



A slum community in Phnom Penh

# Caring for Cambodian Communities

Text and photos by the Project Sothea team

Project Sothea was initiated in 2010, in collaboration with nongovernmental organisation (NGO) Khmer Foundation for Justice, Peace and Development. Our Cambodian project has since expanded, in partnership with international NGO Pour un Sourire d'Enfant (PSE) and local charity Solutions to End Poverty, to provide health screenings for the villagers of Kampung Puay in Battambang and the slum communities located in Phnom Penh. The Project Sothea team, comprising 26 Rotaractors (first and second year National University of Singapore medical students, who are Rotaract Club members), flew to Cambodia for this outreach mission from 11 to 24 December last year.

## Health screenings and set-up of healthcare system

Imagine having to commute 14 kilometres on muddy roads to obtain medical treatment, only to realise that the medicine that you bought at the local pharmacy has expired. This is the harsh reality for the poor villagers of Kampung Puay in rural Battambang, who lack access to proper healthcare. We hope to provide an opportunity for these villagers, as well as those in Phnom Penh, to obtain free medical check-ups and medicine for simple illnesses. Common diseases that plague the villagers are hypertension and diabetes, and

most of the children have hair lice woes. Project director Clare Fong shared, "Cleaning the children of lice was a new experience for me, and it was very heartening when the older children would take the combs and help us comb the lice out of the younger children."

The health screenings also included a wounds management station, which provided disinfection and bandaging for the villagers. Team member Ooi Xue Ting recalled a girl who was suffering from a severe wound on the dorsum of her foot and the last three digits, "The wound looked terribly inflamed, and a lot of soil and dirt were trapped in the open wound. It took my team quite a while to wash out the trapped dirt as we tried to cause as little pain as possible to the poor girl who was crying throughout. After interviewing her father, we found out that the root cause of her injury was due to the fact that she does not have footwear to protect her feet, so severe inflammation escalated from a minor cut."

As part of our bid to increase the sustainability of our project, we as budding healthcare professionals hope to assist in the development of a healthcare system in the urban slum community. PSE will be relocating residents from the dumpsites to a new village under Project SMILE, where proper sanitation and healthcare facilities, such as a clinic, will be available. We also hope to help Peaceful

A visit to the doctors at PSE



Bringing smiles to the orphans at Peaceful Children Home 2 in Battambang



A big smile for the camera!



Children's Home 2 in Battambang develop a health records system. The team is currently working on health booklets, which will be used to track the health of the children living there. Upon visiting the Phnom Penh slum communities, team member Bing Howe could not believe that people were living in such unhygienic and uninhabitable conditions in the capital of Cambodia. He revealed, "It was a real heartbreak to see these people striving to put food on the table for their families in these harsh environments and with meagre incomes from collecting scrap materials from the dumpsites. It also saddened me to see many of them, especially children, with untreated and infected cuts and wounds especially on their feet from treading on broken glass at the dumpsites."

### Health education

Education is our project's primary objective, as we believe that it is one of the best ways to ensure sustainability. While the villagers queued up for the health screenings, we conducted lessons to increase awareness and reduce incidences of poor lifestyle choices, such as smoking and alcoholism. We also went into the village to teach villagers the importance of first aid with demonstrations of bandaging. Children at the Battambang village school and Peaceful Children's Home 2 were also taught sanitation, hygiene, and treating simple illnesses and wounds. Team member Michael Kwan explained that the experience made him realise the importance of information and knowledge, "I saw for the first time how education was perhaps our strongest weapon in making the project sustainable."

### Water and sanitation project

In 2011, we introduced ceramide filters to villagers in Kampung Puay to cleanse their water in the hope of reducing the incidence of diarrhoea and stomachaches. Last year, we started a pilot project with Hyflux's Free Flow 60 water filter at Peaceful Children's Home, and we intend to monitor its effectiveness this year.

We are also working with the World Toilet Organization (WTO) in our toilet project, to introduce SaniShop toilets to ten households in Kampung Puay. SaniShop, a social enterprise model developed by WTO, provides work opportunities (by the selling of toilets) and sanitation to our beneficiaries (through proper disposal of waste). Team member Ong Lynn witnessed the favourable responses from the villagers during the recce trip in August this year. She recounted, "Villagers were willing to save up for months to build the toilet cubicles, many of whom could only afford toilets made of hay."

For more information on Project Sothea, please visit our Facebook page at <http://www.facebook.com/ProjectSothea> or email us at [projectsothea2013@gmail.com](mailto:projectsothea2013@gmail.com).

### Current updates

Project Sothea's next trip to Phnom Penh and Battambang will be from 9 to 21 December 2013. We are aiming to fundraise \$20,000 for items related to health screening, sponsorship for drugs used for health screening or vitamins to be given to village children who have malnutrition. More funds are needed this year as we are also trying to build an actual clinic in Phnom Penh city's SMILE village for relocation of slum communities, and continue with our water and sanitation projects. **SMA**

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