

INTERVIEW WITH DAVY TITH, DIRECTOR OF OPÉRATION ENFANTS DU CAMBODGE

*Interview conducted by Quentin Wodon
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EXCERPTS:

- “During the Pol Pot regime, times were very hard and I understood how life is when children cannot go to school, homes must be evacuated, work in the rice fields is threatened, and there is hunger and a lack of medicine. I swore that if I could remain alive from this hell, I would work for humanity.”
- “A key achievement [today] is that children living in the remote areas go to school. Parents understand the benefits of education and they enable their children to go to school regularly. Local authorities pay attention with parents and school directors to ways to strengthen the education children receive.”

You are the Director of OEC (Opération Enfants du Cambodge). Why did you create this organization and what does it do?

During the Pol Pot regime (Khmer rouge), times were very hard and I understood how life is when children cannot go to school, homes must be evacuated, work in the rice fields is threatened by construction, and there is hunger and a lack of medicine. I swore that if I could remain alive from this hell, I would work for humanity. We have a lot of orphans, so I have tried to help them. You can see a video on YouTube with the title “Mme Davy Tith parle des plaies du Cambodge” on some of our work.

I waited until 1995 to realize my wish because after Pol Pot fell, I had to help my parents who were old and my own family. In 1995, I created a local NGO named Opérations Enfants de Battambang (OEB). The organization was officially recognized by the Ministry of Interior in 1997. After 10 years, OEB was expanded into other provinces. So OEB's name was changed from Opération Enfants de Battambang to Opérations Enfants du Cambodge (OEC), but we continue to implement the activities in Battambang until now. I love very much my Motherland Battambang province.

Box 1: Interview Series

What is the mission of the Global Catholic Education website? The site informs and connects Catholic educators globally. It provides them with data, analysis, opportunities to learn, and other resources to help them fulfill their mission with a focus on the preferential option for the poor.

Why a series of interviews? Interviews are a great way to share experiences in an accessible and personal way. This series will feature interviews with practitioners as well as researchers working in Catholic education, whether in a classroom, at a university, or with other organizations aiming to strengthen Catholic schools and universities.

What is the focus of this interview? In this interview, Davy Tith, the Director of OEC (Opération Enfants du Cambodge in French), explains the aims of her organization which serves young disadvantaged children. She discusses some of what has been achieved and difficulties that remain.

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My objective has always been to help the children, and to start rebuilding the country with them. I had experience working with UNHCR as an assistant of Administration and Project Administration for Partage, an international NGO and I had also served as a French interpreter. I had the opportunity to meet many journalists, share what was hoping to achieve, and benefit from advice.

With my sister and two friends who were teachers, we formed a group of volunteers. Our adviser was my father, who is a former teacher too. A journalist understood what we were trying to do and she provided support for a non-formal education project in a pagoda for temple boys. That is how we started our work.



Photo: activities of Non-formal education at Pagoda

What are some of the programs you are implementing with support from BICE?

BICE supported OEC for a project called “Smiling Cambodian Children” in 2008 at Rukhakiry district in Battambang province. The activities were focused on preventing child sexual abuse. From 2012 up to now, BICE has continued to support our work through the project School without Walls. The activities focus on child rights, child protection, and preventing child exploitation in collaboration and cooperation with local authorities and other NGOs. Among other activities, we created a Parents Association to ensure that parents participate in all activities for their children that concern their education, in particular so that they understand well what is in the best interest of their children.

What are some of the strengths of these programs? And what are some of the difficulties you face?

A key achievement is that all children living in the remote areas go to school. Parents understand the benefits of education and they enable their children to go to school regularly. Local authorities pay attention with parents and school directors to ways to strengthen the education other children receive, and communities mobilize resources to build schools. There is also a good collaboration between

communities, NGOs, and police officers to help prevent child abuse, sexual abuse, and domestic violence.

We work with children of all faiths, including Buddhism, Islam, Catholicism, etc. But we also work closely with the Catholic Church, especially for children who have disabilities. Thanks to a reference from Father Kike, we receive funding from Kindermissionwerk.



Photo: Non-formal education at Rattanak Mundul district of Battambang province

In terms of challenges, I can mention the flow of Chinese people coming to live in Cambodia which makes the price of land higher and higher, and the conflict between local authorities and people and their children related to land issues, especially when people are forced to move. Sometimes schools also need to be moved to new places. This means that students must move too, so that it is very difficult for them to go to school and study. When children are beyond the support of OEC, they often drop-out of school and when public schools are far from the students' house, they have no means to go to school.

With the COVID 19 pandemic, we have also had difficulties to support families that are struggling economically, and some of our activities were delayed, in part because it has been difficult to communicate with local authorities to obtain permissions for the work.



Photo: supporting patient of dengue fever at Battambang Referral Hospital.

Could you share how you ended up in your current position, what was your personal journey?

I am now 70 year olds! I have worked since 1992 as staff with different organizations including the United Nations, international NGOs and local NGOs. I have always believed in the precept of the Buddha: "Do the good thing, receive the good thing". Right now, I am focusing on selecting three persons who have worked with OEC for more than 20 years to serve as a committee to lead OEC in the future. Right now they are under my supervision,

but when I will leave I will simply be an advisor and they will lead the organization.

Finally, could you share a personal anecdote about yourself, what you are passionate about?

Every day I take care of my small garden, and every afternoon on Saturday and Sunday, I participate at the (meditation) Center of Vipasana.



Photo: School without walls program in Cambodia.