

Intersections

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Emerging research

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Each year, MCC places young adults in scores of one- and two-year assignments for service and learning. In the International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP), young adults from the global South serve for a year in the United States, while in the Serving and Learning Together program (SALT), young adults spend a service year in the global South. In the Young Anabaptist Mennonite Exchange Network (YAMEN) program, operated jointly by MCC and Mennonite World Conference, young adults from the global South serve for a year in another country in the global South. And in MCC's two-year Seed program, cohorts of young adults from both the global South and the global North serve together in a country or cluster of countries.

As alumni of these programs report time and again, they learn and receive much more than they share and give. Yet these IVEP, YAMEN, SALT and Seed participants also undeniably contribute in substantial ways to the global relief, development and peacebuilding programs of MCC and its partners, including research into the impact of and lessons learned from those programs. In this special issue of *Intersections*, several participants in MCC's young adult service programs share learnings from the work that MCC and its partners undertake globally. —*The editor.*

Citizens engaged in environmental justice for all in Cambodia

In Cambodia, forest resources are subject to high rates of illegal logging for export, with great harm to the livelihoods of Cambodians whose traditional ways of life are bound up with the forest. While Cambodians' environmental rights have long been protected by legislation, they rarely are able to exercise them because of systemic inefficiencies, corruption and the absence of the rule of law. To address these realities, an MCC partner in Cambodia, Peace Bridges Organization, has implemented Citizens Engaged in Environmental Justice for All (CEEJA), an initiative that deploys strategies to reduce deforestation, decrease illegal logging and protect forests that are culturally and economically vital for Cambodia's ethnic minority populations.

Peace Bridges trainer Keout Chunnly facilitates a discussion of women mobilizing for environmental justice in Cambodia's Kratie province. (Peace Bridges Organization/ Moeung Solida)



For the forest-dependent communities in Cambodia to conserve and benefit from their natural resources, their capacity to exercise their environmental rights peacefully must be deepened, empowering women as well as men and strengthening solidarity across different groups. The CEEJA project has employed a versatile strategy of community-based monitoring, innovative technologies, collaborative forestry protection, policy and trust-building dialogues and citizen advocacy.

The CEEJA project also coordinates closely with another Peace Bridges venture, the Women Engaged in Community initiative, which mobilizes women for environmental protection and community engagement. This initiative's long-term goal is to see more women raising their voices to lead and engage their communities to address issues such as poverty, domestic violence, child abuse and natural resource protection and conservation in the Prasat Tek Kmao community forest and the Prey Lang forest.

Deforestation causes conflict within minority ethnic communities that traditionally have depended on the forest for their livelihoods, dividing community members over how to respond to this new reality. Through its interventions, Peace Bridges has equipped communities facing deforestation with skills to manage the internal conflicts this illegal logging generates.

During follow-up trainings, Peace Bridges has found a change in men's attitudes around traditional gender norms that act as barriers to the active engagement and leadership of women in the community. However, gender norms change slowly: Peace Bridges therefore provides sustained additional training to men seeking to become respectful and inclusive of the roles, voices and leadership of women in community events and forest protection. Through this ongoing coaching, men and women have stepped up to co-lead and co-facilitate community responses to the deforestation crisis.

The conflict management skills introduced by Peace Bridges have also helped community members, including women and youth, become agents of change and work together to mobilize other individuals, relevant local

“While Cambodians’ environmental rights have long been protected by legislation, they rarely are able to exercise them because of systemic inefficiencies, corruption and the absence of the rule of law.”

authorities, religious actors and civil society organizations to respond to the deforestation crisis and other challenges their communities face.

The Peace Bridges projects have also broadened horizons for participants and opened them up to collaboration with others to face common environmental challenges. One of the participants in Peace Bridges' environmental care and conflict management training shares that:

Looking back at my past interaction with others, I was not open to communicate with non-Christians as I thought that would affect my faith. Currently, I communicate with anyone around me whatever their religion. Sometimes I share with them what I learned at the training as I believe that we are all children of God and I would love to see the change in them too. We are all human and we should encourage each other—with such an attitude and mindset we will have a strong sense of belonging.

Responding to the deforestation crisis in Cambodia requires an engaged, mobilized response on the part of the ethnic minority groups most impacted by these practices to insist on their environmental rights. Inclusivity and gender equality, Peace Bridges has discovered, are essential principles for building a sustained movement for environmental and livelihoods protection.

Sarah Pariken serves through MCC's YAMEN program as a peace program support worker at the Peace Bridges Organization in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Moeung Solida is monitoring and evaluation coordinator with Peace Bridges Organization.

Capacity gaps: tackling the void with candor and creativity

Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) supports initiatives that deliver life-changing solutions to marginalized populations by working with local partners who best understand the contexts in which their relief, development and peacebuilding projects unfold. MCC also works to build the capacities of these local actors, tapping into MCC resources of international best practices. But what happens when a knowledge gap emerges that neither the partner organization nor MCC is equipped to fill? This was the challenge faced by Young and Powerful Initiative (YAPI), an MCC partner organization implementing water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) infrastructure such as rainwater tanks and latrines in western Uganda. This article will discuss how MCC leveraged creative partnerships to fill capacity gaps and how these lessons learned can be applied to strengthen future projects.

When I first met YAPI staff in September 2022 as a participant in MCC's Serving and Learning Together (SALT) program seconded to their organization, they were excited to have me on board. YAPI was scheduled to construct rainwater harvesting systems and latrines and I was the first civil engineer they had on staff to provide technical input on the project. Upon examining the project details, potential threats to sustainability were quickly realized—we asked ourselves if YAPI and MCC would be able to deliver quality design and construction of latrine infrastructure that could be readily maintained. Though I brought some technical knowledge to the

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“ Because MCC typically partners with organizations for a sustained period of time, success is measured by partners' growth in capacity, not solely by the outcomes of a single project.”



The MCC-supported latrines and girls changing area at St. Johns school in Nyakabingo Village, in Kasese, Uganda in November 2021. The school is part of a water, sanitation and hygiene project carried out by the Young and Powerful Initiative (YAPI). The changing room for girls also has space for washing and drying reusable menstrual pads. (MCC photo/Paul Shetler Fast)

“When we normalize these challenges and recognize the potential of partnering creatively, MCC and partner organizations can avoid pitfalls while approaching projects with a sense of hope rather than fear.”

team and MCC provided general project delivery resources, input from more specialized and locally experienced professionals was paramount to confidently deliver sustainable infrastructure.

To supplement existing knowledge and skills, our YAPI team engaged the services of two Ugandan young professionals. Rafael Masereka, a civil engineer, and Clovis Baluku, a plumbing technician, provided local insight into construction practices and increased understanding of the political landscape that affects WASH initiatives in western Uganda. We also consulted with Jon Vidulich, a senior WASH engineer based in the United States with a decade’s worth of technical experience in rural water and sanitation infrastructure in various countries. He provided reviews and recommendations on technical decisions before YAPI proceeded with construction. Though Rafael, Clovis and Jon were not officially part of YAPI or MCC at the start of the project, they have been pivotal supporters of the work and have provided key insights into the technical and nontechnical considerations necessary for project success.

This experience highlights important lessons that can be applied to other development projects facing capacity challenges. First, creating a safe space to voice capacity gaps is crucial and starts with normalizing them. One way to introduce this topic is to acknowledge that capacity gaps are inevitable in any project—by identifying these gaps upfront, organizations can be prepared to respond to them. Because MCC typically partners with organizations for a sustained period of time, success is measured by partners’ growth in capacity, not solely by the outcomes of a single project. Partners like YAPI are assured by MCC’s long-term investment in them as organizations. This commitment encourages MCC partners to feel safe wherever they may be on the capacity-building journey and alleviates fear of performance-based repercussions. Creating these opportunities to acknowledge capacity gaps can transform potentially painful conversations into normal and vital parts of every project.

A second lesson is that capacity gaps can be filled by partnering creatively. These partners don’t need to be “big P Partners” such as famous experts or official organizations. They can be “small p partners,” like individuals or groups who already have existing relationships with the partner organization, MCC or the project area. Engaging with Rafael, Clovis and Jon came naturally—I had met Rafael and Clovis through church events and had already developed a mentoring relationship with Jon prior to asking them if they would like to support YAPI with their knowledge and skills. All it took was a simple ask to get them involved.

Furthermore, these partnerships do not need to be administrative headaches. For example, when it became apparent more knowledge on local construction practices was needed, the recruitment of volunteer interns who could also benefit professionally by working with YAPI happened quickly. Official agreements and contracts did not need to be signed because our volunteers were happy to help and recognized opportunities for mutual learning. These “small p partnerships” can take place in countless different ways, but the key is to remember that possibilities exist—we just need to tap into them.

Acknowledging capacity gaps can be uncomfortable and scary, but it does not need to be. When we normalize these challenges and recognize the potential of partnering creatively, MCC and partner organizations can avoid

pitfalls while approaching projects with a sense of hope rather than fear. Ultimately, these practices bring us back to the beauty of bringing positive change for people, as humans and in community.

Rebecca Yoo is a program assistant with Young and Powerful Initiative (YAPI) in western Uganda, placed through MCC's SALT program.

Early childhood development in Kyangwali refugee settlement in Uganda

Located in Kikuube district of Uganda, Kyangwali refugee settlement has a diverse population of over 130,000 refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, South Sudan, Rwanda, Burundi, Kenya and Ethiopia. Of these refugees, 57% are female and 43% are male. Residents of the Kyangwali settlement experience significant challenges accessing quality education, healthcare and sustainable livelihoods. To address these needs, youth from Kyangwali refugee settlement founded the non-profit organization, Planning for Tomorrow (P4T) in 2007.

P4T has embarked on a mission to empower local communities and to strategically promote self-reliance by equipping young people with knowledge and skills while also advocating for a healthy community. Grounded in fundamental values of humanity, equality, integrity, empowerment and commitment, P4T's core objectives are to:

- Enable sustainable community development initiatives through knowledge and innovation.
- Build income-generating capacity through skills training.
- Improve individuals' psychological and physical well-being.
- Positively contribute to a safe and peaceful community through sensitization.
- Educate the community on the importance of a clean and protected environment.

Acknowledging that early childhood education is critical to building a strong foundation for the mental, social and spiritual development of children in the early stages of their lives, P4T has implemented early childhood development (ECD) initiatives for children between the ages of three and eight. In 2015, P4T established a nursery and primary school located in Kyangwali refugee settlement. Today the school operates with an enrolment of 591 pupils including orphans and HIV-positive children. In 2017, the church-founded New Hope nursery and primary school was also established.

Both schools have depended on community contributions to cover their daily operations and recurring costs. When the schools were first established, limited resources available from the community meant that the learning environments were less than ideal. A lack of furniture meant that students had to sit on the dusty floors of the shelters that served as classrooms while trying to learn. Students had to walk long distances to access water for drinking and washing or had little to no access to any water during the school day. These early education schools also lacked instructional materials and trained personnel.

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Children at the P4T Primary School in the Kyangwali refugee settlement in western Uganda in February 2022. (MCC photo/ Matthew Lester)



“ Caregivers express more confidence in their abilities to engage the children creatively in the learning process, thus making teaching and learning more effective, improving the teacher-learner relationship and bolstering student performance.”

To address these shortcomings, P4T designed and implemented a plan focused on improving the learning environment at the early education schools, including installing desks, making clean water for washing hands and drinking available, building a play area and equipping staff with the knowledge and skills to provide quality childcare and instruction for nursery students. Quality educational resources such as ECD toolboxes (play kits) were also provided to each institution. Efforts for staff retention included a refresher training for ECD caregivers. P4T also introduced psychosocial support for the children and their guardians as part of a holistic approach to early childhood learning, including talk therapy and home visits.

To carry out this improvement plan, P4T has sought out partners to join in their vision of strengthening early childhood education in this marginalized refugee community. MCC has supported these efforts since 2021, helping P4T establish a playground, provide ECD toolboxes and establish water points at two ECD centers. MCC trainings in planning, monitoring and evaluation, trauma healing, guidance counseling and peacebuilding have increased and strengthened the skills of P4T staff and community members in ECD methods. Caregivers express more confidence in their abilities to engage the children creatively in the learning process, thus making teaching and learning more effective, improving the teacher-learner relationship and bolstering student performance. Teachers also know more about how to recognize trauma among students and how to respond to it—children and parents at P4T early childhood development centers can now access psychosocial services to reduce stress factors and thereby improve student concentration during lessons.

While P4T’s ECD work has markedly improved, it continues to face challenges. Some of the new water points established at its ECD centers are dependent on rainwater harvesting, making them unreliable during the dry season when precipitation is infrequent. The COVID-19 pandemic also disrupted education at all levels, including for pre-kindergarten children.

P4T has found that successful ECD initiatives must recognize that a child’s ability to learn is greatly affected by more than what happens in

the classroom. Children experience many different challenges at home and within their communities. Sometimes children are safer at school than at home—it is important to make the school a positive environment for learners to increase levels of engagement and performance. Psychological services are integral to addressing student needs, including regular follow-up with students and their families.

Drawing on community resources is essential for sustainable educational initiatives. At the same time, limited resources have a negative impact on schools' abilities to provide professional, quality services and to retain strong educators. Funding partnerships with organizations like MCC have helped address these challenges. To maintain effective program management and administration, P4T continually looks for ways to motivate its project team, to plan for, monitor and evaluate outcomes and to keep learning and adapting to provide children in Kyangwali refugee settlement with quality early childhood education.

Kevin Dovinna Candia serves through MCC's International Volunteer Exchange Program (IVEP) as a teaching assistant at Lancaster Menmonite School. She is a volunteer with Planning for Tomorrow youth organization in Uganda.

The importance of local, nutritious food in rural Nepal

Over the past years, Nepal has greatly improved the country's nutritional status, thanks to governmental and non-governmental initiatives. However, the country still faces considerable nutrition-related challenges. While around two-thirds of Nepalese people depend on agriculture for their livelihoods and direct food source, many face malnutrition, especially women and young children. The nutrition problem involves intersecting gender, socioeconomic and climate dimensions. Nepalese women are typically excluded from financial decision-making, including what food to buy for their families. Socially excluded castes or family members of lower social status (younger, female, pregnant) receive unequal opportunities and have lower capacity for obtaining nutritious, secure diets. Additionally, climate change impacts food production through natural destruction and weather unpredictability.

Active nutrition promotion, especially in remote rural areas, is essential. But junk foods, marketed by large corporations and sold in most corner shops, have taken a strong hold as easy, available options for day snacks. To vulnerable groups such as pregnant women, lactating mothers and young children, proactively promoting nutritious foods is critical. Beyond the standard, carbohydrate-heavy meal of white rice and legume soup, or *dalbhat*, Nepalese people need a diversified and locally sourced diet, with an emphasis on fruits, vegetables and more protein. An MCC partner, the Rural Institution for Community Development (RICOD), plays an active role in moving the needle towards better nutrition in Nepal.

RICOD's current project is the fifth in a series of over twenty years of RICOD initiatives that have strived for food security and improved nutrition in the rural mid-range hills of Nepal. With its guiding mission to "build a just and equitable society by empowering the community," RICOD takes pride in its intersectional, sustainable and community-centered practices.

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 **Harek baar khana
chaar—every day,
eat the four food groups.”**

This article explores the successes, challenges and learnings from a project aimed at improving maternal and child nutrition in the rural villages of Lalitpur that ended in 2022.

This nutrition and public health project sought to promote healthy eating habits, improve healthcare and establish greater financial security in the Bagmati and Mahankal rural municipalities of the Lalitpur district. It especially focused on nutrition-sensitive groups such as young mothers and children under five by building strong connections with already-established mothers' groups in each sub-ward (local government unit). The guiding catchphrase was *harek baar khana chaar*, or “every day, eat the four food groups.” Notable activities included nutrition trainings (stratified by audience, such as healthcare personnel, female community health volunteers, mothers' groups, women, men and adolescents), awareness programs with shopkeepers about the adverse effects of junk foods, distributing grants for income-generating projects, financial training within mothers' groups and kitchen garden trainings with vegetable seed distribution to farmers (including women).

To assess the learnings from this nutrition initiative in Lalitpur, we interviewed RICOD executive director, Ram Hari Ghimire, and Bachchu Dahal Timalsina, a community facilitator for the project. Along with their personal insights, we analyzed the project's final internal report as well as the report from an external evaluation at the project's conclusion.

The establishment of mothers' group networks stands out as the project's top success. RICOD assisted the pre-existing mothers' groups from each sub-ward to band together as an institutional unit. After pandemic delays and challenges with recently established local governments, eight networks obtained legal status and registration in 2022, giving mothers' groups future access to political advocacy, government funds and material support. Instead of an informal gathering of women, these networks now have substantial political and economic leverage.

Within the mothers' groups, RICOD staff delivered trainings on nutrition, network management and mobilization and leadership skills to build capacity for future operations. This approach allows for the networks to operate independently in the future. Even though RICOD has since phased out of the area, the networks it helped establish continue to provide financial support and encourage healthy nutrition and pregnancy practices. By the end of the project, some networks were already starting to collaborate with local government bodies in promoting nutrition and securing development funds.

The RICOD project in Lalitpur achieved significant improvements in nutrition. Using the World Health Organization's dietary diversity index, RICOD staff interviewed women at the start and end of the project, asking them to recall the different types of food their families had eaten over the past twenty-four hours. The respondents' dietary diversity scores improved from 6.49 in 2017 to 7.52 in 2022, with a large increase in dark green vegetables, meat, poultry and dairy products consumed. After RICOD trainings to promote super flour (a nutritious mixture of maize, soy bean, and barley flours for making porridge) and *poshilo-jaulo* (rice and pulse mixed with vegetables), the percentage of families who reported using these nutrient-rich foods for feeding their children increased substantially, from 5% to 32% for super flour between 2017 and 2022 and from 15% to 66% for *poshilo-jaulo*.

Receiving foods like super flour and *poshilo-jaulo* is crucial for households who have little access to cropland or stable income to provide nutritious meals. Child malnutrition rates have correspondingly decreased in the communities, with severe wasting among children under five dropping from 4.7% in 2017 to 0.9% in 2022 and with moderate wasting decreasing from 9.4% to 1.4% during this period.

The project faced some major challenges during its implementation. In the fourth year, the COVID-19 pandemic severely disrupted all project activities, due to country-wide lockdowns and movement restrictions. Lockdowns in turn disrupted market access for rural residents to sell their crops and endangered child nutrition. In response, RICOD distributed packets of super flour to 374 infants and young children. Staff turnover within RICOD during this period also damaged project cohesion and caused delays in activity implementation.

RICOD identified shopkeepers as a potential nexus of change in improving nutrition and discouraging the consumption of junk food such as instant noodles, cookies and soda. However, shopkeepers make significant profits from the sale of junk foods, so none stopped or limited their sale. With RICOD's encouragement, some shopkeepers did begin refusing to sell junk food to young children, a small, but not insignificant, change.

At the start of its nutrition project in Lalitpur, RICOD hoped to reduce the percentage of children under five receiving junk food to eat to 25%. Unfortunately, at the end of the project in 2022, RICOD found that 48% of children under five were still receiving junk food as part of their daily diet. Addressing junk food and promoting nutritious alternatives will require further collaboration with local governments and an examination as to why it appeals to families. How can we make local, healthy foods also fast and widely available? What cultural factors must be considered when promoting holistic nutrition? These are questions with which RICOD wrestles as it highlights the importance of a diverse, nutrient-rich diet.

The external evaluation of this RICOD food security and nutrition initiative found that the poorest and most vulnerable families did not receive adequate support through this intervention. While the project thoroughly covered the target groups of newly married residents, pregnant women and parents of children under five, the evaluation highlighted inadequate support for the most socio-economically disadvantaged parts of the community as a missed opportunity. In response to this evaluation finding, RICOD has begun targeting specific households with the greatest need.

RICOD is building on its success within mothers' groups to combine savings and loan group efforts with nutrition trainings, recognizing the intertwined nature of livelihood development, financial security and a diverse, nutrient-rich diet. As RICOD continues to implement nutritional programming in vulnerable communities, a focus on the multidimensional, complex nature of food security and nutrition is vital.

Evan Strong is a Serving and Learning Together (SALT) participant working as an agriculture and nutrition researcher with RICOD in Nepal. Kunjana Pandey has been RICOD's project coordinator for nutrition and food security projects over the last two years.

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Promoting agroforestry and biodiversity in Bolivia

Since 2006, Bolivia has been moving away from a neoliberal economic model towards adopting the social philosophy of *vivir bien*. This means living in harmony between men and women, *Pachamama* (Mother Earth), *apus* (wise grandfathers), *achachilas* (grandmothers), animals, plants and all other living beings. However, many threats to conserving the country's biodiversity remain, including deforestation, erosion, desertification and solid waste pollution. These threats are compounded by the global climate crisis.

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Programa de Desarrollo Integral Interdisciplinar (PRODII, or Interdisciplinary Comprehensive Development Program) has partnered with MCC over many years to address these challenges with the aim of increasing the quality of life for marginalized Bolivian families. In this article, we examine some of the challenges that PRODII has faced, the lessons it has learned and the successes it has achieved through its integrated agrobiodiversity program for rural development to help Bolivian farmers adapt to the devastating impact of a changing climate.

Over its 24 years of experience, PRODII has come to focus on four main organizational priorities: promotion of agroecology, along with management and sustainable use of agrobiodiversity resources; climate change adaptation and mitigation to improve crop productivity; strengthening rural economies by improving farming income; and generational gender equality.

With MCC's accompaniment, PRODII has strengthened its work to support rural families in northern Potosí in Bolivia through comprehensive initiatives in agroecology, with improvements in the production of organic crops and household nutrition. As family production of food for consumption and sale has increased, migration from the region has decreased.

In the process of promoting an integrated development program based on agroecology, PRODII has certainly encountered challenges. When PRODII began its efforts in the north of Potosí, families primarily planted only traditional crops (tubers, grasses and legumes) with low yield levels. PRODII needed to convince farmers about the benefits of diversified crop production. Over time, PRODII helped farmers transition to an *agroforestry system* that involved staggered, dynamic planting and the incorporation of new vegetable crops such as carrots, lettuce, turnip, onion and beetroot. As farmers have become more experienced with agroforestry, fresh vegetable production has increased, family diets have improved and family and community food security and sovereignty have been strengthened.

Agroforestry systems have clear advantages, with forest trees, wild and medicinal plants, fruit, vegetables, tubers and legumes co-existing in harmony. When brought together, these plants generate a system that consistently produces diverse food throughout the year. Farmers use the pruned leaves, branches and stems as fertilizer: this organic fertilizer restores soil fertility, generates protection from pests and diseases and produces a microclimate for other plants to develop that are mutually beneficial when they grow together. The approach also helps families mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change by trapping moisture in the soil as the organic matter decomposes in the agroforestry plot.

 **As farmers have become more experienced with agroforestry, fresh vegetable production has increased, family diets have improved and family and community food security and sovereignty have been strengthened.”**



In September 2022, Félix Vale Vega, director of PRODII, showed potatoes grown by using native seed recuperation methods. At this altitude, producing more delicate vegetables like onions and carrots isn't possible, so a key element of PRODII's work responding to the effects of climate change is preserving and cultivating native potato varieties that are adapted to harsh conditions. (MCC photo/ Rachel Watson)

Agroforestry systems focus on protecting the soil through measures such as farmers setting up stone terraces and terraces using Phalaris and Elephant grass. In farmland with slopes, these terraces prevent topsoil from washing away during torrential rains and thus maintain the land's arable layer. Terraces also nurture the land's natural water filtration system.

Bolivian agriculture has suffered from the disappearance of many native potato, corn, wheat, bean and goose plant varieties, as the introduction of conventional seeds into Bolivian farming practices drove out these native plants. These native plants are well-suited to agroecology approaches. PRODII has therefore worked with farmers to recover and reintroduce native seeds.

Long periods of drought or late rains concentrated in short periods presented a challenge to PRODII's integrated development model, with farmers in this region facing limited water resources. In collaboration with municipal authorities, PRODII has promoted water harvesting systems for household-level irrigation. This strategy takes advantage of existing water resources in times of greater availability, or flow, by collecting the water in reservoirs. These water harvesting systems allow farming families to better maintain their crops and increase their yields, as they can now harvest two to three crops a year. Increased crop yield improves household nutrition and income, which in turn encourages people to stay on their land rather than migrate to cities.

PRODII promotes water harvesting, working to improve areas of water recharge above natural springs where families collect water for irrigation. The most important activities it undertakes include planting native species, whose roots store water underground; introducing species like Monterey pine and queñua trees; fencing areas to encourage the regeneration of shrub species such as grasses, thola and sunchu; and creating and nurturing natural watersheds and micro-watersheds.

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PRODII's work to help farmers understand the benefits of agroforestry systems requires slow, patient commitment—to help agroforestry take root, PRODII staff organize workshops, extension visits, farmer exchanges and trade fairs and create connections between farmers and municipal government departments. These long-term efforts equip farmers to be community leaders in mitigating and adapting to climate change.

Catalina Ospina López is a Seed program participant serving with MCC partner organization, PRODII, in the north of Potosí, Bolivia. Félix Vale Vega is PRODII's executive director.

Rebuilding trust and sustainable community development in Cambodia

In 1993, Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) started an integrated community development project in Mesang district in Cambodia's Prey Veng province. This initiative sought to aid the struggling rural district in sustainable development and community rebuilding following several decades of violence and instability which had contributed to widespread poverty throughout the region. After implementing this program for over a decade, MCC worked with people in the area to turn the community development initiative over to local leadership in 2004: thus was the Organization to Develop Our Villages (ODOV) born. For the past two decades, MCC and ODOV have partnered closely together, with ODOV becoming a leading rural development and community peacebuilding actor in the region. ODOV's emphasis on rebuilding community bonds of trust and interconnection has been a critical component of its sustainable development efforts.

Mesang district has a significant history of violence and hardship. Even before the oppressive violence of the Khmer Rouge during the civil war that raged in Cambodia prior to the era of official Pol Pot rule from 1975 to 1979, Mesang was already damaged and destabilized because of spillover from war in Vietnam, including a U.S. bombing campaign that traumatized and scarred the region. Some of the most brutal purges by the Khmer Rouge authorities took place in this part of Cambodia as well. Years of brutality left a legacy of distrust and violence that persisted long after the fall of the regime.

Following this traumatic period of Cambodian history, living conditions for many in Mesang remained very difficult throughout the 1980s, with poverty, homelessness, starvation and illness prevalent. Food insecurity levels were extremely high across Mesang. Many residents migrated to find higher-paying jobs. Mesang also witnessed an increase in violent crime and sporadic armed conflict, for which Mesang became nationally infamous until the late 2000s.

MCC decided to open a field office in Mesang in 1993 because of its high levels of poverty. MCC sought to address food security, health and infrastructure needs at the household and community levels. More importantly, however, MCC's community development work aimed to restore trust and a sense of social cohesion that communities had lost after decades of violence.

“ Even before the oppressive violence of the Khmer Rouge during the civil war that raged in Cambodia prior to the era of official Pol Pot rule from 1975 to 1979, Mesang was already damaged and destabilized because of spillover from war in Vietnam, including a U.S. bombing campaign that traumatized and scarred the region.”

In this initial decade of work in Mesang, MCC developed a strategy for addressing the tangible needs of the Mesang community as well as rebuilding community cohesion. Through the establishment of several different farmer groups, including agricultural cooperatives, savings groups and producer groups, communities could learn to support themselves through collaborative action. These groups provided the necessary resources, finances and structure for farmers to effectively grow and sell their products in local markets at a fair price. They also promoted new vegetable production and chicken-raising practices.

Cooperative groups require that community members communicate with and respect one another. Their success is based on productive teamwork because it involves collective resource sharing and collaboration on sales. Cooperative groups mobilize whole communities in sharing the costs and benefits of production, maintaining mutual accountability and strengthening positive community dynamics.

After a decade of implementing community development work in Mesang, MCC determined that the time had come to turn the work over to local leadership, a decision that eventually led to the creation of ODOV as a Cambodian organization in 2004. Over the past two decades, ODOV has expanded the scope of its work beyond Mesang and now operates in five districts of Prey Veng province with participants in approximately 90 villages. Over 17,000 people directly benefit from participation in the ten agricultural cooperatives, 22 producer groups and 76 Savings Groups established and supported by ODOV. People active in these groups have become leaders in their communities.

One of ODOV's greatest strengths as an organization is its ability to adapt to new challenges and changing needs. The same support network of cooperative groups created in communities that has alleviated the impact of chronic violence and poverty is now a critical asset in regional climate change adaptation efforts. Climate change is a stress multiplier, increasing the impact of social and economic challenges already facing communities in Mesang.

Due to local topography, Mesang is especially vulnerable to drought, and lacks the fertile alluvial soil of the rest of the province. As a result of rapidly changing climates, seasons in Mesang today are less predictable and distinct, with periods of drought and flooding increasingly extreme. Climate change threatens the food and livelihood security of many in the province. Farming livelihoods are especially vulnerable to climate risks: with an estimated 85% of the provincial workforce employed in the farming sector, the risk of climate-induced stress in the region is high.

ODOV-supported cooperative groups have adapted to meet the emerging needs of farmers being negatively impacted by the shifting climate. In addition to their normal roles of connecting farmers with markets, providing reliable agricultural inputs and offering low-interest loans to members, cooperative groups have taken on additional responsibilities to help farmers in their communities better prepare for and adapt to climate change impacts.

Mesang and the surrounding districts have developed rapidly in the past twenty years, with marked decreases in poverty, food insecurity and violence and increased construction of modern infrastructure and road networks across the region. ODOV has made a critical contribution to these

 **As a result of rapidly changing climates, seasons in Mesang today are less predictable and distinct, with periods of drought and flooding increasingly extreme. Climate change threatens the food and livelihood security of many in the province."**

 **Strong bonds of community trust will be critical as farmers in Mesang work to adapt to the uncertain impact of climate change on their agricultural livelihoods."**

improvements, with its emphasis on not only addressing physical needs but also rebuilding social cohesion and connection. Strong bonds of community trust will be critical as farmers in Mesang work to adapt to the uncertain impact of climate change on their agricultural livelihoods.

Isaac Alderfer is a Serving and Learning Together (SALT) participant working as a climate change resilient assistant with ODOV in Cambodia.

Partner capacity building and MCC's young adult service programs

One of the strategic priorities of MCC over the 2021–2025 period is to increase the capacity of the church and other partners as they support and equip vulnerable people. MCC has paid significant attention to partner capacity building in recent years, from the development of a global partner capacity building framework to more focused work like an evaluation of the capacity building program in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). What role do MCC's young adult service programs play in partner capacity building? This article will begin to explore how the Young Anabaptist Mennonite Exchange Network (YAMEN) and Serving and Learning Together (SALT) programs, which both place adults under the age of thirty for a year with MCC offices or MCC partners outside of the U.S. and Canada, can contribute to MCC's partner capacity building efforts. As someone given the title “partner capacity builder” during my SALT assignment with the MCC Burkina Faso program, I have a particular interest in this question. In my experience, SALTERs and YAMENers face limitations in how effectively they can contribute to partner capacity building—yet these limitations can be mitigated.

 **Capacity building refers to a broad range of activities that intentionally build on organizational strengths and address gaps that prevent partners from achieving their goals.”**

What is capacity building? While the term can be as narrow as a focus on training and education or as broad as “creating new institutions or strengthening old ones” and “improving individual rights, access or freedoms” (UNDP, 5), for MCC capacity building refers to a broad range of activities that intentionally build on organizational strengths and address gaps that prevent partners from achieving their goals. These capacities can range from planning, monitoring, evaluation and reporting (PMER) skills to building local networks to developing policies and procedures for matters such as safeguarding program participants from sexual exploitation and abuse.

Capacity building at MCC further fits within its accompaniment approach, in which MCC seeks to develop trusting, honest and long-term partnerships that are mutually transformative. The need for trust in relationships with partners is important. MCC's internal framework for partner capacity building counsels that MCC staff should generally wait until they are invited by partners to help develop a certain capacity, and if no invitations are forthcoming, it may signal that the country program should devote more time to developing the relationship. At the same time, MCC has basic expectations for capacities all its partners should have, e.g., related to financial management and safeguarding.

An evaluation of MCC's capacity building in DR Congo identified several key findings as to how MCC can best facilitate partner capacity building. Partners reported finding MCC-organized trainings useful, particularly those for PMER skills, and expressed an interest in adding more in-person

and online trainings. They especially highlighted their desire for training in languages, financial management, peacebuilding and communication. These Congolese partners also appreciated in-person coaching from experienced MCC staff, either as a follow-up after a training session, or in developing final project plans. For more effective training, the evaluation recommended thorough assessments of partner needs and strengths as an essential step to developing capacity building plans tailored to each partner.

In a 2019 global study of MCC partner capacity building efforts, some informants observed that MCC staff sometimes lack the technical knowledge needed by partners. Options for remedying these gaps included building MCC staff capacity on specific matters so that they might train partner staff, hiring new staff with specific technical knowledge or contracting with consultants to offer focused trainings for partners.

Within MCC's global partner capacity building framework, how can SALT or YAMEN participants contribute to MCC's capacity building efforts? Most SALTERs and YAMENers face four limiting factors to their effectiveness in helping build partner capacity: limited experience, limited cultural knowledge, limited language ability (sometimes YAMENers and SALTERs are fluent in the language partner staff and community members speak, but often arrive at a beginner's level) and limited time (less than a year working with the organization). Those YAMENers and SALTERs placed with a partner organization will, over the course of their term, develop their practical knowledge of the partner's work as well as their cultural knowledge and linguistic ability. They also have time to build trust with their colleagues and be invited by the partner to share their skills and knowledge. These young adult workers may not typically offer trainings for partner staff, but they do have opportunities for informal knowledge exchange and mutual learning which in turn contribute to building partner capacity.

For a SALT participant like me who is tasked with “partner capacity building,” who works from the main country program office and whose travel in the country is restricted by security factors, the picture is different. In my role, I work to identify the specific skills partners wish to develop and then create opportunities to build those desired skills. It is thus a more formal, consciously directed process rather than the informal knowledge exchange of YAMENers and SALTERs described above. Physical distance from the partners also sharpens these four limiting factors, particularly those of limited time and experience. My time with MCC partners consists of calls, emails and occasional meetings and trainings at the MCC office. (Unfortunately, visits to many projects have not been possible this year due to security concerns). This means less familiarity with the work of each partner and fewer opportunities to build rapport and trust.

However, there are ways to mitigate these limitations, some of which MCC has already put into place. First, MCC offices could consider only hiring YAMENers and SALTERs with basic competency in the local language for these positions. This would help them make the most of their limited opportunities to meet face-to-face. Second, where resourcing and security considerations permit it, MCC offices could organize visits to partners early in the service term. These would go a long way to helping the YAMENer or SALTER understand the partner and their work as they co-develop capacity building plans. Third, MCC offices can continue to conduct situation and needs assessments with partners. These assessments provide a critical starting point for identifying and achieving partners' capacity building priorities.

 **Situation assessments provide a critical starting point for identifying and achieving partners' capacity building priorities.”**

A blue circular button with the text "Learn more" in white.

UNDP. *Capacity Development: A UNDP Primer*. United Nations Development Programme. 2009. Available at <https://www.undp.org/publications/capacity-development-undp-primer>.

Fourth, MCC offices could explore online trainings to help overcome physical distance. At the same time, MCC's partners in Burkina Faso, where I work, express greater preference for in-person trainings and coaching. Internet connectivity is also a significant barrier for MCC's partners in many contexts. Building trust and rapport with partner staff from a distance and primarily through virtual means also proves challenging.

A final way for SALTERs and YAMENers based in MCC offices to contribute effectively to partner capacity building efforts could be organizing trainings for other MCC country program staff on specific matters, using a "training of trainers" model. The shape of such trainings would of course depend on what specialized knowledge the SALTER or YAMEer brings to the position. Through such trainings, young adult workers placed at an MCC office can support the program's capacity building efforts by strengthening the skills of MCC staff who connect more directly with partners on an ongoing basis.

Building the capacity of churches and partners is a priority of MCC, one in which the YAMEN and SALT participants can make significant contributions to building the capacity of churches and other MCC partners. Young adults seconded directly to partners have opportunities to build partner capacity in informal ways throughout their assignments, in addition to options for providing more formal training and resourcing. SALTERs and YAMENers placed in MCC offices can still contribute to partner capacity building work, although the distinctive limitations of these positions must be recognized, with strategic thought given about how to compensate for those limitations.

Declan Moulden is a Serving and Learning Together (SALT) participant working as a monitoring and evaluation capacity builder with MCC in Burkina Faso.

Developing emerging young leaders in Phnom Penh

Mission DOVE Cambodia is a youth development organisation established with a vision of cultivating emotionally mature and humble leaders to bring healing to a nation affected by the traumatic legacy of genocide committed by the Khmer Rouge. Mission DOVE works to keep young people out of trouble through discipleship programs and initiatives that equip them with skills and knowledge. Mission DOVE implements its activities using two paths: a drop-in centre for neighbourhood youth and Christian leadership development programs for young adults. Through these activities, young adults acquire the ability to recognize sources of pain in their lives, to address that pain in healthy and appropriate ways, to think critically and to engage in self-reflection. Gaining these skills prepare young adults to be leaders in their communities, the church and Cambodian society more broadly.

The Mission DOVE drop-in centre operates multiple programs that respond to community needs and priorities. Each year, 150 young people enrol in language lessons such as English and Thai and learn reading, art and computer skills. At the centre, young adults also receive encouragement to join personal growth and support groups to process the pain they face in their lives. The centre's contextualized classes are tailored to address

challenges young adults face in their communities. All Mission DOVE learning communities are highly participatory and structured to foster self-discovery, dialogue and reflection.

Open to individuals ages fifteen years and above, the leadership club has an open-admission policy with no restrictions based on religion. As most Khmer people are reserved, with cultural norms restricting self-expression, leadership club lessons focus on developing life skills such as confidence, self-care, self-awareness and assertiveness. These skills not only help participants express themselves, but also think critically.

Khmer society has strict codes for both men (*Chabop Proh*), women (*Chabop Srey*) and children that guide how to behave and relate to each other. Shame is used in all cases to enforce these codes. Mission DOVE addresses shame at its root and offers ways for young people to navigate feelings of shame while also honouring their culture. In separate women's and men's groups, participants examine how patriarchal culture shapes harmful understandings of the identity and roles of women and men.

Mission DOVE also hosts Alateen, an international program that offers counselling, mentoring and support for teenagers who live with a parent or sibling who struggles with alcohol addiction. The baggage these young people carry—from emotional and physical abuse to needing to step up to run their households to having to “parent” and cover for their alcoholic relatives—exact an emotional toll. Lessons within the Alateen program help these young adults address their pain and burdens. The program also provides counselling and support for individuals through substance abuse programs and for those living with people struggling with addiction.

Most Cambodian youth suffer from vicarious trauma. Open only to Christians, the Mission DOVE's ONYX program uses Christian spirituality to equip participants with skills to deal with emotional pain and encounter God through nature, meditation and gallery walks. The ONYX program supports participants in emulating the life of Jesus and covers topics such as healing, social justice, peacebuilding and gender equality. The program prepares trainees for Christian discipleship and mission within their communities.

In all its programs, Mission DOVE equips young adults to “pay it forward,” to apply the skills of self-reflection and critical thinking and to assume leadership in their daily lives. Doing so requires recognizing traditional constraints that stifle creative self-expression while also navigating them with sensitivity.

Ladai Zulu is a YAMEN participant serving as a youth worker and English teacher with Mission DOVE's drop-in centre in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Brian Maher is the advisor and facilitator for Mission DOVE Cambodia.



Razack Titiebou forges decorative metal work for gates and windows. Titiebou is an orphan supported by MCC partner Song Kibsé. They facilitated his training in a metal workshop for the last three years. May 2022. (MCC photo/John Clarke).

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