

First Hand Service Trip to Poipet

April 28th – 30th, 2019



Four First Hand volunteers, Evelyn, Melita, Uma and Annette H. went on a 3-day service trip to visit our main beneficiary in Cambodia, Damnok Toek. This important NGO offers several amazing projects to support the most vulnerable families in Poipet (www.damnoktoek.org).

The purpose of our trip was to learn more about their child-protection projects, to understand their needs and to show our engagement and commitment to raise funds to assist them. We were delighted to also donate over 150 kgs of donations incl. books, educational toys, school supplies, t-shirts and shoes that we had collected with thanks from kind friends in Singapore.

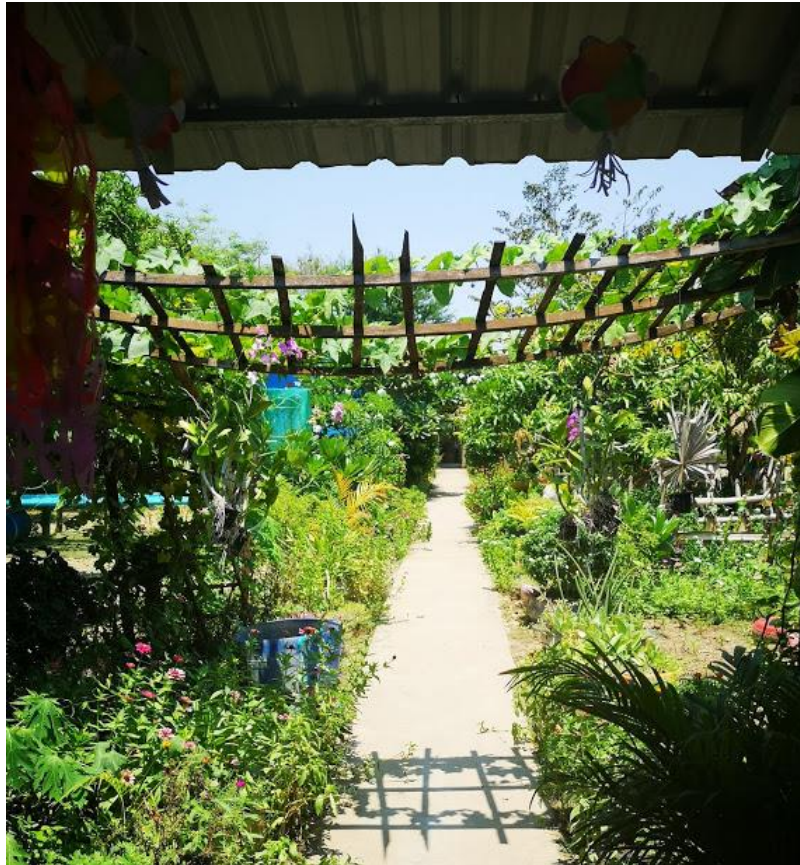


Poipet is a 'boomtown' with approx. 150,000 citizens located 3 hrs drive west of Siem Reap on the border with Thailand. It is a key crossing point and transport hub between the two countries.

A special economic zone along the border between the Cambodian and the Thai immigration counters offers several casino hotels, attracting numerous Thais, Chinese and other foreign gamblers. It is also a 'magnet' for illegal cross-border migration for many poor Cambodians who, often in vain, move to Poipet with the hope of easy employment. It is estimated that approx. 50% of Poipet citizens live in the slum.



Unfortunately, a large number of these people are exploited. Any Cambodians being caught by the Thai authorities as illegal immigrants are 'collected and dumped' at the border crossing – the children are often found without parents or relatives and or even knowing their identity. That happens daily and those people are then being transported to a newly built Border Center (5 km from the border) where the Cambodian Authorities, Damnok Toek and two other NGO's aim to assist them in various ways.



For the unaccompanied children, Damnok Toek offers The Transitional Care Facility Project and Group Home Project as well as The Reception Centre Project. The main goal is to reunite and reintegrate the often-traumatized children with their families. However, due to various reasons the success rate is below 30 %!

In the circumstances where children cannot be reunited with their families, the children stay in the charity programmes to the age of 18. Training in cooking, sewing, general vocational training etc. help the youth to be able to provide for themselves in the future.

Pictures from Damnok Toek's main premises where these projects are carried out.



Non-formal Education is taking place for the children being part of The Transitional Care Facility Project.



A newly opened primary school building provides formal education for the poorest children in Poipet. Damnok Toek also arranges transportation to and from school for the children every day.



Primary school children attend classes either in the morning or in the afternoon in the new school building.





We also visited the 24 hours Drop In Centre where children living in the surrounding slum and street children can play, learn to read and count in a non-formal manner, get meals and a safe shelter to sleep.

Each month mobile libraries and awareness workshops are held covering important topics like trafficking, sexual exploitation, HIV and the importance of education.

Workshops for parents are also offered here regarding parenting, good behaviour and very basic housekeeping.

This centre is the only one of its kind in Poipet.



We followed the Damnok Toek social workers to talk to the families living in the slum surrounding the Drop In Centre. This area has recently been bought by a Chinese company, so the future for these families are even more uncertain and unsafe.

A woman with 8 children and a drinking husband explained that she could earn USD 1 to 1.5 a day by “pushing trolleys at the border”.

Damnok Toek social workers encouraged her to send their children to the Drop In Centre and to get assistance to get them to attend school.

This 48-year old woman (to the right) takes care of her 5 grandchildren - she didn't know where their father is, and her daughter disappeared a few month ago.





We went out at night with Damnok Toek social workers, watching them interact with a lot of street kids who were out begging! Poipet can be an exceptionally hazardous place for children.

Due to the hard work of the social workers, they have built up trust with the children, who were happy and confident to hug them, and even to hug us.

Drug addicted boys were being comforted by the social workers and reminded of the safe sleeping-house at the Drop In Centre.

It was heartbreaking but so touching to see the way the skilled social workers, with respect and dignity, approached the children and families in need!



The social workers also spoke to a poor family with two very young children, encouraging the mother to visit Damnok Toek employment project 'Future Office' the next day.

This Future Office project offers free help, and education is given to assist young adults and parents in applying for suitable jobs, mainly within construction and service-related industries.

Last year through this project, 30 people got a job securing an income for their family.



Together with Dr. Heng from Damnok Toek's medical programme, we visited families who live under horrible circumstances at a rubbish dump on the countryside.



Dr. Heng visits once a week to provide free medical care and assistance if further treatment or hospitalization is required.

The only way for the families to try to earn a living is by sorting trash to find recyclable items to sell.

One family managed to move from the dumpsite – they now earn a living by raising and selling pigs, thanks to their 16-year-old daughter's employment at one of the casinos.





Our intense trip was a life changing experience with massive impressions – although it can seem hopeless, it is so rewarding to learn that, what is being done, really does matter.

Damnok Toek offers amazing and very impressive projects that do make a big difference for so many vulnerable children and their families – kindly find out more on www.damnoktoek.org

At First Hand we are even more committed to raise as much funds as possible to support Damnok Toek.

Thank you to all the fantastic Damnok Toek colleagues who took so good care of us.

Photo credits to Evelyn Abbott, Melita Gerber and Uma Babu

June 2019
Annette Harling