

Free education and opportunities for children in rural Cambodia

SAVONG SCHOOL NEWSLETTER

Savong School Newsletter: Number 15: April 2013



Cambodian Rural Schools Trust
A registered charity for the support of Savong's School

SAVONG SCHOOL NEWSLETTER MOVING ONLINE

You can find this by linking to savongschool.wordpress.com

Updated regularly—you can choose to receive it monthly if you prefer.

One reason for this move is to spend less production time—the newsletter requires much effort to put together!

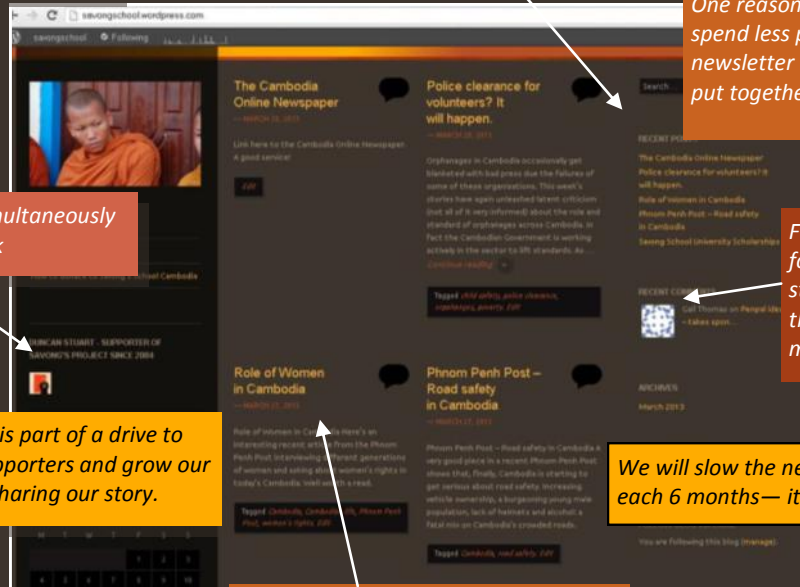
Blog format enables us to simultaneously post on Twitter and Facebook

Format makes it easier for supporters to share stories or comment on these stories as a community.

The move to this format is part of a drive to reach more potential supporters and grow our support base by simply sharing our story.

We will slow the newsletter down to one each 6 months—it still has a role to play!

Links to good related news items about life and society in Cambodia



Laptop Presentation Day

Friday March 15th was a blue-sky day for the latest intake of University Scholarship students at Savong's School. To be honest, our fundraising had lagged last year, but this last month a very generous supporter made a donation that enabled us to buy a laptop for each of the students, and to cover their living costs and enrolment fees for another year. The gift gives us time to fundraise while providing continuity for the students.

At the Laptop ceremony the students were invited to bring their parents and this was a considerate move by Savong.

In the photo (right) is student Chorm Thea, age 22, and his dad a farmer who has grown up in extremely tough times. Chorm Thea is one of 6 children, and it is likely that once he gets his degree (these students are hard workers) he will then support his brothers and sisters through University as well.

In this fashion, the gift of a scholarship reaps tremendous returns in Cambodia, assisting not only the bright students who shine in the annual exams, but also their families and their villages.

The giving isn't all one way either. While doing their studies, these students also do some tuition, mentoring and other duties around the school.



A proud student with a brand new laptop. Computers are a requirement of university students. We included a safe carry-bag as well as anti-virus software—a must-have in Cambodia's highly pirated stretch of cyberspace.

Letter from Duncan. Fewer Facebook moments.



I had a very interesting conversation with Savong recently. He was quite upset by an event which, at first glance, I'd thought had been quite positive. A charitable organisation which attracts volunteers globally, had chosen Savong's School as a place to get across lessons in dental health. I saw their photos on Facebook, and to these eyes the day had been a wonderful success, with fun exercises, free toothbrushes and, of course, those smiling students.

But something troubled Savong, and it was the feeling that his students had been used as a mere props in an exercise designed to produce great Facebook moments.

For a start, the charity did little if anything to acknowledge the work of the school—or even to name the school. These were just Cambodian kids. It didn't matter about their story.

Secondly, we know dental health has a long way to go in Cambodia, but the students at the school know about brushing their teeth, thanks. The real problem is lack of clean running water, and the lack of a family budget for basics such as toothpaste. In other words dental health is more of an economic problem than a health problem.

The third thing that bothered Savong was a sense of relativity and fairness. The organisation in question charges volunteers well over a thousand dollars (excluding airfares etc) to ensure that the volunteers have a worthwhile experience. Yet for all this money nothing was offered to the school. There was no talk of doing anything that would make a lasting difference.

They came, they took their photos, then they left.

Savong was quite caustic in his comments, (uncharacteristically so,) about the whole phenomenon of what I call Photo-op Volunteers. "I want to make a rule," he said. "No photos. If that puts you off, then don't come."

Over eight years the school has been blessed with hundreds of volunteers, and it says something about the way we communicate the project, and about its location, that we've had a very good calibre of visitor.

But a few things have been changing to alter the benign chemistry we've experienced.

For a start, social media sites have changed the way we visitors record and report our time in Cambodia (or anywhere else.) Where once we simply went to a restaurant, now we ritually take photos of the food and upload these to Facebook. Everything becomes a matter of record, and where once we had to conserve our shots because there were only 24 photos per roll of film, now we can take photo after photo. So instead of visiting a place and taking a significant shot at the end of the day—now we're tempted to keep camera in hand. I'm guilty of this too. Hold it kids! Say cheese! "But this is a place for teaching," Savong told me.

Second, there's now an established "gap year" trek that takes thousands of students through countries like Cambodia. The agenda is to give the student a life changing experience: and I see nothing wrong with that. But the experience has to be a two way thing. We don't mind gap year students but the question they need to ask is: "what lasting difference can I make?"



Enrolment day—2012. For these students university was once an unobtainable dream.

There's a third dynamic at work too; and it is a good one. As Cambodian NGOs get together and compare notes they are beginning to set clear standards. Among these is a growing sense of professionalism amongst their staff, and the distaste for anyone (local or foreign) interrupting the main agenda which is to educate local students. I think we'll see raised expectations surrounding us visitors from now on. I must admit, I'd find a no-camera rule pretty tough, but it does ask the question: what are our priorities?

SOC—now renamed SHEC (Savong Home & Education Cambodia)



Something of a rebranding has taken place on January 12th with the change of name of the Savong Orphan Center to become SHEC. Savong made the announcement as part of his long term plans for the children's home.

"We would like to inform you that Savong Orphan Centre (SOC) was changed to SAVONG HOME AND EDUCATION-CAMBODIA (S.H.E.C) and the website of SOC has expired and we set up a new website, it is called www.savonghomeeducation.org."

Life at the Bakong based home continues to be very stable, and we've had very good reports from recent volunteers. But long-range the establishment looks like it may have to be relocated thanks to zoning regulations governing land-use in the historic area near the Roulos temples.

Government tightens controls at orphanages

Recent closure in Phnom Penh, and more paperwork as accountability ratchets upward.

Orphanages in Cambodia occasionally get blanketed with bad press due the failures of some of these organisations. This week's conflicting [stories](#) (of alleged failures of a Phnom Penh orphanage) have again unleashed latent criticism (not all of it very informed) about the role and standard of orphanages across Cambodia.

In fact the Cambodian Government is working actively in the sector to lift standards. As an interview last May in [Al Jazeera](#) (Ith Sam Heng—Cambodia's minister of social affairs, veterans and youth rehabilitation,) shows the sector has at least 500 orphanages and of these only around half, 270, are formally registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs. So the Government is taking an aggressive shape-up or ship-out stance towards the sector with an overall intention of reducing the number of children in foster care.

This has been the recipe promoted by UNICEF, but the story isn't so simple. In a nation with no real safety-net for needy families, and the number of Cambodians living below the poverty line estimated to be [one third of the population](#) (92% of whom are rural dwellers) the UNICEF objective of returning all children to their families simply doesn't address the core problem: how will the children of the poor receive adequate food, care and education? What happens for children when their parents have issues of alcohol, problem gambling or violence?

Until adequate safety mechanisms are in place the role of orphanages (who need to openly discuss that most of their children have at least one parent) must be rated as necessary.

So the next question is how to raise their standards in order to ensure the best for the children in their care? The first answer is to clean out unsuitable operators. These are the organisations—and a few exist—that simply use children as a lure to extract tourist dollars while failing to provide adequate food, care and education. Savong's organisation cares for three children who previously dwelled in such a place

Those children received no schooling while being forced to put on nightly cultural shows for well-meaning tourists. The licensing process may help eliminate these operators. The Al Jazeera reported quoted the Minister as saying that the Government had 70 orphanages in their sights.

In the meantime the Government's policy of promoting and, if necessary, enforcing higher standards of care and management is ongoing. Ministry consultants have been active in visiting NGOs in Siem Reap, and laying down standards of accountability including annual reporting as well as what people in Health & Safety refer to as incident reporting.

So if a child falls sick then the incident and the follow-up actions need recording. Or if a child goes home to visit parents for a week, then the time of departure and re-arrival need recording so that the whereabouts of the child is fully accounted for. Likewise their school progress needs to be recorded

Now paperwork alone doesn't ensure a safer, better environment for children, but the management saying "what gets measured, gets done" has a lot of truth to it. The new regulations are also resonating with what NGO directors—Savong included—are learning at University about management practices.

So in this instance the Government's moves are to be applauded. They appear to be working quite constructively in Siem Reap at least.



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Bookmark these sister websites and spread the word!

SAVONG SCHOOL - www.savong.com This one has a focus on the school, but includes news, links to visitors and is a fund raising channels with a PayPal button.

SAVONG FOUNDATION- www.savongfoundation.org This website is beautifully designed and provides supporters with news. The foundation works hand in hand with the Cambodian Rural Schools Trust.

SHEC (Formerly SOC) — www.savonghomeeducation.org This one is managed by Savong and he posts news and events in the life of SOC.



Strong season for volunteers this year.

Three overseas students share a creative classroom at the children's home. 2013 has proven a strong start for volunteer numbers and Savong School is enjoying a record number of longer-term volunteers as well.

News Briefs

Office extension at Savong School. Thanks to generous contributions by visiting volunteers, a new office is being built at the school—as an extension from the much-used library building. This will help give the teaching staff room they've requested for lesson preparation and study.

The biggest stories in Cambodia right now. Upcoming elections, land evictions and road safety are the big stories at present in Cambodia. The elections are widely expected to result in the return of the existing Government, though land evictions (farmers losing land to which they had legal title—to strong-arm corporations) are cause of real discontent. Meanwhile a terrible road smash that took the lives of well-know entertainers has turned the public spotlight on Cambodia's shocking road-toll of almost 2,000 lives lost each year.

New checks on volunteers? Savong has discussed whether police checks will be a requirement soon for overseas volunteers. These are easily available in most countries—a certificate vouchsafing that the volunteer has a clean police record. This follows the arrest recently of an orphanage worker—a Cambodian—who allegedly had sexual relations with two underage girls in his care. Increasingly police checks are being specified by NGOs—though Savong is not sure whether the insistence of these will simply have the effect of putting up unnecessary barriers to would-be volunteers. In the interim we are going to test volunteer reaction.

Right—young Heak and two other boys ran a high fever recently and were taken straight to medical care. Their health is now much better. straight to medical care



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From now: every six months - sent to our fairly exclusive mailing list of around 200 people!

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- To remove your name from our mailing list, please let us know.
- And if you have spare money you can always link to Secure PayPal site via the www.savong.com website. On the left down the bottom of each page is a button: PLEASE DONATE.