

TRUSTEES' VISIT TO VIETNAM AND CAMBODIA

It was with a certain amount of trepidation that Mary (Lidgard, Honorary Secretary) and I set off with our suitcases from Cheltenham Coach Station early on the morning of 24th February, heading for Vietnam and Cambodia. It was eight years since we had last travelled to South-East Asia to monitor MSAVLC's projects there, and we knew that much had changed. Twice we had booked to go and then had to abandon the trip due to illness, and then Covid intervened. We had been planning this trip for some time, and we hoped that we would be able to visit all our present projects in Vietnam and Cambodia, and that the whole twenty-eight day trip would run smoothly. Well, most of it did.

From London's Heathrow Airport we flew directly to Ho Chi Minh City, courtesy of Vietnam Airlines, and due to the time difference we arrived very early the next morning. Vietnam's largest city had grown more affluent, and there were more bright lights, more advertising, more tower blocks, more coffee shops and more cars than before. However, we also noted that some of the familiar landmarks were missing, and some of the hotels and restaurants had closed, due to the Covid-19 pandemic which had a devastating effect upon tourism.

We took a taxi from the airport to our rather downtrodden hotel, and slept for quite a while.



Our first official visit was to Hoa Binh Peace Village, a residential home for children disabled by the effects of Agent Orange/Dioxin. We have been there on many occasions, and we were delighted to see many familiar faces, but they had all grown up since our last visit in 2015. Sadly, there were babies and small children in the nursery, which reminded us that deformed and disabled children are still being born because their grandparents had been exposed to the toxic chemicals fifty years ago.

We handed over a donation to the nursing staff which had been given by some of MSAVLC's donors and

said a fond goodbye to children and staff.

From Ho Chi Minh City we travelled by coach to Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh, traversing the Mekong River by the newly-built Neak Loeung suspension bridge, which replaced the vehicle ferry boat.

Our first project visit in Phnom Penh was to Daughters of Cambodia, the organisation which rescues young people from the sex trade and provides them with social, physical and psychological recovery, along with sustainable and meaningful employment.



The Founder/Director of Daughters of Cambodia, Ruth Elliot had a full schedule for us, and we visited the Visitor's Centre which included their boutique shop, spa, medical clinic, and the jewellery-making workshop. We also visited the nearby Operations Centre where we saw the girls working at their sewing machines, in the cutting room, and in the woodwork and screen printing rooms. All appeared happy in their work and we were glad to see the effects of our partnership with Daughters.

We talked with the Medical Officer and the Finance Officer, and we were able to check how donations given by MSAVLC supporters were spent on their medical program. We then talked to staff members and some of the girls and boys. We heard harrowing stories of how they had been rescued from the sex trade and the abuse and degradation that they had suffered. They were so grateful to Daughters for their rescue, and were now happy and relieved, although many of them were still receiving counselling.

We left Daughters of Cambodia knowing that the funding provided by MSAVLC was making a real difference to the lives of so many young women, and some men, in the poorest areas of Phnom Penh. We were emotionally drained by the experience but full of admiration for

the work done by Ruth Elliot and her team.

The next day we set off early in the morning to visit All Ears Cambodia, which is also based in Phnom Penh. There we were met by our friend of many years, the Founder/Director of All Ears, Glyn Vaughan.

In a country which has a very rudimentary ear and hearing health care service, Glyn has built a strong organisation, serving not only Phnom Penh and its surrounding area but with clinics in Siem Reap, Kratie, and Prey Tralach, near Battambang. During that day we visited both Phnom Penh clinics and we met with staff and patients. We were able to look at their relevant accounts and check how MSAVLC funds had been spent.

Later we sat in on the "Listen.Out.Loud" project which we fund. It teaches children about the ear, and ear care with the aid of some amazing BBC videos, musical instruments and games. There were about 20 children attending the session



and all seemed to be enjoying the presentation and learning a lot from the superb teacher, who we found out later was one of the clinicians. It was gratifying to see that the selection of musical instruments which had been bought by MSAVLC were being well used during the presentation.

In May 2022 our charity began sponsoring a medical doctor at All Ears Cambodia, but unfortunately he had left in December as he had heart problems. He had been replaced by a

new doctor, Dr. Huy Chheang Kruey, and we were able to talk to him about his work at All Ears.

The following day we left Phnom Penh for Pursat, where we have been sponsoring a project with Disability Development Services Program (DDSP) for the last 13 years. It's a three-hour bus ride and we have travelled it before, so we bought our tickets and arrived at the bus station in plenty of time. There was no-one else waiting for the bus, and after waiting for about an hour we were asked to take our luggage and climb into a tuk-tuk. We were driven around the town and dropped off at bus garage, where again we were asked to wait. There was a handful of other people waiting also, but we became concerned when a group of them crossed the road, sat under a tree and set up a picnic lunch!

The bus did eventually arrive. It was overloaded with passengers and produce of all kinds, in bags along the gangway and loaded up on the back seats! We were the only foreigners on the bus, but after a few more stops to pick up more folk and even more baggage, off we went. We made it to Pursat after nearly five and a half hours travelling, which included a couple of unsavoury toilet stops and the driver crawling under the bus to do some minor repairs!



The next day, our visit to the headquarters of Disability Development Services Program (DDSP) in Pursat began with a presentation about their work given by the Director, Pheng Samnang.

MSAVLC supports the Paraplegic and Quadriplegic Rehabilitation Project, a vital part of DDSP's work. Samnang told us that the organisation was hit hard by Covid as they were unable to visit their clients for months. In that time some of the clients had died, and donations had dropped considerably. Their total staff had reduced from 23 to 17, and all had agreed to take a cut in their salaries. We checked the accounts and chatted to the staff, most of whom had been with DDSP for a long time, and were very loyal and totally committed to their work.

DDSP now supports 130 disabled people, 48 of them female. Each person is visited at least once a month, and all their physical and mental needs are dealt with as much as is possible. Health and hygiene issues are addressed, physiotherapy is given and taught to family members, bedsores are dressed, wheelchairs and water filters provided and adapted latrines built for them. Clients are also given money to set up their own businesses, such as small shops, sewing, animal rearing, farming, etc., and training is given where necessary.

We then spent the next two days visiting DDSP clients. Each one told us their stories, how they had become paralysed and how their lives had been affected since. Many of the stories they told us were heart-breaking, but inspirational. DDSP had changed their

lives tremendously, providing them with necessities and giving them dignity and respect. We were very moved by all of the people that we met, and it was a privilege to be able to help them and spend time with them. (Some of their stories will be published in future Bulletins)

The second half of our trip, when we visited New Hope Children's Home in Poipet, All Ears Cambodia in Siem Reap, the Vietnam Union of Friendship Organisations in Hanoi, and the Vietnam Association for the Victims of Agent Orange in Hanoi and Ninh Binh, will feature in our next

Bulletin in August.

*Peter Lidgard
Chair of Trustees*



Some of the Disability Development Services Program staff members who took a pay cut following the Covid pandemic, with Peter Lidgard and Pheng Samnang, Director (extreme right).

ROUNDTABLE MEETING

As Part of the celebrations commemorating the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the diplomatic relations between Vietnam and the UK, Trustees of MSAVLC were invited by Ambassador Nguyen Hoang Long to attend a roundtable meeting at the Vietnamese Embassy in London on April 3rd 2023.

The meeting was called to discuss how British Non-Governmental organizations (NGO's) could better support Vietnam's socio-economic development. It was attended by representatives from eleven NGO's all currently working in Vietnam.

After a welcome and opening speech by Ambassador Long, the topics discussed were;

- The reason why the NGO's chose to work in Vietnam, and why they continue to do so.
- What problems and difficulties the NGO'S have working in Vietnam.
- Suggestions as to how NGO's can improve support for Vietnam's development.

It was an excellent, informative and useful discussion, and afterwards the delegates were able to mingle and chat, sharing their ideas and experiences, over a splendid buffet lunch.

CONSTANCE (CONNIE) NGUYEN-XUAN



Bulletin 210 carried the sad news of the death of Connie Nguyen Xuan, a long-term supporter of MSAVLC and a familiar face at the Vietnamese Embassy's Tet celebrations.

Connie was born in 1928 in Langley Park, a Durham mining village. She later moved to London when her father served in the RAF during the war. Connie's war effort was preparing and testing camouflage at the Colgate factory. However. It was in Battersea Park, watching the oriental tennis players, that she met her handsome husband, Thieu.

Thieu was a Vietnamese sailor with the Free French Navy. He had been bombed whilst serving on the last ship to deliver soldiers and rescue

civilians from Singapore, and later survived a torpedo attack, which sank his ship.

They married at Caxton Hall with Connie wearing a dress made from parachute silk. The couple, their friends and Thieu's comrades formed the beginning of the Vietnamese community in London – The British Vietnamese Association. They had strong bonds with Vietnam, meeting regularly with diplomats, and introducing them to MP's and trade unionists. The Association, which started in the 1950's in Connie and Thieu's kitchen, acted in Vietnamese interests until the UK established full diplomatic relations in 1973.

Connie was active throughout her life in helping others. When the miners marched towards London she

arranged accommodation and refreshments by contacting church communities on the route. She was a regular at Medical Aid for Vietnam and CND meetings, and the family home accommodated demonstrators travelling for the Aldermaston marches. In her forties she passed her driving test after at least 8 attempts, learned car mechanics at night school and drove 'Meals on Wheels' around Lambeth.

In later years, she made her views known to politicians and wrote a strongly-worded letter to Tony Blair and Gordon Brown with her views on the Iraq invasion.

Latterly, Connie had progressive dementia, but she still spent a lot of time reading the MSAVLC Bulletin, in fact it was the only piece of reading material that would hold her attention.

Connie leaves 8 children, 12 grandchildren and 15 great-grandchildren; she will be greatly missed.



THANK YOU!

Once again, many thanks to David, Fiona and all at the Organic Farm Shop in Cirencester, for donating money from the sale of second-hand books to MSAVLC.



We are most grateful for your continued support.

MEDICAL AND SCIENTIFIC AID FOR VIETNAM, LAOS AND CAMBODIA

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The charity's Annual General Meeting will be held at
 Charlton Kings Social Club
 Church Street, Charlton Kings,
 CHELTENHAM GL53 8AP

on Saturday 17th June at 2.00 pm.

Refreshments will be available.

There is adequate parking at the back of the club.

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