



**National University of Singapore Muslim Society Youth Expedition Project
Project A.B.C: A Better Cambodia
Official Report**

Introduction

We are a group of 21 National University of Singapore students representing the Muslim Society in its annual Youth Expedition Programme (YEP). This year we have chosen Hope Villages as our beneficiary and have since spent 10 days in Kampong Speu conducting service-related activities.

During the trip we were accompanied by our guide Yusuf, two translators Nawawi and Shafi'e, as well as two interns, Latifa and Michael. Each day our team would divide into three groups to conduct the following activities:

1. House Building
2. Survey
3. Teaching English and Hygiene

In addition to the three main activities, we also engaged in a few side projects:

1. Operation F.U.N
2. Movie Screening for Students
3. Love Sneakers

In this report we will be evaluating the effectiveness of our efforts through each activity as well as siting observation that we feel could help future volunteers of Hope Villages.

Objectives

Main Activities

1. House Building

Our aim was to assist in building two houses from its foundation stage to a complete cement building. We have allocated 6 people per house each day which was the recommended number by Ann Phua.

2. Survey

This survey aims to interview all 76 families living in Kampong Speu. This is to evaluate their current living conditions as well as to gather official demographics on each household and its occupants. It also offers a platform for the villagers to voice any concerns they have regarding the project.

3. Teaching English and Hygiene to students

We aim to complete the activity book provided by Hope Villages. Before our expedition, we were told that although the school have activity books, it is not being fully utilized. Therefore our aim was to make the activity books relevant again by making the lessons more engaging based on the activity books.

As for Hygiene we intend to teach the children the proper steps to wash their hands and to inculcate this habit so that they perform it before every meal.

Ad-hoc Activities

1. Operation F.U.N

Operation F.U.N will be a whole day event which aims to cover a few aspects of our project. It will be a day where:

- a) Families will come to the Education Resource Centre to collect their welfare packs
- b) Children will have fun through sporting and cultural activities
- c) Children will participate in a mass clean-up session where we will revise with them where and how they should dispose their waste

2. Movie Screening for Students

We aim to screen a movie to the students for them to enjoy after a week of back-to-back activities. This movie will be in English.

3. Love Sneakers

We aim to work with Running Lab and help them in the process of the collecting used shoes in Singapore. We will then distribute these collected shoes to the villagers of Kampong Speu. Through this collection and distribution, we hope to provide everyone in Kampong Speu a pair of shoes which they could use for their daily activities as well as for safety reasons.

Execution and Evaluation

Main Activities

1. House Building

We did not achieve our objective of seeing through the building of two houses from start to finish. This is because while we were there, the main contractors worked on different houses concurrently. Instead of channelling our efforts to two houses alone, we went where help was needed and through this we got to help in the building of several houses. Since we were not skilled enough to lay bricks, we primarily helped in speeding up the process by carrying rocks and soil for the foundation of the houses.

Even though we did not manage to see the completion of two houses like we expected, we felt that this experience was just as enriching, if not more. This is because it gave us the opportunity to bond and interact with more families rather than just the intended two families. We also noticed that every house we went to, the residents were very welcoming and constantly showed their gratitude which made the experience even more worthwhile.

2. Survey

We did achieve the objective of the survey which was to collect demographic information and to be a platform for villagers to voice their concerns. We completed almost all the houses except the ones that seemed to be unoccupied.

Through the survey we managed to identify who lived in each house, hear their stories to better understand them as well as identified what the villagers felt were their greatest needs. This would help future volunteers tailor their efforts accordingly to suit the specific needs of the villagers and avoid wasted efforts in the future if a group of volunteers decide to embark on a project that is unnecessary for the villagers.

In addition to that, we became a platform for the villagers to voice out their concerns. Through the survey, we managed to identify a misunderstanding the villagers had regarding the amount they had to pay and this caused concern among the villagers. This could be due to the villagers not being educated enough to know what they will be paying for. Also, we spotted a trend that shows the villagers were just following the actions taken by their neighbours and this highlights the great issue of lack of understanding.

Following this, we informed Ann and she managed to clarify the issue during her trip to Kampong Speu.

Our team felt that this was one of the most beneficial aspects of our project both for us and the villagers. Through this survey we managed to identify some common trends in the survey answer in terms of what they need and this could hopefully direct future volunteers to know which area to help them out in. It was also a highlight for most of us because we got to interact with the villagers and really get to know them as individuals, understanding their hardships and hearing their stories which we found very interesting. We urge for future volunteers to take the time to talk to each household from time to time to ensure the all is well with the village and to understand the people they are helping through their service.

3. Teaching English and Hygiene

As for the teaching English, we felt that we did not fulfil our objective of reiterating the use of the activity books. When we first arrived, we realised that the children did not have the textbooks with them. We were taken aback initially but we improvised accordingly.

Before the trip, we based our lesson plans on the activity books. So while we were there, we just carried on with our lessons without the books. While we may not have fulfilled our objective of emphasizing the use of the books, we still felt that we had imparted some useful knowledge. The fact that our lesson plans were based on the books, this will make it easier for the students when they have their books and attempt them. Also, during the classes we made

use of flashcards and the students were very receptive towards it. Hence we decided to leave behind the flashcards with the teacher for her to use in the future.

As for the older students, we underestimated their English speaking abilities with our activities. So instead of carrying on with our lesson plan for some of the lessons, we improvised and taught them conversational English. This was one of the more satisfying lessons because we noticed that gradually more and more students tried to converse with us in English, making use of what they had learnt. This was remarkably satisfying as we witnessed the students using what they've learned.

We also ensured the kids had a lot of fun through our Arts and Craft session which we inculcated into the English lessons. These sessions included balloon- and kite-making, tying friendship bands and more. Throughout the activities, they did look like they were having lots of fun, and it was one of the things that impacted all of us greatly. The fact that the room used for Arts and Craft was constantly packed, shows how highly popular the activity was.

As for the hygiene lessons we did teach them the proper steps to washing their hands. For the older kids we taught them how to wash their hands using the full 7 recommended steps. Whereas for the smaller kids we taught them a simplified 4-steps version. Most of them caught the steps very fast and managed to do it when we had our 'mini test'. However, it seems that they will only do it when we remind them to and it did not become a habit like we wanted it to be. We feel that this habit should be continuously emphasized by future volunteers in order for it to become a habit for the children. Now that they know the steps, it is a matter of repetition before it becomes a habit. Maybe the teachers could be asked to remind them every day and make it part of their daily activity, since we are no longer there to remind them to do so.

Overall, even though we were quite disappointed for not being able to achieve our full objective, we hope that we have imparted valuable skills and knowledge which are beneficial to them. This is because the children were a big part of the trip for most of us and they really made a great impact on us. We can see that most of them were eager to learn and were so genuine during classes. We hope that what we did for them in those 14 days was enough to repay them for the experiences they have given us.

Side Activities

4. Operation F.U.N

Operation F.U.N managed to achieve most of its objectives. As for the welfare pack distribution, there was a great turnout and the whole process was very systematic and organized. We could not have done it without the help of the village chief, Mr Anh.

The students also did have fun through the cultural activities and sports day. It was hard to maintain organization for the two activities, so in the end it was a free and easy session where the kids chose the activities they wanted to partake in. It was great to see active participation on both the sports and cultural side.

As for the clean-up session, the kids were about to leave so we had to rush this segment. We taught the kids how to collect the litter but we did not have the time to show them the proper disposal method. We are quite disappointed that we did not manage to fulfil this objective due to the circumstances that we were in. We hope that the next batch of volunteers could try and allocate a bit more time to this cause. The kids were receptive to the litter collection so we think that teaching the next step of disposal should not be a problem.

5. Movie Screening for Students

We screened Mr Bean for the children and they enjoyed it. However, I think for future reference, we should select the episodes that are more relatable to the students. This is because we noticed that they found certain episodes funnier than others and the ones that were funny to them were generally the episodes they could relate to.

Seeing how the children enjoyed this segment, we brought the projector to the Muslim Village that has been cooking for us over the course of 10 days and played Mr Bean as well and invited the whole village to watch as a form of gratitude on our part. They seemed to enjoy it very much.

6. Love Sneakers

Before the trip we helped Running Lab in two aspects:

- a) Helping them man the Love Sneakers promotional booth that helped raise funds for the sea freight.
- b) Sort the shoes according to sizes for easy distribution in Kampong Speu

Due to the delayed arrival of the shoes, we did not manage to distribute them during our stay there. However, we still feel that it was a good thing we paired with them to bring the shoes to Kampong Speu. On the last day, some of us gave some of our own clothes and shoes to the children and they were genuinely happy and grateful for them. Knowing that each of them would be receiving shoes that are very much needed as some were barefooted, made the effort of manning the booth and packing the shoes completely worth it.

Notable Experiences

1. Railway Village

The railway village experience was sort of our first act at interacting with the Cambodians. We visited the railway on the first day and we think it is a good way to kick-start the expedition. This is because interacting with these playful, genuinely pleasant children really dissolves all the apprehension and hesitation we had communicating with the Cambodians in general. Our task was definitely made easier by the fact that the children were so open to playing with us. An additional note for future volunteers would be that the kids seem to love having pictures taken of them and seeing these pictures afterwards. It was something that seemed really simple to us and something that we did on a daily basis, but it made all the difference to these children and we were so happy that this simple act could bring them so much joy and amusement.

The railway village was also the setting that most of the Kampong Speu villagers came from. So it gave us a better understanding when they were describing their previous homes and we somewhat understood their hardship better.

But a thing to note is that even though they lived in such simple conditions, they seemed happy. This made the things we worry about at home seem small and petty. We realise that we should take a page from their book by learning to be happy with what we have.

2. Bridge Building

One of the more significant quantifiable impact our team had on the village was the building of a bridge. When we had trouble getting to the Education Resource Centre due to the rain, the villagers decided to fill a pit so as to construct a bridge for the bus to pass through. Instinctively, the team got off the bus and helped the villagers construct it. All in all, the bridge can be said to symbolize our trip experience where the villagers' and us mutually help one another in any way we can and we hope we have done quite enough to bridge the needs of the locals to the future help that would be given by future volunteers of the area.

3. Agriculture

On one of the last days of the service we got the opportunity to learn more about the process of agriculture. When we first arrived at the paddy field there was only one lady working there. She told us that we could help plant the rice seeds so some of us would dig the plot and some of us would plant the seeds. However, we realise there were too little things to do and too many people. So we had to work in shifts. To us, this experience was more of a learning process, being exposed to how farming was done rather than a service to them. This is because it was really hard to catch how they organized the farm plot. There were hardly any visible markers and they planted the seeds diagonally rather than vertically. So there was some minor confusion on which groups should plant where. So we felt more like an imposition rather than of actual help.

However, all in all, it was a good experience and it made us respect the villagers even more. They work so hard as individuals and they are skilled in what they do. From this experience, we acknowledge that farming is not an easy task and the fact that they do it for sustenance and commercial use shows their ambition to be self-sustaining individuals.

4. Landfill

Our experience at the landfill was truly an eye opening one. All of us have never been to an actual landfill. For some of us, our perception of what a landfill was came from our geography textbooks and their countless case studies on

it. However, all that definitely did not prepare us for the experience. The first thing you notice when you get off the bus is the smell. This was followed by the swarm of flies which entered our bus. We were then overwhelmed by the sight of the massive landfill.

We distributed bread that we bought earlier and the people at the landfill, which included children and adults, came to collect it in an orderly manner. We did not buy enough, but we could see that the people there were willing to share with one another and we could feel that there was a close-knit sense of community among the people there.

All in all, this eye-opening experience has definitely impacted all of us. So much so that we have pledged to change certain wasteful habits of ours. This experience further reiterates how blessed we are and many of us saw this experience as a stepping stone to further projects and involvements.

Conclusion

Even though we did not fulfil everything we intended to, many of us agreed that we received more than we expected. There were many learning points and opportunities, such as learning to interact with people of totally different backgrounds and culture, to step up and take initiative when change comes around and also to adapt to a changed living environment. One of the most amazing things was that despite the language barrier, it did not hinder our ability to interact with the people of Kampong Speu, with and without the help of our translators.

Furthermore, the villagers were all very supportive of our efforts and always seemed concerned over our welfare. They were also very kind and welcoming, providing us with many fresh fruits like watermelons, jackfruits, sugar cane and more. We are indeed really thankful for the kind hospitality that they gave us.

As much as we tried to help them and as much as it may seem like the villagers were the ones solely benefitting, we felt like we benefitted more from experience. Materials aside, we gained humility, awareness and many of us reflected on the experience as a life changing experience. Not to sound too cliché, but many of us were truly impacted by the simple lives of these people and we cannot help but look up to these people.