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MJP មុលនីពិ ម៉ាដក្យូលីប៊ីត
Maddox Jolie-Pitt Foundation

SOPHY AND THE VEGETABLE PATCH



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MJP is committed to environmental security, creating peace and stability in all communities by planning and implementing interventions that prevent negative environmental changes. Working with impoverished rural villagers and local governments to alleviate food insecurities and increase access to basic primary healthcare and education, we're implementing projects that build healthy and vibrant communities.

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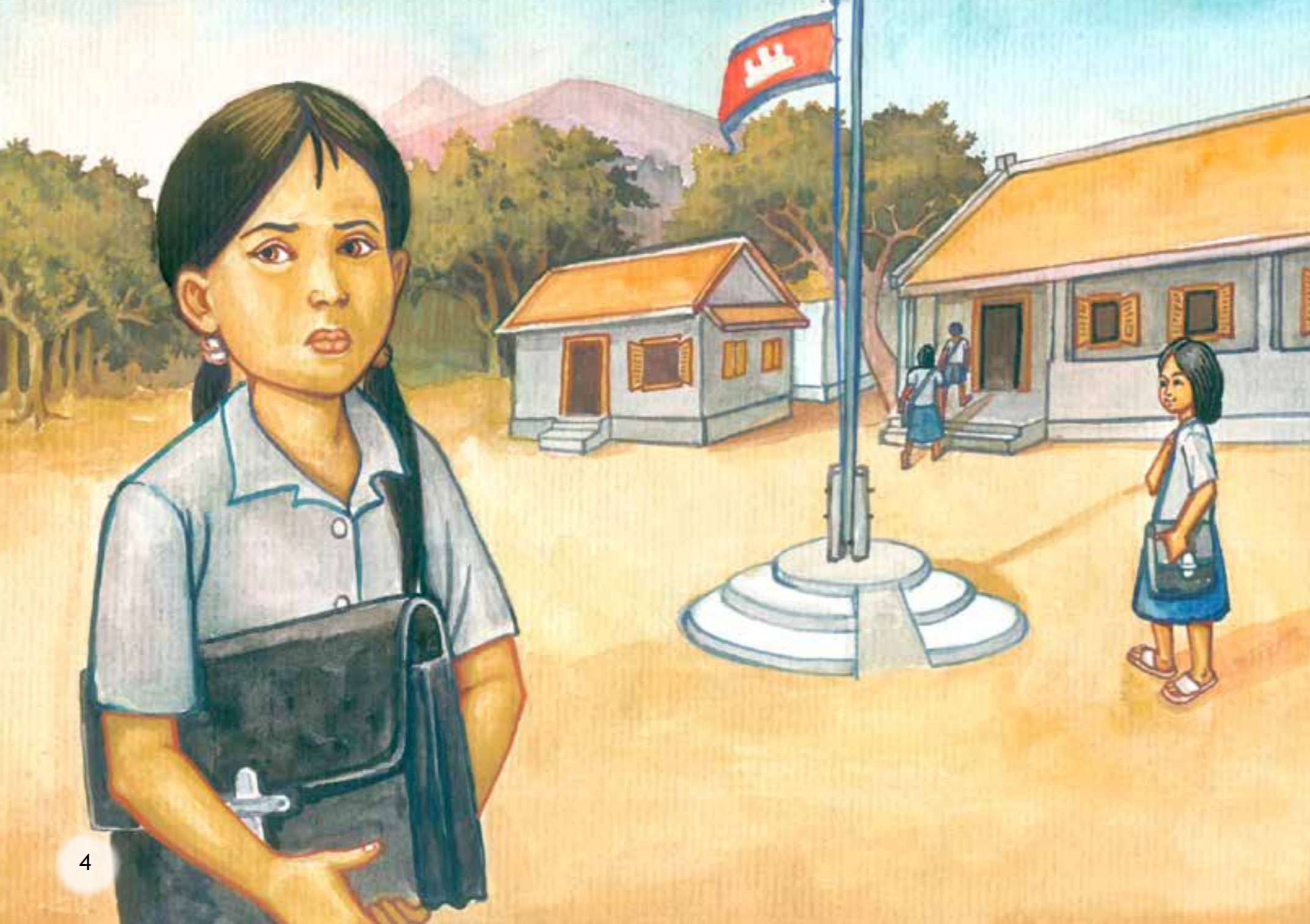
Sophy and the vegetable patch

2012



It's another hot and humid day in the rural villages of Samlout. It's monsoon time, when clouds roll across the sky and bring their wonderful gifts, the rains. The villagers are anxiously waiting for the rains to water their crops, especially since the early rains that usually come at the beginning of the year never arrived.





It's Monday morning and Thida is eagerly waiting to meet her best friend Sophy in the school playground to swap stories about their weekend. School's about to start and Sophy is nowhere to be seen. Thida, a little worried, decides to enter the classroom without Sophy.



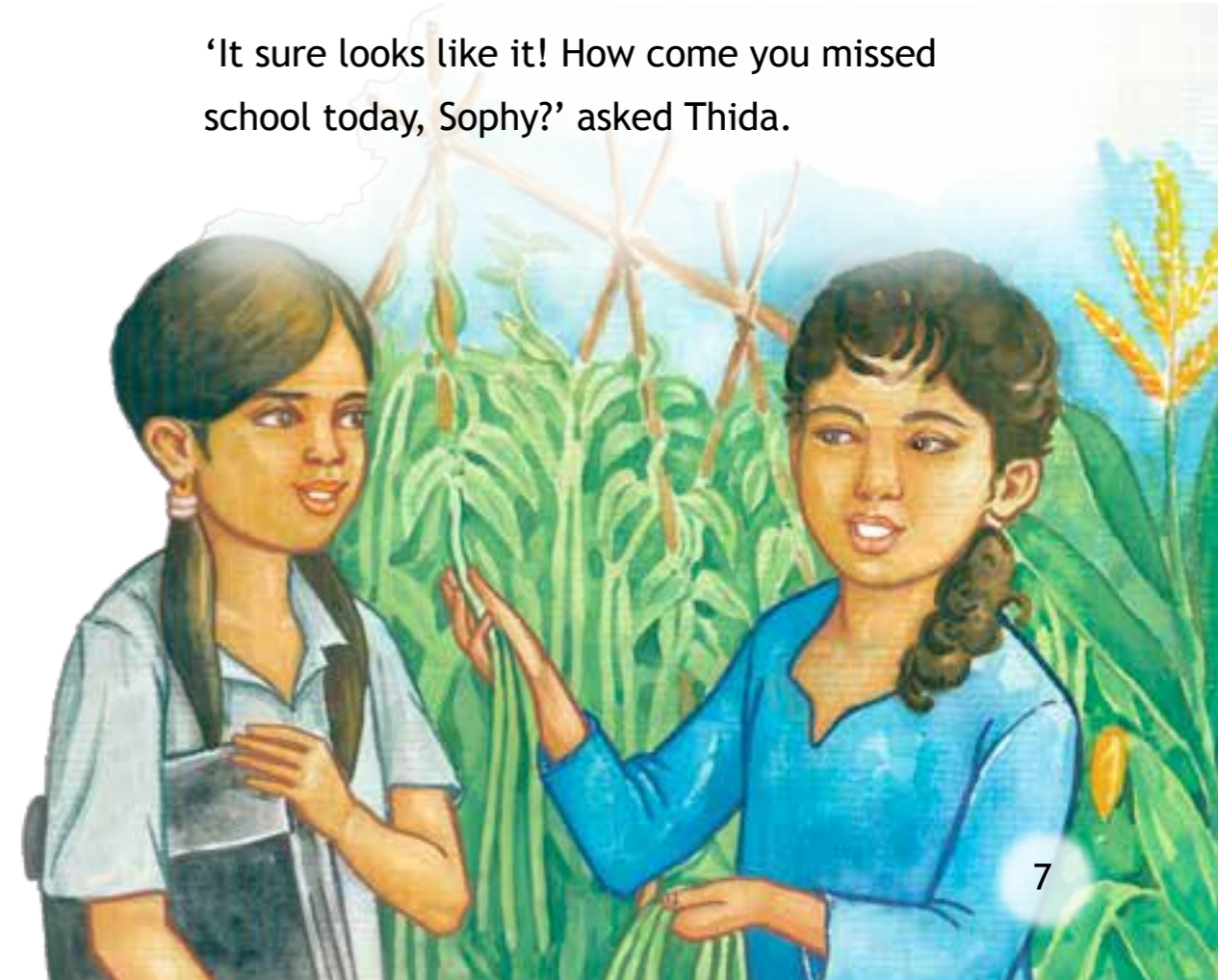
After school, Thida decides to visit Sophy at her home to see why she missed school.

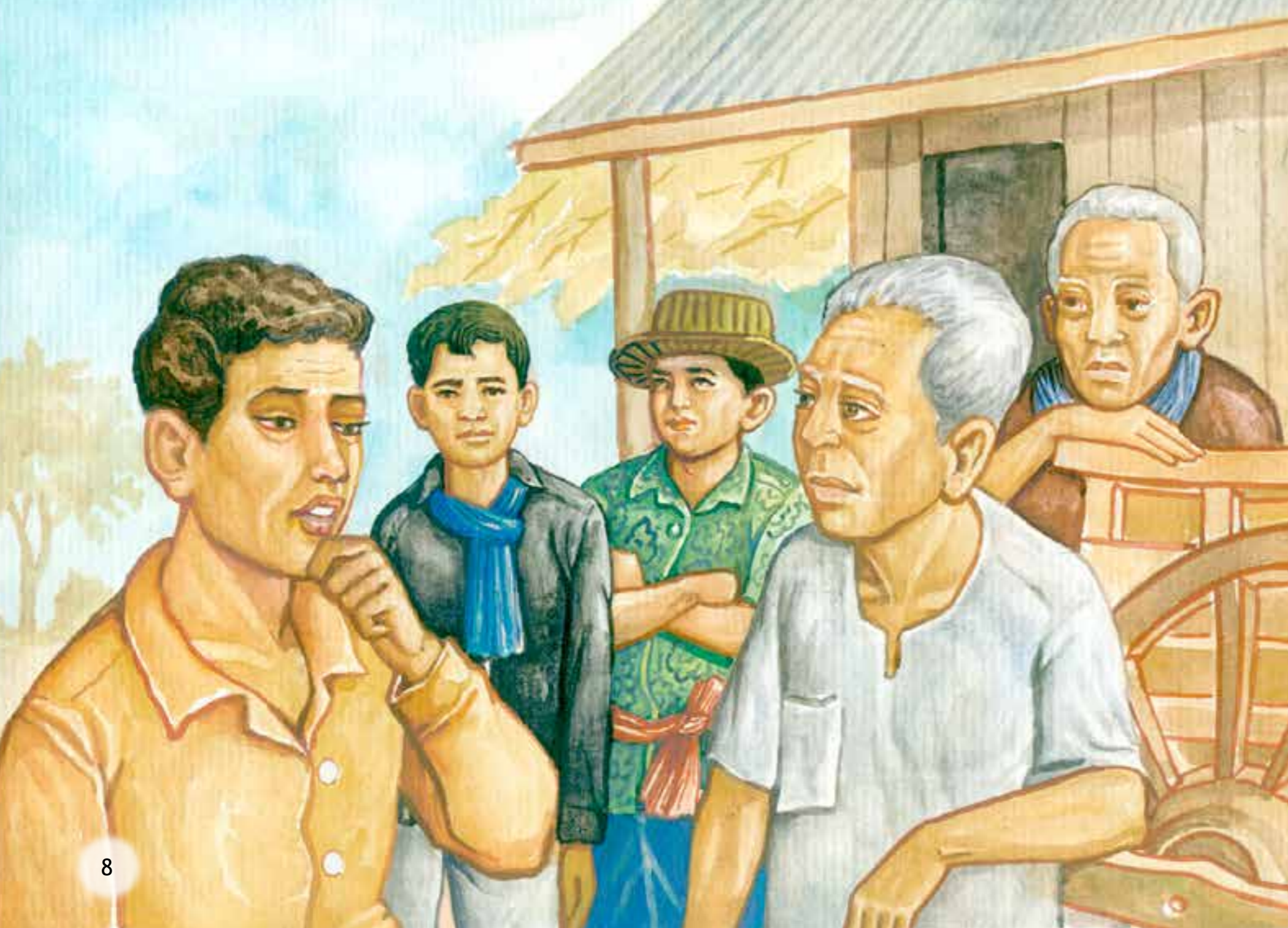


'Hi Sophy', calls Thida. 'Wow, your crops look so healthy!'

'Thanks Thida', says Sophy proudly, 'I guess the special program about the good and bad crop bugs we learnt about in school last year is really helping', smiled Sophy.

'It sure looks like it! How come you missed school today, Sophy?' asked Thida.





‘I had to help Mum and my brother Sareth collect water from the river for our soybean and maize crops because it hasn’t rained for a very long time. Dad couldn’t be here to help because he had to meet with other farmers to talk about the missing rains.’

‘Well, I think you’ve done a great job, Sophy’, said Thida. ‘The crops look well watered. Now, let’s go inside and I’ll tell you what you missed at school today.’

‘OK’, smiled Sophy.

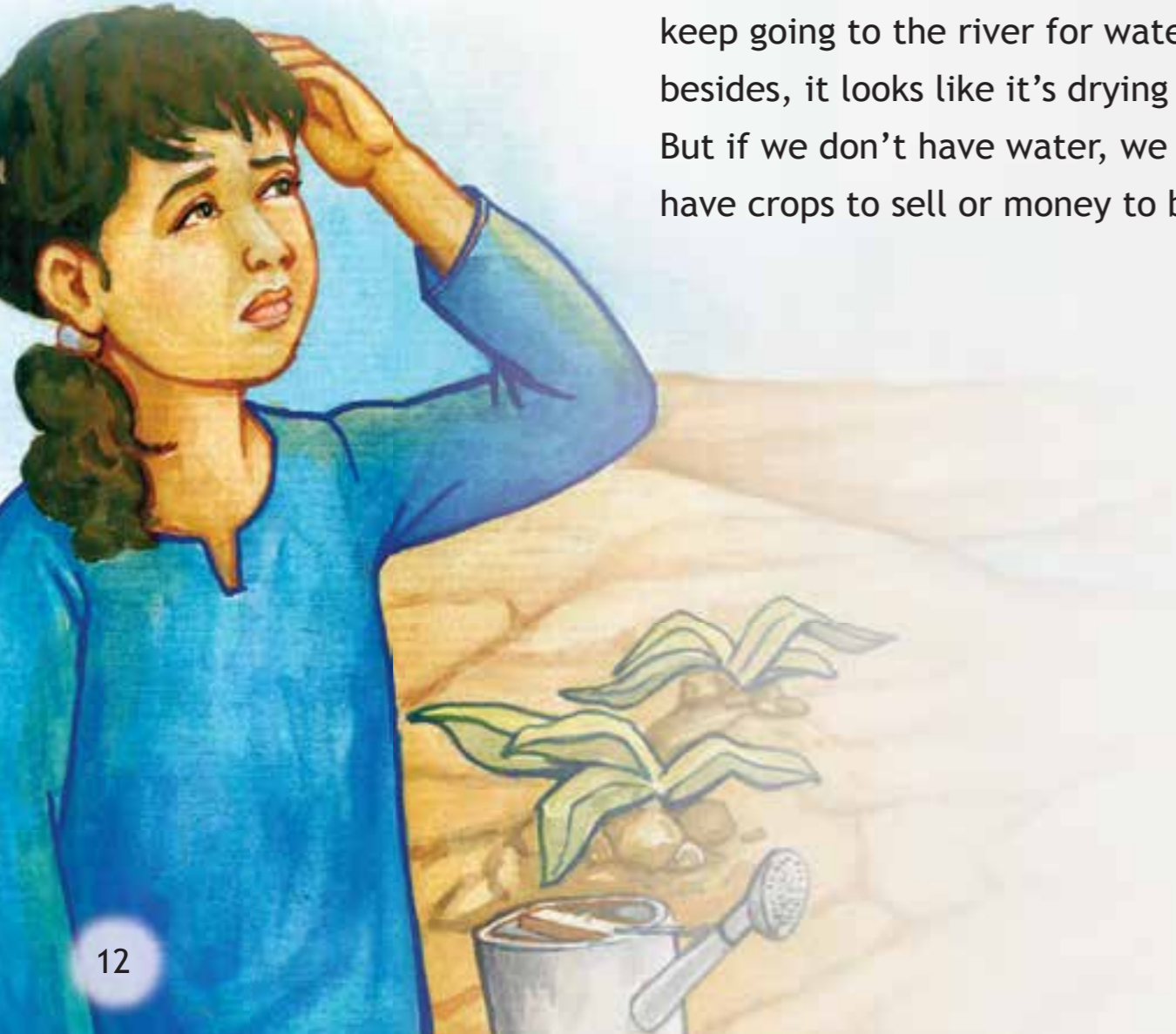


On the way to the house, Sophy tells Thida how tired her mum Sovanni and brother Sareth were after walking to the river and watering their crops. She also tells Thida how worried she is about her baby brother Touch, who doesn't want to play very much.



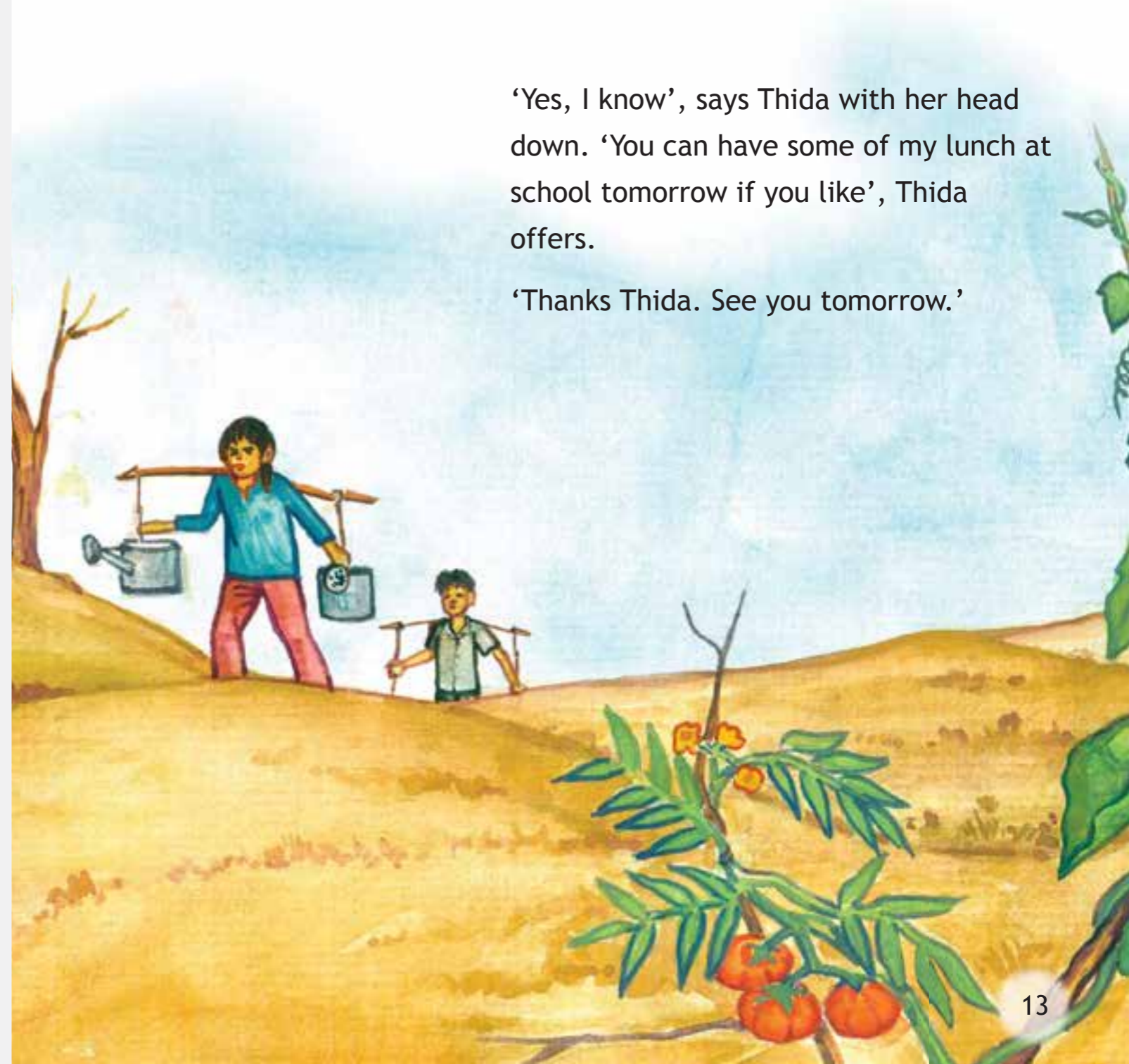
Inside, Sophy leans toward Thida.

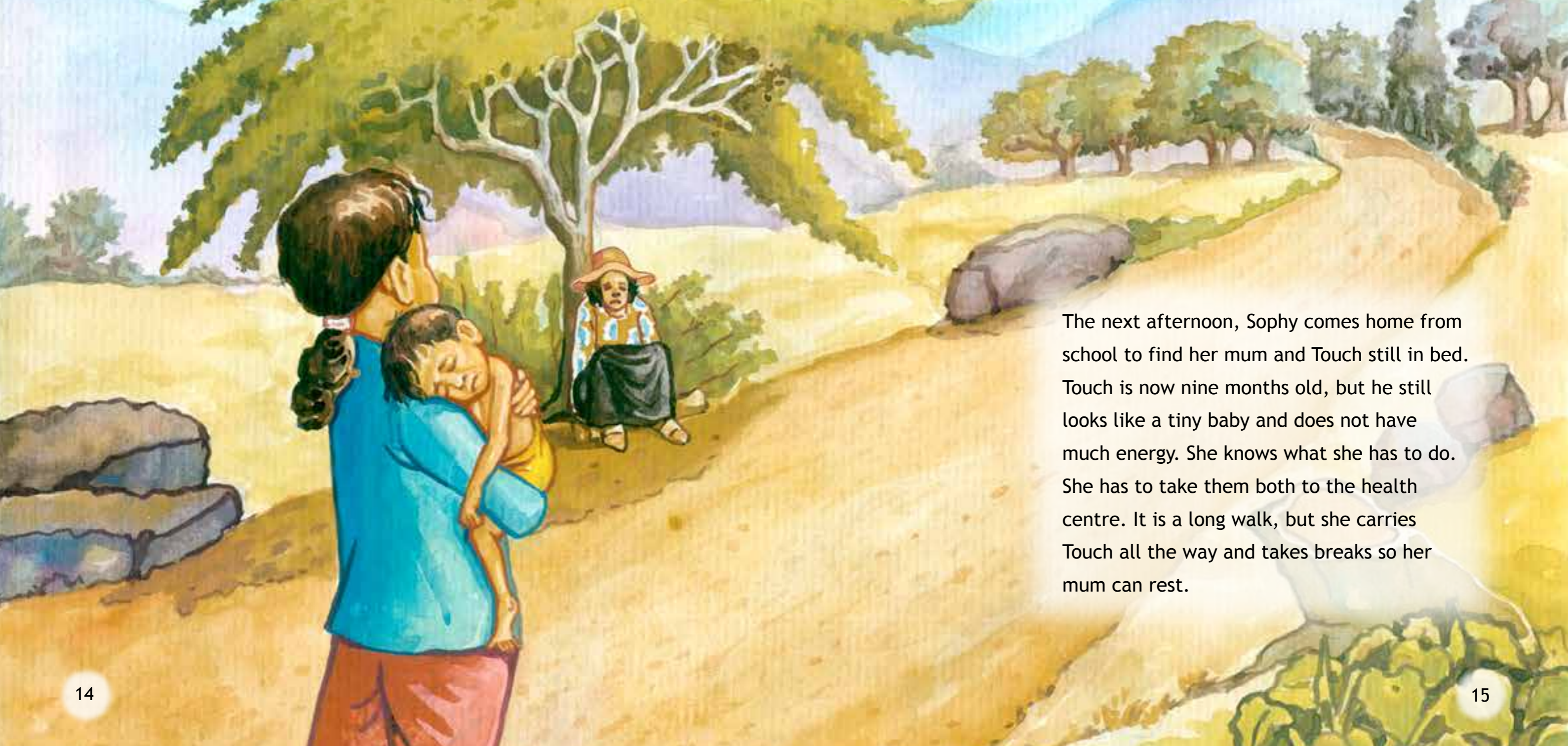
‘Collecting water today made me realise how much we need the rain. We can’t keep going to the river for water, and besides, it looks like it’s drying up too. But if we don’t have water, we won’t have crops to sell or money to buy food.’



‘Yes, I know’, says Thida with her head down. ‘You can have some of my lunch at school tomorrow if you like’, Thida offers.

‘Thanks Thida. See you tomorrow.’





The next afternoon, Sophy comes home from school to find her mum and Touch still in bed. Touch is now nine months old, but he still looks like a tiny baby and does not have much energy. She knows what she has to do. She has to take them both to the health centre. It is a long walk, but she carries Touch all the way and takes breaks so her mum can rest.

When they reach the health centre, the doctor looks at Sovanni and Touch and explains to Sophy that her mother and baby brother are tired because they are not getting enough food with protein, vitamins and minerals in it.

‘A quick way to help your mum and brother feel better is to make sure they eat food that has plenty of iron in it, like the ones on this poster’, said the doctor, handing Sophy a copy to take home. ‘You know, you could even start your own veggie garden and grow some of these foods,’ the doctor suggested.

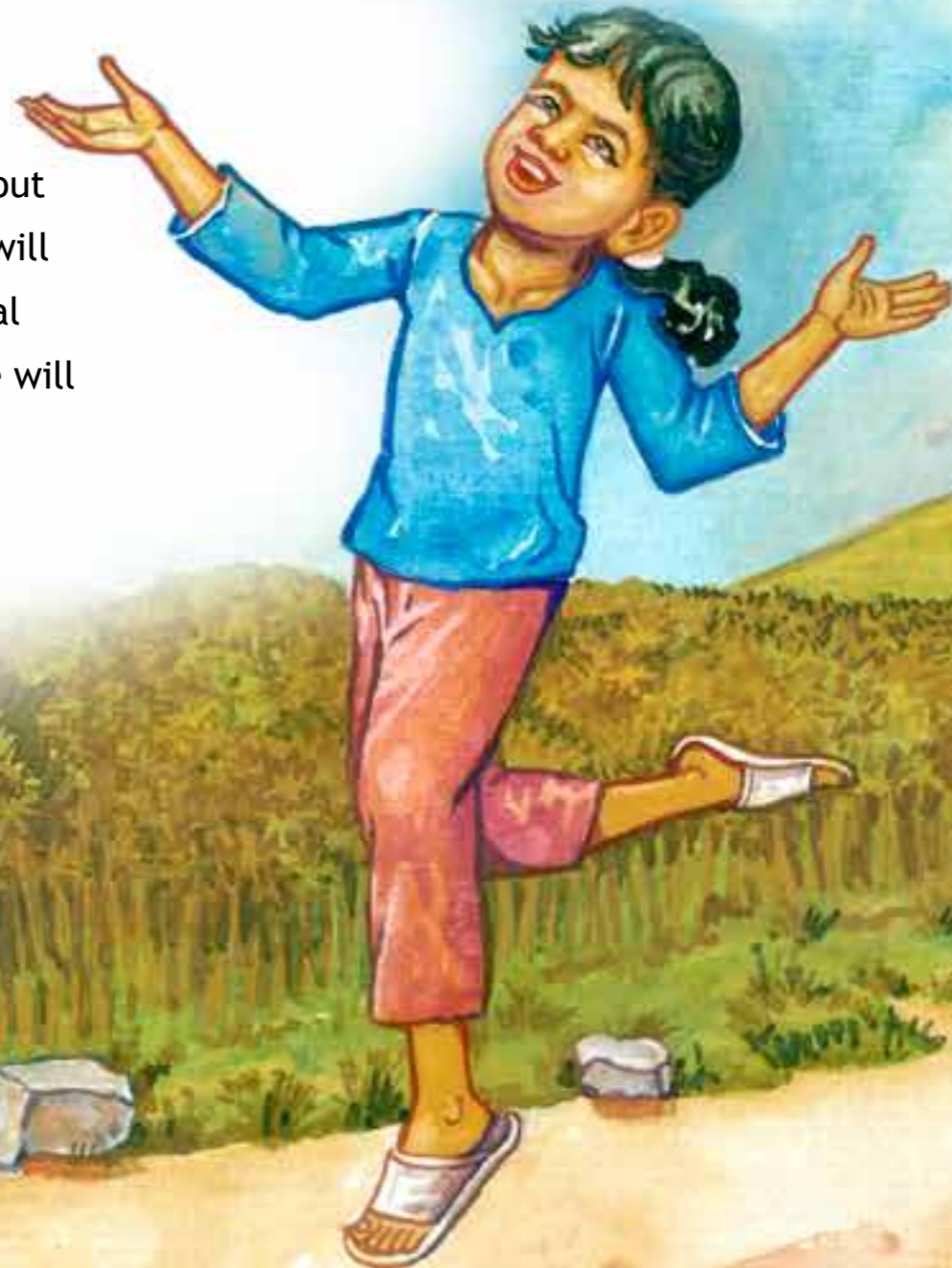
Hmm ... I always eat the same food as Mum and Touch. So why am I not getting sick?
Sophy asks herself.



On the way home, Sophy thinks about what the doctor said and how she will have to work hard to make a special vegetable patch for her family. She will need good soil, mulch and seeds.

But how do I start?

Suddenly, she stops and cries out, 'But of course!'





Sophy remembers her friendly neighbour, Serey. Before Touch was born, Sophy used to do some odd jobs for Serey after school. Serey was always kind and gave Sophy some vegetables and chicken eggs to eat while she worked. Serey used to have the best chickens in the village. All the villagers thought she had a special secret that made the chickens so big with beautiful feathers.



That's why I'm not getting sick or feeling tired, realised Sophy happily, because I'm eating a variety of different foods. It's not just the chicken eggs; it's also Serey's delicious veggies.





The next morning, Sophy wakes up early and visits Serey. When she arrives, Serey is very pleased to see her.

‘Hello Sophy!’ cries Serey as she runs to hug her. ‘I haven’t seen you for a long time.’

‘I’m sorry Serey,’ says Sophy, ‘Mum hasn’t been very well since she had Touch.’

‘Oh dear. Is there something we can do to help?’ asks Serey with concern in her eyes.

‘Yes, Serey. Would you please show me how to grow these foods?’ says Sophy holding up the poster she received from the doctor.

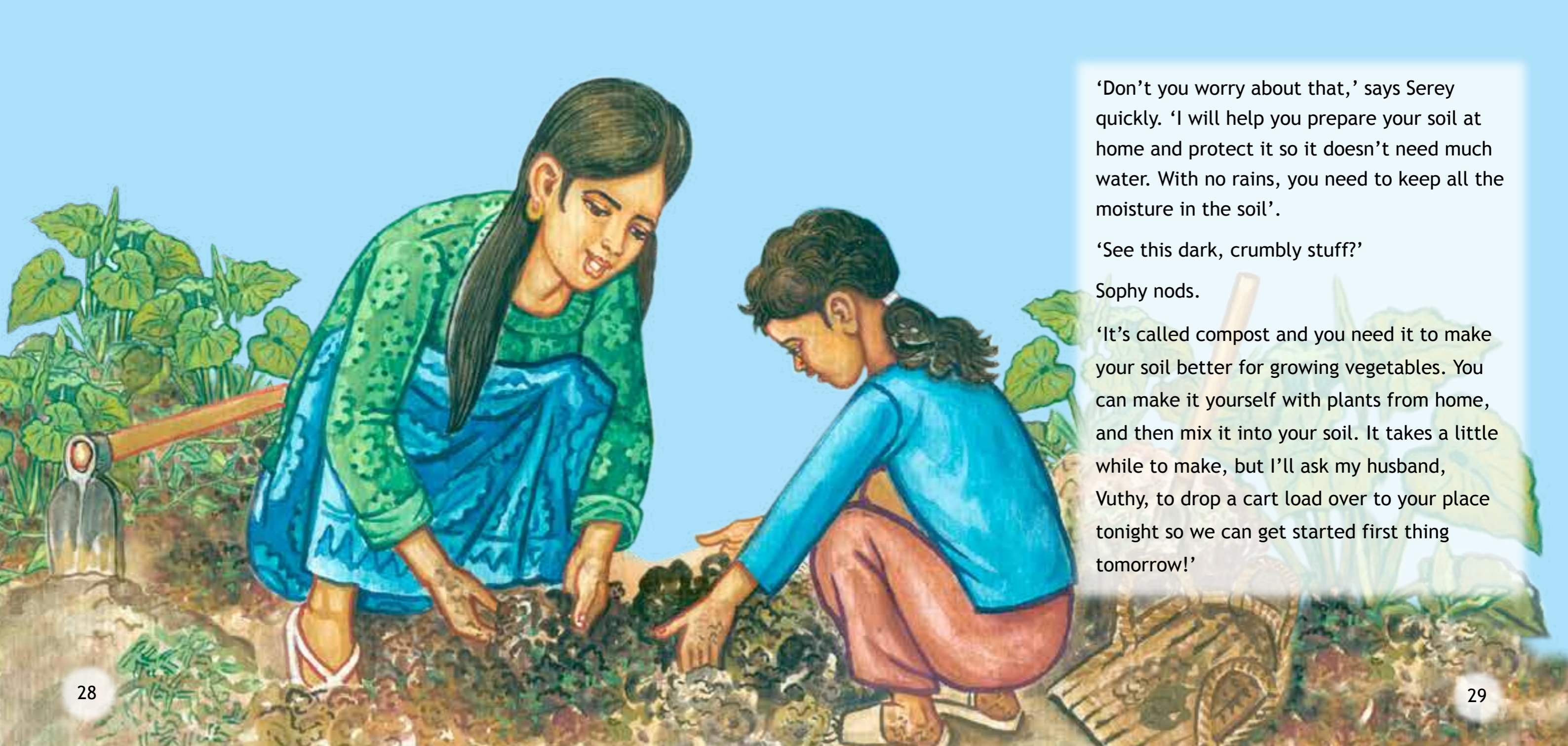
‘Ah, yes. Iron-rich foods are very important to us in Samlout,’ explains Serey. ‘They help us to stay strong and healthy. Come out into the garden and I’ll show you what to do.’



Out in the garden, Sophy smells a beautiful earthy smell. She can see lots of green vegetables growing in a large patch of dark, moist soil. Serey begins explaining to Sophy what each vegetable is called.

‘This one is called water convolvulus, this one is tomato, this one is corn and this one is called yardlong bean. And that one over there is pumpkin. I can tell you how to grow them and even give you some seedlings of all of these plants if you like,’ offers Serey.

‘Thankyou Serey. But our land doesn’t look like yours. It’s stony and dry. I don’t think they will grow,’ Sophy says with her head down.



‘Don’t you worry about that,’ says Serey quickly. ‘I will help you prepare your soil at home and protect it so it doesn’t need much water. With no rains, you need to keep all the moisture in the soil’.

‘See this dark, crumbly stuff?’

Sophy nods.

‘It’s called compost and you need it to make your soil better for growing vegetables. You can make it yourself with plants from home, and then mix it into your soil. It takes a little while to make, but I’ll ask my husband, Vuthy, to drop a cart load over to your place tonight so we can get started first thing tomorrow!’

‘Thankyou so much, Serey. ‘You’re the best neighbour in the whole village.’

‘You’re welcome Sophy. Here, take these eggs and this basket of vegetables home to your family. Boil the eggs and the vegetables, but not for very long — just until the green vegetables are soft. They taste nice with a little bit of oil on top.’

When Sophy arrives home, she immediately cooks the vegetables and eggs for her family. Touch loves eating the soft beans, and so does Sophy.

While they are eating, Vuthy arrives with the compost and talks to Sophy’s father, Heng, about the crops and the drought. When he leaves, Heng says that Vuthy is coming back tomorrow with his threshing machine to help them harvest what they can from the crops that survived the drought.





At first light, Serey and Vuthy arrive. Heng and Vuthy quickly leave the house to start threshing their crops, while Serey and Sophy start to plan their garden beds.

Serey explains that Sophy will need small garden beds and bamboo stakes for her tomato and water convolvulus, and a large garden bed for her corn, pumpkin and yardlong beans.

‘If you plant these vegetables together in the large bed,’ explains Serey, ‘the beans can climb up the corn plants while the pumpkin can grow along the ground.’

‘That’s clever!’ says Sophy happily.



Serey and Sophy work all morning preparing the soil for their garden beds. They dig down into the soil as much as they can. They remove big stones and bring water from the village river, bucket by bucket, until the ground is nice and moist.

‘Now it’s time for the compost’, says Serey.

As they shovel and dig the compost into the surface of the soil, Sophy notices a pink, wriggly worm.

‘Serey, there are worms in here!’ gasps Sophy.

‘Will they eat our plants?’

‘No’, laughs Serey, ‘they are good worms.

They help turn vegetable scraps into compost.’

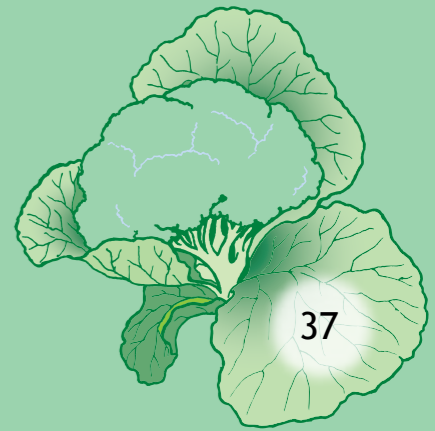
Sophy smiles and pats the worm before putting it carefully back into the soil.

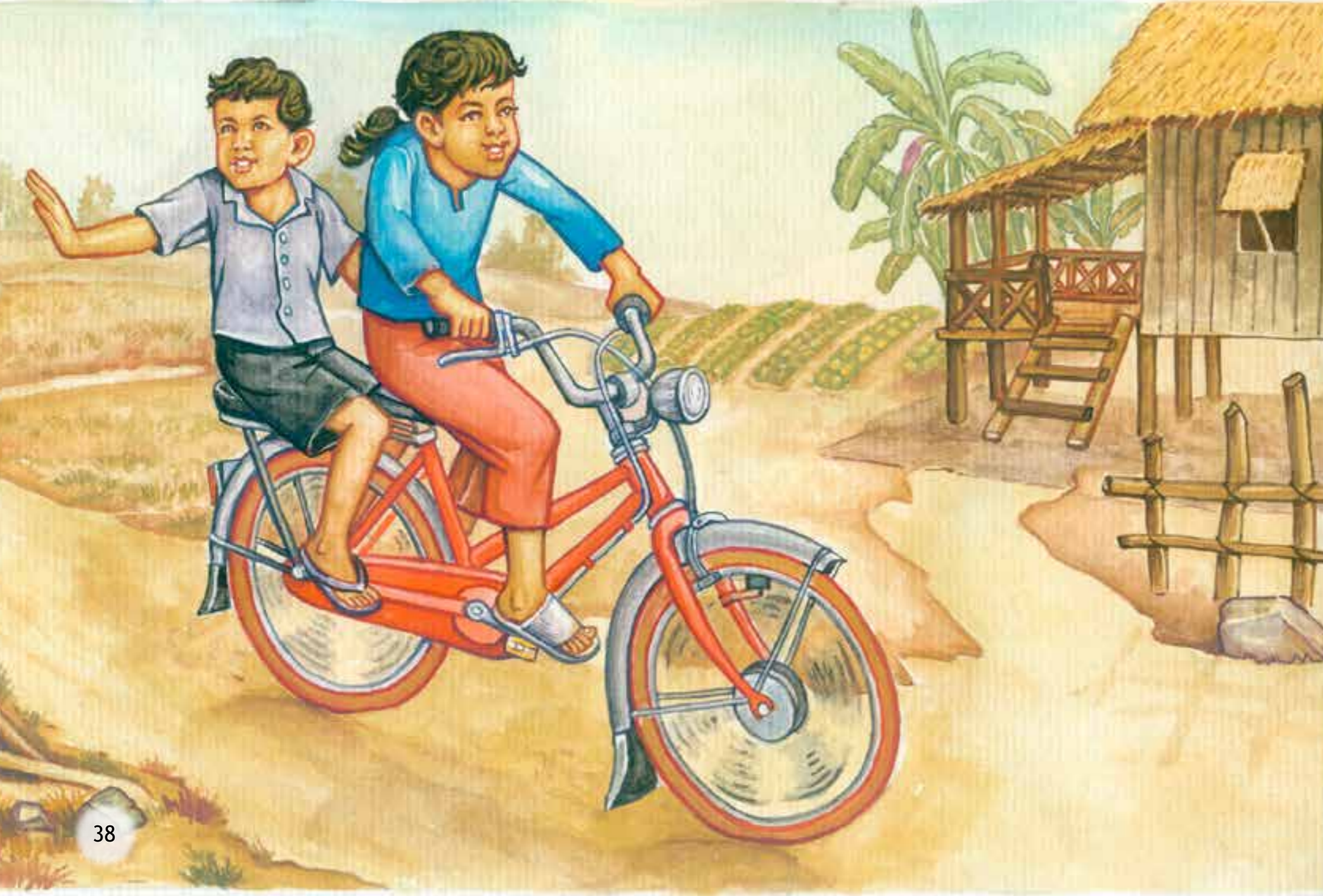




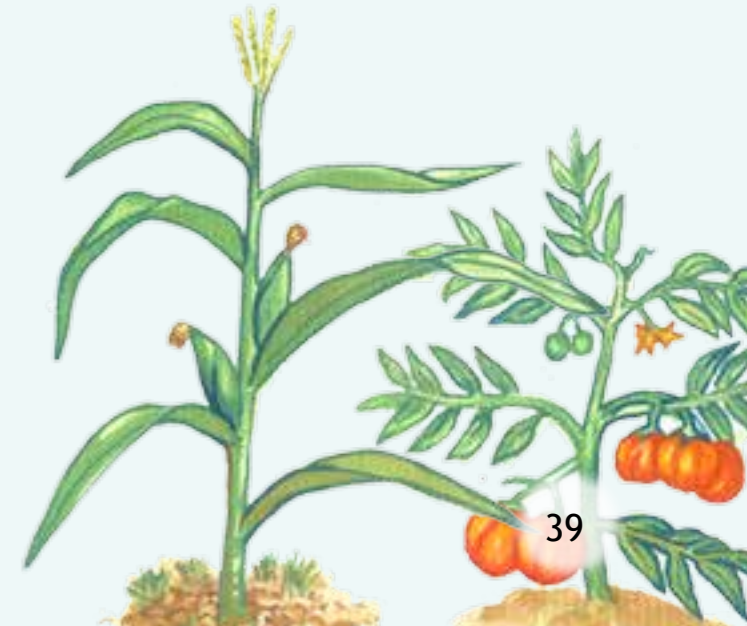
Before Serey and Vuthy leave, they show Sophy and her family how they would need to cover their vegetable gardens with soybean mulch to help keep the soil cool and moist. They even help them get their own compost heap started with the scraps from their tasty meal the night before.

‘And remember’, warns Serey, ‘to watch out for bugs that can ruin your plants. Caterpillars will chew the leaves and green vegetable bugs will suck the goodness out of pods. Pick these off every day and feed them to your chickens.’





Eventually, Sophy's vegetable patch started to grow and gave her family lots of good fresh veggies to eat. They even had enough to sell. Sophy's mum also started to make pickled cucumbers, which the villagers loved to eat. After about a year, they were able to save enough money to buy more garden tools and even a small bicycle for Sophy and Sareth to ride to school.



‘Our home gardens are really growing’, said Heng. ‘I am very proud of you Sophy. You’re going to be a great farmer when you’re older, or at least a great veggie farmer. Perhaps after you finish your studies you’ll become an agricultural specialist and teach other farmers how to improve their farming practices’.



When Sophy comes back to school, she tells her teacher, Miss Socheat, what she was doing while she was away and how eating good food has helped her mum and baby brother get well again. Miss Socheat is very impressed and asks Sophy if she would like to help the school create their own vegetable patch.

So Miss Socheat and Sophy sit down to make plans. They will need the help of the rest of the students so they decide to teach them all about growing good food at home in the school's Life Skills lessons.



‘THE VEGETABLES IN OUR GARDEN’ Song

- 1- Cucumbers, guards, sponge gourd, eggplants, yard longbeans, winged bean, tomatoes.
- 2- Cabbages, salads, fresh morning glory (x2)
All vegetables provide good vitamins.
- 3- We must eat vegetables and plant vegetables (x2)
We gain good health by eating vegetables.
- 4- We keep maintaining vegetables in our garden.

Lyrics by: **Hing Kimhoeurn**
Director of Primary School Office
Battambang’s Department of
Education, Youth and Sport



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