



## PROGRAMMING

# 3. CHILD RIGHTS CLUBS

### SUMMARY:

*These clubs provide a bridge between children and adults by providing support parents are unable to provide.*

*Children's rights are promoted inside a framework that respects Cambodian traditions and the role of the family.*



*Self-Portrait, Cambodian youth*

## INTERVIEW WITH SAMBATH NHIM, WORLD VISION CAMBODIA

We had a bad history with the Pol Pot regime. It was a terrible time. There was nothing. Even children who were five were forced to work hard. There was no school. Anyone with education was hated. Young people were taken away from their families and put in camps. Aspects of life not related to basic survival were not totally forgotten but were pushed aside because of the instinct for surviving. All of this broke down some of the traditional family loyalty. Things changed. People began to live more for themselves.

Many who had been youth during the Pol Pot regime are now parents. Their experiences are so different that it can be difficult to have communication with their children. Many people don't want to talk about it; they don't want to be reminded of it. But children want to know about it. My children want me to talk about that time. They want to know about that hard life.

Now people are freer. And now we live inside a buying and selling world. In the past we had poverty but the living standard was higher because they received more money for their produce. Now the price of things like rice is very, very low. The things that they want to buy in the market cost more than the price that they get for their produce. Because of the conflict they have not been able to grow much rice. So much of the land still has a problem with land mines. With all these problems, the level of poverty is high in the rural areas. Many parents have broken bodies because they have to work so hard. Their minds are broken too. I see people in the countryside who are desperate.

I find that many children are lonely and feel helpless. They feel that nobody cares for them. The poverty is so extreme the parents do not have time to take care of their children. There is a lot of domestic violence and some of the parents are divorced or separated. With the poverty in the family there is not enough food. Children leave their homes both because of the poverty and because of the violence.

So we created these children's clubs to try to help both children and their families in these situations. We have about fourteen of them. We wanted to reinforce child participation at the community level but in ways that are in keeping with Cambodian culture. We wanted to work with parents, to support them.

We began by giving children the opportunity to come and play and also to study. Then we began to talk about children's rights. We talked to them about the rights of the child because most of the people at the village level do not know about the concept of children's rights.

In our culture many parents do not necessarily think that children have a particular value to the society. Sometimes some people do not understand the value of education. Many of these parents have not had education because of the Pol Pot Regime time so that is why they don't understand its value.



In rural areas most people are farmers so they think about the value of that kind of work. They think that two or three years is long enough for school, just to learn to read and write. They expect their children to follow them into the fields so they can't understand wasting so much time on education.

*Drawing by Sen Jeunsafy, Cambodia*

*Child rights clubs are gaining popularity in other regions of the world as well. In Gulu, Uganda CAP/World Vision has just established a child rights club in a displaced people's camps. The purpose of this club is both to provide training on children's rights and to create opportunities for parents and their children to enjoy being together.*

*This is partly in response to the high level of domestic violence. The CAP/World Vision Drama Club's next play will be on child abuse.*

I say to the parents that even if a child does go back into the fields if they have finished the primary school or high school then they can think of new things and contribute new ways and ideas. Their thinking will be broader.

An important objective of the clubs is that children become responsible people. We want to help them to broaden their thinking, increase their respect for other people and for the traditions of Cambodian culture. We hope that the clubs will become independent. Already the more established clubs don't need much support from adults.

In some areas we have had clubs for three years. At first it was difficult to motivate parents. But after a while they saw that we were trying to support their children, not to undermine their role as parents and they became more open. Now they support us.

We can see a big change. Before we had the clubs children didn't think much about school, now they do. In our culture, children must respect their parents, but we found that, before the clubs, many children did not show this respect. But with the club we find that the children are much better with this and are also better with school attendance.

All of this comes from our idea of what development should be. When we talk about development we are not talking just about building schools or nice bridges. We also need to consider children and think how to equip them so that they can contribute to their culture and create a new and stronger Cambodian culture. We need to build their capacity because by the time they're adults it will be too late. It is very hard to change the attitude of adults. Children and youth are more open.

So we need to spend time with children to change their hearts and their minds to broaden their vision to embrace life. There are more than 1000 children involved in the club.