

# Lifestyle

## Cambodia's first social work grads ready to take the reins



Soon-to-be graduates of Cambodia's first social work program, run by the Royal University of Phnom Penh, prepare to enter a sector dominated by foreign NGO workers. PHOTO SUPPLIED

Calvin Yang

**A**FTER witnessing his fellow Cambodians endure poverty, child exploitation, domestic violence and discrimination for years, 24-year-old Hun Chhaileng wasn't going to let each day pass without doing something about it.

"It's not easy for Cambodians to live under these difficult circumstances," he says. "I wanted to do something to help them find solutions to their problems."

Chhaileng graduated from high school four years ago and chose to pursue a university education in social work – completely uncharted territory for local undergraduates and one dominated by foreign aid workers and volunteers.

Next month, Chhaileng will be among the pioneer batch of students who graduate from the Social Work Baccalaureate degree program at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), the first college-level social work course in Cambodia.

"This is the first time such a program has been offered in Cambodia," says Dalin Meng, head of the department of social work.

"There is a lot of need here in Cambodia, and this course plays a crucial role in answer-

ing to that need." To commemorate the completion of their course, the students have been invited to a formal ceremony early next year at which the top students of the program will receive their official certificates from Prime Minister Hun Sen.

Cambodia, a country ravaged by decades of civil conflict and mistrust, is slowly moving out of the shadows of its disturbing past with the assistance of about 2,000 local and international non-government organisations.

"After Pol Pot's reign, there were issues of poverty, street children, domestic violence and more, but we didn't have the knowledge or skill to help our own people," Meng says.

"Even now, there are a lot of people here who face such problems."

For two decades, myriad NGOs have come to Cambodia to work on everything from child rights and protection, HIV/AIDS and mental-health issues to disabilities and youth rehabilitation.

Some experts, however, feel that the help offered by international organisations and agencies is only short-term when it comes to the future of Cambodia.

Today, the country is populated by young people who have not experienced war

but are still living with its consequences. "Some NGOs are handing out help to the needy rather than teaching them skills, which is more long-term," says Meng, who has a graduate degree in social work from the University of Washington in the United States, a close partner that has helped to establish the program.

"We are trying to put in place a more sustainable approach to social work in Cambodia, and this program is a good way to let young Khmers take charge of their own country."

As Cambodia transits from reliance on foreign aid to locals working on the ground, advocates and aid workers hope the local angle will change its ability to address the issues that have plagued the Kingdom for decades.

"It's a very exciting time for social services in Cambodia with this first round of graduates entering the workplace," says Rebekah Kofoed, a social work technical adviser at Friends International.

"Having Khmer social work graduates on the ground will balance well-developed field practice with theory that will provide strengthened services to beneficiaries.

"This is an important step in the overall positive development of Cambodia."

The four-year course, which began in September, 2008, was specially designed as a practical, hands-on program to prepare its students for work at local and international organisations as well as in public agencies.

"This program provides our students with a more participatory learning environment instead of just sitting in lectures or reading their textbooks," says Meng, a lecturer specialising in psychological trauma and counselling.

"We hope this will help students to learn more, explore more and experience more."

The professional degree, which emphasises field learning as a key component, allows students to be directly exposed to the situation on the ground through practicums during their second and third year, as well as a semester-long internship in their final year.

With close to 40 partnering organisations including UNICEF, Maryknoll, Transcultural Psycho-social Organisation and First Step, the undergraduates, who come from 10 provinces, are offered a broad range of opportunities in every facet of community living, from community-based organisations and hospitals to government agencies and NGOs.

"The placements allow us to apply what we have learnt in class through the different areas of social work," says student Hun Sinoun.

"With all the experiences I have gained through different placements, I am confident of finding a good job."

According to the department, five of the 22 graduating social-work students have already received permanent job offers from various NGOs and government agencies in Phnom Penh.

"In a few years, I think many NGOs here will be localised, so they can become more sustainable for the long term," Meng says.

The social-work course, which has gained popularity with high-school students keen to enrol at university, is being adapted into a part-time program in addition to short-course certifications to cope with the demand for long-term aid workers.

"If we take a look at the situation in Cambodia today, we can see that even though it's not perfect, some things have changed," Sinoun, a former intern with the Advocacy and Policy Institute, says.

"I strongly believe that one day, Cambodia will be a great society in which everyone can help both themselves and their country." ■

### Snapshots

#### Highest US court rules on censorship policies

THE US Supreme Court on Thursday ruled against a government crackdown on broadcast profanity and nudity, saying the Federal Communications Commission had not given fair notice of its policy change in three high-profile incidents. The unanimous high court ruling, written by Justice Anthony Kennedy, declared that the FCC's standards were vague as applied to the broadcasts at issue in the case. Under the policy, which dates from 2001 and was amended in 2004, broadcasters can be fined for airing a single profanity blurted out on a live show or for brief nudity. Government lawyers said it covered the "F-word" and the "S-word" denoting "sexual or excretory activities" respectively. REUTERS

#### Disney studio features first female heroine

PIXAR has brought to life cars, fish, rats and monsters, but *Brave* is the animated studio's first film built around a feisty female. *Brave*, opening in US theatres on Friday, is the tale of a young, red-headed Scottish archer named Merida who decides to defy her mother, break with tradition and do her own thing. When a witch grants Merida an ill-fated wish and turns her mother into a bear, the girl must gather all her resources to bring her family back together. REUTERS

#### Airline giants turn to non-ticket extras

BIG airlines struggling to maintain profits in the face of stiff competition and rising fuel bills are increasingly looking at sales of non-ticket extras as a way to boost earnings without harming their reputations or alienating customers. Low-cost pioneers such as US carrier Southwest Airlines and Irish group Ryanair have been cashing in on such alternative or ancillary revenues since their advent, pushing sales of everything from teddy bears to train tickets, bacon sandwiches to baggage charges. A recent Amadeus and IdeaWorks report estimates traditional airlines generate between five and 10 per cent of their total sales from ancillary revenues. REUTERS

#### International stars join to protest Arctic drilling

ONE hundred celebrities backed a Greenpeace campaign against oil drilling and unsustainable fishing in the Arctic last week, as oil giant Shell prepared to begin exploratory drilling in the region. Paul McCartney, actor Robert Redford and British entrepreneur Richard Branson were among the celebrities demanding that the uninhabited region around the North Pole be protected from pollution, the environmental group Greenpeace said. REUTERS