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Giving children a voice

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The bracelet that Maly had made shone bright orange, red and white in her palm, made from the type of string that schoolgirls in Britain use to braid one another's hair. The bus-load of tourists had all spent or exchanged the last of our Cambodian money in the city before leaving for the Thai border, so all I had to give her was a few coppers and a black ballpoint pen. Her deep brown eyes lit up as she asked for the pen. "I want to be a teacher one day", she said. "But my writing needs to get better first – I practise a lot."

Children like Maly are not too ashamed or proud to ask for help from strangers, or to let us know that they want change. That is their advantage over adults. One third of Cambodians like her live on \$1 a day, but the light in her eyes showed that she was determined not only to survive, but to rise up from below the poverty line and make a difference for others.

"Adults forget what it's like to be a kid", said Allan Dow of the International Labour Organisation, who last autumn teamed up with Save the Children UK to give a group of young people from Cambodia, Burma, China, Laos, Thailand and Vietnam a voice.

"Young people have a different perspective. These youths all came from areas where human trafficking and child labour are ongoing problems. They weren't well-heeled 'young parliamentarians' or anything like that - and some had seen the effects of trafficking, labour or sexual exploitation first hand," he explained.

The 30 teenagers traveled to Bangkok for the Mekong Youth Forum on Human Trafficking, where they spoke to government officials and recommended ways of helping vulnerable children. One of the forum's requests was that their governments consult children more often about issues which they understand and feel passionately about.

"Children have innocent minds and so when they work on an issue like this they are genuine – they don't get up to any tricks," said a member of the youth forum. "This is why I want adults to allow children to have more freedom to talk."

Cambodia and its neighbouring countries have a traditional culture where older people are admired and children are taught to treat their parents and elders with respect. These ideas exist in countries worldwide but need not be a barrier to change.

Since 1989 the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has given children the right to have their opinions considered when adults are making choices that affect them. Final decisions rest with adults though, maintaining the culture of respect.

With half the population of Cambodia aged under 20 years old, many of the country's political issues concern children, and they are becoming keen to show off their thoughts and ideas.

"It is truly rewarding to see the enthusiasm and determination among the children." Said Sakina Sakerwalla from children's charity Plan, who met 200 children from a rural area of Cambodia near the famous temples of Angkor. She added: "Children's voices are a great help when planning how to tackle problems faced in poor communities. Children's realities, hopes and aspirations are guidelines for our work."

Also around the temples dozens of children live without the help of charities. They beg or sell postcards and jewellery to tourists for a living. On the bus to the Cambodia-Thailand border, a maths teacher from Bristol had spoken about a six-year-old girl he had found crying among the ruins of Angkor Wat one evening. A group of tourists had kicked her when she approached them with a box of postcards she had hoped to sell.

The teacher comforted the bruised child and listened to her problems. Children need to be heard if their lives are going to get better, and this need is not limited to those in Cambodia.

School children from the Philippines have made themselves heard by showing that their ideas can be enough to help tackle serious problems. A Thousand Little Red Thumbs awareness campaign had children mark their thumbs with red ink to provoke interest and discussions about HIV and Aids.

"Everyone started to approach us: students and teachers." Said one of the children involved. "That gave us the chance to talk to them personally."

The children spoke openly to their peers and adults about the difficult subject of HIV and Aids, making others aware of the dangers and how it could affect them. The campaign was publicised by Plan, who claimed it showed the potential ability of children to "reverse the traditional parent-to-child transfer of knowledge" and to influence policies.

These few success stories may only create small stepping stones towards change, but they are giving children the materials to make their voices heard. As their confidence grows perhaps one day the world will see children build a bridge to a new and better life.

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