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Agir pour le CAMBODGE

Sala Baï Program Impact Assessment
Agir pour le Cambodge (APLC)

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This report was produced at the request of Agir pour le Cambodge (APLC). The report was prepared independently by Rapid Universal Pty. Ltd.

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This report was prepared by Rapid Universal, with a dedicated team that included Daniel Lindgren as technical lead, James Patrick Carpy as project lead, Sui Seng Ng as project assistant, and Emily Edwards as a report writer.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Background

Despite strong economic growth in Cambodia over the past two decades, many Cambodians face persistent barriers to economic equality, particularly women and people in rural areas. While Cambodia's national poverty rate has decreased significantly from 33.8% (2009) to 17.8% (2019/20), poverty rates in rural areas (22.8%) far exceed those in urban centers (9.6%).[1] Although Cambodia has relatively high female labor force participation, women remain over-represented in low-paid, informal and in-secure employment. A significant gender wage gap of up to 19% further compounds economic inequality.[2] These challenges are reflective of persistent gender inequalities more broadly, with Cambodia ranking 116th out of 170 countries in the 2023 Gender Inequality Index, which assesses inequality across a range of social, health and economic measures.

Vocational training is critical to equipping young Cambodians with job-ready skills to increase workforce participation and provide pathways to economic security. Despite progress in primary education, many low-income and rural students drop out before gaining vocational qualifications, with young women particularly disadvantaged. Fewer than 1% of girls transition from secondary education to formal technical training, and only one-third of TVET students are female.[3] The Cambodian government's National TVET Policy (2017–2025) recognizes the importance of vocational training to enhance workforce readiness, targeting 1.5 million disadvantaged youth through public-private partnerships.

The hospitality and tourism industry contributes significantly to Cambodia's economy, contributing a quarter of GDP and providing an estimated 2 million jobs prior to the COVID-19 pandemic.[4] Due to its critical role in the economy, hospitality and tourism represent significant opportunities for young Cambodians to pursue decent work. The hospitality and tourism sector offers vital employment opportunities, especially for women, who make up an estimated 60% of its workforce.[5]

Study rationale

Within this national context, the Sala Baï Hotel School aims to bridge these gaps, providing free vocational training to disadvantaged young people in Cambodia. The training program facilitates young people from rural and low-income families to obtain employment in the hospitality workforce, enabling them to improve economic outcomes for themselves and their families. Sala Baï prioritises female students (70%) who face additional barriers to accessing education and stable employment.

While immediate employment outcomes for Sala Baï graduates are well documented, with 97% securing jobs within three months, less is known about the program's longer-term impacts on graduate livelihoods, household well-being, and shifts in social norms. This study assesses the long-term impact of Sala Baï's vocational training program on graduates who completed their training more than five years ago. Specifically, it interviewed 205 alumni, to explore their economic progression, employment stability, and career development, perceptions of gender roles, and their contributions to household income and family education levels. A Livelihood Outcome Index (LOI) was developed to provide a holistic measure of livelihood outcomes.

[1] World Bank. (2022) *Cambodia Poverty Assessment: Toward A More Inclusive and Resilient Cambodia*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.
[2] United Nations Development Programme. (2021) *Gender Wage Gap in Cambodia*. Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
[3] Australian Aid, Cambodia Gender Equality and Social Inclusion, World Bank. (2024) *Cambodia Country Gender Action Plan FY25-FY29.*
[4] Ibid.
[5] Government of Cambodia. (2021) *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Cambodia*. Phnom Penh: Ministry of Women's Affairs.

Key findings and recommendations

Sala Baï's vocational training program has demonstrated significant positive impact in transforming the lives of its graduates and their families. The program's effectiveness is evidenced by strong livelihood outcomes, with alumni achieving an average score of 79 out of 100 on the Livelihood Outcome Index, which measures key indicators including employment, income, savings, and skills.

Graduates have experienced remarkable improvements in their professional and economic circumstances. The employment rate among alumni stands at 97%, a dramatic increase from the 80% unemployment rate prior to training. Alumni who graduated five or more years ago have an average monthly income of USD 950, including benefits, with nearly all working in semi-skilled or higher-level positions. This reflects the program's success in facilitating meaningful career progression through its industry-relevant curriculum, practical internship components, and strong employer partnerships.

The program's impact extends beyond individual graduates to benefit entire families and communities. Three in five alumni regularly send financial support to their families, contributing an average of 71% of the USD 200 needed to lift a household out of poverty. Many graduates continue to live with and support their parents, with nearly all earning at least USD 200 per month. Additionally, alumni are helping to improve educational opportunities for younger family members by easing financial barriers to schooling, demonstrating the program's intergenerational impact.

Despite these achievements, gender disparities remain a significant challenge. Female graduates earn on average 22% less than their male counterparts, with the gap widening to 30% for those working in hospitality. Women also bear a disproportionate share of unpaid domestic work and tend to remit a higher percentage of their income. While Sala Baï has made commendable efforts to promote gender equality through preferential enrollment of female students, these findings highlight the need for broader industry-wide changes to address systemic gender inequities.

The program's combination of technical training, soft skills development, and practical experience has been instrumental in preparing graduates for workforce success. However, opportunities exist to further enhance outcomes by strengthening financial literacy and business skills training, improving English language proficiency, and expanding access to overseas internship opportunities. These refinements would better equip graduates to overcome remaining barriers to career advancement.

Considering these positive findings, the report makes several recommendations for Sala Baï to further enhance its program offerings and maximize its impact. These are summarized below:

1. **Encourage graduate support and voluntary contributions** as alumni have demonstrated strong willingness to engage further with Sala Baï, including paying for any additional trainings and supporting the school financially.
2. **Expand course offerings to address skill gaps** in English language proficiency, management and finance skills, as these were highlighted as key skill gaps for alumni once they entered the workforce.
3. **Explore opportunities to support overseas work placements** in environments where English is the primary language used in the workplace.
4. **Continue and monitor gender equity training** as a standard part of the curriculum and regularly review their relevance and effectiveness.
5. **Consider ways in which Sala Baï can play a more active role in improving gender equality** across the hospitality and tourism sector.

ABBREVIATIONS

Short Form	Full Form
APLC	Agir pour le Cambodge
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
CAPI	Computer Assisted Personal Interview
GII	Gender Inequality Index
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
KII	Key Informant Interview
LOI	Livelihood Outcome Index
MOI	Migration Outcome Index
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USD	United States Dollar

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, Cambodia has experienced strong economic growth, coupled with increased productivity and a transition to better-paying industries. This has facilitated significant poverty reduction for its people, seeing Cambodia's poverty rate decline by almost half from 33.8% in 2009 to 17.8% a decade later (2019/20).[6] Despite these gains, many Cambodians have been left behind, with inequality particularly pronounced outside of urban areas. **80% of low-income people live outside of Cambodia's cities,[7] with poverty rates in rural areas (22.8%) greatly exceeding those in urban centers (9.6%).[8]**

Cambodia's economic development over the previous decade has largely been driven by growth in the garment manufacturing and tourism industries, and more recently, construction and real estate.[9] **The hospitality and tourism sector has developed into a major pillar of Cambodia's economy.** Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, this sector accounted for one-quarter of Cambodia's GDP, providing an estimated 2 million jobs.[10] The pandemic had a significant impact on hospitality and tourism, as well as the country's economy, however **these sectors continue to show strong signs of recovery**. By 2023, the tourism sector in Cambodia had returned to 81% of pre-pandemic levels.[11] With 6.7 million international arrivals in 2024, Cambodia has officially surpassed its pre-pandemic tourism peak of 6.6 million in 2019. In the first quarter of 2025, Cambodia's tourism industry saw 1.84 million international visitors, marking a 16.1% year-on-year increase.[12]

Due to its critical role in the economy, **hospitality and tourism represent significant opportunities for young Cambodians to pursue decent work**. The hospitality and tourism sector, in particular, is a large source of employment for women, with women representing 60% of employees in 2019.[13] However, women remain underrepresented in managerial positions.[14] **To harness these opportunities, young people require a sufficient set of skills to gain initial employment and support career progression. Indeed, a key challenge in the growth of the tourism and hospitality sector is a shortage of skilled workers, particularly with management expertise.[15]**

Vocational training is an important pathway for young people to obtain job-ready skills, especially for those migrating from rural to urban centers, and has been shown to help alleviate poverty.[16] In particular, research indicates that formal training significantly improves employability for young people in the hospitality and tourism sector.[17] While Cambodia has made substantial improvements in educational attainment at primary and lower secondary levels, many students, especially from low-income and rural families, drop out of education before obtaining the necessary vocational skills.[18]

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[6] The World Bank. (2022) *Cambodia Poverty Assessment: Toward A More Inclusive and Resilient Cambodia*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Cambodia Investment Review. (2024) *Cambodia Hotel Association: Recovery in Sight Despite 93% Decline in Chinese Tourists and Reduced Air Travel Last Year*. https://cambodiainvestmentreview.com/2024/08/01/cambodia-hotel-association-recovery-in-sight-despite-93-decline-in-chinese-tourists-and-reduced-air-travel-last-year/
[12] Kiripost. (2025) *Cambodia Welcomes 6.7M Tourists in 2024, Surpassing Pre-Pandemic Levels [Review of Cambodia Welcomes 6.7M Tourists in 2024, Surpassing Pre-Pandemic Levels*. https://kiripost.com/stories/cambodia-welcomes-67m-tourists-in-2024-surpassing-pre-pandemic-levels
[13] Asian Development Bank. (2022) *Sector Assessment Summary: Tourism in Cambodia*, Community-Based Tourism COVID-19 Recovery Project.
[14] Government of Cambodia. (2021) *Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment in Cambodia*. Phnom Penh: Ministry of Women's Affairs.
[15] Asian Development Bank. (2022) *Sector Assessment Summary: Tourism in Cambodia,* Community-Based Tourism COVID-19 Recovery Project.
[16] International Labour Organization (2021) *State of Skills: Cambodia*;
Yousaf, M., Ali Bhatti, A., (2022) *Impact of Technical and Vocational Education and Training on Poverty Alleviation through Skill Acquisition: Evidence from Developing Countries*
[17] Asian Development Bank, International Labour Organization. (2015) *Cambodia: Addressing the Skills Gap, Employment Diagnostic Study*.
[18] Ibid.

Young women in particular are underrepresented in technical and vocational education and training (TVET), with less than 1% of girls enrollled in secondary education moving into formal TVET.[19] In 2021/22 only one in three students enrollled in public TVET institutions were female.[20] This gender gap reflects broader structural inequalities. According to the 2023 Gender Inequality Index (GII), which measures disparities in reproductive health, empowerment, and labor market participation, Cambodia ranked 116th out of 170 countries, indicating persistent challenges in achieving gender equality.[21]

Despite relatively high female labor force participation in Cambodia (74% compared to 86.5% for men), women remain heavily concentrated in low-paid, informal, or unpaid care work, with fewer than 1% occupying senior or managerial roles.[22] A persistent gender wage gap—estimated at 16 to 19%—further compounds these disadvantages.[23] The underrepresentation of women in formal vocational training perpetuates these broader inequalities, reinforcing a cycle of limited opportunity and exclusion. Addressing these gaps is essential for reducing inequality and ensuring that vocational education contributes more equitably to Cambodia's development goals.

The Cambodian government recognizes the importance of the tourism sector and its contribution to socio-economic development and poverty alleviation through its Rectangular Strategy for Growth, Employment, Equity and Efficiency (Phase IV).[24] The government also recognizes the importance of vocational training and education for developing the sector's workforce. Cambodia's Tourism Development Strategic Plan (2012-2020), which is now under review, specifically highlighted vocational training as essential for improving service quality and competitiveness (Ministry of Tourism, 2012). This aligns with the Cambodian government's broader National Technical and Vocational Education and Training Policy 2017–2025, which aims to enhance workforce readiness and address unemployment through practical skills development.[25] **Alongside public TVET institutions, this policy also explicitly encourages private sector partnerships and social enterprise models in vocational training, to facilitate 1.5 million poor and vulnerable youth in receiving vocational training as aimed by the Cambodian government.**[26]

1.1 Background

Sala Baï Hotel School is a program created by the French NGO Agir Pour le Cambodge (APLC) with the aim of fighting poverty through social and professional training. The school provides free vocational training to disadvantaged young people in Cambodia, facilitating their integration into the hospitality workforce and enabling them to improve economic outcomes for themselves and their families. Sala Baï prioritises female students (70%) who face additional barriers to accessing education and stable employment.

The Sala Baï training program includes theory (technical skills, agroecology, English language, general education and "soft skills") and practical experience at school or during internships at partner hotels. The school covers all training costs (lessons, school supplies, books, uniforms), and daily expenses (accommodation, food, bicycles, insurance and medical expenses) for all the students.

[19] Australian Aid, Cambodia Gender Equality and Social Inclusion, The World Bank. (2024) *Cambodia Country Gender Action Plan FY25-FY29.*
[20] Ibid.
[21] United Nations Development Programme. (2024). *Human Development Report 2023-24: Breaking the gridlock: Reimagining cooperation in a polarized world.* New York.
[22] World Bank. (2025) Gender Data Portal: Cambodia. Accessed 1 July 2025 at: https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/economies/cambodia
[23] OpenDevelopment Cambodia. (2023) *Women in development.*
[24] Government of Cambodia. (2018) *Rectangular Strategy for Growth, Employment, Equity and Efficiency* (Phase IV). Phnom Penh.
[25] Government of Cambodia. (2017) *National Technical Vocational Education and Training Policy 2017-2025*. Phnom Penh: Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training.
[26] Khmer Times. (2023) *Ministry of Labour to provide vocational training to 1.5 million young people from poor and vulnerable families*. https://www.khmertimeskh.com/501303351/ministry-of-labour-to-provide-vocational-training-to-1-5-million-young-people-from-poor-and-vulnerable-families/

Sala Baï Hotel School and its graduates are well regarded within the Cambodian hospitality industry. Upon program completion, graduates receive a diploma, co-signed by two Cambodian Ministries: Ministry of Labor and Vocational Training and Ministry of Tourism, which is highly beneficial in finding employment. Notably, the diploma has been recognized in 10 ASEAN countries, allowing graduates to work legally within ASEAN, thereby contributing to the Cambodian government's effort in tackling trafficking of vulnerable populations in the country. Since its founding in 2002, Sala Baï has trained over 2,200 students, with 97% securing employment within three months of graduation.

1.2 Study rationale

While immediate employment outcomes for Sala Baï graduates are well documented by their social team, less is known about the program's longer-term impacts on graduate livelihoods, household well-being, and shifts in social norms. As Cambodia's tourism sector recovers and evolves, assessing the sustained outcomes of vocational training becomes essential for refining development strategies and demonstrating program effectiveness. Understanding whether and how Sala Baï's graduates and their families have progressed economically, advanced professionally, or contributed to broader community-level change, particularly in gender equity and poverty reduction, will help APLC and its stakeholders make evidence-based decisions about future programming, partnerships, and advocacy.

1.3 Study purpose

This study aims to assess the long-term impact of Sala Baï's vocational training program on graduates who completed their training more than five years ago. Specifically, it will explore their economic progression, employment stability, and career development, perceptions of gender roles, and their contributions to household income and family education levels. **The findings will support APLC in strengthening program design, and identifying pathways to maximize impact for future students, particularly those from the most vulnerable segments of Cambodian society and demonstrating accountability to donors and partners.**

4. CONCLUSIONS

The evaluation finds that Sala Baï's training program has had a profoundly positive impact on graduates and their families across multiple dimensions. A key achievement has been the dramatic improvement in alumni livelihoods. The Livelihood Outcome Index (LOI) was used to measure alumni livelihood outcomes, across eight indicators: debt, savings, assets, income, health/social problems, job skill level, employment, and life skills. Using this measure, Sala Baï graduates were found to have very positive livelihood outcomes overall, achieving an LOI score of 79 (out of 100). In particular, Sala Baï alumni had significantly high employment rates, as well as increased incomes, assets and savings.

These results demonstrate the program's success in helping alleviate poverty for alumni and their families. As a direct result of completing the Sala Baï program, alumni were able to enter the workforce, progress their careers and increase their monthly incomes. Five years after graduation, 97% of alumni are currently employed, earning an average monthly income of USD 950, including benefits. Professional outcomes demonstrate equally impressive results, with almost all alumni now employed in semi-skilled or higher positions. This transition into higher-quality employment has been facilitated by the program's strong industry alignment, practical internship components, and effective job placement support.

The program's impact extends beyond individual graduates to positively influence broader family and community outcomes. Two in three alumni regularly send remittances to support their families, contributing to essential expenses such as education, healthcare, and daily household needs. Notably, alumni who remit provide, on average, 71% of the USD 200 Household Poverty Exit (HPE) threshold, highlighting their substantial role in lifting families out of poverty. Additionally, one in three alumni (38%) continue to live with their parents, and nearly all of them earn USD 200 or more per month. Alumni are also contributing to improved educational outcomes for siblings and children by easing financial barriers to schooling. This intergenerational effect underscores the program's role in serving as a catalyst for broader social mobility.

Despite these gains, female alumni are failing to experience the same outcomes as men. Significant gender disparities remain evident in multiple areas, with women overall rating 5 points lower than men on the LOI. This is particularly influenced by a substantial gender pay gap among alumni, with women earning on average 22% less than their male counterparts (USD 859 vs 1,100 monthly, including benefits). The wage gap was even higher for those working in the hospitality sector, with women earning 30% less than men (USD 774 vs 1,112). Women also remitted a higher proportion of their wage and were more likely to take out larger loans. In addition to paid work, female alumni bear disproportionate responsibility for unpaid domestic work. While Sala Baï has made commendable efforts to promote gender equality through preferential female enrollment, these findings suggest a need for significant change across the hospitality industry.

The Sala Baï program's combination of technical training, soft skills development, and practical experience through internships and placements, were key enablers to alumni's professional success. The curriculum's relevance to industry needs, coupled with Sala Baï's strong industry partnerships, has effectively prepared graduates for the workforce and facilitated employment.

However, opportunities exist to enhance training in financial literacy and business skills, areas where alumni reported gaps between their preparation and job requirements. English language proficiency was another notable area for improvement, with alumni and stakeholders consistently highlighting this as a primary barrier to career advancement. These skill areas, alongside demand for expanded internship opportunities, particularly overseas, point to clear pathways for program enhancement.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

The evaluation findings point to clear pathways for Sala Baï to further enhance its program offerings and maximise its impact.

1. **Encourage graduate support and voluntary contributions,** as alumni have demonstrated a strong willingness to engage further with Sala Baï, including paying for additional trainings and supporting the school financially. This not only sustains the school's impact through continuous professional development but also fosters an engaged alumni community, enabling graduates to contribute back and mentor new cohorts.

2. **Expand course offerings to address skill gaps in English language proficiency, management and finance skills,** as these were highlighted as key skill gaps for alumni once they entered the workforce. Evidence from alumni outcomes and stakeholder interviews highlights a clear gap in the skills necessary for graduates to advance in their careers. Designing targeted courses for graduates in these subjects will better equip them for promotions and entrepreneurial opportunities, while aligning training with industry demand. Improved financial management skills will help reduce family debt burdens, contribute to more responsible spending, and provide tools for long-term economic security.

3. **Explore opportunities to support overseas work placements in environments where English is the primary language used in the workplace.** Leverage existing networks with international hospitality partners to facilitate work placements abroad for graduates seeking to hone their hospitality skills after Sala Baï training. International exposure will offer students unique learning experiences, enhance their language skills, and increase employability for higher-level positions. Overseas internships can be piloted with a small cohort and later expanded as successful outcomes are documented.

4. **Continue and monitor gender equality training** as a standard part of the curriculum and regularly review its relevance and effectiveness. Ongoing monitoring should assess whether these courses contribute to changes in gender attitudes and behaviour among graduates. The results from gender modules should inform further curriculum updates, with attention to emerging needs.

5. **Consider ways in which Sala Baï can play a more active role in improving gender equality across the hospitality and tourism sector.** While Sala Baï is already promoting gender equality through its own programs, this would enable it to expand its impact for female alumni post-graduation. Sala Baï should actively disseminate the results of this impact evaluation among industry partners, government stakeholders, and training providers, with special emphasis on the identified gender differences in career outcomes. Clear communication of these findings will encourage sector-wide awareness, help advocate for more equitable hiring and promotion practices, and strengthen Sala Baï's leadership role in championing gender inclusion within Cambodia's hospitality and tourism sector.