



## Current Status and Issues of Residential Care Institutions in Cambodia

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### Abstract

Cambodian government had promoted the policy “Family Reunion Program” between 2016 and 2018, and sent 30% of the children staying at each residential care institution each year. It was started with a survey on residential care institutions. Cambodian government found so many unregistered residential care institutions. And also number of children staying at the residential care institutions are found to be “one out of three hundred and fifty children.” And moreover, many of those children have families and are not orphans. We visited Cambodia in March, 2019 to interview the children who went back to their family to investigate if they are well taken care of and they are going to school.

**Keywords:** Cambodian government, Family Reunion Program, residential care institutions

### Introduction:

According to the UNICEF, the number of children living in residential care institutions is estimated to be 2.7 million around the world. However, practically, in Cambodia it is regarded that there are more children living in residential care institutions. Moreover, UNICEF mentioned that there is not an accurate system to determine the number of children living in residential care institutions, and it says the main reasons are family breakdown, health problems, disabilities, poverty and a lack of social services. UNICEF points out that the governments should investigate the number of children living in residential care institutions regularly. In addition,

UNICEF points out that the most preferential matter is to make children live with their families. In other word, government of various nations of the world is needed to reduce the number of children who live in residential care institutions by means of to prepare homely environments like foster families.

A massacre by Pol Pot regime in the 1970's and civil war in the 1980's caused impoverishment in Cambodia. After that, it was quite difficult to reconstruct the society, however, economic growth is somehow achieved in Cambodia. On the other hand, new problems are being caused such as the economic disparity among the citizens by too rapid economic growth.

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In such economic conditions, many children who cannot live with their parents are mainly taken care of in residential care institutions. However, Cambodian government considers staying at residential care institutions should be a temporary measure and they are trying to send those children back to their parental homes.

This paper is aimed at clarifying current conditions and issues of the residential care institutions and those who are under the care of those institutions in Cambodia through consideration of what influence do UNICEF's and Cambodian government policy have on the children in residential care institutions based on interview survey to the children who were sent back home by the policy.

### Overview of Cambodia:

Cambodia is located south of Indochina, South Asia, and it bordering on Thai in the west, Laos in the north and Vietnam in the east. The population Cambodia is around 16.3 million. 90 percent of the population is Cambodians, and their mother tongue is Khmer language. Majority are Buddhists, and some minority races are Muslims.

In 1953, Cambodia became independent as "Kingdom of Cambodia" from France under King Sihanouk regime. After that, confusion continued more than twenty years from civil war and subsequently to communist regime by Pol Pot.

After the civil war, economy of Cambodia has been developed gradually, and GDP growth rate was over 10% from 2004 to 2007. In 2009, Cambodian economy slumped under the influence of the subprime loan problem and the global recession. However, it recovered in 2010 and it has kept economic progress since 2011. On the other hand, it is pointed out that there are still various problems in the country. For example, Shigeta clarifies that the gap between the rich and the poor increased by corruption in spite of the standard of living had been improved in ten years since 1994. The rate of people below the poverty was 47.8% of the total population in 2007, and it decreased to 19.8% in 2011. However, it cannot be denied that there is urban and rural disparity.

Since 2000, many of Chinese companies and Korean companies began to operate in Cambodia, and foreign capital firms started to inflow. The number of Japanese companies has been increased and the investment in real estate by China and Korea has been proceeding. While Cambodian economy continues to grow as mentioned above, many issues are pointed out such as rise in prices of land, widening urban and rural disparity, decrease in income of farmers, and increase of migrant workers to urban area or neighboring Thailand.

In other way, economic growth is processing in only in urban like the capital city Phnom Penh. Now, one of the issues of



Cambodia is the status of institutions what foster a child who cannot live with his or her parents. Cambodian government is promoting policy sending children back to his or her family who live in residential care institutions under the strong influence of UNICEF.

#### **Current Condition of the Residential Care Institutions:**

In Cambodia, 254 residential care institutions are registered officially, and 11,171 children are living in those institutions as of 2015. However, survey results clarified that there were 406 residential care institutions and 16,579 children were living in those institutions. It means that nearly one child in every 350 Cambodian children lives in a residential care institution.

Some of residential care institutions are operated by government, but most of them are operated by private or NGOs which are based on faiths, and they are obtaining funds from donors in foreign countries. UNICEF mentions that many of those institutions are implementing “orphanage tourism” to obtain funds from donors. It is said that there are residential care institutions which call themselves “orphanage” and act like to be on exhibition to tourists visiting Cambodia. Iwashita points out that there was a case that an English school was a camouflage and actually provided child prostitution and the children were used commercially.

From these circumstances, Cambodian government made a survey of residential care institutions including orphanages in cooperation with UNICEF, and trying to conduct policy of sending children back to their families. The Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation (MoSVY) did mapping research about all residential care institutions for children in Cambodia. MoSVY conducted mapping research in five province: Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Battambang, Kandal and Preah Sihanouk, from November 2014 to February, 2015. Moreover, MoSVY mapped other 20 provinces from October to December, 2015. According to their report, there are 639 residential care institutions and there are 35,374 children and young people in those institutions.

#### **(1) Residential Care Facilities;**

According to REPORT “Mapping of Residential Care Facilities in the Capital and 24 Provinces of the Kingdom of Cambodia (REPORT),” residential care facilities can be categorized into five types as shown in Table1. Most of the facilities are residential care facilities (406 institutions), followed by boarding schools (72 schools), group homes (71 homes), pagodas / faith-based care institutions in religious buildings (65 buildings), and transit homes / temporary emergency accommodations (25 homes). Most of residential care institutions are concentrated in nine provinces, with the highest number in Phnom Penh (117), followed by Siem Reap (80),



Battambang (35), Kampong Chhang (16), Preah Sihanouk (15) and Kampong Speu (15). Thus, 49% of residential care institutions are

located in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap. It shows that residential care institutions are concentrated in urban areas.

**Table1. Types of Residential Care Facilities**

| Type of Facility                                       | Number of Institutions | Rate (%)   |
|--|------------------------|------------|
| Residential care institutions                          | 406                    | 64         |
| Boarding schools                                       | 72                     | 11         |
| Group homes  | 71                     | 11         |
| Pagodas/ Other faith-based care in religious buildings | 65                     | 10         |
| Transit homes and temporary emergency accommodation    | 25                     | 4          |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>639</b>             | <b>100</b> |

Source: MoSVY REPORT (2017).

**(2) Number of Children and Young People Living in Residential Care Facilities;**

26,187 children (0-17 years old) and 9,187 young people (18-24 years old) are living in residential care facilities. Table2 shows that there are more boys than girls. Number of children under 18 living in residential care facilities is 26,187, thus, one in every 100 children is living in those facilities. It is pointed out that there is quite a high dependence on residential care facilities in Cambodia.

According to REPORT, 254 residential care institutions are registered officially and 11,171 children are living in those institutions as of 2015. However, survey results clarified that there were 406 residential care institutions and 16,579 children were living in those institutions.

Thus, it shows that more than 150 institutions and more than 5,000 children had not been registered officially. It means that one in every three children is living in the unauthorized residential care institutions which are not under the control of government. A matter of concern such a number of children and young people are living in the facilities which do not meet a standard defined by Cambodian government.

There are children who need a special care; 925 children with disabilities, 576 children with HIV or AIDS, 270 children need treatment for drug and alcohol poisoning, and 252 are victims of human traffic. Especially, Phnom Penh has the majority of children in residential care facilities who need various kinds of special care.



Table2. Number of Children and Young People Living in Residential Care Facilities

| Type of Facility                                   | Number of Children 0-17 years old |               | Total         | Number of Children 18-24 years old |              | Total        | Total         |
|--|-----------------------------------|---------------|---------------|------------------------------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|
|  | Girls                             | Boys          |               | Girls                              | Boys         |              |               |
| Residential care institution                       | 7,776                             | 8,803         | 16,579        | 2,056                              | 4,713        | 6,769        | 23,348        |
| Transit home and temporary emergency accommodation | 348                               | 280           | 628           | 185                                | 136          | 321          | 949           |
| Group home   | 820                               | 772           | 1,592         | 320                                | 224          | 544          | 2,136         |
| Pagodas and other religious buildings              | 673                               | 676           | 1,349         | 43                                 | 179          | 222          | 1,571         |
| Boarding school                                    | 2,909                             | 3,130         | 6,039         | 719                                | 612          | 1,331        | 7,370         |
| <b>Total</b>                                       | <b>12,526</b>                     | <b>13,661</b> | <b>26,187</b> | <b>3,323</b>                       | <b>5,864</b> | <b>9,187</b> | <b>35,374</b> |

Source: MoSVY REPORT (2017).

### (3) Duration of Child Care;

Out of the 406 residential care facilities, 293 provide long-term (more than 6 months) care and 26 provide short-term (less than 6 month), and 87 institutions do not have documents about duration of stay. This seems to be considered quite inadequate. According to “Policy on Alternative Care for Children (2006)” or “Guidelines for the Alternative Care of Children” adopted by the United Nations in 2009, “institutional care should be the last resort and a temporary situation, and that family care and community care are the best options for alternative care.”

16,579 children under the age of 18 reported to be living in residential care institutions, 10,126 children (61%) out of

them are staying for more than 6 months.

### (4) Staff of Residential Care Institutions;

Total number of staff working for 406 residential care institutions is 6,262: 5,079 (2,712 female and 2,367 male) are fully employed and 1,183 (657 female and 526 male) are contracted staff. This number shows that there is one formal or contracted staff per three children living in residential care institutions. Although there is not enough data of volunteer workers, there are 365 volunteer workers: 199 (55%) are foreigner and 166 (45%) are Cambodians.

Majority of residential care institutions are operated by Cambodians. 98 out of 126 institutions in twenty provinces are operated by Cambodians, and 28 are by



foreigners. However, this survey did only in twenty provinces excluding provinces which have many institutions such as Phnom Penh, Siem Reap, Battambang, Kandal, and Preah Sihanouk, and therefore this data cannot be said to be a generalized one in Cambodia.

Based on REPORT, we can summarize the current condition of residential care institutions in Cambodia as below.

1) In Cambodia, 254 residential care facilities had been confirmed by 2015, however, there are 639 facilities and 35,347 children and young people are living in those facilities.

2) There were five types of facilities and the majority are residential care facilities (406 institutions).

3) Majority of children living in residential care facilities are school-age children.

4) Among the children at residential care facilities, there are children who need a special care, like children with disabilities, children with HIV or AIDS, children who need detoxification, and victims of the human traffic.

5) 72% of residential care facilities provide long-term care and 61% children live in those facilities.

#### **Interview Survey:**

We performed interview survey of children who left Peaceful Children Home (PCH): residential care institutions between 2016 and 2018 with cooperation of Peaceful Children Home in March, 2019. The organization run two institutions, PCH 1 in

Kandal and PCH 2 in Battambang. They host 37 children aged 6 to 18 at PCH 1 and 17 children and young people at PCH 2 as of in August, 2019.

#### **(1) Survey Outline:**

1) Dates of survey: March 17 – 21, 2019

2) Target of survey: 7 children and young people aged 10 to 27 who had left Peaceful Children Home after 2016.

3) Survey method: interview survey, asked questions in English, then an interpreter translated into Khmer.

4) Questions asked: background or reasons of stay in PCH, life at PCH, current life, and future life, etc.

#### **(2) Result of Interview**

For the question of the reason of staying at PCH, all the children and young people answered it was poverty. In addition to the poverty, we also found another reason. It was distance to their schools. One said it took one hour and a half to school by bicycle from his home. It was impossible for him to go to school before coming to PCH. Some were taken to PCH by their parents. Children living in PCH are not always orphans. Some were sent to PCH when their parents divorced, one was sent when her single father went to a far place, one was sent when his single mother married to a new husband. Some were brought to PCH by NGO and some were brought by neighboring community. Stories of the children symbolized complicated Cambodian rural society and families.



Cambodian government had promoted policy to send back the 30% of the children at each residential care facility home since 2016 through 2018. Because of this, number of students at PCHs was greatly reduced, then they moved small children to PCH 1 and high school and older students to PCH 2. This helped PCH 2 to earn its own budget to run the facility. They could open a small restaurant with the help of older girls and chicken farm along with rice farming.

Three out of five school-aged children we interviewed do not go to school since they left PCH. Two children are going to school because one came back to PCH and the other is living in a church. It is clear that children who live with their family cannot go to school. Because of the two major reasons: one is the poverty and the other is a distance to school.

Children who go to school can draw their future image, however, those who cannot go to school have no dream about their future. They are expected to start working before reaching their teenage to support family. This has been done for long and is taken to be quite natural. We felt this when we interviewed some young adults who were graduated from university supported by PCH.

### **Conclusion;**

It had been considered that current status and issues of residential care institutions in Cambodia and children who had left institution. Though we interviewed only seven children and cannot generalize,

however, we could see certain trend among the children who were sent back to their family. Cambodian government regarded as ample global research and evidence demonstrate the detrimental effects institutional care on a child's social, physical, intellectual and emotional development as opposed to family and family-based care since 2016, It might be true that spending time at an institution which does not fulfill the required conditions of government does not give good influence to a child's development.

Unfortunately there are orphanages involved in so called "orphanage tourism." Government should investigate or watch those facilities. However, there are children who have to choose to live with their families but cannot go to school, or living away from their family to go to school. We interviewed two institutionalized children apart from seven children and young people. They have lived PCH and graduated from university, and they are now working. Both of them said

I could get a chance and support to study at my university that because I lived in PCH. I would be still poor if I lived with my family, I could change my life by attending schools. I am lucky."

As Okada points, a stable relationship is necessary in order to grow attachment. If one spend time for long at a residential care institution where there is a case of not only lacking of attachment but too many people are involved, this may cause problem in growing attachment. We admit that it is not ideal for children to stay



at a residential care facility for long, however, not attending school is also check the healthy growth of children. Those who live in a developed country believe that children should spend their young days under the care with attachment of parents, however, there are places where parents cannot bring up their children. There are many reasons why parents cannot bring up their children. At the same time, there are many reasons why children cannot access to education. It is easy to say Cambodian situation “one out of three hundred and fifty child is under the care of residential care facilities” is unusual and a serious problem. People say that Cambodian parents abandon their duty of bringing up their children and give it to residential care facilities. Cambodian government and UNICEF are said to continue the family reunion program. We need to study more cases of the children sent back to their families.

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