

GreenShoots

FOUNDATION

Green Shoots COVID-19 Community Survey

Overview:

Cambodia is now opening up following strict border closures and lockdown restrictions that impacted community mobility, access to stable income and education over the past two years of the COVID-19 Pandemic. While COVID-19 is still a fluctuating situation, Cambodia has been moving forward with its vaccination programme and is attempting to live in a ‘new normal’¹. Despite this, poverty levels remain higher than pre-pandemic levels and communities are still coping with the challenges faced throughout the pandemic².



Through this rapid assessment we hope to understand how COVID-19 has impacted the communities surrounding the Agri-tech Centre and how they have adapted to the changing environment. By talking to community members and gathering their insights we hope to better meet their changing needs in future projects. The map above shows the location of our project, in Oddar Meanchey province, which was exceptionally hit by COVID-19 in 2021. During February 2021, it saw migrant workers returning in hordes from Thailand and Phnom Penh. Many of these were employed in factory jobs or construction work- both of which saw a slump in the last few months. It had been reported that many high-schools and secondary schools in the province were converted to quarantine centres. The daily number of returning migrants was

¹ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/cambodia/publication/cambodia-country-economic-update-december-2021-cambodia-is-now-living-with-covid-19>

²

<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/0993350012062137172/pdf/P1773400f35a770af0b4fa0781dffcd517e.pdf>

approximately 320 per day. The main high school in Samrong Town, where Green Shoots operates, had approximately 958 individuals in quarantine³.

Aim: We feel this influx of people, and general strain on services due to COVID-19 needed to be studied in more depth so new interventions can be designed taking changes into account. We feel the needs of the community might have changed along with their ability to cope.

Methodology:

A rapid data collection study was conducted during December 2021 in collaboration with local partners in its design and execution. The study was designed specifically to be used in interviews with key informants (community leaders) and focus groups for community members. Questions have been organised around four main themes to understand how COVID-19 has impacted community members. The four themes are:

- **COVID-19 Information & Local Sentiment**
- **Home Life**
- **Food Security & Environment**
- **Income Sources**

Within each theme the survey also aims to understand coping strategies that may have emerged throughout COVID-19 and how lifestyles have been adapted to meet any emerging needs of the community.

It is proposed that focus groups and interviews will be led by local partners with the following selection criteria for interviewees and guidance.



³ <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50811363/oddar-meancheys-17-quarantine-centres-bursting-at-seams/>

Identified Key Informants: Trabek Village Chief, Bossbov Commune Chief, Council Member

Location of Key Informant Interview: Village Chief house, Commune building
1 hour per interview

Focus group selection criteria:

- Groups of 5 different households
- Important to include school director/ school teachers
- Ideal to organise two/ three session per week

Location of focus group: Village Meeting location or Agritech centre (1-1.5 hour per focus group discussion)



Key Takeaways

methods emerged to cope (with lockdowns) including changes in looking for food in the forest, foraging or growing more at home.

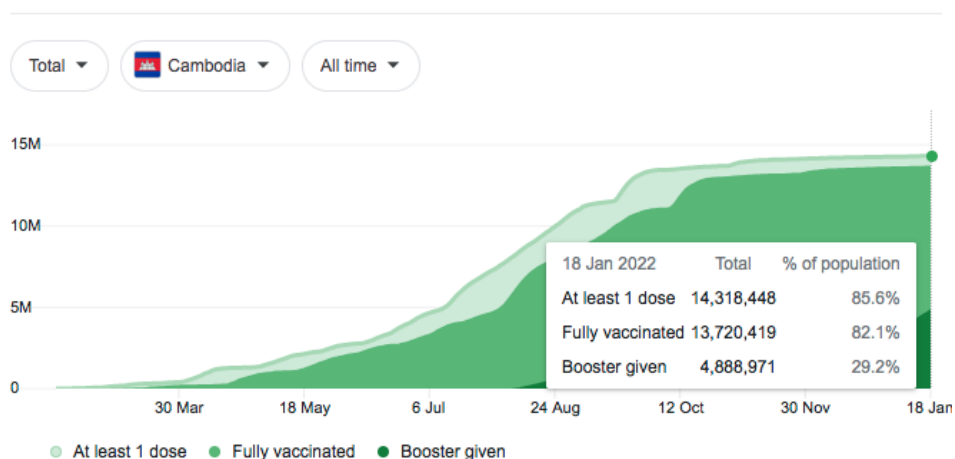
Families struggled to support themselves with more family members returning home, home schooling, food prices and loss of income

- Lockdowns impacted income for all community members, taking away the ability to work and sell goods. While prices for food and materials generally went up, the sale price of crops like rice and cassava went down, greatly impacting the community who rely heavily on agriculture as a means to generate income.
- Only those who were classed as ID-Poor received support from the government.

- Families who had access to food they grew themselves noticed fewer changes in their diet with access to rice, vegetables and meat.
- Some methods emerged to cope including changes in looking for food in the forest, foraging or growing more at home. Foraging is a part of Khmer culture in the countryside and this resulted in maintaining a level of food security at homes. Participants were aware that urban areas faced greater food shortages.
- Home schooling was a significant challenge for students during lockdowns. They adapted to searching on the internet and using their phones but this involved increased stress, strain on family resources and increased costs for phone cards and internet access. Most students conveyed being able to search for information online as a skill acquired during this time.

COVID-19 Information & Local Sentiment

- The local community felt significant fear towards COVID-19 initially, while cases were high and lockdowns impacted daily life. Now as cases have decreased and vaccinations are more common the level of fear has gone down.
- Community members were able to get information about COVID-19 through social media, village authorities and neighbours.
- Those classed as ID-Poor received financial and food support from the government.
- Access to vaccines was seen as the key support provided by the government and a key factor in reducing fear.
- Cambodia has seen over 80% of the country fully vaccinated.



Home Life

All interviewed groups experienced family members returning home during the pandemic, usually from Phnom Penh or Thailand due to their inability to work. Supporting more household members with little or no income created increased strain on finances.

- Students found it difficult to continue studying from home but made efforts to adapt and find ways to access information through google and using their phones. This brings to attention accessibility to technology within households
- From Key Informant Interviews, we can ascertain that no thoughts on how youth who may have returned home during the pandemic may be retained to support the community.



Food Security & Environment

With more family members to feed, some ate less during the pandemic due to price and access to food. Generally, once markets and borders were open, the initial lack of variety improved.

- Food and other essential material prices increased.
- Families who had access to rice and some home grown produce were able to continue to feed their family. Many would forage and go to the forest to find food. Examples of foraging include harvesting bamboo shoots, fishing, hunting, mushrooms in the forest and relying on nutritious leaves from bushes, trees. The photo above shows a meal prep from fish caught in the rice paddy by one family.
- A great wealth of knowledge exists in seasonality and anticipating opportunity.
- Some community members would borrow food within the community however most were only able to focus on supporting their own household.

- Oddar Meanchey, where this study was conducted, is heavily dependent on goods (perishable and non-perishable) from across the border in Thailand.
- When asked in Key Informant Interviews about increased home gardening activity during the pandemic. It seems only those already doing it in the past carried on and little or no new pick up of home gardening.
- Little to no attention was given towards nutritional content of foods provided as part of home assistance.

Income

All family members that were part of the focus group saw a decrease in overall house income. Many reported a loss of livelihood with little or no opportunity to diversify income generation

- All surveyed community members experienced a loss of income over the period of the pandemic.
- The price of rice and cassava decreased, further impacting income for farmers. This can be attributed to fluctuating weather patterns and drought conditions due to less rain and dams built upstream on the Mekong.⁴
- Some looked to the forest and foraging for food to possibly sell.
- Community members changed spending habits to be able to pay back loans. This included decreased spending on food.
- In Key Informant Interviews there was acknowledgment that farmers need support in animal raising and with ways to improve variety and cultivation in rural lifestyles.

Next Steps:

- Assist local government with youth training and retention schemes such as agri-business incubation at the AgriTech Centre
- Greater focus on female farming and nutrition-based food growing. This would be to encourage home gardening in response to changes in home life with increased households and returning migrants.
- COVID 19 has brought to attention the importance of foraging as more than a survival instinct but a wealth of knowledge housed in rural households. We aim to focus on maintaining this culturally significant and precious erudition through collaboration for a digital archive of Khmer produce and food.
- Importance of our Bio-Kitchen to showcase a farm-to-table ethos and food preparation for nutrient-dense food.

⁴ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/28/in-the-mekong-a-confluence-of-calamities/>