

Bridging authorities and civil society



Poverty is still the main problem for the majority of people in Cambodia, which, besides financial poverty, also includes the lack of education and knowledge. Due to financial poverty many parents seek to migrate for work; some taking their children along, others leaving them behind with relatives. Sadly many parents do not value their children's education, and children are dropping out of school too early. These are some of the factors behind that fact that many children are growing up with no opportunities for healthy holistic development, good education and safety.

ICC's development project, VOTC (Voice Of The Children), has since 2009 contributed to the successful implementation of the Convention on the Right of the Child (CRC), by training and empowering church leaders to promote child rights and good parenting skills in their communities.

In 2015 VOTC took initiative and conducted two envisioning forums for local authorities together with the civil society, on how best to value and protect the children. In the forums, attendees from the local authorities included village chiefs, government school teachers and police officers, and from the civil society included representatives from churches, pagodas, as well as children, parents and other caregivers. At the end of the forums, participants expressed a shared vision to protect their children from crime, abuse and exploitation, but also to improve the children's childhoods with good education, proper parenting, inclusion and safety.

Afterwards, this outcome from the envisioning forums has been adapted into the next project phase of VOTC starting in 2016, where the new emphasis is to empower the civil society to network and advocate intentionally with the local authorities. It includes extending the project focus to work with Commune Councils, village chiefs, police forces and government schools. Church leaders, previously trained by VOTC, are playing a key-role in networking and advocating. For some church leaders it is felt as a challenge to get directly involved with local authorities i.e. because of status and rank. But the church leaders believe it is necessary that the civil society and local authorities work closely together in order to see long-term sustainable changes for the betterment of child welfare in their communities.

VOTC is only six months into the new project phase, but already good results are being seen from working directly with government school teachers. After conducting a Parenting Skills training for government school teachers, the participants expressed new understanding of a child's developmental stages. They also gained new understanding about the value of children and about the role of parents and caregivers. One government school teacher decided right after the training that she would apply her new learning at home with her family. Another young teacher in her early twenties felt the lesson was eye-opening for her to understand her own childhood and her relationship with her parents as a child. These are two examples of a changing mindset, which is core for changing old traditions and habits, and for laying the foundations for better child welfare in Cambodia.