



Program in Focus
GREATER MEKONG

FISH, FORESTS AND FINANCE

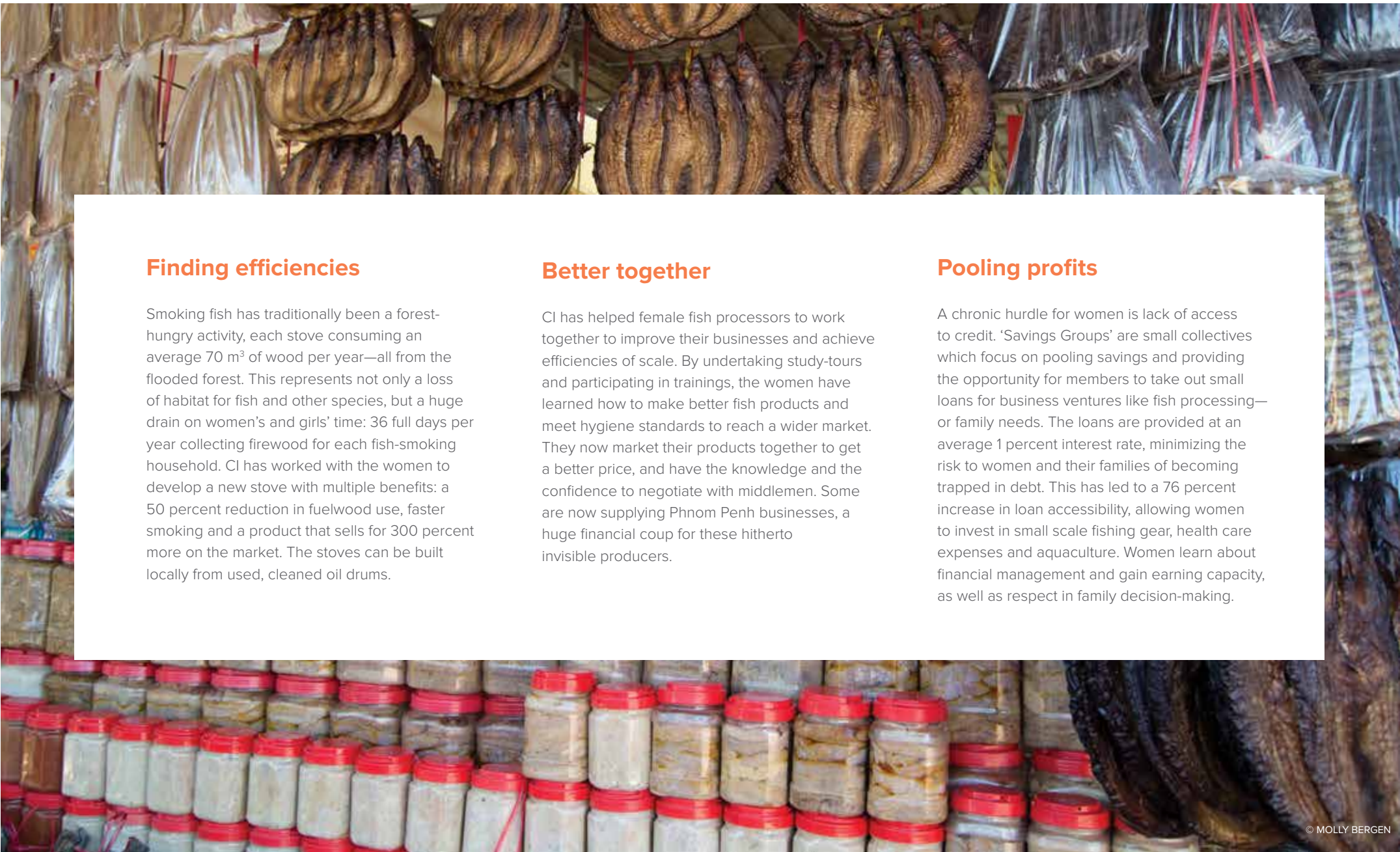
For the floating communities on Cambodia's Tonle Sap Lake, fish is life. While catching fish is largely a male domain, women work hard to add value to the fish by 'processing' them—usually smoking them on skewers or making Cambodia's favorite fish paste, *prahok*, before they are sent to market. For most women, this is the only opportunity they have to earn critical income for their families.

Yet processing techniques have been basic and hygiene standards low. Coupled with a limited understanding of business, this has meant that women's efforts see very low financial return. Conservation International (CI) initiated discussions with the women in three villages on the Lake's western edge in 2011. The result has been an ongoing relationship that is helping women entrepreneurs to establish successful small businesses, work together in collectives, and effectively manage their new incomes for the benefit of their families.

Collaborating with women forms a part of CI's broader work on the Lake, assisting communities to secure their livelihoods through protecting their precious natural resource base: the Lake's spectacular flooded forest, and the rich array of fish to which it is home.



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Finding efficiencies

Smoking fish has traditionally been a forest-hungry activity, each stove consuming an average 70 m³ of wood per year—all from the flooded forest. This represents not only a loss of habitat for fish and other species, but a huge drain on women's and girls' time: 36 full days per year collecting firewood for each fish-smoking household. CI has worked with the women to develop a new stove with multiple benefits: a 50 percent reduction in fuelwood use, faster smoking and a product that sells for 300 percent more on the market. The stoves can be built locally from used, cleaned oil drums.

Better together

CI has helped female fish processors to work together to improve their businesses and achieve efficiencies of scale. By undertaking study-tours and participating in trainings, the women have learned how to make better fish products and meet hygiene standards to reach a wider market. They now market their products together to get a better price, and have the knowledge and the confidence to negotiate with middlemen. Some are now supplying Phnom Penh businesses, a huge financial coup for these hitherto invisible producers.

Pooling profits

A chronic hurdle for women is lack of access to credit. 'Savings Groups' are small collectives which focus on pooling savings and providing the opportunity for members to take out small loans for business ventures like fish processing—or family needs. The loans are provided at an average 1 percent interest rate, minimizing the risk to women and their families of becoming trapped in debt. This has led to a 76 percent increase in loan accessibility, allowing women to invest in small scale fishing gear, health care expenses and aquaculture. Women learn about financial management and gain earning capacity, as well as respect in family decision-making.