EMPOWERING YOUNG WOMEN
ENTREPRENEURS IN CAMBODIA

WE Act

USAID
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pact
building local promise.
WE Act is a five-year project funded by USAID that supports young women in Cambodia's urban centers to realize their path toward empowerment and success as entrepreneurs and leaders in their communities.

While estimates show women own more than 60% of businesses in Cambodia, they own only 26% of small businesses with 10 or more employees, and less than 2% of women's businesses are formally registered. These facts point to a 'glass ceiling' for women entrepreneurs, a service gap, and a big opportunity to systematically support the growth of women as economic actors.

We believe that if women have access to the right information, skills, investment capital and social and business connections, and if they have the personal agency needed to take strategic action with those resources, they will be able to achieve their entrepreneurial goals and live the lives they choose. For their families, communities and Cambodia, this will mean thriving, innovative women-owned enterprises and young women playing dynamic leadership roles throughout Cambodian society.
We know this is already happening in various ways with support from diverse organizations, institutions and companies. Rather than duplicating these efforts, WE Act comes in at a systems-strengthening level to support those supporting young women entrepreneurs. We have the flexibility to enter into a variety of partnerships and collaborations with different kinds of actors – for profit or non, formal or non, big or small. We look for strategic opportunities to provide financial, technical and convening assistance to those that are providing demand-driven and impact-focused support to young women entrepreneurs. But more on partnerships on page 10, the bottom line is that WE Act

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is a 5 - YEAR PROJECT (2018 - 2023)

STARTS 2018

5 YEARS

ENDS 2023

WORKS IN URBAN GEOGRAPHIES, STARTING WITH PHNOM PENH, SIEM REAP AND BATTAMBANG

DELIVERS IMPACT THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS AND COLLABORATIONS WITH EXISTING ACTORS IN CAMBODIA’S ENTREPRENEUR SYSTEM

SUPPORTS YOUNG WOMEN ENTREPRENEURS (ASPIRING, EMERGING AND ESTABLISHED) BETWEEN THE AGES OF 15 AND 35

INTENDED OUTCOMES INCLUDE REDUCING ECONOMIC GENDER BARRIERS, STIMULATING WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING PROCESSES, AND DRIVING ECONOMIC GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT IN CAMBODIA
OUR INSPIRATION

The inspiration that drives WE Act is the passion, commitment, dreams and unmet potential of Cambodia's young women entrepreneurs. Fundamental to harnessing this inspiration is the recognition that there isn't one standard experience for all entrepreneurs, but rather that every journey is unique, and that the better we understand those journeys, the better we can all design and deliver support services that meet specific needs in practical and relevant ways.

To inform our project strategy, we spoke with a wide variety of entrepreneurs and system actors to understand some of the most common experiences and journeys for young women entrepreneurs in Cambodia. We listened to stories about educational opportunities, access to information, language abilities, family and community support structures, access to networks, access to finance and entrepreneur experiences. Commonalities helped us form three overarching archetypes that we will look to for continued inspiration.

We welcome you to get to know the WE Act archetypes:

KUNTHEA

Have you been to Kunthea's grocery shop in Phnom Penh? She started the business a few years ago, even though some family members advised against it, and has worked hard to ensure she maintains a stable and strong livelihood. She now enjoys support for her business endeavors from family, but she can struggle to balance the needs of the shop with caring for her husband and children. Kunthea is a proud member of a women’s savings group, and uses her own savings along with micro loans to invest in her business, so hopefully it may grow, even if it takes some time!
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THAVY

You may have met Thavy at a recent pitch event in Phnom Penh, when she won a prize for her new innovative tech startup. Prior to this she received a scholarship to study abroad, and has since completed her University studies. Her parents are supportive of her entrepreneurial pursuits, and agree with her that marrying and starting a family can wait until she is ready. Thavy may take a formal job down the road, but for now she is focusing on scaling her own business.

BOPHA

After finishing University in Phnom Penh, Bopha went back home to open her travel agency in Siem Reap. She has been thankful to have some support from her parents and friends, but she wishes there were more opportunities to connect with entrepreneurial resources and networks without having to go back to the Capital all the time. Nevertheless, Bopha is committed to seeing her business grow and has the thought to open a second branch in the near future.
OUR APPROACH

**Empowerment**

Empowering young women is at the core of WE Act and cuts across all of our work.

Our understanding of what constitutes empowerment comes from the social economist Naila Kabeer, who speaks of women’s empowerment across three key domains: resources, agency and achievements.

**Resources** enhance women's ability to make choices, and include a range of different material, human and social resources that they may draw on in pursuit of their goals. Accessing appropriate resources is a precondition for empowerment. For young women entrepreneurs, this includes information, skills building, financing, social capital and the physical assets that make enterprises viable.

**Agency** is a woman's capacity to define her own life choices and to act on those choices. Agency is the process of empowerment, and for young women entrepreneurs this includes ability to use their voice, participate, influence, and ultimately to take ownership of decisions that impact their life opportunities.

**Achievements** are the outcomes of choice, otherwise seen as living the life one wants to live. For young women entrepreneurs, this may be increased incomes or healthier and more prosperous families.

Women are empowered when they have access to resources that enable them to have viable choices in their lives, they have personal agency to define their goals and to act on them, and they realize achievements that are aligned with their chosen goals. This is WE Act’s ultimate objective.
**Entrepreneurship**

Like others that have recently analyzed Cambodia's entrepreneurship system, we have adopted the Babson Entrepreneurship Ecosystem framework. This framework describes a healthy system as one that delivers support and services across six key domains:

- Policy and leadership
- Entrepreneurial culture
- Support structures and organizations
- Markets
- Access to finance
- Human capital

*WE Act will work across these domains in close partnership with diverse organizations and companies to fill gaps and scale strengths.*
Systems thinking

Complex systems are made up of interconnected forces that affect each other in contributing to a collective purpose, including the unintentional (Omidyar Group’s guidance on Systems Practice). We recognize that Cambodia’s entrepreneur system is already up and running; a wide range of actors are already working in various ways to interact with dynamic forces, including educational opportunities, network strengthening, capital investments, policy development, social norms and more. This existing system is both enabling and inhibiting the empowerment of young women entrepreneurs.

WE Act does not intend to drop into this system with a magic bullet. We know there are no quick fixes. So we are working on the ground, consulting and exploring with those that are already here and active. We aim to identify points in the system where our efforts and support will make the system healthier overall, resulting in increased empowerment so more women are able to pursue their own life choices.

We also know that the system is constantly changing and adapting, and we intend to adapt our approach along with it, continuously checking to ensure the points we are focusing on are enabling positive impact.

Our analysis has resulted in a series of system maps built around core framing questions, such as the one here, that help us to identify specific points of leverage for alleviating key barriers and reinforcing enablers of young women's empowerment.
WHAT WE WILL DO

With robust conceptual frameworks, a systems-thinking approach, and findings from months of research, including interviews, focus groups and surveys with a wide range of entrepreneurs and systems actors in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap, we will undertake the following to unlock the potential of young women entrepreneurs in Cambodia in six focus areas:

1. Responsive Business Networks:
   We will partner with and support existing business networks working to help young women entrepreneurs build their personal networks and grow their businesses sustainably. We’ll focus on networks that are creating inclusive and accessible space and services that enable young women to exercise personal agency to influence network decision making and to access ongoing mentorship that meets their unique needs.

2. Business Skills Building:
   We will work with organizations and institutions that provide demand-driven technical assistance and regular, quality and sustained business training programs to young women entrepreneurs. We’re interested in the technical side, including support for quality business planning, as well as in ‘soft skills,’ so that young women have the confidence needed to pursue their life choices.

3. Reduce Barriers to Appropriate Forms of Capital:
   Financial capital is critical for business success, but only if it is the right capital that is accessed and managed in responsible and strategic ways. We will work with institutions that are helping to make financing for entrepreneurs accessible and appropriate for their circumstances. We’ll support those that make information about financing available and easy to understand, as well as those that help women to increase their financial literacy so they can better manage their business and personal finances.

4. Participation in Policy Formulation and Government Leadership:
   We will work with institutions, big and small, that are engaging with policy makers to support a more business friendly environment – one that enables and encourages young women to succeed in pursuing their goals. We will support initiatives that help government to understand where they can improve delivery of information and services that are responsive to the needs of young women entrepreneurs. Linked to this, we will support legal service providers that ensure young women are able to navigate a complex legal and regulatory environment.

5. Appropriate Engagement Platforms:
   We will support efforts to enable meaningful engagement between young women and key decision makers in government, civil society and the private sector. We know this will require shaking things up a bit, so we will work with non-traditional engagement platforms and mechanisms, and we will support civic leaders that are organizing constructive approaches to affect change through issue-based advocacy.

6. Changing Social Norms:
   Underlying everything we do is the recognition that young Cambodian women are living, working and dreaming in a society where widely held norms and expectations restrict their ability to choose certain paths. We will strive to address restrictive social norms, as deeply entrenched as they may be. This will include promoting family support for young women and showcasing positive role models that women can look to for inspiration and motivation.
HOW WE WILL DO IT

A flexible approach will enable WE Act to engage with a variety of partners, providing financial, technical and convening assistance to create as much joint value as possible for young women entrepreneurs.

Our partners will include existing actors in the entrepreneurship system, such as:

- **Entrepreneur associations**
- **Incubators and accelerators**
- **Private sector companies**
- **Financing institutions**
- **Independent media**
- **Legal advisors**
- **Government ministries and departments**
- **Academic and training institutions**
- **Civil society organizations**
- **And others interested in supporting young women entrepreneurs.**

**Do you…**

*Have strong expertise and experience in one or more of WE Act’s focus areas?*  
*Have a vision and documented objectives that are in line with the activities WE Act seeks to implement?*  
* Demonstrate the ability and/or willingness to monitor and evaluate your activities to show impact?*  
*Have a sustainable plan for your organization going forward?*  
*Embrace learning and adaptation?*  
*Display willingness and ability to engage in a strong cooperative partnership with Pact?*

☐ **Yes**  ☐ **No**  
*If yes, then let’s act together… WE Act!*
HOW TO GET INVOLVED

Share with us a summary of what you are currently working on in the entrepreneur system.

Please describe how this aligns with WE Act’s focus areas, and be sure to include your contact information!

WE Act will issue calls for proposals throughout the project. These calls will be public, as well as published on the WE Act website (under construction).

If you have information or knowledge to share that will contribute to a better understanding of the entrepreneur ecosystem, please reach out to us.

We look forward to working together!
WE Act | Pact Cambodia

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