

Cambodia: *continuing to learn - for the benefit of children*



Redd Barna Cambodia

This article consists of extracts from the Ten Year Anniversary Report 1988-1998 of Redd Barna (Norwegian Save the Children) Cambodia. It looks at aspects of 10 years of establishing policies and setting up programmes in a country that has experienced civil war, political turbulence and unrest – with children among those suffering most. The extracts review Redd Barna Cambodia's progression from providing emergency aid to establishing child-oriented development programmes that started from building local capacity. The impressive consequences of this evolution reflect the importance of identifying opportunities, being alert to changing circumstances, and being willing to learn.

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photo: Redd Barna Cambodia

photo: Edgar Kløsterud/Redd Barna Cambodia

From emergency relief to long term, child-oriented development

Redd Barna's history in Cambodia began in 1979 with emergency relief channelled through the Oxfam-led NGO Consortium. From 1983, activities for the rehabilitation of health, food production and education were carried out from the Thailand office in direct cooperation with authorities and other NGOs. Five years later, in November 1998, a country office opened its doors in Phnom Penh.

With the establishment of an office, a long-term development programme was set up. During its first years, Redd Barna's principal tools to help improve the living situation of children were on the one hand village-based community development, on the other institutional upgrading and training of personnel in the fields of education, health and child development.

From the early days, training of staff has been given much emphasis, to address the need for qualified human resources. In 1998, 70 qualified Cambodians worked in the organisation, including in senior

positions, and the number of expatriates was four.

As some of the needs seen in the early days had been met, and the conditions in general had changed significantly, Redd Barna reviewed and subsequently changed its strategy in 1996. Partnership, child rights, advocacy and focus on vulnerable groups of children were identified as the new core; and the emergency feature finally gave way to a long-term, child-oriented programme.

Building relationships, designing a strategy

This extract offers some reflections by Redd Barna's first Resident Representative in Cambodia, Per Egil Wam, on his return to the country.

Back for the first time in many years, Per Egil Wam recalls the setting in which Redd Barna Cambodia commenced its pledge to support Cambodian children. He was the organisation's first Resident Representative and ten years ago he arrived, to set up an office, and started chiselling out the role of the organisation.



Education in Kampong Chang

The integrated basic education project embraces primary education, preschool education and educational alternatives for those with no access to school. The project aims to improve five components of the educational system: institutional management at provincial and school levels; learning and teaching activities; resource centres; community involvement; and the physical environment.

The project is run together with educational authorities on provincial and district levels, and the heads of core schools. Redd Barna provides technical assistance and guidance, as well as training.

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Per Egil Wam points out many changes since then: infrastructure has modernised, the issues fuelling discussions have altered, the general standard of living has improved. And international contacts are visible everywhere; Cambodia is now part of the international community.

The NGOs present in Cambodia in the late 1980s came to play a significant role in that regard, partly within the framework of the NGO Forum, according to Per Egil Wam: ‘We were determined to support Cambodia, and took an active part in the attempt to end the international isolation. Perhaps our influence and that of other NGOs came to enjoy (was bigger than) our budgets. But it was important that we tried to work out and stick to a firm line in the political context that we were in.’

This was far from the only challenge facing the development community. ‘The devastating results of genocide were evident everywhere’, Per Egil Wam recalls. ‘Starvation was a reality for many children, and the Khmer Rouge a large threat. Infrastructure was extremely basic, the needs of the people were endless and the structures to cater for development cooperation not yet shaped. The post office in Phnom Penh lodged the only international phone in the

country, mail arrived once a week and the city of Phnom Penh had a nine o’clock curfew.’

Although selective when giving NGOs permission to work in the country, the government backed those they had welcomed and worked closely with them, showing gratitude as well as resolution to bring Cambodia back to its feet. The Cambodian National Council for Children and the NGO Forum became increasingly important actors in coordinating efforts of NGOs. Redd Barna Cambodia was an active member of both.

For Per Egil Wam, the first year revolved around designing a strategy for Redd Barna Cambodia. Community development, health and education became the principal fields of work, and the specific role of Redd Barna was to build capacity and assist in institutional upgrading. Another important task was to form relationships and identify resourceful people to cooperate with, he recollects, adding that for him, those relations remain precious:

‘In spite of the hardship and predicaments I experienced on the part of the people, the children in particular, Cambodia is largely something positive in my mind and will always be special to me.’

Redd Barna in Cambodia today

This extract offers some reflections by Redd Barna Cambodia's current Resident Representative, Gunnar Andersen, about where the organisation stands today.

Childhood – the first, say, ten years of life – is a time when we learn basic skills and establish the platform for our future.

Adolescence is the crucial and often painful period between childhood and adulthood that follows, when we resist as well as embrace maturing. This is somehow also applicable to an organisation like ours. During our ten years in Cambodia, Redd Barna has learnt basic skills and developed, while questioning its role and surroundings. Mature adults at times believe they have all the answers, hence forgetting to challenge themselves, forgetting to listen to the young. Today, approaching adolescence, I hope the organisation will continue to learn and develop, yet remain youthful, curious and open-minded.

Four years ago, we had 18 expatriate staff. A tremendous and successful effort in the mid 1990s to develop human resources has allowed us to leave that stage behind. In 1999, the full-time expatriate staff have been reduced to two, and all departments in charge of our working areas are headed and staffed by well-qualified Cambodian nationals.

1998 was the initial year of our new strategic period, stretching into the next century. The new strategy has brought a clearer child focus, and a final transition from self-implemented projects to programmes carried out in partnership with local organisations and the Royal Government. Our main working areas are basic education; promotion of children's rights; and support to children in especially difficult circumstances, for example, sexually exploited children, street children, and disabled children.

