

## CASE STUDY

# Inspiring role model grandmother leading the way for WASH\* behavior change

Developing a national behavior change campaign for Cambodia to improve health outcomes of children under 5 years old through better water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) practices.



In Cambodia, the lack of good sanitation and hygiene practices jeopardizes the health of children under 5 years old by contributing to undernutrition and stunting (low-height-for-age). Not washing hands with soap, exposure to harmful faeces in the environment, and drinking unsafe contaminated water are some of the main causes of life-threatening child illnesses such as diarrhea, which also affects brain development in the first 5 years.

\*WASH - Water, Sanitation and Hygiene

## Exploring the problem: Talking to the community to get a deeper understanding of the situation

To understand why basic hygiene practices are still low among children in rural areas, The iDE Cambodia Innovation Lab began with expert interviews, literature reviews, and led a multi-stakeholder Alignment Workshop with WASH and Nutrition experts to assess existing knowledge, solutions and gaps around this topic. Following this, the team conducted field research using a human-centered approach to further explore current practices and perceptions around hygiene and sanitation in the local context. Interviews were held with different members of the community, including caregivers, household members, health care workers, the local authority, and key focal points in multiple locations to understand the current situation better.

### What did they learn?

**Open defecation for children is an accepted social norm.** Despite a positive increase in latrine adoption in Cambodia, children under five years old in rural areas are still practicing open defecation due to it being socially accepted for this age group. One of the reasons for this acceptance is the misconception that child faeces is less harmful than adult faeces. Children under five are also perceived as difficult to train or too small to use a potty or latrine, and their faeces are not always safely disposed of, exposing them to higher contamination risk. While latrine adoption for adults is on the rise (at over 70%), there is no social pressure or expectation for children to use a latrine, or for adults to train their children to use one.

**Children do not wash their hands with soap regularly.** Even adults have not made handwashing a habit, and there is no urgency to wash hands with soap because germs are not visible to the naked eye and people are motivated by visual proof. While many caregivers *know* the critical times to wash their hands and children's hands with soap due to sanitation interventions, it is not often practised because having knowledge does not necessarily lead to action. Children are especially at risk as it is common for them to eat snacks throughout the day without washing their hands, with a lack of access to handwashing facilities, and no instruction from caregivers at this critical point. The common attitude is that children are "always dirtying their hands" and being "hard to teach."



"Sometimes when adults are not in the house they scoop water from the jar."

Mother of children under 5 years old  
Stung Treng, Cambodia

**Children have easy access to unsafe water.** While multiple interventions have ensured that knowledge around treating drinking water is high, caregivers are not aware of the recontamination points of drinking water after treatment and the importance of safe handling and storage. For children, water quality is mostly regarded as a priority for infants because they are perceived as more “fragile,” and many caregivers will invest in purified bottled water for them. However, older children may not necessarily have a safe drinking water source easily accessible to them and risk being exposed to unsafe drinking water options once they start to walk. For example, they may drink directly from a rain jar or well, and because they have more freedom to move around, there is no way to control where they drink water from.

### ***Finding a focus: A critical gap in child-focused WASH interventions for caregivers with children between 2-5 years old***

Children need safe WASH practices in parallel with nutrition, safety, and education in order to maintain healthy physical and cognitive development. While many interventions in Cambodia have primarily focused on improving nutrition in the first 1000 days of life (from pregnancy to two years), there have been limited solutions that focus on improving *child-focused* WASH behaviors, specifically for the slightly older child (once they become more independent and start receiving less close care from their caregiver).

The team discovered from research and observation that the age group from approximately 2-5 years old is a critical development period that gets overlooked by caregivers (and development projects), with limited information available for caregivers around how to take care of them at this challenging age. Generally infants receive more attention from their caregivers than older children due to the perception that infants are “small and need more care.” Once children are walking and more mobile, they are often left to their own devices which increases their chances of contaminating themselves in different ways through independent behaviors and more risky exposure to their environment.



**“It’s okay for children to defecate outside. What can we do?”**

Grandmother of 2 year old  
Kampong Speu, Cambodia

In addition, while caregivers may have some knowledge on correct WASH practices due to sanitation interventions, they do not know how to enforce good practices or teach children of this age group, lack confidence in their abilities, and have no positive role models to follow. Recently the trend in rural Cambodia is a heavy reliance on grandmother caregivers while parents go out to work. These grandmothers are older, tired, lacking motivation and knowledge, and sometimes overburdened with

many grandchildren to look after, not having the time or energy to take care of children's WASH practices. These caregivers need support, encouragement, and more guidance to know what to do. With multiple WASH interventions and organizations in the country, there has been a need to use a consistent, harmonious approach to tackle these issues and create an aligned strategy. Solutions have to be targeted and developed using a collaborative approach to bring in existing expertise and learnings as well as new ways to engage with audiences for increased impact.

## How can we motivate caregivers to ensure children under five years old learn good hygiene habits early and grow up healthy?

### **Uncovering triggers: Determining the underlying motivations and drivers for caregivers and children in rural Cambodia**

Through a process of exploratory and participatory research methods, the iDE Cambodia Innovation Lab team explored aspirations and key triggers that motivate caregivers and children to practice good sanitation and hygiene. For more effective, targeted solutions, behavior change frameworks were also incorporated into the analysis process. For example, using Jonathan Haidt's *Elephant, Rider, Path* analogy to identify methods to address knowledge, emotion, and the environment, as well as the *Stages of Behavior Change* (based on the traditional Transtheoretical Model) to assess where respondents are in terms of the desired behaviors and their readiness to change.

#### **What are the key motivations and drivers?**

**Caregivers want children to be smart.** Children having a "good brain" and growing up to be smart is a key motivational trigger for most caregivers because this is linked to the idea of success (i.e., education, job, money) which leads to a "better life."

**People learn through copying and need visual proof.** Copying behaviors is a key learning mechanism for both adults and children in Cambodia. People learn by watching those around them and feel social pressure to do the same as others. Seeing visual proof (of results and consequences) drives them to copy because seeing is believing.

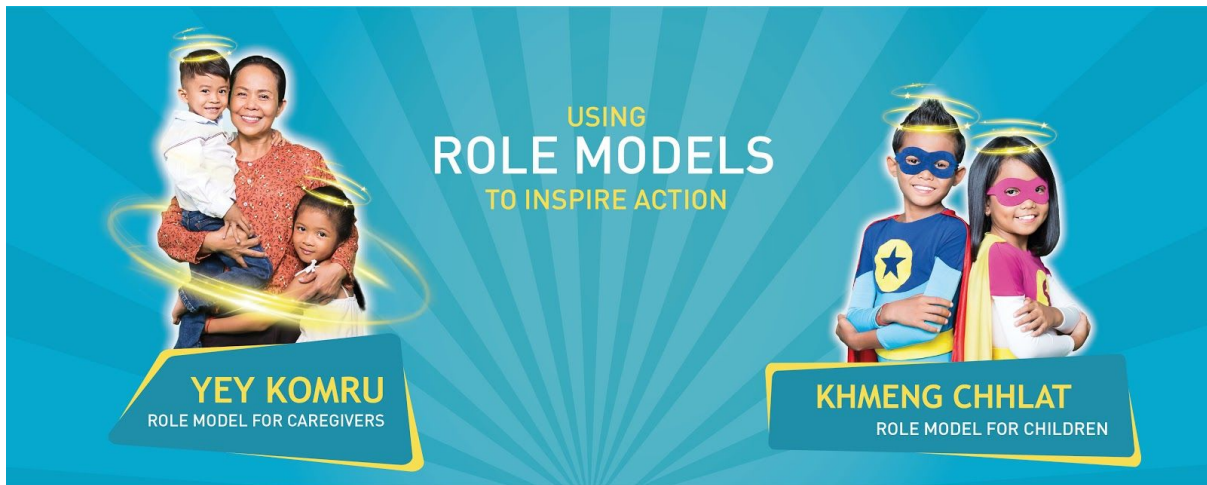
**Fear grabs attention and creates a sense of urgency.** However, knowing how to overcome the problem that causes the fear creates an enabling factor that allows caregivers' confidence to grow as they learn what to do.

**Caregivers want to know how to teach their children.** Many grandmothers and mothers, including working mothers, expressed the desire to learn more about how to take care of their children. But positive role models to copy are mostly non-existent for good WASH practices in rural areas.

**Experiencing pride and status.** Being able to feel proud of themselves and their family is an emotion that motivates caregivers to do something. While it is not the key trigger, it is an underlying driver. Often, the opposite has been used to trigger action, but it is important to help people feel positive emotions about themselves to move forward. Households will regularly use comparison as a way to determine how to act and what to achieve. During research it was learned that many caregivers have a defeatist mindset and only practice the bare minimum, due to low expectations and beliefs of what is possible. Therefore creating feelings of pride and status is one way to overcome this, in addition to others.



## **The solution: “Yey Komru,” a WASH behavior change toolkit for the nation – improving child hygiene and sanitation practices through real-life aspirational characters**



Working with the Royal Government of Cambodia (Ministry of Rural Development), World Bank, Melon Rouge Agency, and multiple stakeholders from the WASH and Nutrition sectors, the iDE Cambodia Innovation Lab has developed a national Social Behavior Change (SBC) campaign called *Yey Komru* to promote improved child-centered WASH behaviors. Through a targeted approach and diverse open source toolkit for any organization to adopt, it aims to improve the overall health outcomes of children and contribute to the reduction of stunting in Cambodia.

Taking Cambodian children and caregivers’ needs and aspirations into consideration, the campaign integrates WASH impact on child nutrition, attempts to avoid duplication in the sector, and creates a harmonious approach to tackling WASH behavior change that is complementary to nutrition interventions. Developed over an 18-month period, the campaign has gone through multiple rounds of research, testing, and alignment with experts. It addresses the child-WASH gap in interventions in the country, and is based on research that positive, aspirational role models are much needed key influencers in rural communities.

**Using aspirational role models to inspire both caregivers and children, the campaign shows households how to instill good hygiene habits in children from an early age and make it easy to do so.**

Targeting children from 2 to 5 years\* old as well as their caregivers, solutions have been tailor-made to suit their needs and focuses on three specific **child-centered WASH behaviors**:

1. Handwashing with soap at two critical times (after defecation and before eating anything, including snacks)
2. Stopping open defecation
3. Access to safe drinking water

*\* Behaviors can be taught earlier than 2 years old and later than 5 years old. This is a general guideline for monitoring and evaluation purposes, but intends to have a cumulative effect on audiences regardless of target age group.*



“Do you want your children to have a good brain and become smart?”

Motivational trigger for campaign (based on research and testing)

“Yey Komru” (meaning “Role Model Grandmother” in Khmer) is an aspirational grandmother who sets a positive example for caregivers in rural Cambodia to follow. Her name and identity has been created by caregivers themselves during fieldwork tests and she encourages them to teach children good WASH practices from a young age so they can “grow up smart and have a better future” based on learned aspirations. Through her two grandchildren under 5 years old, Yey Komru demonstrates practical steps of how to create consistent habits at home, using relatable context and adding visual proof of grandchildren who grow up happy and successful.

Yey Komru empowers caregivers with easy tools, recognition, appreciation, and by showing empathy to their situation. She repeats the mantra “If I can do it, you can do it too,” encouraging others to follow her, showing them what to do, and how to overcome obstacles so they can feel confident teaching their children good WASH practices.



“Take them to the latrine, show them how to stand in the latrine, and hold them so they feel safe.”

Yey Komru showing how she teaches her grandson to use a latrine.

Children also copy behaviors and need inspiration, so “Khmeng Chhlat” (“Smart Kids” in Khmer) are colorful role models for children to follow. Chosen and named by local children, the *Khmeng Chhlat* feature a boy and girl who are two real-life superhero characters practicing good WASH behaviors. They are used as a teaching tool for caregivers to motivate their children to defecate in a latrine, wash their hands with soap, and drink safe water. The *Khmeng Chhlat* inspire children to want to become smart just like them and copy their good habits. The superheroes’ hygiene activities are incorporated into children’s tools such as a catchy hygiene song with dance moves, storybooks, handwashing stations, and reminder stickers.

This empathetic, relatable approach using real-life actors is a fresh alternative to previous WASH educational materials.



“We know it’s hard but Yey Komru will show you easy steps to make sure your children always wash their hands with soap.”

Yey Komru with a *Khmeng Chhlat* handwashing station, using affection to train her grandchildren, encouraging caregivers to follow, and showing empathy towards their challenges.

The primary targets for the materials are grandmother caregivers and mothers who work (and come home in the evenings), with an additional target being children themselves. However, the campaign also aims to reach a wider audience to influence other caregivers, fathers, older siblings, etc. and create best practice knowledge for local leaders as well. In addition to triggering good WASH practices for children, the campaign tackles underlying needs such as decreasing burden on just one caregiver through sharing tasks and leveraging the role of the father, using a gentle caregiving approach, and creating early learning opportunities for children. While previous WASH campaigns have used disgust and shame as triggers, *Yey Komru* aims to uplift caregivers to make them feel capable, and incorporates feelings of pride, love, and status as well as empathy for their current situation and challenges. While fear is used as a trigger to create urgency, it is quickly negated by simple, easy-to-follow steps to resolve the problem and create confidence around caregiving abilities.

**Combining a commercial approach with local actors and context makes the *Yey Komru* campaign more relatable, aspirational, and actionable.**



"If I can do it,  
you can do it too!"

Yey Komru's repeated mantra to encourage caregivers to follow her steps for good child sanitation and hygiene

## Going beyond communications: How the Yey Komru SBC design is more than just an awareness campaign and creates a path to action

Key principles of behavior change have been incorporated into the Yey Komru SBC campaign to shift knowledge into action. While communication is just one aspect of behavior change, success requires going beyond *telling* people what to change, but also helping them change by giving them practical tools. Often to facilitate the desired change, there must be more than "communicating" chosen messages – an enabling environment becomes essential to make it easy for people to develop a new habit. For example, educating people to wash their hands with soap will not shift behaviors if there is no infrastructure to do so.

**The campaign goes beyond simply designing behavior change communications, and incorporates new services, products, and tools that can be used in a sustainable way by the local community.**

The Yey Komru SBC communication materials include tools such as a TV spot, educational videos, flip charts, posters, etc. to change behaviors by positively influencing knowledge, attitudes, and social norms. However, they are just a small part of the whole SBC process, which starts with research and analysis to understand the whole context and narrowing behaviors down to *specific actions* and target audiences in order to create more impact throughout the campaign. People are always being told what to do, how to think, what to buy, etc. Multiple messages become white noise and eventually get ignored. With this campaign, the team have incorporated various approaches that are *supported* by communications, nudges, and paths to facilitate the change and allow caregivers to participate in the behavior change process. And because behavior change does not happen by itself and is dependent on a larger system, the campaign strategy aims to reach different audiences and levels (such as the individual, family, community, service delivery, and enabling environment), with key messages delivered across multiple channels, with repeated and varied exposure.



The Yey Komru campaign includes three approaches:

1. **Mass Media** to raise awareness and promote key WASH behaviors through a TV spot, educational videos, and motivational song for children;
2. **Interpersonal Communication (IPC) tools** for implementers to teach behaviors and motivate caregivers in an interactive way (e.g., using games to reinforce messages); tools for caregivers to use at home (such as storybooks and stickers to remember key messages); behavioral nudges for children; tools for pride and recognition (e.g., certificates for caregivers, branded t-shirts for implementers); low-cost ways to facilitate pathways in the household (such as a Do-It-Yourself handwashing station);
3. **A solution pathway/intervention** that converts local vendors into “Hygiene Champions” to create an enabling environment and easy access to handwashing with soap in the village by leveraging existing behaviors and services. Village vendors are recruited as Hygiene Champions and directed to maintain a simple handwashing station with water and soap and remind children to wash their hands at this station before they leave the shop. Their shops are decorated with eye-catching display materials to attract people to their shop, and vendors receive a certificate of recognition for their efforts. The intervention creates a path to action, excitement around handwashing stations at shops, and makes vendors feel proud about making a difference in their community.



'Hygiene Champion' vendors promote handwashing, create access to handwashing facilities in the village, and become early adopters of a simple, low-cost handwashing station to increase interest.

The Yey Komru campaign has been designed by the community, for the community, through an interactive, experimental process, learning from people along the way during multiple rounds of research and testing, workshops to ensure alignment of the sector, and engagement from the government.

The campaign concept and materials have been rooted in deep dive research and testing. Ideas generated through co-creation have gone through a continuous process of rapid prototyping and iterations based on feedback from the community, target audiences and stakeholders. In the

18-month project journey, various levels of prototypes were developed over six rounds of testing, including visuals, messages, content, physical materials, as well as conducting short behavior trials. This iterative design process has helped refine and shape solutions that are closer to people's needs and address their barriers. It also takes into account key components of behavior change, such as emotion, knowledge, and having an enabling environment. The process has been interactive and experimental, learning from people along the way and providing alignment and evidence for the final strategy and tools.



"I want to be like her.  
Her grandchildren  
become smart because  
of good hygiene."

Grandmother,  
Kampong Cham, Cambodia

**A fully designed and tested behavior change toolkit is ready to use and download at [www.cambodiawashsbcc.com](http://www.cambodiawashsbcc.com) promoting improved water, sanitation, and hygiene behaviors in Cambodia for caregivers and children ages 2 to 5 years old.**

A customized open source platform created especially for sharing the *Yey Komru* tools and background information allows anyone to access the materials and create a united approach to promoting improved child-WASH behaviors in the country. Endorsed by the Ministry of Rural Development, organizations can choose to use the campaign to complement their programs, giving easy access to tried and tested materials, as well as comprehensive strategy, implementation and monitoring recommendations. As a nutrition-sensitive WASH campaign it can be used by both WASH and Nutrition sectors, implemented as a standalone toolkit or as complementary materials to existing interventions, including being used in areas with nutrition programs to enhance efforts of improving child health.

## “Pave the way for the next generation of bamboo shoots”

- His Excellency Dr. Yim Chhay Ly, Deputy Prime Minister

In Cambodia, children are referred to as the “bamboo shoots” of the country. As Cambodia focuses its national plan on human resource development, this metaphor is particularly relevant to investing in the health of children, i.e. taking care of the shoots will ensure they grow into strong bamboo.

### **Adapting to a crisis: Yey Komru materials being used to promote handwashing with soap during COVID-19**

With the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, the implementation strategy for *Yey Komru* has been adapted to release all materials relating to handwashing with soap, including a handwashing educational video, a child-friendly 'Do-It-Yourself' handwashing station design, educational flip chart and game, handwashing storybook, and a hygiene song for children. One of the key tools—the low-cost handwashing station and soap—are being distributed around rural areas in Cambodia to reinforce an enabling environment to wash hands with soap. The stickers on the bucket links to the *Yey Komru* YouTube page that includes a playlist of Covid-19 prevention videos. Partnering with Hydrologic sales agents who sell water filters in those areas, filter sales efforts are being combined with sales of handwashing stations and soap, in addition to educating households about COVID-19, and leaving them with posters highlighting important preventative actions. These handwashing stations are also a way to test future interest in household handwashing stations and iterations in the design and pricing.



*Yey Komru Khmeng Chhlat*  
handwashing stations  
prepared for distribution  
with soap during COVID-19

Through a collaborative and evidence-based approach, the *Yey Komru* campaign hopes to engage people in deeper ways than seen before, creating positive impact together and improving health outcomes of children in Cambodia.

## Lessons Learned

- **Behavior change is hard** and in order to have the most impact, it is not just about communicating desired behaviors to audiences; we have to facilitate a path to action and create an enabling environment. There are still a lot of infrastructure factors that need to be resolved before real behavior change is possible.
- **Have a clear goal in mind.** When designing a solution, keep reviewing the specific problem you are trying to solve and make sure solutions are aligned with the overall goal. This can also evolve during the process as you learn more information.
- **Be willing to test and iterate.** Even “good” ideas can fail. It is important not to get attached to initial ideas, go through the process of experimentation, and be open to changing or scrapping ideas. Even the *Yey Komru* campaign should continue evolving even after its launch based on learnings during implementation.
- **Changing the way things are done** can face resistance and be slow to start. But it requires patience, persistence and collaboration. Keep revisiting the end goal so you know where you are heading, and break the stages of progress into bite-size pieces.
- **Collaboration and alignment are key.** Getting input from key stakeholders and diverse minds improves the innovation process to come up with viable solutions together. It is important to involve people from different levels and expertise, especially key decision makers of the final output. (In this example it has been government stakeholders).
- **At the same time, having too many cooks can block progress.** Know what feedback is necessary and when to move forward. Feedback can either help or hinder the process. Be clear about the difference.
- **Always put people at the center** and find solutions that are made to suit their needs.

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