

Project No. 2

Battambang Education Project

Education and Accompaniment of Poor Students in the Battambang Prefecture, Cambodia

Country Overview

Decades of war and internal conflict have left Cambodia with significant poverty and its people scarred physically and psychologically. On the Human Development Index (a measure of poverty and development, with a higher number equaling higher poverty), Cambodia is currently ranked 144 out of 189 countries assessed. The population of Cambodia is 16.7 million people.

Although it has been over 20 years since the surrender of Khmer Rouge, Cambodia, especially the northwest, remains highly vulnerable. Health, education and infrastructure development programs are weak.

According to official estimates, the poverty rate in 2014 (the most recent year available) was 13.5%. About 90% of those living in poverty are in rural areas and are generally dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods. Small-scale farmers mostly practice agriculture at the subsistence level, using traditional methods. Productivity is often low and two thirds of the country's 1.6 million rural households face seasonal food shortages each year. Rice alone accounts for as much as 30% of household expenditure and rural people are constantly looking for work or other income-generating activities, which are often temporary and poorly paid.

Cambodia has experienced strong economic growth over the last decade; GDP grew at an average annual rate of over 8% between 2000 and 2010 and about 7% since 2011. The tourism, garment, construction and real estate, and agriculture sectors accounted for the bulk of growth.

Still, Cambodia remains one of the poorest countries in Asia and long-term economic development remains a daunting challenge, inhibited by corruption, limited human resources, high income inequality, and poor job prospects.

The Jesuits have a long history of working in Cambodia dating back to the 1980s in refugee camps. Today, there are 29 international Jesuit Priests, Brothers and Scholastics missioned to Cambodia. There is only one young Cambodian Jesuit. The Jesuit works are diverse including education, health, disability, agriculture, ecology and development programs.

About the project

The Battambang Prefecture under the leadership of the Spanish Jesuit, Enrique Figaredo Alvargonzalez (commonly known as Bishop Kike), provide services such as education programs, social enterprises and more to disadvantaged people

The Battambang Education Project aims to provide opportunities for young women and men and youth from very poor families in the Battambang Prefecture to have a chance to study. Students come from nine provinces in North-Western Cambodia: Kampong Chhnang, Pursat, Battambang, Pailin, Oddar Meanchey, Bantaey Meanchey, Siem Reap, Kampong Thom, and Preah Vihear.

Following are some of the ways in which the project makes a difference:

1. Financial assistance:

To provide scholarship support to cover the tuition fees of university, technical and vocational students and for extra class fees of those in grades 1-12. This financial educational assistance will enable the children coming from economically challenged families to have a chance to study because many families in the villages barely earn enough to cover the basic needs to survive or to have three decent meals a day.



2. Student hostels

To provide board, lodging and learning facilities which are conducive to learning. Most of the students who live at the hostels come from far-flung villages where there are no schools. There are six (6) student hostels:

- i. Msgr. Tep Im Student Centre, Battambang
- ii. De Nobili Student Centre, Sisophon
- iii. Nazareth (Kampong Roteh) Student Centre, Kampong Thom
- iv. St. Joseph Student Centre, Siem Reap
- v. St. Peter's Student Centre, Kampong Chhnang
- vi. St. Joseph (Ta Hen) Student Centre, Battambang

3. Accompaniment and special formation

Organising seminar-workshops to help build leadership, psycho-social and environmental formation of the students; offering counseling support, and maintaining good relationships with the students' families through regular house visits and constant communication. These are necessary to ensure the holistic development of the students, especially given the present deficiencies of the Cambodian education system.

Some student hostels also provide financial assistance and academic support to students living outside the student centre. The students may be living with their families or may have private accommodation close to their educational institution.

Number of students

The target is 330 students, divided fairly evenly between females and males, and spread across the six student hostels, with the number at each hostel varying accordingly to the accommodation available. The smallest hostel, St Peter's in Kampong Chhnang, can accommodate 12 students, whilst the largest, St Joseph's in Taken, accommodates 106 within the student centre and provides support to 53 students living outside.

Selection of students

All applicants sit an entrance test to aims to assess their commitment and desire to study further. It also helps determine their level of attainment so far, which is important as those coming from distant villages, far from reach of government inspectors, suffer much neglect from absentee teachers and defective educational practices.

The priorities for student selection are:

1. *Orphans* and those who have been *abandoned by parents* because they are deemed most vulnerable.
2. Children/youth from very poor families where no children have received any formal education.
3. Children/youth coming from a family where very few or none (in the family) have completed studies up to Grade 12.
4. Those who come from far-flung villages, who live long distances from local schools or universities, and without relatives to live with while studying or those who could not find decent accommodations near schools.

Parish Priests, parish council, community elders, religious sisters and brothers, and lay volunteers living and working in the local communities and mission areas are among those who recommend the students.

There are also some cases where the children/youth applicants, accompanied by parents or guardians, apply for scholarships and admittance in the student hostels, usually having heard about the student centres by word of mouth.

Operation of the student hostels

There is a Director and other staff at each student hostel to oversee the students. The students participate in different household chores, such as, cooking food for the community, dishwashing, maintenance of the cleanliness in and around the centre and maintenance of the garden and surrounds.

Project outcomes and measures

The Battambang Education Project uses a variety of methods to assess the outcomes and impact of the program.

Objective	Measures	Means of Verification	Assumptions
Through education, the students become independent and able to support themselves.	Students learn how to read and write; apply critical thinking skills, as well as strive for academic excellence.	Through quizzes and exams, both oral and written; through their academic achievements in school; through their growth in wisdom & knowledge.	That the students will become independent and be able to find good, well-paying jobs. That the students will be able to support and help their family as well.
To support the families of students such that they will help encourage their children in their studies. (Note: Many families in Cambodia do not want their children to study because they want them to work.)	Families become more supportive of their children studying, helping create an atmosphere of confidence and patience in learning.	Regular visits to the families of the students, especially the ones who need more help which may include financial help, proper housing, jobs, etc. Families are also invited to join some of the activities of the student centre, such as "Gratitude Day" where students show appreciation and gratitude to their parents and guardians.	That the families of the students become self-sufficient and are able to send their other children for an education.
To provide formation on leadership and values formation—for holistic development of students. (Note: Some of the growing problems of the Cambodian society nowadays are lack of discipline among the young and the desire for quick and easy money.)	Children become more respectful, disciplined, and learn to value the rewards of working.	Regular and personal encounter with students, feedback from parents, teachers, formators and peers.	That the students, in the near future, contribute to the building of the Cambodian society and help make it better.

Impact of COVID-19

All Cambodian education institutions have been closed because of an outbreak of COVID-19 in March 2021. Today there is a gradual reopening of education centres but this is dependent on the COVID activities in the local area. As at 19 September 2021, COVID-19 case numbers were a 7-day daily average of 662 cases, which is 68% of the peak in early July 2021. Since the pandemic began there have been 103,482 cases and 2096 recorded deaths. More than 21.6 million doses of vaccine have been given (mainly Sinovac and Sinopharm, as well as AstraZeneca) which equates to 65.5% of the population having received two doses. Vaccination of teenagers began on 1 August 2021.

Budget

Jesuit Mission has been supporting the Battambang Education Project since 2010 and has been critical to the development and success of the project, making education possible for hundreds of youth in the Prefecture to date.

The budget covers scholarships, hostel operations including food, staff salaries and maintenance, as well as transportation and medical costs. Jesuit Mission covers 40% of the total operational costs and is one of a number of funding agencies to this project. Pilgrims 100 is invited to contribute towards Jesuit Mission's commitment of USD85,000.

Potential for Pilgrims 100 members to visit

Excluding the current COVID-19 restrictions, it is normally possible to travel to Cambodia. The Battambang Prefecture welcomes visitors and is able to arrange for groups to visit the student centres to meet students and staff and understand more about the importance of these facilities .

Case Studies

1. **An Sok** is a former child worker who thought that going to school again was just a dream. He is 20 years old and in Grade 10. He is the eldest in a family of four children. His father earns US\$7.50 a day by selling bread and his mother is pregnant with her fifth child and also sells bread, earning about US\$5 a day. Before An Sok entered the St Joseph Student Hostel in Siem Reap in October 2017, he had stopped attending school for three years because his family did not have enough funds for food, let alone funds to pay for his schooling and compulsory extra classes.

For those three years he worked hard to help earn money to feed his family. He found work in a printing shop, a restaurant and then a business that made big cement jars. However he found this work was too hard for him so he returned to Siem Reap and, through joining a youth group at the Catholic church, the parish priest was able to help him by offering him a place in St Joseph's Student Hostel.

An Sok feels he has been given a new life. When he was working, life was so difficult and he really felt the burden of being the eldest son. Living in the Hostel has made him very happy. He now has food, friends and attends school. He has learned new skills and explores art and music.

He looks forward to completing his studies and hopes to be an electrician or electrical engineer. He dreams of buying land and building a house for his parents and siblings.

2. **Chhan** is 18 years old. His mother died when he was five years old and his father when he was 15 years old. He is currently completing Year 12 and living at the St Joseph Student Hostel in Siem Reap, where his younger brother also lives.

In 2017 when his father died, Chhan fulfilled the Cambodian Buddhist tradition, whereby the eldest must become a novice monk for a few days to give back merit to the father. At first he thought he would just stay for three days, as is customary, but the pagoda had a school and he decided to spend his life there. He thought he could live on alms and share these with his younger brother who was also attending the pagoda school.

After five months in the pagoda, he had the opportunity to move to St Joseph's Student Hostel with his brother. He is very happy there, particularly as he receives three meals a day. At the Student Hostel all students are engaged in the preparation of meals and Chhan enjoys the chance to learn how to cook.



Chhan (far left) preparing a meal at the Student Hostel

The rules of the Hostel have encouraged him to focus on his studies and he has learned to depend on himself more. He feels he has more initiative and confidence in dealing with personal issues. He also profits from the guidance of senior students at the Centre and learning from their experiences.

Chhan dreams of completing a university degree. He loves studying history, both about Cambodia and the world. He would like to eventually help other children, particularly those who are unable to attend school.



Ang Sok at St Joseph's Student Hostel