

# A year in Cambodia

Queensland librarian Louise Barber looks back on her year as an adviser to the National Library of Cambodia with immense pleasure and satisfaction. The AusAID-funded Australian Youth Ambassador for Development has been helping to upgrade skills of staff and expanding opportunities for readers and publishers.

The National Library of Cambodia has a story well worth telling. Under French colonial rule, the book-filled rooms of this elegant 1920s building were graced mainly by officials and visiting French scholars. In the 1950s Khmer books, including precious palm leaf manuscripts, were added to the collection. By 1975, just as the library was growing to a respectable size, its contents were systematically scattered or destroyed in the brutal years of the Khmer Rouge.

When the library re-opened in 1980, it was heavily dependent on donated books from other countries. 'The collection has been re-stocked over the past 25 years but it is slow progress and resources are limited,' Louise explains.



*Louise Barber (in foreground) with Mrs Ros Sarou, the Head of the Reading Room at the National Library of Cambodia, among the shelves of the library's General Collection. This includes all the English, French and other language materials for general research.*

There is no formal training for librarians in Cambodia. Students must go abroad and source funding from donors to do this. The trouble is, those who do obtain library qualifications from overseas institutions are quickly snapped up by academic institutions and the many non-government organisations based in Phnom Penh. These offer much higher salaries than the National Library where a librarian can only expect a salary of between A\$13–40 per month. 'It is difficult to live on such a salary and you can't blame qualified people for searching out better paid jobs'.

Although the staff at the National Library lack professional training, they have great commitment and dedication to their work. 'Staff turnover is low because they feel honoured to work at the country's leading library,' Louise says.

But the lack of formal training in librarianship and little experience with computers is holding back National Library staff and making it difficult for them to provide public services. 'The first thing I did when I arrived was to make an ISBN database and train staff to use it,' Louise says. 'I spent a lot of time teaching staff how to use the library's catalogue which uses software that was created by UNESCO for libraries in developing countries. The system is good but the staff hadn't been trained to use it as a tool for searching their own collections. To find a book on a shelf, staff generally relied on their memories.'

One of the poorest countries in Asia, new books in Cambodia are priced beyond the reach of many people. This accounts in part for the thriving market in cheap, photocopied books. 'Intellectual property is a big issue but there is no escaping the fact that these cheaper versions are the only option for many people. They



*Louise Barber (L) and Serials Officer Mrs Chack Tuoch in the Cambodian Serials Room of the National Library of Cambodia. The newspapers are old Khmer-language newspapers, being sorted for preservation.*

sell like hotcakes, which contradicts the notion that Cambodia is not a nation of readers. Given a chance Cambodians love to get their hands on a novel, newspaper or magazine. The sad reality is that most people live in the rural provinces where there are few libraries and almost no free access to books.'

As an Australian Youth Ambassador for Development, Louise's main aim is to pass on her skills. 'The library now has a staff member dedicated to ISBN who does all the allocations and liaison with publishers. This person has it down to a fine art and I don't need to be involved at all. Having an ISBN system will raise the profile of the National Library within and outside Cambodia and will tie in well with the new Legal Deposit legislation that is in the pipeline. It will enable the staff here to keep accurate records of Cambodian publications and will lead to the production of a catalogue *Books in Print* that can be distributed to other libraries and booksellers. This should give the local publishing industry a lift by stimulating the sale, distribution and publishing of new books.'

Louise's placement at the National Library of Cambodia has deepened her commitment to working in the information sector in developing countries. 'It strikes me as so unfair that some people in this world have endless access to books and computers and others have virtually none. I always wanted to get into this sort of work. I love working in libraries in Australia but it is also extremely rewarding to work in a country like Cambodia, where access to reading materials and technology isn't taken for granted and there is such joy in learning through books and shared information.'

Louise has a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations and French from the University of Queensland and a Graduate Diploma in Library and Information Studies from Queensland University of Technology.

## Become a Youth Ambassador

The Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development (AYAD) program places skilled young Australian volunteers, aged 18–30, on short-term assignments in developing countries throughout Asia and the Pacific. For more information on the Australian Youth Ambassador for Development program, including examples of assignments, visit <http://www.ausaid.gov.au>.

Intake 18 assignments (March 2007 departure) are available to view on the AYAD Program Management website <http://www.ayad.com.au/>. Intake 18 Assignments are now available. Applications close on the 13 October 2006. Mobilisation will be in March/April 2007. Round two Intake 18 Assignments will be available on 20 October 2006. Applications close on the 10 November 2006. Mobilisation will be in March/April 2007.

Inquiries about the AYAD Program should be sent to [ayad@austraining.com.au](mailto:ayad@austraining.com.au) or by phone on 1 800 225 592.