



Partnerships for a Cleaner City: Community-Based Environmental Improvements in Phnom Penh

Flood water flows to urban poor areas

Street vendors, small-scale traders, and motorbike taxi drivers are the bulk of Phnom Penh's working poor. Further, female heads of households working at low-income service jobs accounts for a large share of Phnom Penh's working poor. For the most part, members of this hardworking population are prevented from acquiring higher-income, formal-sector employment because they lack basic education as they cannot afford schooling; and have no access to facilities for appropriate personal hygiene and, as a result, are generally in poor health. Sickness, accidents, and involuntary unemployment further reduce their income levels.

As a result, roughly 176,000 people—equivalent to one in seven of all Phnom Penh residents—contend with adverse living conditions, such as houses that flood regularly and are consequently accessible only by boat or makeshift footbridges. More importantly, flooding causes storm water to enter the city's sewerage system and clog the drains. This, in turn, releases waterborne diseases, such as diarrhea and cholera into the flood waters, increasing the risk of contact with disease-causing bacteria.

Urban sanitation: A not-forgotten issue

The *Income for the Poor through Community-Based Environmental Improvements Project*¹ addressed numerous urban sanitation issues. These included flooding, poor drainage, and inadequate solid waste disposal, as well as the relationship of these concerns to poor public health, low levels of household income, and lack of awareness of the importance of hygiene in disease prevention. The Municipality of Phnom Penh (the Municipality) was well aware of these concerns, as well as the constraints it faced in funding basic infrastructure that would raise urban sanitation levels. As a result, the Municipality sought assistance in resolving the environmental and sanitation concerns referred to above in a manner that would simultaneously raise household income levels. As executing agency of the project,



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The littered and dilapidated footbridge is a thing of the past

the Municipality was responsible for facilitating project activities, developing strategy, and providing policy advice relevant to the target community. Of the total population of 19,000 households located within the project area, 6,000 households in seven low-income communities were selected for grant assistance.

Working in partnership

Since a participatory process could link the project's goals of improving sanitation and simultaneously raising household income, four major groups of stakeholders were identified and mobilized. These were the low-income communities, the national government, nongovernment organizations (NGOs), and private sector transactors.

A fundamental assumption was that improving conditions relating to the environment and sanitation without addressing the low household income levels of beneficiaries would, in the end, achieve far less than addressing both problems simultaneously with

¹ The project was financed by the Japan Fund for Poverty Reduction (JFPR) and administered by the Asian Development Bank. Approved in the amount of \$1.0 million, the project was implemented from January 2003 to September 2005.



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Awareness-raising campaigns on the importance of good environmental hygiene to public health were conducted frequently and with positive results

the participation of the community. Project activities, therefore, emphasized establishing solid waste management systems operated by members of the communities served by these same systems. In particular, the project's major components comprised of upgrading of infrastructure; public awareness on the importance of personal hygiene in disease prevention; community-based solid waste management that likewise generates income within the target communities; and policy dialogue with other project stakeholders.

When project implementation began, solid waste collection services were provided only in geographic areas of the city where this was deemed financially profitable. As a result, many of the city's neighborhoods were entirely without solid waste collection services of any kind particularly communities with very low household income levels. Of the total solid waste collection services provided at that time, the Phnom Penh Waste Management Authority accounted for 30%; large-scale private-sector solid waste companies, 60%; and small-scale private-sector operators, 10%. In light of this situation, members of the target communities were initially skeptical of project activities. However, the project management unit was able to earn the trust of the target communities through persistent implementation coupled with dynamic leadership. Through this "social capital," the project management unit was enabled to catalyze incremental efforts at solid waste management and income generation. Eventually, these incremental efforts led to spin-off activities calling for the involvement of a wide group of stakeholders, both the private sector and relevant NGOs.

Hard work pays well

Ultimately, the project's outputs were impressive and of three types. First, roads, tertiary drainage facilities, small bridges, and footpaths were maintained, rehabilitated, and upgraded in addition, to improvements on the Stung Mean Cheay municipal dumpsite. A cost-sharing formula was adopted to finance these works

where the beneficiary community underwrites 20% of the total cost through either cash or in-kind contributions (usually labor or materials), while project contributions were to cover 80% of the total cost. Second, public awareness campaigns under auspices of the project promoted a positive stance toward the environment (e.g., using trash bins instead of littering), stressing the importance of community-based solid waste management.

Third, the project established a comprehensive fee-based solid waste management system with numerous positive spin-offs: it encouraged sound practices in all aspects of waste collection, transporting, segregating, recycling, and composting of all types of solid waste; it improved occupational health and working conditions in the dumpsite and along solid waste transport routes; and it generated income-earning waste recycling activities to beneficiary households living adjacent to the dumpsite.

The project also generated a policy dialogue involving municipal and local government leaders, NGOs, and members of the beneficiary communities themselves. This dialogue concluded that technical and financial solutions in and of themselves are powerless in reducing poverty. Instead, poverty's root causes, such as poor governance and lack of political commitment, must be addressed, which requires the participation of both the Government and civil society.

Ultimately, the post-project scenario was positive. First, the cash and in-kind contributions made by members of the beneficiary communities totaled \$35,544, equivalent to 99.1% of the amount pledged. Second, the public awareness campaigns led to a more positive stance toward the environment on the part of beneficiary community members, more sanitary living conditions, and an increased understanding of the importance of a well-functioning solid waste management system. A post-project survey confirmed this, with 84% of respondents stating that their living conditions had improved as a result of the project. Third, the voluntary cleanup activities catalyzed by the project greatly increased civic pride. This is evident from the fact that following project implementation, far less trash was deposited into waterways and onto public lands.

Because the project was, by design, a learning-by-doing initiative, a great degree of flexibility was allowed in its implementation to encourage experimentation with innovative means of achieving project goals. From the very outset, some inevitable problems during implementation were expected. Likewise, it was well understood that some envisaged outcomes may not be realized.

Notwithstanding, the shortcomings were far overshadowed by the long-term and far-reaching benefits of the project. In the end, the Municipality applied the same cost-sharing scheme to the construction of urban roads, with better-off beneficiary communities increasing their share in total construction costs from 20% to 50%, resulting in an additional 26 kilometers of upgraded roads in Cham Karmon district. With such success, the Municipality plans to expand cost sharing to other urban infrastructure services, such as water supply and drainage.