



## Breaking out of poverty



Hu Jihua, head of Lequn village, surveys the land worked by members of the local cooperative. This year, the village has lost tens of thousands of yuan's worth of crops as a result of disease and abnormally hot weather.

PHOTOS BY LIU HAO/CHINA DAILY

# Co-op: Helping people to help themselves

FROM PAGE 1

One of the reasons behind the high disability rate in Lequn is generations of marriage between close blood relatives, according to Hu Jihua, the village head.

About 50 percent of the residents are members of ethnic groups, mostly the Hui, Buyi and Yi peoples, said Hu, who is of Yi origin. In previous generations, most of the groups forbade marriage with people of other ethnicities, and although the local government has tempered the tendency in recent years, the problems are likely to remain for some time. "What's done is done," Hu said, with a sigh.

Another reason is a problem that often affects isolated villages such as Lequn, where the primary activity is farming. About 20 years ago, the lack of other work resulted in younger villagers, mainly men, leaving home and heading to coastal cities, where wages were about 10 times higher, in search of jobs.

Most of them ended up on unregulated, dangerous construction sites, and their status as migrant laborers provided little protection if they became injured. Almost inevitably, a large number of them returned home with permanent physical damage.

Fang Jiaping is one of them. As a result of a work injury, the 47-year-old's left leg has withered to the extent that the muscles are barely visible. Wearing a flat cap and clutching a handmade pipe, Fang had to lean against a wall for support as he spoke.

Nearly 20 years ago, Fang headed to Guiyang, the capital of Guizhou, to do odd jobs. His injury occurred when he fell off scaffolding while working at a construction site, leaving him with a crippled leg and five toes he is unable to flex. He said pain is the only thing he has felt in his lower limb for nearly two decades.

Fang, a Han, is married to a woman from the Buyi group. They have a 19-year-old son, who has followed his father's example and left to work in Zhejiang province, despite a serious skin condition that is exacerbated by the humidity in the coastal province.

"He lives on his own money. We don't expect him to give us anything. We're happy as long as he doesn't come back to ask us for money," Fang said, with a humble smile that revealed several yellow teeth.

The family has three *mu* (0.2 hectares) of land. Before Hu was elected as the village head, the family was dependent on Fang's wife, who raises chickens, cattle and pigs in addition to farm work, to make ends meet.

Hu's plan has raised the family above the national poverty line of 2,600 yuan per person per year. Fang acts as a casual laborer at the



“Since joining the cooperative, I do whatever I am able to do, such as spraying pesticides, watering the plants, and weeding.”

Cai Xingxue, shareholder and worker in the Lequn village cooperative

company, packing bags with grain, earning 90 yuan (\$13) a day. He has also invested 5,000 yuan in the cooperative to become a shareholder, which has given him a rare taste of how it feels to make money with money. Even better, even when the cooperative fails to make a profit, Fang can still get his 5,000 yuan back whenever he wants.

Cai Xingxue's urinary system was damaged in a farming accident, so the 52-year-old has to wear a diaper in bed. His wife has a serious spinal condition which prevents her from working, despite the fact that the couple has three daughters and a young son to support. Before Hu established the cooperative, a family such as Cai's would have been reliant on limited government subsidies.

"Since joining the cooperative, I do whatever I am able to do, such as spraying pesticides, watering the plants, and weeding. Every year, I work for five or six months and earn about 10,000 yuan," he said.

Villagers whose land falls within Hu's area of activity have an extra option. They can invest their land in exchange for shares in the cooperative, and every *mu* they allow it to use brings them a fixed sum of 600 yuan a year.

Hu is proud that his idea has improved the peoples' lives: "We give them cash before the seeds are planted, and as long as the plot of land is accurately measured, the dimensions are made public and no one disagrees, I transfer the money to their bank accounts, so they have a guaranteed income. For now, at least, investing their land brings them 200 yuan (per *mu*) more than farming it would."

Contact the writer at [chenmengwei@chinadaily.com.cn](mailto:chenmengwei@chinadaily.com.cn)



Online  
Scan the code to watch a video about this story



In the remote village of Lequn, hidden in a mountainous corner of Liupanshui city, Guizhou province, nearly 400 villagers — 10 percent of the residents — have physical disabilities, almost double the national average.



## Setbacks and solutions

Hu Jihua's business model — a village cooperative that sells farm produce and local delicacies — is constantly being challenged.

This year, the weather has been the main enemy for residents of Lequn, a village in the mountains of Guizhou province, after searing heat damaged the crops. Moreover, a slump in the price of coix, a cereal crop also known as Job's tears and grown by many people in the village, and the loss of many fields of konjac, or elephant yam, to a crop disease have added to the problems.

"Our losses were huge this year. As a result of abnormally high temperatures and humidity, we lost a lot of crops. Overall, hundreds of hectares worth 600,000 (\$85,700) to 700,000 yuan have been basically wasted," Hu said, pointing to a large area of land that has produced nothing but worthless grass.

His older brother, Hu Jixue, had long lived below the national annual poverty line of 2,600 yuan per person. Struggling to feed his five children, Hu Jixue joined his brother's cooperative by investing his 3 *mu* (0.2 hectares) of land in the operation, which brings him an extra 2,000 yuan per year. In addition, now his land is worked by other villagers, he is free to concentrate on his other job as a glazier.

"The harvest was bad. We lost money on the coix, because the buyers forced the price down to 1.8 yuan per 500 grams, and they only paid that for completely dry grain. Look, this grain was dry a couple of days ago, but now the rain has dampened it. If it rots, we'll

get nothing," Hu Jixue said.

The setbacks have affected Hu Jihua more than the other villagers: "I am the head of the village, so I must shoulder the biggest responsibility. I have taken out a loan, and am 570,000 yuan in debt."

However, he has devised a new solution — producing beef jerky with authentic Hui flavors, which makes good use of the ethnic and cultural traditions in Lequn, where about half of the population of 4,000 are members of ethnic groups.

Having formulated the idea, Hu Jihua summoned villagers' representatives and explained his new blueprint.

Ma Minguang, one of the representatives at the meeting, was firmly in favor of the new approach. "This new factory is great news. For example, when I wanted to sell a cow on the street, I had to walk a long way (out of the village), and that tired me out."

The 43-year-old's primary concern is the welfare of his family, because his father and mother are both disabled, while his wife has serious mental health issues. He also has a daughter at primary school.

"As long as they are able to build the factory, our thinking is that we will just have to take good care of our cattle, feed them well and be dedicated to our business, then we can sell them to the factory. It will be a great opportunity," he said.

In 2012, the Outline of Development-oriented Poverty Reduction for Rural People with Disabilities (2011-20) was issued. It



“I don't have any big ideas. It's still the same old plan — to make people's lives better and to make a little money for myself.”

Hu Jihua, head of Lequn village



emphasized that impoverished people with disabilities are key targets of poverty alleviation measures, and must be given preferential status when policies are formulated.

Under a new policy, Hu Jihua's cooperative is likely to qualify for a number of additional zero-interest loans that would buy them time to assess their new business model.

"I don't have any big ideas. It's still the same old plan — to make people's lives better and to make a little money for myself," he said at his home, where the grain is stored. "As long as I can support my children, bring harmony back to my family, and improve the lives of the local people, that's what I will do."

CHEN MENGWEI



CHINA DAILY