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## INITIATIVES AIMED AT REDUCING POVERTY WITH SPORT: A CASE IN CAMBODIA

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### Abstract

The Homeless World Cup (HWC) is an annual event for homeless people in which almost 600 homeless players sent by national partners from over 60 countries participate. These national partners are currently conducting daily activities in 420 venues worldwide. Happy Football Cambodia Australia (HFCA) is an organization that has been conducting futsal activities in the Cambodian capital city, Phnom Penh, since 2005. It offers weekly futsal trainings to Cambodian youth, aged from 8–24 years, who are sent from several youth support NGOs and orphanage centres. We conducted face-to-face interviews and participant observations from October 2015 to November 2017 with 18 HFCA-related persons, including four staff members from collaborative NGOs and ex-players of HFCA.

From these interviews, we found that almost all of the ex-HWC players had found learning or working opportunities spontaneously, while a few faced difficult life situations. HFCA has started new programmes to increase their commitment to the issues involved: 1) creation of women's teams, 2) holding of the Reunion Cup for ex-players, and 3) participation in a local football league. These new trials of HFCA are closely related to football/ futsal, and play a significant role in building trust in and improving the expertise of the HFCA's specialties. In the recent Cambodian society, especially in Phnom Penh, demands for football players and coaches have increased because of an overall boom in the sport. Many companies have football clubs and recruit new staff members, although their levels of expertise in football vary. A few ex-HWC players have found jobs as coaches, players, or even as company staff members due to their experience in the HWC. Thus, the significance of HWC seems to have expanded, as seen from this recent trend in Cambodian society as well as HFCA's activities.

Key words: sport and poverty; Homeless World Cup; futsal; Cambodia

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## 1. Introduction

Although we cannot say that sport may reduce or eradicate poverty, there is an international futsal event which aims to do this. The Homeless World Cup (HWC) is an annual futsal event that has been held in various countries since 2003. The HWC Foundation states, “Our vision is for a world without homelessness. Our mission is to use football to support and inspire people who are homeless to change their own lives.”<sup>2)</sup> More than 500 homeless people from over 60 countries have participated each year.

There are associated organizations in each country, which have experience in working with some issues concerning poverty and homelessness, known as National Partners (NPs). Their missions vary, such as providing support for homeless people, helping socially vulnerable groups, or offering educational opportunities for youth and so on. Some NPs have futsal related activities as a part of their actions and the others do so just to send a team to the HWC.

This study focused on a Cambodian NP, Happy Football Cambodia Australia (HFCA). The author attempts to verify the expected role of sport, and the concrete outcomes of the HFCA’s activities in the context of poverty reduction in recent Cambodia. Furthermore, if the concrete outcomes of HFCA’s activities can be confirmed, the organizational characteristics of the HFCA that might have secured these outcomes should also be investigated.

## 2. Background of the research

### 2.1. *What is the Homeless World Cup?*

People can participate in the HWC if: they are over 16 years of age, have not participated in the past HWC events, and have, in the year prior, been homeless for more than 3 weeks, made a living selling street papers, received medical treatment for narcotics or alcohol dependence within 2 years previously, sought asylum, or applied for asylum (Okada, 2017). However, needless to say, the homeless people’s lives inevitably differ significantly according to country and region, and they have multiple problems such as unemployment, criminal records, drug use, alcoholism, or mental illness (Okada, 2017). NPs in each country have responsibility to select players based on their own criteria, to prepare for travel including acquiring passports and visas, and to maintain follow-up after the return to the home country. The HWC headquarters form an organizing committee with the local government of the host city and provide coordination of the event, accommodations, food, local transport, sightseeing opportunities, and similar arrangements for the HWC players.

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2) the Homeless World Cup website <http://www.homelessworldcup.org/> [2019/8/24]

## 2.2. *Research methods*

Participant observation at HFCA's routine practice and events in Cambodia's capital city, Phnom Penh, was combined with interviews of relevant parties. Surveys were carried out during one-to-one interviews lasting an average of 80 minutes with a total of 18 relevant parties, including HFCA representatives, over a total of 22 days from October 28 to November 3, 2015; February 12 to 16, 2016; August 20 to 24, 2016; and December 1 to 6, 2017. There were also interviews with representatives of four of the HFCA's partner organizations. Interviews were carried out in English, mainly at the Cool Sports Club in Phnom Penh, where the HFCA conducts routine futsal practices, as well as in other locations, including cafés and event venues. Core survey questions were delivered in stages, beginning with questions regarding how and why participants first began their activities and details of their organizations' foundations, continuing with summaries of their activities and partner organizations, and ending with discussions of changes in setup and players, new activities, and prospects.

In addition, interviews were conducted in 2016–2017 with HFCA representatives and coaches at the 2015 HWC in Amsterdam (The Netherlands, September), the 2016 Cup in Glasgow (Scotland, July), and the 2017 Cup in Oslo (Norway, September). The author also used e-mails and social media to maintain frequent contact, endeavoring to build rapport and keep up with the organizations' news. As the author entered into communication with HFCA representatives in 2011 to prepare for this survey, the results of this study also use data unofficially gathered before the survey began.

## 3. **Happy Football Cambodia Australia (HFCA)**

### 3.1. *Summary of HFCA activities*

The HFCA was established in 2005, in Phnom Penh, the capital of the Kingdom of Cambodia. It has been sending players to the HWC since 2008 and the axis of its activities are regular practices for the HWC and annually sending players to participate.<sup>3)</sup>

An Irish social worker and a young Cambodian with the shared wish “to provide the children of the next generation with educational opportunities through sports” began preparations for establishing the organization in 2005. As of 2018, the HFCA had two paid staff members, but the bulk of its activities were carried out by volunteers from various countries using e-mail and social media, and centered on regular practices on Saturday mornings. Partner organizations sent players to the HFCA's regular practices, while the HFCA provided the training field, balls and other equipment, shoes, uniforms, water, and other necessities. Between them, the partner organizations to be discussed in the next section had

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3) Happy Football Cambodia Australia's website <https://hfca.org.au/> [2019/8/24]

gathered together nearly 100 young men, divided into three categories for approximately three hours of training. The young men were split by age into Over-17s, Under-16s, and Under-14s, with a maximum of eight players selected for the HWC from the Over-17s category. Coaching was initially undertaken by two Cambodian coaches and one Australian coach residing in Phnom Penh, but all categories have had Cambodian coaches since 2017, when the organization brought in former players, referred to as “alumni.” While the coaches did not hold coaching licenses issued by the Football Federation of Cambodia (FFC), some had participated as observers in the FFC’s refereeing course and had received training.

The HWC is held in cities in different countries for approximately one week sometime between July and November. Every year, the HFCA selects its players five months in advance of the HWC and begins the process of obtaining passports, applying for visas, and making essential preparations. Although up to 25 people from each of the HFCA’s partner organizations participate in routine practices, coaches and staff select a minimum of one player per organization for the HWC; players are evaluated comprehensively not only for their futsal skills but also for such qualities as their ability to contribute as part of a team.

Meeting the operating costs, including airfares, posed a serious problem for the HFCA. All countries can participate in the HWC free of charge, and each country’s NPs need only to arrange travel costs to and from the tournament venue. However, as the HWC location changes each year, further-flung venues can present problems with player transportation. For example, only three players and one coach from Cambodia could be sent to the 2014 tournament in Santiago, Chili, and only five Cambodian players could participate in the 2012 Cup in Mexico City, Mexico, due to budget constraints. There have been years when the choice of HWC location placed a serious strain on the organization’s financial stability.



Photo 1: HFCA’s routine practice



Photo 2: 2015 HWC Cambodia team

As of 2017, the HFCA received approximately US\$20,000 in annual funding for its activities from both individuals and groups, chiefly from Cambodian business sponsors, charity events in Australia and elsewhere, and contributions from individuals through the HFCA website and social media. The HFCA published a newsletter and frequently shared

information on its Facebook group page<sup>4)</sup>, allowing donors and interested parties to keep up with the HFCA's activities in real time. These also provided means for supporters worldwide interested in getting involved to volunteer without having to go to the HWC or to Cambodia.

### 3.2. *Summary of Partner Organizations*

The HFCA have cooperated with six organizations so far, using a format in which the HFCA were responsible for a segment of the other organizations' activities. These were principally orphanages and youth support organizations located in Phnom Penh, but in 2015, the club also began to work with organizations from local municipalities. HFCA representatives and staff established communication with these other organizations before providing futsal training as one programme among these groups' activities. The HFCA once worked with more organizations, but numbers declined for various reasons, including some of the other organizations ending the programme, programme leaders leaving, and activity objectives changing with the arrival of new representatives. In 2017, the HFCA partnered with the Cambodian Children's Fund (CCF), Happy School (HS), and Build Your Future Today (BYFT).

The CCF is a huge NGO with annual projects on a scale exceeding US\$1.5 million. Established in 2004 and headquartered in California (United States), it is legally registered in Cambodia, and in the United States, Great Britain, Australia, and Singapore. With nearly a total of 500 full- or part-time staff, as well as volunteers, the CCF carries out projects in the six areas of education, leadership, community development, healthcare, childcare, and career skills training, reaching approximately 3,000 Cambodians, slightly more than 100 of whom are children living in CCF orphanages.<sup>5)</sup> The organization began its activities at Phnom Penh's large-scale garbage dump (internationally recognized as an issue in terms of health, human rights, and the environment and closed by the Cambodian government in 2009), with the goal of providing "a safe place and healthy meals as a refuge for the orphans and mistreated children—some of the most destitute in the world—working at the appalling dumpsite in the suburbs of Cambodia's Phnom Penh."<sup>6)</sup> In one village, the charity established facilities, including an orphanage, community school, health clinic, and daycare, as bases for its operations. It has been commended for its comprehensive support model and other achievements and attracts attention within and outside the country.

HS is a community education facility founded in 2004 with funding from Act, Change, Education (ACE).<sup>7)</sup> Although it is an orphanage managed by four staff members and seven teachers, it also has among its enrollees children with parents who cannot afford to send

4) 2 Happy Football Cambodia Australia Face Book <https://www.facebook.com/happyfootballcambodiaaustralia/> [2019/9/20]

5) Cambodian Children's Fund website <https://www.cambodianchildrensfund.org/> [2019/9/20]

6) Meyer International Ltd. website <https://en.meyerjapan.com/cambodian-childrens-fund/> [2019/8/24]

7) ACE website <http://acehappyschool.com/the-happy-school/> [2019/9/20]

them to usual schools. These children must leave the orphanage school if their parents reach a certain financial threshold. Employing nationally qualified teachers, HS provides the same curriculum as public elementary schools for first to fifth graders, with 110 children between the ages of six and ten enrolled as of 2016. Scholarships, uniforms, and school supplies are provided to allow students to progress to public elementary or middle school after finishing the five-year programme, when they generally return to their parents; if the parents' financial situation is unstable, however, the children have the option to remain at HS. In addition to the subjects typically taught at elementary schools, HS also offers classes in English, Khmer dance, computing, and other subjects, including the HFCA's futsal activities. The school receives numerous volunteers from overseas every year, each engaging for approximately two weeks, and they often provide these special classes. Inequalities have risen conspicuously alongside economic growth in Cambodia's urban areas, particularly the capital city of Phnom Penh, with many children forced into work by extreme poverty. In consideration of the local environment in which children attend the school, HS provides breakfast free of charge and supplies the guardians of children living at the school with 25 kg (approximately 55 lbs.) of rice each, four times a year. The organization's goal is to reduce the likelihood of current students' siblings being prevented from attending school by being obliged to work.

BYFT—based in Siem Reap, another Cambodian province—is the HFCA's only partner organization to send players to and from training by overnight bus.<sup>8)</sup> BYFT's founder was a refugee during the Pol Pot regime and lived in refugee camps along the Thailand border, at which time he became a teacher and looked after many orphaned children. In 2006, he returned with them to Siem Reap, his home region, to establish an orphanage. In addition to managing this orphanage, BYFT runs village development activities and is a rare local Cambodian NGO. BYFT listens to communities and makes local observations to select impoverished villages and provide them with customized and carefully considered support over the course of four years per village. After identifying local issues through communication with villagers, BYFT provides support aimed at solving issues in the following five areas: support for children and the building of learning centers, educational development, health and nutrition, capacity building and improving livelihoods, and peace-building. As of 2016, over 30 villages had completed the four-year process, and villagers who received support to attend school or skills training that allowed them to enter employment now volunteer in BYFT's activities on their days off. Diverse volunteers—including nurses, teachers, hairdressers, tour guides, and mechanics—have provided BYFT with essential support in broadening of its activities.

### *3.3. Changes of HFCA activities*

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8) Build Your Future Today website <http://www.buildyourfuturetoday.org/> [2019/8/24]



In 2015, the HFCA added activities especially for girls 14 and over. It entered the local girls' football league and held weekly matches every Saturday for four months of the year, from December to March, at a venue approximately 30 km (approximately 18.6 miles) away. Between April and November, regular weekly practices were held for girls, with 30 participants as of 2017. Anne Elizabeth Moore, author of several books on Cambodian young women's rights, said that when she first started spending time in the country in 2007, she could hardly get any of the young women she knew to participate in any physical activity beyond using a hula hoop or taking part in an aerobics exercise class, but she added that as the nation began to emerge from poverty, women started taking up more athletic activities such as badminton and skateboarding, which promote such skills as agility, strength, and teambuilding (*Women's eNews*, 2015). The HFCA began its girls' team activities at a time when opportunities for Cambodian women to engage in sports were increasing.

In 2015, the HFCA began an "alumni" event, the Reunion Cup, for players who had taken part in the HWC or retired. Since the first alumni tournament gathered together 45 former players in 2015, the event has taken place each year, reuniting HWC players and past participants in HFCA activities. As well as playing matches in age-group teams, tournament participants spend time together between games, updating one another on their current situations and sharing meals: as of 2017, the HFCA had sent a total of 46 players to the HWC, but three among them were later to be imprisoned and another's whereabouts is unknown. Although the reasons for the imprisonments varied, two were reportedly entangled in the arrests of drug-using friends. An HFCA investigation into the potential causes of these difficulties among its former players concluded that better communication among coaches, staff, teammates, and players following the HWC is needed, with advice from older people being particularly important. At the Reunion Cup, the gathered alumni update one-time teammates and HFCA staff on their current situations, but also forge deeper connections by communicating with participants of different ages, exchanging social media handles and cell phone numbers. Since the first tournament in 2015, participant numbers have grown, and Vibol Chao, the country manager in 2016, highly evaluated the event, saying, "They sometimes have no one to rely on in their daily life. It is incredibly helpful for them to hear from people who are doing their best in similar circumstances."

In October 2017, the HFCA decided to participate in Phnom Penh's regional league, the KMH Champions League.<sup>9)</sup> The 2017–2018 season ran from October 22 to July 22, with 32 teams (including business, regional, and NGO teams) competing in the preliminaries on Saturday evenings from October to January (Round 1) and from February to May (Round 2). A representative of the KMH Champions League welcomed HFCA's participation in the tournament sharing the same brief with HFCA, which is that playing football can protect the

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9) HFCA KMH Champions League page <https://hfca.org.au/football/kmh-champions-league/> [2018/8/20]



vulnerable youths from harmful environments and improve their well-being by increasing their mental strength. (Hammond, 2017)

Many of the other teams participating in the Champions League had contracts with foreign players, and many of the Cambodian players had professional contracts and were remunerated for each match. All players on the HFCA team were Cambodian players who had participated in the HWC and—to go further back—grew up in orphanages. In 2017, HFCA team members were paid only their transportation costs, and they participated in the tournament while working or studying. However, participating in the league brought with it the possibility of being scouted by a superior league depending on their performance. Participation in the KMH Champions League was viewed by some as making the dream of becoming a professional football player a real possibility.



Photo 3: HFCA girls' activities



Photo 4: 2017 Reunion Cup

#### 4. Results

The HFCA has provided certain achievements for the ex-HFCA players by regular practices and sending to the HWC. Cambodia maintained a high annual real GDP growth rate of approximately 7% from 2011 to 2016 (World Bank, 2017). Furthermore, Horie (2016) stated “in 2016–2017, when it is predicted that many emerging countries will suffer harsh conditions of economic downturn or setback, it is anticipated that the strength of the Cambodian economy will remain a world apart.” Economic development underpinned by the prospering garment making and tourist industries and an increase in foreign (including Chinese) investments lowered the unemployment rate and lifted labor costs. Although political issues were rife in 2017 and rapid economic growth had brought with it a spate of new problems, Cambodia’s external image—previously tarnished by civil war, massacres, land mines, orphans, and poverty—was brightening into one of Asia’s most promising emerging nations.

Prior to their participation in the HWC, many of the ex-HWC players had been bypassed by the growth of the economy or, in a broad sense, become its victims. However, as Chao said in

a 2016 interview with the author, players had their “eyes opened” by their participation in the HWC, and many players made changes, including actively seeking work or at least taking the first steps toward employment. The author also observed that there were players who seemed to have changed in appearance when they returned to Cambodia after the HWC, presumably having gained confidence, communication skills, understanding of other cultures, and more, through their experiences at the HWC.

While participation in the HWC is not directly linked to financial income generation, Cambodia was, as of 2017, an exception to the rule. Football-related jobs are still increasingly available, particularly in Phnom Penh, with frequent vacancies for coaches in addition to player contracts. Cambodia does not have a fully realized system of extracurricular club activities and regional sports clubs, so there were few people with experience playing in international or even national competitive tournaments at the juniors’ level. There are national football tournaments for elementary, middle, and high school students, but children have very limited opportunities to engage in regular practice or participate in tournaments. Thus, players with the HWC had “international futsal experience” and were sometimes classed as top-ranking athletes.

By 2017, the Cambodian football craze that began in 2000 had begun receiving an increasing degree of government backing. This phenomenon may be explained by the fact that “many in the younger generation played football in the schoolyard as a means of ‘amusement,’ and national football fever took off at the same time as they were growing up and achieving financial independence” (Okada, 2014). Moreover, cases of “young people forming their own teams, running practices, and organizing matches against other teams [are] rapidly spreading across the country as a kind of movement” (Okada, 2014) and even today more companies are creating football clubs with the aim of preserving the health and welfare of their employees. Former HFCA players are contracted as coaches for these company teams and clubs, or coach them in addition to their other work. In addition to the two professional players so far produced by HFCA, these coaches represent examples of those gaining their livelihoods through football.

The particular characteristics of the HFCA as an organization that delivered these concrete results may be summarized as follows. Unlike most of the NPs participating in the HWC in other countries, the HFCA ran specialized football and futsal activities, gaining them both a talent pool of players and the trust of the wider public. Its main activities were limited to routine practices and sending a team to the HWC, and it continued efforts to further develop its football expertise through cooperation with the FFC and participation in regional leagues. This also increased expertise among its former players and may have helped maximize HWC outcomes. Further, it distinguished itself admirably by undertaking new ventures based on this football and futsal expertise such as widening its target group to include girls, collaborating with local organizations, and holding the Reunion Cup. To maintain football and futsal

expertise as the central axis of the club, the HFCA developed its activities into a simple and universal format.

The organization's second distinguishing feature was its management structure. Routine practices were conducted by HFCA's Cambodian coaches, while publicity, liaison, fundraising, and similar activities are handled by the management group, led by the organization's Irish representative. The HFCA clearly identified internal divisions according to role, with each aware of its responsibilities and cooperating with the others, with rigorous communication at its heart. Rather than the HFCA requesting that organizations that became part of its player pool participate in HFCA activities, it created links through introductions made by acquaintances and other organizations. Communications were principally by e-mails and social media, where the organization's ideals and details of its activities were summarized simply and shared, and the wider purview of each of the responsible parties in technical areas was a further distinguishing feature. Having established relationships with people within and outside the organization, the HFCA maintained its activities while communicating with them and operated under a painstaking management style that valued quality over quantity—perhaps its most significant characteristic.

## **5. Conclusion**

HFCA activities, which started in the latter half of the 2000s, were by 2017 beginning to attract wider attention within Cambodia. While there may be various reasons for this, including the organization's participation in regional leagues, its publicity, and Cambodia's growing football fever, its increasing popularity could also be attributed to the growing number of "alumni" players and the organization's focus on expertise. The national leagues' professional players produced by the organization encouraged the acquisition of football and futsal skills as a potential source of future livelihood and may be presumed to have enhanced the value of the HWC.

The existence of the HFCA and the HWC encouraged personal growth in young people and the value of HFCA and HWC activities was enhanced when these individuals entered the larger society. In the context of individual outcomes, the recent poverty-reduction initiatives of the HWC in Cambodian society can be appreciated as they hold value as a generalizable model.

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