

September 2015

Ninety days in Cambodia

Volunteer development project in Ratanakiri, Cambodia

Before ICS

I made the decision to participate in the ICS program because I wanted to do something challenging but meaningful and fulfilling. I had always considered myself to be an adventurous person; someone willing to engage in extraordinary ventures and have unique life experiences. Therefore I felt ICS would be an incredible opportunity to continue this. Despite my relatively young age, I had already spent extended periods of time away from home. I went to boarding school for two years, lived in South Africa for the summer of 2014 and traveled extensively alone and so the prospect of being away for three months did not deter me.



(11th June outside my house in the UK, ready to go to Cambodia)

I heard about ICS in September 2014, I was immediately enthused and determined to participate. However, at the time, I wasn't old enough. Within eight months of my eighteenth birthday, I had passed the assessment day, completed the UK training, met my fellow volunteers and was on the plane to

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Cambodia with VSO. We departed for Cambodia on June 11th, returning to the UK for the 1st of September.

Personal development

I've developed considerably as a person since partaking in the ICS program. The unique experience of living, working and interacting with new people in a foreign environment and community significantly improves your understanding of not only yourself but also your wider surroundings. I've developed my ability to interact with people cross-culturally, not only tolerating difference but actually valuing and appreciating it. I often had interesting discussions with the Khmer volunteers and indigenous people about the differences between UK and Cambodian culture and there was frequent heated debates between UK volunteers about different opinions which I surprisingly grew to enjoy. Learning and attempting to replicate the ways of the indigenous people has been fascinating and memorable. It has allowed to grow to value the little things more for example being able to cook for my host family or seeing the excitement on the children's faces at the prospect of being taught English.



(3/5 members of my host family. Excuse the sad faces, it was the day I was leaving and it was 4.30am)

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(My host home)

I've become more mature and grounded from this experience. I'm very grateful to be from a fortunate family in the UK, and therefore one of the goals I set myself in Cambodia was to live within the budget in order to fully appreciate and experience living on only essentials. This has put things into perspective for me and implored me to become more introspective and self-aware. It's encouraged me to assess and question whether there is necessity in what I am spending and cautious not to engage in profligacy. For example, I made the decision to hand-wash my clothes instead of taking it to the laundrette. The laundrette costs four dollars which is the same price of four days worth of breakfast and I felt the latter was more essential.

I have countless wonderful memories from the project. From the evening conversations with the youth in my village to providing training sessions to indigenous young people in transferable skills. From planting nearly 100 trees near Yeak Loam lake to raise awareness of deforestation to Indigenous Population Day celebrating indigenous culture, rights and heritage. The list is endless but the memories will stay with me forever.

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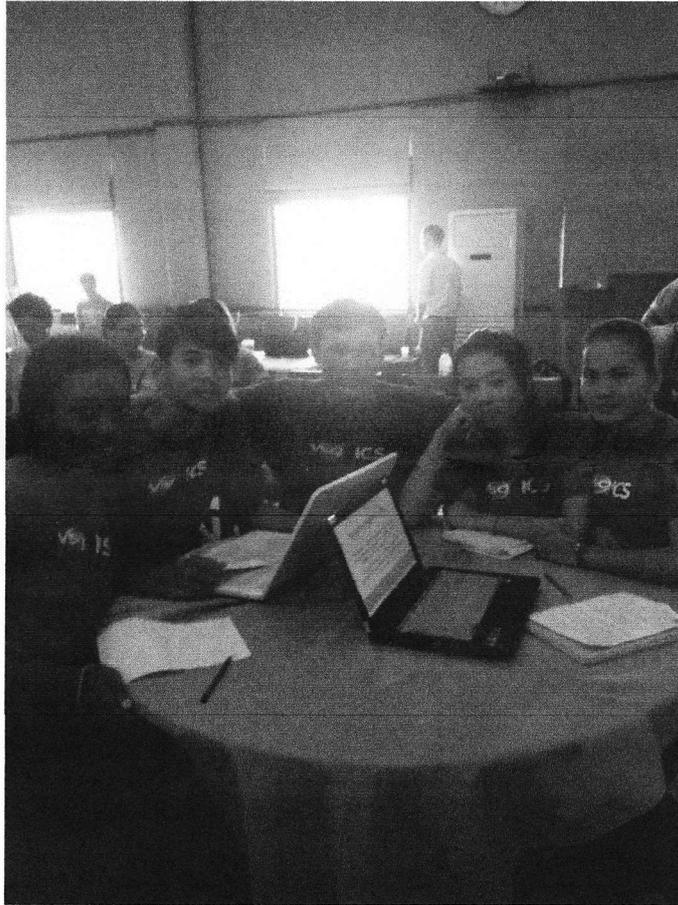
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(Myself with some of the Ratanakiri VSO ICS volunteers)

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(Preparing for a presentation with some of my work placement team)

A particular quality that I have notably improved on is my ability to handle situations of conflict or disagreement. Having to live, work and interact with the same people daily inevitably causes problems especially when you are trying to communicate with people who struggle to speak English. It can be frustrating, disheartening and sometimes discouraging but this experience improves your empathy, patience and consideration of others in conflict situations.

Work Placement

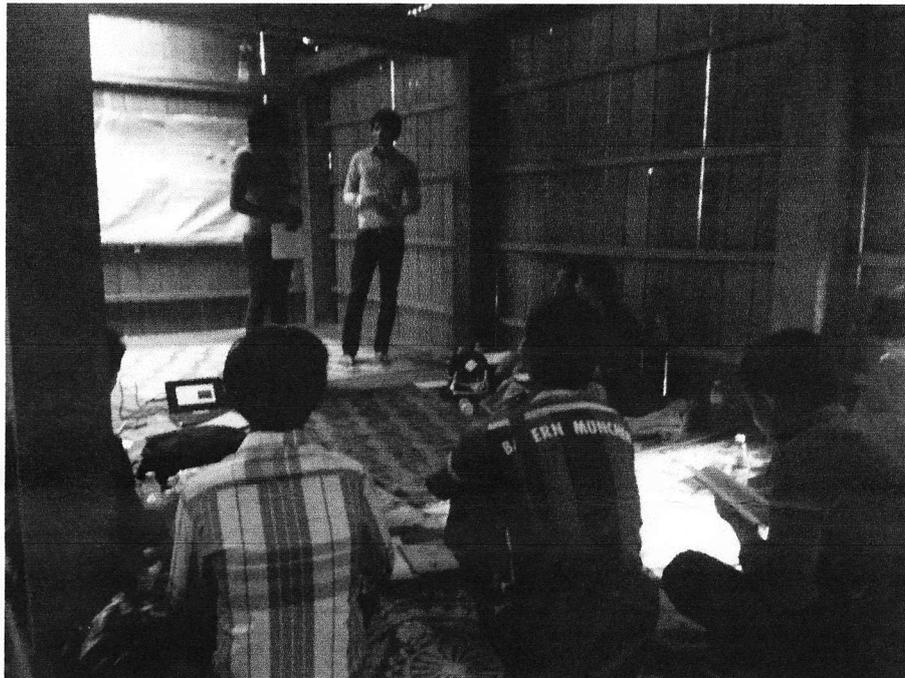
In Cambodia, I worked as part of a team of British and National volunteers with 24 of us in total. I worked on one of three placement options with 7 other volunteers in partnership with an NGO CIYA (Cambodian Indigenous Youth Association) whose work has a strong focus on helping to improve indigenous youth's access to education and ability to gain further professional experience, whilst still upholding the importance of their custom and traditions.

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(Speech given to indigenous people on the importance of valuing their culture and knowing their rights)



(training indigenous youth of tour guiding and customer service)

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(Adding direction signs to the an indigenous cemetery)

The team's aims were to increase awareness of indigenous culture, improve and empower the livelihoods of indigenous youth, ensure that there is sustainability in the work we do and develop the infrastructure of valued indigenous sites. The team fulfilled these aims by compiling a book on indigenous folk stories and culture for tourists and visitors to read. This enables people to learn and understand more about indigenous heritage. We provided four training sessions to indigenous youth in the following areas: Savings and banking, CV and interview, Computer skills, Tour guiding and customer service to enable the youth to be better equipped with skills that will improve their future prospects.

The team improved the infrastructure of an indigenous cemetery and cultural and environmental centre by adding signs, bins and an information board to the cemetery and decorating and painting the cultural centre. This was to demonstrate to the indigenous people the importance of maintenance and also to make the sites more accessible to visitors. All of our work was done in cooperation the indigenous youth.

As our team was the last cycle, the majority of our work centred on putting finishing touches to the work of the previous cycle and therefore the full extent of our impact will be seen in the long term. However, there were some visible changes that occurred as a result of our work. Firstly, the indigenous cemetery was transformed. Previously the location of the cemetery was so obscured that some of the indigenous youth had expressed that they did not know the location. However, we added numerous signs to direct to the cemetery location, a bin, a information board about indigenous burial practices and others signs asking visitors to be respectful and careful. Other visible changes was the décor of the cultural and environmental centre which was painted, decorated, some of the interior was rearranged, cabinets were added, gardening was done to the outside and new trees were added. As a result of our

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training, it was evident that the indigenous youth learnt a considerable amount of valuable skills and information. Not only was this frequently expressed by the youth but also at the end of every training session participants had to fill out a reflection sheet and consistently conveyed that the training was useful and invaluable.



(Myself drilling at site of new sign our team placed)

There were few problems that our team faced during our placement. Our NGO partner worked well with us and our team worked successfully together. There were minor issues that we faced when it came to executing events for example on more than one occasion, the village elders and chiefs objected to us doing certain activities. We were prevented from doing a clean and tidy-up of the indigenous cemetery because according to the elders it was against their indigenous beliefs. They expressed that it would offend the spirits and therefore we could not tidy the cemetery. Despite our disappointment, we had no choice but to respect the decision of the elders. We overcame this problem by contacting the elders well in advance of planning events to ensure that they are in agreement. Other problems our team faced was issues with the language barrier which consequently resulted in general communication issues. It is very difficult having to organise, prepare and run training sessions and other events when there is significant variation in the level of language capabilities amongst colleagues. However, this was dealt with by

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designating one UK with the clearest voice and language and one Khmer person with the best English skills to be the communicator and translator. Any challenges our team faced were addressed by team meetings, giving everyone an opportunity to speak and express their concerns with everyone contributing to provide solutions.

I've had an unforgettable, incredible and valuable experience in Cambodia and I hope one day I am able to visit again.

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