



# A national network of Libraries -Education Centers in the 27 prisons of Cambodia

A project implemented by  
Sipar and the General Department of Prisons  
in partnership with the Ministry of Education  
Supported by Agence Française de Développement &  
Fondation Pierre Bellon



# Introduction

- ❑ **Sipar** is a French-Cambodian NGO implementing projects in Education in Cambodia since 1992.
- ❑ **Its mission:** to fight against illiteracy and to give access to a quality education targeting underprivileged people.
- ❑ Sipar, a major player in the library and literacy sector in Cambodia, has implemented **440 libraries and reading services**, fixed or mobile, in schools, villages, ethnic minorities, communities living on the lake, slums, hospitals, brick factories, garment factories and prisons reaching **640,000 beneficiaries**.
- ❑ **3,000 librarians** are trained.
- ❑ All projects are implemented in partnership with Ministries, local authorities and communities.
- ❑ Since 2000, in order to fill the gap of books in Khmer language, Sipar has started a **publishing program: 220 titles** of fiction and non-fiction books are published in **2,6 million copies** for children, youth and adults.



## Context of Cambodia

- ❑ Cambodia suffered terribly during the Khmer Rouge regime (1975-1979) in which a third of the population was exterminated, 80% of whom were intellectuals.
- ❑ 90% of the books and libraries were destroyed. All forms of education were eradicated.
- ❑ It took many years to rebuild the country after decades of civil war. Cambodia is now a low middle income country thanks to a growth rate of 8% for 10 years.

## Literacy and Libraries in Cambodia

- ❑ The Khmer alphabet is the largest in the world with 74 letters, making learning to read particularly difficult.

### ពិបាកក្នុងការអានភាសាខ្មែរ

- ❑ The illiteracy rate remains around 30% of the total population.
- ❑ The habit of reading is still very timid and starts to be observed among the young generation only since few years.
- ❑ There is no network of public libraries, only school or university libraries under the supervision of Ministry of Education.



**National Book Fair 2019**  
**180,000 visitors**





# Prisons in Cambodia

- ❑ The country counts **27 prisons** in **25 provinces**, under the authority of the **General Department of Prisons (GDP)** within the Ministry of Interior.
- ❑ The number of prisoners has dramatically increased from 15,000 in 2016 to more than **37,000 (2,400 females) in 2020**, due to an intense campaign to fight against drug trafficking conducted by the government.

*(Ratio: 250 prisoners for 100,000 of the national population)*

- ❑ Prison overcrowding can reach 200% in some prisons, making the life in detention more and more stressful and difficult to support.
- ❑ **2,820 prison officers (415 females)** are in charge of the security and correction of the 37,200 prisoners *(Ratio: 1 PO for 13 prisoners)*



The very first prison library



The 2nd prison library



## Origin of the project of prison libraries

Based on an initiative of a small library in one prison, open since 2004, and in accordance with the new law on prisons of 2011, **a pilot project of libraries in four prisons** set up by Sipar in partnership with the General Department of Prisons and supported by the *Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights*, revealed **the relevance of the access to reading for prisoners to improve conditions of detention**, encouraging Sipar and the GDP to extend the project.

# Implementation, development and sustainability of the national network of prison libraries in Cambodia in three phases (2012-2021)

- ❑ The project in three phases was launched in 2012 to be directly anchored in National Policies and in **the Strategic Plan of GDP** to cover all the prisons in the country.
- ❑ With co-financing from the EU, Sipar and *Agence Française de Développement*, **the first phase of the project** (2012-2015) enabled the construction and equipment of 26 prison libraries, offering inmates several thousands of books in Khmer that they can consult on site or take out on loan to read in their cell.
- ❑ Prison officers and inmate-volunteers received basic training in managing the collection of books and providing advice to the readers.



The library in  
the heart of the prison



Prison officers and prisoners  
working together to install the library



Small group of readers

The largest libraries are 77m2



Training of prison officers and prisoners

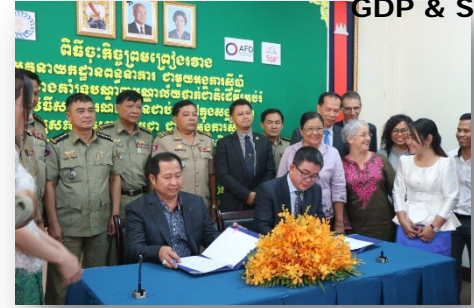


## Second and third phases (2016 – 2022)

MoU signed between  
GDP & Sipar

The success of the first phase led Sipar & GDP to draw up the outlines of a second phase (2016-2018), then a third phase (2019-2022) **to strengthen the services** delivered by the libraries (which became Libraries-Education Centers) to more than 37,000 inmates:

- ❑ **The computerized management** of the catalogue and the data of users with an adapted software
- ❑ The provision of **supplementary books** and the training of prison officer librarians on documentation policy (books selection, purchase etc.)



- ❑ **The assessment** of prison officers and prisoners working as librarians and presentation of a certificate of proficiency by the **Cambodia Library Association**, as there is no higher-education school in library sciences in Cambodia.
- ❑ The initiation of hundred prison officers at the **Police Academy of Cambodia** during their pre-service training about the importance of education and access to library for all prisoners, a way to motivate them before their appointment.
- ❑ Publishing by Sipar and distribution of **guide books for prisoners**: Financial literacy  
Job readiness – Health – Micro enterprise - etc.



The prisoner's guide book  
published in 2020

# The extension of educational services within the libraries



- ❑ Implementation of **literacy classes** by the Ministry of Education: Training of prison officers as literacy teachers, supervised by trainers from Ministry of Education. Technical support by Sipar to reinforce the collaboration between librarians and literacy teachers for a better learning of prisoners
- ❑ Extension of **rehabilitation services** in five prisons with two partner NGOs: Training on soft skills to reintegrate into society and job market for prisoners 3 to 6 month before their release
- ❑ **ToT of prison officers** in charge of Education/Rehabilitation to be able to conduct the sessions



## Today and tomorrow

- ❑ The Covid-19 pandemic has only slightly affected Cambodia which records 460 cases in one year and no deaths.
- ❑ All external interventions were suspended from April to August 2020 but the literacy classes continued and **the libraries remained open**, which helped the prisoners to cope this stressful situation.
- ❑ In this final phase of the project, the GDP, supported by Sipar, becomes the national coordinator of the prison libraries network.
- ❑ Nearly all prison directors and key prison officers are able to manage the libraries and education services independently.
- ❑ The partnership between GDP and Ministry of Education will strongly contribute to the sustainability of the project.
- ❑ Sipar and the Cambodia Library Association will be technical advisors beyond the project (from February 2022).



## Main impact on prisoners detention and rehabilitation

- ❑ **26% of the prisoners are regular users** of the library services and 40% of the women in detention borrow books regularly
- ❑ An average of 16,000 books are borrowed each month by 9,800 prisoners (among 37,000)
- ❑ 90% of the prisoners who attend literacy classes are able to read and write and **86% become regular users of the library**

### **Among 550 prisoners interviewed in 2020 in 22 prisons**

- ❖ 89% believe that the library helps reduce stress and depression
- ❖ 84% increased their general knowledge
- ❖ 45% increased their reading skills
- ❖ 55% increased their civism and morality
- ❖ 86% increased their skills useful for their reintegration (agriculture, money management, etc.)

## In general, we observe

- ❑ More peaceful relationships and communication among the prisoners, and between prisoners and prison officers.
- ❑ Development of solidarity among prisoners (literate helping illiterates by reading aloud in the cells, etc.)
- ❑ Prisoners increase their self-esteem and confidence, which is helping them to prepare their future with a more positive perspective.
- ❑ Some illiterate prisoners become literate and have even developed an enthusiasm for reading.



## Positive Impact on prison officers as well

- ❑ Prison officers and prisoners working together as librarians behave as colleagues more than guards and prisoners.
- ❑ Prison officers who become librarians or literacy teachers feel more valuable because the status of teachers in Cambodia is highly respected.



A literacy class

## Testimony of Bopha, detainee library assistant *"The library saved me"*

Bopha was sentenced to one year of detention

*"When I was sentenced and conducted behind bars,  
I immediately became depressed,  
I had black thoughts, I even thought of ending my life.  
Then, in an attempt to survive,  
I started coming to the library.*

*I chose a book, I read and I forgot my condition.  
I came every day, even borrowing books to read in my cell.  
I could not live without reading.*

*One day, the guard librarian told me that the assistant prisoner was leaving the prison and that the post was therefore free. She offered me to replace her.*

*My heart has jumped. I immediately agreed.*

*She trained me to take care of books, to arrange them,  
to classify them. I am so proud. And I want to say it loudly when I will be released  
in a few months: In prison, the library saved me!"*







Escape through reading



# THANK YOU

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