ISA innovation for sustainable agriculture

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Case Study

MetKasekor

This project is financed by the Happel Foundation, the Symphasis Foundation, the Leopold Bachmann Foundation, among other donors. It is part of the Swisscontact Development Programme, which is co-financed by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC).

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Imprint

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The impact evaluation of the Innovation for Sustainable Agriculture (ISA) project conducted in 2024 highlights the transformative benefits of Conservation Agriculture (CA) practices for smallholder farmers (SHFs) in Cambodia. These practices have improved soil health, reduced input costs, and enhanced yield stability, resulting in greater household financial stability.

CA describes farming practices that, among other benefits, reverse climate change by rebuilding soil organic matter and restoring degraded soil biodiversity. These benefits result from the practice of minimum mechanical soil disturbance through direct seed and/or fertilizer placement, implementing permanent soil organic cover with crop residues and/or cover crops and species diversification.

Central to these achievements has been the MetKasekor intervention, developed under the ISA initiative to activate the market for CA. Launched in 2021 as a four-year pilot, MetKasekor aimed to increase awareness and demand for CA among SHFs, service providers, and agricultural cooperatives. The intervention fostered collaboration across sectors, engaging private companies to invest in CA-based businesses. Its early adopter-led extension service model and focus on Sustainable Intensification positioned MetKasekor as a key enabler of CA adoption in Cambodia, building a more inclusive and sustainable agricultural ecosystem.

However, challenges persist. Our study also found that there is limited access to machinery, financial constraints, and market barriers hinder wider adoption and consistent implementation of CA practices. Adoption rates and benefits vary by crop type and household conditions, underscoring the need for adaptive strategies tailored to local contexts.

To address these challenges, expanding access to affordable machinery through shared models, partnerships, or loan programs is essential. Collaboration with seed suppliers to ensure quality cover crop seeds can also boost adoption. Sustained technical support and community-based peer networks are critical for knowledge sharing and long-term commitment to CA practices. Strengthening market linkages by connecting farmers with sustainability-conscious buyers and introducing certification for CA-grown crops can enhance market appeal and profitability. Inclusive training programs that engage all household members, focusing on both technical CA practices and economic management, will empower families to adopt and sustain CA. Finally, adapting CA approaches to local conditions and prioritizing crops like rice and maize with proven benefits can maximize impact and scalability. With these targeted measures, the full potential of CA can be realized, advancing Cambodia toward a resilient and sustainable agricultural future.

KEY FINDINGS

Knowledge and Adoption of CA Practices

55%
Awareness of CA principles

20%
Active adoption of CA

Soil Quality Improvements Perceived by Farmers

82%
Adopters observing soil improvements

Yield Changes Following CA Adoption

Rice farmers reporting yield gains **60%**

Average net income increase **229CHF**

Smallholder Farmers increase net income

1,096
Female farmers

439

Financial Implications of CA Practices

58%
Farmers reporting reduced input costs

Market Access and Ease of Selling CA-grown Crops

69%
Improved produce quality

Sustained CA Practice Adoption and Implementation

75%
Retention of some CA practices

01. CONTEXT OF AGROECOLOGY

Agriculture plays a pivotal role in Cambodia's economy, serving as a key driver of growth and poverty reduction. Approximately 31% of the population is employed in the sector, and around 70% of Cambodian households derive all or a significant part of their income from agricultural activities. However, the country's agricultural productivity remains highly dependent on the monsoon rains and the natural flooding cycles of the Tonle Sap River and Lake. This limits most smallholder farmers to cultivating a single crop during the wet season, leaving them vulnerable to climate change due to their reliance on rainfall and limited crop diversity.

This vulnerability is further exacerbated by land degradation (approximately 42% of Cambodia's total land area was classified under strong degradation, FAO, GLADIS, 2018), declining soil fertility, and unplanned watershed management in both upland and lowland areas. Additionally, monocropping practices driven by regional and international market demands have intensified agricultural production, leading to the depletion of Cambodia's natural resources. Given these challenges, Cambodia's agriculture sector must transition from relying on land expansion and intensive practices to embracing sustainable intensification and regenerative agriculture.

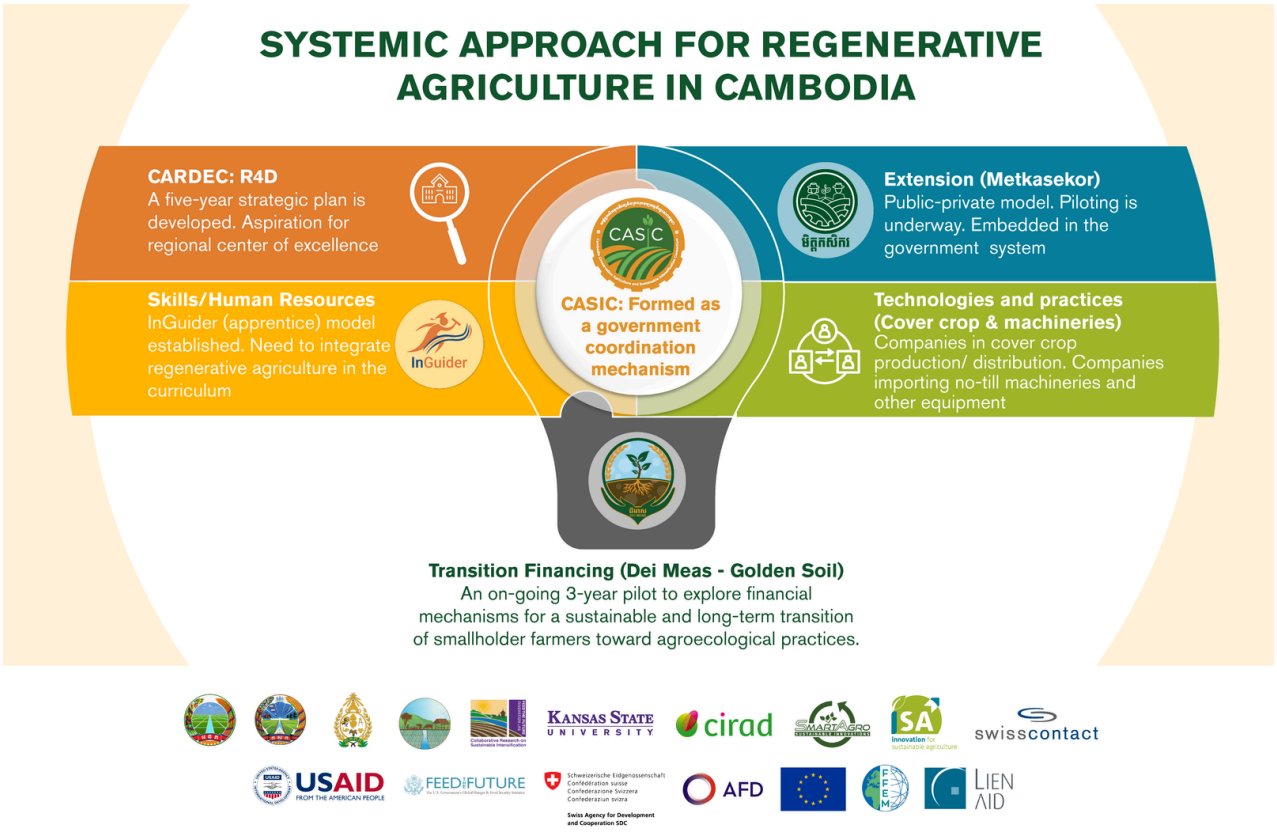

Figure 1: Rectangular Agroecology Systemic Approach of Cambodia Conservation Agriculture and Sustainable Intensification Consortium (CASIC).

As Cambodia seeks new pathways to drive future growth, technology and innovation will be critical to transforming its agriculture sector. The Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) envisions a modernized agricultural sector driven by sustainable intensification, which relies on adopting new techniques, technologies, research and development, mechanization, and enhanced irrigation capacity to improve productivity. This vision is articulated in several strategic documents developed by the RGC. Future agricultural transformation in Cambodia will focus on improving production methods and profitability through new, adaptable techniques and knowledge transfer via agricultural extension services. Achieving this transformation will require effectively commercializing appropriate technologies and practices.

The development of regenerative agriculture in Cambodia has benefited from the support of various development projects and programs, alongside institutional backing from the RGC through the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF). Since 2004, when Conservation Agriculture (CA) practices began to be tested in various agroecological settings, the focus has shifted from research to commercialization. By 2013, CA/SI tools and technologies were introduced, but sustainable change in farming practices required stronger private sector engagement. From 2018 to 2020, the Mekong Inclusive Growth and Innovation Programme (MIGIP), along with the first phase of the Innovation for Sustainable Agriculture (ISA) project and the Conservation Agriculture Service with a Fee (CASF) project, bolstered private sector participation. By 2021, regenerative agriculture also became a subject of policy dialogue and extension services through initiatives such as the Conservation Agriculture and Sustainable Intensification Consortium (CASIC) and MetKasekor. These combined efforts have led to significant growth in the adoption of CA/SI practices in Cambodia over the past decade. CASIC plays a critical role in coordinating and streamlining agroecology efforts among various stakeholders. Under its framework, MAFF has adopted a systems approach that addresses key gaps, such as a lack of technical skills in agroecology, limited coordination mechanisms and extension systems for farmers, minimal private sector investment, and inadequate incentives for farmers to shift practices, thus facilitating the smoother adoption of agroecology and regenerative agriculture.

02. INNOVATION FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE (ISA)

The Innovation for Sustainable Agriculture (ISA) I project, the successor to the MIGIP project, facilitated access to machinery, inputs, and extension services, enabling sustainable intensification of agricultural production for at least 11,006 smallholder farmers (32% women) and 97 students (45 women). The project also contributed to broader outreach, benefiting 5,538 smallholder farmers (2,603 women), with an annual income increase of 229 CHF per year. This was achieved by supporting established public and private actors in raising awareness of sustainable intensification practices and providing appropriate technologies and services.

ISA1

11,006
smallholder farmers

32%
women

97
students**

*** include 45 women*

The project provided capacity building and technical support to the government at the national and local levels to establish a public-private agricultural extension model. Furthermore, to promote sustainable agricultural technologies, the project continued its partnerships with small agribusiness companies from Phase I (2017-2020). It helped them to develop and expand their business activities through business development and marketing support.

One challenge hindering the wide adoption of sustainable agricultural practices was the lack of technical human resources. The project has supported the Royal University of Agriculture to establish an internship program called InGuider. It allows agricultural engineering students to increase their employability, and the private sector benefits from a skilled labor force.

The Innovation for Sustainable Agriculture I project is financed by the Happel Foundation, the Symphasis Foundation, and the Leopold Bachmann Foundation among other donors. As part of the Swisscontact Development Programme, it is co-financed by SDC (Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs FDFA). The project successfully concluded in 2024.

03. BACKGROUND

Since 2004, Cambodia has been at the forefront of testing and developing innovative cropping systems based on the principles of Conservation Agriculture (CA) and regenerative agriculture across various agroecosystems. These scientific studies demonstrated that Conservation Agriculture Production Systems (CAPS) significantly improved soil fertility, reduced labor requirements, conserved water, and increased both yields and smallholder farmers' incomes. Despite these promising results, sustainable change in farming systems required active engagement from the private sector to ensure the widespread adoption and long-term success of these practices.

Recognizing the critical role of private sector engagement, the MetKasekor initiative emerged from the collaboration between the Mekong Inclusive Growth and Innovation Programme (MIGIP) and the Conservation Agriculture Service with a Fee (CASF) project between 2018 and 2020. This initiative aimed to disseminate and promote regenerative agriculture practices in Ratanak Mondul district, Battambang province. Through this agricultural extension intervention, the project closely engaged with local service providers, smallholder farmers, and private companies to promote regenerative agriculture. The success of MIGIP and CASF in delivering efficient agricultural extension services laid the foundation for MetKasekor to evolve into a more comprehensive model, ultimately becoming a recognized brand and an integral part of the government’s agricultural extension system.

The name “MetKasekor,” which means “farmers’ friend” in Khmer, was conceptualized to provide technical information and practical knowledge to facilitate the adoption of regenerative agriculture among smallholder farmers. As an early adopter-led extension service model, MetKasekor focuses on ‘opening the market’ for private sector investments in Sustainable Intensification through its six-step approach. The model leverages the collaboration between government agents, the private sector, and smallholder farmers to expand the reach and impact of regenerative agriculture in Cambodia.

The model emphasizes a collaborative approach involving multiple institutions to ensure the effective extension of Conservation Agriculture (CA). At the national level, three key departments—the Department of Agricultural Engineering (DAEng), the Department of Agricultural Land Resources Management (DALRM), and the Department of Extension of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (DEAFF)—work in coordination with the provincial administration, private companies, and the Provincial Department of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (PDAFF).

DAEng, DALRM, and DEAFF serve as the primary sources of technical knowledge, training the PDAFFs in their respective areas related to CA. Once the PDAFFs are adequately trained and equipped with CA expertise, they collaborate with private companies to provide extension services to agricultural cooperatives and early adopters, who, in turn, can further disseminate CA practices to smallholder farmers. In this model, the three national departments assume an "Advisor" role, offering guidance and support to the PDAFFs as needed.

The four-year pilot of MetKasekor began in 2021, supported by key partners including the Center of Excellence on Sustainable Agricultural Intensification (CE SAIN), Kansas State University, the French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development (CIRAD), and Swisscontact. The initiative is offered through the Provincial Agriculture Department (PDAFF) and managed by the Department of Extension Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (DEAFF). In close coordination with private sector partners, such as cover crop companies and machine providers, MetKasekor aims to expand the services and products related to regenerative agriculture (CA/SI) to a broader base of farmers, fostering sustainable agricultural practices across Cambodia.

04. GENESIS OF METKASEKOR

The Innovation for Sustainable Agriculture (ISA) project identified and aimed to address several critical challenges faced by smallholder farmers (SHFs) in Cambodia. One key challenge identified was low and declining productivity and limited profits for SHFs. The root cause of these issues was found to be a lack of awareness and understanding among smallholder farmers about appropriate technology options and sustainable agricultural practices that could enhance their productivity and profitability. Many farmers were not well informed about the relevance of soil health and the measures needed to prevent soil degradation. Additionally, identifying potential early adopters of new technologies and effectively promoting these innovations proved difficult.

To address these challenges, it became clear that there was a need to promote an agricultural extension, networking, and coordination services among system actors. However, there were several barriers to achieving this, including a lack of technical knowledge, insufficient coordination among market actors, and a shortage of human resources to effectively disseminate knowledge on sustainable practices to farmers. Furthermore, there was inadequate collaboration with technology providers in the private sector to deliver these essential services.

Recognizing these gaps, an innovative extension model was envisioned to bridge the divide between the public and private sectors, emphasizing sustainable practices, primarily focusing on use on conservation agriculture based technologies. The model sought to enable smallholder farmers to access relevant agricultural techniques and technologies through coordinated efforts between government agents and private companies. This public-private collaboration aimed to enhance farmers' productivity while promoting environmental sustainability.

The MetKasekor intervention was then designed to activate the market for Conservation Agriculture (CA) by increasing awareness and demand among smallholder farmers, service providers, and agricultural cooperatives. This was to be achieved through targeted promotional activities and by engaging private companies to invest in CA-based businesses. By fostering collaboration across sectors, the initiative sought to create a more inclusive and sustainable agricultural ecosystem that benefits all stakeholders, particularly smallholder farmers.

05. WHAT IS METKASEKOR?

MetKasekor employs a six-step approach to ensure the widespread adoption of Conservation Agriculture (CA) during its pilot phase.

MetKasekor Steps

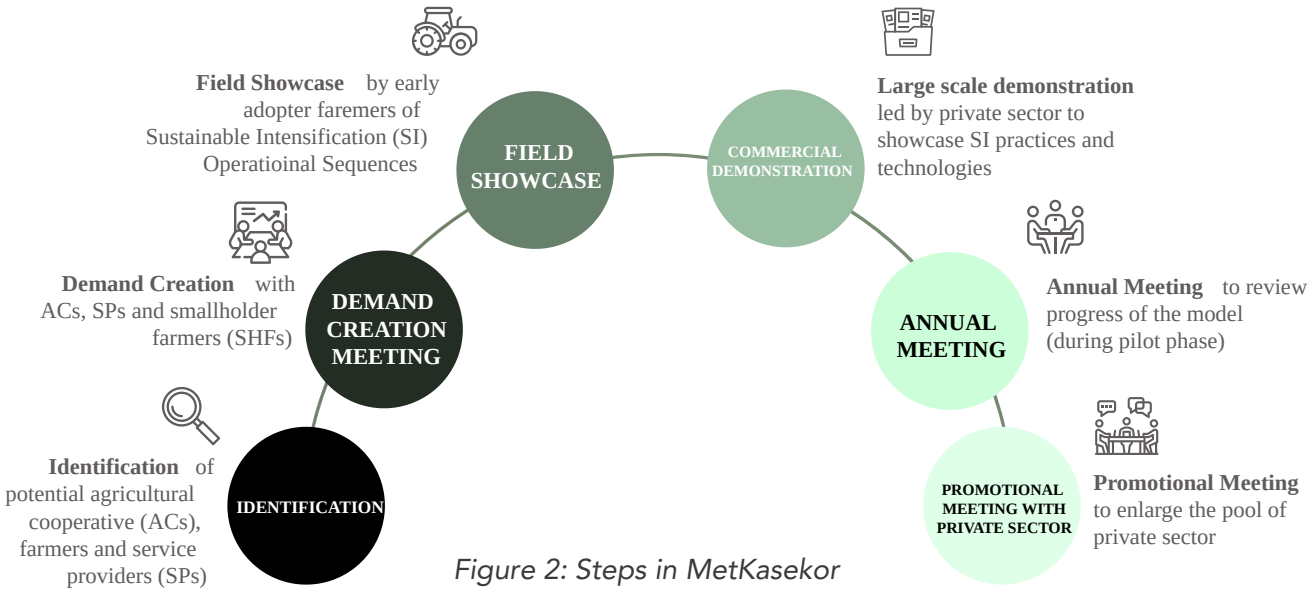

Figure 2: Steps in MetKasekor

Step 1: Identification

involves selecting target communes and villages by contacting local chiefs for information, interviewing agricultural cooperatives, potential farmers, and service providers, and entering this data into the MetKasekor IT platform. This stage focuses on identifying the right groups of farmers, cooperatives, and service providers, along with suitable communes and villages to gauge interest. In the first year of the pilot, 591 farmers (40% women), 9 communes, and 9 villages were identified.

Step 2: Demand Creation

are meetings organized by the Provincial Departments of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (PDAFF) in target locations, introduce conservation agriculture (CA) practices to farmers and service providers, initiate service provision, and connect key stakeholders. The process begins with coordination between PDAFF, private companies, cooperatives, and other stakeholders to plan the event and invite participants. During the meetings, extension workers from PDAFF and technical teams from CARDEC present a clear comparison of production costs and economic benefits between conventional farming and agroecology, using images, videos, and field data to illustrate improved soil health and plant growth. Practical demonstrations, such as no-till planters, further reinforce these concepts.

To strengthen engagement, lead farmers share their firsthand experiences, offering credible peer testimonials that resonate with local farmers. Representatives from cooperatives, agricultural machinery companies, microfinance institutions, and agricultural input suppliers provide insights into available products and services, ensuring farmers have access to necessary resources. The meetings also identify early adopters and coordinate with companies to provide CA services. Following each event, participant data is recorded into an IT platform for monitoring and evaluation. To date, 43 demand creation meetings have engaged 1,507 smallholder farmers (573 women), fostering greater awareness and willingness to adopt sustainable agricultural practices.

Step 3: Field Showcase

are events designed to gauge interest among new farmers and service providers by demonstrating demand for CA services before investments are made in machinery and cover crops. This stage involves agreeing with an early adopter to conduct the showcase, planning for machine demonstrations, inviting participants, preparing the venue, conducting the showcase, and providing ongoing technical support through communication channels. So far, 79 field showcases have attracted 2236 farmers (949 women).

Step 4: Large Scale Demonstration (Commercial Demonstrations)

Commercial Demonstrations promote CA practices to a broader audience while providing companies with opportunities to market their products and services. This stage includes coordinating with a successful early adopter, planning the demonstration, inviting new farmers, and organizing the event to showcase machinery and technologies. To date, 6 demonstrations have attracted 1444 farmers (712 women).

Additional Steps of the model include annual meetings to evaluate progress and promotional meetings to attract new private sector partners, further enhancing the outreach and impact of MetKasekor.

06. IMPACT

Since 2021, MetKasekor has been successfully implemented by the Provincial Departments of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (PDAFF) in Battambang and Preah Vihear, reaching over 5,780 smallholder farmers. As of now, more than 870 farmers are actively practicing conservation agriculture (CA) on over 4800 hectares of land. The initiative has supported the sale of 27 machines, introduced 20 CA technologies, trained 100 farmers, engaged 12 service providers, and produced 22 tons of cover crops.

In 2024, the Innovation for Sustainable Agriculture (ISA) initiative conducted an impact assessment with a sample of 220 smallholder farmers in Battambang and Preah Vihear provinces. This sample included 97 early adopters and 127 general smallholder farmers (SHFs), providing key insights into the outcomes of CA adoption.

KEY HIGHLIGHT

6,648 smallholder farmers

35% female farmers

6,774 ha land practice CA

949 practice CA

Cover Crops Produced **22,000** kg

i. Knowledge and Adoption of CA Practices

ISA training has effectively increased awareness of CA principles among SHFs, with 55% of respondents recognizing techniques such as no-till farming, cover cropping, and crop diversification. However, only 20% of the randomly selected farmers actively practiced CA, hindered by barriers such as limited access to machinery, complex farm management requirements, and inadequate training support.

ii. Soil Quality Improvements Perceived by Farmers

The majority of CA adopters (82%) reported improvements in soil quality, including enhanced fertility, texture, and water retention. These outcomes are attributed to practices such as minimal soil disturbance and cover cropping, which reduce erosion and improve soil moisture retention. Such improvements contribute to long-term soil health, supporting sustainable crop production.

iii. Yield Changes Following CA Adoption

CA practices produced varying yield results across different crops. Rice farmers experienced the most consistent gains, with 60% reporting increased yields. For maize and cassava, results were mixed, with around 50% reporting improvements. The benefits are largely linked to CA's positive effects on soil conditions and water retention, though outcomes depend on crop type, environmental factors, and local practices.

iv. Financial Implications of CA Practices

CA practices significantly reduced input costs for 58% of adopters, particularly for water, pesticides, and fertilizers. Practices like no-till farming and soil cover reduced the need for frequent applications and preserved soil moisture. Higher yields led to increased profits, especially among rice farmers (81%), maize farmers (82%), and cassava farmers (56%). These findings underscore CA's potential to enhance profitability, particularly for crops well-suited to its methods.

55%

Increase Awareness of no-till farming, cover cropping, and crop diversification

82%

improvements in soil quality, and water retention

60%

Rice farmers increased yields

50%

Maize & cassava farmers increased yields

v. Market Access and Ease of Selling CA-Grown Crops

Market access improved for nearly half of the farmers post-CA adoption, although prices remained unchanged. Improved produce quality—such as better size, appearance, and resilience—was reported by 69% of farmers, highlighting potential for better reception in sustainability-focused markets.

vi. Sustained CA Practice Adoption and Implementation

Long-term adoption of CA remains challenging. While 75% of adopters retained some practices, many faced barriers such as limited access to machinery and technical support. CA practices require time and experience to integrate into farm routines, creating an initial hurdle. Nonetheless, many farmers expressed willingness to continue CA if they received sustained support, training, and affordable machinery access, highlighting the need for enhanced mechanisms to ensure long-term success.

vii. Household Economic Context and Gender Roles in Decision-Making

CA's economic benefits extended to household well-being, with improved financial stability reported due to increased yields and reduced costs. Gender roles in financial decision-making showed that men typically managed major purchases and farm investments, while women oversaw daily expenses such as food and childcare. Both genders shared responsibilities for social obligations, indicating a balanced approach. Engaging both men and women in CA training could foster shared decision-making and greater adoption of CA practices, maximizing household benefits.

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07. LESSONS LEARNED AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The impact evaluation of the ISA project demonstrates that Conservation Agriculture (CA) practices have delivered significant benefits to smallholder farmers (SHFs) in Cambodia. Improved soil health, reduced input costs, and increased yield stability have contributed to enhanced household financial stability. The positive economic and environmental outcomes highlight CA's potential as a transformative tool for sustainable agriculture in Cambodia, laying the groundwork for resilience against environmental and economic challenges. MetKasekor has been instrumental in driving this progress.

However, the evaluation also pin-pointed persistent challenges. Barriers such as limited access to machinery, financial constraints, and underdeveloped markets hinder widespread CA adoption. Sustained implementation remains inconsistent across different crop types and households, emphasizing the need for adaptive approaches tailored to local conditions. To address these issues and fully realize CA's potential, the following recommendations are proposed:

i. Expand Access to Machinery and Cover Crop Seeds

Improving access to CA-compatible machinery, such as no-till seeders, land levelers, seed braodcasters and roller crimpers etc. is essential to reduce entry barriers. Shared machinery models, public-private partnerships, and loan programs can enhance affordability for SHFs. Efforts should also focus on increasing the availability of high-quality cover crop seeds by partnering with local seed suppliers or cooperatives. These farm inputs are critical for promoting CA adoption and ensuring its long-term sustainability.

ii. Strengthen Ongoing Technical Support and Peer Networks

Continuous support is vital for sustained CA adoption. Establishing peer learning groups within communities can facilitate knowledge sharing, problem-solving, and encouragement among farmers. These groups can serve as platforms for discussing challenges and exchanging successful strategies. Regular advisory visits, follow-up training, and the involvement of experienced farmers as "champions of change" can further reinforce CA practices and encourage broader adoption across communities.

iii. Develop Market Linkages and Promote CA Awareness Among Buyers

Many CA farmers are unable to capitalize on price premiums due to a lack of differentiation for sustainably grown produce in conventional markets. Building direct connections with sustainability-focused buyers, such as restaurants, specialty markets, and exporters, can create more profitable opportunities for CA farmers. Collaborations with Modern Agricultural Cooperatives (MACs) can help negotiate better terms and establish reliable markets for CA products. Introducing a certification or branding system for CA-grown crops would allow farmers to showcase the environmental and quality benefits of their produce, fostering consumer trust and potentially securing higher prices.

iv. Support Inclusive Training and Household Engagement

Given the critical role of gender in household decision-making, CA training should target both male and female household members. Inclusive training sessions that address household budgeting, resource management, and CA planning can empower families to adopt CA practices collectively, leading to more sustainable outcomes. Integrating financial management skills into training programs can further enhance families' ability to track expenses, reinvest earnings, and maximize the benefits of CA.

v. Adapt CA Approaches to Local Environmental and Economic Conditions

Since rice and maize have shown the most positive responses to CA practices, future interventions could prioritize these crops to maximize impact. Developing location-specific recommendations tailored to local soil conditions, climate, and water availability will help farmers adapt CA practices effectively. This targeted approach can increase productivity, ensure sustainability, and enable gradual expansion to other crops as practices are refined and adoption increases.

By addressing these key areas, the ISA initiative can strengthen CA's adoption, maximize its benefits, and promote long-term resilience for Cambodia's smallholder farmers.

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