



## FAO promotes better diet through home gardens in rural Cambodia

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**24 March 2014** Svay Chrum District— In the blazing sun in rural Cambodia a group of women farmers argue about who among them has the greenest thumb. She might not claim the title but standing in the middle of her neighbour's backyard garden, Ly Sokvanna, is proud of what she sees in front of her. What began with an initial compost pit is now a colourful garden with seasonal vegetables, blooming flowers, and roaming chickens.

As one of the few educated farmers in the district, Ly Sokvanna, 53, a mother of seven, was included in the first



*Ly Sokvanna (front) and Serey Chenda (behind) talk about the impact of home gardens on improved nutrition among rural farmers*

group of farmers to become qualified facilitators to train 30 other farmers using the farmer field schools approach that was being implemented by FAO through the Joint Programme for Children, Food Security and Nutrition.

Funded by the Spanish Government's Millennium Development Goal (MDG) Fund, the Joint Programme for Children, Food Security and Nutrition was a joint programme between several UN agencies that worked together to battle food insecurity and malnutrition in rural Cambodia. The purpose of the Programme was to improve the nutritional status of young children and pregnant and lactating women. The Programme targeted the provinces with high levels of food insecurity and malnutrition and the highest numbers of poor people.

Cambodians love their rice. Since rice is the most common component in the daily diet, many poor Cambodians eat more rice than meat and vegetables, thus not diversifying their diets. This means that they consume enough calories but lack protein, vitamins and minerals, especially iodine, iron and vitamin A.

According to statistics of the Royal Government of Cambodia, some 2.2 million people or 15.4 percent of the Cambodian population are undernourished. Approximately 19 per cent of women are underweight and 40 per cent of children under five years of age are moderately or severely malnourished.

Through the MDG Programme, the UN agencies worked with local government departments and community-based organizations to change that. As one of the UN agencies contributing to the joint programme, the FAO initiative sought to improve home gardening techniques and livestock production in two of the poorest provinces, Kampong Speu and Svay Rieng using the farmer field schools scheme in order to improve nutrition and food security of the farmers and their families. FAO established a total of 70 farmer field schools, and 2 100 vulnerable households received seeds including Chinese cabbage, cucumber, eggplant and yard-long beans, watering cans and hoes to improve their kitchen gardens. Some beneficiaries were given two hens and a rooster to start-up their livestock production. Furthermore, beneficiaries received nutrition education on complementary feeding practices for children age 6 to 24 months. To complement the home gardening activity, over 3 000 books entitled "*Nutrition Handbook for the Family*," were printed and distributed to all

trained farmers and the provincial government including the offices of the Provincial Department of Agriculture and the Provincial Department of Women's Affairs.

After the establishment of the farmer field schools, the number of farmers who planted more than five different kinds of vegetables increased by 51 percent. According to the beneficiaries in Svay Rieng, the farmers targeted by the activities of the MDG Programme now grow six to seven different types of vegetables compared to three to four when the Programme's farmer field schools started.

A farmer since her childhood, Sokvanna thought that she knew everything there was to know about the sowing, planting and harvesting in her paddy fields. She did not suspect that her lifelong ways were about to be changed when trainings on innovative planting techniques were introduced in her village.

Willing to learn, but skeptical and reluctant to spend time on the trainings, Sokvanna managed to complete the 16 week course. To her surprise, she was ranked the best student there. "When FAO staff and officials first tried to recruit me, I was hesitant to participate in the training," Sokvanna recalls. "I am very glad that I completed the course, and now our lives are so much better than before."

Officer Thyda Sao, from the Provincial Department of Agriculture that worked with FAO to implement the Programme, says he listed Sokvanna's name in the first group of the trainees because of her educational background and people skills. "The villagers told me that she is well like by the local residents," Sao recalls. "Despite her age, Ms Sokvanna was a fast learner and she was able to explain to others in the group if they were too shy to ask us."

In her home village of Tropeang Kompeus of Romdenh commune in Svay Rieng province, Sokvanna explains that the FAO farmer field schools methodology not only offers learning tools but also empower

the local residents in the decision-making process at the household level. Through the nutrition education, the farmers are also more aware of the importance of organic food and diversifying their diets to improve their health and nutrition. And the key to this is eating seasonal fruits, vegetables and native plants that are home grown, she says.

Sao agrees. For the first time, the farmers in Tropeang Kompeus village are in control of the food they grow and eat. They decide what vegetables they want to plant to put on their dinner plates, Sao says. Unlike before, now these families have enough food to eat at home while some farmers were able to sell the extra chickens and vegetables to neighbours in villages nearby, he adds.

"This local exchange did not take place before," Sao explains. "The FAO activities ended a year ago and today these farmers continue to utilize what they learned from the farmer field school trainings."

The FAO project manager of the MDG Joint Programme, Hieu Luc, confirms that the farmer field school is an effective method to improve living conditions in rural Cambodia through sustainable, small-scale home gardening that does not require large start-up investments.

"The aim of the training is to give farmers knowledge on



*Ly Sokvanna (second left) and beneficiaries debate over who has the greenest thumb*

crop production that will not only sustain their needs, but also provide a steady source of profit over the years,” Luc says. “The method resulted in improved soils, better yields and higher income for farmers. And this has proven to be a success in Cambodia and in other countries as well.”

FAO uses the farmer field school approach to train thousands of farmers to develop individual skills to build their communities in a sustainable way for years to come. The farmer field schools approach is a learning tool on farming techniques to improve crop production and generate income. The field school approach has been used by FAO and others to provide hands-on training to thousands of farmers like Sokvanna on topics including integrated pest management, improved varieties, better water management and enhanced plant nutrition, soil fertility, animals husbandry, and income-generating activities. Farmers learn about agro-ecology to minimize the excessive use of pesticides that are serious health hazards for humans and animals.

Sokvanna acknowledges that the farmer field schools methodology requires hard work and is time consuming. “It was a long and step-by-step process,” Sokvanna recalls. “When I proved that I was growing vegetables as instructed, the FAO gave me two female chickens and a rooster to further develop my homestead.”

“Now we have everything growing in our own garden and I can even sell my excess produce. The facilitator was there to guide us every step of the way if we had questions or encountered problems,” she adds.

Srey Chenda, a 31-year-old farmer with four children who lives down the road from the Sokvanna family, echoed this sentiment as she paused from kissing and rocking her six-month old baby girl happily smiling on her lap.

“My girl is a healthy baby and she hasn’t gotten sick since I fed her the improved rice porridge. I followed the cooking recipe in the handbook that I received from FAO,” says Chenda, holding up her baby on her lap.

Although the FAO’s cooking recipes require several ingredients that she cannot afford, she can grow them. Chenda explains that the vegetables garden contributes not only to her family’s health but also to the family’s happiness. Chenda’s husband used to work as a construction worker in other parts of the



*A mother receives the FAO nutrition handbook for improved food and nutrition security*

country. Now her husband stays with the family to help plant the crops in the field.

“Now I have a very important status at home,” she laughs. “I teach him how to plant better with the training I received from FAO.”

Cambodian women are often dependent upon subsistence agriculture but are frequently caught in cycles of poverty due to lack of access to necessary resources as well as relevant technologies and training. Gender equality and empowerment of women are essential for the attainment of Cambodia’s Millennium Development Goals of improved food and nutrition security. Improved gender equality within the rural poor and vulnerable groups in the targeted areas was therefore an important part of the MDG Programme and gender mainstreaming characterized all of the Programme’s

activities. Several farmers field school groups had only female members and a woman elected as leader. The farmer field schools provided a forum for the participating women to improve farming technics, knowledge and practice on nutritional basics. The Programme also provided exchanges between neighbouring villages, through which women could share their experiences.

Increased participation by women in income-generating activities contributes not only to increase agricultural productivity but also to the empowerment of women through a greater influence over the production and the household economy, improvements that in the end will benefit the whole community.

“This Programme helped me and my family earn extra income from the garden and eat healthier foods,” says Ouk Sopheap, a neighbour down the road, who sold 60 chickens last month. “With the extra money I earned from selling the chickens to the neighbours, I can send my children to school,” she adds.

Another recipient of the Programme, Koug Vantong, says, “Since we eat the vegetables picked from my garden, I notice that my family is not sick as often as before.” Vantong explains that by having a backyard garden she knows where her food is coming from. “FAO improved our lives by providing farming skills and knowledge, which we didn’t know we needed,” she adds.

Sokvanna could not agree more. If the nutrition education had come twenty years earlier, Sokvanna would have saved hundreds of dollars on her family’s medical bills. She remembers how her daughter, So Chantey, fell ill in the middle of the night.

Pale, skinny, frail and in pain, her four-year-old daughter suffered from health problems due to a lack of nutrition. The doctor at the provincial public hospital explained that So Chantey suffered from chronic stomach ache and lung infections. According to health experts, these two conditions are most commonly caused by a lack of adequate nutrition. Frightened by her daughter’s near death experience, Sokvanna vowed to her family that she would do everything in her power to stop this event from happening again. And she did.

Today Sokvanna is not only a well-respected community leader but she is also a trained health worker in the village. Afraid



*One of the 2 100 beneficiaries who participated in the FAO farmer field schools scheme holds up his vegetable*

of driving a motorbike, Sokvanna still manages to travel from village to village to pass on health materials and information that she received through her training including information from FAO farmer field school trainings. “I am a messenger,” she says, standing next to her beaten-up bicycle. “Travelling by bicycle, I stop house by house to educate the people in the community.”

Programmes like FAO’s help households similar to Sokvanna’s avoid health problems related to malnutrition. They teach nutrition education and a better way of farming to improve health and living conditions for the communities that need it most.

Thanks to the FAO support, Sokvanna says local residents in her village are better off than before. “Now the local people have a safety-net: a garden of good nutritious food,” Sokvanna says. “I see less sick children now. People eat more healthily than before.”

A year has passed since the Programme ended and farmers like Sokvanna, Chenda and Vantong observe that many local villagers have benefited from the FAO farmer field school initiative. “We do not forget the farmer field schools training,” Sokvanna says. “We apply what we learned to this day,”

When asked if she prefers money over education, Sokvanna smiles and replies, “Education.”

