



Innovators expanding clean cooking access in Cambodia's remote communities

The Higher Tier Cooking Component (HTCC) strengthens Cambodia's clean cooking supply chain through market-based solutions that improve rural access and drive adoption. Supporting 67 rural SMEs, the project enhances business operations and facilitates scaling finance. HTCC's Innovation Fund (IF) provides financial and in-kind support for enterprises to scale operations, diversify products, expand distribution, and develop innovative sales strategies.

Local businesses bringing clean cooking to rural homes

In the first round the HTCC committee awarded an outstanding small shop owner with an entrepreneurial spirit, who showed the way on how to expand cookstove sales channels in remote rural Cambodia. Building on this successful 'last mile'-approach, the committee awarded grants to four other shop owners in Kampong Speu, Kampot, Pursat, and Siem Reap provinces. These shop owners evolved into grassroots-level entrepreneurs that replicated the business model. They not only strengthened their own businesses, but also drove behavioral change toward clean cooking for households in remote communities. These five changemakers played a vital role in making clean cooking possible, contributing to improving health, and protecting the environment in their communities.

Key recommendations

- Target small, local entrepreneurs over large companies for rural market penetration. SMEs reached 159 villages and scaled rapidly (from 5 to 105 stoves/month), while established brands decided not to participate. Grassroots actors adapt faster and reach remote areas more effectively.
- Simplify application processes and build capacity support into project design. Family businesses needed direct help with proposals and accounting—complex requirements can exclude capable entrepreneurs. Provide hands-on support rather than expecting independent compliance.
- Use milestone payments but build in flexibility. Paying after results ensured accountability but created cash flow problems. Consider flexibility in timelines and giving some money upfront for inventory to reduce risks.
- Embed peer mentoring networks in project architecture. Successful recipients naturally mentored new ones, creating organic knowledge transfer and scaling without additional costs. This proved more effective than formal training programs.
- Integrate trust-building and relationship development from the outset. Clean cooking adoption requires sustained community engagement, not just technology deployment. Work through existing local networks rather than starting from scratch.

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Highlights of IF small grant activities

1. Marketing campaigns in rural villages

The SMEs and their teams traveled to more remote areas from their locations, from village to village by van, truck, or tuk-tuk, carrying stoves, shop banners, promotional materials, and a sound system to draw attention. They distributed flyers highlighting discounts, warranties, gifts, and payment options, stopping wherever people gathered to engage with the community. They reached a total of 159 remote villages with marketing campaigns and by having booths in pagodas during special occasions such as Khmer New Year and Pchum Ben festival, where they met a lot of people.



2. Sales agents' recruitment and cooperation

The entrepreneurs looked for potential sales agents among existing sellers in the village. They identified those who were good at selling, friendly, and trustworthy. In meetings with identified sellers and local authorities, the entrepreneurs discussed the terms and conditions for becoming sales agents, including the agreements that would guide their cooperation. After that, they invested in stock for electric cookstoves to store at the sales agents' local shops. Some conducted market surveys with sales agents to understand buyers' preferences in villages. There were 90 sales agents, (72 females) recruited in total.

Community meeting and cooking demonstration in remote villages — introducing clean cooking solutions and engaging local residents through hands-on product demonstrations.





Sales agent recruitment and collaboration in action.

3. Training on stove maintenance skills

After selecting sales agents, the entrepreneurs provided clear instructions on customer care, available promotions, and record keeping. They also arranged training sessions on stove maintenance to ensure agents could deliver quality after-sales service and uphold product warranties. This helped strengthen customer trust, especially in areas where poor follow-up had damaged confidence in similar products.

The maintenance service and warranty proved to be important strategies to attract new buyers and retain loyal customers. Sales agents acted as the first point of contact for minor repairs and follow-ups, which not only reduced returns but also encouraged word-of-mouth referrals. By investing in after-sales support, entrepreneurs created stronger, longer-term relationships with their customers.



4. Cooking demonstration/community meetings

The entrepreneurs cooperated with local authorities to gather villagers for meetings, sometimes holding two sessions in larger villages to demonstrate cooking technologies. During the meetings, they explained the purpose, the impact of traditional cooking, and common misconceptions of technologies, taste, and cost. Then, they invited volunteers to cook rice with the electric rice cooker, boil eggs with the electric pot, and grill dry fish with the air-fryer. While observing food, the SMEs explained the benefits of e-cooking and provided available options. After explaining everything, the food was cooked. With a meter they calculated the energy consumed and the cost, which triggered direct sales of cooking appliances. Some entrepreneurs even offered free maintenance services during the meeting, building trust and credibility with the villagers.



Mr. Heam Bunheng



Ms. Va Loemheang



Mr. Sam Thai

Meet our grant recipients

Mr. Heam Bunheng

A passionate pioneering entrepreneur is transforming his small shop in Basedth District, Kampong Speu province into a thriving business. He is the first to receive a grant of USD10,000 under the project in 2023.

With the HTCC's support, he expanded his business network to 25 sales agents and increased cookstove sales tenfold (from 5 to 50 stoves per month). He has strengthened his leadership skills in business, formed better connections with local authorities and villagers, and gained new technical skills in clean cooking. These new skills have made him a confident entrepreneur and a role model for other SMEs to follow in his path.

Ms. Va Loemheang

A committed SME from a small shop in Kandieng district, Pursat province, which is about 45 minutes away from the Pursat city center. She received USD 4,500 for implementing the project in 2024.

She has transformed herself from shy, passive, and insecure into a strong entrepreneur. With motivation and support, she has developed herself, and her business and experienced personal growth. Her business has expanded to 13 sales agents and her cookstove sales have gradually increased, from 4 stoves to 48 stoves per month, exceeding her initial expectations. She gained knowledge, skills, and confidence to be more innovative and proactive in managing her business.

Mr. Sam Thai

A hardworking and dedicated entrepreneur from Samrong Tong district, Kampong Speu province, is driving change despite resistance from family and neighbors. Inspired by Mr. Heam Bunheng's story, he overcame many barriers, seeking support from Mr. Heam Bunheng to apply for funding. He received USD 5,500 for implementing the project in 2024.

After being awarded, he has worked hard to ensure the project is on track. He and his wife shared responsibilities, and gave up other work to dedicate their time to the business, recognizing the potential impact beyond the project duration. He now has 26 sales agents supporting his business. His cookstove sales increased sharply, from 3 to 105 stoves per month.

Mr. Phum Chanthol

A deputy district governor, from Chum Kiri district, Kampot province, grew into a businessman, selling cookstoves with his wife. Inspired by Mr. Heam Bunheng, he reached out to SNV and set up some meetings. He traveled across the province to listen to Mr. Heam Bunheng's experiences. He encouraged his wife to get involved and applied for the funding. He received USD 5,500 for implementing the project in 2024.

Despite his official title, he performed as a salesperson, attending community events to sell his products with innovative sales strategies. He has recruited 22 sales agents to support his business, achieving sales from 6 to 84 stoves per month.



Mr. Phum Chanthol

Ms. Sek Chhet

The last IF recipient from Angkor Chum district, located 52 km away from the Siem Reap city center, transformed her business from empty shelves to fully stocked ones.

She originally sold a variety of products, including a few cookstoves. After attending the IF orientation, she recognized the opportunity to grow her business. She immediately applied for the funding without waiting for her husband's permission, despite his resistance. She received USD 3,000 for the 2025 project.

With limited knowledge, she challenged herself to follow the opportunities given by the HTCC project. She learned to work according to procedures that she had never experienced and is now able to comply with fund management policies. Although it was difficult, she completed the project in May 2025. She expanded her business to 7 sales agents, achieving significant stove sales of 5 to 69 stoves per month.



Ms. Sek Chhet

Villagers in remote communities gather for a clean cooking demonstration — creating space for learning, dialogue, and hands-on experience with improved technologies.



Challenges

Although small businesses showed interest, initial engagement revealed low innovation readiness among provincial shops. To address this, the team provided direct support, helped develop proposals, and established connections among shop owners.

Large, established cookstove brands were unwilling to collaborate, preferring to avoid the application process due to their maturity.

SMEs, often family-run, struggled with compliance—especially in accounting—due to limited systems and capacity. SNV mitigated risks by offering procurement and financial guidance after signing the contract and supported them with expense verification before claims.

Some SMEs faced delays reaching milestones due to limited budgets, as the programme only provided results based payments, and due to internal leadership or strategy changes. SNV supported them by adjusting milestones and extending project timelines when needed.

Lessons learned

1. Expanding access to clean cooking to remote and hard-to-reach communities does not require large enterprises to lead, as their distribution channels are often limited to more urban areas. Partnering with small SMEs enhances outcomes and effectiveness within a short timeframe.
2. By extending the distribution of clean cooking through sales agents, clean cooking transformation is possible and more sustainable due to local influencers, with products and services available in communities.
3. Working with small SMEs requires simplified procedures and low requirements due to limited knowledge, financial capacity, and human resources.
4. Providing funds for cookstoves purchase to be stored at sales agents' shops is a crucial approach for starting the collaboration between sales agents and SMEs. This approach helps build trust among them while minimizing their risks.
5. Maintenance skills training is essential for the sustainable development of clean cooking appliance supply chains. It enables SMEs and sales agents to provide extended, better-quality after-sales services, strengthening their reputation, retaining loyal customers, and increasing credibility in the market. The training is beneficial for SMEs and sales agents not only during the project but also in the future.

About SNV: SNV is a global development partner, rooted in the African and Asian countries where we operate. With 60 years of experience and a team of approximately 1,600 people, it is our mission to strengthen capacities and catalyse partnerships that transform the agri-food, energy, and water systems to enable sustainable and more equitable lives for all.

About the project/programme: The Higher Tier Clean Cooking (HTCC) is part of a broad initiative on Strengthening the Entrepreneurial Ecosystem for Clean Cooking. The programme is co-financed by the European Commission, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Danida. The programme is coordinated by RVO and operates in partnership with EnDev.

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Cover photo: A sales agent guides a customer through the features of an electric cooking device — building trust and product understanding through hands-on demonstration.

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