

Providing educational opportunities to out-of-school youth

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Around the world, more than 100 million children are not in school. Most either don't enroll in school or drop out because they're poor and must work to help support their families. In Cambodia, for example, 63 percent of those children who enroll in primary school drop out before reaching grade 7. With more than a third of the nation's people struggling to survive on less than \$1 a day, poverty is the leading contributor to young people leaving school.



Most vulnerable are children, especially girls, living in isolated rural areas. "Such children suffer from all kinds of problems because they were born to parents who were malnourished and unhealthy due to the side effects of the Khmer Rouge period," says 21-year-old Raj Ridvan Singh, recalling the bloody rule of the Communist Khmer Rouge forces from 1975-1979 and the civil war that followed. With little chance to improve their circumstances, such children are far more likely to fall victim to the threats of HIV/AIDS, prostitution, child trafficking, domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse, he explains.

To help improve the situation facing rural youth, Raj – along with his father and brother – founded the Leadership Character Development Institute (L-CDI) in 2000. Over the past four years, they've set up a network of boarding schools in 23 poor rural provinces throughout the country. At the schools, trained youth teach their younger peers. The curriculum includes English and math instruction, along with "life skills" training aimed at developing young people's self-confidence, critical thinking, and leadership abilities. Equipped with such skills, the students are far better able to negotiate life's challenges and make positive decisions, says Raj.

Striving for gender balance isn't easy, says Raj, given that parents are reluctant to pay even a modest fee to have their female children attend school.

Participating youth, all above the age of 16, undertake a two-year program. In addition to receiving academic instruction, each is given practical skills in teaching, with those who particularly excel serving as teacher trainers in the provinces. Those looking to gain practical management skills become full time volunteers once they've "graduated." Toward the end of the program, participants also receive job preparedness training and learn computer and other vocational skills. L-CDI graduates are given preference in the job market because of their English skills, positive values, and self-confidence.

Currently, L-CDI schools reach 2,000 full-time and 3,000 part-time students. While initially L-CDI relied on financial support from individuals within the country and international organizations, now it's practically self-sustaining. Each student studying in the provinces and the training center in Phnom Penh pay a nominal fee. L-CDI's emphasis on cost-effectiveness – each Center with an average of 30 boarding students and 50 part time students operates on roughly US\$300/month – has enabled it to expand rapidly and reduce its reliance on external funding.

With young girls half as likely as boys to enroll in primary school, L-CDI places a



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L-CDI focuses particular attention on educating young girls, who are half as likely as boys in Cambodia to enroll in primary school.

premium on engaging girls in its programs. Yet striving for gender balance isn't easy, says Raj, given that parents are reluctant to pay even a modest fee to have their female children attend school.

Today, L-CDI is the nation's largest provider of non-formal education and has received positive endorsements from the Ministries of Education in both Malaysia and Cambodia and from Cambodia's King. In the future, Raj hopes to extend the program to all 184 districts within the country and to expand the model to other nations in the region, beginning with East Timor and Laos. Given his families recent move to Malaysia, Raj and his father are working to expand L-CDI activities to Laos and East Timor in 2005 while Dhinu, Raj's younger brother and co-founder of L-CDI, is facilitating the transfer of management of the program to individuals within the country. Toward that end, every quarter, up to six Cambodian volunteers visit Thailand, Malaysia, and Singapore to receive LCDI advanced leadership training. As of September 2004, 19 volunteers had completed this program

For Raj, working well with others is essential to being a good leader. "I consider myself a great team player instead of a leader, he says, because achieving objectives, especially for others, requires a team and lots of love and unity."

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