

QSA Notes

Preserving traditional handicrafts, providing skills, work and incomes to poor women in rural Cambodia

FLEUR BAYLEY | QSA PROJECT MANAGER



Producers at the Centre's production facility in Pursat (one of whom lives with a disability) hand-weave a grass mat using traditional designs, colours and materials. They produce one metre of mat per day SOURCE: QSA

(Inset) Grass harvested sustainably in local communities in storage ready for use in grass mat weaving SOURCE: QSA

I have recently been inspecting our projects in Cambodia, including the Bunrany Hun Sen Development Centre. Since its establishment in 2004, Bunrany Hun Sen Development Center has provided skills training, employment and a source of income to hundreds of people (primarily women) in and around the regional city of Pursat in northeast Cambodia. It focuses on increasing women's skills and empowering them to establish businesses and earn income to supplement rural-based activities, particularly for those women with little or no land.

This organisation is unique. As well as helping the community, it is also keeping alive traditional handicrafts skills and techniques.

History of the Centre and QSA's involvement

The Centre was established in 2004 when Prime Minister Mr Hun Sen

funded the construction of a vocational training centre in Pursat. QSA supported the Centre's vocational training activities, but falling student numbers due to competition from nearby factories prompted a restructure in 2016. The Centre then focussed on commercial activities, including production and sale of handicrafts, while continuing handicraft skills training at the production facility and in surrounding rural areas.

What makes this Centre unique?

- It's one of the last organisations in Cambodia teaching traditional handicraft techniques
- Traditional designs and colours from the Pursat area are incorporated into modern and traditional products
- Women from poor rural families are empowered to develop skills, obtain work or establish their own businesses

- Raw materials including bamboo, grass and rattan cane are harvested sustainably in local communities, and natural plant dyes are used to colour

Overview of operations

During the current project year, the Centre provides permanent employment for 17 skilled handicraft producers working in sewing, fabric weaving, cane and grass mat weaving, food processing and computing, with a further four working from home. This year, 91 students will receive vocational training, 43 at the Center and 48 farmers in rural areas.

Each year, a new village is identified with commune and village leaders, where people are offered training in basket weaving and palm sugar production. The villages selected for these courses all have raw materials available close by that can be sustainably harvested. Trainees also receive small



The only weaving machine of this type in Cambodia having been modified to suit this purpose at the Center SOURCE: QSA



Some of the clothing made from handwoven fabric on display at the Centre in Pursat



A hand weaving machine used to weave kroma SOURCE: QSA



A village-based palm sugar operation that sells to the Centre SOURCE: QSA

business training to set up a small business in their village or home and sell their output to the Centre, earning a regular income to help support their families.

A retail facility at the Centre and a small roadside shop nearby sell a wide range of handicrafts. In addition, customers can order online and also visit the Centre to view the handicraft production.

The impact of COVID

COVID-19 seriously impacted the Centre's operations. With international borders shut and restrictions on domestic travel, gatherings and events, orders for

the Center's handicrafts were drastically reduced. This forced a slight reduction in employment, but most staff were retained. However, the amount of produce sourced from rural producers for sale at the Centre was cut almost completely for several months, and vocational training was halted.

What does the future hold?

Sales have picked up in the past few months, and the future looks more promising.

The technical expertise required for production and handicraft skills training is well developed. However,

the Centre has limited capabilities in product design, marketing and sales. There is a recognised need to focus on online marketing, develop new products and designs, and adopt new working methods, including increasing salaries to retain skilled workers. QSA is now working with the Center, in conjunction with a local university, to prepare a new business and marketing strategy to help secure its future.

This project is supported by the Australian Government through the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP)

QSA is a member of the Australian Council for International Development and is a signatory to the ACFID Code of Conduct. The purpose of QSA is to express in a practical way the concern of Australian Quakers for the building of a more peaceful, equitable, just and compassionate world. To this end QSA works with communities in need to improve their quality of life with projects which are culturally sensitive, as well as being economically and environmentally appropriate and sustainable.

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Unit 14, 43-53 Bridge Road, Stanmore, NSW 2048 Australia • administration@qsa.org.au

PHONE+61 2 8054 0400 • FAX: +61 2 9225 9241 • ABN 35 989 797 918



ACFID
MEMBER