
Dr Lien Pham

Thrive Networks | Evaluation Lead

IMPACTS OF WOBA FOR MARGINALISED HOUSEHOLDS IN RURAL CAMBODIA

Lessons learnt from the Mid-Term Review of WOBA Cambodia





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INTRODUCTION

The Women-Led Output-Based Aid (WOBA) Cambodia is an AU\$ 3.2 million project, funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) through the Water for Women Fund over 4.5 years (June 2018 to December 2022). Designed and implemented by Thrive Networks/East Meets West Foundation, WOBA Cambodia aims to improve health and gender equality for low-income and vulnerable households in Cambodia through sustainable and inclusive water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH).

One of the two key objectives in WOBA is to improve rural livelihoods through increased access to equitable WASH services, especially among marginalised community members. The targets on water and sanitation in project are:



3,750

WATER: 3,750 poor and poor plus vulnerable households connect to piped water schemes. Their connections are co-financed through a competitive output-based subsidy fund.



34,000

SANITATION: Improved access to hygienic sanitation in rural communities, with latrines constructed by 15,000 poor and 15,000 non-poor households, with 4,000 of these in the poor/GESI.

By June 2021, WOBA achieved 24,802 latrine constructions, representing 97% of the project target for latrine uptake. 5,687 poor plus GESI, 11,115 poor and 8,000 non-poor households completed latrines, of which 1,391 households had persons with disabilities. The water connection output is slower with about 33% of water connection targets achieved.

A Mid-term Review (MTR) of WOBA was conducted over a five-month period from March to July 2021 by an evaluation team comprise of a Team Leader (Dr Lien Pham, Thrive's Director of Research and Evaluation) and an external consultant. The primary purpose of the MTR is to get the better understanding about the effectiveness/efficiency and initial impact of the project approach and interventions. The team employed three data collection methods: 1) desk review of WOBA project design, deliverables and relevant WASH policies in Cambodia, 2) Focus group discussions, and 3) semi-structure interviews with beneficiaries, private sector operators, and Committees for Women and Children (CCWC) members – separately. Field visits were conducted in Prey Veng, Kratie, and Pursat.

This learning note is based on the findings from this MTR, focusing on the impacts (intended and unintended) of WOBA for marginalised households in rural Cambodia.

WASH NEEDS

As stated in the National Strategy for Rural Water Supply, Sanitation and Hygiene 2011–2025, access to clean water and basic sanitation service remains a challenge for most Cambodians living in rural areas. Interviews with beneficiaries affirm that their critical needs for WASH are similar across different socioeconomic and geographical areas in the three provinces included in the MTR. Prior to WOBA, many households did not have access to latrines. They defecated in the nearby bushes or forest including bamboo sites and in the rice paddy fields. Most villagers lived in an unclean and unhygienic environment and defecated in the public areas, and exposed to conditions that negatively impact their health such as snakebites. It was difficult to find dry places for defecation during the rainy seasons or when floods submerged the forest sites. Their water sources for consumption are rivers, ponds, and stored rainwater, and are highly susceptible to diseases like diarrhoea and other water borne infectious diseases. The beneficiaries had difficulties in fetching water from the rivers (common in Kratie), or ponds (common in Pursat and Prey Veng). Some used big jars to store water and pumped wells.

Climate change has increased the frequency and intensity of flooding and/or drought, both of which already cause severe hardship to these communities and further amplified their vulnerability to water borne illnesses due to lack access to improved sanitation means and reliance on unimproved water sources.

Sandan village in Kratie is located on the edge of the Mekong River and is a flood-prone area. Households in this village have no access to clean water unless they are connected to piped water.



One of the beneficiaries told a story of the flood destroying their rice and cash crop plantation which severely affected the livelihoods, so they had to focus on storage rice, crop adaptation plantation. Their village submerged under water, and most latrines were built on the ground so became inaccessible. They defecated in open water by using boats or in the uphill ground. Some defecated in the elevated latrines of neighbours.

In Prey Manoh and Tbeng villages in Prey Veng and Boengkak village in Pursat, flash flooding occurs regularly because of heavy rains. However, perhaps due to different geographical landscape, they seem to encounter less stress in using latrine and water security in these villages. The majority of latrines are still functional. Some use soiled bags to prevent water submerged villages and latrines. Others choose to defecate in the nearby forest.

Storms occasionally happened in all four villages visited, and also led to flood and consequences on latrine and water supply. Droughts, however, were very common in all four villages in three provinces which impacted water security and thus latrine use. As most households in the Sandan village were already connected to piped water, there was less of an impact from drought because they could still use latrines and access clean water. Two villages, Prey Manoh and Tbeng in Prey Veng seemed reasonably well adapted to drought because they had an underground aquifer and stored rainwater to use. In Boengkak village in Pursat province, the beneficiaries had more difficulty than the other three villages. They relied on private truck water sellers (which costs about 25,000 riels per tank) and ponds. The underground aquifer is scarce. During drought periods, most households used stored water for sanitation.

Other impacts of climate change are lost employment which led to indebtedness, migration out of villages, or opting for self-employment.



One beneficiary said, “I could not generate income to support my kids. Floods damaged people’s fish catch. They did not have fishing nets to repair. No one hired me to transplant young rice and yield collection. Now farmers stopped practicing traditional rice cultivation. They have adapted to using new methods of rice cultivation, and use machinery equipment rather than labour hire.”

To cope with loss of livelihood due to climate related issues and natural disasters, some beneficiaries borrowed from the local banks and relatives to buy rice and food, but others were also buying water in the dry season. Some chose to migrate to seek employment elsewhere, or even changed their jobs.



For example, one beneficiary shifted from growing rice to selling grocery because their rice paddy was repeatedly damaged from floods,

“I stopped rice cultivation to be a grocery seller. I borrowed money from my relatives coupled with cash relief package of the government. This provided the opportunities for me to run a grocery shop in this village.”

COVID-19 has affected beneficiaries' income generation. Most people in the villages visited earned their income from labour work and have lost their job because of COVID-19. Elderly people and single mothers seem to be most affected by COVID-19 due to economic loss. To address these economic impacts of COVID-19, the government has implemented the economic relief package to support poor families. The beneficiaries used this funding for food and livelihood expenses. Most felt that the package was insufficient to meet their basic living expenses, yet some used this package to build latrine.

Intended Impacts of WOBA

Most households interviewed gained awareness about the importance of improved sanitation for their health and the health of the community. They understood the potential of contracting diseases from open defecation. Such awareness and knowledge are the intended impacts of the CCWC's awareness-raising activities in WOBA. The subsidy can be a nudge to get the family to decide to install latrines, but understanding the value of building latrine for their own and others' health is the decision trigger. Some prioritised purchase of latrine over food and basic necessities when they understood the link between sanitation and health.



A beneficiary said, "After the introduction about WASH by the village facilitators and other facilitators, I realised that there are many health problems due to lack of knowledge and practice of hygiene and sanitation. I learnt about handwashing with soaps, using clean water and drinking safe water as well as using latrine for defecating are the major methods to prevent infection of diseases. So, we decided to build a latrine."

The partners' discussion in the focus groups also underlined WOBA's intended impact on improving knowledge and changed attitudes of the communities. They agreed that once the poor and socially disadvantaged households understood the positive link of sanitation, water, hygiene and health, they would construct latrines,

"Some women villagers have little knowledge and did not understand sanitation and hygiene. Once they understood, they were cooperative. They built latrines and continued learning on sanitation, hygiene, and clean water as well as MHM management. The more knowledge they have, the more they want to learn."

"Knowledge enable people to build latrines. It's not poverty that is a barrier to sanitation."

Households' understanding about WASH and health has led to changed attitude toward hygiene and handwashing practices. They acquired knowledge about hygienic behaviours including how and when to wash their hands with soaps. They noted that washing hands with soaps has become a regular practice. They spoke about being aware of the need to wear facemasks, social distancing, and practising sanitation and hygiene. They have used latrines regularly and felt more secure, safe, and improved privacy especially for children, girls, and females, and pregnant women. There was only a small number of beneficiaries who said they were not using the latrines or wash hands with soap.

In addition, the household members interviewed and the CCWC women spoke about improved sanitation and hygiene surrounding the house and the whole communities and therefore better living conditions.

The intended impact on having access to clean water through piped water connection is evident in terms of changed practices of drinking safe water and reduced time to fetch water from the river or other sources. Although the majority of beneficiaries reported that they consumed boiled water, filtered water, purified water, and bottled water, which were observed across three provinces, a number still used other water sources.

Unintended Impacts of WOBA

Affordability is the main barrier that beneficiaries encountered in building latrine or connecting to piped water system. The subsidised cost of latrine is still very high for many poor people. For elderly people and people with disabilities, it is very difficult to save even a small amount because of ongoing basic needs.

Affordability also impacts latrine use if the latrine did not come with support structure and roof.



One beneficiary in Kratie gave an example, “An elderly couple was eligible to receive latrine subsidy. They did not install the latrine and still continued practices of open defecation. The reasons were that they did not have the money to hire labour for installing and lacked money to construct walls and roofs.”

Another unintended impact is that some households were asked by the mobilisers to use their COVID-19 support funding from the Government to pay for the latrine. As some CCWC members said,

“The poor do not have money to cover the rest of the subsidy. They are encouraged to use some of the COVID-19 relief package for this cost.”

“Money from COVID-19 support package could be used for paying the cost of latrine.”

Other households were encouraged to join a group of households and make regular deposits into a pooled fund and take turn in drawing down on the pooled fund. One CCWC member explained,

“Our strategies are to persuade the poor to establish saving group with about 4 to 5 per group and rotate drawdowns to pay for the latrines.”

Although these methods may produce the desired target of latrine construction which brings about health benefits, they do affect the livelihoods and living conditions of many families who chose to sacrifice basic living costs. Their economic vulnerabilities have worsened due to COVID-19 and climate change. Women have also suffered more because of lost jobs, or their husbands have migrated to find employment. Having to pay for latrine work against the idea of the COVID-19 package relief ‘no one die because of hunger’. Although these unintended impacts arise from the COVID-19 situation, which is unforeseen, it is because the subsidy scheme still leaves many poor households having to shoulder financing of basic WASH. For this reason, some of the suppliers interviewed allowed the beneficiaries to pay by instalment or even reduced the price for most vulnerable and desperate households.

Ways Forward

These findings suggest that WOBA has made good strides in raising awareness of health benefits associated with latrines and piped water for poor and vulnerable households in rural Cambodia. However, unintended consequences need to be recognised to improve WOBA's inclusive approach and progress towards

“leave no one behind”.

Some recommendations are:

- Increase content on WASH and health delivered to households to include contamination, water related diseases, poor infrastructures, scarcity and risks relating to flood/droughts
- Continue to deliver WASH, health, and hygiene information even if the households have already built latrine or connected to piped water
- Deliver WASH education in a targeted way to ensure women can access them, for example not at the time they have to fulfil domestic duties; information on hygiene practices is not the same as information on water filters effectiveness or water testing therefore should be delivered differently; identify networks that women trust to deliver information in addition to the CCWC and female volunteers
- Incorporate feedback of beneficiaries about quality of service and products, and experience of WOBA in the verification surveys and use their feedback to improve and adapt the implementation processes
- Supplement the current method of selection of households to WOBA using government ID poor cards with other means of identification and documentation of poor households.
- If possible, review appropriate designs and construction options for latrines in challenging environments with higher subsidies. A pilot can be conducted for the prototype and subsidy scheme.
- The CCWC's practice of encouraging households to use COVID 19 relief package to build latrines should be discouraged. WOBA could support households economically affected by COVID 19 by finding alternative resources such as pagoda in Prey Veng.

References

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