

Land of Hope: The Journey of Puthay and Da



Moeuk Da and Puthay pose for a photo in their veggie net house garden.

Oeung Puthay, 30, recalled her hardship 10 years back when she was a factory worker. Due to their lack of land ownership, Puthay and her husband, Moeuk Da, opted to relocate to Phnom Penh in search of employment after marrying in 2005. Their aspiration was to accumulate savings for the eventual purchase of a piece of land on which to settle and farm. Puthay got a job at a garment factory, earning a monthly income of \$50, while Da worked as a construction worker with an irregular daily income of \$5.

However, despite working diligently for three years, they found it challenging to save any money due to various expenses such as rent, food, utilities, healthcare, and more. Ultimately, in 2008, Puthay and Da made the decision to return and reside with her mother in Thmar Keo village, Peam commune, Sameakki Meanchey district of Kampong Chhnang province. Fortunately, a sign of hope emerged after the couple heard from a village leader that an international NGO was implementing the "Community Empowerment through Access to Land Project (CETAL)" in Sameakki Meanchey in late 2008. CETAL, a social land concession sub-project within the framework of 'Land Allocation for Social and Economic Development II (LASED II),' aimed to provide land for landless and land-poor families for residence and farming in order to reduce poverty among these communities. Under the project, each family got one hectare

of land for farming and a plot of land, sized 30 meters by 40 meters for residence.

Following a fair and transparent selection process for land recipients, the couple was granted the land in Khsach Sor village, Kraing

Lvea commune in Sameakki Meanchey. In 2012, they moved to settle on their newly acquired land and started to build their new life.

"I vividly remember my excitement after learning that I had been granted the land," Puthay recalled, reflecting on her emotions from a decade ago. "And we immediately thought of what to do on the land," she added.

Brimming with joy and confidence, Puthay and her husband constructed a small house on part of their residential land. In the first year, they cultivated vegetables and raised chickens on the remaining land, and in the following years, they diversified their agricultural activities, planting seasonal crops such as water melon and corn on the farmland.

As their agricultural venture flourished, in 2012, they decided to enter into a farming contract with Phum Kasekam Thamacheat (PKT), a local organic farming enterprise. They invested US\$4,000 in credit toward a new project: constructing a 10m by 30m net house, 3 meters in height, dedicated to cultivating organic vegetables. As per the agreement, Puthay committed to repaying PKT from the profits of her vegetable sales, continuing until the balance reached zero.



From the sales of her vegetables in the new project, she generated a gross income of US\$500 monthly, doubled compared the income from growing traditionally. After covering the costs, she earned a net income of US\$350, with an additional daily sales profit of around US\$3. As of October 2023, Puthay repaid PKT around US\$700.

When asked to reflect on her family's current living situation, Puthay replied with a smile that, "Today, our family's economic stability has improved by 80% compared to a decade ago. Back then, we had nothing. But now, we have a home and a farm, and we possess the means to afford food, rice, and medicines in times of illness."

"Our lives now are far different from the past years. Previously, before closing my eyes at bedtime, I thought of having nothing to eat the next morning," Puthay said. "The rice in the

bucket was almost running out," her husband added. "Now, we no longer have such feelings. Now, before closing our eyes, we thought of the daily work plan in the next morning, what to continue doing and what to complete," the couple said.

"The difference between our lives now and in



the past years is profound," Puthay shared. "Previously, before drifting off to sleep, the fear of having nothing to eat the next morning haunted my thoughts," she recounted. "Our rice supply was nearly depleted," her husband added. "But now, those anxieties no longer plague us. Instead, as we close our eyes at night, we plan for the next day's work—what to continue and what to accomplish," the couple affirmed.

Expressing deep gratitude, Puthay conveyed, "We extend our sincere thanks to the project leader and the government for granting us the land. It's akin to gifting us a new life."

Moeuk Da, Puthay and their youngest daughter pose for a photo in front of their second home built on their farm land.

Puthay and Da, 33, had two daughters—the oldest is 14 years old and the youngest is 5. Their eldest child is in the sixth grade at a public school and attends part-time English classes at a private school, with a monthly tuition fee of \$20.

(Story and Photo by Leak Ratna, Communications Specialist, LASED III/MLMUPC)