



Justice and History Outreach Project in Cambodia

Update from Sophia Dien, International Fellow in Cambodia
April 2010

The work of ICfC in Cambodia remains incredibly relevant to the masses of ordinary people, 80% of whom live in villages and small towns. Our Justice and History Outreach (JHO) Project occupies a unique space in the country. Most programs run by other NGOs focus strictly on information outreach, meaning that they have information that they want to bring to the people, whether about the Khmer Rouge Tribunal (KRT)/ Extraordinary Chambers of Court of Cambodia (ECCC) proceedings or the law, history, health tips, education, or ideas about human rights, land rights, women's rights, and so on. What is missing from many of these initiatives is a type of pre-outreach effort in which time is invested in the rural community to listen to people's pained memories, to foster their ability to communicate the gruesome past with their family members and community, and to acknowledge and validate their experiences. These efforts are the focus of the JHO project. While getting people "unstuck" from their pained memories and helping to achieve transitional justice, ICfC also enhances rural Cambodians' ability to discuss, to problem-solve, and to feel empowered.



Dr. Andreas Selmecci of DED (and our funder) thought that our methodology was particularly vital and unique in that we are truly one of the few organizations that focuses on a participatory approach and does not confine our activities to informational outreach. According to him, "ICfC's work is not 'unidirectional,' but rather the information and decision making comes from the participants themselves through its well developed activities and its participatory approach." Yes, there is information sharing from us, especially when participants ask for that knowledge, but we focus on having the participants decide what activities they want to participate in, what they believe would bring a sense of justice and peace, and what would have lasting meaning for their community.

Mychelle Balthazard, the independent evaluator (who is the co-author of the evaluation report on our work), said that ICfC's program activities are wonderful and unique because we really spend a significant amount of time in each village and with the villagers. The staff members are 'intimately involved' with the villagers at each step of the process and spend the time needed to build significant trust within the community and to understand community needs and dynamics from the villagers' own perspectives. Most other NGOs spend nowhere close to the amount of time and resources that we do to cultivate relationships and ensure a participatory approach. Balthazard also mentioned that the 'closure is meaningful and lasting for the community' because the end products are the memorials and the purpose and meaning of them and what they will commemorate are determined by the villagers. The villagers also manage the construction process and maintain the upkeep of the structure, all of which creates a sense of personal and community responsibility and ownership of both the process and the memorial itself. Memorials become the reminders of the heinous acts of violence and bring the hope that such acts won't be repeated again.



The ICfC programs are coordinated by Tim Minea. Minea is trained in an anthropological perspective and is genuinely interested in the underlying issues of memory and transitional justice. Having traveled and worked extensively with rural communities throughout Cambodia, he is a great source of knowledge about local communities, regions, and ethnic groups and how to best involve them in a participatory approach. Minea is also a very good team leader/manager, is able to think of solutions, and is eager to improve upon our methodology/process. The two assistants, Dara and Kong, are well-trained in the process of researching, setting up, and conducting dialogues and program activities in the villages.

We have already done a number of small informal trainings aimed at building the staff capacity and improving the field-note taking and report-writing skills. We will continue to work with the staff on how to capture all of the important details, however small, that make up the ‘wealth’ of small miracles and ‘ah-ha’ moments that occur in reconciliation work with the villagers.

Status of Program Activities

Program activities have been completed for Kampot, Prey Veng, and Kampong Cham provinces. Two more provinces remain. Follow-ups also occurred for all of the villages involved in 2008.

In Kampot, there were no NGOs working on the topic of the Khmer Rouge (KR) era despite the many widows, orphans and other victims living there. Near the village exists an old KR prison, as well as a stupa memorial full of skulls and bones estimated to belong to over 500 KR victims. In addition, the villagers were very aware of the existence of KR perpetrators living nearby. The NGOs in the area were very eager to work with us. The village is also easily accessible by road, which will make the activities and follow-up assessment easier to complete.

In Prey Veng province, staff chose to work in the village of Svay Samsok. In this region, there were an estimated 17,000 deaths attributed to the KR regime. Although there is a stupa memorial in the community, most of the bones of the victims lie unprotected. ICfC staff and the villagers fear that this evidence and history will soon be lost to the forces of natural erosion and the activities of the people and animals living nearby. In addition, large swaths of land have been sold to a private company which is digging up the land and dirt for sale elsewhere. Many marked and unmarked graves have been destroyed or removed in this process, which is why staff members believe that it is vitally important to work in this region immediately, before more historic evidence is lost. ICfC has partnered with CEDAC, a local NGO focused on agricultural projects that is very well respected in the community and works closely with the people.

Looking Towards the Future:

Minority groups in Mondulakiri and Ratanakiri, sparsely populated provinces in the east and northeast of Cambodia, would greatly benefit from working with ICfC in the future. In the 1950s, government soldiers were sent to the Ratanakiri and Mondulakiri provinces to forcibly integrate these groups into Khmer society and to force them to accept Khmer values. The Khmer Rouge appealed to the minority groups’ distrust of the government and built strong alliances with them in the 1960s. During that time, the KR were even headquartered in Ratanakiri. Although these minority groups supported the KR initially, they were also targeted and treated harshly by the KR because of their ethnicity. During the height of the regime, ethnic minority groups were not allowed to speak their native languages, wear traditional clothing, or practice any traditional customs or religion. This region also experienced extensive US bombing as it was seen as a hotbed of North Vietnamese activity. After the fall of the KR, Ratanakiri was one of the last strongholds of the remaining KR rebels. Currently, very little outreach about KR history has been done in Ratanakiri and Mondulakiri provinces.

In addition, ICfC should start to frame our work in ways that highlight the project’s lasting legacy for the community and the people even after the ECCC/KRT proceedings conclude. One NGO worker mentioned that there

is a lot of donor fatigue regarding support for activities surrounding the trials and that those potential donors would be interested in the next phrase of reconciliation/transitional justice.

An asset of ICfC activities is that our program is not contingent upon the trials taking place. Having the trials coincide with our program is just one way in which we capitalize on the general public's interest in KR memory, ideas of justice, and history that is piqued by the trial and all of the discussion and outreach associated with it. The work of ICfC, however, is also important for continuing to meet people's needs for reconciliation even after the trial ends. Justice and healing do not automatically finish with the end of a trial or with a conviction. Often times, former victims are left wondering, "What next?" or "Why don't I feel better?" This is precisely where ICfC activities fit in. Through our program activities, justice and healing happens closer to home, in the communities where the atrocities happened and where people still live their lives with these memories. Since we use a participatory approach, there is no question of whether these activities are appropriate or not. Their success or 'failure' rests in the hands of the people who came up with the ideas, discussed and negotiated amongst themselves, and, with our help, facilitated the healing and the sharing of memories with their neighbors, their children, former victims, and perpetrators.