



INFOFISH speaks to.....

MARY LEP

Founder and Managing Director of UNICA Enterprise (Cambodia)

Q: Ms Lep, could you please start by providing some background on UNICA Enterprise?

A: I started the business to help women's fish processing groups in Pursat and Siem Reap provinces. Over the years, my company, UNICA, has grown a lot. We now supply our quality products to local markets and supermarkets, and even pilot export to international markets. The main groups who benefit from UNICA are fish suppliers and processors. We support them to bring their products to formal markets under the UNICA brand. Our partners include the Fisheries Administration of Cambodia (FiA); the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF); development projects like UNIDO CAPFISH-Capture; national universities and other stakeholders.

What does UNICA produce and how do you obtain the raw materials for processing? Where are the end-products marketed and who are the main consumers?

UNICA produces many products like dried fish, fish paste, fish fillets, and smoked fish. We get our raw materials from small-scale fishers around Tonle Sap Lake and other fishing communities in Cambodia. These fishers give us fresh fish and semi-processed fishery products, which we turn into our quality products. Our sales volume has increased around 20% to 25% every year.

Our products are marketed both locally and internationally. In Cambodia, you can find our products in local markets, supermarkets, and stores like Greenat Stores, Makro market and Lucky Supermarket. We are also talking to the AEON retail group and looking into export markets in New Zealand. Our main consumers are mid- to high-income people who like convenience and quality. Our products are perfect for busy households that want healthy and easy-to-make and ready-to-eat food.

Would it be correct to say that 2021 marked a turning point for UNICA when it was chosen as one of the beneficiaries of the European Union-funded CAPFISH-Capture project¹ which is implemented by the Fisheries Administration of Cambodia (FiA) and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)? What did you hope to achieve when you applied for project support?

Yes, it would be correct to say that 2021 marked a turning point for UNICA when it was chosen as one of the beneficiaries of the CAPFISH-Capture project, implemented by the FiA and UNIDO. When I applied for project support, my

primary goal was to enhance UNICA's business operations, improve food safety standards, and expand our market reach. The support from CAPFISH-Capture has been instrumental in achieving these objectives, allowing us to upgrade our equipment, receive technical training, and achieve certifications that have significantly boosted our competitiveness and market access.

Could you elaborate on how taking part in the project has helped to strengthen UNICA's production and market activities throughout the value chain?

Participating in the CAPFISH-Capture project has significantly strengthened UNICA's production and market activities throughout the value chain. The project has helped us implement an Internal Control System (ICS) and achieve the Cambodia Quality Seal (CQS) certification, ensuring that our products meet high food safety standards; and has also provided fish processing equipment to boost productivity. This has increased our sales by 20% and expanded our markets to include six new buyers. We have increased jobs at UNICA by 50%, and all the new positions are held by women.

Additionally, the project has supported the development and implementation of an innovative value chain model, which has significantly strengthened cooperation with our value chain partners. This collaboration has enabled us to enhance their facilities and product quality to meet market requirements. The project has also facilitated comprehensive capacity development in business, technical, and food safety aspects, ensuring that our value chain partners are well-equipped to thrive in competitive markets.

Finally, the project along with national universities, has supported the development of new products, such as fish jerky and smoked fish, which have been well-received by consumers. It has also created jobs for women and communities involved in fish processing, contributing to economic growth and gender equality.

Overall, the CAPFISH-Capture project has been instrumental in enhancing UNICA's competitiveness and market access, while also promoting sustainable and inclusive growth in the fisheries sector.



Photo credit: UNIDO Cambodia

UNICA products arising from the UNIDO CAPFISH-Culture project

¹ CAPFISH-Cambodia@unido.org



Photo credit: Phnom Penh Post

Fish jerky and smoked fish are some of the more recent additions to UNICA's product line.

Specific to markets, we understand that UNICA is pilot-testing its products in New Zealand which have significant Asian communities. How successful have these pilot initiatives been and what are your future plans?

The pilot export initiative in New Zealand has been quite successful. The feedback from consumers in these markets has been positive, and we have seen a growing interest in our ready-to-eat fishery products. This success has encouraged us to continue exploring these markets and expanding our presence.

For the future, we plan to pursue HACCP certification to further enhance our food safety standards and build consumer trust. Additionally, we aim to participate in trade shows and international food expos to showcase our products and attract more customers. These efforts will help us strengthen our market position and reach a wider audience.

And moving on to bigger international markets, in a Phnom Penh Post news report titled Challenges, progress in exporting Cambodia's fishery products to the EU dated 16 July 2024², it was stated that "Despite the sector's potential for economic growth, the industry is hindered by inefficient production practices, lack of coordination and inadequate resources, preventing it from meeting the stringent EU standards required for export." In your capacity as a small-scale processor, how do you think the national authorities and external organisations such as UNIDO could further support UNICA and other organisations to access international markets?

To help small-scale processors like UNICA access international markets, national authorities and organisations like the EU and UNIDO can further:

- Provide technical training to improve production practices and meet international standards;
- Enhance coordination among stakeholders to streamline processes;
- Facilitate investments in infrastructure upgrades and provide financial support for modernising facilities and improving equipment;
- Promote partnerships between small-scale processors and larger enterprises;
- Continue policy reforms to create a more enabling environment for Cambodian agrifood businesses; and
- Adopt a digital traceability system to help consumers and supply chain partners identify product sources.

² <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/business/challenges-progress-in-exporting-cambodia-s-fishery-products-to-the-eu>

These steps would help improve production efficiency, ensure quality, and expand market reach for small-scale processors.



Gender equality and equity are highlighted in the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries (SSF Guidelines) as being of crucial importance. In your personal experience from years in the field, in which areas have you seen the biggest progress for small-scale women in Cambodian fisheries? What are the key factors holding women back and could you suggest ways to address the challenges?

In my experience, the most significant progress for small-scale women in Cambodian fisheries has been in empowering women in decision-making roles, along with increased access to markets and improved business operations, thanks to initiatives like the CAPFISH-Capture project. Nevertheless, women continue to face challenges such as home-related tasks and time constraints, as well as continued limited access to resources. To overcome these barriers, we need tailored capacity-building programs, stronger community support, policies that actively promote gender equality, and increased awareness and advocacy efforts to foster a more inclusive and equitable environment. UNICA can also contribute by sharing its expertise with communities and small-scale fishers.

And on a personal note, as you look back at UNICA's journey since its founding in 2014, would you have done things differently in light of the lessons learned through the years? What do you hope to achieve in the next five years?

Reflecting on UNICA's journey since 2014, we've made significant progress, especially in empowering women and expanding our market reach. While I wouldn't change our core mission, I would have prioritised the promotion of ready-to-eat products, building partnerships with value chain partners and securing resources earlier. In the next five years I aim to achieve HACCP certification, expand into international markets, and continue supporting small-scale producers, particularly women-led entities, through capacity-building initiatives and cooperation.



Photo credit: UNICA