

Linking CEDAC's supply chain in an exploration of organic farming livelihoods – an organizational innovation

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My peers, Avery and Hunter, and I were eager to spend our time in Cambodia investigating internal and external networks of organizational communication, a research topic proposed to us by our partner organization, the Cambodian Center for Study and Development in Agriculture (CEDAC). CEDAC hosts the PROLINNOVA Cambodia network which promotes local innovation and farmer-led innovation development in smallscale agriculture in the country. CEDAC is one of more than 25 organisations involved in the PROLINNOVA network.

Through interviews with farmers, conversations with administrators, facility visits, and farmer homestays, our team relied on observation and interaction as a means to grasp CEDAC's many layered components and aims. This ever-expanding map of understanding allowed us to successfully offer recommendations, as intended, to CEDAC for its 2012-2022 Strategic Plan at the conclusion of our research period. Throughout that same process, though, we came to realize we were presented a rare, unexpected opportunity—the chance to witness and contribute to a complete food supply chain. For three American students who are familiar with generally detached and apathetic consumer attitudes toward the food industry, our experience with CEDAC proved especially revealing, and elicited mixed sentiments of both dismay and newfound empowerment.



Learning to harvest Morning Glory during a homestay (photo: Maggie Gratz)

I remember piling back into the truck after a visit to the main CEDAC shop (Number 9) in Phnom Penh. We had just watched employees organize boxes of produce for sale and prepare orders of rice wine for shipment. While there, Hunter playfully inquired if the bitter melons in front of us were the same ones we had helped a farmer pluck from her organic vegetable garden, cut to perfection, and sort for transport. We knew it was unlikely they were, for she had sent hers to a local market, but his simple pleasantry was enough to connect the dots.



Vegetables being sorted in CEDAC's organic shop no. 9 (photo: Maggie Gratz)

Scooting across the seat, I admitted I have never actually seen, or quite honestly, known exactly where my food comes from. Avery and Hunter nodded, expressing similar realizations. We sat for a short moment in silence. Our appreciation for each, now tangible link of CEDAC's organic food chain clouded with bewilderment. In recent years, the "Go Local" food movement in America has sparked conversation about transforming food systems, of which we frequently engage in and follow; however, we all still could not deny our personal unawareness or the lack of knowledge among consumers in the United States.

It began with an explanation of CEDAC's various training programs and services from Sam Vitou, Executive Director of the organization. He described the benefits of provincial workshops that introduce agricultural techniques to member farmers-- education, supports farmer innovation, personal fulfillment, and greater market knowledge. Such outcomes were confirmed in our interviews with farmers, during which, through our translator, we heard about their interactions and communication with CEDAC. After touring farmers' organic gardens and rice fields it was clear that their expressed words of gratitude and learned methods had been transferred into thriving practice. From pulling, to separating, to weighing, to loading, to allocation and distribution, our team then followed farmers' organic produce to local farmers' markets, CEDAC's organic shops scattered around Phnom Penh, and finally the aforementioned truck. A supply chain completed. A

transformation of well packaged, purposefully communicated information into sustainable income stemming from environmentally sustainable origins.

We ventured to Cambodia hoping to learn from CEDAC about their systems of communication, in order to then serve as a useful source of feedback for the organization. In our last days of research, though, we discovered that all we had learned was not only worth reporting back to CEDAC, but remains worthy of sharing with our peers, our families, and our university.