

What is Peace?

Start with gestures



CWS-CAMBODIA



Within Cambodia, and even CWS, there is confusion about what peace is and how to articulate it. Perhaps this reflects the social atmosphere here, where a tribunal of “those most responsible” for a genocide that occurred more than 30 years ago is now underway. Peace remains, for many, a concept rather than an experience.

During the slow build up to the tribunal’s first hearings, a conflict also broke out along the Thai border over which country owns the land around a temple that sits atop a cliff in the Cambodian province named after the temple: Preah Vihear or Temple of the Gods.

During the tensest months of conflict, some residents of the villages in the district where the temple is located had constructed underground bunkers in

expectation that the Thai air force might bomb them. CWS-Cambodia works in these villages.

Cambodians have been paying closer attention to this conflict than the tribunal. The dispute over the temple predates the genocide. The temple is also the location where thousands of Cambodian refugees who had fled to Thailand to escape the Khmer Rouge were driven back into Cambodia by the Thai military in 1979. It is a site of bitterness as well as national pride: for both countries. The temple is in Cambodia, some of the land around it is in Thailand (how much of this land belongs to each country is a matter of great dispute).

What I see are 2 men who have had very hard lives. They feel sympathy for each other. They don't want to be there. Even in war there are gestures of peace.

The photo above (taken by Cambodian photographer Vandy Rattana) shows a Cambodian soldier passing a lighter to a Thai soldier near the temple. What

struck him most while taking photographs there, he said, were the gestures of camaraderie displayed by troops on both sides of the disputed border. At times they exchanged food, cigarettes, water and friendly greetings. Several, however, were killed in clashes, while others suffered the loss of limbs from landmines. The area around the temple is still heavily mined; it was one of the final refuges of the Khmer Rouge.

CWS-Cambodia's peace program focuses on identifying "connectors" between people involved in conflicts. The dispute over Preah Vihear has strained staff working on peace within CWS-Cambodia: they get cross when the name of the temple is pronounced the way Thais pronounce it.

"Maybe Buddhism is our connector. We are both Buddhist nations," suggested Mr. Sok Nao, a peace program adviser who led conflict resolution workshops in the province earlier this year.

The program coordinator of CWS-Cambodia's Peace department Mrs. Tauch Norneath takes another approach. "What I see in that photo are 2 men who have had very hard lives. They feel sympathy for each other. They don't want to be there," she explained. Even in war there are gestures of peace, she pointed out.

CWS-Cambodia's peace program is focused on the local level. It works within households and villages and in their links to commune councils, health centers and other government agencies. For example, direct aid is distributed very carefully so as not to create jealousy or

feuds within villages: it goes to the absolute poor who are identified by fieldworkers and Village Development Committees. The peace program encompasses reconciliation, gender equality, conflict resolution, trauma workshops, cross cultural and interfaith connections, and compassion for the absolute poor as well as those living with HIV/Aids.

One of our 2 drivers, Mr. Oun Vibul, sums up peace in 3 precepts: the law applies to everyone; we must respect each other; and we must not act violently. He is also quick to add, "The whole world needs peace, not only Cambodia."

Two years ago he attended a 3-day conflict resolution workshop in Kompong Thom. What he learned came in handy late last year, when the youngest of his 5 children, his 16 year old son, dropped out of school and disappeared from home for days at a time. He had joined a gang.

Neighbors urged Mr. Oun to either throw his son out of the house or beat him till he reformed. He decided instead to talk to him and convince him to attend a 3 week session at juvenile rehabilitation center.

His son is now back at home and attending school. He has new friends who he invites to his home. He speaks about his future plans with his father. Mr. Oun would like his son to become a doctor, but his son wants to join the military, perhaps because of the stand-off at Preah Vihear. Mr. Oun is wise enough not to discourage his son's ambition. "I am happy he has his own dreams," he said.



Participants at a conflict resolution workshop in Preah Vihear explore possible roots of latent conflicts, before discussing how to deal with them effectively.

Our Learning Curve

The learning curve for building peace is a swift one. Once embarked on, it transforms thinking and actions, and deepens understanding of others, which leads to more genuine and effective relationships.

One of the catalysts to making peace the core of CWS-Cambodia's work was a conflict over fisheries in Kompong Thom in 1999. At that time, small-scale fishing families faced the loss of their livelihood to powerful officials. CWS advocated, successfully, on behalf of the fishing villages.

In 2001, a single staff member attended a peace training workshop on nonviolent activism conducted by the Cambodian Development Research Institute. Following enthusiastic discussions with our Kompong Thom project manager, this training was then incorporated into the province's strategic plan. This became another catalyst for transformation within CWS-Cambodia. A space to confidently discuss (and implement) peaceful strategies was created in a society where a post-war mentality impeded such ideas. We also learned that latent conflicts could explode into open ones if we avoided them, and searched for personal and organizational strategies for identifying and exploring such conflicts.

During 2003 and 2004, CWS-Cambodia conducted workshops in villages on weapons reduction as part of a program funded by the European Union. Village leaders reported a dramatic decline in the number of armed robberies following this project. This experience prompted CWS-Cambodia to begin networking with other organizations working on peace, within Cambodia and other countries. We also switched our strategic plan to make peace building a goal and guiding principle of our work.

Next, staff members attended a training session in the Philippines on Local Capacity for Peace (the

"Do No Harm" operational theory), where they learned, among other things, to identify connectors and dividers. These concepts and theories were then adapted to Cambodian culture, duplicated within our organization, and then passed on to our partners, village leaders and commune councils.

Gender issues are also a vital component of peace building. Because they provide a prime example of power structures in a hierarchical society, they can be a good place to start building peace. Gender equality is now embedded in CWS-Cambodia and this is having dramatic effects in the villages where we work.

Peace building means siding with those who are right rather than with those who wield power. This is, perhaps, the biggest challenge for CWS-Cambodia. Our obligation to protect those who lack power exceeds our capacity to do so, but by expanding our partners in peace building (as well as our own knowledge, creativity and experience) this will change.

CWS-Cambodia is also introducing restorative justice to Cambodia, and linking this to the healing of trauma. The launch of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal makes this work more vital than ever. In 2007, we began working with groups in Timor Leste, introducing peace-building skills developed in Cambodia to a country emerging from conflict. After decades of civil conflict, Cambodians are discovering that they have something unique to teach the world about peace.

We are convinced that the concept of peace building boils down to one goal: getting every individual to realize that peace is his or her responsibility. We have learned that some of our staff excel at sparking discussions on peace, while others are better at bridging differences, or determining when it is best to cooperate or time to accommodate. Everyone plays a role.



Members of CWS-Cambodia facilitate a peace building and reconciliation workshop for youths in Dili, Timor Leste in May last year. This followed training on organizations and conflict analysis in November 2007. A 3rd workshop was held in August last year.

Peace at Work

Community Peace Volunteers are the vital link between peace concepts developed or adapted to suit Cambodia by CWS and their application in rural villages, where a dynamic of conflict and suspicion continues to thrive and the lack of community solidarity remains a key barrier to social and economic development. This is especially true in villages along the Thai border. Many comprise former Khmer Rouge soldiers and those who fled them to refugee camps in Thailand, but were then repatriated in the early 90s after the Paris Peace Accords.

The volunteers, who are either elected or appointed by Village Development Committees, receive training on conflict resolution, domestic violence, restorative justice, stereotypes and prejudice, and the role of peacemakers. There are currently 44 peace volunteers

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working in Kompong Thom and Preah Vihear provinces. They gather information on potential triggers of conflict (such as land disputes), as well as actual conflicts, like wife beating and violence against children, and draft monthly reports. They submit these reports to Village Development Committees, village leaders and relevant officials and, when necessary, call for intervention. They also collect their reports and submit them to their Commune Council on a monthly basis.

Their role is also educational, spreading practical knowledge about solving disputes through dialogue or intermediaries. Every year they draft annual activity plans with other peace volunteers in their commune. They also work with local authorities and government agencies to organize awareness-raising events to coincide with global campaigns, such as the White Ribbon Campaign and International Children's Day. Environmental awareness is also part of the peace-building process.

Peace volunteers work with village elders and Buddhist monks to mobilize funds and resources to assist the most vulnerable

households in their village. This includes financial as well as moral support. They pay home visits to elderly people as well as the absolute poor, and encourage other members of the community to do the same. Social gatherings and religious ceremonies are also used as occasions to introduce techniques for building peace and resolving conflicts.

The volunteers receive regular training at CWS-Cambodia offices and refresher courses. They also attend international events, such as the Youth for Peace conference held in Siem Reap last year. Community Peace Volunteer Ms. Ngan Sokha, 21, (below) a resident of Thmey village in Tipou Commune, Kompong Thom, attended the week-long event and brought the knowledge and experience she gained from it back to her village.

"Now, I know that Cambodia is not the only country that has experienced genocide. I don't want to see any more violence in my country," she said.

"Reconciliation is the way to solve problems. I'll share this knowledge with other people in my village, especially youths. What I experienced at the conference is that we need to learn this all over the world."

