

Cambodia

A year of handing over and picking up speed

2009 was a year of transition for VVOB in Cambodia. Two projects were handed over to our local partners, while the new Multi-Year Programme, consisting of two main components - one in Teacher Training and one in Agricultural Extension - gained momentum.



Wanted: quality in large quantity

Cambodia has made considerable progress in achieving the Education for All targets over the past years. Primary school enrolment rates are high, with a declining gender gap. But on the other hand, many children redo grades, so on average it takes more than 10 years to complete primary school. However, less than half of all students even achieve this. It goes without saying that the situation in secondary schools is even more worrying. That is why the VVOB education programme in Cambodia addresses not so much access to school, but rather focuses on the quality of education. By strengthening the pre-service teacher training centres, VVOB and its partners improve the quality of teaching and increase the relevance of learning for pupils in rural Cambodia.

Fully fledged

As such, the two VVOB projects that were handed over in 2009 to the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS), met important needs in teacher training. Both the Learner Centred Methodology and the Open Resource Centre projects focused on general teaching methodology for primary education, through professional development of teacher trainers and quality educational resources. These teacher trainers now provide the young teacher trainees with better skills and insights into what it takes to be a good teacher.

Whereas the initial scope of the project targeted only three provinces of Cambodia, all pedagogy teacher trainers throughout Cambodia received training on learner centred methodology. Moreover, digital resources in Khmer language were developed, distributed to all 18 Teacher Training Centres and even put online.

The resource centre at the Provincial Teacher Training Centre of Siem Reap is now housed in a more spacious building, recently built by BTC, the Belgian Development Agency. A good example of how two development partners can complement and reinforce each other.

The sustainability and ownership of VVOB's intervention becomes more apparent as MoEYS is now deploying the pre-service teacher trainer capacity and materials - developed by both VVOB projects - for training to (in-service) teachers in primary schools.

Based on the mid-term evaluation in 2008 of the School Health Promotion project in Battambang province, this third project was scaled down to a more feasible scope within the current context. In 2009 a great deal of the project team's effort went into the development of quality materials in cooperation with teacher trainers and experts. In 2010, the challenge remains to turn this project into a success and strengthen health education in Cambodian Teacher Training Centres.

Taking shape

At the same time, the recently started SEAL programme for pre-service teacher training in Science, Environmental and Agricultural Life skills gained momentum in 2009. Building on the results of the physics project that was handed over to the Cambodian partner in 2008, the pilot stage for lower secondary school level takes place at the Regional Teacher Training Centre of Kandal. It addresses the need to make education more relevant by introducing practical, hands-on approaches to the four science subjects: physics, biology, earth science and chemistry. Teacher trainers learn how to stimulate creative thinking and develop problem solving skills of students. They acquire skills to apply learner centred methodologies, such as low cost experiments and field trips and develop supporting tools and materials in line with the local curriculum.

In 2010 we will also incorporate environmental awareness and agricultural life skills into these four core curriculum subjects.



The focus will therefore shift towards life skills-based approaches for building a responsible attitude and social behaviour with pupils. This is clearly necessary as the spirit of cooperation is still somewhat lacking in Cambodian society in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge genocide.

First results in agricultural extension

The very same concepts lie behind the introduction of 'Participatory Technology Development' methods in the ImAgE (Improving Agricultural Extension) programme, in cooperation with the Provincial Department of Agriculture of Kandal. By showing farmers how to identify and solve problems as a group - rather than individually - extension workers play an important role both as a coaches of farmer groups and as agricultural experts. The food crisis of 2008 has once more highlighted that rural households are at great risk in countries like Cambodia, where 80% of the population depends on farming activities and

one out of three lives below the poverty line. Their vulnerable livelihood is further threatened by environmental degradation. Hence why this second component of the new Multi-Year Programme equally pays attention to the safe use of (organic) pesticides and fertilisers. Although the programme experienced some difficulties in the initial stages, the first results were achieved by the end of 2009. In the three pilot districts of Kandal province, the System of Rice Intensification was successfully introduced by the extension workers leading to a higher yield and lower cost for farmers.

During 2010, the programme will - in cooperation with other donors - continue with the development of technical training materials, such as manuals for organic vegetable and mushroom growing. The inclusion of women and youth as priority target groups remains also high on the agenda in order to address the problem of increased migration of youth to cities.

Challenges

Although a year of transition, or even transformation, VVOB Cambodia can look back on a very rewarding 2009. The new Multi-Year Programme will finally reach full speed in 2010 while the last remaining 'old style' project will be handed over. At the same time, the programme management will develop the second phase (2011-2013) of the Multi-Year Programme, based on the lessons learned of the mid-term evaluation. Plenty of challenges remain; this much is sure!

A bumpy ride but definitely worthwhile!

My name is Jan Geusens. For 8 years I worked as a VVOB associate in Vietnam. Since 2007 I am the programme manager of Cambodia. While I sometimes have nostalgia looking back at my Vietnam period, the last 3 years have probably been the most exiting and rewarding in my life as a development worker.

I vividly remember the circumstances when I arrived in Phnom Penh three years ago. As before there was no programme manager present in Cambodia, I was faced with many challenges, moreover because the projects were already running for a couple of years. On top of that, I arrived at a special time; during the transition from project to programme operations. As VVOB became increasingly professional, the organisation examined and optimised the role of the associates, the relationship with local counterparts, the organisational structure, the management of personnel, as well as the implementation strategies. In 2009 this process runs at full speed and demands a lot of flexibility and efforts from everyone involved.

As I look back at the past 3 years, I realise how much has changed in VVOB Cambodia, all within a short period of time. Associates work closer in team, which integrates well within the structures of the Cambodian institutes. The intervention programme is more coherent and aligned with the priorities of the strategic partner. A closer cooperation with the central departments of the cabinets involved, encourages ownership and sustainability. Together with the most important actors in the education sector in Cambodia (e.g. BTC, UNICEF, JICA and USAID), VVOB brings the capacity of the target groups to a higher level. Hence why VVOB is highly appreciated by the Cambodian and international partners, especially because of the high quality of its contributions.

Although there is still a lot of work to do and new challenges present themselves, I am a satisfied man. It is very rewarding to lead a strong programme team, which indeed can be very proud of its accomplishments. Admittedly, I gained a few more wrinkles during the last years, but it definitely was, and still is, worthwhile!

