



Free education for children in rural Cambodia



SAVONG SCHOOL AND SAVONG ORPHAN CENTRE

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Korean Classes begin at Savong's School



Inaugural students commence Korean class which begin this new term

Savong's School has added another syllabus option for students wishing to improve their job prospects in town. Welcome to classes in Korean. In fact Korea contributes more tourists to Siem Reap than does any other single nation, and right now the demand for people who are fluent in Korean easily out-matches supply. Recent Korean visitors noted this and by kind invitation flew Savong to Seoul for a few days in order to discuss sponsorship of a teacher of Korean.

The sponsors and Savong agreed on a plan and in time for the new academic year (following the April new year festival) classes began. These complement the classes in Japanese, English and computer studies already on offer.

The new year was a hive of activity, with teachers and the scholarship students distributing leaflets to the local community to announce the new offer, as well as the offer of advanced English classes which will be based around the demanding TOEFL (Teaching of English as a Foreign Language) books and CD-ROMS recently delivered to the school.

Computers are very much becoming an integral part of the education scene in Cambodia, with all university students expected to own one, and many schools using CD-ROMS and even the internet as teaching tools.



Above: teaching Korean on the new glass-fronted whiteboards. Teacher Sovannarith—using a laptop to teach advanced English.



Letter from Duncan. Making steps for the future



Four days ago I returned from a 3 week trip to Siem Reap, and arrived home exhausted. I don't handle the heat very well at all, and I came down with various travel bugs also. Of my first 72 hours home I slept at least 50 of these.

I wouldn't say the journey was an easy one, and that's because we had a lot on the agenda, and because the pace in Cambodia is always slower than in the west. Still, I'm very happy that we've set up a stronger process for forward planning and for increasingly transparent accounting.

Recently I've heard from a number of volunteers who suggested that there are things we can definitely work on.

1. Making the organisation more transparent and offering better acknowledgement and "proof of spending" to donors.
2. Achieving more consistent activities and supervision for the children at SOC.
3. Better managing the experience of volunteer teachers. **We're not consistent in that department.**
4. More contact time between Savong and volunteers. Too often he seems too busy.

Feedback is what we run on, and one of my roles is to carry this to Savong and to encourage him as he learns and grows as a manager. Among the things we established in the simple principle of weekly meetings—by SKYPE— in which we can discuss issues and plans, budgeting and business.

The biggest achievement of the trip was due not to me but to Terri, a skilled chartered accountant from Scotland who made a point of being in Siem Reap for a few weeks in order to coach Savong and his brother Theavy (who does administration—a very bright young guy) in the arts of accounting. **Terri's system is do-able, and that's no mean feat in a country where receipts are NOT the norm.** Now we have a better basis for budgeting and forward planning.

We also added the need to keep updated a list of all assets—so that the focus is not necessarily just on the new things we need, but also on the old things that may need replacement. This is a simple act which helps us better manage our priorities. My intention is to publish and keep updated a transparent set of accounts on the website. **You want to see where the money goes? Here's where!**

Our discussions about SOC are at a starting point. Savong and I discussed the need for more concerted "child leadership" in order to give the younger children (especially) more direction and guidance. At the same time a number of older children have returned home (largely due to better domestic economic circumstances) though not without some regret on the part of the children.

We also discussed the introduction of Child Safety Policies at the school and SOC. This was initiated by Savong, and it said a lot that while we foreigners think mostly in terms of safety from predators (recently a UK man was sentenced to 2 years prison for molesting children in Siem Reap) the main safety issue is actually health. Cambodia is a place where contagious diseases can run rampant. The policy is in draft stage—and this will doubtless place more obligations on visitors so that everyone can see that the issue is taken seriously.

We're still discussing how to best create the most positive experience with volunteers. Personally I think the days of the 1-2 day volunteer are numbered, and that the best feedback we get are from those committed souls who brave the heat and put in two weeks or more. The experience is richer for the visitors and more cohesive for the students - giving time for each party to know each other better and to work to a more planned schedule.

I was really impressed by other volunteers I saw while there—including a Japanese teacher, a retired Civil Engineer who has been teaching at the school for almost 12 months, and a British pair, Rachel and Matthew who each gave an enthusiastic 110%. In the 36 degree heat. Inspiring individuals!



Child profile—Chay Bron



Chay Bron photographed here with her sister Gruoch, is 11 years old and a real extrovert. Bron's mother is extremely poor and had placed Bron with another orphanage which proved unsatisfactory (children were made to perform cultural shows - but were not satisfactorily fed or educated.) So this led to Bron and her siblings being placed with Savong. When I was at the SOC I interviewed each of the older children and apart from checking their background stories, their health and their general attitude to school and life at SOC— I asked about the future ambitions. Bron (who is sponsored) says she is very happy, loves school and enjoys good friendships. Her ambition, she told me was to be a manager. Thereafter I called her "Oh Great manager" a title she seemed to wear very comfortably.

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

NEWS FROM SAVONG SCHOOL

A quick summary of what's been happening at the school.



New year break-up party. For the first time the school held ceremonies to mark the new year. Speeches were made, of course, but students also sang, and then enjoyed traditional Khmer games before festivities concluded with a feast. This promises to be the start of a new tradition. A video was made of the party, and this was screened a few weeks later using a video-projector kindly donated by a good Japanese supporter. The party was the talk of the community, and two of the students who sang have since appeared on a local TV program dedicated to telling the stories of local schools and similar organisations.

Enrolment drive at the start of the new year. In April a staff initiative to spread the word about Savong School to the local community (leafleting) has resulted in huge numbers of enrolments. Locals are not just attracted to the promise of free language education, (and computer education) but also the delivery of classes for students more advanced in English. These will be based on TOEFL texts which feature a highly structured approach to learning English, using a series of CD Roms. New technology is an inherent part of the school now.



New whiteboards. Anyone who has volunteered will know how the whiteboards in Cambodia are hell on felt pens—which dry up so quickly in the heat. The quality of whiteboards has never been too spectacular either. Well, in the main classrooms that's been fixed with glass-fronted whiteboards. They write better and clean better. Just a small improvement that can make a difference.

On the agenda: Savong and staff are planning an additional "simple classroom" with open sides and a thatched roof to handle the overflow of class numbers. Also on the agenda is wireless internet (we're working out the budget but also the consequences.) Meanwhile examinations are soon to be held to find the "next four" scholarship winners to join the four who have been making good university progress since 2010. A children's safety policy (health) is also being drafted by the teachers.

NEWS FROM THE SOC

Some recent highlights from the Savong Orphan Centre



Childrens Safety Policy. **Across Cambodia there's a tightening up of children's safety in NGOs, and this is a good thing.** The most immediate concerns are simple health and physical safety. The policy is being drafted to cover these three facets (health, physical and visitor safety) - and already four actions have been taken. First: an emergency health fund has been established at the local bank. This is topped up each month automatically, and ensures that health treatment is never delayed due to lack of funds. (A real issue in Cambodia—where doctors are often seen as a 'last resort' due

to costs.) Second, the principle was established with the children that they should seek medical care as soon as they experience an ailment. Already two have received medical treatment on this basis. Third, a first aid kit was established at the SOC. Fourth, a safety fence has been established to prevent young children from wandering near the fish ponds.

Asset management. Often our focus is on the needs for new equipment, but the SOC now has an assets list drawn-up, and this is to be reviewed each month—so that we can be aware of any assets or equipment that need mending or replacing. Example: this last month at least half a dozen bicycles were fixed. These get a beating through usage and the environment. The red dust stick to the bikes and drinks the oil away from bearings and pedals. Anyhow, the bikes are back in business and one outcome is that their owners are expected to give the bikes a weekly clean and check-up. We also added a new bicycle for one of the boys Buntheourn. The lesson for visitors is this—before you give for "new" things, be sure there aren't some simple fixes required for existing things .



More new beds. A recent visit by a generous Singaporean family resulted in the purchase, the very next day, of more beds for the SOC— where many children have been sleeping on the floor. The family also generously provided bags of rice, as well as toys and clothing for the children.

Chicken on the menu! The favourite food of almost every child at SOC is chicken—especially friend chicken. Well, the new chicken farm (adjacent to the school) is now running, and the farmer currently runs 31 hens and one proud rooster. The small farm will help the SOC be more sustainable in terms of food supplies. An additional benefit of the farm, made possible through Australian donations, is that the farmer, who has had a very hard background, now has employment.



Medical Center

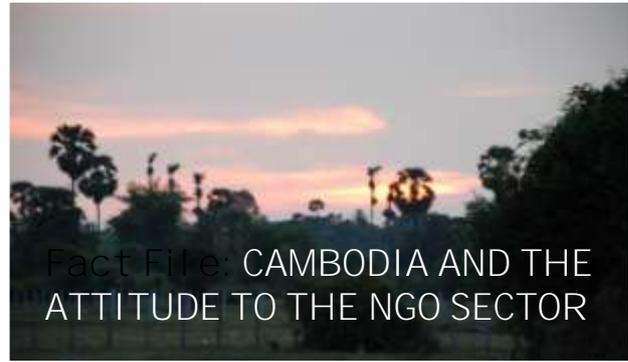


Pictured above are two wonderful German volunteers Robert + Brigitte who earlier this year donated a laptop (fully equipped with Biosoftware—patient record-keeping software) for the medical center at the SOC. This information system is of huge importance for a village-based medical unit because there are simply no medical records, and a lot of time is lost through re-establishing name, age, condition etcetera of each patient.

The medical center was closed earlier this year due to a health emergency within the doctor's family, and plans are well under way to re-establish the center, albeit on a sounder footing with clearer budgets and smoother operating systems. The first incarnation certainly revealed a strong community need! Discussions are currently being held with a Siem Reap GP who is willing to help.

NEW LOOK FOR NEWSLETTER

The next issue of the newsletter will have a refreshed look and will fly under the Savong Foundation masthead. The objective is to coordinate the way we share the story of the project which is supported both by the registered charity the SavongFoundation in the US, and via the registered Cambodian Rural Schools Trust, in NZ.



The political landscape in which organizations such as Savong's School operate is definitely heating up in Cambodia. This is due to three main forces.

First, under pressure from UN organizations, but also due to its own motivations, the Cambodian Government has signalled that the volunteer/NGO sector will face registration and controls—probably from 2012 onwards. In our case the school and SOC are both registered, (having met a series of standards) but in the Labyrinthine world of the local and central governments, new departments of Central Government seem to be getting involved.

One part of the Government motivation is to clean-up bad operators and profiteers, and to enforce standards. Good move. However there is another motivation and that is evident in the frequent warning (particularly to bigger charities) to “stop criticizing the Government” - the threat now, is that the Government can de-register such NGOs.

Within the NGO community there is increasing co-operation and it is notable that the new regulations, which have not been well communicated, have had the effect of pushing competing organisations together as they endeavour to make sense of the fragmented messages from the Government. This coming-together will, probably more than anything else, accelerate the establishment of shared standards.

The third force? We've noticed more pressure—more cynicism perhaps—creeping into foreign media toward Volontourism. It's as if the initial honeymoon is over, and there are enough stories of tourists being burnt by scams to put everyone on alert. This is no bad thing—and it is certainly a factor in our own drive for transparency, accounting systems and the establishment of standards. However there is another drive for this—and that is the registration of the Savong Foundation as a charity in the USA, and the equivalent Trust as a charity in New Zealand: both organizations being subjected to scrutiny by their respective taxation departments. One way or another, international scrutiny is forcing Cambodia to show more transparency.

SAVONG SCHOOL NEWSLETTER

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