



The single muddy village pond shared by about 2250 people is contaminated with excrement, chemicals and and bacteria

Sarah Macklin

TIMES are tough for some of the 1350 or so children who crowd the classrooms at Tanop Community

Education Centre, about 50 kilometres from Phnom Penh in Takeo province.

The single muddy village pond shared by about 2250 people for washing and drinking water is contaminated with excrement, chemicals from fertiliser run-off and bacteria, according to a professional analysis of the water.

And children are still drinking the water. “Now the village has decided to deepen the pond and supply the labour to do that, but in the meantime there’s only one other village pond in an even worse condition and people have to travel six kilometres to the next one,” says Lyn Hotchin, an Australian retired teacher who co-founded the school with headmaster Tek Tith, the first villager from Tanop to gain a university degree.

“We had the water professionally analysed and it’s contaminated through the roof with faecal coliforms, chemicals from fertiliser run-off and other bacteria,” says Hotchin. “There’s also a duck farm next door, so there may well be contamination from that as well.”

In the meantime, the school has decided to provide barrels of drinking water to ease the thirst of pupils. But that costs about \$6 a day, points out Tek Tith.

“Ninety percent of villagers don’t boil the pond water before drinking it, so kids often get sick,” he says.



Many of Tanop’s pupils have dreams of working as journalists and teachers when they complete their education. MARISA REICHERT

Thirst for knowledge

Takeo province’s **Tanop Community Education Centre** is faced with more than just the challenge of providing free education to over 1300 students. Ensuring the kids have clean drinking water and enough to eat are vital necessities the school’s staff is currently working towards securing. Here’s how they’re doing it...

“They often have stomach problems and in this dry season, the water gets very muddy and thick.”

That’s not the only problem children face. “A lot of children don’t have enough to eat, or enough of the right, nutritious foods, so they’re hungry when they come to school in the morning,” says Tek Tith, who is now completing a master’s degree in rural development at Build Bright University in Phnom Penh.

“My vision is that I don’t want pupils coming to me to learn with nothing in their stomachs. We’re looking at ways to provide breakfast for some of the pre-schoolers, but it all costs money,” he explains.

One bright 12-year-old boy is so stunted by malnutrition that he looks like a five-year-old. Surviving only on rice, he still cycles five kilometres to school each day on a donated bicycle. Sometimes volunteers can give him an extra bottle of soy milk.

He’s not alone, says Hotchin,

who co-founded the Cambodian-registered NGO to run the school, which opened two years ago.

“Many of our children come from single-parent families or rice farmers who struggle to make ends meet. We’d love to start a breakfast program for our 45 pre-schoolers but that would cost \$1 a day per child, which we can’t afford,” she explains.

The school – which provides a completely free education through to secondary classes – is looking at ways to make itself self-sustaining in the long term, says Tek Tith.

At the moment it is funded by supporters of Singingkites.org, whose members are townspeople who mostly live in Toowoomba in Queensland, which was recently ravaged by severe floods.

Two new classrooms have been opened, awnings added to provide shade, and a library will shortly be built. One income-generating plan is to set up a bakery in the nearby

town to make breads and goods fortified with protein and vitamins. “These can be sold at low-cost to villagers, provide skills training for our school leavers and generate an income to keep the school running,” says Hotchin.

The school is also investigating partnerships with other NGOs who produce protein-enriched baked goods for skills transfers and set-up help.

Another income-generating plan for the school is to set up a weaving and sewing centre to capitalise on traditional rural skills. Many local families still treasure at least one skilled mother or auntie who weaves multicoloured chequered silk on primitive wooden looms, each length of cloth taking two solid days of arm-wrenching work to produce.

“When girls graduate from our sewing school, we hope to give them a sewing machine, so they can set up their own tailoring and clothing



All-day classes, plus extra tutorials, are offered at Tanop school. MARISA REICHERT

businesses from their home,” says Hotchin.

Other children at the school – which now runs classes from morning to night, and has added specialist tutoring in maths, physics and chemistry – have different dreams.

“One of our 13-year-olds is so keen to be a teacher that he runs informal classes in his village when he gets home at 7pm from studying all day,” says Hotchin. “Another of our boys is desperate to become a journalist. He devours *The Phnom Penh Post* when the copies come down every week.”

Education, it seems, can be one way to climb out of poverty; to leave a village with no running water and classmates who are hungry. Several graduates of Tanop School are now studying at university in Phnom Penh, sharing a group house and supported by sponsors in Australia and elsewhere. Their horizons have widened from their tiny village. And one day, like Tek Tith, they may return to help improve the lives of their fellow villagers. **PD**

To follow the school’s progress, visit www.singingkites.org



just 450 pupils and now we have 1225 pupils in classes running from morning to night, from kindergarten upwards," she says.

In just 18 months, Tanop Community Education Centre – under proud headmaster Tek Tith – has grown to nine teachers to offer Khmer literature and numeracy, English classes, the arts and vocational skills to its pupils. Teachers are well-paid by Cambodian standards and their families have access to free healthcare – and education.

The school is using a syllabus developed by Rotary International called Concentrated Learning to accelerate pupils' English-language skills – one of the few designed

especially for developing countries such as Cambodia. After lunch, the children sing out the alphabet in English, and cheerfully count out the numbers to 100.

"We've just sent our fourth student to university in Phnom Penh," says Hotchin, who was in the capital recently to take pupils to free dental check-ups in the truck used for school transport. Dr Robert Ogle and staff at the Cambodian World Family Dental Clinic have agreed to perform dental work for 40 students a month at the school.

"And we are now a registered NGO in Cambodia, as well as being a Toowoomba-based charity."

On their trip to the city in the

back of a truck, the Tanop students took their first elevator ride to the eighth-floor offices of the *Phnom Penh Post*, where they were given a guided tour and shown how a newspaper is produced each day. Following their dental checks, they were able to run wild at the city's water park.

However, headmaster Tek Tith and Hotchin feel an obligation to offer more than free education to villagers. "We're now trying to build up other micro businesses in the area, such as sewing, weaving, and maybe a café and hospitality training," she says. "We're lucky in that we have exceptional volunteers, but we need to make the school pay for itself."

The Tanop Community Education Centre now draws pupils from about 25 villages in an eight-kilometer radius, with several children making their way along "shocking" roads in the dark, rain or heat to school each morning. Some volunteers have donated bicycles to help them get there more easily, says Hotchin.

"Yet we get about 300 to 400 parents turning up to parent teacher nights, all with ideas to help us grow and grow. It's a little miracle."

Other initiatives are aimed at improving the livelihoods and health of farming families. One farmer, Sam Ouen, has been given 30 ducks to raise, which he'll be able to sell for meat and their eggs. The \$100 to start the scheme was donated by an Australian couple, while the farmer will repay the loan by giving 30 12-week-old ducklings to the next farmer waiting.

Singing Kites has a website (www.singingkites.org), where people can register to help sponsor a child's education and follow the progress of the school as it grows.

Recent improvements have seen ceiling fans installed in the classrooms, and a scheme to purify village water, with the help of Siemens and Global Development Group. Next the school pond will be deepened, and two Skyhydrants will be installed to treat the water and purify it for use in the community and school.

Already, land has been staked out across the road from the school to build a centre to teach weaving and sewing skills, and work is beginning on building extra classrooms to ease the burden of class sizes of around 70. Students at the school have been followed by father-and-son documentary makers Brian and Luke Jeffery, who are filming *Conscience for Cambodia*, inspired by people and NGOs who work to make a difference to help children in the Kingdom.

And just one chance meeting can make a difference – as more than 1200 children living around Tanop and their families have discovered. **7D**

The man who had a dream

HEADMASTER Tek Tith will never forget the difference his meeting Lyn Hotchin has made to his home village of Tanop. "She's the most important and wonderful lady I've ever known," he says. "Not many people are interested in setting up schools in the countryside, but she was full of questions when I first met her.

"We made a good connection, with her asking what I wanted in life. When I said a school, she just got to work raising money."

Tek Tith, who says he's now "about 35", is currently studying for a master's degree in rural development at Build Bright University, as well as being the full-time head of the Tanop Community Education Centre.

As he shows visitors around the school, he quickly and discreetly sweeps up a tiny speck of dust from the floor – everyone, from the teachers to the students, is evidently proud of the buildings, which are immaculately clean.

Like many of his generation, he struggled to help his family in their desperate fight for survival under the Pol Pot regime. To improve his English and begin his secondary studies, he spent time living with monks in a pagoda. He did any job he could find to support both himself and his parents back in Tanop.

After graduating from high school, he enrolled at Build Bright University in Phnom Penh to begin a teaching degree. In 2003, he married in an arranged match and his wife encouraged him to keep studying in the capital.

Over the next few years Tek Tith worked a variety of jobs, including as a motodop driver and building worker, to support his wife and two children back in their village. Two years ago he graduated with his teaching degree and worked with an NGO in Phnom Penh before returning home to fulfill his dream.

"We sing a lot at school," he says. "It's important to support the creative arts. It makes me so happy to see the kids come from all over the different villages to school each day.

"The importance of education spreads from mouth to mouth, and we help the children's families so they don't drop out of school. The next generation is especially important."

