Cambodia

Gender Equality, Disability and Social Inclusion Case Study

DISTRICT WIDE WATER RESOURCES MANAGEMENT IN CAMBODIA

Partners
Cambodian Water Supply Association (CWA), WaterAid, Royal Government of Cambodia.

Australian Aid

THE AUSTRALIAN WATER PARTNERSHIP

About the Authors
Prepared by Isobel Davis, Shreya Gyawali, and Chelsea Huggett and Tith Nhim from WaterAid for the Australian Water Partnership.

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Cover photo:
The iconic handmade bamboo bridge in eastern Cambodia which is built each year during the dry season, to cross the Mekong River, connecting the town of Kampong Cham to Koh Paen island. (Source: Cheryl Ramalh/ Adobe Stock)

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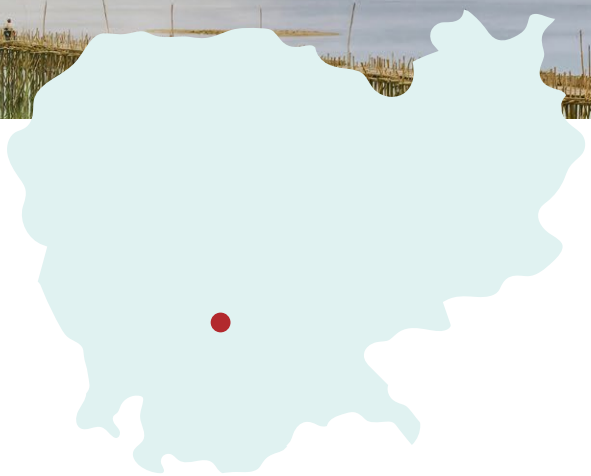
UC Innovation Centre (Bldg 22)
University Drive South
Canberra ACT 2617 AUSTRALIA
T: +61 2 6206 8320
E: contact@waterpartnership.org.au
waterpartnership.org.au



Overview

In 2021 and 2022, the Australian Water Partnership (AWP) supported the development of a gender-sensitive and inclusive water resource management (WRM) plan for the Sameakki Mean Chey district in the south of Kampong Chhnang province, in central Cambodia. The initiative aimed to catalyse district level WRM by laying the foundations for Cambodia's first water secure district.

Local partners, led by WaterAid, worked with the existing district water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) working group, who support coordination of WASH services in the district. They engaged key stakeholders, conducted a feasibility study and training needs assessment, developed an inclusive water resource management plan, and held capacity building, training and progress reflection workshops. These steps were part of developing a WRM plan which embedded gender equality, disability and social inclusion (GEDSI) principles. The resulting plan is being implemented in Sameakki Mean Chey with initial results showing district government officials considering disability inclusion in water resource management efforts and private water operators having an expanded focus on marginalised households. The plan has also been shared with other districts.

Activity Background

As part of the decentralisation processes in Cambodia, the role of WRM has been devolved to the district government level. However, there has been limited support for district officials to understand their role and responsibilities in operationalising WRM. Given this and building on previous initiatives in Cambodia, AWP supported WaterAid to lead a process to develop and pilot district wide water resource management. Sameakki Mean Chey district in central Cambodia was identified as the target district for the activity.

The overarching objective of the activity was to strengthen inclusive governance arrangements and increase water resource management planning and programming capacity at the sub-national level.

The activity aimed to:

- Build the skills and capacity of district government in their roles and responsibilities for WRM.
- Facilitate a participatory approach to support the development of a gender sensitive and inclusive district wide WRM plan.
- Support women and people with disabilities and their representative organisations to have improved skills and capacity to actively contribute to decision making in the WRM district plan development, implementation and monitoring.
- Support the district WASH Committee to initiate the implementation of the WRM plan at the district level, including conducting inclusive behaviour change awareness campaigns.
- Demonstrate a model district for WRM, and document lessons learned to inform ongoing development of the approach and policy and practice at the provincial and national level.

Case Study Highlights

This case study provides an example of embedding GEDSI in a district-wide water resources management plan.

It shows how GEDSI can be front and centre of water resources management to ensure inclusive and sustainable outcomes that meet the needs of all people in the district. This can be a two-way process where greater inclusivity means that groups, such as women, older or indigenous people, can provide improved approaches for managing water based on their experiences.

It also provides an understanding of the potential of a GEDSI empowering program, that is, one that can develop actions that are inclusive, participatory and engage diverse voices in WRM planning and decision-making. Local rights groups played a leadership role in the activity. Feasibility field data collection teams included members of rights-holder organisations, such as organisations of persons with disabilities (OPD), and the district WRM plan went beyond an inclusive approach to empowering, as local rights groups were key decision-makers.

GEDSI Activity Context and Objectives

The Sameakki Mean Chey district includes approximately 87,000 people living in 21,000 households. Most people are engaged in agricultural activities such as rice production or factory work for their income. According to 2021 census data, around 900 people are living with a disability.

People in Sameakki Mean Chey rely on three major sources of water: groundwater, rainwater and surface water. Groundwater from wells is particularly important during the dry season. Those that rely on community ponds and shallow wells are generally faced with water scarcity concerns in the dry season from March to May. When people in some areas are unable to access clean water, they resort to unimproved wells, boreholes, and other sub-optimal or difficult to access sources. Solid waste and run-off containing chemical products used in agriculture are common issues that affect the quality of water, while climate change induced droughts are having negative impacts on water availability in the district.

In terms of GEDSI in Cambodia, marginalised groups face more difficulties in accessing clean water due to some key barriers and challenges, including a lack of opportunity to participate in planning and decision making. Marginalised groups include elderly people, people with disabilities, children, people living in challenging areas, such as floating communities, poor people, people with low levels of education, female headed households, and migrants.

People experiencing marginalisation generally have fewer opportunities to participate in meetings, discussions, decision making, and other social engagement activities. Their needs and demands are sometimes not fully heard, or they are often "left behind" due to stigma and difficulties of engagement. Many people experiencing marginalisation struggle with their livelihood and often have limited access to information. They spend most of their time trying to earn a living which means that they have less time to access clean water and participate in community water activities. Negative social norms and an unfriendly environment placed on people experiencing marginalisation can limit their access to basic human rights and result in them being overlooked in access to water and sanitation. For example, men generally have more power in decision making than women, and some projects or development activities do not prioritise or include people with disabilities.

The Sameakki Mean Chey district government and local providers must grapple with how to address existing and future water resource management needs and challenges including how to ensure sustainable water supply for all.

"We are pleased to have developed a district wide water resources management plan and to have allocated budget to take more action on gender sensitive and inclusive water resource management."

Mr Channa Chhuon, Deputy of the District Governor, Sameakki Mean Chey

Key Statistics

17million
Population of Cambodia[1].

29%
of households in Cambodia accessing a safely managed drinking water service.

37%
of households in Cambodia accessing a safely managed sanitation service[2].

Fresh water & transboundary Mekong River system + seasonal variation: Cambodia relies on fresh water and the transboundary Mekong river system for inland fisheries and seasonally experiences shortage and surplus of water resources.

4 million
people expected to be exposed to an extreme river flood by the 2040s[4].

[1]UN Population Division Projections (2023) available at: https://population.un.org/wpp/
[2]WHO/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Programme (2023) Data Table Water, Sanitation and Hygiene: https://www.UNICEF.org/eap/media/10346/file/
[3]Sithirith, Mak & Sao, Sok & Silva, Sanjiv & Kong, Heng & Kongkroy, Chay & Thavrin, Tim & Sarun, Hy. (2024). Water Governance in the Cambodian Mekong Delta: The Nexus of Farmer Water User Communities (FWUCs), Community Fisheries (CFis), and Community Fish Refuges (CFRs) in the Context of Climate Change. Water. 16. 242. 10.3390/w16020242.
[4]World Bank (2021) Climate risk country profile: Cambodia available at: https://climateknowledgeportal.worldbank.org/sites/default/files/2021-08/15849-WB_Cambodia%20Country%20Profile-WEB.pdf

GEDSI Approach

The process to develop the district wide WRM plan included the twin approach of 1) having GEDSI as a principle for the whole plan, and 2) conducting an inclusive feasibility study to gather specific GEDSI inputs. The meaningful participation of representatives from marginalised groups was always a focus area in the activity, guiding the overall approach to collaboration and inclusion. The district WRM plan was collaboratively developed with government from provincial, district and commune levels, private sector, rights groups including the local organisation of persons with disabilities and representatives of domestic water users.

A district-wide feasibility study was conducted to gather information on inclusive WRM planning. WaterAid in partnership with Cambodian Water Supply Association (CWA) provided capacity development training and field practice for the district wide WRM feasibility study. For the field data collection, 20 people, including 11 women of which two were living with a disability, were trained and engaged as data collectors.

The data collection team included representatives from the organisation of persons with disabilities Kampong Tralach and sub-national government departments including the Provincial Department or Rural Development (PDRD), Provincial Department of Industry, Science, Technology and Innovation (PDISTI), Provincial Department of Water Resources and Meteorology (PDOWRAM), Provincial Department of Women's Affairs (PDOWA), and the District Authority.

Participants from nine communes in the target district participated in 11 focus group discussions making a total of 100 participants reached. Nine groups with approximately 16 people per group, were made up of diverse community members to gather a range of perspectives.

One target group of 35 participants was made up of government officials, private sector and rights-holder organisations. In each of the nine communities, one target group reaching approximately 50 participants in total was made up of people experiencing marginalisation such as people with disabilities. The group participated in a facilitated discussion on the four types of barriers (social, institutional, environmental and attitudinal) to access clean water supply.

The study found that most people and groups experiencing marginalisation represented in the data noted difficulties in access to clean water. They also reported fewer opportunities to participate in meetings, discussion, and decision-making with their local authorities. Their demands were sometimes not fully heard, or they were often "left behind" (without voice or services) due to the lack of engagement and information sharing as well as inaccessible physical spaces or environments.

A commune focal person in WASH shares her 'Cart Box campaign' as part of an inclusive behaviour change campaign. (Source: WaterAid/Ekudom Sok)

Focus group discussions revealed that availability of water during the dry season is a common issue for those who depend on shallow wells. This is especially the case for some marginalised groups including poor people, elderly and people with a disability as they often need to travel further distances to collect water and / or spend a higher portion of their income on expensive water supply options.

The study suggested that the engagement of relevant stakeholders, such as marginalised groups and the private sector, and collective action could be improved. Through the remaining planning process, diverse stakeholders were actively involved in getting to know and understand each other and to collectively perform their roles and responsibilities to improve water supply services. Activity partners undertook information sharing, awareness raising, training and behaviour change communications to support and increase clean household water supply.

The accountability scorecard tool for water supply services, previously developed by WaterAid, was rolled out in the target district, Sameakki Mean Chey. The tool allowed service providers to receive feedback from the users through community scoring on their performance criteria, and helped them understand areas for improvement regarding their roles and responsibilities, and services. The facilitators aimed to reach diverse community members in the scorecard process by hosting the meetings near their houses and actively inviting women, people with disabilities and low-income households to participate. Stakeholders put in a lot of effort to improve water services to marginalised households and ensure the newly repaired water infrastructure was accessible for people with a disability.

Activity Impact

A positive result of the activity has been the mainstreaming of GEDSI in the district WRM plan including as part of the plan title "Gender Sensitive and Inclusive Water Resource Management Plan, Sameakki Mean Chey District" and the vision (see box). These policy mandates set the ambition to ensure due attention is given to inclusive planning.

Vision statement from the Gender Sensitive and Inclusive Water Resource Management Plan, Sameakki Mean Chey District, Kampong Chhnang:

"We want to see all people in Sameakki Mean Chey district, especially marginalised groups, have full access to clean water, good health, and better livelihoods."

The plan identifies threats to water security in Sameakki Mean Chey and outlines actions to be taken by different actors to mitigate the risks from these threats. The district government used the plan to advocate for additional budget for inclusive WRM, and as a result the district-wide plan was integrated into the Sameakki Mean Chey 2022 District Investment Plan. Some of the WRM and GEDSI components of the Plan are quite comprehensive and include water source protection and rehabilitation, water quality monitoring, waste management, women's leadership, participation of marginalised groups and water-related data.

The District Investment Plan reflects the various priorities and initiatives of the district and the respective allocated budgets. As of 2023, activities related to water sources rehabilitation and awareness raising on hygiene and household solid waste management have taken place. Four wells equipped with handpumps have been repaired with new accessible ramps and fences. Also, two community ponds have been rehabilitated to collect water for multiple purposes.

In addition, commune authorities have been integrating actions from the plan into their annual WASH plans. The integration of the WRM plan into WASH plans is supporting the monitoring of water resources and water service quality, in addition to prioritising coordination with private water operators for expansion plans and increased piped connection to communities, especially the most marginalised households.

Training on climate resilient WASH was provided to 15 representatives from an organisation of persons with disabilities (OPD) and a women's group which strengthened participants' understanding of climate change and its impacts, as well as potential responses.

The representatives have supported the development of action plans to increase access to clean water and sanitation in the context of climate change.

Support was also provided to the district WASH Committee to initiate the implementation of the WRM plan at the district level, including sharing climate resilient water safety guidelines and conducting inclusive behaviour change awareness campaigns. These campaigns included awareness raising on the advantages of using clean water sources, household water treatment and safe storage and effective piped water operations for local authorities. The behaviour change materials incorporate images of people with disabilities using WASH facilities.

The representatives of local authorities and private water operators organised some awareness raising sessions in community and the nearby community people were invited to join those sessions where the knowledge and concern around pipe water supply operation and the advantages of using clean water supply was presented and discussed. Facilitators targeted households with low incomes, people with disabilities and women to ensure hygiene messages reached diverse community members. Another type of campaign known as the 'Cart Box campaign' was also used. This campaign involved a cart equipped with hygiene behaviour change messages or posters, handwashing materials and loudspeaker. The representatives of commune authority tow the cart with a motorbike around the community and may stop at some crowded place to share the messages or demonstrate handwashing to community people. The campaign was designed to reach community members with difficulty seeing and hearing by using mixed communication methods. As a result, more than 1,300 new household connections to piped water have been made in the Sameakki Mean Chey district, including over 70 poor households.

"The impact we observed from the activity is that the government has recognised people from all social groups need to be included in evidence collection and planning. They understand that when they consider for example barriers for people with disabilities, then they can address their water issues.

In addition, we have seen a significant positive change in the engagement of women in our program activities. They are less shy and more active than before acting as focal points and leaders for activities".

Tith Nhim, Senior Water Resource Management Specialist, WaterAid Cambodia

Children with disabilities participate in an interactive handwashing campaign. (Source: WaterAid/Ekudom Sok)

Learnings

In developing the WRM plan, partners noted the importance of investing time and financial resources to successfully implement a gender sensitive and inclusive WRM plan. Following the positive step of adopting a district wide WRM plan, the working group then needed to ensure WRM budget in the district and commune systems, a process that required integrating WRM into the District Investment Plan. This experience highlights the need to continue to emphasise GEDSI through the planning, implementation and monitoring stages.

This was a strong intervention bringing GEDSI into WRM, one which brought diverse stakeholders closely together and led to comprehensive and collaborative solving of challenges on a fairly new topic (WRM). The activity's overall approach of bringing women's groups and OPDs into all activities was an effective strategy to embed GEDSI as deeply as possible. From evidence collection, planning and implementation WaterAid engaged them meaningfully. This in turn strengthened the government's commitment to GEDSI continue addressing beyond the activity. Given that water resource management is a fairly new topic, it was challenging to address GEDSI beyond participation of marginalised groups. The activity's short timeframe has made it challenging to continue to support the implementation of the Plan.

Despite the short timeframe, activity partners reported positive initial progress in implementation of the district WRM plan. GEDSI concepts appeared embedded in their thinking for future planning, for example, consideration was being given to planning for a ramp for people with physical disabilities to access the water services.

Looking ahead

The experience and lessons from the Sameakki Mean Chey district have been shared with at least six other districts. Lessons were also shared at an event in Kampong Chnang and the plan was shared with those stakeholders. Global and national actors in Cambodia were also reached at the 4th Cambodia Water Conference in 2022. It is anticipated that experience from the implementation of the district wide WRM plan informs broader WRM in Cambodia.

The development of a gender sensitive and inclusive WRM plan is a key step in laying the foundations for Cambodia's first water secure district. Stakeholders remain committed to working towards water security, that is, ensuring adequate, reliable access to water of a sufficient quality to meet people's daily needs.

For more information and resources, visit https://bit.ly/AWP-GEDSI--Resources

The AWP recognises that the integration of gender equality, disability, and social inclusion leads to more equitable and sustainable outcomes. The AWP GEDSI Policy (2020-2023) and Strategic Plan (2023-2028) reinforces the AWP's commitment to value and promote inclusion and diversity by prioritising the most poor and vulnerable. This case study is an example of the AWP's activities towards the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals.