

**PROJECTS:** ASEM/2003/007, CIM/199/048, CIM2003/030, ASEM/2000/109, ASEM/2003/012  
**DESCRIPTION:** Cambodia's reliance on rice is being eased as new, more productive varieties are grown, freeing up land for alternative crops that allow farmers and villages to establish commercial enterprises  
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**PARTNER COUNTRY:** Cambodia



# Training for a competitive edge

BRAD COLLIS

BY WARREN PAGE

**D**uring the turmoil of the 1970s Cambodian scientific capacity was almost destroyed, leaving a void that has not properly been filled. A shortage of funds made it harder to re-establish an effective agricultural research sector.

In the late 1990s, when funding from foreign donors found its way into the Cambodian agricultural science sector, it was assumed that scientists were familiar with the competitive process of applying for grants. But for researchers like Meng Sokhon, applying for funding was a new and difficult experience. There was no shortage of ideas and research needs, but most scientists lacked experience in negotiating funding processes. This also presented a problem for donors trying to manage competitive grants in an environment that was unfamiliar with such systems.

Since then, Meng Sokhon and 41 colleagues have been the beneficiary of a unique training scheme that is lifting scientific capacity by helping local researchers access international funds.

To help local agricultural scientists develop the skills needed to secure funding and transform ideas into projects, AusAID and ACIAR launched the Cambodian

Agricultural Research Fund (CARF) in 2002. The fund was established as a component of the AusAID-funded Cambodian Agricultural Research and Development Institute (CARDI) Assistance Project.

Open to government, university, college and NGO organisations based in Cambodia, CARF introduced a competitive research-funding environment and the training and support to go with it. Small research grants of up to US\$30,000 were made available.

The difference between this and other funding schemes was that CARF was purposely designed to

Researchers and staff work on crop trials at CARDI.

## Developing new skills

Scientists from the following organisations have received funding:

Cambodian Agricultural Research and Development Institute  
 University of Tropical Agriculture  
 Prek Leap School of Agriculture  
 Royal University of Agriculture  
 Maharishi Vedic University  
 Kampong Cham National School of Agriculture

Department of Animal Health and Production  
 Department of Agronomy and Agricultural Land Improvement, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry  
 World Vision Cambodia  
 University of Tropical Agriculture Foundation  
 Union Aid Abroad – Australian People for Health, Education and Development Abroad

develop scientists' skills in negotiating the competitive research environment required by donors.

Initial training focused on writing scientific papers in English, followed by a second course on writing research proposals. Five single-day courses and one-on-one training introduced these concepts to more than 100 Cambodian scientists from a range of institutions, including CARDI, the Kampong Cham National School of Agriculture, the Royal College of Agriculture and the Prek Leap School of Agriculture.

Meng Sokhon from the Prek Leap School was one of the 23 applicants for funding in the first round, in July 2002. His application, along with the others, was judged by a panel of Cambodian and international agricultural development experts.

Proposals that addressed existing problems by emphasising agricultural diversification and involving multidisciplinary teams, particularly with socioeconomic, extension or farmer linkages, were ranked highest.

Meng Sokhon was successful with his proposal on the 'Improvement of maize management and production through farmer participatory research'. This focused on improving dry-season maize production by applying cultivation techniques that were new to farmers.

Traditional techniques did not produce sufficient yields to provide income, except in the best of seasons. Farmers were involved in the project, selecting, evaluating and adapting improved maize varieties and applying new cultivation techniques.

Since that first round of grants, 42 projects have been funded. Fourteen have involved CARDI scientists, with a further 19 projects shared across four educational institutions. Two government departments and four NGOs have shared nine projects between them.

Areas of research have included cattle and pig production, Newcastle disease, aquaculture and a range of crops and vegetables. Watermelon, banana, cassava, tomato, mango, dragon fruit, maize, soy and mungbean have all been subjects of funded projects, along with biological controls for diamondback moths and coconut beetles.

ACIAR will fund a further two rounds of applicants and projects, late in 2006 and again in 2007, along with funding for the completion of existing projects. ◀

Chilli has become a significant crop for many Cambodian farmers, who have diversified away from rice.



## CAMBODIA BUILDS ON DIVERSIFIED EXPERTISE

ACIAR's work is supporting Cambodia's efforts to reduce its dependence on rice

BY WARREN PAGE

After decades of upheaval, Cambodia is today building a new economy strengthened by an increasingly more diverse agriculture. The change is significant in a country where rice has been the centre of rural culture, not just its staple crop. Rice-banana cakes have been served at wedding ceremonies and special events for centuries. It was this relationship with rice that led to 90% of agricultural land (more than two million hectares) being devoted to the crop.

The almost total reliance on rice is being eased as new, more productive varieties are grown, freeing up land for alternative crops that allow farmers and villages to establish commercial enterprises.

In the late 1960s Cambodia's rice production was comparatively advanced and it was the first country in the region to achieve an export surplus. However, the civil war and complete economic collapse in the 1970s had a devastating impact on agricultural infrastructure and scientific

expertise, cementing the dependence on rice even further. Impacts from that period are still being felt, with Cambodia the least developed country in East Asia. By contrast, Thailand, Cambodia's neighbour, has seen rapid economic growth in the past decade. Cambodia's per capita GDP is estimated at US\$300 a year, one-tenth of Thailand's.

Poverty is still endemic, especially in rural areas where 40% of people live below the poverty line, compared with 13% of urban residents.

Change, however, is happening. Cambodia has attained World Trade Organization (WTO) accession and it is reforming its economy. A key component of this change is diversifying agriculture to tap into non-rice markets, and this is where ACIAR-supported research has been playing an important role. ACIAR's work in Cambodia focuses on diversifying agriculture and improving rice yields. This includes boosting Cambodia's agricultural research capabilities. ◀