

EDUCATION THAT INSPIRES

Cambodias children have a poor access to education

Cambodia is a country that has been ravaged by three decades of war and strife. Generations grew up knowing nothing but a life of war, famine, death, disease, and depravation. Formal education was almost at a total standstill; millions were illiterate and uneducated. In 1998, some statistics estimated the literacy rate in Cambodia at 35%; it had risen to approximately 70% in 2003. Although the government has tried to put in place a national education system, there are still vast numbers of children in Cambodia with no access to basic education.

It was against a backdrop of both an uncertain but hopeful future that a group of seven Cambodians, determined to contribute to the development of their own community, came together to form the Cambodian Organization for Research, Development and Education (CORDE), which was initiated in 1994 as a private, non-profit, and non-political voluntary development organization involved in the process of social and economic transformation and of upraising the quality of human life and well-being of individuals, families and communities, upholding the principles of human honour and dignity through the provision of viable and sustainable projects that will enhance their capacities and capabilities, thereby increasing the level of participation resulting in empowerment for a long-term sustained impact.

It was towards these ends that CORDE started its first activities to provide informal education for children and youth. The inefficiency of the formal education system in Cambodia left much to be desired. Most children did not attend any school. CORDE initiated informal education classes which included language lessons and other academic subjects. For a large percentage of the students who were from poor families, the classes conducted by CORDE were their only means of education.

Most of CORDEs first initiatives were concentrated in the province of Battambang, in northwest Cambodia. Inspired volunteers gathered children from their villages to hold daily tutorial classes, each running for a minimum two hours, with at least 20 students. More classes were started as more teachers came forward to help. Classes were held in whatever space was available be it the homes of teachers, in market place or under the trees. As the number of classes grew, and the number of students multiplied, CORDE embarked on a systematic training program for its teachers to ensure that the quality and content of the classes would constantly improve and to make monitoring possible. CORDE also offers educational programs for junior youth and adults.