

PROJECT LOKUN 12 - REFLECTIONS

Josiah Wong

What I contributed to Lokun 12 cannot compare to what I got out of it. Behind the house to house visits, education and clinics came a personal understanding of Cambodia in terms of the big picture - each patient a report on the healthcare system, each child a result of the education system and each Cambodian a product of his country. There is still much work to be done, both on the ground and in the local system; and this trip has only made me want to return to play my part in bringing about positive change.



I remember asking a woman about her family history. The translator spoke to her in Khmer, then turned back to me saying: “Her family died in the Khmer Rouge” Considering the scars of the past helps us understand the Cambodia of the present. Only then can we work towards a better future for this country.

Julia

Starry Starry Cambodge Night

Going back to Cambodia for Lokun, I was rekindled with many familiar sights and sounds. The ride into CROAP was no smoother than the last time and trusty Muppet was still at the porch of the girls' bunk welcoming us eagerly. As a returning senior, I wasn't as bombarded with new experiences as when I first stepped into CROAP in 2012. It didn't mean that I was bored nor was there any sense of dread. In Lokun 10, it was about stepping out of my comfort zone and feeling the ground, thus much of my energy was spent tackling my surroundings and my insecurities. After being somewhat inducted into the Cambodian way of

things, I returned more mentally prepared, allowing me to appreciate a more subtle, implicit side to rural life. A key feature of my stay in CROAP which I appreciated much more wholly on return was the starry night sky. Unadulterated by city lights, it was a defining point of reflection for me and probably the entire team.

As I stared wide-eyed at the speckled sky (#speckledeggs) on the last few nights, I felt a strange tugging at the heart as I simultaneously experienced wonderment, a sense of companionship and somehow, fear. At that moment, my experiences in Lokun and the anticipation of things to come all made clearer sense.

First, wonderment. It constantly warms my heart at the hospitality and generosity of the Cambodians despite their circumstances. Something that was debated on was the team's decision to attach a nominal sum of money to our clinics so ensure a level of sustainability at the acute care level. As it was on a voluntary basis, I personally thought that the system probably wouldn't gain much momentum. I was proven very wrong time and time again as we managed to collect \$10 USD in total on our first day of clinics, a pretty surprising outcome considering the Cambodians live on less than \$1 USD a day. I especially recalled a villager who went through the entire clinic, received symptomatic medication and walked from the pharmacy all the way back to the triage station to place some money into our donation box. To see their gratitude and appreciation for our services brings to mind the sea-star story of Zhao Yang. To many, clinics may not seem a sustainable component of the project. However, I feel that clinics are important not only in addressing the immediate concerns of the people, it is also the first step in bridging the people to their own healthcare system through the referral programme. Without clinics, progress in chronic health management will seriously be impeded because deranged blood pressure and blood glucose readings are usually only picked up at the triage stations of clinics.

Next, companionship. The enjoyment of star-gazing was amplified when done in the company of a close, bonded team. Saying that the Lokun 12 team was great is really an understatement. Every member, including the translators and the doctors, went beyond just executing their role in the project to the best of their abilities, help was always in abundance to the various comms with the big picture constantly acting as our yardstick. How the stars aligned (pun so intended) such that THE dream team could be formed is really God-sent. I was especially blessed with a fantastic development committee. Each member (zh, zeb, shergs and celpy) so efficient in completing work but more importantly so warm and understanding. I really couldn't have asked for a more capable and joyous bunch of people.

Lastly, fear. Staring into the black void and encountering that vastness, I was pretty taken aback at the sense of my minuteness and insignificance in the greater scheme of things. Existentialist thoughts aside, I thought about the team's place in Cambodia and for a moment, I pondered on the role of OCIPs in Cambodia. Just like the numerous stars in the sky, Cambodia suffers from an NGO endemic which has perpetuated the poverty cycle. I constantly ask myself how we can make an actual, sustainable impact on the Cambodian healthcare. The answer I realized, lay in the very possibility of our existence. Of all the stars and the planets, 2 key elements that allows Earth to sustain life effectively in the presence of the Sun is perfection in DISTANCE and TIMING. Distance brings to mind the balance between directly offering help and keeping our distance so that the Cambodians can slowly gain ownership of their own health and their health system. There is no doubt that most go on OCIP with a heart of service but one of my greatest concerns was that we could actually be doing more harm than good by creating an over-dependence on the aid we provide. In terms of timing, I really felt that especially for this trip, we were at the mercy of many issues. One personally frustrating issue was with the closure of the local hospitals during the weekends that severely hindering our acute referral programme. It also prevented me from providing the most holistic development comm experience to the members. Giving in to the

cynicism and really just anger at the local system was a constant temptation, but again help was always at hand, this time in the form of Dr Sitha. It became apparent to me post-trip that this seemingly big hitch in the plan was in fact a blessing in disguise. I realized that the circumstances forced us to take a leap of faith with Dr Sitha, allowing him to personally handle most of the referral cases. This was a also great opportunity for Dr Sitha to garner support and trust from the villages. It dawned on me that the single entity underlying wonderment, companionship and fear all was simply, Gratitude. I am very thankful for getting the opportunity to go back for Lokun and experience all that Cambodia had to offer and more. The company was amazing and the progress made was extremely encouraging.

Even as I step down as head of the development comm, I have one final thought on the sustainability of the team as a personal reminder to myself and perhaps a form of encouragement to subsequent teams. One leaves Cambodia the first time with a fire burning fiercely inside them. As school takes over, the initial bonfire dies down and all that's left are simmering ambers. They are reminders of what had been, but equally important, they are glowing opportunities in light of what is to come.

At first, it may seem as if the passion for change has been extinguished but everyone knows it's easier to start the fire going again from the ambers than it is from fresh wood. The key lies in 2 things: laying down a solid foundation of wood in the construction of the original bonfire and fanning the ambers often enough to keep them glowing. We are very fortunate that the first few Lokun trips have laid a solid foundation for a sustainable fire. However, it is the duty of every subsequent team to stoak the fire with fresh progress and to keep those ambers alive post-trip so that the fire of change may be rekindled and burn with greater ferocity than ever before. Biquan mentioned before that we should all be more than just a member of Lokun but rather, we should strive to be part of an idea (and in Lokun's case, it's a darn good one). I really believe that if every single member, both past and present, commit their all to the cause of helping the Cambodians with perfect distance and timing, Lokun and all the OCIPs will truly leave a star-blazing legacy.

Describing Lokun 12 in a sentence:

Lokun was an incredible experience that has touched and inspired me in so many ways that I've never imagined possible. I wish to remember and treasure every moment and every friendship I've grown to love in the two weeks.

Jessica



The children in Cambodia have touched us in so many ways with a simple 'orkun' and a smile. I think I will never forget this little boy who gave me a necklace made of string and straws during our first day of clinics. (The necklace is hanging in my room now!)

He made me realize that however small our efforts are in Lokun, we have touched someone's life and I hope that all Lokuners will continue to reach out to more Cambodians in our own special way!



A young girl writing in the health workbook with our sponsored pens!

Designing a series of health education workbook is definitely quite challenging but it pays off to see the children writing in them!



In Lokun 12, I think the greatest takeaway for our Education Committee is the importance of listening to the people with an open mind. After speaking with our translators and the teachers at the schools, we realize that some parts of our health curriculum are not

applicable to them. Things that we take for granted like refrigerators, a proper market and running water, they do not have.

Thus, we will continue to perfect our curriculum in future trips to ensure that it is able to empower the children appropriately and sufficiently.

As for our future prospect, Project Lokun believes in and work towards sustainability and our Education comm share the same belief.

It is our little dream to integrate our Health Education Curriculum within the school's mainstream syllabus. We hope that every child in Cambodia will benefit from a proper health education in the near future.

Mr Jed once reminded us during a meeting that we are visitors to the country and we should never force our ideas into their system but enable the Cambodians to help themselves. After the trip, I've learnt to appreciate his advice. I hope that Project Lokun can be grow to be something that the people of Cambodia trust and look towards for help; and when they do, we will support them in every way we can

Zeb



Lokun 12, for me, has been about hope. Hope for a 5 day old baby lying limp in her mother's arms, hope for a mother with no money for treatment. Hope for better lives and long-term chronic disease management. Hope for a better future. With Project Lokun's strong emphasis on sustainable development, the teams have worked for many years towards a myriad of long term plans, local partnerships and work strategies, yet it's not only in these that I see the greatest hope for sustainable, positive change - rather, it's in the hearts and minds of our Cambodian friends and teammates, with whom we have had the pleasure of

working shoulder to shoulder, that I most clearly see the brightest hope for the future of Cambodia. Hearing them share their hearts about how they have been inspired to dedicate their lives to such missions, the gratitude they have for the work we came to do, and the burdens laid upon their hearts for their country, it struck me then - they are the future, and I, as a member of this project, am immensely privileged to have been a part of its humble beginnings.