

Cambodia: Then and Now

A 10-year comparison

1994 and 2004

Introduction

I lived and worked in Cambodia between 1994 and 1997. It was the first country I lived and worked in for an extended period of time as an independent person and came to know it reasonably well. I learned to speak Khmer (although writing was always beyond my abilities), and made many deep friendships with local people.

I returned to Cambodia for a 6 week period in September of last year, which was both a work and pleasure trip, after a break from the country of 7 years. As one would expect from a country which has recently emerged from a nightmare past of war, genocide and chaos, many things have changed, and some things have remained the same. But for good or bad Cambodia is in the fast-track of change.

There is no doubt, however, that there is a long way to go for Cambodia, before it can compete meaningfully in the international scene, or indeed, even in the Asian context. It is not easy to throw off the legacy of Pol Pot, mad-cap foreign policies from our world's powerful, and rampant internal corruption and under-development.

This article is about the changes I have witnessed in 7 to 10 years of frenetic development.

Jobs then and now

I was broke and sick in Phnom Penh, while travelling through Indochina. It forced me to look for a job, and a few months later I was invited to join the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) as an advisor to the Ministry of Environment. Specifically it was to head up the ecological component of an integrated conservation and development project 15km North of Phnom Penh.

That job led to my being involved in protected area management, and I was involved in the initial research and management of three protected areas: Ream, Kirirom and Yeak Laom. I also got involved in community forestry and community-based natural resource management. Cambodia taught me PRA, what community-based means, and what sustainability can mean in real life contexts.

Cambodia also taught me about insecurity, which there was plenty of, and cured me of my youthful disdain for my personal safety, and my gung-ho attitude to development.

7 years have past since I left Cambodia, and a masters degree and several interesting jobs later I am now a freelance trainer and consultant of sustainable development, focusing on the training and application of sustainable agriculture and PLA. It was in this guise that I was invited back to Cambodia by InWEnt, a German government training and capacity building institution, to run a training course in Sustainable Upland Farming. The two week course was delivered to provincial government staff and extension agents in the hilly area of Mondulkiri, and was designed to present a range of alternatives to swidden farming for hill tribe people.

The Changes

Security

So what changes have there been in the last 7 to 10 years? I will start with security, as it is in many ways the most profound change of all.

The war has ended in Cambodia, and what a change that has brought. In 1994, when I first got to Cambodia, between a third and a half of the country was out of bounds – in the hands of the Khmer Rouge, littered with land mines, and a one-way ticket to being a hostage or dead. Travel in the provinces was strictly limited to the hottest hours of daylight – when any self-respecting bandit would be fast asleep under a tree instead of looking for rich westerners to kidnap. There was absolutely no staying out overnight outside of an urban area, and you would never go down a road first – let someone else take the land mines out! It was not random though – almost all incidents of violence and kidnap in those days were politically motivated and controlled by the brotherhood of the Khmer Rouge.

Strangely, though, Phnom Penh was quite safe – wandering around at night was quite OK even for women, and the crime rate was very low. This was to change through the time I lived there, and by the end gun-point muggings and bike theft were becoming more known, but were still far from common-place. In fact, surprisingly rare for a country where it was estimated that every single family owned a gun. Standing outside a busy bank in 1996 was interesting, watching people disarm themselves by the door before being allowed in – dumping pistols from armpits, pockets, waist-bands and socks – onto an ever-growing pile of armoury.

Today's security is a far cry from then. With the demise of the Khmer Rouge came reunification of a previously divided country. The whole west of the country is now open. Kidnapping has gone out of fashion, although it has been replaced with random muggings, hold-ups and robbery by armed gangs of bandits, who are often dispossessed ex-soldiers from one of the three warring factions of before. It is still not a great idea to be out after dark in the more remote areas of the country, but along the main roads things seem OK. The main highways have all been fixed up, and one can travel comfortably all over the country, and to

neighboring countries, by air conditioned bus. We took a bus from Siem Reap to Phnom Penh last year – it took 5 hours of relative air-conditioned comfort, and only cost 4 dollars each. They even gave us a free bottle of water each.

Last year we took a car down to Kampong Som, and left at 4PM, so we did not get in till about 8 that evening. That would have been unthinkable in 1994 – indeed we did the same trip back then, and left early in the morning to negotiate the potholes in time to reach the coast by 4 in the afternoon! Even so, there was one memorable time when a passing military convoy opened fire on our car – just to pass the time. You can even take the train there now, although I have been told it is horribly uncomfortable. When I lived in Cambodia the railways were a definite no-go: the first carriage was free to travellers as it was the one that took out the land-mines on the track. You may remember three western travellers who were taken hostage from the train – they had been looking for an experience ‘on the edge’, and they certainly found one, although I am sure being hostage, suffering from malaria for months with no medical relief, and then being executed, was not in their original plan.

Phnom Penh has done the other way, and is much more like many other capitals in poor countries. It is struggling to cope with the massive increase of cars and motorbikes on infrastructure built by the French before the Vietnam War started. On the street where I first lived in Phnom Penh, in 1994 there were 2 cars parked. By 1997 you could not park anywhere as it was so full of cars. Today, the street is clear again as cars are prohibited from parking on the road side – and a new boom industry has sprung up of guarded private car parks. It is necessary, as leaving your car out overnight is a good way of never seeing it again.

Phnom Penh is one of the development capitals of the world – about 150 international development agencies have offices there, and there are thousands of foreigners flaunting their wealth. It is a comfortable place for the expat – scores of bars, nightclubs, restaurants. Many Cambodians are cashing in on this too, and there is a conspicuous increase in wealth. They even have 2 shopping malls now – with designer boutiques, bowling alleys and so on. In 1994 there were few shops selling imported goods, and most of the shopping was through the markets. But the poor look on, and are you surprised to hear that the crime rate has soared, many people have been mugged at gun-point, and had their bikes or cars stolen?

Politics

The political landscape has changed too – in the early ‘90s Cambodia was still sticking its fingers up at the UN efforts to bring peace to the country.

It was not long ago that Pol Pot died, leaving a power vacuum in the Khmer Rouge that caused them to crumble into dust. Thus ended one of the most

extreme incidents of genocide ever – between 1975 and 1979 a third of the population died from hunger, illness, torture or murder, and almost everyone was relocated. Worst-hit were the educated classes from the cities. The Vietnamese invaded in 1979, bringing the worst of the excesses to a halt, and although they were hardly angels, they did rebuild a government and basic services. The war did not stop though, and by the end of the '80s war had split into a three-way brawl between the Khmer Rouge, the Royalists under Prince Ranarridh and the Vietnamese-backed Cambodian People's Party of Hun Sen. The UN intervened, and held elections, but failed to bring peace.

By the time I arrived in Cambodia Ranarridh and Hun Sen were co-prime-ministers in one of the worlds least workable power sharing experiments, and busily fighting a war with the Khmer Rouge who were tenaciously holding on in the west. A few hours after I left in 1997 Hun Sen threw Ranarridh out and took full control. It was only a matter of time before the war stopped because of the demise of the Khmer Rouge leadership – and the Cambodian government's turning a blind eye to what the Khmer Rouge did (they also offered attractive demobilisation and reintegration packages to ex-Khmer Rouge soldiers, many of whom had not been paid for months. The defected in droves).

Hun Sen has managed to get all the power, although recently his party is starting to split between the military-backed ministers and the more intellectual ministers, so it will be interesting to see where that one goes. I doubt it will go far – Hun Sen, as one of the last South East Asian dictators, will not shift easily, and whatever your value judgement is about his ruling style, he has brought more stability to the country than has been seen in the last 30 years.

Tourism

The increased security and stability, and the better transportation, has transformed the tourism industry into the country's number one earner of hard currency. In 1994 Cambodia was only visited by the budget traveller and those willing to put up with the discomfort of it all – but no more. The international airports in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap are newly refurbished, and Angkor gets over one million tourists visiting every year. The set up is well controlled, with polite but strict ticket checks at the gates to all the main temple sites, clearly defined refreshment areas for the stalls of tourist souvenirs, cold drinks and spare film canisters, and a union of taxi drivers with standard fares for temple trips. Siem Reap, the main town by Angkor, is no longer the charming wooden village it was in 1994 – it is now a sprawling mess of concrete, air conditioned guest houses, hotels and restaurants.

These changes are no doubt a great improvement for Cambodia, and will encourage many more people to visit the amazing temples, but I am afraid to say that for the tourist, the best time has past. In 1995, when I first visited Angkor, the temples were safe by day, but reverted to Khmer Rouge by night – and one

hoped they didn't forget to remove the trip wires across the doors when they left at dawn. One of the greatest excuses for a lie in. It was perfectly possible to visit the temples without seeing another tourist all day, and the cold drink sellers were allowed to wander freely too. I remember sitting on the roof of one temple, calling to a young girl to sell me a cold coke, as she was passing by. Not possible these days.

Similar changes could be described from all over the country – Ochateal beach in Kampong Som, an important coastal tourism area next to the country's main port, was virtually empty in 1997, with about 3 guest houses and one restaurant. Now, the beach front is full – literally – with beach bars and cafes, many of which you can stay at overnight for free. They also do great buckets of Pina Colada!

Environment

Cambodia's natural landscape is incredibly rich – with a variety of unique environments hosting endemic species, untouched forest and the Mekong-Tonle Sap system the most productive inland fishery in the world. Unsurprisingly it suffers from a lack of control: rampant logging leads to top soil loss and siltation of the rivers and lakes, and over-use of agricultural chemicals coupled with injudicious dumping of toxic wastes and effluents are making their marks felt.

It's not all bad though – the ministries of agriculture and environment are slowly tackling some of the problems, with assistance from the international aid community. Logging is slowly being scaled back, although that could also mean that the accessible forests have already been chopped down. New roads bring new problems, and a negative consequence of mine clearance is that the loggers can cut the trees with less fear of losing their own limbs. However, all of the protected areas are now being managed to some extent, and local and international environmental groups continue to apply pressure on the government to refuse massive logging concessions. The Mekong River Authority keeps its eyes on the river and fishery, although last year Cambodians were saying that there are less fish available than ever before, a cause for national concern.

Culture

The pace of development has brought the world to Cambodia. Unlike countries which have been developing slower and for longer, Cambodia has been developing in the information age. For such a poor country with such a large number of illiterate people it is amazing how many Cambodians in the capital are computer literate, and learning English.

The exposure that the country is getting to the rest of the world – through the internet, media and the huge presence of foreigners since the UN mission in 1991 is severely impacting on the culture.

Traditional Cambodian culture is conservative Buddhist. Their sexual mores are strict, with no sex before marriage – indeed no touching before marriage – and ‘western’ habits such as wearing revealing clothes and dancing till dawn unacceptable. In 1994 it was rare for westerners to have a Khmer lover – unless they were paying or married. Bars and nightclubs were often only patronised by westerners or prostitutes – the locals could not afford many drinks, and never wanted to stay out late.

I was amazed at how this aspect of Cambodian life, at least in Phnom Penh, has changed. Apparently the parties during the annual water festival go on all night now, and Khmer nightclubs do a brisk trade. We went to one nightclub – it was about midnight – and I was shocked to find the crowd made entirely of Khmer youth, dancing seductively to American hip hop and rock! Westerners with Khmer lovers – not prostitutes – are more common. Khmer art is no longer just tired renditions of Angkor Wat.

Whether you think this is a good thing or not is up to you!

Working with Cambodian government officials is harder than before. They are still paid terribly – their salaries have doubled since 1997 but that doesn’t mean much, as they have only gone from \$15 to \$30 per month. What makes it difficult is that they have learned all the bad habits of development: they will only attend training courses if they are paid a handsome per diem; many of them have attended so many training courses offered by each wave of development agencies that it is difficult to see how they have the time to do their normal jobs; they are masters at skimming budgets; motivation is the hardest part of the work. But the interested ones, the ones that care, are still there. Offer decent, well thought out projects that allow them to earn enough to survive, and the rewards are still great.

The type of work has changed too – emergency / relief work is rare now, and development the norm. Many more projects work through local institutions, organisations and community groups. Many more Cambodians do all the work themselves.

Some things remain the same

Not all things have changed though, I am glad to say. Cambodia is still a wonderful place. You can still be surrounded by laughing children while appreciating the view of a temple proudly watching over the iridescent greens of the rice paddies. You can still break your back on terrible roads – although you have to spend more time finding them. It still smells of raw sewerage by the flood defences of Phnom Penh, and the city still gets submerged every time it rains heavily. The culture is still its own – they have not yet lost their deep, ancient traditions and still remember their own unique and impressive history. You can still have a quiet beer in the Foreign Correspondents Club, and read of the latest

political scam or sale of forest in the Phnom Penh Post, and the people are still some of the most genuine, welcoming and friendly people around.

Conclusion

The Changes

In conclusion, I am struck by the thought that Cambodia is growing up. When I first went there, there was a sense of innocence in the air. Of course Cambodia is not innocent to the horror of what people can do to each other – indeed they are certainly some of the most experienced people in that respect. But there was a curiosity, a naïveté, with respect to the rest of the world. They were fascinated with what foreigners could bring them, they wanted to learn, and they still had their ways to mark them as different, unique. I think that innocence has been lost – they have matured to the rest of the world and can see it in a more realistic light. They have joined in with the rest of the world in development being driven by economic growth, and are becoming as aware as everyone else of the ills that development can bring. They are also more able to direct development themselves, and take control of their own destinies.