



Report on Cambodian Youth Perceptions of Healthy Diets and Food System During COVID-19

Background

The Youth of Cambodia are a critical group for nutrition intervention, both in their own right and as key actors in breaking the cycle of malnutrition. Healthy diets are essential for ensuring that the demographic dividend promised by Cambodia's youthful population is not wasted due to malnutrition, lower educational outcomes and increasing health costs. Addressing youth needs is a key element of SDG 2: Zero Hunger, which identifies addressing the nutritional needs of adolescent girls as one of the key steps towards ending malnutrition by 2030.

Investing in the education and training of young students is becoming ever more important as the challenges associated with adopting sustainable, climate-smart consumption and linking up with diversity of supply in modern value chains are growing. Working with adolescents presents a unique opportunity that allows adolescents to hold stakeholders accountable and helps to build engagement between adolescents and the state.

Activities

At the end of 2019 the SUN CSA Cambodia, coordinated by Helen Keller International (HKI), recruited ten university students to represent the youth of Cambodia as Youth Nutrition Champions (YNCs). Stakeholders including SUN CSA led by HKI Cambodia, the EU-FAO FIRST Program, World Food Program (WFP), UNICEF, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) and the Council for Agriculture and Rural Development (CARD) have been working together to engage Cambodian youth through several channels.

To continue with the momentum gained on youth engagement, efforts were redirected towards supporting the youth in Cambodia in times of the COVID-19 pandemic. Cambodian youth have had to make drastic changes to their lifestyle, most notably the need to maintain social distancing, which requires them to stay at home as much as possible and to work, study and socialise remotely. In order to ascertain how this was affecting youth, the aforementioned stakeholders asked each of the ten YNCs to specify five ways in which their lives had been changed by the crisis. From the feedback provided by the YNCs (Box 1), the organizers developed a short survey for youth to inform the design of multimedia products and key messages to facilitate youth to follow healthy diets and lifestyles in times of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Box 1. YNC Feedback

COVID-19 AND YOUTH

1. Lack of access to healthy food;
2. Lack of exercise (feeling unhealthy and stressed);
3. Isolated from friends and family (stress);
4. Difficult to maintain motivation and work ethic;
5. Disillusioned about behaviour of the community (people acting selfishly; not taking care of each other; exacerbates rich/poor divide);
6. Worried about economic decline (stress);
7. Change has been sudden, no time to adapt;
8. Increasing cost of food and essential goods;
9. Fear of catching the virus;
10. Uncertainty; how long will this last? What will be the short- and long-term ramifications?

Methodology

The survey was designed by the youth engagement team, then inserted into Google forms and posted on the SUN CSA Cambodia and Youth Nutrition Champions Facebook pages to identify how the pandemic is affecting Cambodian Youth. The survey targeted Cambodian youth, defined as “people aged between 15 and 30 years,”¹ and was open from 13 April 2020 to 01 May 2020. Upon closing, the data was analysed by the EU-FAO First Program and results were disseminated in a report titled *Empowering Youth for Food Systems Improvement and Healthy Diets*².

Results

A total of 91 Cambodians participated in the survey. However, six respondents were not included in the analysis as they were either not living in Cambodia at the time of the survey or were out of the youth age range. The remaining 85 participants consisted of 53 females and 32 males from 12 different provinces, although a big majority – 60 percent – was living in Phnom Penh.

Preventative practices

According to the results, 41 percent found it was hard to adapt to the current situation. However, from those, 60 percent were female and 40 percent were male. This could be explained because data showed that females have limited more strictly than males the number of times that they went out over a week compared to the pre-pandemic situation (Figure 1).

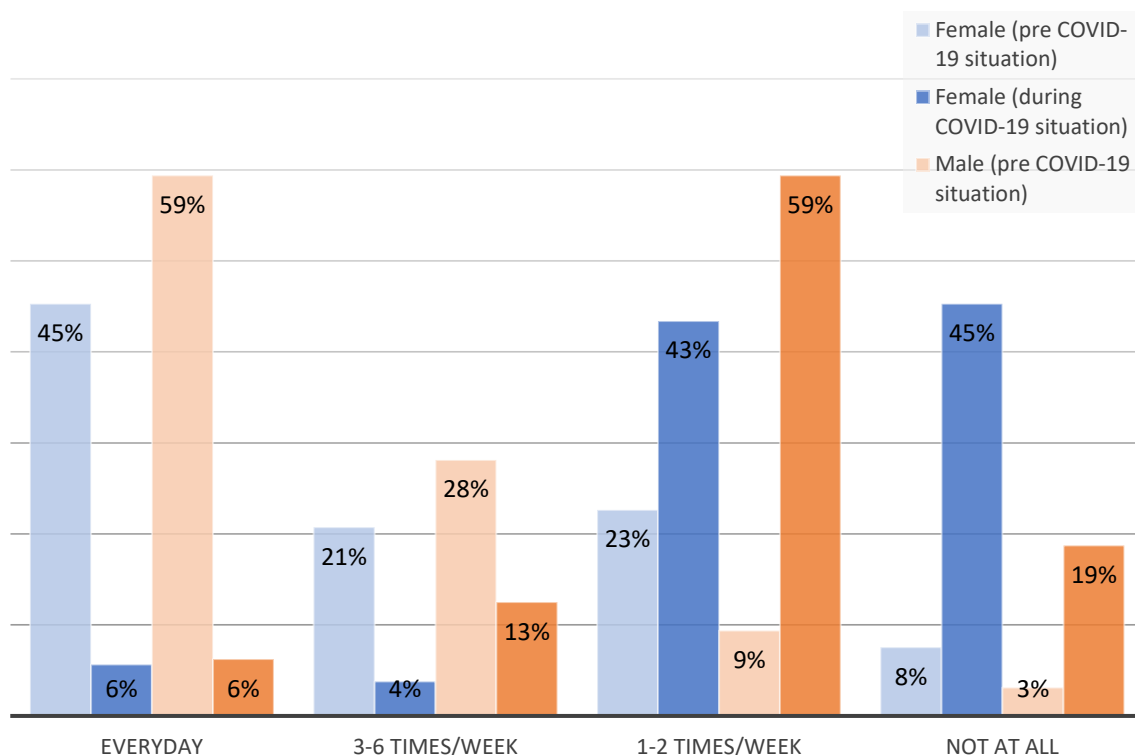


Figure 1. Comparison between the number of times a week youth go out pre-pandemic and during the pandemic, by sex-disaggregated data.

The official announcements from the Royal Government of Cambodia and the World Health Organization (WHO) were the most trusted source of information related to COVID-19, followed to a

¹ Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MOEYS). 2011. National Policy on Youth Development. Accessed 23 April 2020. https://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Cambodia_2011_Policy_Youth_Development.pdf

² Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations and Helen Keller International Cambodia. 2020. Empowering Youth for Food Systems Improvement and Healthy Diets. Accessed 19 June 2020.

lesser extent by health units/centres. In addition, youths used Facebook as the main channel to get information related to COVID-19, over other channels such as TV or radio.

Overall, the youth in Cambodia showed a good understanding about the main preventative measures for COVID-19. Almost all respondents (98 percent) reported washing their hands with soap and water or alcohol-based hand gel on a regular basis, and 75 percent stated the importance of staying home. Masks were used by 79 percent of females but only 63 percent of young men. When it came to thoroughly cooking meat and eggs, 75 percent of females were aware of the importance, however this figure dropped to 59 percent for male respondents. Other practices, such as covering the mouth when sneezing and coughing, were practiced by 75 percent of respondents, but social distancing and avoiding close contact with people showing flu-like symptoms were practiced at lower levels (Figure 2).

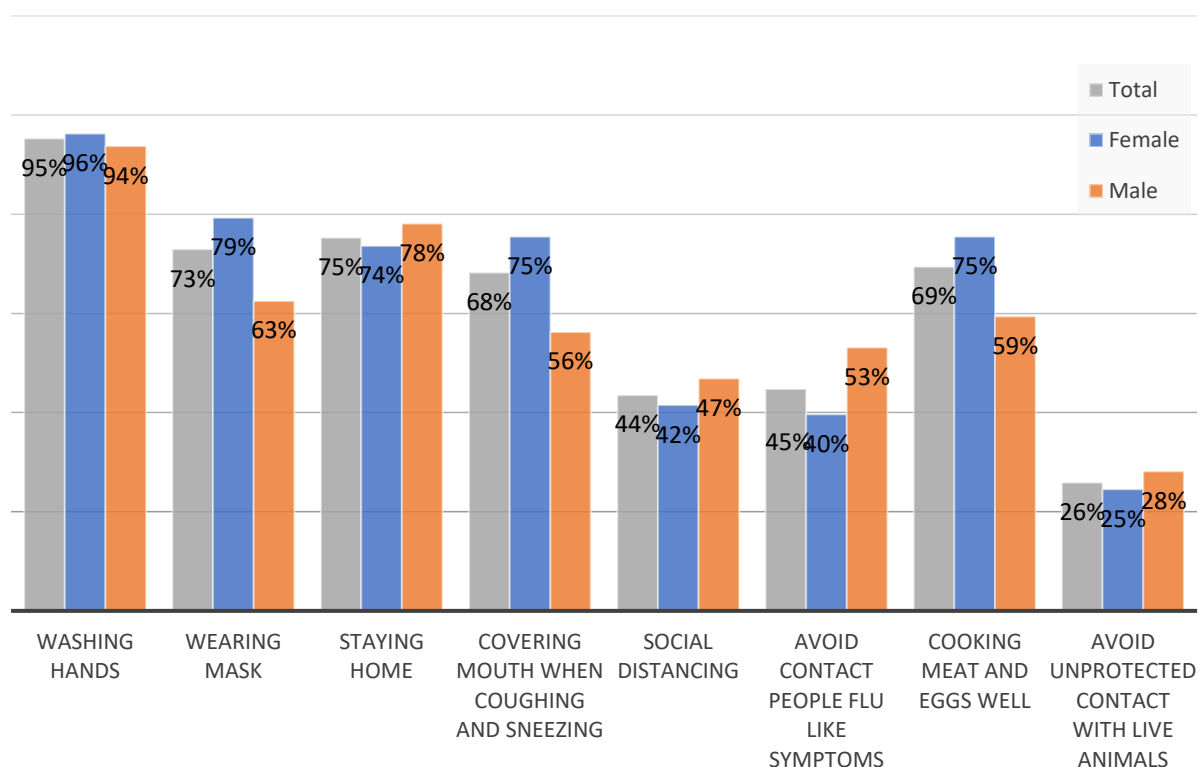


Figure 2. COVID-19 preventative measures practiced by Cambodian youths, according to the survey.

Impact on diets

All respondents stated that due to the COVID-19, they cooked at home. None of them went to restaurants or had street food and only a very small percentage ordered food for delivery. The survey showed an increase in the consumption of frozen food and fast food (i.e. instant noodles) by 35 percent and 27 percent of respondents, respectively. However, the increase in consumption of frozen food is higher for females, while the increase of fast food is higher for males, as shown in Figure 3. In terms of availability and access, 20 percent of respondents reported that there is lower availability of fresh products such as vegetables and fruits, and 23 percent said that the prices went up, limiting their food choices.

One of the positive impacts on diets due to the pandemic was that 48 percent of respondents stated that they have more time to cook healthy meals. However, this figure varied when comparing females (53 percent) and males (41 percent). This variation was likely due to gender roles in Cambodia (Figure 3). Finally, overconsumption of food due to being at home all day was reported by 28 percent of the respondents. This pattern was more common amongst males (38 percent) than females (23 percent) (Figure 3).

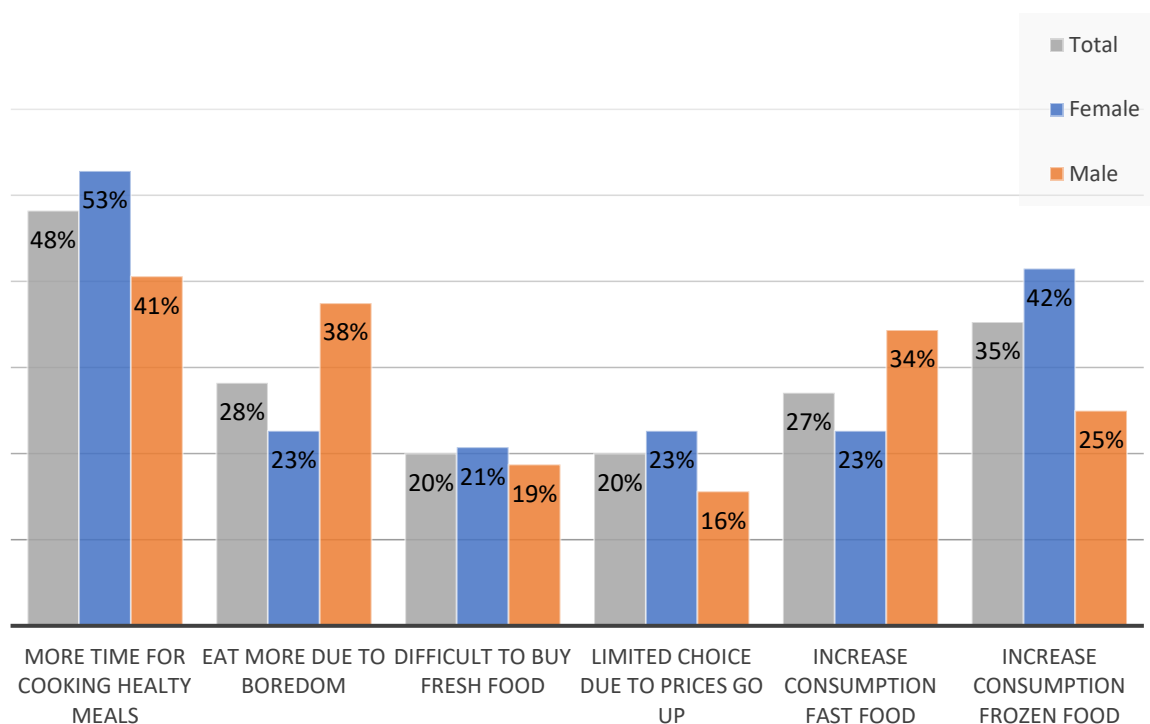


Figure 3. Change in youth due to the COVID-19 pandemic, according to the survey.

Keeping social interactions

Most of the youth in Cambodia - 88 percent, according to the survey - use Facebook or similar social media platforms to keep up social interactions with friends and family, while 51 percent also reported the use of Telegram and WhatsApp and 36 percent the use of phone calls. Only 11 percent responded they were still meeting with their friends, and this behaviour was more common amongst males than females (Figure 4).

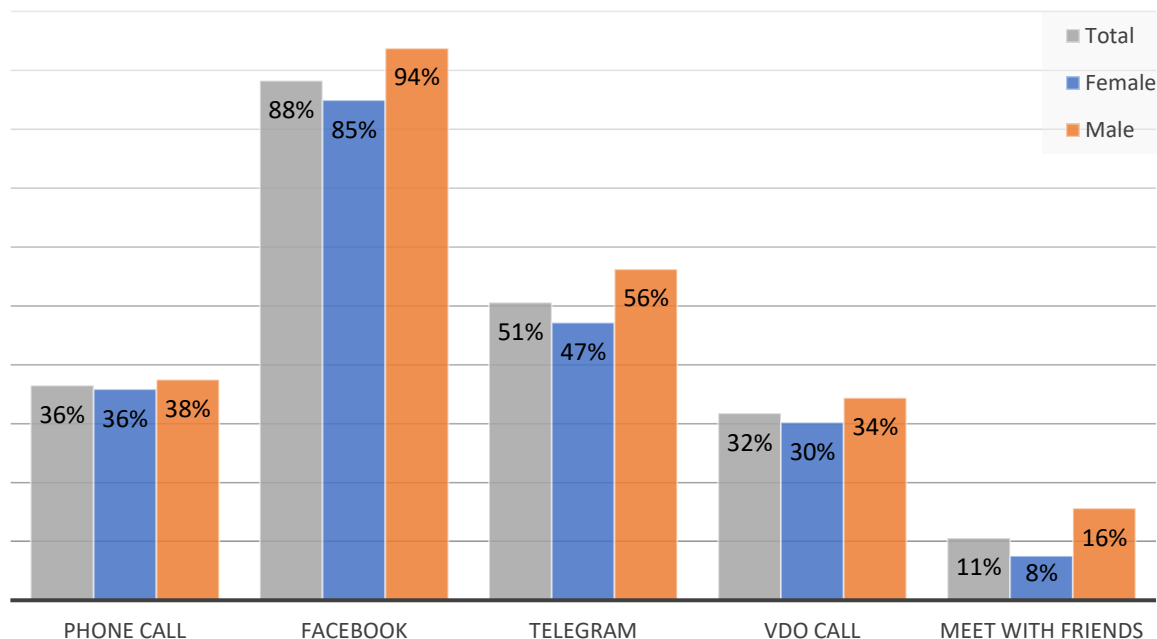


Figure 4. Preferred ways to keep up social interactions with family and friends during the pandemic by the Cambodian youth.

People's behaviour in times of a pandemic

Overall, the youth observed that people in their surroundings practiced better hygiene and were aware of its importance due to COVID-19. People were paying much more attention to their health and followed advice from authorities. They also noted that people were trying to eat more often at home and eat healthy and nutritious foods. However, they were concerned for those who did not care about the pandemic or believed rumours and misinformation, as well as possible forms of discrimination among people or even communities which might arise as a consequence of COVID-19. In addition, they reported that some opportunistic people were taking advantage of the situation by increasing their prices to generate more profits. Stress, anxiety, being bored/lazy and spending more time on their smartphones were also reported by youth as consequences of the situation.

Youth's strategies for healthy lifestyles during the COVID-19 outbreak

The survey asked for the strategies the youth adopted to keep healthy and stay focused on their studies during the pandemic. Overall, all were aware of the importance eating home cooked meals that included healthy, diversified and nutritious foods. Having healthy diets and doing physical exercise while staying at home were also reported as important by a great number of respondents. While some opted to do yoga, others preferred to workout at home or go for early morning walks around their homes. The need to keep a daily routine by scheduling time to study, to do exercise and to rest and sleep was also widely mentioned. However, it was highlighted that studying from home through online lessons is more challenging. Some respondents stated that since they spent more time at home they have read more books.

Recommendations

- **Give a voice to youth.** Youth, defined as the age group between 15 and 30 years old³ and representing 31.7 percent of the total population in Cambodia⁴, have been increasingly recognized as a critical group to promote sustainable food systems and healthy diets. It is vital that their needs, interests and heterogeneity are heard and integrated into decision-making and policy processes.
- **Design innovative approaches to reach youth.** For the Youth Nutrition Camp, social media was key in reaching youth. The youth survey also showed that almost all used Facebook or similar platforms for social interaction or to stay informed. This channel proved to be very effective, particularly in urban areas.
- **Adapt engagement strategies to ensure no one is left behind.** Particularly in rural areas with limited access to the internet and social media, local NGOs and community-based organizations are a great vehicle to reach rural and poor youth, as well as ethnic minorities.
- **Having a young team of Advisors brings fresh and innovative ideas.** When planning events for youth, make sure to involve young members in the team. Promote their involvement in designing activities and consult with them during the process. They know much better how to capture the interest of youth and what it is relevant to them. In addition, the youth interact more easily with them and they may be more confident to ask and discuss ideas with people of a similar age.
- **Targeting tertiary students may lead to higher impacts.** It is more likely that this target group can become more influential and transfer their knowledge to other members of their communities.
- **Promote discovery learning and avoid lecturing the youth.** It is impractical and unlikely to engage youth in long, theoretical explanations. Instead, facilitate activities by fostering observation, group discussion, team work, critical thinking and hands-on activities.
- **Designing a simplified conceptual food systems model.** Such a model, where participants were placed at the centre – as consumers – has proved to be a successful approach. It helped participants to better understand how the different subsystems interact with each other, how these can affect consumers' diets, and how consumers can play a key role in rent parts food systems.
- **Ensure that inclusiveness and gender aspects of food systems are fully covered.** It is recommended to have a gender and social inclusion expert involved in designing and conducting activities. Involving young staff from the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MoWA) would not only bring their expertise, but also promote a new way of doing things to the Ministry.
- **Youth leaders.** Conducting activities for youth, facilitated by youth, creates strong opportunities to build their leadership and facilitation skills. These skills are critical for future youth leaders to become agents of changes, disseminate information, and influence their communities on the importance of transitioning towards sustainable food systems and healthy diets.
- **Involving young staff from Government.** This can help to facilitate links with faculties and technical staff networks.
- **Retain youth capital in the agricultural sector.** Youth do not perceive agriculture as an attractive career. Engaging them with the different elements of food systems, such as agro-industry or agribusiness, may help to improve this perception.

³ Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MOEYS). 2011. National Policy on Youth Development. Accessed 23 April 2020. https://www.youthpolicy.org/national/Cambodia_2011_Policy_Youth_Development.pdf

⁴ OECD Development Centre. 2017., "Youth Well-being Policy Review of Cambodia", EU-OECD Youth Inclusion Project, Paris. Accessed 23 April 2020. <https://www.oecd.org/development/inclusivesocietiesanddevelopment/Youth-well-being-policy-review-Cambodia.pdf>

- **Engage the private sector.** The private sector proved very receptive to sharing knowledge and explaining their enterprises. This gives young people a chance to interact with interesting avenues for employment.

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