



Enhancing Participative Community Development through School Construction and Renovation in Cambodia

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Abstract In rural Cambodia, inadequate school facilities and a shortage of classrooms continue to constrain children's access to education, despite increasing parental demand for schooling. Equally critically, the legacy of the Pol Pot era disrupted traditional forms of cooperation, eroded trust among villagers, and left many communities with limited experience in collective action. These conditions have made the concept of 'community' fragile and underdeveloped, posing significant challenges for rural development. To address both the educational and social dimensions, this project introduced school construction not as an end, but as a strategic entry point for community development. In the fiscal year 2024, the project was implemented in four primary schools in Tboung Khmum Province. At each site, school construction committees composed of local residents and teachers mobilized donations and labor, supervised construction progress, and practiced joint decision-making and accountability. Through these processes, residents began to rebuild trust and recognize the value of working together for a shared public good. After construction, contributions were reinvested into community development funds, which initiated small-scale businesses, such as community loans, chicken raising, fertilizer sales, and agricultural product collection. The profits from these activities are intended to be reinvested in education as revenue grows, reinforcing a cycle that links improved learning environments with community-led economic activities. The results suggest that school construction, when strategically positioned as a driver, can not only improve educational infrastructure but also foster cooperation, ownership, and self-reliance among rural Cambodian communities that have historically lacked strong traditions of collective action.

Keywords community development, school construction and renovation, self-sustaining community, importance of education

BACKGROUNDS AND OBJECTIVE

In rural Cambodia, the educational environment remains inadequate, with shortages of classrooms, limited school facilities, and insufficient hygiene infrastructure. Although parental demand for

children's education has been rising, these structural constraints continue to hinder access to quality learning opportunities. Meanwhile, the legacy of the Pol Pot era has severely disrupted community life: traditional forms of mutual support were dismantled, trust among villagers was eroded, and opportunities for collective action have remained limited. Consequently, the concept of "community" has become fragile, posing significant challenges for rural development.

This project was therefore designed to address both educational and social challenges by integrating school construction with community development. School construction was introduced not as an end in itself, but as a practical entry point for fostering cooperation, accountability, and ownership among local residents. By engaging community members in school construction committees, mobilizing local contributions of funds and labor, and subsequently reinvesting these resources into community development funds, the project aimed to create a cycle in which improvements in the educational environment stimulate community-led initiatives, while the benefits of those initiatives are reinvested into education. The ultimate objective was to promote self-reliance and sustainable development within rural Cambodian communities.

Accordingly, this report explores the factors that influence the enhancement of local self-help efforts by creating a sustainable educational environment to improve the livelihoods of local residents and promote sustainable rural development.

STRATEGIES FOR PROJECT IMPLEMENTATION

The project was undertaken in four primary school communities in Tboung Khmum Province, Cambodia (Fig. 1). Its implementation was structured in three interrelated phases, each designed to situate school construction as a driver of community development.

In the first phase, school construction committees were constituted at each site, comprising local residents and teachers. These committees assumed responsibility for mobilizing financial and labor contributions, liaising with construction companies, and ensuring procedural transparency through systematic reporting. The committees were intended to enhance local capacity in collective decision-making, accountability, and negotiation.

In the second phase, new physical infrastructure, including school buildings, toilet blocks, and handwashing stations, was constructed under the oversight of the committees. This phase not only addressed the shortage of educational facilities but also provided an opportunity for community members to engage in collective action directed toward a public good. Simultaneously, hygiene education initiatives were introduced, thereby linking the provision of physical facilities with behavioral improvements in school health practices.

In the third phase, community development fund committees were established. These bodies were trained in bookkeeping and financial management and were tasked with planning and implementing small-scale community businesses adapted to local contexts. Initiatives included community loan schemes, poultry raising, fertilizer sales, and the collection and marketing of agricultural products. The revenues generated from these activities were intended to be reinvested in education, establishing a feedback loop in which improved educational infrastructure and community-driven economic activities mutually reinforced one another. For example, loan schemes were prioritized in Damril Primary School, while cashew nut collection was initiated in Chhuk Sandal, reflecting the adaptation of business activities to local conditions.

Through this sequenced approach, the project sought to demonstrate that school construction could transcend its immediate function of infrastructure provision and operate as an entry point for cultivating community organization, participation, and self-reliance.

ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE PROJECT

The project produced notable achievements in terms of educational infrastructure, community awareness, and the initiation of community businesses. At the same time, it also revealed challenges and limitations that are instructive for future activities. These outcomes are presented in three main domains.

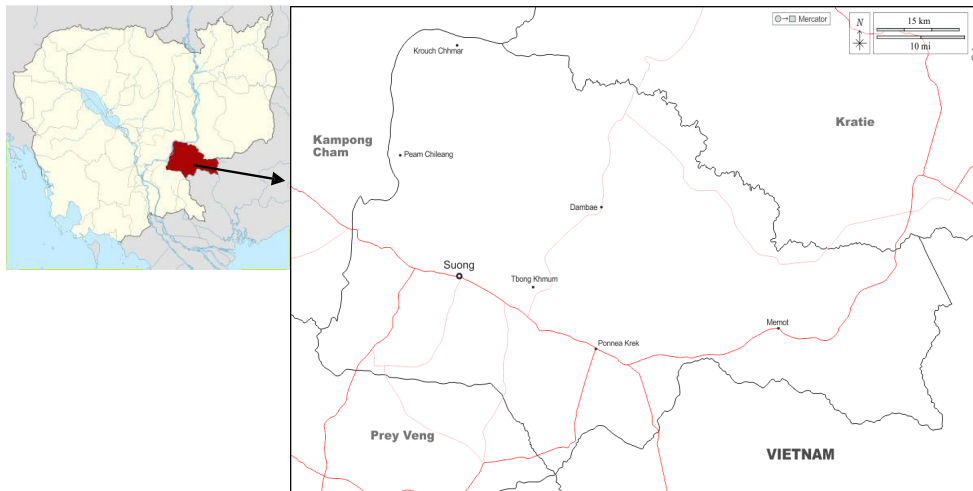


Fig. 1 Project sites for community development through school construction in Tboung Khmum Province, Cambodia

1. Establishment of School Construction Committees

Committees were successfully established in all four target schools. The members organized fundraising, mobilized labor, and monitored construction in collaboration with contractors. Weekly progress reports were produced to ensure transparency and accountability. Committee activities strengthened local capacity in negotiation and management; for example, signing a memorandum of agreement (MoA) with construction companies demonstrated enhanced procedural formality. Residents increasingly recognized that schools were being “built by themselves,” rather than externally provided, indicating an emerging sense of ownership. Nevertheless, participation levels varied across schools, with weaker engagement observed in sites where household constraints limited contributions of time and resources (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Meetings between the Trapeang Russey Primary School committee and the constructor for MoA signing

2. Improvement of Educational Infrastructure and Environment

The project resulted in the construction of one school building, one toilet block, and one handwashing facility at each site. Specific outcomes included six new classrooms at the Damril Primary School, a staff room and library at Chhuk Sandal (rare in rural contexts), improved space allocation and office functions at Trapeang Russey, and the introduction of afternoon classes at Chimoan, which increased facility utilization. These improvements contributed to compliance with the Ministry of Education,

Youth, and Sport (MoEYS) standards, which recommend class sizes of 35-45 students in the lower grades and 40-50 students in the upper grades. Prior to the project, some classes had more than 50 students (Fig. 3).

Hygiene education was also institutionalized. Although MoEYS promoted handwashing during the COVID-19 pandemic, these practices were not consistently sustained. With the installation of new toilets and handwashing stations, hygiene education was reintroduced in a systematic manner. Teachers were trained to deliver lessons on handwashing and toilet cleaning using posters and practical demonstrations, thereby linking new facilities with daily practices and reinforcing continuity (Fig. 4).

In addition to the above, teacher surveys revealed differences in involvement and perceptions of the project. At Chhuk Sandal and Trapeang Russey, all teachers participated in the project, whereas only 64% were involved at Damril and 67% at Chimoan. Moreover, variations were evident in the perceived importance of the project for improving educational quality and community development: 88% of teachers at Chhuk Sandal regarded the project as “very important” or “important,” compared to 68% at Damril, 68% at Chimoan, and 60% at Trapeang Russey. These findings indicate differing levels of teacher engagement and recognition of the project’s significance across sites (Table 1).



Fig. 3 Inauguration ceremonies at Trapeang Russey Primary School (left) and Chimoan Primary School (right)



Fig. 4 Hygiene workshops at primary schools of Damril (left) and Chimoan (right)

Table 1 Teachers’ involvement in, and perceptions of the school construction project

Primary school	Teacher involvement (%)	Perceived importance for educational and community development (%)
Damril Primary School	64%	68%
Chhuk Sandal Primary School	100%	88%
Trapeang Russey Primary School	100%	60%
Chimoan Primary School	67%	68%

3. Establishment of Community Development Funds and Businesses

Community development fund committees were created in all four sites, although business activities commenced only in Damril and Chhuk Sandal within the fiscal year. In Damril, where many households rely on migrant labor and are often composed of grandparents and grandchildren, a community loan project was selected as it required less intensive labor input. This scheme offered lower interest rates than microfinance institutions, thereby reducing household financial burdens.

At Chhuk Sandal, agricultural marketing initiatives were prioritized under the strong leadership of the school principal and village chief. Their capacity to mobilize and coordinate the community enabled the committee to explore multiple business ideas. During the 2025 harvest season, the committee collected and sold 18,871 kg of cashew nuts, generating a profit of USD 152.78. In contrast, an attempt to establish a rice collection scheme faced major difficulties. Insufficient initial communication with villagers and opportunistic selling to external wholesalers offering higher prices undermined the system. This outcome highlighted the importance of early consensus-building, transparent information-sharing, and incentive alignment with community members. Learning from this setback, the committee adjusted its approach in subsequent initiatives, placing greater emphasis on trust and communication, which contributed to the success of the cashew nut project.

Plans for fertilizer sales were also launched, and pilot production of organic compost was initiated to address declining cassava yields, marking an initial step toward sustainable agriculture. However, the labor-intensive nature of compost production poses potential barriers to adoption, and sustained community commitment will be required to ensure its viability.

In Trapeang Russey and Chimoan, where school completion occurred later in the fiscal year, business activities had not yet started, although discussions on potential initiatives were underway.

As the community businesses had only recently been initiated, the revenues generated from these activities remained modest and had not yet been reinvested into education. At this stage, committees were expected to develop clear plans, in consultation with schools, on how future profits could be allocated for educational purposes. For example, in Damril, the committee identified the installation of an incinerator as a priority for improving the school environment. Such initiatives illustrate the process through which schools and committees are expected to work together to shape concrete plans for educational improvement. Thus, the feedback loop between community businesses and educational development was still in the process of formation.



Fig. 5 Cashew nut collection in Chhuk Sandal Primary School community

Summary of Outcomes

Taken together, the results demonstrate that the project improved the educational environment through infrastructure provision, fostered new practices of transparency and collective action, and initiated community businesses that connected local economic activity with educational sustainability. At the same time, the challenges encountered—including limited teacher engagement in some schools, household constraints on participation, and the failure of the rice collection scheme—underscore that successful community development depends on local leadership, communication strategies, and the alignment of activities with community capacities. The variations across sites offer valuable lessons for scaling up community development efforts in rural Cambodia.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

In fiscal year 2024, the project engaged four primary school communities in Tboung Khmum Province to improve educational environments and foster community development through the integrated processes of school construction and committee management. The outcomes demonstrated that school construction can function as more than an infrastructure intervention; it served as an entry point for cultivating collective action, transparency, and ownership among local residents. Teacher surveys further indicated that, although levels of involvement and perceived importance varied, the project contributed to greater awareness of the link between education and community development. Several challenges also emerged. In some communities, household structures, such as reliance on migrant labor or elderly caregivers, constrained active participation. Variations in leadership capacity also influenced outcomes, with Chhuk Sandal's strong village chief and school principal enabling diverse business initiatives, while other sites faced difficulties in mobilization. The unsuccessful rice collection scheme further highlighted the risks of inadequate communication and the need for consensus-building prior to launching community businesses. These experiences underscore that school construction alone cannot guarantee community empowerment; rather, the quality of facilitation, leadership, and participation strongly conditions the results.

Looking ahead, the project provides useful insights for scaling up community development through educational infrastructure. First, continued support for committee capacity building—especially in bookkeeping, communication, and negotiation—will be critical to sustaining both educational and business activities. Second, tailoring community projects to the specific socioeconomic contexts of each community is essential, as demonstrated by the appropriateness of the loan scheme in Damril and the cashew nut initiative in Chhuk Sandal. Third, building mechanisms for continuous monitoring and reflection will help communities learn from both successes and setbacks, thereby reinforcing self-reliance. These findings also have practical implications for policy, suggesting that school construction initiatives should be integrated with capacity-building and community engagement strategies to maximize their developmental impact.

In conclusion, this project aims to improve the sustainability of local communities through the integration of school construction with community development. The outcomes of this project are expected to contribute not only to improved educational infrastructure but also to the long-term formation of self-sustaining and resilient rural communities in Cambodia. Increasing local residents and governmental officers' understanding of ESD is indispensable for scaling up and replication in other areas.

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