Exposure
‘Green Gold’
How One Woman’s Passion for Quality Vegetables Connects Farm to Table in Cambodia

It was a combination of personal and professional experiences that led Bun Sieng to found Natural Agriculture Village.

With a background in agriculture, Sieng understood the dangers of consuming vegetables grown with unsafe levels or types of chemical pesticides and fertilizers — yet she had trouble finding safely-grown vegetables in markets across Phnom Penh, Cambodia’s bustling capital city. Through her work, she observed that for many farmers wanting to grow safe vegetables, finding a reliable market was also a great challenge.

Sieng decided to take matters into her own hands. In 2012, she began renting a stall in O’Russey market, in the heart of Phnom Penh. There, she sold vegetables, sourcing her product from farmers’ associations whose members used safe production techniques. With this, Natural Agriculture Village, or NAV, was born.
AN EXPANDING MARKET

Over the next few years, Sieng expanded her business in new directions, as growing demand for safe, healthy vegetables brought new opportunities.

She moved her retail location near a popular park, where health-conscious customers were willing to pay more for quality vegetables, and then began selling surplus vegetables at a second wholesale market.

As she developed a network of reliable suppliers, Sieng set her sights on more formal markets. She began selling to one of the city’s most prominent grocery outlets in 2015, and quickly expanded to others. By 2016, NAV had stopped selling retail, focusing instead on supplying modern supermarkets with safe, locally-grown vegetables.

“At first we didn’t earn a profit,” Sieng says, “but I still wanted to try it. My aspiration was to see farmers have reliable markets.”

NEW MARKETS, NEW CHALLENGES

By selling to modern supermarkets, Sieng was able to provide a link between farmers growing quality vegetables, and consumers willing to pay a premium price.

NAV provided training to farmers on the principles of Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS), two sets of standards for farmers designed to ensure safe production methods and quality produce.

As she began working with more farmers, however, Sieng needed a way to efficiently and reliably monitor and verify their farming practices, to ensure that their fruits and vegetables were up to her standards.
SUPPORTING FARMERS

In 2019, Sieng received a grant through the USAID-funded Feed the Future Cambodia Harvest II project to expand her business activities with Cambodian farmers.

Through this grant, Sieng has been able to expand her system of training farmers on organic and safe production practices. NAV’s staff in the provinces both provide technical support to the farmers who need it, as well as monitor producers’ farms to ensure their compliance with NAV’s standards for organic and safe fruits and vegetables.

“Outside of our purchasing contracts, we teach our farmers, and verify the quality [of their products],” says Sieng. “In our contracts, we make clear that we will hold aside a small amount of the price per kilogram of whatever we purchase, in order to provide a small fee for the association committee, to incentivize and encourage them. Furthermore, with that money we can help any farmer who faces a heavy loss at harvest time. And we can set the rest aside, for the association’s other uses.”

SAFE, ORGANIC VEGETABLES FOR CAMBODIAN CONSUMERS

NAV currently works with more than 400 farmers, including 140 trained through the company’s collaboration with Harvest II. For farmers whose production practices do not yet meet NAV’s standards for organic and safe
vegetables, Sieng and her staff provide additional support, helping them improve their practices and make the necessary on-farm changes to begin supplying to NAV.

In Phnom Penh, Sieng has also begun to diversify her marketing activities. Supermarkets are still NAV’s primary retail partners, but through a second initiative, Sieng has established a wholesale shop near Doem Kor market. At Meas Baitong, or ‘Green Gold’, Sieng sells produce specifically marketed towards retailers, restaurants, and hotels.

“Packaging is important to differentiate our products from the wholesale market,” she says. “We have our own packaging and labeling so our product is unique.”

FUTURE GROWTH

Seven years after its founding, NAV is growing faster than ever before, helping provide safe, locally-grown vegetables for Cambodian consumers, and a stable and reliable market for farmers.

Sieng has attracted attention with her innovative business models and the close collaboration that she forms with her farmers. At supermarkets around the city, NAV’s produce section is distinguished by its rows of vegetables in branded packaging. And through grants support from Feed the Future Cambodia Harvest II, NAV has expanded its farmer networks to include horticulture producers from 13 provinces across the country.
Sieng knows that, as with any business venture, there are bound to be challenges ahead. She is confident, though, that her dedication to her farmers, and their commitment to growing safe, quality vegetables for Cambodian consumers, will ensure that NAV continues to grow.

“It is like they say: the bamboo falls, and then it rises back up,” she says.

ABOUT THIS STORY

Feed the Future Cambodia Harvest II builds upon years of USAID investment in Cambodia, working to accelerate the growth of the horticulture sector in the provinces of Pursat, Battambang, Siem Reap, and Kampong Thom, part of USAID Cambodia’s efforts to create sustainable and resilient pathways out of poverty for those in rural areas.

Harvest II works with horticulture sector actors to accelerate market growth, employing an integrated buyer-led and market systems approach that places a high priority on developing sustainable commercial partnerships between buyers (e.g. wholesalers, processors, and exporters) and producers. Harvest II also works with forward-looking input suppliers and financial institutions to pilot, test, and showcase innovations that will benefit the market as a whole.

In its first two and a half years, Harvest II engaged more than 5,700 actors in Cambodia’s horticulture sector to increase farm-level sales by $15 million and spur $5 million in new investment, helping private sector partners create 600 jobs along the way.

PHOTO CREDIT

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