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# PROJECT UPDATE

## A NEWSLETTER FROM THE NEXT GENERATION AGRICULTURAL EXTENSION PROJECT

## Connecting research and practice

*FROM: BRIAN COOK*
*PHOTO: BRIAN COOK, VAN TOUCH, SOPHANARA PHAN, SAO CHEN, LITA MOM, PANHALEAK CHAY ON-SITE WITH COMMUNITY MEMBERS AT A WATER WELL IN PAILIN*

Hello/**ជំរាបសួរ** (Chom Reap Sour) from the research team of the *Next Generation Agricultural Extension Project: social relations for practice change.* This quarter, our team has continued implementing Activity 6, which focuses on supporting livelihood development through collaborative efforts with farmers. In this issue, we share the impacts on farmers and communities from solar-powered wells and laser land levelling. We also share insights from a recent publication on inequality and life satisfaction and its link to village settlement history in Northwest Cambodia.

## Project Overview

This project aims to produce an innovative model of agricultural extension founded on expanding enabling social relations, which will complement and/or replace existing models of extension based on the provision of technology, capital and information.

Duration: January 2021 to December 2026
Target Areas: Cambodia
Budget: AUD$4.5million
Project Leader: Associate Professor Brian Cook, The University of Melbourne

# Levelling the Field, Lifting Hopes

*FROM: SAROEUT YONG, PHEROM SONG, SOPHEA YOUS, CHARIYA KORN, LITA MOM, PANHALEAK CHAY, SOPHANARA PHAN, VAN TOUCH & BRIAN COOK*
*PHOTOS: PANHALEAK CHAY & SOPHEA YOUS*

Uneven rice fields have long limited productivity in Northwest Cambodia, wasting water, fertiliser, and labour while increasing weed pressure. With paddy prices stagnant and costs rising, many farmers feel trapped by their land's irregularity.

To address this challenge, our team introduced subsidised **laser land levelling** which has begun to transform these conditions. By reducing costs, it has enabled smallholders to access a technology once beyond reach. "Without support, I could not pay. With half covered, I finally tried," explained one farmer.

**'I walked through my land and it feels like a new farm. I feel proud to show it to others'.**
**- One farmer's comment on the impact of laser land levelling**

This activity has demonstrated **instant impact**: with levelling completed in a single day, **irrigation time halved, fuel costs cut by 50%, and weed coverage reduced from 40% to 10%**. A levelled field means that rice can grow healthy and uniform with higher yields expected.

Beyond technical gains, **the change has restored farmers' pride**. "Before, I didn't even want to look at my field. Now I visit it every day," said another farmer. Levelled fields are becoming visible symbols of progress, drawing neighbours to observe and learn as the above image shows.

Subsidies are acting as gateways to adoption in this region, turning early users into advocates and models for their peers. Farmers described the process as "opening the door" to **sustainable and dignified farming**.

Laser land levelling has not only evened the soil—it has reshaped community optimism, improved resource use, and built momentum for wider adoption. What was once a costly dream has become a **pathway toward resilience, efficiency, and renewed hope** for rice-growing families.

# Inequality and Life Satisfaction in Northwest Cambodia

*FROM: JARVIS ZHUO & NICHOLAS HARRIGAN*
*PHOTOS: PHEROM SONG & LITA MOM*

Our publication in **World Development** explores life satisfaction across eight villages, revealing a surprising trend: **households in poorer upland areas report higher wellbeing than those in wealthier lowlands**. Drawing on Activity 2 census data, we offer new insights into how inequality, rather than income alone, shapes wellbeing in rural Northwest Cambodia.

**Addressing inequality and promoting inclusive community structures are vital to ensuring that development contributes to a genuinely "good life" for all.**

Despite lower incomes and poorer human development indicators, residents of recently settled upland villages consistently report higher life satisfaction. Statistical analysis links this to markedly lower levels of income inequality in these newer settlements.

Multilevel regression modelling confirms that **villages with longer settlement histories exhibit higher inequality**, which negatively affects the wellbeing of low-income households.

Over time, social and economic power consolidates within older villages, entrenching disparities and reducing wellbeing among poorer residents. In contrast, the relative equality in newer communities fosters stronger perceptions of fairness and collective welfare.

These findings carry important implications for rural development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). **Efforts to improve wellbeing must go beyond income growth to address structural inequalities that deepen over time**.

Recognising the links between settlement history, inequality, and wellbeing highlights the need for policies that sustain social cohesion and protect low-income households in rural Cambodia.

# Small infrastructure, big change

*FROM: SOPHANARA PHAN, PANHALEAK CHAY, LITA MOM, CHARIYA KORN, PHEROM SONG, SAROEUT YONG, SOPHEA YOUS, KIRT HAINZER, VAN TOUCH & BRIAN COOK*
*PHOTOS: PANHALEAK CHAY & SOPHANARA PHAN*

In the upland villages of Battambang and Pailin provinces, **access to clean and reliable water has long been a challenge**. Communities relied on unprotected creeks and seasonal ponds—sources often contaminated by sediment, agrochemical runoff, and household waste. Collecting water required long walks or expensive purchases from vendors, contributing to frequent illness, physical hardship, and financial strain.

To address this, our team has installed **six solar-powered wells across four villages** through a collaborative initiative involving Partners for Rural Development (project partner), a local drilling firm, and community members.

Villagers took part in needs assessments, site selection, and the formation of well management committees, ensuring that the system was both responsive and sustainable.

The **impact has been transformative**. Reliable access to clean water has **reduced waterborne diseases, improved hygiene, and enhanced safety**. With less time spent fetching water, families can now engage in other productive activities, while reduced household water costs have freed up income for education, food, and small investments. Many households have begun using the water for home gardens and poultry production (see bottom image), strengthening food security and livelihoods.

Usage is monitored weekly via well meters to support transparent management and impact assessment. Our team **continues to evaluate social and environmental outcomes**, demonstrating how small-scale, community-led infrastructure can deliver lasting benefits for rural communities.

**'Before, even giving water to chickens was hard. Now we can clean and care for them every day.'**
**- Mrs Phoy (above left and below)**

## Project Partners

## Resources

Check out the latest articles, blogs and research outputs which are shaping the project:

### World Trade Organization Trade Policy Review: Cambodia

This review, the first for Cambodia, highlights the country's post-conflict economic growth, driven by open trade and investment policies within a rapidly developing regional context. Challenges, such as weak institutions, corruption, and inadequate infrastructure are also discussed. **Read more**

### 'A History of Cambodia' revised

In the fourth edition of this comprehensive volume, Chandler includes a new section which analyses the current state of politics, and sociology, and the increasing pressures of globalisation for Cambodia.

**Read more**

Next-Gen Agricultural Extension