

Child Clubs

Our lessons learned



Rationale

PEPY began working in Chanleas Dai commune in 2006, following a partnership project to fund the construction of a primary school building. While initially focusing on school-based education projects (you can read our Lessons Learned documents for these and other projects [here](#)), after a short time the PEPY team felt that it was important to address issues children faced outside the classroom, and to understand more clearly the challenges for young people growing up in the area.

In 2009 a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) was conducted with community members from each village in Chanleas Dai commune and with young people from Chanleas Dai village. The purpose of conducting the PRA was to obtain an overview of the biophysical and social conditions in the locality, understand the community's past experience, and to gain more specific information on people's livelihood systems and challenges. The tools used within this PRA included a village walk, base map and social map, developing seasonal calendars, trend analysis, problem tree, solution ranking and SWOT analysis.

Feedback from participants – from both children and adults – was that the greatest challenges facing the population were food shortage and disease. 11 more specific problems were identified and participants brainstormed the reasons behind these problems, and possible ways to address them.

- Unfertilized soil
- Lack of rain & agricultural skills
- Lack of waterway/water source
- Lack of perseverance
- Illiteracy
- Disease (both children and animals)
- Parents do not value/understand education
- Shortage of food
- Few employment opportunities
- Poor quality of education
- Too many children per family

It was also felt that the fact that these basic rights listed above were not being met contributed to other situations that were impeding the development of young people in the area. These situations include but are not limited to:

- **Migration to Thailand:** In 2012, 61 students in grade 8 and grade 9 dropped out of school. 39 of these students (64%) dropped out to illegally migrate to Thailand for work. While the chances of earning a better wage (albeit with the inherent dangers of illegal migration) can be a preferable option for many young people and their families, what is lost is the opportunity to become active, educated citizens, able to shape major decisions about their own futures.
- **Education system:** Teacher shortage, limited resources and problems of access all pose additional challenges to those young people interested in attending school. Even those who overcome these challenges are seldom encouraged to express their opinions or challenge assumptions within the school environment. The style and quality of education does not support the development of essential life skills such as critical thinking and problem solving.
- **Active citizens:** Young people in rural areas are not used to having an agency in their own development, or the development of their communities, and the suggestion of change can be quite an intimidating prospect. There is no sense that they have the power to change anything in their lives. There is a strong belief that the cycle of poverty is impossible to break.

As many of the issues facing young people in Chanleas Dai are interconnected, it was proposed to introduce a participatory, child-led approach to holistically address some of the key problems. Supporting children's learning and developing youth leadership could potentially be achieved through encouraging young people to address the issues (such as disease and illiteracy) that they and their parents identified as having the greatest impact on their lives. To implement this idea, Child Clubs were established in all villages in Chanleas Dai commune, and welcomed children between the ages of 5 and 15. These Child Clubs were facilitated by adults recruited from Chanleas Dai commune and met under houses for two hours every Sunday.

Child Club methodology

Background to the model

The methodology for the clubs was based on a technique developed by the [Child-to-Child Trust](http://www.child-to-child.org) in the UK. The Child-to-Child Trust promotes child-centered, active learning approaches that engage children on health and development issues.¹ Children then disseminate their learning to other children, their families and their wider communities through participatory research activities. The three key features of this approach are as follows:

6 steps of Child-to-Child methodology

1 – Understanding the problem. The young people are first invited to share and brainstorm issues that affect them, their family or their community. Regularly cited issues include diarrhea, malaria and dengue, road safety, head lice. Once the issue has been agreed on, young people share their experiences on how this has happened to them and their family and how it affects their life.

2 – Finding out more. The club members are encouraged by facilitators to undertake research in their own community. They interview their peers and adult to community members to understand how many of them are also affected by this problem and what it means to them. The young people are also encouraged to make their own observations on how activities in their home community affect or contribute to the issue. They also collect opinions on how this problem can be addressed.

3 – Discussing findings and planning action. Club members bring their research findings to the club and share them. The facilitators encourage them to look for commonalities in what they have found and to think about how that might help them solve the problem. Typically at this point there may be a learning intervention such as facilitators sharing posters or ideas about the causes of diarrhea, and the proven benefits of water filters and hand-washing. The young people learn about these solutions and consider what will be useful for them and their community. They then decide how to take action on what they have learnt.

4 – Taking action. This can involve a drama or a campaign that the young people organize for their community. At times the action might be simple, such as visiting houses to talk about what they have learnt to other adults and children.

5 – Evaluating. The young people examine how effective their actions have been. Has anything changed in their lives? In the lives of their family? What was the result of their activities?

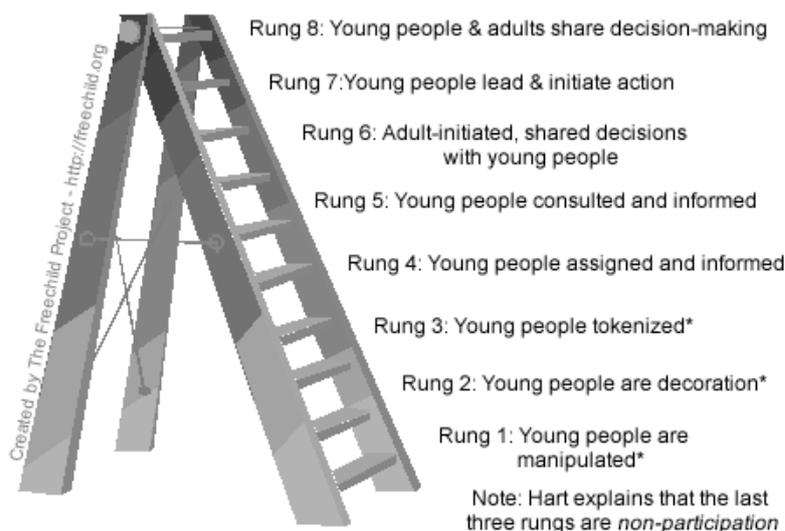
6 – The last step in the process examines how the activity could be improved. The young people are encouraged to think about ways they could have worked together better, or communicated their ideas more effectively.

¹ www.child-to-child.org

Participation

The clubs were run in a participatory manner, inspired by the Ladder of Participation as suggested by Roger Hart:

Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation



Adapted from Hart, R. (1992). *Children's Participation from Tokenism to Citizenship*. Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

Active learning

The Child-to-Child methodology emphasizes the difference between doing an activity and active learning. Active learning is learning which engages and challenges children and young people's thinking using real-life and imaginary situations.² For example – reading a story with children is an activity. Asking questions during the story or talking to the children about how the story is relevant to their life is active learning. Other common active learning techniques include the use of drama, work groups, games-based learning and creative writing. Active learning is effective in building critical thinking and problem solving skills as well as confidence and self-efficacy.

In this way, the club seeks to be as young –people focused as possible. They identify the issues, and, after a facilitated process, they are the ones taking their learnings and solutions to their community.

These clubs were also supplemented with “Life skills camps” which involved a 2-3 day camp with club members using games and activities to promote team work and communication skills.

² Definition sourced from www.educationscotland.org

Topics covered

Topics covered in the clubs in general were raised by the children. Often, these topics would be similar across different clubs as children shared a lot of the same concerns. Popular issues addressed were:

- Hygiene and hand-washing Oral health
- Clean environment (i.e. litter picking around the village)
- Clean drinking water
- Road safety
- Oral hygiene
- Hair hygiene

Many of these topics focused on the issue that children raised that they or their families frequently became ill. Facilitators would then encourage them to think of the root causes of these problems and the main learning points of the topic would develop from there.

Staff recruitment and training

PEPY recruited Child Club facilitators from the local community. This was not only to provide employment and capacity building opportunities to community members, but to provide local role models for the children, and also to build trust between the children and the group leaders. A project manager, with previous strong experience of working with young people in community settings was recruited from Phnom Penh.

Trainings for the Child Club facilitators were an important part of developing the project. The PEPY Team received training from a PEPY manager who had facilitated Child Club programs (using Child-to-Child methodology) for many years, and who had received training directly from The Child-to-Child trust. In addition, the team received a initial week-long training from The Child to Child Trust. The resources from the Child-to-Child Trust were also very useful for conducting refresher trainings and workshops on new ideas or materials.

Challenges

The main challenges the PEPY team faced in implementing the Child Club project were as follows:

Child attendance

Attendance at clubs was often inconsistent. Many children were asked to stay at home to help with their parents in the fields or around the house. Some children left the clubs to go to Thailand, or to stay home and look after other family members because their parents or siblings had gone to Thailand. Rice planting season, harvest season, wedding season, Khmer New Year – all the rhythms of the Cambodian year meant that children would drop in and out of the clubs.

Appropriate meeting space

In the first years of Child Clubs, the clubs were held under people's houses – and willing community members would offer their house for the clubs. After a few years, some community members tired of having the club at their house and asked the clubs to find somewhere else to meet. To solve this problem, PEPY supported the community to construct small shelters which could be used for these and other meetings. However, both meeting under houses and in these shelters was problematic in rainy season as neither provided particularly effective cover from monsoon rain. Some clubs moved into school classrooms to meet, however, this was not viewed by all as an ideal solution as the clubs were focused on learning being done outside of a school environment and it was felt holding the clubs inside classrooms might create a different atmosphere and learning experience for the children.

Capacity of facilitators

PEPY believed it was important to work with people recruited from the local community as Child Club facilitators. However, this meant that training and development was very important, as the Child Club facilitators often had not finished school themselves and had a limited understanding of certain topics. When the Child Clubs tried to address some more advanced topics, this issue became problematic as the children and community members did not necessarily have faith in the facilitators' knowledge and expertise.

Snacks or no snacks

Initially, PEPY provided snacks to the children who attended the clubs. This was a great motivating factor for children to join the clubs. After some time, the PEPY team felt that the snacks were too strong a motivation for children to join, and that the project needed to work harder at communicating the benefits of attendance without snacks. Snacks were then removed from the club budgets. It was a challenge to communicate the reasons behind this to children and community members, and attendance at clubs suffered as a result.

Too empowered?

Many of the PEPY Child Clubs were successful in developing leadership skills in young people, and in encouraging them to take action on issues that affected them. However, this new confidence of the young people was not always seen in a positive light. PEPY received feedback during one project that the parents of club members were worried that their children were becoming "too empowered". PEPY in no way wished to cause inter-generational conflict or distrust and sought to meet this challenge by working on communication skills with Child Club members.

Community ownership

While hiring members of the community to facilitate the clubs was a step towards creating a sense of ownership in the community, the clubs were always seen very much as PEPY clubs. This meant that children and community members were less invested in finding ways to maintain and improve the clubs, as they felt that was PEPY's responsibility. This was also a challenge when it came to managing an effective transition out of the project.

Exit strategy

PEPY Child Clubs were not intended to run forever, but at the beginning of the project there was no fixed idea about how long they would run, and how the clubs would end, or be transitioned. After 5 successful years of running Child Clubs, PEPY's strategic priorities changed and the team felt that Child Clubs couldn't be a part of their new mission and goal as an organization. As such, PEPY conducted a consultation with the community and it was agreed that some clubs would close, and some clubs would be transitioned to be run by young leaders in those communities. PEPY conducted trainings with community members and the young leaders and transitioned the clubs during the process of a year. However, on visiting the clubs one year on, none of the clubs are functional. This is due both to children not attending, and young people not being consistently available (due to school work) to run the clubs. There is no doubt that the children who attended the clubs gained many skills which will be valuable to them in later life (see the impact section below), but it is a shame that PEPY was not able to find a long-term sustainable solution to give more children this opportunity.

Impact

Over 5 years, PEPY ran 15 Child Clubs across 14 villages and worked with nearly 400 children. PEPY observed significant changes both in the young people, and in the communities that they were working with.

	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
Villages	11	14	14	14	13
# of clubs	13	16	15	15	14
# children	325	386	303	280	131
# topics trained	3	6	5	5	6
# of project staff	7	10	9	8	7

Impact - community

With each topic covered by the young people, the facilitators monitored the change in behavior with the young people and their families. Over the 5 years of the project the facilitators noted success with the following topics:

Clean environment: The amount of trash present in the villages decreased. Villages invested in and used trash cans. Families became more aware of the quantity of cash they were generating. Young people encouraged each other not to litter and to take pride in their environment.

Awareness of oral health: Improvement in actual oral health was not monitored as this project was not broad enough in scope to attempt to make changes in the oral health of the community. However, improvements were noted in the fact that families began purchasing toothbrushes and parents and children took up teeth brushing on a regular basis.

Hand-washing: Through observation of community members it was apparent that more families understood the importance of hand-washing and practiced it daily, especially when handling food.

Math and Khmer: As part of the initial PRA it was identified that young children in school were learning, but not fully understanding. To address this, Child Clubs initiated peer-to-peer learning meet-ups. These meet ups were run by children with the aim of supporting each other in their studies and explaining lessons and concepts to each other than that might have struggled to fully grasp in a classroom setting. These meet-ups were successful not only in supporting the young people's learning, but also in developing their communication and leadership skills. Many young people became quite passionate about their role in supporting younger students learn and grow.

Chhunly, a 20 year old High School student who comes from Chanleas Dai village, attended Child Clubs for 4 years commented on the areas where he saw the biggest change in his community:

"The two most important topics that I learnt about in Child Clubs were clean water and clean environment. Good health comes from drinking clear water. If people drink clean water they do not get sick a lot.

If it is clean around one person's house - if their neighbor can see that, then they clean their house too. Then the whole village after a time will be clean, and then another village will see that village and they will clean the same. So in that way Cambodia can be clean.

I learnt about water filters and how to get clean water. My family buy the water filter and I use it every day until now. I did a show to the villages about the water and they came to watch. They learnt and they asked questions. 90% of my village started using water filters.

Before I joined Child Clubs I don't know how to talk to the people in my village. But then I had to meet with them for Child Clubs so I had to be brave. I learnt how to speak in public, not to be rude when speaking to each other. I had to be brave as every club I would have to stand up and speak to other members in the club."

Impact – young people

Vanna, a former teacher at Chanleas Dai primary school commented on the difference in confidence between those children who attended the clubs and those who did not attend:

"Students who go to clubs are more confident at expressing their ideas – especially when working in groups. It's easier for teachers to see when they don't understand as the students express themselves. If you give students an assignment to complete in groups, the students who go to the clubs are more likely to lead those groups."

The biggest indicator of the development of leadership qualities in the young people attending Child Clubs came from an activity outside of the clubs, that happened with no prompting from PEPY. In 2010, a group of young people in Chanleas Dai aged between 12 and 18 decided to start their own voluntary organization. This organization, called Volunteer for Community Development has a mission to fuel sustainable growth in communities. Their tagline is "Creating opportunity for the youth creates a brighter future for all".³

VCD started with 13 members and began to teach English to younger children in Chanleas Dai Commune free of charge. Sayorn, a VCD member comments: *"It is important for young people to speak English and be leaders because that helps them to find a job. Young people in my community want to study at University and get a job. It is more difficult for girls. Girls just stay at home. They get married and their husband gives them some money and they cook and clean. That is what my grandmother always thought but I told her many times that girls can change the world, can change their country. Now my family want me to study and pay for my transport to school. If we could explain to people more about the value of the girl that would be good. We need to encourage girls to study higher and give them opportunities"*

After one year, the VCD team had grown to over 50 volunteers, with community development projects ranging from the English program to gardening and the performing arts. VCD were awarded a small office by the Commune Chief of Chanleas Dai and have established their own website and Facebook page. They also conduct field visits and team bonding activities:

Volunteers for Community Development began at no prompting from NGO or local authority members. It was, and has stayed, a youth-led initiative. However, VCD members cite their experiences with Child Club activities, and the role models of the team who facilitated activities as being their inspiration to begin the organization.

Around the same time that VCD began to form, Young Leader Clubs were introduced into five villages in the commune. These clubs were intended to provide a forum and learning opportunities for those young people who were becoming too old for the topics covered in the Child Clubs. The Young Leader clubs were targeted at young people aged 15-25 and while they didn't follow the Child-to-Child

³ <http://yvcd.wordpress.com/>

methodology in the same manner, they still used participatory techniques to deal with more ideas such as team building and goal setting in a more adult way.

These clubs were not as successful as the Child Clubs as many young people of that age migrate to Thailand, and if not, have greater demands on their time due to school pressure and family responsibility. Club attendance was frequently low in some villages, and some clubs closed entirely due to non-attendance. This project only ran for 2 years, unlike the five years of Child-to-Child.

However, within these two years, while the engagement with the topics covered would not necessarily be deemed a success, there were two clear leaps forward in the leadership capacity of the young people.

Khea's story

Khea, youth club member in Preah Lean village, was asked by her mother stop studying and urged to go to Thailand. As she still wished to study at school, she tried to persuade her mother otherwise, but could not get her agreement. She raised this issue with club members, asking for help. Club members in Preah Lean village joined together to explain to Khea's mother the benefits of continuing to study and asked for Khea to be allowed to continue to study. Finally, the mother acknowledged the commitment of her daughter and her daughter's friends, and allowed Khea to continue to study, but, as a compromise, suggested that during vacation periods, she should go to Thailand with her mother. Khea, happy with this decision, is still committed to her studies.

Run Youth Club

In Run village, after about a year of operation, the youth club did not need to be facilitated by an adult. The students created their own action plan for the year, setting out what they want to learn and achieve together. They then asked support from the facilitator for information, resources, and training. They developed their own vision and mission:

Vision: that older generations will see the potential of young people

Mission: to encourage and promote thinking and leadership skills in young people

Somphois, one of the leaders in Run Youth Club talks about the club plans for Khmer New Year in 2013:

"We have many plans. We want to put up posters about the importance of keeping a clean environment in the pagoda before Khmer New Year to encourage people to put rubbish in their bins at that time. During Khmer New Year we will play traditional Khmer games to raise awareness of these traditions and also develop good communication between young people. We will take pictures of our activity and show them to people in our village so they understand."

These welcome outcomes were not anticipated in the design of the project, but clearly demonstrate a growth in the ability of young people as leaders over the last few years. However, the main challenge for the sustainability of VCD and Run Youth Club was the available time of the young people. Once the majority of the students were at high school age, they were either likely to migrate to Thailand, or would be studying at high school with very little time for other activities (due to extra classes at high school some students have classes for up to 60 hours a week, and the school is at least 7km away from their village). When PEPY transitioned away from the Child Club program, it meant there were no new younger children with enough time available to keep the clubs going. As a result, currently neither VCD, now Run Youth Club have regular meetings as the young people are in the main busy with their studies.

Lessons learned

Community Advocacy

In the later years of the project, PEPY Team members created slideshow presentations and videos of activities in the clubs, and showed them on “movie nights” in villages. While this required PEPY to use their own projector and generator, it made a great difference in helping parents understand the benefits of their children attending the clubs. More activities like this could have been designed so that parents understood the point of their children attending the Child Clubs, and were more invested in the clubs’ development.

Timeframe

PEPY Child Clubs, once launched, ran indefinitely. While there was a registration period every year, there was no clear progression for the children, and no set time or age for a child to “finish” at the clubs. This results in many children returning year after year to the clubs, and repeating the same topics – many of which were now too young for them. While the return of these students was welcomed for their engagement, the clubs no longer provided enough stimulation for them, and the vast difference in the age of the children attending could make facilitation challenging. The PEPY team would recommend Child Clubs being a one or two year program, which children sign up for and complete. This would give more structure to the clubs, and make facilitation easier as the children would be at more of a similar level.

Exit strategy

PEPY began Child Clubs without a clear exit strategy, and without the community having any particular expectation that the Clubs could be a community-led project. This meant that when PEPY needed to transition out of the project, it was not easy to find a way to keep the clubs going, as the community didn’t see the clubs as their responsibility. If PEPY were to implement this project again, with long-term sustainability as a key goal, the team would consider the following approach:

- Investigate how PEPY could implementing the project in a way that supports systems which are already exist (but perhaps not functioning well) instead of creating new initiatives. This way it will be easier to secure community involvement.
- Frame the project as a community initiative that is being supported by PEPY in the initial years. Give a set time frame for handover (which can of course be revised) that is clearly communicated to the community.
- Give at least a 2 year handover period to support the community in taking over the project. During the transition period PEPY can also see how feasible it is for the community to implement the project and suggest changes where necessary.

It’s not school!

It was very important to differentiate the clubs from the kind of learning children participated in at school. For children to have the confidence to take ownership of problems and take action, traditional school-like hierarchies of teacher-student must be lost, and club-time referred to as “clubs” or “meetings” rather than “class”. Active learning strategies were very important so that children did not feel they were simply receiving information, as in school. This was also important for the location of the clubs. While empty school classrooms provided dry, safe spaces for clubs, they weren’t an ideal location due to the classroom atmosphere. Clubs held in villages worked the best.

Scale of activities

Small, specific projects worked best. Projects that dealt with complex issues were difficult for both children and facilitators, and were particularly difficult for children to communicate their ideas back to their parents and family members. Projects that were targeted on a single, simple issue were much more manageable and saw the greatest success in terms of uptake in the community.

Research component

Stage 2 of the six-step process is “finding out more”. This involved the children conducting research in their community. PEPY found that the children and facilitators needed significant help with this part of the program. There was a tendency to collect data that wasn’t particularly meaningful, and effective analysis of the data was particularly challenging. When done well, this stage was a clear way to promote critical thinking. When done less well, it was enjoyable game for the students, but didn’t really develop their skills.

Retreats and group events

For a few years, PEPY held “Life Skills” training camps in August, prior to the new year of Child Clubs. Children were invited to stay away from home and participate in 2-3 days of games and activities designed to promote team-building and self-confidence. At various times during the year the Clubs would visit other Clubs in the area to learn from each other and share their ideas. These events were always successful in building confidence in the young people, and in motivating them to attend the clubs and engage with the idea of taking action.

Training of staff

It was crucial that the facilitators truly believe that the children had the capability to make change and be active in their community. In some ways the success of the clubs was as much about changing the minds of the adults, as inspiring children to take action. In addition, facilitators also need enough information and resources to be able to help orient students to topics and ensure they are spreading correct information. For example if it is health focused they need correct health info, if it is a topic on domestic violence the facilitators need extensive training on how to deal with this. One particularly useful technique for training and developing the skill of Child Club facilitators was peer observation. Facilitators would visit each other’s clubs and watch and learn from their different techniques. This not only gave facilitators confidence to give and receive feedback but also dramatically improved facilitation and the amount of preparation that the facilitators did.

Documentation

One of PEPY’s biggest lessons learned during this period was inadequate documentation and communication of outcomes. The PEPY team worked very closely with the community and young people, and so it was very clear to them what changes were happening. However, without robust data and indicators often these changes were difficult to measure and even more difficult to relate to PEPY activities. As PEPY constantly informally reviewed and examined the effectiveness of the project and this lack of documentation did not necessarily effect the overall impact of the project, but was more of an organizational challenge in terms of being able to share experiences with other organizations, and potentially secure funding for future activities.

Having said that, Child Clubs and Youth Clubs weren’t started to generate organizations like VCD, or intended to result in young people taking full ownership of the clubs. They were started to promote

leadership and critical thinking and as a holistic approach to a variety of development issues within Chanleas Dai. However, the formation of VCD and the evolution of clubs like Run were certainly the greatest successes of the project. Yet, these outcomes are very difficult to design for as their whole success is in the fact that they are youth-initiated. It is important to recognize that in projects working with young people in this way that the outcomes might not always be obvious. They may manifest in different ways and bring different benefits to the community that originally intended. It is difficult in the development world to design projects with this degree of flexibility. The “see what happens” approach is not generally applauded. The outcomes of this project suggest that perhaps it is important to promote the idea that projects dealing with outcomes that can be difficult to quantify – such as leadership – should be perceived as more open-ended. In trying to plan outcomes, we forget that sometimes the best outcomes can’t be planned. The challenge is to design projects that are transparent and accountable but can also allow for and delight in the unexpected.

