



Cooperative Association of Cambodia (CAC)

Cooperatives Promoting Gender Equality

Rural women in Cambodia have less access to resources and opportunities than rural men. This inequality impacts on the economic development of Cambodia as a whole and also impacts on social development and the health and wellbeing of households. Gender equality and women's rights are part of the United Nations development goals.

Where do the inequalities lie?

Women in developing countries generally face some or all the following inequalities:

- Greater workloads and time constraints in both productive and domestic activities
- Reduced access to training and education
- Greater constraints in access to decent employment and productive work
- Greater socio-cultural and physical isolation, resulting in poor access to information, communications, infrastructure and markets

(FAO, 2012)

How do cooperatives promote equality?

Cooperatives provide open and voluntary membership. They, by their nature, provide a framework for equal access to services for all women (and men). Cooperatives operate according to democratic member control, which is one of the seven cooperative principles discussed in the previous issue (issue 2, April 2014). So not only do

cooperatives provide a framework for equitable access to their services, but they also provide the opportunity of equal control over the governance of the cooperative and participation in the strategic decisions relating to how the cooperative is run. Cooperatives in Cambodia are generally locally based. Women members will know the cooperative leaders, which can make it less intimidating and more flexible than Microfinance Institutions or typical banks.

CAC's member coops and credit unions have approximately 60% women membership. Membership of a cooperative gives all members access to markets, greater bargaining power and economies of scale. These benefits are emphasised for women members, due to the inequalities they face. The cooperative also provides the social benefit of regular interaction with other community members, helping alleviate isolation, which women in rural communities may face.

Women's activity and leadership still needs to actively be promoted

Despite this framework for inclusion and equality, which cooperatives provide, many of the barriers to women's active participation are entrenched by socio-cultural norms. Cooperatives are good institutions to begin to breakdown these socio-cultural norms. Women's participation in cooperatives, especially in positions of leadership need to be actively advocated.



Case Study: *New Cooperatives Build Trust to Grow Savings*

As the rains from the wet season's storms slowly flood the rice fields in Kampong Chnang and the ploughing and planting activity of farmer's hits fever pitch, the Chronon Sekmeas Agriculture Development Cooperative (CSADC) board divide their time between the rice field and activities to support and grow a fledgling Credit Union.

The eight board members, four of whom are women, are all rice farmers in their own respect, so they understand the necessity for finance to purchase seeds, grain and machinery at the beginning of the season. Once the rice is harvested and sold at market farmers are increasingly turning to this local cooperative as a safe place to bank their profits, grow their wealth and secure their future.

The key to mobilising savings in rural communities in Cambodia is building trust within the community. All too often we see this trust eroded by the unscrupulous behaviours of a small group of selfish individuals. To safeguard against this CAC provides technical support to new cooperatives to ensure that they have a board of directors who are democratically elected by the members of the cooperative. CAC also provides training to ensure the leaders of the cooperative have the capacity and the tools to accurately account for members' savings and loans.

CSADC only started to promote and mobilise savings from the farmers in the village in May this year. To attract members' deposits and new membership CSADC pays interest of 2% per month, which is much higher than the local Microfinance Institutions. The local members who save with CSADC like to keep the money they have earned from their hard work within the community. Slowly, as this new cooperative builds strong and trusting relationships within their community they will attract more members and more savings. At the same time they will be able to grow their capital, lower costs and improve the livelihoods of more people from their village.



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