



The Junior Farmer Field and Life School programme teaches vulnerable children and youth about farming and how to take care of themselves.  
Photo: Johannes von Stamm

## SUPPORTING YOUTH IN AGRICULTURE – EVIDENCE FROM CAMBODIA

Following last year's Rural 21 Focus Edition "Tapping the potential of rural youth", the authors address the concepts of decent rural youth employment and agricultural entrepreneurship to assess how vocational training in Cambodia can enable young people in rural areas to have job opportunities along the agricultural value chain.

By Manuel Marx and Heidi Feldt

Although the main drivers of the Cambodian economy are the industry and the service sectors, agriculture is still its most important sector of Cambodia's economy, and is fundamental to its development. Nevertheless, agriculture has a perceivable bad reputation, mainly because working conditions are very poor. Many Cambodians living in rural areas work primarily as unpaid family workers and own-account workers. Child labour in general, but also especially in the agricultural sector, is still a considerable problem in the country. Young people are not interested in working in agriculture and are increasingly turning to other employment opportunities. The accompanying structural change in rural areas has so far not been adequately guided by agricultural policy. Above all, the potential of young people to develop new ideas to shape structural change in rural areas, and particularly in agriculture, is not used.

If the Cambodian economy is to benefit from the agricultural sector, it has to promote, protect and modernise its agriculture at local level. Not only must the government boost investments and improve policies targeting small-

holder farmers, it also needs to focus on the youth who bear the greatest potential to become drivers of sustainable agriculture.

To address some of these challenges, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), in co-operation with the Centre for Rural Development (SLE), commissioned a research team in 2017 to develop a practitioner's guide assessing skills and training needs of youth based on a case study in Cambodia. Furthermore, the study was meant to support the implementation of the childhood protection policy of the Cambodian Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF).

Both the demand and supply side of the labour market were investigated. During the field phase in three provinces (Kampong Cham, Battambang and Kampong Chhnang), qualitative methods were applied. Data was collected through 37 focus group discussions, 89 expert interviews and two stakeholder workshops. Focus group discussions were held with young people, in particular with youth aged 15 to 17 years. The purpose of the focus group discussions was to pinpoint skills and training needs,

and to identify the barriers and enabling factors that influence access to decent employment. To verify the information, further interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with parents, teachers and local authorities in the villages. Employers, training providers and participants and other stakeholders, such as research institutions, job centres and provincial departments, were interviewed in order to explore the skills and training needs.

### DECENT RURAL EMPLOYMENT IN CAMBODIA

Four key areas were identified that influence the agricultural sector and limit access to decent employment in the three case study provinces: working conditions in agriculture and access to markets, administration and policy, the labour market as well as education.

Above all, the work is physically demanding, and income generated is low. High input prices mean that farmers spend a disproportionate amount of their income on seeds, fertilisers and pesticides, while on the other hand, prices



for agricultural products are often perceived to be too low and unstable.

With regard to the rural labour market, there is limited information on what jobs actually exist and what skills are needed to access these jobs. In fact, there are very few enterprises that engage in high-level processing or employ skilled workers on a permanent basis. Only a small number of employers in agricultural production and processing could be identified as doing so. Instead, most employers preferred unskilled and seasonal labourers. Hence, there appears to be no strong formal mismatch between employers' demands for skills and the skills provided by youth. However, employment opportunities were rarely found, and jobs mainly lacked decent incomes and working conditions, and did not fulfil occupational safety standards.

Still, it is important to consider that most youth who will be working in agriculture will be self-employed, mostly as small-scale farmers. When planning to develop capacities and skills (e.g. through training programmes), it is crucial to consider the type of self-employment envisaged for the target group, which ranges from someone that sells his/her own labour daily to someone running an enterprise. On the one hand, it is important for rural youth who work as seasonal labourers on plantations to be able to weigh their expenses (i.e. transport costs) against their daily or monthly wages and to quickly adapt to changing working environments if there is no contract securing long-term employment. On the other hand, a young person running a small processing company needs to have the skills to create a comprehensive business plan, to manage more complex administrative and financial processes and to be able to lead a team.

## AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING BARRIERS

While Cambodia's agriculture policy framework and strategy are designed to improve working conditions and diversify the sector, challenges persist in implementing regulations and providing the intended support to young people. Policies such as the National Policy on Youth Development prepared by the Ministry of Education Youth and Sport (MOEYS) or the Strategic Framework on Childhood Development Protection in the Agriculture Sector developed by MAFF are well-intended, although a lack of resources and capacities limits their implementation. The MAFF has not yet addressed youth in its Agricultural Extension

Policy and its Agricultural Sector Strategic Development Plan.

Sound education and vocational training is needed to support rural youth in productively engaging in agriculture or related activities along the value chain. However, training in this area is not favoured, and opportunities are few. Given these realities, it is unfortunate that training needs of young rural people — in particular those related to capacities in engaging in productive, profitable and sustainable agriculture

— have rarely been systematically addressed in the Cambodian training agenda. Instead, the country's formal vocational education system often ignores defining characteristics of rural youth and fails to address the specific training needs of young people. This is especially the case when it comes to youth aged 15 to 17 years, a stage in life that is typically decisive in how youth will develop from school to work and for the likelihood of transitioning out of poverty. Furthermore, youth under 18 years face specific barriers and vulnerabilities. They can easily succumb to child labour and face additional challenges in accessing decent employment opportunities, productive resources, services, employment opportunities and markets.

Training programmes in Cambodia are offered in formal Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions that are co-ordinated by the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training (MOLVT). The programmes complete with a certification or are provided as non-formal trainings by other ministries, NGOs, and extension services, amongst others, and do not necessarily end with an official certification. Formal TVET is primarily offered in urban areas, which limits access for rural youth. The parallel structure of formal and non-formal trainings creates governance problems between the MOLVT and MOEYS. For example, responsibilities regarding the supervision and co-ordination of non-formal trainings are overlapping and



Life skills training components, focusing on self-esteem, problem-solving and decision-making, are key issues for young people.

Photo: Johannes von Stamm

unclear. Most of the agricultural trainings are short-term programmes with only limited benefits for the participants.

## MOVING AGRICULTURAL TRAININGS FORWARD

Moving agricultural trainings forward for the young generation in Cambodia will require a comprehensive and context-specific approach. But there is also a great opportunity for improvement through the implementation of even moderate changes. Generally, youth-tailored agricultural trainings require not only the improvement of training quality, but also easier access and adequate training content.

Following a study on non-formal education in Cambodia, TVET serves “vastly different clienteles including youth, those with low incomes, workers, women, disabled persons, unemployed persons, and migrants — each with their own characteristics, contexts, and constraints”. This applies not only to TVET, but also to any kind of agricultural training service. Therefore, it is important to clearly distinguish between potential trainee groups and to adapt the level of formality as well as the structure of skills development to their particular circumstances.

Institution-based training services through Provincial Training Centres, agricultural schools and agricultural extension services

are only one route of skills building. Moreover, non-governmental and private training initiatives provide a significant contribution, especially in remote areas. Although institutionalised training provision should be strengthened in order to be in line with the national vision to transform Cambodia's agriculture, the diverse nature of skills acquisition opportunities ought to be maintained. Some Cambodian and international NGOs already provide this kind of agricultural trainings for rural youth. Nevertheless, the country's lack of access to community-based agricultural trainings is one of the major challenges for rural youth.

### YOUTH-TAILORED TRAINING PROGRAMMES

Reflecting current and future needs, rural youth need long-term training services at local level that enable them to professionalise family farms and to successfully run and own agricultural businesses. Thus, innovative self-employment-oriented training services, such as non-formal field and problem-based agricultural education like the Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools (JFFLS) developed by the FAO, could increasingly be considered a new type of vocational training.



*Only three out of 150 interviewees stated working in agriculture as a career aspiration, and some others saw agriculture as an option to carry out while doing another job.*

When designing and implementing training services which reflect the individual needs of youth, development practitioners and policy-makers should pay particular attention to the following issues:

- Knowledge and skills in promising agricultural products: To improve youth career options, training providers should strengthen knowledge and skills of young farmers in promising agricultural products where markets are available. Skills provided should also involve different stages of the value chain, which often lead to higher returns than primary farming. Therefore, training providers

### JUNIOR FARMER FIELD AND LIFE SCHOOLS

The JFFLS after-school programme teaches vulnerable children and youth about farming and how to take care of themselves. The JFFLS methodology and curriculum combine both agricultural and life skills and teach the value of co-operation and collaboration through the establishment of farmer associations and other organisations.

Young people take part in training programmes that last 6-12 months and follow the local cropping cycle. They learn about local agro-ecological conditions, field preparation, sowing and transplanting, weeding, irrigation, integrated pest management, utilisation and conservation of available resources, utilisation and processing of food crops, harvesting, storage and marketing skills. Young trainees are also encouraged to initiate good agricultural practices within their households. The hands-on programme is accompanied by a training of trainers programme.

### DECENT WORK / DECENT EMPLOYMENT

Based on the four pillars of the Decent Work Agenda of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) – employment creation, social protection, rights at work and social dialogue – which became integral elements of the new 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, decent employment refers to work that provides a living income and reasonable working conditions. Work should be remunerative and dignified. It should enable people – whether through self-employment or wage labour – to provide for themselves and their families. Workers should be able to perform their work under safe and healthy conditions and have a voice in the workplace.

ought to offer courses on the processing skills for agricultural products such as pepper, cassava and coffee, which have the potential to add value in the market chain and improve the livelihoods of rural youth. However, it is essential to ensure that vocational education is holistic, not only addressing quickly changing technical skills, but also focusing on greater life and business skills.

- Practice in planning and running a micro-enterprise: Agricultural self-employment is often the only option for young people, but the limited foundation of business and entrepreneurial skills is a development constraint for them. They lack basic business knowledge, which is essential to reduce the risks of self-employment. Thus, trainings should involve practice in planning and running a micro-enterprise and include coaching from people who have business experience. Creativity is another essential part of entrepreneurship. As a result, trainings should encourage young people to reflect critically, to assess options and think outside of the box. Hence, life skills training components, focusing on self-esteem, problem-solving and decision-making, are key issues for young people. Many potential training beneficiaries in Cambodia come from vulnerable backgrounds and therefore often lack basic educations. Considering the lack of education, a potential approach could be to design learning modules that cover not only skills relevant to agricultural work and entrepreneurship, but also offer an opportunity for trainees to catch

up with basic education they have missed, such as functional literacy and numeracy skills.

- Post-training support: Youth must have opportunities to practise agricultural activities with limited consequences if they fail. They must be even encouraged to trial and error. Training participants in Cambodia have mostly been left alone after training, which has led to insufficient implementation of knowledge of new agricultural techniques. Hands-on learning experiences must play the important role of guiding youth through failure to minimise negative consequences. Thus it is essential to ensure post-training support for all public and private trainings, especially for young people. They must be supported by facilitating access to markets and credit. Also, trainees should receive regular post-training follow-up support to help them establish their farms as business units and to tackle initial challenges.

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