WHERE PEACE BEGINS

Stories from 25 years
of Civil Peace Service in Cambodia

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INTRODUCTION

Where Peace Begins: Stories Behind 25 Years of Civil Peace Service in Cambodia

This introduction reflects on the 25-year journey of the Civil Peace Service (CPS) in Cambodia – a story of partnerships forged in trust, communities healing from deep wounds, and people working courageously toward justice and reconciliation. It offers an overview of how CPS helped strengthen local capacities and supported Cambodia's long path of remembering, recovering, and building peace.

01

When the Civil Peace Service (CPS) of GIZ first arrived in Cambodia in 2001, the country was still carrying the weight of decades of war. The fighting had stopped only a few years earlier. Former soldiers were learning to farm again, and the last armed groups had just laid down their weapons. Phnom Penh was slowly regaining its bustle, with cyclos pedaling heavily loaded with market goods, motodop drivers calling out for passengers, and motorbikes weaving through streets where buildings still bore bullet scars. The air carried a restless mix of sounds: the sharp bleat of horns, the cries of street vendors advertising noodles, and, rising above it, the slower rhythm of temple bells. Amid the gray concrete and crumbling facades, saffron-robed monks walked barefoot on their morning rounds. Their calm presence hinted at continuity, yet it was also fragile. Only a generation earlier, the Khmer Rouge had targeted religion itself, seizing temples, converting them to other uses, and forcing monks out from their pagodas. Now, slowly, faith was returning to public spaces, a quiet sign that Cambodia itself was recovering piece by piece. Small shops reopened where ruins had stood, and families cautiously returned to city life. In the countryside, silence was heavier. Fields once mined were being cleared, but villagers still moved with care, and old fears lingered.

The wounds of the Khmer Rouge era were everywhere, even if rarely spoken of. Parents avoided questions from their children. Grandmothers and grandfathers carried memories too heavy to share. Young people grew up with fragments of knowledge: a whispered name, a photograph hidden in a drawer, a sudden tear in the eyes of an elder who refused to explain. The promise of a tribunal existed only as a distant plan debated in international meetings; for ordinary Cambodians, justice remained something abstract, almost unimaginable.

Into this fragile landscape stepped on the Civil Peace Service.

The Civil Peace Service itself was still young when it set foot in Cambodia. In Germany, only two years earlier, nine peace and development organizations had joined forces around a daring idea: that a country could send not soldiers but deploying trained civilian peacebuilding specialists. Instead of uniforms, peacebuilding specialists would bring analytical tools, facilitation and listening skills, and the ability to accompany partners through long and complex processes of dialogue, recovery, and institutional strengthening. With support from the German Government, this idea took shape as the CPS, a program for violence prevention, civil conflict transformation, and peacebuilding. From the outset, it was less an institution than a community of conviction, built on the belief that conflicts cannot be solved by outsiders imposing answers but by people on the ground who know their history, their wounds, and their hopes. Its task was not only to help societies confront painful pasts but also to strengthen their ability to prevent new violence through dialogue, civic participation, and nonviolent conflict resolution.

When CPS came to Cambodia in 2001, implemented by GIZ (then still the German Development Service, DED), these principles found a new testing ground in a society emerging from decades of conflict, where silence about the past was heavy and the future still uncertain. The program arrived quietly, not with grand announcements, but with advisors who sat in the corners of partner offices, listening more than speaking. Some traveled dusty roads to meet survivor groups, discovering local idioms for courage and healing. Others stood beside young Cambodian colleagues just beginning their professional journeys. Slowly, trust grew. People realized this was not another project that would vanish with the next donor cycle. It was something different: a presence that stayed, quietly and patiently, long enough for confidence to take root and for people to dare to imagine a different future.

Over the course of twenty-five years, this intention unfolded in countless ways. The CPS of GIZ cooperated with more than two dozen Cambodian organizations, seconded international peace workers, and supported local staff who became leaders in their fields. The program's role was never to stand at the front but to stand alongside, sometimes offering expertise, sometimes resources, and often simply continuity. In a world where donor projects usually come and go in short cycles, CPS remained steady. That constancy allowed trust to grow, institutions to mature, and individuals to develop the confidence to carry forward work long after projects ended.

The challenges were immense. The wounds of the Khmer Rouge era were not only legal questions to be resolved in a courtroom. They were personal scars, family silences, and social fractures that could not be healed with verdicts alone. Survivors needed acknowledgment, psychological support, and opportunities to share their truth in ways that were safe and meaningful. Communities needed spaces to talk across generations, to understand how the past still shaped the present. Youth needed education that went beyond textbooks, helping them to replace inherited prejudice with empathy and understanding. And memory itself, held in old documents, photos, and also in stories yet to be told, needed to be safeguarded and created anew before it would disappear. At that time, the idea of a tribunal was beginning to take shape, but much about its form and functioning still had to be negotiated and clarified.

This is where CPS's contribution became distinctive. When the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) began its first trial in 2007, the focus was on criminal accountability. CPS and its partners worked alongside this process, creating pathways of accompaniment. Outreach teams traveled to remote villages to explain court proceedings in simple words. Counselors sat with survivors who were giving testimony, helping them manage the emotions that surfaced when memories returned. Teachers and students were invited to exhibitions at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, where history was no longer abstract but tangible, visible on the walls of classrooms that had once been prison cells. Young journalists were trained to report with sensitivity, ensuring that stories of the past would be told ethically and with care. In these ways justice became something lived not only in Phnom Penh's courtrooms but also in schools, pagodas, and communities across Cambodia.

Behind every initiative stood people. This is perhaps the most important lesson of CPS in Cambodia and beyond: peacebuilding is never just about projects or institutions but about individuals who grow into their roles and carry the work forward. Many first encountered CPS as students, interns, or early-career professionals. They learned through practice, often working alongside international colleagues who encouraged them to test new ideas and develop their own approaches. Over time, they became leaders, directors of NGOs, professors at universities, and advisors in government institutions. Their stories show how CPS created not only short-term activities but also long-term changes through the growth of people.
This book tells their stories.

You may notice, as we did while compiling our initial list of potential protagonists, that only three women are included. This reflects reality: while women often make up the majority at the project level – whether as staff members or within target groups – they remain underrepresented in leadership positions, not only in Cambodia. We deliberately decided to keep this stumbling stone to acknowledge the imbalance, rather than artificially creating gender parity.

In each of the four thematic fields where CPS focused its work – transitional justice, mental health and psychosocial support, truth and memory, peace education and youth – we met three people who joined this journey at different points. Some started as early-career professionals and later became leaders in their fields. Others carried survivor experiences into their work, shaping it with a personal sense of responsibility. Still others first encountered CPS as students or interns and, over time, grew into teachers, mentors, or directors. Together they form a mosaic of twelve lives intertwined with the history of CPS in Cambodia.

The stories are diverse in detail, but they share a common thread. Each one shows how peacebuilding is not an abstract theory, but a lived practice, grounded in the decisions and convictions of individuals. In the courtrooms of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal (ECCC) in Phnom Penh, in village pagodas, in museum galleries, in university classrooms, these people turned values into actions: they gave survivors a voice, they sat in circles of self-help groups, they created space for dialogue, they taught young people to ask questions about history. Their work illustrates how justice, healing, memory, and education are inseparable strands of the same fabric.

In the chapter on transitional justice, we meet three Cambodians who stood at the forefront of a historic experiment: giving survivors a place inside international criminal proceedings. Their journeys, from building the Victims Support Section at the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, to coordinating civil society outreach, to sustaining survivor forums long after media attention had faded, show what it meant to translate the law into lived recognition.

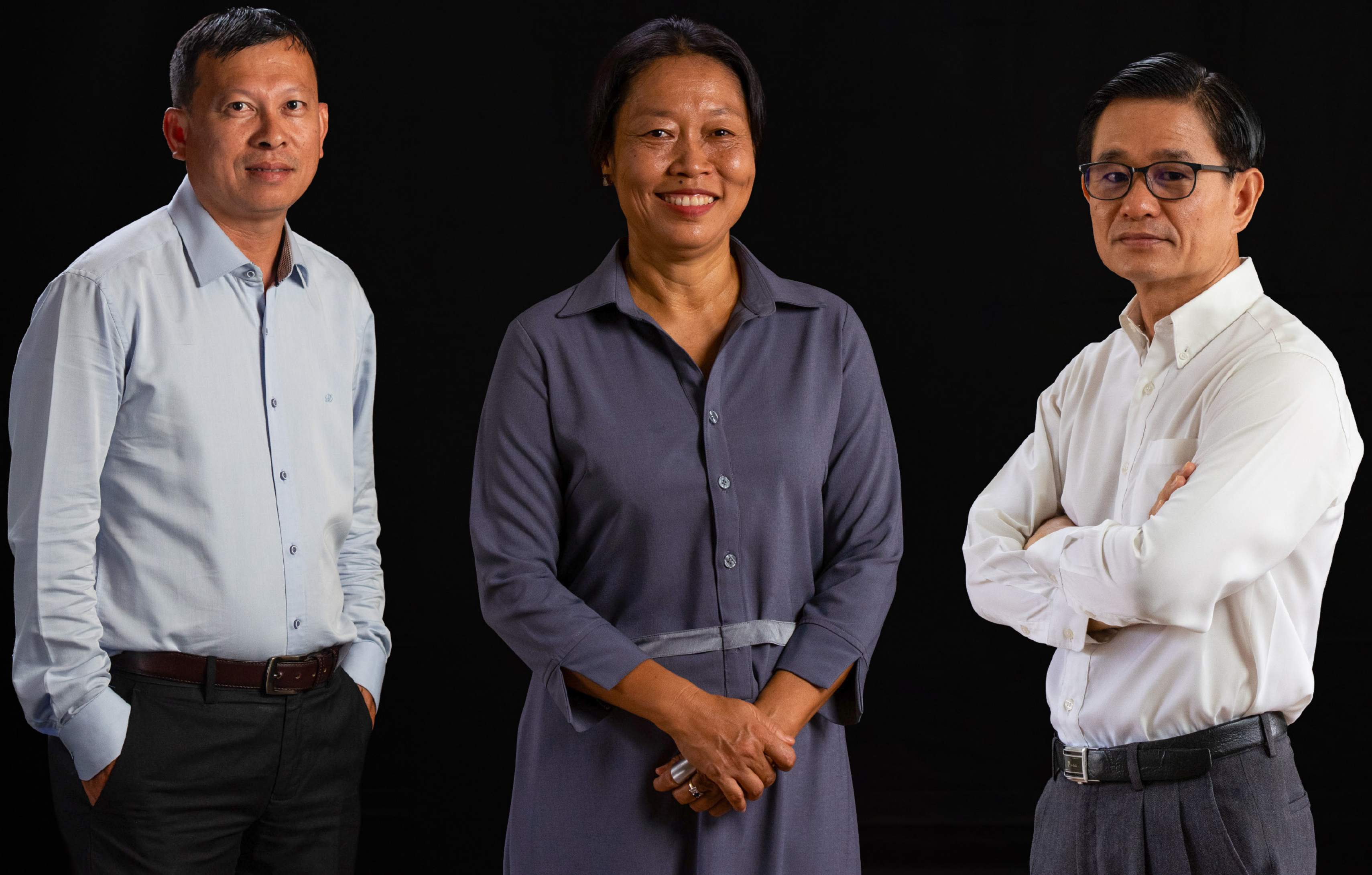
In the chapter on mental health and psychosocial support, three practitioners guide us through the hidden terrain of trauma and resilience. Their stories reveal how Cambodian concepts like *baksbat* (broken courage), helped make sense of suffering, how survivor groups became “bundles of chopsticks” that could not be broken, and how love, toward oneself and others, became the foundation for healing.

In the chapter on truth and memory, we follow three people who turned fragile archives and painful places into resources for the future. Their work at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, at Bophana Center, and in community dialogues shows how memory can shift from silence and fear to education and reconciliation, how survivors can move from being passive victims to active carriers of truth, and how Cambodia’s heritage became part of the world’s shared responsibility.

And in the chapter on peace education and youth, we see how history is handed on. Three educators and peacebuilders, through classrooms, research, and grassroots listening, show how young Cambodians are invited to understand not only what happened, but why. They challenge myths, open spaces for dialogue across differences, and insist that history should be used not to fuel anger, but to foster compassion.

Taken together, these twelve portraits are not a comprehensive account of CPS in Cambodia. They are windows, personal perspectives that illuminate the larger journey. Alongside the more than one hundred other local colleagues who worked with CPS over the years, they remind us that the program’s legacy lies not only in what was built, but in who was shaped along the way. Institutions may change, projects may close, but the people who walked part of their path with CPS carry their values into new spaces, into counseling centers, universities, museums, NGOs, and communities. This book is therefore more than a record of what has passed. It is a collection of voices pointing forward. Each story, in its own way, shows that peace is not a single achievement but a continuous process, carried by people who dare to listen, to accompany, and to remember.

And so, as you turn the page, you are invited to walk alongside these voices. May their journeys offer not only a glimpse into Cambodia’s past, but also inspiration for how peace is nurtured, quietly, patiently, and always through people, into the future.



TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

A Journey of Justice and Healing

The Khmer Rouge Tribunal or officially known as the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) represents a landmark in Cambodia’s pursuit of transitional justice. It symbolizes a pivotal moment in history where survivors of the Khmer Rouge regime were given a voice in the legal process, shaping the nation’s path to reconciliation. This chapter explores the critical role of civil party participation in trials and the profound importance of survivors’ voices in both justice and memory.

02

KEAT Bophal

Building Justice from the Inside Out

Building Justice from the Inside Out

In the early days of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, when survivors cautiously stepped forward with decades of grief and questions, a significant shift was taking place. For the first time in international criminal law, victims were not merely witnesses – they were granted procedural rights as civil parties in a hybrid court. And leading the formation of this groundbreaking mechanism from within the court's walls was a Cambodian woman named KEAT Bophal.

[...] THE SUPREME COURT CHAMBER
DECIDES TO IMPO NTENCE OF LIFE IMPRISONMENT AGAINST KAING GUEK EAV (DUCH).
UMMARY OF APPEAL JUDGEMENT CASE FILE 001, 2012)

> *"What I remember most vividly from those early days are the faces and voices of the elderly women and men who traveled from near and far provinces to submit their complaints."*

With an academic background in law, specialized in international law and professional experience spanning criminal and administrative justice, civil rights, and socio-economic and land rights, Bophal became the inaugural head of the Victims Unit - later renamed the Victims Support Section (VSS) – at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). She was tasked with a monumental challenge: to create a system that would allow survivors of the Khmer Rouge Regime to participate meaningfully in the pursuit of justice.

"It was deeply human," she recalled. "What I remember most vividly from those early days are the faces and voices of the elderly women and men who traveled from faraway provinces to submit their complaints. Their courage and determination to seek justice – not just for themselves, but for their families and lost loved ones - became the foundation of the ECCC's victim participation model."

For Bophal, the work was not just procedural or legal. It was built on relationships, accountability, and the trust of those who had endured unimaginable losses. In helping to draft internal procedures, develop legal frameworks, and build trust in communities long devastated by war, she laid the groundwork for a survivor-centered approach to transitional justice that was previously untested. Victims were no longer peripheral. They were central.

Designing a Legal First

The civil party model adopted by the ECCC represented an international milestone. Victims were given the right to legal representation, to be heard in court, and to request reparations – not just symbolic acknowledgment, but collective and psychological redress. However, embedding this model within a hybrid tribunal posed significant institutional and personal challenges.

When Bophal first arrived, many of the tools needed to support legal pathways for victim participation, as well as coordination protocols, did not yet exist. Working with a small team, she helped design and build these systems step by step. Even more daunting was the emotional terrain. Many survivors lived in rural areas, burdened by trauma and hesitant to revisit the past. Some feared retaliation, while others simply did not know they had rights.

"There were logistical difficulties in reaching remote communities, and the psychological toll of recounting traumatic experiences was enormous," she said. "A number of applicants were not admitted as civil parties, and accounts from survivors and case records show that this sometimes led to feelings of disappointment and exclusion."

With limited support available, especially for those not formally admitted, the path forward was unclear. And yet, some persisted. For those who eventually entered the courtroom, their presence became more than participation – it was a statement: they mattered.

Institutional and Interpersonal Challenges

The ECCC was a unique and multifaceted working environment, with national and international staff bringing different perspectives on the role of victim participation. The tribunal's mandate recognized victim participation, but colleagues differed on how it should be prioritized – some considered it central, others treated it mainly as an administrative task. Bophal, however, saw it as essential to justice. Building that shared understanding required patience, diplomacy, and consistent engagement, and in time the practice became embedded in the institution.

"Advocacy came naturally to me, but navigating such a complex institutional setting was challenging," she admitted. "There were moments of quiet frustration, yet

The Survivors Who Stayed with Her

also important breakthroughs – times when colleagues began to see survivors not simply as case files, but as individuals with agency, grief, and aspirations for justice." She will never forget several elderly women and men she met during her early days at the Victims Unit. They traveled long distances to the tribunal, bringing with them precious documents – photos, letters, scraps of evidence – that they had safeguarded for decades.

When they spoke, often through tears, about losing family members or enduring inhumane treatment under the Khmer Rouge, their composure and quiet dignity carried more weight than any raised voice could. Many told her they had kept these stories locked inside for years, and that finally speaking them aloud in a space where they were truly heard felt like lifting a heavy burden.

A Woman Leading Justice in a Fragile Time

"I still think about them," she reflected. "They embodied the strength and resilience that I hoped the Victims Support Section could help sustain."

Being a woman in a high-stakes legal institution presented its own complexities. Bophal herself acknowledged that her approach was shaped by being both a woman and a mother leading a unit focused on victims and survivors. Her sensitivity to survivors' dignity and trauma-informed care was palpable. Her ability to hold space – for grief, for silence, for delayed voices – became a critical element of the VSS's success.

At the same time, she was navigating an equally demanding role at home. Her husband was often away for work, leaving her to balance leadership at the tribunal with caring for young children. She relied on her mother's tireless support to manage these responsibilities. Most mornings began with preparing breakfast, dressing her children, and doing the school drop-off before heading to the tribunal. Even though she often returned home late, she made it a priority to dedicate evenings to her children, especially reading bedtime stories.

"My approach was deeply shaped by being a woman, and a mother leading a victims/survivor-focused unit," she explained. "I understood, viscerally, the balancing act between responsibility and care."

This dual responsibility deepened her empathy for survivors – many of whom were caretakers themselves, carrying grief while continuing to support their families. She also recognized that not all harm could be addressed through legal proceedings. For many survivors, especially those from marginalized or minority backgrounds, the path to healing required more than courtroom recognition. It demanded culturally sensitive engagement and sustained psychosocial support.

"Those moments with my children reminded me why this work mattered," she said. "Justice was not only about addressing the past for survivors, but also about contributing to a better future for Cambodia's children."

Working Hand-in-Hand with Civil Society and CPS

From the beginning, the Civil Peace Service (CPS) played an important role in shaping the Victims Unit. A CPS advisor worked closely with the team in drafting regulations, processing applications, and establishing operational systems.

"A CPS advisor was helping with the initial regulation and setting up the unit," Bophal recalled. "They also worked with Transcultural Psychosocial Organization Cambodia (TPO) to provide psychosocial support to victims, integrating traditional and religious practices into trauma treatment."

Their core values – trauma-informed care, cultural healing, and survivor empowerment – became integral to the work. "It was never solely about processing applications; it was about creating safety, dignity, and acknowledgment," Bophal emphasized.

In collaboration with TPO and other civil society partners, the Victims Unit integrated psychosocial approaches such as Buddhist ceremonies and community outreach to ensure survivors could participate meaningfully, even from remote areas. CPS's support helped extend outreach and legal aid far beyond Phnom Penh, reaching rural and marginalized communities.

CPS didn't just offer funding – it offered philosophy. Its commitment to empowering the marginalized, working beyond the courtroom, and strengthening survivor networks resonated deeply with the goals of the VSS. Through organizations like Cambodian Human Rights Action Committee (CHRAC) and TPO, CPS supported outreach, legal aid, and testimonial therapy, providing the foundation for meaningful participation.

Beyond the courtroom walls, these collaborations helped seed Cambodia's post-tribunal civil society landscape. "We made many connections during that time that continue to shape our work today," Bophal said.

Healing as a Process, Not a Verdict

For Bophal, the work of transitional justice is ongoing. It does not end with a verdict, a sentencing, or the closure of a tribunal. True justice, she believes, is measured in the quiet transformation of survivors – from silence to testimony, from grief to community, from invisibility to dignity.

She saw firsthand that many survivors, especially those from minority communities and those affected by gender-based violence, carried deep, often unspoken trauma.

Courtroom recognition was important, but it was never enough. Long-term healing required culturally sensitive engagement and psychosocial support rooted in local traditions.

Through her work, Bophal also became a proponent of memorialization – not just as remembrance, but as repair. She pointed to initiatives like the Khmer Rouge memorial at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum – developed under the ECCC's reparation program and among several projects supported by German funding – as tangible symbols of acknowledgment. These projects gave survivors and families a sense that their suffering was recognized not only in legal records but also in public spaces.

"Healing is not a single moment but a long and continuous process."

The Personal Impact of a Professional Mission

Facilitating victim participation and collaborating with CPS profoundly shaped both Bophal's personal and professional journey. She reflected that it reinforced her belief that justice must include emotional and social dimensions – not only courtroom procedures. She developed stronger skills in empathetic leadership and inclusive, survivor-informed program design.

"Professionally, it strengthened my capacity. Personally, it challenged me to confront painful truths about Cambodia's past. It deepened my commitment to upholding the dignity and rights of survivors."

And while the ECCC may have closed its legal chapter, Bophal's vision for justice in Cambodia continues through education, memorialization, and the construction of structures that ensure non-recurrence.

Looking Forward: Restoring Dignity, Rebuilding Trust

For Bophal, the legacy of the VSS lies in showing that victims can stand at the center of justice. It created survivor networks and forged relationships between communities, civil society, and legal actors that outlived the tribunal itself.

"I hope future transitional justice efforts in Cambodia will keep those principles alive: dignity, agency, and culturally rooted care," she said.

From the outset, the VSS was never just about processing legal paperwork. It was about creating a space for humanity within the law - a place where survivors' pain could be acknowledged, their experiences validated, and their voices finally heard.

That same commitment now guides her ongoing work in research, advocacy, and consultancy. Whether addressing transitional justice, human rights, or land rights, she continues to push for processes that are inclusive, survivor-centered, and tied to real social change.

"The settings are different, but the values are the same," she concluded.

"Justice for victims is not solely a legal matter – it is also deeply emotional and social."

REFLECTIONS ON PEACE & CHANGE

What is your personal definition of peace?

Peace means more than the absence of violence. It is the presence of justice, dignity, and equality, where people can live free from fear, and where past harms are acknowledged and never repeated.

What has been the most significant change in Cambodia in the last 25 years?

The most significant change has been the shift from silence and fear toward open dialogue and recognition of the Khmer Rouge era, supported by growing civic engagement and survivor-led initiatives.

What still needs to change to ensure lasting peace and justice in the next 25 years?

Cambodia needs stronger rule of law, inclusive education that integrates historical memory, and long-term support for survivors and marginalized communities to ensure that the roots of past injustice are not repeated and that reconciliation is truly sustainable.

OEUNG Jeudy

The Infrastructure of Justice

The Infrastructure of Justice

In the early days of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, the promise of justice often felt out of reach for ordinary Cambodians. Survivors of the regime's violence lived across the country – in remote villages, in urban slums, even in exile. The courtroom in Phnom Penh was hundreds of kilometers away, both physically and legally. What stood between these survivors and meaningful participation in the justice process was not just geography. It was paperwork, language, fear, lack of information, and, most of all, a system that had never before made room for them.

Into that space stepped OEUNG Jeudy.

From 2005 to 2013, Jeudy served as a Program Officer in the Secretariat of the Cambodian Human Rights Action Committee (CHRAC), a coalition of 20 human rights and democracy NGOs in Cambodia, where he provided support and coordinated the Khmer Rouge tribunal-related project under the CHRAC leadership. Under his coordination role, CHRAC engaged and transformed victim participation from an abstract legal promise into a lived reality. At a time when the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) had just been established, and its mechanisms were still unclear, CHRAC took the initiative to help coordinate its member support to the tribunal. Jeudy and his CHRAC team, as well as CHRAC member organizations, helped build Cambodia's first civil society-led complaint system, trained civil party lawyers, translated complaint forms, and organized outreach across the provinces. In total, CHRAC facilitated more than 4,400 civil party complaints – over 50 percent of the total forms submitted to the ECCC.

Jeudy is not a judge, nor did he ever sit on the bench. But his and his organization's work fundamentally shaped the tribunal's legacy for the domestic courts and NGOs to learn from. Without CHRAC's and its members contributive efforts, thousands of survivors – particularly those in rural and marginalized communities – might never have known that they had the right to participate, let alone how to do so. His story is not about courtroom drama. It's about the quiet, invisible labor that made the courtroom matter.

From Law to Action: Jeudy's Early Foundation

Before his role at CHRAC, Jeudy trained as a law graduate. With his legal experiences at CHRAC, Jeudy was admitted to the Cambodian Bar Association as a professional lawyer. His passion for law was never limited to courtrooms. It extended to access – how to make legal systems work for people, especially those most often excluded, especially when it comes transitional justice and fair trial rights.

His motivation for joining CHRAC was rooted in a desire to see international justice connect to Cambodia's realities. "I was motivated by the challenge of bridging a very complicated legal structure with real people, especially in rural areas, who had no idea such a process existed," he recalled. As a Program Officer at CHRAC Secretariat, he helped shape strategy, supervised project teams, and facilitated communications and coordination among CHRAC's 20 member organizations.

He also reflected that much of his early learning came from trial and error. "At that time, most of us had little experience working on transitional justice, international criminal or hybrid tribunals. We were learning as we went about the legal procedures, about victim rights, and how to make these things accessible and widely reachable to the public, drawing lessons from other tribunal best practices and other international experts or advisors."

Building the System: Cambodia's First Survivor Complaint Database

When the tribunal opened the door for civil party participation, it did not come with comprehensive instructions. There was no mechanism in place to help survivors prepare complaints or understand their rights properly, which include the rights to participation, legal representation and reparation, according to the ECCC's internal rules.

Together with its members, CHRAC stepped in to support the tribunal. Under Jeudy's coordination, CHRAC designed the first NGO-led tracking system for civil party applications. The database was used for case mapping and coordination among NGOs, and it assisted assigned lawyers within CHRAC members Legal Aid Cambodia (LAC) and the Cambodian Defenders Project (CDP) during the early phase. It proved especially valuable because it stored applicants' information in both Khmer (as submitted in the original applications) and English summaries for international lawyers working with CHRAC's legal team. Later, once donor funding became available, the Victims Support Unit (VSS) of the ECCC developed its own data system when it became fully operational.

The system required more than just forms. Jeudy and his team worked with provincial NGO members of CHRAC to collect testimonies, verify details written in the application forms They helped ensure accuracy in the forms before they were submitted to the ECCC's Victims Unit at that time.

CHRAC created multilingual application templates in Khmer and English, following the ECCC's Victims Information Form. CHRAC and its member organizations[1] offered training to staff members who helped collect information from various provinces. For many rural applicants, it was their first time ever writing an official complaint.

The process also required coordination with multiple stakeholders – the VSS, the Public Affairs Section of ECCC, legal aid NGOs as well as other NGOs partners.

"We had to build a system that worked across different actors, met different expectations, and with constant pressure from deadlines and donors," Jeudy said.

Each complaint was reviewed multiple times. The CHRAC team often followed up directly with colleagues who had helped engage with applicants to clarify inconsistencies or missing information. "We didn't want to submit anything that might lead to rejection. That would be another form of harm to the victims who devoted their time and wanted to meaningfully participate in the justice process," he noted.

Beyond dealing with victims' complaints, CHRAC also did some additional activities around outreach, advocacy and monitoring of the tribunal's proceedings. Jeudy and his team produced internal monitoring and outreach activity reports, in which it informed CHRAC leadership for guidance and advocacy purpose on some legal procedures pertaining the due process and fair trial rights – benefiting both for the victims and the perpetrators, as well as documenting key challenges that needed to raise with the court's respective sections during their meetings.

"Civil society had to keep the process transparent," he explained. "We were helping survivors participate in the legal proceedings. Therefore, we had responsibility to further engage with the tribunal on their complaints as CHRAC became intermediary organization to relay responses from the ECCC to the civil party applicants or to its NGO members who facilitated the submissions."

Making Participation Real: Reaching the Margins

CHRAC didn't stop at complaint forms. They developed two main nationwide outreach tools: the *Khmer Rouge Tribunal Watch* radio program, which aired weekly for seven years and reached approximately half a million listeners with more than 1,500 direct callers, and a monthly *Khmer Rouge Tribunal Watch* newsletters, with about 32,000 copies distributed nationwide. These efforts made complex legal developments accessible to ordinary people, especially those in provinces.

From Cham Muslim communities to Khmer Krom and survivors in rural provinces, Jeudy and his colleagues worked to ensure that no one was left behind.

They issued newsletters in Khmer, hosted discussions in local communities, and explained procedures in simple language.

CHRAC member NGOs such as the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC) and the Center for Social Development (CSD), also organized public forums and field outreach activities, often using newsletters and radio broadcasts as reference materials.

> *"We tried everything – from radio broadcasting programs to visual outreach materials – to make the ECCC's legal proceedings understandable for the public."*

Some survivors hesitated to apply as civil parties, fearing retaliation or stigma. Jeudy recalled that the CHRAC members' staff often returned to villages several times to reassure them, explain available protections, and sometimes accompany them discreetly to the ECCC's hearings.

"We had to build trust step by step," he said.
When survivors needed help interpreting court developments, CHRAC's members organized group briefings in the provinces. In a system built on unfamiliar international frameworks, they became translators, not just of language, but of justice.

They also designed visual tools – flyers, pictorial summaries, and posters to explain the complaint process and court updates. Many were distributed during village forums or at pagodas. "We made every possible effort – from radio to visual materials – to make the law understandable to the ordinary people," Jeudy said.

Throughout this process, CHRAC partnered closely with the CPS of GIZ. CPS advisors supported legal coordination, training and technical capacity-building. One key advisor, Christoph Sperfeldt, worked side by side with Jeudy and others to align their work with international standards, while CPS local experts helped translate complaints into English to be accessible for assigned international lawyers of the civil parties under the CHRAC victims support scheme. and French.

CPS assisted CHRAC in developing frameworks and advocacy for reparations for the civil parties, documenting outreach impact, and advocating for long-term survivor support. As Jeudy recalled, "CPS didn't just offer money. They offered structure and experience in how to deal with international systems."

With CPS support, CHRAC also co-organized regional conferences on reparations, outreach, and legacy of the ECCC, where Cambodian legal practitioners exchanged experiences and best practices with colleagues from Africa and the Balkans. "These exchanges showed us that we were not alone," Jeudy reflected. "Other countries also struggled with how to make tribunals meaningful for victims of mass atrocities."

Designing for Dignity: Ethical Sensitivity Behind Participation

One of the greatest challenges, Jeudy shared, was not technical but ethical: how to ensure that victims were treated with respect throughout the justice process. Submitting a civil party application was not just a matter of legal paperwork – it was a form of truth-telling, a deeply personal and emotional act.

"We had to be very careful. If an application was rejected or deemed ineligible, that could retraumatize the victim-survivor," Jeudy explained. "So, our lawyers and staff reviewed each application form closely, often returning

> *"We saw our role not just as legal aid, but emotional support."*

to the field to re-interview or clarify with the complainant. We did not want anyone to feel that their story was not good enough."

CHRAC's approach was built around preserving dignity. Beyond completing legal forms, the team ensured that survivors were accompanied to hearings, provided transportation and meals, and supported emotionally as they navigated a legal setting that often re-opened painful memories. "We saw our role not just as legal aid, but emotional support," Jeudy said.

The work also took a personal toll. Handling thousands of survivor complaints meant carrying thousands of stories of pain. "It was heavy for all of us," Jeudy admitted. "But it also shaped how I see justice – not just in law, but in society."

A Model for Future Justice Processes: What Justice Meant to Survivors

Reflecting on Cambodia's experience, Jeudy believes that the country offers a valuable model for other post-conflict nations. "It wasn't perfect, but what we accomplished – especially civil society's involvement – showed what's possible when survivors are treated as participants, not just passive beneficiaries," he said. In his academic work, Jeudy has highlighted lessons that other international tribunals could learn from Cambodia: the need for clear outreach strategies, the integration of victims' voices from the start into the tribunal's internal rules with adequate budgeting, and stronger partnerships between civil society and the court. "Other tribunals have tried to replicate elements of what we did here. But few have the kind of deep grassroots coordination that CHRAC built," he noted. For many survivors, the opportunity to submit a complaint or attend the trial was more important than the law – it was about recognition of the harms they suffered. Some told Jeudy that simply being part of the process – whether by submitting a complaint, attending the hearing, or receiving the tribunal's updates through outreach – gave them a sense of recognition they had long been denied.

Jeudy also acknowledged that CHRAC's role in engaging in the court wasn't always easy. "Sometimes there were tensions between NGOs and the court, or even among NGOs due to misunderstanding of roles," he admitted. "We had to align different priorities – some were more focused on legal aid, others on outreach, reparations, or advocacy." Still, the collaboration worked because of mutual trust and shared goals for the benefit of the victim survivors and sake of justice.

The database may be gone, but its legacy remains. For Jeudy, the real measure of success was not legal victory – it was dignity restored through meaningful participation.

Continuing Work and Legacy

Today, Jeudy continues his peacebuilding work through multiple channels. He trains civil society advocates through the Diplomacy Training Program (DTP), contributes to academic and policy research on transitional justice, human rights and peacebuilding. He works for the United Nations in Cambodia responsible for peace and development.

In 2019, he co-authored an article with CPS advisor Christoph Sperfeldt on victim participation in the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, now a key reference for scholars studying participatory justice models. He also mentors younger

> *"There's still a gap in public understanding of transitional justice, especially among youth. We need more civic education, more platforms for survivors to speak – not just for documentation, but for healing."*

legal practitioners and supports NGOs in strengthening their internal systems, seeing this as an extension of what CHRAC once provided.

"What we started during the tribunal should continue in our everyday legal and civic practice," he said. "There's still a gap in public understanding of transitional justice, especially among youth. We need more civic education, more platforms for survivors to speak – not just for documentation, but for healing."

For Jeudy, the infrastructure built at CHRAC was not just a database. It was a civic ecosystem – a network of lawyers, NGOs, survivors, and communities that carried the weight of thousands of voices into a courtroom that might otherwise have stood empty.

In a process often dominated by foreign lawyers and legal jargon, Jeudy's story reminds us that the true architects of justice are often those behind the scenes: coordinating documents, organizing outreach, translating the legal meaning into simple words for public to easily understand and follow. His work made it possible for survivors to be seen and heard – not just as victims, but as agents of truth. And that is a form of justice that outlives the court itself.

REFLECTIONS ON PEACE & CHANGE

What is your personal definition of peace?

To me, peace is not just the absence of war, but a condition where people feel free from fear, treated fairly, and able to live with dignity. It means inner peace for individuals, social justice for communities, and a society where human rights are respected and people can participate equally in public life.

What has been the most significant change in Cambodia in the last 25 years?

The most significant change in Cambodia over the last 25 years has been the country's political and social transformation after the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements. People have become more aware of their rights, public participation has grown, and civil society has expanded. Alongside this, Cambodia has experienced steady economic growth, showing how peace has supported national development.

What still needs to change to ensure lasting peace and justice in the next 25 years?

To ensure lasting peace and justice in the next 25 years, Cambodia needs stronger and more independent institutions – especially the courts – built on the standards set by the ECCC – to deliver justice in free and fair manner. The country must expand civic space, protect human rights, and strengthen mechanisms for accountability. Education on peace, law, and history is essential for younger generations, and addressing everyday social injustices in communities is crucial to maintaining social cohesion and preventing future conflict. Lessons learnt from the ECCC - legal jurisprudence - should be taught at law schools to change mindset of justice and fair trial standards, which will change the public perception on domestic courts in delivering justice and their judicial independence and impartiality.

HANG Vannak

Transformative Justice Beyond the Courtroom

Transformative Justice Beyond the Courtroom

During the quiet years of the COVID-19 pandemic, Cambodia's Khmer Rouge Tribunal (ECCC) moved into the background. Hearings were delayed, outreach suspended, and international attention shifted elsewhere. In villages across the country, many survivors assumed that the court had already ended without resolution.

"They thought the ECCC had come to an end," recalled HANG Vannak, who served as the head of the Victim Support Section (VSS). "But when lawyers visited them and explained that the court was still progressing, they were very happy."

Thanks to the support of the Civil Peace Service (CPS), VSS and its legal partners continued this outreach even during the pandemic. Despite logistical challenges and health risks, they traveled to remote areas, bringing survivors news about court developments, including the final judgment in Case 002/02 and the passing of Nuon Chea.

This was more than legal information – it was an act of care and respect. Survivors, many of whom were elderly and isolated, felt that someone still remembered them. Their complaints had not been forgotten. Their participation still mattered.

Vannak explained, "As a court, we know that the direct participants have the right to gain legal information about their case. If they did not have the chance to receive those, then it would be meaningless."

A Different Kind of Justice Work

While others focused on handling litigation or arguing cases, Vannak's role was different. He worked at the intersection of law, community, and memory. His mission was to ensure that survivors remained connected to the process they had helped initiate – years, even decades, after their first engagement.

Vannak brought to this work a deep reservoir of experience. Before joining the ECCC, he worked with the United Nations Inter-Agency Project Against Human Trafficking in the Mekong Sub-Region (UNIAP) and later completed a postgraduate degree in International Human Rights Law in the United Kingdom. Upon returning to Cambodia, he taught human rights and continued working in development and legal reform.

Under his leadership, the VSS expanded its engagement with survivors beyond the filing stage. Forums were organized across the country – safe spaces where civil parties could ask questions, receive legal updates, and share their perspectives. These gatherings became more than informational exchanges; they were places where survivors could reclaim voice and agency.

He described his work not as a technical task, but as accompaniment. It demanded empathy before expertise, and sensitivity at every step. There were logistical responsibilities – transportation arrangements, coordination with lawyers – but also the quiet, demanding work of trauma-informed support. “We didn’t focus only on legal rights,” he said. “We also supported healing by helping survivors to take part in the judicial proceedings.”

The projects varied: survivor forums, reparation ceremonies, school visits, and storytelling events. Vannak and his team didn’t just explain proceedings; they built bridges between institutions and emotions, between past trauma and the possibility of inhabiting the present and imagining future hope.

In a country still grappling with collective trauma and limited access to information, that human connection became a form of justice in itself.

Peace Begins Within – Justice Through Inner Transformation

Vannak’s perspective on justice evolved the longer he worked with survivors. Over time, he came to believe that courtrooms could only go so far. Legal decisions might recognize suffering, but they could not erase fear, dissolve shame, or deal with painful memories. “Peace must start

from within,” he emphasized. “If people are mentally unstable, if they don’t have inner peace, they cannot build peace outside.”

He saw it repeatedly – trauma that hadn’t been acknowledged or transformed began to echo across relationships. Survivors passed down their pain, sometimes without realizing it. “Some survivors, once they were brought to the memory, kept on talking about the same trauma again and again, cried again and again for over two hours,” he recalled.

He often explained the problem using a metaphor that resonated with both students and survivors: “Our body is a machine or supercomputer, but we don’t know where its keyboard or handbook are. If we punch *happy* by chance, we feel happy. If we accidentally punch *suffer*, we suffer. But no one teaches us how to locate and use that keyboard and handbook.”

In classrooms, students learn to operate devices with precision. But few are taught to recognize their own emotional responses – what triggers sadness, what generates happiness, how to calm the mind when anxiety rises. “We don’t know how to manage ourselves,” he explained.

This, he argued, is the missing piece in Cambodia’s education system – and a vital key to long-term peace. Until individuals learn how to manage their inner worlds, external tools and policies will always fall short. For Vannak, this is why emotional literacy must become a core pillar of transitional justice. “If we don’t heal inside, the anger will come back. The next generation will continue the violence, even if they don’t know why.”

> *"When survivors move from being victims to becoming educators or leaders, that's transformative development. That's real justice."*

From Pain to Purpose – Survivors as Leaders

One of the most moving parts of Vannak's work was watching survivors transform – not into passive beneficiaries, but into community leaders and educators. He recalled cases where survivors who first came to the tribunal only to file a complaint or application as Civil Party later found the confidence to speak publicly, lead community events, or engage with youth. Some began teaching or mentoring, others helped organize exhibitions or supported fellow survivors in processing trauma. Many had not imagined such roles for themselves when they first submitted an application.

Vannak emphasized that justice is not only about what courts deliver. It is about what survivors become. "If survivors can take their pain and turn it into something positive – for themselves or others – that is real healing," he said.

This process took time, encouragement, and support. But it revealed what was possible when transitional justice prioritized agency over victimhood.

The Quiet Catalyst – Civil Peace Service as Enabler and Bridge

Much of this quiet transformation would not have been possible without the sustained backing of the CPS. While many donors focused on institutional or judicial infrastructure, CPS consistently invested in the human side of justice: outreach coordination, travel stipends, legal accompaniment, survivor forums, and psychosocial support. "CPS allowed us to stay in touch with survivors," Vannak said. "They helped us reach them when other funds dried up."

But beyond financial support, CPS offered something rarer – continuity and trust. Their long-term presence in Cambodia meant they could adapt quickly and respond sensitively to shifting needs. "They were not just donors," Vannak said. “They were collaborators who believed in long-term change.”

Unlike many short-term projects, CPS stayed through the entire lifespan of the tribunal. For Vannak, that consistency mattered. “Many donors came and left,” he recalled. “But CPS always remained. Survivors trusted us because they saw the same people coming back year after year.”

CPS didn’t impose fixed agendas. Instead, they asked local actors what survivors needed and then supported those requests – whether consultations on reparations, survivor forums, or community-based healing activities. This flexibility not only enabled initiatives but also helped build credibility and momentum among Cambodian partners.

Today, the legacy of that approach lives on in local organizations shaped by CPS-era partnerships. Though the work began quietly, its impact continues to resonate.

Legacy of the ECCC – Not Just in Verdicts

Vannak is clear-eyed about the limits of what a court can offer. “Full justice is not possible,” he said softly. “We cannot bring back the dead. We cannot undo the trauma.” Yet in the same breath, he speaks with quiet conviction about what the ECCC left behind – traces of justice that go deeper than verdicts or press releases.

The first legacy, he said, is memory – not just personal memory, but collective truth. For the first time in Cambodia’s history, survivor testimonies were formally recorded, evidence examined, and the crimes of the Khmer Rouge acknowledged in a court of law. “Now there is a truthful documentation,” he said. “Future generations will have evidence – not just stories.” That archive, he believes, is a shield against forgetting, a record to protect future students, journalists, and educators from denial, distortion, or silence.

But what matters just as much, in Vannak’s view, is the human growth that took place behind the scenes. Lawyers, outreach workers, psychosocial counselors, youth facilitators – hundreds of Cambodian professionals stepped into new roles during the court’s lifetime. “Many of us gained experiences we could never have received elsewhere,” he said. These were not only technical skills, but also values: a deeper sense of justice, patience, and the power of listening.

Today, these individuals are working across Cambodia – in ministries, NGOs, and international agencies – carrying with them the lessons the court gave them.

Then there are the institutions. Organizations like Transcultural Psychosocial Organization (TPO) or Kdei Karuna (KDK) didn’t just collaborate with the ECCC. They grew with it. They developed outreach programs, community healing projects, and educational tools that reached thousands. Supported by partners like CPS, they became the emotional and logistical infrastructure around the court – bridging gaps between survivors and systems, memory and healing.

“These groups didn’t disappear after the court,” said Vannak. “They became the backbone of Cambodia’s peacebuilding civil society.” To him, these legacies are just as important as the final verdicts. Maybe more so. “These are the things that will continue, long after the court closes.”

Protecting Survivor Memory with Purpose

As survivor numbers dwindle, Vannak is increasingly focused on how their stories are preserved and used. “Some people think we should just collect and publicize everything,” he said. “But that’s not healing. That’s dumping.”

He stresses that historical storytelling must serve a clear, ethical purpose: “Before you promote a story, ask yourself:

> *“Before you promote a story, ask yourself: is this to liberate others or to entangle them further?”*

is this to liberate others or to entangle them further?” This question has become central to his advocacy for trauma-informed storytelling, guiding journalists, teachers, and curators in deciding what stories to tell, and how to tell them.

“Not every story should be in a textbook or outreach program,” he said. “Some stories should stay private or be told in therapeutic spaces.”

He is also concerned about the younger generation. “We don’t want to pass our trauma to them,” he said. “We want to pass our wisdom.”

This is why he supports archiving projects that center healing – not shock value – and urges policymakers and outreach managers to consult education and mental health experts, and spiritual leaders before integrating memory into curricula or programs. “We can’t just remember the pain,” he said. “We have to learn how to grow from it.”

Peace Education for a New Cambodia

Looking forward, Vannak sees Cambodia at a crossroads. With the court’s judicial mandate complete, he believes the next phase must be educational – and deeply personal. “We need to teach peace in a new way,” he said. “Not just through textbooks, but through practices that reduce anger and increase compassion.”

His proposed peace education model includes mindfulness and breathing techniques to support emotional regulation, along with trauma literacy for teachers and community leaders who engage with survivors and younger generations. “He added that mental cultivation goes hand in hand with taking care of the body. When the body is in constant pain or discomfort, it becomes difficult to focus, to think clearly, or to cultivate a healthy state of mind.”

Vannak’s reflections are also deeply personal: his father died under the Khmer Rouge, a loss that sharpened his conviction that memory and healing must continue. “It’s not only history – it’s my family,” he said. That experience convinced him that the next generation should inherit resilience, not silence or avoidance.

He also advocates for historical education that is carefully balanced with healing frameworks, ensuring that memory work promotes growth rather than division. Finally, he emphasizes the need for self-reflection practices that help individuals let go of blame and grudges and navigate their emotional patterns with optimism. For Vannak, this is Cambodia’s next moral responsibility. “We suffered so much,” he said. “Now we must become teachers of inner transformation and healing.”

To him, the ECCC was not the end, but the beginning of a broader, deeper peace process – one rooted in survivors’ growth, youth awareness, and the daily choices Cambodians make to respond with consciousness and compassion rather than revenge and hatred.

REFLECTIONS ON PEACE & CHANGE

What is your personal definition of peace?

Peace is the absence of war and conflict, where human rights, justice, and equality are respected, protected and promoted. It is not an ultimate goal of sustainable development, but a fundamental requirement for a society to become civilized and human well-being is improved. Peace is the outcome of many processes that involves quality education, the rule of law, democracy, economic development, and public health.

What has been the most significant change in Cambodia in the last 25 years?

The prosecution and sentencing of Khmer Rouge leaders marked a major step toward justice and the psychological healing of victims. Once considered taboo, psychology is now more openly discussed and acknowledged in Cambodian society. Issues related to the Khmer Rouge, previously removed from the education system for the sake of national reconciliation and their involvement in the 1993 general election, are now being reintegrated and more openly addressed in public discourse.

What still needs to change to ensure lasting peace and justice in the next 25 years?

Equality and the rule of law remain pressing issues which must be addressed and reinforced. Human rights-based economic development should be a core component of social and economic progress. While education must keep pace with global advancements in science, technology, and AI, it should also foster inner peace through a more internally oriented approach.

LOVE, HEALING & MENTAL HEALTH IN PEACEBUILDING

03

Love as a Foundation for Healing

War leaves more than just physical destruction. It fractures human connection, silencing expressions of love and trust for generations. The Khmer Rouge era inflicted deep psychological wounds, shaping how people form relationships, express emotions, and heal from trauma. This chapter explores the role of love in recovery and peacebuilding, highlighting its power in healing individuals, families, and communities. Beyond justice, true reconciliation lies in restoring the bonds that hold a society together, allowing love to mend what violence once tore apart.

PICH
Panha

Community Love
and Compassion

Community Love and Compassion

At an English language school, PICH Panha went to the library and found a psychology book. The book caught his intention because it stood out – its pages filled with colorful diagrams of the brain, emotions, and human behavior. Unlike the plain textbooks he was used to, this one invited curiosity. “It was the first time I saw something like this,” he remembered. “I thought maybe this is what I should study, because psychology can help me understand people, and that can be useful in any field.”

That small moment of curiosity opened the door to an unexpected career. When he later joined the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), he enrolled in the Department of Psychology – a program still young, founded in the mid-1990s as one of the few academic spaces addressing Cambodia’s psychological wounds. The program introduced him to concepts like trauma, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). But in villages and survivor communities, he noticed people often described their pain in ways that textbooks did not capture.

A Culturally Specific Approach to Trauma

But as Panha moved from theory into practice, he quickly realized that the language of Western psychology did not always capture how Cambodian survivors expressed their suffering. This gap drew him to Transcultural Psychosocial Organization Cambodia (TPO), where he began working under director Dr. Chhim Sotheara, who had introduced a culturally specific frame for trauma rooted in the Khmer idiom *baksbat* (broken courage). In Cambodian usage, it describes the lingering fear, withdrawal, and guardedness many older survivors carried.

Clinically, Panha notes that *baksba*t and PTSD overlap substantially, with only modest differences – some PTSD indicators are absent in *baksbat* and vice versa. Practitioners choose whichever framework best fits the setting. In his TPO work, the *baksbat* checklist was used more often because it “fits our context slightly better,” though the PTSD checklist “also works – it is not wrong in Cambodian cases.”

The timeline mattered. During the early ECCC years (around 2007–2008), teams screened survivors with PTSD checklists. After Dr. Chhim’s doctoral study developed and validated a Cambodia-specific *baksbat* scale, TPO shifted to using that tool. Importantly, the interventions themselves did not change – community self-help groups, intergenerational dialogues, and testimonial therapy continued as before. Only the assessment instrument changed, better aligning with Cambodian language and lived experience.

Testimonial Therapy and Survivor Self-Help Groups

At TPO, Panha joined programs that brought survivors together to share their stories. One of the most profound approaches was testimony therapy – a five-day process. For the first four days, survivors recounted their life stories in detail, which were recorded and documented. On the fifth day, their narratives were read back in a public ceremony attended by monks, villagers, students, and local authorities. The monks then performed Buddhist rituals, bringing a sense of peace to survivors and their deceased relatives.

The process itself was powerful: survivors saw their pain acknowledged, structured, and validated. But the therapy did not end there. Testimonies were often shared again in intimate ceremonies, sometimes at pagodas, sometimes in community gatherings, where monks, family members, and neighbors could bear witness. These gatherings were framed by Buddhist prayers and chanting, with symbolic acts like offering robes to monks or lighting incense for the dead.

For survivors, this blending of counseling and ritual created a sacred space where pain could be released. “This way it makes the survivors feels like their suffering has been lifted and offered to the Buddha,” Panha recalled. Others wept as they felt, perhaps for the first time, that their neighbors believed them, honored them, and carried part of their burden.

Over time, TPO realized that counseling alone could not reach the thousands of survivors still living with unaddressed trauma. So, they helped form survivor self-help groups in villages across Cambodia. These groups were not only for therapy, but they also became circles of love, where members cooked for each other, visited when

> *“One chopstick breaks easily.*
> *But a bundle of chopsticks is hard to break. Survivors, when alone, feel fragile. But when they come together, they are stronger.*
> *This is healing in community form.”*

someone was ill, and celebrated family milestones together. Panha often described these groups using the metaphor of chopsticks. “One chopstick breaks easily. But a bundle of chopsticks is hard to break. Survivors, when alone, feel fragile. But when they come together, they are stronger. This is healing in community form.”

But even as older survivors found new ways to support each other, Panha sees another challenge, the silence between generations.

Intergenerational Trauma and Healing

Panha emphasizes that intergenerational trauma in Cambodia has been studied by his former colleagues at TPO, including work on the transmission of trauma across three generations – from grandparents who survived the Khmer Rouge, to their children, and then to grandchildren. That research found clear evidence of transmission from the first to the second generation, signs of transfer to the third generation mainly as depression, but little evidence of direct transfer from the second to the third.

In practice, when TPO tried to implement a dialogue model across three generations within one family, it proved difficult to find many households where all three lived together. The team therefore adapted the approach into community-based intergenerational dialogues. They invited grandparents, parents, and youth from different families in the same community, then brought them together by generation for facilitated exchange.

One version of this program was run in schools, especially with Grade 12 students. Complainants – survivors who had filed cases at the ECCC – shared painful stories from the Khmer Rouge era, while TPO prepared both survivors and students in advance – teaching grounding techniques like deep breathing and self-massage to prevent secondary trauma.

Even with this preparation, reactions were strong. One student admitted afterwards that he still felt “inside the Khmer Rouge” rather than back in the present. These sessions showed the intensity of intergenerational trauma, but also the importance of safe preparation and follow-up.

An interesting pattern emerged. Grandparents tended to share advice drawn from past hardships, while young people expected more equal, participatory communication, which sometimes created tension, but also opened space for new understanding. Parents often played a mediating role between older and younger voices. Participants later reported that the experience encouraged them to speak more openly within their own families.

At the same time, Panha is cautious about the limits of such interventions. A single NGO cannot reach the whole country, and many older survivors do not see themselves as *mentally ill*, keeping stigma high and problems hidden. Even so, these efforts have begun to de-stigmatize mental health in pockets. The next step is to sustain and widen that work – recognizing that the challenge is broader than trauma alone: mental health matters regardless of cause, whether linked to war, poverty, stress, or everyday life – and creating safe spaces for conversation remains one way to chip away at the silence war left behind.

Building Inner Peace, Building Social Peace

In Panha’s eyes, the work of trauma healing is inseparable from the work of peacebuilding. Wars may end with treaties, but their wounds linger in human hearts. If individuals cannot find peace within themselves, how can communities or societies truly move forward?

“I often say peace begins inside,” he reflected. “If you are angry all the time, suspicious, or afraid, you cannot listen to others. Without inner peace, there is no social peace." This idea became a guiding principle throughout his years at TPO. Healing survivors of trauma, he emphasized, was not only about alleviating psychological symptoms, but about creating conditions where people could relate to one another with greater patience, compassion, and trust. The survivor groups, testimonial therapies, and intergenerational dialogues that Panha helped to facilitate were not technical exercises. They were pathways to inner peace. And once individuals tasted that inner calm, they could contribute to a wider, collective peace.

The Role of Civil Peace Service (CPS)

The CPS played an important role in shaping this approach. For years, CPS supported TPO with advisors, funding, and knowledge exchange, ensuring that psychosocial interventions were both clinically sound and culturally rooted. This collaboration went beyond technical training. CPS advisors often joined in the planning and proposal process, pushing teams to think critically about whether activities truly met community needs. "Sometimes the discussions were long and tiring," Panha recalled, "but they shaped us to think more broadly and carefully about our work."

For Panha, what shaped him most was CPS's constant reminder to plan for the "pre-exit" phase – what would remain once donor support ended. This meant helping survivor groups build leadership, identity, and routines to continue meeting independently. "Many projects end and everything stops," he explained. "But CPS challenged us to make sure the groups could go on without us."

For Panha, this was the lasting value of the partnership: "We were trained not only in techniques," he said, "but in how to ensure these practices survive beyond projects and donors."

Forgiveness, Without Forgetting

Among the most delicate issues Panha encountered was the question of forgiveness. During the trials of former Khmer Rouge leaders, these emotions came to the surface. Panha recalled survivors responding differently to the apologies of Duch, the S-21 prison chief, and Khieu Samphan, the former head of state. In Duch's case, reactions varied: some heard genuine remorse, while others saw a calculated bid to lessen his punishment. Khieu Samphan's refusal to accept responsibility, by contrast, was largely met with anger.

"What mattered to survivors was not the sentence or the prison term," Panha reflected. "What mattered was acknowledgment, compassion, and remorse. That is what opens the door to forgiveness."

Still, he believed that even partial forgiveness – or simply letting go of hatred – helped to restore what

> *"What mattered to survivors was not the sentence or the prison term. What mattered was acknowledgment, compassion, and remorse. That is what opens the door to forgiveness."*

war had broken. “When you let go of hatred, you make space for love,” he said. “Not always love toward the perpetrator, but love toward yourself, your family, your community.”

The *Hot Potato* and the *Bundle* of Chopsticks

Two metaphors became central to Panha’s way of explaining trauma and healing.

The first was the *hot potato*. Trauma, he explained, is like a burning potato passed from one hand to another. Survivors who do not process their pain may pass it unconsciously to their children – through silence, fear, or anger. “If one generation does not heal,” he said, “the next generation receives the heat. Intergenerational dialogues help us put the potato down, so we do not pass the pain further.”

The second was the *bundle of chopsticks*. Alone, one chopstick snaps easily. But tied together, the bundle is strong. Survivor self-help groups, for Panha, embodied this principle. When survivors came together – sharing meals, supporting each other in illness, speaking openly about their past – they became stronger than any one of them could be alone. “That is the power of community compassion,” he said. “That is love in action.”

Academic Vision and Research

Panha’s vision is closely tied to his academic path. After earning a BA in Psychology and a master’s in public health, he is now pursuing a PhD in International Relations, combining the psychological dimension of trauma, the preventive lens of public health, and the policy perspective of diplomacy and leadership.

> *“When someone with unresolved emotional pain [hate and anger] becomes a decision-maker, what is in their mind can turn into policy – if that is revenge, then the policy will also be about revenge.”*

Panha's dissertation-in-progress explores the link between psychology, decision-making, and policy. His preliminary analysis examines how unresolved emotional pain may have influenced pivotal moments in Cambodia's modern history – Sihanouk's anger toward the United States, Lon Nol's aggression toward Vietnamese incursions, and the Khmer Rouge leaders' hostility. He suggests that such emotions, when left unaddressed, could harden into revenge and contribute to destructive policies, even written into law. "When anger drives decision-making," he notes, "what is in the mind can turn into policy."

At the same time, he emphasizes that emotional struggles are not inherently negative. "If mental problems are transformed positively – if we know how to think constructively – they can become good. But if they harden into revenge, they can develop into more hate, violence, and killing," Panha explained.

His central question is how emotional pain might be transformed constructively rather than destructively. While his findings are not yet finalized, his preliminary analysis points to history as offering both cautionary lessons about unresolved pain and possibilities for healing. If leaders and societies learn to manage anger with awareness and compassion, policies can foster peace; if not, they risk fueling further violence.

For Panha, this shows that mental health is never only private – it shapes governance, history, and the very possibilities of peace.

REFLECTIONS ON PEACE & CHANGE

What is your personal definition of peace?

What really keeps us going is peace of mind. You can have calm on the outside, but what matters most is that sense of inner clarity and honesty with yourself.

What has been the most significant change in Cambodia in the last 25 years?

We've seen development across all sectors – infrastructure, the economy, education, human resources, everything has moved forward. And most importantly, we now have country-wide peace: no more war, and the freedom to travel wherever we want.

What still needs to change to ensure lasting peace and justice in the next 25 years?

We need to keep developing all sectors, of course, but what's most important in the next 25 years is education. Only education can help develop the country further, both physical and mental education. We must preserve peace, and build more understanding around mental health, because caring for people's wellbeing is essential for preventing conflict.

YIM Sotheary

Love as the Beginning of Healing

Love as the Beginning of Healing

Sneha is a word in Sanskrit and Pali meaning *love*. For YIM Sotheary, it captures the essence of healing. Not the love of romance, but the deeper currents of empathy, kinship, patience, trust, deep understanding, and self-protection. It is the name she chose for the center she later founded, a place for resilience and reconciliation open to everyone. She believes love is both the method and the destination of trauma recovery.

Her own path to this realization was neither straight nor easy. "I first worked as an English teacher, but after three years I felt my circle was too narrow – just school, teachers, and students. I quit. In 2006, I joined Project Against Domestic Violence (PADV)[2],and when the funding ended, I was transferred to the Center for Social Development (CSD). That was at the same time when the Khmer Rouge Tribunal was set up."

At CSD, she encountered the language of trauma for the first time. "I translated and edited a book on trauma. The word *trauma* didn't even appear in Khmer dictionaries, so I asked the Civil Peace Service (CPS) advisor to explain, and I decided to translate it as ការប៉ះទង្គិចផ្លូវចិត្ត (psychological wound). I was proud to be the first one using it." The experience planted a seed: if Cambodians did not even have words for these experiences, how could survivors find healing?

Realizing this gap, she decided to go further. With encouragement from mentors and support through CPS networks, she enrolled in a master's program in clinical psychology while continuing her work on CPS projects.

Burnout and the Courage to Continue

The work was never easy. Sotheary found herself at the edge of exhaustion. She was listening to stories of pain, day after day, holding tears back, session after session,

> *"We cannot truly give love to others*
> *if we do not first love and care for ourselves."*

while raising her own family at the same time. “There were times I felt exhausted. I kept telling myself that if I gave up, everything I had done would return to zero. It would all disappear. That thought kept me going.”

At one point she admitted she could no longer carry the weight. “I felt burned out,” she said simply. The pressure of hearing so much trauma without enough support systems around her began to take its toll. She decided to step away for a while. It was not an easy choice, but she realized she could not help others if she was collapsing inside. That pause became a turning point. It taught her the importance of self-care, of saying no when needed, of protecting her own well-being so she could return stronger. The lesson would shape the rest of her career: healing others must go hand in hand with healing oneself.

A second turning point came in 2019, when her marriage ended. Divorce is still stigmatized in Cambodia, and for a mother it can bring feelings of shame, judgment, and fear of instability for the children. Sotheary remembers the uncertainty of those months, wondering how she would manage both her professional responsibilities and her family life. “As a single mom, I balance my time for my kids and for myself. When I started Sneha, many people wanted to join or push me to grow faster, but I said no. My children were little, and I didn’t want to feel guilty for not giving them love and time. That’s why I chose to be slow.”

This period deepened her empathy for clients who struggled with rejection, stigma, and feelings of failure. She experienced firsthand the way pain can be transformed when met with compassion. After her divorce, she returned to clinical work with a renewed sense of maturity and strength. She had learned to balance vulnerability with resilience, allowing herself to feel pain while also regaining control of her life.

Looking back, she sees these years of burnout and personal crisis not as setbacks but as training grounds. They gave her tools that no textbook could provide: humility to pause, the courage to ask for help, and the wisdom to know that healing is never linear. “We cannot truly give love to others if we do not first love and care for ourselves. You enjoy giving – until giving no longer brings joy, and instead feels like a heavy burden,” she reflected. That conviction would later guide her in founding Sneha Center, a space built on the very values she had struggled to embody in her own life: patience, acceptance, and the courage to start again.

Women Carrying Invisible Burdens

“About 80% of my clients are women. The rest are men and homosexuals. Men sometimes prefer female therapists because we listen and ask questions, not just give advice.” Sotheary often used simple metaphors to help women understand why they felt so exhausted. One of her favorites was to compare the human mind to a mobile phone. “Our phone memory will be full at some point. If we don’t transfer the data out, it will freeze. Our

> *“When the memory is full, you cannot add more data unless you transfer something out. Our emotions are the same. If you keep everything inside without release, one day you will break.”*

emotions are the same. If you keep everything inside without releasing it, one day you will break."

Her solution was not only individual counseling but also group support. She believed that women could heal more effectively when they gathered to share experiences, laugh, cry, and reflect on each other's life paths. At Sneha Center, she facilitated women's meetings where participants discovered that their problems were not unique – that others also felt overwhelmed, anxious, or powerless. In that collective sharing, many found relief.

Sotheary's perspective was shaped not only by her work as a psychotherapist but also by her identity as a woman in leadership. She knew how rare it was in Cambodia for women to hold decision-making positions in psychology and mental health. With that visibility came both opportunities and challenges. She often emphasized that women in leadership roles should not compete but support one another. "Female leadership," she explained, "is about listening, empathy, and giving space. It is about being strong enough to lift others up, not push them down." This is her definition of *empowering women*.

She modeled this approach in her own practice, encouraging young women entering the profession to take care for themselves and not feel ashamed of setbacks. Resilience, she argued, was not about hiding pain but about growing stronger with it, and through it. "As women, we face many obstacles," she said. "But we can overcome them if we support each other and learn to rise higher from our struggles."

Through this lens, Sotheary redefined what love meant in professional practice. For her, love was not indulgent or sentimental. It was the act of listening deeply, of creating space for women to be heard, and of coaching them to protect their own well-being. In Cambodia, where women often carry the invisible labor of both family and community, she believed that this kind of care and mutual

support was essential not only for survival but also for peace. "When one woman rises, others find the courage to follow." she added.

Stigma, Silence, and Cambodia's Hidden Wounds

Despite the growing number of trained professionals, mental health work in Cambodia remains fraught with obstacles. For Sotheary, the biggest barrier has always been stigma. Too often, she explained, people still equate mental illness with being *crazy*. Families hesitate to send loved ones for counseling out of fear they will be labeled or looked down upon. This stigma silences people who are suffering and prevents them from seeking the help they need.

She has seen how unhealed trauma in parents spills into the lives of their children. Many survivors of the Khmer

> *"History shaped how Cambodian parents raise kids – with overprotection, fear, neglect, or emotional distance. Society is fragmented because people hold trauma and don't talk about it."*

Rouge, having endured neglect and violence themselves, struggled to raise children with warmth and stability. In some cases, they became harsh or emotionally distant; in others, they overprotected their children to the point of suffocation. The next generation grew up with insecurity, anxiety, and an inability to cope with stress. “When parents do not heal, they pass their wounds down,” Sotheary explained. “History has shaped the way how Cambodian parents raise kids – with overprotection, fear, neglect, or emotional distance. Society is fragmented because people hold trauma and don’t talk about it.”

The younger generation faces its own distinct challenges. Many of the youth who come to her feel overwhelmed by pressure from school, family expectations, and the rapid pace of modern life. Sleep deprivation, unhealthy diets, excessive consumption of energy drinks, and a lack of discipline in digital use all take their toll. Depression and anxiety have become increasingly common among teenagers and university students, who struggle to balance ambition with well-being. Some only arrive at counseling once their health has deteriorated to the point of collapse. “So often, when we look deeper into a child’s struggle, we find traces of their parents’ unhealed trauma.” Sotheary said.

Geography compounds these problems. Mental health services are heavily concentrated in Phnom Penh and a few major towns, leaving most rural Cambodians without access to professional support. Villagers experiencing trauma or depression often have nowhere to turn but traditional healers or local monks, who may offer comfort but not the tools needed to address deeper psychological wounds. For Sotheary, this imbalance is unacceptable. “Over 70 % of our people live in the countryside,” she said. “If mental health services do not reach them, then most of our society is left behind.”

These challenges weigh heavily on her. But rather than discouraging her, they reinforce her conviction that mental health must be integrated into every level of society – schools, health centers, communities, and families. Without such integration, she believes, Cambodia will continue to carry hidden wounds that undermine both individual lives and collective peace. To reach more people, Sotheary has spent the past years creating digital content to raise awareness about mental health and well-being. She produces videos and podcasts on topics such as positive parenting, trauma healing, and meditation — using her voice to bring compassion, understanding, and practical support to the wider community.

A Vehicle Called Civil Peace Service, a Vision Called Sneha

Sotheary often says her career would not have taken shape without CPS – the *vehicle* that carried her into trauma work and into the language of peace and conflict transformation. Over roughly fifteen years, she held varied roles, from local expert on CPS-supported initiatives to national Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS) advisor for the Cambodian CPS program and deputy of the program, before founding Sneha. She continues to collaborate occasionally – for example, on female leadership trainings – using these projects to sharpen her practice, support partners, and strengthen Sneha.

One of the qualities she valued most in CPS was its approach to partnership. Rather than imposing foreign models, CPS encouraged mutual empowerment and knowledge exchange.

She learned not only new therapeutic techniques but also how to think about sustainability, how to build organizations that could survive beyond the life of donor projects. This perspective was critical when she decided to establish the Sneha Center.

At Sneha, survivors could find a safe space to share their experiences, mothers could gather for group sessions, and young people could seek support without shame. In creating this space, Sotheary translated her philosophy of love into practice.

Her vision extends beyond the walls of Sneha. She dreams of a Cambodia where psychology is valued and understood like physical health, where going to see a counselor is as natural as visiting a doctor.

She wants mental health to be part of school curricula, workplace policies, and national conversation. She envisions a future where stigma fades, services reach the countryside, and every Cambodian family knows how to nurture both body and mind.

For Sotheary, sustainability lies not only in institutions but in attitudes. If society can embrace mental health as a normal and essential aspect of life, then healing will not depend only on NGOs or donor projects. It will be woven into the everyday fabric of Cambodian communities.

That, she believes, is how lasting peace is built – through systems and values that protect the human spirit as much as the human body.

REFLECTIONS ON PEACE & CHANGE

What is your personal definition of peace?

Peace, for me, is the moment a low, trembling voice finds the courage to speak and knows it will be met with care. It is when a wounded heart feels seen, held, no longer alone, and able to hope again. Peace lives inside us – not as the absence of conflict, but as the presence of compassion, justice, and emotional well-being.

What has been the most significant change in Cambodia in the last 25 years?

The greatest change has been watching our people slowly rise from generations of silence. I have witnessed survivors reclaim their stories, young people open their hearts to painful truths, and entire communities rediscover their strength. More people are seeking inner peace while working hard to heal transgenerational trauma and striving for growth. This collective awakening is the most powerful transformation of all.

What still needs to change to ensure lasting peace and justice in the next 25 years?

We must heal the wounds that still live inside our bodies, families, and memories. Cambodia needs spaces where truth can be spoken without fear, where pain is not dismissed, and where healing is a shared responsibility. Lasting peace will come only when every Cambodian – young and old – feels that their suffering matters and their dignity is protected. I hope that we will reach this goal.

HEM
Kia

Compassion, Professionalism and Sustainability

Compassion, Professionalism and Sustainability

The training had just ended at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum. Staff gathered for a group photo, certificates in hand, in front of the memorial wall engraved with thousands of names. As they smiled for the camera, a man from the United States approached the wall. He was Cambodian American, and he had come to find his brother's name among the dead. When he located it, his body collapsed into grief. He cried, shouted, and trembled with anger and despair.

In the past, museum staff might have frozen at first, unsure how to respond. But this time was different. Several of them had just completed trauma-responsive training with HEM Kia, a Civil Peace Service (CPS) advisor. They immediately recognized the man's distress and walked toward him. They sat with him, offered him a glass of water, listened to his story, and stayed until he calmed down. One staff member even took notes to help trace the victim's profile for follow-up.

For Kia, who witnessed this moment, it was a quiet but powerful affirmation of his work. "The staff are not psychologists," he explained, "but they learned to recognize trauma reactions and provide immediate support. This is the meaning of capacity building: helping people care for themselves and equipping them to help others."

Trauma-Responsive Care

This moment at Tuol Sleng illustrates the center of Kia's professional mission: developing and promoting trauma-responsive approaches. Over the past three years, he

> *"Trauma work is like a staircase: from awareness, to sensitivity, to being responsive, and finally to trauma-informed care. Each step brings us closer to making support safe and healing for survivors."*

has trained staff in NGOs, government institutions, and community groups to recognize trauma symptoms, respond safely, and practice self-care.

He describes the model as a staircase: trauma awareness, trauma sensitivity, trauma-responsive, and trauma-informed care. At the first step, staff simply recognize that trauma exists and that it can have a wide range of impacts on how people feel and respond. At the second, they begin to understand how trauma shapes emotions, thoughts and behavior. The third step – being responsive – means knowing how to act in the moment, whether by grounding, listening, offering a calm presence, or taking care not to retraumatize the person. Only at the highest level, trauma-informed care, do organizations begin to embed these principles into practices, policies, supervision, and culture.

Most partner organizations in Cambodia, he says, are somewhere in the middle of those steps. They understand trauma exists, but they often miss the chance to engage survivors in a way that is safe and healing. His training moves them further up: how to respond when survivors share their stories, how to ask questions without causing harm, and how to offer grounding techniques like breathing or self-soothing when emotions overwhelm.

Equally important is self-care. Staff who work daily with survivors are exposed to secondary trauma and to their own unprocessed wounds being reactivated. Kia insists that caring for oneself is a precondition to caring for others. “We cannot give support if we collapse inside,” he said.

A Fruit of Civil Peace Service (CPS)

Kia often introduces himself as a “fruit of CPS.” After completing his BA in Psychology in 2012, he immediately entered the master’s program in Clinical Counseling Psychology at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP) – an initiative established with CPS support. He graduated in 2015 as one of the program’s early cohorts.

“I am one of the students who benefited directly from CPS’s seeds,” Kia explained. “Even though at that time I was not working for CPS, I applied the knowledge everywhere I went. Now, years later, I am part of CPS myself. My whole career is connected to that foundation.”

For him, this is also the story of CPS’s own evolution. In the early years, CPS relied heavily on international experts to guide programs in Cambodia. But gradually, the goal shifted toward building local expertise. Today, Kia himself stands as the embodiment of that shift – a Cambodian professional now serving as advisor.

“In the past, CPS sent experts from Germany,” he said. “Now CPS has us, Cambodian advisors, to continue the work. That shows sustainability in practice.”

The master’s program gave him not just academic knowledge but also a professional identity in a country where psychology was still little known. It offered Cambodia’s first structured path for training psychologists, ensuring that trauma healing could be pursued by local professionals rather than relying only on international experts. Kia has carried this legacy forward, first in NGOs like Hagar and now in CPS itself.

From Village Boy to Psychologist

His path to psychology was not straightforward. Growing up in a rural area, he first dreamed of studying banking. “At that time, I thought the bank was a place where money was kept, so if I worked there, I could earn a lot of money,” he recalled with a smile. Without access to much information or technology, banking seemed like the surest way to success.

But stories he heard at home shifted his thinking. His parents and grandparents often spoke about their experiences during the Khmer Rouge. Those stories – of loss, suffering, and survival – stayed with him. When he moved to Phnom Penh and explored study options at RUPP, he came across the psychology program. Reading about it stirred him deeply. “I began to think differently: it didn’t matter how much money I earned – it was about how much difference I could make.”

That choice set the course for the next 15 years of his life. After finishing his BA, he interned at Hagar, supporting victims of violence, trafficking, and slavery. That internship turned into nearly a decade of work there.

He specialized in trauma therapy, learned advanced methods and treatments recognized by WHO like EMDR (Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing) and Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TF-CBT), and built the foundation of his expertise in helping survivors heal.

Building Capacity at Every Level

When Kia joined CPS in 2022 as an advisor for Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS), he felt as though his personal vision and the organization’s mission were perfectly aligned. “It’s not easy to be in an organization where the values do not fully align with your own,” he reflected. “But at CPS I feel that alignment, and it has shaped not only my career but also my personal development.”

For Kia, being at CPS has meant growing both as a professional and as a person – learning to balance technical skills with compassion, and individual work with a commitment to collective sustainability. His work since then has ranged from the most intimate support to the broadest policy frameworks.

At the micro level, he develops training materials, supervises interns, and equips staff in partner organizations with practical skills. During COVID-19, he helped design the Psychological First Aid in Schools guidelines with the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) and WHO, training teachers to recognize distress and provide immediate support to students. “Because teachers are on the front lines,” Kia explained, “they need to know what to do in the moment.” In addition to this, he helped MoEYS develop a mental health education curriculum, which became part of the national health education curriculum and was rolled out nationwide in public schools in the 2022–2023 academic year.

At the meso level, he focuses on strengthening the Department of Psychology at RUPP and Transcultural Psychosocial Organization Cambodia (TPO) as institutions. He arranges internships, organizes clinical workshops, and provides supervision so MA students can bridge theory with practice. Having once been a student himself, he understands where the gaps are. “In my time it was difficult,” he recalled, “but now we can make it easier for students to adapt and focus on quality.”

And at the macro level, he has been closely involved in the development of the Cambodia Association for Counsellors and Psychologists (CACP), which CPS recently recognized as an official partner. Kia sees this as a vital step in professionalizing psychology in Cambodia. “Without an association, psychologists are like being professionally homeless,” he said. “CACP gives us a home, and a collective voice with government and continuity for work nurtured over decades – carried forward with CPS and local partners.”

The Challenge of a Fragile Profession

Despite progress, Kia is frank about the obstacles. Cambodia, a country of 17 million, still has fewer than one hundred psychiatrists. Psychologists, though slowly increasing in number, remain outside the official health system. Graduates often work in NGOs or private practice without any licensing framework or government recognition.

"We are still professionally homeless," Kia reflected. By this he meant that psychologists in Cambodia belong to no formal professional house. They graduate with skills but have no ministry structure, no licensing system, and no recognition in the health sector. Some drift into unrelated jobs; others move to NGO roles that rise and fall with donor cycles. This leaves the profession fragile and fragmented, with young graduates uncertain about their future.

"Psychologists are trained, but not recognized in the health system," he said. "Without that, it is very hard to build careers or provide services to the people who need them most."

Beyond structural gaps, stigma continues to be widespread. In many communities, mental health is still equated with "craziness." People who show signs of trauma often avoid seeking support for fear of discrimination. Even when services exist, they are concentrated in Phnom Penh, far from the rural areas where most survivors live.

A Vision for the Future

Kia is clear that sustainability requires more than donor-funded projects. His vision is of a mental health system that is recognized, resourced, and fully Cambodian. He speaks of three urgent priorities: stronger advocacy for government recognition and support of psychologists, better collaboration among NGOs and universities, and preparing for a future when Cambodia's economy can sustain mental health services without relying solely on donors.

"One day, when people are richer, they can pay for services themselves," he said. "Mental health support will not have to depend only on donors."

Part of this future, he imagines, is financial sustainability through the National Social Security Fund. If counseling services are integrated into the fund, mental health could become affordable and accessible to all, not only those who live in cities or who can pay out-of-pocket.

For Kia, such changes would allow psychologists to build lasting careers and create the structures necessary to meet demand across the country.

Mental Health and Peacebuilding

At the heart of Kia's work is the conviction that mental health is inseparable from peace. He often reflects on how far the field has come, and how far it still needs to go.

In his vision, mental health services are part of everyday life – built into schools, health centers, and workplaces. Psychologists are licensed, respected, and integrated into national systems. Awareness is high enough that families

> *"When people in a society have good mental health, it contributes to peace. And when a country has peace, it creates the stability needed for development. The two go hand in hand."*

encourage their children to seek support rather than hide problems. The profession has the numbers and structure to reach not just Phnom Penh but every province.

For Kia, the link between trauma recovery and peace is direct. “If there is no healing or trauma recovery, it becomes very difficult to move forward,” he explained. Trauma left unaddressed fuels cycles of anger, mistrust, and violence. But with healing, people can manage emotions, cultivate compassion, and build peace in their families and communities.

“When people in a society have good mental health, it contributes to peace. And when a country has peace, it creates the stability needed for development. The two go hand in hand.”

He also stresses that trauma-informed care work prevents stigma and builds social trust. “Without trauma-informed care work, people might instead blame or further stigmatize the person,” he explained. Survivors who show distress could be mocked, silenced, or ignored, reinforcing their suffering and isolating them further.

By contrast, when communities learn trauma-informed practices, they create a culture of compassion. “With it, seeking support becomes normalized and safe,” Kia said. Teachers who understand grounding techniques can help a child panicking in class, while police or museum staff who recognize trauma symptoms can respond safely rather than with suspicion. For him, these are not small gestures, they are the foundations of peace.

He believes that understanding mental health does more than reduce stigma – it strengthens resilience and helps break intergenerational cycles of violence. “A society that understands mental health can help each other, help themselves, and access services without fear of judgment or discrimination,” Kia concluded. That, in his view, is the true connection between mental health and peacebuilding.

REFLECTIONS ON PEACE & CHANGE

What is your personal definition of peace?

Peace is calmness, happiness and freedom that contribute to how the people work and live together in their community with security and harmony.

What has been the most significant change in Cambodia in the last 25 years?

The most significant change over the last 25 years in Cambodia includes the transition from nation that experienced a civil war and instability to a nation that is now experiencing rapid economic growth and infrastructure and social development. The poverty reduction is also seen as one of the most significant changes in the country where many Cambodians have been lifted out of poverty line.

What still needs to change to ensure lasting peace and justice in the next 25 years?

To build lasting peace and justice in Cambodia, we need to strengthen social reconciliation and a sense of national unity among people in Cambodia. It is also important to continue the progress made in governance, the legal system, and economic development. And when civil society organizations are able to contribute constructively, it benefits everyone by supporting a more just, healthy, and peaceful society.

TRUTH & MEMORY

Safeguarding the Past for the Future

The process of uncovering historical truth is not just about documenting facts - it is about ensuring that multiple perspectives are acknowledged, voices are heard, and the memories of past atrocities are preserved for future generations. In Cambodia, where the Khmer Rouge Tribunal (ECCC) played a role in establishing legal truth, there remain many untold stories and broader societal truths that need to be explored. This chapter examines how truth and memory are preserved through archival work, museums, and survivor storytelling. It highlights the role of institutions like the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (TSGM) in keeping history alive and fostering collective understanding.

04

HANG
Nisay

Tuol Sleng:
More Than a Museum

Tuol Sleng: More Than a Museum

In July 2025, Cambodia reached a milestone in its decades of work to safeguard memory. The UNESCO World Heritage Committee officially inscribed Cambodian Memorial Sites: From centers of repression to places of peace and reflection. The serial property comprises three sites: The former M-13 prison in Kampong Chhnang (bordering to Kampong Speu), Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (former S-21) and Choeung Ek Genocidal Center (former execution site of S-21) which are both in Phnom Penh. This marked Cambodia's first World Heritage listing devoted to its modern history, elevating memorialization of the Khmer Rouge era to the global stage.

For Hang Nisay, Director of the TSGM since 2020, the announcement was the culmination of years of relentless work. Preparation required detailed maps, management plans, translations, and coordination across ministries. UNESCO experts scrutinized authenticity, conservation, and educational programming. With the support of Civil Peace Service (CPS) advisors and the Tuol Sleng team, Nisay recalled how they worked day and night – facing rejection in 2023 and finally succeeding with a complete nomination in early 2024.

The inscription was more than a recognition of buildings and landscapes. It affirmed the suffering of victims, honored survivors, and signaled Cambodia's commitment to truth and reconciliation. For Nisay, however, the path to this moment began much earlier. In 2009, when a young archaeologist who knew little about the Khmer Rouge first stepped into Tuol Sleng.

From Archaeology to Tuol Sleng

Nisay's journey to this responsibility was unexpected. His first dream was to study IT or tourism, but those were paid programs that his family could not afford. With the help of a relative in Phnom Penh, he received a scholarship to study archaeology at the Royal University of Fine Arts in 2005. By the time he graduated in 2009, he immediately began an official internship at Tuol Sleng, a place he had never visited before.

He began as an administrative officer, handling reports and paperwork. In 2010 he also became a guide, leading visitors through the haunting classrooms and photographs. By 2014, under a new leadership, he was promoted to the head of exhibition section, and in 2016 he became head of planning section, tasked with shaping the museum's mission and long-term projects. Finally, in February 2020, after more than a decade of service, he was appointed director.

Along the way, survivors like Chum Mey and Lok Ta Vannat became his teachers. Their testimonies helped him understand what S-21 meant not only to history, but to Cambodian families like his own.

As he grew into these roles, international partnerships – especially with CPS – would soon play a decisive role in shaping his path.

Growing with Civil Peace Service

A turning point came in 2015, when CPS began supporting Tuol Sleng. Exhibitions, publications, and staff training soon expanded the museum's scope. "With GIZ CPS support, we organized temporary exhibitions starting in 2015," Nisay recalled. "*Skill and Fortune* came first, followed by *Forced Marriage* in 2016, *Ko Mar Angkar (Children of Angkar)* in 2017, the art project *Empty Hand* in 2018, and in 2019 the *40th anniversary* of S-21 as a museum. These events were important to involve youth and preserve memory."

CPS also strengthened Tuol Sleng's publishing work. With its support, the museum released two major books: *40 Years: Remembering the Victims of S-21* (2019) and *S-21: No Way Out* (2023). The first traced the museum's history, while the second reconstructed the prisoner experience from arrest to execution.

Another milestone was academic. In 2018, CPS sponsored Nisay to pursue a master's degree in history at Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP). His thesis on M-13, Duch's earlier prison camp, became a key reference in preparing M-13 and S-21 for UNESCO nomination.

The partnership extended abroad. CPS facilitated study visits to Germany, where Nisay observed how Holocaust memorials engaged visitors in dialogue rather than silence. "It was eye-opening to see how others manage museums, how they engage survivors, how they integrate history into education. We tried to adapt those lessons here," he said.

By the time he became director in 2020, exhibitions, books, training, and exchanges had given him both skills and confidence. Yet almost immediately, an unexpected crisis would test his resilience.

Personal Journey and Resilience

When Nisay became director in early 2020, he hoped to build on his predecessors' legacy. Instead, COVID-19 forced Tuol Sleng to close. Visitor numbers collapsed, income dried up, and staff salaries were cut. After more than a decade of service, the weight on his shoulders felt overwhelming. "I thought to myself, if I cannot preserve what my former director had achieved, I should resign," he admitted. "At one point, I was afraid of Mondays."

CPS advisor Barbara Thimm urged him to stay and arranged a coach who helped him overcome depression. Slowly, he regained confidence. Equally vital was the loyalty of his staff. Despite pay cuts, no one left – not even the cleaners. "If they had all left, I would not have known how to handle it," he said.

"In the past, staff waited for instructions. Now, without me saying anything, they help each other. They have learned to think of the museum as a shared home. When heavy rains flooded Building B, cleaners from other blocks joined in automatically." That solidarity grew from years of CPS-supported training and exchanges. Staff who had visited Germany, Poland, Japan, and Okinawa returned with a new sense of teamwork.

For Nisay, this proved that investment in staff development had built resilience into the institution itself. During the darkest months of the pandemic, Tuol Sleng survived not only because of leadership, but because of a team whose commitment to memory did not falter even when their paychecks did.

> *“With GIZ CPS support, we organized temporary exhibitions starting in 2015. These events were important to involve youth and preserve memory.”*

Transforming Tuol Sleng

When Nisay first began working at Tuol Sleng in 2009, many Cambodians still avoided the site. It was seen less as a museum and more as a place of ghosts, a reminder of tragedy and bad luck. Outreach was minimal, and few students came.

That perception began to shift in the mid-2010s, supported by the same cycle of exhibitions and youth-focused programming he had helped create. The curatorial work he described earlier became the backbone of this transformation. Together, they invited visitors to see not only the brutality of the Khmer Rouge, but also the resilience of survivors.

These exhibitions brought young Cambodians into dialogue with history. Survivor storytelling events became a regular feature, creating direct encounters between students and those who had lived through S-21. Publications and online resources expanded access to the archives, making the museum more than a physical site.

The results were tangible. “In 2019, we counted around 500,000 visitors,” Nisay said. “About 25 percent were Cambodians, and among them 60,000 - 70,000 were students. The numbers continue to rise.”

The change was not only about numbers. It reflected a cultural shift: Tuol Sleng was no longer just a place to fear, but a place to learn. Students began to see the site as part of their history and identity.

For him, this transformation was essential. “People used to see S-21 only as a tragedy. Now more students come, and they embrace peace and stability when they look at that history,” he explained.

Challenges of Memory Work

Directing Tuol Sleng also means confronting the difficulties of preserving a painful past. One of the biggest challenges, Nisay explained, is how to handle evidence created under duress. “Some testimonies were written while victims were punished, forced to say things,” he said. “So, these records need careful cross-checking.”

> *“We study the painful past not to carry hate and revenge, but to remember and change, and not to repeat history.”*

The same applies to oral testimony. Survivors sometimes unintentionally alter or embellish their stories. "We can only record what they tell us, but when we cross-check against archives, sometimes the details do not match. One survivor, for example, kept changing the length of time he was imprisoned at S-21. Eventually I told him, please stop saying this in public, because the records show something else."

Another challenge is urgency. "Survivors are getting older," he noted. "Many have already passed away. If we don't gather their information now, history could disappear."

He also worries about young people's engagement. "I observe that many university students don't like to read or do research. Of course, not all, but the interest is not strong. That's a concern. Even though today we are working hard to record and organize history, if the next generation does not continue, public understanding of this history may fade."

For him, the solution lies in education. "We tell the stories in a positive way," he said. "We study the painful past not to carry hate and revenge, but to remember and change, and not to repeat history."

Education as Transformation

Education has become one of Tuol Sleng's most important missions. Meetings with a survivor are now a regular feature, allowing students to link history to real lives. Outreach programs bring learning to villages, encouraging students to visit local memorials and atrocity sites near their communities.

With CPS and Bristol University, the museum developed a teacher manual, combining international research with local museum expertise[3]. The manual *Disconcerting Past – History Education on Mass Atrocities* can be used in any country or community dealing with a difficult past, not only in Cambodia. Teachers were encouraged to move

from lecture-based instruction to more student-centered, interactive methods—an important pedagogical shift in Cambodia. The manual provides activities to not only learn about the past, but also to discuss it.

Introducing debate, questioning, and student-led inquiry required not only new tools, but also a change in mindset about what students – and teachers themselves – are capable of. At first, many teachers doubted whether their students could adapt. But during a visit to a school in Sihanoukville, the museum team demonstrated otherwise. "The students were very active, asking questions and debating. The teachers were surprised to see how much knowledge their students already had," Nisay recalled.

Archives and Innovation

Tuol Sleng has become a hub for historical preservation as well as remembrance. Its vast archives of prisoner lists, confessions, and photographs were recognized by UNESCO's Memory of the World program in 2009. Since then, the challenge has been not only to safeguard these fragile records but also to make them accessible.

One breakthrough was the Graffiti Project in 2017, when staff documented more than 10,000 marks and messages left on the walls, revealing new insights into daily life and survival inside S-21. Another came with digitization: with KOICA funding and CPS support, about 60 - 70 percent of the archives have been digitized and placed online since 2021. "We don't want researchers to touch the original papers anymore," Nisay explained. "They are too fragile. Now people can view them safely online."

These projects have preserved the records while also opening them to students, teachers, and researchers in Cambodia and beyond. By combining preservation with innovation, Tuol Sleng has become a living archive, ensuring the truth of the Khmer Rouge era remains accessible for future generations.

Vision for the Future

For Nisay, UNESCO recognition of Tuol Sleng, Choeung Ek, and M-13 is not a destination but the beginning of new responsibilities. International listing brings prestige, but also strict obligations: meeting conservation standards, reporting, and demonstrating that Cambodia can preserve these sites. “Listing is not the end,” he explained. “It is the start of a long-term commitment. We must now prove that we can protect this place, use it responsibly, and share its lessons with the world.”

He envisions the three sites working in connected roles: Choeung Ek with its long experience, Tuol Sleng as already advanced, and M-13 just beginning. “In the next five to ten years, I hope M-13 can become like Tuol Sleng and Cheung Ek - a place for history and peace education.”

Part of this vision is to create a more complete picture of the Khmer Rouge system across the country. Nisay aims to update the 1990s Yale Genocide Program database, developing a detailed national registry linked to Tuol Sleng’s archives so that survivors, families, and researchers can more easily trace where atrocities occurred.

Education is central. He hopes teachers trained through Tuol Sleng’s workshops will bring students not only to Phnom Penh but also to local memorials in their provinces. He also plans continuous collaboration with the Ministry of Education so that Khmer Rouge history is fully integrated into curricula and supported by museum publications.

Above all, his hopes rest with Cambodia’s youth. “The way we tell stories is important,” he said. “We teach this difficult past so young people can understand, learn from it, and choose a different path.” If they can take ownership of this history, he believes the future will be safer. Museums, in his words, must not only preserve memory – they must also build peace.

BUILDING « A »
IT CONTAINS THREE STORIES DIVIDED INTO 20 CELLS:
THE FIRST ONE HAS 10 CELLS - USED FOR JAILING, INTERROGATING AND TORTURING THE PRISONERS WHO HAD BEEN THE HIGH OFFICIALS.
THE SECOND AND THIRD ONES HAVE 5 BIG CELLS EACH - USED FOR THE SAME PURPOSE AS ON THE FIRST STORY.
NOWADAYS THERE ARE A LOT OF EVIDENCES, REMAINING IN ALL THE CELLS WHICH PROVE THE ATROCITIES OF POL POT CLIQUE.

REFLECTIONS ON PEACE & CHANGE

What is your personal definition of peace?

According to the United Nations, “peace” means dignity and well-being for all - not simply the absence of war. To me, peace goes even further: it encompasses harmony, unity, and the ongoing work of reconciliation. True peace begins with ending violence, but it also requires pursuing justice, restoring dignity, strengthening well-being, and fostering education and understanding among people.

What has been the most significant change in Cambodia in the last 25 years?

Since the Win-Win Strategy, Cambodia has gradually rebuilt and unified society after years of conflict. Justice for survivors has advanced through the Extraordinary Chambers, which held key Khmer Rouge leaders accountable. Memorialization has grown as institutions like the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum now serve as both historical and commemorative spaces. Peace education has also become vital, helping younger generations understand the causes and consequences of genocide and prevent its recurrence. Together, these efforts – justice, remembrance, and education – foster healing and strengthen lasting peace.

What still needs to change to ensure lasting peace and justice in the next 25 years?

I believe the most important aspect is the educational program. It is not only about creating change, but also about strengthening the capacity of educators and improving the program itself so that students can more easily understand and internalize the message of peace.

TIM
Minea

From Victimhood
to Active Survivors

From Victimhood to Active Survivors

When Cambodia began engaging with the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, TIM Minea was starting his career in sociology and peacebuilding. What struck him most was not the courtroom, but the silence outside it. Survivors spoke to judges, yet at home many still could not. Families avoided painful memories, and generations grew up without understanding the fears behind them.

> *“The ECCC gave survivors the chance to submit complaints, but justice cannot only be in the courtroom. Communities needed a way to talk, to recognize their suffering, and to heal together.”*

Minea believed this gap required a different approach – one rooted in relationships as well as legal truth. “The ECCC gave survivors the chance to submit complaints,” he said, “but justice cannot only be in the courtroom. Communities needed a way to talk, to recognize their suffering, and to heal together.”

In 2009, he and colleagues founded Kdei Karuna (KDK), turning an international project into a Cambodian NGO.[4] Its mission, grounded in what Minea calls “restorative justice,” was to create safe spaces for survivors, connect generations, and even engage former cadres. “If we keep seeing only black and white - victims on one side, perpetrators on the other - we miss the lessons,” he explained. “We want the new generation to understand how violence happens, so they can avoid becoming victims again.”

From Sociology to Reconciliation

Minea earned a BA in Sociology in 2004 and a Pedagogy Certificate in 2005, first imagining a teaching career. But in 2007, while working on projects linked to the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, he began hearing survivors say legal justice was not enough.

“They told me they wanted recognition, not only a court verdict,” he recalled. “They wanted ways to share their pain with their families and neighbors.”

In 2009, he and his colleagues localized KDK as a Cambodian NGO to bring dialogue into communities beyond the court. He completed an MA in Sociology and Anthropology in 2012, grounding his practice in research while continuing to work directly with survivors. “Cambodia needed more than legal truth,” he said. “It needed dialogues that could heal relationships and bring hidden memories into the open.”

Building Kdei Karuna

KDK’s mission was to create dialogue and community-based reconciliation. Rather than leaving survivors defined only by trauma, KDK aimed to help them find dignity, share their experiences, and reconnect with their communities.

“I don’t want survivors to stay only in the position of victims,” Minea explained. “We try to help them become active survivors - people who can recognize their own strength. Surviving itself was resilience. From that place, they can heal others and teach the younger generation.”

This philosophy shaped KDK’s programs from the beginning. Survivors were not only invited to describe what they had endured but also to reflect on their hopes, strengths, and the ways they had managed to endure. Minea often shared examples: a woman forced into marriage who nevertheless managed to protect her dignity, or a survivor of sexual violence who raised her child with determination until she earned an education abroad. “These stories show strength,” he said. “They inspire young people to see that if survivors could overcome such challenges, they too can face their own problems.”

Under Minea’s leadership, KDK gradually expanded its methods. Community dialogues, oral histories, and intergenerational conversations became core practices. Over time, these initiatives helped shift the image of survivors – from silent and broken to resilient and engaged.

Breaking Silence across Generations

One of KDK’s earliest innovations was intergenerational dialogue. Many survivors had never told their stories at home. Parents avoided describing their suffering; children avoided asking. Grandchildren grew up sensing pain but never hearing its source.

> *"Dialogue gave both sides relief. For survivors, it meant their stories were not lost. For youth, it gave meaning to their family's silence."*

KDK created spaces where survivors, their children, and grandchildren could talk openly. Survivors spoke of their lives under the Khmer Rouge, while young people listened, asked questions, and sometimes responded with drawings or poems.

The impact was often immediate. Survivors who had carried memories in silence for decades felt acknowledged when youth looked them in the eye and said, "Now I understand." Young people, in turn, began to grasp why their grandparents were quiet or why their parents carried certain fears. "Dialogue gave both sides relief," Minea said. "For survivors, it meant their stories were not lost. For youth, it gave meaning to their family's silence."

He also observed how trauma shaped parenting after the Khmer Rouge. Survivors who grew up in neglect and fear sometimes raised their children with intense caution, passing on anxiety. "Parents thought they were protecting their children," he explained, "but sometimes they limited them too much. The children grew up with fear, without independence." Intergenerational dialogue helped families recognize these patterns and see one another with new understanding.

Oral History as Community Memory

Alongside dialogue, KDK began systematically recording survivors' stories. Oral histories were collected, transcribed, and published in community books on themes such as forced marriage, ethnic discrimination, and daily life under the Khmer Rouge.

For many survivors, seeing their words in print was deeply affirming. Their experiences, once carried in silence, became part of Cambodia's collective record. The books were shared in villages, where neighbors gathered to read and discuss them, and later used by youth clubs and teachers as learning tools.

The emotional impact could be profound. Survivors who spoke at community meetings often received simple tokens from young people - a flower or a poem reflecting what they had heard. "When a young person writes you a poem or gives you a flower, it means your story has value," Minea reflected.

Youth as Carriers of Memory

Minea emphasizes that reconciliation is not only about survivors but also about preparing the next generation to carry memory forward. KDK invested in youth clubs across provinces, encouraging young people to study history, practice facilitation, and organize events in their communities.

The process often transformed participants. After listening to survivor testimonies, some wrote poems or songs; others planted trees or laid flowers in remembrance. These symbolic acts gave youth a way to connect their own lives with the past, while showing survivors that their pain carried meaning for the future.

"Youth bring hope," Minea reflected. "They take memories seriously, but they also see resilience. Survivors realize they have something to give, and young people realize they have something to learn."

Facing the other Side

Among KDK's most sensitive initiatives were dialogues between survivors and former Khmer Rouge. For years, they had lived side by side in villages but rarely spoke about the past. Fear, shame, and stigma kept them apart.

KDK approached this gradually. At first, survivors and former cadres exchanged recorded video messages. Once trust was built, meetings were held face to face, often in pagodas. Police were informed for safety, and monks opened the gatherings with prayers and teachings on compassion.

The results varied, but many participants found relief. Survivors expressed pain they had carried for decades, while some former cadres admitted regret or explained the pressures that led them to join the regime. "Reconciliation is not about forgetting or excusing," Minea explained. "It is about understanding why things happened and allowing survivors to move forward."

The spiritual setting was essential. Rituals reassured survivors that their suffering was honored and reminded former cadres of their responsibility. "The pagoda gave people a safe space," Minea said. "Rituals made reconciliation not only social but also spiritual."

From Victimhood to active Survivors

Through years of dialogue and community work, Minea developed one of his guiding philosophies: survivors should not be seen only as victims of violence but as people with resilience and strength.

"We do not want survivors to stay only in the position of victims," he said. "We want them to recognize their own strengths. Surviving itself was resilience. From that place, they can help heal others and become part of building peace."

KDK encouraged survivors to share their experiences in community forums, publish their oral histories, and engage with youth. Some who had once been silent became advocates, speaking publicly or supporting reparations initiatives. Minea often pointed to individual stories – a woman forced into marriage who nevertheless protected her dignity, or a survivor of sexual violence who raised her child and later earned an education abroad.

By reframing survivors as active agents rather than passive victims, KDK helped transform both personal self-perception and community attitudes. Survivors began to see themselves not as broken, but as contributors to reconciliation.

Partnership with Civil Peace Service (CPS)

From its early years, KDK benefited from the long-term partnership with CPS. Beyond financial support, CPS provided advisors who worked side by side with the team for more than a decade. They strengthened methodology, introduced comparative perspectives, and helped the organization think about sustainability.

"Without CPS, KDK could not have grown as it did," Minea reflected. "They helped us become professional but also stay true to our vision."

Through this support, KDK staff gained new skills. Ten to fifteen team members were trained intensively, and one went to Germany to study conflict sensitivity. International exchanges also exposed Minea to different contexts of reconciliation – from Holocaust memorial practices in Germany to post-conflict healing efforts in Africa. "CPS pushed us to look wider," he said. "We learned not only from our own history but from others who faced mass violence. It gave us ideas and confidence that our work in Cambodia was part of something global."

From Silence to Advocacy

Over time, KDK's work created ripples beyond its immediate projects. Survivors who had once stayed quiet began to speak publicly – in schools, at community forums, and even in the media. More than ten of them became active advocates for recognition and reparations, a powerful shift in a country where silence had long prevailed.

Youth clubs also grew stronger. With KDK's guidance, young people organized debates, exhibitions, and remembrance events in their provinces. These activities did not erase pain, but they gave both survivors and youth a sense of ownership. Survivors felt less isolated, while young people discovered that history was not abstract but part of their own families and communities.

Minea acknowledged the fragility of this work. With the closure of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, donor interest has waned, and funding for long-term reconciliation projects is harder to secure. At the same time, some young Cambodians hesitate to engage with Khmer Rouge history, seeing it as distant from their lives. "This is why local ownership is so important," he stressed. "Youth clubs and survivor networks must carry the work forward even when projects end, so that memory is not lost when donors leave."

Looking ahead

For Minea, the future of reconciliation lies in deepening the transformation already underway. He believes survivors must be recognized not only symbolically but also materially. After the closure of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal, KDK began piloting an individual reparation program that offers cash, job opportunities, and psychological support for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence who were left outside the ECCC process. "Survivors need to feel that society values their suffering," he explained. "Without that, reconciliation is incomplete."

He also sees KDK's role as preparing youth to carry memory forward. As survivor numbers dwindle, intergenerational dialogue and oral history must become part of education, ensuring that young people inherit both the truth of the past and the responsibility to prevent violence in the future.

Minea's vision is that one day survivors will no longer be described only as victims of history, but as teachers of resilience. Their strength in surviving – raising children, rebuilding communities, and speaking despite fear – can inspire a society that chooses compassion over violence. "Truth and memory are not only about the past," he said. "They are about how we live now, and how we prepare the future."

> *"Truth and memory are not only about the past. They are about how we live now, and how we prepare the future."*

REFLECTIONS ON PEACE & CHANGE

What is your personal definition of peace?

For me, peace means freedom from fear of violence between individuals and groups – whether physical, mental, economic, or social.

What has been the most significant change in Cambodia in the last 25 years?

The most significant change in Cambodia in the last 25 years has been its dramatic economic transformation and sustained rapid growth, which has transitioned the country from a war-torn nation to a lower-middle-income economy.

What still needs to change to ensure lasting peace and justice in the next 25 years?

To ensure lasting peace and justice in the next 25 years, Cambodia needs to focus on strengthening the rule of law, improving governance, institutional capacity, and promoting social justice and human rights.

CHEA
Sopheap

Archiving Memory
for the Future

Archiving Memory for the Future

In a country where film reels crumbled, photos faded, and entire histories risked disappearing, Bophana became the first sanctuary for Cambodia's memory.

Founded in 2006, the Bophana Audiovisual Resource Center is Cambodia's first cultural archive dedicated to collecting, digitizing, and providing open access to the public to the nation's audiovisual heritage[5].

BOPHANA
ARPAA
N° 64
St.200

CHEA Sopheap began working at Bophana in 2008 as an audiovisual archivist – a role that was new in Cambodia. He did not just consider it just a job. It was a mission: to ensure that Cambodia's history would not vanish in silence or decay.

From Farmer's Son to Memory Keeper

His own story began far from archives and film reels. Born in Kampong Cham to a farming family, he was the youngest of many siblings, all of whom survived the Khmer Rouge. Sopheap grew up listening to stories from his father and older brothers and sisters. Yet poverty interrupted his education. For nearly four years he left school, working in construction jobs in Phnom Penh to save money, eventually buying a secondhand bicycle to ease his commute once he returned to class.

Determined to continue, he also pursued English with passion, practicing with foreigners and teaching part-time while finishing his high school diploma. In 2004, he won a scholarship to study for a bachelor's degree in history at the Royal University of Phnom Penh.

Three years later, a class assignment led him to the Bophana Center, where he encountered its growing collection of films and photos. Fascinated, he began volunteering, and in 2008 was offered a position. From that moment, memory work became his life's path. "I never dreamed of being an archivist," he later said, "but once I understood how much could be lost, I knew I had to do it."

Growing Up with the Archives

One afternoon at Bophana, while Sopheap was busy answering questions at his desk, a little girl appeared in the doorway holding a bundle of papers. She walked up shyly and asked for his signature. Sopheap smiled, signed the papers, and sent her off again. She was not his daughter, but the child of another staff member. Scenes like this were common at Bophana. Children sometimes played quietly in the corner while their parents worked among film reels and catalogues.

From the start, the founders wanted the center to feel less like a rigid office and more like a home. Founder Rithy Panh often told staff that if they needed to, they could bring their children along. Sometimes he even bought candy for them and treated them like his own grandchildren. This small gesture sets a tone: memory work should never come at the expense of family.

For Sopheap, this culture mattered deeply. When Sopheap later had a daughter of his own, he sometimes brought her with him. And over the years, many of his nieces and nephews – children he helped raise and has always thought of as his – came too. Being together in that place reminded him that this work was never just mechanical; it was filled with the same love and responsibility that guided his own family. “We were preserving life, and we lived our lives here too,” he often thought.

Learning the Craft

At the same time, Sopheap was learning the painstaking discipline of archival science. French specialists trained him and his colleagues intensively for nearly two years, teaching them how to clean reels, digitize fragile photographs, scan brittle documents, and apply international metadata standards. They also introduced areas that were new to most Cambodians at the time: copyright law and intellectual property.

The training was strict and demanding. Each item had to be carefully described, given metadata, and transferred into formats able to withstand Cambodia’s humid climate. “They were strict, but they gave us confidence,” Sopheap recalled. “They showed us that if we worked carefully, we could reach international level.”

The approach also emphasized responsibility. “We don’t allow people to download the files from their home; they have to view them here,” he explained, underlining how fragile and valuable the collections were. For him, these lessons were not only technical but also ethical – about treating Cambodia’s memory as something to be handled with respect.

Just as important as saving the archives was training a new generation of Cambodians to manage them. Sopheap and his peers were among the first, but he already knew they could not be the last. The French experts made clear that sustainability meant passing knowledge onward.

Growing into Leadership

Over the years, Sopheap’s role expanded far beyond archiving. He helped curate film screenings for the public, organized cultural events, and joined mobile cinema teams that carried documentaries into rural villages, sometimes showing films until late at night. These screenings often sparked long community discussions, reminding him that memory was not only about preservation but also about dialogue.

> *“At first we were students, but then we could stand as professionals in our own right. That is what makes Bophana sustainable.”*

He also supported visiting researchers and NGOs who came to Bophana seeking historical materials. Later, as the center grew, he took on responsibilities in communications, fundraising, and management. By 2014, he was asked to support fundraising, later he was elected Deputy Director, and eventually became Director of Bophana, entrusted with carrying forward the mission of safeguarding memory for the future.

What had begun as a small team dependent on French experts gradually became a Cambodian-led institution. Sopheap became a bridge between international experts and local staff, ensuring that knowledge was transferred and that the center could stand on its own. Over time, he and his colleagues trained others – teaching workshops for younger archivists, students, and visiting NGOs.

This shift from being learners to becoming teachers gave Sopheap particular pride. “At first, we were students, but then we could stand as professionals in our own right. This is what makes Bophana sustainable,” he reflected.

For Sopheap, Bophana was never just a workplace – it was a community. Sometimes, when his children were small, he brought them to the office, knowing the team would welcome them. “At Bophana, I grew up together with the archives. Every day I learned more about Cambodia’s history, and every day I felt more responsible for protecting it.”

When Memory Changes Lives

The true measure of Bophana’s work, Sopheap believes, is not only in the archives themselves but in how they touch people’s lives. Over the years, he has carried countless reels, tapes, and projectors into communities, and he has seen how a single screening can change perceptions.

> *“Memory is not only for researchers. It belongs to everyone, and when youth take part in telling it, the memory lives.”*

One moment that stayed with him came when a former street boy told him he had “stopped stealing” after watching films at Bophana. For Sopheap, it was a reminder that memory is not abstract - it can guide people toward different choices in their daily lives.

In another case, a mobile cinema screening in Kratie addressed the issue of domestic violence. After the film ended, men in the audience began discussing what they had seen. Some admitted they had never considered their behavior as part of a larger pattern of abuse until confronted by the documentary.

Bophana also invests in youth. “We have trained hundred students now,” Sopheap noted, through training programs that introduced young Cambodians to filmmaking, archiving, and storytelling. Many of these students went on to produce documentaries of their own, sharing stories of their families and communities.

For Sopheap, seeing young people take ownership of history confirmed the center’s mission. “Memory is not only for researchers,” he said. “It belongs to everyone, and when youth take part in telling it, the memory lives.”

From Film Reels to Reparations

Bophana’s work has never been limited to preservation alone. From early on, the center also engaged in projects that linked memory with justice and healing. With support from Civil Peace Service (CPS), Bophana became a bridge between archives, survivors, and transitional justice initiatives in Cambodia.

One of the earliest projects was to co-produce the documentary *Red Wedding* (2012), which told the story of a woman forced into marriage under the Khmer Rouge. The film was widely recognized internationally and used for outreach on the issue of forced marriage. This was followed by *Pka Sla Krom Angkar* (2017–2018), an ambitious project that combined classical dance, survivor testimonies, and public dialogue. Bophana documented and archived the performances, filmed interviews, and created a database so that the project’s legacy could continue. It was also a major effort in intergenerational education, with young artists working alongside survivors to explore trauma and resilience through art.

Another milestone was *Mapping Memories Cambodia*, a digital platform connecting historical sites, survivor testimonies, and audiovisual archives. Originally initiated at the Department of Media and Communication of the Royal University of Phnom Penh and later transferred to Bophana, the project was supported by CPS to ensure its continuity. The mapping tool allows users to explore locations tied to Khmer Rouge history, hear survivors’ voices, and link them to archival materials.

Even as CPS begins to phase out of Cambodia, their commitment to sustain Mapping Memories remains. For Sopheap, this continuity is crucial. “It is not enough to store memory in boxes or hard drives,” he said. “We must connect it to places, to stories, and to people. Mapping Memories Cambodia makes this possible.”

The Fragile Work of Saving Memory

Safeguarding memory in Cambodia is not easy. Sopheap often says that archiving is “not sexy” for donors. Unlike schools or visible infrastructure, memory work is slow, technical, and invisible until it is gone. Funding cycles are uncertain, and some ask: “Why invest in films or photos when people need food or health?” To Sopheap, the answer is clear: “If we lose memory, we also lose lessons that protect our future.”

The archives themselves are fragile. Old film reels, tapes, and cassettes degrade quickly in Cambodia’s humid climate. Some are so brittle they break when handled; others require expensive digitization before they disappear forever. Metadata – the detailed descriptions that make archives searchable – takes time and skilled staff. Copyright adds another layer of complexity, as many collections come from international partners and require careful agreements.

Today, Bophana holds around 4,000 video titles, 100,000 photographs, and several hours of audio recordings. Only about 50–60% of this material is accessible to the public; the rest awaits digitization, ownership checks, or cataloguing. Some of the earliest photographs date back to the 1860s, taken by Émile Gsell[6].

Despite the difficulties, Sopheap remains committed. He has seen how fragile materials, once saved, become powerful resources for survivors, youth, teachers, and researchers. "If we lose these archives," he said, "we lose our ability to teach the truth. Preserving them is not just technical work – it is peace work."

Democratizing Memory for Peace

For Sopheap, the role of Bophana is not to write Cambodia's history, but to "gather the ingredients so others can cook." Teachers, researchers, survivors, and youth can then use these resources to build their own understanding. "We are not the authors," he often says. "We are the keepers. We make sure memory is safe, so others can use it."

This humility is matched by ambition. Sopheap dreams of democratizing access to memory – through apps, audiobooks, digital libraries, and interactive mapping tools that could bring testimonies and archives directly into classrooms across the country. He envisions a Cambodia where young people can pull history from their phones as easily as they scroll social media, where memory is woven into daily life instead of being hidden in boxes or institutions.

This vision builds on what he has already seen through mobile cinemas and youth training: when memory is accessible, it changes behavior, inspires compassion, and strengthens identity. It also prevents denial. "If we lose archives, denial will grow," he warned. "But if people can see, hear, and touch memory, then truth becomes undeniable."

Even as CPS phases out of Cambodia, Sopheap takes hope from the support given to help Mapping Memories Cambodia continue. For him, this project embodies the future of memory work: connecting places, voices, and archives in ways that are accessible to all generations. "Preserving memory is preserving peace," he said. "If we keep our memory alive, we protect our society from repeating violence. This is why Bophana must continue – not just for today, but for the future."

> *"Preserving memory is preserving peace. If we keep our memory alive, we protect our society from repeating violence."*

REFLECTIONS ON PEACE & CHANGE

What is your personal definition of peace?

Based on my own childhood experiences and the Cambodian context in which I grew up, peace means being able to live without fear or violence. It means having the stability to work, care for my family, move freely from place to place, and contribute to rebuilding community life. Above all, peace represents the hope for dignity, healing, and the safeguarding of Cambodia's cultural identity for future generations.

What has been the most significant change in Cambodia in the last 25 years?

Over the last 25 years, Cambodia has moved from conflict to stability, with major improvements in infrastructure, the economy, and social services. A new, educated, and tech-connected generation has emerged, bringing fresh ideas and aspirations. Cultural revival and memory initiatives have also helped strengthen national identity and support healing from the past.

What still needs to change to ensure lasting peace and justice in the next 25 years?

To keep peace for the long term, Cambodia needs stronger and more open governance, where people can join and share ideas. Development should benefit all people, not only some groups, and we must continue to heal from the past through dialogue, education, and community support. It is also important to protect our culture, take care of our environment, and build institutions that are fair, transparent, and trusted by the public.

PEACE EDUCATION & YOUTH

A Path to Future Peace Through Education

Peace education is crucial in addressing the past and supporting transitional justice. By fostering understanding, empathy, and dialogue, it bridges, divides and encourages healing. Acknowledging the suffering of victims helps rebuild emotional connections and social fabric. Education on past conflicts aims to prevent violence and to promote non-violence, conflict resolution, and mutual respect.

In Cambodia, peace education is integrated with Civil Peace Service's (CPS) work in media and journalism, providing crucial information on the Khmer Rouge era and promoting public understanding. Through collaborations, CPS has fostered youth programs, minority inclusion, and civil dialogue, addressing the challenges of a post-conflict society.

05

KEO
Duong

A Historian in Pursuit of Peace and Understanding

A Historian in Pursuit of Peace and Understanding

In a modest classroom at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), KEO Duong stands before a history class, gently correcting a student's assumption about Cambodia's wartime past. The foundation-year student had repeated a familiar claim: that Khmer didn't kill Khmer during the Khmer Rouge, but that the Vietnamese were responsible. Duong doesn't scold. He explains. He shows sources. He adds context. This is his method: addressing misconceptions through clarity and dialogue.

For two decades, KEO Duong has been a quiet force in Cambodia's peace education movement. A historian, lecturer, researcher, and father of three, he has dedicated his life to documenting complex histories, promoting inclusive narratives, and pushing back against the culture of nationalist anger that still seeps through Cambodian memory. At the heart of his work is a single conviction: that history must be used not to divide, but to heal.

A Scholar Rooted in Memory

Born in 1987 in Svay Rieng province, KEO Duong grew up with stories – some whispered, others left unsaid – about the Khmer Rouge era. But it wasn't until he studied history at the Royal University of Phnom Penh (2004–2008) that he began to explore Cambodia's violent past with academic rigor. At that time, the Khmer Rouge Tribunal (ECCC) was just being established. The events of the 1970s, long silenced in public discourse, were returning to national attention. "That got me interested," he recalls. "I wanted to know more."

After graduating, Duong worked as a recorder for the ECCC in Case 001 and then joined Youth for Peace (YFP) as an intern. By 2010, he became a full-time staff writer and field researcher. His tasks involved interviewing survivors and, crucially, former Khmer Rouge at the grassroots level. The work was heavy. He remembers lying down for days after interviews, haunted by what he'd heard. "The first week till the first month... I could visualize it in my head," he says. "Even when I told myself not to get involved emotionally, I couldn't help but cry with them."

Rather than stepping back, Duong leaned into discomfort. He sought trauma processing guidance from colleagues at Transcultural Psychosocial Organization Cambodia (TPO) and continued fieldwork with increased emotional resilience. "I never thought of giving up," he says. "It only deepened my motivation to learn more."

A Career shaped by CPS

Though Duong never worked directly as a GIZ CPS partner expert, CPS supported several of his research projects and professional development opportunities. A pivotal moment came in 2011, when he joined a GIZ-sponsored fellowship program on Khmer Rouge Tribunal History that included a field study in Germany. “It was the first time I saw how another country confronted its past,” he says. “That trip opened my eyes to how other countries preserve difficult memories - and how important that is for healing.”

CPS also funded his early publications and built the foundation for his academic career. “Research needs resources,” he says. “If I had only relied on teaching, I wouldn’t have had the means to start. CPS gave me access to networks, mentorship, and support that helped launch both my writing and my studies.”

Those experiences also deepened his personal life. Researching the Khmer Rouge helped him reconnect with his own family’s history. “I learned more about my parents, especially my father, who was a teacher and knew a lot about what happened,” Duong says. “When I started interviewing people in my village, he helped me find contacts and introduced me to neighbors. That research helped me learn more about where I come from.”

Rewriting the Past, Rethinking Hate

Since 2014, Duong has taught modern Cambodian history at RUPP and trained university students on how to research the Khmer Rouge period, including several training sessions at Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (TSGM). In parallel, he pursued further studies – a Master’s in Southeast Asian Studies from Chulalongkorn University and currently, a PhD in political science in Germany, focused on memory politics between Cambodia and Vietnam.

Over the years, Duong has become a leading scholar in the under-explored area of ethnic Vietnamese experiences under the Khmer Rouge. His contributions to this field include two peer-reviewed books co-authored with Thun Theara (in Khmer and English), four publications with Youth for Peace (YfP) and Kdei Karuna (KDK), a Khmer Rouge history app developed with Bophana Center, roughly nine academic articles, supervision of more than 30 student theses, and teaching history and research methods to over a thousand students.

At the center of KEO Duong’s life work is a deep conviction that history must never be used as a tool to promote hate. “One of the core things I want to challenge,” he says, “is the idea – still very common in Cambodia – that studying history should build nationalism through anger.” For Duong, this belief isn’t just academically flawed – it’s socially dangerous.

“Some students still say things like, ‘It [Khmer Rouge] wasn’t Khmer who killed Khmer – it was the Vietnamese,”

> *“The purpose of studying conflict is not to stay angry - it’s to understand the roots of violence and how to prevent it.”*

“Learning history should not be about creating enemies. It should be about building compassion.”

he explains. “This kind of thinking doesn’t come from real history. It comes from myth, propaganda, and inherited prejudice.”

He argues that even much of Cambodia’s historical narrative – particularly in school textbooks and public discourse – has been shaped by outdated ideologies. “In the 1970s, Cambodia was at war. Writers and leaders at the time used history to rally people through hate, especially against the Vietnamese. But that context no longer applies,” he says. “Yet the tone and intent of that writing is still found in our curriculum today.”

Duong wants to shift that paradigm entirely. For him, history is not about choosing sides, seeking revenge, or justifying anger. It’s about explanation, understanding, and building a more just society. “I study history not to create hate, but to promote development,” he says. “And more than that, I want to help students replace anger with understanding – because only through understanding can we build peace.”

His methodology combines rigorous research with empathy. He teaches students how to question sources, analyze context, and trace the motivations behind historical events. He challenges them to ask not just what happened, but why – and how that knowledge can help Cambodia move forward.

“Learning history should make us better citizens,” he says. “It should help us become part of a peaceful society, not a bitter one. When we replace hate with understanding, we open the door to healing.”

This mission shapes every part of Duong’s work – as a teacher, researcher, and public intellectual. His latest publications focus on how anti-Vietnamese sentiment was manufactured in the past, and why it no longer serves Cambodia’s future. “Our responsibility as historians is not to recycle anger,” he says. “It’s to help people see clearly and choose a different path.”

For Duong, reshaping this mindset is essential. History, in his view, is not about taking sides or reliving grievances – it’s about illuminating causes, promoting dialogue, and contributing to a more just society.

Going Against the Grain

KEO Duong’s decision to pursue academic research in modern Cambodian history is not just unusual – it’s almost radical within the context of his generation. Among the 15 students in his BA history class at the RUPP, the vast majority chose more conventional paths. “At that time, it was very easy to pass the exam at the National Institute of Education (NIE) and become a high school history teacher,” he explains. “There wasn’t much competition. Half of my classmates took that route for the job security.”

The other half mostly joined NGOs or international organizations, drawn by better pay and immediate employment. Only Duong and one other classmate, Thun

Theara, chose to stay in academia and specialize in modern Cambodian history – a field that remains limited and underrepresented. “We both knew that taking the NIE path meant giving up the time and space needed for real research,” Duong says. “We wanted to go deeper.”

Even today, Cambodian researchers specializing in modern history, particularly the Khmer Rouge era, remain limited. Most history scholars study the ancient era – especially the Angkor period – or come from other disciplines like political science, sociology, or international relations. “Many study Democratic Kampuchea from political science or international relations’ points of view, but few are trained historians. Our discipline demands evidence-based analysis. We contextualize why past historians wrote with nationalist anger – and challenge its relevance today.”

This minority status was on full display at a Meta House[7] event in April 2025 commemorating the 50th anniversary of the Khmer Rouge’s accession to power (April 17, 1975). Duong was the only Cambodian on a panel otherwise filled with foreign scholars and practitioners. “That’s not unusual,” he admits. “Foreigners still dominate discussions about Democratic Kampuchea.”

But he’s working to change that – not through confrontation, but through example.

A Family Grounded in Quiet Support

Despite his growing reputation in Cambodia’s academic circles, Duong remains modest about his achievements. “I don’t think I’m successful,” he says. “But I’m satisfied with the progress of my work.”

He credits his wife for making that possible. “She allows me to focus on my work,” he says gratefully. The couple, married since 2011, has three children. “If I had to do as much child-rearing as she does, I wouldn’t be able to focus on my career.”

He acknowledges that their different backgrounds sometimes create tension – her family runs a business and initially didn’t understand the slow, modest path of academia. “But over time she came to understand where our happiness comes from,” he reflects. “Not from showing off, not from luxury – but from meaning.” Even within his family, Duong sees his role as an educator. “She used to ask me about Khmer Rouge history, and I was glad to share,” he says.

Looking Forward: Peace Education Beyond the Classroom

Duong’s work goes beyond teaching university students. He believes peace education must reach both youth and educators, and that it must be anchored in accurate, inclusive, and critical historical thinking. “We can’t stop at ‘what happened.’ We must ask why – why social injustice, why leadership failures, why nationalist ideologies led to genocide.”

> *“When people understand history – not just what happened, but why – it becomes a path to peace.”*

He advocates for "positive peace," a concept that includes not just the absence of war, but the presence of justice, social equity, and mutual understanding. "Right now, in Cambodia, peace is still seen as just the absence of war, no conflict. But that's not enough. If people still hold anger, still believe in conspiracy theories, still feel injustice, then peace hasn't truly arrived."

With the current context of peace education in Cambodia still limited, Duong sees major obstacles to peace education: lack of funding, political sensitivities, and entrenched nationalist narratives. But he also sees hope. The Cambodian government has begun promoting peace in rhetoric, even if not yet in curriculum. New publications and public events offer small but meaningful platforms as well as all the resources of knowledge productions developed up to today.

For Duong, peace education is not a destination but a long road. It requires institutional change, cultural humility, and personal patience. It means teaching students who have already been shaped by nationalist textbooks and helping them think critically. It means publishing research that challenges prevailing myths and standing alone on panels when necessary.

But it also means planting seeds. "Even if they don't understand right away, something stays with them," he says. "Some students come back to me years later and say that one class changed how they think."

His vision for the future is modest and powerful: a Cambodia where history is used not as a weapon, but as a mirror. A society where students are taught not to hate, but to understand. And a generation of historians who aren't afraid to ask hard questions – and to listen carefully to the answers.

REFLECTIONS ON PEACE & CHANGE

What is your personal definition of peace?

To me, peace is more than just the absence of war. In Cambodia, nearly 30 years have passed since the conflict ended in 1998, and I view peace as the assurance of security and economic stability, as well as the presence of social morality and the rule of law.

What has been the most significant change in Cambodia over the last 25 years?

Aside from steady economic growth, the decline of violence and criminal cases reflects progress in national security. Political intimidation has largely shifted from violence to more indirect tactics of using the legal system. Regarding the legacy of the Khmer Rouge, Cambodian society has moved toward greater reconciliation through the work of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal and various NGO-led initiatives focused on healing, justice and reconciliation.

What still needs to change to ensure lasting peace and justice in the next 25 years?

Education should be a top priority in ensuring lasting peace. It is essential to equip younger generations with skills, strong moral values, and historical awareness to contribute to economic and social justice and to prevent the repetition of past violence and the outbreak of future conflicts. I do not believe that military build-up guarantees peace. Instead, a more just and inclusive society together with the values of global citizenship is fundamental

UNG
Bun Y

Media, Memory,
and the Long Road to Peace

Media, Memory, and the Long Road to Peace

UNG Bun Y speaks with quiet precision, his words bearing the weight of someone who has spent years navigating Cambodia's fractured past. A lecturer, documentary filmmaker, and former Local Peace Expert for Civil Peace Service (CPS), his journey mirrors the nation's own struggle to reconcile with the horrors of the Khmer Rouge era.

"I joined CPS in 2007 as a 4th year university student," he recalls. "At that time, I didn't understand the technical side of peacebuilding. We just focused on topics related to the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) – justice, and reconciliation." Like many young Cambodians suddenly confronting a difficult history, Bun Y's early work felt more like technical assignments rather than a process of healing. "We went to provinces to interview survivors, screened our films in villages... but I was just focused on doing the tasks. It took years to understand why this mattered."

Today, as head of the Department of Media and Communication (DMC) at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, Bun Y embodies Cambodia's generational bridge. For 15 years, he has trained students to document unspoken trauma while confronting journalism's ethical dilemmas in a post-conflict society. His evolution from a *local CPS counterpart*[8] to a mentor reveals both Cambodia's progress and the unfinished work of reconciliation.

A Childhood Shaped by Silence

Bun Y's journey began in Kampong Thom province, where his middle-class upbringing as the child of entrepreneurs shaped both independence and isolation. "My dad was very aggressive," Bun Y recalls, his voice still carrying the weight of childhood observation. "I learned to communicate with my family because businesspeople meet a lot of people. I saw how different people are and learned how to interact with them." Yet this exposure came with a cost: "I usually only stayed home and school, later at work. I was afraid of society partly because of my father, and partly because of society itself."

His parents' unconventional approach – granting autonomy despite their traditional background – became pivotal. "They didn't tell me what to do, they just let me make choices. That allowed me to become who I am." This freedom led him to reject the family trade. "When I grew up, I felt unhappy with society, so I chose education to bring impact. I didn't want to do business like my parents. Witnessing their transactions influenced my decisions."

Academic pursuits became both a refuge and a rebellion. He earned dual bachelor's degrees – a Bachelor of Arts in Media Management from DMC and a Bachelor of Education in Teaching English as a Foreign Language from the Institute of Foreign Languages (IFL), completing both programs in 2008. He went on to earn a Master of Arts in International Journalism Studies from Hong Kong Baptist University, completing the program in 2010. The following year, he received his professional certification in Multimedia and Online Journalism from International Institute for Journalism in Germany.

The Weight of Awakening

Beneath Bun Y's academic achievements lay unresolved generational trauma that would shape his life's work.

"Cambodian parents raise kids to be afraid – too protective," he reflects. "It's a war trauma. They don't talk about it, but it's there." This understanding came slowly, as his own childhood fear of society evolved into something darker. "At one stage, I needed counseling with Transcultural Psychosocial Organization Cambodia (TPO) for months, I was depressed, lost in insomnia, and needed to take medication." This crisis became the catalyst for understanding the parallels between his own pain and Cambodia's collective wounds.

Through his work, the transformation came in moments of shared recognition. "At first, I didn't understand why survivors cried during interviews," he recalled. "Survivors would sob during interviews. I felt guilty, like I'd bullied them." But with time, he learned trauma-sensitive techniques: "Letting them talk was a way to relieve pain. Media's role is to document truth, but also to help survivors speak."

The therapeutic process revealed profound insights. "What the counselor helped with was not much," he admits reflecting on his own therapy. "But it let me speak when I had no one else. Each time, they just let me talk." In these moments, he recognized the same healing mechanism at work – both in counseling and interviews. "We actually helped them to heal."

This personal revelation mirrored his professional work and reveal a powerful realization about Cambodian society. "History shaped how Cambodian parents raise kids – too protective, afraid. Society is fragmented because people hold trauma and don't talk about it."

Now he understands what once escaped him – that all those years documenting others' pain while remaining detached as a local peace expert were part of the same unspoken story. "When we don't talk, it stays inside and festers."

Media as a Bridge for Reconciliation

When Bun Y became a full-time lecturer at DMC in 2010 and later assumed leadership as Head of Department in 2017, he faced a growing challenge: a new generation of Cambodian students increasingly disconnected from their country's painful history. "Young people now are far removed from the Khmer Rouge," he observed. "In my generation, parents talked about it constantly. Now? It's hard to force interest. This year in documentary class, no one chose Khmer Rouge topics."

Determined to bridge this gap, Bun Y crafted an innovative approach to media education. As part of the curriculum, the DMC would organize field trips to Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (TSGM) and Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-CAM), believing direct encounters with historical sites could spark engagement. "Some students get story ideas after visiting these places," he noted, "especially when combined with conflict-sensitive reporting studies."

For those unmoved by traditional history lessons, he found ways to connect past trauma to contemporary issues. “When students report on modern problems like disabilities or poverty, we trace the root causes back to the war. Why would families keep bullet casings as souvenirs? Because relatives died from those weapons.”

In the classroom, Bun Y emphasized a conflict-sensitive approach to journalism. He drew from his own early mistakes, recalling how he initially felt guilty when survivors cried during interviews. Over time, he developed techniques to help them share their stories without re-traumatization. His curriculum stressed rigorous fact-checking and contextual reporting. “Journalists must minimize harm,” he taught. “Verify information, interview all stakeholders before reporting. Don’t just examine surface issues – look for the historical roots of social problems.”

This ethical framework extended to his critique of Cambodia’s media landscape. With professional clarity, he distinguished between responsible journalism and sensationalism. “Some outlets provoke conflict for profit,” he said. “They don’t consider how word choices can generate racism or political chaos.” In contrast, he maintained that “the role of media is not to advocate but to report truth ethically. Professional journalists serve the public by providing verified facts from all perspectives.”

Beyond the classroom, Bun Y’s work took on broader significance. The survivor testimonies he helped document became part of the ECCC archives, serving as both legal evidence and historical record. Community screenings of student documentaries in rural provinces sparked intergenerational dialogue. Even when students focused on contemporary issues, he encouraged them to ask: “How did history shape this problem?”

The results, while subtle, gave Bun Y cautious optimism. “After visiting Tuol Sleng,” he noted, “some students start asking grandparents about their experiences or

research more into the history of Khmer Rouge. That’s how understanding begins – one conversation at a time.” Yet he remained realistic about the limits of his work: “Media won’t fix everything. But ethical reporting creates space for truth, and truth is the first step toward reconciliation.”

Through this multifaceted approach – combining hands-on historical engagement, rigorous journalism training, and community outreach – Bun Y worked to ensure Cambodia’s next generation of media professionals would approach their country’s past with both clarity and compassion.

Confronting Personal & National Trauma

Bun Y’s journey into peacebuilding forced him to confront not just Cambodia’s collective trauma, but his own buried pain. “When I was younger, I used to hate this society,” he admitted, reflecting on his early struggles. “I could understand why people like Pol Pot, did what they did.

> *“Ask your parents what they endured. Without these conversations, each generation inherits the same unspoken rage.”*

I also used to hate the rich like him," he added with a rueful laugh. This visceral resentment, he later realized, stemmed from unprocessed generational wounds. His breaking point came when depression left him sleepless and dependent on medication. "The experience of counselling let me understand trauma's grip – how history shapes our minds without us knowing."

The counseling process revealed striking parallels to his documentary work. "The trauma stays alive inside families – in the way parents flinch at loud noises or refuse to speak of the past." This insight transformed his teaching. He began urging students to break the silence at home: "Ask your parents what they endured. Without these conversations, each generation inherits the same unspoken rage." He often urges the students to speak openly or make open conversations with their parents when there's any issue as he believes open dialogue is key to resolving problems, conflict, or misunderstanding.

These personal revelations reshaped his leadership at DMC. Having worked alongside German peacebuilding experts during his CPS days and other western colleagues, Bun Y consciously rejected Cambodia's traditional top-down management. "Some typical Khmer supervisors tend to keep strict distance – not much discussion, mostly orders," he noted. "But my German colleagues debated openly, admitted mistakes, and treated everyone as equals." He adopted this approach as Department Head, flattening hierarchies in ways that initially startled Cambodian staff. "I tell my team: Question me, propose ideas and take responsibility. Real collaboration needs mutual respect and understanding, not fear."

Cultural Synthesis in Peacebuilding

This blending of Western and Khmer communication styles became a cornerstone of his approach to peacebuilding. Bun Y's approach blended cultural insights: Where German colleagues emphasized structured dialogue, he recognized that "Cambodian society is fragmented... people don't like to talk openly to each other, don't like to listen to reasons." His work focused on creating conditions for survivors to speak, noting "when we don't talk, it stays inside and just affects us."

He argued that reconciliation "takes time and needs multiple stakeholders... individuals need to achieve inner peace first." This requires patience: "You cannot have aggressive behavior and still talk about achieving peace. It starts from the individual."

His own transformation – from an angry young man who distrusted society to a leader advocating inner peace – mirrored Cambodia's halting progress. "If individuals are fragmented, society can't unite," he said. The classroom became his laboratory for change: he applies these insights by encouraging students to examine historical roots of conflict, "We let students look at present issues they care about but examine root causes. Some topics are still connected to war trauma."

Bun Y's approach recognized Cambodia's unique cultural contours. While Western peacebuilding often prioritizes institutional reform, his work focused on the human scale – repairing communication between parents and children, teachers and students. "Reconciliation starts when a daughter finally understands why her mother hides rice under the bed," he said, referring to habits formed during the famine years. "That's when fractured families – and by extension, a fractured society – begin to mend."

Even his critique of Cambodian media reflected this duality. Where Western journalism prized adversarial questioning, Bun Y trained students to interview trauma survivors with what he called "listening first" – a method blending German precision with Khmer patience. "You don't start with tough questions. You sit through long silences, bring tea, let the story unfold like it would in a village conversation."

This cultural synthesis didn't come easily. Some colleagues resisted his management; older survivors sometimes mistrust his documentary teams. But Bun Y persisted, convinced that Cambodia's healing required both global peacebuilding techniques and distinctly local forms of trust-building. "Germans taught me to value transparency," he reflected. "But my Cambodian roots taught me that real peace arrives quietly – through shared meals, not just signed agreements."

In his office at DMC, where German-funded recording equipment sat alongside traditional Khmer manuscripts and newspapers, Bun Y embodied this fusion. The man who once studied closely about Khmer Rouge history and Pol Pot's rage now dedicated his life to undoing its legacy – one honest conversation at a time.

"Peace Takes Time" – The Unfinished Journey

Bun Y's most revealing fieldwork occurred in 2006 in Anlong Veng, the Khmer Rouge's final stronghold. "Former Khmer Rouge soldiers, some disabled, were running away, thinking we were authorities stopping illegal logging. At that time, they still found Ta Mok good. They said during Ta Mok's time there was enough food to eat." These encounters built his view of reconciliation: "Peace takes time… to build for everybody, not just any individual".

At DMC, he insists on teaching history despite student resistance. "Even if they don't want to study, we still try to encourage them and provoke interest because we know it's important. Like research skills, they'll need it when they work". Yet he recognizes the media's limitations: "Just media alone is not possible. Schools, religions must participate in helping to educate people on reconciliation".

His cautious optimism stems from observable change: "CPS's 25 years helped. We notice improvement as beneficiaries" – evident when "students visit Tuol Sleng and start asking grandparents questions". Bun Y's journey mirrors Cambodia's: "Peace starts from individual to achieve inner peace first – if not, it's hard to discuss or move forward together. With memory and dialogue, maybe we'll find peace."

"Peace takes time… You cannot have aggressive behavior and still talk about achieving peace. It starts with the individual."

REFLECTIONS ON PEACE & CHANGE

What is your personal definition of peace?

To me, peace refers to a state of calmness and happiness, free from internal and external conflicts. In a broader sense, peace is achieved when different groups of people share mutual respect and understanding, engage in open dialogue, and coexist in harmony.

What has been the most significant change in Cambodia over the last 25 years?

Over the last 25 years, Cambodia has experienced rapid growth in all sectors. The most significant change in Cambodia in terms of peace is the absence of war. It was then a fragmented society, a result of civil wars, but now Cambodia has made a steadfast move toward building sustainable peace.

What still needs to change to ensure lasting peace and justice in the next 25 years?

To ensure lasting peace and justice in the next 25 years, I believe Cambodia should continue to dedicate ongoing efforts to a more harmonious society where people from different social or political backgrounds opt in open dialogue, value mutual respect and understanding, and work together constructively to address the root causes of any conflicts.

KRY
Suyheang

Listening for Peace,
Leading with Conviction

Listening for Peace, Leading with Conviction

When Heang first asked her mother to speak about life during the Khmer Rouge, her mother wept. The second time, she cried again. And the third. It took more than four weeks of quiet persistence for Heang to piece together her family's untold past – a buried story of loss, silence, and survival. It was a turning point that would shape not only her personal understanding of family's history, but the course of her life.

Today, Heang is the Executive Director of Women Peace Makers (WPM), a Cambodian organization that sits at the intersection of gender, peacebuilding, and social justice. Through tools like Facilitative Listening Design (FLD), she and her team are helping communities unpack intergenerational trauma, confront discrimination, and cultivate new ways of living together without violence. But her leadership was not inherited – it was carved from contradiction, shaped by conflict, and earned through years of questioning what it means to build peace as a woman, a mother, and a survivor of inherited silence.

Awakening to the Past

Long before she became a peacebuilder, Heang was a language teacher and university student at the Institute of Foreign Languages (IFL). Like many Cambodians born after the war, her understanding of the Khmer Rouge was vague, shaped by school textbooks and hushed conversations.

That changed when she volunteered with Documentation Center of Cambodia (DC-CAM) in 2008. The task seemed simple: write a story about her parents' lives during the Khmer Rouge regime. But when she began interviewing her family, she uncovered a well of pain. "My mom kept crying. The first time I asked, she cried. The second time, she cried. The third time, she still cried."

Through this process, she learned that she had lost an older brother - just a baby - during the Khmer Rouge regime. Her grandfather, unable to overcome the grief after discovering that his son had been buried alive, passed away only a few days before the Khmer Rouge was overthrown on January 7, 1979. "It struck me that we knew so little about my family's live during that darkest period," she says. "And sadly no one, even my schoolteachers or neighbors, talked about it."

That awakening led her to a full-time position at DC-CAM, where she supported the victim participation program for the Khmer Rouge Tribunal. “I listened to stories of both survivors and former Khmer Rouge soldiers – including commanders,” she recalls. “It opened my eyes to how complex healing really is.”

This work ignited her curiosity and conviction, prompting her to pursue a master’s degree in Peace and Conflict Studies in the United States. It was a discipline still foreign to many in Cambodia at the time. But for Heang, it offered theoretical tools to match the lived realities she had already begun to explore.

Learning Through Movement

After graduating, Heang engaged in a regional peacebuilding space, working with the Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies in Cambodia but working on conflicts across the region including Myanmar and Sri Lanka. It was during this time that she was being exposed to integrating listening as a research methodology – inspired by the CDA Collaborative Learning Projects[9] which is mainly used in international humanitarian, peacebuilding, and development work.

From armed clashes in Myanmar’s Shan State to political repression in Sri Lanka under Mahinda Rajapaksa, her peacebuilding work took her into tense, sometimes dangerous environments. “I never told my family I was going into conflict zones,” she admits. “It was hard. But I learned that peace processes must center the voices of those most affected.”

What shocked her across contexts was the absence of women – in decision-making rooms, negotiation tables, and peacebuilding narratives. “I didn’t even know what ‘gender’ was in 2008,” she says with a small laugh. “But I felt something was off. How could women be expected to participate meaningfully when they were dealing with violence at home, limited access to education, and gendered expectations in every sphere?”

This realization stayed with her as she returned to Cambodia – compelled to act not just as a facilitator of peace, but as a feminist leader in a field that rarely made space for women’s voices.

Building Something New

In 2016, Heang joined WPM – an organization on the verge of shutting down. “There was little funding, low visibility, and a small team of 4,” she recalls. “But the mission was everything I cared about: gender, peacebuilding, and community transformation.”

In her first two years as executive director, she and her team developed a new strategic plan, revitalized partnerships, and re-centered WPM’s mission around the concept of intersectional gender and peacebuilding. “When we look at a woman who is poor, belongs to an ethnic minority, is stateless, disabled, and living with poverty and with HIV, her experience of discrimination, gender-based violence, or injustice is not simply the sum of these identities. It is shaped by the intersections of them. Each layer of marginalization compounds the others, creating unique barriers that cannot be understood through a single lens,” she explains. “So, peace work must look at that complexity.”

At the core of this transformation was her co-development of Facilitative Listening Design (FLD[10]) together with WPM Advisor, Raymond Hyma. FLD is a participatory action research methodology that trains local community members to use listening – not questioning – as a tool not only for data collection, but also for transformation. “Listening removes pressure. It lets people speak freely in a conversational manner,” she says. “It’s not about investigation. It’s about understanding and transformation.”

Beyond Cambodia, FLD has been tested in Vietnam, Thailand, and even academic settings, where it challenges mainstream ideas about what counts as “valid” research.

> *“FLD breaks down those barriers. It’s more than a research tool – it’s a transformative approach that brings people who are at odds together, fostering dialogue and understanding.”*

“Academic institutions often don’t see community knowledge and research as “real” research or knowledge,” she notes. “But FLD is trying to challenge that.”

Listening as Transformation: The Power of FLD

At the heart of Heang’s peacebuilding approach lies a deceptively simple tool: listening. Developed in collaboration with Civil Peace Service (CPS) and shaped by years of field experience, FLD has become one of WPM’s most innovative contributions to peace work in Cambodia and beyond.

Unlike traditional research methods that involve recordings or filming, FLD removes formal barriers to conversation. “When people know they’re being recorded, especially on sensitive topics, they become cautious,” Heang explains. “FLD removes that pressure. It creates space for people to talk as if they’re speaking to a friend.” In a society where silence and fear have often shaped memory, this simple act of uninterrupted listening can be profoundly disarming – and deeply healing.

What makes FLD even more distinctive is its community-led model. Rather than treating locals as passive data collectors, FLD trains community members – those directly impacted by the issues – to become researchers themselves. “It’s not just collecting data for outsiders,” she says. “They co-design, analyze, reflect, and co-create knowledge. That’s a shift in power. That’s decolonizing research.”

From uncovering anti-Vietnamese sentiment to exploring statelessness, gender identity, and disability-based discrimination, FLD has been used in some of Cambodia’s most sensitive social terrains. Its findings have not only shaped WPM’s programming but also informed policy discussions, brought marginalized voices into national reports, and supported youth from multicultural backgrounds to become peace ambassadors in their own communities.

Ultimately, FLD is more than a methodology – it’s a tool for transformation. In some communities, just participating in the process helped people shift long-held prejudices and build new trust. “Peace isn’t always about solving the problem on paper,” Heang says. “Sometimes it starts by helping people see each other differently.”

The Role of Civil Peace Service: Trust, Tools, and Traction

When Heang stepped in to lead WPM in 2016, GIZ’s CPS became a key partner at a crucial time. Their support then began in the following year with the development of FLD but quickly grew into something much more. “Without CPS, FLD would not have reached the level of recognition it has today,” she says. “They gave us space to test, refine, and evolve.”

> *"CPS supported our vision, helped us build tools, and gave us credibility to engage stakeholders at national and regional levels."*

Through CPS, WPM gained access to a broader network of partners, and entered a learning community focused on peacebuilding, minority inclusion, and transitional justice. The impact was not just organizational – it was deeply personal. "It wasn't just funding," she explains. "They supported our vision, helped us build tools, and gave us credibility to engage stakeholders at national and regional levels."

One of the most lasting effects has been the growth of local peacebuilders. WPM staff trained through CPS-supported programs have moved into other INGOs and civil society roles, continuing peace work in new spaces. "These people don't disappear," Heang says. "Wherever they go, they carry the peacebuilding mindset and methods they helped create."

CPS also contributed to the expansion of WPM's tools and methods – particularly FLD, which has now been applied across Cambodia, and beyond. It helped inform responses to statelessness, ethnic tension, and gender-based discrimination, while also shaping a new generation of multicultural youth peace ambassadors. "We saw that when people understand each other, barriers begin to fall," she reflects.

Beyond programmatic impact, CPS gave WPM something harder to quantify: traction. "They helped us turn vision into action," Heang says. "Their partnership didn't just support projects – it supported transformation."

Balancing Motherhood, Leadership, and Liberation

Behind Heang's leadership is a personal story shaped by patriarchy – and resistance to it. Born the youngest of five siblings in a conservative household, she was the only daughter in her family to finish high school, while her sisters were married off before finishing secondary school. Her parents believed that for women, marriage offered security in a country recovering from war. Yet, Heang

> *"Without gender equality, there won't be easy meaningful participation… we cannot live as ourselves."*

defied those expectations, staying in school and working until she earned a Master's degree. Since then, she has devoted over a decade to advancing gender equality and peacebuilding through her leadership at WPM.

Now a mother of two, Heang reflects on the balance between passion and caregiving. "I could not become who I am today without my family's support," she says. "My husband shares housework and childcare. That's what gender equality looks like in practice."

But gender equality, she insists, isn't just about parenting roles. It's about dismantling patriarchal norms in leadership, peace and security work, and negative social expectations. "If we don't challenge gender inequality, we can't live as ourselves," she says.

A Vision Rooted in Justice

For Heang, peace is not just the absence of war – it's the presence of justice, dignity, and opportunity. That means addressing statelessness, anti-minority sentiment, and gender-based violence not as side issues, but as central barriers to social cohesion.

Her experience with transitional justice in Cambodia informs that perspective. "The Khmer Rouge Tribunal was important – but it's not enough," she explains. "Peacebuilding needs to go beyond courtrooms. It must include prevention, education, and reconciliation."

FLD has become a key strategy in this vision. It doesn't just document people's pain – it brings communities together in nonviolent dialogue. "When people listen to each other deeply, their perceptions change," she says. "That's how healing starts."

WPM's work now includes school-based peace education, peer mediation, nonviolent communication, conflict transformation training, and among other, gender-responsive mediation frameworks. Their approach isn't just about raising awareness – it's about shifting mainstream narratives and shaking the systems.

Looking Forward: Courage, Creativity, and Accountability

As WPM approaches its 10th year under Heang's leadership, she remains both hopeful and grounded. "In the beginning, it was just four or five of us, and few knew about us. Now WPM has evolved into a recognized knowledge hub and evidence informed organization working on the intersection of gender and peace," she says. "But it hasn't been easy."

When asked what keeps her going, she answers without hesitation: accountability. "At the beginning, I wanted to quit when the future looked daunting. But I had made a promise – to myself, to our community, to our supporters. That sense of responsibility is what pushed me through."

Her definition of peace is both simple and profound: "the ability to address conflict nonviolently and with creativity. It's not just an end goal that we aspire to achieve but also a process in itself. It is a very active, conscious, and mindful practice. Or else, violence will always find its way to justify itself. That's why, on an institutional or national level, peace is beyond the absence of war; it's about having a strong institutional infrastructure that helps the country to deal with any types of conflicts or shocks nonviolently."

It's a vision grounded in lived experience, guided by listening, and sustained by an unwavering belief: that women, when trusted and resourced, can transform even the most painful histories into powerful futures.

REFLECTIONS ON PEACE & CHANGE

What is your personal definition of peace?

On a personal level, peace, to me, is the ability to address conflict nonviolently and with creativity. It's not just an end goal that we aspire to achieve but also a process in itself. It is a very active, conscious, and mindful practice. Or else, violence will always find a way to justify itself. That's why, on an institutional or national level, peace is beyond the absence of war; it's about having a strong institutional infrastructure that helps the country to deal with any types of conflicts or shocks nonviolently.

What has been the most significant change in Cambodia in the last 25 years?

Over the past 25 years, I think Cambodia has undergone a remarkable transformation, moving from a post-conflict society toward one characterized by relative stability and economic growth. The achievement of negative peace, marked by the absence of large-scale violence, has enabled significant progress in infrastructure, education, and healthcare. The Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), however imperfect, has been a pivotal step in acknowledging the crimes of the Khmer Rouge regime and provided a platform for truth-telling and recognition, offering survivors a sense of justice and contributing to national reconciliation.

What still needs to change to ensure lasting peace and justice in the next 25 years?

To ensure lasting peace and justice in Cambodia over the next 25 years, I think it is essential to address the root causes of inequality, discrimination, and exclusion through an intersectional, inclusive, and transformative approach. This includes dismantling structural barriers related to gender, ethnicity, and marginalization, while investing in social cohesion and strengthening peace infrastructure such as community-based dispute resolution mechanism and equitable law enforcement. Moreover, promoting peace education, rooted in empathy, civic engagement, and inclusive narratives, is imperative in fostering culture of nonviolence among young generation.

Most importantly, advancing the Women, Peace and Security agenda in Cambodia is crucial, ensuring that women, youth, and marginalized groups are not only meaningfully included but empowered to lead in decision-making and peace processes at all levels.

EPILOGUE

Carrying Legacy Forward

This chapter reflects on what remains after 25 years of Civil Peace Service in Cambodia – tracing how knowledge, relationships, and locally rooted capacities continue to shape justice, memory, and healing. It looks ahead to the people and institutions now carrying this work into the future.

06

As the tribunal's final chapter closes and the transitional justice work of the GIZ Civil Peace Service program nears its end, the question arises: what remains? For almost two decades, the tribunal was our anchor, yet from the beginning it was clear that a courtroom alone cannot carry a country's grief or hope. Transitional justice lives beyond law: in dialogue and care, in classrooms and ritual, in memory and daily practice. What remains, then, is not only a legacy but a responsibility.

After twenty-five years, the CPS work implemented by GIZ in Cambodia comes to its conclusion. Yet what matters most remains firmly in place: the Cambodian teachers and counselors, facilitators and archivists, youth leaders and community workers who have grown into the heart of this field. They will continue carrying memory work, psychosocial support, and dialogue forward in their own institutions and communities, shaping how these practices live on in public life. At the same time, CPS itself does not disappear from Cambodia. Other German organizations continue their long-term peacebuilding partnerships here. In this way, the end of one long-running project marks not a disappearance, but a handover into a broader, locally rooted landscape that continues to evolve and grow.

Across twenty-five years in the country, CPS supported conflict transformation broadly. Within that work, its engagement in transitional justice stood out for its depth and duration – survivor participation, psychosocial care, youth dialogue, memory initiatives, and education for peace. Some figures give a sense of scale without claiming to capture the whole story: more than 6,000 survivors applied to participate in the tribunal, nearly 4,000 were admitted, over 40,000 students who joined CPS supported outreach, education, and memorial activities, and hundreds of teachers, counselors, facilitators, and archivists were trained in trauma-sensitive practice and dialogue. Behind each number is a person who chose to speak, to listen, and to engage with a difficult past.

Change did happen, but not everything changed. For some survivors, justice arrived too late or not at all. Symbolic measures could not replace lost family, livelihoods, or health. Many applied to participate and were not accepted because of procedural or jurisdiction rules. Reaching rural and remote communities remained difficult, and for young people born after the war, the past could feel distant or contested. Civil society also navigated political sensitivities, shifting donor priorities, and institutional uncertainty; even strong partnerships were squeezed by short project cycles. To admit these limits is part of the legacy. Transitional justice is not a destination. It is a social practice that must be revisited.

One lesson from Cambodia is simple: justice cannot be rushed. Over two decades, CPS accompanied the work, learning with partners, cultivating trust, and shaping relationships that could live through uncertainty. As the program hands over, what endures is the capacity built together. At the center were national colleagues – community workers, educators, facilitators, counselors, archivists – keepers of knowledge and institutional memory who led practice in culturally grounded and forward-looking ways. International peace workers facilitated and connected. Ownership was not transferred; it was honored. From this posture emerged approaches that were both practical and humane: trauma care rooted in local practices, oral histories that bridged generations, learning materials that spoke to lived experience, and forms of recognition that touched institutions and homes alike. These are seeds that can outlast any program, provided they are tended.

It is possible to speak of fragility without dwelling on fear. Cambodia now holds a substantial base of experience: peace education resources, digitized archives, trauma sensitive methods, community healing practices, youth dialogue formats, and professionals with deep skill. The task ahead is to activate what already exists, connecting materials to routine teacher training and school use, weaving trauma awareness into museums and classrooms, and extending outreach with steady attention to rural areas and minorities so that inclusion is a design choice, not an afterthought. With light coordination, open access, and modest but consistent support, what exists can grow.

Here, the Legacy Institution of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia has a vital role. Safeguarding records is not enough; it can be a civic space where justice continues to matter in people's lives. That means keeping access open and usable, partnering with schools, universities, youth groups, and community venues, hosting survivor and youth dialogues, collaborating with civil society so approaches remain people-centered and responsive, and ensuring that rural and underrepresented communities are included from the start. Guided by openness and care, the Legacy Institution can be a catalyst, a place where remembrance fuels reflection, where archived voices inform active citizenship, and where lessons from the past strengthen imagination for the future.

Cambodia's path also speaks beyond its borders. Courtrooms are necessary but not sufficient. Healing asks more than verdicts. Justice gains depth when it is linked to education, memory, dialogue, and community. The formal participation of survivors, welcomed in principle and demanding in practice, was new, sometimes difficult, and ultimately formative; by participating, survivors helped define what justice meant. For those designing future processes elsewhere, certain themes stand out:

- **Fund for the long road:**
  Support must continue beyond verdicts, with flexibility for reparations, psychosocial care, education, memory, and light coordination over time.
- **Make participation real:**
  Admission is not enough. Participation needs preparation, accompaniment, translation, transport, feedback, and follow up so dignity and agency are felt.
- **Pair law with care:**
  Link legal work to trauma informed practice, intergenerational dialogue, education for peace, and community memory. Courts clarify facts; societies need help to carry them.
- **Share ownership:**
  let local actors lead while international advisors accompany, connect, and strengthen capacity. Build methods that remain usable without external presence.
- **Keep access open:**
  ensure students, teachers, survivors, and researchers can reach archives and materials; let the Legacy Institution be a civic platform, not only a storehouse.
- **Reach the whole country:**
  include rural areas and minorities from the start as a guiding choice throughout.
- **Invest in people who stay:**
  support national colleagues' learning, networks, and career paths so knowledge remains alive.
- **Coordinate the connective tissue:**
  create light, regular spaces for civil society, educators, survivors, and state actors to align and avoid duplication.
- **Center youth:**
  invite young people as co-researchers, facilitators, and storytellers so the work travels into the future.

When a chapter ends and the work continues, responsibility shifts. The transitional justice work supported by GIZ within CPS is concluding, while CPS in Cambodia continues through other agencies and programs. The tribunal that anchored much of this work has fulfilled its mandate; now the center of gravity moves to schools, communities, archives, and everyday conversations. The court clarified crimes and responsibility. Society gives that clarity meaning when it listens to survivors, teaches with care, and keeps dialogue open, including in rural and minority communities. Not everyone is satisfied, and justice after mass violence is never complete. Yet the pieces are here, and they can be held together. If the Legacy Institution collaborates openly, ensures wide and practical access, invites students to engage, and works with civil society, the tribunal's lessons will remain usable for prevention, education, and healing.

Cambodia's experience reminds us that justice deepens when participation is real, when care accompanies law, and when trust is given time to grow. Institutions matter, but people carry the work forward, especially the young. Keep knowledge accessible, cooperation open, and practice human centered. Then the work will continue where it matters most: in the choices people make with one another, every day. Let this be a handover, not a closing.

ENDNOTES

[1] Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC), Cambodian Defenders Project (CDP), Khmer Institute for Democracy (KID), Legal Aid Cambodia (LAC), Khmer Kampuchea Krom Human Rights Association (KKKHRA)

[2] PADV was a CPS partner in 2005–2006. After funding ended, staff and know-how transitioned to the Center for Social Development (CSD), which CPS continued to support.

[3] The collaboration with the University of Bristol took place through the Education, Justice and Memory Network (EDJAM), funded by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. From 2021 to 2024, EDJAM worked with Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum to co-develop the teacher training manual and classroom resources, and to conduct national workshops where museum staff introduced interactive methods – debate, questioning, and student-led inquiry – to high-school teachers. These teachers later piloted the approaches in their classrooms. The collaboration also supported follow-up visits to provincial schools to observe student engagement and gather feedback for further refinement.

[4] Founded in 2005 as the Cambodia branch of the Boston-based International Center for Conciliation (ICfC), the organization registered locally in 2010 and adopted the name Kdei Karuna in 2012.

[5] DC-Cam was already established in 1995 digitizing and publicly sharing records - incl. photos and films -but focused exclusively on the Khmer Rouge era.

[6] Émile Gsell (1838–1879) was a French photographer active in Southeast Asia and is recognized as the first commercial photographer based in Saigon (today's Ho Chi Minh City). He joined several scientific expeditions, and his photographs from an early mission to Angkor Wat are among the earliest visual records of the site. Before Gsell's arrival, however, the Scottish photographer John Thomson had already traveled through Cambodia and other parts of Asia, producing some of the earliest known photographs of the region.

[7] Meta House (Cambodian-German Cultural Center) is a leading arts-and-media hub in Phnom Penh, operated by the Cambodian-German Cultural Association (KDKG, NGO since 2014) in cooperation with the Goethe-Institut for language courses. It hosts exhibitions, film screenings, concerts, theater, workshops, and public debates, supporting Cambodian and Cambodia-based artists, researchers, and cultural practitioners while fostering international exchange.

[8] In CPS usage (adopted from the former German Development Service), a local counterpart is a national professional employed by a partner organization who works day-to-day with an international advisor on shared tasks and goals. The role emphasizes co-ownership and two-way knowledge exchange rather than hierarchy and may also be described as a "national counterpart" or "partner focal person.

[9] CDA Collaborative Learning Projects – a non-profit organization that evolved in 2003 from the earlier Collaborative for Development Action (founded in 1985 by Mary B. Anderson and Catherine A. Overholt). CDA is best known for the Do No Harm and Reflecting on Peace Practice frameworks and for its collaborative learning approach, which engages diverse practitioners across sectors and countries in inclusive, iterative inquiry. By listening for essential questions and co-creating practical resources, CDA helps transform learning into real-world change in fragile and conflict-affected settings.

[10] To learn more about FLD handbook: https://wpmcambodia.org/project/the-fld-handbook/ or learn more about FLD story: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Tg99gYURds&t=308s

February 2026

Published by

Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale
Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH Registered
offices Bonn and Eschborn, Germany

Civil Peace Service Cambodia

Justice and Reconciliation in the Aftermath of the
Khmer Rouge Tribunal

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Phnom Penh, Cambodia www.giz.de/kambodscha

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Photos: Conor Wall

Graphic Design: Melon Rouge Agency

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This publication was shaped through the collaboration of many individuals. We would like to thank all contributors involved in its creation. Our thanks extend equally to the twelve protagonists featured in this publication and to the many partners and collaborators whose long-standing engagement has informed, inspired, and shaped our work and the experiences reflected in this book.

Disclaimer

The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and protagonists and do not necessarily reflect the views of GIZ.

Printing

Printed in Cambodia

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