



Food and Agriculture
Organization of the
United Nations

THE IMPACT OF **GENDER POLICY PROCESSES** ON THE **RIGHT TO FOOD**



THE CASE OF CAMBODIA

The purpose of this study is to identify potential gender-related entry points for the development of activities on the human right to adequate food in Cambodia. To this end, the analysis focuses on gender policy processes currently ongoing in the country, considered as a viable opportunity to initiate or strengthen the implementation of the Right to Food Guidelines at country level.

S U M M A R Y

FOOD INSECURITY IN CAMBODIA

Cambodia adheres to human rights principles that constitute the ground for a human rights-based approach (HRBA). These include the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).

The Cambodian government has made a commitment to eliminate hunger and food insecurity. However, despite significant progress in tackling poverty achieved by the country in the last years, a significant part of the population continues to live just above the poverty line, especially in rural areas, with a very thin margin of difference and a high degree of vulnerability. Malnutrition and food insecurity affect in particular women and children. Household headed by women (nearly a fifth of

total Cambodian households) usually have smaller plots of land and are more likely to be poor. Despite the high participation of women in the workforce, the majority of them (70 percent) are in vulnerable employment or suffer from poor earnings, difficult work conditions, lack of social security and representation.

NATIONAL FOOD SECURITY POLICIES

Improving food security is an important development priority of the Royal Government of Cambodia, addressed in the Government's Rectangular Strategy for Growth, Employment, Equity and Efficiency, which strengthens the government's engagement in the areas of gender equality, nutrition and social protection, and in the **National Strategic Development Plan** (NSDP 2014–2018) formulated to implement the Strategy and articulate it across all national sector policies.

To ensure a platform for joint inter-sectorial action to enhance food security and nutrition (FSN), the Cambodian government has entrusted the **Council for Agricultural and Rural Development** (CARD) with the development and implementation of the **National Strategy for Food Security and Nutrition** (NSFSN 2014–2018). The NSFSN is a policy permeated by a multi-dimensional and integrated approach, thus addresses three main priorities:

1. availability of and sustainable access to food at household level;
2. child and maternal nutrition, together with human and economic development;
3. vulnerability of the food insecure and their exposure to risks and shocks.

Its implementation represents a challenge in terms of coordination, technical capacity, governance and resource mobilization.

The CARD is also the national entity responsible for the drafting of National Protection Policies. The first 2011 Plan has been reviewed and updated, and recognizes, *de facto*, the right of poor and vulnerable people to receive support, including food, water and shelter, in times of emergencies and crises and institutionalizes social safety nets to reduce poverty and food insecurity, targeting in particular children and mothers and providing free access to health care for the poor and vulnerable.

Social protection measures targeting the poor in Cambodia are relatively recent and represent a step in the direction of effective social protection coverage. However, government financing for social protection remains low and most of the social protection measures depend heavily on external donors.

NATIONAL GENDER POLICIES

The main institution for the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment in the country is represented by the **Ministry of Women's Affairs** (MoWA), which acts as a catalyst and advocate to encourage public institutions to integrate gender equality into their policies and programs, as a coordinator and facilitator for gender mainstreaming across government sectors, and finally is responsible for monitoring and evaluating the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women across government.

In partnership with relevant ministries and institutions, the MoWA has developed its **IV National Strategic Plan**

for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (Neary Rattanak), covering the period 2014–2018 and including the vision, mission, key objectives and strategies to address gender equality in various thematic programmes, such as economic empowerment, education, health, legal protection, decision making and politics, and climate change. In particular, the plan promotes better working conditions and social protection for women and recognizes the role of women in agriculture, looking at models of cooperation with private sector to increase the number of enterprises led by women.

Among the policies developed within the new national gender mainstreaming approach, which mandates gender plans to sector ministries, the 2016–2020 **Gender Mainstreaming Policy and Strategic Framework**, developed by the Gender and Children Working Group established within the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fishery (MAFF), is a key driving document for gender and food security. The gender analysis informing the plan recognizes the problems faced by rural women, confronted with the rapid process of modernization of agriculture that risks leaving them behind, and acknowledges the significance of migration from rural households that often leaves women alone to take care of farms. The Framework highlights, among the main obstacles faced by rural women, low education and literacy rates, under-representation in community-based organizations and rural services, and lack of access to resources necessary for economic empowerment.

GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN THE DECENTRALIZATION REFORM

The complex and long-term process of administrative decentralization started in 2002 with the establishment of elected commune councils and the progressive devolution of administrative and political issues at provincial and district level. With the second decentralization plan, delivered in 2014, the process is entering a new phase which focuses on management, democratic accountability, service delivery and fiscal decentralization and primarily targets district structures, called to play a major role in the delivery of services. Gender is mainstreamed throughout the new plan which shifts the responsibility for gender equality and women's empowerment from Women and Children Committees, created by previous sector reforms, to all functions of the structure. The decentralization reform opens new spaces for citizens' participation, accountability and rights enforcement.





Field work conducted by the author has revealed the major **challenges and difficulties** faced by vulnerable and food insecure women: landlessness, difficulties in coping with the agrarian transition, indebtedness and migration were considered as major causes of food insecurity. Despite the existence of some social protection policies, the quantity and quality of care services offered to women were still considered insufficient.

Subnational structures are important actors in the implementation of social policies, dialogue and negotiation. The **Women and Children's Consultative Committees** at provincial and district level, and the **Committees for Women and Children** at the commune level, provide advice and recommendations, albeit limited, on issues related to women and children.

During the field work, the **Commune structures** visited showed a strong commitment to improve the livelihood of their communities and a good knowledge of the real problems faced by the most vulnerable in their areas, in spite of the limitations in terms of resources and budget.

The Commune Women and Children Committees operate with limited budgets and their action very much depends on the capacity, activism and commitment of their members.

District and provincial Women and Children Committees are mainly consultative bodies, but lack decision making power. Their intervention on gender issues is focused on women and children's services in health and education, with limited budgets.

At the **district level**, the new phase of the decentralization process will provide important resources in terms of capacity building, budget and power, thus improving the functionality of these structures which at the moment are underperforming.

Provinces are well structured institutions with significant mandate, power and budgets and practices more in line with the central line ministries policies. Provincial staff recognized nutrition, food security and gender mainstreaming as priorities and a need for social projects, which is at the moment not being fulfilled.

A HRBA aimed at creating awareness about rights or involving communities in entitlement and accountability demands, may be difficult to negotiate. Access to resources, in particular land, has been an area of conflict in the recent years, and very often of polarisation and confrontation.

GENDER AND RIGHT TO FOOD IN DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION

Finally, the study reviews briefly **aid programs, approaches and practices** related to gender and right to food, adopted by Official Development Assistance (ODA) agencies and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). In the gender sector, ODA is channelled through the MoWA and follows the priorities set by the national Neary Rattanak IV plan.

With regard to programs and plans targeting FSN, major development agencies, such as FAO, IFAD, WFP and UNICEF are providing their contribution. These projects work with institutional partners, the sector Ministries, at central and local levels and are focused on a wide range of areas, including emergency food assistance, poverty reduction, improved market access, climate adaptation and resilience, rural infrastructure and irrigation, strengthening farmers' associations, financial literacy and extension, and vocational training. However, while most programmes have adopted gender-sensitive frameworks, the HRBA *per se*, is not clearly mainstreamed.

Local and international NGOs operating in Cambodia have gradually shifted from mere service provider entities to funding agencies operating in partnership with local organizations and supporting community participation



in many issues related to access to land and resources and helped to gain more awareness of their rights and entitlement and demand reparation or settlement of their disputes. According to their representatives, thanks to this support, Cambodian women, including rural women, have in part overcome the barriers represented by gender norms and traditional values that limited their role to the private sphere and important changes have been attained in terms of recognition of women's rights, including the right of women to participate, speak and engage in public roles.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR GENDER AND RIGHT TO FOOD IN THE COUNTRY

The analysis carried out by this study shows that Cambodia is currently building policies aimed at responding to the needs of the population in terms of food security, adequate food access and social protection and that a more effective integration of gender issues at national and subnational level has begun.

However, the scope for a clear assertion of the right to food as a guiding principle and objectives for policies and initiatives remains controversial. Human rights are perceived as a challenging area for the government and previous experiences of mainstreaming human rights principles at policy and legal levels have not produced the expected changes.

On the other hand, a number of **opportunities** may arise from different processes currently affecting Cambodian society, such as:

- the urgency, expressed by national authorities, to address food insecurity and malnutrition and the spaces open by the National Policy for Food Security and Nutrition and Social Protection;

- the need, expressed by local authorities, to be provided with social project packages available to the lowest levels of the subnational structure, able to produce change and reverse the existing trends;
- the process of gender mainstreaming that is moving away from a perspective centered on women and children's basic services, to embrace a gender perspective rooted in the analysis of gender dynamics in various sectors, in particular agriculture;
- finally, the presence of organizations with experience and practice in adopting women's based agendas and a HRBA.

The new phase of the decentralization reform opens up new spaces for citizens' participation, accountability and rights' enforcement as well as gender perspective. With the potential inclusion of food security and social protection measures at local level, there will be opportunities for developing forms of social accountability, influencing policies and planning processes, and moving towards right to food implementing measures at the local level.

At institutional level, the Gender Working Group at MAFF, for its engagement in promoting a gender perspective in the agricultural sector, represents a primary partner for work on gender and right to food issues. MoWA representatives working on vulnerable women's rights, as well as other stakeholders, could be also involved in the process.

The presence in Cambodia of NGOs active in human rights could be an engine for an initiative that gathers also other actors. Among other, the study recommends to move forward with the creation of a Gender and Right to Food working group, facilitated by FAO and led by the institutional entities and organizations in the sector.

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This brief summarizes the findings of the study
*The impact of gender policy processes on the right to food:
the case of Cambodia*, authored by Margherita Maffi.

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