

មជ្ឈមណ្ឌលឯកសារកម្ពុជា

Genocide Education Project

The Teaching of "A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)"
Democratic Kampuchea Textbook Distribution: A Public Education Forum between
teachers students and parents
Thpong District, Kampong Speu Province
August 23, 2010



Students attending the public education forum

The Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-Cam) in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport launched a formal genocide education program, which began in 2004. As a part of the program, DC-Cam published the textbook "A History of Democratic Kampuchea (1975-1979)," 300,000 copies of which have been distributed to over 1,500 lower and upper secondary schools across Cambodia since then. In addition to textbook distribution, DC-Cam and the Ministry of Education provided methodological and pedagogy trainings to secondary school teachers specializing in history, Khmer studies and citizen morality in efforts to prepare them to teach Khmer Rouge (KR) history in schools. To date, over 1,000 history teachers from eighteen provinces have received trainings. By late 2011, DC-Cam and the Ministry of Education will provide trainings to over 3,200 teachers.

As evidenced in many prior formal teacher trainings that took place in December 2009, most teachers' knowledge about the Khmer Rouge was confined to the realms of their personal experiences and their relatives' and friends' experiences. One trainee from Kandal province thanked DC-Cam staff and the national trainers at the end of the training session for teaching him his own history. He says, "It has helped me learn more. For example, I was only aware of a few prisons. Because of DC-Cam documents, I have learned there were nearly 200 prisons during the Khmer Rouge." These sentiments were not only present in Kandal, but seemed apparent in trainees in all regions. In Battambang, for example, one female trainee stated that she only knew a little bit about the Khmer

Documentation Center of Cambodia

Searching for the Truth

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Rouge experience, but she “now knows a lot more about the Khmer Rouge, their policies, and their ideologies. I was older than 20, probably 24 when the Khmer Rouge existed. Now with this training, I can put the story together.”

In light of these sentiments, Dc-Cam and the Ministry of Education recognized this void in the larger Cambodian population and sought to fill it. As such, Dc-Cam launched more informal genocide education trainings in August 2010 in order to promote education on the Khmer Rouge history, foster reconciliation, and prevent further crimes of inhumanity from occurring inside Cambodia. The objectives of the informal education project were as follows:

1. To provide informal Khmer Rouge genocide education to various Cambodian communities, specifically focusing on people who live in remote areas and have little access to textbooks and publications related to the KR history.
2. To provide opportunities to villagers who are both victims and perpetrators to create a dialogue and collaborate with teachers in educating their children about what happened during the KR.
3. The forum was not conducted to teach villagers to provide formal teaching to their children per say but rather to bring awareness to the community about the larger historical context to their own personal experiences.

As evidenced in the participants’ comments and questions during the informal genocide education training in Kampong Speu, the villagers, much like the History Teacher Trainees during Formal Genocide Trainings, also had little understanding of the larger socio-political context and implications of the Khmer Rouge. For instance, one survivor of the Khmer Rouge could remember his experience during the Khmer Rouge and some of the stories told to him but not the larger implications or the legal structure of the Khmer Rouge. Furthermore, some participants asked basic historical questions such as “Why did the KR exist? Who held power in the KR regime?,” which also points to a lack of understanding among some Khmer Rouge survivors. Other participants asked more uncanny or poignant questions, pointing out the paradoxes of the regime, such as “Why did Pol Pot kill people if he did not want the people to be oppressed? Or “Why did the KR kill intellectuals when some of the KR leaders are educated people?,” highlighting the need for more dialogue to work through and grapple with these inconsistencies. In this regard, teaching genocide education must not be confined to the classroom, but rather is an endeavor that must reach through classroom doors and out into the community at large. For education to be most effective, it requires collaboration from teachers, students, parents, officials, and elders to join together to fight instances of inhumanity, a process that must occur from the ground up in as much as it does from the top down.

The first public education forum is conducted in Anlong Chrey village, Pram Bei Mom Commune, Thpong District, Kampong Speu province, the description of which is as follow:

Geographical and school description

The first public education forum was conducted in Hun Sen Anlong Chrey High School in Anlong Chrey village, Pram Bei Mom Commune, Thpong District, Kampong Speu Province. The school is located about 52 kilometers from Kampong Speu downtown. The

road condition was pleasant as it had had been repaired several times to facilitate traveling and transportation. Situated on seven hectares of land, the school was first built in 1981 as the first lower secondary school in Thpong District. It was upgraded into an upper secondary school in 2007. The school consists of five buildings including one general administrative office. There are 28 classrooms to house 745 students and 25 teachers including the administrative staff and the school principal. There are four history teachers, three Khmer study teachers and three citizen morality teachers, none of whom had participated in DC-Cam's teacher trainings. The school provides education to students from grade 7 to 12. Since the number of teachers is small, some teachers teach two to three different courses.

Located in the remote area, the school meets several challenges that are the key obstacles to improve the quality of education. Tens of thousands of hectares of land become the concession land for private companies. Many adult students escape from the classrooms to work for the companies to make earnings in order to support their families. Some parents discourage their children to drop out of classes and help out with the family businesses. The parents have the feeling that no matter how educated their children are, they will end up doing farming. They believe that it is a waste of time to keep the children in the class for too many years. The new incoming teachers are unable to cope with the living conditions and move out of the school after completing their service terms of two years, leaving very little, if any, qualified or experienced teachers in the classrooms.

Meeting with the school principal

DC-Cam has trained 180 provincial teachers from almost all districts of Cambodia. Therefore, in each forum, we use provincial teachers as the key contact in conducting the public education forum. The project team members (Sokchamroeun Ly, Khamboly Dy, Pheng Pong-Rasy, Dara Peou Vanthan, and Keodara Prak) traveled to the site one day prior to the forum day in order to prepare the place and the materials as well as discuss aspects of the project with the relevant officials. Mr. Khem Vorn is a provincial teacher from Thpong District. He assisted us in informing the District education officials and the school principal and in inviting teachers, students and parents. Provincial teachers, such as Mr. Vorn, help make use of existing resources and cut down unnecessary expenses and time spent for the preparation.

On August 22, the team members met with Mr. Meas Thorn, the school principal, and Mr. Khem Vorn to discuss the plans for the next day. Mr. Meas Thorn informed us that August is in the vacation period for students. Only students who come to do extra-hour study are available. Mr. Meas also invited some villagers around the school, but he anticipated only a small number of villagers to participate. This is the rainy season, so most villagers take this opportunity to do the plowing and to plant rice. It is also the season of Chinese Cheng-Meng ceremony in which most people will stay at home and do the praying.

The opening remarks

The morning started with welcoming remarks and an introduction by Mr. Pong Rasy Pheng. Mr. Pheng introduced the program of the day which started with a brief description of the objectives of the public education forum by Mr. Khamboly Dy, the textbook author, and a remark by the representative of the district education office. Mr. Dy mentioned the collaboration between DC-Cam and the



Ministry of Education in conducting the textbook distribution and teacher trainings as part of their formal genocide education project. He also described the importance of the public education forum as an informal genocide education and its objectives. He said that it is important that teachers, students and parents have an opportunity to sit in one room and receive education on the KR history. Doing so will allow all participants to understand the importance of studying this history at the same time. The collaboration between young generations and their elders who are first hand witnesses of the atrocity must be encouraged. Teachers play an important role as the facilitators to ensure that dialogues exist between families and communities at large and that students will also be a part in the processes towards healing and reconciliation.

Participants in the forum included forty-five students from grade 10 to 12, six villagers and two teachers. Since the informal forum was held during the vacation period, students wore plain clothes. They came with no pen and paper, basically just to attend an event. Being asked if they have learned the KR history in class before, some of them said had learned a little. Hearing that the KR history appeared in two national exams for secondary school levels (2009 and 2010 consecutively) and two semi-annual exams, students became curious of what we were going to provide them in the forum. They started sharing pieces of paper, pens and pencils to take note.

Activities of the forum

1. Presentation on Chapter 8: Security System

By Pong Rasy Pheng

Mr. Pheng started his presentation by asking the meaning of the word “security.” He asked the students if they knew when the KR came to power and collapsed. One student stood up and said, “the KR regime occurred between 17 April 1975 and 7 January 1979.” Then he went on to explain the five levels of the KR security system (central security center—S-21, zone security centers, regional security centers, district security centers and commune security centers.) He explained the types of prisoners who were arrested and detained. Most of the prisoners in the central security were political prisoners who were KR cadres. In the lower levels, prisoners included former government officials and

military officers of the Lon Nol regime and Sihanouk regime. He gave an example of how the KR pinpointed those who were former government officials. For instance, the KR announced in Battambang province that those who used to be military officers of the Lon Nol regime should come to register in the special list so that they would be granted back their positions. The registered military officers were all killed en masse. Then he explained how the KR produced shackles and handcuffs. He summarized the chapter by saying that the KR divided enemies into two types: internal enemies and external enemies. He asked the students if they knew people in the two categories.

2. Questions from participants

At the end of the presentation, Mr. Pheng opened for questions from participants. Khamboly Dy and Peou Dara Vanthan assisted Mr. Pheng in answering the questions. Some of the questions from the participants were as follows:

1. Why did the KR exist?
2. The KR wanted to create a society that had no poverty and corruption and a place where people could live equally and happily. Why did Pol Pot kill people if they did not want the people to be oppressed?
3. Who held power during the KR regime?
4. Will the KR regime happen again?
5. My parents told me that the KR produced a lot of rice. But people were starving at that time. Where did they take rice to? Why didn't the KR allow people to have enough food?
6. Why did the KR kill intellectuals when some of the KR leaders are educated people?

Mr. Pheng answered question 4 with a poignant response to the participants. He said that, "we don't want genocide to happen again in our country. That's why we are here together today." Mr. Dy and Mr. Vanthan together with Mr. Pheng answered the other questions.

3. Reactions from participants

When asked if they have heard anything about the KR, most of the young people reacted positively. They have heard this history from their parents and learned about it in school. When someone posed the question, "What comes to your mind when you talk about the KR regime?" the adults mentioned killing, forced labor, starvation, evacuation, and family separation. One teacher said he experienced the KR hardship directly. But he remembered only some of the stories around him, but could not recall the larger picture of the KR regime. For instance, he did not know the answer to the number of zones during DK regime, which appeared on the high school national exam, historical nuances that, for survivors, are not necessarily as important as their own personal histories, but nuances that may help answer the larger question as to "Why." The teacher also emphasized that it is important that the KR history is well documented.

In the afternoon, the team conducted interviews with selected villagers, teachers and students to gather their opinions on the teaching of *A History of Democratic Kampuchea*. The followings are extracts from some of the interviews:

1. *Phoenu Sreynoun, 18 years old, student from Anlong Chrey Hun Sen High School:* Sreynoun's parents are farmers in Tranh Veng village, Pram Bei Mum commune, Thpong district. She has five siblings. In addition to her studies, she helps her parents in planting rice and raising pigs.
Sreynoun understood more about the Khmer Rouge after attending the forum. She saw the magazine *Searching for the Truth*, but did not pay much attention to it. In class, Sreynoun generally studies about World War II and the Lon Nol regime, but not much about KR. In some occasions, her parents described their experiences during the KR to her. She knew that her mother was a resident in Takeo province and was evacuated to Kampong Speu during the Khmer Rouge. She has lived there since. During the KR, her mother was forced to carry soil to build dams. When asked if she wanted to learn about the KR history, she said that, "If someone tells me, I want to know. If there is no education on that history, I don't care as well" In her mind, the word KR regime signifies killing and no development. She views the KR regime as cruel. She said, "It is so different from today." Her father encourages her to study by emphasizing that he did not have chance to study during his time. "Now, you have school nearby home." Sreynoun's house is close to the house of a man who was former KR cadre. Her father described the man as a cruel person during the KR. The man was sick and died a result a few years ago. Sreynoun does not feel hatred toward the former cadre's children. She said that, "He did a lot of bad things, but his children did not commit any of the mistakes he did. Moreover, the cadre committed those crimes because he was ordered to.." Sreynoun said that she acted normally with the former cadre's children. Even if the cadre killed her relatives, she said that she would still talk to his children as usual but in return she would never be able to talk to the perpetrator.
2. *Khem Vorn, a lower secondary school teacher:* Vorn lives in Thmei village, Rung Roeung commune, Thpong district, Kampong Speu province. Vorn became interested in teaching KR history for two main reasons. First, he is a history teacher. Second, he wants to teach KR history so that the younger generations can know in order to avoid the same mistakes his generation made. He said that when the students become leaders of the society, having this knowledge will help prevent them from walking down the same path. Vorn thinks KR history is different from other histories. He wants students to know the full history during the KR and the fall of the KR in chapter 11. He said he will try his best to educate the students because what the KR did was against people's will. To date, he still recalls his experiences during the KR. He especially talked about the hardship his mother faced during that period. "My mother had to wake up very early in the morning and walked to another village about 20 kilometers. She was asked to do the plowing which was the work that was supposed to be done by the men. She had to move from one place to another within half month. The journey usually began at midnight in order to save time. My siblings were separated from each other. Every time she recalled her experiences at that time, she cried." Vorn was very sad that this type of regime could happen in Cambodia. Vorn said he could not forgive the top leaders whose crimes cannot be accepted by both national and international communities. However, he said he could forgive the lower-level cadres who followed orders. Vorn believes that the teaching of *A History of Democratic Kampuchea* is important. Young children need to be educated not to think of revenge but empathy toward each other. He believes that the teaching will bring about reconciliation and healing to some extent. He said that, "We need to understand first before we can go on to reconcile." Some forms of discrimination still exist in his village. According to his experiences in teaching students about the KR history, students are happy and

interested but they compare a lot to the atrocities in other countries. The students believe that the killing and torture in Cambodia are crueler than other countries. One of his students mentioned that, “In the future, if I become a leader, I will encourage the accurate teaching of history. I will not follow the Khmer Rouge.”

3. *Pen Sann, 64 years old, a village living in O Angkum village, Amleang commune, Thpong district, Kampong Speu province:* During the KR regime, he was in the mobile unit moving from one place to another. He was assigned to build dams and dig up canals. He has been a primary school teacher for 28 years. He has just retired four years ago. Since he is a teacher, he has often told his students and children about life during the KR and his own experiences. He



Pen Sann (Left) and Pong Rasy Pheng (Right)

wants his children and others to know the suffering of Cambodian people at that time and what the KR did to the people. It is important for younger generations to know this history in order that they will think critically about their parents’ suffering. Talking about the regime, he recalls the killing, hard labor and insufficient food. When he climbed up the palm trees to collect juice, he saw the KR walk the people in a line to the killing fields. He usually described his story during the KR to his children after dinner at which time the family chatted for pleasure. He dared not guarantee that his children believed what he told them. But none of the children would ever say that “I don’t believe him.” Instead, the children feel pity on their parents and the people who experienced such hardship. He believed that the KR history should be taught in the classroom to preserve the memory so that the atrocities will not happen for the second time. For him, studying the KR history will lead to forgiveness not division. He lives side by side with the former KR cadres. However, their living is normal because the big chiefs of the KR in the village died long time ago. He does not discriminate against the children of the perpetrators. They play together normally.

Table: List of interviews

No.	Name	Sex	Status	Address
1	Phoeun Sreynoun	F	Student	Tranh Veng village, Pram Bei Mum commune, Thpong district, Kampong Speu
2	Yeang Yuthea	M	Student	Anlong Chrey village, Pram Bei Mum commune, Thpong district, Kampong Speu
3	Phai Vin	M	Student	Chambak Thom village, Pram Bei Mum commune, Thpong district, Kampong Speu
4	Keo Sokhom	F	Student	O Angkum village, Amleang commune, Thpong district, Kampong Speu
5	Pen Sann	M	Father	O Angkum village, Amleang commune, Thpong district, Kampong Speu

6	Toy Savry	F	Student	Snoul village, Amleang commune, Thpong district, Kampong Speu
7	Khem Vorn	M	Teacher	Thmei village, Rung Roeung commune, Thpong district, Kampong Speu
8	Um Ra	M	Father	O Angkum village, Amleang commune, Thpong district, Kampong Speu

Challenges

Inviting participants to attend the forum is the major first step to ensure the success of the forum. Participants need to be well informed a few days ahead of the forum. They need to have incentive and be able to see the value of participating in the forum. Since the team members are not on the ground, the key informants are provincial teachers and local authorities who help us invite the villagers whose children are currently in school or villagers in general. In this first forum, the school principal and the provincial teacher together were able to invite only six villagers. The rest of the participants were students who came to take an extra-hour of study during the vacation. To deal with this challenge, the team members should contact the provincial teachers and especially the local authorities who have had relations with us to help invite the villagers who are the focus of this project group. The team must clearly explain to the two informants about the purposes and the objectives of the forum. The villagers themselves must see the value of participating in the forum rather than making them join. The forum is informal genocide education; therefore, numbers of participants should range from 70 to 200. The forum should be held in places other than school.

Presentation: The presentation on the textbook should be well organized rather than teaching history randomly among the eleven chapters in the textbook. The team must also have a clearer understanding of what they want to achieve at the end of the forum. The topics for presentation can be chosen according to the location. For instance, the presentation on “purge in the Eastern zone” should be conducted in Prey Veng. The presenter needs to cultivate the steps of the presentation, adhere to the steps in the Teacher’s Guidebook, which generate critical thinking. Moreover, in order to produce active dialogue, participants should have more opportunities to talk and participate in the reading and discussion. The dialogue among the villagers, teachers and the children will produce more discussion at home after the forum. In this sense, we can divide participants into groups and read sections of the chapter so that they have a basis for the discussion. To deal with this challenge, the team member who is going to do the presentation or teach must prepare the lesson plan in advance and bring additional teaching materials from the office. It is important to ensure that the program for this public education forum is practical, well-organized, and well-orchestrated.

Impact and general observation

DC-Cam’s public education forum pedagogically and naturally engages the villagers within the communities to participate in the genocide education process. The forum brings awareness about the importance of genocide education to the communities, encouraging a dialogue between villagers, elders, students, and teachers, all who are important stakeholders in the education process. According to the interviews conducted with the villagers, all of them wanted their stories to be heard inside and outside the classroom, providing legitimization of their experiences through listening and learning. While the

first forum in Kampong Speu had its weaknesses, these forums are solid steps towards sharing, learning about, and validating the pain so many people faced.

Project team members:

Khamboly Dy

Pong-Rasy Pheng

Keodara Prak

Sokchamroeun Ly