

Older people's associations in rural Cambodia

Life stories from Battambang and Banteay Meanchey



Older people's associations (OPAs) are community-based organisations of older people, which aim to improve the well-being of older people, their families and communities. OPAs provide a mechanism for social support as well as for delivering services.

Introduction



In Cambodia the proportion of older people in the population is growing. Approximately 852,000 people are aged 60 and older. **By 2025, it is predicted that this number will almost double to 1.5 million older people.**

Older people are predominantly found in the rural areas where poverty is most severe and there is a lack of knowledge on hygiene and healthcare. For poor families, traditional support systems are limited, leaving increasing numbers of older people forced to work as labourers for their survival. Moreover, the responsibility of caring for grandchildren, whose parents have migrated or died from AIDS, falls on older people, particularly on older women.

To address the needs of older people in Cambodia, HelpAge International has established a network of older people's associations (OPAs) in the provinces of Battambang and Banteay Meanchey. These OPAs aim to promote mutual support among older people, reducing their isolation and vulnerability by creating a social support network that facilitates community development. The OPA model utilises the skills and experience of older people to enable them to help themselves and their communities.

Here are the stories of some older people and their OPAs.

Chheut, 68 years old



“They always fight while they’re eating,” says Chheut as he spoons lunchtime rice soup into his grandchildren’s bowls. He has been looking after these five children for the last six years. His son and daughter-in-law – died four years ago.

Chheut says he does not know what they died of, but “people said it was AIDS because they died young. They didn’t have blood tests and didn’t have enough money to go to hospital.” He said:

“I do my best to look after the children. I’m tired. But the children are our blood line and we can’t break away from our blood line.”

“In the past my wife, who’s 62, would help. But about two months ago she went to work as a cook near the Thai border. If we had stayed together, it’s likely that we wouldn’t have made enough money. She occasionally sends money to help the family. Its very hard for me to cope on my own.”

He still grows cucumber, winter melon and sugar cane on his remaining land, and recently had some help from the older people’s association in his village.

“I have to make 5,000 riel (approximately 1.25 USD) a day to support the children. Rice is cheap but vegetables and meat are expensive. All the children go to school. The two older ones need 200 Riels a day and the other three need 100 riel a day. They follow me and ask for money until I give it to them. They’ve never stopped going to school.”

Chheut lives with the grandchildren and one of his daughters, who has disabilities because of a childhood accident. He had three daughters and five sons. The surviving children all live in different villages. But his sons do support him. “During Khmer New Year and at spiritual ceremonies they come. Whenever they are not able to come, they send 10,000 to 20,000 riel (2.5 to 5 USD).”

He is still active in the community as an advisor to the village older people’s association as well as volunteering for an HIV/AIDS project.

“I’m worried about the future. At the moment my health is good and I’m still strong so I can carry on helping the children. But what will happen if my health gets worse? I don’t know if the other relatives would take the children. ”

Sim Lon, 64 years old

Sim Lon lives in Koun Klong village of Battambang province. She is looking after two grandchildren as their parents moved to the Thai border to work. They come to visit twice a year, but cannot take their children with them as the children would not be able to go to school. The grandchildren go to school here. Sim Lon's husband is still alive but cannot work. He has constant joint pain and is frequently sick with fever.



She received a small grant from the OPA two years ago, and used that money to buy materials to sell Khmer noodles. Also she received two training sessions on how to run a business, how to make Khmer noodles and basic accounting. Since then she has been selling Khmer noodles in the village. Sim Lon said:

“I have been an OPA member since the OPA started. This year I have participated in three health camps, and joined a ceremony with the OPA and monks, and we prayed for people.”

“My business has improved my living condition. Before I had difficulty buying food and medicine. It was also difficult to borrow money. Since I started my business, the money lenders will agree to lend me money.”

“Now I am less afraid about not having enough money in the future. I only have a little money now, but know that I will get more money tomorrow.”

She made a profit of 5,000 riel per day (1.25 USD) and spent this money on sending her grandchildren to school and tried to save money to buy her husband medicine. She also spent money on food – fish and rice.

However, the problem is the long drought period. People in the village have not had a rice harvest, and have not been able to sell rice. Sim Lon is afraid that people will have no money to buy noodles from her.

Sok Keng, 74 years old

Sok Keng lives alone in a room under her neighbour's house.

When her husband was alive, they spent all their money and sold their land to pay for her husband's medical treatment. Then they did not have any land, so they lived in a small shelter on the side of the road. After her husband died, her neighbour allowed her to live in the small room in his house. Sok Keng has no children.

Her village had a drought last year. There was no rain for four months and all of the rice crop died. Almost everybody in the village has food shortages, and there is not enough rice in the rice bank for everybody. People have to go outside of the village to look for work.

She received a grant of 75,000 riel (18 USD) through the OPA from an outside donor every three months. She spent most of the money on medical treatment for her husband when he was sick, and on food. When her husband was alive the money was enough to buy food for one month. The OPA committee has also been giving her some rice because she does not have enough to eat. She said:

"I am an OPA member. I cannot remember when I joined, but I always join the OPA meetings and salachhotien Buddhist ceremonies with monks in the public hall."

The OPA leader organised for a new shelter to be built for her on a small plot of spare land.

"The OPA members visit me everyday and ask about my health. I have been to two health camps at our village. The local health officials also came to the camp."

"Our OPA leader also organised for very poor old people and orphans to receive free treatment at the local health centre. Now when I have a fever or joint pain I go to the health clinic in the commune and they give me treatment for free."



"I am happier than before as I am less afraid about not having enough food to eat. Now, with the OPA, I have some money to buy food, somewhere to live and better health conditions. I wish I could improve my living condition and give back to other people."

Plak Vin and Tuy Soth

Plak Vin, 44, has been taking care of Tuy Soth, 74, for almost five years. Although Tuy Soth cannot walk because of a stroke, she decided to live alone since she does not want to be a burden on her two sons.

In 2005, Tuy Soth was introduced to Plak Vin by the village OPA. Plak Vin received training on caring for older people from the OPA and has been a home care volunteer, a home helper for frail older persons, since then. She visits Tuy Soth three times a week to support in regular housework and befriending. Plak Vin said:

“I am very happy to help her. I want to show the community how to be a good person; I want to be a model of a good person. When I get old I want my grandchildren to care for me in the same way.”



Plak Vin prepares sleeping area and mosquito net for Tuy Soth.



Fetching water from pond for cooking and bathing



Preparing daily meals



Buying medicine and groceries for Tuy Soth

Story from Romchey village

The older people in Romchey village, Battambang province formed an OPA in May 2007. Prior to this many of them felt lonely and isolated. The isolation felt by the older people led to a feeling of powerlessness in the community. Older people felt they did not have a say when it came to issues of development in the village. Several older people decided that they wanted the situation to change, they wanted older people to have a say in their own future and solve their own problems. They had seen the benefits of the OPA in a nearby village and decided that they too would like to establish an OPA.



The OPA in Romchey is working on building its skills to become a self-sustaining community based organisation which implements development activities that benefit the whole community.

“The OPA was established so older people could help themselves and all other members of the community. We want the village to develop and the OPA is a good way to do that.”

Deputy OPA leader, Romchey village

The National Guidelines for Older People's Associations

In 2009, the government of Cambodia approved the national guidelines for establishing and managing older people's associations. The guidelines will support the formation and strengthening of OPAs throughout Cambodia, and promote older people's social and economic well-being.

The guidelines were developed by the Department of Pensions of the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation, with support from UNFPA and HelpAge International.



A practical tool

The guidelines will be a practical tool for local government authorities, communities and aid organisations to support OPAs. They include advice on mobilising the community, developing activities and fundraising plans, and financial management.

The implementation of these new guidelines will reap benefits for older people, their families and communities.

HelpAge's OPA film aired on Bayon TV



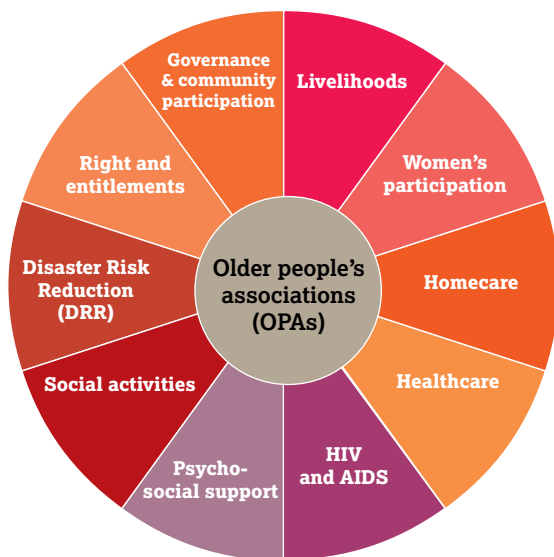
The film of *“Together in old age: Older people's associations (OPAs) in enhancing local development”* was broadcasted on Bayon TV, a national television of Cambodia in June and July 2010.

The film was produced by HelpAge International to share the experience and best practice of older people's associations in Asia and to show how older people

contribute to their families and communities. UNFPA in Cambodia supported the translation from English to Khmer.

The film includes in-depth interviews that probe the importance of OPAs in achieving major development and community empowerment goals within local communities in Cambodia.

OPAs are multifunctional organisations



What's next?

Through older people's associations, HelpAge and local partners will provide training and agricultural inputs to a total of 2,750 older people and their 11,000 family members in four districts in Battambang province: Bavel, Aek Phnom, Maung Russey and Banan. A total of 46 OPAs, made up of both older people and younger people, will be formed in the targeted communities. OPA members will receive trainings on OPA management, leadership, finance and accounting systems, grassroots advocacy, small business management, agriculture, literacy, water and sanitation and self-care promotion. In addition to the training, agricultural inputs such as vegetable and rice seeds will be given to the members. HelpAge and partners also aim to select and train volunteers as home helpers for frail older people. Indirectly, the project will benefit a total of 152,000 people in the 46 villages.

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