

It is crucial all children receive primary education, especially the poorest children who have no chance to go to school and children who are not able to study regularly. To improve primary education in the rural area, the Cambodian Center for Study and Development in Agriculture (CEDAC) has been implementing the *Happy Mountain Bird* project since 2004. It is in collaboration with village based farmer associations, and its purpose is to *ensure access to primary education for the children of the poorest families*.

To understand how the project's strategy is improving the livelihoods of the target poorest families, this study was conducted in 24 target villages across five communes of Baphnom and Kompong Trabek districts, Prey Veng province. The 237 poorest families were interviewed, below is the summary of the results:

**The project's strategy is divided into five stages:**

- **Project introduction:** the project's staff organized introductory workshops at the commune level and village general meetings in each of the target villages. These activities were conducted to present the objectives, activities and strategies of the project to local stakeholders such as commune council members, school teachers and villagers. This enabled them to understand the project, especially the criteria used to select the target poorest families and the target children.
- **Wealth ranking** was conducted to select the target poorest families. It was done through discussions with the management committee of the village based farmer associations and village chiefs. Crosschecking visits were then made to each family who had been initially selected by the village chief.
- **Formation of the target group:** when the target families and children had been selected, they were organized into groups; groups of target poorest families and groups of target children. To make it easier to manage the groups, the group members of the poorest groups elected leaders for their groups. The main role of group leaders is to look after the general management of the group, including the management of collective saving of the group members.
- **Group training sessions** were held to build up the capacity and knowledge of the poorest group members and the target children; they were conducted separately every month. Training for group leaders was conducted every three months, the training focused on practical leadership and management, collective saving/credit and agricultural techniques.
- **At the final stage of the project,** the poorest groups were integrated under the umbrella of village based farmer associations. At the same time, some poorest group members have become direct members of village based farmer association. The integration is a good way to ensure the continuity and sustainability for the target families after the project ends.

## **1. The livelihood improvements for the target families are described below:**

- The poorest family on average consists of six people, one or two family members migrate to work as labourers outside the village. Furthermore, 60% of the poorest families are illiterate, 15% of the poorest families are landless, they have no land for rice cultivation and the rest of the poorest families have a rice field of 0.5 ha per family.
- One-to-one conversations with the target poorest families are a good way to find out in detail the root cause of their poverty, for example a lack of knowledge and skill to generate income, high expenditure on treatment of diseases, lack of draft animal for farming, indebtedness, unnecessary expenses and gambling, many children, a shortage of labor in the family, etc.
- After cooperation with the project, the target families have increased their income from agricultural activities. Actually, each target family could increase their income by 248,400 riel per year (a growth of 59%) on top of their income before the project that was only 421,000 riel per year. Therefore at the moment they generate an income of about 669,400 riel per year from agriculture. The income from off-farm activities has also increased, the previous income was only 747,800 riel per year but it is now 871,700 riel per year after the project.
- The family's expenditure has decreased from 748,800 riel per year before the project to 79,000 riel now. Specifically, they have reduced their spending on disease treatment and on food because their agricultural production has improved.
- The project's intervention has meant that the target children can go to school regularly and achieve good results. Before the project, the majority of the target children were absent from school approximately 5 – 7 days each month. Now 36.59% of the children are never absent from school, 53.81% are absent 1 – 3 days each month. As a result of their commitment, they have increased the quality of their study and now rank on average 10th among 30 – 40 children in the class.

Based on the results of the study, it can be concluded that the project's strategy is appropriate to sustaining primary education for the poorest children. It has been shown that by improving family's livelihoods the parents are more able and have greater understanding of the advantages to their children's study, so they commit to send their children to school. With the quality of the children's study, we can conclude that the poorest children have a lot of potential, while they still have the opportunity to go to school. Finally, the target families still have the potential to increase their income from on-farm activities, if they make efforts to improve their agricultural techniques and so increase productivity.