

Reflections on PROLINNOVA Cambodia: development as inclusive learning and agency building

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In May 2014, with the guidance of our Global Development Studies professor, David Edmunds, we participated in a four-day International Partners Workshop (IPW) of our host organization PROLINNOVA, in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. The workshop was a fantastic educational tool for us to learn about PROLINNOVA as an international network, community of practice and movement, including its background and strategies to institutionalize participatory innovation development or PID. This is a process whereby farmer innovators are identified, recognized and supported to improve their innovations in partnership with other external service providers such as agricultural extensionists and researchers. Being able to participate in the event provided us with a really valuable insight about how PROLINNOVA's international partners create spaces for effective, democratic dialogue and feedback on a central mission. We noticed that PROLINNOVA was structured to encourage bottom-up approaches and solutions and we saw examples of this at the local level with farmers being involved in experiments of their choice and also at the organizational level. Each of PROLINNOVA's Country Platforms (CPs) organize their respective operations differently tailored to the different socio-political and economic structures and contexts in their own countries. In addition to the PROLINNOVA mentors who took us under their wings to explain their experiences and operations, we were included in the workshop and were able to co-facilitate a session with David Edmunds on Climate Change and impacts on farmers.

During the workshop we were able to experience our first field visit in Kampong Chhnang with other PROLINNOVA representatives. When visiting, we were able to observe and take notes on the experiments farmers were involved in and gather information on the history of land distribution in the province and how this has shaped the social and economic values in the community. After the workshop was over and we parted ways with a lot of our new international colleagues, we spent the next week travelling and building on our field visit interviews, working with a local NGO, CEDAC. CEDAC (Centre d'Etude et de Développement Agricole Cambodgien / Cambodian Center for Study and Development in Agriculture) has been operating as one of the main drivers of PROLINNOVA Cambodia. It has been the host organization of PROLINNOVA in Cambodia since its inception in 2004. They work actively with farmers and farming associations, the Ministry of Agriculture, academic institutions to help shape the mission of rural development in their country.



Figure 1: Tracking/evaluation documents CEDAC shares with their farmer innovators to help them document, track, and evaluate their experimental plots.

The CEDAC farmers that we interviewed had shed light on some of their experience with the System of Rice Intensification (SRI) as well as their new experiments with biochar, a locally sourced rice husk that served as a natural fertilizer and soil enhancer. The farmers we visited explained how they designed their experiments, what observations, adjustments, and conclusions were made. We realized how important it was that farmers had the decision-making capacity to design and adjust their experiments, as needed, as we rarely saw a plot with the same economic, ecological, and social demands. Rather than prescribe experimental plots, extension agents largely helped facilitate the experimental process for CEDAC farmers, by sharing learning tools and documenting practices that they can apply in their experiments.

We also had the opportunity to visit the local engineering student who had been identified by CEDAC to produce the bio-stoves (the stove in which the rice husk was burned to make the biochar) for the farmers in the province. Having a local manufacturer was a significant added value to the biochar enterprise as it reduced costs for farmers who were previously purchasing bio-stoves from Vietnam and provided a new avenue for local manufacturers



Figure 2: Student bio-stove manufacturer uses the bio-stove to burn rice husk into biochar.

Another element about CEDAC's mission that impressed us was their ability to utilize and maintain their multi-stakeholder collaboration with other institutions to help farmer's receive the incentives and credit they deserve for ecologically responsible farming practices. After our field visits, we met with a professor in the Agricultural Department at the Prek Leap National College of Agriculture to explore the possibility of measuring carbon for the smallholder farmers and potentially introducing a carbon market as a means of rewarding the farmers that are successfully sequestering carbon. Being able to witness and participate in these conversations and meetings was really valuable to us as students who are learning skills for professional collaboration and working through translation.

In working with PROLINNOVA and CEDAC, we saw a multitude of ways that the network dedicates itself to finding and supporting smallholder farmers and the local markets that enable them to build livelihoods that reflect community leadership and resiliency. The network's partner organizations attempt to improve the adaptive capacity of smallholder farmers as opposed to a top-down approach of a prescription that is unilateral but does not accommodate the methodological decisions or needs of each farmer. CEDAC and PROLINNOVA provide alternative resources for farmers so that they are not forced to comply with a certain norm if it wasn't going to be beneficial to them in the long run. PROLINNOVA and CEDAC seek farmers' active involvement with the decision-making, research, and experimentation process.



Figure 3: (Left to right) Marta, Susan, Sopheaktra, Chesha (PROLINNOVA International Support Team), farmer innovator Ms. Siem, Vitou (Executive Director of CEDAC). As one of the first farmers to join with CEDAC in carrying out experiments in her commune, Ms. Siem shares her experiences with SRI and biochar experiments and the influence she has had within her farming commune. She also speaks on her role in managing the finances of her farming associations rice bank, women-dominated leadership, within the farming association and the commune, and connecting youth groups to employment opportunities.

Our experience in Cambodia allowed us to recognize the difference between learning from a textbook, case studies, and actually first-hand witnessing development strategies that are co-constructed across multiple scales of governance. In classes we often discuss and analyze comparative social, political, and economic systems and use that as a foundation for understanding what is being experienced at the community level—we found it difficult initially to begin bridging this lens in Cambodia because it was still very unfamiliar to us. It is much easier to look at a case study in which the author has already laid out all the power dynamics and point to where the developers went wrong than to identify how to navigate through the knowledge gaps in person. While there, we were able to talk about the politics involved in development with both David, Vitou, Chesha, and other PROLINNOVA members. For example, we visited different farming families that were involved with CEDAC in farmer-led experiments and were able to inquire about gender relations within the family and if partaking in innovation development created a space for empowerment. We were able to channel a lot of what we learned through these interviews and our experience into helping David produce a Gender Analysis Report for CEDAC.

During the PROLINNOVA IPW, the CP representatives were very welcoming to us as young pupils-- they had a lot to share with us, but were also open to the knowledge and observations we had to contribute. Even though we were considered junior colleagues, our input was always appreciated, which speaks to the spirit that drives their efforts. This experience was very beneficial to us as Global Development Studies students hoping to pursue development careers. The personal and professional relationships we built while abroad allowed us to understand the work environment that we will potentially be involved in and help us understand that ultimately, behind all the logistics and strategizing, it takes people who are dedicated and passionate to bring these initiatives into fruition.