

Chreay Pom

Improving Rural Health Services



University of Canberra Australia Award graduate Chreay Pom, returned in 2009 to the Ministry of Rural Development in Phnom Penh, and is now the Director of the Rural Health Care Department in that Ministry. Mr Pom, an active alumnus, and an influential public servant, is the *Point of Contact* for the Australia Awards program at the Ministry.

The knowledge gained and contacts made during his Master studies in Public Administration are used daily in his work as a senior health system administrator, based in Phnom Penh. Policy development, in particular, has been a focus of Mr Pom since his return, and his Australia Awards experience and qualification have given him even stronger skills in working with partners and NGOs in developing strategies to improve health services for rural citizens.

"I feel I can make a difference in my role, as my Minister is very supportive, and is keen to see real improvement in health services in rural areas", Mr Pom said.

"I tend to work across a range of programs and areas; as well as my day-to-day role as the Director of Rural Health, I am current also the director of Ketsana Emergency Reconstruction and Rehabilitation Project supported by the World Bank, and team leader for a number of other health-sector projects and other health and rural hygiene programs."

Mr Chreay Pom feels that his studies have equipped him very well to help progress rural health services in Cambodia. He has found that it has not only been the technical and professional skills that have been improved by his Australia Award, but also the enhanced life skills and confidence his Master's program has given him.

Born in a small village of only 50 households, along the Mekong River in the heavily-populated Kampong Chhnang Province, Chreay Pom grew up in (what is for rural Cambodia), a small family – with only two sisters, both older than him.

As farmers in a remote location, his parents grew many different crops: rice, corn, soya, and watermelons.

"My parents were born in the same village as me, and that's where we stayed, until moving to another district in 1990."

Every day, six days a week, he walked several kilometres to and from primary school, and by the time he got to secondary and high school age he had to travel even further afield by bicycle ride. Obviously a bright student even from an early age, he enjoyed all subjects – which he feels was the result of having very encouraging and kind teachers.

"I can still remember my first day at secondary school", Mr Chreay Pom said. "I had a big, heavy bicycle which was a hybrid of bits and pieces made up from all sorts of old bicycles dating back to the war."

"I had to cross a stream with my bicycle on a ferry to get to school, and I still recall that the bicycle was so big and I was so small that I couldn't even lift it, so I just cried." Clearly he overcame that challenge and many others on his life journey to his current role.

After good results in his high school examinations, he talked to his father about his future, and they decided that he should go to Phnom Penh to try to get into a university. The family had no money so when he got to the city he stayed at the Neakavorn Buddhist Temple, where "we all looked after each other".

After spending one year for the pre-university entrance (It was compulsory during that time but not existed any more now) he applied for two universities: Royal University of Agriculture and Royal University of Phnom Penh. He was accepted into both, but decided on the Royal University of Agriculture, major in forestry.





Mr Chreay Pom (at left) at a provincial field workshop

"I was always interested in plants and the environment around me, so I spent five years there studying forestry. After graduating I spend one year as lectured at Prek Leap School of Agriculture before transferring to the Ministry of Rural Development."

Those university years were hard on Mr Chreay Pom; as he came from a poor family and as a teenager he had to look after himself while studying; he had no home in Phnom Penh and built his own shack just outside the University grounds.

With a focus on research, and realising that he wanted to be a better lecturer, he always intended to do more study – and there were better opportunities for that in the Ministry of Rural Development, which he joined and where he worked in the Department of Training and Research.

After nine years at the Ministry, he started to look around for a scholarship program and decided that Australia Awards (then ADS) would best meet his and his Ministry's needs.

He decided that he needed even better English skills to succeed in his Master's program, so he undertook advanced English studies, before applying for the Australian scholarship.

"The sectors and disciplines that the Australian Aid was offering at that time had a lot of relevance both for me and for rural development more broadly. After applying twice, I was successful in gaining an Award and started on an English language program in Phnom Penh."

And while the opportunity to study at a university in Australia's capital city has proved to be of great benefit to Mr Chreay Pom, of almost equal importance was the opportunity to spend time and have discussions with Australian students who were working part time and studying Public Administration part time at Canberra University.

All the same, and while acknowledging the tremendous impact his Award has had on his professional and personal life, Mr Chreay Pom can see ways to improve the Australia Awards program.

"If I'd had the opportunity to do have some hands-on components while in Australia, it would have improved the overall scholarship experience", he said.

"And I'd like to see more discussions taking place between applicants, their work supervisors, and selection panels from the very start. The Australian Aid needs to ensure that more time is spent with each candidate, investigating the institutions that are offering programs, to ensure that selection panels know where and what the most appropriate courses are."

"The selection process needs a stronger emphasis on gaining the opinions of both the candidate and their supervisor, when it comes to choosing an Australian institution and a study program – to make sure that the course selected closely matches work priorities."

On the same issue, Mr Chreay Pom advises potential Australia Awards applicants to review the courses available very carefully before deciding in a program. "Make sure it aligns closely with your work roles and future directions", he added.

Nevertheless, the Australia awards program is one he recommends thoroughly and widely: "It was even better than I expected, and as well as gaining my Master in Public Administration, I made many new friends and university colleagues that I still keep in touch with."

In such a demanding job as the Director, Mr Chreay Pom does not have much spare time, but with the little available, he likes to ready and play sport.

In the future, he is keen to undertake more tertiary-level research to support his Ministry's strategic directions - and although that goal will be best achieved through Doctoral studies, he can also see the value in short-term or bridging courses, with specific topics relevant to rural health in Cambodia and the region.



Cambodia's **Ministry for Rural Development** has widespread responsibilities, including:

- Integrating all rural development, at family, village and commune levels;
- Raising the standard of living and the quality of life of rural people by alleviating poverty through Rural Infrastructure improvement; and
- Promoting human resource development for rural communities and MRD staff, by running local training programs, seminars and workshops that relate to specific rural training needs.

Summarised from www.mrd.gov.kh

Over the past 10 years, economic growth (in Cambodia) has averaged 9.7% per annum..... Agriculture continues to be the mainstay of the economy, but garments, tourism, and construction have contributed more to GDP growth. ... In the last decade, the contribution of agriculture and agro-industry to overall economic growth has come largely through the accumulation of factors of production—land and labour—as part of extensive growth of activity, with only modest improvement in productivity from very low levels. Rice is still the overwhelmingly predominant crop, but there is some diversification and regional specialisation as farmers take advantage of agro-ecological systems and market opportunities ... Structural and institutional constraints to agricultural and rural development exist that, unless addressed by appropriate interventions and policies, will result in a slowing of economic growth and poverty reduction.

Rural Development for Cambodia, Key Issues and Constraints, ADB, 2012, p. xi

Rural development is a major crosscutting issue, covering health, education, agriculture, water, and sanitation. It is central to poverty reduction since 85% of Cambodia's population live in rural areas, which have high poverty incidence. The Government of Cambodia has adopted a multipronged approach to foster rural development and to empower local communities to plan and manage their development. The decentralization and de-concentration of public services delivery; support for participatory, decentralized, and area-based programs; and provision of credit to households and small businesses are part of this approach.

Rural Development for Cambodia, Key Issues and Constraints, ADB, 2012, p. 41

Throughout Cambodia, Health Centres and Health Posts are minimum-level primary health care services for rural populations. Slightly more than one-thousand facilities service between 10,000 and 20,000 Cambodians each week; including initial consultations and primary diagnosis, emergency first aid, chronic disease care, maternal and child care, birth spacing advice, immunisation, and health education. However, in 2010, slightly less than one-half of the Health Centres provided the full minimum package of services, with constraints including limited key personnel and inadequate essential drugs. The Health Centres are the first point of entry into the health system and act as “gatekeepers” to higher-level care, referring to district hospitals and to provincial hospitals as needed. However, health centres lack financial resources and ambulances to transfer patients, particularly in rural and remote areas, where challenges are exacerbated by poor road and travel conditions, and limited transport options. Community members participate through village health support groups, and through Health Centre management committees.

Data from a range of sources, including Cambodia health service delivery profile, 2012

