

The Need

Under the Khmer Rouge rule of the mid-1970s, at least 1.5 million Cambodians died from execution, forced hardships or starvation. Although in 1978 the Vietnamese drove the brutal communist regime into the countryside, Vietnam's invasion and subsequent occupation set off a near 13-year civil war.

Not until recent years has Cambodia achieved a period of relative calm. Although slowly stabilizing and rebuilding its society, this S.E. Asian country faces a host of ongoing social problems – many acutely felt among orphaned, abandoned and vulnerable children. UNICEF estimates that nearly half of all Cambodian children are malnourished. One in eight dies before their fifth birthday. Underfunded and insufficient, Cambodia's child welfare system



continually struggles with high rates of HIV/AIDSs, large numbers of street children and increased child labor, trafficking and prostitution. As chronic poverty leads many families to seek alternative care for their children, the state's institutional system continues to grow as well. Recent estimates suggest the number of children in care most likely exceeds 10,000.

Holt's History in Cambodia

Throughout the mid to late 1970s, hundreds of thousands of Cambodian refugees fled across the border into Thailand. Through local partner organization the Holt Sahathai Foundation, Holt began serving the many displaced children living in Thailand's refugee camps.

Not until the early 1990s, however, did Holt gain entry into this devastated nation. With funding from both USAID and the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Holt developed programs for children living in refugee camps and institutions as well as

children and families at risk of separation. Initially, Holt also explored ways to unite children in care with permanent, loving families. However, Holt quickly learned of ethical violations in Cambodia's existing practices of both domestic and international adoption. Domestic adoption in Cambodia is more akin to indentured servitude; in exchange for shelter and food, "adopted" children frequently become the family's servant.



ICA lacked a regulated system of protections to ensure that this placement option was the best option for the child. Holt consequently decided not to pursue an adoption program.

In 1994, ongoing instability as well as difficulty responding to the shifting needs of displaced families led Holt to suspend operations in Cambodia. Holt subsequently left the region for 11 years. In 2005, Holt returned to Cambodia on a USAID-funded project to determine the number of children living in state institutions. After documenting 204 orphanages caring for over 8,200 children, Holt re-established programming to serve Cambodia's many orphaned, abandoned and vulnerable children.

During Holt's extended absence from the region, ICA became increasingly fraught with unethical practices. In 1999, international adoptions from Cambodia dramatically increased. Many children who might have reunited with their birth families were instead unethically placed abroad. In response, the U.S. Government closed adoption from Cambodia in late 2001. Upon returning in 2005, Holt decided to invest greater energy and resources toward preserving families for children and serving children in care.

Holt began providing financial assistance to the child care facility Cambodian and International Children Friends Organization (CICFO) as well as Project AIDS Khmer – an organization dedicated to providing support and care for children affected by HIV/AIDSs.

With Holt support, Project AIDS Khmer broadened its outreach by developing a family preservation program. Through basic nutritional, health and educational assistance, this ongoing

program helps struggling families cope with hardships that might otherwise cause them to abandon their children. In the years since its founding, the organization has also acquired a new name to reflect its broader scope; today Project AIDS Khmer is called Pathways to Development.

Current Projects



With ICA suspended, Holt continues to concentrate efforts on keeping children in families, and out of institutions. Through ongoing partnership with Pathways to Development, Holt supports family preservation services ranging from nutrition, health and medical aid to school materials for children and income-generating opportunities for parents.

For a handful of families, Pathways administers grants to cultivate small businesses such as raising livestock, growing vegetables or running a grocery. By generating their own income, families become increasingly self-sufficient and able to provide long-term stability for their children. Our partner also provides remedial and English language classes for over 200 children and maintains a community library on site. All together, these resources and services provide the fundamental support that keep families together and prevent child abandonment.

Through the years, Holt has also sustained support for the CICFO child care center, providing children with shelter, food, clothing and education. Often, children entered care only temporarily, later reuniting with their birth families, once stable.

Although the efforts of our local partners have enabled hundreds of children to stay or reunite with their birth families, thousands remain in Cambodia's institutional system. To help these children join permanent families, the Cambodian Government has begun to take steps toward developing an ethical system of adoption. In 2006, Cambodia signed the Hague Convention – the international

treaty that sets the standards for ethical practice in ICA – and in 2009, the King of Cambodia approved a new ICA law. Once the U.S. and Cambodian governments formalize agreements, ICA may resume.

Strategic Directions

Although existing services for local families will continue in the coming years, Holt has recently decided to scale down operations in Cambodia. Rather than employing in-country staff, Holt will work directly with Pathways to sustain family preservation. Due to recent legal changes, agencies are no longer permitted to fund orphanages. Consequently, Holt has also discontinued partnership with CICFO.

In the coming years, Holt will continue to seek the funding needed to strengthen the services currently provided through Pathways to Development. Long-term goals include both increasing access to services and expanding the health and nutrition services for families in Cambodia. Depending on additional funding, Holt hopes to provide greater training and technical assistance to ensure quality and consistency of Pathways' projects. Gradually, these efforts will enable more children to remain within their birth families.

Holt is also continuing to advocate and solidify positioning for a successful adoption program within a reformed process, as it develops. To this end, Holt will work alongside Cambodia's Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation (MoSVY) – the primary government body charged with the care and protection of orphaned, abandoned and vulnerable children. Through training and technical assistance, Holt will help MoSVY strengthen Cambodia's child protection system – an integral component to an ethical process of ICA. Although implementation of the new legislation remains slow, the Government of Cambodia projects that agencies will be licensed and begin the process of placing children with families in March of 2011.

For the children who continue to wait for families, Holt will also seek avenues to support and fund the development of alternative, family-based care. Although a long-term goal, bringing Holt foster care to Cambodia would enable institutionalized children to receive the loving, attentive care they need to thrive – and prepare them to ultimately join permanent families through adoption, once resumed.