

MAKING MARKETS WORK



for safe farmers

*Myanmar farmer group's experience
in piloting 'Safe Food from Safe Farm'*

By Dwight Jason Ronan

It was a sunny Saturday morning and several people have started to gather around the small stalls lined up along Nat Mauk Street near Yangon's Kandawgyi Lake. There is nothing unusual seeing a weekend market packed with shoppers—some of them fresh from their early morning walk—carrying bags of fresh produce. But there is more to this market than meets the eye. This weekly agro-bazaar offers a wide selection of farm-fresh and certified safe fruits and vegetables.

SHARED STORIES



Aptly called Safe Food from Safe Farm market, this busy weekend bazaar gathers local growers from Yangon and nearby districts to sell their organic- and Good Agricultural Practices (GAP)-certified produce. About 20 farmers put their high-quality harvests for sale and proudly display the certificates they have received proving that their products are safe and clean.

Started in 2015, this market is an initiative of the Myanmar Fruit, Flower, and Vegetable Producers and Exporters Association (MFVP) aimed at linking fresh producers directly to consumers and making natural and certified safe fruits and vegetables more accessible to the public. U Hla Aung, a senior trainer and advisor to MFVP, shared that this activity was started to support a more sustainable market for organic and GAP-certified produce in Yangon. "All sellers here have certifications so we can guarantee the safety of the products sold here," he shared. According to him, MFVP members, especially those who participate in the weekend market, are regularly inspected to make sure that they comply with the recommended practices to grow and produce safe food.



"It is good that we have a sure place to sell our products every week," said Ko Myint Zaw Oo, one of the market's regular sellers, as he hands a bag of fresh cabbage to his customer. "This market gives us, small farmers, a good opportunity to directly sell our products to buyers without paying extra for middlemen or traders," he continued. He explained that the market for certified crops in the country is still relatively small and many consumers are still not aware of the differences between certified products and those grown conventionally. For Ko Myint Zaw Oo, the weekend market not only helps small-scale growers sell their products and compete against bigger producers but it also serves as a venue to promote the benefits of growing and consuming safe produce. "More and more residents come here regularly, especially those looking for chemical-free and healthier fruits and vegetables" he added.

Building local champions

Linking farmers directly to consumers is one of MFVP's major goals. Established in 2006, the main target of the group is to encourage and support local fruit and vegetable growers to produce fresh, high quality, and safe products. To achieve this, MFVP primarily trains farmers on sustainable agricultural practices and builds networks among key supply chain players.

With over 30,000 members from all over the country, MFVP has established about 30 producer clusters for key cash crops, such as mango, watermelon, pomelo, cabbage, and mushroom. The organization has also been providing technical support to farmers including organizing localized trainings and assisting growers to comply with local standards through farmer field schools and regular inspections.

To support these initiatives, many MFVP members have been invited to participate in the safe food courses offered through Mekong Institute's **Promoting Safe Food for Everyone (PROSAFE) Project**. Over the years, MI has worked with these local safe food champions to enhance their knowledge and skills on various food safety issues and assist them in sharing these learnings to others, including their fellow farmers.



U Sann Linn, a senior MFVP member, participated in several MI regional training programs in the last few years. After the courses, he led many localized trainings for local growers on GAP, effective agrichemical management, and integrated pest management. Recently, he closely worked with the MFVP mango cluster in Mandalay to help farmers and processors improve the postharvest handling of mangos for export.



In 2019, U Thet Kyaing, an organic inspector and trainer from Yangon, also joined PROSAFE courses on safe postharvest management as well as product packaging and labeling for processed agri-food. Utilizing the new knowledge he gained from MI, he assisted several farms in Shan State to comply with the requirements to receive local organic certificates. At the same time, he initiated improvements in the product labeling and packaging for his virgin coconut oil business.



Back at the Safe Food from Safe Farm market, U Hla Aung shared that the PROSAFE courses he attended has been very useful in building his confidence to support more farmers to apply safer farm practices. "Aside from learning new concepts and technologies from the experts [in MI], I really enjoyed listening to the experiences of my new friends from neighboring countries and see how those can be applied in my country," he shared. Many of the participating farmer-traders in the weekend market, he said, have joined in the sharing sessions he organized after returning from MI.



"This is just a start," he explained, "since the products sold here are not completely organic and many farmers still end up using chemicals to improve soil quality or manage pests." But U Hla Aung is hopeful that the Safe Food from Safe Farm initiative can generate more interest for farmers to adopt better farm practices and encourage more consumers to buy certified safe produce at reasonable prices.

"People have started spreading the word about this market and hopefully we can have the opportunity to open similar safe food markets in other cities soon," he ended. ■



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