

Mechanical training meets growing need

Wednesday, 28 November 2012 Justine Drennan and Mom Kunthear



A woman learns mechanics skills as part of a USAID/HARVEST initiative.
Photograph supplied

When Cheng Sokhim's water pump broke down, she used to spend several days taking it from her small village in Kampong Thom's Kampong Svay district to the provincial capital for repairs.

The repairs themselves cost her around \$10 per visit.

"I paid whatever they charged from me – I couldn't negotiate the fee because I could not repair it myself," said Sokhim.

Now Sokhim has the skills to fix the pump on her own after participating in a four-day training course that was part of an initiative by USAID's Cambodia HARVEST program to teach farmers how to maintain their equipment and make basic repairs.

"It was important for me and other farmers to learn which parts of our machine were broken and how to change the oil and store the machine," said Sokhim. "I do not need to send it to be repaired in town anymore."

She can now prevent the pump from getting damaged in the first place, as well as knowing to keep it on smooth ground and check its water and oil levels before using it to irrigate her farmland with water from a nearby pond.

Such skills are increasingly important as the number of rural Cambodians owning mechanised farming equipment grows rapidly.

According to the [World Bank](#) and the [UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific](#), the number of engine-based water pumps and threshers in Cambodia more than doubled between 2001 and 2008, while the number of tractors increased by more than 50 per cent in that period.

From June to September, [HARVEST](#)'s training program focused on these three common farming machines, sending trainers from NGOs Lom Orng and Farmer Livelihood Development to about 150 villages in Kampong Thom, Pursat, Battambang and Siem Reap provinces and reaching almost 3,000 villagers – 8 per cent of them women.

In a second round of trainings slated for early next year, the program intends to expand into more villages and include a broader range of equipment, including boat motors and other machines used for fishing and forestry, said Susan Novak, Cambodia HARVEST's director of social inclusion and capacity development.

While other mechanic training programs target select individuals at a few specialised training centres, HARVEST's trainings spread basic knowledge at the village level, Novak said.

The only requirements for participants in the last round of trainings were that they were between 16- and 30-years-old and belonged to a family

who owned one of the targeted appliances – participants learn using their own machines.

“We want this to be practical,” Novak said. “We want 65 to 70 per cent to be hands on.”

HARVEST also produced a users’ manual in Khmer, since many farmers cannot consult their machines’ manuals because they are written in other languages or were lost before the machine came into their hands, Novak said.

Sam Oeurn Pok, the Lom Orng Organisation’s director, said he believed this to be country’s first such village-based project.

“We did a few field visits recently and found that the majority of the trainees are using the skills they learned to take care of their farm machinery by storing it in a correct place, maintaining good levels of engine oil, warming up before starting and changing nozzle heads and fuel injectors by themselves in order to maintain machine strength and prevent malfunction,” he said.

Lom Orng hopes that spreading this knowledge will help Cambodia increase its low rice yields to levels closer to those of neighbouring countries.

“Four days is a very short time – my own training took six months,” said trainer Sang Sareth, who taught a about 100 villagers in three Pursat province districts.

“So we chose to teach them specific points that they could use in their daily lives.”

Bee Pich, a trainee from Phnom Rei village in Battambang’s Samlot district, did not think four days was enough.

“I am not sure whether I can use the skills that I’ve learned in the future, because I learned them in a very short time,” he said. “I want to have more training.”

Requests for more training helped motivate HARVEST’s expanded second round of sessions, to be launched after the rice harvest.

In this new round, HARVEST hopes to boost women's enrolment.

While Cheng Sokhim was the only woman among the 20 trainees in her village, Novak noted that women are becoming an increasingly dynamic economic force, with countless women managing micro-enterprises or moving to cities to work in the garment industry.

By the time a woman returns to her village to marry, Novak said, "she's had a taste of living in Phnom Penh, Kampong Speu, or wherever the factory is. She's going to want to do something more than just be a wife and mother."

Perhaps a more active role in mechanics work could counter the draw of cities like Phnom Penh, seen in the Cambodian Rural-Urban Migration Report, released in October by the Ministry of Planning and [United Nations Population Fund Cambodia](#), which detailed the draining effect of on home villages of young peoples' surge toward cities.

"The younger generation don't really want to be rice farmers like their fathers. They want a cash income," Novak said.

"They don't have land. They're getting pushed out of the rural areas," she said, noting that better roads and job prospects abroad also help pull them out.

"I don't know that we can stop that necessarily, but we can give them some skills that at least give them alternatives."

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