

Aspects of Social Work with Vulnerable Groups in Cambodia

Helen Fujimoto

[Abstract]

Social Work in Cambodia is still largely conducted by NGOs and INGOs, rather than Government employees of the Social Affairs Department. In the paper I focus on some organizations which are meeting the needs of some of the most vulnerable groups in the society, women and children affected by domestic violence, and disabled children. It is important first to clarify the way in which past decades of war have produced a culture of violence. I consider some of the many and varied NGOs currently working simultaneously to change this culture of violence and to meet the social welfare needs of Cambodians. I focus on the activities of one particular NGO, CWCC, which is active in advocacy, education and the rescue of women and girls from violence. I then discuss inclusive schooling for disabled children, which was set up as a project and implemented in schools in several areas in the country. I conclude by discussing two NGOs which focus on mental and emotional health, TPO which offers direct mental health care, and Social Service Cambodia, which has set up social welfare training courses to give training in social work care and counseling to social workers and others already working for government departments and NGOs.

[Key words]

Culture of violence, services for women and children, disabled children, NGOs, Social Work education

Introduction

In August 2005, and October 2008, I visited Cambodia to study the state of social welfare education in the country as part of a project of the Research Institute of the Japan College of Social Work. This paper focuses on those NGOs working to aid the development of legal and social infrastructure and offer services to two of the most vulnerable groups in society, women and children affected by violence, and disabled children.

It is important first to address the definition and common image of Social Welfare. As a government department, the Ministry of Social Welfare is, in many countries, supported by a nationwide work force composed of people native to the region, with centrally or locally allocated government budgets to fund projects and care for weaker and/or disadvantaged members of the society. However, in the context of Cambodia, as well as other countries which have suffered from prolonged war and

social dislocation, it is important to understand that the social, administrative, economic and personnel structures which underlie the activities of a state-directed social welfare bureaucracy have either not been allowed to develop or have suffered severe damage. It is more useful, therefore, to think of social welfare in a much broader context of generalized and multi-faceted social development. Social welfare in Cambodia is implemented in the form of a wide range of medical, legal, social and economic activities conducted by a wide variety of local and international organizations. These activities are largely funded from outside the country. In this paper, I will discuss the background to this situation and focus on some of the organizations providing services for the most vulnerable members of the society.

Relationship between the Ministry of Social Affairs and I/NGOs

The Ministry of Social Affairs in Cambodia is charged with the mandate to provide services to the most vulnerable members of the society. However, the Ministry is one of the least funded of all the ministries and suffers from a chronic lack of financial and personnel resources. The social welfare services of Cambodia are largely implemented by non-government organizations. The large number of organizations involved and the great variety of their provenance and membership means that one of the most important issues is communication among and between the different organizations working in the same field. At the same time, the various gaps - in language, culture, education and perceptions, as well as roles and goals - among the various organizations, increases the difficulties of implementing direct and consistent aid for those who are most in need of it. It is clear that government ministries and departments act more as a point of referral and a registration center rather than a center of active policy making and implementation. In this paper, therefore, I will focus on the activities of non-government organizations. My main focus is an NGO which is working to provide services to women and children suffering from domestic violence and an inclusive education project to enable disabled children to receive education in state primary schools.

Social Governance

There have been extensive reports published by several INGOs on various aspects of the economic and social situation in Cambodia. The UNICEF report on Cambodia presented the background to some of the ways in which the effects of Khmer Rouge period have continued to influence the country. "The recent history...has continued to be tumultuous... including a lack of government due to a political stalemate for close to one full year from the July 2003 election. The lack of a government prevented education planning from taking place and there was a general slowing of government activities in the face of continued uncertainty. Salaries were paid late and many donors also waited until the conclusion of these issues before making further aid commitments. In addition, the country remains overwhelmingly poor and rural, with 35 - 40% of the population living below the poverty line and up to 75 - 80% below the poverty line in rural and remote areas. Industries outside of agriculture remain insignificant, with tourism and the garment industry offering the only hope for significant gains; most persons in the country are still engaged in agriculture. Therefore, while the most devastating Khmer

Rouge years (1975 - 1979) are now close to 30 years distant, their effects continue to be felt through a decimated elite (due not only to wartime deaths but also to massive emigration) and on-going lack of political and economic security for many persons” (UNICEF report, p. 28). The vacuum created by this lack of active political and social governance has been filled by a proliferation of international and local non-government organizations. These are described in the ADB Overview of Civil Society in Cambodia in 2002, as follows:

“the number of international non-government organizations (INGOs) in Cambodia reached about 300, up from 25 in the early 1980s. The first local NGO was established in 1991. Since then, the number of local NGOs and associations ... increased exponentially. An estimated 1,000 organizations are currently registered with the Government of Cambodia, but only about 300 are operational. In addition, more than 60 NGO working groups organized by sector, issue, or geographic area have been formed by umbrella organizations such as the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC) and NGO Forum” (p 2). This means that administrative and cooperative activities which are usually carried out by government are divided between multiple organizations, which derive funding from a great variety of sources. This situation also makes it very difficult to obtain clear information and data about particular sectors in Cambodia.

Shadows of the Past

In discussion with various NGO representatives, I was presented by many different people with the image of a special kind of “generation gap” in the country. Cambodians over the age of fifty have direct memories of the traumatic Pol Pot period, in which they suffered in various ways – some of those ways remain untold and unhealed even after the passage of more than thirty years. This generation of people who survived experienced such fundamental violations of basic human rights and underwent such horrendous experiences that they found it difficult in all sorts of ways to function as mentors (parents/teachers/elders) of the younger generation. It was difficult also for younger people, as well as non-Cambodians, to imagine the reality which their elders had survived. Those people who remained in the country and directly experienced the regime of Pol Pot could not gain education or skills of any kind and lived in continual fear of their lives. Survival from that period has involved living with internal as well as external scars, which probably made it difficult to function effectively when peace returned to the country.

In the intervening period, the population balance in the country has changed dramatically. People under the age of thirty now account for as much as 70% of the population. In recent years, with the coming of globalization to Cambodia and greater access to resources in Phnom Penh, youth, especially urban youth, were exposed to pornography, drugs, alcohol and HIV/AIDS – in addition to being born of parents who had suffered great trauma, directly or indirectly.

This situation has direct implications for family relationships. A study conducted in 1999 concluded that: “domestic violence, husbands battering wives, wives battering husband, parents beating or cursing children, are considered normal within family life in Cambodia” (Sokhem). The social background

of war creates a situation of normalized violence, lack of trust between people, greater numbers of disabled people, greater numbers of widowed women and single parent families and former soldiers who know no other way to live. The normalization of violence does not end with the end of war, but continues within the family as well as the wider society. Domestic violence and violence against women and children continues to be a severe and complex problem in the society.

Legal infrastructure support in the area of domestic violence

The necessity for change was recognized soon after the international organizations were invited back into Cambodia in 1992. A Ministry of Women and Veterans Affairs was set up in 1996 and work was started to provide a framework of law to protect the rights of women. Aid in the process of framing the law and its various provisions supporting legal and educational infrastructure was provided by the Technical Assistant to the (later named) Ministry of Women Affairs, funded by a German NGO advising on the implementation of law. Their team, including Cambodian and German women, worked on various ways of informing and educating people in institutions of law implementation and enforcement to include the legal, social and conceptual aspects of Domestic Violence. The technical assistance project started with the Legal Unit and the DV unit in 2004 as part of an effort to create the technical, administrative and social infrastructure preparatory to implementing laws and programs. The focus of this team, in the Ministry of Women's Affairs, was on the infrastructure needed for the law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence. The process, which took 9 years, was modeled on the Japanese law and finally adopted in 2005. Following implementation, the team focused on a holistic approach towards implementing the enacted law, by conducting trainings for law enforcers in order to improve attitudes to women and women's issues. One of the difficulties was said to be the creation of awareness in the Ministry of Women's Affairs itself, that Domestic Violence is not purely a legal but also a social problem. A Ministry of Women's Affairs delegation was taken to Germany in 2003 to show a variety of services for women and to demonstrate philosophy and attitudes.

However, as recently as 2006, at the United Nations General Assembly meeting of the Committee on Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, the Cambodian Minister for Women's Affairs noted that the country and society was still dominated by "a culture of violence", largely directed at women, in the form of domestic violence, trafficking in women and extremely high incidence of rape. Widespread prostitution and trafficking were evidence of the fact that the enacted laws were still not being well implemented.

The Cambodian Women's Crisis Centre: An NGO providing social services to women:

Protection of women is an area of social work where the influence of individual people coming into the country is very evident. The Cambodian Women's Crisis Centre (CWCC) was first set up in 1997 by a woman working for the UN Task Force. Shocked to discover the level of violence experienced by

many women and children, she started a project to address gender-based violence. Begun as a small pilot project run by three women, the NGO rapidly expanded to the current organization staffed by 82 people. New projects and programs have been developed in order to address the problem of violence against women in the whole society, in a holistic way. CWCC focuses its efforts in three ways, through direct protection of women in shelters, through social and legal advocacy, and through education in local communities.

At the time of my visit in August 2006, there were two buildings in Phnom Penh, two in Siem Reap, and two in a province on the Thai border. One building in Phnom Penh is a Drop-in Center, and the other is the Confidential Shelter. The organization provides shelter, care and legal advice, as well as conducting community education programs for prevention, and lobbying the government to advocate for the implementation of adequate laws and law enforcement.

There were 8 programs on Gender-based violence, monitoring and legal assistance to provide counseling to women referred to the center in various ways, sometimes by community volunteers or by motor taxi drivers. Sometimes women walk in off the street, directly escaping from violence. If the victims are poor or trafficked, the service is free. Once the woman recovers from her injuries, a staff member interviews her to discover whether she wishes to file for divorce, accept mediation (in case of a violent spouse) or if a victim of rape or trafficking, to file charges and so will need legal help and counseling. Many women don't file complaints, but those who do so need secure protection at the confidential shelter.

If a complaint is filed, then the woman is introduced to a legal assistance program. There are 4 lawyers associated with the program and the centre provides legal counseling, pays for the court fees and represents the case in court. Some women want help to mediate with their husband and so the lawyer may also mediate in the conflict. This is considered to be effective, as around 60% of such women do not return to the centre, while about 40% may return to the shelter and file for divorce.

The Confidential Shelter program protects women who are in personal danger. In Phnom Penh up to 75 women come in per day, in Siem Reap 60 per day and on the Thai border, 130 per day. The Shelter allows women to stay for 7 days before interviewing and then allows a stay of 6 months. If they are involved in a court case, it may take up to a year, so they allow people to stay on in such cases.

At the center, women are offered counseling, health care, education on HIV, body sanitation, daily exercise and three meals a day with two snacks. The Vocational Training School offers training in screen printing for T-shirts, posters, post cards and leaflets, sewing bags and these things are exported to an organization in Denmark for sale there. Women also do mat weaving, silk weaving, sewing training and training for small business. Before vocational training they must attend the literacy program for 3 months, because mostly they cannot read, write or calculate.

The Community Education Program focuses on educating villagers about domestic violence, trafficking, rape, dealing with evidence of rape, the law, and the raising of women's awareness. Women have traditionally been educated to be inferior and to serve men and very high value is placed on women's virginity. Sex abuse is considered to be the fault of the woman victim, so many victims remain silent and blame themselves. It is impossible to establish the number of rapes throughout the

country, but ad hoc reports show that rapes have become more violent and victims are often killed after being raped. Marital rape is not regarded as sexual assault. Gang rape is also a serious problem – the perpetrators are young men, often policemen. The woman is usually accused of attracting the rape and is blamed for it.

Action is continuously carried out to lobby the government to approve and amend the law on Domestic Violence and Trafficking, and to push for changes in the family and juvenile court. At present there is only one court and rape victims have to give evidence in open court. There is a plan to lobby government to adopt a memorandum of understanding with regard to the increasing number of Cambodian victims of trafficking in Malaysia. The Deputy Director of the Phnom Penh branch of CWCC attended a 2004 Symposium on Trafficking in Japan, accompanying a woman victim to tell her story, which he translated. The known trafficking routes show that Cambodians are used to supply Thailand and Thais to supply Korea and Japan. Currently, however, in Cambodia the central problem continues to be the culture of violence, legal impunity and lax law enforcement in society.

Education for Children with Disabilities

In almost any area of development work in the country, and particularly in connection with work in the area of disability, the low level of health services available in the country is an important factor. The UNICEF report noted that, “there are only 16 physicians available for 100,000 people, compared to 59 per 100,000 in neighboring Laos, 53 in Vietnam and 30 in Thailand. Such important essentials as running water and nutrition are also unaddressed at many levels Few births occur with a skilled health professional in attendance; 32% of births in Cambodia, compared to 19% in Laos, 85% in Vietnam and 99% in Thailand” (p. 29).

Where the situation of care and well-being for the weaker members of society is grim, this is even more so for children with disabilities. Particularly in the rural areas, where poverty is endemic, disability is cause for shame and stigma. Disabled children and people tend to be left hidden and neglected. When the first inclusive education project was started in 1999, the whole idea of the right to education for children with a disability was something completely new. At that time, there was no knowledge at all about the issue and most people, including disabled people themselves, had no idea that disabled people were entitled to the same human rights as others. Policy on special education was non-existent and no one even dreamed of the idea of inclusive education.

Various organizations have focused on project activities in particular regions but until 2000, there was little information on the situation of children and people with disabilities throughout the country. That has now changed with three extensive research reports. One of the earlier of these includes the statistical profile of disability, produced by the Disability Action Council (DAC) supported by Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), “Country Profile: Study on Persons with Disabilities (Cambodia) 2001”. Following this ground-breaking report, research was conducted in 2004 by the INGO, World Vision, to determine the specific needs of children and young people with disabilities, to research possible ways of meeting their needs and to recommend policy and administrative organizational structure to meet such needs, particularly in the rural areas.

Simultaneously, UNICEF was conducting nation-wide research on education for children with disabilities and on the implementation, progress and needs of inclusive education projects. The UNICEF research focused on evaluating an inclusive education project entitled “Education for Children with Disabilities Support Program (Inclusive Education)”. The project had been conducted over a six-year period from 1999 - 2005, piloting an inclusive education system in S’vay Rieng province, S’vay Teab district, in 2001 and extending to nine provinces throughout the country as of 2004/2005. Disability Action Council (DAC) and the Special Education Office (created in 2000) were the main project implementers with the assistance of various disability NGOs which acted as “project coordinators and implementers, attempting to develop an inclusive education (IE) structure, train teachers, raise awareness, and develop teaching and learning materials.” In addition to assessing the current level and progress of that project, the research also focused on future needs and recommendations on specific ways of meeting those needs.

Until these surveys, the numbers of people with disabilities and their situation was not known. People born with disabilities have been a source of shame, to be hidden away and left without resource or recourse. A vivid demonstration of the kind of change made possible by the vision and concept of the value of every single human life, and the right of every human being to develop to full potential was the Rabbit School, in Phnom Penh. This school was established for children with severe disabilities, and the staff worked extremely hard “to prove that children with disabilities, no matter how handicapped, have a right to education and to a certain quality of life.” A fundamental part of all activities focused on education for children with disabilities has been advocacy to the surrounding communities, to raise awareness of the rights and value of children in society. This policy included such diverse actions as taking all the children of the House of Smiles on regular outings to public places and shopping centers in Phnom Penh in order to raise awareness of their existence and the fact that they were being cared for, and that they had that right. To further social awareness, important officials of the Ministry of Education were invited to visit and witness in person the progress made by the children. The message conveyed to the school and to the society by the visit of government officials also, by implication, reinforced the concept that the children of the school were accepted and valued members of society.

Mental and Emotional Health Service

Although mental health has been and still is an issue of major importance in a situation of recent war and national trauma, very few organizations actually addressed this situation. There have been only two NGOs which focused on mental and emotional support in the context of other kinds of aid. One of these was Social Services Cambodia, which focused on providing training in personal social services, and Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO), which first entered Cambodia in 1995 as a branch of the Netherlands based TPO International, devoted to treating mental and emotional disorders in war-torn communities. I will first discuss the activities of the TPO.

The TPO Head Office estimated the situation of mental health in Cambodia as follows: “more than two out of every five Cambodians suffer from a stress related mental disorder. ...These traumas are

the result not only of recent conflict, but of the legacy left behind by the perpetrators of aggression, such as land-mines and HIV/AIDS victims who are in need of considerable support. ... Specifically, 11.5% of the population suffer from depression and 27 % suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)”.

In October 2000, TPO Cambodia registered as a local NGO. Five years of full-time expatriate clinical supervision came to an end and the management of the programme was transferred to a local directorship and a locally appointed management team. The project is currently funded by ICCO (Interchurch Organization for Development Co-operation), JICA (Japan International Co-operation Agency) and DCA (DanChurchAid). At the end of 2002, TPO Cambodia was conducting activities in the provinces of Pursat, Battambang, Banteay Meanchey, Phnom Penh and Kompong Thom.

Social Work Training

While TPO carries out direct treatment in mental health, Social Service Cambodia focuses on the education of social workers to enable them to provide counseling and empowerment to the people with and for whom they work. This is the only organization in Cambodia exclusively devoted to social work education in the form of training in social work counseling and social work skills with the focus on empowerment of the client. Social Service Cambodia was first established in 1992, when UNTAC moved into the country, by Ellen Minotti and Cambodians from the Khmer Buddhist Society, who had been Cambodian refugees in Seattle. Ellen Minotti, a social worker from Seattle, started courses in basic social work training, with the cooperation of other social workers, including Helen Pitt of Australia. People from around the countryside come to the center for training and Ellen also traveled and did workshops around Cambodia. She and others also worked to gather NGO people together to try to move from dealing with emergencies to looking at long-term issues of social development.

The first course was a six-week course and following that, a residential course of 3 months' duration was taught at a facility outside Phnom Penh. Then a supervision course was set up. Over the years there have been several short-term courses. Ellen also started running courses in Social Work Principles and Practice for people working in NGOs in Cambodia.

Social Work training is conducted at the centre for people from a huge array of organizations. The course is a 30 - day course taught in blocks of five-day sessions every month for six months. In order to become a trainer, a student must do the training and then observe the training at least once before starting to teach as a trainer.

Most of the students have no qualifications and basic training is given. The training is conducted in the Khmer language by Cambodians, who have themselves done the social work training at the centre and then trained to be trainers. With this kind of training and experience, they are in great demand in other organizations and frequently leave the centre to go to jobs with higher status and/or pay. Since it takes about 18 months for someone to work from basic training through to independence, this means a major loss for the centre, which is continuously under pressure to train more trainers in a context of scarce financial and personnel resources.

SSC thus faces huge challenges in keeping trainers and introducing ideas. The differing expecta-

tions of trainers and potential trainees regarding the level of commitment is becomes evident in the preamble to the training materials. The introduction specifies that all course participants must attend all sessions, something which may be taken for granted, but which would be quite difficult in Cambodia, as many people were balancing more than one job and had become used to moving between commitments as circumstances changed. The concept and practical reality of committing full-time to one specific event for as much as two weeks must have seemed difficult to understand. From the organizers' point of view the sudden and irregular absences from key parts of a course meant that it was extremely difficult to develop and deepen learning in the context of the group focus and experiential nature of the course work. One of the major problems with training staff of the Ministry for Social Affairs was that after completing the training, they would leave the Ministry to work for an NGO or a UN body because the Ministry salaries are too low to support daily life. Even heads of Government Departments were only earning only 20 dollars a month, whereas INGOs were able to pay a living wage.

Conclusion: Social Work in Cambodia

It is clear that the meeting of human and social needs in Cambodia is a very complex and multi-dimensional task. The necessary work of advocacy and education for social change, development of legal and social infrastructure and various kinds of face-to-face care with different vulnerable groups, is being undertaken by a wide range of local non-government and international non-government organizations. The culture of violence resulting from decades of war is changing slowly over time, but social welfare in the country continues to require outside funding for multi-dimensional activities in social welfare, social education and social development conducted by many different organizations working in cooperation in order to meet the human and social needs of Cambodians.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge with gratitude the help and encouragement and the contacts I received from Helen Pitt, an Australian social worker instrumental in founding the disability affairs council (DAC) and, thanks to her, Mr. Vicong Chetra, who arranged all interview appointments and Mr. Pet, who was an invaluable guide.

References

- Asian Development Bank, Identifying Disability Issues Related to Poverty Reduction: Cambodia Country Study, Prepared by: Foundation for International Training
- Best, Anne, 2005. *The Monk, The Farmer, The Merchant, The Mother: Survival Stories of Rural Cambodia*, Japan Printing House, Phnom Penh.
- Coates, K., 2005. *Cambodia Now: Life in the Wake of War*, McFarland and Co.

- Cooperation Committee for Cambodia, 2005. "Domestic Violence in a Rapidly Growing Border Settlement: A Study of Two Villages in Poipet Commune, Banteay Meanchey Province: Analyzing Development Issues" by Trainees (Round 15) and Team.
- Dennis, J., A Review of National Social Policies, Cambodia, Regional Environmental Technical Assistance 5771 Poverty Reduction & Environmental Management in Remote Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Watersheds Project (Phase I)
- Mackinlay, L., 2004. Disability Research, 2004, World Vision Cambodia.
- Ollier, Leahkhina Chau-Pech, 2005. "Of Home and Other Simulacra" in *Asian Migrations: Sojourning, Displacement, Homecoming and Other Travels*, Ed. By B. Lorente, N.Piper, S. hsui-Hua and B. Yeoh, Asian Research Institute, National University of Singapore.
- Palmer, B., 2002. *The Rough Guide to Cambodia*, Rough Guides.
- Pellini, A., 2002. Decentralisation Policy in Cambodia: The Main Actors, DED-Cambodia.
- Sokhom, Hean, 1999. "The Portrayal of Domestic Violence in Cambodian Newspapers", Center for Advanced Study, Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
- Sunderji, Aziz (based on staff report of CARE International, Nepal), 2005. Overview of Civil Society, Asian Development Bank, Civil Society Briefs.
- Thy Naroeun, 2007. "Social Work Education in Cambodia", Proceedings of the 15th International Seminar, Japan College of Social Work.
- UN ESCAP/CDPF Field Study cum Regional Workshop on Capacity Building of Grassroots Self-help Groups of Persons with Disabilities in Local Communities - Second Phase of and Follow-up to the Regional Workshop on Poverty Alleviation of Persons with Disabilities.
- US Library of Congress, Health and Welfare, Cambodia <http://countrystudies.us/cambodia/53.htm>
- Yoder, J., 2006. External Evaluation for Children with Disabilities, 1999 - 2005: Support Program in Cambodia, UNICEF.