

Best Practice and Lessons Learned

The Development of the Cambodian Sign Language And Deaf People in Cambodia

General Overview

Cambodian deaf people are one of the most disadvantaged groups in Cambodia. They have a hidden handicap which is not greatly understood by the hearing population, and although they physically live in the same community as hearing people and generally are members of hearing families, their minds and hearts, as well as their ability to hear, can be quite different from those of the hearing world around them. Because of problems with communication and sometimes because of cultural differences, they have suffered a great deal in areas such as health care, basic needs in daily life, education, skill training, relationships, and social participation. In many ways, they live in an isolated world.

During the many years of conflict, the leaders of Cambodia have not paid much attention to the development of disadvantaged groups, especially people with disabilities and deaf people. But the first free elections in Cambodia, organized by the United Nation in 1993, have led to improvements in infrastructure, basic education, basic health care, nutrition, etc. The current Cambodian government has also signed many declarations, conventions, and proclamations with the United Nations. Some of them, such as the goals of the first UNESCAP Decade of Disabled Persons, 1993-2002, and of the second decade of disabled persons called the Biwako Millennium Framework, 2003-2012, were related to disability and disadvantaged groups. However, since the country has such great needs in the emergency phase of development, the deaf sector has remained largely outside the development agenda of the Cambodian government.

Cambodia now is moving slowly from the emergency phase to the development phase of rebuilding the country, and the government recognizes many needs of deaf people, but they lack experience and expertise on deafness, so they are very much dependent on non-governmental organizations to work in the deaf sector to implement the work with deaf communities. Because the deaf issue is still very new to both Cambodian societies in general and for policy makers, it is very hard to move the process faster to fulfill the needs of the deaf people in the current situation. As time moves on, because of advocacy through committee meetings, training workshops and other events, the government is recognizing what they are lacking in term of expertise and is seeing the importance of equal rights and full participation of all citizens, and they warmly welcome the technical input from NGOs to help develop policy on Education For All, with full support from UNESCO.

Cambodian Sign Language Project Information

The Cambodian Sign Language began to be noticed only in the late 20th century, but now it is receiving attention from organizations in countries such as Finland, France, Japan, Thailand, the United States, and Vietnam. And the Cambodian deaf community is also beginning to understand and appreciate its own language and to work to develop it. One of the main tools and resources for developing Cambodian

Sign Language has been the Cambodian Sign Language Committee (CSLC) of the Disability Action Council (DAC).

Brief Background for Establishment

In the late 1990s, a committee had been established to discuss the sign language being used in two projects with deaf people that were beginning at that time. One emphasized developing a local sign language for Cambodia and the other was using American Sign Language. The committee met for a while but then became inactive.

In mid 2000 this committee was re-established. A national semi-autonomous agency, called the Disability Action Council, with the responsibility of coordinating work with the disabled community in Cambodia, invited the leaders from NGOs working in the deaf sector to renew their previous working relationship under the coordination of the DAC. Basically this involved two groups, the Deaf Development Program (DDP), working mostly with adults, and Krousar Thmey, which had established the first school for deaf children in Cambodia. Most of the members of the re-established committee were also members of the original committee in 1997. Two consultants asked by the Finnish Association of the Deaf to do a mid-term review of DDP in late 2001 made several recommendations concerning the use and development of sign language in Cambodia. The DAC agreed to implement the recommendations after discussing them with the re-established committee. The current committee is called the Cambodian Sign Language Committee (CSLC) and it is still coordinated by the Disability Action Council.

The recommendations also mentioned a sign language research team, which at that time was also being coordinated by the DAC. The recommendation was that the coordination of the research group should be given back to DDP which had guided the research from 1996 to 1999 when the old committee ceased to function. The research-working group had been re-established by DAC in 2001 and DAC was responsible for it until mid 2002.

The Cambodian Sign Language (formerly referred to as Khmer Sign Language) development era had started in 1996. There were very few formal Cambodian signs then, and deaf people mostly used natural gestures and “home signs” within their own families. There were very few signs agreed upon which allowed broad communication among local deaf communities.

At that time, the deaf people began meetings to develop their sign language with assistance from a Finnish deaf representative who also conducted a survey on the living standards of deaf people in Cambodia in early 1996. These activities were based at the office of the Cambodian Disabled People’s Organization (CDPO) in Phnom Penh, and it was here that the Deaf Development Program was first established. Later in 1997 the deaf groups (mostly adults) set up classes for learning this new Cambodian Sign Language in Banteay Meanchey, Kampot, Kompong Speu, and Svay Rieng provinces.

DDP is now under the management of Maryknoll (an international non-governmental organization), another of the recommendations made in the review by the consultants. The switch to sponsorship by Maryknoll caused another break in the operations of the Cambodian Sign Language Committee in mid 2002 while DDP went

through a restructuring. Now it is operating fully again since early 2003. [See appendix A for more information about DDP.](#)

In 1997, a French non-government organization, Krousar Thmey (KT), established the first deaf school in Cambodia to provide formal education for deaf children. The Deaf School uses sign language in the education of deaf children. Because the Cambodian Sign Language research was proceeding very slowly, CSL was not developed enough to be the only sign language used within the education system at Krousar Thmey. KT discussed and decided on adopting American Sign Language at the deaf school. Not all of the signs used at KT are American signs. Some Cambodian Sign Language has been introduced to the children and some of the American signs have been adapted to suit the culture of Cambodia. [See appendix B for more information about Krousar Thmey.](#)

The Deaf Development Program and Krousar Thmey cooperated on the original sign language committee, but the group experienced working difficulties and philosophical differences about what sign language to use in the schools and in the community, and this is one of the reasons the committee ceased meeting in mid-1999.

About 1% of every population are profoundly deaf, and about 10% have a hearing loss of some degree. Cambodia has a population of about 13,000,000, and it is estimated that there are more than 300,000 people with a severe enough hearing loss to need assistance of some kind, e.g., sign language, interpreters, hearing aids, etc. Because the Deaf Development Program and Krousar Thmey are the only programs working directly with the deaf population in Cambodia, only about 800 of this deaf population are actually receiving services related to their deafness. There are a huge number of deaf people without any access to sign language, education, and other basic needs.

Membership and CSLC Structure

The Cambodian Sign Language Committee today is made up of representatives from the Ministry of Education Youth and Sports (MOEYS), Maryknoll's Deaf Development Program (DDP), Krousar Thmey's (KT) Deaf School, the MOEYS District Education Office, and the Disability Action Council. There are twelve members in the committee and included among them are decision makers from senior and mid management levels with knowledge of deafness and sign language. The CSLC meetings are scheduled once every two months, sometimes a full-day meeting and sometimes just a half-day meeting, depending on the issues to be addressed.

The members of the CSLC are:

- Two hearing officers from MOEYS (ministry level), from the Department of Primary Education/Special Education Office and the Department of Pedagogy Research and Curriculum.
- Four staff from DDP, three deaf adults (Assistant Program Manager, sign illustrator, sign research/analyses) and one hearing person (Program Manager).
- Three staff from KT, two deaf (one student leader and one teacher) and one hearing (Children with Disability Coordinator).
- One hearing officer from MOEYS—District Education Office (Officer Manager) with pedagogy and curriculum development skill. She links with KT Deaf School also.

- Two hearing staff from DAC, one the Deaf Sub-sector Advisor who is CSLC chairperson and the other his counterpart (the Public Relations and Information Officer)

Roles and Functions of the CSLC

CSLC Role: The CSLC is under the DAC structure, and the committee follows the DAC mission and vision. It has the specific objective to facilitate all NGOs working in the deaf sector, helping them and ministries, religious, and local communities to work together with deaf people to develop sign language in Cambodia.

There is no national association of the deaf in Cambodia. The committee is guided in its sign language work by the statements and principles set by World Federation of the Deaf (WFD), by the UNESCO Education Mission Statement on Education for All, and by consultation with sign language experts.

Main functions of CSLC

- To provide direction on development of Cambodian Sign Language
- To guide and support the CSLC and Research Team Plans of Action
- To liaise with CSLC members and relevant agencies on deaf issues
- To communicate and share information on sign language issues at national and international forums.

Main Activities of CSLC

- To promote the development and use of a national Cambodian Sign Language
- To monitor the work of the Cambodian Sign Language Research Team
- To review the signs developed by the Sign Language Research Team
- To disseminate newly developed signs throughout Cambodia
- To coordinate and conduct workshops related to sign language issues
- To communicate and share information on deaf issues related to sign language
- To advocate and lobby for deaf issues and sign language among stakeholders and government ministries
- To support the production of sign language educational materials

Since DDP assumed responsibility for the coordination of the Cambodian Sign Language Research Team from DAC, all the members of the research team are deaf in accordance with the CSLC Terms of Reference. The research team consists of deaf representatives from DDP, Krousar Thmey, and from the provinces. The original plan was for them to hold a sign language consultation meeting every six to nine weeks for two full days with the support of the two advisors from DDP.

However, in order to build up a strong foundation for the research team, the committee suggested a pilot project to last for three months. A deaf DDP advisor provided an intensive training to ten young deaf students with the assistance of three local deaf leaders at DDP. Five of these deaf students are from DDP and five from KT. They received training every Thursday for a full day with a local travel and food subsidy from DDP. The training included an introduction to sign language development, the differences in sign languages around the world, and how to develop a national sign language.

Resources

- The CSLC uses the DDP's two advisors (Mr. Collin Allen and Ms. Liza Clews) as resources. They both have good access to the WFD and other deaf experts around the world.
- The Chairperson of the CSLC, Fr. Charlie Dittmeier has been seconded by Maryknoll to work at the DAC as an advisor for the Deaf Sub-sector.
- The CLSC has a professional sign language linguist as an advisor. He is Dr. James Woodward, based in Vietnam, who is the overall project director for the national sign language dictionary project in Vietnam, Cambodia, Hong Kong, and the Philippines. The project funded by the Nippon Foundation.
- DDP provides one sign language interpreter at the CSLC meetings for the members who use mainly Cambodian signs.
- KT also provides one sign language interpreter (a teacher) at the CSLC meetings since they use both Cambodian signs and American signs at the deaf school.
- DAC support for the CSLC includes providing the meeting venue, record keeping, English-Khmer interpreting, paper work, and general communication and dissemination of materials. DAC's core funding is supported by USAID.

Success and achievement

The Ministry of Education Youth and Sports (MOEYS) strongly supports the principle of education for all and closely cooperates with deaf education and the development of Cambodian Sign Language.

- The MOEYS Departments of Formal Education, Primary Education, and Pre-school and the Provincial Education Office all collaborate well with Krousar Thmey.
- The Department of Non-Formal Education and the Provincial Education Offices also collaborate well with the Deaf Development Program.

Because of networking and information sharing among CSLC members and stakeholders, and because of the advocacy of teachers and field workers in the general community, groups of deaf people have been established in the provinces, and families with deaf members have emerged seeking further support from KT and DDP. They recognize the importance of sign language and education to improve their daily lives.

Sign language can also be very useful for children with intellectual disabilities and with severe multiple disabilities. It can provide them with a way to communicate with each other, their parents, friends, and teachers.

Outcome of CSLC Work

- It is something of a unique situation that all the agencies working for the well being of deaf people in Cambodia began their work using sign language for deaf education and communication for both adults and children, and have continued this emphasis by strategic agreement. All of them are aware of the problems and controversy around the world about the different methods for helping deaf people.
- All the CSLC members from Krousar Thmey, the Deaf Development Program, and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports agree on the development of

Cambodian Sign Language to be used as the main communication language for deaf people in Cambodia.

- The committee reviewed and supported materials published for deaf education:
 - ❖ Three textbooks for primary school grade one were sponsored and published by Krousar Thmey with approval from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports.
 - ❖ Two local sign language booklets and about 1000 alphabet posters were produced and distributed by the Deaf Development Program in cooperation with Krousar Thmey.
 - ❖ More than 1500 signs were put on teaching cards and printed in five booklets produced by the Deaf Development Program.
- The working group/research team developed Cambodian signs:
 - ❖ 1996 to mid 1999: 700 local signs were developed and put into use; they were record in two booklets.
 - ❖ 2001 to mid 2002: another 800+ signs (for total of 1547) were developed and distributed to the CSLC members. They were then categorized by hand shape by the Deaf Development Program. Eventually they will be included into a series of small dictionaries of practical sign language language.
 - ❖ 2003-2004: 471 new signs developed by a separate group of hearing and deaf teachers at Krousar Thmey with consultation and input from the deaf students.
- The sign language developed by the CSLC is used in the deaf education programs in Cambodia:
 - ❖ Total number of deaf children receiving formal education at deaf school of Krousar Thmey: 405 students; 153 students are girls.
 - ❖ Total numbers of deaf children receiving formal education through Krousar Thmey support program in integration classes in regular government primary schools: 212 students; 58 students are girls.
 - ❖ Total numbers of deaf children and adults receiving non-formal education through the Deaf Development Program: 120 students; 75 students are girls.
- Distribution of materials: the Deaf Development Program and Krousar Thmey made educational materials for the deaf available to all the deaf schools, government integration classes, Ministry deaf communities, NGO partners working in the deaf sector, and to interested people.
- Members of the CSLC are involved in international contacts with other deaf groups. A group of Cambodian deaf adults from the Deaf Development Program (DDP) was invited by the National Association of the Deaf Thailand to visit the Thai deaf communities through out Thailand in 1997. That was the first time that the Cambodian deaf group began communications with a neighboring country. They made a second international link through a representative of the Finnish Association of the Deaf. That was an outstanding success in sharing information about deaf people in Cambodia. In 1998, the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) sponsored a deaf adult from DDP to study one full year in Japan on deaf culture and sign language. In 1999 JICA sponsored another deaf adult, for similar study, who was an assistant teacher at Krousar Thmey's school for the deaf. These two deaf adults are some of the most outstanding deaf leaders in Cambodia in terms of knowledge and communication. The man from DDP is now the DDP Assistant Program Manager. In 2003 some deaf people from DDP went to the conference in

Canada of the World Federation of the Deaf. There they made a presentation about the current situation and needs of the deaf community in Cambodia. Doors of opportunity are opening and deaf people are communicating more for themselves. For the first time, they are developing a community of their own.

Conclusion

Awareness of deaf issues is very new to Cambodian society, and because deafness is an invisible handicap, there are many major constraints facing the development of the deaf sector in Cambodia regarding social work; awareness within the deaf community about health care and HIV/AIDS; discrimination by hearing people, even within their own families; lack of access to services they require; lack of policy and legislation to protect them; and the lack of literacy among the deaf people in the country.

However, a major step toward improvement is that the CSLC provides a neutral facilitation role in the development and promotion of sign language and represents key participants in the field of deafness. The Cambodian Sign Language Committee (CSLC) is presently the only group of people knowledgeable about deaf issues in Cambodia, coordinating, providing recommendations and technical input to MOEYS, and linking with the Inclusive Education Program of the DAC.

Within the last two years, the literacy skills and communications of some of the deaf community have been greatly improved due to training in deaf leadership and in sign language research and analyses. Deaf people are starting to take the lead in the development of their own language. They understand their role and responsibilities and are giving direction to the task, showing both their independence and ownership; and they are working together as a deaf group.

In order to improve the well-being of the deaf in Cambodia, there needs to be strengthening, improving, and expanding of networking among deaf communities, government Ministries, families of deaf people, NGOs in the deaf sector, and donor agencies. They must collaborate and continue both moral and financial support to the deaf community and help to integrate deaf people into the mainstream of society.

Appendix A Information

A). Deaf Development Program (DDP):

DDP funded by: Maryknoll, Finnish Association for the Deaf, Nippon Foundation, Asia Mind, Australian Embassy.	
Office Address: Fr. Charlie Dittmeier-Director Deaf Development Program #23A, St. 304 & 113, Boeung Keng Kong, Chamcar Morn, Phnom Penh, Cambodia E-mail: DDPGeneral@online.com.kh Phone: (855-23) 987 931	Mailing address: Deaf Development Program PO. Box 2469 Phnom Penh, Cambodia

The Deaf Development Program was formally established under the auspices of the Cambodian Disabled People's Organisation (CDPO) in 1996; it was the only program

looking at deaf issues in Cambodia. Maryknoll took over management of DDP in August 2002.

In 1996 there were about 40 adults and deaf children who met regularly at the CDPO office. They were inspired by Ms. Katja Merenti, a deaf field worker for the Finnish Association of the Deaf, who supported and encouraged the development of the local sign language. She also conducted research on the quality of life of deaf people in Cambodia.

The DDP mandate is to teach literacy and to develop Cambodian Sign Language with the long-term goal of building up local deaf groups and eventually creating a national association of the deaf in Cambodia. DDP has cooperated with DAC since 1999, at first through the Active Women's Group of CDPO, and since mid 2000 as part of the CSLC.

DDP's main office is in Phnom Penh city with a total staff of 26 and 2 advisors. They have programs in four provinces, with two staff in each province, one deaf and one hearing. They collaborate with MOEYS, Non-Formal Education Department, in Phnom Penh, and with the Provincial Education Offices in Kampot, Kampong Speu, Svay Rieng, and Banteay Meanchey provinces. In three of the provinces, DDP puts their classes of deaf students in classrooms in government schools.

After a review of its structure and programs under CDPO indicated the need for change, DDP was reorganized with the help of two program advisors, Mr. Colin Allen (deaf) and Ms. Liza Clews (hearing). The program was then suspended for several months while all the DDP staff received intensive training.

DDP Activities:

- Conducts research and training in Cambodian Sign Language
- Manages and advises Cambodian Sign Language Research Team
- Collects and compiles information for a Database on deaf people in Cambodia
- Develops small practical dictionaries of Cambodian Sign Language in a project with the Nippon Foundation
- Provides non-formal education course for reading and writing Khmer language
- Provides sign language and deaf culture courses for deaf and hearing people
- Provides sign language interpreter training
- Provides leadership training for deaf people

DDP Achievements:

In Phnom Penh, DDP provides literacy and sign language training to deaf people over fifteen years of age. In the provinces, DDP offers sign language and literacy to both deaf children and adults from six years of age because in these provinces there is no Krousar Thmey deaf school. DDP receives funding from the Finnish Association of the Deaf, Maryknoll, the Canadian International Development Agency, and the Nippon Foundation.

1. Deaf people received non-formal education

Date	Total # students	Total # girls	Location
1996-2002	140	25% (approx)	Phnom Penh and Provinces
2002-2004	120	24% (approx)	Phnom Penh and Provinces
2. Training conducted			
Date/Year			
2002-2004	Teacher training Deaf awareness Leadership		Phnom Penh
3. Interviewed for deaf database			
2002-2004	192		Phnom Penh and Provinces
4. Number of educational materials for the deaf produced			
2002-2004	Fingerspelling posters Sign language booklets		Phnom Penh and Provinces

Appendix B Information

B) Krousar Thmey:

Name of Director/Founder:	Founder: Mr. Benoit Duchateau-Arminjon General Director: Mrs. Cheam Kosal
Address:	# 4, St 257, avenue kampuchea Krom, Toul Kok, Phnom Penh, Cambodia Phone: (855-23) 366 184 or (855-23) 880 503 E-mail: krousar-thmey@everyday.com.kh Website: www.krousar-thmey.org
Resources:	25% Krousar Thmey France, 25% Krousar Thmey Switzerland, Private Foundations (Terre Des Hommes, Dark and Light, Amis des Enfants du Monde, Kinderleed, Suez,) (i.e. public/private/co-funding.)
Number of employees:	190 Khmer staff, 3 volunteers
Philosophy:	Krousar Thmey is a non-religious & non-political registered association assisting deprived children. Krousar Thmey provides deprived Cambodian children with material, educational and social support in harmony with their environment and respectful of their traditions and beliefs. Our purpose is to help children develop and blossom into responsible adults. We make sure that the aid neither creates disharmony between a child and his relatives and friends, nor creates privileged or dependent children.
	Aiming at efficient long-term development, Krousar Thmey advocates the responsible involvement of local partners. Cambodians for Cambodians run all projects: 190 local people take directly charge of around 900 children and support some 3000 others indirectly.
Fields of intervention:	Protection of the Childhood, Educational support, Aid to cultural and artistic development
Areas of intervention: Cambodia:	(Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Battambang, Sisophon, Poïpet, Kampong Cham...)
Targeted communities:	Deprived children (street, abandoned, trafficked, (poor children), blind and deaf children
Evolution envisaged:	Krousar Thmey is willing to create a national network of infrastructures for blind and deaf children all over Cambodia, by opening integrated classes in public schools

of provinces. This will increase the involvement of the government in the education of handicapped children, so that, Krousar Thmey will be able to leave progressively the responsibilities to the National Education Ministry.

Krousar Thmey-Deaf schools:

Krousar Thmey (KT) established the first deaf school in Chbar Ampeou, Phnom Penh, Cambodia in 1997 to provide formal education for deaf children. The school uses sign language in the education of deaf children. They have closely cooperated with the Ministry of Education Youth and Sports (MOEYS) at the Ministry level, Provincial level and District level, and with the Deaf Development Program (DDP) since 1997. KT has cooperated with the DAC since 1999 as part of the Children with Disability Committee, and Krousar Thmey has been part of the re-established sign language committee at DAC since mid 2000.

KT's goal for deaf children is changing attitudes toward people with disabilities by creating special educational structures and adapting pedagogic and didactic tools; they also seek to raise the awareness of families about opportunities for education and social integration of their children.

Through the years, KT has expanded its services to many provinces, building three more deaf schools in Battambang, Siem Reap, and Komgpong Cham, and also establishing twenty-nine integrated classes in the provinces of Kandal, Takeo, Battambang, Siem Reap, Posat, Kampong Som, Svay Rieng, Prey Veng, and Kampong Cham. These are separate classes for deaf children but within government schools and with government certified teachers. All Krousar Thmey deaf schools and integrated classes work closely with MOEYS' provincial education offices.

Krousar Thmey's approach in deaf education has been to adapt the national primary curriculum of MOEYS by adding sign language to the government textbooks, using some American Sign Language until enough CSL has been developed for use in the school system.

KT Deaf School activities:

- Provides formal primary education
- Teaches Khmer arts and the performance of traditional dance
- Provides sign language training for teachers on weekly and yearly basis
- Provides training on teaching methods and materials development on a yearly basis
- Provides a Parent-Teacher forum
- Maintains integrated classes in the government public schools
- Supports a teacher-student sign language development team
- Establishing a pre-school for young deaf children in Phnom Penh
- Providing testing and hearing aids for some students with a hearing loss

KT Achievement in the Deaf sector:

1. Primary school			
<i>Date school established</i>	<i>Total:students</i>	<i>Total: girls</i>	<i>Location</i>
First school 1997	228 students	92 girls	Phnom Penh
Second school 2000	87 students	27 girls	Siem Reap

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Prepared by the DAC Secretariat

Database on Case studies of Best Practices

The Case of the Development of the Cambodian Sign Language and Deaf People in Cambodia

Forth school 2001	67 students	22 girls	Battambang
Third school 2002	23 students	12 girls	Kg. Cham
First Pre-school will operate in October 2004, Phnom Penh (student data is not yet available)			
29 Integration classes 2001-04	212 students	58 girls	9 provinces
Total=	617 students	211 girls	
2. Secondary students			
Integration classes 2002-2004	14 students	7 girls	
3. Numbers of Sign Language Developed (Teacher-student team)			
2003-2004	471 new signs		At the first deaf school

Further information on this case study please contact:
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