



Free education for children in rural Cambodia



SAVONG SCHOOL AND SAVONG ORPHAN CENTRE

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Wrapping up 2010. A huge year for the project.



Cha Senh, one of the boys at the SOC cools down at Kulen Mountains waterfalls. The children have been on a number of whole-day excursions this year and these greatly enrich their experience as a group. (Photos—Phil Caldwell.)

Well, 2010 is all wrapped up and it has been a monumental year for Savong's project. During the last 12 months the school has experienced record attendance, four senior students have been granted university scholarships, the number of children in care of the Savong orphan Centre (SOC) has increased to 35, the SOC has a more sustainable food supply thanks to the new fish ponds and vegetable gardens, and the centre has introduced two community schemes—one in the form of sewing classes for local women, and the second in the form of a health clinic which provides free medical diagnosis and care for the local community.



The growth has been matched, mostly, by an expanding support base for the project with an increased number of volunteers and individual sponsors, as well as significant fund-raising initiatives in Canada, the USA, Australia and New Zealand—each making a timely difference.

All growth comes with a few pangs and two issues include Savong's sheer busy-ness (he's stretched too thin) and consequently inconsistent communication with arriving volunteers.

Another issue—increasing and fairly unhelpful pressure from the local Apsara authority who are placing real restrictions on new building, paving and fencing work.

Letter from Duncan

The zone around Siem Reap and Angkor Wat is largely governed by a regional authority: the Apsara Authority and until recently it has taken a fairly hands-off approach to such issues as building permits. Where in the UK, USA or here in my little country - New Zealand - it might take weeks or even months to get permission to build a house or even make additions, in Siem Reap we've experienced no such hassle. The school went up with scarcely any intervention, and so did the library and the SOC buildings.

But this year the Apsara authority has been flexing its muscle. One of its mandates is to ensure that the traditional character of the region is being preserved and this causes real difficulties for locals. If you want to build a new rural house, then in theory it has to be traditional in style—made of native hardwoods and constructed on stilts. Of course there's another law which says you are not allowed to fell traditional hardwood timbers, and the penalty for getting caught is extremely steep. You are fined, your timber is confiscated and if it's on a truck, then the truck is confiscated as well. So herein lies the riddle: how do the people of Siem Reap region make progress?

This year Savong encountered the problem three times. The first was during the construction of the medical centre when the authority delayed the work unexpectedly. Four weeks ago during the rainy season, Savong decided to put in a few concrete slabs as raised paving so the kids could avoid getting muddy. Again the authority came in and halted progress: this time demanding that all concrete and bricks be removed or else these would be confiscated. It took a meeting between Savong, the Authority and the local police to come to a suitable agreement. Most recently, plans to build the fence for the new chicken run have had to be modified. Fences are usually started with a base layer of bricks to stop sand and soil erosion—but not this time: the Authority has deemed that the fence have no brickwork.

While Savong finds these things frustrating, I'm glad at these times that he's there to navigate the problems and find solutions. This is where overseas-run NGOs can sometimes run into real grief—tangling with a changing bureaucratic landscape.

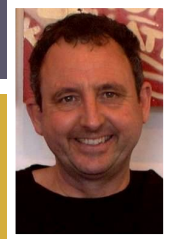
There are other difficulties in the neighbourhood from time to time, and these are not bureaucratic. Last week a small group of unemployed boys—they're referred to as gangsters—were harassing students as they spilled out into the night-time after class. One evening a fight broke out, with these boys attacking some of the students.

The teachers were quickly onto the scene, Sopheak phoning the police who have an office just a few hundred metres away. They broke up the fight and three of the gangsters were later apprehended.

Now here comes the tricky part. What would you do? On Savong's say-so the police offered to send the gangsters to jail for a year. (Justice, such as it is, is swift in Cambodia.) It would be Savong's decision the police said.

I spoke to Savong about this decision and he wasn't sure what to do—to offer some kind of restorative solution or to take a hard line. He told me: "Whatever I do, it must be seen by my students to be the right thing." So on that basis he went to discuss the options with the students who were affected.

In the end Savong met up with the gangsters and their families at the police station and in light of their ages (around 20, 21) Savong gave the offenders a second chance even while the policeman (whom I've met—a genial man) played "bad cop" and urged jail. The meeting had its effect, and we frankly doubt if the gangsters will be trouble again. Again, Savong was adept at navigating the local system.



Orphan profile—Nuhk Buntheourn



There are two boys named Buntheourn at the SOC, and 17 months ago this boy joined his older namesake when he came to SOC. Both of Buntheourn's parents are alive and in their late 30s—and they live locally in Chom Bork Village, Rolous Commune (near the historic temples) but they really struggle to make a living and were unable to support their son through school.

Buntheourn looks very young for his age. He is a young teenager and is making good progress in Grade 6 at the local school where he studies Khmer and the broad range of state school subjects including mathematics and social studies.

He also learns English at Savong's School and eats more regularly than he was able to at home. When asked what he's like to do when he grows up, like many of the children he says "Teacher." Meanwhile he particularly enjoys volleyball and football with his friends at the SOC. We are looking for a sponsor for Buntheourn as well as for 11 other children.

Check out the website: www.savongorphanage.com Many thanks to Annabel Ling in Singapore. This is an official sister website to www.savong.com

Children at the Savong Orphan Centre—December 29th, 2010

Here's a summary of their health and school progress. For these children SOC is now giving an educational catch-up.

	Name of Child	M/F	Age	Food/care	Health	Education
	Veourn Srey Am	F	6	Sponsored	Good	Grade 1
	Chay Bron	F	11	Sponsored	Good	Grade 3
	Tun Bros	M	16	Sponsored	Good	Grade 8
	Thay Buntheourn	M	18	Sponsored	Good	Grade 7
	Cha Senh	M	16	Sponsored	Good	Grade 9
	Chorm Rong	M	24	Sponsored	Good	University
	Di Chea	M	13	Sponsored	Good	Grade 6
	Dorn Piset	M	11	Sponsored	Good	Grade 1
	Chay Gruoch	F	15	Sponsored	Eyes	Grade 4
	Ut Dom	M	11	Sponsored	Good	Grade 2
	Dom Kadeb	M	17	Sponsored	Good	Grade 7
	Ken Manh	M	13	Sponsored	Good	Grade 2
	Kim San	F	16	Sponsored	Ear infection	Grade 7
	Nhuk Buntheourn	M	15	Not yet	Good	Grade 6
	Moa Leak	M	14	Sponsored	Good	Grade 10
	Moa Heak	M	12	Sponsored	Good	Grade 5
	Veourn Sinuon	M	4	Not yet	Good	Pre-School
	Kay Ratana	M	5	Sponsored	Good	Pre-School
	Te Sary	F	9	Sponsored	Good	Grade 1
	Oun Seanghai	M	15	Sponsored	Good	Grade 9
	Chay Shun	M	5	Sponsored	Good	Grade 1
	So Kim	M	9	Not yet	Good	Grade 1
	So Korng	F	4	Not yet	Good	Pre-School
	Veourn Sorm	M	9	Sponsored	Ears	Grade 2
	Svay Sreymom	F	14	Not yet	Good	Grade 3
	Duong Dat	M	6	Sponsored	Good	Pre-School
	Duong Mido	F	3	Sponsored	Good	Pre-School
	Duong Samet	F	11	Sponsored	Good	Grade 1
	Duong Savann	F	5	Sponsored	Good	Pre-School
	Than Panni	F	7	Not yet	Good	Just starting
	Than Panna	F	8	Not yet	Good	Just starting
	Tang Sreynak	F	12	Not yet	Good	Just starting
	Tang Tha	M	10	Not yet	Good	Just starting
	Tang Sarom	F	9	Not yet	Good	Just starting
	Tang Then	F	7	Not yet	Good	Just starting
	Veourn Siv	F	2	Not yet	Good	Pre-School
	Krol SreyNeang	F	10	Sponsored	Good	Grade 2

In recent weeks the SOC has taken in additional children—and in the case of the Duong children, the SOC is also providing food, shelter and paid employment to help her get back on her feet. A very kind Australian, Lesley-Anne, was on hand when this family was basically rescued from unimaginably poor circumstances. The mother was seen stumbling, very ill, toward Siem Reap seeking medical help. A solo mum, she had no job, no money and no way of caring for her four children. In the circumstances Savong didn't hesitate to offer care and shelter for this family and in that practical Aussie manner Lesley-Anne didn't hesitate to offer full sponsorship. Thank you.

Short takes

Power to the children. Many thanks to fund raising efforts from a Singapore school, the SOC now has a solar converter installed. These are extremely useful in Cambodia—turning bounteous sunshine into 12v electricity via batteries which are used to power TV sets, radios, or charge up laptops and mobile phones. No-tech to Hi-tech in one single jump.



Fish and Chicken. Meanwhile with the second fishpond completed, also courtesy of the Singapore students, the next step is a chicken farm. A Tasmanian community (Newstead College) has raised money for this project which again enhances the capacity for the SOC to be more self-sufficient in terms of food. Work on the fencing begins in early January.

Communication improvements. We're getting more systematic with communications and while this newsletter will continue—out every couple of months, sponsors of children at SOC will get quarterly statements giving progress on each child. Elsewhere, to facilitate a smoother volunteer experience and avoid peak-time clashes, we've added a Volunteer Bookings Calendar to the website so you can check ahead.

GLOBAL VILLAGE DEPARTMENT



On the web we've found a couple of recent blogs from visitors to Savong School and SOC. Great comments and lovely photos from Sheryl and Steve.

<http://tinyurl.com/2awwt6w>

Meanwhile Hahn Huang from Oregon has this last week departed the cold of the American Northwest and arrived in Siem Reap (followed by his baggage) to work at the Medical Clinic and School.

Follow his blog: <http://hahnhuang.blogspot.com/>

FACT FILE: SIEM REAP PROVINCE ENERGY AND FUEL

Savong School is located in Bakong District, part of Siem Reap province which despite the tourism boom based around Angkor Wat remains the second poorest province out of 24 in all Cambodia.

What do they use for lighting and cooking? In the west we take household energy for granted, that's for sure. Electricity is there at the flick of a switch. It is relatively cheap. But in rural Cambodia the fuel and energy needed for cooking, lighting or other household appliances is a really expensive component of the household budget.

The figures for household lighting tell some of the story. In Cambodia, outside the cities, just 8% of home lighting is powered from the national grid. By contrast 17% is battery powered—and a typical system is for a village to have one businessperson making a living by charging car batteries and for households to swap charged batteries for their discharged batteries, for a dollar or two.

Meanwhile 70% of households use kerosene lamps for lighting.

Cooking is the big user of fuel however, and in Siem Reap 93% of households use firewood for cooking. A small percentage use charcoal. This is expensive, and increasingly so, and wood is going to be in increasingly short supply in years to come.

Vietnam has faced a similar crisis and one increasingly used option is the development of bio-gas generators, using animal manure. Tens of thousands of these units—cess pits with a domed 'collector' have been installed successfully. So far there does not appear to be a similar program in Cambodia. Another solution is to install wood stoves with a much more efficient design - and again, initiatives along this line are apparent in Africa, but not so far in Cambodia.

SAVONG SCHOOL NEWSLETTER

Email us at duncan@kudos-dynamics.com And follow us on Twitter: Savong_School

Telephone +64 9 366 0620 or Telephone Savong (Skype: Savong6) or +855 12 531 037

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