

ThePeaceArchitect

Developing a Blueprint for Peace

Cambodia – Caught Between Beauty and Despair

NOVEMBER 22, 2014NOVEMBER 24, 2014 / THE PEACE ARCHITECT

In October I visited Cambodia with my wife, Lydia. It is an exquisite country. As I look back over my memories and peruse my photos, I see a rich and dynamic culture, people who are smiley and polite, happy to interact, hard workers with much



Lydia in One of the Halls of Ta Prohm Temple

entrepreneurial skill and a high level of resilience. After

discussing these characteristics with others who have travelled through the country, I find that they describe Cambodia in similar fashion.

Just as incredible was my visit to Angkor. The temple Angkor Wat, meaning “Temple City”, and the several others, each represent an earlier civilisation that admired grand architecture and had an affinity for symmetry, unity, order, beauty, mastery over artful narration of story and appreciation of the divine. I could not help but imagine what it would have been like to live in Cambodia in the early 12th century, when these superb pieces of architecture were being constructed.

Given both the beautiful people and culture, I would encourage everyone to visit in order to experience and appreciate these realities.

Yet, however beautiful Cambodia’s people, however grand its historic architecture and however welcome you may feel, you will soon find yourself in a tension, between its brilliance and its apparent despair.

It is not long before you come to observe the poverty, inequality, lack of education and political and economic corruption, which have all conspired to detract from peace within Cambodian society.

OF OPULENCE AND BEGGARS



Little Girl Playing in Ta Prohm Temple

You can quite easily discern between the haves and have-nots in Cambodia. I saw many luxurious houses throughout the town of Siem Reap and yet could be approached by a young girl, approximately 10 years of age, desperate for support. I had told myself I would not hand out money to those who are begging, because it's not certain what it will be used for, but it was not money this little girl was after.

She wanted baby formula to feed the weak looking baby in her arms, covered in sores. Before giving us time to think, she dragged us to a small supermarket to buy a \$20US tin of formula. It began to dawn on me that this was a scam, but it was too late, so we bargained to purchase a smaller \$6 tin instead, a move she was particularly unhappy about.

Ten minutes later, the same girl could be observed convincing another unsuspecting and visibly concerned and distraught tourist couple to buy her the same \$20US formula for the same ailing baby.

Of course, with this manipulation of people's sensibilities and the likelihood that this baby is kept in a permanently dreadful state for that purpose, I quickly found a source of anger and despair. Yet, if I direct this anger at the girl, I'll most likely find that she is also being exploited, either by a poor mother, or someone who's found a new business model for their personal enrichment.

If we want to broaden our understanding even further, we may even find that she, together with the exploitative entrepreneur in charge, are ultimately part of an economic system that has left behind a very large proportion of the population, who in sheer desperation are simply trying to keep their heads above water.

A DEVELOPING WORLD ECONOMY FALLING INTO LINE

Having read the history and news, I found that Cambodia opened itself up to increasing levels of trade and investment from the 1990s, resulting from a desire to integrate into the ASEAN and World Trade Organisation trading systems. Rapidly, Cambodia moved away from its planned economy, to introduce fast paced capitalism – deregulation and privatisation.

Consequently many industries have moved to Cambodia, in part to escape the rising costs associated with business in China and elsewhere. The economy has grown rather rapidly, and yet given prevailing political conditions and weak institutions, this has had several negative impacts on poorer Cambodian people, including the illegal expropriation of land for business (gentrification) and remuneration levels below living wage standards.

Expropriation of Land

Writing for the New Internationalist, David Nathan professed that since the 1990s, 2.1 million hectares of land has been forcefully expropriated by the government, or bought at below-market prices, from small subsistence farmers and given to industrial agricultural firms.

Many multinationals have made use of these favourable trade conditions and the government protection afforded to them to buy up the country, alienating rural Cambodian people, rendering them homeless and effectively keeping them impoverished and without security.

Several Cambodians who have protested against their eviction from the land have faced violence, arrest and possible detention by police and security forces, at the behest of the government.

Below Living Wage Standards

One of the top 20 clothing producers in the world, Cambodia has among the lowest minimum monthly wages in the industry. Worker conditions and safety is also poor (ILO). Consequently, garment workers have on several occasions taken to the streets in protest. And continually these protests have been quashed by soldiers armed with live ammunition.

One dire example occurred on 3 January 2014, when a peaceful protest to increase the minimum wage from USD 80 to USD 160 ended in violence as state troopers shot dead four people and seriously injured others.

In a strange twist of justice, several newspapers report that the soldiers were protected with impunity, while several trade union leaders who supported the strikes were arrested and face a possible 14 year jail sentence, if they are found guilty.

Despite these arrests, the government has allegedly agreed to an increase in the minimum wage in 2015, but the anticipated increase will undercut worker and union demands and is still



Cambodian Woman Eking Out A Living in the Temples of Angkor

below the living minimum. Due to the impasse, some protesters are becoming more violent in their struggle, and have on occasion pelted rocks and Molotov cocktails against State forces.

This demonstrates the way in which unequal access to economic resources can induce social struggle. In a system that has given preference to some, in particular politicians and foreign companies, while leaving closed the door on the poor and marginalised, tensions increase and with it peace and stability is threatened.

CORRUPTION AS 'DISTURBER OF THE PEACE'

Of course economic growth gives the impression that things are proceeding well within a country, particularly given our tendency to preference economic indicators in measuring a countries performance and success.

However, as I've just shown, purely economic indicators, generally based on Gross Domestic Product, do not reflect inequality rates and nor do they betray levels of corruption. Both of which, have a profoundly negative effect on peace and stability within a country.

Cambodia has done several things to curtail corruption, including the establishment of an Anti-Corruption Unit and the institutionalisation of associated Anti-Corruption Laws. Judicial inquiries into people involved in fraud, bribery and extortion have since resulted in several prosecutions.

And yet, Cambodia has been ranked by the 2013 Corruption Perceptions Index as the most corrupt South East Asian country. With respect to corruption Worldwide, Cambodia is ranked 160th out of 177, existing alongside Zimbabwe and Eritrea.



This

Parliament House – Image from CAAI News Media

corruption has brought into doubt the integrity of several State institutions, including the Legislature, Judiciary and law enforcement agencies. It appears that in practice the Legislature and Judiciary are controlled by the executive branch of Government and there is also strong evidence that bribery, extortion and a culture of impunity pervades law enforcement agencies (Transparency International).

Prime Minister Hun Sen, during a recent speech at the Eighth Regional Anti-Corruption Conference, laid blame for corruption at the feet of the private sector. Yet, the story is more nuanced. As I demonstrated above, foreign enterprise is protected by the government. And as a report from Transparency International suggests, “High-level business and government operate within a tightly woven mutually beneficial nexus.”

Having mobilised and centralised much political institutional capital, some in government have used their resources to acquire large amounts of private economic capital. There is

evidence that money has, in the past, been allocated to companies owned by family members of those in government.

This is evidence that the current absence of budget transparency can easily lend itself to nepotism, embezzlement and entrenched systems of patronage. This system is quite easy to sustain because of the lack of fiscal transparency in the national budget.

This lack of fiscal transparency has helped to leave 1.5 Billion of unallocated funds in the 2014 budget, providing authorities greater flexibility to allocate resources free from the oversight of the National Assembly.

This is highly important because corruption has been demonstrated to retard growth and development, particularly among the poor, resulting in hugely uneven economic development. Even an increase of one percentage point in corruption has been shown to drastically reduce the economic growth rates of a country.

Commonly, corruption results in reduced productivity of existing resources, decreased investment in physical capital and contributes directly to massive income inequality (Gyimah-Brempong).

As such, corruption and inequality constitute a powerfully interdependent relationship, serving to enrich the elite while disproportionately affecting the poor and marginalised. Given the presence of corruption with impunity, this will give rise to incentives to hold public office, not for the good of the country, but for personal enrichment.

TOWARDS A PEACEFUL CAMBODIA

The most important thing is not that there are issues in Cambodia. Every country has its issues and my own country, Australia, is certainly not exempt. The real issue, and the question that I ask of myself and pose to anyone who reads this, is how do we build peace within this context?

When I say 'peace' I don't mean sentimental and romantic 'peace-love' with little or no substance. Moving a society away from low-levels of peace and instability demands a coordinated and multi-dimensional approach that simultaneously addresses the causes of social conflict, addresses needs and interests, increases justice, reduces violence, while helping to attain positive and life-giving relationships.

More practically, peace is, as described by Camilla Schippa, a sound business environment; a well functioning government; an equitable distribution of resources; free flow of information; low levels of corruption; acceptance of the rights of others; high levels of education, and; good relations with neighbours.

If these are some of the structures upon which peace is built, the several factors in this blog will need to be systematically and sustainably addressed, which will take efforts from government organisations, non-government organisations, social enterprise and several other actors.

Here, we are not without hope! There are several actors doing incredible work within Cambodia helping to create a harmonious and peaceful social fabric. Given my desire to reflect on my experience I would like to give a positive appraisal to one project that I found to be wonderfully entrepreneurial and sustainable. I introduce to you Haven!

INTRODUCING A 'HAVEN' FOR THE VULNERABLE

Haven is a restaurant providing life skills training to vulnerable Cambodian people. While Haven doesn't consider itself to be a peace project, I would like to suggest that it is contributing toward the development of peace within Cambodian broadly speaking and even more so, within the context of several Cambodian peoples' individual lives. Let me explain.



Refreshing Drinks at HAVEN Restaurant

A Swiss couple Sara and Paul Wallimann were the restaurants developers and pioneers. Their experience in orphanages in Cambodia led them to the notion that orphanages do not provide a sustainable approach to human development and can result in institutionalisation for children and adolescence.

Further to this, several orphanages are simply established to raise money through the exploitation of children. They wanted a different model, and Haven was born!

I had the honour of meeting Stef Feierabend, who helps implement this project. Several factors of the project are positive, but as Stef spoke, two factors were for me, particularly encouraging. First is the development of skills in these young Cambodians and second was the concept of 'family' as applied to the staff.

'Give Me Skills and I'll Change My World'

The project works on several factors that aid skills development of the Cambodian staff. As reflected on one of Haven's websites, the project "offers young adults a quality vocational training in hospitality, supports them in their transition from institution to real world and mentors them on their way into the professional world."



https://thepeacearchitect.files.wordpress.com/2014/11/dsc_23961.jpg

Chef at HAVEN Restaurant

If you, like me, have grown up in a particularly dysfunctional environment that hasn't afforded you the opportunity to develop life skills and gain knowledge and understanding to contribute toward society, you will know the deep sense of disempowerment, fear and uncertainty that characterises all of life.

Haven is transforming these realities in those with whom they work by providing a safe environment in which to learn and develop life skills, vocational capacity and the entrepreneurial understanding to 'make it' in the world.

'I Am Family'

I think most of us would agree that the institution of family can help to foster in its members a sense of purpose, identity and responsibility. Yet, I'm sure for many of us, this imagery may have once needed to be, or may still need to be redeemed, because of a traumatic family history or the loss of parents.

I learned that many of the



Staff at HAVEN Restaurant

Cambodian's working and training under Haven came from orphanages, having lost their parents, or alternatively they were abandoned by parents who could not provide for them.

Growing up in a post civil war world, in poor conditions, without a family and a lack of skills and education, can create a sense vulnerability, isolation, loss of identity and loneliness. Haven helps to overcome these realities by adopting the institution of family as a structure for their staffing.

All members of the nuclear family are represented and possess different responsibilities depending on their different positions within its structure. However, despite this structure, all of its members gain training and education because the tasks demanded by the restaurant are shared on rotation.

The family is, in this story at least, an institution that provides its protections, produces and reinforces identity formation, yields skills development and knowledge, protects the rights of its members, while demanding of them a sense of shared responsibility and input.

Mixing the family structure with a business structure is risky given the potential for termination and a host of other



Lydia and I With Stef!

issues, however, the potential benefits are tremendous if the exchange is characterised by grace and forgiveness as a counterweight to performance and expectation.

Ultimately, in its work, Haven is transforming the lives of many Cambodian's who have come from deep poverty and vulnerability.

Of course, as I have mentioned above, developing an architecture of peace with justice throughout a nation demands several institutional developments that help to contribute toward positive and life-giving relationships.

As such, the response to Cambodia's several issues must be a coordinated effort across all levels of society, of which Haven is one small, but not insignificant, component. Cambodians are not without hope either, because the same skill and capacity that built the 12th Century Temples continues to reside within them. It only has to be realised.

In my future blogs we will be building and integrating the various pieces of our architectural elements towards the development of just and peaceful societies. I hope you can join me in developing some ideas!

The views presented in this blog post are not the views of Haven or its staff members. It is purely based on my observances and readings of the country. Images are property of the author unless otherwise indicated.

Uncategorized

BEGGARS ◀ CAMBODIA ◀ CAPITALISM ◀ CONFLICT
◀ CORRUPTION ◀ CULTURE OF
IMPUNITY ◀ DEVELOPING WORLD
ECONOMY ◀ EXPROPRIATION OF
LAND ◀ GOVERNMENT
CORRUPTION ◀ HAVEN ◀ HAVEN
CAMBODIA ◀ IMPUNITY ◀ INEQUALITY ◀ LIVING
WAGE ◀ PEACE ◀ PEACE AND
CONFLICT ◀ POVERTY ◀ THEPEACEARCHITECT

[BLOG AT WORDPRESS.COM.](http://www.wordpress.com) | [THE HEMINGWAY REWRITTEN THEME.](#)

Follow

Follow “ThePeaceArchitect”

Build a website with WordPress.com