**Project Taom 2010**

In the last quarter of 2010, we, a group of teenagers who started Project BLISS (Building Libraries in Siem Reap Student Group) in December 2009 started planning another trip back to Taom village to continue with our contribution to the village.

Our original intention was to build a kindergarten. However, on a recee trip, we realised the Catholic Church had their own plans for a school building that will double up as a pastoral centre.for church meetings. Due to our preference to be secular and the church’s ability to garner donation support, we decided to step down from building the kindergarten.

While we were in Cambodia in December, we aimed to:

* Empower villagers to improve their standard of living, especially health & hygiene, as well as improve their poverty situation.
* Promote education as a long-term solution to poverty.
* Enhancing the educational resources of the village
* Spread joy and cheer among the children.

**What we achieved**:

* **Installed a water filtration system** to provide clean water as well as educate children and villagers on health and hygiene. Free Flow 60 gravity flow ultrafiltration system produces up to 60 litres per hour of microorganism safe water for remote communities and disaster planning. It filters out all water-borne bacteria and viruses using a 0.01 micron membrane.

The system was chosen because there is no need for electricity and easy to use (only requires regular flushing by turning a lever).

* **Bolster teaching resources** and **build capability of teachers**

Upon returning to the village, the two students who were previously given scholarships were already teaching kindergarten children in the village.

We had brought along with us teaching resources like flash cards with Khymer text (these were handmade by Yen), crayons, drawing blocks, coloured paper, pencils markers, erasers, games etc. Most of these resources were donated by friends and family.

One of the challenges is upgrading teaching capability. We had been in touch with Caring from Cambodia, an NGO that run several schools in Siem Reap. They provide training to training to teachers in their school and have agreed to allow the two students who received scholarships to observe their trainings. We passed the contact to Thon from the Catholic Church for his follow-up.

* **Purchase more books for the library**.

As the starting point of this project, it was essential that we monitored the progress of the library we had built and its resources to ensure the sustainability of the facility. It is well visited and used by youth and children of Taom as well as neighbouring villages.

There are challenges like loss of books or stolen books. The mission had constructed grills on the windows to prevent people from climbing into the library when it is close.

We bought more stationery and Khmer books to enrich the resources. Most of the books we bought were in Khmer or had both Khmer and English language text. We figured that buying more English books would not be so relevant at this stage of development.

* **Provide additional scholarships** for youth - to high school or vocational training. We had considered providing more scholarships. However, the leadership at the mission, taking care of Taom had changed and we felt that it was better to allow some time. We will have Project Happy Feet assess the situation before making any decision in this area.
* **Rice Soup Programme**

The rice soup programme was started by the church to provide nutritious porridge for the children in the village. It used to be organised several times a week in an attempt to combat malnutrition which is sorely lacking for the children. This could be seen in the similarity between the kwashiorkor children in Africa and the children in the village when we were there in 2009. However, due to lack of funds, the church has reduced the frequency to once a week.

We were considering funding an extra bowl of porridge for each child which costs US$0.25 a bowl. The calculated cost for a year’s supply is US$ 3,900.

The point of contention lies in how we want to give this extra bowl of porridge. One way to help promote education in the village is to provide the porridge only to those who partake in the education provided in the village. This is a common method used by NGOs to promote education by pegging additional services to the school. However, the concern lies in the excluded children who do not go to school. Should they be excluded because they are needed on the fields or because their value systems vary from ours?

There is a need to address the issue of how the porridge is given out to the children.

In addition to this, there is also a need to find a more sustainable method to provide nutrition for the children in the village. As of now, it has been declared that due to the lack of water in the village, their agriculture only has one season which is a source of food shortage. Is it possible to find a way to implement a more sustainable form of subsistence agriculture that can reduce the village’s dependence on the church’s rice soup programme?

Upon further observation, we decided that standing in line, waiting and asking for a bowl of rice soup is not the most empowering experience for children. It sets up a dependency they are not conscious of. We also felt that the church will continue to provide what they are able to. Our decision was not to fund this programme.

* **Primary School in Taom**

We visited the Primary school situated in the village (attended by children in Taom and possibly the neighbouring village). The public schools are supposed to be funded by the Government. However, the support provided is inconsistent and for remote villages like Taom, resources may not arrive regularly, mostly due to corruption.

We managed to find the Director/Principal of the school, who gave us a quick tour and explanation of the situation. We were quite appalled by the standards of the school - their teaching resources and educational standards.

The school is a single storey concrete building with 5 to 6 classrooms. Two rooms were unused and filled with cob-webs. The remaining 3 rooms were used as regular classrooms. They did not have sufficient teachers to run classes for higher grades (5 and 6); hence the cob-webbed filled space.

One room had 30 plus children and is furnished with a chalkboard, wooden chairs and tables. Their chalkboard is so overused, it was no longer green and there’s just no space left to write on.

We also realised that some children did not even have any books and had to share with others. Upon further enquiry, we discovered that stocks of text books did not arrive in the school and there were insufficient old books for all the children. The same went for simple stationery such as a pencil and eraser. It was inconceivable. How could children be expected to learn anything without even having such basic items needed for a class?

The principal requested for 2 whiteboards and mentioned that he will purchase the markers. He also requested for text books. On chatting further, he supported the idea of starting a little school library.

The teachers had also requested for sports equipment like soccer balls, volley balls and shoes for the children. While they had the t-shirts and shorts for children, they were lacking in shoes and sports equipment.

We bought the following resources for the school:

* 2 whiteboards and markers
* Story books to start the school library
* Exercise books for children
* Text books for all grades (Maths and Science)
* Charts for the classrooms
* Stationery
* Soccer balls, volley balls, volley ball nets, shoes and socks

We were pleasantly surprised that on our second visit to the school, they had cleaned up one of the cob-web filled rooms and were ready to use it as a library. They were already using the whiteboards and the principal informed us that they are in the process of building a frame for the white board.

Another horror we stumbled upon in this run-down, government funded school, was the water source. The school has a water pump that pumps water out of the ground. The water has a strong metallic smell and is may not be safe for drinking.

We took a sample of the water from the water pump. While the water looks clear upon being pumped out of the ground, it turned yellowish brown when left to stand. We also discovered that the children do not drink water from the well but from a pond, just outside the school.

We also noticed that they were using the Rabbit Brand water filter. This contraption has terracotta filter placed over a plastic bucket with a tap. It takes 3 days to filter one bucket of water. The water being filtered was from the pond has green muck in it!

We chatted with the principal about the possibility of building a water tank and installing a water filter for the children. He mentioned that he can request villagers to support the building of a water tank. We will explore this possibility on returning to Singapore

We also enquired about employing teachers for the school. On our first visit, the principal mentioned that he needed to check with the authorities. On our second visit, he mentioned that he had called and the authorities mentioned that they can employ teachers. He also mentioned a possible teacher. We decided to give this further thought before committing to it.

* **Spreading Cheer to Children**

During the same trip, we also visited a floating village where the Catholic Mission had another learning centre to spread cheer to the children of the village. Similar to Taom, the Mission runs a rice soup programme,

We brought along drawing blocks, crayons, coloured pencils and other stationery for the learning centre floating on the river. We spent half a day singing and playing with them before serving rice soup.

**Future Plan**s:

* **Primary school in Taom**

We also realised that the children who attend the school are different from those who attend programmes at the Catholic mission leaning centre – the compound where the library we built in 2009 is located. It is likely that this school may reach out to a different group of children in Taom.

We intend to continue working with this school to improve its educational and teaching resources as it is in line with our aim of promoting education as a way of alleviating poverty. We hope to be able to use this school as a base to spread the importance of education to the surrounding villages.

We plan to visit Taom in 2011 and these are our initial thoughts:

1. Clean water - We feel that clean water is necessary for a good study environment and it is the least that a child should have. We are considering the possibility of clean water system. We may have to build a well, should the existing water pump not be viable. It is also likely that we will have to purchase a generator to pump water into a water tank. We are exploring possibilities with Social Capital Venture, a social enterprise committed to improving lives and conditions of disadvantaged people in developing countries. They are currently working with villages in Phom Phen on water sanitation systems.

The primary school is not as well equipped and a more elaborate set–up may be required, as compared to the water filter installed in the Catholic Mission compound. The mission compound already has a water tank while the school does not.

1. Grade 5 and 6 Education – The school currently teaches grade 1 to 4. Grades 5 and 6 have been cancelled due to a lack of teachers and funds to employ a teacher. This has left the school with seriously low educational standards as it is not even a complete lower grade education! If children want to pursue higher grades, they must travel a few kilometres. We are exploring the possibility of funding teachers for Grades 5 and 6. We will look into a safe system of remuneration with suitable accountability. It is not safe to remit money into bank accounts.
2. Higher standards – As the school only teaches Lower grade education, children who wish to attain middle grade education have to travel about 15km to the middle grade school. This is why many of the children remain at such low levels of education - many find it too troublesome to travel such long distances and they may not have the means to travel the distance (apart from walking )

If a child is to go beyond grade 9, he or she must go to the city. The number of children from the villages that actually pursue this is close to zero. This reinforces the poverty cycle and we are dedicated to changing that. We are looking into a few potential options such as a bicycle rental system or a van that can transport the children to and from school.

We are exploring the possibility of scholarships to allow the teenagers who are passionate and keen, to attain higher levels of education. Whatever system we implement will have accountability and we propose starting with one teenager, track progress and effectiveness as well as gauge viability to increase numbers.

1. Sports programme – learning can be fun. That is the message that we want to bring across to the children. The principal mentioned an enrolment of about 300 plus children. Yet when we visited, there were less than 80 children in the school.

Reason - many children either do not have the money to continue their education or their parents do not see the benefit of education and would rather have their children work in the farms.

We hope to start a sports programme to make school a more fun place to be. This includes the provision of sports equipment for the school so the children can use as well as the possible development of a proper playing court for ball games and such.

1. Teaching resources – As mentioned before, the school is very poorly equipped for teaching the children. While we may have provided them with some exercise books and stationery, these may not be sufficient and we are likely to top up the supply in 2011.