



# LATEST NEWS

Samrong Centre, Cambodia

OCTOBER 2023



**Children of  
the Mekong**



# TCHIRT IRA: ON HIS WAY TO GRADUATION!


*The Children of the Mekong's centre in Samrong takes in some of the poorest young people in Cambodia. Despite their poverty, they all have one dream in common: to change their lives and those of their families through school!*

*In this newsletter, we talk about Tchirt Ira. Tchirt Ira is one of many young people in Samrong. In other words, he's a strong-willed young man with an incredible background.*

Ira is a 19-year-old boy from Tamoan, a town on the border with Thailand. The eldest of three children, he lives with his father, a soldier, his mother, a housewife, and his brother and sister.

Children of the Mekong began supporting Ira in 2016 when he was in Grade 6, equivalent to Year 7 in the UK.

Like many children, he was unable to continue his studies at secondary school. The first secondary school is several dozen kilometres away, and his family lacks the means. Like many pupils in his village, Ira could have dropped out of school and gone off to work to earn a few pennies. However thanks to his sponsorship, Ira was admitted to the Children of the Mekong Centre in Samrong to continue his studies. Since December 2017, a new life has begun for him.



As well as being a good student, Ira is proving to be a perfectly decent centre-forward!  
(photo taken on the pitch at the Samrong centre)





Ira is currently in his final year of secondary school. He will take his exams next month before going on to higher education.

### The sad but classic story of a sponsored child

As we told you, Ira's father is a soldier. Although this provides him with a fixed monthly income, the family's economic situation is challenging. They are heavily in debt. Many poor families in Cambodia take out loans without having the means to repay them. Their lack of education doesn't help them manage their debt, and the situation often spirals out of control.

In Ira's case, his family went into debt to pay for his mother's care while she was pregnant with his little sister. They then borrowed again after a car accident. Seeing that they were unable to repay the rent, they went into debt again to buy a plot of land.

Ira's mother has not been able to work since her accident, so it's his father's salary that barely covers everything.

Ira's younger brother, who is only 17, had to leave school a few years ago to become a painter in Phnom Penh. He sends whatever money he can to support them. His little sister is in her 4th year of secondary school, but her parents are thinking of making her stop going to school...

Children of the Mekong's teams work with families like Ira's to teach them how to manage their debts better and to enable them to take a longer-term view.

Ira is a very good student. He came 35th out of 300 students in his mock exam organised by Children of the Mekong. Next year, he hopes to enter the ITC (Institut of Technology of Cambodia), one of the country's most prestigious engineering schools. Entry will be by competitive examination at the end of the year.



The Samrong centre is the perfect place to study... and to make lasting friendships!

Some evenings, Ira likes to relax by going fishing in the ditch bordering the centre of Samrong.







Initially, his father wanted Ira to stop his studies and join the army. That way, Ira could immediately earn a small monthly salary and help his family. But discussions with Ira and his family revealed the boy's full potential. After lengthy discussions, Ira managed to make his father see reason. So he's now on the homestretch, taking his secondary school exams and then the entrance exam for the ITC... If he keeps this up, he'll become an engineer. His salary will enable him to help his family out of poverty.

We wish him the best of luck!

*And because Laetitia and Gabriel, our 'bamboo' volunteers in charge of the Samrong centre, are true artists, they have graced us with this magnificent chiaroscuro photo of Ira, well worth a half-page spread!*





# ANOTHER YEAR, ANOTHER MARATHON...

Every year, the town of Siam Reap organises the Angkor Marathon. This prestigious race in Cambodia is a good opportunity to bring along a few of the centre's students who are passionate about running.

Participants are selected on a voluntary basis and above all on motivation.

Two months before the event, the participants meet every Sunday at 5:30 (in the morning, of course!) for a training session. It would be unthinkable to do this at any other time of day because of the heat. In fact, on the big day, the start was also given at 5:30 am. Our students then set off on the road through the temples of Angkor, an idyllic setting that almost made you forget the effort involved.

This year we took 5 boys and 4 girls, who outdid themselves! Here are the results:

## Girls' Results

Peakny, 21 km, 2h37  
Sreylang, 21 km, 2h37  
Sophet, 10km, 1h15  
Kalyan, 10 km, 1h14

## Boys' Results

Ira, 21 km, 1h57  
Tieng, 21 km, 2h16  
Vat, 21 km, 2h17  
Keut, 10 km, 49min  
Soleang, 10km, 50min



Participants at the finish line.

Sport is an excellent way to  
develop and push our limits!





# A FEW RENOVATIONS

Thanks to a number of generous donors, we were able to undertake work on the centre this year. The centres are constantly evolving, looking for improvements that are useful and necessary for the children's comfort and education. It must also be said that the climate, and in particular the alternation of very hot, dry weather and torrential rain, puts a strain on the materials.

This year we set out to refurbish our classrooms. One of the centre's buildings is dedicated to complementing classes. In Cambodia, the education system is as follows: half of the pupils' classes are taught in state schools and the other half in private classes organised by the teachers, for which fees are charged.



The new partition walls are being installed

It's a way for them to earn a bit more money in a system that doesn't value their work. These private lessons are free for the children at the centre, as they are covered by the sponsorship. They also benefit pupils from outside the centre, whom Children of the Mekong welcomes free of charge.







The Samrong centre has 6 classrooms, historically separated by a system of removable wooden planks. During exam periods, we were able to create a large room to accommodate all the students. However, this system was complicated to operate and meant that the classrooms were not properly insulated. Just imagine: on days when all 6 levels have lessons at the same time, around 90 pupils and 6 teachers are together in a space separated by a few planks... the noise level quickly becomes unbearable. The teachers speak louder and louder, and it's a downward spiral!

In the new system, we installed removable fibre cement partitions on rails and added bamboo ceilings to create individual closed rooms. It's a radical change, and allows the students to focus much more easily.

In addition to this work, other improvements have been made to the centre:

- We renovated a part of the centre, which had been left unattended since we bought it. This has enabled us to create a larger football pitch, much to the delight of all the children.
- On the site of the old football pitch, we were able to create two volleyball courts, one for boys and one for girls, to the official regulation dimensions!
- Finally, we were able to buy fans, lights and even a water machine. So we're all set for the warm weather next spring!

The new football pitch.  
Even at 35°C, it makes you want to put on your shorts and take a kicks!





# THE TREASURE HUNT

*But where could Samrong's bamboo treasure be hidden?  
That's the riddle the 70 children from the centre had to solve*

It all starts with 10 teams. Each team has a well-defined route, and part of the clues leading to the treasure.  
Riddles, rebus, keys to find, hidden messages, puzzles: our young adventurers are going to have to rack their brains on this Sunday morning if they want to get their hands on the treasure.

It took two hours of thinking, doubting and finding to achieve their goal.

The youngsters finally understood that the teams would have to work together to achieve their goal.

They meet up in the flag square, and the directions appear:

- The starting point is the gate
- 67 steps
- Direction 331° North-West
- One team found a shovel
- Another has found a key...

So close to the goal, the excitement is real! In a matter of seconds, our youngsters start digging and discover a chest that can be opened using the key they found earlier. But what treasure might it contain?

A few packets of sweets, and a message: every pupil in the centre will receive a sports kit with their name on it! Queue in an outburst of joy!

The outfits will be unveiled a few days later at the end-of-year outing! (*next article*) We would like to thank our corporate partner for their generous support to purchase the sports kits.





# A TRIP FOR SOLIDARITY

Studying in Cambodia is a challenge when you come from a poor family. The young people at the Samrong centre need a great deal of motivation to not give up, given the situation of their families.

Successes should therefore be celebrated. That's why the centre's budget includes a small sum for an end-of-year trip for Grade 12 (Year 13 in the UK) students. It's a way of congratulating them on finishing high school.

This year, the Grade 12s gave a fine lesson in solidarity. When it came to organising the trip, the students themselves suggested that the budget should be shared, so that all the young people at the centre, whatever their class, could take part!

After Bantey Chhmar last year, Preah Vihear was chosen as the destination. This town in the north of Cambodia is also home to another centre by Children of the Mekong, a simple and free option for accommodation!

Laetitia and Gabriel, our bamboo volunteers, explain:



"So here we are, off we go, the excitement is at its peak and the children can't hold still any longer. It all starts with the first test: getting on the coach for a 4-hour journey. And it's not easy for everyone, as many of these little ones have never been in a vehicle before! But a few stops, a few plastic bags, some mints and a good dose of self-mockery will do the trick."

We were given a warm welcome at the Preah Vir centre by the Children of the Mekong team on site: the bamboos, the Khmer teams and all the sponsored children. Introductions are made and the weekend begins!

On the schedule: sport, parties... and a little surprise before we say goodbye.







Everyone gets dressed and may the best team win! Petanque, badminton, volleyball, football - it's all done in good spirits and in an atmosphere worthy of a League 1 stadium. Everyone gives their best on the pitch and in the stands!

Then comes the dinner, where we mix the two centres, grouped by class. It's impressive to see how quickly friendships are made, under the spell of the children's never-ending laughter. The evening continues with dancing and games. Then it's off to bed, as tomorrow promises to be a busy day!

After two football matches under a blazing sun, it would be good to cool off! And what could be better than a "water park" near Preah Vir?

As soon as they got off the bus, the youngsters couldn't believe their eyes! They were soon shouting, laughing... and splashing!

At last, it was time to say goodbye and see you next year in Samrong. Strangely enough, there will be fewer sick people in the bus for the return journey. It has to be said that with such great memories made, it's easier to fall asleep!





# BAKERS & COOKS

What better way to understand cultures than through food! The smell, the taste and the way food is prepared stimulate all the senses.

Cooking with young people is also a great way to get discussions going. On the menu this month: Nomb Somlap Pedey: literally "cakes that kill husbands"!

A feminist recipe? You be the judge!



## THE RECIPE

- Grate the coconut and mix it with the rice flour and water, then knead for a long, long time until you get a uniform dough.
- Crumble in the cane sugar.
- Shape the dough into small balls. Fill the balls with cane sugar, then close the lid.
- Dip the balls in boiling water for a few minutes.
- Serve with a coconut sauce. Bon Appétit!



## "Cakes that kill husbands": why do they have that name?

In Khmer culture, which is very patriarchal, the husbands work in the fields while the wives are at home looking after the children and cooking (in reality, they do look after the house and the children, but they are also often seen in the fields, on building sites, at the markets, etc.).

So, during the day, the women prepare the desserts that their husbands will eat when they get home. Exhausted and hungry, they enjoy these dishes in large quantities. The cake is so good that they eat it until they choke. Then the woman is free. Bon appetit!

NB: This is a Khmer metaphor. Do not try it at home!





# THE **SAMRONG TEAM** SAYS THANK YOU FOR YOUR SUPPORT!

To find out more  
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