

Building Back Better: Organic Agriculture for Smallholder Farmers in Northern Cambodia: **A civil-society led project review**

REVIEW SUMMARY REPORT

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Executive Summary

The Cambodian Partnership for the Development of Human Resource in Rural Areas Association (CamboDHRRA), through the Civil Society Partnership for GAFSP (CSOs4GAFSP), led the review of the Building Back Better: Organic Agriculture for Smallholder Farmers project between 24 November and 11 December 2025, in the communes of Orborn Le, Sre Sangkum and Sre Huy.

The review finds that the project is making significant contributions to improving the livelihoods, resilience and wellbeing of smallholder farmers in Mondul Kiri Province, particularly among Indigenous Bunong communities and women. Participating farmers have benefited from improved access to training, technologies and collective marketing arrangements, which have contributed to increased incomes, reduced production costs and more stable market access. The establishment of local infrastructure, including a warehouse and processing facilities, has further strengthened value chains by reducing post-harvest losses and improving product quality. Agroecological and organic farming practices are improving soil health, supporting more stable yields over time, despite initial dips, and enhancing farmers' resilience to climate variability. The project's strong emphasis on gender equality emerges as a key success. Women constitute a majority of participants and have gained increased access to training, leadership roles and income-generating opportunities. This has translated into enhanced decision-making power at household and community levels, improved confidence and more equitable gender norms, including greater male involvement in care responsibilities. At the same time, improved incomes and nutrition programming have led to positive shifts in dietary diversity, health-seeking behaviours and overall family wellbeing.

Despite these positive outcomes, several important challenges persist. Farmers continue to face structural constraints. Market-related risks are evident in dependence on a limited number of buyers and the practice of side-selling to opportunistic traders offering immediate cash.

Additionally, ensuring compliance with organic standards remains demanding. Institutionally, while cooperatives have strengthened significantly, further investment is required to ensure their long-term financial sustainability, governance capacity and ability to operate independently beyond project support.

The review makes the following recommendations to further enhance the impact and sustainability of the project.

- Strengthen and deepen support to farmer organisations by investing in governance, leadership development, financial sustainability and farmer-led monitoring and feedback systems.
- Expand market diversification strategies, including value addition and direct market linkages to reduce dependence on single buyers and improve income stability for farmers.
- Strengthen branding and certification systems for organic rice to reinforce market positioning, justify premium pricing and counter competition from opportunistic traders.
- Scale up and systematise the adoption of agroecological practices across all participating farmers through enhanced training, peer learning and monitoring of outcomes.
- Mitigate risks of chemical contamination by promoting buffer zones, community awareness and regular soil and water testing.
- Develop and enforce clear internal organic standards and compliance systems within cooperatives, supported by peer monitoring and simple digital tools.
- Provide targeted support during the transition to organic farming to address initial productivity declines and stabilise yields.
- Advocate for longer-term, flexible funding cycles to support agroecological transitions and allow farmer organisations sufficient time to mature and become self-sustaining.

The Project Context

Cambodia's national development priorities, as articulated in its National Strategy for Food Security and Nutrition, and its Food Systems Roadmap for Sustainable Development 2030, emphasise sustainable food production, nutrition-sensitive value chains and the empowerment of women and vulnerable populations. These plans also promote climate-resilient agriculture and the reduction of reliance on chemical inputs while strengthening inclusive agricultural value chains.

In Koh Nhek District, Monduliri Province, one of Cambodia's most remote and socio-economically disadvantaged regions, smallholder farmers (including Bunong Indigenous communities) face multiple challenges, including limited market access, weak infrastructure, vulnerability to climate shocks and high levels of poverty and malnutrition. These challenges are exacerbated by increasing climate variability and pressures on land and natural resources.

Many households depend heavily on low-subsistence farming, with limited access to technical and extension support, improved seeds or reliable markets. Rice production is often based on traditional shifting cultivation or small rain-fed plots with minimal soil management. Farmers frequently face unstable yields because of poor soil fertility, erratic rainfall and pest outbreaks. Due to weak market linkages, farmers typically sell paddy rice individually to local traders immediately after harvest at low farm-gate prices. Without collective marketing or storage facilities, farmers have little bargaining power and often accept prices that barely cover production costs.

In addition, women, who contribute significantly to agricultural labour, often face barriers to accessing productive resources, training and market opportunities, exacerbating their persistent challenges related to food insecurity, climate change, limited market access and social inequality. Gender-based barriers also restrict women's participation and leadership in agriculture and decision-making.

Farmer packing rice in
Srae Sangkum commune.
PHOTO: CamboDHRRRA



About the Building Back Better Project

The Building Back Better: Organic Agriculture for Smallholder Farmers project is being implemented over a four-year period (January 2023 to September 2026) and focuses on strengthening climate resilience, food security, nutrition, gender equality and livelihoods of smallholder farmers, particularly Indigenous peoples, through the promotion of organic and agroecological farming practices, farmer organisation strengthening and inclusive value chain development.

The project currently works with six agricultural cooperatives, comprising 461 (71% women; 40% youth) farmer members, and aims to include six to eight cooperatives, eventually reaching 1,200 to 1,600 smallholder farmers, with a strong emphasis on women's participation. The project is expected to indirectly reach 6,000-8,000 household members and community participants through nutrition, gender and behaviour change activities.

The Global Agriculture and Food Security Program (GAFSP) is supporting the project through its producer organisation-led grant tract. The project's total budget is US\$ 2.89 million, of which US\$ 1.79 million is funded by GAFSP and US\$ 1.1 million is co-financed by the Cambodian Agriculture Cooperative Corporation (CACC) (generated through its own revenue and a business loan). The project is led by the CACC, as the producer organisation, with the United Nations World Food Program (WFP) serving as the supervising entity. WFP provides oversight, technical guidance, monitoring and evaluation and ensures compliance with GAFSP standards, while working closely with CACC and relevant government institutions.

The project emphasises sustainable agriculture approaches that reduce dependency on external inputs, enhance soil health and biodiversity, improve nutrition through diversified food production, and strengthen community resilience to climate shocks. These include capacity building and skills development for smallholder farmers and agricultural cooperatives on organic farming techniques, crop diversification, sustainable agriculture

practices and business management, as well as financial and digital literacy training to strengthen farmers' entrepreneurial capacities and support cooperative leadership. To improve market access and reduce post-harvest losses, the project supports the development of value chain infrastructure such as warehouses, drying, milling and storage facilities. The project also supports the transition to organic production and integration of farmers into value chains through facilitation of access to credit, support for organic certification and development of branding and marketing strategies for organic products from Mondulkiri. In addition, farmers receive support for organic certification and traceability systems to meet international standards and access premium markets. Gender dialogue clubs and empowerment activities are also conducted to promote women's leadership, shared household decision-making and gender equality.

The project promotes improved nutrition and gender equality through social and behaviour change communication activities, including nutrition education sessions, development of communication materials and gender dialogue clubs that encourage equitable household decision-making and healthier diets. Cross-cutting activities such as monitoring and evaluation, evidence generation and stakeholder workshops on public-private-producer partnerships (P4) are also implemented to strengthen institutional learning and sustainability.

Working through existing government structures, farmer organisations and multi-stakeholder platforms, the project complements and adds value to existing initiatives supported by GAFSP, international NGOs (such as Oxfam, SNV), national NGOs (such as Development Partnership in Action (DPA)), and government institutions at both local and national levels. At the local level, the project builds on interventions supported by GAFSP and international NGOs that focus on productivity, food security, nutrition, climate resilience and gender equality by providing capacity building, organisational strengthening and market-oriented support for smallholder producers and their agricultural cooperatives.

The Project Review Methodology

Cambodian Partnership for the Development of Human Resource in Rural Areas Association (CamboDHRRRA), through the Civil Society Partnership for GAFSP (CSOs4GAFSP), led the review of the Building Back Better: Organic Agriculture for Smallholder Farmers project between 24 November and 11 December 2025. The review was conducted in Orborn Le, Sre Sangkum and Sre Huy communes, using tools co-developed by the CSOs4GAFSP consortium. The review findings aim to support collective learning and contribute to evidence-based recommendations for GAFSP, as well as inform broader debates on financing a just and sustainable transition in food systems.

A purposive and stratified sample was drawn to ensure the participation of information-rich participants directly involved in or affected by the project, while minimising risks related to power dynamics, exclusion and safeguarding. Attention was given to Indigenous peoples, women, youth and other marginalised groups. The review administered three community scorecards (CSCs) through focus group discussions (FGDs) and eight key informant interviews, using a semi structured interview guide with

selected individuals from agricultural cooperatives, project implementers, local authorities and community-level actors based on their roles, experiences and relevance to the review objectives. Separate FGDs with men, women and mixed groups further enabled the review to capture diverse perspectives in safe and comfortable settings, particularly for women and potentially vulnerable groups. The sampling approach was designed to generate credible, context-specific insights, ensuring ethical participation, and support a balanced assessment of project implementation and outcomes.

The review went beyond approaches used in conventional external evaluations by emphasising participatory, qualitative and feminist research principles. It generated critical reflections on how GAFSP-supported interventions are contributing to climate resilience (including a transition towards agroecology), gender equality and women's empowerment, improved nutrition, participation and inclusion and synergies with other initiatives. Through photography, case studies and videography, the review documented project impacts, lessons learned and success stories.

Civil Society Partnership for GAFSP

The Civil Society Partnership for GAFSP (the Partnership) is a consortium of civil society organisations that has been contracted by GAFSP to assess a selection of their grant-funded projects. The consortium is led by *ActionAid International*, together with the *Eastern and Southern Africa Small-Scale Farmers Forum (ESAFF)*, *Asian Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Areas (AsiaDHRRRA)*, and *Coordination pour des Actions en Santé et en Développement d'Haïti (COSADH)*.

Project Impact

I. Farmers' Productivity and Livelihoods

Through the project, CACC provided practical support to producer organisations and agricultural cooperatives to strengthen organic rice production and market participation. By integrating production support with organisational strengthening and market-oriented interventions, the project is enabling participating agricultural cooperatives and their members to adopt appropriate technologies, improve farm management, and ensure organic product quality and consistency. As a result, smallholder producers have stabilised their organic yields, reduced costs and post-harvest losses, and improved product prices through more reliable markets, ultimately, enhancing their incomes and livelihoods.

A key difference between organic rice and conventional rice production is the approach to soil fertility and pest management. In conventional systems, farmers often rely on chemical fertilisers and pesticides purchased from local agro-input suppliers to increase yields. In contrast, the project promotes organic principles, providing farmers with hands-on training, coaching and technical support through demonstration plots and farmer field schools. CACC has trained farmers in land levelling techniques to improve water management in rice fields, selection of rice seed varieties, and production of organic inputs, such as compost and biochar (using rice husks and farm residues), as well as ecological methods, such as crop diversification and improving soil health, to manage pests and diseases, instead of using synthetic fertilisers. An estimated 30% of farmers have adopted cover cropping and crop rotation practices in the project sites to restore soil fertility and reduce erosion.

Organic farming practices, however, require more careful farm management and the strict adherence to standards by all the smallholder producers involved in the project. Farmers noted challenges in preventing the risk of contamination from chemical runoff in neighbouring conventional farms. Additionally, farmers found that organic rice initially, over the first two years, has lower productivity compared to conventional rice. During that time, farmers are adapting to new practices, soil fertility is recovering from the use of synthetic fertilisers and pesticides, and nutrients from organic fertilisers are breaking down to become more available. From the third year, however,

farmers indicated that their productivity gradually improved, as soil fertility, biodiversity and water retention is enhanced. In some cases, yields were found to approach conventional levels, particularly for more experienced farmers on well-managed farmers, while most remain slightly below conventional levels. Organic practices, from onset, reduced farmers' dependence on costly external inputs, lowering overall production costs, and improved long-term soil productivity and environmental sustainability.

In addition, the project supports improved post-harvest handling practices, such as proper drying, cleaning and storage of paddy rice, which helps maintain grain quality and reduce post-harvest losses, while increasing product value. These practices are particularly important for organic rice certification, where strict quality control standards must be met. Notably, the warehouse and processing plant, built by the CACC through the project, is located close to the community, allowing farmers to store and process paddy locally without incurring long-distance transportation costs, further enhancing accessibility and reducing post-harvest losses. The rice is collected, dried and stored at the warehouse and processing facility.

Working primarily through existing farmer groups, agricultural cooperatives and networks, the CACC is strengthening organisational governance, leadership, financial literacy, business planning and internal control systems for organic certification, including delivery of agricultural extension services to members. Smallholder producers and their organisations play active roles in delivering activities such as farmer-to-farmer learning, demonstration plots, peer mentoring and engagement with private sector and government actors. CSOs also provide technical backstopping, facilitate multi-stakeholder dialogue and coordinate across value chains, while ensuring the inclusion of women, youth and marginalised producers. At the same time, CACC itself is benefitting from institutional strengthening through partnerships forged with private sector actors, such as Amru Rice and Rice Tech, alongside support from NGOs including SNV. These collaborations are expanding CACC's capacity to serve its members more effectively and sustainably.

CACC assists agricultural cooperatives in bulk purchasing of inputs, organising collective harvesting schedules, consolidating members' paddy for larger market volumes,

and negotiating better contract terms with buyers. This institutional strengthening has enabled farmers to move from individual small-scale sales to a more organised value chain approach, allowing them to secure better prices and more reliable markets. At the same time, the project reinforces producer organisations and agricultural cooperatives, empowering them to collectively plan production, access inputs more efficiently, and comply with the quality and safety standards, consolidate their products, improve negotiation capacity to benefit from better market terms (price, logistics).

Through the project, members of participating agricultural cooperatives now collectively supply organic rice to buyers, such as CACC and Amru Rice Cambodia (a leading rice exporter), under contract farming arrangements. Through this arrangement, participating farmers and cooperatives receive a guaranteed market for their organic rice, provided they comply with organic production and quality standards. Farmers also benefit from technical guidance provided by the buyers and the project to ensure compliance with organic certification requirements. The contracts typically offer pre-agreed purchase prices that are higher and more stable than those offered by local middlemen, helping farmers better cover production costs and reduce price uncertainty.

While farmers, who previously sold small amounts of paddy individually to local traders immediately after harvest, had limited bargaining power and often received lower prices, review findings show that farmers participating in the project's contract arrangement now sell larger volumes of rice through their cooperatives. Because rice is collectively marketed through the cooperative, farmers gain stronger bargaining power and better logistical support. Despite the advantages of more stable, collective sales, however, some farmers are persuaded into side marketing by aggressive buyers who come into the fields to purchase rice directly from the farmers, offering immediate payment. While this is a breach of contract that can potentially affect the market relationship with the buyer, it highlights the clear demand for organic rice and potential to scale up production by project-supported and other cooperatives. To justify higher prices, and address the challenge of aggressive pricing from external traders, the cooperatives should look to strengthen the branding and marketing strategy of the Bunong Rice brand, now recognised by the Cambodian Ministry of Commerce, that highlights the rice as a new rice brand that is indigenous as well as 100% organic, safe and traceable.

By strengthening farmer organisations and promoting collective marketing and inclusive business partnerships, smallholder producers have gained stronger bargaining power, reduced their transaction costs and created more stable income streams. The resulting income gains extend beyond individual farmers, stimulating local economies. For example, local transporters and small service providers benefit during the harvesting and marketing periods. The establishment of the CACC local warehouse and processing plant has also created local employment opportunities for residents engaged in rice drying, cleaning, grading and transportation.

To further improve income stability of its members, CACC could integrate support for rice value addition (such as organic rice flour or snacks), post-harvest handling and processing, and market diversification, reducing dependency on single buyers or commodities. Strengthening direct market linkages with retailers, restaurants and online platforms could also reduce dependence on intermediaries.

Key lessons

- Integrated support that combines technical training, cooperative development and market access is essential for achieving sustained improvements in farmer livelihoods.
- Organic and agroecological farming transitions typically involve short-term yield declines but result in lower input costs, improved soil health and more stable productivity over time.
- Collective marketing through cooperatives strengthens farmers' bargaining power and enables access to more stable and higher-value markets.
- Persistent side-selling highlights that contract farming should be complemented by financial solutions that address farmers' immediate cash needs.

II. Climate Resilience, Adaptation and Agroecology¹

The project has assisted farmers and their communities in adapting to climate change by strengthening their capacity to manage climate risks while building more resilient and sustainable farming systems, particularly by avoiding synthetic fertilisers and pesticides as required by organic certification. It further supports the adoption of agroecological approaches that enhance ecosystem functions, diversification of agricultural production, reduce dependency on external inputs and improve farmers' ability to cope with climate variability such as droughts, floods and irregular rainfall. Through practical training, field demonstrations and farmer-to-farmer learning, small-scale producers are supported to adopt practices such as soil organic matter improvement, mulching, crop diversification, intercropping, integrated pest management, water conservation and the use of open-pollinated and locally adapted seeds.

These practices are stabilising yields, despite initial dips during the transition, improving soil moisture retention and reducing vulnerability to climate-related shocks. For example, a participating farmer, Mrs. Heu Sokleap who adopted agroecological practices (such as crop diversification, organic composting and integrated pest management), reported more stable yields, even during periods of irregular rainfall, as diversified crops and improved soil fertility have helped her maintain production.

At the community level, the project is promoting diversified and integrated farming systems that combine crops, livestock, and, where appropriate, agroforestry, increasing both ecological resilience and livelihood options. For example, farmers plant crops, such as rice and vegetables, while raising chicken and planting fruit trees. Crop residues feed the livestock, and livestock manure is recycled as organic fertiliser for the crops, improving soil fertility and reducing the need for chemical inputs.

Training activities, farmer-to-farmer learning and technical support also support co-creation and sharing of knowledge, as farmers combine local knowledge with improved agricultural practices introduced through the project. Furthermore, the strengthening of producer groups and cooperatives contributes to social values and responsible governance, enabling farmers to work collectively, improve decision-making and strengthen their participation in local value chains.

Overall, agroecological practices appear to be increasingly adopted among participating farmers, further augmenting the benefits of those required by organic certification, particularly for those who received training and technical support through the project. However, adoption is not yet widespread across all farmers, and many practices remain at demonstration or early stage of implementation, requiring more systematic promotion.

Key lessons

- Agroecological practices such as soil improvement, diversification and water management increase farmers' resilience to climate variability and shocks.
- Farmer-to-farmer learning and the integration of local and technical knowledge enhance the adoption and sustainability of agroecological practices
- Diversified and integrated farming systems reduce risk while improving both ecological sustainability and livelihood opportunities.
- Wider and more systematic scaling efforts are needed to move agroecological practices beyond early adoption stages across all farmers.

1. The review defines agroecology in terms of the 13 principles developed by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security.

III. Gender Responsiveness and Women's Empowerment

The project places women at the centre of its design and implementation, with gender mainstreaming emerging as one of its strongest components and generating tangible economic, social and household-level benefits. By integrating gender empowerment beyond mere participation – by supporting women in leadership, knowledge transferring, decision-making and

entrepreneurship roles – the project encourages inclusive and transformative outcomes at the community level.

Deliberate efforts were made to promote women's participation in trainings, group activities and community decision-making processes, with community structures, such as the commune women and children committees (CWCC)² and village health support groups (VHSG), playing a key role in mobilising women and ensuring that gender-sensitive approaches are applied at the local level.

Women leading the way at cooperatives and in their communities

Mrs. Heu Sokleap, 45, a wife and mother of six, manages a bustling household and a thriving community role. Sokleap and her family grow organic rice and manage a highly productive vegetable home garden and livestock area with two small fishponds, 20 pigs and 100 chickens. This integrated farming approach reduces her daily expenses and provides a surplus for her to sell at the market.

At the cooperative, she serves as the Chair of the Board of Committees for the Aphivat Meanchey Agricultural Cooperative, leading 114 members (including 86 women). Since the cooperative joined the project in 2023, Sokleap's technical and leadership expertise has grown substantially. She has been trained in leadership and technical farming, including field coaching, and participated in study visits to learn about group and cooperative management, leadership and business development. She has improved her skills in accounting, bookkeeping, contract farming, market negotiation and gender inclusive leadership.

Her cooperative's members now produce high-quality organic rice that fetches premium prices and household production costs have plummeted. Family incomes are gradually increasing, and there is a visible shift in family wellness. The agricultural cooperative now operates its own warehouse and has a dedicated truck for transporting rice to buyers, ensuring independence from predatory middlemen. Sokleap's family, and cooperative members', now consume their own safe, organic rice and a variety of home-grown food crops, reducing the intake of high-sugar snacks. Their hard work culminated in the official recognition of the Bunong Rice brand by the Cambodian Ministry of Commerce.

Watch this video testimony to learn more.

Mrs. Heu Sokleap tending to her pigs as part of the project's integrated home farming activities. PHOTO: CamboDHRR.



2. Commune committees for women and children (CWCC) are sub-national mechanisms established under the National Committee for Women and Children in Cambodia to promote the rights, welfare and development of women and children at the local level. CWCCs operate within commune administrations and work closely with commune councils, local authorities, health workers, schools and community-based groups to address issues related to gender equality, child protection, nutrition, education and social welfare.

Women constitute a significant proportion of farmers participating in the contract farming arrangement through the agricultural cooperatives involved in the project. Among the six agricultural cooperatives currently engaged in Koh Nhek District, approximately 71% are women. Women farmers participate in multiple stages of the value chain, including organic rice production, post-harvest handling, cooperative management and collective marketing through the contract arrangements with buyers such as CACC and Amru Rice. Their strong representation reflects the project's focus on gender inclusion and on strengthening women's role in agricultural production, income generation and household nutrition.

Socially, the project actively promotes women's participation and leadership in farmer groups, producer networks and community committees, increasing their visibility and voice in collective decision-making processes. The review noted positive changes in women's confidence, leadership, negotiation skills and ability to speak out in community forums. This has strengthened women's roles as community leaders and role models, contributing to positive shifts in gender norms and more inclusive local institutions.

At the community level, CWCC members are playing important coordinating and facilitation roles. Women are supported to take active roles as facilitators in social and behaviour change campaigns and food-for-family groups, creating platforms for peer learning on nutrition, health and gender equality. They mobilise women, youth and families to participate in development activities, including nutrition awareness sessions, campaigns and community health initiatives. CWCC members often collaborate with VHSGs, agricultural cooperatives and local CSOs to disseminate information on maternal and child health, promote improved childcare and feeding practices, and support gender-responsive community development.

Economically, women smallholder producers were trained in agroecological production practices and value-addition opportunities that have increased their productivity, diversified income sources and improved control over earnings. Through collective sales, savings mechanisms and strengthened market linkages, women are better able to engage in income-generating activities, reduce production risks and enhance their economic resilience. For example, women farmers who adopted organic vegetable and crop diversification practices were able to harvest multiple crops throughout the year instead of relying on a single seasonal crop. During periods when rice production was affected

by irregular rainfall, these farmers continued to generate income from vegetables, small livestock, or processed products sold through agricultural cooperative marketing channels. This diversification, combined with savings groups and collective marketing, enabled women to maintain household income, cover essential expenses and reduce their vulnerability to climate and market shocks.

At the household level, increased and more reliable incomes enabled women to contribute more directly to household food security, education and health expenditures, strengthening their control over income and position in household decision-making. The introduction of improved farming practices, labour-saving approaches, shared household responsibilities between husbands and wives, and collective action have helped reduce women's unpaid care and agricultural workload. In parallel, gender-transformative activities encouraged more equitable sharing of responsibilities and joint decision-making between women and men, contributing to improved household well-being and gender equality.

For example, through the Engaged Father Movement, the programme has encouraged a shift in household roles, presenting meal preparation and childcare as shared responsibilities, and educating men on cooking, caring for and feeding children. This has led to a visible increase in men participating in the kitchen. It is now common to see men returning from the fields with fresh vegetables to help their wives prepare meals and feed their children.

Key lessons

- Gender-transformative approaches that prioritise women's leadership and decision-making power drive meaningful and lasting social change.
- Women's increased access to income and diversified livelihoods strengthens household wellbeing and enhances their economic autonomy.
- Local community structures play a critical role in mobilising women and embedding gender-responsive practices at the local level.
- Engaging men in household and care responsibilities is essential for sustaining progress toward gender equality.

IV. Nutrition

The project has helped improve food security and nutrition at the household level by promoting diversified, climate-resilient farming systems and encouraging healthy meal preparation through social behaviour change activities that aim to influence knowledge, attitudes and behaviours related to nutrition, health and gender equality. Combining both knowledge of farm and household management has enabled families to balance food consumption with income generation more effectively, reducing vulnerability to shocks such as climate variability and market fluctuations.

At the community level, the project strengthens farmer networks and promotes the inclusive participation of women and youth as members of agricultural cooperatives and community-based groups. Through the Food for Family programme, trained community actors (such as VHSGs) use targeted communication materials tailored to the local context to facilitate community sessions using participatory methods such as group discussions, storytelling, cooking demonstrations, role plays and community debates. These sessions focus on healthy diets and dietary diversity, maternal and child nutrition, hygiene practices, prevention and management of childhood illnesses, and shared household decision-making. Community sessions target pregnant and lactating women covering topics on sanitation and food groups through interactive learning using games to help identify healthy vegetables and understand balanced mixing for recipes.

Women and youth actively contribute as facilitators in VHSGs and food-for-family groups, which provide a practical platform for households, particularly women, to apply nutrition knowledge and improve household food consumption practices. These groups bring families together to learn about producing, preparing and consuming diverse and nutritious foods using locally available resources. Through regular meetings, participants share experiences, practice improved cooking and food preparation techniques, and explore ways to diversify household diets through home gardening, small livestock production and improved food storage and utilisation.

The Family Food Game is also used to challenge community members' perceptions and practices and promote improved nutrition knowledge and attitudes. Each session features eight engaging mini-challenges built around locally available fruits and vegetables. These challenges range from true or false quizzes to hands-on competitions like ingredient preparation races. By combining fun, teamwork and practical demonstrations, the game reinforces key nutrition messages while encouraging active participation in ways that are memorable, inclusive and culturally relevant.

Most families now understand the benefits of a healthy daily food diet, with parents and guardians reporting that they now avoid giving their children sweetened snacks and drinks and they have increased the variety of vegetables and fruits in their diet.



A mother and her daughter, holding materials from the family food game in Srae Sangkum commune.
PHOTO: CamboDHRRA

Women leading the way at cooperatives and in their communities

Mrs. Chenda, a 41-year-old champion for change in the Sre Huy commune, said she has applied every lesson to her own home, successfully reducing her household's consumption of highly processed snacks high in calories, fats, sugar and salt, but low in essential nutrients like fibre, vitamins and minerals. Her family takes enormous pride in her role as a community mentor and trainer.



"The project helps us address our challenges and leads us to a better situation...Most importantly, it is changing our daily lives, we are eating more fruits and vegetables, and men are now actively involved in cooking and feeding our children. We haven't just seen our incomes rise; we've gained better health and a deeper sense of happiness within our families. I am so proud to share what I've learned with my neighbours."

Watch this video testimony to learn more.

Mrs. Chenda cooking lunch for her family. PHOTO: CamboDHRRA

Higher and more predictable incomes have also assisted households to invest in better diets, education, healthcare and housing, thereby raising overall living standards. Members are selling organic rice to increase income, which is then reinvested into safe, nutritious food. In addition, agricultural cooperative members who produce organic rice retain part of their harvest in storage for their own annual household consumption.

Remarkably, the intervention is also sparking significant behaviour changes, particularly among the Bunong indigenous people. Previously, traditional practices, such as home births without medical assistance, avoiding vaccinations and using natural unsafe water, were common. Families report improvements in their health-seeking behaviours, with many now visiting health centres for medicine and vaccinations.

Key lessons

- Integrating agricultural production with nutrition education and behaviour change interventions leads to improved dietary diversity and health outcomes.
- Participatory and practical learning approaches, such as cooking demonstrations and interactive tools, are effective in changing nutrition behaviours.
- Community-based facilitators are key to sustaining nutrition improvements and scaling behaviour change across households.

V. Community Participation and Cohesion

The project is enhancing relevance, ownership and resilience in fragile and climate-vulnerable contexts through participatory and adaptive implementation where feedback from farmers and civil society continuously refine activities. These insights reinforce the importance of integrated, farmer-led and context-responsive approaches for achieving sustainable food systems and rural development outcomes.

Small-scale food producers, producer organisations and CSOs are engaged as core partners rather than passive beneficiaries, ensuring strong local ownership and long-term sustainability. From the planning stage, small-scale producers, agricultural cooperatives, women and youth groups and CSOs were involved through consultations, needs assessments and participatory discussions that shaped project priorities, activities and implementation approaches based on local realities. Farmer organisations and CSOs contributed their knowledge of community contexts, production systems and market challenges, ensuring that the project design responds to genuine needs and opportunities.

The project promotes inclusive participation and collective decision-making among small-scale producers and local stakeholders. CACC organises regular stakeholder consultation meetings to share progress updates, raise concerns and challenges and discuss solutions related to project implementation, contract farming and the promotion of food security and nutrition. Farmer leaders and CSO representatives are involved in tracking progress, assessing results and identifying challenges and lessons learned. Farmers' groups contribute data, feedback and reflections through regular review meetings, field monitoring and community-level assessments. Project management could, however, further deepen accountability, continuous learning and improvement by strengthening farmer-led monitoring and feedback loops.

The project is also strengthening community cohesion by encouraging collective action through farmer groups, joint learning activities and inclusive market engagement. Women and youth are actively engaged in leadership, training, knowledge transferring and decision-making processes. Strengthened farmer networks, and the inclusive participation of women and youth, is fostering social

cohesion, local leadership and collective problem-solving. However, further investment in leadership development, governance and financial sustainability of farmer organisations, particularly women and youth-led groups, would ensure groups remain representative and resilient, enhancing long-term impact.

The project also leverages partnerships with government agencies, including village, commune and district authorities, as well as Provincial Departments of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (PDAFF), and health, alongside research institutions and development partners to scale-up approaches (such as agroecology, food security and nutrition, digital agriculture and inclusive value chain development). By connecting farmer groups and CSOs to government extension services, policy dialogue platforms and national strategies, the project has enhanced coherence between grassroots initiatives and policy frameworks. For example, farmer groups supported by the project regularly interact with commune and district authorities as well as the PDAFF during training sessions, field demonstrations and technical meetings.

Government extension officers participate directly in capacity-building events on agroecology, food security and nutrition, and digital agriculture. This approach ensures that government staff are familiar with the practices being promoted and can support farmers beyond the duration of the project. In some cases, project demonstration plots and farmer field schools serve as practical learning sites where extension officers, researchers and farmers jointly observe results and discuss improvements. This creates a two-way learning process in which farmers' experiences and feedback help refine extension advice and the scaling of proven practices.

For example, during multi-stakeholder meetings and commune-level consultations farmers spoke about delayed or unfavorable payments for their paddy rice, while companies expressed their concern about the quality standards of the rice supplied. In response, the PDAFF, together with district and commune authorities, facilitated dialogue between both parties to better understand the challenges faced by each side. Through this facilitated discussion, farmers and companies were able to reach a common understanding and identify practical solutions that addressed quality while ensuring fair and timely payment arrangements, resulting in a more mutually beneficial outcome.



A documentary about the Building Back Better project, produced by CamboDHRRA, through the Civil Society Partnership for GAFSP. [Watch it here.](#)

Key lessons

- Strong producer organisations enable collective action, improve governance and enhance farmers' ability to engage effectively in value chains.
- Multi-stakeholder collaboration enhances problem-solving, aligns local initiatives with policy frameworks, and supports scaling of successful practices.
- Strengthening farmer-led monitoring and feedback systems is necessary to deepen accountability, learning and adaptive management.



Conclusions and Recommendations

The review gathered evidence of how the project is strengthening resilient livelihoods among participating smallholder farmers by increasing their productivity and facilitating their participation in the organic rice value chain, as well as coordinating organic certifications and better marketing arrangements. The integration of nutrition programmes has improved family diets, making them healthier, especially for women and children under two years old. Higher and more predictable incomes have also assisted households to invest in better diets, education, healthcare and housing, thereby raising overall living standards. The project demonstrates the importance of integrated, farmer-led and context-responsive approaches for achieving sustainable food systems and rural development outcomes.

To strengthen the project's effectiveness in addressing crosscutting and core objectives, the review makes the following recommendations:

- *Continue, but deepen, support for farmers' organisations.* Project management should further deepen participatory and adaptive management approaches by strengthening farmer-led monitoring, feedback loops and learning processes. Additionally, greater investment in leadership development, governance and financial sustainability of farmer organisations, particularly women and youth-led groups, would further enhance groups' representativeness and resilience and enhance their long-term impact.
- *Reduce dependencies.* Project management should expand support for value addition, post-harvest handling and market diversification to reduce dependency on single buyers or commodities and to improve income stability. Strengthening direct market linkages with retailers, restaurants and online platforms will also reduce dependence on intermediaries, while exploring value-added products such as organic rice flour or snacks can diversify income streams.
- *Strengthen branding.* To address the challenge of aggressive pricing from external traders, the cooperatives should be supported to focus on developing a strong premium branding and certification strategy that highlights the rice as 100% organic, safe and traceable, which can justify higher prices.
- *Further integrate agroecology.* To further strengthen the integration of agroecology, the project could promote more comprehensive and widespread adoption of nutrient recycling systems, expand biodiversity-based farming practices such as agroforestry, and encourage stronger reduction of external agricultural inputs through integrated pest management and locally produced bio-inputs. In addition, supporting farmer-led innovation, participatory learning and better monitoring of agroecological outcomes would help scale up these practices and improve the long-term sustainability and resilience of farming systems supported by the project.
- *Mitigate risk of chemical runoff.* To mitigate the risk of contamination from chemical runoff in neighbouring conventional farms, buffer zones with non-edible plants or grass strips can be established, complemented by community awareness campaigns to encourage responsible chemical use and regular soil and water testing to monitor and address contamination.
- *Develop an organic standards handbook.* To ensure all members strictly adhere to organic principles, the cooperative can develop a clear internal organic standards handbook, implement peer-to-peer field inspections and mentoring, and use simple digital monitoring tools or checklists to track inputs and practices, thereby maintaining technical rigor and compliance.
- *Support transitional needs.* To address lower initial productivity in organic rice, CACC should support members to more systematically adopt organic soil fertility enhancement practices, such as composting, green manures and biofertilisers, alongside training on organic pest and disease management to optimise yields. Gradual transition plots blending conventional and organic methods may also help stabilise production while improving soil health.
- *Prioritise longer-term funding.* GAFSP should continue to prioritise flexible and longer-term funding windows for farmer organisations that allow for the benefits of agroecological transitions to be realised (ie. improved soil health, increased yields) and institutional strengthening of farmer organisations to mature over time, as these changes require sustained engagement beyond short 3-4 year project cycles.

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COVER PHOTO: A community nutrition training in Sre Huy commune. (CamboDRRA)

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