



# Greater Mekong Subregion

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## In Cambodia, Improved Access to Affordable Electricity Helps Save Lives

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Steady access to electricity improved services at the Ta Phem Health Center, leading to a 20-fold increase in patients. Photo: ADB.

**New transmission lines bring cheaper electricity from the Viet Nam border to Phnom Penh. Tram Kok, Cambodia** - When darkness fell in Tram Kok district, Keo Sarum, head of Ta Phem Health Center, would start to worry. Located 80 kilometers from the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh, 11,500 people from 16 surrounding villages depended on the public health facility. The 44-year-old and his

staff of seven knew night would bring a string of emergencies from serious road accidents to sudden life-threatening illnesses. Without electricity, the center was at the mercy of unreliable solar-powered lamps.

“Without electricity, our patients’ lives were constantly at risk.” -  
Keo Sarum, head of Ta Phem Health Center

Around 10 p.m. one night in 2012, Keo was delivering a baby for a mother in a fragile condition. “In the middle of the delivery, the solar lamps suddenly went out. The patient was shouting for help in the darkness and there was chaos in the waiting room,” he recalls. Keo successfully delivered the baby using battery-powered lights, but says: “Without electricity, our patients’ lives were constantly at risk.”

## A partnership for power

Early the following year, affordable and reliable electricity lit up the health center. Electricity brought improved health services and growing confidence in the center, which received about 18,600 patients in 2015, 20 times more than in 2012.

In partnership with the Cambodian Ministry of Economy and Finance, the Electricity Authority of Cambodia, the Nordic Development Bank, and the World Bank, the [Asian Development Bank](#) [3] approved the Greater Mekong Subregion Transmission Project in 2003 to construct 109 kilometers of high-voltage transmission lines and bring cheaper electricity from the Viet Nam border to Phnom Penh, Cambodia's capital.

With readily available electricity flowing down the new lines, private power distributors were encouraged to connect homes and small businesses in towns and rural areas to affordable power.

The project now provides power to 90,000 households in Phnom Penh and rural areas along the transmission route.

## Making electricity available and affordable

Before the project, the electricity supply system in Cambodia was fragmented and lacked a transmission grid. Small-scale providers, mostly using diesel-fuelled generators, supplied electricity.

Costs in rural areas often exceeded \$1 per kilowatt hour, putting electricity far beyond the reach of poor villagers. The high cost and unreliability of electricity posed a major stumbling block to economic growth, investment, and social development.

ADB has played a leading role in Greater Mekong Subregion power sector cooperation by financing a regional master plan for power interconnection, which included the transmission link between Cambodia and Viet Nam.

## Helping communities thrive

The project made a big difference to low-income families in Srae Khvav, Tram Kok district.

Mom Sophol, a 39-year-old mother of three, used to buy electricity from local suppliers for \$20.00 per month. Now she pays \$5.50 a month.

Her daughter, Ith, is a fifth-grade student and remembers that before the project electricity was so expensive she could only study one hour a night. Now, the lights in her home stay on as long as she needs.

“I have enough time to do my homework,” she says with pride. “I get good grades now.”

Oum Sovannarith long dreamed of starting his own business. When electricity arrived in his neighborhood of Udom Sarya Commune, the 27-year-old set up a chicken farm near his home.

His 1,300 chickens need to be fed after dark so lights need to be on all night. “Without this electricity, my business would not be possible. I spend about \$40 per month on electricity. I would be spending up to \$300 per month for diesel-based power,” he says.

Din Sophea is a typical example of how the project boosted many existing small businesses. When he opened his small welding shop in Takeo province in 2010, his only option for electricity was a diesel-powered generator that ate up almost 40% of his income.

After the project brought electricity to his town, his power bill dropped from \$300 a month to \$85, freeing up money to expand his business. He doubled the size of his shop in 2015 and now employs four welders.

“With more income I can buy better food for my children and I hope to send them to good schools in the next few years,” he says.

## Successful cross-border cooperation

The project successfully supported the government's energy development goals to provide an affordable energy supply throughout Cambodia and demonstrated the economic benefits of interregional links.

Viet Nam earned export income from the sale of surplus electricity and Cambodia made exceptional economic returns on its investment.

Examining a patient in his well-lit office in Ta Phem Health Center, Keo says with a smile, "These days I am confident operating at night."

*This article was originally published in Together We Deliver, a publication highlighting successful ADB projects across Asia and the Pacific that demonstrated development impacts, best practice, and innovation.*

Source: [ADB.org](http://ADB.org) [3], 27 April 2017

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