

Is it a bird? Is it a plane?

No! It's a superhero stove –
and 100,000 have been
spotted all over Laos



There have been many superheroes in our time – from the fictional characters of Superman and Batman, fighting crime and saving people from imminent danger, to the real-life superheroes who don't have superhuman strength, yet make positive changes in people's lives.

In Laos, a new superhero has taken to the stage and his name is ICS Man. ICS Man is a fictional character but is making real changes in people's lives. His only downside: he has a head shaped like a bucket.

ICS stands for Improved Cookstoves, and ICS Man is the mascot of a newly created stove. He has been sweeping the nation with his distinct green lycra jumpsuit and flowing red cape, spreading over 100,000 stoves across the country since 2013. A great accomplishment in just a few years.

But how did this superhero come into being? Superman got his strength from kryptonite and Batman was compelled to fight crime after the death of his parents. ICS Man, however, had a different source of inspiration.

Lao people love their food. From the famous Larb (marinated meat dish) and the popular Lao sausage (Sai Oua), to Khao Niaw – sticky rice which is usually served with grilled meat or fish, steamed vegetables and sauces called Jiao. Lao cuisine is distinct from other Southeast Asian dishes but just as tasty. This obsession with food means that the country uses a whopping 70% of its total energy consumption for cooking. That's right – 70%! What's more, people here rely heavily on inefficient cookstoves that use wood and charcoal. They emit excessive amounts of

smoke, are costly to use and create indoor air pollution that causes the premature death of thousands of people, mainly women and children, across the country every year.

To overcome this problem, SNV decided to develop a market for long lasting, fuel efficient and convenient cookstoves for wood and charcoal that would meet consumer needs. In partnership with OxfamNovib, ARMI and with funding from the EU Switch Asia Programme, SNV started the Improved Cookstove Programme in 2013, with the aim of mass dissemination and uptake of the improved ICS Man cookstove.

"We started to build a market around an improved cookstove and we wanted to create an engaging brand in order to encourage people to buy it," says Bastiaan Teune – SNV Sector Leader Energy Lao PDR. "We started to develop a stove that saves fuel, time and money, and is good for the environment – and we wanted our mascot to reflect that. The result is an effective, fun and colourful mascot which catches people's eye and represents durability and quality of the stove. Of course the main aim was to create a useful, fuel efficient stove. But having a fun brand really helps with promotion and visibility."

These were the first flickers of life for ICS Man – he would soon start to gain more power,

making positive changes across the country.

Getting people involved

The ICS programme has involved a number of groups to research, develop, test, produce, sell, promote and market the stove. The public sector oversees social promotion, consumer outreach and the implementation of national quality standards; civil society organisations provide technical and managerial input; and private producers and retailers drive production and sales.

"We started by finding out what the current status was, what consumers really needed and what the supply looked like. Once we knew that, we worked with the Ministry of Science to test a range of stove models and prototypes until we developed one that ticked all the boxes regarding convenience, safety and efficiency as well as ease of production and profitability. We then started to involve producers and retailers around the country who could spread the stove far and wide with sales records exceeding 100,000 in an area with just 500,000 households, the programme demonstrates how a well-balanced intervention involving the public, private and civil sector, can unlock a greener economy," explains Amphone Souvannalath, director of the NGO coordinating the daily operations of the programme. >



Superwomen

There is an old adage that says 'Behind every good man is an even better woman'. And that is definitely true for ICS Man. Women are the ones most affected by unclean cooking techniques, so it is only natural that they play an important role in testing, production and sales of this improved cookstove. An overwhelming 90% of the 1,000 retailers are women owned. And the Lao Women's Union and the project team have so far given over 150 demonstrations of cooking with this improved stove in markets and at festivals.

In addition, one of the 20 producers of the cookstove is the Lao Disabled Women's Development Centre. The Centre built a production facility on their site and the women have learnt how to construct the cookstoves. They even sell the stoves, along with other locally-made products, in their gift shop which gives them an extra source of income.

Where to now?

The market for ICS Man and his stove is strong. The stoves themselves are not subsidised and production and sales are still profitable. With the stoves offering clear benefits, and made recognisable by ICS Man, we are convinced that demand and supply will continue to grow.

ICS Man has made a huge impact in the first few years of his life and we expect him to expand his outreach in coming years, with the ultimate goal of conquering all Lao kitchens. And who knows? Maybe we will see him on the Silver Screen in the near future next to some of the great superheroes of our time. ●



Bastiaan Teune, SNV Sector Leader Energy - Lao PDR

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ICS Man's power statistics

- Sold:** 100,000 since 2013
- Producers:** 20 (each producing on average 500 stoves per month)
- Retailers:** 1,000 (90% are women-owned)
- Retail price:** US\$5
- Fuel savings:** US\$2 per month (uses 25% less fuel than a normal stove)
- Testing facilities:** 3
- Greenhouse gas reduction:** 0.5 tonne per year per stove
- Cooking time saved:** 20 minutes on average
- Customer satisfaction:** 95%
- Lifespan:** 24 months (against 6 for the baseline stove)