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# Providing Bicycles and Educational Opportunities to Children in Cambodia

Natsumi YOKOCHI

**Abstract:** Since the spring of 2021, I have been working with 5 university students to support bicycles for Cambodian children who are unable to attend school due to long distance commuting or being busy with household chores. We have been sharing our plans and progress at regular weekly meetings, asking for funding, and visiting companies related to the project, and have raised over 1.2 million yen through crowdfunding. We have been in close contact with “Globe Jungle”, a Japanese partner Non-Profit Organization that runs an orphanage in Cambodia, and have been interacting with Cambodian children to survey their needs. In addition, I met Professor Taro Mochizuki and he introduced me Ms. Kasumi Nakagawa, who has been conducting research in Cambodia for more than 20 years, and I learned some obstacle when it comes to giving bicycles. Thanks to her, I was able to attend classes at a university in Cambodia and interview the students about the learning situation in Cambodia, the significance of having bicycles, and their dreams for the future. Through these activities, I considered how to make sure that the bicycles we give to the children will be used effectively for a long time, hoping that the bicycle will be helpful for children to make their dreams come true.

## 1. The Current Educational Situation in Cambodia

The Khmer Rouge in 1970s destroyed the entire education systems in Cambodia. The low level of adult education and the thin professional human resources are the major obstacles to the development in Cambodia<sup>1</sup> (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, n.d.)

According to the data of ‘The state of the world's children 2019’ from Japan UNICEF Organization, from 2012 to 2018, the percentages of children in Cambodia who successfully graduated from elementary schools were 68% for boys and 79% for girls. The ratios of junior high schools are 41% for boys and 39% for girls. The rates of high schools were much worse, only 20% for both sexes<sup>2</sup> (The state of the world's children 2019, n.d.). Since these are the national averages, it is true that much fewer children living in the rural areas were able to attend and graduated from the schools.

The reasons for such a low level of education include the following: their family cannot afford the school fees such as textbooks, school uniforms, and taking examinations; the school is too far from home; and neither the families nor the children understand the significance of studying in school. The biggest reason to

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan (n.d.) [https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/oda/shiryo/hyouka/kunibetu/gai/cambodia/ej99\\_01\\_0406.html](https://www.mofa.go.jp/mofaj/gaiko/oda/shiryo/hyouka/kunibetu/gai/cambodia/ej99_01_0406.html)

<sup>2</sup> The state of the world's children 2019 (n.d.) <https://www.unicef.or.jp/sowc/data.html>

note is that the children are busy taking care of their young siblings and working part time to support their families.

If children are not properly educated, they will not be able to find higher income paying jobs. In a current situation, since the parents cannot earn enough salary to support the whole family, the children have to work to make ends meet, thus causing a vicious cycle. Even if the children can go to school, they have to walk barefoot for 5 to 10 kilometers going to and from school on bumpy country roads especially with the children living in the countryside.

Then, what can the children do with a bicycle? If the children's commute to school could be shortened and made less burdensome, they would be able to attend classes every day and learn well with their classmates. In addition, they can do their housework, part-time jobs, and even take care of their younger siblings in the time that they save from the commute to school. Furthermore, they can get back home safely before it gets dark.

Therefore, we thought, "YES! Let's give them bicycles!"

## 2. What is the "OKULU Project"?

The project was originally conceived in January 2021 by five university students living in the Kansai region. We held once-a-week-online meetings and sometimes had face-to-face-discussions. The name "OKULU" is an abbreviation of "Opportunity, a Key to Unlock Learning Ubiquitously" because of our concept that every child in the world should have an opportunity to study, and bicycles will be a key to their being able to go to school. Since it is difficult for us to go to Cambodia due to the covid-19, we are working with a Japanese Non-Profit Organization, Globe Jungle, which helps to promote this project in Cambodia.

The first challenge for us was to make a crowdfunding success. It was conducted from October to 31, 2021. Totally, 78 individuals & companies have supported us through a website, READYFOR. The project has successfully raised 1,286,000 yen, exceeding the goal of 1,200,000 yen.

READYFOR キーワードでさがす 自分プロジェクト一覧 はじめる さがす

#社会にいいこと #国際協力 #社会課題 #貧困 #学生のチャレンジ #カンボジア

**通学困難なカンボジアの子供たちに自転車をお届けして教育の機会を！**

一般社団法人Nanoful

支援総額 **1,286,000円** 目標金額 1,200,000円

支援者 **78人** 募集終了日 **2021年10月31日**

フォロー中

プロジェクトは成立しました！

シェア ツイート 印刷 印刷

However, it was far from easy to achieve this high goal. In order to make it success, we had to make this project an ingenious and mesmerizing one. There are following five points.

First, one-on-one support project: One of the distinctive traits of this project is that the supporters can know the names and faces of the children, as if they were the children's foster parents. Donation projects tend to result in not knowing who supported who, however, in this project, supporters and children can know each other's names and faces individually. Stickers written the supporters' names will be attached to the bicycles. This brings much more relief to the supporters, and motivation to the children.

Second, we do not transport the bicycles from Japan. We purchase them from local bicycle shops in Cambodia. This will help revitalize Cambodia's local economy, which is currently severely suffering from the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, sending the bicycles from Japan would costs a lot and would not be environment-friendly with the huge amount of greenhouse gases emission involved. By sending local bicycles, we can minimize these problems.

Third, we hope that supporters will learn more about Cambodia through the donation, so we have prepared reciprocity items that will allow them to experience Cambodia. One example is the 'Original Thanks Book,' entirely made by the OKULU members and friends aspiring to be future designers in the future. The book includes pictures of bicycle donation ceremonies and previous online communications with the children, cartoons of daily life in Cambodia, the supporters' name list, and our thoughts on the project and the future. Other reciprocity goods include letters from children, eco-bags handmade by Cambodian women, pepper (which is a Cambodian specialty), and the chance to join the donation ceremony through Zoom on March 26, 2022.

Fourth, company supporter can put their logos on the front of the bicycle baskets, which will serve as a "riding advertisement" in Cambodia. This is why this project works. In addition, as the companies' employees will get to know in detail about the children they support, their awareness of the concept of social contribution will be raised. At the same time, the children learn about Japanese companies and expand their future possibilities.

Fifth, we will hold an online ceremony on March 26, 2022 and the children will receive the bicycles. The ceremony was initially planned to be held with OKULU members traveling to Cambodia. However, as the situation of Omicron variant was getting worse, we put off the face-to-face meeting until next summer. We will then be able to observe how the bicycles are working and whether the children will keep them. Hence, postponing the opportunity makes sense.

Picture 1: the front cover of the "thanks book"

Picture 2: a student in Sonong Chai Mango School, photographed by Globe Jungle

Picture 3: five OKULU members in a face-to-face meeting



Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3

Now, achieving the goal in crowdfunding and giving bicycles for the children are not the end goal of the project. We really want the children to use the bicycle effectively, go to school and study hard, and expand their future possibilities. In order to do that, we need to have a deeper understanding about Cambodia. Below are my personal experiences on this because I was in charge of getting to know Cambodia. OKULU members cooperate each other and other members discussed with the sign company, printing company, ordered reciprocity goods, operated social media etc.

### 3. Understanding Cambodia

When I talked about this project to my professors and friends, some of them gave information of Cambodian expert in Osaka University. Then, I had an opportunity to talk to Professor Taro Mochizuki of Philosophy, Thought, and Culture, School of Letters at the Osaka University, who had experiences in Cambodia. I met him on December 8, 2021, from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. He told me many important facts that were otherwise difficult to know. In this session with him, I learned about the existing problem of corruption in Cambodia. Sadly, because of this problem, it could be expected that the children's teachers or families would sell the bicycles to get the money or other children who are unable to get bicycle would steal it. From this, I thought over how the project would be managed without such possible problems.

I was wondering whether bicycles should be provided to the individuals or to the school. The choice was difficult because both have advantages and disadvantages: donating to school makes us easier to manage the existence of bikes and it is good when one student graduated from the school, another student can use it. Donating for the individuals is advantageous in that all family members of the student can use the bike. However, it is more possible that bikes to be sold off. I finally proposed my decision that it was better to provide bikes to the school, however, I cannot

imagine whether this choice was better or not. I thought I should know the reality of Cambodia even more to address considerable problems like this.

Next, Professor Mochizuki kindly introduced me to Kasumi Nakagawa, who lived in Cambodia for more than 20 years and studied about Cambodian politics in terms of gender problems. She graduated from the Osaka University School of International Public Policy. After having some online meetings and e-mail exchanges with her, I was able to participate in online meetings with students from the Paññāsāstra University of Cambodia (PUC), where we discussed children's education in Cambodia on January 12, 4:00–5:20 p.m. and on January 19, 4:00–6:30 p.m. (picture 4, picture 5)

Here are the questions I asked the students and some of their answers:

1. In your school life from elementary school to the university, did you have a great time? What was your most enjoyable memory?

Learning hospitality. / Cooking cakes. / Jogging to the school. / Playing soccer with friends. / Playing games. / Swimming in the fall.

2. What is your dream in the near future?

Teach English for poor children. / Something related to the global. / To be an accountant. / To be a lawyer to help people in northern Cambodia. / To be a chef. / Help their family and people in Cambodia. / Build schools. / Provide a scholarship to children.

3. Strictly speaking, what do you think about relatively poor children in the rural areas?

Teachers do not teach children sufficiently. / Engage in a job after the graduation from junior high school. / Get marry when people are in their teenage. / People do not have money to get enough food.

The students of PUC know well about the situation of poor children, and they generally think that they want to make the situation better.

4. Why were you able to go to university?

Parents, grandparents, or relatives supported mentally and financially. / Grandparents always took care of the student. / Studied very hard and won the PUC's scholarship. / The high school they went to was high level.

Though most students in the class are not from the capital city, they said they were able to come to the PUC in Phnom Penh because of their families' aid.

5. What do you think about Japan?

Japan is famous for its high-quality products. / Tap water is edible. / People are punctual. / People are decent and often greet with a bow. / High technology. / Frequent earthquakes. / Long life. / Both Japan and Cambodia have problem of gender inequality, so both countries should enhance women's rights. / Japan and Cambodia should respect and learn from each other.

Most students said that they want to go to Japan in the future.

6. Do you use a bicycle? Why? How often?

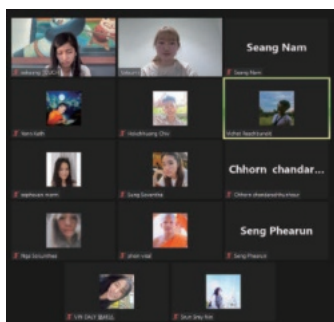
Once a week when coming back to the parents' home. / Bought niece's bike and enjoy tourism. / Ride double on a bicycle and go to the school.

7. Do you have a part-time job?

Most said yes: Elementary school teacher in the poor areas. / Research assistant.  
/ At a café restaurant. / Join an internship to a foreign company.

One said no but he did volunteer work instead. Another said no because it was the last year at the university and he have to prepare for the future.

I had a great time communicating to the Cambodian students and exchanging our cultures and experiences. In the future, I would like to cooperate with them and do something for Cambodia, if it will be possible



Picture 4



Picture 5

#### 4. Conclusion

I have been a member of the OKULU project for about a year and I gradually got to know about Cambodia. The experiences are the treasures in my life. The reason I started to engage in the project is that one of my friends invited me and I joined as a start-up member since my hobby is cycling, and I have always wanted to contribute to the world since I was a child. In addition, I liked not only to learn about the situation of developing countries and the idea of SDGs in the university, but to do something in practice to make changes.

However, at the same time, I faced some obstacles. At first, I was not able to tell my action about supporting Cambodia to my friends with confidence, because there are many existing problems much closer to my daily lives, especially related to the COVID-19. I was also bothered thinking that whether it is proper to do something about Cambodia now, though I cannot go there in person. However, the disaster is also very serious in Cambodia. If we do not do anything now, the pandemic will widen the gap in the world. And I was also bothered about the fact that although supporting and donating needs a lot of money, I, as a 20-year-old student, do not

have money. However, I considered that though I cannot support children financially, I can do something for them with the ingenuities and time I have.

These thoughts are why I organize the OKULU project now, and want to introduce it to the readers.