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Chemicals in the Food Chain and other concerns

Health is a big issue in Cambodia. Many people in the remote villages suffer from malnutrition. This is often due to lacking the knowledge and ability to grow vegetables during the dry season, when the rice has been harvested and the cows and buffaloes are left to roam around the dry fields searching for food. Vegetable gardens need to be enclosed from the wandering animals, but the main problem is the lack of water. Why build the capacity for vegetable planting if there is no water source? Hence, in an integrated approach to development, we listen to what the villagers say and provide skills on community mobilization—to build wells, for example—with partial funding from those who lovingly donate to our programs, as well as contributions from the villagers in order to ensure sustainability of our programs. But there is also the question of using chemicals. This is often offered as an option to increase yields of vegetables and rapid growth of animals. However, farmers in the villages are increasingly rejecting this option, for a number of reasons.

Recently, in a discussion with participants attending an exposure visit to another area, there was a discussion about how many people in the West are opting to be

vegetarians because of the cruel treatment of animals destined for slaughter, and how chemicals in the food chain affect human health. All the participants noted how their parents were telling them that food had become tasteless and un nourishing, even dangerous to health, as compared to the past. One person commented how his mother was telling him not to eat pig meat. “It is not good,” she said, “because it is full of chemicals.”

A woman in the group, a village leader, told us how she feeds her pigs a daily mixture of low grade husked rice porridge, morning glory (or any seasonal leafy vegetable), and salt. It takes six months for the piglets to reach 60kg, while chemically fed pigs reach that in three months. She said that to conserve the meat, she either slated and sun-dried the striped pieces of meat or put the meat in a barrel of soy or fish sauce and conserved it up to three to five months. “For every four pigs I sell,” she said, “I kept one for the family.”

When asked why she kept



vegetable garden and well

the animals longer, she explained that keeping the animals for six months instead of three was more economical, because not only did she not have to spend money on chemicals, feeds, and medicine, but the meat was better and more flavorful. “It is just not worth it,” she said. “My profits are not better, and I can do without the middle man. I like to see my animals grow naturally, with food from my own fields. It is better for the environment, better for my animals, and better for my income!”

While I was listening to the group, I thought to myself how much there is to learn from each other. While we are using so many resources to keep ourselves healthy, and often failing, simple farmers work hard to get it right, even under pressure to buy into the system.