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SUCCESS STORY:

Women Farmers Leading the Way

Ma Ei Thaw is a 32-year-old female farmer. She lives with her family in Than Ywa Village in Kyauk Se township, in the Mandalay Region of Myanmar. She has an older brother and sister, neither of whom followed her father into farming. Ma Ei Thaw, however, began joining her father in the fields when she was a teenager, learning traditional farming techniques from her father and from other farmers in the village. The family has 30 acres of farmland - they usually grow turmeric on 10 acres, sesame on eight acres, banana on five acres and chili and other seasonal crops on the remaining land.

Last year, due to kidney problems, both of Ma Ei Thaw's parents passed away. Suddenly left alone, without the support of her parents, she felt very lost and uncertain about her abilities to manage the family farm on her own. She lacked confidence and it was a tremendous challenge for her to keep farming on her own, without the guidance of her father.

From her friends in the local community she heard that Snacks Mandalay was procuring fresh chili directly from local farmers at a guaranteed premium market price. This initiative from Snacks Mandalay was made possible by investment and support from the DaNa Facility, a programme funded by the UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID). Ma Ei Thaw was very interested since she felt that if a company bought crops direct from the farmers, rather than farmers selling to local middlemen, this would improve her income and provide some much-needed assurance and stability.

Due to the support provided by DFID and DaNa, Snacks Mandalay provided farmers with training, information and advice on modern farming techniques and skills. Ma Ei Thaw was invited to participate in a training event led by an expert agricultural professor from Thailand, where she discussed planting options together with other farmers. During the training event, Ma Ei shared her concerns and difficulties, which mirror many of the major challenges for farmers in her region, and include lack of access to modern technology and training, poor quality seeds and limited access to markets.

The advice and guidance provided during the training focused on farming practices, including seed quality, disease control and cultivation practices that enhance



Ma Ei Thaw in her chili farm

productivity and assist disease control. Ma Ei's knowledge of seedlings, variety selection, growing techniques for seasonal crops and access to markets has dramatically improved. She said, "I usually grow mostly banana, sesame, chili and turmeric. Now, because of the training I received I can also grow other seasonal crops such as tomatoes, bitter gourd and pumpkin. This allows me to earn money the whole year which is a tremendous help in supporting my family. I now feel proud and confident in my abilities to manage my farm on my own."

Through this agricultural training, supported by DFID and DaNa, hundreds of farmers like Ma Ei from the surrounding Mandalay area have gained significant skills and benefits. At the beginning of the training she said, "I will try these farming practices first and once I have the evidence I will then share them with other farmers". Her farm has now become a model of good practice and other farmers in the village are now following the techniques she uses. Due to the application of these new techniques, productivity has increased by over 10% per acre. Farmers that apply the new techniques can earn additional profit of between 250,000 – 1,000,000 Kyat (\$159 to \$648) per acre.

Sharing her knowledge and newly acquired skills with her friends and neighbours gives Ma Ei a feeling of great pride. By passing on knowledge of modern farming technology and techniques, Ma Ei has proven to herself and to her peers that women farmers can be successful leaders in their community.