

Support of School Attendance for Needy Children in Kampong Chhnang, Cambodia

With the generous support of the ViDan Foundation, Minority Rights Organization (MIRO) is implementing a project which strives to provide education to poor Vietnamese, Khmer and Cham children in Kampong Chhnang province, Cambodia. Besides the benefit for the students and their families, MIRO aims at improving interethnic relations and advocates for the human rights of Vietnamese who have been living in Cambodia for generations, but face many obstacles to obtain Cambodian nationality. As a result, they must be considered as stateless and are therefore particularly vulnerable to human rights violations.

Ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia

Ethnically Vietnamese people are the largest minority community in Cambodia. While exact numbers are unavailable, the 2008 census found that 0.54 percent of Cambodians identified Vietnamese as their Mother Tongue, whereas the CIA World Fact Book states that the Vietnamese population amounts to 5 percent of the total population in Cambodia.¹ A significant portion of the ethnic Vietnamese lives in predominantly Vietnamese communities situated on Lake Tonle Sap and the Tonle Sap River. Throughout the centuries-long history of Vietnamese migration and settlement in Cambodia, the relationship between Khmer and Vietnamese people has often been tense, stemming from years of conflict and power struggles between the nations. As the result of this, ethnic Vietnamese are now subject to a number of human rights issues in Cambodia. Some of the most pressing issues are statelessness, lack of access to social services including healthcare and education, no access to land ownership and political and public discrimination and racism.

The most significant issue faced by the ethnic Vietnamese community is their inability to obtain identification papers proving their Cambodian citizenship. According to the nationality law, children born from parents living legally in Cambodia will be considered as citizens. But many Vietnamese cannot receive documentation to prove they have a legal status. This is largely because of a lack of clarity in policy. These barriers have left many Vietnamese in a position of statelessness, preventing access to the rights and services they would be entitled to as citizens.

The stateless status of many ethnic Vietnamese has translated into several issues facing the community, one of which is the low education rates across the community. Without birth certificates, children are disallowed from attending state schools. Other education options (including private schools) are often non-existent or not affordable. Education is a

¹ c.f. CIA World Fact Book in its latest update on 23 June 2014. <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cb.html> The total population of Cambodia amounts to around 15,5 million people.

prerequisite to understanding one's rights, and its inaccessibility constitutes a violation of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child.

Based on a MIRO report entitled "Limbo on Earth, Investigative Report on the Current Living Conditions and Legal Status of Ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia" (2014², along with ongoing research into issues regarding access to birth certificates for Vietnamese people in Kampong Chhnang province, MIRO discovered that a majority of Vietnamese children in the province cannot access the state education system due to the fact that they cannot be register at school without presenting a birth certificate. The second main obstacle to school attendance, i.e. private schools which offer Vietnamese language classes, is the overwhelming poverty. Vietnamese children have to go fishing with their parents to support the family income or take care of younger siblings while their parents are at work.

During research in Phsar Chnnang commune, MIRO interviewed Khmer and Cham families as a reference group. It became apparent that although these families have identification documents, can lease or purchase land and generally have more income opportunities, many of them still struggle for living conditions that allows them to send their children to school. Like their Vietnamese neighbors, numerous Khmer and Cham children cannot attend school or cannot attend school regularly, but have to contribute to the family income.

Interviews with respondents from all ethnic groups also revealed that although relations between the groups are friendly, they are not close or supportive. Neighbors from different ethnicities might celebrate religious or family holidays together, but Khmer and Cham people for instance are unaware of the problems arising from the statelessness of the Vietnamese. The main reason for not demonstrating much interest in each other is the fact that people have to survive on a day-to-day basis and neither have the time nor the capacity to deal with more complex aspects of their communal life.

According to MIRO's observation, the mere coexistence of different ethnic groups weakens the communities. If they cooperated and supported each other, their communities would become stronger and more assertive to improve livelihoods for all. Interethnic cooperation could also have a significant impact on eliminating discrimination against Vietnamese and strengthen their claim to documentation and Cambodian nationality.

The Project

While according to its mandate, MIRO focuses on the Vietnamese minority in Cambodia, we conduct a project that brings benefit to all three ethnic groups in Kandal and Chong Koh villages, Phsar Chhnang commune, Kampong Chhnang province. While this approach intends to increase the general acceptance of the project within the communities, it mainly aims at improving and substantiating interethnic relations among Vietnamese, Khmer and Cham families. By sharing the common aim of improving access to education for all poor children in the villages, the different groups will gain a better understanding of their respective living

² Please see www.mirocambodia.org

conditions and challenges. The project will thus foster interethnic collaboration and community empowerment.

As stated above, MIRO's primary aim is to improve education opportunities for needy Vietnamese children. Generally, MIRO identified three main barriers to education for the children in Kampong Chhnang commune. The **first issue** specifically relates to Vietnamese children. The inability of Vietnamese families to receive birth certificates for newborn children in the communities, despite their legal entitlement to receive documentation, is the most significant obstacle to access the education system. Birth certificates are generally required by public school administrators to register for class. In turn, Vietnamese children are put at a disadvantage when they do not possess birth certificates, contributing to low attendance rates in the community.

MIRO advocates with the local authorities to issue documents that permit school registration for Vietnamese children and thus pave the way for a discussion on a national level about the issuance of official birth certificates.

The **second issue** MIRO identified as a barrier to education for children from all ethnic groups is the overwhelming poverty. Many families in the communities do not make enough money to send their children to school. The parents often work long hours, requiring school-age children to either stay home and take care of their younger siblings, or contribute to the family income. In cases where children are not required to stay home, the costs of education are often too high for the family to endure. At state school, children are required to unofficially contribute to the salary of their teachers, while Vietnamese families have to pay a fee for every lesson when sending their children to private school. Or, if children wish to attend state schools, the transportation costs are often beyond the means of the family. As well, children must be able to cover the costs of their meals while attending school. These expenses severely limit the ability of children to attend school.

MIRO will provide eighty selected families with financial means to help cover the costs for the transportation to and meals at school, as well as the honoraria for four teachers.³

As a **third issue**, a lack of understanding of the importance of education in the communities hinders children's ability to attend school. Many families in the communities do not recognize the importance of education, and choose not to send their children. This perspective further contributes to the target area's low education rates.

In workshops, MIRO will provide information to all families about the right of children to education, explain about future benefits that derive from school attendance and the procedure of how to obtain birth certificates.

³ With USD 75 to 125, the average salary of a teacher is too low to make a living. As a result, teachers either take "extra" money from their pupils or work in other jobs, thus spending less time on the actual teaching.

3. The Project in Detail

Location: Kandal and Chong Koh villages in Phsar Chhnang district, Kampong Chhnang province. The villages have an ethnically mixed population of 874 Vietnamese families, 563 Khmer families and 100 Khmer-Islam or Cham families. While the Khmer and Cham live along the shore of the Tonle Sap River, the Vietnamese live in floating villages on the river itself.

Support:

- Contribute to regular school attendance of 80 needy children (60 percent Vietnamese, 40 percent Khmer and Cham) who cannot afford to attend the state school or Vietnamese language classes by supporting the expenses for transportation and meals at school and purchase school supplies (books, school uniforms, pens, pencils, rulers, etc.).
- Support two Khmer state school teachers so that they have a sufficient income and employ two Vietnamese teachers for language classes.
- Conduct two workshops for the communities' parents to inform about children's rights and the importance of education, so that more parents are willing to send their children to school.
- MIRO will advocate with the commune chief to issue more letters of confirmation to Vietnamese children which allows for school registration.
- MIRO will advocate with the local and national authorities to grant birth certificates for Vietnamese children in order to allow them to permanently attend state schools.
- MIRO will raise public awareness to the rights of Vietnamese in general and to the right to education for their children in particular by providing information to the media and stakeholders.

Duration: The project has started on 01 August 2014 and will run until 31 January 2015.

The Future

MIRO hopes to secure funds from the ViDan Foundation and other generous donors to continue support of school attendance for needy children in Kampong Chhnang also in the future. This would ensure the sustainability of the project and enhance its impact. In the long-run, through this project, Vietnamese families can gain better access to further education, find more profitable jobs and thus overcome poverty. Basic education will also increase the chances of ethnic Vietnamese to step in for their rights successfully and claim Cambodian nationality. MIRO envisions the full integration of long-term Vietnamese residents into a democratic and versatile Cambodian society and their political, social and economic participation and prosperity.

Please visit MIRO website at www.mirocambodia.org for more background information, and details about our human rights organization. Should you have any questions or comments, please contact us at miro.cambodia@gmail.com.