Becoming A Literate Nation, Step by Step

Cambodia has the challenging task of rebuilding its society after decades of civil war and in particular, the infamous Pol Pot regime. The entire society was turned upside down during that era: cities were emptied, schools were closed, and intellectuals and educated people were sought out and systematically killed. Books and libraries were destroyed throughout the country. A whole generation grew up without schooling or access to written materials, greatly multiplying the number of
illiterate Cambodian people nation-wide.

Education For All? The country faces continuing challenges to achieving ‘Education For All’. Many children are still not enrolled in school, and grow up illiterate. This is especially true in rural areas, where the entire family is busy in livelihood activities during daylight hours, and primary schools and teachers are in short supply.

The Department of Non-Formal Education has seen positive results in over two decades of supporting literacy materials development, teacher training, literacy classes, and community learning centres. The official literacy rates for ages 15 and over are 74% for the total literacy rate: 85% for males; 64% for females.

The demand for classes and learning materials for the various ages and ethnic groups throughout Cambodia continues to be much greater than the government resources to meet the need.

Since mid 1990s, literacy programs have expanded nationwide. Here is the story of one young woman who has benefited from these programmes.

Literacy Student first becomes Teacher, then Health Post Registrar

Lueng is a young woman in her early twenties, from the Kavet/Brao ethnic group in Ratanakiri province, living a half day’s travel from the Provincial capital. Her village is accessible by a forest trail or canoe. She began attending literacy class when she was about 12 years old,
and soon excelled although she was one of only a few girls in a class comprising mostly men. Most of the girls lacked the confidence to attend literacy class, but Lueng soon completed the three books in the literacy series.

Lueng was then recruited as an assistant teacher, and soon was responsible for her own class. She was very active in teacher training sessions to increase her literacy and numeracy skills. In addition, she volunteered to join the village health group, which was responsible for training other villagers concerning primary health care and measures to avoid preventable diseases, such as the use of mosquito nets, boiling water, and immunizing women and children. She taught all levels of literacy classes in her village for four years, enabling many young men and women in her village to become literate.

When a Health Post was opened in her village a year ago, Lueng’s literacy skills and experience in the non-formal education health activities enabled her to gain a paid government position as patient registrar for the Health Post.

*This story was submitted by NGO Education Partnership (NEP) in Cambodia*