



Hun Chan Nang of CCK talking with members of the rice bank committee in Tonlab village: Prak Roun, the finance officer, and Mrs Seang Yon, the head of the committee. (Jim Holmes/Oxfam)

## CAMBODIA CASE STUDY

### Women flourish in disaster risk reduction leadership roles

Oxfam's programme in Takeo province linked emergency response with mid- and long-term development as a way of enhancing the sustainability of livelihoods improvements from other development projects. It built up community-based disaster preparedness structures and aimed to empower women by creating women's leadership roles in the community. In addition, the programme increased the ability of the community to better cope with disasters through strengthening the structure of houses to provide protection from wind and floods, identifying and constructing safe areas, and raising house foundations.

# INTRODUCTION

Takeo is a province of Cambodia located along the southern Cambodia-Vietnam border and is affected by flooding every year. From September through to at least December, people's movements, agricultural work and productivity are restricted until the water recedes. Those living in flood prone areas experience significant difficulties in protecting their livelihoods. This has resulted in out-migration as families and individuals seek more secure livelihoods in other districts or provinces of the country.

In 1999, the Vietnamese government built a dam on the Mekong River close to the Vietnam-Cambodia border. Since then, the flooding experienced in Takeo is different: water rises faster than before, stays longer, and recedes more slowly.

Banteay Sloek is a village in Chey Chouk commune, Takeo with a population of 148, of whom 78 are women. It is one of many villages affected by flooding since the dam was constructed. The community lives with six months of flood and six months of drought. During the flood months, the source of livelihoods is fishing and harvesting aquatic products, whilst during the drought period income is derived from rice cultivation. As a remote rural area, the community faces a lot of difficulties including food shortages, inadequate health services and a lack of access to education. Life is challenging at the best of times; when disasters hit, there are no resources to respond to them and years of development progress can easily be wiped out.

## Takeo Flood Mitigation Programme

Oxfam worked with partner Chamroeun Cheat Khmer (CCK) to implement the Takeo Flood Mitigation Programme in villages throughout Takeo province, including Banteay Sloek village. It was a 24-month project, running from 2002 to 2004, with a total budget of £145,000.

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Consequently, villagers felt better prepared to deal with disasters. Through the programme they acquired valuable tools and knowledge to reduce risks and to better deal with critical situations once a disaster has occurred.

The major activities undertaken by OGB and CCK included:

- Capacity building for Village Committees for Disaster Management (VCDMs) and local authorities on humanitarian response and DRR related concepts.
- Building up women's leadership within the process of establishing VCDMs.
- Implementing 'cash for work' schemes.
- Promoting house repair by contributing construction materials.
- Distribution of boats, fishing nets and water filters.
- Making and distribution of cement water jars/containers.
- Growing vegetables.
- Tree and bamboo planting in the village as protection from strong winds and storms.
- Safe area and school construction.

"The project gave our villagers knowledge and livelihoods assistance such as wooden boats, cash for work to elevate our homes, giant water jars, emergency kits, fishing nets and houses for the most vulnerable families. The aid from the programme improved our day-to-day living conditions. Compared to five years ago, the community's life is very different. Every family has enough food to eat, increased income and reduced debt. Increasingly people are able to send their children to school and our health is improving. The majority of households have been able to upgrade to new engine boats from the wooden boats that were distributed by the programme. The new boats support people to earn more income through increasing the volume of aquatic products taken to market and decreasing time spent as well. A number of trees were planted and have grown high to protect houses against strong winds during flood time, and the house structures are now stronger. These changes show that community members understand how and take action to manage living with floods."

**VCDM chairwomen in Banteay Sloek village**

## **Promoting Women's Leadership and Participation**

Gender equality and women's leadership was a central focus of the Takeo Flood Mitigation Programme. This involved conducting a systematic and complete gender analysis, and included specific methodologies to promote women's leadership and gender equality. There was a wide series of consultations with women and there were opportunities for them to develop community leadership skill and abilities, especially through the VCDMs. A forum was created for women leaders in VCDMs to come together, share experiences and support each other.

The project also worked with men, to build their awareness of gender equality and gain their support for women's participation. By making the whole community acknowledge women's role in DRR and preparedness programmes and by actively involving them in VCDMs, women's need and interests were effectively addressed. This means the right of women to participate in decisions that affect their lives has been enhanced.

“More women are participating in key aspects of the programme and its implementation. There are real opportunities to learn village institutional leadership and management skills. This is a contribution to women’s strategic needs. Some women in two of the target villages stated firmly that “they want to be leaders.”

**Team leader of the project evaluation**

“Female VCDM leaders are visible in the eye of community and are able to make decision equally within the family. Whether about small or big things, the women and their husbands always makes decisions together. Those women leaders of VCDMs feel that they have more value within their family and community. Community members, especially women, feel comfortable seeking assistance from them when they face a problem.”

**CCK director**

## **Setting Up and Building the Capacity of VCDMs**

In Takeo, Village Committees for Disaster Management (VCDMs) were elected by their communities. The committees usually consist of five members, of whom three have to be women. The chair must also be a woman whilst the deputy position is assigned to a man. In normal circumstances, the VCDMs meet on a monthly basis. In a flood situation they are recommended to meet on an ‘as needs be’ basis but at least every two weeks.

Oxfam worked with CCK to support the community to develop VCDM guidelines and internal policies, to provide committee members with a framework for the effective functioning of the VCDMs. CCK also offered day-to-day support on project management to ensure that these local bodies had the capacity to perform their roles.

The VCDMs in affected communities received a package of training in disaster management leadership, management skills, and participatory methods such as Participatory Rural Appraisal and wealth ranking. The project staff assisted the communities to analyze the information and material that they collected.

VCDM members have taken turns to attend Commune Council meetings and community members have been encouraged to attend Commune Development Plan and Commune Investment Plan meetings. This is an important space for the VCDM to raise issues and to explain the challenges of building sustainable livelihoods in the face of climate change.

VCDMs have demonstrated the importance, usefulness and ability of genuine village institutions to promote community leadership, especially that of women.

“Even though Oxfam and CCK phased out in late 2007, the VCDM still functions. VCDM members continue the work, including meetings and plans to support community people. I am very proud to be a woman leader of the VCDM. It helps me as an illiterate woman to get involved in development and gives me a chance to serve my community.”

**VCDM chairwomen in Banteay Sloek village**

“Promoting women’s leadership in VCDMs can be an effective approach to promoting women’s participation in local level development. These women leaders are enabled to effectively address women’s strategic interests.”

**CCK director**

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