Press release

World Water Day 2016: “Water and Jobs”

Social entrepreneurship promoting access to drinking water in Cambodia

Paris, 22 March 2016. “Water and Jobs”: the theme of the 2016 World Water Day, celebrated on 22 March. According to the United Nations, 850 million people in the world have no access to an improved water source. Involving the private sector and supporting small local entrepreneurs working in the area of drinking can be an effective solution to ensure water supply in certain contexts. This is the approach taken by GRET in Cambodia, with the social enterprise iSEA, the first services centre dedicated to the country’s small water operators.

In Cambodia, water supply to rural villages is ensured by 400 local private operators who invested spontaneously. Distribution of water is done exclusively via household connections and the resource is often treated using traditional methods. But difficult access to loans and lack of skills are hindering development of these entrepreneurs. GRET has been supporting small water operators in Cambodia for 15 years, with a view to providing sustainable access to quality water for all, including poor populations in rural villages.

“In 2012, observing the limits of the project approach to sustainable development of access to water in Cambodia, GRET switched to a “social entrepreneurship approach” to reconcile public service, social added-value and economic sustainability,” explains Alicia Tsitsikalis, drinking water and sanitation expert at GRET. It created a services for water operators, which was institutionalised at the end of 2015 in the form of a company governed by Cambodian law: iSEA (Innovative Services, Engineering and Advisory)*. “To guarantee iSEA’s social mandate, we defined safeguards such as reinvestment of 50 % of profits in the activity and inclusion of at least one representative of the water companies and one member of civil society on the board of management” specifies Yi Sokkol, director of iSEA.

In the space of three years, iSEA signed 21 contracts with 17 operators. Services supplied include the design, extension and improvement of networks and treatment plants, as well as training of operators and sometimes loans. This innovative approach of reinforcing local entrepreneurship via social entrepreneurship is set to be developed for other, similar situations. In November 2015, a discussion workshop organised in Phnom Penh by GRET and the World Bank’s Water and Sanitation Programme (WSP) made it possible for experts from various regions (Africa, South-East Asia) to consider developing this economic model in other contexts, particularly in rural areas.


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You can listen to GRET on French radio channel RFI, in a programme called “C’est pas du vent” on Saturday 26 March at 11.10 am
For World Water Day, see all GRET actions on access to water at www.gret.org

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Founded in 1976, GRET is an international development NGO, governed by French law, working both in the field and at political level to fight poverty and inequalities. GRET staff work in over 30 countries in a broad range of areas in order to provide innovative, sustainable solutions for fair development. GRET has been working in Cambodia since 1988, particularly in the areas of drinking water & sanitation, health and agriculture. www.gret.org