



## MALIS: Improving food security and market linkages for smallholders

Input credit fairs expand market linkages for remote communities in north-west Cambodia



*In this edition, FAO Cambodia journalist, Ms Botumroath Keo Lebn, travels to the field to report on FAO's first agricultural input fairs in target districts of Preah Vihear and Oddar Meanchey Provinces in Cambodia.*

## MALIS Empowers Farmers through Input Credit at Agricultural Fairs

*FAO's approach to supporting long-term food security for farming families in vulnerable communities*

Through the MALIS project, FAO Cambodia has trialed its first agricultural input trade fairs in Cambodia. The fairs bring together farmers and local suppliers of agricultural inputs to expand market linkages for remote communities in the north-west of Cambodia. Farmers are provided with an agreed amount of credit for the purchase of agricultural inputs and are given the freedom to choose inputs that meet their specific needs.

The fairs stem from the successful piloting of input credit schemes with six farmer groups in the provinces of Oddar Meanchey and Preah Vihear. The pilot activities in 2013 showed that there was very good participation and repayment by the farm households.

FAO Project Manager of MALIS, Dr Iain Russell explained how the scheme works. "In the input credit scheme, the farmers place an order for seed and we buy in bulk and then the farmers pay 60 percent of the price back to the cooperative after harvest. In the agricultural fairs, we arrange for the suppliers to join the fair and create a competitive market place for the farmers to choose the inputs they need most. They pay back the same 60 percent of the value of the credit to their farmer organisations after harvest."

"Through the hands-on education received in Farmer Field Schools (FFS), farmers are empowered to make informed and independent decisions on which varieties will best suit their family's nutrition, food supply and

income needs. Instead of giving farmers a package of inputs that might not suit all our beneficiaries" said Iain Russell, "through the voucher system

we are giving farmers choices to buy what they need for the planting season at the time it is most needed."

The fairs offer farmers opportunities to make business contacts and allow them to meet potential buyers for their produce. Project beneficiaries like Mr Or Sochet, 56, President of the Cheung Tien Meanchey Agricultural Cooperative in Chongkal District in Oddar Meanchey Province, want to meet sales representatives to bargain for agricultural inputs, especially for quality seeds and fertilizers for his agricultural cooperative.

"Input credit fairs create market linkages and improve the supply of locally produced seeds, inputs and tools for farmers," said FAO Provincial Adviser for Preah Vihear, Ms Charya Khim, who oversees the set-up of fairs in her province.

During the fairs, inputs including rice and vegetable seed, fertilizer, hand tools, small machinery, livestock feed, veterinary medicines and kitchen wares were sold by local traders. Farmers who met criteria for vulnerability to food insecurity and who belonged to qualified Community Based Organizations (CBOs) and Agricultural Cooperatives were invited to join the fairs. The project distributed vouchers to approximately 3 800 beneficiary households, for a total cash value of US\$543 000. More than 50 cooperatives and smaller CBOs participated in the input credit scheme and total attendance at the fairs exceeded 6 500 persons.

Fairs have been conducted in all of the nine target districts of Preah Vihear and Oddar Meanchey Provinces and have proven a resounding success. Major distributions of rice seed by input credit preceded the fairs to add to the total impact on agricultural production in these provinces.

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Children receive free nutritious meal of improved porridge provided by Malteser International staff at the agricultural fair in Anlong Veng District

## Nutrition: The Missing Piece of the Puzzle

Malnutrition threatens the health and well-being, and ultimately the future, of the Cambodian population. In the last decade, Cambodia's poverty rate has declined but malnutrition rates remain high. In 2010, 40 percent of children under the age of 5 years were stunted, 28 percent underweight and 11 percent wasted.

Against this backdrop, FAO in Cambodia provides nutrition education to smallholder farmers, especially to families with children aged under 2 years. Mothers and caregivers with infants and young children (6-18 months) are selected for an intensive training on improved infant and young child feeding (IYCF) practices, hygiene and food safety from the MALIS FFS and the wider community to ensure nutrition and agricultural linkages.

In remote areas of Preah Vihear and Oddar Meanchey provinces, where the MALIS project operates, the nutrition education intervention is scaling up its activities. During participatory cooking demonstrations mothers and caregivers learn how to prepare safe and nutritious complementary food with locally available foods and how to responsively feed their young children to foster growth and mental development. Since September 2013, 449 mothers and caregivers have directly benefitted from IYCF trainings.

"A large number of mothers do not diversify the diet of their infants and young children and only provide a plain rice porridge which is not nutritious enough for the child to grow and to stay healthy. Often the amount of food provided is also insufficient for their babies," explained nutritionist Ly Koung Ry, former MALIS staff.

After four intensive months of training, 43 out of 60 (72 percent) mothers and caregivers, who were interviewed in a small survey, reported to have learned how to prepare the *bobor khap krop kroeng* (thick and multi-ingredient porridge) and 39 mothers and caregivers (65 percent) stated that they have learned about good hygiene practices. Although 58 mothers and caregivers (97 percent) stated that they follow the recipes at home, only 20 mothers and caregivers (33 percent) said that they prepare the *bobor khap krop kroeng* on a daily basis. Nevertheless, the impression of the mothers and caregivers was that their child's health had improved since they participated in the trainings.

In February and March 2014, a complementary feeding campaign was undertaken in all 35 target villages, and was reported a success with

a total of 1 080 participants. The campaign was followed by a 7-day free *bobor* distribution where children under 2 years received the nutritious food 3 times per day. Children who received the *bobor* reportedly gained weight and had healthier skin. Caregivers from 12 villages subsequently formed groups to cook the *bobor* together on a regular basis for their children.

In summary, the MALIS nutrition program uses community-based approaches to educate caregivers and mothers on improved infant and young child feeding practices, and ultimately aims to prevent malnutrition.



Mr Ly Koung Ry (L) showing MALIS nutrition education training materials to Mr Phorn Yoeum during the handover briefing

## Introducing Mr Phorn Yoeum

*Mr Ly Koung Ry worked as the MALIS National Nutrition Specialist for 2 years and has left the project to take up a new job. His replacement, Mr Phorn Yoeum, who commenced as a Nutritionist in March 2014, will work closely with Ms Theresa Jeremias and Ms Thoang Sokha in Cambodia.*

With a background as a Community Health Worker, Yoeum believes the nutritional status of children can be improved if mothers' and caregivers' knowledge, attitudes and practices change. He wants to address this challenge in his new post with the MALIS project.

From past work experience, Yoeum has noted that the dietary practices of mothers and caregivers can be changed, provided that staff can properly explain the benefits associated with improved IYCF and family feeding practices. However, the attitudes and beliefs of mothers and caregivers are the biggest challenge for change.

"Attitude is almost impossible to change," says Yoeum. "But it can be done."

During his first three months at FAO, Yoeum's top priority is to focus on behaviour change among caregivers and to develop creative ideas of working with them to modify traditional ways of feeding children. Although exclusive breastfeeding for the first six months is common in Cambodia, caregivers are reluctant to practice improved complementary feeding on a regular basis. Yoeum explains "We need to work with caregivers to identify the difficulties they face, improve their understanding of the benefits and try to modify feeding practices so that babies and young children are provided with nutritious meals and healthy snacks."

"During these first three months I will work hard, research and read a lot, and contribute my ideas to beef up the nutrition programme," says Yoeum.

With a decade of field experience in the health sector, Yoeum will combine his educational and communication skills to ensure that the MALIS project reaches its objective of improving nutrition among children and their families.



Signing agreements with Primary Partners in Oddar Meanchey  
Directors of CIDO and RCEDO and Mr Tek Kimsong witness the  
signing of KBA agreement by Mr Tuy Koeun

## FAO Renews Agreements with Primary Partners

In April 2014, MALIS renewed its partnership with local Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) by signing Letters of Agreement (LoAs) for improvement of farming systems and market linkages for smallholders in two of Cambodia's poorest and most remote provinces—Preah Vihear and Oddar Meanchey.

Under the LoAs, the expected achievements in the next 12 months include selection and engagement with Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), mobilization of members to join project activities, facilitation of farmer field and business schools; supervision of agricultural fairs and the voucher system; and strengthening of CBO management.

The MALIS Primary Partners who signed LoAs were Rural Community and Environment Development Organization (RCEDO), Community Integrated Development Organization (CIDO), Khmer Buddhist Association (KBA) and Buddhism for Development (BFD) with a total budget of US\$230 000. "We are pleased to renew the agreements with our partners because of their record of achievement and our good working relationship with them," said MALIS Project Manager Iain Russell. "The relationships are important to MALIS, both for local experience of the organizations and for the skills and experience of individual staff."

The difference between the first and second agreement said Dr. Russell, is that the second agreement now focuses on the independent role of the partner staff as facilitators of the Farmer Business Schools (FBS). In 2013, the FAO staff took a leading role but they are now confident to hand over this responsibility to the NGO partner staff. There are 20 facilitators in the FBS and almost 50 facilitators involved in the Farmer Field Schools (FFS). MALIS will strengthen their skills as facilitators to run 60 FFS and 14 FBS in time for the main wet season crop. Similar agreements with the Provincial Departments of Agriculture and Women's Affairs and with Nutrition NGOs Malteser International and Farmer Livelihood Development take the total investment in the LoAs up to US\$476 000 for 2014-15.



FAO provides training for poor farmers to become nursery operators in order to establish a small business

## Cambodian farmers benefit from FAO TeleFood Special Fund

Currently the MALIS project is benefiting from additional funding support from FAO under the TeleFood Special Fund (TSF) for the project 'Fruits and Vegetables for Improved Nutrition'.

"The overall objective of the project is to assist members of farmer field schools (FFS) in both provinces to increase the diversity and nutritional value of vegetable and fruit crops available from home gardens and smallholder farms," said MALIS Agronomist Mr Pel Chivita, who guided the TSF project. "A total of 812 members of the FFS have directly benefited from the TSF project through the supply of planting materials for fruits and vegetables."

The purpose of the TSF is to finance grassroots-level projects to assist poor families in developing countries. Its aim is to improve their means of production, enabling them to produce more food and to generate cash income, thereby allowing them better access to food. These funds are most effective when teamed with existing interventions that provide training and technical support. The MALIS Primary Partner NGOs, BFD, CIDO, RCEDO and KBA are helping to implement the TSF project.

The approach taken by the project is to use five local nurseries to produce planting materials for nutrient dense fruits and vegetables such as banana, mango, jackfruit, moringa, papaya, sweet potato and taro. The planting materials are then distributed to smallholders through the FFS, to stimulate more diverse homestead gardens and to encourage better nutrition.

"The TSF grant provides some limited start-up assistance to small enterprises like Mr Doeum to help launch his nursery business" said Iain Russell. Mr Lanh Doeum is a vegetable grower in Pongro Commune in Chongkal District and he has established a small nursery business to produce planting materials for the TSF project.

The MALIS project helped Mr Doeum and other nursery operators in the target districts with inputs and training for their nursery businesses. "MALIS staff trained operators individually on nursery techniques ranging from nursery shelter construction, nursery bed preparation and propagation techniques" said Mr. Pel Chivita.



Thousands of beneficiaries like Mrs Piet Thida are taking advantage of MALIS Farmer Field Schools to lift themselves out of poverty

## Impact of MALIS on Poor Farmers

Members of an agricultural cooperative in Oddar Meanchey's Chongkal District explain how MALIS activities are making a profound difference to their lives and to the success of their group. The members of the cooperative have participated in the whole range of project activities, including FFS, FBS, the agricultural fairs, input credit scheme and nutrition education activities

Mr Or Sochet, President of the Cheung Tien Meanchey Agricultural Cooperative, said that if it wasn't for FAO, his Community Based Organization (CBO) would have earned limited revenue over the past year. When the monsoon season arrives from June to October, thousands of farmers are out in the field planting their rice because these crops depend on the rain. The country lacks irrigation. It is at planting time, that they need help to access good quality seeds and fertilisers to give them the best chances for a successful crop. Many farmers do not have the cash on hand to buy these inputs at the time and input credit gives those farmers the chance they need to break through the cycle of poverty. Members of the cooperative now look at their farming more as a business opportunity and they can see the benefits that come from investment in quality inputs.

According to Mr Sochet, one of the biggest contributions from MALIS, was the establishment of the input credit scheme for the cooperative, where each member is required to pay back 60 percent of the value

of the inputs to the agriculture cooperative. During the growing season in 2013, the farmer groups that joined together to form the cooperative successfully ran group buying schemes and added significant amounts to the bank balance for the cooperative. They were able to achieve 100 percent success with repayments from the members.

The cooperative currently has 57 members and is growing. "A large number of applicants now want to join our cooperative. The board cannot accept new memberships until we hold a meeting to vote on how many new members can join," he said.

"In the Farmer Business School, Ms Kim Davin from FAO taught us the effectiveness of group purchasing power. We applied this lesson in one of our business transactions with a fertiliser wholesale company" said Mr Sochet. "The company agreed to sell the fertilizer we wanted for US\$17.50, which is cheaper than the market price of US\$20," explained Mr Sochet. "We didn't expect the company to deliver to us as part of the deal, so this was an extra benefit."

Another member of the Cheung Tien Meanchey Agricultural Cooperative echoed these comments. Mrs Piet Thida is a member of the Commune Council and works as a Community Nutrition Promoter for the MALIS project. She said that the training on marketing and financial planning that she received in the FBS has put her small business on the right track. "They taught me how to keep records of inventories and contact information in one book. Before, I relied only on my memory and at times had misplaced phone numbers," Mrs Thida explained "they showed how the flow of money comes in and goes out, which makes sense for a business owner like myself."

Mrs Thida applauded FAO for developing the agriculture stakeholder directory that contains useful contacts to expand her small enterprise. In her small store, Mrs Thida takes orders from clients and sells agricultural products including seeds and fertilizers. She uses the financial record book as her guide. Her shop is operated underneath her wooden house. She also conducted nutrition education sessions for mothers and caregivers from her village underneath her house

Cooperative member Mr No Sokpheap, 32, a father of two children, said the MALIS project gave him a jump-start for his chicken raising business. In January 2014, he and 11 other graduates of a chicken FFS received good breeding three hens each. With these three hens and two roosters he purchased himself, Mr Sokpheap estimates that he has already made about US\$350 in profit.

Although he and Mr Sochet have followed the chicken raising guidelines in the FFS, they have faced many challenges with the health of their chickens. When asked what they remembered most of about the FFS learning experience, Mr Sochet and Sokpheap said clean water and sanitation were essential for producing healthy chickens.

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