



Positive change:
How preparing for climate change is helping strengthen Cambodia's district governments

SET out along the 125km road west from Battambang to Phnom Proek and see mountains rise from rice paddy fields of all the most vibrant shades of green. If it's been raining, the place will look like a postcard. A kaleidoscope of green. But keep travelling. Keep travelling until the bitumen starts to crack, pot-holes open up and the track narrows. That's when that veil of greenery falls away. You'll arrive at villages left broken and fragile by climate change. And only children and the elderly will be there to greet you.

La Phath moved to the Phnom Proek district in 1979, the year the Khmer Rouge fell. Immediately she liked the place, for its mountains and fresh air. But during the past 12 years, working within the district government as a women's affairs coordinator and on a commune council, she's come to notice changes in the region's weather cycles. It often rains in the dry season and is dry in the rainy season. It's hotter. And that's playing havoc with the families that rely on agriculture and a natural source of water for their livelihoods. No longer can farmers rely on seasonal cues to guide their activities. While the district administration will truck water to households that would otherwise have to walk for hours each day to collect it, she doesn't know how it will cope if climate change and droughts intensify.

Mrs. Phath guesses that 40% of the population of each village in the district has already left to work in Thailand, driven away in part by the changing climate. Once drought, or occasionally flood,

destroys a crop, families fall easily into debt. Young parents leave children with grandparents and travel across the nearby border to work for higher wages in Thailand. As this work is at times undertaken without formal documentation, Mrs. Phath said they rarely visit home out of fear they will be caught. Elderly residents are then left to raise the children and run the farms and due to their age, struggle with both. Children often don't go to school, because of the poor roads, because there's no one to take them or because they are put to work. Poverty gives birth to further societal breakdown.

Adapting to climate change

But since the start of the year Mrs. Phath has worked on a program that could one day bring some of those young mums and dads back to town. In 2017 Phnom Proek became one of three new districts to join the Local Climate Adaptation Living Program (LoCAL). This program was pioneered in Cambodia and Bhutan in 2012, and its success has now seen the model rolled out across the world.

The model uses local government systems to undertake projects that will help communities adapt for a changing climate.

The first step, which has already been completed in Phnom Proek, was to bring district administrators and commune councilors together to create a climate change adaption strategy. A number of infrastructure and service delivery projects were discussed; from building more resilient roads, to creating new water reservoirs, to hosting workshops that teach better agricultural techniques. As the district women's affairs coordinator, Mrs. Phath fought for those which would improve the lives of women and children. These tended to be water projects, as it was often women charged with walking to collect water for the home, or roads projects, as the quality of a road could determine whether a child attended school.

At the Rottanak Mondul district, another of the three new Battambang districts selected to join the LoCAL program, resident Hum Chan believed climate change would soon force farmers to adopt better agricultural techniques. Currently he said farmers would commonly produce only one rice crop a year, and may leave a paddy fallow for up to six months. But with a single rice crop becoming an increasingly risky investment, programs that taught farmers the value of diversifying and improving the quality of crops could be key to strengthening the district's economy. Gaining this knowledge would then lead to more profitable farming operations, which could reduce the flow of young workers to Thailand.

Building strong institutions

After a series of assessments, the Phnom Proek district secured grants this year to undertake six projects. Crucially, these funds were credited directly into the district and selected commune accounts, which builds resilience into relatively new budgeting systems.

At Koas Krala, the third of the new Battambang districts to be brought into the program this year, 23-year-old Ry Sonat heads up the district's finance division on her own. While administering the grant through the usual budgeting process is routine for her, she said the monitoring of budget expenditures is now much stricter, because of the involvement in the program. Cheoun Sopheany, 32, who is responsible for writing progress reports at the Koas Krala district believes the focus LoCAL places on accountability will see her own skills and the skills of her colleagues improve.

"It will help the overall operation of the district (administration)," she said.

"It requires more accountability procedures. This helps (the staff) become more skillful and more careful in terms of work." In this way, the LoCAL program empowers local levels of govern-

ment, which fits exactly with the agenda of the National Committee for sub-national Democratic Development Secretariat (NCDDS). It was set up to transfer key responsibilities from the national to local levels of government; bringing government 'closer to the people'. The NCDDS manages the program nationally, through the Local Governments and Climate Change (LGCC) project and with support from the United Nations Capital Development Fund and the Swedish International Development Agency.

The grassroots structure of the project also forces a dialogue between the district level administrators, the commune councils and the citizens, particularly those in isolated parts of the region. At Phnom Proek district, 30-year-old technical support official Lim Sinoun said the program was helping her understand the needs of citizens in her area, which would lead to better service delivery. Although she had lived in the area 10 years, she grew up in Battambang city and hadn't previously travelled to remote parts of the region.

"I feel like I know more about people's situation, more about the things impacting people, like transport difficulties and water," she said.

"The roads are so difficult to travel for example, just so muddy and bumpy."

A view to the future

The other key feature of the LGCC project is that after a year the projects will be assessed and successful implementation will be rewarded with more money, through additional performance based grants. However this money can only be used to fund the "climate change related" part of new infrastructure. For example, a commune would pay the basic cost of a new road from its own resources, while the grant would pay the additional cost of building the road to a climate-resilient standard. The idea is to mainstream climate change concerns into a broader set of projects, rather than just having stand-alone climate change projects, as would occur if the grant funded these initiatives entirely. This way government institutions are also encouraged to invest in their own future and keep climate change adaptation at the front of mind.

Given that climate change adaptation is so closely linked with the economic prospects of this region's youth, and the optimism shared by so many of those who will be leading the new projects, conditions appear ripe for another LoCAL success. The green landscape could at last reflect the attitudes of communities who live within it.

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