

Sahakoom Apeewaht

Sala



Rationale

PEPY began working in Chanleas Dai commune in 2006, following a partnership project to fund the construction of a primary school building. The motivation behind this project was to support the improvement of education standards in the area. However, the PEPY team quickly realized something, which soon turned into something of a PEPY mantra: “schools don’t teach kids – people do”. As a result, PEPY implemented a range of education projects in schools in Chanleas Dai, such as additional literacy, computer, and English classes, as well as teacher support and training initiatives (you can read our Lessons Learned for those and other projects ([here](#))). In the main, these projects were wholly funded by PEPY and staffed by PEPY team members. While there were many positive impacts in terms of student performance and teacher capacity, PEPY was facing the challenge of ownership of the overall problem. As the schools and community made no financial contributions, or had any particularly expectations for the projects, their investment in their outcome and their ongoing involvement was inconsistent. To create long-term improvement, we realized we would need to look to more participatory approaches, and find a way to involve children, teachers, school leadership, community members and local authorities in the development and improvement of the educational opportunities in their area. Moreover, we began to be increasingly concerned with questions of sustainability. We wanted to find a way to continue to support education programs in the area, yet over time work ourselves out of a job. We started actively trying to learn about organizations in our field asking how they thought about sustainability and what their long-term exit strategies (for those who had them) were.

One of the organizations we visited in 2009 was Schools for Children of Cambodia, who ran a program called the Primary School Development Program (PSDP). This project, linked to the Ministry of Education initiatives to promote Child Friendly Schools, looked at the role of School Support Committees, and took a 3-year, capacity building approach to help schools and communities develop the skills to improve their schools. PSDP was well-aligned with the government’s goals, comprehensive, community-oriented and aimed at sustainable improvements to government schools. Inspired by this project, PEPY decided to adopt a similar approach in Chanleas Dai making a few key changes to the model.

SAS methodology

Relevant definitions

Quality education: one that provides children with the skills to live healthy and productive lives. PEPY believes that the following are necessary inputs for a quality education:

- Safe, clean and welcoming school environments which are conducive to learning
- Adequate teaching and learning materials
- Relevant educational content (i.e. Local Life Skills)
- Ongoing professional development of teachers and directors
- Strong school leadership
- Parent and community involvement in the education of their children and the running of their schools
- Students' on-time school enrollment, by age 6

Community: The group of people living within the geographical area served by a school or other stakeholders who have a vested interest in the school. The community includes: students, parents, grandparents, teachers, the school director, religious leaders (monks), local organizations and associations, and local authorities, such as the village chief, commune chief and DOE.

School Support Committee: A group of people consisting of parents, teachers, the school director, and influential community members who are responsible for the development of their school and education in their community.

Background to the model

SAS was largely adopted from the Primary School Development Program implemented by Schools for Children of Cambodia. At the time, Schools for Children of Cambodia were looking to share their approach, and gave trainings to the PEPY team in the project and implementation. PEPY made a few key changes in creating SAS:

- PEPY supported school income generation schemes and training for proposal writing to help schools become financially self-sufficient.
- PEPY provided diminishing levels of financial support for implementation of school development plans in the 5 years of the project.
- PEPY provided SSCs with an "activity menu" (see a similar approach by KAPE in their [ESCUP model](#)) to help them select activities to do in their school development plan.
- Kids club activities were replaced with supporting Ministry of Education-prescribed student councils.

Key elements

To promote involvement and ownership, PEPY gave a Khmer name to the project: Sahakoom Apeewaht Sala (trans. communities developing schools), which was shortened to SAS (pronounced Saw-Ah-Saw in Khmer).

The goal of the project was to empower communities to develop sustainable schools that provide all children a quality education. The key elements of the project were as follows:

- 1) Mobilizing School Support Committees (SSCs) to increase communities' ownership of and participation in their schools and to build accountability between schools and the communities they serve.
- 2) Coaching SSCs to identify their education-related problems and design and implement community-driven solutions in annual school development plans. School Development Plans are required by the Ministry of Education, but they are often developed by the school principal, with little community input, or accountability. SAS sought to change this by involving the SSC. The school development plans are based on the results of a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA), which gives parents and students and other community members opportunities to identify problems at their school and ideas they have for solving them. Training and tools for developing these plans were provided to SSCs so they could continue the processes in the future. Each year, the SSCs would choose 3-5 projects to implement to 0 ideally focused on improving the quality of education and / or attracting students to attend school. quality of education offered. In the first year these projects were fully funded by PEPY, but in subsequent years PEPY funding was set to decrease, meaning the community had to source funds themselves for their projects.
- 3) Providing training and basic resources to teachers and school directors to strengthen the quality of teaching and leadership at the school. This was known as PEPY's "Standard Support" package. The support focused on training for teachers and SSCs, particularly in areas where SSC members may not have been able to identify a particular need but that were necessary to improve the quality of education. These trainings included:
 - Conducting PRA, and related data collection and analysis
 - School Development Plan
 - Child Friendly Schools policy
 - First Aid

- Child Protection
- Teacher training
- Financial management and school budgets
- Education law
- Communications skills and strategy development
- Advocacy
- Gender
- Project cycle management
- Proposal writing
- Leadership and management (school principal only)

Another key part of standard support was exposure visits to identified “model school” for teachers to share their experience with other teachers, and also gain ideas from other schools.

School selection

One of the most important parts of this project was selecting schools to work with. As SAS is a project based on school and community ownership, it was crucial that the schools involved had the motivation and support to fully participate. The first part of school selection involved spreading information about the project in the area, and inviting schools to apply. This helped the PEPY team to understand which schools and principals were particularly motivated to develop their school in this way.

PEPY received guidance from the Provincial Office of Education (PoE) with regards to potential schools to work with. It was important to PEPY that the PoE understood the goals of the project, and were happy to support its development. In addition, PEPY worked closely with the District Office of Education (DoE). The DoE support the PEPY team in advocating for the project, and dispersing information in the local area. They also provided advice and support throughout the project.

One of the most important parts of the school selection process was meeting with school directors and village officials. This gave the PEPY team a very strong idea of the motivation and capacity of the school and community leadership.

Another consideration for school selection was whether the school was currently receiving support from other NGOs. As the SAS methodology focused on building a sense of ownership and responsibility, this process could easily be disrupted by other NGOs funding building projects, or bringing resources into a school. While relationships with other NGOs wouldn't necessarily preclude the possibility of establishing the SAS project in a school, it is definitely worth considering whether different interventions would be complementary, or confusing for the school and community.

A condition of the SAS model was that schools did not charge informal fees to students. A common practice in Cambodia is teachers charging students a small amount to attend classes, to supplement their low wages. This was not tolerated as part of the SAS model, and should and community members were made aware of the condition.

School development plan

One of the initial trainings for the SSC was on conducting Participatory Rural Appraisals. The goal of this process was to encourage the SSC to better understand the needs within their community and how that could inform the development of the school. In addition, it build key skills such as research, data collection, communication and advocacy, and data analysis. In the first year of the project, the PRA was conducted by PEPY staff with trainings provided for SSC members. In later years of the project, the PRAs were conducted by the SSC, with reduced input from PEPY.

The results of the PRA would inform the design of the School Development Plan. At the beginning of each school year, the SSC would meet to discuss and agree on possible development activities for the coming school year. The SAS team would support the formation of this discussion into an activity plan. An example development plan may include:

- Initial workshop covering the program agreement, structure, and the role of SSCs
- Training on education law
- Garden design and tree planting
- Study visits to other schools
- ETL training
- Needs assessment with students and community
- Workshops on data collection and analysis
- Training on strategic planning
- Trash solutions – installing a rubbish kiln
- First aid training
- Improving school water system
- Building playground/play areas for children
- Review projects mid-year, revise activity plan if needed
- Training on accounts and financial management
- Training on documentation and reporting
- Monthly update meetings with SSC and SAS team

These activities would be plotted over the course of the year. Often – due to adverse weather conditions or religious ceremonies – projects were delayed and the activity plan would be revised accordingly

Income generation

As part of PEPY’s SAS model, over the course of three years, schools were expected to fundraise in order to implement their development projects.

Year	PEPY contribution	School contribution
1	100%	0%
2	70%	30%
3	50%	50%

In order to raise the needed funds, schools were encouraged to develop sustainable ways of generating income. SSC members were invited to participate in trainings on a variety of projects (fish farming and mushroom growing being the most common) and visit locations that were successfully making money from these projects. Schools also found that if the local pagoda was involved (some schools had a monk on the School Support Committee) then raising money for school projects from community donations was much easier when done in connection with religious festivals.

Standard support

As outlined above, PEPY provided a “standard package” of training to the SSC, school principal and teachers. This support was closely linked to the six dimensions of Child Friendly Schools outlined by the Ministry of Education:

1. All Children can go to school. This was addressed by the agreement surrounding informal fees made with each school at the start of the program.
2. Effective Teaching and Learning. Schools were provided with resources to support their classes, as well as training on these resources. In addition, teachers were trained on how to

make their own resources from the materials available in and around their school. ETL training was conducted for teachers, and exchange visits were conducted with other schools to share ideas. Trainings were also conducted around the concept of Child Friendly Schools. Once a year, as part of building the teachers' capacity, PEPY worked with the schools to host Literacy and Math camps. These were 2 week projects that focused on teacher training in the first week, and then active teaching practice in the second, with children invited to the school for a week long "learning" camp, focused on play-based and active learning.

3. Safety, health, and child protection. Water filters were installed in every school, with trainings provided on how to maintain the filters. This was to ensure all children had access to clean drinking water. First aid trainings were conducted for teachers and a First Aid Kit was provided for every school. Child Rights and Child Protection trainings were also conducted with teachers and SSC members.
4. Gender. All schools were expected to collect gendered data, to ensure tracking of girls participation. As part of ETL training, teachers were encouraged to call on girls to speak in class, and made aware of different techniques to engage the different genders. Specific trainings on gender issues were conducted with teachers and community members in year 3.
5. Community involvement. Community involvement was addressed at the beginning of the project, when monitoring the level of investment in education from the community. IN addition, mobilizing SSCs also contributed greatly to community involvement, as they were often inactive prior to the project. Training in community advocacy was also conducted for SSC members.
6. Government support. In rural Cambodia, often support from government bodies is remotely felt at best. As part of the program, the SAS team conducted trainings on leadership, creating school development plans, monitoring and evaluation, education law and policy, and school and education budget. These trainings were designed to strengthen the ability of SSCs and school leadership to manage their school, and work with local authorities for the development of their school.

Challenges

Teacher turnover

One of the challenges of working in rural areas is that teachers often do not stay long at a school. Teachers will stay at a rural school for 2-3 years and then move on, often back to their hometown, or to a teaching job in a city with a higher salary. Schools would often find it a challenge to replace teachers, especially in time for the start of a new school term or year. As such, while the training was never wasted with teachers, the turnover did impact the development of the specific school, as the new teachers would not be familiar with the SAS program, nor the teaching techniques that were shared.

Teachers income

Teachers in rural primary schools in Cambodia receive a very low salary – as little as \$80 per month. As such, often they struggle to feed their family, and they will prioritize earning extra income over improving their teaching through training. In addition, the low salary feeds into a lack of commitment where teachers are often late to school, or do not show up for lessons. It is a systemic problem in Cambodia that teachers are not paid enough to sustain them, and so schools find it difficult to attract committed staff. This was an issue PEPY found very difficult to address at a grass roots level.

Income generation

The income generation aspect of SAS gave the most challenges to PEPY's SAS team. While fish farming was successful in one school, in another it was discovered that the community didn't like buying farmed fish. In another, the fish were stolen, which set the project back. Mushroom growing was also problematic, with much of the training and methods available involving electricity for part of the process – not ideal in communities that are not on the electricity grid. The schools persevered with the projects they believed in, but the returns on these projects were not, at the time, enough to raise the funds needed for school development projects. Instead, schools came to rely on creative ways of fundraising from community members – such as linking donations to religious festivals or public holidays – in order to raise the money needed to complete their project.

Capacity of SSCs

Many SSC members had not had the opportunity to attend or complete school themselves, and so often their ability to grasp complex ideas was limited. Some members also did not have particularly high literacy levels. This became problematic when conducting trainings in areas such as proposal writing or education law. Developing these types of knowledge and skills often required a much higher level of literacy and general academic capacity than could be found in many SSC members. In addition, as SSC members had limited experience of education themselves, they found it difficult to identify ways to improve the quality of the education being offered in their school. Development plans often focused on infrastructure improvements – in other words, tangible, visible projects that members could easily understand and contribute to.

Leadership

School leadership, and the role of the School Director played a critical part in the success of the SAS Project. While the investment of the School Support Committee members was also important, this

could succeed or fail based on the motivation of the school director. This was evidenced quite clearly in the schools PEPY worked with. The SAS team saw the biggest changes at the school with the strongest school director. Another school also made great improvements, but struggled to continue with their projects when the school director retired. It proved to be much harder to work with principals who hadn't been part of the initial application and set up for the project. A third school, where the school director proved to have less of a commitment to the project struggled to complete the development projects and raised the needed funds from the community.

Timeframe

It became quite quickly apparent that three years was not a sufficient time frame for the project. While it was possible to complete much of the planned training and activities within three years, this did not give adequate time for a successful transition – especially in terms of the School Support Committee feeling confident to run their own affairs and raise the needed money.

A potential five-year time period was discussed, but it was also clear that schools had varying capacities and so the choice of time frame was possible best agreed with each individual school, and then reviewed at various stages during the project. Another consideration was the possible risk of dependency on the implementing organization. In choosing the correct timeline for the project, it is a fine line between leaving too soon, and risking no continuing work because of lack of capacity, and leaving too late and risking no continuing work due to dependency.

PEPY changed strategic direction in 2011 to working with young people rather than with school and communities. While a two-to-three year extension may have been ideal for the SAS project, this wasn't possible within the new strategic framework and so the project in all schools concluded after three years.

Basic needs in the community

In the rural areas in which PEPY implemented the SAS model, the target communities are very poor. Many adults in the region received limited schooling themselves, and do not strongly value education over other alternatives (particularly contributing to the household economy). It was difficult to communicate the long-term benefits of education over short-term gain of immediate income. Adults and children would illegally migrate to Thailand to earn money, leaving the community for months at a time. In such circumstances, community advocacy and securing engagement was particularly challenging for the SAS team.

External environment

Shifts in government policy could also strongly affect the progress of the SAS project. For example, in one year, the government introduced a new policy concerning contract teachers (similar to "supply" teachers), and removed several contract teachers from the schools PEPY was partnering with. This meant that some government teachers were left in charge of two classes at one time. It is clearly makes it very difficult to improve teaching quality when there is a significant reduction in resources.

Impact

PEPY implemented the SAS project in three schools in Chanleas Dai commune.

	School A	School B	School C
Project year	2009- 2012	2009 - 2012	2010 - 2013
Students	523	567	356
Teachers	9	9	4
SSC members	11	12	15

Overview of fundraising

These comparative figures are taken from the year 2011 – 2012, when SAS was being implemented in all three schools, and all three schools were at the stage when they were being expected to raise their own funds to pay for part of their projects.

The figures below are a clear indication that schools can raise their own funds, if given the support and training to do so. However, the figures also demonstrate the impact of effective leadership. School B, the biggest school, had the weakest school leadership, and struggled to raise funds. School C had particularly strong school leadership – and the largest School Support Committee. Due to this, despite being the smallest school with the fewest teachers, being only two years into the project, and having a fundraising goal for just 50% of their development plan budget – School C raised nearly the same amount of funds as School A school.

School A	School B	School C
Year 3 of project	Year 3 of project	Year 2 of project
Raising 70% of budget	Raising 70% of budget	Raising 50% of budget
\$769.50	\$452.83	\$755.15

Overview of activities

School A	
Year 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Outside play area for children Creation of teaching materials Bike repair classes Mushroom growing training Handicraft training
Year 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fish raising training Filling of land Development of school garden Creation of teaching materials Provision of kindergarten materials Mushroom growing activities
Year 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Garbage kiln construction Roof repair Continue with fish and mushroom projects Filling of land Decoration of classrooms with student achievements Implementation of toilet cleaning rota

School B	
Year 1	Rebuilding school pond Filling of land
Year 2	Building huts in school yards Creation of school garden Construction of well and pump Creation of kindergarten materials Mushroom growing training Fish growing trainings
Year 3	Improvement of school garden Play area for students Fence around school pond Repair toilets

School C	
Year 1	Creation of Kindergarten Mushroom training Fish raising training Water filters Well construction Creation of teaching materials
Year 2	Garden improvement Continuation of mushroom projects Filling of land Securing food support from WFP
Year 3	Construction of 2 huts in school yard Filling of land Construction of water system Improvement of drainage Purchase of pre-school chairs Garden improvement

School impact overview

School A

PEPY worked with School A primary school through a range of different projects, so it is difficult to attribute specific successes to the SAS project. However, the above activities did contribute substantially to the overall effectiveness of the school, and many teachers at School A school were committed to the training opportunities available to them, and their capacity noticeably improved.

School B

School B was chosen to participate in SAS on the basis of the school principal, who was particularly committed and determined. However, the principal retired very soon after the project was established and the subsequent principal had much less interest in pursuing the SAS mode. The activities conducted were successful, and provided needed improvements to the school, but the projects and developments have not continued in the same way since PEPY's departure. The school is now working with a Korean NGO which is funding other development projects.

School C

School C had particularly strong leadership and an invested School Support Committee chose projects for their school that would make the school attractive to students. As a result, the projects

were also popular with the students, and many students were involved in maintaining projects such as the school garden. School C had the added benefit of having a monk on the School Support Committee. This helped substantially with community advocacy, and many of the school projects had strong support and encouragement from the local community.

Lessons learned

It takes a long time to build capacity

PEPY set too high expectation on how quickly people would pick up new skills and implement knowledge. Sending a group of people on a course to learn how to farm fish, does not make them expert fish farmers! It takes time for people to learn and develop new skills. Three years was not enough, especially for the income generation portion of the project. As mentioned previously, an ideal timeframe is difficult to suggest as it depends on the needs of the school, and there is also the risk of dependency. Five to six years with the schools PEPY was working with would probably have been ideal.

Exposure visits

Visits to other schools were part of the “Standard Support” offered to each school participating in SAS and these proved to be particularly useful. The visits always had a strong impact on the teachers and School Support Committee members. Seeing other schools in the region, and what they were able to achieve in similar situations gave inspiration and motivation. It was also an opportunity for the participants to share ideas and experiences with other teachers and recognize that they were facing similar challenges.

Importance of project staff

PEPY has always had a young team, and while this has been very effective for working with young people and motivating students, when working with adults and older community members it could be very challenging in Cambodia’s hierarchical society. The SAS project takes a unique set of skills to be implemented effectively and sometimes our team did not have quite the right background or level of experience. PEPY dealt with this problem through hiring additional staff, and also bringing in trainers for specific topics. However, ideally, the project staff should be consistent throughout the project to enable a strong relationship with the school and community.

School leadership

As mentioned previously, school leadership can have an enormous impact of the success of the project. This is part of the reason for the rigorous selection procedure, but it is impossible to ascertain 100% that a School Director will not only continue to support the project, but also remain the school. This is something that needs to be considered carefully when mapping out assumptions and success indicators at the start of the project.

Funding of on-going costs and consumable items

At the beginning of the SAS project, PEPY funded some on-going school costs, and consumable items. This caused problems later on in terms of sustainability! When choosing how to fund the projects in SAS, and which projects to fund, it is essential to make sure that the NGO is contributing to start-up costs, or costs for items that have a long life span.

Teacher trainers

When implementing the teacher training aspects of the project, PEPY hired teacher trainers from the Provincial Teacher Training Center, based in Siem Reap. While these trainers had a great deal of professional experience, they were not that familiar with working in a rural context. This meant that there was a lack of understanding between the trainers and the teachers themselves, which caused some problems in terms of the teachers' motivation to attend the training. If implementing the project again, PEPY would look for trainers either from the area of implementation, or trainers with experience working in rural schools.

Working with other community development projects

As in rural communities there are often basic needs that are not being met, SAS would be most effective if implemented with other projects. For example, rural communities can benefit from income generation projects for many reasons – not just to fund their schools. Health projects are also important, as the attendance at school by children and teachers is often caused by preventable diseases. If SAS was run in conjunction with other community projects such as these, all would ideally contribute to the other's success. Running an education project in isolation in a community that has very little resource puts a large burden of expectation on community members who are still trying to, or only just become able to cover their basic needs.

