Welcome to the MEKONG DELTA of Vietnam!

At last you have come to the land of the famous but mysterious Plain of Reeds and Uminh Forests. For nearly three decades, with support from the central and provincial organizations of Vietnam and numerous international research and development institutions, and many NGOs, Western scientists together with numerous Vietnamese scientists have unveiled the secrets of the land of the Mekong Delta. From 1989, Vietnam emerged from a near famine state to become the world's second largest rice exporter after Thailand. Although the underlying factor that contributed to the big leap in Vietnamese rice exports was accredited to the rapid change in government policy, other factors --improved agricultural technology, increased irrigation systems, and availability of inputs-- have no doubt helped farmers increasing the productivity of their land. However, it is difficult to increase their income due to the inefficient existing agribusiness management system and the inherent low "gray content" in our farmer's products.

The Mekong Delta (see map below), the southernmost region of Vietnam from Longan province to Camau province, extending from $8^\circ30'$ to $11^\circ$ N and from $104^\circ30'$ to $107^\circ$ E, is just a young land mass formed not more than 10,000 years ago. This four-million-ha plain has been deposited with alluvium carried by the Mekong river, 4,000-km all the way from Tibet, and with marine accretions through epochs of sea level changes. At each new sea level, a new shore line was formed, and eventually became a
sand bar. Today hundreds of sand bars run parallel to the present coast lines. Between the sand bars, ancient mangroves added organic matter to both riverain and marine alluvium providing ideal conditions for the formation of the present acid sulphate soils. The combined actions of the river and the sea have formed good alluvial soils on elevated levees along riverside and acid sulphate soils in depressed back-swamps such as the Plain of Reeds, the Longxuyen-Hatien quadrangle, and the Trans-Bassac depression. The monsoon climate of the Mekong Delta is influenced by the river flow and the diurnal tidal movement of the Eastern Sea and the semi-diurnal tidal movement of the Western Sea. The annual rainfall of 1,400 to 2,400 mm combined with the high flow of about 40,000 m$^3$/sec of the Mekong river result in regular floods of 0.5 to 1.5 m during the wet season (May to November, with highest flood level in September) on this poorly drained depressed areas. Contrarily, these entire areas become totally dry during the dry season (December to April) as the river flow is reduced to less than 1,800 m$^3$/sec. The average temperature during the coolest months (December-January) is 23$^\circ$-25$^\circ$ and during the warmest month (April) 32$^\circ$-33$^\circ$.

During the 300-year exploitation of the then swampy region, the pioneer Vietnamese established resettlements in places most suitable for rice production, leaving the acid soils untouched. The wars further prevented the development of these areas. It is only during the last 25 peaceful years that all efforts by the government and the people have continuously changed the faces of the Mekong Delta. Yet, the 17 million inhabitants are still concentrating in large towns and cities; while the average population density is 355 persons/ km$^2$, in remote areas the figure does not pass 100 persons/km$^2$. The Delta farmers are generally hard working, versatile, and very adaptive to the natural conditions of their land and seas. A number of them have been taking advantage of the nature to build up a sustainable way of life. In the color map on page 4, you can see the various land uses. Those who are highly receptive to new technologies, are among the early agricultural entrepreneurs who quitted a subsistence life to live in greater prosperity. They transform their monocrop of 180- to 210-day rice having only 1 t/ha/year to two crops of 100-day modern variety getting 8 to 10 t/ha/year. Occasionally some smart farmers integrated an upland crop, such as mungbean, soybean, sesame, corn,..., between their two rice crops, or raise fish, shrimp, or duck with their rice successfully. In non-rice land, many kinds of fruit trees are bountiful. Some farmers can even plant coffee and black pepper. On acid sulphate soils, woody plants such as *Melaleuca* spp., *Eucalyptus* spp., *Acacia* spp. and cashew can thrive very well; pineapple, sugarcane, kenaf, jute, yam (*Dioscorea esculenta*) and cassava bring an income for the new settlers in these places. Along the 700 km coast line, where the marine resources are considered richest in Southeast Asia, some farmers venture in shrimp production with various degrees of success.

Despite all effort, the Mekong Delta still has a long way to prosperity. So far most investments were given to irrigation systems to help increasing rice production. As world rice price is too low while production cost is quite high, the income of all rice farmers is badly affected. Other rural infrastructures such as rural roads and bridges, transportation, communications, housings, health and specially education received much less investments. Despite significant advances in agricultural research, Vietnamese farm produce often do not conform quality standards required by the industries due to the fact that most farmers –whose level of education is generally very low- still are relying on their age old traditional experiences instead of following strictly the technical procedures recommended by research and the industries.

The educational level of the Mekong Delta region is ranked next to that of the mountainous region. Based on the results of national tests, particularly the results of standard university entrance examinations, the general education of the Mekong Delta is ranked next to lowest. While the national passing average was 14.5%, the Mekong Delta only reached 9.5%. This downward trend in education reflects truly the state of education system in the country at this time. Furthermore, the drop out and retention rates in general education also quite high (see Appendix 1). The government as well as various development agencies are trying to invest in tertiary education, leaving the primary and secondary to the local people who are mostly poor and marginalized people. **The root causes** of the poor performance of rural pupils can be traced to: inadequate facilities for learning and teaching, too heavy loaded curriculum (compacted theory, less practical), poor preparation of the teachers, and weak-will parents. The large disparity in income between the rural and urban people can be seen very clearly in education, too. The rural pupils hardly have excellent teachers, neither a decent library nor laboratory. On agricultural production, rural farmers are in need of timely guidance to handle production problems in order to lower their costs. We at Angiang University, the second public institution of higher learning located right in the remote region of the
Mekong Delta, are determined to make significant contributions toward narrowing down this gap. While other universities in Vietnam are aspiring to excellence in their respective fields, we believe that the immediate action that will have a domino effect on Vietnamese education systems is the modernization of all academic curricula both at the general education and the tertiary education levels and the accompanying teaching-learning technologies. Angiang University is trying to revolutionize the existing teacher training and agricultural education systems. We are revising all our curricula and require our lecturers/instructors to use ICT means. Once the syllabi and expertly prepared teaching materials and other scientific and technological documents are put on line, the students at Angiang University as well as the teachers and pupils in all the high schools in the remote rural areas, the extension workers, the farmers in the cooperatives or extension clubs will have a single source of information to learn from. The people in the remote rural areas will then have the same opportunity to access to the same source, the same good teachers, the same competent production advisors. Hence, there will no longer be inequality between the rural and urban people, thanks to the digital application. We are confident that by closing the digital gap, others gaps will eventually be closed. In order to carry out this mission, we need to have more experienced professors in the field of teacher education and education management, and to be equipped with better ICT facilities. The immediate expected outcome of this revolution are better trained students in secondary schools who can enter universities or other vocational schools with better competence.

Hopefully these difficulties will be overcome in a very near future. By then the productive farmers together with all the people of the Mekong Delta will join the rest of the people on the globe to enjoy good life in a peaceful and prosperous world.

We trust that your short visit to the Mekong Delta is successful and enjoyable, and that you can make optimum and realistic decision to help Vietnam’s education.

APPENDIX 1

Retention and Dropout Rates in Vietnamese Primary and Secondary Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>AG Primary</th>
<th>VN</th>
<th>MD</th>
<th>AG Low Second.</th>
<th>VN</th>
<th>MD</th>
<th>H. Second.</th>
<th>AG</th>
<th>VN</th>
<th>MD</th>
<th>AG Primary Dropout rate (%)</th>
<th>VN</th>
<th>MD</th>
<th>H. Second.</th>
<th>AG</th>
<th>VN</th>
<th>MD</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>96-97</td>
<td>4.85</td>
<td>2.24</td>
<td>1.17</td>
<td>11.27</td>
<td>11.00</td>
<td>6.35</td>
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<tr>
<td>97-98</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>1.93</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>11.67</td>
<td>10.98</td>
<td>7.83</td>
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<tr>
<td>98-99</td>
<td>2.45</td>
<td>1.78</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>10.69</td>
<td>14.49</td>
<td>9.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>99-00</td>
<td>2.22</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>4.11</td>
<td>1.84</td>
<td>2.06</td>
<td>9.76</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>9.74</td>
<td>15.98</td>
<td>8.08</td>
<td>14.94</td>
<td>8.96</td>
<td>5.06</td>
<td>11.47</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

LEGEND:
Primary = Primary schools; Low Second. = Junior High schools; H. Second. = Senior High schools.
AG = An giang province; VN = entire country; MD = Mekong Delta.

An Giang University
situated in Long xuyen City of An giang Province, 215 km southwest of Ho Chi Minh City, adjacent to the Cambodian border, was established by the Prime Minister’s Decision No 240/QD-TTg dated December 30, 1999. It is administered financially by the People’s Committee of An giang Province and supervised technically by the Ministry of Education and Training of the Central Government.

In 2003: number of teaching staff: 395
- number of students: 4,382
  - university level: 2,290
  - college level: 2,092

In 2010: number of teaching staff: 650
- number of students: 11,000
  - university level: 8,500
  - college level and short courses: 2,500