

WHY WE NEED TO BUILD A BRIDGE

18 April 2006



I may have mentioned in previous emails the desperate need to build a bridge to enable better access in and out of our village. One of the problems that is keeping our village stuck in the poverty trap is their remoteness. This is not remoteness caused by distance, rather by inaccessibility.

A few days ago we had a meeting with the village and commune chiefs to discuss the problem of the bridge. They are all more than happy for us to build the bridge and are very keen to help, though they cannot help with money. Everyone involved agrees that we need to get started straight after the Cambodian new year (which is right now) for two reasons.



1 - It is the driest time of year, and

2 - its just before the rice season. Once the rice season starts the people won't be able to afford to spare the time to help build the bridge.

We are in the process of finding someone with the right knowledge to “head up” the team. We hope to find someone who knows how to build a bridge and who can tell us what materials, etc, are needed. We will have to pay this person and we will pay for all the materials.

We then plan to have the villagers supply the labour. We will have to pay them, either a little bit of cash (equivalent to what they would earn for a day's labouring on rice fields or on the construction sites), or with rice – perhaps with support from the World Food Program (who might provide the rice).


We all like to donate money to causes that emotionally move us, such as a child needing an operation, or a destitute family needing farming materials, or a child needing books, uniform and bicycle for school, etc.

However, it's possible that a project like building a bridge for a village is overlooked. Though, when the village is extremely poor and isolated, supporting (with a financial donation) the building of a bridge can lead to the transformation of the lives of each and every family within that village. I hope the following points illustrate the importance of this bridge building project and how essential it is to the survival of the families that live within the Prasat Char village:

WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT TO BUILD A BRIDGE?


- **Basic safety** – the current bridge is extremely dangerous. We had one driver recently fall into the water as his motorbike toppled over. Apparently, many people (and their loaded vehicles) have fallen off the bridge into the water.
- **Many of the young people from our village and surrounding villages need the bridge to get to Siem Reap for work.** They ride their bicycles one hour each way in order to work on construction sites, for which they are paid \$1.25 per day. We have conducted a survey and approximately 400 people use the bridge each day.



- There is a small English school being built on the “more prosperous” side of the bridge. With a decent and safe bridge the **children from our village will be able to attend this school**. (Being able to speak English is an **absolute necessity** to get a decent job in Cambodia.)
- **Traders will be able to get IN to this now isolated village**. For instance just the other day when we were having a meeting at the bridge I watched a scrap plastic trader ride up to the bridge, ponder if he could cross it, decide that he couldn't, so he simply turned around and went back the way he had come. This naturally, further isolates the villagers from accessing products and services. 
- **The nearby villages that don't suffer from the difficult access that Prasat Char village has, are much more prosperous**. For the villagers to be able to sell more vegetables that we get them to grow, and before long the piglets, we really need to give them safe access in and out to Siem Reap and the markets.
 - The rickety bridge creates a barrier to all other services that they need but don't access for example **medical and health care**. (One day we literally had to walk several kilometers with a sick man on a stretcher in order to get him to an ambulance.)

The following are quotes from a book on Cambodian development issues. While the quotes are specifically referring to a road, the same would apply to a bridge as its all about accessibility.

“improvements from road construction have enabled villagers to obtain higher farm-gate prices by reducing transportation costs and increasing competition among merchants who come to the village to buy their products. Those villagers who produce more have been able to obtain more benefits. The improved roads have also opened up new markets for goods produced in the village, thereby stimulating more local income generating activities.



.... The new road opened up a market for cash crops and many villagers started to grow watermelons in the dry season.”

WHY DON'T THE AUTHORITIES BUILD THE BRIDGE?

Sovanne and I had a meeting with the Chief of the Provincial Department of Rural Development in order to get advice on what our options were with regard to the bridge.

I had been hoping to get the authorities to build the bridge or at least contribute to it, but after our meeting with the Rural Development Chief we realised this was not going to happen. Each village is part of a commune made up of several villages. The commune gets allocated a budget each year for infrastructure projects. Our commune was only allocated a total of US\$9,500.00 for this year which is clearly woefully inadequate.

So please, if you can help us with any amount at all it would be greatly appreciated. Options for donating are below:

If you are in Australia you can also send cheques to my Mother who can deposit them on your behalf. Please let me know if you would like to do this and I can let you know the details.

Thank you so very much for your time, care and compassion,
Deborah Groves
Helping Hands