

Our Connections

The next generation



CWS-CAMBODIA



Like many small Cambodian NGOs that rely on volunteers and good intentions to address the most serious and complex social problems in Cambodia, the Children Support Foundation fell into a crisis last year, 7 years after its launch. It ran out of funding and could not even meet its overhead costs, while underlying issues prevented it from obtaining financial support from donors.

“We had no strategic plan, centralized filing system, or capacity to draft formal needs assessments,” explained CSF founder and executive director Mr. Heap Sereyvuth, who started the foundation in 2001 with his own money after returning from Malaysia where he had worked in the telecom industry.

He was inspired to start CSF

after traveling through Cambodia and seeing “that children in some areas of the country had no access to health or education, that they were being exploited and that they had no understanding of their most basic rights.”

He and a handful of volunteers began working in several areas throughout the country: from the coastal resort of Sihanoukville to the tourist town of Siem Reap and indigenous villages in the Northeast.

Their programs focused on assisting children in exploitive situations, preventing exploitation and enhancing healthcare. Their projects included peer education, the formation of children’s clubs and support for vulnerable families to prevent the conditions that

To deal with its immediate financial crisis CSF is now gathering used paper and other materials that can be recycled from international NGOs in Phnom Penh.

allow child labor, violence against children, sexual abuse and trafficking to thrive.

“Our primary task is to identify at-risk families and children and prevent exploitation and violence before it occurs,” Mr. Heap explains. CSF, however, lacked the capacity to do this effectively. “It was very frustrating. We knew what needs to be done. We knew what we could do and we were deeply committed to our work,” he said.

CSF approached CWS-Cambodia’s partnership program, which had been providing small grants for several years, for assistance. Our partnership program manager responded immediately. In-depth discussions with foundation staff and volunteers were the first step. An assessment of the organization’s structure followed, and its weaknesses and strengths were identified. This was followed by training on financial management, strategic planning and proposal writing for donors.

To deal with its immediate financial crisis CSF is now gathering used paper and other materials that can be recycled from NGOs in Phnom Penh, raising funds from

donation boxes at hotels in tourist areas, and operating a motorbike postal delivery service in Sihanoukville. It is also exploring the feasibility of opening a second social enterprise: a printing shop.

The benefits of what CWS-Cambodia refers to as Local Institutional Development (LID) have been vital and immediate. Assistance in proposal writing allowed CSF to obtain funds from UNESCO to launch a HIV/Aids awareness campaign during Cambodia’s annual Water Festival in Phnom Penh. This year the 3-day festival drew up to 3 million rural Cambodians to Phnom Penh for a series of concerts, performances and boat races. CSF used this grant to distribute condoms and flyers explaining how to prevent HIV infection to people from across the country, many from villages that would be very difficult to access directly.

The foundation now has a strengthened structure, transparent accounting, centralized reporting system, a 5-year strategy, and a CWS-Cambodia staff member on its board of directors, which now has regular quarterly meetings to review projects, assess their value and plan for the future.

New Ideas and Self Help

CWS-Cambodia holistic partner Kumnit Thmey (New Ideas) Organization has helped set up 27 Self-Help Groups in 15 remote villages in Banteay Meanchey and Oddar Meanchey provinces. Of these, 15 have become self sustaining and do not require monitoring. Combined, the groups had accumulated more than \$3,000 of their own savings (as of November 2008).

Besides providing an alternative to moneylenders, who charge 5 to 10 percent interest per day, the groups also create solidarity in villages where the effects of war remain visible on the environment and the people. Peace building, gender equality, democratic principles, accountability, transparency and a focus on helping the absolute poor are among the values embedded in these groups.

New Ideas used CWS-Cambodia’s guidelines to help village residents establish the groups. These guidelines were updated and reprinted in May 2008. The booklets have been distributed throughout Cambodia. New Ideas director Mr. Leang Saorey sums up the process in 6 stages.

➔ **Introduce the concept:** When fieldworkers enter the village they begin by explaining how Self-Help Groups have been developed in other villages and explain their structure, effectiveness, and purpose. These discussions take place during home stays. Field

staff visit every household in the village and identify the most vulnerable ones. “We stay closest to the absolute poor so that we can get a clear perspective of their position,” Mr. Leang explained. The concept of Self-Help Groups is also introduced during social events in the village. This stage takes 2-3 months.

➔ **Formation of groups:** At this stage it is crucial for fieldworkers not to intervene. Instead, they closely observe residents’ attempts to set up Self-Help Groups. By not intervening, fieldworkers ensure that the groups are independent from the start, and that members do not join them in the expectation that they will receive aid or financial assistance from New Ideas. They do, however, begin discussing the regulations and organizational structure required for Self-Help Groups to succeed. This stage lasts about 4 months.

➔ **Technical assistance:** Once the groups have been formed and members have begun saving money and investing, it is time to offer technical assistance to the committee that has been democratically elected to operate the group. Committee members receive training on 5 record books: accounting; savings; investment; lending; and attendance lists for monthly meetings. This stage takes about 6 months.

➔ **Capital request:** After the group has accumulated capital from its members and can demonstrate that it

is operating transparently, it can request a loan from New Ideas. The loan ranges from \$300 to \$500 for 1 year. At this stage, New Ideas ensures that the way the group intends to use the loan is consistent with its goals and mission. This stage takes up to 3 months.

➔ **Evaluation and monitoring:** New Ideas has an internal rule that requires that the fieldworker in the village be switched to another village and a replacement brought in to conduct the evaluation of the newly formed Self-Help Group(s). The capacity of the committee is evaluated as are its records and documents. If the evaluation is positive the loan from New Ideas is approved at an interest rate of 3 percent per month. (Two percent goes to the Self-Help Group and 1 percent goes to New Ideas.) This stage takes about 2 months.

➔ **Workshops:** Annual workshops are held to bring together the committee members of all Self-Help Groups in the target area. During the 2-day events investments, loans and savings during the previous year are reviewed and plans for the next year are drafted. The workshops allow committee members to exchange ideas about what works best and what does not, as well as increase solidarity between villages.

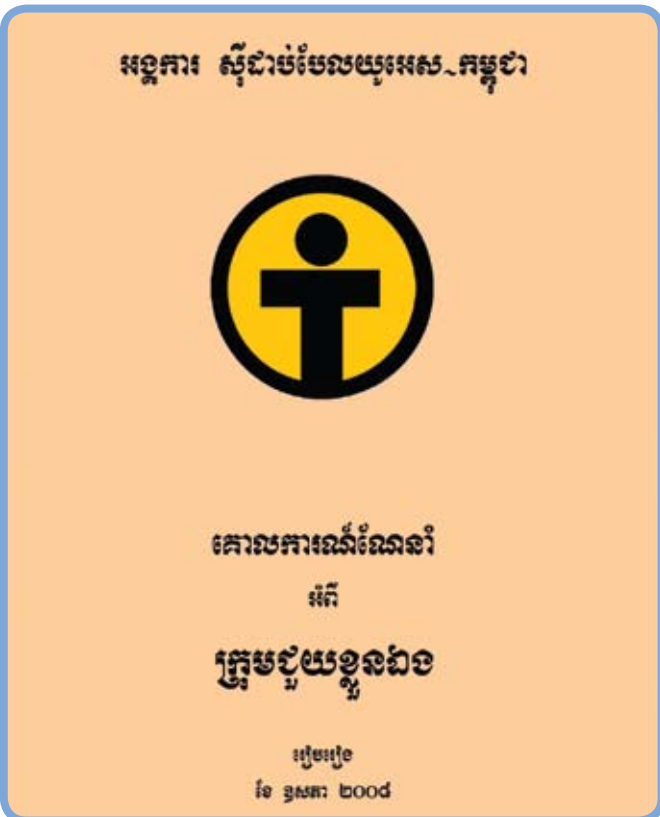
Mr. Leang believes these groups are at the heart of village-based development. Members begin to see each other as partners in development and they slowly but surely begin to see how much they can accomplish by working together. As a result of these

groups, children of members are more likely to attend school (their parents can borrow from the group to buy school supplies), and families are moving from temporary shelters into homes. Members of the groups also borrow money to buy seeds, fertilizer and start livestock and poultry-raising businesses.

Mr. Leang has noticed that the impact has been greatest on those who had been isolated in absolute poverty. Previously, they had been too embarrassed to even talk to fieldworkers when they first arrived in the villages. The change has also been noticed by commune officials. They are asking New Ideas to expand. CWS-Cambodia is the only international NGO providing overall funding for New Ideas, as well as mentoring and encouragement. Other donors provide valuable support for specific projects.



Left: CWS-Cambodia’s updated guidelines for Self Help Groups. **Right:** A SFG meeting in Odar Meanchey province.



Small Grants

Besides providing holistic funding (which covers operational and project needs) for carefully selected Cambodian NGOs and Local Institutional Development assistance, CWS-Cambodia provides small grants (under \$1,000) for specific projects for a host of community-based organizations, volunteer groups and NGOs.

In some cases, this is the first step in a process of linking the groups with other donors and with other groups doing similar work. The orphanage Meatho Phum Komah (Homeland) in Battambang operated by Mrs. Mao Lang (below) has received ongoing support from CWS-Cambodia for several years. A detailed set of guidelines is followed for all forms of partnerships.

Our partnership program was founded in 1996 in Kompong Thom by our international ecumenical partners. Its focus was to build the capacity of Cambodian NGOs in that province, but has expanded significantly. It now includes an ecumenical partnership program, which supports Christian groups in Kompong Thom as well as Christian and interfaith groups based in Phnom Penh. The latter includes the Cambodian Student Christian Mission, which conducts monthly workshops on cross cultural peace building. During the workshops students discuss how Buddhists and

Christians can work together for common goals, like building a more peaceful society.

The ecumenical program also supports the Initiatives for Change Association (ICA), which mobilizes youths to support vulnerable families and promotes peace building between communities and across borders. With support from CWS and other donors, ICA organized the fourth Cambodia-Vietnam Dialogue last March, bringing together youths from both countries to discuss conflicting versions of their painful history on a personal level.

CWS-Cambodia partners also work with each other. For example, the Kompong Thom-based Cambodian Organization for Women's Support (a former holistic partner) helped our ecumenical program staff conduct a study tour of their programs for members of 3 churches in Svay Rieng, giving them the opportunity to see firsthand how Self Help Groups had helped raise vulnerable households out of poverty.

CWS also supports Cambodia's annual Peace March, or Dhammayatra. The 15-day march is led by Buddhist monks. Besides financial support, all staff members have the opportunity to join the march: for 1 day to 15. The decision is entirely theirs.

