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A woman wearing a white tank top and a patterned skirt is riding a green motorcycle. She is looking down at the handlebars. Two young children are standing on either side of the motorcycle. The child on the left is holding a long stick. The child on the right is wearing a yellow shirt and blue pants. The background shows a dirt road and some trees. The text "Rural youth - to stay or not to stay?" is overlaid on the bottom of the image.

Rural youth -  
to stay or not to stay?

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# Business development and youth in rural Cambodia

Educating and training rural youth in agri-business skills – a new programme in Cambodia, the Cambodian Center for Study and Development in Agriculture (CEDAC) has launched a programme aimed at developing business and entrepreneurial skills among young people in rural regions. The Young Agri-Entrepreneurs (YAE) training course has proved highly successful, and the centre now seeks to provide villages throughout Cambodia with YAE graduates.

To date, six in ten Cambodians are under the age of 25, eight in ten of whom live in rural areas. According to a recent UN report on the situation of the country's youth, the single most important challenge for them today is a lack of employment opportunities. The report states that the growth in the garment, tourism and construction industries – the three pillars of Cambodia's economy – cannot absorb the approximately 300,000 new labour market entrants each year. To make matters worse, with the global economic crisis, about 130 garment factories closed their doors in 2009 alone, leaving an estimated 60,000 garment workers temporarily or permanently without work. Many of these unemployed are considering going back to their home villages as the income situation in the rural areas is improving. A

regular average income in the garment sector is equivalent to two US dollars a day. During the rice harvest period people can earn up to three dollars a day. In response, the Cambodian government has launched a strategy to promote the agricultural sector as the additional engine of growth for the Cambodian economy, as outlined in its Rectangular Strategy under the National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) 2006–2010.

What is needed now, however, is an intensification of efforts to stimulate small and medium enterprise (SME) devel-

opment and agri-business investments, as well as a strengthening of the business-enabling environment. Additionally, Cambodia's young labour force generally suffers from poor levels of

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*A young agri-  
entrepreneur irrigating  
his organic vegetable  
fields near Kampong  
Chhnang.*

*Photo: Lars Düerkop*



education, partly still due to after-effects of the Khmer Rouge Regime, which systematically purged Cambodia's educated elite 30 years ago. For Cambodia, therefore, the challenge lies not only in enabling sufficient economic growth to absorb the growing labour force, but also in adequately preparing young people for the next generation of jobs, which may require a higher level of skills, alongside an improving and internationally competitive economy, not least in the agricultural sector.

So far, attempts by the Cambodian government to establish a National Youth Programme, have been rather poor. However, programmes to support young people in the economic process and to mainstream them in development efforts have become the focus of various international donors. Particular emphasis lies on youth's access to education and vocational training. According to the UN Cambodian Office, 14 major international and multilateral donors are providing around a quarter of a billion US dollars as of September 2006 for training and further education measures in the country. Several Cambodian NGOs are now being involved in developing appropriate educational and vocational training options for rural youths, too. One of these is the Young Agri-Entrepreneur Programme of the Cambodian Center for Study and Development in Agriculture (CEDAC).

## ■ Young agri-entrepreneurs

For over a decade, CEDAC assisted tens of thousands of small farmers in several provinces throughout Cambodia. Although young people could attend CEDAC's various training programmes, they did not offer them a professional perspective. So far, most of the youths leaving rural high schools have had hardly any access to additional education. To fill this gap, CEDAC has started with a new training

## The Young Agri-Entrepreneurs training course

The Young Agri-Entrepreneurs trainings course (YAE) lasts for one year and offers theoretical and practical learning. In the first part, the students learn together in lectures and workshops as well as by self-study. In the second part, the students start to implement their own pilot enterprise project in their village.

Rural youths between 16–30 years of age with at least nine years of schooling are eligible. Children of poor farmers are especially encouraged to attend the course. Applicants have to participate in a workshop and pass some tests before they are accepted.

The training and travel costs are covered by the programme and the students receive a monthly allowance of 20 US dollars. However, the trainees are required to reimburse 300 US dollars to CILD, CEDAC's Institute for Local Development, within three years of completing the course. CILD issues a Diploma in Agri-Enterprise Development and Management to each trainee who has successfully completed the course.

At the end of the course, trainees will be able to obtain loans of up to a thousand US dollars from CILD to start with their own project. The young agri-entrepreneurs have to repay these loans to CILD within three years.

In 2008, CILD trained an initial group of eleven people. In 2009, almost a hundred young people, 30 of whom were women, finished the course and started their own farming and business activities, mostly on their parents' farms.

course for young villagers (see box). The objective of the Young Agri-Entrepreneur Programme is to impart skills to young people so that they can take up a professional career in agriculture while playing a leading role in their communities.

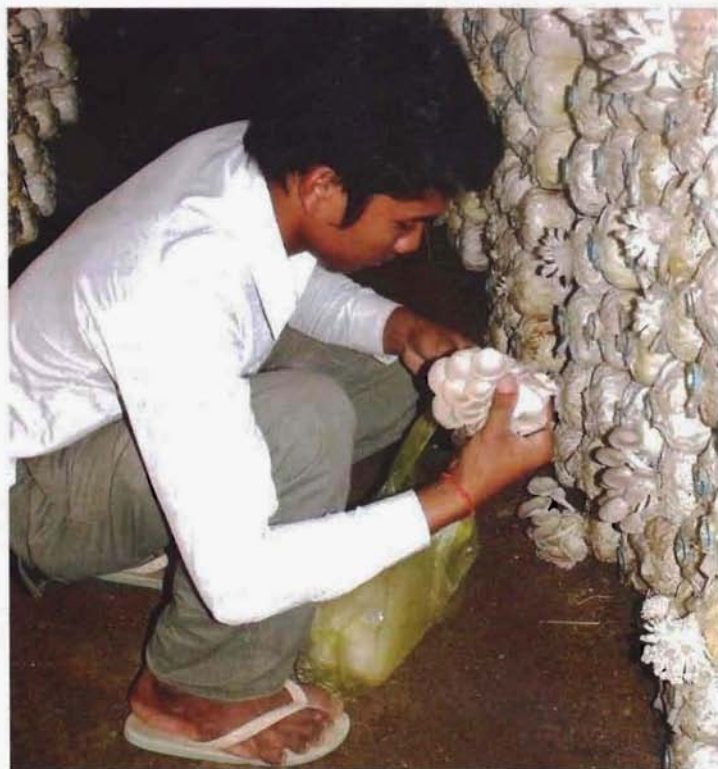
Prior to this new course, CEDAC, through its Institute for Local Development (CILD), had gained experiences in training young community leaders who were initially employed to support CEDAC's field programmes. Now the aim is to help young people to become successful agri-entrepreneurs. CEDAC also expects that the students will become resource persons for other farmers and that they may represent community/local leaders in their villages.

## ■ Industrious young people

The participants of the Young Agri-Entrepreneurs (YAE) course come from various backgrounds mostly from small family farms. Some are orphans or have lost one parent. A number of the participants have graduated from high school, but many of them dropped

out before graduation. Thus, the YAE course is an opportunity for them to set a new course in their life. Usually, the participants learn about the YAE course from CEDAC staff. In some cases, their parents have already benefited from a CEDAC programme.

In February 2010, graduates from the last YAE course attended an evaluation workshop. Most participants were proud of the knowledge they had acquired. They can now start with new projects and improvements either on their own or on their parents' farms. They highly appreciate being in touch with experienced farmers. Participant Dong Samneng says he learnt a lot from Ros Mao, a well-known farmer who manages a small but highly diversified farm in Takeo province. From him, he learnt about various ways to cultivate vegetables and how to raise fish. Most graduates were able to start an additional production and to generate income on their own. In the evaluation workshop, Suy Sim said that his mother was now no longer worried about him. Before the course, he had had no clear idea what to do with his life. Now he was confident that he could make a living on his own.



*Thor Phirom entered a joint venture with his brother. Four months after starting production, he harvested about 20 kg of mushrooms daily, resulting in a gross income of over 7 US dollars per day.*

his peers in the village have established their own livelihood activities.

For example, Srey Neang, a young female participant, said that she could no longer imagine working in the garment industry. She had heard that many workers were often sick and had considerable medication expenses. Chhem Sophat added that for her, there was no need to look for a job in the city. She was optimistic about making a living by raising chicken and planting vegetables.

In view of the success of the first two years of the young agri-entrepreneurs programme, CEDAC President Dr. Yang Saing Koma wishes to considerably expand the capacity of the training course. His target is that within the next ten years, all of the 14,000 villages in the country will have at least one or two graduates from YAE courses, to be young leaders encouraging other young villagers to become young entrepreneurs. Not only would this give many young people a perspective, but it would also lead to a significant increase in food production. So far, Cambodia has had to import food to a significant degree from neighbouring countries.

Photo: Winfried Schroeve

## ■ Snowball effect

Most of the graduates of the YAE courses admitted that before they had attended the course they were shy and were hardly able to talk during public meetings. This has changed considerably. Many of the young men and women are now active in various affairs in their communities. For exam-

ple, some are leading a savings group in their village.

Many of the graduates from the course have set a good example to their community. Dong Samneng states that several young farmers in his village have come to his farm to learn from his new activities. Thor Phirom adds that even though his family is poor, three of

## Zusammenfassung

Der Erfolg ländlicher Entwicklung hängt nicht nur von der verfügbaren Infrastruktur in den ländlichen Gebieten, vom Zugang zu Märkten, von Mobilität, der Verfügbarkeit von Finanzmitteln und Banksicherheiten ab, sondern auch von den Fähigkeiten der Menschen. Jungen Menschen fehlen aber nicht nur die Möglichkeiten zum Erwerb solcher Fähigkeiten, sie haben oft auch keine Vorstellung davon, was sie damit erreichen können. In Kambodscha wird dieses Dilemma noch dadurch verstärkt, dass das Regime der Roten Khmer (1975–1979) geschäftsorientiertes Handeln und sogar

Geld praktisch ausgelöscht hatte. Dies ist eine große Herausforderung für die Gesellschaft und für die internationale Entwicklungszusammenarbeit. Der Artikel umreißt das Programm einer lokalen Nichtregierungsorganisation zum Aufbau einer Agrarwirtschaft und zur Förderung von Unternehmertum bei kambodschanischen Jugendlichen im ländlichen Raum.

## Resumen

El éxito del desarrollo rural depende no sólo de la infraestructura disponible en las regiones rurales, del acceso al mercado, la movilidad, la disponibilidad de servicios financieros y garantías bancarias, sino

también de las destrezas de las personas. Sin embargo, los jóvenes suelen carecer tanto de oportunidades para adquirir estas destrezas como de una visión sobre lo que podrían lograr con éxito. En Camboya, este dilema se ha visto agravado por las secuelas del régimen del Khmer Rouge (1975–1979), que erradicó no sólo los enfoques de negocios sino incluso el dinero. Esto plantea un gigantesco desafío a la sociedad, al igual que a la ayuda internacional al desarrollo. El artículo examina brevemente un programa creado por una ONG local para desarrollar agro-negocios y fomentar las capacidades empresariales de las personas jóvenes de Camboya.