

## Tobacco leaf not so golden in Cambodia<sup>1</sup>

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Agriculture is an important activity in Cambodia since 64% of working population is involved in it. Although tobacco farming forms a tiny portion of agricultural activity, less than 1% of total agriculture land, it is often raised when tobacco control is discussed.

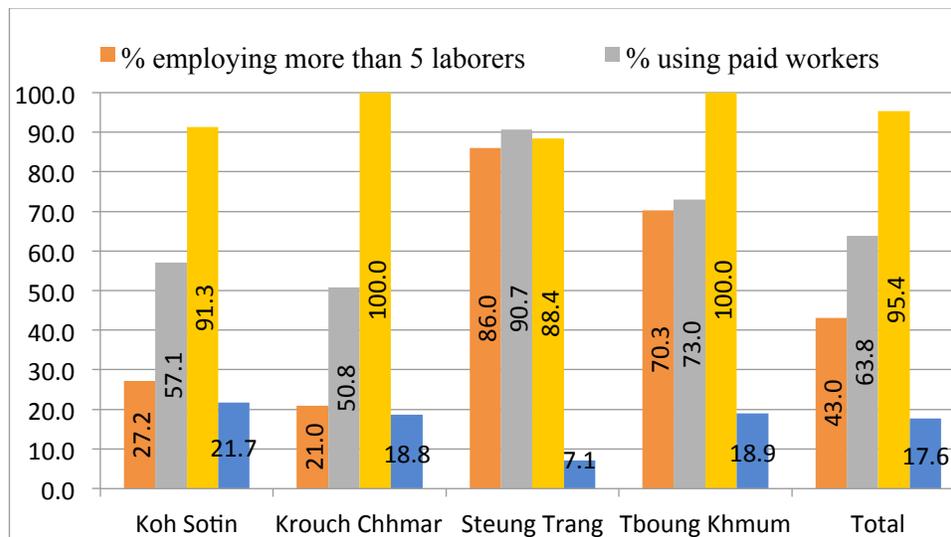
Tobacco is seen to be profitable and no other crops can replace it. There is concern that tobacco control measures would hurt tobacco farmers and negatively affect the country's economy.

Nearly 90% of Cambodia's tobacco farmlands are located in the fertile Kampong Cham, the country's central province irrigated by the Mekong River. However, tobacco is grown in only six of the province's 16 districts, and the harvested land for tobacco has been declining from 8,334 hectares in 2010 to 6,161 hectares in 2013.

Cambodia produced 8,423 tonnes of tobacco in 2013, and its bulk (7,837 tonnes) is grown in Kampong Cham. Tobacco farmers are not full-time tobacco growers as they also engage planting other crops and about 55% of them also grow tobacco on rented lands.

Tobacco farming is a capital and labor intensive activity involving many stages: soil preparation, planning, weeding and fighting pests, harvesting, and drying leaves. Weak or old people cannot meet the demanding nature of growing tobacco and are susceptible to falling ill on the farm.<sup>2</sup> Thus, paid labor is needed to sustain large tobacco farms.

### Type of labor involved in tobacco farming



<sup>1</sup> Based on a 2013 follow up study in Kampong Cham Province, Cambodia prepared by Dr. Poch Bunnak for Cambodia Movement for Health, WHO Cambodia, and SEATCA.

<sup>2</sup> Focus group interview, Koh Pen, 22 November 2008.

Drying tobacco leaves need a great amount of firewood. Almost all tobacco farmers who dry the leaves by themselves buy the firewood from the market. To dry one tonne of tobacco leaves, 18.2 cubic meters of firewood is needed.

Farmers who have quit planting tobacco cite difficulty in growing the crop, less profitability (if family labor is paid), and unstable market prices (subjective price from the tobacco buyers) as other key reasons to stop.

While farmers who are ready to shift planting other crops still need information on suitable alternatives (corn, sesame, vegetables), availability of markets, and extension of support services such as trainings and initial farm input subsidies to keep them going.

Overall, tobacco farming is becoming less significant as a contributor to Cambodia's agricultural sector. Land planted with tobacco is declining, and more rapidly in recent years. Agriculture labor is not easy to find because the young generation opting to work for wage in cities and the increasing costs for farm operations given limited access to formal financing and credit institutions.

But tobacco still occupies portions of productive agricultural lands that could otherwise be used for more profitable crops, fishery, livestock and other livelihood, which have less negative impacts on health, environment, and development.

Cultivated lands under five crops, (corn, soybean, sesame, peanut, and mung bean) have been increasing the past few years. About one third of former tobacco growers found their lives were better after switching to these crops while about 50% of farmers reported no worsening of their lives after stopping tobacco.

Tobacco farming has been profitable if planted at large scale because of resources and free family labor invested in it. Alternative crop farming can be at par or even more profitable with sufficient investment and support.

Farmers should be encouraged to grow crops other than tobacco. Support and assistance, either from the government or microfinance institutions, in form of technical or loan should be available for those who wish to switch crops from tobacco to other crops.

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