

**Project Title: “To conserve and promote the culture and identity rights of IPs through documentation of the knowledge on traditions, heritage and culture in Cambodia”**

Total Participant: 957

Women: 455 , People with Disability: 13

Total Target Communities: Bunong, Tampuan, Kreung, Kavet, Lun, Brao, Jarai, Kachork, Souy, Chong, Por, Saoch , Kui

Provinces: Monduliri, Rattanakiri, Phnom Penh, Kampong Thom, Siem Reap, Kampong Speu, Preah Sihanouk, Koh Kong, Battambang

The project, titled "To Conserve and Promote the Culture and Identity Rights of IPs through Documentation of the Knowledge on Traditions, Heritage, and Culture in Cambodia," is a landmark 12-month initiative aimed at reversing the rapid loss of cultural identity among Cambodia's Indigenous communities. Recognizing that factors such as discrimination, land loss, and cultural assimilation have threatened traditional beliefs and languages, the project operates across 9 provinces to engage with 13 distinct Indigenous Peoples' groups. Its core mission is twofold: first, to revitalize the cultural identity and technical skills of Indigenous people through rigorous research and knowledge exchange; and second, to strengthen the institutional capacity of the Cambodia Indigenous Peoples Organization (CIPO) to ensure these conservation efforts are sustainable and professionally managed for years to come.

A primary strategy of the project involves the evidence-based documentation of traditional knowledge, specifically focusing on Indigenous architecture, Textile woven, and traditional tools and materials. This participatory research is complemented by a series of high-level validation and sharing workshops designed to eliminate negative social perceptions and promote the inherent value of Indigenous heritage. To provide a concrete roadmap for the future, the project includes a strategic exchange visit to the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, which serves as a model for the project's ultimate ambition: the establishment of Cambodia's first National Indigenous Museum. By combining this field research with the development of a new five-year strategic plan and enhanced board governance for CIPO, the initiative represents a historic turning point in the community-led effort to safeguard the vibrant and diverse cultural identities of Cambodia's Indigenous Peoples.



# APPROACH



## 1. Capacity Building and Visioning

The process begins by establishing a shared vision through education and international exchange. By providing specific training on the concept of Indigenous Museums in Asia and sharing case studies from exchange visits to Hanoi, the program helps local communities visualize the tangible benefits of cultural preservation. This stage is crucial for shifting the perspective from "collecting data" to "building a future," as it uses successful practices from other Indigenous groups to spark passion and a clear sense of purpose among the participants.



## 2. Ethical Engagement and Institutional Support

A foundational element of this approach is the strict adherence to Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) at every stage. To ensure clear communication, the team employs community facilitators who are literate in both Khmer and the specific Indigenous language of the group. Furthermore, the approach bridges the gap between grassroots efforts and government policy by inviting local authorities and Ministry representatives to join the missions. This collaborative environment ensures that the documentation process is legally recognized and that all stakeholders are supporting each other's goals.



## 3. Participatory Field Research and Group Specialization

The field research is conducted across 9 provinces and 13 indigenous groups, focusing on the specialized knowledge of elders and skilled community members. Participants are divided into thematic groups—such as textile weaving and traditional tools, or architectural design and ceremonial construction—to ensure deep technical accuracy. During these sessions, elders are encouraged to "reimagine" and name artifacts in their native tongue. If a written Indigenous script does not exist, the information is meticulously transcribed using the Khmer alphabet to ensure the phonetic integrity of the language is preserved.



#### **4. Digital Documentation and Community Verification**

Once the raw information is gathered from the field, it is digitized and entered into a computer system for permanent storage. However, the documentation is not considered final until it has been returned to the community for verification. This step allows the knowledge holders to review the digital records, correct any inaccuracies, and confirm that the data truly reflects their traditional knowledge. This ensures that the community maintains "ownership" over how their culture is represented and stored.



#### **5. Multi-Stakeholder Validation and Network Building**

The final phase involves a high-level validation workshop where the research results are presented to a broad audience, including provincial departments, Indigenous Peoples' Organizations (IPOs), and ministry officials. This forum serves as a platform for feedback and recommendations, ensuring the research meets professional and academic standards. More importantly, it builds a cohesive team and a network of partners who are committed to the ultimate goal: the establishment of a formal Indigenous Museum that serves as a permanent home for these documented traditions.

## Successful Case 01 : Safeguarding the Soul of the Sa'och People



The Sa'och Indigenous Group in Cambodia is at high risk of cultural loss, with only 52 families remaining on less than one hectare of land. Most of the younger generation don't speak the language, and only a few elders do. They live within Khmer communities and haven't actively preserved their traditional culture, which is evident as almost none of their traditional tools or materials are visible.

There's a clear risk that if the elders pass away, their traditional knowledge will be lost forever. To combat this, we initiated a mission to provide hope and encourage them to conserve their traditions. We emphasized the value and uniqueness of their culture and its importance for future generations.

Our continued support, including purchasing their projects even after the mission ended, has yielded encouraging results. I was deeply moved to see them begin making their traditional tools again. Specifically, they built a small model of their traditional house—a design previously only in their thoughts—which we can now display publicly. These steps suggest they are beginning to see and take pride in their ancestral heritage.



## Successful Case 02 : Youth-Led Documentation in the Kavet Community



The successful engagement of Phang Phanh, an Indigenous youth from the Kavet Group, highlights a significant and impressive shift toward cultural advocacy and community support. Mr. Phanh has become an active champion for his heritage, demonstrated by his proactive connection with our documentation team to provide detailed photographs and information on the construction of a traditional Kavet house, ensuring its unique architectural style is accurately recorded. Furthermore, he has leveraged his involvement to facilitate crucial economic support for his community by connecting local Indigenous women weavers with our organization, thereby establishing a vital market link to the city for their products. This behavioral change and deepened commitment to his culture represents a powerful story of successful Indigenous youth empowerment and cultural revitalization.

## Testimonial 01 : An Liyong's Newfound Passion



For An Liyong, the museum visit triggered a transformative shift in perspective. She gained a newfound appreciation for the inherent value of everyday objects, previously dismissed as commonplace. Witnessing how these artifacts were meticulously cared for, she realized their significance as reflections of Indigenous identity and history. This revelation has ignited a personal mission to collect, restore, and share these treasures with her community, aiming to instill a collective sense of responsibility for cultural preservation. She now understands the importance of these items and wishes to share them with her community. This experience served as a wake-up call, prompting her to actively participate in safeguarding Kreung cultural heritage for future generations, ensuring their traditions remain vibrant and relevant.

## Testimonial 02 : Restoring Kreung Identity Through Ancient Architecture



Kang Munny's visit to Vietnam's Museum of Ethnic Minorities sparked a transformative cultural vision. Witnessing meticulous preservation, he aims to build a traditional Kreung house, replicating ancient architecture, to house historical artifacts. This endeavor will symbolize their heritage, reigniting community pride and ownership. He also intends to revive traditional crafts, especially weaving, and establish a community art group, ensuring cultural continuity. He envisions his community as a vibrant cultural education hub, attracting visitors to learn about the Kreung way of life.

# SUPPORT FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS

## 1. Validated Cultural Significance and Self-Esteem



The documentation process served as a powerful tool for emotional and psychological healing. For many Indigenous women and girls, their daily traditions—such as weaving, traditional cooking, and seed preservation—had long been viewed as "low-status" or "commonplace" by the outside world. By bringing a professional documentation team to record their skills, the project provided formal validation of their expertise. Women expressed that seeing their knowledge treated as "heritage" rather than "chore" led to a significant increase in their pride and self-esteem. This newfound confidence has made them more willing to wear traditional attire in public and speak their mother tongue without shame, effectively reclaiming their cultural identity in the face of external discrimination.

## 2. Economic Opportunities through Traditional Crafts



The project successfully bridged the gap between cultural preservation and poverty reduction. By documenting the intricate patterns of Indigenous textiles and the specific materials used in traditional tools, the project created a "knowledge bank" that supports sustainable entrepreneurship. A key success mentioned in the report is the creation of market links; by connecting women weavers directly with urban markets and organizations, the project provided a path for them to earn a fair income from their traditional skills. This ensures that preserving heritage is not a financial burden, but a viable livelihood strategy that allows women to support their families while remaining within their communities.

## 3. Inclusion in Decision-Making and Community Voice



One of the most structural changes noted in the report is the shift in gender dynamics during community discussions. Of the 287 participants in the project, 126 were women, ensuring their perspectives were integrated into the research from the start. The validation workshops provided a platform where women's voices carried equal weight to men's in determining what aspects of their culture should be prioritized for the future museum. Because women are often the primary "knowledge holders" of oral traditions and weaving techniques, the community and local authorities have begun to recognize that cultural preservation cannot succeed without women's leadership. This has opened doors for women to participate more actively in broader community governance and advocacy.