hoi commune, Chau Thanh district, Long An province
38	Technician, Hoang Phat Fruit Company
39	Specialist, Long An Provincial PPD sub-department
40	Production Manager of Packing House, Hoang Phat Fruit Company
41	Owner, Sau Quy Agricultural Supplier_ Long Thuan hamlet, Long Tri Commune Chau Thanh Dist. Long An
42	Long Binh Hamlet, Long Tri commune, Chau Thanh dist., Long An
<b>Stakeholders – Lao PDR</b>	
1	Director of Division/National Project Coordinator, Department of Agriculture (DOA), Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (MAF), Vientiane
2	SYMST Project Assistant, DOA/MAF
3	Farmer, Haitai Village, Sangthong District, Vientiane Capital
4	Farmer, Haitai Village, Sangthong District, Vientiane Capital
5	Farmer, Haitai Village, Sangthong District, Vientiane Capital

No.	Position and Affiliation
6	Farmer, Haitai Village, Sangthong District, Vientiane Capital
7	Provincial Project Coordinator, Vientiane Capital Agriculture and Forestry Division, Vientiane Capital
8	District Project Coordinator, Sangthong District Office, Sangthong District, Vientiane Capital
9	Worker, Agro-Asia Organic farm, Vientiane Capital
10	Worker, Agri-Asia Organic Farm, Vientiane Capital
11	Head of Section, Border Checkpoint/Vientiane Capital Agriculture and Forestry Division, Vientiane Capital
12	Technical Officer, Border Checkpoint/Vientiane Capital Agriculture and Forestry Division, Vientiane Capital
13	Owner, Daoheuang Agriculture Supplier, Vientiane Capital
14	Head of the group, Donvangpho Village, Pakngeum District, Vientiane Capital
15	Rice farmer, Donvangpho Village, Pakngeum District, Vientiane Capital
16	Rice farmer, Donvangpho Village, Pakngeum District, Vientiane Capital
17	Rice farmer, Donvangpho Village, Pakngeum District, Vientiane Capital
18	Rice farmer, Donvangpho Village, Pakngeum District, Vientiane Capital
19	Rice farmer, Donvangpho Village, Pakngeum District, Vientiane Capital
20	Rice farmer, Donvangpho Village, Pakngeum District, Vientiane Capital
21	Rice farmer, Donvangpho Village, Pakngeum District, Vientiane Capital
22	District Project Coordinator, Pakngeum District Office, Vientiane Capital
23	Founder, ETU Green, Champasak Province
24	Coordinator, Sky Vision, Champaksak Province
25	Farmer, Samorliep Village, Phonthong District, Champasak Province
26	Farmer, Samorliep Village, Phonthong District, Champasak Province
27	Farmer, Samorliep Village, Phonthong District, Champasak Province
28	Farmer, Samorliep Village, Phonthong District, Champasak Province
29	District Project Coordinator, Phonthong District office, Champasak Province
30	Provincial Project Coordinator, Champasak Agriculture and Forestry Division, Champasak Province
31	District Project Coordinator, Sukuma District Office, Champasak Province
32	Farmer, Huayhae Village, Sukuma District. Champasak Province
33	Farmer, Huayhae Village, Sukuma District. Champasak Province
34	Farmer, Huayhae Village, Sukuma District. Champasak Province
35	Farmer, Huayhae Village, Sukuma District. Champasak Province
36	Farmer, Huayhae Village, Sukuma District. Champasak Province
37	Farmer, Huayhae Village, Sukuma District. Champasak Province
38	Owner, Phouvong Shop, Champasak Province
39	Owner/Vice President, Yopang Technical Agriculture Import-Export Sole Co., Ltd. Luang Namtha
40	District Project Coordinator, Viengphukha District Office, Luang Namtha Province
41	Technical Officer, Yopang Technical Agriculture Import-Export Sole Co., Ltd. Luang Namtha
42	Accountant, Yopang Technical Agriculture Import-Export Sole Co., Ltd. Luang Namtha
43	Accountant, Yopang Technical Agriculture Import-Export Sole Co., Ltd. Luang Namtha
44	Technical Officer, Luang Namtha Agriculture and Forestry Division
45	Owner, Sombath Watermelon Farm, Luang Namtha

Source: SYMST Project Final Evaluation team (2023)

## Appendix 6: List of Project Activities Conducted under the SYMST Project

Lao PDR	Viet Nam
<b>ER 1: Improved awareness and knowledge of the private sector and authorities on plant health and pesticide issues in fruits, vegetables (F&amp;V) and other plants and plant products.</b>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Developed and launched a National Awareness and Communications Strategy on plant health and pesticide use.</li> <li>2. Developed, launched and disseminated the Manual on EU regulations. Also available on Lao PDR Quality for Trade Platform.</li> <li>3. Developed and launched a National Awareness &amp; Communications Strategy on plant health and pesticide use.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Launched and disseminated a book on EU regulations related to food safety and phytosanitary for imported plant and food agricultural products. It is also available in audio format and shared on the PPD website. Also published an introductory video of the book and an animated question-and-answer (Q&amp;A) video on EU regulations for food safety and plant quarantine when exporting fruits and vegetables from Vietnam. <a href="https://vovlive.vn/evfta-va-cac-van-de-lien-quan-den-sps-440181.html">https://vovlive.vn/evfta-va-cac-van-de-lien-quan-den-sps-440181.html</a></li> <li>2. Developed and published bilingual manuals on good agricultural practices (GAP), safe and responsible use of pesticides, and meeting EU regulations on SPS for pomelo, dragon fruit, and black pepper exported to the EU.</li> </ol>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Conducted awareness-raising workshops/training on:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) TRACES at the national level and shared experience on its use at the subnational level.</li> <li>(ii) EU Regulations: RASFF and EUROPHYT</li> <li>(iii) Workshops on International Standards for Phytosanitary Measures (ISPMs) No, 4,6,10,22 and 31</li> <li>(iv) EU Phytosanitary Measures, Export Non-compliance regulations, coordinating mechanism on law enforcement.</li> </ol> </li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>3. Conducted awareness-raising workshops on:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) TRACES at the national level and shared experience on its use at the regional level.</li> </ol> </li> </ol>
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Designed and produced learning materials on plant health and safe use of pesticides using:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) Large posters for farms, labs, and packing houses.</li> <li>(ii) Brochures and leaflets on pest management and safe use of pesticides</li> <li>(iii) Brochures and leaflets on export market requirements comprising four booklet series on International Standards for Phytosanitary Measures</li> <li>(iv) Two short videos on market access through SPS compliance and the SYMST project achievements</li> <li>(v) Information/knowledge on quality requirements for four priority products and markets mapped and available to the public comprising basil, chilli and rice for the EU market and watermelon for the Chinese market.</li> <li>(vi) Lao PDR Quality for Trade Platform – Quality Compass by hosting digital awareness materials and training packs (e.g., Manual on EU Regulations, ISPM booklets) and success stories based on project activities.</li> <li>(vii) Social media presence with 231 SYMST Facebook® members including project beneficiaries; regular update audience on previous and ongoing</li> </ol> </li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Designed and produced learning materials on plant health and safe use of pesticides using:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) Product leaflets (paper and digital) to provide information to relevant stakeholders on the production value chains of pomelo, dragon fruit, and black pepper and long-form digital leaflets made available on an upgraded PPD website.</li> <li>(ii) Developed a series 10 articles and published the Vietnam Gardening Association's Journal of Rural Economy covering (i) the status of priority sectors and exports to the EU market and (ii) identifying the advantages, challenges and solutions to improve the capacity and compliance of Viet Nam exports to the EU.</li> <li>(iii) Produced video clips showcasing the successful demonstration models of target products, with an added focus on how to solve the phytosanitary and food safety issues of Vietnamese pomelo, dragon fruit and black pepper to comply with EU regulations.</li> </ol> </li> </ol>

Lao PDR	Viet Nam
<p>activities; information on training and workshops, successes and impact stories; cross-sharing content between SYMST and ARISE+ project social media; featuring project activities on the Lao PDR European Delegation and MAF's Facebook pages (29,000 followers); and sharing project news via @ITCnews on X (formerly (Twitter) and ITC official websites.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(iv) Produced structured e-learning video guidance to farmers and relevant stakeholders on how to establish production areas for pomelo, dragon fruit and black pepper to be exported to the EU market; with a focus on good agricultural practices and IPM.</li> <li>(v) Upgraded PPD's website to promote the dissemination of SPS information and facilitate the access to and search of information on SPS, EVFTA and SYMST project. The sub-domain sansangxuatkhau.ppd.gov.vn had 90,000 views at project closing with the top five countries Viet Nam, the United States, China, Ireland, and Sweden.</li> <li>(vi) Published and shared six impact stories.</li> <li>(vii) Supported Viet Nam Quality for Trade Platform with forward and backward linkages to the upgraded PPD website and mapping of quality requirements on the Quality Compass tool including mandatory legal requirements, standards and market preferences for the three priority products to the EU market.</li> </ul>
<p><b>ER 2: Improved performance of the regulatory and control institutions and improved capacity of the F&amp;V and other plants and plant products supply chain actors to comply with plant health and pesticide control.</b></p>	
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Strengthened the regulatory and control system for the use and traceability of plant health and pesticides by</li> <li>2. Strengthening key SPS legislation by undertaking tasks related to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Comprehensive review of SPS-related procedures,</li> <li>b. Assessment of the needs and challenges of inspectors to conduct inspections regarding the use of pesticides and proposed measures to reduce the needs,</li> <li>c. Ministerial Guidance on EU manual no. 4030/MAF date 16 September 2022,</li> <li>d. Ministerial guidance on measures responding to non-compliance Export of Plant Product and Regulated Articles to European Union Import Regulation No 4269/MAF, date 10 October 2022</li> <li>e. Report on the evaluation of the law implementation of Plant Quarantine border checkpoint (13 March 2023)</li> <li>f. DOA guidance on the establishment of Lao Pest prevalence area no. 3395/DOA date 11 September 2023</li> <li>g. Implementing regulation signed September 2023 to adopt ISPM 22 (Low pest Prevalence)</li> <li>h. Training on EU Phytosanitary Measures, Export Non-compliance regulations, and coordinating mechanisms on law enforcement.</li> </ol> </li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Strengthen the regulatory and control system for use and traceability of plant health and pesticides: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Provided training for Quarantine Inspectors &amp; Food Safety inspectors completed.</li> <li>b. Developed a coordination mechanism to receive and share information from the EU for commodities that violate EU regulations on food safety, phytosanitary and traceability.</li> <li>c. Conducted a gap assessment of the current capacity of plant health laboratories.</li> <li>d. Provided roadmaps to develop plant health laboratories following ISO/IEC 17025 2017.</li> <li>e. Developed Standard Operating Procedures for Pest Identification</li> <li>f. Organized training workshops for pest diagnostic experts, and multi-residue homestead analysis.</li> <li>g. Reviewed and improved/developed Vietnamese legal regulations on pesticide management and allowable MRL levels in line with EU and importing countries' regulations and import tolerance of pesticide levels.</li> </ol> </li> </ol>

Lao PDR	Viet Nam
<p>3. Strengthened capacity of the PPC Laboratories to analyse pesticide quality and residue for routine monitoring by conducting a series of training workshops:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) Assessment of PPC Laboratory (2021)</li> <li>(ii) Hand-on Training on LCMS/MS Use (22-26 March 2021)</li> <li>(iii) Virtual Training on Theory, Principle and Technique in Pesticide Residue Analysis (28-29 June 2021)</li> <li>(iv) Hand-on Training on Analysis of Pesticide Residue in Vegetables (21-15 Feb. 2022)</li> <li>(v) Technical Workshop on Performance on Analysis of Pesticide Residue in Vegetables for Exporting to EU (03 March 2022)</li> <li>(vi) Training on ISO/IEC 17025 –General requirements covering (a) Gap assessment completed by International Consultants March 2023, (b) Updated roadmap for accreditation to ISO/IEC 17025 for pesticide residue analysis developed in June 2023, (c) purchased of equipment and consumables for the PPC lab, and provided online/hybrid training on the General requirements for the competence of testing and calibration in laboratories (24, 26, 28 and 31 July 2023).</li> </ul>	<p>2. Provided training for State Management Staff, Quarantine Inspectors and Food Safety Officers on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Overview of EU and ISPM regulations for agricultural products and foods of plant origin exported from Viet Nam.</li> <li>b. Phytosanitary subjects and priority pests.</li> <li>c. Current regulations and how to look up EU requirements on phytosanitary matters.</li> <li>d. Training and guidance on recording necessary information in phytosanitary certificates by EU and ISPMs regulations.</li> <li>e. EU RASFF information and regulations and how to take corrective actions when there is a notification of non-compliance with phytosanitary and food safety regulations.</li> <li>f. Related ISPMs</li> </ul> <p>A total of 27 trainees attended a five-day training programme.</p>
<p>4. Facilitated Technical Cooperation between DOA Thailand and Central Lab Thailand during 25-26 September 2023</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) Organized field visit by PPC and DOA team to Thai Lab</li> <li>(ii) Discussed cooperation agreement with Thai Lab.</li> </ul>	<p>3. Developed a Coordination Mechanism (to be signed by related departments) to (i) receive and share information from the EU for commodities and enterprises that violate EU regulations on food safety, phytosanitary measures and traceability; and (ii) identify causes and remedy errors in the chain of agricultural production and exports.</p>
<p>5. Strengthened Capacity of DOA to Identify plant pests and diseases by conducting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Workshops and field coaching for PAFO DAFO staff on major insect pests by national and international experts in 3 provinces and at PPC central pest identification lab</li> <li>b. Pest Surveys and insect collection</li> <li>c. Training and field work included pest identification, sampling, identification of key pests for target markets, record keeping, etc.</li> <li>d. Training lab staff and providing equipment support to 3 provincial labs and central PPC pest identification lab.</li> <li>e. Introduced active surveillance programmes for identification of pests and illegal use of pesticides focussing on field sampling procedures in 3 provinces, capacity building of PPC, PAFO and DAFO, and training on the use of rapid test kits. Also, developed field sampling flowcharts for basil, chilli, rice and watermelon.</li> </ul>	<p>4. Strengthened the capacity to detect and inspect pests of major agricultural and foodstuff products exported to the EU</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Conducted a GAP assessment of PPD Plant Health Laboratories in December 2020. These included the Plant Quarantine Diagnostic Centre and the Post-Entry Plant Quarantine Centre No.1.</li> <li>b. Developed two Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for pest identification for PCR and ELISA methods and 14 SOPs for morphological identification and conducted training for PPD technicians on the SOPs.</li> <li>c. Conducted training on multi-residue homestead analysis for technicians in food safety testing laboratories in Vietnam.</li> <li>d. Updated applied analytical methods of pesticide residues, focussing on residues of commonly used pesticides on samples of priority sectors.</li> </ul> <p>- 13 technicians from PPD Control and Testing Pesticides Centres joined the 5-day training programme.</p>
<p>6. Strengthened pesticide residue monitoring programme through enhanced inspection and certification capacity of DOA in line with the new regulations through training on TRACES (attended by 153 participants, and 14 companies</p>	<p>5. Reviewed and proposed supplementing and completing Vietnamese legal regulations on pesticide management, and allowable MRL level to harmonize and meet EU and importing countries' regulations. The consultants collaborated to</p>

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<p>registered in the TRACES system), and training PAFO and DAFO inspectors (stationed at border control points and on farms) to understand inspection and certification system to export to the EU and to issue electronic Phyto certificates.</p>	<p>identify a list of active substances/pesticides without MRLs and recommend MRLs to be set up for these active substances/pesticides following the EU requirements (pomelo, dragon fruit and black pepper produced in Viet Nam for export to the EU market), and proposed application appropriate MRLs where a pesticide MRL was not available.</p>
<p>7. Conducted</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>workshops and awareness of the International Standards for Phytosanitary Measures (ISPM) 4, 6, 10, 22 and 31 attended by 31 DOA staff and inspectors. Total attendance was 59 in Champasak and Vientiane.<sup>71</sup></li> <li>Provided training on ministerial guidance measures for non-compliance export plant, plant produce and regulated article to the EU for 3 provinces and 7 districts.</li> </ol>	<p>6. Conducted</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Training and provided documentation to PPD staff to request EU to apply import tolerance (IT) to some pesticides used in pomelo and black pepper (attended by 40 staff in June 2023).</li> <li>Training based on the SPS book produced with project support for the exporters, cooperatives and farmers groups. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The training packs developed ensured sustainability for the continued training beyond the project.</li> </ul> </li> </ol>
<p>8. Provided training to farmers and exporting enterprises for compliance with plant health and pesticide regulations by establishing export value chains covering:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Awareness regarding national procedures for establishing registration and registration for farmers and pack houses.</li> <li>Training on GAP<sup>72</sup> for 20 producer groups</li> <li>Training and coaching on HACCP GMP GHP &amp; EU buyer requirements in Vientiane &amp; Champasak for the exporters, processors, DOA, PAFO DAFO and CASC staff. The model value chain exporters and CASC (DOA) were further coached to implement HACCP. Four companies developed HACCP plans and completed the implementation of HACCP in their product processing steps. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Training on sustainability at the farm level including producer group management.<sup>73</sup></li> </ol> </li> </ol>	<p>7. Build six demonstration models (two each of pomelo, dragon fruit and black pepper)<sup>74</sup> production value chains applying IPM practices, linking production, consumption and export to the EU including analysis of samples for monitoring of compliance.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrated technologies and organization of production chains to produce and export safe products in compliance with EU regulations on plant health and food safety.</li> <li>The model farms served for learning visits and to share experiences on production and export to the EU.</li> <li>Provided successful stories, pictures and videos for introduction using mass media to inform the EU regulations on plant health and food safety and to show how to organize the F&amp;V production chain for exporting to the EU market.</li> </ol>

<sup>71</sup> ISPM 4 and 10 relate to the establishment of pest-free zones and pest-free production sites; ISPM 6 refers to pest surveillance for determination of pest status in the area, ISPM 12 provides guidelines for issuing phytosanitary certificates, ISPM 22 focuses on requirements for the establishment of areas of low pest prevalence, ISPM 31 covers consignment sampling methodologies at border inspection posts ([https://assets.ippc.int/static/media/files/publication/en/2016/11/01\\_2008\\_ISPMs\\_1-31\\_book\\_En.pdf](https://assets.ippc.int/static/media/files/publication/en/2016/11/01_2008_ISPMs_1-31_book_En.pdf)).

<sup>72</sup> Good Agriculture Practice (GAP) is an approach used to prevent and reduce risks that could occur during cultivation, harvesting and post-harvest management by introducing a safer and more environmentally friendly use of substances e.g. bio-fertilizer, chemical use monitoring and records. Safe pesticide use is also one of the key monitoring and outreach activities of the project. Pest surveillance and management were also part of the assistance. Fruits fly yellow traps were distributed to farmers with hands-on training on how to use, collect and monitor. A pest safe zone was established in Phonthong and Soukkouma Districts.

<sup>73</sup> The Rice Producer Groups in Vientiane and Chili and Basil Producer Groups in Champasack are now actively implementing GAP with close support from DOA, PAFO and DAFO. Farmers now understand the importance of the safe use of pesticides and chemical substances. Results from the Hamburg lab as well as rapid test kits confirm safe products.

<sup>74</sup> Pomelo: (1) Chan Thuh Co Ltd, Quan District, Dong Nai Province and (2) Green Pomelo Cooperative, Chau Thanh District, Ben Tre Province; Black pepper: (1) Pearl Group Corporation, Dak Song District, Dak Nong Province and (2) Viet Pepper Co Ltd, Xuyen Moc District, Ba Ria – Vung Tau Province; and Dragon fruit: (1) Duc Hue District, Long An Province; (2) Hoang Hau Dragon Fruit Co. Ltd, Ham Thuan Nam Binh Thuan Province.

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>d. Conducted 6 training courses based on the demonstration models to guide farmers on how to IPM measures, how to reduce pesticides and control the MRLs.</li> <li>e. Coached and guided selected local trainers to offer the same training on a long-term basis and contribute to putting in place models to ensure the sustainability of this training and related support required.</li> <li>f. Guided, monitored, and coached the related stakeholders in the production chain on subjects such as keeping a farm diary, harvesting, preservation, packing, etc</li> <li>g. Conducted six training courses for the demonstration models covering the application of IPM and use of alternative pesticides, using pesticides approved by the EU, responsibilities of products in the production chain including their commitment and community supervision, choosing a reliable source of pesticides and avoiding contamination with substances prohibited for use, and specific measures to minimize food safety violations that can occur in production and export at source to the EU.</li> </ul> <p>- 180 participants attended the training courses comprising Black pepper: 50 farmers and 3 lead of the groups (53), Dragon fruit: 36 farmers, 6 lead of the groups, and 28 related stakeholders (70), and Pomelo: 60 farmers (60).</p>
<p>9. Facilitated linkages between farmers and exporters. For example: (i) In August 2023 Chili and Basil producers and exporters in Champasack met at the GAP and Pest Management Training workshop and in June 2023, Souksavanh Agriculture Co., Ltd met with GAP rice producer group in Pakgnuem District, June 2023.</p>	
<p><b>ER 3: Strengthened market access opportunities and facilitated business linkages of F&amp;V, other plants, and plant product actors from target countries to EU and regional target markets.</b></p>	
<p>1. The project supported exporters (potential) to attend THAIFEX food expo/trade fairs to boost business opportunities. In 2022 and 2023, SYMST supported 5 companies to attend trade fairs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. In 2022, Champahom, Etu Green Garden, Paniphone, Simon Agriculture and Yopang attended and established 186 contacts;</li> <li>b. In 2023, P&amp;P, Etu Green Garden, Maisavanh, Souksavanh, AgroAsia attended and established 185 contacts.</li> </ul> <p>Before they participated in the trade fairs, the project assisted in packaging design, brochure development, name card development, and one-pager information sheet. The project readiness involved ensuring 20 exporters understood the EU market requirements and had business and export licenses, ensuring six exporters were registered in the TRACES system, five followed and had implemented the HACCP system, and five exporters used certified packhouse and good standard cold storage facilities. The exporters</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The project supported exporters to attend THAIFEX food and trade fair held in Bangkok <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. In 2022, seven companies attended the fair and they were able to establish contact with 337 clients in addition to the sale of 800 tons of produce valued at USD3.4 million.</li> <li>b. In 2023, the project supported the attendance of nine Vietnamese exporters who established 245 contacts and succeeded in exporting valued at USD7.6 million, of which export to the EU was about EU794,000 to four clients. Before they participated in the trade fairs, the project assisted in packaging design, brochure development, name card development, and one-pager information sheet.</li> </ul> </li> <li>2. The project supported the publication of an E-Directory on the PPD website <a href="http://sansangxuatkhau.ppd.gov.vn">sansangxuatkhau.ppd.gov.vn</a> which aims to facilitate connections between Vietnamese enterprises and overseas importers (including the EU) interested in agricultural products.</li> </ul>



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<p>were aware of the required documentation to export and link to shipping companies.</p>	<p>ITC expects that more market linkages are likely to be established.</p>
<p>2. The project supported Yopang to attend the China-ASEAN Trade Fair in September 2023.</p>	
<p>3. Promoted market linkages:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Yopang Shanghai Trading and Import Company was in business negotiation with the Sichuan Changji Group Co. Ltd. For watermelon and Champahorm rice export to China.</li> <li>b. Champahom has been exporting 25 tons of sticky rice per month (as a part of a 1,000-ton contract) to France. The Company is negotiating with Anabel Food of Hamburg, Germany.</li> <li>c. Anabel Food had expressed interest in Souksavahh Agriculture's white rice.</li> <li>d. Maisavanh Lao had expanded the chilli cultivation area in the new 60 ha plot of land in the Vientiane Capital to produce Lao Tabasco sauce and dried chilli processing export to France.</li> <li>e. There is a prospect of linking up with the European Spice Association for chilli and basil exports.</li> </ul>	

## Appendix 7: Area, Production of Viet Nam F&V and Exports to the EU Markets



Source: Data provided by the Plant protection Department to the evaluation team on 17 March 2024.

## Appendix 8: Evaluation Matrix

Criteria and focus	Guiding evaluation questions	Indicator	Means of Verification	Data Source	Risks
<b>Relevance: Did the project support the right things?</b>					
<b>How did the project objectives and design respond to beneficiaries', global, country, and partner/institution needs, policies, and priorities?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Was a needs assessment conducted in each project country, and did the project design sufficiently consider the needs and priorities of the beneficiaries in the country?</li> <li>Was the project design and theory of change (ToC) appropriately adapted to the contexts in each country?</li> <li>Did the project align with and support the government's national development priorities and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2, 8, 9, and 17 as set out in the project document?</li> <li>Were cross-cutting dimensions including human rights and gender equality, inclusion of youth and persons with disabilities, green growth, and social responsibility reflected in the design of the project? Has integrating these cross-cutting issues been relevant to achieving the goals and results of the project?</li> <li>Are the objectives and design of the project in line with the mandate and corporate objectives of <a href="#">ITC's Strategic Plan</a>? Did the project build on ITC's strengths and comparative advantages?</li> </ul>	<p>Evidence of need assessment</p> <p>Presence of ToC in the project document</p> <p>Project priorities stated in the national development and the latest national SDG report.</p> <p>Statements pertaining to cross-cutting issues explicit in the project document.</p> <p>Evidence of ITC priorities reflected in the project document</p>	<p>Document review and stakeholder interviews</p> <p>Document review and interview with the project team</p> <p>Document review</p> <p>Document review and interview with project team</p> <p>Document analysis</p>	<p>Inception report and project document</p> <p>Project document</p> <p>Project document and national planning/strategy documents</p> <p>Project document and interview notes</p> <p>Project document</p>	
<b>Coherence: How well does the intervention fit internally and externally?</b>					
<b>How did the project support internal and external coherence, complementarity, synergies, harmonization and coordination with other interventions carried out by ITC, and other entities including the EU?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Regarding internal coherence, is the project compatible with ITC mandate? Did the project establish synergies and interlinkages with other interventions carried out by ITC?</li> <li>Regarding external coherence, was the project compatible and consistent with the interventions of other actors' interventions (including those of the EU and other development partners) in the same countries and sectors?</li> <li>To what extent does the project respond to trade and development strategies of Lao PDR and Viet Nam, and possibly Thailand?</li> </ul>	<p>Linkages to other ITC projects</p> <p>Evidence of consultation with other development partners in designing project</p>	<p>Interview notes and project document</p> <p>Interview notes</p> <p>Document review</p>	<p>Interviews and document review</p> <p>Interview with selected development partners</p> <p>Project document</p>	

Criteria and focus	Guiding evaluation questions	Indicator	Means of Verification	Data Source	Risks
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Has there been complementarity, harmonization and coordination with other entities? If so, to what extent did the project add value while avoiding duplication of effort?</li> </ul>	<p>Evidence of project's support to trade and development strategies</p> <p>Evidence of harmonization with other entities</p>	Interview notes and document review	Interview notes and review summary	
<b>Effectiveness: Did the project achieve its objectives? Alternatively, Did the project do things right?</b>					
<b>What has the project achieved in terms of its objectives, and have results be distributed across the different beneficiaries?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have the activities and outputs been delivered according to the quality requirements and the work plans? Were baseline data established to measure progress?</li> <li>Did the project achieve, or is expected to achieve, its objectives and its attributable results (such as institutional strengthening, estimation of trade impacts (exports) and interceptions/compliance) along the causal pathway, including any differential results across groups? Are the results distributed across different groups?</li> <li>Did stakeholders have a good understanding of the project? Do all beneficiaries have access to the project's deliverables (training, publications, events, etc.)? Are the project deliverables being used by beneficiaries as intended? Are there any factors that prevented beneficiaries from accessing the results or services of the project?</li> <li>Are there any results related to cross-cutting issues related to human rights and gender equality, youth, persons with disabilities, climate change and environment and social responsibility?</li> </ul>	<p>Evidence of change from the baseline values</p> <p>Export trend of target commodities to EU and to China in the case of watermelon</p> <p>Stakeholders' level of understanding of the project design and deliverables</p> <p>% beneficiaries belong to ethnic groups, women, youth, PWDs, affected by climate change and environmental degradation, and involvement in commodity group work.</p>	<p>Project data analysis</p> <p>Data from the Ministry of Industry and Commerce or Bureau of Statistics,</p> <p>Interview data</p> <p>Data analysis</p>	<p>Project records, stakeholder interviews</p> <p>Producer organizations, published government data, and stakeholder interviews</p> <p>Interview summary</p> <p>Project database</p>	
<b>Efficiency: How well were resources used in the project?</b>					
<b>What has been done to convert inputs into outputs, outcomes and impacts in the most cost-effective way possible within the intended timeframe?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Did the project deliver results in an economical and timely way? Have inputs (funds, expertise, human resources, time, etc.) been converted into outputs, outcomes and impacts (relative to the entire results chain) in the most cost-effective way possible within the intended timeframe?</li> <li>How well was the project managed to address operational efficiency within ITC as well as the local project coordination teams? How effective have the</li> </ul>	<p>Percent cost overrun.</p> <p>Percent time overrun (delays)</p> <p>Staff/team member turnover</p> <p>Evidence of cost sharing across different units of ITC for joint programming and output delivery</p>	Interviews and project	Project records, interview notes	

Criteria and focus	Guiding evaluation questions	Indicator	Means of Verification	Data Source	Risks
	<p>management arrangements been in the delivery of the project? To what extent were the project governance structures (BCC, PEC, PRC, etc.) in Lao PDR and Viet Nam effective in supporting and guiding the project management?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Was the administrative cost comparable to that of other development partners?</li> <li>Was a monitoring system put in place that enabled effective management, implementation, and accountability? Was the monitoring system revised or changed during the project's implementation?</li> <li>To what extent did the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) impact the project deliverables?</li> </ul>	<p>Administrative cost comparison with Arise+ project</p> <p>Quality of monitoring and evaluation data, nature of objections raised in audit reports</p> <p>Extent of changes in programme delivery</p>	<p>Interviews with key stakeholders and quality of project board meetings, decision analysis</p> <p>Interviews with ITC staff and project team members</p> <p>Analysis of monitoring reports</p> <p>Changes in outputs delivered and interviews with ITC and project team</p>	<p>Interviews and board meeting notes</p> <p>Interview notes</p> <p>Project data and interviews with project team members</p> <p>Work plan and interview notes</p>	
<b>Potential Impact: What difference will the intervention make?</b>					
<b>What has been achieved by the project in terms of improved food safety through better governance in Viet Nam and Lao PDR?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Has the project generated or is expected to generate significant positive or negative, intended or unintended, higher-level effects, including as measured by the outcome-level indicators? Can observed changes be linked to the project's interventions?</li> <li>Has the project strengthened the regulatory framework for control of plant health and pesticides in the F&amp;V sector and other plant products?</li> <li>Has the project strengthened compliance with quality and food safety requirements of the target export markets and built related capacity?</li> <li>To what extent has the project contributed to SDGs 2, 8, 9, and 17?</li> </ul>	<p>Incidence of food-borne diseases</p> <p>Increase in the number of food safety and quarantine Inspectors.</p> <p>Percentage rejection rate of exported F+V and other plant products</p> <p>Percent achievement on SDGs 2, 8, 9 and 17.</p>	<p>Health Department statistics, interviews with stakeholders</p> <p>Number of positions created and fully staffed in plant protection area</p> <p>F+V and other plant product export statistics</p> <p>Government published data on SDG 2,8, 9 and 17.</p>	<p>Government publication on food-borne diseases and interview notes.</p> <p>Department staffing data</p> <p>Department statistical reports on F+V and other plant products on export rejection rates</p> <p>Government SDG reports</p>	
<b>Potential Sustainability: Will the benefits last?</b>					
<b>What is the extent to which partners and beneficiaries are enabled, committed and likely to contribute to ongoing benefits?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To what extent are the net benefits of the project likely to continue after ITC support came to an end in particular from the perspective of institutional strengthening?</li> <li>Are the financial, economic, social, environmental, and institutional capacities of the systems needed to sustain</li> </ul>	<p>Budget allocation for food safety and quarantine offices at the central and subnational levels</p> <p>Adequacy of human and financial resources is</p>	<p>Interviews with government staff</p> <p>Government data and interviews</p>	<p>Interview notes.</p> <p>Budget reports and interview notes</p>	

Criteria and focus	Guiding evaluation questions	Indicator	Means of Verification	Data Source	Risks
	<p>the net benefits over time in place? Has engagement of relevant agencies with stakeholders strengthened under SYMST? If so, what are the recommendations to improve this engagement further?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>How effective has the project been in establishing national ownership of food safety in each country?</li> <li>What are the factors that may influence the achievement or non-achievement of sustainability of the project including cross-cutting issues?</li> <li>Was a specific exit strategy or approach prepared and agreed upon by key partners to ensure sustainability?</li> </ul>	<p>demonstrated by sustained increases.</p> <p>Sustained increase in budget for food safety and plant quarantine offices</p> <p>Staff turnover rate, trends in budget allocation and utilization</p> <p>Government strategy and commitment to implement project recommendations.</p>	<p>Departmental budget allocation for the last five years; stakeholder interviews</p> <p>Trends in staffing levels and budget allocations</p> <p>The clarity in the project document about an exit strategy</p>	<p>Budget reports and interview notes</p> <p>Budget reports and interview notes</p> <p>Project document an interview with project takeholders</p>	
<b>EU Added Value<sup>75</sup></b>					
<b>What is the added value of EU support through the SYMST, at the sectoral level?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Could the identified results have been achieved without EU intervention? Were there clear benefits of EU-level action to Lao PDR and Viet Nam?</li> <li>Was the assumption that the objectives of the intervention could best be met by action at the EU level valid?</li> </ul>	<p>Perception of the SYMST team</p> <p>Evidence of clarity in assumptions</p>	<p>Interviews</p> <p>Document review and interviews</p>	<p>Interview notes</p> <p>Document review notes and interview notes</p>	

<sup>75</sup> EU added value: the extent to which the intervention brings additional benefits to what would have resulted from Member States' interventions only in the partner country. Further information can be found in the [EU Evaluation methodological approach](#).