

The Effectiveness and Sustainability of the Saemaul Undong's Participatory Approach in Rural Cambodia

HUN Bunra

The University of Cambodia, Phnom Penh, Cambodia

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the challenge of fostering sustainable rural development and effective local governance in Cambodia by evaluating the applicability and impact of the Saemaul Undong (SMU) leadership model, originally developed in South Korea. Specifically, it investigates how the SMU model enhances community participation and leadership effectiveness within the dynamic contexts of decentralization reforms and post-conflict reconstruction in rural Cambodia. A mixed-methods research design was employed. Data collection involved a combination of qualitative approaches (interviews, focus groups) and quantitative methods (structured questionnaires, statistical analysis) across 12 strategically selected SMU pilot villages in Kampong Speu, Tboung Khmum, and Takeo provinces, in addition to insights from the Cambodia-Korea Rural Development Center (CKRDC). Quantitative data was analyzed using SPSS, incorporating descriptive statistics, regression modeling, and path analysis. Findings reveal significant positive outcomes, with a high commitment to SMU activities reflected by 98.9% of respondents expressing continued involvement. Statistical analysis demonstrates strong positive and statistically significant correlations between SMU training and key development indicators: women's leadership ($r = .896$), community participation ($r = .862$), and income generation ($r = .799$). SMU principal training emerged as the most influential factor, followed by practical application and knowledge acquisition, in driving these improvements. The study highlights the model's capacity to reinforce local governance and decentralization efforts by developing capable and participatory leadership at the community level.

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Corresponding Author:

HUN Bunra

University of Cambodia – Techo Sen School of Government and International Relations

Email: hunbunraksp@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

This research critically examines the application and outcomes of the Saemaul Undong (New Community Movement) participatory approach in rural Cambodia. Originating in South Korea in the 1970s, the Saemaul Undong emphasized diligence, self-help, and cooperation to

transform rural communities. This research mainly focuses on developing a community-based rural development policy following the great success of Saemaul Undong (SMU) and mainstreaming capacity development at all levels from the central government to village communities by spreading SMU's three guiding principles of diligence, self-help, and cooperation.

Cambodia, a country striving for sustainable development, has implemented various decentralization reforms to enhance community governance. The decentralization process, aimed at delegating authority and resources from the central government to community levels, seeks to improve the efficiency and responsiveness of public services.

There are some positive responses from the community governments, especially regarding infrastructure and decentralization reform. There are many obstacles due to historic and social issues to explain the community leadership's roles in helping people bridge the gap between state and society.

This study will explain how the Saemaul Undong (SMU) model, a successful rural development initiative from South Korea, emphasizes self-help, diligence, and cooperation [1]. SMU model has officially come to Cambodia since December 2014. After attending the ASEAN-ROK Commemorative Summit in Busan, former Cambodian Prime Minister Samdech Hun Sen paid an official visit to the Republic of Korea at the invitation of Korean President Park Geun-Hye. It went to visit the Saemaul Undong Training Institute in Seoul. Former Prime Minister Samdech Hun Sen, noting that Saemaul Undong and the rural development projects of Cambodia shared many similarities, explained plans to apply Saemaul Undong to the Cambodian context by establishing a college on rural development to develop human resources in the agricultural sector as well as rural economic development [2].

Nevertheless, in Cambodian history, the Kingdom of Cambodia and South Korea established diplomatic relations in 1970, but Korea severed the relations in 1975 when the Khmer Rouge subsequently came to power. In the meantime, the two countries, Cambodia and South Korea, re-established their relations in 1997, and since then, the bilateral relations have intensively developed [3].

Since late 1998, Cambodia has fully obtained peace, national reconciliation, and development after almost three decades of civil war. This is one of the outstanding achievements of the Royal Government of Cambodia, under the leadership and effective strategy of Samdech Techo HUN Sen, to end the civil war in the country [4]. After numerous high-level exchanges between Cambodian and South Korean officials since 2007, the two nations solidified their relationship in 2009 by signing several key cooperation agreements. These agreements included significant grants and loans to bolster Cambodia's physical infrastructure, covering vital sectors like roads, wastewater treatment, energy, mining, and communications.

During a 2009 meeting with his Cambodian counterpart, then-President Lee Myung-bak of the Republic of Korea (ROK) affirmed his nation's commitment to share its socio-economic development expertise with Cambodia. This initiative was part of South Korea's broader strategic shift towards Asia. Furthermore, President Lee Myung-bak pledged Official Development Aids (ODA) to support Cambodia's progress in agriculture, medicine, industry, and education [5].

As a result of the discussions, the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) of the Republic of Korea and the Ministry of Rural Development of the Kingdom of Cambodia

have agreed to make a record on Self-Supporting Rural Development Project with Saemaul Undong (SMU)'s Participatory Approach on February 26, 2014 in Cambodia by the representative of the Parties [6]. After that, the Cambodia-Korea Rural Development Center (CKRDC) started its operations to give the Saemaul Training in 2017.

The project Saemaul Undong (SMU) complements the major policy of Cambodia: The Rectangular Strategy and SDP. Even now, the project plays a very important role in rural development, considering that rural areas remain laggards. Considerable numbers of poor farmers remain at the bottom of the pyramid, having been marginalized by subsistence farming, due to limited access to agricultural support, and limited market access, due to an undeveloped value chain [7]. In the wake of the situation in the rural areas, the project tried to build self-reliance of the community through the principles of SMU. The development model "Self-Supporting Rural Development Project Saemaul Undong (SMU) was initiated by the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) and the Cambodian Ministry of Rural Development in 30 selected villages from three provinces in Cambodia: 10 villages in Kampong Speu province, 10 villages in Tboung Khmum province, and 10 villages in Takeo province.

After four years of the project from 2014 to 2018, the result of implementing "Self-Supporting Rural Development Project with Saemaul Undong (SMU)'s Participatory Approach in Cambodia" has achieved significant accomplishments, where lessons can be drawn and serve as a model for rural community development. Since its operation, "Cambodia-Korea Rural Development Center", called "CKRDC", has organized several trainings and provided leadership skills. The selected participants from the 30 villages have attended training courses at CKRDC. This center, known as SMU center in Cambodia, was granted by the People of the Republic of Korea and it is a symbol of friendship and cooperation between the Kingdom of Cambodia and the Republic of Korea through the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) in international relations in terms of helping Cambodia develop the rural areas by using the "New Village Movement" or Saemaul Undong [8].

The Saemaul Undong (SMU–New Village Movement) was created by the Park Government in 1970 to lift the nation's villages from poverty and provide basic food crops for burgeoning urban populations [9]. The term "Saemaul" was coined by combining "Sae", which means "progressive renewal based on past experiences," and "Maul", which refers to "regional and social communities." Thus, Saemaul Undong represents a continuous effort towards community renewal and modernization for a better future [10].

The basic project in SMU involved improving living conditions, such as removing thatched houses and paving roads, which later developed into an income generation project [11]. Korean and foreign developmental economists have frequently referenced the success story of the SMU. It has compelled the Korea International Cooperation Agency and other international organizations, such as the UN, to devote substantial resources to applying SMU experience to other countries [12]. This part aims to derive a theory of the SMU's success by summarizing the new principles of economic development, which are the basic framework for analyzing the success factors of the SMU.

Economic discrimination models can be divided into two classes: competitive and collective. Competitive models study individual maximizing behavior that may include discrimination. In collective models, groups act collectively against each other [13]. Economic

discrimination has long been recognized as a cause of income inequality among families and of wage inequality among workers. Discrimination in the labor market has been a particular concern because labor earnings are by far the most important source of income people can obtain from their resources [14]. Discrimination in the labor market occurs when employers make decisions on wages and employment based on prejudices, such as race, gender, and religion. It can lead to wage variations for the same job and different employment rates [15].

The Saemaul Undong (SMU) movement offers crucial lessons for successful community-driven development (CDD). It highlights that fostering diligence, self-help, and cooperation within traditional societies, along with introducing male-female paired leadership, can drive significant social and economic transformation. Providing microfinance is key to empowering low-income communities, enabling them to leverage resources and boost incomes. Furthermore, the SMU demonstrates the power of revitalizing and modernizing traditional cultural values to propel socio-economic change. Critically, the movement underscores the need to avoid top-down, command-and-control government approaches and overly rigid quantitative monitoring, as these negate community empowerment. Instead, strong national political leadership committed to sustainable CDD is essential, coupled with careful screening of CDD leaders to prevent abuse of power. There is no standardized blueprint for CDD projects; successful initiatives must be flexible and tailored to local contexts to truly empower communities [16].

Under the Saemaul Undong initiative, village leaders transitioned from being skilled farmers to effectively running their communities like businesses. This expanded role demanded more than just advanced agricultural techniques and diligence; these individuals became the "CEOs" of their village companies. These Saemaul leaders spearheaded a comprehensive development approach. Their training extended beyond farming, encompassing essential social skills such as conflict management, effective meeting facilitation, and the ability to formulate robust community development strategies [17]. Saemaul Undong Training Institute was the primary agency responsible for educating Saemaul leaders and producing training materials. SMU began as a relatively conventional integrated community development program to improve the physical environment of villages, introduce new attitudes and skills, and increase incomes through small-scale self-help projects introduced by government agents and implemented through village cooperation [18].

It rapidly became a nationwide program for rural development that had spread to cities as a national symbol of the Korean way of government-guided participatory development [19]. The success of Saemaul Undong bears global significance as well. A conventional theory argues that it is common for the rural sector of a nation to become dependent on the urban sector in the development process [20].

The existing studies on the SMU have so far been listing and emphasizing many elements of the Korea's SMU as the success factors; such elements include effective political leadership, efficient administrative arrangements, high quality of the SMU leadership (including female leaders), traditional convention of cooperation in rural villages, ideological reform, Saemaul education, community participation, and community-driven development [21].

The Saemaul Undong (SMU) movement is globally recognized as a valuable development model, with many developing countries keenly observing its success. This "New Community Movement" is seen as a comprehensive approach that promotes inclusive growth by

providing practical tools for creating social and economic value directly benefiting people. SMU was fundamental to Korea's modernization, and there is a growing push to evolve it into a more multifaceted model. Combining SMU's principles with advanced agriculture, energy, and environmental technologies can address critical global challenges in health, education, gender equality, and human rights more comprehensively.

Rural Saemaul Undong was implemented with villages as its unit, led by a Saemaul leader and a female leader. In this regard, it can be inferred that the success of rural Saemaul Undong has hinged on the competence of the Saemaul leaders in the individual villages. Since the Saemaul leaders played a crucial role in the success of Saemaul, their education and training were of equal importance.

Saemaul Undong Development Model is one of the rural development models with the situational context of all parts related to the rural development policy, decentralization, and agricultural sector. In its "Saemaul Initiative Towards Inclusive and Sustainable New Communities Implementation Guidance," the UNDP draws on the SMU's experience as a case study for identifying proven approaches and policy options for inclusive and sustainable local development. Some of their rural development reports mention Saemaul Undong as a model for community-driven development [22]. The Saemaul Undong program is a success story due to its reliance on community participation, where villagers provided labor and resources alongside government support and funding for various development projects like infrastructure and education [23]. Saemaul Undong as a Mechanism for Social Inclusion [24]. The World Bank has also recognized the SMU as a model. For example, the World Bank's newsletter mentioned the program's performance-based approach, emphasizing the importance of linking local government with community-driven initiatives and developing training programs based on SMU principles, as highlighted in the newsletter [25].

The ever-changing nature of the Saemaul Undong's focus and goals makes it difficult to pin down a precise definition. Nevertheless, we can identify core features by concentrating on its rural initiatives from 1970 to 1979. At its heart, the Saemaul Undong was an integrated, community-driven program aimed at rural development. Like many government-led initiatives in developing nations, "Saemaul Undong" was simply the brand name given to this specific program by the South Korean government [26].

The sentence on the Saemaul Undong (SMU) Model aligns with various academic sources discussion the movement. However, the exploration of leadership has evolved from a singular leadership figure (Table 1) to the qualities and evolutionary principles involved in leadership formation [27]. Albert S King identifies nine evolutionary eras, with researchers in each era focusing on a specific theme of leadership, together with different approaches in developing a sustainable leadership theory [28].

A study by Park (2012) explains the SMU's impact on narrowing the development gap between urban and rural areas in South Korea by promoting opportunities and facilitating empowerment for the people [29]. Furthermore, Doucette and Muller (2016) provide a critical intervention into South Korea's efforts to promote the Saemaul Undong as a model of international development assistance, emphasizing its core principles and success [30].

Saemaul Undong (SMU) is known as Korea's community-based integrated rural development movement as the driving force behind Korea's rapid socio-economic development

and modernization. This model has succeeded in Korea's community development by drawing individuals' active, voluntary participation and collective decisions in developing their community. The Kingdom of Royal Cambodia proposed to the Republic of Korea (ROK) through the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) in the flagship form of Korea's rural development program, Saemaul Undong (SMU) was officially known in Cambodia in late February 2014 [31].

The SMU model combines both top-down and bottom-up approaches. The central government provides overall guidelines and directions, while community governments act as intermediaries to connect village voices with the central government. The SMU model emphasizes the active participation of rural villagers. Villagers contribute to their development goals through labor, cash, land, and materials. This participation is pivotal for successfully implementing community projects [32].

Due to its significance, in February 2014, the Korea International Cooperation Agency (KOICA) and the Cambodian Ministry of Rural Development agreed to sign Record of Discussions on 'Self-Supporting Rural Development Project with Saemaul Undong's Participatory Approach' project at the Ministry of Rural Development in Cambodia. It was piloted in 30 villages in the three provinces. The SMU project was implemented in 4 years from 2015 to 2018. The project's implementing agency is the Kangwon National University, Global Agro, and Yonsei University of South Korea consortium. The budget plan for SMU in Cambodia in 48 months was USD 8,950,000 and was used for three main project sites: (a) project site of Strategic Policy Consulting covers the whole Cambodia; (b) SMU's Training Center project site (Cambodia-Korea Rural Development Center-CKRDC); (c) SMU's 30 pilot villages [33].

Running from 2014 to 2018 under a 2014 grant, this five-year project implemented intensive Saemaul Undong (SMU) activities across three main areas: strategic policy consulting and master-planning, capacity building for government officials and villagers, and pilot projects in 30 villages. Key outputs included an SMU Master Plan, a feasibility study for establishing a training center (potentially a "Hun Sen Saemaul Undong University"), and the development of educational materials and training programs, alongside pilot initiatives focused on income generation, environmental improvement, and spiritual reform. While village chiefs are tasked with overall management, their leadership roles have fewer direct responsibilities, as they cannot resolve issues under the Commune Council's authority without explicit delegation. To maintain communication, the village chief, vice-chief, and members must meet monthly and engage with the community [34].

For the project of "Self-Supporting Rural Development Project with Saemaul Undong (SMU)'s Participatory Approach in Cambodia" that is implemented by the Ministry of Rural Development under the support of KOICA, leadership and skills in Rural Development are important [35]. How to lead people is what the government defined Saemaul leaders as active workers who would play a crucial role, including triggering, protecting, and maintaining meaningful changes for the community, and gave systematic and continuous support for their development [36].

2. METHODS

This study investigates the suitability and impact of South Korea's Saemaul Undong (SMU) leadership model for village-level leadership in rural Cambodia, specifically within Cambodia's ongoing decentralization reforms. Using a mixed-methods approach, the researchers employed an input-output framework to analyze how community leadership emerges from development processes influenced by various factors (geopolitical, educational, economic, and leadership itself).

Data was gathered from 12 of 30 SMU pilot villages across Kampong Speu, Takeo, and Tboung Khmum provinces and the Cambodia-Korea Rural Development Center (CKRDC). The study involved 161 participants, including village leaders, general villagers, and government officials. To facilitate comparative analysis, the selected villages were categorized into "excellent," "very good," and "good" performance tiers based on KOICA's 2018 evaluation.

The researchers used quota and cluster sampling to ensure a representative sample across socio-economic groups and administrative regions. Data collection combined primary methods (structured, focused, and group interviews) with secondary sources (policy documents, reports) while strictly adhering to ethical guidelines like informed consent and confidentiality. Statistical analysis, including descriptive statistics, regression modeling, and path analysis using SPSS, revealed a significant finding: training in SMU principles positively influenced rural development outcomes, and the quality of community leadership mediated this effect.

The study concludes that these findings underscore the relevance of the SMU leadership model for rural development in Cambodia and suggest its potential for broader adaptation. Analysis was conducted using SPSS software, incorporating descriptive statistics, regression modeling, and path analysis. The study found that training in SMU principles significantly influenced rural development outcomes, mediated by the quality of community leadership. These findings support the model's relevance to Cambodia's rural development and potential for broader adaptation.

3. RESULTS

3.1 People's participation

The research highlights community participation as a key response to the research question, with community leadership efficacy at Cambodia's village/commune level as the primary dependent variable. Data analysis from 30 SMU villages shows a significant increase in participation through the Saemaul Undong (SMU) model. Labor contributions rose from 21.9% at baseline to 63.5%, and monetary contributions reached 90.1%. Around 94.2% of community members participated in road construction within villages, 62% in community hall or pagoda repairs, and 48.6% in main road works. Interviews reveal that 98.9% of respondents participate in village activities and are interested in continuing the project, while 87% are actively engaged. Participation focuses on infrastructure development such as roads, temples, and irrigation systems, with temple repair highlighting religion as a community unifier. The SMU model emphasizes collective action and self-reliance. Women's participation has notably increased, with 75% showing improved engagement in social services, especially in sanitation, hygiene, and environmental activities. However, men remain more active overall. Women's participation

spans development (77.4%), leadership (27.4%), general social activities (7.1%), and full involvement in all activities (10.7%).

3.2 Development awareness

The study found a marginal overall improvement in community awareness of development effectiveness across all areas, with notable positive perceptions of the project's efficiency and effectiveness. The newly measured perception of social capital scored 4.67, exceeding the overall average of 4.60. While awareness of effectiveness, efficiency, and gender equality increased, there were no statistically significant changes regarding sustainability and impact. Causal analysis was conducted to understand these awareness changes, and its insights will inform post-project management for improved outcomes. Among the provinces, Takeo showed the most positive results, particularly in gender equality, while Kampong Speu had the lowest overall scores and even a decline in perceived impact. Tboung Khmum showed minimal change over the last two project years. Despite some negative item-specific shifts, none were statistically significant. A comparative study between Kampong Speu and Takeo is recommended, especially concerning the contrasting results on impact awareness.

The perception of development effectiveness in Kampong Speu increased from 4.28 to 3.3 (a 0.24-point rise), showing overall positive growth across evaluation items. However, a negative result was observed in the "impact" category, suggesting a need for causal analysis related to project transparency and beneficiary selection. Despite improvement, Kampong Speu still ranks lower in awareness than the other two provinces. In Takeo, the effectiveness perception rose from 4.49 to 4.71 (a 0.22-point increase). All indicators showed slight improvement, with gender equality perception improving the most. Residents showed strong recognition of project impacts and changes, particularly in effectiveness and efficiency, surpassing the other provinces. Tboung Khmum saw a modest rise in development awareness by only 0.08 points, with individual item scores changing marginally (0.02–0.16 points). Perception of project sustainability remained nearly unchanged (4.41 to 4.39). A deeper analysis is needed to strengthen future project management. Community participation in development activities was notable: Labor contribution: 36%, Cash contributions: 31%, In-kind contributions: 31% Other: 2% Takeo had the highest labor contribution (9/10 villages), while Tboung Khmum led in-kind support.

3.3 Development effectiveness

Most people, including village chiefs and commune councilors, seemed unaware of the term SMU, which is very common in many projects implemented in Cambodia. In contrast, communities remember their practices and activities rather than the term SMU. "SMU" is not a theory or concept that people need to remember, but the villagers remembered their actions and practices in the project well. The people in these provinces believe that people with low incomes are prioritized when the project is implemented in the villages, while villagers' needs are not well reflected in the project selection. Participants also believe that Korean experts' activities were supportive, while the MRD-PDRD SMU officials' activities helped implement them in the villages.

3.4 Achievement of planned targets

The project achieved high success rates in key areas such as income generation, community activities, and spiritual development. Participant perceptions aligned with improved ID poor classifications—ID Poor 1 decreased from 10.3% to 5.4%, although ID Poor 2 slightly increased. A significant portion of participants (64.3%) now consider themselves middle-income earners, and 21% report being high-income. Despite progress, some households still experience food shortages. Agricultural income has grown, and increased spending on food and education indicates rising living standards. Infrastructure needs, particularly sanitation, remain a concern in densely populated villages. Overall, the project was effectively implemented across targeted provinces, benefiting 30 villages with timely activities and appropriate training delivered by CKRDC.

The project's master plan introduced model villages and SMU pilot projects based on four strategies: bottom-up government-led approach, comprehensive scope, strong village leadership, and inter-village competition. Of the 30 model villages, 13 were recognized for outstanding performance—five rated “Excellent” and eight “Very Good.” Monitoring and evaluation confirmed improvements in quality of life using Human Development Index (HDI) comparisons. The project successfully fostered a Self-Reliant Village Model, with measurable outputs including increased rural income, enhanced living conditions, stronger capacity, and institutionalization of SMU.

3.5 Living environment improvement

The community has shown strong interest in continuing the Saemaul Undong (SMU) model practices even after the project concludes. A key factor in the project's sustainability is the shift in community mindset toward self-reliance and improved behavior. To enhance income generation, there is a need to develop cottage industries and strengthen farmer cooperatives by linking them to the value chain.

Significant household-level changes include adopting improved farming and livestock practices, better access to clean water and irrigation, increased income, enhanced health and sanitation (e.g., toilet installations), and upgraded infrastructure such as roads with proper drainage. Social changes were also observed, including reduced alcohol consumption, increased savings, self-help behaviors, community engagement, and strengthened solidarity. Sharing SMU lessons with other institutions like the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) is recommended to gain broader support and impact.

3.6 Trust in leaders' capacity

The awareness and perception of the interviewees about the SMU project were found to be higher. The level of trust in village leaders' capacity and the perception of the women's leadership roles were also higher. The research study recognized that many community leaders in the SMU target villages have confidence in their capacity and can work with minimum support from outside. The study shows an increase in the community members' perception of the capability of their village leaders. The number of interviewees who believe that the capability of their village leaders is high has increased to 70.2 percent (6.5 % higher than the baseline, which is 63.7 %). 50% of the interviewees believe village leaders could work independently with little support. Only 38 % of interviewees believe that the village leaders have limited capacity.

3.7 Perception of women's roles in villages

Based on research results, 95.2 % of the interviewees support women taking leadership roles in the village, and 3.6 % undecided. The percentage is almost the same as the baseline survey. The baseline survey also indicates that 95.6 % of the community members support women taking active leadership roles. 1.7% do not support. There is a higher number of women who participated in SMU activities. The awareness and perception of the respondents about the SMU project were observed to be high.

3.8 Result of Saemaul Undong training

Following the Korean training, CKRDC implemented 42 training sessions under the Self-Supporting Rural Development Project with SMU's Participatory Approach, training 866 participants, including government officials, community leaders, and villagers from provinces such as Tboung Khmum, Kampong Speu, and Takeo.

A survey of 161 trainees revealed:

- 62.87% acknowledged CKRDC's role in human resource development through leadership and agricultural skills.
- 78.20% reported mindset changes; 65.46% had implemented action plans (e.g., farming, small businesses).
- 84.74% were satisfied with the training, noting practical benefits in daily life and increased income.
- Positive behavioral changes included: early rising, exercising, quitting smoking/drinking, and environmental cleanliness.
- Trainees valued women's participation and embraced the SMU spirit.

The training program incorporated:

- Daily schedules from 5:30 AM to 10:00 PM combining lectures, fieldwork, and personal development.
- A curriculum structure: 25% Mindset Change, 25% Leadership Development, and 50% Rural Development, covering subjects like agriculture techniques, food processing, gender empowerment, and income generation.
- Educational outcomes improved significantly, with test scores rising from 58.19 to 90.15 points.

Since the project's handover in 2018, CKRDC has conducted 67 training courses (48 short, 18 medium) for 1,654 trainees (562 women) across 15 provinces, expanding its impact beyond the original three target provinces. CKRDC continues to blend theoretical education with hands-on practice to ensure sustainable livelihood improvements and broader rural development in Cambodia.

3.9 Result of Correlation Analysis and Regressions

The study tested alternative and null hypotheses to address the core research question through correlation analysis using data from 12 villages. It examined the relationships among four key variables: SMU Principle Training, Income Generation, Women's Leadership, and Community Participation. The independent variables were Knowledge Gain, SMU Principle Training, and SMU Application, with Community Participation as the dependent variable.

Results revealed strong positive and statistically significant correlations:

- SMU Principle Training and Income Generation ($r = 0.799$, $p = 0.000$),
- SMU Principle Training and Women’s Leadership ($r = 0.896$),
- SMU Principle Training and Community Participation ($r = 0.862$).

All variables were positively correlated, with the strongest link between SMU Principle Training and Women’s Leadership, suggesting that enhanced training is closely associated with increased female leadership in the community (See Table 1).

Table1. Correlation Analysis

		SMU Principle Training	Income Generation	Women Leadership	Community Participation
SMU Principle Training	Pearson Correlation	1	.799**	.896**	.862**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000
	N	161	161	161	161
Income Generation	Pearson Correlation	.799**	1	.786**	.858**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000
	N	161	161	161	161
Women Leadership	Pearson Correlation	.896**	.786**	1	.849**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000
	N	161	161	161	161
Community Participation	Pearson Correlation	.862**	.858**	.849**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	
	N	161	161	161	161

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level. The p-values (labeled "Sig. (2-tailed)") test the null hypothesis that the correlation is zero (no correlation). A p-value less than 0.05 (close to 0) generally indicates that the correlation is statistically significant. The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed), meaning there is less than a 1% chance that this correlation is due to random chance. All the variables in the table are positively correlated, and these correlations are statistically significant. Similarly, strong relationships are observed among all other variables, suggesting they are likely interconnected in the study context.

The correlation analysis of Saemaul Undong principle training and the village leaders’ efficacy with 161 respondents was highly positive and statistically significant ($r=.799$, $r=.896$, $r=.862$, $p<.001$). This shows that an increase in Saemaul Undong Training would significantly increase leaders’ efficacy in villages because the alternative hypothesis ($H1_a$) was supported, and the p-values test the null hypothesis ($H1_0$) that the correlation is no correlation.

Another correlation analysis between four variables: Community Participation, SMU Application, SMU Principle Training, Knowledge gain, with 161 respondents, was found to be highly positive and statistically significant: ($r=.865$, $r=.862$, $r=.856$, Sig ($p<.001$)) (Table 2).

All correlations in the table have a p-value of 0.000, which means they are statistically significant. Community Participation is strongly correlated with all other variables, indicating that as any of these variables increase, Community Participation also tends to increase.

All variables are positively correlated, and these correlations are statistically significant. Community Participation is strongly correlated with all other variables, indicating that (SMU Application, SMU Principle Training, and Knowledge Gain) increase; Community Participation also tends to increase. Therefore, there are strong correlations among the other variables,

suggesting that these variables are related and likely influence each other.

Table2. Pearson Correlation

		Community Participation	SMU Application	SMU Principle Training	Knowledge Gain
Pearson Correlation	Community Participation	1.000	.865	.862	.856
	SMU Application	.865	1.000	.798	.836
	SMU Principle Training	.862	.798	1.000	.815
	Knowledge Gain	.856	.836	.815	1.000
Sig. (1-tailed)	Community Participation	.	.000	.000	.000
	SMU Application	.000	.	.000	.000
	SMU Principle Training	.000	.000	.	.000
	Knowledge Gain	.000	.000	.000	.
N	Community Participation	161	161	161	161
	SMU Application	161	161	161	161
	SMU Principle Training	161	161	161	161
	Knowledge Gain	161	161	161	161

The research also found that the trainees from SMU center (CKRDC) continue to practice the skills they have learned to change their mindset and take the knowledge they gained to reach out to the other villagers in the community. SMU Center (CKRDC) is a big part of increasing people's income in the project by utilizing any knowledge trainees have learned. The trainees, as the village leaders, can lead the community well. People in the target province's community pay attention to their community development with confidence, transparency, and love. The target provinces with SMU principles were established by performing specific roles and activities associated with the legitimacy of decentralization in Cambodia. The overall increase in awareness of development effectiveness of community residents indicates that the effect of community-driven sustainable community development has improved. The acceptance of the Saemaul Undong Development Model can be applied.

4. Discussion

This study rigorously confirms that the Saemaul Undong (SMU) leadership model significantly enhances community leadership efficacy, broadens community participation, and boosts income generation in Cambodia's rural areas, operating effectively within ongoing decentralization reforms. The research successfully achieved its objective of examining the applicability of the SMU leadership model, demonstrating that training in SMU principles strongly influences rural development outcomes, with the quality of community leadership acting as a crucial mediator. The study of Jwa [12] also supports this research. Moreover, [30]'s study addresses "responsible leadership" in the context of SMU's success in reducing poverty and improving socio-economic conditions, emphasizing the importance of ethical leadership alongside the movement's principles. Interestingly, LWD [32] also examined Cambodia's rural development project based on the SMU concept, explicitly considering the role of women. Their findings about the pilot project's positive effects on resident ownership and the high relevance,

efficiency, effectiveness, impact, and sustainability scores align with your overall positive assessment. In addition, LWD [32] explored how Korea "exports" the SMU model and the challenges and adaptations involved. While acknowledging successes, it often touches on the nuances of transferring a context-specific model, which can be helpful when discussing your findings' sustainability and adaptation elements. It highlights *how* of knowledge sharing is.

Specifically, the findings underscore the transformative power of SMU's emphasis on diligence, self-help, and cooperation, leading to substantial increases in community labor and monetary contributions. The remarkable rise in women's participation and leadership roles, strongly correlated with SMU training ($r = 0.896$), highlights the model's potential for fostering gender-inclusive development. Furthermore, the tangible improvements in household income and the shift towards self-reliant village models validate the practical effectiveness of the approach.

These results carry significant policy implications for rural development strategies in Cambodia and similar post-conflict or developing contexts. They suggest that targeted capacity-building, particularly in participatory and self-reliant leadership, is not merely a supplementary activity but a fundamental driver for achieving sustainable community development and empowering local governance structures. The demonstrated success of the SMU model in cultivating trust in leaders, fostering a "can-do" mindset, and enabling communities to drive their progress provides a robust framework. Future rural policy initiatives, especially those embedded within decentralization efforts, may benefit profoundly from integrating and scaling SMU principles as a proven mechanism for inclusive, self-sustaining, and community-driven governance.

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Strong government involvement is essential to launch rural development innovations in poor communities successfully. The government must provide initial support through political will, leadership, and clear administration. It should also encourage active community participation by revitalizing or replacing inactive Village Development Committee (VDC) members and ensuring each member has defined roles aligned with community needs. A key barrier to rural progress is villagers' pessimism about their potential. To overcome this, projects should focus on delivering public goods that benefit all and promote community-driven models like the Saemaul Undong (SMU), expanding their application beyond rural development.

The Ministry of Rural Development (MRD) should build the capacity of VDCs by training members in data usage for village planning. CKRDC should carefully select trainees based on assessments and compare results with non-trainees to measure impact. Poor rural households struggle to access markets and compete in modern value chains. Thus, income-generation projects should target areas with broad benefits and focus on collective value-chain participation to enhance bargaining power. Capacity development should strengthen institutional arrangements, leadership, knowledge, and accountability. Project management is hindered by a lack of categorization, making it hard to measure outcomes. Lessons from Korea's SMU project reveal the limitations of purely community-led approaches. In Cambodia, SMU implementation must integrate market-driven elements to ensure sustainability and address local weaknesses effectively.

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