

Organic project empowers small farmers in Cambodia

THE NATION

“GOING ORGANIC” wasn’t easy for third-generation farmer Him Sothea, 49. But this mother of three daughters who hails from the Chum Teavchreng Village in Cambodia’s Kampong Chhnang Province got the boost she needed from a joint project run by the Cambodian Centre for Study and Development in Agriculture, and German International Cooperation (CEDAC/GIZ).

Sothea has been a farmer since childhood, following in the footsteps of her parents and grandparents. After completing grade 6, she married and began cultivating rice on a hectare and a half of land, just like her ancestors.

“Before joining the CEDAC/GIZ project, I was too shy to attend meetings,” she said in an interview with Asean Sustainable Agrifood Systems.

“People wouldn’t listen or pay any attention when I shared information. Maybe they saw me as poor and illiterate.”

Sothea is a perfect example of how a near-powerless worker can transform into a well-organised rice farmer.

In 2006, Sothea began participating in the CEDAC/GIZ project in order to learn more about techniques to improve harvests, and was named leader of a group of organic rice producers. She found herself spending a lot of time attending meetings, train-



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Him Sothea is one among 6,000 Cambodian farmers expected to benefit from a scheme employing local and German expertise.

ing and various other activities, while her husband tended to the fields.

Her husband began complaining when a neighbour taunted him, saying his wife’s place was at home or at the farm. But this didn’t stop Sothea from wanting to learn more.

Later she began sharing her newfound knowledge with her husband so he would understand and let her continue what she was doing.

On a normal day, Sothea wakes at 4am to cook, tend to the plants, feed the family’s pigs and cows, and work

on their now 4-hectare rice farm during the growing season. When the season is in full swing, she only gets half an hour to herself during the day, though during off-season planting, she manages to take an hour off. Now, her land is devoted to organic crops, which both feeds her family and also earns her US\$2,500 (Bt90,700) per year thanks to an organic rice crop that fetches a 15 per cent premium in the market.

Apart from farming, Sothea also earns \$40 a month working part-time

as a collector of village statistics and promoter of women's and children's health.

As for future plans, she wants to increase the production of organic produce and apply bio-control agents to her farm.

So far the project only has women participants, who are learning to share their knowledge with other farmers and cooperatives.

The participants learn organic production techniques and means to protect their crops, and natural ways of cultivation, including the control of pests. The lessons also make them aware of the damage chemicals and synthetic pesticides can have on human health and the environment, including soil degradation and water pollution.

The project has the added benefit of empowering the women by boosting their self-confidence and giving them a larger role in the agricultural sector and society.

The CEDAC/GIZ project trains farmers to implement biological plant protection techniques based on the trichoderma fungi, a vital part of the soil ecosystem.

Set up in cooperation with the USAID project HARVEST, the aim is to improve the yield of some 500 small farmers in Cambodia and spread their knowledge to 6,000 farmers across the country.