

Our Action, Our Voice!

Newsletter, Issue 002

The Advocate: How Kimcheng Empowers Her Community to Fight for Their Livelihood



Far from Cambodia's capital lies Koh Kong, a coastal province where Kimcheng grew up. Life was not easy. Raised in a remote village by fisherfolk parents, Kimcheng's family of eight suffered greatly after her father passing. Forced to drop out of school in grade 9 because of the family economic conditions, she shouldered responsibility, witnessing firsthand the environmental changes threatening her village.

Living by the coast, Kimcheng witnessed firsthand the changes in temperature, rising sea levels, more frequent storms, and droughts. "After dropping out of school," she said, "I joined climate action because I didn't want to see our natural resources depleted."

To conserve the environment and the natural resources in the coastal area, Kimcheng organised the Youth Volunteer Group for Community Development in 2014, bringing together about one hundred young people. Through art to promote awareness, the organization tackles illegal fishing, cleans beaches, plants mangroves, patrols with the Community Fishery, and more. Kimcheng shared,

My vision is for my neighbourhood to become an ecotourism site actively engaged in monitoring and conserving the ecosystem, protecting natural resources, planting mangroves, cleaning up the environment, and managing waste in the community and public places.

Her passion for social and volunteer work brought her to Mlup Promvihear Thor Center (MPC), an ActionAid Cambodia (AAC) local rights programme partner organisation in Koh Kong province.

In 2018, she became a member of the Gender Responsive Alternative to Climate Change (GRACC) initiative. She was equipped to make a major contribution to disaster risk reduction (DRR) in her community and beyond.

The establishment of a women champion network is one of the aspects of the project's implementation that aims to increase women's capacity to engage, mobilise, and carry out various activities in terms of awareness raising, campaigning, lobbying on the inclusion of gender-related issues of disasters and climate change in Commune Investment Plans and budgeting. Women from sub-national levels and women who volunteer in the community are chosen to be Women Champions.

Building on the groundwork established by GRACC, the Women-Led Alternatives to Climate Change in Cambodia (WLACC) initiative aims to empower local advocates for gender inclusion and alternative solutions by recruiting and educating more than 100 women champions in DRR/CC.



Kimcheng initially hesitated to become a Woman Champion (WC) on DRR and CC due to the lack of trust towards the project's sustainability and duration which may affect the longevity of the network post project implementation. Kimcheng, however, was inspired to try this role by her peers, and this is what has helped her become a Woman Champion.

While there were many NGOs in Koh Kong, not many of them maintained a long-term connection with the local community. She noticed that MPC and AAC actively engaged the people "I can discuss openly with the organisations about any problems I have about the network or the community. We support each other to overcome obstacles and come up with the best possible solutions". Because Kimcheng and other volunteers often go unappreciated and unrecognised for their voluntary efforts, she sees this partnership as very important for bridging and amplifying her voice with the local authorities. "One of the positive changes I have noticed is being recognized by the local authority. It's important that they are starting to listen to us more, allow us to speak up and share what's on our mind, even if their response doesn't happen overnight" she mentioned.



She was instrumental in securing funding for a much-needed health centre and improving community access to healthcare for women. Kimcheng and her team work closely with MPC to bring up the public's concerns on the development of infrastructure for women during several community meetings with the authorities. Because of inadequate road infrastructure, natural disasters like floods, and lack of health facilities, it was challenging for women to travel effectively and safely. "Having a local health centre is important so that women can receive proper health care consultation and services, especially for women who are pregnant" she said.

New Initiative, New Hope



Ms. Eam Sokha, a 41-year-old vegetable farmer, who is currently involved in the “Women-led Alternatives to Climate Change in Cambodia” project, has adopted an agroecological approach to farming in Tadeob Village, Andong Khmer Commune, Kampot Province, Cambodia. Ms. Eam Sokha grows crops including radish and pumpkins on her farm, frequently using chemical fertilizer. She stated, “As a result of this approach, I was only able to plant and harvest once per season in a year. In addition, I was not sure how to grow my vegetables properly, which led to pest infestation and poor harvest yields. As requested by the vendor, many of my vegetables were damaged and sold for a low price. Although I made 1,500,000 riels (US\$365) in profit from selling my vegetables in a single season, I had to pay 500,000 riels (US\$122) for pesticides and chemical fertilizer, so I could barely afford to sustain my family’s daily needs.”

Ms. Eam Sokha was having financial difficulties providing her nine-member family. She made the decision to give up farming in 2016 and move to Koh Kong province to work in factories. She revealed, “I was constantly sick/ill and my physical conditions deteriorated rapidly after working in this environment for five years. I had (how severe is it) skin issues and respiratory issues; so, in 2022, I left because I could not take it anymore.”

After that, Ms. Eam Sokha returned to her hometown with the intention of returning to farming. She wanted to acquire more farming methods and skills in order to advance her farming. As a result, she began involving with “Women-led Alternatives to Climate Change in Cambodia” project in 2022 with the Children and Women Development Center in Cambodia Organisation (CWDC).

Through CWDC, Ms. Eam Sokha participated in numerous trainings on sustainable farming, with a focus on nursery preparation, seed cultivation, biofertilizers, effective microorganisms, organic pesticides, and biological control. Sokha learned about the advantages of agroecological technique such as soil health, cost saving, utilizing existing resources, and the use of safe pesticides. Furthermore, Sokha explored types of vegetable that are resilient to climate change.

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Access to the health center and roads for women was made possible by the networks' tireless efforts and persistent commitment to collaborating with local authorities and communities.

Campaigning exposes Kimcheng’s resilience as she has to deal with many adversaries. When faced with a problem, Kimcheng first assesses the community’s context and documents the impact on them. She also considers policy and legislation. She then goes on to identify the pertinent parties involved in the issue and determines who is best suit for consultation and dialogue, including the authorities, local NGOs, and subject matter experts. She shares “I come across many individuals that abuse their power. They threaten me with bribes and with their power. I reject them and stand firm on what is right for my community”.

Advocating for Kimcheng entails moving slowly and steadily. She realized that her safety might be jeopardized and that, in order to get the best outcome in a particular situation, it also depended on her ability to communicate effectively. We must be flexible and vigilant in this field of work”. She shared “Doing advocacy can be exhausting because you will never know when there will be a response. You must try again and again until there’s one”. Due to this, there are times where she has lost motivation, and she coped by taking some time off with herself and connecting with people who shares the same mindset as her in order strategise and reprioritise her objectives.

“I have to represent the people’s voice as one of the committee members” in order to achieve a more equitable distribution of resources or opportunities within her community, according to Kimcheng. Her top priority is to advocate for the need in accordance with the law.



In April this year, she mobilises support from NGO called Our Citizen Organization to provide a 2-days training program for her people on: Principle of Democracy, Good Governance, Human Rights, Civic Engagement, and Climate Change adaptation. The purpose was to increase people’s understanding on the concepts and the importance of civic engagement. There were 30 participants and 90 percent of them were female.

Kimcheng has earned the trust from the community; thus, she is now a committee member of two community fisheries and the leader of Koh Kong’s Woman Champion. For her, being a leader is recognising the importance of being accountable and transparent as well as mutual respect towards one another. She brought up the point that “I walk the talk and follow through until I see the result. For instance, I advocated and mobilised funding for a bridge so that the community can use and access for fishing.” She also organised local residents and authorities to put in place key infrastructures required for disaster preparedness; such as the culvert to redirect floodwaters, the solar water pump installation, the water storage, and the canal rehabilitation in Chroy Svay commune.

Her effective advocacy and campaigning is further demonstrated by the way Trapang Pris land, a fish shelter, is managed as a community. This land was going to be given to private individuals, despite the fact that it greatly benefits the future of her people. “People are no longer able to freely access this pond because the land is being encroached by ten neighbourhood households. This pond provides vital food resource, clean water for the local residents and may also become a destination for ecotourism in the future, providing jobs and revenue for the locals”, she highlighted. After realising this problem, the committee of the Trapangpris community fish shelter came together and demanded for the land be returned to the community.

Specifically, Kimcheng said “Within our networks or partners, we cannot advocate alone. We need to figure out how to engage the public in the discussion, encourage them to participate, and connect with them. They have to be aware of the potential effects, particularly on the most vulnerable.”

The people who relied on this pond, frequently come to Kimcheng to voice their concerns, whether formally or informally, and she declared her continued ambition to listen to them to fight injustice when their voices are unheard.

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Kimcheng, worked alongside the committee members and leader to raise the concerns to the provincial official about the land tenure. The commune held three negotiation meetings on this matter and both parties came to an agreement on the proposed 60 percent and 40 percent rule, which the community received 60 percent, and the neighbourhood received 40 percent. This was a result of their hard work and determination. However, the committee is still awaiting an official document from the local authorities.

Kimcheng also shares her experiences with many female members of the network and the village. She inspires other women to speak publicly, be confident and engage in social justice causes like protecting the environment and natural resources. with regard to climate change, disaster management, and environmental preservation in particular, her leadership thus contributes to a positive change that makes the community more resilient.

Her efforts have received recognition on a national and international level. She was honoured with the Women of the Future Awards Southeast Asia in Singapore for her efforts in community spirit and public service, as well as local and provincial government recognition.



"My involvement in actions and partnership with MPC and AAC help me better understand how to voice my concerns and issues to the right people in order to find solutions."

Lastly, Kimcheng emphasizes the importance of youth, women and local authority involvement in advancing social and environmental welfare.

"I encourage youth to get involved in volunteer and advocacy work, particularly with regards to the preservation of natural resources. I think that youth have a great capacity and that they are the key to change. They can begin by speaking up about issues that are important to them, spreading important messages in the media, and setting the example 'being the role models' for others in their communities. Don't wait until you are older; get started today."



Photo Credit: Koh Kong Provincial Administration

"Women ought to feel free to voice their concerns, particularly to their partners or to someone who shares their view. We have to stand up for ourselves since suppressing our emotions would eventually cause emotional stress, and no one will know what we are going through. The concept of gender must be comprehended and applied in our families and society."

"My message to the authority and the people who work in the government sector is that we should move beyond simply promoting gender in our policies. We need to figure out how to provide women greater opportunity to engage, increase their employment, support them, and show them respect and value. I would like to request that the Ministry of Woman's Affairs and local authority collaborate with the Woman Champion Network on any project aimed at advancing women's roles so that they can be the role model for the community".

Ms. Eam Sokha stated,

"I found a new hope in agroecology. I became knowledgeable about natural farming techniques. Meeting the CWDDC and the other farmers is joyful for me. When we run into problems, we can talk because I am not alone in this journey."

Eam Sokha is currently growing a variety of vegetables, such as Chinese choy sum, lettuce, cabbage, radish, winter melon, pumpkin, eggplant, bitter melon, and corn. Because she employs natural substances, she spends less on inputs. In response to growing market demand, she has also expanded the amount of vegetables she produces. She shares that she currently makes a good living.

"My farming profit was approximately 1,000,00 riels (US\$243) in one season, after I spent on chemical fertiliser and pesticides." Sokha explained, "I now have the ability to produce year-round and make about 1,200,000 riels (US\$292) every month. This is primary because of crop varieties, farming techniques, and materials that are resilient to climate change. I can grow my vegetables even in the dry season. I save money since I don't need to use chemical pesticides and fertilizers. I use both natural fertilizer and organic pesticides. I use locally available natural resources around my house and learn how to make them. Compared to before, my vegetables stay fresher longer."



Since Ms. Eam Sokha grows her vegetables in accordance with her plan and market demand, the harvest no longer constitutes an excess supply. Her vegetables are also supplied to and bought by the Women Champion network and are sold with the help from her family members. Although her vegetables are more expensive compared to vegetables that used chemical fertilizers, they are sold out well because people recognize the natural, chemical-free component within her vegetables. Therefore, Sokha now has more options to sustain herself and her family. Her revenues have been put into a livestock business, which started with chickens and intends to grow to include cows. Beyond this, she uses the extra income and money she made to support her nieces' education.



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