

SeeBeyond|Borders

LESSONS LEARNED

A Reflection on 10 Years in Cambodia

SeeBeyondBorders celebrated the ten-year anniversary of its first education program in Cambodia in January 2020. In this document we discuss some of the main challenges we have faced in our work and the strategies we have applied with the potential to overcome them. Considerations that are now arising as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic will be explored in the forthcoming organisational strategic plan.

INTRODUCTION

In this publication we have unpacked what we now see as the key barriers to learning in Cambodia, together with the strategies that we have found offer the best chances for the next generation of Cambodian children to reach a minimum proficiency level in core subjects.



The vast majority of Cambodian children fail to reach minimum learning

Perhaps the single biggest inflection point we have reached in ten years is to understand that while we can provide knowledge about teaching and education system management, if progress is to become a sustained reality, there must be a commensurate change in behaviour, behaviour with respect to how knowledge is developed and applied. It is one thing to teach something and quite another to see that new knowledge applied willingly and enthusiastically. The three categories into which we put the barriers we encounter in this respect are:

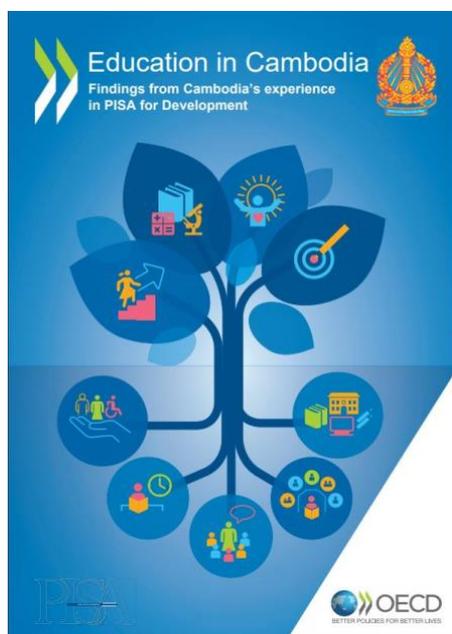
<p>Mode of learning:</p>	<p>Traditionally Cambodian education systems have emphasised hierarchy, obedience, and respect over logic and self-expression. This has consequences for the ways that we engage and interact with those we work with.</p>
<p>Motivation in a Cambodian context:</p>	<p>The extent to which an individual is willing or able to apply the knowledge gained is a complex topic in Cambodian society and motivation for change less obvious than it may first appear. Removing the barriers to change and recognising these barriers within the team, has been a major focus.</p>
<p>The actions of others:</p>	<p>There are many approaches being adopted by development organisations in a country with the second highest number of NGOs per capita in the world. Determining where we can and cannot add value has been a significant challenge.</p>

These factors are examined in more detail across the following pages together with suggestions for overcoming the challenges they present. First however, we have identified some key contextual factors that identify the challenges ahead.

CONTEXT

“Over the past two decades, Cambodia has undergone a significant transition, reaching lower middle-income status in 2015 and aspiring to attain upper middle-income status by 2030. Driven by garment exports and tourism, Cambodia’s economy has sustained an average growth rate of 8% between 1998 and 2018, making it one of the fastest-growing economies in the world... [and yet] a child born in Cambodia today will be only 49% as productive when grown as she could be if she enjoyed full quality education, good health, and proper nutrition during childhood” ([World Bank Cambodia Overview 2019](#))

The Cambodian education system remains amongst the weakest in the world. Recent data from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS, 2018) provides a stark reminder of the impact of poor quality teaching: “When the proportion of students who reach the baseline level is expressed as a share of the total 15-year-old population..., only 2.1% of 15-year-olds in Cambodia can be said to reach a baseline level of performance in reading; 2.7% in mathematics; and 1.4% in science.”¹ **For any country that has an education system where over 97% of 15-year-olds fail to achieve a baseline level of competence in any of the key subjects, describing the situation as “a learning crisis” would not fully explain the extent of the problem.**



The PISA-D National Report for Cambodia revealed the extent of the learning crisis

It is both difficult to keep the depth and complexity of the problem at the forefront of discussions on what initiatives are now appropriate, and tempting to assume that fixes can be rolled out at a systemic level that will quickly rectify the situation. Given the paucity of student achievements identified by MoEYS, multi-million-dollar interventions appear to have accomplished no discernible improvement in student achievement levels over the last 30 years. Where progress has certainly been made is with the numbers of children going to school. The country has arguably close to full enrolment rates in grade 1. However, dropout rates are high, rising again in the academic years 2018/19 and 2019/20. **As the World Bank 2017² puts it “When poor parents perceive education to be of low quality, they are less willing to sacrifice to keep their children in school—a rational response, given the constraints they face.”³** Credit does need to be given to the Ministry for the availability of schooling. However, schooling does not necessarily equate to education in Cambodia and there remains an enormous challenge to raising the potential for the Nation.

With the majority of international aid being channelled through bilateral or multilateral arrangements between governments and international organisations like the

¹ MoEYS (2018). *Education in Cambodia: Findings from Cambodia’s experience in PISA for Development*. Phnom Penh: (p. 28).

² World Development Report 2018: *Learning to realize education’s promise*. Washington, DC: World Bank. doi:10.1596/978-1-4648-1096-1. License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0 IGO. (World Bank 2017)

³ Banerjee, Jacob, and Kremer (2000); Hanushek and Woessmann (2008); Rivkin, Hanushek, and Kain (2005) as cited in World Bank (2017) (p. 8).



Cambodia trails far behind its nearest neighbours

United Nations and the World Bank, or via aggregators such as GPE (Global Partnership for Education), most donor funding to support education is provided as cash grants to Government departments, in this case the Ministry of Education, to pursue specific donor designed programs. **At the heart of the challenge faced in Cambodia, is its willingness to embrace lasting change, beyond the specific program, and a different approach is now needed.** We believe that creating a vision for what change looks like and can achieve in partnership with those we work with, has to be the cornerstone of our efforts to develop teaching practice and give children a chance to learn.

Inevitably there are contextual considerations that present significant challenges to achieving change that go beyond the dependency that has been developed for programming. These go beyond the educational issues discussed in this paper but are relevant when considering the barriers and their origin.

These are as follows:

1. First, “under the control of the Khmer Rouge, almost 2 million people died, sending Cambodia’s development back one hundred years.”⁴ It is entirely logical therefore that it now takes perhaps decades of incremental activity to achieve sustained change with three and even five year projects insignificant in this timeframe. **Challenges resulting from this genocide are multidimensional and tackling just one aspect does not deal with the related difficulties. Solutions have to address broader issues, be contextually appropriate, clearly understood, and owned by the hierarchy of beneficiaries.**
2. Secondly, there is no common understanding of what “learning” means, looks like, or is represented by. The failure to recognise this as a significant problem underlies much of the country’s difficulties and needs to be addressed to secure its future. **Our work has found that students will take home neatly written sentences or algorithms, copied from the board into their exercise books, erasing any mistakes or less than neat initial attempts. Parents, many of whom are illiterate themselves, admire the penmanship, failing to identify the difference between copying and comprehending.** Discussions around a child’s picture or piece of writing are largely unheard of and represent the kinds of barriers children face to the development of their imagination and sense of creativity.

“A large proportion of Cambodia’s population of 15 million continues to live in communes (social units) in rural areas (80%); and 90% of the country’s poor are rural dwellers”⁵. Many remain illiterate for all practical purposes, although measures of literacy vary widely. With few books and little print media available in the community, television and sometimes social media, generally provide the only means for connecting with the wider world. Consequently, weaknesses in the education system are not acknowledged and parents often do not recognise the need to become actively involved in stimulating their children’s imagination and natural tendency to explore.

Farming processes are handed on by word of mouth and younger generations without an education often emigrate to Thailand and find manual work. Even teachers do little research or see any need to develop their skills, having limited access to computers or the internet. While more than 50% of the population owns a smartphone, Smart Axiata’s chief marketing officer Stjepan Udovicic says “[Like

⁴ Corrado R., Flinn R. E., Tungjan P. Journal of Management, Economics, and Industrial Organization, Vol.3 No.2, 2019, pp.1-15.

⁵ Ministry of Health Cambodia, PMNCH, WHO, World Bank, AHPSP and participants in the Cambodia multi-stakeholder policy review (2014). Success Factors for Women’s and Children’s Health: Cambodia.



Livelihood in rural Cambodia is dependent on agriculture

elsewhere] smartphones play a huge part in the lives of Cambodians [and are] used for chatting, making calls, browsing the internet and social media sites, and accessing entertainment portals.”⁶ They are not generally seen as educational tools as is becoming increasingly apparent during this time of COVID. Economic growth has been stimulated by rises in land values and the availability of credit, bringing improvements in living standards, but as yet little awareness that a sustained growth in opportunities for young Cambodians will require that they

become better educated.

3. Thirdly, foreigners coming to work in Cambodia can bring levels of skill that are not readily available in country and can provide excellent mentors to raise the skill levels of Cambodians. **However, while those aiming to contribute to the development of the country must be skilled operators in their own discipline, more importantly, they need to be skilled at working in a cultural context very different to their own.** Unfortunately many of those who haven’t experienced such different environments will not understand this different reference point, seeing only from where they stand. A willingness to learn, with time allocated towards that purpose, is essential.

We have many people who generously come to work with us for a relatively short time, full of confidence given the immediate problems they identify. The danger is that volunteers can end up leaving frustrated or worse, having set up systems and processes that are simply not understood. In a country where “Yes” can simply mean “I hope you are having a good time with whatever it is you are doing”, it is easy not to know what is actually going on at the implementation level. Working with foreigners to help them through an acclimatisation period, gaining their trust so that they can consider that all is not necessarily as it seems, is essential if their contribution is to be valuable.

These factors frame the environment in which we work and underpin the nature of the challenges we face. Communicating these is not straightforward, but an understanding of them is essential to finding practical ways of working that can be foundational to lasting improvements in public education for Cambodians.

CHALLENGES

1. MODE OF LEARNING

We begin this section by recognising the conundrum as to whether education overcomes inequalities in society or is a product of the society in which it operates. In the latter case, given societies are directed by a dominant group, the education system would perpetuate that group’s domination. **It seems more plausible that education reflects rather than directs, taking its lead from its encompassing society from which its educators are drawn. The question then becomes - can**

⁶ As quoted in the Khmer Times Business Weekly publication in an article called “A boom in smartphone sales in the Kingdom” by Poovenraj Kanagaraj dated 15th March 2019 accessed on 21st January 2020 from

<https://capitalcambodia.com/a-boom-in-smartphone-sales-in-the-kingdom/>

the dominant forces in Cambodian society be influenced to change the kind of education system that it wants Cambodian society to be reflected by?

Cambodian society has been forged into steel by repression over centuries and so it is no coincidence that its education system reflects a strongly behaviourist model which looks to ensure that successive generations preserve and perpetuate existing societal values and beliefs. Little has been written on educational philosophy in Cambodia but much has been written about Thailand where cultural norms bear a remarkable similarity and educational performance continues to languish in international rankings despite access to far greater resources. There are parallels there which have helped articulate the challenges we find in Cambodia.

Nicholls and Apiwattanakorn (2015)¹ explore “The extent to which elements embedded in Thai culture impede a much needed paradigm shift from traditional Thai teaching methodologies to greater student-centeredness on campus and in the classroom” (p. 1). Their enquiry “seeks to discern whether resistance to change is conscious or whether it stems from an invisible or embedded ethnocentrism. In its broadest dimensions, ethnocentrism is the belief that one’s own culture is superior to others and is therefore effectively determinative of personal and public behaviour” (p. 2). They characterise lessons as being a place where “Most students attend class submissively as passive observers rather than active participants, trusting that communication will be a one-way affair, moderated solely by the knowledge and skills of the instructor, and hoping they will not be called on to contribute” (p. 5). In conclusion they find that “Inevitably any individual who seeks to modify long standing practices may face the criticism of rejecting or challenging Thai cultural values, or at the very least, not understanding Thai culture. This of course makes the task of implementing change an exercise in cultural diplomacy of a very high order” (p. 11).

Our own experience has been one of resistance to change that is in part conscious but also due to ethnocentrism brought on by the oppression Cambodians have felt for generations. Although there is an apparent willingness to undergo training, a traditional teacher centred approach in the classroom with students as passive learners is also the norm. A willingness to undergo training is not reflective of a willingness to embrace change but frequently a function of the economic factors in Cambodia that are more severe than in Thailand, such that per diem incentives offered with such programs are particularly attractive.

Patriarchal societies around the world have historically been characterized by behaviourist modes of learning as opposed to the constructivist approaches favoured in western cultures. In Cambodia, paternalism in an educational context has certainly been detrimental to developing problem solving skills. Cambodians do not grow up to be single minded about pursuing logical conclusions, to assimilate information and generalise, or to research different points of view to formulate their own conclusions, having not been taught in a constructivist manner. Their learning comes from repetition and an unchallenging adherence to instructions, without questioning, as handed down by a superior whose position is determined by a complex set of rules around status, a key component of which can be age, but not necessarily expertise.

Most relevant for us as an organisation in this context is that when we teach a new approach or perhaps question an aspect of an existing custom, even an item in an existing text book such as the order in which information is presented, there is the potential for resistance to considering new ideas or engaging with a logical re-evaluation process. Where the Ministry of Education has specifically prescribed that a new set of material, or approach, is to be used and followed, questions are simply around, “show me what to do exactly” rather than there being an engagement with the subject and, or, the reasons for the change. This is often a reflection of a deeper challenge, being that the teachers see they are carrying out the Ministry’s job without an understanding of what that is and why it matters. This is a theme we will come back to.



The question is, in the post-modern world, at what cost does Cambodia maintain this approach and can Cambodian society be motivated to change the kind of education it offers, to one that it would most like to be reflected by? We are not certain. **What we can say is that in all we do, we aim to teach teachers to give children the tools to build their own knowledge. We call this “building conceptual understanding”.** In Maths, students are encouraged to use concrete materials and gradually transfer their

conceptual understanding from these materials into simple abstract algorithms, where a set of rules and parameters can emerge, be tested and applied in like situations. Literacy reflects a similar process, with students building on what they know from their own environment, developing their ability to make connections to new learning and communicating their ideas and experiences through speaking, listening, reading, writing (or decoding and encoding), exploring creative ways of responding to and envisioning the world around them.

The Cambodian approach to teaching can certainly bring about a great deal of conformity across its society but this is at the expense of creativity and progress, creating a nervous, fragile and sometimes guarded community, often lacking in the self-confidence to tackle its own issues. Nicholls and Apiwattanakorn (2015)⁷ express the hope that “a pathway to change is to raise awareness and to initiate a fresh dialogue, leading to an exchange of ideas and in turn creative responses for the benefit of both teachers and students, and ultimately the country as a whole” (p.3). As foreigners in Cambodia, cultural diplomacy is an essential skill if we are to offer anything of value to a country that has suffered much from those who would crush its culture.

2. MOTIVATION IN A CAMBODIAN CONTEXT

It is a key objective that we be a catalyst for professional behaviour change, such that more of those involved in our programs embrace greater responsibility for their roles as educators. Whether or not a person, having been given the training and support offered by our programs, and having demonstrated a good level of competence, continues with their responsibility to fulfil their job as an educator when the direct support they receive diminishes, comes down to a question of how can their motivation be continued. All teachers experience barriers to motivation. However, given the life pressures in Cambodia, these manifest in very different ways to those present in the West, not least because of the vast differences in economic circumstances, and create many layers to unpack, a process which has been crucial in finding effective ways forward.

Cambodia’s institutions that go to the protection of civil society and the vulnerable, still have a long development road ahead of them as do efforts to reduce corruption. It is those that are poor who are the most exposed to existential threats in these environments. In Cambodia “according to official estimates, the poverty rate in 2014 was 13.5% compared to 47.8% in 2007... While Cambodia achieved in 2009 the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of halving poverty, the vast majority of families who escaped poverty did so by a small margin. Around 4.5 million people remain near-poor, vulnerable to falling back into poverty when exposed to economic and other external shocks.”¹

⁷ Nicholls, P. Apiwattanakorn, P. (2015) Thailand: Where Culture and the Classroom Collide. *The New English Teacher*. Thailand: Assumption University, the Theodore Maria School of Arts

It is no wonder that teachers as much as anyone are concerned for their own personal interest and safety above community responsibility, creating significant challenges with regards to motivation. Identifying individuals who are willing to take risks and be pioneers of change is a challenge, although it would also be naïve and unfair to portray all Cambodians as being the same. We have certainly witnessed hard working individuals demonstrating enthusiasm for improvement and development.

Nearly thirty years after the withdrawal of the Vietnamese and the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements, it is still relevant to cite the country's recent history as well as the current fragility of its institutions as being crucial factors underpinning the fear people have of change and for their own personal circumstances. This fear would include for example, that of losing any income that allows families to meet their basic needs. If teachers do not feel secure in their roles and do not receive support, they may well be reluctant to adopt and implement new teaching approaches out of concern for their own security if these changes are not seen to be prescribed.

Distrust in the system can generate a sense of hopelessness of there ever being any change. Teachers may not concern themselves with the bigger picture of how they can contribute to a stronger society and simply see the interventions of NGOs as onerous and another thing to be “done”, not understanding that some NGOs are trying to provide help to them. The NGO pays the teacher to come to workshops or to do mentoring and follow its program after all, so a simpler question for the teacher is whether the associated pay is enough for the extra effort expected without further thought on what might be achieved. Motivation that transcends the extrinsic and becomes intrinsic can be difficult to stimulate.

Government policies aimed at providing a “Teacher Career Pathway” or “Continuing Professional Development” have been recorded for some time but are as yet to be operationalised and in any form will be challenging to implement. Many teachers are certainly extrinsically motivated to improve their teaching when they work in communities that pay them to provide additional lessons for their children. This is a prime reason why teachers want to work in better off communities where parents can afford extra lesson fees. **However, there remains little understanding as to what quality teaching looks like and a reluctance among teachers to explain their approaches. The problem comes down to recognising that education is a National challenge that requires a contribution from everyone to resolve, and that by doing so, everyone benefits from the ensuing improved economic prosperity.**

We have identified that in a good number of cases teachers do not continue to put into practice what they have learned, what they have demonstrated they understand, and what they have witnessed improves the learning outcomes for their students, once we reduce our support and the frequency of our visits. Often the explanation given is that the teacher does not have the time, as they now have to concentrate on other means by which they can earn their income. We have seen that motivation is not

only an issue for teachers but is a systemic problem within the Cambodian education system. School principals, District and Provincial Office of Education officials have little autonomy and do not have the power to hire and fire teachers. They have to rely on their powers of persuasion to get the most out of their staff who they are powerless to reward or penalise where the circumstances warrant such interventions.

Apparent lack of both motivation and a sense of community responsibility can be particularly confronting as one reflects on one's own motivation for trying to bring about change. Local government officials can welcome NGOs into their areas saying “You can come and do your business here” expecting a pay-out for fostering a commercial transaction wherein the NGO's business attracts money from overseas when foreigners come to see the local situation. Certainly there are individuals working in, or who have set up, an NGO because of the prestige and salary that attaches to it, but while we are all paid a form of living to do the work, we look tirelessly at how the situation could be improved for generations to come. In an environment where setting a good example is often referred to as “showing-off” and any negative reference to the behaviour of another potentially risks the challenger's personal safety, moving systems forward takes a good deal of persistence, patience and perseverance.

3. THE ACTIONS OF OTHERS

As a small NGO, we are highly susceptible to changes in resource levels. Investment has to be strategic. There is not enough capacity to make significant or long-term programming errors. Focus is paramount to ensure clarity as to where we have the expertise and capacity to maximise benefits to those we support. We have been sufficiently forward thinking, perhaps lucky enough, to identify initiatives which have the potential to influence the national education reform agenda. This has increased the chances of embedding what we do into the education system, for which the Ministry is of course responsible, and so ensure its sustainability.

Organisations that have more resources at their disposal, may take less care, “rolling out” programming developed in other contexts with less thinking behind their initiatives. With more financial resources, they have greater influence on the National or local agendas. Their own agendas involve spending their budgets within a given time frame and at “scale”, often achieved by paying local education officers to carry out activities and measuring success in outputs rather than in longer term impacts.

In recent times there has been a perfectly reasonable desire to see NGOs working in the education sector, collaborate better and work together on identified areas of concern. The problem is that there has been no account taken of the practical challenges this can pose given each NGO’s focus and their own funding constraints. A number of calls to collaborate have been poorly orchestrated, or managed. In Cambodia these initiatives have been followed up by directives to NGOs to, for example, only use a given text book to support teaching standards, a wholly impractical requirement that is widely disregarded.

Such actions of high-profile organisations can have major consequences on our work – “rolling out” initiatives that are poorly conceived, across multiple Provinces, confuses teachers and District of Provincial Office of Education staff wanting to know how to prioritise their time. They reinforce the theme that the individuals required to implement these programs, are simply working for that given project, rather than to improve their own practice. Such mass initiatives also blur issues of national identity, homogenising teaching practices and resources into visions of global pedagogical symmetry. These initiatives are no more likely to survive than any previous attempts to roll over Cambodian culture.

An additional challenge is created by the pervading concern that a successful intervention suggests a historical shortcoming and that a shortcoming is the fault of someone which needs to be laid at their

door. Cultural sensitivities and personal pride or ‘face’ are strong influencers such that project footprints made by smaller organisations need to be carefully negotiated if these initiatives are to be given any support. Big partners to the Ministry may avoid these problems by funnelling their spending directly into Ministry departments and having very small teams of their own. However, projects that purport to be low cost and scalable to reach *thousands* while theoretically possible, have so far changed little. The MoEYS 2018 report ably illustrates this point.

STRATEGIES TO ADDRESS THE CHALLENGES

So what works if teachers are locked into ways of teaching which they don't really comprehend, children cannot question, educators act simply out of self-interest, and the big names are not helping! Or, in summary, "how can we get children learning?"

1. ADDRESSING MODES OF LEARNING

Empowerment and self-efficacy – a term originally defined by psychologist Albert Bandura to mean an individual's sense of "how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations" are at the heart of a good learning environment. This is reflected by teachers instilling the confidence in their students to challenge patriarchal norms while providing them with opportunities to learn and develop their problem-solving skills. Developing critical thinking skills is what we aim to see not only reflected in the way students are engaged, but embraced by teachers themselves as they become the learners engaged in SeeBeyondBorders programs. Extending this to developing an understanding of reflected practice is an important aspect of what we aim to see occurring in our mentorship program.

The processes we have applied, combine the following:

- Teaching teachers the curriculum content itself (so for example in Maths - what is a fraction?) and how the underlying mathematical concepts build on one another to develop a child's understanding. The same process is applied in literacy explaining the rules of the language – something they will not already know;
- Teaching teachers techniques for managing the classroom including strategies for catering for children with different learning styles and capabilities (we include strategies to manage poor behaviour in order to combat abusive practices here);
- Providing teaching resources and guides including in literacy - daily planners with all the books and materials necessary to support the planner;
- Providing teachers with regular and relevant support in their teaching to embed their understanding of what they have learned in their own classroom context.

We encourage teachers to use word-based problems rather than simply giving the children algorithms to solve, so helping develop their problem-solving skills. This is a teaching skill we run a specific course on. The process works well in Maths which is identified as a universal subject without a great need for a cultural context. Literacy on the other hand is much more emotive and there is more resistance to change here. Programs such as the BETT program from 2011⁸ identified the rules underpinning the written language that should be taught for children to scaffold their own learning, but this process was abandoned under pressure from various Ministry officials.

⁸ Courtney, J. (2011) *Completion Report: Khmer Literacy* CTB - Agence Belge de Développement
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Ongoing and continuous support is needed to embed quality teaching standards

We have persevered with the dialogue, explaining the rules in literacy without reference to the BETT findings, researching, rediscovering and codifying them for ourselves in a manner relevant to early grade learners. We have been astonished by the fact that these are rarely known by even the best educated Cambodians.

Teachers are reluctant to accept the rules and it has taken some time to identify strategies that help teachers be open to understanding the simple rules so they can teach them to the children and move beyond the cultural pride that is taken in Khmer being a “complex” language as discussed in Needham, S. (1994)

Once there is a basic routine provided to the teachers for the learning sequence, other skills can be layered on, such as managing teaching and learning activities and how to ask questions. We have introduced differentiated small group intervention tasks and guided reading groups in grade 2 based on student results from well-constructed assessment tasks – a further step in the learning process for teachers.

2. ADDRESSING MOTIVATION

As already discussed, identifying the root causes for a lack of motivation is complex. Participating teachers in our Quality Teaching programs, often perceive, initially at least, that the beneficiary of the work we are asking them to do is actually SeeBeyondBorders, not seeing that there is any problem with the status quo. We have been surprised to learn how prevalent this attitude is, potentially as a result of both community members and teachers in rural areas not understanding or having not seen what quality teaching is or can achieve. They do not read Ministry reports or understand how the work of NGOs can help them in the longer run. As a consequence, we have had to step up communications with teachers and school communities around why we are working in their area and discuss more deeply what it is we can help them to accomplish.



We work with communities to engage in education

It takes time to develop trust, a deeper understanding of the work we do, and a recognition that it is for the benefit of the children and so also for the future of the communities where we work. **In all this time we have subscribed to the norm of paying teachers to come to workshops and to mentor, to improve their teaching, and this has worked in as far as it goes. However, this approach seen from the teacher’s perspective legitimately raises the question of who the teachers are then accountable to.** They then reasonably ask whether they are receiving enough to perform the extra duties as expected by SeeBeyondBorders, not recognising benefits

beyond the money and their cultural proclivity for wanting to keep foreigners happy.

Our task is to ensure that teachers have a sense of accountability to the children in their classes, their parents, and their communities beyond what we pay for, based on their own professional obligations.

We have looked to expand our School Development Planning initiatives to encourage schools to place a greater focus on learning. We have begun holding community meetings in all the schools in which we work, to discuss what the future holds for their children. Communities do understand that there is no longer simply more land to be farmed and that existing properties are not providing a sufficient source of income for growing families. Parents who attend these meetings are overwhelmingly mothers (97% at our most recent meetings). They do not want to see all their young having to find work in Thailand or elsewhere outside of Cambodia in jobs that simply involve manual work. They do see, when prompted, that education can provide alternatives for their children and that it is of value. We are hoping that this will begin to hold teachers and schools accountable for providing this education and that teachers will understand that teaching is their work and that the support they get from SeeBeyondBorders benefits them and their children and should be cherished, perhaps one day even paid for.

Community meetings are also designed to break down the superstition around education processes and resistance to change. Communities are aware that current teaching practice achieves little or no result and underlies why within a few years the majority of families no longer encourage or insist that their children continue to attend school, but instead get work. Having champions from the community, amongst the local ministry representatives, as well as within our own staff, helps overcome long held and often intransigent views. However there surely are no simple and immediate solutions.

3. ADDRESSING COLLABORATION WITH OTHERS

Our UNESCO award in 2016 and the Honourable Commendation we received in 2017 for “Innovations in the Professional Development of Teachers”, drew the attention of the Minister of Education who provided us with a ringing endorsement after visiting our programs, but it has been challenging for us to maintain the momentum with promoting our solutions. Our research



The UNESCO Award for Improving Teachers

indicates that this is frequently the case for organisations who also win awards for innovative programs addressing the “learning crisis”. All have challenges with “scaling”, but the logic of starting with something that has proven to be successful and growing that, rather than attempting to impose a unilateral big budget and an off the shelf international solution, is compelling. It does seem that it is time for a different approach from those with the resources to influence the outcomes for the next generation given the lessons apparent from the last thirty years.

The investment required to collaborate is considerable and requires a good deal of trust given the precarious nature of funding available to support what we already do. We were certainly pleased by our awards and the consequential visits from those interested in what we do. But our expectations were too great, lacking a sophisticated understanding of the realities of international development. We have learned not to let success go to our heads and to be content with what we can do – at least until someone or some organisation with deep pockets is prepared to back a program of

significant change and put funding into building capacity in civil society as distinct from cycling it through Government institutions where accountability can be challenging to achieve.

CONCLUSION

Is there a solution to the question, “how do you get children learning?” given the challenges identified? Our view is that there certainly is. Countries like Singapore and Vietnam have achieved wonders with their education systems in a generation by being well organised, inclusive, and persistent, empowering schools and teachers. We have proved that maths and literacy levels can be dramatically improved for students at a modest investment in Cambodia, identifying that it too could achieve a revolution in educational achievement by addressing both its educational processes and the underlying culture in the system.

The challenges, as already outlined, are to change human behaviour and to develop a sense of cultural purpose so that these development initiatives can become sustainable, or in the words of Nicholls and Apiwattanakorn, “raise awareness and initiate a fresh dialogue, leading to an exchange of ideas.” A common understanding amongst teachers of what learning means and their role in improving the lives of Cambodians is now very much needed. This is not going to be achieved simply through a mechanical change. At the outset, this will require putting self-interest to one side and having donors, the Ministry and practitioners with credibility and proven experience, join forces in a common cause and rethink what they want to see as the outlook for the next generation of Cambodian children with better learning – something that is within the power of all of us to contribute towards.

About the Author



Edward Shuttleworth first travelled to Cambodia with his wife Catherine and their young family in 2002. The Shuttleworth’s were immediately struck by the poverty levels in Cambodia and witnessed the desperate measures families took to obtain an income. Edward and Catherine founded SeeBeyondBorders in 2009. They were determined to contribute to improving the quality of education in Cambodian primary schools through ensuring teachers are equipped with the skills necessary to do their jobs effectively. Over the last 10 years the SeeBeyondBorders team has grown the charity from its humble beginnings to become an internationally recognised, award winning organisation with a local leadership team. Today the charity has a staff of 25 people mainly based in Battambang and Siem Reap Provinces. Edward leads the organisation as the CEO and divides his time primarily between Cambodia and France.