

The Importance of Community in Agricultural Success

How CEDAC uses local organisation to create community leaders and foster innovation

Hunter Hewlett, Student at the University of Virginia, USA

My project partners, Avery and Maggie, and I left Cambodia in early June feeling enlightened, encouraged, and awe-struck. We had spent a month learning from the Cambodian Center for Study and Development in Agriculture (CEDAC), based in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. We had the opportunity to witness the functioning of CEDAC in many of its endeavors, and in doing so learned an incredible amount about sustainable agricultural development, community organizing, the worldwide food supply chain, and humanity.

During our time in Cambodia, my partners and I had the chance to truly see first-hand how CEDAC, a PROLINNOVA partner organization, operated. We spent time with administrators in their main office in Phnom Penh, learning about how far CEDAC has come and how much farther it wants to go. We visited some of CEDAC's key partner farmers in several provinces, observing their daily lives and agricultural techniques while also learning about their individual histories. We were also shown some of CEDAC's specific project initiatives, including the Young Agricultural Entrepreneurs, and one of their partner export organisations, Cambodian Organic Farm Enterprise. My team members and I felt as though we were given the opportunity to see the full scope of CEDAC's reach. From talking with individual farmers, to hearing from CEDAC's current president, we came to understand the powerful and meaningful work this organisation is doing in the lives of so many people involved in the local food supply chain. Avery, Maggie, and I would often remark about how completely impressed we were by how much CEDAC has taken on and how they've done it so effectively and efficiently.

Something that struck me most powerfully about witnessing the full scale of the food supply chain, and the role sustainable, organic agriculture has within it, was the role of community and local organisation. Many of the farmers we spoke with, through a translator, told us about their personal successes in agriculture, stemming from their involvement with CEDAC. We noticed that many farmers told us that before attending some of CEDAC's training programs, they had little understanding about basic agricultural techniques and even less about the importance of sustainable, organic practices. CEDAC helped them learn both concrete agricultural practices and more market-based economic and leadership initiatives. The farmers with whom we spoke were always appreciative of the knowledge they had learned and not only were very eager to learn more, but also eager to teach more. Using the successes they experienced as selling point, many farmers were showing their neighbors and family members how they too could benefit from engaging with CEDAC. In these stories of success and learning, the theme of community organising became vividly apparent to us.

CEDAC provides many diverse opportunities for local leadership. Farmers are encouraged to involve themselves in community producer groups, rice mill cooperatives, local farmers' market initiatives, and in leadership roles within each sector. CEDAC's support for the development of community leadership provides the scaffold for widespread agricultural development. Using

this scaffolding, farmers have built extensive networks of farmer groups and have paved the way for more to involve themselves. Farmers are encouraged to not only use learned agricultural knowledge to better their own standing, but to also use it to better the lives of their families, friends, and neighbors. They share their techniques and ask questions in monthly meetings, coordinate product transportation to markets, pool community funds to save for future investment, and more.

CEDAC's model allows for farmers to invest in their own success. By taking on leadership in community development initiatives, farmers use their position to further disseminate information to their communities. This also allows for increased technical innovation as farmers are working together and sharing practices. Combined with the apparent cultural importance of family and community networks in Cambodia, CEDAC's leadership opportunities make all the difference in helping CEDAC achieve their goals. From what we saw in Cambodia, the future of sustainable agricultural development lies with local organisation.

Avery, Maggie, and I were continually impressed with how well CEDAC understands this dynamic landscape. As an organisation, they have provided much-needed and well-deserved leverage to farmers who have never had the opportunity for leadership. I am excited to see how CEDAC continues this innovation to improve the lives of people throughout Cambodia.