

Let Justice Flow: Thirsting for Justice World Development Appeal 2011

CAMBODIA

Introduction

The population of Cambodia is 13.8 million, a little over twice that of Ireland. According to the most recent statistics, 30.1% of Cambodia's people are living in poverty, rising to 40% in rural areas. This was not always the case, however. There was a time when Cambodia was one of the wealthiest rice producing countries in south-east Asia. The rise of the Khmer Rouge (under whose rule in the 1970s over 2 million people died), the invasion by Viet Nam in 1979, and civil conflict which lasted well into the 1990s left many of Cambodia's people not only impoverished, but traumatised.

Today, over half of Cambodia's population is under the age of 25, and Cambodia has one of the highest rates of HIV in Asia. Woman-headed households account for 25% of total households, and severe violence against women and children is common. Local communities regularly report incidents of rape, gang rape, trafficking, and domestic violence.

In rural area, 70% of the people depend on agriculture, mainly rice farming, for survival, but only 10% of rice-growing land is irrigated. Rural areas remain isolated by poor roads and lack of electricity, and the forests whose natural resources once provided supplemental food and income for the poor have been heavily degraded by logging and land clearance operations in the last decade. A legacy of unclear land ownership has enabled wealthy Cambodian and foreign companies to purchase or annex tracts of land for commercial use or speculation, leaving the poor with little legal recourse and driving up the price of the land. The anecdotal evidence of local partners also suggests that both droughts and flooding have become more severe.

Project Details

Our World Development partner in Cambodia is *Life with Dignity (LWD)*, a local offshoot of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), and the specific project we are supporting this year is *Integrated Rural Development Through Empowerment (IRDEP)*. LWD takes a holistic approach to village development, in which local communities are able to identify and address the ways in which issues such as sanitation, access to clean water, literacy and food security are all inter-related. As a result, both the causes and the symptoms of poverty can be tackled at local level through the efforts of village development councils, set up by LWD to enable communities to take responsibility for their own development decisions.

At present, LWD is operating in four provinces and nine districts, and the approach in each area is a progressive one. During the first stage, LWD identifies the poorest households in each community, and then, over an average of five years, LWD works with these households to help them acquire the knowledge, the access and the skills needed to lift them out of poverty.

Each year, the partner households are able to assess their progress using an A – D grading system devised by LWD. This system enables the communities and households themselves, as well as LWD, to set clear and measurable goals to which they can work each year. When these goals are clear and manageable, participants remain motivated, and begin to recognise their power to create lasting change. And the aim of the project remains in sight: that participating families might become empowered, self-sufficient, and independent from LWD within 4 – 5 years, thus enabling LWD to move on, and to implement its programme in new communities, wherever the need is greatest.

Let Justice Flow!

Sar Ren (pronounced *Saw Rain*) is a widow who is now responsible for supporting not only her son, but also her mother, and a sister who has a disability. Sar Ren is in her early 40s, and initially, after her husband died, she was too vulnerable and frightened to stand up for any of her own rights. She lived in a small bamboo cottage, and sold her labour to local farmers, who paid her a pittance. She was barely able to put two meals on the table each day for her family.

Seven years later, however, Sar Ren can hardly recognise herself. She is a member of the village development committee, and has recently been chosen as village leader. In her new role, Sar Ren is coordinating fund-raising efforts for a new village school, and is helping to establish disaster management mechanisms for the village.

As for herself, she runs six small businesses in rural Kampong Chnang, thanks to the help of LWD, whose village credit scheme helped her to get started by buying and raising pigs. She also now lives in a new house, built of wood.

Sou Et and **Em Ouem** are farmers, who are proud to say that they are no longer poor. In 2003, they were struggling to survive. But today, thanks to LWD, they have two acres of rice fields, two cows, several chickens, and a small fruit and vegetable plantation. Having “graduated” from LWD, however, they then went on to help pilot LWD’s biogas project in their village. As a result, they are now able to generate enough biogas from their cow dung to fuel a gas cooker and three lamps. They, and their granddaughter Kanha, who is 10 years old, no longer have to spend time collecting firewood, or spend their money buying charcoal. And Kanha’s grades in school have improved from 7/10 to 10/10.

The holistic, time-bound, and progressive approach to development embraced by LWD is working well and sustainably in a country whose infrastructure and civil society were both devastated by the conflict of recent decades. This approach is a coherent and imaginative one, which allows households and villages to become strong and cooperative partners in their own development, and to celebrate what they are continuing to learn to do together in their local context.

Deep within our biblical tradition is the claim that God liberates those who are in bondage not only so that they themselves might flourish, but also so that they might come to embody a new way of life in community, in which the waters of justice flow freely and enable a sustainable and joyful life for all. It is our privilege this year to partner with *Life with Dignity*, and to let justice flow.