

**The Past is Always with Us: Inter-generational Dialogue
for Restorative Justice in Cambodia**

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Introduction

As part of the Documentation Center of Cambodia's (DC-Cam) initiatives for restorative justice in Cambodia, DC-Cam held a public forum on March 3, 2015 in Kampong Thom province. Attended by approximately twenty local villagers and survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime, sixty 10th grade students, three members of the Civil Party to the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), and representatives from DC-Cam, the forum aimed to promote inter-generational dialogue on the Khmer Rouge and its after-effects as well as provide a space for community members to participate in the national process of reconciliation and healing through the sharing of individual experiences and concerns about the regime and the ongoing justice process.



Students engaging in group discussion on the Khmer Rouge history and the ongoing trial proceedings at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) during DC-Cam's Public Village Forum on March 3, 2015

DC-Cam has held more than twenty such forums across Cambodia since 2010 in an effort to bring the national justice and reconciliation to individual communities. The process for restorative justice in Cambodia has not been without significant challenges. Following the downfall of the Khmer Rouge in 1979, in June 2003, the United Nations and the Royal Government of Cambodia signed an agreement to bring to trial the senior leaders of Democratic Kampuchea and those most responsible for the national and international crimes committed between 17 April

1975 and 6 January, 1979. In July 2006, ECCC were established within the Cambodian judicial system. With the desire to give testimony and seek justice at the court, over 4,000 civil parties and over 6,000 complainants have stepped forward to participate at the ECCC. And yet, while the ECCC has given voice to numerous victims, for survivors and their families, there is still much to be done in terms of making the testimonies tangible for local communities and future generations.

It is now widely acknowledged that for countries emerging from violent conflict and grave human rights abuses, like Cambodia, institutional arrangements and legal proceedings may not offer individuals enough to address their trauma, and additional adjustments in individual and group identity have to be made at a more fundamental psychological level as an essential component of reconciliation. Without opportunities for victims and their families to address lingering psychological trauma, through

acknowledging and discussing individuals' traumatic experiences and giving a sense of having received justice, society may develop destructive social and political patterns in the aftermath of the trauma, causing further adverse effects on the population, such as domestic violence, widespread prostitution, and violence in the name of revenge and reinforced group identities.



Villagers participating in the forum

With approximately 70 percent of Cambodia's population born after 1979, Cambodia is now at a critical point in its development as a post-conflict nation, and providing opportunities to engage Cambodia's youngest generation in the process of national healing and memory has never been more important. Moreover, knowledge of the justice and reconciliation process remains low, and a recent study conducted at the University of Berkeley, California, showed

that up to 85% of the Cambodian population had no knowledge of the ECCC and the ongoing legal justice process (Pham et. al., 2009). Thus, without significant efforts to educate the Cambodian youth about the history of the Khmer Rouge and engage them in the process of restorative justice, the memory of the period and the individual experiences of survivors which have shaped the country's post-war politics and culture will transform into the realm of folktales, effectively vanishing from the national memory, and leaving many of the nation's citizens with little, if any, support as they continue to heal from the wounds left by the brutal regime.

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The Forum

The Forum opened with a discussion by DC-Cam representative, Dr. Ly Sok-Kheang, on the importance of inter-generational dialogue in peace and reconciliation. Speaking about both the positive and negative effects of regime changes on a society, and noting that Cambodia has survived several major shifts in regime and governance in less than 70 years, Dr. Ly highlighted three factors responsible for causing drastic changes in a society: (1) revolution, (2) democracy, and (3) education. Education, he explained, however, is the most important of these three as it shapes individual abilities to question their surroundings and think for themselves.

Encouraging the students to share what they hoped to get out of the forum experience, many students blurted out their pressing questions, such as, “Who were the Khmer Rouge?”, “Who created the Khmer Rouge?”, and “When was the Khmer Rouge?”, further reflecting the need for further education and discussion on this important topic.

As one student explained, whose grandmother was a survivor of the regime, although the history is still very recent and most families still have a living survivor in them, the trauma of the history is still very present and there is little real discussion in families

and communities about people’s personal experiences. The majority of the learning about the regime is thus coming from student’s lessons at school. While DC-Cam and the Ministry of Education have made significant strides to incorporate learning on the Khmer Rouge history into the national mandatory curriculum, develop textbooks, and train thousands of teachers across Cambodia on how to teach the history in recent years, still relatively little has been done to ensure quality teaching on the subject and many student’s understanding of the historical events remains deficient.

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In order to provide participants with the opportunity to engage with each other on an individual level, students and survivors separated into three separate discussion groups. These break-out groups served two purposes: (1) To allow survivors to share their personal experiences of the regime, and (2) to provide an opportunity for students to engage directly with survivors and ask them questions about their experiences.

Each discussion group focused on separate themes relating to people’s experiences of the Khmer Rouge. The main themes that were discussed included the lack and poor quality of food, forced labor (especially in regards to the elderly and the young), and the dehumanizing tasks that individuals were forced to perform in order to survive, such as collecting human excrement and mixing it by hand for use as fertilizer.

As the final activity in the forum, students were given the opportunity to hear from and ask questions to three members of the Civil Party to the ECCC—representatives of the Cham Muslim community. This was the first public forum of its kind to bring civil party members of the ECCC directly to the community to discuss with community members.

Reactions to Forum

Coming together as a group after the forum, students shared and reviewed what new knowledge they had gained during the forum and expressed their opinions about the quality and usefulness of the event. Speaking about the forum, one student remarked, “This is my first time speaking with a survivor. My grandmother survived [the KR] but she does not talk about it much.”

Other students remarked on the most memorable aspects of the forum for them, which included learning about the starvation and policies on the distribution of food, speaking with survivors, and having the opportunity to meet members of the Cham Muslim community.



A student in the forum

This forum, being held in Kampong Thom, near the famous temples of Sambo Prey Kuk, offered a unique historical backdrop to the



A famous lion statue in front of "Lion Temple" within the Sambo Prey Kuk complex in Kampong Thom province (March 3, 2015)

discussions and shed a new light on the importance of preserving history for new generations. Many of the student participants in the forum were, themselves, aiding with the preservation of the temple complex through a school research program and spoke about the necessity to preserve the relics of one of Cambodia's most prosperous times during the Chenla Kingdom. The beauty of this region, with temple ruins scattered across the landscape, now carries with it a poignant contrast to the atrocities committed here. Like most areas in Cambodia, this province fell victim to the Khmer Rouge policies of forced transfer and separation of families. Many of the families living here today are still working to locate the remains of their lost family members. Additionally, one village in particular, Kampong Chouk, now rests almost completely abandoned, believed to be haunted by the spirits of the 40-50 executed individuals, believed by the Khmer Rouge to have been loyal to an opposing political party. Too traumatized to return home, many of the families that once lived here have now relocated to

other areas, seeking to leave the grizzly past behind, or have taken up small business ventures on the outskirts of town.

This historical backdrop provided a central theme in the discussions. Speaking about the contrasting history between the temples of Sambo Prey Kuk and the Khmer Rouge, one student commented on the importance of remembering the past. She said, "The history [of the KR] has changed us forever...The past is not the past. We have to learn about it to lead the country to a democratic future. The past is always with us, so we have to learn about the history so that we do not repeat it."

While it is tempting to try to forget the past, these discussions were a reminder that reconciliation in Cambodia should be viewed, not as a restoration of the way things once were before the regime, but as a process of building a new society that recognizes and understands where it has been.

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On moving forward and building such a society, another student remarked that "...this discussion can help have a good impact on society in terms of democracy and human rights. The people can understand more and more. The more people ask questions, the more people can protect their rights."

Many of the participating Khmer Rouge survivors also spoke about the importance of such forums as a way of opening the lines of dialogue on challenging or taboo topics, and ensuring that the memory of these events are passed down from one generation to the next. 71 year old Khmer Rouge survivor and local resident of Samrith Village in

Kampong Thom, Roath Huong, stated, “I have a really strong interest in having the children learn about the Khmer Rouge history, especially the realities of the Khmer Rouge regime because for the schoolchildren, even though they learn [the history] from their teachers, not all of them believe that the Khmer Rouge existed.” The idea in passing down the Khmer Rouge history from one generation to another is to ensure in the short-term that history is not forgotten, and in the long-term, to ensure that such a regime can never gain power again.

Furthermore, Aom Minh, 70-year-old survivor from Samrith Village in Kampong Thom, expressed the forum’s ability to relieve some of the trauma he has lived with by providing a safe and open space for survivors, like himself, to share their experiences in a productive manner. He stated, “I hope that the students understand those social circumstances during the Khmer Rouge through their discussion with me. I am so proud to talk to them. Because they don’t know much about the experience during that time, it is only us who can speak and tell them. It is good for me personally. I feel relief from the talk.”

Following the forum, many students reflected that they especially valued the exposure to the civil party members in the forum, which offered them a perspective on the unique experiences of Cham Muslim community and survivors. The civil party members also reflected on their presence as a positive step, both in educating the next generation of Cambodian citizens about the history of their nation, but also in integrating the national effort for justice with community-based mechanisms for transitional justice. Speaking about which effort was more important for the progress of Cambodian society, one civil party member expressed his opinion that both efforts are equally important and mutually dependent—without an integrated approach, whereby justice is delivered to the highest leaders of the Khmer Rouge regime by the international tribunal and communities can come together to reflect upon their citizen’s individual experiences and engage in healing processes, the process of national reconciliation in the aftermath of the Khmer Rouge will be unlikely to fully succeed.



A student receiving a copy of DC-Cam’s publication: The Forced Transfer: The Second Evacuation of People During the Khmer Rouge Regime.

Conclusion and Recommendations for the Future

Unlike more centralized modes of teaching about genocide in a classroom, this forum offered a polyvocal and decentered method for educating youth about the regime, aiming to open up dialogue on challenging topics, encourage students to reflect upon their civil roles and duties, and encourage all members of society to actively engage in the processes of post-war reconstruction.

As the first community forum to bring civil party members to the community to interact and participate in local efforts for peacebuilding, this forum also made a significant step towards integrating the national and local efforts for restorative justice in Cambodia.

Overall, all participants in the forum agreed that the discussion was informative and useful for the continued effort for reconciliation and healing in Cambodia, and many participants requested that more forums of this kind be held, allowing for more community members to participate. Witnessing the distress and trauma still present among many of the survivors participating in the forum, several students also expressed their wishes that further steps be taken to address the mental health concerns of the survivors, and ensure that they had the help they needed. This could take the form of increased access to mental health professionals and services and/or increased opportunities for survivors to share their personal stories in safe public spaces.

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- Aom Minh, 70-year-old survivor

The Commune Chief and civil party members also suggested that additional educational materials could be provided to the community to encourage families to speak with their children about their experiences during the Khmer Rouge and the importance of an inter-generational dialogue on the genocide.