

TOWARDS MORE INCLUSIVE COMMUNITIES:

Strategies for Promoting Social Inclusion and Equity in Rural Development

By: Ngo Sothath and Khon Leakhena

October 2024 | Phnom Penh

INTRODUCTION

The peace dividend has allowed Cambodia to develop its economy continuously over the past few decades, and rural areas have benefited accordingly from this development process. Through the cooperation with SAAMBAT Project (funded by IFAD, European Investment Bank, and the European Union) and Ponlok Chomnes Programme (funded by DFAT, implemented by The Asia Foundation), the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS) undertakes a study to review the experience of rural village development in eight villages across eight provinces (two villages of indigenous peoples in Mondul Kiri and Ratanak Kiri) to draw relevant lessons for further reflection and discussion.

This policy brief particularly highlights key issues and recommendations that seek to improve the inclusiveness of the future rural development in Cambodia.

MAIN FINDINGS

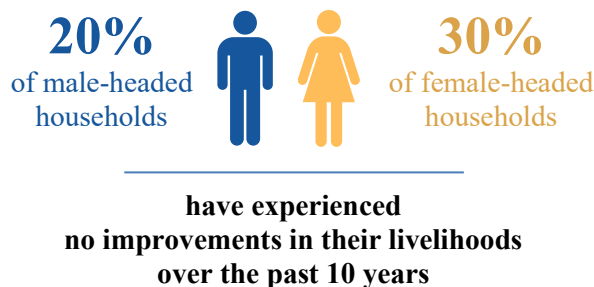
Rural infrastructure: The findings reveal that rural transformation has been significant over the past 20 to 30 years, especially in terms of physical infrastructure development such as roads, irrigation, electricity, schools, health facilities, water supply, and sanitation, all of which have notably improved living conditions in rural areas. However, these infrastructures often fail to accommodate accessibility needs, particularly for persons with disability and the elderly. Public facilities, such as schools, pagodas, and Salabons, generally lack ramps, designated parking spaces, accessible toilet, and handrails, which are essential for supporting the mobility of persons with disability, pregnant women, and the elderly.



KEY MESSAGES

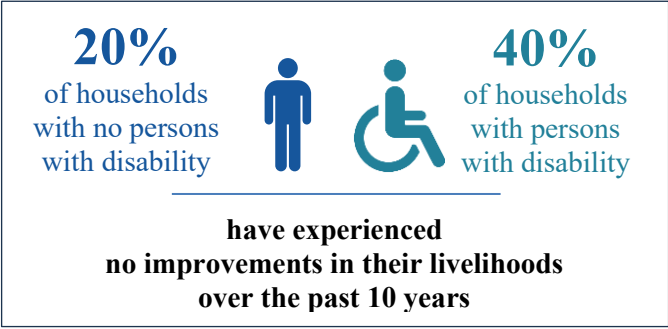
- (1) Rural livelihoods have significantly improved, but the progress is unevenly shared with women and persons with disability.
- (2) Rural infrastructure needs improvement of accessibility for diverse social groups.
- (3) Friendly and respectful social environment is a prerequisite for diverse participation in village meetings, community projects, and social gatherings.
- (4) Equitable opportunities in education, skills development, and employment are crucial for equitable and sustainable livelihoods.

Local livelihoods: The livelihood development has significantly improved, but varies among villages and the benefits of development are not evenly distributed. The female headed households and households with persons with disability do not experience a similar pace of development. Their livelihoods lag behind others. Around 30% of the female headed households (versus 20% of their man counterparts) report no livelihood improvement over the past 10 years. The household with persons with disability face a slower progress. Up to 40% of them (versus 20% of their counterparts without disability) have experienced no livelihood improvement over the past 10 years.

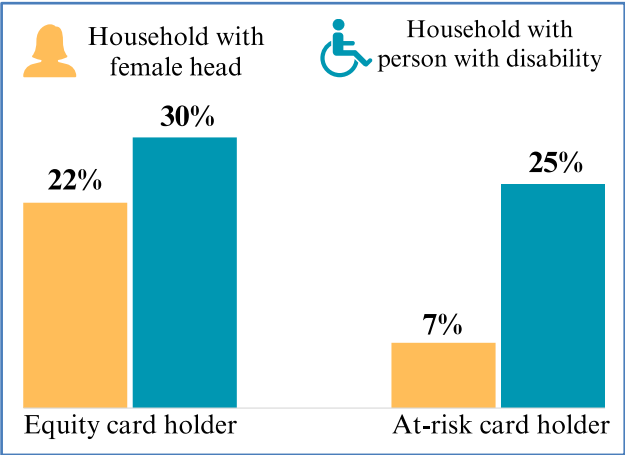


The progress in rural livelihoods is more heavily attributed to external factors such as jobs in the

garment and other industrial sectors, migration work, and construction. Agriculture remains an important internal source of livelihood, facilitated by substantial support from infrastructure developments like roads and irrigation. Handicrafts also played a significant role in the past, but their relevance has diminished over time.





Social vulnerability: In the studied villages, 22% of households of female heads and 30% of households with persons with disability are the holders of equity cards. These figures are well above the national average of 18%, well reflecting the disadvantage and poverty rates of these two social groups. Moreover, 25% of the households with persons with disability are issued with at-risk cards, which also reflecting the vulnerability of economic situation.



KEY ISSUES

Education access: Access to education is very low among the women who are the household heads. Overall, a woman attend school for 4 years. Most of them (60%) could only attend primary school while the other 18% had no schooling at all. The gap of education access is far more pronounced for female persons with disability. The average of their schooling is merely 1.7 years. Around 65% of them

did not attend the school at all while the other 30% could only go to primary school. The average years of schooling for counterparts (male persons with disability) is 4.9, and 15% of them did not go to school, but up to 55% of them could attend primary school. These findings are consistent with the general population census in 2019.

Person with Disability		
Education Level		
No schooling	15%	65%
Primary school	55%	30%
Secondary school	20%	5%
High school	10%	0%
Average years of schooling	4.9	1.7

Social neglect: The majority of persons with disability who participated in the study reported feeling neglected by social activities and empowerment programmes. They noted a lack of community awareness programmes specifically addressing disability issues. Compared to other social



groups such as women, children, youth, poor families, and vulnerable families, persons with disability feel that they receive less attention and support from the government and charitable organisations. For example, while women are actively encouraged to participate in local leadership, similar support is not extended to persons with disability. This neglect extends to village meetings, community gatherings, and public forums, where the issues and challenges faced by persons with disability are often inadequately represented in local discussions and decisions.

Discrimination: It is a persistent issue faced by persons with disability and women (especially girls and widows), when they seek public services (healthcare), engage in social gatherings (weddings), or attend village meetings. Women and persons with disability often encounter hostile environments and inappropriate



language, such as mockery and teasing, which significantly impact their mental well-being. For example, one woman with a disability mentioned her reluctance to participate in village affairs due to these negative attitudes, highlighting the need for respectful treatment to foster a more inclusive and dignified community. Similarly, a mother shared the words of her son who live with disability, saying:

"I do not want to use the walking sticks as they always laugh at me and call me four legs."

While improving physical accessibility in public spaces, such as adding wheelchair ramps and designated parking, is important, the more pressing issue is the lack of respect and negative attitudes they face. These social barriers prompt persons with disability to avoid seeking social services or participating in social events, leaving them feeling discouraged, excluded, and disconnected from their communities.



Access to employment: Empowering person with disability is crucial due to the various challenges they face, including social accessibility and discrimination, which negatively impact their well-being. The lack of empowerment further exacerbates these issues, as many persons with disability are discouraged from pursuing education and face limited employment opportunities due to persistent biases. For instance, despite having the skills, a person with disability was denied a job opportunity because of disability-related biases. Skills development is vital for persons with disability, yet only about 12% of persons with disability in eight case villages have received vocational or technical training. Additionally, the training often fails to align with their specific needs or provide necessary support, such as capital or equipment, limiting their ability to effectively utilise their skills and achieve economic independence. Addressing these challenges through



inclusive employment opportunities and tailored support is essential for fostering community development and social inclusion for persons with disability.

Social networks: Despite being socially disadvantaged, women and persons with disability lack access to social network so that they could connect with peer or reach out for help. Evidence from the eight case villages indicates that only 5% of female household heads and 9% of persons with disability respectively have affiliation with women's network and persons with disability network. There are no specific hotlines or social media platforms for communication with these networks. Generally, the village focal point is a primary reference for contact.

SUGGESTED RECOMMENDATIONS

To build truly inclusive communities, it's essential to address physical accessibility, social respect, economic opportunity, and social protection. By focusing on inclusive infrastructure, fostering a supportive social environment, promoting equitable livelihoods, and strengthening social safety nets, we can ensure that all individuals – regardless of their physical abilities, age, or socio-economic status – can fully participate in and benefit from village development and community life. The following sections outline specific strategies and measures to improve inclusivity in these key areas.



Promoting inclusive infrastructure development

For rural infrastructure to be more inclusive, it is essential to integrate accessibility considerations into every phase of rural infrastructure development, from planning through design and implementation. This approach ensures that all aspects of infrastructure—such as roads, public buildings, playgrounds, community ponds and parks, and transportation facilities—are equipped with ramps, handrails, designated parking spaces, restrooms, clear signage, and safe pathways to accommodate the needs of persons with disability, as well as pregnant women, elderly people, children, and those with temporary or permanent health conditions. When passing the village or town area, the road, for example, shall provide additional pathway to

accommodate the mobility of persons with different types of disabilities.

Creating a conducive social environment

Creating a friendly and respectful social environment is essential for promoting social inclusion. Such an environment ensures that everyone feels included, empowered, and dignified within their communities. It is crucial to eliminate all forms of mockery, teasing, and discrimination, as these are particularly hurtful, if not harmful, to disadvantaged people, for example, persons with disability. Respectful treatment is vital for encouraging their participation in social gatherings, village meetings, and other community activities. It is therefore essential to promote a balance of gender representation in the local governance and local development planning process. To foster social harmony, key measures should be implemented:



Fostering equitable and sustainable livelihoods

Empowering women, girls, and persons with disability requires promoting equitable opportunities in education, skills development, and employment. Evidence highlights a strong link between lagged livelihoods in these disadvantaged groups and their access to education, skills training, and employment. Along with making school environments and teaching methods more inclusive, it is crucial to establish more special schools and community kindergarten to broaden access for rural children. Skills training should address physical fitness, personal interests, and market demand. At the employment level, disadvantaged individuals may require capital support to start their own

businesses. Moreover, both legislation and policy are essential for fostering inclusive employment opportunities. For instance, a law could mandate that workplaces with more than 50 employees include a minimum percentage of persons with disability in their workforce, while the government could provide incentives, such as tax cuts or subsidies, to employers who hire persons with disability or other disadvantaged persons.

Expanding the coverage of social security system

To ensure that disadvantaged people are well protected, it is essential to implement comprehensive social protection measures that address their specific needs and vulnerabilities. This includes expanding the cash transfer programme to address gaps in financial assistance, improving access to healthcare and education, and strengthening local social safety nets. Cambodia has already implemented several social assistance programmes, including cash transfers and scholarships, which are now integrated into the Family Package targeting poor and at-risk populations. The priority is to continue implementing this Family Package while simultaneously expanding the coverage of social security schemes to include more beneficiaries in rural areas and collaborating with local organisations to regularly evaluate and adjust the programme to enhance its effectiveness and reach. As of now (2024), around 20% of the households in eight village cases report their members are covered by the National Social Security Fund (NSSF).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

While significant progress has been made in rural infrastructure and livelihood development, substantial gaps remain in accessibility, social inclusion, and support for disadvantaged people. To ensure equitable progress and address these disparities, it is essential to integrate accessibility considerations into infrastructure planning, foster a respectful social environment, promote equitable opportunities in education and employment, and strengthen social protection systems. By implementing these recommendations, we can better support women, persons with disability, and other vulnerable populations, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and resilient rural community.