

# MÁIRE NÍ BHRÓITHE

## See Beyond Borders Cambodia - Summer 2022



In July 2019, my husband and I decided to spend 4 days in Cambodia on our way home from a holiday in Vietnam. A friend told me to look out for a 'Colm Byrne' from Dublin – she said he lived somewhere in Cambodia! Two nights later in a small restaurant in Siem Reap we were served by a man from Northern Ireland. I asked "Do you happen know a 'Colm' here in Cambodia"? He smiled and said "of course, I do – would you like to meet him"?

The rest is history.

The following day Colm brought us by tuk-tuk to the offices of *See Beyond Borders* (SBB), a charity that aims to improve the early years of primary education in Cambodia, through empowering the teaching profession. Colm, formerly a Dublin primary teacher had spent over 10 years living in Cambodia. He produced some stark statistics about Cambodian education.

Between 1975 to 1979, the Pol Pot Regime murdered 90% of Cambodian teachers. It is estimated that between 1.5 to 2 million Cambodians died of starvation, execution or overwork. Their bodies were buried in mass graves that became known as 'killing fields'. Former doctors, teachers and other professionals were stripped of their possessions and forced to toil in the fields as part of a re-education process and a return to an agricultural society. The education system was destroyed.



Today, on average, a Cambodian child spends 4.7 years in school in total. 79% of teachers have no graduate qualifications and less than 3% of all children reach minimum standards.

We promised to return to Cambodia and to do what we could to help SBB. We kept in touch with Colm and he arrived in Ireland with a delegation from the Cambodian Ministry of Education in 2020. They met with various groups of educators, visited schools, met the Centre for School Leadership, the Inspectorate and spent time in National College of Ireland and DCU.

We had hoped to spend some time in 2020 in Cambodia assisting in whatever way we could. This was not to be with Covid's intervention. Last summer, we made a return trip to Cambodia to learn more about the Cambodian education system. It became clear that the situation had deteriorated since 2019 - Covid had a devastating impact on Cambodian

education. The country experienced the highest rate of school closure in southeast Asia. SBB had to cut down on their work and they are currently working in just 27 schools. They are focusing on literacy, numeracy and digital learning projects with students in the first three years of schooling.

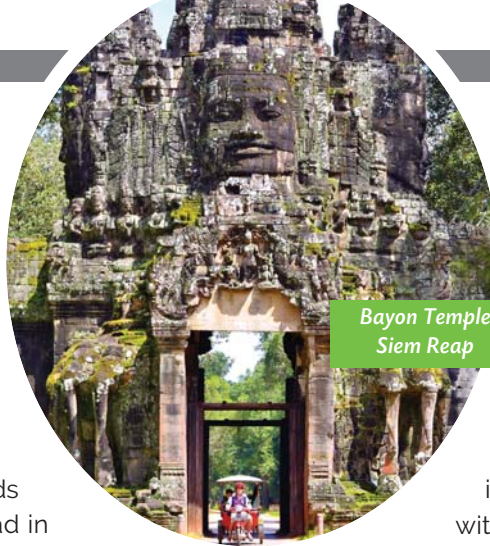
We visited schools and watched teachers work with up to 40 five-year-olds in dark classrooms at desks like we had in the 1960s. All their shoes remained outside the door. While there were small fans on ceilings, it was very warm in what was essentially as an outdoor classroom. We watched children run enthusiastically to the back of a classroom, roll out a thin mat and sit on it while they recited the Khmer words that appeared on the screen. Indeed, all around the schools, I could constantly hear children chanting. I was fascinated by the school bell – a large cylinder which was hit by a hammer at the end of break.

Schools are open from 7.00am to 11.00am for students, six days a week. All children wear a uniform of white shirt and blue skirt/trousers - exactly the same in every school that we visited. In one school it appeared that the teachers were also wearing a uniform. It turned out that there is a colour associated with every day of the week and that the teachers, (mainly women) wore blouses of the 'designated day' colour.

In Cambodia, 80% of the Principals are male, even though they only make up 24% of the teaching population. I had the pleasure of meeting one Principal. Through an interpreter he indicated that he had a major role in monitoring teachers. He monitored their attendance, their punctuality, their report writing and visited their classes to look at their teaching skills. He said that he would allocate marks to teachers based on the above criteria.

Teachers earn just \$350 (US) a month. Many have a second job to improve their financial situation. Teachers drive to school daily on their motorbikes - I saw no cars in the school yards. Many teachers are unqualified, while others have done a 2-year programme, which had low entry requirements. Very few have opportunities to engage in quality professional learning. The work of SBB is to support teachers develop and improve their teaching skills. They have a mentoring programme for all teachers in the 27 schools. This involves training 35 teachers to work as mentors across all the schools and training 15 master mentors to support those mentors.

Another focus of SBB is to improve the leadership across the schools. This means working with the Principals - there are no Deputies and no middle leaders. There is a clear need to provide leadership training for female teachers to empower and encourage them to consider taking on the



Bayon Temple  
Siem Reap

senior leadership role. SBB run an excellent Change-Makers programme which involve five women working in schools every morning, gaining an understanding about education and partaking in a professional development programme in the afternoons.

Colm Byrne was appointed CEO of SBB in June 2022. We spent two days working with the SBB team and some teachers, looking at progressive pedagogy, exploring what makes a skilful teacher and discussing the future direction of SBB. We felt privileged to be there for those uplifting days.

Cambodia is a wonderful country and its people are warm, friendly and generous. While we were very busy over the few weeks, we had the weekends to ourselves. We loved the Temples of Angkor Wat just outside Siem Reap, had a wonderful ride on The Bamboo Train in Battambang, watched millions of bats leave their bat caves, learned to cook Khmer dishes, learned to speak some Khmer and had some wonderful meals in various restaurants.

In Jack Whitehall's Series "Travel's with my father" (series 1, episode 4) – Jack and his dad stayed in Bambu Hotel in Battambang. We stayed in the same hotel (\$40 a night) and were treated very well by its Irish owner.

I travelled with my IPPN Water Bottle (lost on the bamboo train) and my NAPD notebook and recounted the story of our journey and time in Cambodia on Twitter (See @mairenib for photos and more details).

We continue to support SBB from Ireland and hope to return again to assist with mentoring and leadership programmes. SBB Ireland is a new charity which was launched in Ireland in 2021. Should anyone wish to find out more, they can be contacted on E: [ireland@seebeyondborders.org](mailto:ireland@seebeyondborders.org).



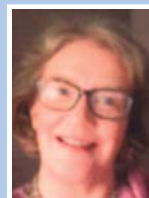
SCAN ME

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SBB Ireland website



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