Exposure Trip with University Scholarship Programme to Cambodia

On the first day, we travelled from Chiang Mai to Phnom Penh and it took us the whole day to get there: we flew from Chiang Mai to Bangkok, then Bangkok to Phnom Penh, and finally took our friend’s tuk tuk (motorised three-wheel vehicle) through the chaos of the city traffic. We arrived at the hotel in the evening, rested, and got ready for the following day’s visits.
On 12 July 2016, we visited couple of universities in the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh. Our goals were to introduce Child’s Dream and the University Scholarship Programme (USP), investigate the courses offered, clarify their school grading system, and understand the admission process. In the course of one day, we successfully visited two universities. First was the University of Puthisastra (UP). The university was established in 2007 and is fully recognised by the Royal Government of Cambodia. Next, we visited the Royal University of Phnom Penh. This university was established in 1960 and is the oldest and largest university in Cambodia. At the end of each site visit, we also took a tour of the university campus.
During our discussion with university representatives, we learned some of the majors that are listed on the university websites are not actually being taught now, but rather were future plans. According to both schools, the courses will soon be offered, but not at the moment. The USP staff were a bit disappointed as some of the majors were directly related to the development of Cambodia, including health and education. I learned that working with institutions in Cambodia is a bit challenging due to the lack of accurate and available information on their websites. A clear understanding really requires a visit in person in order to obtain accurate information.

On the same day, we held an informal meeting with all the scholars and discussed their challenges during the first year. This was done to build a closer relationship between the students who study different majors at different universities as well as to build trust with Child’s Dream staff. First, we met individually with students who had a particular challenge, such as low grades or personal issues. One of the scholars previously told our staff about her jealous boyfriend who was interfering with her studies. Our staff advised she should consider ending her relationship with her boyfriend if the problem persisted or grew larger and negatively influenced her performance and goals at university. The meeting on this trip was to follow up on that issue; she ended her relationship and appeared happier and more confident, so we were pleased with her situation. She also thanked us for giving her the advice and said she felt so happy with her decision. In her free time, she enjoys spending time with her fellow scholars doing group study. After addressing any individual, private problems, we all had a group meeting followed by an early dinner so students could travel back to university safely before nightfall.
On the third day of our trip, we travelled by bus from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap to meet our CD Cambodia team. We arrived in the afternoon and the temperature was scorching, as always. Sinoeuy picked us up at the bus station and took us back to the office, approximately 3-4 km from the bus station. Later that afternoon, we met one of the scholars to discuss the challenges he encountered during his first year in the university. He could not join our meeting in Phnom Penh with the other scholars since he travelled to Siem Reap to attend training with his university. During our discussion, he expressed his dissatisfaction with his fellow classmates who discriminate and exclude him from their group study because he is poor. Despite this challenge, he is determined and motivated to study. We advised him to focus on his studies and not to become distracted with other students; we also told him about our scholars from Myanmar who experienced a similar situation studying in relatively well-off Thailand, who managed to overcome their discrimination issues to finish their studies successfully.

On the following morning of day four, we packed our bags to get ready to travel to Battambang. After packing, Thomas and I went to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. P Tuu and her friend, P Tee, were upstairs packing and getting ready as well. P Tee came downstairs and told us that P Tuu was locked inside the toilet. Thomas went upstairs to try and help, but couldn’t succeed. I finished cooking breakfast, then later went upstairs to see what was going on. When I got there, P Tuu was still inside the toilet, still desperately struggling to get out. We tried picking the door lock, but that didn’t help at all. The door knob was jammed and the door refused to open.

Half an hour later at 8 am, one by one, our CD Cambodia team arrived. First Nary tried. Then Yem arrived; he also tried. Sreylin arrived; she also tried. None of them succeeded. I could hear P Tuu struggling from the other side of the door wanting to be freed so badly. We offered to feed her toast through the bottom of the door if she wanted. Out of desperation, we called the landlord, who lived just across the street, for help. He arrived with a giant hammer in his hand, followed by his wife, who also brought their little daughter. Seeing the crowd steadily grow, it seemed as if the entire village was there. After smashing the door knob twice or thrice with the giant hammer, the door knob popped out, releasing P Tuu from her temporary prison. The escape was witnessed by everyone (the whole village), rejoicing for her release. After the morning drama, we resumed packing and travelled to Battambang.
We arrived in Battambang city at noon, had lunch by the riverside, then visited Puthi Komar Organisation (PKO). The purpose of the visit was to meet organisation’s staff members, explain the reporting cycle and fund transfer process, and gather updates about their possible new office location. After the meeting, we hurried to a small river dock to catch a boat. The dock was about a 25-minute drive from PKO’s office. We unloaded our stuff from the truck quickly, clambered into the boat and travelled towards Tonle Sap Lake. It had been raining heavily in the area and everything was flooded; everywhere you turned, all you saw was green...well, except for the brown river water rushing towards the lake with us.

We travelled along the main river, then entered small canals that slither through the jungle, emerging from time to time in small villages. The villagers living along the river are highly dependent on fishing and subsistence farming. It was quite amazing to see people living on the river banks in floating and stilted houses. During flooding, the residents can be left without food and clean drinking water.

After a couple hours of fun jungle-boating, we finally arrived at Prey Chas Secondary School in the evening. We stayed overnight at the school, which we built couple of years ago. Standing tall on stilts two-storeys high along the banks of the Serei Sophm River in Prey Chas commune, the school offers secondary education to children from five villages. Due to annual flooding around the Tonle Sap, the school was built on concrete stilts. During the rainy season the river swells and floods the entire area, putting the base of the school underwater. In addition to flooding, transportation by boat is also a challenge. This makes the situation difficult for students to continue their education because transportation takes a great part of the day and also costs money. On the night of our stay, we gathered in one of the classrooms to formally introduce ourselves to everyone.
The meeting was attended by the village leader, a representative from the district education office, teachers, and students. The students were so eager to know about us and asked so many questions about our country. They asked what our country looked like, our food compared to theirs, what languages we spoke, and our levels of education. We were so impressed with the participation of the students, teachers, and the community! After the discussion, we thanked everyone for the warm welcome and the students sang a song for us—and even in English!

Before heading back to the city, we visited another school not so far from Prey Chas. The way to the school was quite a challenge for our boats since it was heavily congested with hyacinth. We had to push the hyacinth little by little to give way to our boats for a couple of hours. We finally arrived at the school and the village leader greeted us at the gate and escorted us to the village hall. We played a game to relax everyone; it was really fun playing that game with the village elders. I am not sure what it’s called, but it works by tying a dangling wooden baton to your waist; you must move your body in an awkward way in order to swing and hit a ball to the finish line. After the game, Yem and Sreylin
introduced us to everyone and we had a discussion with the villagers. We had lunch together with the village people and travelled back by boat two hours to Battambang, then finally four more hours back to Siem Reap. Just before arriving to the office, we had dinner as a team, which included something with red ant sauce (in the orange bowl).

While working at Child’s Dream over the years, I learned about our USP mostly from reading second-hand information gathered by our field staff, in reports and on our database. I previously thought USP trips were always about fun. In fact, the actual work is quite demanding. Having meetings here and there upon arrival from a long journey, with a limited amount of time, is quite a challenge. Every meeting has to have a packed agenda to make the most of it. Driving a car can be an option, but due to significant distances between programme locations, it would cause so much wasted time and resources on the roads. Time is a luxury seldom available when travelling with USP. Although there is public transportation, planning ahead and booking in advance can be problematic as local transportation, like buses, often lacks sufficient and credible information on their websites.