

THINK GLOBALLY, ACT LOCALLY

Course And Immersion To Cambodia

JOE DIMECH

CEO SYDNEY AND Caritas Australia are working in partnership to provide a thirty-hour course (evenings and Saturdays) each year for a small group of seven teachers and support staff on development, aid and Catholic Social Teaching.

I was fortunate enough to be accepted into the Think Globally, Act Locally: Course And Immersion To Cambodia in 2011 with the coursework taking place during the second half of 2011 and the in-country ten day Immersion Experience in January 2012.

A post-immersion Lived Response took place in March 2012. The thirty-hour course explored current philosophies on aid and development, Catholic Social Teaching and the work of Caritas Australia.

Our group was comprised of seven primary and secondary teachers, two Caritas staff, Jane Woolford (Group Leader Education Team) and Julie Vass (Global Education Adviser NSW & ACT) and Christine Hingerty Head of New Evangelisation, Catholic Education Office Sydney.

One of the outcomes of the program was to talk to schools and parishes about the work of Caritas during Lent. This provided a great opportunity to share our first-hand experiences of the development projects that have been put into place in Cambodia and to communicate to students, parents and parishioners the positive effects of the Project Compassion campaign by citing real life examples of sustained long term development with local partners in Cambodia.

In Cambodia, Caritas Australia is known as Australian Catholic Relief/Caritas Australia (ACR/CA). In 2010/2011 ACR worked with seven local Cambodian partners. These groups

implemented eight projects in Cambodia with the financial support of more than 500,000 dollars from the Australian Catholic community. Projects ranged from Food Security, Sustainable Agriculture, Basic Health, Water and Sanitation and HIV/AIDS education.

Our Immersion group was led by Lay Sothy, Leader of ACR. We visited a range of rural and urban projects across Cambodia.

Project Compassion is one of Australia's largest humanitarian fundraisers. It brings thousands of Australians into solidarity with the world's poor as well as providing disaster relief. The 2012 Project Compassion theme *'If you want Peace, work for Justice'* (from Pope Paul VI) offers a message of hope that remains as powerful as ever ... together we can help the poor regain their human dignity.

Cambodia Synopsis

Cambodia is still recovering from the Khmer Rouge's brief but destructive reign (1975-1979). During the genocide a third of the Cambodian population (2 million) were killed and the economy, infrastructure and social structures were left in tatters. Part of our experience included visiting the Toul Sleng Genocide Museum and the Killing Fields at Choeung Ek.

Key Facts

- Nearly half of the population (13.5 million) is under 20 yrs old.
- The life expectancy is 62 years.
- 61% of the population have access to safe drinking water.
- Almost 50 % of Cambodian children suffer from chronic malnutrition.
- Although 75% of Cambodian children attend primary school, less than half complete

it and only 24% of boys and 21% of girls graduate to secondary school.

- The average Cambodian living in poverty survives on US\$2 / day.

Summary of the Local Partners and Projects we Visited

The first local partner we visited was Youth For Peace. YFP offers a safe after-school centre where students are educated in peace, leadership, conflict resolution and life skills such as sewing, silk screen printing and gardening. The students' handicrafts are sold at the local markets and they are taught financial management. YFP supports the poorest of the poor children in urban Phnom Penh; those who could be targeted for exploitation or child trafficking.

Village in Kampong Chhnang

The village elders of Kampong Chhnang welcomed us in their multi-purpose space and gave us a dollar for dollar breakdown of how money from ACR was spent over the year. We asked them how the money spent made their lives better. They told us that they made rugs and baskets to sell at the markets, built an open-sided community meeting space, replaced thatched roofs with zinc ones and set money aside to care for the elderly. They wanted to know why people in Australia would send money to them and help them. Our answer was that it was part of our practice as Catholics to help the poor and that the Project Compassion campaign during Lent was a very big event in our churches and schools.

Maryknoll Bridges of Hope

The Maryknoll Bridges of Hope supports orphaned children living with HIV/AIDS. They target the poorest of the poor on the outskirts of Phnom Penh; orphaned children with no immediate family. They support these children by providing medication and HIV/AIDS education, school education and dormitory style living quarters. The 'house mothers and fathers' told us that the children have every chance of living productive lives into adulthood and that



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through the support of Caritas they offer hope and raise the dignity of these children.

Remote School Pursat Province:

Australia is often called the Lucky Country. The situation is quite different in Cambodia. 75% of Cambodian children attend primary school. This is much less in remote parts of the country. ACR, with the support of Caritas Australia, built a remote school in Pursat Province. The school is nothing more than a concrete slab with a tin roof divided into two rooms. On the day of our visit around forty-five children sat in one of the rooms. Their ages ranged from five to fifteen years of age. ACR supplies the children with a uniform, exercise books and a school bag. They demonstrated their knowledge of the Khmer language and mathematics. Compared to 'western standards of education', the school lacked all the mod cons we expect in Australia. This school only has blackboards, is open to the elements and has no electricity, yet the villagers see it as the cornerstone of their community as their children have access to an education—a basic human right.

EPDO Duck Raising Project: Remote Pursat Province

Money from Project Compassion is distributed to a wide variety of local Cambodian partners and is spent on many varied projects. We visited the EPDO Duck Raising Project in Pursat Province. Here a farmer is supported in duck raising. In 2010 floods washed away

his modest wooden house and now he lives with his daughter's family of twelve people and supports them by raising ducks. He collects seventy eggs a day, rides three kilometres with the eggs on a bicycle to the market and makes US\$10/day. He also supplements his income with market gardening. As Catholics we believe that everybody has the right to work and be paid a just wage for their labour.

Economic Justice: Remote Pursat Province

In Pursat Province we visited a remote village that had benefitted greatly from support from Project Compassion. Women play an important role in economic activity as many of the men work away from their families or have died from HIV. One mother we visited has multiple income streams; vegetable growing, fish farming, chicken and duck raising. Caritas does not see itself as a charity supporting individuals; rather they work with communities for long term development bringing economic justice and lifting up the lives of the people they support. She told us with great pride how her family has benefitted from her multiple income streams and that they have been empowered to make the daily decisions that affect their lives.

Cow Bank

This simple scheme provides a family with a cow. Once the cow produces a calf they pass the cow on to another family and keep the calf for milk and for labour on their farm. Caritas supports this initiative as it is a concrete example of the Catholic social teaching of *subsidiarity* whereby people at the grassroots make their own decisions about their lives.

Solidarity

Simple agricultural technologies such as fish gates, canals and water pumps allow for greater productivity, generate income and provide solidarity amongst communities. Our brief stop by a canal provided an opportunity to share in the communal activity of catching fish for the evening meal. It was interesting to

note the men 'doing the work' and the women 'organising' from the canal bank. We later learned that the canal fish gates are the social centres of the village as they are places to get all the latest gossip.

In Conclusion

Although I experienced the extreme poverty of urban and rural Cambodia for ten short days and gained an insight into the atrocities of the Pol Pot regime, I came away with a great sense of hope for the future. A hope that was realised in the partners we met and in the scores of Cambodians whose lives have been touched and improved by the work of Caritas through ACR and their local partners.

The immersion was a truly humbling experience on many levels. Our group bonded early and shared new understandings and personal reflections throughout the journey over the thirty hours of coursework and the in-country immersion. Our daily de-briefing took place both formally through communal prayer and journal writing led by Chris, July and Jane and informally over a drink or in the mini bus. We were given ample downtime as well for sightseeing and a lot of processing took place in the markets on in the back of a tuk tuk.

I was fortunate to stop over in Singapore after the immersion to take time to be by myself, but found it hard when confronted with overt wealth and the success driven culture given that it was Chinese Lunar New Year. I was presented with the opportunity of driving either a Lamborghini Gallardo or a Ferrari Spyder around the Singapore Formula One track. My conscience weighed up the option of accepting this fleeting and frivolous fifteen-minute thrill ride or considering the CSTs that by now had been integrated into my being; my faith life and outlook on the world. I decided in front of the two cars to channel the money I would have spent on burnt rubber to a deeper financial commitment to Project Compassion this year. My Immersion experience had one other unexpected outcome; trebling my school's Project Compassion donation for 2012.