
RI BULLETIN

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Cambodia: Improving Access to Education for the Phnong

Education for the Phnong living in the remote Monduliri province of Cambodia is the key to helping the population protect its indigenous identity. At the same time education will help the younger generations manage the unavoidable changes that come with growth and development. Education can also lead to long-term solutions for economic development opportunities for the Phnong. Educational opportunities are expanding, but the number of students completing primary school is small.

Between 1999 and 2003, the number of primary schools almost doubled to 58, primary school enrollment was up nearly 100% to 7,551, and the number of teachers rose 71% to 171, according to government figures. But the same figures show a significant dropout rate. The 2,266 students who started first grade in 1999 had fallen to 430 by the time the class reached fifth grade. Though some Phnong complete primary education until the sixth grade, far fewer girls than boys move past the primary level or go on to graduate from high school. At a boarding facility for secondary school education in Sen Monorum, Monduliri near Cambodia's border with Vietnam, only 26 out of 156 students were female. The boarding facility, run by Cambodia Corps Inc., an American charity, makes it possible for Phnong from distant villages to attend the public secondary school.

The short-term economic and labor value of girls to the household explains why girls are less likely to enroll in school and more likely to drop out than boys. Yet education for girls can lead to better job opportunities, improve the stature of women by putting them in leadership positions, and make Phnong women, who play an important role in agricultural decisions, more open to new information on farming, health and child welfare. Educated Phnong women can also promote the value of education to their local communities.

Scholarship opportunities for Phnong girls to attend school past the primary level can be a positive incentive for both the families and students. It is often difficult for Phnong families to visualize the long-term significance of a higher education level, when the short-term benefits of contributing to the family food supply are crucial to survival. Phnong families reluctant to send their girls to school will need to be counseled on the long-term importance of their daughter's educational advancement.

The construction of primary schools by government or non-profit agencies is already changing the Phnong lifestyle. For generations, the Phnong have lived a semi-nomadic life, moving their farms and abandoning their bamboo, thatched roof huts for new ones in new locations in response to changing agricultural conditions or religious beliefs. But school builders are insisting that villages not move once a school is established, so that the investment in education will last from year to year. In Andong Krolung, an isolated Phnong village with a brand new primary school, families are actually moving into the area so that children can attend school. As a result, new schools are leading to larger, more stable villages and gradually changing the Phnong's relationship to their land.

The school in Andong Krolung was built by the Cambodian Arts and Scholarship Fund, a small agency funded by an American dedicated to improving education for Cambodian girls. In general, CASF supports female education through small scholarships, but in this village it helped build a school for the community. It cost \$150 to build the school, a simple wood building with bamboo benches and desks for about 20 students. The tin roof cost another \$100. The teacher, an 18-year old woman with a seventh grade education, received one week of training before she started teaching. She earns \$7.50 a week, a good cash income by Phnong standards yet not much above the \$1 a day dividing line between poverty and extreme poverty. Her well-behaved students range in age from four to ten years old, and they are ready to learn from their young teacher. The government supplies the books, but families must buy uniforms, notebooks, and pens.

CASF is already talking about building a second classroom in Andong Krolung to make it easier to separate students by age and skill level. One challenge is to provide better training to teachers, so that they will be able to cover more challenging subjects as their students advance to higher grades. Another challenge is to help more Phnong become teachers, since they can teach in both Phnong and Khmer. Teachers from other parts of Cambodia are generally reluctant to move to remote Monduliri province.

The Phnong are largely a preliterate population. Not having a written language is a challenge to preserving cultural cohesion. Due to lack of access to schools, until recently, opportunities to learn the Khmer tongue have been limited, leaving 95% of the Phnong population illiterate in Khmer. Thus, learning the Khmer language, spoken by the majority of Cambodians, is the key to helping the Phnong take advantage of the development and economic opportunities in Monduliri province, while protecting their land rights. Cambodian laws that can directly impact the rights of the Phnong are only written in Khmer, so literacy in the Khmer language is an important step toward self-protection. While the older generations speak the Phnong language, the younger generations are beginning to speak Khmer as well as Phnong. Khmer is already being taught at the primary level in Phnong schools. Younger Phnong generations learning the Khmer language in schools will be able to educate themselves and their families on government policy that affects the indigenous Phnong.

Refugees International therefore recommends that:

- While continuing the school building program, the Cambodian government and the Phnong community concentrate on reducing the dropout rate so that more children advance to higher grades.
- The Cambodian government and other donors provide more comprehensive and accessible teacher training and give greater incentive and recognition to those who come to Monduliri to teach.
- Private scholarship and education agencies distribute more scholarships for Phnong students, in particular Phnong girls, so they can attend school past the primary level as guaranteed by the Cambodian constitution.
- Agencies work with communities to stress the value of education.

RI President Ken Bacon and Development Associate Ghazal Vaghedi just completed a visit to Phnong communities in Monduliri, Cambodia.