

Supporting Smiling Gecko's Building Futures programme to advance vocational education for youth in rural Cambodia

Grantee: Verein Smiling Gecko

Location: Cambodia, Asia

Grant Cycle: 2026-2028

Type of Grant: three-year program support, Human Welfare & Rights

Website: smilinggecko.ch

Smiling Gecko is a non-profit organisation founded in 2012 by renowned Swiss photographer Hannes Schmid to support rural communities in Cambodia in building sustainable pathways out of poverty. Its approach combines education, vocational training, sustainable agriculture, and employment opportunities within a holistic model of rural development designed to strengthen livelihoods and enable individuals and communities to shape their futures with greater dignity and independence.

At the centre of Smiling Gecko's work is its 150-hectare campus in Kampong Chhnang Province, 60km from Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh. Opened in 2014, the campus has since provided education, vocational training, and professional development opportunities to hundreds of young people from vulnerable backgrounds, helping them acquire practical skills and improve their prospects for employment and economic independence. Building on this experience, the campus continues to serve as the organisation's educational and operational hub, connecting accredited, practice-oriented training with sectors of the local economy where skilled workers are in demand such as hospitality, sustainable agriculture, carpentry, metalwork, MEP (mechanical, electrical, plumbing), butchery, and bakery.

Despite Cambodia's strong economic growth, significant disparities persist between urban and rural areas. In Kampong Chhnang Province, one of the country's poorest regions, limited access to quality education and vocational training restricts

employment opportunities, while shortages of skilled labour constrain local economic development. Many young people consequently enter the labour market without recognised qualifications or market-relevant skills, increasing their vulnerability to unemployment, underemployment, and migration in search of work, sometimes under insecure or exploitative conditions.

With the support of the Nando and Elsa Peretti Foundation (NaEPF), Smiling Gecko will expand its vocational education activities from 2026 through the end of 2028, providing young people and adults aged 16 to 30 with access to practical training and pathways to employment. The programme primarily targets vulnerable rural communities within a 30-kilometre radius of the Smiling Gecko Campus and will also provide training opportunities for landmine survivors referred as candidates by Mine Ex.

Inspired by the Swiss dual education system, the programme combines classroom instruction with hands-on training in fields including hospitality, sustainable agriculture, carpentry, and traditional crafts, complemented by literacy and English-language courses. Designed for school graduates, early school leavers, and adults without formal qualifications, the Skills Hub provides flexible pathways adapted to different educational backgrounds. Alongside technical training, participants receive psychosocial support and develop broader personal and professional skills intended to foster resilience, self-confidence, and



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greater autonomy.

With NaEPF's support, the programme aims to train approximately 50 to 100 young people and young adults each year, equipping them with recognised qualifications and skills relevant to local employment opportunities. Paid training is also intended to reduce the financial pressure on participating households, allowing trainees to pursue their education without having to rely exclusively on low-skilled employment to support their families.

By the end of 2028, Smiling Gecko aims to establish the Skills Hub as a certified and scalable vocational training model, capable of expanding access to skills development and strengthening connections between education and employment. By responding simultaneously to the needs of rural youth and local labour markets, the initiative seeks to improve access to dignified livelihoods, strengthen household economic resilience, and contribute to more inclusive and sustainable development in rural Cambodia.

