

Fostering Play in Bech Khlok, Cambodia

Cambodia
Trinity College
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FINAL REPORT

Our project aimed to build a locally-sourced recreation space and facilitate a soccer workshop for the under-resourced children of Bech Khlok – a rural village in Western Cambodia. By fostering play and teamwork, we supported the village's emerging school system and vision for a better future.

This project was fully funded through the Davis Projects for Peace.

The idea for this project stemmed from an established need, opportune relationships, and a passion for education. I, Jessica, believe that education is the most powerful catalyst for social mobility – it is a means for motivating learners of all kinds towards developing the confidence and skills necessary to boost life outcomes. This passion for education stemmed from my experiences teaching inner-city students over two summers.

Suitably, I was apt to advocate for education initiatives and organizations whenever possible. While traveling Switzerland in May 2018, I met and befriended Andrea Brüsweiler. When getting to know one another, Andrea mentioned how she had founded a nonprofit called Seed of Small Beginnings (Seed) in 2014 that endeavored to assist the growth of sustainable Cambodian (Khmer) communities. Beginning with the village of Bech Khlok, Seed helped construct new school buildings and provide clean drinking water. The next phase of the project was to create children-friendly school grounds, including a playground and soccer field.

Given my passion for education, I knew I wanted to help Bech Khlok in some shape or form. Fortunately, I learned of the Projects for Peace grant opportunity from my first-year seminar course at Trinity and had a friend experienced in construction work and soccer coaching (Joshua). Consequently, the Bech Khlok playground and soccer field project originated from community need, the initiative of individuals interested in championing the project, and an underlying passion for supporting children and education.

Since the education system in Cambodia is run by the government, there are limitations as to what changes NGOs and outside organizations can implement within the public school system. For instance, in the case of Bech Khlok, the public school teachers teach for less hours per day (three hours instead of five) and less days of the week (five days instead of six) than required by the government. While Seed is aware of this issue and could raise funding to hire better, more engaged teachers, it is illegal for them to do so. Accordingly, Seed aims to support the village's emerging education system tangentially, by providing proper amenities like clean drinking water and toilets, and materials including a full library. Likewise, our peace project sought to support the school system in Bech Khlok by developing children-friendly school grounds through the playground and soccer field.

The lacking school system in Cambodia is the result of a variety of factors including the Khmer Rouge regime, limited resources, and poverty. Following the destruction of the education system by the Khmer Rouge, during which education came to an effective standstill from 1975-1979, Cambodia had to rebuild its school system from almost nothing. In the current day, there is a severe scarcity of schools and classrooms, particularly in rural villages. Due to poverty, children are sometimes forced to give up education to work and supplement the family's income too. This is the case in Bech Khlok; many students have extra jobs and farming responsibilities that stop them from attending free afternoon English classes taught by the Seed-sponsored Bech Khlok Project Manager (Heang).

Bech Khlok was chosen as our host site because it exemplifies a community that advocated ground-up for a better education system. In 2012, with the limited resources available to them, the villagers built two makeshift classrooms and three locals, including Heang, voluntarily started teaching the children. Given this community-based desire for progress as well as Seed's five years of experience in working in the area, Bech Khlok was chosen as our host site for the construction of improved school grounds.

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Over the past five years, Seed has equipped the Bech Khlok school with amenities including three new school buildings, an accommodation area for teachers/volunteers, water tanks and filters, toilets, and solar power. Therefore, we were fortunate to have a simple accommodation and to sleep on cots.

The main challenges to working at our host site were the weather and lack of resources to be fully clean to first-world standards. The weather this past July was hot and sunny as usual for this area, with temperatures averaging in the mid-90s. Coupled with the lack of resources, we could only spare to shower ourselves with a couple pails of rainwater a day. We were sweaty and grimy most of the time, if not from the harsh climate itself, then from the construction work and layers of sunscreen and bug spray on our skin. Regardless, working alongside the construction builders and self-volunteering students to build the playground and soccer field was very rewarding and fun. For instance, while Joshua and I struggled with low energy levels in the scorching heat, the children were always energetic and willing to help run errands all while wearing their typical uniform of long-sleeved shirts and long pants! And slowly but surely, we became acclimated to the countryside climate, allowing for higher project productivity.

Yet, at the start, Joshua and I had doubts about finishing the project in time allotted. The group of workers hired to assist in the construction projects were local to the Moug Ruessei district but possessed no prior experience building playgrounds. Most playgrounds in Cambodian cities were built entirely of metal too so the builders had no references for our proposal made of local wood and recycled tires. It was also challenging to properly estimate the total materials necessary and to source their delivery out to the rural community. More specifically, the nearest two-lane dirt road was a 20-minute motorbike ride away from the school grounds. Since there weren't roads leading to the school, many of the large materials had to be cautiously tied onto the bed of a slow-moving hand tractor.

In terms of communication, we were fortunate to work closely with the village Project Manager Heang, who is fluent in Khmer and English. Therefore, Heang helped facilitate our communication with local builders, teachers, and children. We did our best to pick up as many Khmer phrases as possible too.

We define peace as efforts directed towards the betterment of communities. Thus, improving school grounds, which in turn supports the school system, coincides with and encourages peacemaking.

In the short-term, our project provides a space for the local students to play freely and work together. Many of the children come from tough backgrounds and family environments. By adding children-friendly spaces to the school, the local children can have a place to escape to and to enjoy time with their peers. In the long-term, our project fits into the initiative of assisting the sustainable growth of Bech Khlok. By improving school grounds, we hope to motivate students to stay in school, keep up with their studies, and pursue better life outcomes.

This project has impacted the way we position ourselves in the scope of volunteerism. Beyond the value of what we built, we strived to learn about Cambodia from local Khmer people too. In particular, our conversations with Heang were profound and inspiring because we all sought to communicate together sincerely. Additionally, it was important for us to be reflective about our project plan and intentions so as to remain grounded and to not develop a 'hero complex.' Finally, this project helped instill in us a greater commitment and drive for championing education and sustainable communities in our futures.

"This project tested my resourcefulness and resilience in rural Cambodia, a place previously unfamiliar to me, but for a cause I'm deeply familiar with – supporting children and education. Moreover, this project actualized my ability to champion the growth of sustainable communities, thereby providing me invaluable experience for my intended lifetime of work dedicated to fostering peace." –Jessica Duong

[Seed of Small Beginnings Newsletter - August 2019](#)

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