

PROLINNOVA Cambodia provides great hope amidst a changing agricultural system

Global warming, rabid urbanization, and youth disenchantment leave agricultural prospects in limbo, but CEDAC provides hope through farmer-led innovation and youth agricultural engagement

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I have spent many hours, which should have been devoted to writing papers or studying for exams, reading about farmer-led innovation and sustainable agricultural solutions. Reading about these innovations was not enough to prepare me for the emotions, excitement, and amazement I felt when seeing them first-hand and coming to understand the effects they have on the lives of farmers.

For one month, two peers and I were kindly welcomed by the Cambodian Center for Study and Development in Agriculture, also known as CEDAC, to learn about and research their organization and how they enable farmers to reach their potential. As a member of PROLINNOVA Cambodia, CEDAC does a tremendous amount of work to promote local innovation. To see the brilliant work that CEDAC and its farmers do is overwhelming, humbling, and awe-striking.

One example of adroit innovation comes from a farmer we spent a few days with in the Takeo province. He has found creative solutions to his lack of arable land through the use of salvaged materials. He plants productive crops around his home in whatever recycled material he acquires, such as Styrofoam boxes, burlap sacks, and aluminum tins.



One farmer's innovative way to increase productivity using recycled materials (photo: Avery Moyler)

Another farmer we spent time with showed us her innovative, organic practices, such as wrapping recycled paper around her bitter melons to prevent against pests. She, like many other CEDAC farmers, uses a biodigester to repurpose cow manure into electricity to power her home. We also observed man-made ponds for raising fish, the use of SRI (System of Rice Intensification), the multi-purposing of land, and local farmers' markets to involve farmers in all levels of the supply chain, among other things. All of these brilliant, organic, climate-smart solutions enlightened us on the ingenious capabilities of these farmers and how far they can go with CEDAC and PROLINNOVA's support.



Recycled papers tied around crops are a pesticide-free way to prevent against pests destroying crops, one of the many farmer innovations CEDAC shares with others (photo: Avery Moyler)



A CEDAC farmer utilizing the biodigester, which CEDAC promotes as a partner of the National Biodegester Programme, a joint program between the Cambodia Ministry of Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries and the Netherlands Development Organization, SNV (photo: Avery Moyler)

These smart techniques used to organically and sustainably increase productivity, improve the health of the land, and enhance the lives of the farmers were inspiring to observe and take part in. These are the sort of innovations that get me excited – that I read about in my spare, and not so spare, time. I wonder, though, do the youth who have grown up on these farms get as excited as I do? Are they inspired to carry on the farming practices of their parents or are they jaded by this livelihood?

Youth are increasingly disenchanted with agriculture and engaging youth in agriculture has become a focus of many agricultural organizations. According to the [2008 census](#), nearly 62% of the Cambodian population is under 30. However, urbanization is rampant globally and the UN World Health Organization [predicts that](#) “by 2030, 6 out of every 10 people will live in a city, and by 2050, this proportion will increase to 7 out of 10 people.” For Cambodia this means that the large youth population will move away from rural areas into cities and towns and there will be less and less people to carry out the agricultural work.

This change is happening globally. Rapid urbanization leading to a decline in rural populations has led to a shift in how our food is produced. Monoculture and factory farms are becoming ever more popular. Globally, we are not supporting or encouraging a sustainable food system. In fact, we are allowing and creating the opportunity for the opposite to flourish: a destructive, resource-depleting food system.

An important way to combat this devastating shift is through youth engagement with sustainable, local, climate-smart agriculture, which CEDAC works hard to achieve. CEDAC’s Young Agricultural Entrepreneur (YAE) project targets the younger generation and provides

them with the tools they need, such as access to credit, extension services and training, and social capital, to continue the legacy of sustainable farming in Cambodia's rural areas. CEDAC is on the right track in combatting this dangerous shift in our food production, which is brought on by rapid urbanization, and leaves an observer satiated and at ease with the important work that CEDAC does and astute foresight it has.