

# Our Room to Read Site Visit in Cambodia

by Dan Levesque on July 07, 2017



A big motivation for starting this blog was to raise a little bit of money for an NGO I really believe in: **Room to Read**.

Their goal is to improve literacy and girls' education in some of the poorest countries in the world. And that's an important thing, because far too many children in the developing world do not have access to a quality education. Any way you cut it, that's just not fair—they didn't choose to be born where they were, it was simply a case of bad luck.

Our travels have taken us through India, Singapore, Thailand, and now Cambodia—the poorest country in Southeast Asia. And while here, we decided it would be a good time to visit one of Room to Read's operations in order to see what they do first-hand. And we were blown away by what we learned from the kids we talked to.



*A group-study classroom arranged by some motivated students.*

The site we visited is one of Room to Read's Girls Education programs in rural Cambodia. Room to Read does everything through partnerships—they find public schools in need and figure out the most impactful way to help.

As a policy, Room to Read doesn't import volunteers or employees from abroad. Instead, they find talented and qualified staff in the local area, and train them on how to deliver an improved education experience. They do this in two ways: first is by establishing a literacy program that includes a fully-stocked library. They don't promote English language learning, but instead focus their efforts on improving literacy in the language the kids actually use on a daily basis.

There are three reasons for this. Firstly, kids aren't always enthusiastic about learning English (as we know from first-hand teaching experience). In many cases, they're only ever using English in the classroom and on written tests—very few ESL students actually get the opportunity to use English in the real world. Sort of like how I was forced to learn

French in school without ever having a need for it, many kids in developing countries just don't need to learn English because it's not relevant to their daily lives. Today, I couldn't even speak French to save my life.

Secondly, everything you do in Cambodia requires that you speak and read and write in the Khmer language. Only a small percentage of jobs will require that you have any sort of working knowledge of English. First and foremost, kids need to be competent in their native language—the language that their education is actually delivered in. In many parts of the developing world, this is severely lacking.

Thirdly, if you're able to become literate in one language, it becomes far easier to become literate in a second language. What we don't need is kids who are barely competent in Khmer *and* English simultaneously. They'd be far better off first having a strong reading and writing ability in their local language and *then* deciding to pursue an English education, if they chose to do so.

The second core strategy of Room to Read (after literacy in general) is focusing on Girls' Education. According to the **Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation**, in most developing nations, including Cambodia, women on average receive far less education than men. Families will opt to have their female child stay home to help with chores while their male child goes to school. They'll send a boy to university before a girl, because they're perceived as having more opportunity in the workforce. As a result, women get left behind—and the whole nation suffers for it.

According to the **United Nations**, as women in the developing world become more educated, everyone benefits. Educated women are healthier, have fewer children, the children they do have receive a better education, and the earning potential of their entire family improves. This drives the entire society forward, which then leads to better opportunities for everyone in the future.

As part of our Cambodia site visit, we got to sit down and chat with a room full of 9th-grade female students at a rural public school.



*Being greeted by a group of bright 9th-graders.*

Since the Girls' Education program started at this school in 2014, female dropout rates have dropped significantly, and the whole community has noticed a big improvement in the confidence and ability of the female students. And it's not just an NGO coming by to drop off supplies—Room to Read is embedded in the community, and everyone is super happy with the results.

Despite sub-optimal facilities (the school just got electricity last year), the room of students was full of optimism. They wanted to be teachers, accountants, bankers, authors, and so on—a far cry from their parents, who primarily consist of farmers and laborers. And of course, each one of them hopes for the opportunity to travel and see the world.

They were also very curious about our lives and if we had any advice for them pursuing their professional careers, so we did our best. One of the more poignant points was that their generation really needs to focus on computer skills, which we later found out were

almost completely lacking at the school (having only just gotten electricity, funding for a computer education program wasn't on the table).

We also talked about the difficulties of getting a basic education in Cambodia. The main problem has to do with funding and lack of opportunity: because they live in a poorer rural area, they aren't able to attend well-funded schools. One girl said that it was sometimes hard to focus because of hunger and lack of food at home. Others struggled with balancing chores and schoolwork.

If not for Room to Read, most of these girls might already have been pulled out of school by their parents. It's a bleak reality, but one that can be slowly changed if we're smart with the way we give.



*A group shot at the end of our visit.*

We asked how many of the young women in the room would like to attend university—every single one of them raised their hands. And that was heartbreaking.

Realistically, few of them will be able to afford a post-secondary education. Scholarship opportunities are very limited, and Cambodia doesn't have any student loan program. While the girls were undoubtedly optimistic, I got the feeling that they knew attending university would be a long-shot.

Despite this, the room was filled with intelligent and confident young women. They were well aware that Room to Read was providing them with an amazing opportunity that they otherwise wouldn't have. An opportunity which, frankly, should be a basic human right: free and equal access to a quality education.

In all fairness, we can (and probably should) make a difference in the lives of children growing up in poorer countries like Cambodia. A little bit can go a long way: one year of university tuition in Cambodia costs between \$300 and \$1000 USD. That figure is unaffordable for the majority of the population, yet represents just one monthly car payment for some people in the developed world.

**You can learn more about [Room to Read](#) [HERE](#).**

Seeing the work they're doing first-hand has really solidified for us just how important this program is. Not only for this particular group of bright young women, but for the world as a whole. Every child deserves the right to a decent education. If we each contribute just a little bit, that vision is well within our grasp.

*Special thanks to the great Room to Read staff in Cambodia who helped arrange this wonderful visit!*