

# Cambodia project: a case study

*by Mike Webb*

## 2005

On a regularly scheduled leadership training trip to Cambodia in the summer of 2005, I was working on a strategy for evangelizing and church planting in rural communities. I had planned to build a fish farm in the process, but was completely thwarted when our driver would not take us to the region because of land mines. Disappointed, I felt that I had failed in my mission. What followed in the next few days was a life-changing assessment and an eye-opening revelation of the true reason God had sent me to Cambodia.

Traveling with a team comprised of partnership representatives from five Vineyard churches, my role was to further train and develop leaders for the existing churches in the rural villages in close proximity to Battambang in northwest Cambodia near the Thai border. Additionally, I would design and begin building a prototype aquaculture project, providing needed protein to the villagers' poor diet of mostly rice and a few vegetables. The Cambodia's Khmer people really like fish, but it is expensive, and therefore rare.

During a child dedication service I noticed a leadership couple who were grieving the loss of their baby boy due to a disease transferred to him through poor water. I was stunned! Something we take for granted in my homeland was unavailable to these people. I suddenly realized that the filter system I was working on for the fish-farm could also provide clean water for human consumption – something these people did not have available. It was a revelation that would change the direction of my work, and literally, my life!

In the 1990's, a Canadian had designed a simple bio-sand water filter housed in a cast concrete structure, costing only a few dollars to build. It is a technology that is now being utilized around the world, but was unknown to these people. According to the U.N. nearly 1.4 billion people world-wide have no access to clean or potable water. Additionally, every day, 4,000 or more people die from the diseases, parasites and effects of the lack of clean drinking water. Most of those dying are children and the elderly. Children are very susceptible because their immune systems do not fully develop for the first few years of life.

With me in Cambodia was tangible evidence of these statistics that I knew so well. I immediately made arrangements for a steel filter mold to be constructed in Phnom Penh. I also made arrangements to return the following spring and train the son of one of the church elders, Duen, to manufacture the filters and to educate the villagers on their proper function and maintenance. During the trip, I was quickly drawn to Duen and his brother-in-law and partner, Keuv - they both have kind eyes and are very quick to smile. These smiles stem from an inherent desire to humbly go above and beyond what is necessary to serve people in need. They are honest. They are strong and dark from working in the sun, and they are eager to do whatever it takes to get any job done, no matter the size. They both have good reputations among the rest of the village.

We decided together to begin a micro-business which could supply the villages in that region with bio-sand filters. We also determined that there could be a connection to the local church with those unchurched in the area, through continuing education in sanitation and hygiene.

The plan for connections was simple; each week for one month, one of the bio-sand filter technicians would return to the home in which it was placed. The technician would then make sure that the entire family understood the operation of the filter. He would provide information on hygiene and sanitation (latrine use is minimal in this area). This in-home visitation would also allow for the businessman to share his faith and the hope of Jesus Christ, and pray for and provide for any needs that the family might have.

Duen and I estimated that it would require a start-up cost of about \$1400 to begin the business. \$450 was paid for the steel mold needed to build the filter shells. We also needed tools and materials to begin the operation. The average wage in Cambodia was about \$1 a day for laborers. There also would be costs associated with delivery and set-up of the 125-kilo units. We set the selling price at \$30 each. Costing about a month's wages, the filters are quite expensive in an agrarian society where most commerce is done with barter and exchanging goods.

## **2006**

When I arrived in March 2006, with my son Matt, we found the steel mold to be excellent, exceeding our expectations in quality of workmanship. Our businessman Duen had purchased a flat-bed truck, increasing his start-up costs, but reducing his overall daily expense of hiring someone to deliver the filters for him. Duen had also become an elder in the church and was now highly respected by his neighbors.

Matt began building filters and training Duen in the construction techniques, setup and usage. I gathered the community together for an informational meeting. Rural communities rely heavily on traditional information sources including the Village Chief, the communal Chief, or Buddhist monks and to an extent, the village elders. NGOs and health centers are perceived as important and trustworthy sources of information, but access to these institutions varies from village to village. Word of mouth and village meetings are still the most popular forms of information dissemination. We proposed a meal to entice more community involvement, and the local church gladly helped in this endeavor.

During this meeting of the community, of which many are unchurched, I presented information about water quality and the need for potable water for sustainable good health. At one point I asked how many were sick from the water that they drank. No one raised their hand. When I asked how many were now experiencing diarrhea or stomach maladies, most hands went up. I asked them if they knew that bad water could make them sick. Again, most of them said no. Their assumption and belief was that spirits or curses caused all their illnesses!

We setup a microscope demonstration utilizing water from a typical drinking water source; a pond which holds rain water. We had often observed animals wallowing to cool themselves in these same ponds. Other drinking sources in this area are the numerous streams and rivers flowing through the rural countryside. Often we saw animal and human feces floating in these sources while villagers would scoop out water for drinking or food preparation. As expected, the microscope revealed many creatures that the typical Cambodian had never suspected resided in their water supply. We encouraged each attendee to look through the lens of the microscope. Each one that looked expressed a new awareness, as their innocence and naiveté about their water vaporized. We then demonstrated that the filters greatly decrease the impurities in the water by presenting them with substantially clearer water.

One of the Village elders asked if the filters were intended only for the church people, or if everyone might have one. My answer was, “If Jesus was here today, He would make sure that everyone would have clean water, and since we come in His name, we want to do the same; anyone can have a filter.” To that the community leader responded that he would buy 10 filters for his family and friends.

Duen was now in business. After 10 days of training our businessman, we went back to the States. We had started the micro-scale manufacture of bio-sand filters in the Battambang province of Cambodia. Our interpreter, Savi Tak, a Cambodian native speaker living in Salt Lake City, Utah, would serve as a liaison and would assist with the transfer of funds for further expansion and growth of the business.

Immediately, we began to experience communication problems. Savi was imprecise in communicating accurately what was transpiring in Cambodia. Funds were held up sometimes for months. We then sent a couple to Cambodia to observe first hand and bring back a report and survey about the business, manufacture and usage of the filters. Meanwhile we would continue to attempt to correct our communication difficulties through Savi.

From our report on the situation in Cambodia, June 2006: *There are currently 30 filters installed in homes and 10-15 sitting in the front yard waiting to be delivered. They can be built at the rate of one per day when money for materials is available—\$15 for each filter including two brand-new buckets for water storage (one of Duen and Keuv’s special touches).*



*Money is a huge issue. Duen and Keuv have not been paid (they should have \$90 each—\$3 dollars per filter), and the payments they collect each month from filter owners are inadequate for any immediate needs, so they save until enough is accrued to buy materials. They have recently*

*received some money via Savi, but either it was not enough to pay their wages and buy equipment in addition to building more filters, or they don't feel comfortable using the funds for anything other than filters, or it has not been communicated to them that they should use the money for anything they need, including their own wages. With all of this in mind, the establishment of a credit union is imperative for the success of the business. If each family could receive their \$30 loan from this credit union, Duen and Keuv could have immediate funding to build filters, get paid, and the rest would go toward interest.*

Trying to correspond with people in a country with a seemingly non-existent infrastructure makes it especially difficult. In Cambodia, land line phones are rare to non-existent. Most people rely on cell phones and many rural villages are outside of service areas. Our primary link between Cambodia and Cup of Hope has lacked the ability to confidently communicate what is going on to either side. Many cultural issues have prevented open communications. This has created great stress and misunderstanding.

Of further interest, the survey revealed some positive results of the filters functioning in families homes:

*But lives are still being changed. As is usually the case, the positive points can be spoken of concisely, but this should not undermine their significance. Our survey of the families who own filters in the immediate vicinity of the church showed the filters working adequately. According to the families themselves, overall health and general satisfaction with daily life have improved. Kids refuse to drink any other water besides the clear life-sustaining liquid that trickles from the filter spout. Adults rejoice in the relief from the burden of having to boil water. No more stomach aches! Smiles, smiles, and smiles. Water is flowing through the filters at much slower rates than expected, but these exceedingly patient people, again, take no issue. They've barely even noticed. Slower usually means cleaner, anyway...*



We have discovered that clean drinking water has increased the children's attendance in school, which is huge in post-Pol Pot Cambodia. Parents also have been more consistent at their jobs because they spend less time at home with sick kids. Reduced costs associated with no longer needing to boil water has been an added bonus.

## **2007**

We have had reports from Savi after a spring 2007 return trip, that about 120 filters have been placed in the village. A second village has also begun purchasing filters from Duen.

We have a monumental task of education ahead of us. Water and the implications for change to a community or nation are huge issues. We must also address the other key

components of sanitation and hygiene to complete the process of educating communities in clean water and health.

Discipleship training to avoid a syncretism of Christianity, Buddhist beliefs and animism is imperative for the future of our partnership and church planting endeavors in Cambodia. However, the deteriorating economic situation in the region continues to take a great toll on the churches. The pastors of all three churches have left to find better employment. Many of the church members and the villagers have left for Thailand, or the big cities, in search of better employment.

The lack of older children in the church and community because of a lack of jobs has grown much more severe. Most children leave the village by the age of 14 seeking employment. While Cambodia is an anomaly with 80% of its population living in rural areas and only 20% in the city, (most countries experience the opposite), it is changing. The youth have begun the migration to the cities for jobs. Unfortunately, because of Battambang's close proximity to Thailand, the young people are drawn away with the allure of promised money. Much of the money that awaits in Phom Penh and Bangkok is the result of participation in the sex-trade.

### **Update**

We have only recently reconnected with our businessman through a new liaison who is a native to Battambang, but living here in the States. She is helping us to enhance the credit union, make loans and communicate much more quickly. We agree with one of the assessments in the first-hand report:

*Upon reflection, the project feels precarious—*

### **Recommendations**

Key recommendations to emerge from the experience are summarized below:

1. Understand your audience: conduct a base-line survey to gain knowledge of attitudes, culture, and practices before developing a communication strategy that targets rural communities.
2. Increase the use of media, in particular video, radio, theatre and puppetry. Most villagers love this type of interaction. All are useful tools to support a more focused communication campaign. Use video sessions projected from a mobile system, and pre-recorded information and music on a public address (PA) system to overcome issues of low access to media. Video can be a useful education tool to target audiences with low literacy levels, and can be reproduced at low cost and used repeatedly in a targeted environment..
3. Organize practical and interactive village-focused communication activities such as facilitated information, education and communication sessions using, e.g., posters, flip charts, picture books and field training schools.
4. Use village volunteers, community theatre, role-plays, t-shirts, music and songs where appropriate, to complement the use of media and village-focused

communication activities. “Sbek Touch” (little shadow theatre) is based on peasants’ traditional daily life and is considered an appropriate medium for conveying modern issues or messages. Attention to color, script and dialect, simple language, photographs and positive images are all important factors that will help to increase understanding, and the accessibility of communication materials to poor rural communities.

5. Maximize the use of local resources to produce communication materials and involve communities in the development process.