

## CHAPTER V

# Educational destruction and reconstruction in Cambodia

Pich Sophoan

*Director, Higher Technical and Vocational Education and Training, Ministry of Education,  
Youth and Sport, Phnom Penh*

The reality of Cambodia over the past twenty-five years, particularly in the area of education, has been unique. In order to sketch the outlines of the devastation of Cambodia and its struggle for reconstruction, a framework for discussion of the situation and the circumstances leading up to Cambodia's recent past is needed.

### HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In 1954, Cambodia became independent from France and, in the same year, the Geneva Conference acknowledged Cambodia's neutrality. However, a reflection of the general discord presenting itself in many countries of the region after the Second World War, was also felt in Cambodia. This was compounded by an almost paranoid fear of the influence of communism displayed by many Western powers.

In 1963-64, an extreme dissident socialist group had already formed. Training initially in Viet Nam and later in the North East jungles of Cambodia, they contested inequalities in the distribution of wealth and opportunity within Cambodian society. Rejecting a moderate socialism for a more extreme one, the group, under the leadership of Saloth Sar (Pol Pot), extolled an extreme Maoist philosophy and called itself the Khmer Rouge (Red Khmer). The peasant revolt in Battambang Province in 1967 reflected such dissension in rural areas.

#### *Spillover from the war in Viet Nam*

Turmoil from outside the country also had a serious effect on the stability of Cambodia. The conflict between North and South Viet Nam, for instance, and the intervention of the United States of America on behalf of the Rightist South Vietnamese Government spilled over into Cambodia, adding to the instability of the already frail political situation. The bombing of Cambodia that began on 18 March 1969, not only caused the death of many Cambodians, but also resulted in the devastation of large segments of the rural infrastructure, including the destruction of a tremendous number of farm animals. The 1970 coup, supported by the United States, saw the replacement of Norodom Sihanouk by General Lon Nol signalling the beginning of a civil war that set Cambodian against Cambodian which adversely affected the fabric that held Cambodian society together.

The continuing civil war and the incursions by the American-backed South Vietnamese intensified the climate of insecurity and resulted in massive displacements of populations. It is estimated that by 1972, 'more than two million Cambodians (were) made homeless by the war between Lon Nol and the Khmer Rouge.'<sup>1</sup>

Only in mid-1973 did an act Congress halt the US bombing raids on Cambodia.

However, the hiatus that saw the start of a violent and dark period for Cambodia was already created.

### *The Khmer Rouge period*

On 17 April 1975, the Khmer Rouge conquered Phnom Penh, emptying the city and all other major towns in Cambodia. The following weeks saw the targeting for extermination of educated people, monks and religious leaders, government workers, people who spoke foreign languages or even those that wore glasses. Anything that was seen as a sign of 'decadence' and a product of 'foreign learning' was destroyed. The goal was to restore Cambodia to an agrarian state controlled by the Khmer Rouge.

Unheard-of atrocities were perpetrated against the population—people were slaughtered, families separated and sent to work camps in far-flung areas of the country, and children indoctrinated into unquestioning acceptance of the 'Organization.' Health care was eliminated, schools destroyed, family life replaced by a communal existence. Endless days of hard labour and indoctrination sessions saw the very nature of Khmer family life and culture close to the point of collapse.

This continued for three years, until 7 January 1979, when the Vietnamese entered Cambodia. Their initial intent was to repel the Khmer Rouge from their own borders; however, finding themselves confronted with little resistance, they pursued their thrust into Cambodia, pushing the Khmer Rouge to the border of Thailand.

### *Vietnamese occupation*

While in Cambodia, the Vietnamese troops faced armed opposition from an uneasy coalition of Royalists and Khmer Rouge which launched its attacks from the border areas of Thailand. This period was also characterized by a United Nations embargo against the Vietnamese-sponsored government. Although many nations could not provide formal aid to Cambodia throughout the period, some assistance was provided through Viet Nam, by the USSR and other East Block Countries. The collapse of the USSR marked the end of both Soviet and former East Block assistance to Viet Nam and Cambodia and became a decisive factor in the withdrawal of the Vietnamese military and civilian occupation force from Cambodia in 1989.

### *Peace and reconstruction*

The years following the Vietnamese withdrawal until the UN-sponsored Peace Accord in October 1991 and subsequent elections in May 1993, were complex years for Cambodia. Aid began to trickle in as a number of countries offered assistance to Cambodia. However, the civil structures were largely unable to deal with the demands of donors and the massive needs for human resource development and reconstruction. The election of the new government in May 1993, saw an accelerated effort and growth in governmental capacity to re-start the political, economic, legal, social and educational systems. The destiny of Cambodia, now on the brink of entering the 21st century, is in its own hands.

## EDUCATIONAL RECOVERY

### *Collapse of the education system*

The implications of these developments on education are clear. At the end of the Khmer Rouge regime, 1979, the whole educational system was in a state of collapse. Education in Cambodia had to be re-started with 2,481 primary schools and 13,619 teachers to educate 724,058 enrolled students. The majority of teachers were those who had received a few years

of education in the years prior to the Khmer Rouge regime, who had survived, and who were willing to become teachers. Only some 87 of the 1,009 teachers in higher education prior to the Khmer Rouge period had survived. A number of these had also fled to a third country for re-settlement from the refugee camps in Thailand.

### *The challenges of educational reconstruction*

The government made education a priority, utilising the former Phnom Penh University as a teacher training institute. This institute initially implemented short training courses in order to provide for the lack of school teachers as quickly as possible. With assistance from both the Vietnamese government and the Russian and Soviet Bloc countries, the programme was later expanded to train and re-train secondary teachers. The teacher training institutions in the provinces followed the same methods - short courses, short training periods and similar bridging strategies in order to make sure the teachers were keeping ahead of the students. School buildings, if they had existed at all, were poor, in a state neglect or damaged by the ravages of war. Teaching materials and books were non-existent, chalk was hard to get and paper for notebooks was a continuous problem. Some of these problems persist to the present day.

A number of groups are currently carrying out analyses and studies regarding the future directions of educational development in Cambodia. For the most part, these studies are linked to government planning, either through the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MOEYS) or the Council for Development of Cambodia. Both of these groups have access to technical assistance sponsored by donor agencies.

### *Co-ordinating aid and the role of government*

Co-ordination, however, is complex. This is largely due to the fact that a number of donor nations are motivated by a desire to gain or regain political hegemony in Southeast Asia, including Cambodia. A number of donor agencies have been accused of only generating employment for their own national consultants. Notwithstanding this, the majority of technical assistance is excellent and has proven to be invaluable as Cambodia plans for its own independent future.

There are also a number of private groups carrying out research in education, including many individuals who arrive in Cambodia with the purpose of writing a thesis or preparing a proposal for funding. Although their insights may be helpful, often they are not because of the short duration of their stay and particular focus of their studies. Most researchers agree that any planning or reconstruction of the education system must be done through government channels. Concerns relative to the need for technical assistance in education to be apolitical have also been voiced. This includes a degree of freedom from external/foreign political influences. To develop a well-balanced society, education should not be used as a tool of politicians. Attempts are now being made to ensure autonomy from politics. Appointment to the various leadership positions in higher educational institutions, for instance, must be free from political influence. As far as is possible, appointments, within the Ministry and government schools, should be made on the basis of a set of objective criteria and merit.

### *Curriculum and ideology*

Schools are not the appropriate ground for political activities in any grade. Textbooks in Cambodia do not reflect ideology, and political views are not supposed to be a part of lessons. However, it is difficult to filter-out an individual teacher's political point of view. In the run-

up to the coming elections in 1998, it will be difficult for political parties to refrain from pressurizing teachers, students and administrators to support their political views. The public use of school openings and events for political speeches and reward of school administrators who overtly or covertly support one party or another is unavoidable. This kind of political pressure within the education system is seen around the world, and Cambodia is no exception. Whilst the government makes efforts to avoid more overt and/or threatening action to teachers, administrators and students, it is difficult to completely stamp-out such phenomena.

### *Public funding*

The government of Cambodia has often stated that it has a strong commitment to education within the tasks of reconstruction of the state (cf. National Programme To Rehabilitate and Develop Cambodia for ICORC III March 1995). The challenge is to apportion a reasonable share of the national budget to this task. The government has pledged that by the year 2000 they will devote 15% of the annual budget to education. In 1993, education received 8 percent; in 1996, it is expected to receive 10.07 percent. It is hoped that during the next meeting of the Consultative Group on Cambodia, the MOEYS will be able to re-affirm its support for increasing the share of education in the nationally-controlled expenditures in order to provide a sounder base than at present for donor support.

In this regard, the continuing civil war, waged by the Cambodian government against the outlawed Khmer Rouge forces, often generates violence against those people who live in the war-affected areas. This also diverts financial resources from the rest of the country, reflecting a critical lack of funding due to moneys spent on attempts to destroy the insurgent army and bandits that roam many parts of the country. The Khmer Rouge continue to control areas of the country that are extremely lucrative sources of both timber and gems. They mine, cut and sell gemstones, mainly outside of Cambodia, creating financial resources that are used to wage war against Cambodia and divert funds that could be utilised for the common good of the Nation. One of the mandates of the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia, 1992-93, was to disarm all the armed factions. This, however, was a failure and may be said to be a contributing factor in the ongoing violence in Cambodia.

### *Continuing insecurity*

A universally-acknowledged footnote to this conflict is the fact that at present there are still two land-mines in the ground for every Cambodian child, often in places where children gather firewood, water their draught animals, and look for berries and grass. Mines continue to be laid everyday, in spite of an appeal by the King and others who support an international ban on land-mines. Children experience the effects of war and violence on a daily basis in many ways. Much of it taking the form of personal bereavements of family, families' loss of land due to land-mines and armed conflict and the loss of government revenue for education. Because of these issues the quality of education, in many areas of the country, particularly in rural areas, is well below that required for proper human resource development.

### *Social reconciliation*

Past wars in Cambodia were not the direct result of classroom learning. Much of Cambodia's difficult past has been a result of external pressures. However, it may be said that there is much that can be done in the classroom to work towards peace in Cambodia. This implies that the tendency within cultures to form cliques must also be addressed in order to achieve a government programme of national reconstruction. This cannot be achieved if a society is fragmented and uncoordinated. There is much that can be done through the education system,

especially in schools, to work toward harmony and peace-making among the children and teachers and staff. To achieve this, an open approach to workshops and seminars for teachers and the inclusion of peace and harmony should be dealt with in the various areas of the curriculum. Further to this, efforts must be made to create and emphasize the successes gained by co-operation within the school and community - all can bear fruit in the lessening of violence over time.

Children are very astute, and if the government, the community leadership, and parents and extended family tell the children that social harmony has value and then act in ways contrary to this value, the children will draw their own conclusions. For example, if the attitude of teachers, parents and significant others in society reflects racism and anger towards regional neighbours children will exhibit the same feelings.

As countries draw together in bilateral agreements and multi-lateral international groupings such as ASEAN, old hatreds, sources of much violence, must be resolved and not brought forward into the new century. Education in schools and colleges can do much to change the old attitudes. However, if strategies for peace are to work, they must include parents and civic leaders as learners, as well as the younger generation of children and teenagers. To fall back upon racist rhetoric when attempting to rouse patriotism is a gambit that must be defused and finally extinguished by sound teaching in the schools and with parent and civic groups. Educators, especially school teachers, can lead the way; they just need the information, skills and authority to do it.

#### *Addressing the environmental impact of war*

Acts of war not only affect people, but also the environment, which in turn destroys the means of existence for many people. Cambodia is no exception in terms of degradation of the environment. During and after long periods of armed conflict, those with power reach for the easiest method of providing economic sustenance and this is often the forests or natural resources from the ground. Much of these resources should be a legacy for future generations. Cambodia presents a clear example of deforestation for economic exploitation. However, much of this does not provide government with economic resources, but instead provides a means of procuring weapons of destruction to be used against the elected government forces and against harmless civilians. It should also be noted, that the government is also selling forested land faster than new trees can be planted.

People are losing their lands and with the forests gone, the rain and heat patterns, in the neighbouring agricultural lands are undergoing change. The whole region is affected by this phenomenon, causing the land to flood in the rainy season without roots to hold the water; the run-off from the rain is silting the rivers; and endless species of flora and fauna are lost from the ecological systems present in the country. Many Cambodians, including the King and environmental groups have drawn attention to these problems. It is going to take education to change this pattern and to pressure, not only the Government of Cambodia, but governments of other regional countries.

The MOEYS is now working on a curriculum addressing environmental issues. It will be included in the grade and high school textbooks. It is hoped that it will not be too late for Cambodia. If the programme is successful and people become aware of the issues in a practical way, it will then be up to government to listen to them.

#### *Ensuring basic education for all*

Taking into account Cambodia's history and analysing the effects of the last twenty-five years of conflict on education, it is clear that, since 1979, the government has placed a high priority on education and has tried very hard to ensure some basic education for all. However, a major

effect of a period of war is that one must focus on quantity when the conflict is over. It is a sad reality that many children have missed years of education because of the period of hostilities.

The Government of Cambodia has made a clear decision to provide schooling for children as quickly as possible. They have done this by providing schools to attend and teachers in the classrooms, although many may not be qualified for the job at present. Now the focus must turn towards upgrading of the quality of education. This, however, presents a number of problems of priority. For instance, although the quality is improving, equality of gender still presents a problem. At present, urban male students make up the majority of the student body of the various institutions of higher education. In rural provincial areas the most salient problem is trying to retrain teachers of the quality needed to prepare students for science, English, math examinations which will allow them entry into the more prestigious departments and faculties of higher education.

### *Education versus training*

The government will be required to make some hard decisions about equality and financial resources in higher education. In areas where war has decimated human and physical resources, as it has done in Cambodia, choices are hard and complicated, and they must be made with as much clarity, care and information-sharing as is possible.

Many Cambodians 'missed-out' on educational opportunities because of the terrible lost years from 1975. In order for them to earn an income for their families and to contribute to the reconstruction of Cambodia, they must be provided with skills and employment. Indeed, skilled labour is in short supply in Cambodia. Notwithstanding this problem, Cambodia similarly to many countries with past colonial ties, instils in its children the aspiration that they should never work with their hands. Tertiary education is set-up as a standard for all education. From grade one, the school system leads children to believe that they must somehow enter the less than one per cent of the population who attend higher educational institutions. The enormous need for skilled labour, traders, and craftspeople is ignored by the majority of young people, who are setting themselves up for an experience of failure when they cannot enter university.

Cambodia now has 16,000 students repeating the final year of secondary school three times. There is no mechanism of assessing whether or not tertiary education is a reasonable and appropriate goal for these particular students. The most well-equipped technical institute in the country does not attract enough candidates. The school of agriculture has the lowest enrolment figure among all higher education institutions. This is alarming given that 77% of Cambodia remains largely agrarian. This issue is not specific to Cambodia in the region as a whole.

### *The role of NGOs*

Lastly, it should be pointed out that questions of education within Cambodia, while primarily the responsibility of the Cambodian government, are, in fact, often being dealt with by international donors through technical assistance from varied government and non-government sources and multilateral partners. Non-governmental organizations in Cambodia had traditionally taken a leading role in education during the time of the United Nations embargo of Cambodia (1979-90). During that period, as bilateral donors expanded their assistance, NGOs re-evaluated their respective roles within the education sector. They are now looking to see where their special talents can be best used in service of the new reality in Cambodia. A number are involved in skills training for the large number of land-mine disabled persons in the country; programmes for assisting and training the blind and the deaf

are NGO-sponsored; a school for helping handicapped children is provided by an NGO.

This would more than likely be true in other countries in a post-war period. It is hoped that the government does make use of the long and rich service of the NGOs within Cambodia and study their records of both successes and failures - we often learn a great deal from things that go wrong. Cambodia has partners who are willing to help in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of the country. As education is the key to the future, it follows that the government should take full advantage of available educational resources, using them wisely, by building on the experience of its many partners as well as on its own experience in determining the long-term success of the process leading to true peace in Cambodia.

#### NOTES

1. Mysliwicz, Eva. *Punishing the poor*. Oxford, UK, Oxfam, 1988, p. xxii.

