

Connecting the Dots: Experiences of RCE Greater Phnom Penh to Promote ESD to Farmers in COVID-19 Era

Project background and activities

In Cambodia, the usage of chemical fertilizers and pesticides has significantly increased to promote agricultural productivity. However, due to the inappropriate use of agro-chemicals such as overuse and application without sufficient knowledge, especially by small scale farmers, this practice has caused various problems to both human and environmental health. Although agricultural productivity has increased temporarily, environmental issues such as soil degradation, water contamination from agro-chemicals, and water degradation through eutrophication have occurred.

Although many farmers realize the adverse impacts of agro-chemicals to human and environmental systems, they lack knowledge related to sustainable or alternative farming practices. Meanwhile, agricultural extension officers who are responsible for enhancing farmers' knowledge are simply not enough in number compared to the assigned area. Cambodia has suffered prolonged internal conflict that ruined its educational system and social economy across the country, and that capacity building of extension officers is also impending. Hence, the intervention from the RCE and its partners such as NGOs and education institutes to tackle this problem is indispensable.

The Project on Promoting Sustainable Agricultural Conditions for Poverty Reduction in Kampong Cham Province (from October 2017 to February 2021) is to enhance the ability of extension officers and farmers, where Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is the key approach. Stakeholders of the project include Institute of Environmental Rehabilitation and Conservation (ERECON), Royal University of Agriculture (RUA), Cambodia, Provincial Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (PDAFF), Kampong Cham, Kampong Cham National Institute of Agriculture (KNIA) and Farmers Groups for Promoting Sustainable Agriculture.

The project aims to promote sustainable agricultural conditions through various forms of education for change agents (agricultural extension officers) and farmers in the province.

1. To build capacity on sustainable agriculture based on cyclic use of natural resources in PDAFF and District Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DDAFF) regarding dissemination skills and knowledge from soft (knowledge, skills) to hard (facilities) measures
2. To promote sustainable farming practices based on cyclic use of natural resources for local farmers
3. To promote conditions for sales of agricultural products with low chemical inputs

Trainings and workshops related to sustainable agricultural practices are provided to extensional officers and farmers by ERECON staff, RUA and KNAI lecturers. Farmers who attended the training and workshop share their knowledge to their neighbors. Agricultural materials such as compost boxes and tanks for making liquid fertilizer and biopesticide are provided to famers. Networks of safety agricultural products will be formed and marketing channel for the products will be introduced to farmers in the final year of the project.

During COVID-19 Era

Kampong Cham is one of the provinces with reported cases of COVID-19 (16 cases up to now). Due to the global pandemic of the COVID-19, several planned workshops and trainings must be postponed

because the Royal Government of Cambodia restricts all event consisting of more than 50 participants and imposes travel restrictions to foreigners traveling to Cambodia. The postponed activities have caused a delay in project implementation, especially in the flood prone areas along the Mekong River which are normally difficult to access during the middle of rainy season.

During this hardship, several organizations decided to hold workshops, seminars or meetings using internet platforms to connect people. However, in the case of project beneficiaries, most are farmers living in rural and remote areas with limited access to infrastructure such as tap water or electricity, let alone a smartphone to connect to the internet. Most of the farmers who participate in the project own mobile phones, but only 25 percent of them own smartphones. Some farmers reported that at least one of their family members owns smartphone, but the farmers themselves do not know how to use it.

In early June, the COVID-19 situation in Cambodia has become relaxed with almost zero new reported cases. RCE Greater Phnom Penh has resumed conducting workshops for farmers in the project areas. We found that it is difficult to practice physical distancing during the workshop because of limited available meeting place. However, locally made fabric facial masks are provided to all participants, and hand sanitizer is available at the venue.

We also found out that face-to-face communication and social gathering are still the most effective means of communication with farmers, especially in remote areas. Therefore, local stakeholders, especially agricultural extension officers, model farmers and district group members, play important roles in project monitoring and keeping the majority of farmers engaged in the project via face-to-face visits and mobile phone conversations.

There are challenges that we are still facing and trying to solve as following.

- How to engage and monitor sustainable agricultural practices done by farmers in remote areas with the minimum risk from COVID-19
- How to engage family members of the beneficiaries who own smartphones to transfer knowledge and information to their elders
- How to find a suitable meeting place for a workshop with enough space for physical distancing
- How to increase level of engagement of 500 district group members to support project monitoring, especially with local farmers

RCE Greater Phnom Penh is working to connect the scattered dots in remote areas of Kampong Cham Province to form a line and network of sustainable agriculture producers amidst these difficult times.