

## Background

In recent years, there has been a marked increase in social enterprises and private companies distributing renewable energy products as well as sanitation and hygiene products in Cambodia. This growth has occurred in response to socio-economic development and the consequent awareness of the benefits of these products—especially in rural areas. Currently, there are more than 25 companies supplying solar products in Cambodia. By and large, the distribution of renewable energy products has been dominated by men due to the somewhat flawed perception that men are better equipped for this kind of work. This perception is partially due to the fact that men have greater access to vehicles and that selling requires extensive travel to demonstrate and promote the products. In addition, there is concern that women may be more exposed to security risks than men. Furthermore, women are typically viewed as more reserved than men, implying they would be less pro-active sales agents, and last but not least, technology has traditionally been seen as men's business, regardless of the primary users of the technology.

The ADB Regional Technical Assistance project (RETA): *Harnessing Climate Change Mitigation Initiatives to Benefit Women*, aims to empower women in productive roles and as active agents of change in response to climate

change. Toward this end, it has worked in close cooperation with the private sector, particularly with a key advanced cookstove distributor, LES, in Phnom Penh, and has been able to influence this innovative private enterprise to engage women in its supply chain for ACE\*-1 cookstoves. It is important to note that, based on traditional gender roles, women are perceived to be mainly responsible for domestic duties within the household, including cooking. There are an estimated 7.5 million biomass cookstoves in use nationwide with a total market value of approximately USD 45 million. Through the cooperation initiated by the team working on the above RETA, support has been provided to the distribution company management to enable the integration of women as sales agents into its sales networks. Currently, the distributor is using a reseller model where women are recruited as sales agents at the village, commune, district level and then receive commission-based payments. Some 67 women have been brought into the supply chain, where they are working to demonstrate and promote the advanced clean cookstoves. In this role, they are not only making fuel-efficient, low-emission technology accessible to their villagers, they are generating livelihood benefits for themselves and their families.

## Co-benefits: Empowering women as agents of change

Traditional gender roles are deeply embedded in the social psyche of a very large proportion of women and men in rural Cambodia. Due to these well ingrained perceptions, women are expected to dedicate themselves to domestic work, while their economic activities are limited to agricultural production and selling of their products in informal street stalls.

However, with their experience as the main users of cookstoves, and their strong community networks, appropriate training and mentoring can enable women to introduce and build acceptance of these high-value domestic products among villagers. The selection of the women sales agents has been done by the distributor with support from the RETA team; this selection is based on a number of criteria including their commitment, trust



Source: SNV pilot project

in the product, family support, ability to travel, and their availability to work as promotion/sales agents.

Initial capacity needs assessments were carried out to explore the different needs and challenges experienced by women and men to facilitate women's successful participation in the advanced cookstove distribution. Findings showed that women were constrained by lack of confidence, inadequate marketing skills, restrictive household relationships and limited mobility. Therefore, a set of capacity building activities was embarked on, including marketing skills, book-keeping and product knowledge. These activities were offered to women who indicated their interest in pursuing the opportunity to become sales agents, and were followed up with coaching on organizing stove demonstrations and sales events in their village to build their confidence and skills. As well as skills development, it was essential to negotiate agreements with each of the women's families, so that the husband and other family members would be supportive of the women's participation in the cookstove supply chain. Efforts have also been made to facilitate good relationships between women sales agents and the local authorities to gain the support needed to enable women to promote the cookstoves effectively. Meetings were also organized among the women sale agents so they could exchange experiences, learn from each other, and establish a supportive network.

Women sales agents generally employ a two-step approach when promoting the cookstoves. To introduce the stoves to villagers, public village cooking demonstrations are organized by the women sales agents with the support from the RETA team as well as from the distributor. This



Source: SNV pilot project

enables local communities to see the stoves in use, ask questions, and learn first-hand about the advantages of using such stoves. The demonstrations are followed up with door-to-door marketing in which the women sales agents meet potential customers at their houses to explain in detail the potential benefits of using advanced cookstoves. Small group cookstove demonstrations with three to four households have also been used. Interestingly, some of the women sales agents have partnered with local authorities in promoting the stove in order to build trust in the product within the community. Some women have also partnered with local retailers outside their villages, so they can expand their market without extensive travel.

Advanced technology often comes only at significantly increased cost. To enable women to effectively engage in the business of stove promotion and sales, many of them are loaned a cookstove so they can become familiar with all the characteristics of the stove without having to first purchase it. This means they have a stove on-hand for their promotional activities, they can fine-tune their advice regarding its use and ensure their customers understand and enjoy the benefits in the process. Importantly, the women are not required to invest in and stock the product, as the company will deliver new cookstoves to the customers within three days after the women sales agents place their orders. In consideration of the target customer's limited ability to pay in advance for a relatively expensive product, the supplier is offering one-year no-interest payment terms, using their in-house financing program. The payment is collected from customers monthly or quarterly by the company's agent, while the commissions for the women sales agents are paid at the time of product delivery. In addition, alternative micro-finance options are becoming available.

To confirm the quality of the product and to build trust among customers, a one-year warranty is provided to customers for all the parts of the product, and if repairs are required, they are carried out within one week. The women sales agents have been trained and equipped with skills for basic repairs, so they can check and fix small problems promptly. However, if serious challenges arise, the women sale agents can call the supply company to address their customers' problems, with replacement stoves generally offered during the repair period.



*When I was first contacted by Mr. Chanty from LES, I hesitated to engage in distributing the stove as I never had any experience and I did not trust the quality of the product. When I attended the first meeting followed by the training, I became more confident. Unexpectedly, I have sold 35 stoves, generating around 280 USD. My husband, appreciates my work and sometimes helps me with household chores if I am not around while promoting the stove.*

**Un Lim** The top female sale agent

Issues	Keys to success – lessons learned
<b>Real gender inclusion in enterprise operations is essential but uncommon</b>	Distributors must be committed at the highest levels to support gender mainstreaming in all aspects of their enterprises and to convey this commitment to their staff. This requires carefully designed training, and clear direction to all employees that both women's and men's abilities and needs must be recognized, valued and accommodated.
<b>Women who can be successful in sales are rare</b>	Identification of potentially successful women and men sales agents does not happen easily. There needs to be a carefully designed HR recruitment process as it takes a particular combination of personality, drive and skill to be successful in sales
<b>Gender-responsive coaching and mentoring is essential</b>	Sales agents need to learn new skills and behaviors to convey to customers the benefits of the product. As women traditionally are less confident than men, and must overcome community perceptions regarding gender norms, this requires gender-sensitive training, significant effort, and development of the confidence to accept the risk of failure for them to go out and promote these new products to achieve sales
<b>Women sales agents need good distributor support</b>	The distribution company must actively support the sales agents, both women and men, with quality product, marketing materials, promotional budget, speedy product delivery, and responsive after-sales services
<b>Poorer women cannot afford a product sample</b>	Sales agents need to be provided with a sample product for demonstrations so that they can become familiar with the product and show it in action
<b>Maintenance of trust is critical to women in respected positions</b>	Good after-sales service is imperative, so it is important that manufacturers have local presence in Cambodia so that problems can be resolved quickly for both consumers and sales agents.

The women sales agents are proud of the part they can play in climate change mitigation, as well as the co-benefits they bring to families through the sales of advanced clean cookstoves.

Each ACE-1 cookstove contributes to reducing CO<sub>2</sub>eq emissions by approximately 1 ton per stove per year. To date some 500 stoves have been sold by women agents, reducing 500 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions annually or 1500 tonnes over the expected 3-year lifetime of the stove.

Additionally, in the distribution areas where there is an abundance of palm fruit, ACE-1 users change to otherwise wasted palm fruit as a replacement fuel for their stoves instead of firewood. The women sales agents now understand and value their roles in not only contributing to better management of resources in their area but also to reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions that are the main cause of climate change.

GHG reduction per stove	How women sales agents of ACE1 contribute to GHG emission reductions
1 ton CO <sub>2</sub> eq per stove per year	1 ton CO <sub>2</sub> eq per year per stove sold to customers by women sales agents
Co-benefit	How ACE1 delivers co-benefits to end-users
Long lasting	High quality product which does not need to be replaced frequently
Fuel saving	More efficient than traditional biomass stoves, saving up to 50% of fuel compared to traditional improved cookstoves
Time saving	Quicker cooking and up to 50% less time spent in collecting wood
Greater convenience	Easy to light, easy to move about, easy to use and control making for more consistent cooking, includes phone charger
Health	Less adverse health impacts caused by smoke as 90% less smoke generated from gasifier stove compared to traditional stoves
Aspirational	Looks modern, associated with high social status

## Challenges and Way Forward

This project involves bringing women into the supply chain for advanced cookstoves, tapping a source of labour that is frequently overlooked when it comes to marketing and selling technologies. This approach demonstrates that co-benefits are not always environmental in nature; they can just as often be social. It nevertheless merits noting that there are some challenges to achieving the co-benefits from the advanced cookstoves. One is cost: while the advanced stoves operate at much higher efficiencies and significantly cut down on indoor air pollution, they are several times the price of a typical cookstove. For rural households investing in a stove can be a sizable undertaking, even with financing plans that allow for extended payback periods. A second challenge is maintenance. The stoves are repaired by the

company that handles their distribution; and though this can be done in a relatively short period of time, even a day or two without a stove can be a considerable hardship on a family. Hence, it is often necessary to keep multiple stoves on hand in the event that the advanced stove needs lengthy repairs. Both these financing and technical issues are not insurmountable, and will become easier to handle as the stoves gain a greater number of users, bringing down costs and increasing knowledge of maintenance. Most importantly, as this intervention is as much about supporting the socio-economic as the environmental dimension, the number of both users and salespeople should grow over time, also having the effect of increasing the co-benefits.



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\*African Clean Energy (ACE) is the producer of the ACE-1. Please refer [www.africancleanenergy.com](http://www.africancleanenergy.com) for further information.