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DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENARBEIT



# IDPoor: The cornerstone of Cambodia's social protection system

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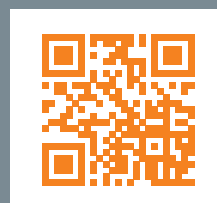
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## Acronyms and abbreviations

API	Application Programme Interface
BMZ	Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, Germany
CSES	Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey
CSWG	Commune/Sangkat Working Group for Identification of Poor Households
DFAT	Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH
HEF	Health Equity Fund
IDPoor	Identification of Poor Households Programme
IIS	IDPoor Information System
IT	Information technology
MoSVY	Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
NSPC	National Social Protection Council
NSPPF	National Social Protection Policy Framework
PRISM	Platform for Real-time Information Systems
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VRG	Village Representative Group
WFP	World Food Programme

# Executive Summary



## BOX 1. KEY LEARNINGS

Since its establishment in 2007, IDPoor has evolved into the cornerstone of social protection in Cambodia, helping to ensure that a growing array of benefits reach the households and individuals who need them most. Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) has supported its partners at the Ministry of Planning for more than 15 years as they have incrementally developed IDPoor from its original rounds-based approach into a fully digitised, on-demand poverty identification system.

The following key learnings emerged in the course of this cooperation:

- **A sustained systems-building approach pays off in times of crisis.** Continuous investments in the institutions, human resources, information systems and processes which underpin IDPoor have laid the foundations of a comprehensive social protection system that can serve the country well in the long term. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Government of Cambodia was able to draw upon IDPoor data and existing payment mechanisms to rapidly roll out a nationwide cash transfer programme for poor and vulnerable households.
- **A poverty identification system can act as a catalyst for integrated social protection.** While IDPoor was not designed with vision of a comprehensive social protection system in mind, its regular identification rounds and steadily growing digital capacities have helped to lay the groundwork for the eventual emergence of a full-fledged social registry and a digital, interoperable social protection system for Cambodia.
- **The transition to on-demand identification has opened up possibilities for more comprehensive social protection for poor households, and particularly those with vulnerable members.** It also holds the potential to facilitate shock-responsive social assistance for Cambodians who live just above the poverty line and are vulnerable in the face of shocks including climate-related natural disasters (e.g. flooding), recurring cycles of food insecurity, and health emergencies, including pandemics.

## THE CHALLENGE

Cambodia joined the ranks of lower middle-income countries in 2015, yet nearly one in five Cambodians still live in poverty and many more live just above the poverty line. By some estimates, three-fifths of Cambodians are at risk of impoverishment in the face of economic shocks, natural disasters or health emergencies. In response to these risks and to ensure shared prosperity, the Government of Cambodia is working to provide comprehensive social protection to all Cambodians. To

deliver on this commitment, it requires a systematic way to identify poor and vulnerable households and to target social assistance to them in times of need. Periodic household-based poverty identification assessments cannot capture dynamic changes in people's economic circumstances, however. Nor are they flexible enough to respond quickly in the face of unexpected shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic.



## THE RESPONSE

Beginning in 2005, the Cambodian Ministry of Planning, with support from Germany through the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), developed IDPoor as a single basis for targeting programmes for the poor. IDPoor initially used a hybrid model to combine the objectivity of a proxy means test survey with the accuracy and affordability of a community-based selection process. Households identified as poor received Equity Cards which entitled them to a range of benefits, from access to free health services to school scholarships. Poverty identification was carried out in recurring rounds, with all 24 of Cambodia's provinces covered over a three-year period.

In 2011 IDPoor was formally adopted by the Government of Cambodia as its official poverty identification mechanism. All organisations targeting poor households, be they government, non-government, local or international, were required to use IDPoor data to identify beneficiaries. In 2016 IDPoor was extended to urban areas and the system attained national coverage.

While the three-year cycle was impressive compared to poverty surveys in other countries, households that missed the IDPoor round in their village had to wait until the next cycle to be evaluated for eligibility. With one in four Cambodians migrating for work, and with many households cycling in and out of poverty, IDPoor needed a more flexible way to allow for assessments between rounds. In 2017 the Ministry of Planning piloted a new 'on-demand' mechanism, including digital data collection, in selected communes, and subsequently announced its intention to gradually roll out the new, more flexible procedures over a three-year period, starting in 2020.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which inflicted massive economic harm on Cambodia, accelerated these plans. In cooperation with Cambodia's 1,646 commune/sangkat councils, the Ministry of Planning used the new IDPoor procedures to update lists of poor and vulnerable households through a countrywide campaign. Identified households could register for cash transfers through a social assistance programme funded by the Government of Cambodia and administered by the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation. New digital solutions linked the cash transfer delivery system with the IDPoor database of households holding Equity Cards.

Convinced by the speed, efficiency and power of the flexible new procedures, the Government of Cambodia decided in August 2020 that, henceforth, IDPoor would employ a fully on-demand approach. Since that time the Ministry of Planning has been working to strengthen the internal systems which will underpin these new procedures. This includes e.g. continuous data

updates from commune/sangkat councils and real-time information about Equity Card holders; a suggestions and complaints mechanism to enhance transparency; and a continuous approach to monitoring and evaluation aimed at reducing inclusion and exclusion errors.

## THE RESULTS

- **IDPoor is a national system fully owned, implemented and funded by the Government of Cambodia.** Cambodia has succeeded in establishing a poverty identification system with national coverage which is implemented by decentralised administrative structures. In June 2022 there were 692,000 households with Equity Cards in the IDPoor database. This represents 2.73 million people, or about 18% of Cambodia's population.
- **IDPoor offers real-time data on poor households.** Since 2020 the IDPoor system has allowed for the continuous addition, removal and updating of households through on-demand procedures carried out by commune/sangkat councils. This enables policymakers to design programmes based on up-to-date data, to deliver social assistance to beneficiaries more smoothly and efficiently, and to ramp up support more quickly in times of shock.
- **IDPoor is seen as fair and impartial.** Thanks to its origins as a community-driven approach, IDPoor is accepted and trusted by Cambodians. Since responsibility for the identification of poor households shifted to the commune/sangkat level in 2020, the Ministry of Planning has strengthened measures to enhance transparency and retain community participation.
- **IDPoor offers a sound basis for designing and targeting programmes.** Since the adoption of the National Social Protection Policy Framework, the government has used IDPoor data to plan new social assistance schemes. The number of organisations using IDPoor data to target services has increased, from 42 projects in 2012 to 181 projects in 2020.
- **IDPoor has steadily developed its digital capacities and become interoperable with other systems.** The IDPoor team has invested in the development of both front-end and back-end solutions which enable it to efficiently collect, manage and share data. In developing these systems, it was careful not to outpace existing levels of infrastructure, connectivity and digital literacy in the country. The introduction of Application Programme Interfaces in 2019 was a critical milestone, as it enabled other stakeholders to seamlessly access IDPoor data.

# Introducing IDPoor, a lifeline for the poor

In front of her home on the edge of Chombok village, about an hour's drive from Phnom Penh, 45-year-old Lay Kosal straps three bunches of palm fruit onto the back of a dusty motorbike. She and her husband, Sou Channunh, earn most of their annual income during the palm harvesting season. A heavily laden bike means more money for the family.

Working as a team – he harvests, she makes and sells palm sugar and juice – the couple can make 50,000 Riel (USD 12.50) a day. This is just enough to buy food for their family of five and to pay for after-school lessons for the two oldest children, Lay Kosal explains.

When the harvesting season is over, however, their household income drops and their daily lives become more precarious. It is during these leaner months that Lay Kosal is particularly grateful for the security that comes from having an Equity Card. Households that are

identified through IDPoor, Cambodia's national poverty identification system, can use their Equity Cards to access various social benefits, including free health services, cash payments and other subsidies. These offer a lifeline to families like Lay Kosal's which sometimes struggle to make ends meet and are vulnerable to the effects of economic shocks, natural disasters or health emergencies.

'Having the IDPoor card has made life easier for us,' explains Lay Kosal. 'If I didn't have one, it would cost me money each time I go to the doctor with my children.' Her youngest child suffers from frequent coughs, bronchitis and high temperatures, so they are often at the local health centre. Before she had an Equity Card, she worried constantly about the costs and had to borrow money from relatives to pay for medicines. 'Now, I still worry about the children's health, but it is good to know that the medical costs are covered,' she says.



→ Lay Kosal and her husband earn most of their annual income from the sale of palm fruit.

As the Government of Cambodia has expanded its social protection programmes in recent years, the Equity Card has unlocked other benefits for Lay Kosal and her family. When she was expecting her youngest child, the village chief helped her to register for cash payments for pregnant women and mothers of young children, which she received every month until her child turned two.

More recently, he helped the family enrol in a cash transfer scheme to offset the effects of the COVID-related economic downturn in Cambodia. With the 224,000 Riel (USD 56) her household received every month through this scheme, Lay Kosal was able to buy a 50-kilogram bag of rice and other food to feed the family. Having an Equity Card ‘makes things more secure for us,’ she observes.

Since 2007, when it was first established, IDPoor has evolved into the cornerstone of social protection in Cambodia, helping to ensure that a growing array of benefits reach the households and individuals who need them most. As of June 2022, more than 692,000 households – accounting for 2.73 million people, or 18% of the Cambodian population – were registered in the IDPoor database. Following a decision taken by the Government of Cambodia in August 2020, households which believe they are poor can now come forward at any time to be assessed under IDPoor and no longer need to wait for scheduled identification rounds, as they did in the past. This transition to a continuous poverty identification system is opening up opportunities for more flexible, better targeted social protection programmes.

The IDPoor system is designed and managed by the Ministry of Planning of Cambodia, which works closely with the country’s 1,646 commune/sangkat councils<sup>1</sup> who carry out the actual work of interviewing households, updating household data and supporting registration for social assistance benefits. Since its inception, IDPoor has been supported financially by Germany’s Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), and has received technical and implementation support from the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH.



→ Lay Kosal with her husband and son, at home in Chombok village.

## ABOUT THIS CASE STUDY

This publication, which builds upon an earlier version (de Riel, 2017), describes the evolution of IDPoor from its origins as a periodic, rounds-based approach to identifying poor households through its transformation into an on-demand, fully digitalised poverty identification system. The case study is structured as follows:

- **Chapter Two** provides a brief overview of how poverty is defined and different ways of identifying the poor.
- **Chapter Three** introduces the history of poverty reduction efforts in Cambodia and developments in the country’s social protection framework.
- **Chapter Four** describes the emergence and consolidation of IDPoor as a community-based targeting system with nationwide coverage. It focuses on key developments which occurred between 2005 and 2017 as the system was designed, rolled out and incrementally improved and expanded.
- **Chapter Five** outlines IDPoor’s transformation since 2018 into a fully digital, on-demand poverty identification system which is central to the design and delivery of social assistance programmes under the National Social Protection Policy Framework.
- **Chapter Six** summarises IDPoor’s main achievements and shares key insights generated throughout implementation.
- **Chapter Seven** looks to the future and considers opportunities to further develop and improve IDPoor as Cambodia moves towards the establishment of a social registry.

<sup>1</sup> Cambodia’s 25 provinces, including the municipality of Phnom Penh, are divided into districts, which are in turn divided into communes (or in urban areas, sangkats).



# A few words on poverty and poverty identification

## DEFINING AND MEASURING POVERTY

The presence or absence of poverty cannot be measured in and of itself: it needs to be constructed from other observed data that, taken together, signify whether a person is considered poor. Traditionally, poverty lines are based on the monetary value of a person's consumption in relation to his or her minimum nutritional, clothing, and shelter needs. Since October 2015, the international poverty line has been set at USD 1.90 per person per day. According to the World Bank (2022), the proportion of the world's population living below this line has declined from 36.3% in 1990 to 8.6% in 2018. National governments set their own poverty thresholds based on the local costs of essential food and non-food items. In Cambodia, for example, the national poverty line was set at 10,951 Cambodian Riel (USD 2.70) per person per day in November 2021.

In contrast to income-based (more common in developed countries) or consumption-based poverty calculations, the concept of multidimensional poverty looks at the deprivation people experience in areas such as health, nutrition, education and standard of living (access to clean drinking water, sanitation and modern cooking fuels). It reflects how poor people describe their own poverty and recognises the various barriers that prevent them from achieving a decent quality of life (UNDP, 2016; Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, 2015).

## FINDING THE POOR

In the context of poverty reduction initiatives, targeting refers to mechanisms which apply criteria to identify eligible individuals – and screen out ineligible individuals – from a larger population, with the aim of transferring resources such as social benefits or access to social services (Devereaux et al, 2015). The effectiveness of a targeting method is generally measured by its ability to avoid capturing beneficiaries who are not poor (inclusion error or 'leakage'), and to avoid missing those who are actually poor (exclusion error or 'undercoverage').

### Targeting methodologies

Targeting requires a measurable definition of poverty. In developed countries, eligibility for social benefits is usually determined through a means test which measures the amount of income and savings a person has, or can involve a detailed consumption survey. Proxy means tests are often used in lower-income settings where many people work in the informal sector, and gathering precise information about income or consumption is difficult, expensive and time-consuming.

Proxy means tests are usually implemented via large-scale periodic surveys, carried out by interviewers or enumerators, which focus on households which are most likely to be poor (Hanna and Olken, 2018). They use easily observable and verifiable 'proxies' – such as assets (for example, ownership of a radio, type of roof material on the house) or behaviours (children attending school) – to predict income or per-capita consumption. Based on the proxy means scores, governments can distribute benefits to all households with predicted incomes or per-capita consumption which fall below a certain cut-off.

Developed in Latin America in the 1980s to better target the poor for social programmes in the wake of the World Bank's and International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment measures, proxy means tests are a relatively efficient yet locally adaptable way to identify poor households (Lavallée et al, 2010). They are widely used in large and small countries alike to determine eligibility for benefits (Hanna and Olken, 2018). Inclusion and exclusion errors from this method can still be significant, however, due to factors such as the proxy selection itself, and how the test is implemented (AusAID, 2011).

Community-based targeting, which gained in favour in the 1990s, allows a greater role for community members in the identification of households that they define as poor, usually with some discussion amongst the group at the outset on the definition or criteria associated with poverty (Alatas et al, 2012). Especially where monitoring and transparency are strong, community targeting can be more accurate than proxy means tests in identifying



the very poor. It can also yield greater satisfaction in the community, which often has positive repercussions such as fewer disagreements or protests when programmes are implemented (Yusuf, 2010; Alatas et al, 2012).

Other targeting methods include categorical targeting (a simple method based on one or more easily observable criteria such as age, gender, disability status); geographic targeting (a kind of categorical targeting, focusing on people living in an identified high-poverty area and often also combined with another targeting method); and self-targeting (participants self-select for benefits that are designed to deter the non-poor, e.g. work opportunities that pay sub-market wages) (Lavallée et al, 2010; Conning & Kevane, 2002).

### Balancing trade-offs between accuracy, cost-effectiveness and acceptability

In general, the more accurate the targeting is, the more expensive it is to administer (Grosh, 1994). Low-income countries often must choose whether to trade off some degree of targeting accuracy in order to direct as much money as possible to the benefits themselves, or spend more on targeting to ensure that funds go to the poorest.

Because of this tension between accuracy and cost-effectiveness, there is no such thing as a perfect targeting mechanism (Devereux et al, 2015). In practice, many programmes rely upon a combination of targeting mechanisms to improve accuracy. For example, proxy means testing can be combined with categorical targeting to identify poor pregnant women. Community-based targeting approaches can inform the way proxy means tests are implemented to enhance the acceptability of such mechanisms in the community.

The way IDPoor identifies poor households has shifted over time. When the programme began, it used a hybrid targeting mechanism which combined a proxy means test with strong elements of community involvement to ensure that households identified as poor were those which villagers themselves believed to be poor. In 2021, the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme suggested a revision of the IDPoor poverty scoring based on data from the latest Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey (CSES), conducted in 2019-2020. At the time this case study was published (September 2022), a multi-stakeholder process, coordinated by GIZ, was underway to improve the methodology and relative indicator weighting on the basis of new data and new regression calculations.

These changes, once finalised, will bring IDPoor closer to internationally accepted standards for targeting and further enhance the credibility of IDPoor data. While community members are no longer directly involved in identifying poor households, community participation remains an important feature of IDPoor. Households, community members and other stakeholder groups initiate IDPoor processes (i.e. identifying households, editing data, removing households) and commune/sangkat councils may take special circumstances into account in issuing Equity Cards to households whose interview scores fall under the designated threshold.

# Poverty and poverty reduction efforts in Cambodia

## A SOCIETY IN TRANSITION

In some ways, rural Cambodians appear to live as they have for hundreds of years: in small raised houses made of wood and palm frond walls and roofs, cooking with a pot resting on three stones over a fire, growing rice or cassava on small plots of land, perhaps with a chicken or a cow if the family is doing well. In fact, Cambodian society is still largely agrarian, with 61% of its population of 15.6 million living in rural areas, surviving at least in part on subsistence farming (National Institute of Statistics, 2020b). Yet the country is changing rapidly and even in rural areas signs of modern life are visible. Motorbikes bounce over the dirt roads, radios hang from hooks under the eaves, most people have mobile phones and in some homes the glow of small televisions, hooked up to batteries, lights up the evenings and the crowd gathered to watch.

As part of the broader ‘mobility revolution’ taking place in Southeast Asia over the past several decades, migration has bolstered the Cambodian economy while also complicating the ability of the government to track and provide services to mobile populations (Rigg, 2013). Internal migration from rural to urban areas is on the rise, driven primarily by young people who are seeking out economic opportunities in cities. In addition, an estimated 1.2 million Cambodians – almost 12% of the total working age population – were working abroad in 2015 (OECD & Cambodia Development Resource Institute, 2017).

Prior to the COVID pandemic, Cambodia’s economy was one of the fastest growing in the world, expanding by more than 7% per year on average between 1998 and 2019.<sup>2</sup> The tourism, textile and construction industries were the main motors of this growth, providing employment for many Cambodians and accelerating the transition from



→ A raised house in Ratankiri Province.

an economy dependent on agriculture to one built around manufacturing and services. Cambodia joined the ranks of lower middle-income countries in 2015 and, bolstered by strong macroeconomic management and rising levels of foreign direct investment, the government set its sights on becoming an upper middle-income country by 2030.

The COVID-19 pandemic dealt a blow, at least temporarily, to these aspirations. The same sectors which underpinned Cambodia’s growing prosperity were heavily affected by border closures, which stopped the flow of international visitors, and by declines in foreign direct investment and in global demand for manufactured goods. Cambodia’s economy contracted by 3.1% in 2020, and was projected to grow only modestly in 2021 as the effects of the pandemic continued to be felt (World Bank, 2021).

<sup>2</sup> The World Bank in Cambodia. [www.worldbank.org/en/country/cambodia/overview#1](http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/cambodia/overview#1). Accessed April 26, 2022.

## POVERTY DECLINES, BUT INEQUALITY AND VULNERABILITY PERSIST

Cambodia is regarded as a success story when it comes to poverty reduction. According to official government statistics, poverty decreased drastically from 47.8% of the population in 2007 to approximately 13.5% in 2015 (Cambodia Ministry of Planning, 2013; World Bank, 2017; Asian Development Bank, 2014). The COVID pandemic reversed this trend, with unemployment and work stoppages contributing to an uptick in poverty and inequality. In 2021 the Government of Cambodia estimated that 18% of Cambodians were living under the new national poverty line, which it set at the equivalent of USD 2.70 per person per day (World Bank, 2021). Poverty rates are higher in rural compared to urban areas.

While progress in reducing poverty is undeniable, household surveys show that a large portion of the population that used to live just under the poverty line has now shifted just above it. For these households, hardship and deprivation still persist. Moreover, they are susceptible to falling back into poverty in the face of shocks such as natural disasters, poor health or the death of a wage earner. The United Nations Development Programme estimated that Cambodia's multidimensional poverty rate in 2021 was 37% – significantly higher than income poverty – with an additional 21% vulnerable to poverty (UNDP, 2021). The gap between the richest and poorest Cambodians has declined since its peak in 2007, but is still visible in different ways. For example, in 2019 the disposable household income of the richest quintile of the population was 16 times higher than the income of the lowest quintile (National Institute of Statistics, 2020a).

These statistics suggest challenges for poverty identification in Cambodia: rapid changes in who is defined as poor according to Cambodia's poverty line; a large and less-discussed segment of the population that lives just above the poverty line but remains vulnerable to shocks; and the question of how best to identify the poor and vulnerable in a way that is both acceptable and nationally replicable.

## FROM POVERTY REDUCTION TO COMPREHENSIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION

In the first decades post-Khmer Rouge, Cambodia struggled to rebuild its economy and join the regional and international communities. During the late 1980s and 1990s, the Cambodian government developed a series of plans to support socio-economic 'rehabilitation and development', and by the mid-1990s, Cambodia began to transition from a centrally-planned economy to a market-based one.

New laws were passed starting in the late 1990s to begin formalising some aspects of an envisioned safety net to protect the poor and vulnerable, including programmes related to employment, insurance and social security. The government began to work on articulating official priorities for addressing poverty with a coherent set of policies: a National Poverty Reduction Strategy was adopted in 2002, and starting in 2004, Cambodia's so-called 'Rectangular Strategy' brought together elements from the economic development plans and the poverty reduction strategy.

While at government level Cambodia's poverty reduction efforts were developed through a series of interconnected strategic plans, the on-the-ground reality was for many years a patchwork set of programmes. While some were government-led, many were implemented by development partners and non-governmental organisations, who piloted approaches designed to address specific problems – food security, access to education and health services – in specific geographical areas. As there were no common implementation arrangements, information systems, or criteria for identifying beneficiaries, these efforts remained fragmented and did not build upon one another (Zambra, 2018). In 2015 expenditure on social protection accounted for only 0.8% of aggregate gross domestic product, far lower than the Asian average of 5.3%. Just two out of five intended beneficiaries in Cambodia were covered by social protection (Asian Development Bank, 2019).

The situation began to change in 2017 with the adoption of the National Social Protection Policy Framework (NSPPF), which outlines the government's commitment to provide social protection to all Cambodians, whether poor or not. The framework envisions a comprehensive set of interventions built around two pillars: social assistance for the country's poorest and most vulnerable citizens, and social security – including health insurance and pensions – for the entire population. The NSPPF's vision is expansive, ranging from emergency relief, vocational training and school feeding schemes to workplace injury compensation, disability benefits and unemployment insurance.

A National Social Protection Council (NSPC) was established in 2017 as a new high-level inter-ministerial body responsible for setting the policy direction for social protection in the country. A general secretariat, located at the Ministry of Economy and Finance, was tasked with operationalising the framework, coordinating social protection initiatives between ministries, and harmonising the previously fragmented social protection landscape.



# The creation of a national poverty identification system

This chapter charts the first decade of IDPoor, from its beginnings as an answer to the need for a standardised approach to poverty targeting in the health sector, through its consolidation as Cambodia's official poverty identification system offering complete rural and urban coverage.

## LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS (2005-2007)

### The need for a uniform national targeting system

Starting in 1997, the Cambodian government implemented health service user fees in all public hospitals and health centres in a bid to generate resources which could be reinvested in running costs and salary supplements. It soon became clear that Cambodians who lacked money to pay the fees either avoided seeking care, which led to worse health outcomes, or incurred debt to pay for treatment, thereby deepening household deprivation. The government began looking for alternative health financing models which could exempt poor Cambodians from paying user fees, while protecting health facilities from operating at a financial loss.

It soon seized upon Health Equity Funds (HEF), which had been piloted by international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in various locations in Cambodia since 2000, as a promising approach. A HEF is a mechanism which reimburses public health facilities for services provided to the poor. Eligible patients receive services at public health facilities free of charge and – in an effort to remove all barriers to care – are also entitled to transportation reimbursements and food stipends. In 2002 HEFs were incorporated into the Health Sector Strategic Plan and the National Poverty Reduction Strategy (Ir et al, 2010). Over the next few years, they were scaled up across the country through a collaboration between the Government of Cambodia and NGOs.<sup>3</sup>



→ IDPoor offered a standardised way to identify households which should be exempted from health facility user fees.

The early HEFs were separately designed and administered, but united by the same aim: to increase health care utilisation among poor Cambodians by exempting them from user fees. But how should 'the poor' be defined and how should they be identified? Targeting decisions fell to the so-called 'HEF operators' – usually NGOs – who managed the day-to-day operations of the HEFs. In the absence of an agreed screening method and screening criteria, each HEF operator developed its own process for identifying eligible households. Some systematically pre-screened households before the onset of illness, in their homes, and provided those eligible with an entitlement card or voucher which they could show at the health facility when seeking care. Others screened patients as they arrived at the hospital, or offered this on-site option in addition to a pre-identification process (Noirhomme et al., 2007). The diversity of identification approaches made it difficult to know whether the most vulnerable populations were in fact being reached.

<sup>3</sup> In 2009 a Multi-Donor Trust Fund, led by the World Bank, was established to finance the second Cambodian Health Sector Support Programme (HSSP2). Germany, through the KfW Development Bank, began contributing to this basket in 2015 with a focus on scaling up HEFs.

The Health Equity Funds were not the only ones seeking to identify poor Cambodians. Other development programmes targeting the poor – for example, food security and school scholarship programmes – were also trying different ways to identify their beneficiaries. As such programmes frequently overlapped in geographic coverage, poor households often had to go through multiple screening exercises, and ended up being eligible for some programmes, but not for others. The confusion and inefficiencies caused by these parallel poverty identification systems made the need for a national poverty identification mechanism increasingly apparent.

### Building consensus around a hybrid targeting mechanism

In early 2005 the Ministry of Planning – the body responsible for collecting national demographic and statistical information to be used across all sectors – organised workshops to bring together interested partners to discuss developing a common poverty targeting system. The German government provided seed funding for the initial programme development and pilot and commissioned GIZ to support the Ministry of Planning. Other development partners, including the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, UNICEF, and the European Union, later followed suit.

A consultative working group was formed that included the Ministries of Health, Education, Interior and Social Affairs, as well as development partners. This group was charged with defining the new targeting system, and drafting the necessary procedures and poverty identification questionnaires. The guiding principles were that the procedures should be effective (avoiding inclusion

and exclusion errors), cost-efficient and transparent. They should also be implemented in cooperation with the new decentralised structures which were established following the first election of commune councils in 2002. As poverty was understood to predominantly affect the rural population, the new system was initially envisioned for rural areas only.

According to Julian Hansen, a GIZ advisor at the time, ‘the primary criterion of success for IDPoor was its acceptance by the local people.’ If the government was going to require all pro-poor programmes to target beneficiaries using the IDPoor lists, people needed to buy in to the approach. For this reason, the working group opted to use a hybrid targeting model: a community-driven proxy means test administered by elected residents of each village and then checked and validated by the community as a whole. They modelled the new mechanism on an approach developed by the German-supported Rural Development Programme, which used a scorecard of poverty indicators for poor households that a village representative group discussed, and village consultation meetings to ensure transparency.

With this vision in mind, the working group got to work producing a draft procedures manual and a poverty identification questionnaire which would be used to interview the heads of poor households. The IDPoor procedure was piloted in four communes in early 2007. After a few changes, the first round of poverty identification – following the sequence of steps described in Box 1 – took place in 2007 in two provinces.



→ Villagers were directly involved in identifying poor households in the original IDPoor procedures.

## → THE ORIGINAL IDPOOR CYCLE, STEP BY STEP

### ELECTION OF VILLAGE REPRESENTATIVE GROUP

The process began with villagers electing 5 to 7 fellow residents to form a Village Representative Group (VRG) whose members were responsible for implementing the proxy means test with households. Those chosen needed to be able to read and write Khmer and were meant to represent a cross-section of the community in terms of religion, economic status and place of residence. At least a quarter of the members were to be women.

### TRAINING OF VILLAGE REPRESENTATIVE GROUP IN IDPOOR PROCEDURES

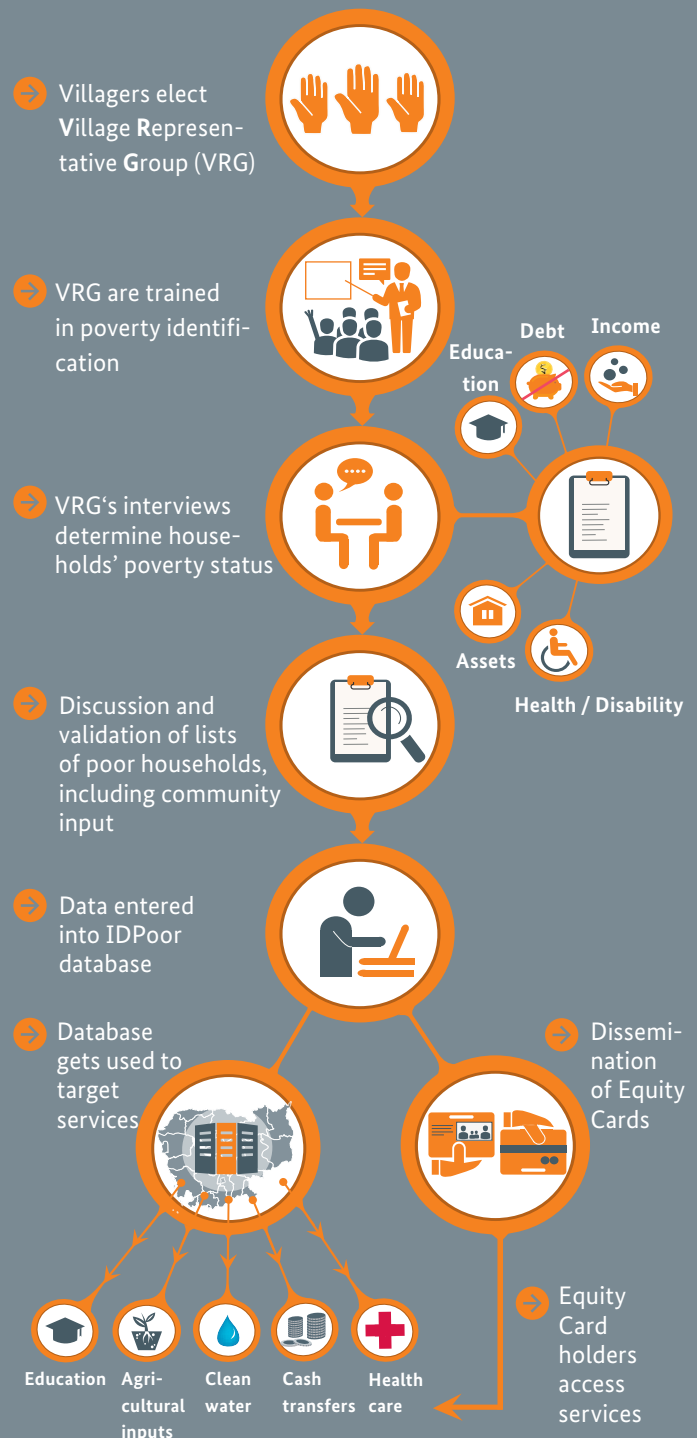
Members of the Commune Council trained the VRG how to administer the questionnaires, how to tally the scores at the end of the household interview, and how to translate the scores into poverty categories. They also learned which special circumstances could be taken into consideration in the scoring of the questionnaire.

The Commune Council supervised the work of the VRG. The entire identification process – from selection of the VRG to finalization of the IDPoor list – was to take no more than 76 days.

### HOUSEHOLD INTERVIEWS TO DETERMINE IDPOOR STATUS

The VRG, village chief and deputy village chief developed a complete list of households in the village, taking recent deaths, departures, or new arrivals into account. (A household was defined as ‘members who share meals from the same cooking pot or share the expenses for food.’) From this list, the VRG identified which households might be poor and should therefore be interviewed. Each of the VRG members then interviewed about 30 households over a two-week period.

### → THE ORIGINAL IDPOOR PROCEDURES IN A NUTSHELL





The paper questionnaire consisted of four sections: A) basic information about who participated in the interview; B) demographic section to identify all household members; C) proxy indicators, with scoring; and D) additional household information for consideration, which was unscored. In section D interviewers indicated if a household had particular vulnerabilities, for example members with disabilities or chronic illnesses, whether the head of the household was a single parent or whether there had been difficulties with children's school attendance. The interviewer added up the points from each section to arrive at an overall score for each household.

The VRG members came together to review the scores and to categorise all households into poverty levels 1 (= extremely poor), 2 (= poor) and other (non-poor) accordingly. They also jointly considered the special circumstances affecting some of the households and whether their IDPoor status should be changed on these grounds.

## **DISCUSSION AND VALIDATION OF RESULTS**

After the initial classification was made, the VRG shared the list at a Commune Council meeting and then posted it publicly at a central location in the village. At a village consultation meeting held soon thereafter, any community member could raise questions or lodge a complaint if they thought that they should have been interviewed, but were not, or if they disagreed with their own or other households' poverty classification. A revised list was posted for seven days for final input. After endorsing the final list, the Commune Council sent it to the Provincial Department of Planning.

## **ENTERING DATA INTO NATIONAL IDPOOR DATABASE**

The Provincial Departments of Planning submitted all lists of poor households, questionnaires and related documents to the Ministry of Planning, which coordinated data entry into the national IDPoor database at central level.

## **DISTRIBUTION OF EQUITY CARDS**

Photography teams travelled to each village to take the photos for the Equity Cards and to inform the assembled IDPoor recipients about the different types of services that might be available to them once they had their card. Using the household's IDPoor code number, the photos were matched with the information in the IDPoor database. The Equity Cards were printed at the national level and delivered to the eligible families.

## **TARGETING PROGRAMMES USING IDPOOR DATA**

Once the data entry for a given round was complete, the IDPoor data became available for organisations to use for targeting, research, analysis and programme planning purposes.

## CONSOLIDATING THE NATIONAL POVERTY IDENTIFICATION SYSTEM (2008-2017)

### Attaining national coverage and enshrining IDPoor in law

Beginning in 2008, IDPoor was implemented in ‘rounds.’ Eight of Cambodia’s 24 provinces<sup>4</sup> were covered in any given year,<sup>5</sup> which meant that identification took place on a three-yearly cycle. An identified household would receive an Equity Card valid for three years; during the next round it would be re-interviewed and its eligibility either extended for another three years, adjusted to a different poverty category (i.e. IDPoor 1 or IDPoor 2), or ended altogether if its circumstances had improved.



→ Upon presentation of their Equity Cards, members of IDPoor can access health services free of charge.

By late 2010, all rural villages in Cambodia had experienced at least one IDPoor round, meaning that, apart from urban areas, IDPoor had achieved complete national coverage. In 2011, in a significant step, IDPoor was formally adopted by the government of Cambodia as its official poverty identification mechanism. Sub-Decree 291 (‘Sub-Decree on Identification of Poor Households in Cambodia’) enshrined in law the government’s role in identifying poor households through the IDPoor process and in disseminating that information to all interested stakeholders. Moreover, it required all organisations targeting poor households, be they government, non-government, local or international, to do this on the basis of IDPoor data. This official adoption solidified the government’s financial and political support to the programme’s sustainability, and added to IDPoor’s value to beneficiaries as more and more services were attached to Equity Cards in different regions.

### Strengthening processes to improve accuracy

As the IDPoor identification rounds became regularised, the team at the Ministry of Planning and the advisors with the GIZ-implemented Support to the Identification of Poor Households project began to fine-tune IDPoor processes to improve their accuracy. The key question was how well the identification procedures were distinguishing the poor from the non-poor: Were all of the households that met the IDPoor criteria and that participated in the process being identified? Were there households that would otherwise meet the IDPoor criteria that were being left out because they were not being interviewed?

In 2011 the World Bank attempted to compare which households identified by IDPoor were considered ‘poor’ by other standards, including villagers’ perceptions, in order to get a sense of inclusion and exclusion errors. It found that approximately 14% of those perceived as ‘very poor’ by villagers were excluded by IDPoor’s Poor Level 1, and approximately 12% of those perceived as non-poor were included. An even higher percentage of exclusion (42.5%) was found when comparing villagers’ perceptions of ‘poor’ households to the IDPoor Level 2 results (World Bank, 2011). This reflected the greater difficulty of making a subjective judgment of poverty where households are close to the threshold, as compared to those that are very poor.

Following the early rounds, the team at the Ministry of Planning introduced certain adaptations to ensure that the process, tools and trainings better matched the realities at the village level. For example, the training curricula were updated to build interviewers’ skills in areas where Village Representative Group members had some difficulty administering parts of the questionnaire, such as estimating the size of a household’s property. To reduce the possibility that incorrect implementation would result in excluding poor households, the Ministry of Planning stepped up implementation monitoring and support. It increased the number of provincial coordinators in the IDPoor team and developed new guidelines for the supervision of the IDPoor process at the commune and provincial level.

After reports from some partners that IDPoor was not capturing all the poor, based on their programme’s experiences, the team also redoubled efforts to identify vulnerable populations. It adapted IDPoor trainings to encourage Village Representative Groups to make extra outreach efforts to vulnerable groups, such as people with disabilities and members of ethnic communities, and encourage their participation in community meetings and other aspects of the IDPoor process.

<sup>4</sup> At the time, Cambodia had 23 provinces plus Phnom Penh, which was considered a 24th province. In 2013 the province of Tboung Khmum was created. Today Cambodia has 24 provinces plus Phnom Penh, which is considered the 25th province.

<sup>5</sup> Identification rounds were carried out in seven provinces in 2008. For the next few years, IDPoor attempted an ambitious plan of covering half of the country’s provinces in each round. This stretched financial and human resources too thin, and, from 2012 onwards, the Ministry of Planning settled on one-third of the country, or 8 provinces, per year.



→ Members of a Village Representative Group review the results of household interviews

### Closing gaps in health care access for migrants and the recently poor

Over time, while adjustments to the process were improving IDPoor implementation, the Ministry of Planning and partners began to tackle other reasons why some poor and vulnerable households were still being left behind.

One of these had to do with the fluidity of poverty itself: people were shifting in and out of poverty more quickly than the three-year IDPoor cycle could capture. Roughly 20% of the population met the IDPoor criteria at a given time, but an additional 50% were vulnerable to falling into poverty. While these households may have been just above the cut-off point when the IDPoor interviews took place, they could easily fall below it before the next round.

Another reason was the fact that a growing number of Cambodians had become work migrants, either splitting the year between two residences or constantly moving to find employment. This pattern was much less common in 2005 when the IDPoor programme was being developed, but within a decade had come to affect one in four Cambodians (National Institute of Statistics, 2013) – most if not all of them likely to be poor. The IDPoor procedures made no provision for villagers who happened to be working away during the interview period.

To bridge these coverage gaps, important programmes targeting the poor found interim solutions. In the health sector, Health Equity Fund operators were authorised by the Ministry of Health to use a ‘Post ID’ questionnaire modelled on the one used by IDPoor to determine if patients were poor, and, if yes, to give them a so-called Priority Card for health services. Like IDPoor beneficiaries, Priority Card holders were entitled to free health services as well as transportation costs and a daily food stipend while at the hospital, although they did not receive any other benefits attached to the IDPoor Equity Card.

Their data were forwarded to the provincial planning departments to ensure that they were included in the next IDPoor round.

A disadvantage of the Post ID process was that it was more vulnerable to possible manipulation, since Post ID was conducted on the spot at health facilities, where reported household characteristics could not be observed or verified. Another limitation was that health facilities were not reimbursed for the services provided to Priority Card holders. From a health systems perspective, this did not encourage respectful treatment of these patients.

### Working with and sharing IDPoor data

In the early years of IDPoor, once all the data from a round had been entered into the national database, the team at the Ministry of Planning would prepare lists of IDPoor households per commune, burn these onto CDs, and distribute them to programmes targeting their support to the poor. The limits of this system soon became apparent. Depending on their programme’s characteristics, some partners were interested in grouping the data differently (e.g. according to health facility or school catchment areas) or in targeting sub-segments of IDPoor households, for example, those with elderly or school-age members. It was impossible to do this on the basis of static lists.

It became obvious that much more could be done with the valuable socio-economic information contained in the IDPoor database. Not only were its contents systematically collected and regularly updated, but the data could be analysed right down to the commune and village level. If the data were made accessible in different formats, they could be used for research and programme design purposes, not only for targeting services.

An important step in this direction took place in 2012, when the Ministry of Planning and the World Food Programme (WFP) collaborated to develop the IDPoor Atlas. Drawing on IDPoor data, the Atlas visualised poverty in Cambodia through maps, tables and graphs showing the breakdown of poverty data by different characteristics. This was well received by partners and government entities, but its printed format made it expensive and cumbersome to distribute.

Two years later, at the suggestion of data users, the Ministry of Planning launched a web-based IDPoor Information System (IIS), which made available summary statistics and poverty comparisons of each province, district, commune, and village in both English and Khmer. The platform brought other benefits, too, such as the ability for social service providers registered on the platform to easily verify the validity of Equity Cards; greater data security through password protection; and the ability to monitor data usage, such as which reports are most frequently used.



Taking the visualisation and interpretation possibilities one step further, in 2015 the World Food Programme linked IDPoor with its school scholarship programme data, as well as census data from the National Institute of Statistics, in an online and interactive suite of technologies called Platform for Real-time Information Systems, or PRISM. This system is aimed at supporting government decision-making by enabling data visualisation, management, automation of reports and alerts, and sharing ministerial data across government. Using PRISM's data sharing software, the World Food Programme began pulling IDPoor data from IIS into interactive maps where users could overlay various other data points for effective targeting. Policy-makers were therefore able, for the first time, to discern both needs (e.g. large numbers of poor households with school-age children) and existing programme coverage (e.g. scholarships and school feeding) in rural areas across Cambodia and to design interventions accordingly. This approach quickly gained interest, with the Cambodian National Committee for Disaster Management employing PRISM as its disaster management information system, visualising interactive IDPoor data to target response to the most vulnerable areas and households.

During these years the Ministry of Planning began intensifying its engagement with partners and data users to increase their understanding of the IDPoor process and to build trust in IDPoor and its data. It convened individual or group meetings with stakeholders several times a year to discuss future plans and solicit input on what development partners and government agencies needed (often focusing on reports or data formats). The Ministry also began to host national-level data user fora, bringing together the key entities that used IDPoor data for poverty alleviation initiatives. A Multi-Stakeholder Advisory Group was also formed as a forum for partners and other ministries to raise questions or problems in relation to IDPoor and to contribute to problem-solving. In combination, these initiatives aimed to build confidence in IDPoor's ability to identify all poor households and serve as the foundation for one common social protection platform in Cambodia.

#### Expanding IDPoor to reach the urban poor

Although IDPoor had been envisioned as a mechanism to identify the rural poor, the rise of migration to cities triggered greater interest on the part of the Cambodian government and its partners in targeting previously underserved urban areas. The Urban Poor Office within the Municipality of Phnom Penh found in a 2012 baseline survey that 516 slum settlements existed in the city (Phnom Penh Capital, 2012). For the estimated 250,000 people who inhabited these communities, the health and

safety risks were vast: the settlements were often built near sewage pipes, rail lines or small waterways, and lacked basic infrastructure such as clean water, toilets, roads, electricity and rubbish collection.

In 2014, the Ministry of Planning conducted consultative meetings with the key IDPoor stakeholders, including line ministries, development partners and private sector entities, to discuss the extension of IDPoor to urban areas. A working group reviewed and proposed adaptations to the IDPoor process and questionnaire, and a revised process was piloted in three urban areas. In late 2016 the Ministry of Planning launched the first urban IDPoor round in the capital cities of eight provinces, plus the municipality of Phnom Penh (see Box 2).

One of the changes that was introduced to make the procedures more suitable for urban settings was the addition of Partner Support Groups. These were organisations and agencies with highly local knowledge who assisted the urban Village Representative Groups in the identification of households to interview. This was necessary because the fluid population dynamics made it impossible to rely on the relatively stable relationship networks and personal knowledge of households that characterise rural communities.

Information also flows differently in cities, compared to villages; people are often not at home and may be too busy to attend public meetings. The urban VRGs therefore gave invitation letters directly to suspected poor households and placed announcements about IDPoor on local radio and television stations. They also posted the draft and final lists of IDPoor households for 10 days, compared to 3 in rural areas, to allow adequate time for people to review them and voice any complaints about the process or outcomes.



→ Sam Kunthea collects recyclable waste in Phnom Penh. She was identified as eligible for an Equity Card after IDPoor expanded into urban areas.



→ In 2016 IDPoor began identifying households in urban areas. Measures of poverty were adjusted to account for differences in assets and expenses between urban and rural areas.

Measures of poverty were also adjusted to account for the difference in assets and expenses in urban areas. Fewer households own their homes and life is much more monetised than in rural villages, where labour can still be traded for food. Not having any cows or chickens is the norm in a city, whereas having a motorbike or electricity is less of a luxury than in a rural area. The proxy indicators in the urban questionnaire therefore included new questions about income (a specific value per month), debt, access to clean water and electricity, as well as some typical occupations for the urban poor such as scavenging and seasonal work.

The urban IDPoor questionnaire also treated household members' chronic illness, disability, adults' education level and children's school attendance as proxy indicators which were scored, whereas in the rural process they were part of the unscored special circumstances section. The urban unscored special circumstances section included additional vulnerability indicators such as domestic violence, addiction, or living in crowded conditions. Compared to rural communities, in urban areas the IDPoor process and the more detailed questionnaire required more training. Each questionnaire also took more time to complete with a household.

## → BOX 2. A BRIGHTER PROSPECT FOR YANY'S FAMILY

Many poor families live dangerously close to the railway tracks in Phnom Penh. San Yany, 59, used to live in a rented room with her 37-year-old daughter and one-year-old granddaughter. After their toilet overflowed and the landlord refused to fix the problem, the family built and moved to a temporary shelter next to the tracks. They have been there for one month already and are desperately trying to save up enough money to rent another room in the area. Currently they do not pay rent, but fear the railway authorities will soon evict them. Trains pass down this stretch of line about four times per day.

Yany's daughter has problems walking due to a congenital disability. Recently Yany herself has suffered from back pains, but with income limited to what she and her daughter make doing laundry for neighbours, there is not enough money to see a doctor. Commune Council officials sometimes give food and monetary donations to the family, and some neighbours also provide food. Once IDPoor reached urban areas, Yany and her family had the chance to get an Equity Card.



● In 2016 IDPoor began identifying households in urban areas. Measures of poverty were adjusted to account for differences in assets and expenses between urban and rural areas.



# IDPoor goes digital and on-demand

The adoption of the National Social Protection Policy Framework in 2017 and the establishment of the National Social Protection Council in 2018 marked the start of a new chapter in Cambodia's social protection journey. This chapter describes how IDPoor became a key tool for designing and targeting social assistance programmes – and how the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated certain planned changes in the IDPoor system.

## A NEW CASH TRANSFER PROGRAMME FOR POOR PREGNANT WOMEN AND YOUNG CHILDREN

Cambodia's social protection journey picked up pace in 2019 with the introduction of a national social assistance programme, funded by the Government of Cambodia, targeting poor pregnant women and children under the age of two. The programme aims to improve maternal and child health outcomes by providing pregnant women from poor households with cash payments tied to specific health visits during the pre-natal period, upon delivery of their babies in health facilities, and during the first two years of their children's lives. Since the launch of the programme, approximately 50,000 women have received benefits every year.

Although conditional cash transfer schemes for pregnant women had been piloted in Cambodia previously, including one designed and funded by UNICEF in Siem Reap province starting in 2013<sup>6</sup>, they had never been attempted at a national scale. What made the difference in this case was the involvement of the NSPC General Secretariat, which succeeded in building a policy consensus for the programme between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation (MoSVY),<sup>7</sup> and the availability of IDPoor data, which allowed payments to be targeted to poor women and children countrywide. Pregnant women with Equity



→ A social assistance programme for poor pregnant women and mothers of young children was launched in 2019.

Cards were able to register for the programme with their commune/sangkat councils, while those without Equity Cards, but who believed they might be eligible for one, were screened by health facilities using Post ID.

According to H.E. Dr Chan Narith, the Secretary General of the NSPC, IDPoor was important for both the design and the implementation of the cash transfer programme: 'Without this system, it would not be possible to identify the eligible women and children, to know where they are, and to channel the benefits to them.'

The introduction of the programme prompted a major leap forward in terms of information sharing between involved parties. New digital solutions were developed to link the cash transfer delivery system – which involved commune/sangkat councils (registration of pregnant women), health facilities (provision of services which triggered payments), the Ministry of Social Affairs<sup>8</sup> (issuer of payments), and the mobile money provider Wing (disbursement of benefits to enrolled women) – with the

<sup>6</sup> [www.unicef.org/cambodia/media/1161/file/CARD%20Evaluation%20Vol.1.pdf](http://www.unicef.org/cambodia/media/1161/file/CARD%20Evaluation%20Vol.1.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Henceforth referred to as the Ministry of Social Affairs.

<sup>8</sup> The Ministry of Health was responsible for the programme from its launch until early 2020, when it was taken over by the Ministry of Social Affairs.



IDPoor database, which contained information about which households held Equity Cards. This was possible thanks to an Application Programme Interface (API) layer which was introduced during a major redevelopment of the IDPoor information technology (IT) system in 2018-2019. APIs allowed for interoperability and data exchange between the IDPoor database and the systems of other data users.

The roll-out of the programme also revealed limitations of the IDPoor system, however. The information in the IDPoor database had been collected during identification rounds which in some cases had taken place two or three years earlier. IDPoor was therefore only able to present a static snapshot of households' poverty status at a given point in time. Implementers had to rely heavily upon Post ID procedures to identify all eligible women. Another limitation lay in the structure of the database itself, which was designed to capture information about households rather than the members of those households. This presented certain administrative challenges when it came to registering and activating mobile money accounts, as the cash payments were targeted at individual women, rather than at households. Finally, IDPoor was not especially well suited to manage data on pregnancies, which are dynamic and time-bound phenomena requiring up-to-date information.

According to Erna Ribar, the chief of social policy at UNICEF Cambodia, the experience of delivering the new cash transfer programme led to a greater awareness of the need for IDPoor to collect information about individuals, as well as households, to facilitate categorical targeting where appropriate. 'With the acceleration of social protection programming in Cambodia, we have been learning together, through practice, what needs to be changed and how things can be done differently,' she said. 'When it comes to IDPoor, one of the main lessons learned was the need for a more dynamic system.' It also underscored the importance of establishing robust digital linkages between the IDPoor database and other information systems to allow different datasets to speak to one another.

## TOWARD AN ON-DEMAND IDENTIFICATION SYSTEM

Long before the cash transfer scheme, IDPoor programme managers were aware that a more immediate and responsive IDPoor process would be preferable to additional screening measures such as Post ID. 'We had feedback from implementers and service providers that it was a great challenge for households which fell into poverty between rounds to wait for the next round to be identified,' explains H.E. Keo Ouly, the director of the Department of Identification of Poor Households at the Ministry of Planning. 'The main reason for introducing on-demand identification was to provide a complementary mechanism to identify those households between rounds.'

In 2017, the Ministry of Planning began consulting with other ministries and development partners to review possible options for an 'on-demand IDPoor' process. A preferred option emerged: commune and sangkat councils would receive requests from households for IDPoor assessment, consider these requests during their monthly meetings, and send out a council member to conduct the interview within a relatively short timeframe. The council would then make a final determination based on the questionnaire results, including special circumstances as in the standard IDPoor process.

### 19 communes pilot a dynamic identification procedure

During 2017 and 2018, the Ministry of Planning piloted this new approach in 19 communes. Financing and technical support for the pilot reflected the great interest among development partners in this potential adaptation: UNICEF, USAID through Save the Children, and the World Food Programme all contributed, in addition to the financing from the German and Australian governments.

The pilot had several aims. It sought to understand whether commune councils could readily manage the volume of on-demand requests which would arise once households had the opportunity to request screening under IDPoor, and to analyse the cost implications of introducing an on-demand procedure. Beyond this, it also set out to assess local capacity to use mobile technologies for registering interview requests, collecting and transmitting household data, and printing out Equity Cards.

Although up to this point IDPoor had chosen to move slowly in digitising its procedures, it was also clear that a more dynamic identification system would be difficult without a move to digital data collection. The pilot presented an opportunity to test this proposition. In approximately half of the pilot communes, commune council members interviewed households using the standard paper-based questionnaires which had always been used during IDPoor rounds; in the others, they used tablets with a specially programmed IDPoor app to administer the questionnaire. The app automatically calculated the score at the end of the interview and, as soon as the commune council validated the household's IDPoor status, saved the household data and photographs directly to the national IDPoor database.

### Proof of concept for digital data collection

The results of the pilot were encouraging. The commune councils were able to handle the volume of new requests for interviews and were not overwhelmed by a surge in demand when the opportunity to apply for an Equity Card was announced. Sabine Cerceau, the technical team lead for GIZ's Support to the Identification of Poor Households project, remembers the moment when it became clear that the on-demand approach was performing as



→ A pilot study explored the feasibility and acceptability of digital data collection. The results were positive.

intended: 'After an initial peak, the number of interview requests settled down to quite a manageable level in the communes,' she explains. 'And then one of the pilot communes was hit by flooding, and we suddenly saw a rapid increase in requests. This showed, without a doubt, that the on-demand approach was working.'

In those communes where tablets were used, the council members were comfortable collecting and uploading the data. In fact, they preferred it over the previous paper-based approach: both the commune council members and the households appreciated that the tablets made the interview process quicker and more objective. The interviewer no longer needed to add up points manually at the end of the interview, or to arrange for a photographer to make a separate visit to the household to take their pictures. The only new element which proved difficult was the printing out of Equity Cards for the identified families: while the tablets were relatively easy to for commune council members to work with, there were too many different steps involved in accessing, downloading and printing out the cards.

Emboldened by this experience, the Cambodian government decided that it would introduce the on-demand approach as a supplement to the regularly scheduled rounds. The intention was to gradually roll out the new option over a three-year period, starting in 2020. With this timeframe in mind, a team at the Ministry of Planning set to work revising the IDPoor master implementation manual, developing training materials, and upgrading the IDPoor IT system so that it could manage data updates and share data with user organisations on a continuous basis.

Then COVID struck and everything changed.

## COVID-19 PUTS ON-DEMAND IDPOOR PROCEDURES TO A NATIONWIDE TEST

The Government of Cambodia responded swiftly to the emergence of SARS-CoV-2, closing the nation's borders and putting in place strict quarantine and social distancing measures. This rapid response paid off in terms of public health – during the first year of the pandemic, there was no community spread of the virus in Cambodia and the health system was not overburdened – but the economic costs were devastating. Factories were shuttered, jobs on construction sites disappeared, and the steady stream of international tourists dried up. Millions of people who worked for wages were left without a dependable income.

Aware of the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic, in April 2020 the National Social Protection Council announced plans for a nationwide social assistance programme for poor and vulnerable households which would be fully funded by the Government of Cambodia. According to H.E. Dr Chan Narith, the General Secretary of the NSPC, data from the IDPoor system was the starting point for designing what became the biggest cash transfer programme in Cambodia's history. 'The IDPoor data gave us an initial basis for planning, but we could not rely upon it completely to design and calculate a benefit package,' he recalls.

The NSPC knew that, as a result of the economic downturn, a huge number of households which did not hold Equity Cards were now struggling to get by. However, there was no way to know how many such households there were, who they were or where they lived. 'We decided to take a few more weeks to update the data so that we could design the programme properly and think through delivery channels to get help to the people who needed it,' Dr Narith explains.

### A massive nationwide effort to identify poor households

The Ministry of Planning was tasked with updating lists of poor and vulnerable households which qualified for Equity Cards and, in a matter of weeks, oversaw a nationwide identification campaign using the new on-demand IDPoor procedures. It distributed tablets pre-loaded with the IDPoor app to all 1,646 communes across Cambodia and, in cooperation with Provincial Departments of Planning, rapidly trained IDPoor coordinators and implementers in the new approach. As COVID-related restrictions made it impossible to organise large-scale in-person meetings, much of the training was done remotely using videos and app-walkthroughs.

Starting on May 19, 2020, members of commune councils fanned out into villages across the country to interview households which had come forward and requested screening. Data about identified households began to



→ IDPoor coordinators practice using tablets to register interview requests, administer questionnaires and validate results.

surge into the IDPoor database – more than 10,000 new households per day on May 25, 26 and 27, the three busiest days of the campaign – before gradually tapering off. By the time the first cash payments were issued<sup>9</sup> just over a month later, more than 60,000 additional households had been added to the IDPoor database. By late September, more than 210,000 households had come forward to be interviewed. Eighty-six percent of these were identified as IDPoor and received Equity Cards.

The rapid roll-out of the COVID social assistance programme was possible thanks to strong political commitment at all levels of government to provide quick and uncomplicated financial assistance to affected households. It was also greatly aided by the existence of data sharing mechanisms and systems for delivering cash payments to beneficiaries which had been put in place for the cash transfer programme for pregnant women and young children a year earlier. When crisis struck, there was no need to design a delivery mechanism from scratch: the Ministry of Planning and Ministry of Social Affairs – with technical support from GIZ and UNICEF – were able to adapt the processes from the existing social assistance programme to enable the smooth roll-out of the new one. This successful example of inter-ministerial cooperation resulted in the quick establishment of data sharing mechanisms which linked IDPoor, the commune/sangkat councils (responsible for enrolling households in the scheme), the Ministry of Social Affairs (issuer of payments), and the mobile money provider Wing (disbursement of cash payments).

Not surprisingly, this complex exercise did not unfold without glitches: a three-year gradual roll-out had to be compressed into a matter of weeks. Working under incredible time pressure, the IDPoor team at the Ministry

of Planning was still developing new features for the IDPoor app while trainings were already underway for the nationwide scale-up. This meant that some implementers were not fully familiar with certain features of the app before they began using it. The core implementation manual and app manual were updated so many times to reflect changes that the printing process was delayed and the materials could only be distributed some months after the start of the on-demand procedures. A helpdesk in the IDPoor department intended to support the Provincial Department of Planning with technical questions related to the IDPoor app became a *de facto* national helpline for questions and complaints from the public about IDPoor in general. Each of the two IDPoor staff who anchored the helpdesk were shouldering as many as 50 calls every day.

Irregularities at the level of implementation were also reported. The commune councils were under such intense pressure to identify households quickly that they sometimes took ‘short cuts’ which went against procedures. In some cases, households were interviewed at a central location in a village, rather than in their own homes. In other cases, households registered an interview request and were interviewed immediately, rather than after the commune/sangkat council had the chance to review and approve the request. From time to time, technical bugs arose which the software developers had to address: the IDPoor app would freeze, fail to open, or crash in the middle of an interview. In other cases, commune and sangkat staff who had little experience with information technology had difficulties working with the tablets and required coaching or additional support. The massive volume of new Equity Cards that needed to be printed by the Ministry of Planning and distributed through the Provincial Departments of Planning led to delays, particularly in the first months of the new procedures.



→ Between May and September 2020, more than 210,000 households registered to be interviewed for IDPoor.

<sup>9</sup> Identified rural households received USD 20/month, plus USD 4 per household member; in urban areas, they received USD 30/month, plus USD 7 per household member. Additional payments were provided to vulnerable groups, including the extremely poor (IDPoor Level 1 households), people with disabilities, children, the elderly, and people living with HIV/AIDS. Total monthly payments were approximately USD 30 million.



## NO MORE IDPOOR ROUNDS: BENEFITS AND TRADE-OFFS OF A FULLY ON-DEMAND SYSTEM

The difficulties described above do not detract from fact that the roll-out was a remarkable achievement. With only minimal preparation and support, commune/sangkat councils, IDPoor coordinators and Ministry of Planning officials withstood this ‘trial by fire’ and succeeded in bringing to life a continuous mechanism for poverty identification during an unprecedented emergency.

The Government of Cambodia took note. Convinced by the speed, efficiency and power of the on-demand approach, the government decided in August 2020 that, henceforth, IDPoor would be fully on-demand (see Box 4 for a detailed description of the new procedure). The ‘era of rounds’ was over.

### BOX 3. SOCIAL ASSISTANCE ‘ON DEMAND’: A SNAPSHOT FROM SIHANOUKVILLE PROVINCE

Preap Pholla lives with her husband, their six children and two nephews in Prey Nob District in Sihanoukville Province. When the pandemic struck, Preap Pholla was laid off from her job at a factory and her husband, a labourer, was only able to find intermittent work. Their income collapsed. ‘Right now, we only have half a bag of rice left at home,’ she said, as she waited at the commune office to register for the COVID social assistance programme, her Equity Card in hand. ‘I’m happy that I can use the cash transfer to support my family.’

Preap Pholla’s family is one of 207 in her commune who already had an Equity Card at the start of the pandemic. Many more subsequently came forward. ‘Since COVID struck an extra 85 IDPoor cards have been distributed using the new interview request system,’ explains Noun Boeun, the clerk for Somrong Commune. ‘I think this cash transfer scheme is a great idea, as it helps vulnerable families in this difficult time.’

Today he is helping a new cardholder to enrol in the programme. ‘I have only had an IDPoor card for a month,’ explains 78-year-old Sok Tet. ‘I requested an interview in May and received the card in June.’ Before the pandemic, Sok Tet’s three adult children sent him and his wife money every month, but after the factories where they work closed their doors, they could no longer do so. ‘For the last few weeks we have not been eating as much as usual,’ Sok Tet says. ‘Sometimes I need to borrow food from my neighbours as we have no food at home.’

After he finished at the commune office, Sok Tet went to see Beng Sokhta, a local agent for the mobile money provider Wing. She scanned his Equity Card, checked how much he was entitled to receive, and paid him the money. ‘The cash transfer system is quick and easy to use,’ she said. ‘So far we have not encountered any problems.’ Cash in hand, Sok Tet was relieved. ‘I am very happy to receive this cash transfer, as these are desperate times for my family. I will go straight to the market and buy rice,’ he said.



● Preap Pholla waits at the commune hall to register for the social assistance programme.



● Noun Boeun registers Sok Tet for the cash transfer scheme.



● Beng Sokhta, Wing Agent.

## BOX 4. THE NEW IDPOOR PROCEDURE, STEP BY STEP

### HOUSEHOLD REQUESTS IDPOOR INTERVIEW

A household which does not hold an Equity Card can come forward at any time to be assessed under IDPoor. Households register interview requests with their Commune/Sangkat Working Group for Identification of Poor Households (CSWG), which enters the request into the IDPoor app. Third parties – such as the village chief, school director, health centre chief, NGOs/civil society organisations, police, or other community members – may assist the household to fill out and submit the interview request.

Equity Cards are issued for a three-year period. Four months before a household's card expires, the respective commune/sangkat will receive an automatically generated interview request via the IDPoor app.

### CSWG DECIDES ON INTERVIEW REQUEST

The CSWG reviews the interview requests against standard criteria and decides whether to interview the household. Criteria for interviews include: the household holds a soon-to-expire Equity Card and is still poor or at-risk; the household has difficult living conditions and high health expenditure related to a serious illness, chronic illness, injury, or disability; one or more members of the household has experienced loss of a job or income-generating activity, or significant reduction in income for other reasons; the household has been affected by shock (e.g. natural disaster or epidemic); the household is newly formed or has been created as the result of a separation from a household with a valid Equity Card; and/or the household has other vulnerabilities, e.g. one or more members are persons living with HIV, persons with disabilities, elderly or indigenous; the household is female-headed, mobile or homeless.

If a household is not interviewed, for example because it possesses a major disqualifying asset, the CSWG must document the reason why. The results of these deliberations are displayed on the commune/sangkat information board, together with information about how to file a complaint.

### HOUSEHOLD INTERVIEW

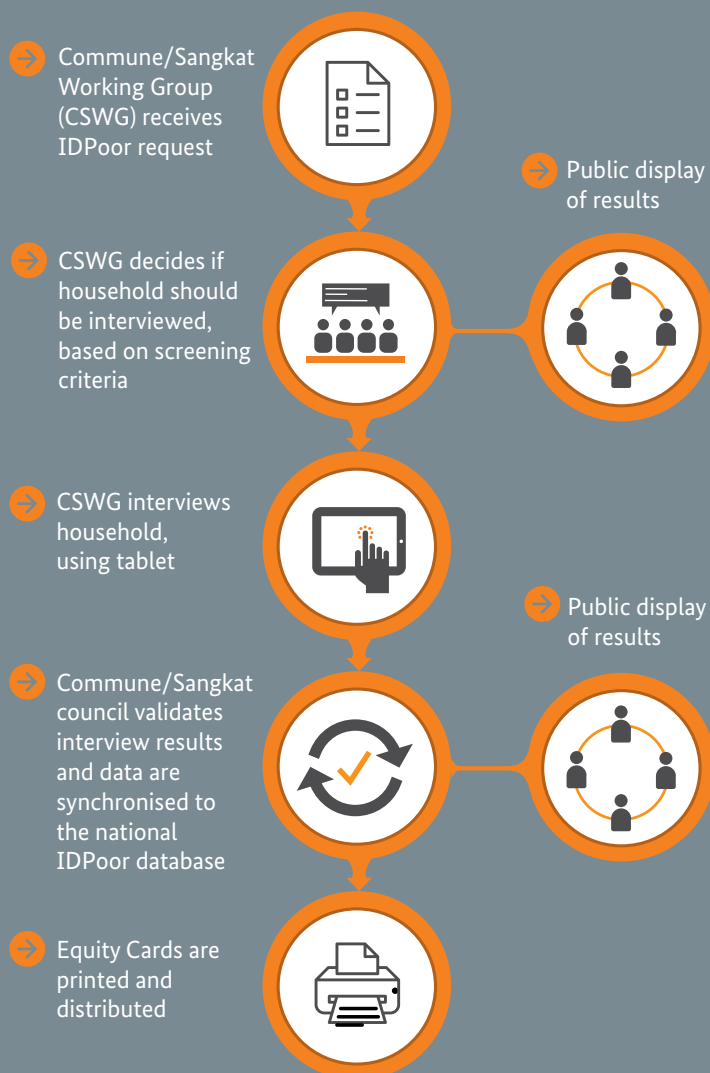
A member of the CSWG conducts the interview at the household's place of residence. This is important so that the interviewer can see the household's actual living situation. The interview is conducted with the head of the household, his or her spouse, or any other adult member of the household. Answers to questions are captured in the tablet and the poverty score is calculated automatically by the IDPoor app. The interviewer records any special circumstances or vulnerabilities that should be considered.

### VALIDATION OF INTERVIEW RESULTS

The commune/sangkat council meets to review and discuss the results of household interviews. If the interviewer has made note of any special circumstances, these are taken into account when validating the poverty classification. Once the commune/sangkat council validates the poverty classification (i.e., IDPoor 1, IDPoor 2, or not poor) via the IDPoor app, the data are synchronised with the national IDPoor database. Village Chiefs inform households of the results of the identification process and post the results on the community information board, together with information about how to file a complaint.

### DISTRIBUTION OF EQUITY CARDS

Equity Cards are automatically generated by the national IDPoor database once the interview results are validated. The cards are printed by the Ministry of Planning and sent to the commune/sangkat councils, where they are stamped and then distributed to households with the help of Village Chiefs.



This change of strategy fundamentally altered the landscape for the IDPoor team at the Ministry of Planning. A set of procedures which was originally intended to *supplement* the three-yearly rounds would in fact *replace* them. The team quickly recognised the benefits of this change, but foresaw that trade-offs would be required as well.

Among the advantages, the new IDPoor procedures offer an identification mechanism that is triggered by community members themselves. If a household's economic circumstances change, and they believe that they now meet criteria to be classified as an IDPoor household, they can come forward at any time and request an interview. In this way, the new procedures are more flexible and responsive to changing socio-economic situations of households and much more useful in the event of a crisis or shock (as COVID-19 made clear).

The digital dimension of the new procedures also makes many things more efficient: it is no longer necessary to manually capture answers from paper questionnaires into the national database, photographs can be taken during the interview itself, and household data can be synchronised with the national database every time the commune or sangkat council validates its decisions.

The team saw that new functionalities could be added into the IDPoor app to allow for updates to information about already identified households (e.g., births, deaths, new members who had joined households and those who had moved away), as well as the removal of households which no longer qualified for Equity Cards because their economic conditions had improved, whenever the need arose, rather than waiting for the next scheduled round. These changes meant that IDPoor data could be continuously updated for data users, too. On the other hand, increased reliance on technology would also require resources to manage, maintain and replace hardware and software when necessary. Additional training and technical support would need to be provided to support commune/sangkat officials through the transition.

There were potentially downsides, too. The main one is that the new procedures provide less opportunity for community participation, compared to the original model. The hallmark of IDPoor in its previous iteration was the fact that villagers themselves were directly involved in determining who amongst them was poor. Under the new procedures, with the commune/sangkat councils playing the leading role, rather than an elected Village Representative Group, villagers are further removed from the interviewing and validation process. Village Chiefs

## → BOX 5. AN EXPERIENCED IMPLEMENTER WELCOMES THE NEW IDPOOR PROCEDURES

Eang Khun, 66, is the second deputy chief of Siem Reap Commune in Kandal Province. He is an 'old hand' when it comes to IDPoor, having helped to implement all four identification rounds undertaken in his commune since 2011. A total of 504 households received Equity Cards during this period, he reports, including 170 in the last round, conducted in 2019.

After so many years of hands-on experience, Eang Khun can still recite all the steps of the round-based IDPoor procedure by heart. But he is open about the fact that he much prefers the new IDPoor: 'In my opinion, it's better because it is much easier and faster to implement.' He explains that the new procedures allow identified families to receive their Equity Cards much quicker than before, which means that they also benefit from available services sooner, too.

'With the old paper system, it took a long time to circulate information, search for the poor families, do interviews, arrange meetings, and evaluate and approve lists at the various village, commune, district and provincial levels,' Eang Khun recalls. Now, the steps have been simplified and the process is less time consuming. 'The only meetings are at commune level to approve final lists. This saves a lot of time for everyone.'

Much of this is thanks to the introduction of digital data collection. But according to Eang Khun, the use of tablets doesn't just speed up the interview process, it also increases trust in the identification itself. Families see that the results are automatically generated at the end of the interview and have nothing to do with the interviewer's preferences or bias. 'They do not take offense or get disheartened at commune staff if they are not rated as Poor 1 or Poor 2,' he explains.



● Eang Khun



remain part of the identification process, but in a more limited way than before. This pointed to the need for the introduction of a robust complaints mechanism which can help to guarantee the transparency and accountability of the new procedures.

Another drawback is the much greater than anticipated workload for commune/sangkat council staff. When the on-demand procedures were envisioned as a supplementary measure only, the IDPoor team was fairly confident, based on the experience from the pilot project, that commune/sangkat councils would be able to handle the volume of interview requests in between scheduled rounds. But the change in strategy meant that they would now also need to re-assess households whose Equity Cards are about to expire.<sup>10</sup> Given that commune/sangkat staff are also drawn upon to fulfil various roles by many other programmes, from agriculture to disaster management, there is a real risk that they become overloaded by these additional responsibilities.

The team was also aware that on-demand registration systems tend to have lower coverage than systems based on rounds. Vulnerable and marginalised populations in particular may lack information about how to register. To address this, it would be necessary to intensify communication and outreach about IDPoor to raise awareness of the registration process and the services which are available to Equity Card holders.

## TRANSITIONING TO THE ‘NEW’ IDPOOR: REFORMING AND STRENGTHENING INTERNAL SYSTEMS

As Oliver Schell, a CIM integrated expert at the Ministry of Planning, puts it: ‘In the past we spoke about *the* IDPoor process. With the switch to the new procedures, there are now many processes running in parallel: identification, updating information, monitoring processes and data quality, and handling suggestions and complaints. There is much more happening than just identification.’

To manage these multiplying processes, the Department for the Identification of Poor Households started in 2021 to strengthen the internal systems which will underpin the IDPoor system in its new form. This has required fundamental changes in four inter-related areas: the IT system; the questionnaires and approach to scoring; the suggestions and complaints mechanism; and monitoring and evaluation. The main developments in each of these areas are summarised below.

### Transforming the IT system

IDPoor’s information system was originally built to reflect the logic of ‘rounds’. Once a round was completed, information was entered about the identified households. When working with data on the IDPoor website, data users specified the round or rounds for which they wished to see results.

Following the decision to switch to a fully on-demand, fully digital system for IDPoor, the team at the Ministry of Planning embarked on a process to rebuild the IT system so that it could accommodate continuous data updates flowing in from commune/sangkat councils and offer data users access to real time information about current Equity Card holders, regardless of when they were identified.

As part of this redesign, changes are also being made in the way data are captured and stored. During interviews, more information is now being collected about individual members of households. Whereas in the past the household was the organising principle of the database, in the future the IDPoor database will become a repository of information about individuals who are grouped into households with an Equity Card. This change will make it much easier to provide individually-targeted support to members of IDPoor households.

### Revising the questionnaires and approach to scoring

Any poverty assessment methodology must occasionally take a step back and assess whether it is still applicable in its context, given changes in the overall development and well-being in the society. In 2021 the National Working Group on Measuring Poverty in Cambodia revised the poverty line in Cambodia on the basis of the 2019-2020 Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey (CSES). Seizing upon the opportunity of the poverty line review, as well as the shift to fully digital data collection, the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme promoted a review of the IDPoor poverty scoring so that these two instruments could be brought closer together methodologically.

The Ministry of Planning agreed to this suggestion and a multi-stakeholder dialogue and work process was launched to update the IDPoor questionnaire and methodology. The aim is to reassess the proxy indicators with regards to per capital consumption – the new poverty measure used for IDPoor – using newer data from the CSES, and to do so in such a way that the interview questions themselves remain similar, thereby limiting the need for retraining. The team has reviewed and analysed the approach proposed by the World Bank and UNDP, applied it to the latest CSES data, and refined variables

<sup>10</sup> With more than 600,000 IDPoor households countrywide, each commune/sangkat will need to re-assess an average of 365 Equity Cards at the end of their period of validity.

and weights to mitigate inconsistencies. During 2022 data are being collected to test the validity of the results, particularly for vulnerable populations, before finalising the methodology and interview questionnaire, which has – in a related process – been shortened and simplified.

### Setting up a suggestion and complaint management system

In the original IDPoor rounds, villagers had the opportunity to raise complaints about the identification process or results at public meetings. With identification procedures now administered at the commune/sangkat level, IDPoor offers fewer opportunities for direct community participation. For this reason, the team at the Ministry of Planning is redoubling efforts to ensure that identification processes and results are as transparent as possible, and that there are pathways open to people of all backgrounds and at all levels of society to register complaints or suggestions.

The suggestion and complaint management system which is under development will allow feedback to be collected through various channels: in person at commune/sangkat offices, via a telephone hotline, electronically through the IDPoor homepage and eventually through a public IDPoor app, or in writing through accountability boxes. Complaints will eventually reach a centralised suggestion and complaint management database, where a ticketing system will ensure that the complaint is taken up by the correct party, e.g., Ministry of Planning, Provincial Department of Planning or commune/sangkat council.

### Investing in monitoring and evaluation

In the past, IDPoor carried out identification rounds using short-term implementation structures which were rapidly scaled up and then scaled down again within the course of a year in a given province. Coordinators from the Provincial Department of Planning supervised these processes while they were underway; in between rounds there was a lull in activity while identification was underway elsewhere. With the switch to on-demand identification, the team at the Ministry of Planning is changing the approach to monitoring and evaluation to make it continuous. This is particularly important given the decentralisation of responsibility for identification to the country's 1,646 communes/sangkats.

The first area of focus is process monitoring: checking whether IDPoor procedures are being implemented correctly, in accordance with official guidelines, and providing on-the-job training and support to personnel responsible for implementation. Under the new model, which was piloted in 66 communes in 2021, teams from the national Ministry of Planning and Provincial



→ Monitoring visits will be carried out to check whether IDPoor procedures are being implemented according to guidelines.

Departments of Planning will visit a random selection of communes each year.<sup>13</sup> During these visits they will interview commune/sangkat personnel, using a standardised questionnaire programmed into the IDPoor app, and undertake 'skills checks' to verify that they are able to perform basic functions, such as registering interview requests, initiating a new interview, and validating interview results. Where they are unable to do so, additional on-the-job training or refresher training will be provided. The results of the individual monitoring visits will be captured in the IDPoor app, allowing officials at the national and provincial level to track performance indicators across the IDPoor system as a whole.

A second area of focus concerns data quality monitoring: to determine how accurately IDPoor is identifying households according to its own definitions and procedures. During monitoring visits, a random sample of households holding Equity Cards will be re-interviewed using the IDPoor questionnaire. The results of these interviews will allow the team to measure inclusion errors, i.e., the proportion of households who were granted Equity Cards, but should not have been. Drawing from the list of households in the village, a second group of households – this time without Equity Cards – will also be interviewed using the IDPoor questionnaire. Here, the aim is to measure exclusion errors – the proportion of households which should have been issued an Equity Card, but were not. During these 're-interviews' households will also be asked about the initial identification process, for example, where the interview was held, whether anyone helped them to register for the interview, and how much time passed between the interview and receipt of their Equity Card. Answers to these questions also contribute to the process monitoring described above.

<sup>13</sup> They can also choose to visit any communes where, for example, there have been a particularly large number of complaints or where an unusually small number of interview requests are being registered.

# Discussion

## KEY ACHIEVEMENTS OF THE IDPOOR SYSTEM

### A national poverty identification system owned, implemented and funded by government

Cambodia has succeeded in establishing a poverty identification system with national coverage which is implemented by decentralised administrative structures using a proxy means test targeting methodology. In June 2022 there were 692,000 households with Equity Cards in the IDPoor database (257,000 classified as IDPoor Level 1 and 435,000 as IDPoor Level 2). This represents 2.73 million people, or about 18% of Cambodia's population.

Working in close cooperation with development partners, including Germany and Australia, the Ministry of Planning has led a process of incremental improvement and expansion of IDPoor from the time of its establishment, in 2007, through the transition to a fully digital, on-demand system in 2020. Originally implemented at village level and, since 2020, at commune/sangkat level, the IDPoor system offers sufficient targeting accuracy while keeping costs affordable – and sustainable – for the government. The political and financial commitment of the Cambodian government to IDPoor are evidenced by its adoption of Sub-Decree 291, which enshrines the system in law as the country's official poverty identification mechanism, and its full funding of IDPoor's operational costs.

### Real-time data on poor households

Initially administered using a rolling three-year cycle, IDPoor achieved routinely updated poverty data in rural areas in 2010. It attained nationwide coverage, including urban areas, in 2019. Since 2020 the IDPoor system has allowed for the continuous addition, removal and updating of households through on-demand procedures carried out by commune/sangkat councils. This enables policymakers to design programmes based on up-to-date data about poor and vulnerable households, to deliver social assistance more smoothly and efficiently to beneficiaries, and to ramp up support more quickly in times of shock.

According to H.E. Dr Chan Narith, the Secretary General of the National Social Protection Council, the availability of continuously updated data is an important step forward towards the goal of 'leaving no one behind.' 'It is more work to collect dynamic data, and it also requires more effort to evolve programmes, benefit packages and service delivery based on dynamic developments in the data,' he explains. 'But we are happy to face this challenge, because we know that having continuous updates means that we capture more people.'

Cambodia's achievements in this regard are noteworthy, particularly given its status as a lower middle-income country. The World Bank has cited 'data deprivation' as a key concern in tracking and reducing poverty: 57 countries (out of the 155 for which the World Bank monitors poverty data) had zero or only one poverty data point for the 10-year period between 2002 and 2011 (Serajuddin et al, 2015). A similar study carried out by Open Data Watch in 2019 found a slight increase in the number of countries with zero or only one data point in the 10-year period through 2017 (Swanson & Noe, 2019).

### IDPoor is seen as fair and impartial

IDPoor is accepted and trusted by Cambodians. This is due in large part to its origins as a community-driven approach in which villagers themselves identified who among them was poor. In its initial round-based form, approximately 35,000 people participated in the IDPoor implementation process each year, from the provincial administrators down to elected villagers who conducted household interviews. This inclusive and participatory process brought communities together to talk to each other about poverty, reviewing its realities, scope, and impact for individual households and the community as a whole. The nature of the process allowed special circumstances to be considered, was transparent and monitored, included ways to complain or request re-evaluation, and resulted in high community satisfaction overall.



In 2020 responsibility for the identification of poor households shifted to commune/sangkat level. To compensate for the fact that villagers are now further removed from the interviewing and validation processes, the Ministry of Planning has strengthened measures to enhance transparency and is designing a comprehensive complaints management system. 'IDPoor is highly regarded among the population. It is seen as a fair and impartial tool,' says Ole Doetinchem, manager of the GIZ-implemented Support to the Identification of Poor Households project. 'We absolutely want to safeguard that.' When changes or refinements to the IDPoor procedures or questionnaire are needed, these are introduced gradually and thoughtfully to ensure continued buy-in and acceptance.

### A sound basis for designing and targeting programmes

Since the adoption of the National Social Protection Policy Framework – Cambodia's roadmap to comprehensive social protection – the government has used IDPoor data to plan new social assistance schemes. H.E. Dr Chan Narith, the head of the National Social Protection Council, described IDPoor as 'a targeting system which allows people to be identified and programmes to be planned on this basis.' Notably, the benefit packages for the two nationwide social assistance programmes launched in 2019 and 2020 were designed on the basis of IDPoor data.

Development partners, international NGOs and other organisations supporting poverty alleviation in Cambodia also appreciate its value. The number of organisations using IDPoor data to target activities and services has steadily increased, from 42 projects in 2012 to 181 projects in 2020.<sup>14</sup> 'The pandemic made a lot more organisations aware of IDPoor,' says Nina Malli, an advisor with the Support to the Identification of Poor Households project. 'They see that the government trusts the data and is using IDPoor for more than health.'

'For a number of years we have used IDPoor as the primary means of targeting poor households,' explains Kurt Burja, a programme policy officer with the World Food Programme in Cambodia. A decade ago, WFP mostly used IDPoor data to target interventions which it directly implemented, such as school scholarship and cash for work programmes. Now it focuses most of its efforts on strengthening national systems for delivering social protection, particularly in the face of shocks. The transition to on-demand identification 'has revolutionised how IDPoor is done and has also allowed the social protection system to be much more shock responsive,' says Burja. There is still a long way to go, and the system is not perfect, but 'IDPoor has huge advantages to be able to target and reach a large number of poor households quickly.'

### A digital backbone aligned to changing needs and capacities

Over many years, the IDPoor team has invested in the development of both front-end and back-end solutions which enable it to efficiently collect, manage and share data. In developing these systems, it was careful not to outpace existing levels of infrastructure, connectivity, and digital literacy in the country. At times, this meant opting for simpler digital solutions rather than high-tech ones. At the same time, the IDPoor IT team kept a constant eye to the future and correctly anticipated the eventual need for new functionalities, such as continuous updating and data sharing.

The introduction of APIs in 2019 was a critical milestone, as it enabled other stakeholders to seamlessly access IDPoor data. Recounting the history of his ministry's cooperation with IDPoor, H.E. Samheng Boros, Minister Attached to the Prime Minister and Secretary of State at the Ministry of Social Affairs, divides it into 'before' and 'after' periods. 'Earlier we only had sets of IDPoor data, we didn't have access to the database itself,' he explains, referring to the period before the introduction of the cash transfer for pregnant women and children under the age of two. 'As soon as it was possible to interface the IDPoor data, we were able to clean the records and take the necessary steps with the mobile money provider so that beneficiary accounts could be created instantaneously.'

While great progress has been made in making IDPoor data interoperable with other systems, there is still significant work to be done to create an integrated digital social protection ecosystem. The lack of unique identifiers in Cambodia complicates these efforts and leads to inevitable duplications when trying to link disparate datasets.

## INSIGHTS AND LEARNINGS

### Sustained investments in systems pay off, especially in times of crisis

The evolution of IDPoor over the past 15 years demonstrates the value of a systems-building approach in the context of development cooperation. Rather than short-term investments aimed at quick returns, Germany has supported its partners in Cambodia to lay the foundations of a comprehensive social protection system that can serve the country well in the long term.

Over a period of many years, advisors with the Support to the Identification of Poor Households project developed a trusting, respectful relationship with the team at the Ministry of Planning, and more recently with officials at the National Social Protection Council and the Ministry

<sup>14</sup> This includes 51 organisations implementing large projects with budgets of at least USD 500,000. Data from unpublished study of data users, December 2020.

of Social Affairs. The long-standing cooperation is an example of effective capacity development, with investments not just in human resource development, but also in the necessary institution building and legislative recognition for the IDPoor system. The project has provided flexible technical support aimed at realising the partners' strategies and objectives, while at the same time serving as a bridge to the global social protection community so that experiences and lessons relevant for Cambodia are taken into account at the right moments.

The COVID-19 pandemic made apparent the merits of this approach: when an unexpected event occurred, it was possible for the Government of Cambodia to react quickly and at scale to provide needed help to millions of people. This was only possible because of years of methodical investment in human resources at all levels of government, functional information systems, carefully honed procedures and manuals, data sharing agreements with partners, and extensive community participation.

'When COVID struck, those countries which already had something in place in terms of social protection were much better prepared to respond to the shock,' says Sabine Cerceau, who was the technical team lead for the GIZ project at the time. 'To build up a new system from scratch in time of crisis is very difficult.'

#### A poverty identification system can act as a catalyst for integrated social protection

Cambodia's experience shows that a national poverty identification system can act as a catalyst for integrated social protection. IDPoor was not designed with vision of a comprehensive social protection system in mind. Rather, it was developed to fill a specific gap in a fragmented programmatic landscape in which the government, development partners and international NGOs implemented overlapping pro-poor initiatives. For a time, the Health Equity Fund was the only national programme which systematically drew upon IDPoor data. It was subsequently joined by others, but as late as 2018 the World Bank observed that Cambodia was 'unusual' in having a national system for identifying poor households, yet a relatively under-developed social assistance programme architecture (Zambra, 2018).

In its first decade, however, thanks to its regular identification rounds, IDPoor did succeed in laying the foundations of a social registry which could underpin a growing range of services for Cambodia's poorest households. With the adoption of the National Social Protection Policy Framework in 2017, and advances in digitalisation which made the IDPoor IT system interoperable with others, the stage was set for IDPoor data to be used in a much more systematic way. These possibilities were recognised and seized upon: against the backdrop of growing political commitment to social protection and the establishment of a new inter-ministerial body (the National Social Protection Council) with a clearly defined coordination mandate, the existence of IDPoor and its digital database made it feasible to quickly introduce targeted social assistance programmes at a national scale.

# Future outlook

Social protection is in the spotlight in Cambodia like never before. While interest was already on the rise before COVID-19, the dramatic economic consequences of the pandemic laid bare the need for robust, yet flexible systems capable of delivering social assistance quickly and efficiently to those who need it. IDPoor demonstrated that it could rise to this challenge, enabling a nationwide update of lists of poor households in a matter of weeks. Thanks to the crucial role it played in the roll-out of the COVID cash transfer programme, IDPoor has become better known among beneficiaries and government officials alike and its value has become increasingly apparent.

As Cambodia embarks upon the next stage of its social protection journey, IDPoor is poised to play a major role. This final chapter outlines some possible directions for the further development and use of IDPoor.

## **IDPoor can help to extend social protection for poor Cambodians across the life course**

The transition to on-demand identification has opened up possibilities in the coming years for IDPoor to facilitate more comprehensive social protection for poor households, and particularly those with vulnerable members. The redesign of the IT system which began in 2021 will enhance IDPoor's targeting capabilities by improving the quality and breadth of data which is held on individual members of households and by allowing members of certain groups, such as persons with disabilities or the elderly, to be easily identified (in the database) for targeting purposes. The IDPoor team will also be paying close attention to whether the identification process itself needs to be adjusted to ensure that certain categories of individuals are reached and interviewed. The anticipated outcome of these changes is that individuals with specific vulnerabilities can be targeted with supplementary benefits in a way that has thus far not been possible using the IDPoor system.

These new capabilities may first be drawn upon with the implementation of a new 'Family Package' which is currently being designed under the leadership of the National Social Protection Council. Envisioned is a package of four cash transfer programmes<sup>15</sup> which span the life cycle, from birth through old age, provided through an integrated delivery, payment and monitoring system. IDPoor will provide the targeting data needed to deliver this support to eligible beneficiaries. This will require, among others, closer integration with other datasets, such as the registry of persons with disabilities maintained by the Ministry of Social Affairs, to avoid duplication of data collection.

## **Expanding IDPoor to cover those at risk: towards shock-responsive social protection**

While IDPoor has always focused on identifying households which are extremely or moderately poor, there is a substantial population in Cambodia that is vulnerable to falling into poverty in the event of a misfortune or shock. At present, this population cannot be readily identified. There is no mechanism for systematically identifying or categorising such households.

The urgency to do so is rising, however. The increasing frequency of climate-related shocks, such as flooding, recurring cycles of food insecurity, and the spectre of further pandemics are just some of the developments which are focusing political attention on the need for a broader social registry of potential beneficiaries of social assistance. Such a registry would go beyond those households identified as poor using the proxy means test methodology to include households just above the poverty line and that are vulnerable in the face of shocks. This could be determined on the basis of household attributes (e.g., main earner in precarious employment, female-headed household), for example, or on place of residence (e.g. in areas which have been subjected to repeated flooding). It also assumes greater coordination

<sup>15</sup> These are cash transfers for pregnant women and young children; persons living with a disability; elderly persons; school children (scholarships).



and sharing of data between institutions involved with social protection and early warning systems implemented by the World Food Programme and the National Commission for Disaster Management.

‘For us to create shock-responsive social assistance, we need this data,’ says H.E. Samheng Boros, Minister Attached to the Prime Minister and Secretary of State at the Ministry of Social Affairs. ‘Every year we have a big flood coming in,’ he continues. ‘People scatter across the country. Many flee their homes. We have to find them to give them assistance. But if you cannot find them, if you don’t know who they are, you cannot help them.’ The Ministry’s vision is to proactively protect people in such situations by having information about households, linked to a mobile money account or other financial instrument, already available before crises strike. That way, when something happens, the government can direct help to those who need it without having to spend time identifying them first.

### A social registry for Cambodia

Discussions are now under way about the shape and structure of an eventual social registry which would cover additional segments of the population beyond the poor. Various alternatives are under consideration, each with its own advantages and disadvantages. Regardless of which strategy is pursued, there is no need to begin from scratch: IDPoor provides a strong foundation upon which to build. Over the past 15 years, an incremental approach to strengthening and expanding IDPoor’s coverage and capabilities has helped to evolve a system which is well adapted to Cambodia’s specific needs. As a next step, expanding the IDPoor database to cover households that are just above the poverty line and that are vulnerable in the face of shocks would be in keeping with the approach pursued thus far.

Whether IDPoor emerges as the basis upon which a full-fledged social registry is built, or is simply one dataset which is linked with others in an interoperable digital architecture, the dynamic data which it is uniquely positioned to capture makes it a valuable asset as Cambodia continues its remarkable journey towards comprehensive social protection.

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