



COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

Interfaith Youth Circle of Cambodia (IYCC) CC, Cambodia

Faiths /Traditions Represented: **Buddhist, Baptist, Catholic, Protestant, Islam**

Location of CC: **Svey Rieng, Cambodia**

Key Areas of Focus: **Youth**

Summary

The Interfaith Youth Circle of Cambodia CC (IYCC), located in Svey Rieng, Cambodia, works on issues concerning climate change, farming, poverty and migration. IYCC has been able to unite Christians and Buddhists to collaborate and find sensible solutions to deal with farming practices and population displacement induced by global warming. IYCC provides resources, programs, and training to farmers from diverse faith backgrounds. IYCC brings people of different religions together and provides a space to address their common problems caused by challenges from climate change and poverty.

1. Can you please help me understand the current religious/cultural/political contexts in the area where your CC is working?

We have climate *change* in Cambodia resulting in intense flooding that severely impacts farmlands. The poor farming families are the hardest hit which leads to poverty and migration. The long staying floods make the paths to the rice fields inaccessible thereby resulting in the destruction of crops and ultimately loss of food security that leads to worsening poverty. School children are unable to attend classes; and, as a result, many are dropped because of attendance. The expected impact is twofold: families remain in the community and stay poor while scouting for part time jobs in construction; or else they migrate to nearby countries, particularly to Vietnam and Thailand.

The poor farming families continuously live under the subsistence level. To be able to farm, they 'rent' land from rich landowners. The rich landowner provides capital on credit for seedlings, farm implements, fertilizers, etc. After harvest, very little is left to the farming family after paying off debts.

2. Why is interfaith/intercultural bridge building needed where your CC is working?

Our CC helps farming families understand climate change. We educate on how they might help reduce destruction to their crops. Since many families are crossing the borders en route either to Vietnam or Thailand, our CC created an educational initiative focused on migration needs. Underneath these survival concerns is a looming religious conflict between the Buddhists on one side and the Christians and Baptists on the other.

3. Can you please briefly describe the main activities or programs your CC is doing this year?

We were moved by the plight of the farming families in despair due to severe flooding and low harvests. Responding to this crisis, our CC provided a two-pronged information



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drive. First, is education on how to reduce land destruction brought about by *climate change*; second, is education on *safe migration*.

Education on climate change includes ideas on how to contribute to reducing the impact of climate change starting with things to do at the home and family level.

Education on safe migration includes relevant and critical information for families opting to leave Cambodia to make a living elsewhere. For instance, our CC is in touch with hiring companies (food companies, construction firms, etc.). We invite these companies to send their respective representatives to seminars and symposia that we organize. In addition, we invite participation of NGOs and other stakeholders. The hiring companies allow 50% or the equivalent of a half year salary to cover the settlement of the migrating family. Our CC assesses the reputation and track record of the hiring companies and makes this information available to the families.

Primarily, migrating families are well-informed about the documentation process needed for migration. The families must know their expected daily income in the host country. In cases of emergency, they need to know the necessary contact information for the Cambodian Embassy in the country they are migrating to. This essential information helps both the migrating families as well as the hiring companies. In this way, our CC maintains good linkages with hiring companies overseas.

Our CC officially informs the authorities in Vietnam of any migrating family to Vietnam for documentation purposes. Thereby, the Vietnamese government is able to extend protection to child workers and insurance to the families for their own protection.

4. Between which specific religions or cultures are bridges being built?

Buddhists, Baptists, Protestants

5. How do you see your CC's work improving cooperation among people of different traditions?

Since our CC has started, a 'visitation program' has begun to take place in the community. Buddhists stopped committing violence against Christians, and began extending invitations to each other's important religious events. For instance, Buddhists are invited by Christians to visit their community during Christmas and the Christians are invited by the Buddhists to the pagoda. A more peaceful community is coming into view.

6. How is the work of your CC helping to prevent religiously inspired violence or transforming conflicts?

By addressing common challenges brought on by climate change and poverty, we help unite people who might otherwise stay isolated and in conflict. Through cooperative processes, intervention and education programs, differences in faith are being set aside. In fact, tensions and conflicts among people of different religions are decreasing as people band together to face the common challenges of living.

7. What are some indicators / observations you see that relations are improving between people of different faiths/cultures in the area where your CC works?

Prior to organizing the CC, there were conflicts taking place between Buddhists and Christians (Catholics, Protestants, and Baptists) from trivial to more serious things. At one point, a group of Buddhists burned down a Catholic church in the community. A



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group of Buddhists called on some young peace activists, (who later became founding members of our CC) to help repair the destroyed church. The group organized as a CC and actively worked on religious conflict through mediation and conflict transformation involving the community at large. Later, more changes could be seen. Once when a big flood affected the community, the church offered shelter and helped the flood victims regardless of faith.

8. Do you have a specific short story you can share about your work that might inspire other CCs or teach us a lesson about interfaith?

(Sam An speaking): With this kind of work, I personally learned to get along easily with persons from any other faith. When I upload images on Facebook of myself with a Muslim, for instance, I am mistaken for a Muslim myself and I do not feel insulted in any way. It makes me smile.

Personally, experiencing Buddhists and Christians coming together and seated side by side, whether in a church or in a pagoda, is genuinely inspiring. You know deep in your heart you have created or at least done something no matter how little to make the difference! A Buddhist at a Christmas party organized by the Christians becomes teary-eyed and when asked why he was tearful replied, "We can be happy even if we have different religions."

9. How is your CC's work helping to achieve the mission of URI?

Our CC enlivens and enshrines in our work the purpose of URI, "to promote enduring, daily interfaith cooperation, to end religiously motivated violence and to create cultures of peace, justice and healing for the Earth and all living beings."

We are very well advancing URI's Preamble, particularly the following points:

- Respecting the uniqueness of each tradition, and differences of practice or belief
- We unite for the benefit of our Earth community
- We unite to build safe places for conflict resolution, healing and reconciliation
- We unite to support freedom of religion and spiritual expression, and the rights of all individuals and peoples as set forth in international law
- We unite in responsible cooperative action to bring the wisdom and values of our religions, spiritual expressions and indigenous traditions to bear on the economic, environmental, political and social challenges facing our Earth community
- We unite to use our combined resources only for nonviolent, compassionate action, to awaken to our deepest truths, and to manifest love and justice among all life in our Earth community

Similarly, we are enlivening the principles of URI in many respects if not in full.