Reading behind bars

Lessons learned from the project
‘Supporting educational, informative and cultural activities for persons in detention through implementation of library services in the 26 prisons of Cambodia’
2012-2014

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2015
The project in short

A project led by Sipar and the General Department of Prisons from 2012 to 2014 aiming to provide detainees from the 26 prisons and correctional centers throughout Cambodia with opportunities such as education, self-education and preparation for reintegration, but also offering a distraction and a means to counter boredom through access to the library’s daily services managed by prison officers and prisoner volunteers who have been introduced to librarianship.

The two partners

Sipar, an international solidarity NGO founded in France in 1982 for the establishment of hosting and education programs for refugees from South-East Asia, has been working in Cambodia since 1991 to improve the quality of education as well as the development of reading. Its vision: ‘Contributing to fighting against illiteracy and promoting Education For All alongside Cambodian Institutions and with communities.’ Its mission: ‘The establishment of fixed and mobile libraries towards diverse public in school and non-formal environments (from kindergartners to high school students, disadvantaged urban and rural populations, hospitalized children and their family, garment workers, prisoners, ethnic minorities...), the publishing of fiction and documentary books in Khmer language and the training of the stakeholders of the book and reading sector (trainers, librarians, educators, editors, authors, graphic designers...)’

The decision to develop library services towards prison detainees is in accordance with the vision of Sipar to reach populations who do no benefit from educational services.

The General Department of Prisons (GDP) created within the Ministry of Interior in 2006, oversees the management of Cambodia’s 26 correctional facilities. It implements prison reform in accordance to the law promulgated in December 2011, which follows the Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners set by the United Nations. This reform’s objectives and actions are defined as part of five year National Strategic Plan (2009-2013 then 2014-2018).

Therefore the GDP ensures the implementation of the new law, which aims at encouraging the rehabilitation of prisoners whose incarceration should not be focused solely on punishment. The General Director, the Deputy General Director of GDP, as well as the Director and the Senior Officers of the Education/Rehabilitation Department were involved through all the stages of the project from its inception to its final evaluation.

Some relevant statistics (January 2015)

In the 22 provincial prisons and 4 National Correctional Centers:
15,200 detainees, of whom 1,220 are women (8%) and 350 juveniles (2%).
2,125 prison officers of whom 232 are women.
26 libraries operational.
52 prison officers (librarians), 63 detainees (library assistants) and 90 detainee chiefs of cell, have been introduced to librarianship.

A collection of 1,200 books made available (660 titles) in prisons with less than 150 detainees, and 4,200 books (1,380 titles) in the largest institutions.

(With a ratio of 4 books per detainee)

An average of 250 books are borrowed every month in the prisons with less than 400 detainees, a figure that rises to 800 in institutions with more than 600 detainees.
Background

Initiated by the Buddhist organization Dhomayatra with the technical support of Sipar, a first library was opened in Battambang prison in 2004. Based upon strong results from this first experience, Sipar decided in 2010 to launch a pilot library in ‘CC1’, the largest Correctional Center in Cambodia with (up to) 3,400 detainees. This was the foundation of the partnership between the GDP and Sipar, which led to an extension of the libraries in ‘CC2’ and Siem Reap prison, and to the consolidation of the libraries in ‘CC1’ and in Battambang prison during 2011-2012 thanks to Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights and Caritas Cambodia support.

The positive experiences acquired from these four first libraries, each having different sizes and terms of use, enabled Sipar and GDP to design an extension project on a national level in order to provide all of the country’s prisons with library services, co-funded by the European Union and the French Agency for Development (AFD).

Factors critical to the success and the sustainability of the project

A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) drafted in close cooperation with Sipar and the General Department of Prisons (GDP)

The point was not to submit a ready-written MoU to the GDP but rather to draft the document in a collaborative fashion between Sipar and GDP, which lead to many cooperative working sessions with the involvement of the Deputy Director General in 2011 and 2012. This process helped to define, as clearly as possible, the roles and responsibilities of each partner in the project’s implementation process as well as the terms of the implementation, taking into account the capacities and specificities of the two structures.

Actions in line with national policies

The inception and implementation of the project has been carried in a manner consistent, compliant, and in accordance with the reform initiated in 2008 and with the texts of the new law on prisons promulgated in December 2011. Indeed Articles 13 and 37 state clearly the requirement that “prisons shall have facilities for practicing religion, vocational training and a library” and “detainees shall be allowed to participate in the library’s activities and to borrow books in their cells to improve their knowledge”. The actions taken were compliant with the objectives and strategies set out in the GDP’s National Strategic Plan, the framework document developed every five years relating to law enforcement, thus reinforcing its institutional anchorage.

The desire to increase the involvement of GDP’s officers and prison directors since the very beginning of the project through to completion in order to ensure full ownership.

Throughout the project, two or three officers from the GDP’s Education/Rehabilitation Department as well as the director of the Department were drawn on, trained, supported and guided through participation in every stage of the project.
From the launch of the project in 2012, all of the 26 prison’s directors and deputy directors were brought together in a consultative workshop set in ‘CC1’ during which they were guided through the modalities and anticipated benefits of the project, and were encouraged to be involved in the process of creation, management and development of library services in their respective setting, based on the model of the ‘CC1’ library.

At the project mid-term in 2013, an experience-sharing workshop was organized in Battambang prison, gathering the 26 deputy directors and prison officer librarians already in place, to allow them to improve their practice and together devise solutions to the main challenges encountered.

The project ended in December 2014 with the organization of a national consultative workshop to evaluate the three years of action and to support the 26 prison directors or deputy directors and GDP’s officers in finalizing their developmental plan for prison library services in future.

The creation of libraries in prison
The programming of projects based on prisons’ planned site relocation

In order to avoid the construction of libraries on sites imminent for relocation, to best adapt facilities in each prison in accordance with the space available, and to account for the number of detainees and the available budget, the scheduling of new libraries was decided with the GDP’s Office of construction, in conjunction with CCJap and the prison directors.

As a result, three prisons welcomed buildings of 77m², eight prisons buildings of 60m² and eight prisons buildings of 30m², each allowing groups of 10 to 20 detainees every half-day (2 hours in the morning, 2 hours in the afternoon). Due to lack of space or due to an imminent planned move, six prisons set up libraries in small renovated premises and have organized a lending scheme in the cells.
**The Director and the inmates build their library**

The designs of libraries were developed by Sipar’s team alongside the engineer from the GDP’s Office of construction, together with each of the prisons’ directors. All of the construction works have been overseen by its prison director or their deputy, and constructed by the inmates, offering them the opportunity to develop new skills in the field of building. All the libraries were equipped with shelves, tables, chairs, fans, and 17 of the libraries contain a computer.

![Construction of Library in Koh Kong's prison](image)

**The involvement of prisoner volunteers alongside the prison officer librarians in the installation and commissioning process**

The Sipar teams, alongside two officers from GDP, have supported prison officers in charge of libraries, and assisted by five to ten voluntary inmates, in the set-up of the library (including the classification of books, inventory, coating books, organizing books on the shelves, library signage...), in the commissioning and in the reception of inmate service users. These tasks were accomplished in a spirit of full cooperation.

![Prisoner library assistants help prison officers to classify books](image)

**The training of correctional staff, ‘How to turn a prison guard into a librarian’**

*Training content and methodology adapted to the specific context of the prison environment*

The content and methodology of the basic training were established in 2012 then updated over sessions in order to respond best to the specific needs of correctional officers in their new role. As librarians, they greet, guide, encourage and advise inmates in their reading choices, they also collaborate with inmates who act as library assistants and become their coworkers in managing documents, in cell book loans and in maintaining the premises and equipment.

"I think the training session was well organized, the trainers explained clearly and allowed participants to ask questions. Now I understand how to do inventory, how to classify books and how much a library is important in prison. I think that library can help prisoners to reduce their stress and to get knowledge.”

Mrs. CHHUYON Sreyroth, Vice Chief of Logistic Oddar Meanchey Prison during training in 2014

**Training Contents**

**General understanding about libraries**
Definition of a library
Types of library
Context and reason of library creation in prison

**Library and books management**
Types of documents
Physical presentations of a book
Process of new provision of books
Positive attitudes of a librarian

**Library services**
Five laws of library sciences
Service of borrowing
Consultation service
Reading service
Statistic of readers
Orientation service: How to guide the readers

**Importance of reading**
Importance of reading for all
Importance of reading for prisoners

**Development & follow up of library services**
How to select a prisoner to become library assistant
Action plan for each prison
Activities to support library services
Follow up of data of users
What has changed in the everyday life for prison officer librarians?

Sarith has been a librarian in Koh Kong’s prison since 2012:

“I am proud to have become a ‘knowledge broker’. And this new position fills me with pride as now I have developed a different relationship with detainees. I am not any longer just a prison warden for them. That makes me feel better.”

Meng was appointed librarian in 2014 in Kandal’s prison:

“I am happy with the change of my position. Since I have been working in the library, I have developed a passion for books. Before, I did not know much as I am not very educated. Now I read novels till late in the night and I learn a lot from the self-development guides. It opens up new horizons! And I enjoy greeting and guiding inmates in groups of 15 to 20, each morning and each afternoon.”

Vanthy, who holds the baccalaureate, was chosen as librarian in Sihanoukville’s prison because of his level of education:

“In order to encourage inmates to borrow books, I sensitize cell leaders to convey the interest of reading to combat boredom and dark thoughts in this small prison where almost no activities are offered. I tell them it is also a good way for them to improve their knowledge or skills.”

Kea, former auxiliary nurse in Svay Rieng’s prison, has been selected as librarian thanks to his taste for reading:

“I am trying to transmit my passion for books to detainees. I explain to them that reading is not only about passing the time but mostly to reflect, to get knowledge for their own development and to prepare their future. I think that a person who reads books during his time in jail will have better chances of integration into the life once released from custody.”

Solutions designed to improve services

Yearly in-service training sessions were offered to the staff in charge of the libraries, based on practice sharing and problem solving. In addition to the 52 prison officers concerned, the 26 heads of the prisons’ Education/Rehabilitation Office also received training to prepare them for their duties of supervision and support to services provided by the libraries.

Focus groups organized during these sessions helped to convey the good practice implemented in prisons to strengthen the book lending services in the cells, to collect new books from NGOs or families of detainees, to stimulate reading, to guide users and allow the least literate to access contents by reading aloud, or to make easier the storage and maintenance of the books.

Skill exchange workshop held in Battambang’s prison in 2013

A library serving prisoners

Throughout the project, satisfaction surveys in the form of individual or group interviews were conducted with more than 400 prisoners across all prisons. The results are encouraging and consistent with the objectives of providing prisoners with access to a variety of resources for their personal development, education, recreation, to prepare them for reintegration, and to relieve their stress. This contributes overall to the improvement of detention conditions.

In their comments on the importance of access to books, the first issues expressed by the vast majority of detainees interviewed were the struggle against boredom, dark thoughts and stress.
The other motivations expressed are:
For pleasure - To gain more knowledge - For self-study and self-development - To get moral support - To get information from the outside world - To prepare for personal and social life after release - To fight against depression, to be in a better mood - To have a feeling of freedom, the freedom to choose the books they want to read - To develop new ideas - To increase literacy by reading regularly.
Some feedback collected from the prisoners:
- They have positive feelings about developing their minds, their intelligence, and even their skills.
- The relationships among the prisoners, with the prison officers, and the general atmosphere within prison have improved.

- They read aloud in cell to the others, especially to those who cannot read.
- They borrow books from each other in the cell.
- They love to read and develop the habit of reading.
- They have more new topics of discussion and like to share stories or information
- Their family is proud of them becoming more educated.

Testimonies from detainee readers
S. 28 years old
“I have studied only till level 2 and I couldn’t read properly. Since there is the library in the prison, I have been reading more and better and better and it puts me in a good mood. I have more confidence in myself and I better understand the life of others.”

M. 30 years old
“I have the baccalaureate diploma and I was a Military Policeman (PM). I go to the library to borrow books every three days on average. I like to read novels dealing with morality that helps me not to think about what I did to end up here…”

R., female detainee, 34 years old, mother of three children
“I borrow and read magazines so as not think about my children, but also cookbooks to learn to cook in order to get a job in this field when I get out in one year.”

K. 20 years old and S. 30 years old
“We stopped our studies at level 7. We were jobless, without special skills. So that’s a really good opportunity for us to be able to get some education, in business and agriculture notably, which will help us to build a better future once out. We are also happy to be able to escape through reading novels.”

V. 32 years old
“Outside, I did not have the means to buy books. Now, I read 1-2 books a day. It stimulates my mind and maintains my appetite to learn. In my cell, we are already 7 out of 10 inmates to borrow books. We help each other, we read aloud to others or even we teach them what we learnt in the books.”
**The detainees' favorite books**

In more than 70% of cases, popular novels are the first choice of reading for the detainees, most of the time romantic subjects with a happy end. These stories help them to forget about their everyday conditions and allow them to dream. Mrs MAO Samnang is by far the most read contemporary Cambodian author in prisons. Then popular magazines (15%), books on personal development, practical guides and books on farming practices (12%). General knowledge books account for 3% of the loans. Once they had read all the novels available on the shelves, most of prisoners move to reading documentary books.

**Publishing of self-learning manuals on life skills to prepare reinsertion of prisoners**

In order to meet some urgent needs of prisoners on life skills, four self-teaching guides, richly illustrated, written in Khmer language in a simple way, have been designed with the technical collaboration of Friends International, published and distributed to the 26 prison libraries: 1) Job readiness 2) Micro-business 3) Health and safety 4) Relationships and sexual life.

**Prisoners satisfaction to be library assistants**

In total, more than 60 inmates are library assistants in the 26 prisons. Selected on criteria of motivation, educational level and taste for reading, they are trained by prison officer librarians and by Sipar team during monitoring missions. For many of them the opportunity to develop a new skills set and to fulfill a rewarding position helps them to better cope with their detention, to build their self-confidence, and open up promising prospects after their release.

K., 36 years old, detainee working as library assistant in Kompong Cham’s prison

“I’ve got a university degree in accounting, it’s why they chose me to work in the library. It is a good opportunity for me because not only can I develop new management skills but also I started to read documents to educate myself. I would like to get a librarian certificate to help me to get such a job once I am released.”

Prisoner library assistants working alongside with prison officers

P., 22 years old, detainee library assistant in Sihanoukville prison

“I was looking forward to being offered such a position as I read a lot and I wanted to have a meaningful activity, something that really helps me to cope with my imprisonment. In addition what I like is that, with my colleague prison officer librarian, we talk to each other as if we belong to the same family.”
The detainee chiefs of cell get behind

The detainees who are chiefs of cell were drawn on before the opening of each library so that they could transmit information about how to use library services to all inmates from their cell and have promoted it ahead.

To make sure that all inmates have access to books, including those detained in high security zones, or those awaiting trial who are not allowed to visit the library, a lending scheme in the cells has been set up. The prison officer in charge of the library alongside the detainees who act as his assistants, prepares boxes of 50 to 100 books, selected in accordance with the choices made by the detainees, which will be channeled to the cells. The chief of cell is the one responsible for the management of the book loans, and books are renewed monthly.

Positive results and encouraging outlook

Overcoming challenges

Challenges were encountered; however none of these challenges put at risk the implementation of the project, and were overcome thanks to the close cooperation between partners and to the involvement of most prison directors and their deputies:

- Librarian guards do not always have a sufficient educational level to understand classification techniques for books in accordance with the DDC* during the basic training. Therefore, the project’s team and the GDP officers had to provide additional support for several days on site in each prison at the time of the set-up of the library.

- The number of novels written in Khmer is insufficient because local literary production remains limited.

* DDC Dewey Decimal Classification

Conclusion of the final external evaluation of the project - October 2014

“Sustainability is a measure of ownership and capacity on the part of library staff and their directors. It also relates to ongoing budget provision and institutional support. From discussion and observation, the ownership of the library system seems securely with GDP. According to the Director General, this includes responsibility for staffing and ongoing maintenance both in terms of budget and operations. Basically, SIPAR is the authority and has the most experience in terms of developing libraries in government institutions. They have the confidence of GDP and have not had to sacrifice ownership by the state for speed and control of costs. GDP and the prison directors all regard SIPAR highly, but claim the library and systems as their own in a very satisfactory manner.”

The inmates, who often read with increasing frequency (one novel per day for some of them) quickly run out of new titles to read. The librarians then encourage them to turn to other types of works such as documentaries or practical guides until the next supply of novels as part of a new project and thanks to the support the director would have garnered from other organizations and from detainees’ families.

- In some prisons, prison officer’s lack of availability or rigor to keep the library open during the hours provided or they are slow to reactivate the library services after National Holidays. The chief of the prison’s Education/Rehabilitation office should then intervene to make up for these deficiencies or enforce hours of services.

- Some prison officers tried to extort money from detainees to allow them to borrow books from the library but these practices were quickly discovered and since ceased completely through the intervention of the senior management of the General Department of Prisons with the directors of prisons concerned.

- In ‘CCI’ prison, the director has solved the problem of lack of access to the library for two categories of prisoners: building, on the prison’s funds, two library annex buildings in the two zones in question. Those two places are regularly supplied by prison officer librarians and are visited, morning and afternoon, by dozens of detainees.
Preparing for the future

The General Department of Prisons in Cambodia has gained a precious experience of an educational service implementation at a national scale in support to the reform of prisons within the framework of the National Strategic Plan. This experience can be transferred to other initiatives with potential to be implemented. The success of the project is encouraging and has provided perspectives within the GDP to sustain the prison libraries network, and in partnership with Civil Society Organizations (Sipar and others) to reinforce existing programs and to develop new actions for the preparation of socio-professional reinsertion of prisoners such as: Literacy classes with the support of the Non Formal Education Unit of the Provincial Office of Education within the national NFE policy framework – Pre-release and rehabilitation program to help prisoners to protect themselves, to re integrate society, their family, their community, to plan their future, and to prepare their employment – Vocational Training responsive to the employment market with the support of NGOs, and in collaboration with the Provincial Office of Labor and Vocational Training (POL&VT) as it is already effectively implemented in the prison of Koh Kong (POL&VT provides short training sessions on construction, electricity, carpentry, sculpture, hair dressing, fish breeding, poultry raising with official certificate).

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