



Faith in development

A Case study from World Vision Cambodia

World Vision has had a presence in Cambodia for over 40 years, partnering with children, families, communities and faith leaders to overcome poverty and vulnerability. World Vision has built relationships with faith leaders with a common goal of child development and wellbeing. Staff have been able to discuss deeply embedded cultural attitudes about violence against children with faith leaders, particularly Buddhist monks, and empowered them and their communities to change their mindsets and behaviours. Recent accomplishments include improvements in parenting techniques and children taking the initiative to collectively raise the profile of child rights and protection with local government.

Context

Cambodia is a south-east Asian country which borders Vietnam, Laos and Thailand, with a medium level of human development. Cambodia is a predominantly Buddhist country (97.9% of people) with just 1.1% adhering to Islam, 1% to Christianity and the rest belong to small tribal/indigenous groups. Even though the government state the national faith is Buddhism, there is multi-faith tolerance amongst the majority of people. Across Cambodia, Violence Against Children (VAC) affects 75% of children before they turn 18 and costs the country approximately US\$161 million per year in health-related consequences. Violence often happens at home and school because parents, caregivers and teachers believe it is the best way to discipline children. VAC includes, although is not limited to, domestic violence, physical, emotional and sexual abuse, negative discipline and corporal punishment.

Approach to Faith and Development

World Vision Cambodia has partnered with the 'Ministry of Cults and Religions' and faith leaders to help address perceptions about and eradicate violent practices. Through these interfaith partnerships World Vision is able to work alongside Monks, Imams and Pastors to engage them and their faith communities in protecting children. Projects typically involve faith leaders discussing their own beliefs and the prevailing issues impacting children. One such belief is that violence is a good discipline technique. World Vision staff then help them understand how child protection is aligned with their religious texts. Once onboard, leaders have influence to share child protection messages with their followers and wider community. This is effective because in Cambodia people respect, listen to, digest and act upon what faith leaders talk about.

World Vision sees its distinctiveness in taking a relational approach to development work instead of a superficial/transactional approach, demonstrated by its long-term presence in Cambodia. Area Programme (AP) staff are committed to personally getting to know people in the communities where they work; commonly staying overnight with vulnerable families to understand the needs and complexities of their lives. Showing a genuine interest in people's lives and working alongside them provides hope where there is none. Many of the World Vision staff see developing these relationships as an opportunity to express their values to those in most need.

Celebrating families

Celebrating Families (CF) is a model which equips faith leaders, parents, caregivers and teachers to create a safe environment for children. The workshops aim to educate participants in how to nurture and approach children with love, warmth and forgiveness. It also teaches alternatives to harsh parenting and discipline techniques.



Above: Makara Khi, his wife Sokhim, and their two children eat dinner at their home. © 2017 Oscar Durand/World Vision.

Celebrating Families has been implemented in 23 Area Programmes. This has resulted in the following:

- 8,022 parents/caregivers completing CF training
- 72% of participants reported an improvement in their behaviour toward children particularly in positive discipline and parenting
- 10,845 children of these participants have benefited from the change in their parent's attitudes and actions.

One example of this change is seen with Makara Khi, 29, his wife Sokhim, 38, and their two children aged 4 and 5, eat dinner at their home in the Kampong Chhnang province. Makara used to be in a gang and did not provide care for his two children. He was also violent against his wife while she was pregnant. He was invited to attend a "Celebrating Families" session and was convinced to leave the gang and start caring and providing for his family.



Above: Over 400 young people celebrated an International Children's Day at Krang Tarath primary school on May 31, 2019, to promote better protection from violence. © 2019 Makara Eam/World Vision.



Advocacy on injustice and children's rights

In 2017, World Vision Cambodia marked International Children's Day by bringing 11,400 community members, including faith leaders, from across the country to the capital city to focus on changing attitudes towards corporal punishment. This led to the adoption of community action plans in 37 primary schools to prevent and respond to violence against children. In 2018, 1,300 children and children club leaders were trained to enhance children's resilience, confidence and advocacy skills.

World Vision Cambodia was also involved in training teams to lead Social Accountability for Child Protection. This has been implemented in seven programmes to communicate the need for communities to take active responsibility for child protection and to empower local government to deliver mandates to ensure children are safe. 168 children used their collective voice to influence local government, service providers, faith leaders and fellow citizens to identify and target specific child protection issues. So far there have been improvements of two services/policies which have the potential to impact 12,923 children.



Channels of Hope for Child Protection

Channels of Hope (CoH) is a project model which aims to respond to local development issues, such as violence against children (VAC), by transforming the minds and actions of faith leaders and their congregations. Initially faith leaders attend workshops to discuss their existing beliefs and perceptions about community issues. Faith leaders then select people to form Congregation Hope Action Teams (CHATs) who develop action plans to educate and empower community members on specific issues. In 2017 a workshop was conducted with 32 Buddhist Monks and they debated how their faith communities could tackle VAC in light of their teachings.

Channels of Hope roll-out:

- CoH-Child Protection implemented in six Area Programmes
- 11 CHATs formed with 279 local pastors, church and community members
- 83% of action plans developed by the CHATs were implemented to raise children's and parents' awareness of child protection

Mr Ngem Chhay, pastor of Popel Pok church, was chosen to be a leader of a CHAT in Rolea B'ier. Before he worked hard to educate his congregation on how to have a strong faith in Jesus. But after his CoH training he realised the need to engage with the wider community. Since being a CHAT leader, he has put a strong focus on child protection during his Sunday services. He commented that: "God told us in the Bible that a child is the best gift. We have to take part to protect and give them a safe environment". He is committed to his CHAT leader role which also involves visiting vulnerable families' homes.



Working across faiths

World Vision have a global strategy of 'living out our Christian faith with boldness and humility' which is manifested differently depending on each country's faith and political context. In Cambodia this involves staff being clear, open and unashamed of their Christian faith and identity when entering communities, while also being sensitive to the majority Buddhist population.

When working with local faith leaders in Cambodia, it was found that there is often a misunderstanding of World Vision's purpose and intentions resulting in some hesitancy to engage in projects. To overcome this, when starting projects, staff explain to faith leaders that the goal of the development programmes is the care and flourishing of children and not to convert people to Christianity, while recognising that faith, regardless of affiliation, can be used to promote the wellbeing of children.

“Before working with Christianity and Islam people I thought it was going to be hard because we come from different faith backgrounds. But because we are working towards one common goal, we are able to work together”.

Roem Nam-Chhiev, a Buddhist Monk in Phnom Penh



Above: Participants at Cambodia's first interfaith forum on Child Protection convened by World Vision. © 2019 Phanna Sorn/World Vision.

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Conclusion

During the 40 years of working in Cambodia, World Vision has witnessed much positive change whilst openly identifying as a Christian organisation in a predominantly Buddhist country. This has been achieved by staff striking a balance between boldly living out World Vision's Christian values, in love, whilst sensitively appreciating those from different faith backgrounds. The various successes suggest that challenging faith leaders with their own scriptures is an effective approach to holistic human development. Community members participating in the faith-based work have not only changed their own behaviour but have been inspired to inform their neighbours about child wellbeing. This is encouraging as it implies that the extent of World Vision's work is expanding and is reaching those beyond its initial target audience.

Front cover photo: Participants at Cambodia's first interfaith forum on Child Protection convened by World Vision. © 2019 Phanna Sorn/World Vision.

World Vision is a Christian organisation, working with people of all faiths and none, to transform the lives of the world's most vulnerable children.

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