



*Guide to*  
**COMMUNITY BASED CHILD PROTECTION**

*The Village Safety Net Programme in Cambodia*



## **Guide to Community based child protection**

### ***The village safety net programme in Cambodia***

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*'It is in our culture that we don't listen to children. But now even the government is encouraging us to listen to them.'*

*Deputy Governor*

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## Preface

It is with great pleasure and pride that I present to you this Guide to our well established Village Safety Net methodology of building and strengthening a community based child protection system in Cambodia. It is my hope that the concept, which has been developed over many years by skilled national SCN staff, local partners and children in Cambodia, can inspire and engage practitioners within the global Save the Children family, as well as child rights workers in other agencies and organizations. Within Save the Children we have put a lot of effort into rights-based Child Protection over the years – and it is my hope that this booklet will contribute to sustainable work aimed at protecting children from violence and abuse at the local level.

Ms. Khat Ty Ekvisoth has been one of the key people involved in developing the model and deserves to be mentioned in this context. However, there are many local partners and staff members both in Cambodia as well as in other Save the Children programs across the globe, who have contributed to this unique piece of know how.

I wish you success in our joint efforts to protect children.

**Gunnar Andersen**

International Program Director  
Save the Children Norway





# INTRODUCTION THE

## VSNP – what is it?

The core of the Village Safety Net Program (VSNP) can be summed up in the words of the villagers themselves, who described it as an initiative that “brings together authorities, parents and children in a workshop to discuss about violence against children – trafficking, sexual abuse of children, physical punishment, HIV/Aids and child labour, what these are, and their effects on our children and our communities, and encourages us to work together to stop the violence and to protect our children better!”<sup>1</sup>

Children are themselves actively engaged in identifying the risks and protection issues as well as proposing protection measures. As one boy said in a workshop after a session on the UN Child Rights Convention; “*I never learnt about my rights (to be safe) before, only about my duties!*” From the same workshop, a teacher said he had learnt something new from the children; that beatings did not improve their ability to learn, on the contrary, they get so scared they lose their concentration. “*I know now that no child learns from fear*”, he said.<sup>2</sup>

Save the Children Norway (SCN) has implemented this child protection program in Cambodia for ten years. The Village Safety Net Program tackles the challenges of child protection in a holistic way, by strengthening families, communities and child protection networks from commune to provincial levels. The VSNP is engaging and working with local authorities, civil society groups and community members, including children. It links with and feeds this work into provincial and national child protection initiatives, and as such encourages systems building for child protection at community and national level.

# VILLAGE SAFETY NET PROGRAM

This Guide highlights the program's methods, achievements and learning points. It builds on observations and interviews in programme communities, testimonies of change in these communities, and also previous evaluations and programme reports documenting results and key learning.

It is hoped that this publication will contribute to ongoing wider efforts to improve and expand child protection in Cambodia as well as other countries where applicable.

Children make up more than half of Cambodia's population of 14 million people. They represent the country's hopes for the future, yet many are vulnerable to a wide range of threats to their safety and development, including violence, neglect, and sexual and labour exploitation.

SCN is committed to fulfilling children's right to protection, according to the UN child rights convention. In order to reach more children with better protection from all kinds of violence and abuse, we aim to build and strengthen child protection systems at community and national level, with the meaningful participation of children as a key component. In the VSNP we have seen demonstrated how crucial and active the role of children has been in identifying risks and proposing solutions.

SCN recognises that proactive measures taken at the village and community level are a vital aspect of this work. Community-based child protection approaches, linked with wider systems, has proven to be one of the most effective means of protecting children against violence.



- 1 Thematic evaluation report, SC in Cambodia Protecting children against violence and sexual abuse, 2005
- 2 Personal notes by B. Damsleth, from observation at VSNP workshop in Kampong Thom, January 2010.

# Violence against children – taking on the challenge

## Global context

Worldwide, violence against children occurs on an unacceptably high scale. Children who suffer from violence, abuse, neglect, or exploitation struggle to thrive. They suffer negative physical and psychological effects, are less likely to go to or stay in school, and are at increased vulnerability of future exploitation and marginalisation.

Societies that fail to protect children from violence squander their most precious resource. They place their future development at risk, including national targets to reduce poverty and hunger under the Millennium Development Goals.

There is increasing global recognition of the urgent need for effective national child protection systems that keep children safe, also a key recommendation of the UN report on Violence against children (2006). Child protection systems require laws, policies and structures that prevent and respond to all forms of violence against children. Effective protection systems also require children participating. Children have the right to be heard in matters that concern their well-being, and are also the experts on the risks and protection issues that is affecting them in their communities. With support and skilled facilitation, they can also play an important and appropriate part in prevention and response.

**Community-based child protection systems are a vitally important part of an effective national response. Communities are where children live and where abuse happens. Communities contain structures including local authorities, schools, health centres, police, and civil society members that can be mobilised to keep children safe. Children should always be a part of the mobilisation process.**

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*Save the Children defines child protection as measures and structures to prevent and respond to abuse, neglect, exploitation and violence affecting children.*

*Save the Children Child Protection Initiative, 2010.*

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## Situation for children in Cambodia

Cambodia is a developing country that is still recovering from violent conflict that killed and displaced millions of people and severely weakened traditional community and family structures. Poverty, related social pressures and secondary trauma continue to make life extremely challenging for many Cambodians, who now make up a population of 14 million. Half of these are children, and they face numerous protection challenges.

When SCN began working in Cambodia in 1988, the country was still functioning at a minimal level as it was recovering from the effects of the genocide of the Khmer Rouge regime. With continued instability and isolation, local government structures remained barely operational for many more years. Cambodians suffered a collective trauma and the country is still marked by a culture of violence. The violence was and still is primarily directed at women and children in the form of domestic violence, trafficking and rape. There was extreme poverty, and children were growing up amid severe deprivation and hunger. Many could not go to school. Chil-

dren are still highly vulnerable to physical and sexual violence and abuse, trafficking, drugs, child labour and a general neglect of their needs and rights.

Especially the situation regarding sexual abuse and rape is alarming, and appears to be on the rise. Children report that they do not feel safe anywhere alone, neither at home, on their way to school or out in the fields herding the animals or fetching water for the family. ECPAT (End Child Prostitution, Abuse and Trafficking) in Cambodia reported in 2010 an increase of almost 30 % in reported rape cases from 2007 to 2010, and the majority (80 %) of the 538 reported cases in 2010 the victims are girls between nine and thirteen years of age. Very few rapes are by strangers, most violators are known to the child; a neighbour, a family member or someone in the community. Half of the girls receive death threats to stop them from telling, and five percent of the cases the children were actually murdered after being raped. In most reported cases the perpetrator is never convicted, and many more cases are never reported, or settled outside the court with monetary compensation between the family of the girl and the rapist. The girl will often face secondary protection issues after a rape, as she now is seen as “damaged goods” and is at higher risk of trafficking and sexual exploitation. She might have difficulties getting married, and risk being thrown out by her family.

Regarding child labour and the economic and/or sexual exploitation of children, ECPAT estimates that at least 1,5 million children age seven to seventeen years are working either longer hours than they should and or are doing dangerous jobs in hazardous sectors (including the sex workers industry).



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*“A boy is like a gold coin; if he falls in the mud he can be cleaned and shine again. A girl is like a white cloth; if she falls in the mud she will stay soiled forever”*

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*Khmer proverb*



More than 11,000 Cambodian children are living in orphanages and the trend seems to be on the increase. Many shelters do not yet adhere to the minimum standards on residential care for children policy guidelines issued by the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation, something Save the Children is committed to work on and promote.

## VSNP background and history

In 2002, in recognition of children's extreme vulnerability, Save the Children Norway in Cambodia (SCNiC) introduced a community-based child protection system named the Village Safety Net Program (VSNP).

The VSNP was designed to support communities to find tools and strategies to improve child safety. First, SCNiC and partner staff conducted research on child vulnerability with adults and children in the target communities. Based on the outcomes of the situation analysis, a program design was created that prioritised community capacity-building, case management support, and the creation of effective child protection networks that included child participation.

The program piloted in Siem Reap province and has since operated in 141 communes in 25 districts in four provinces; Kampong Cham, Kampong Thom, Siem Reap and Battambang, and in the capital city Phnom Penh. Three local partner organisations have been involved in implementing the program; the Cambodian Center for Protection of Children's Rights (CCPCR), the Vulnerable Children Assistance Organization (VCAO) and the Cambodian Children Against Starvation and Violence Association (CCASVA). In Battambang, SCNiC directly administered the program from 2008-2010.







## How the Program Works

The VSNP model empowers communities to meet the challenges they face in the prevention and protection of children from violence and sexual abuse. The program fosters local capacity by strengthening existing local authority mechanisms and building capacity among those whose existing official responsibilities and remits include child protection. The program promotes networks and linkages of all stakeholders at the local level (horizontal approach) and with key actors at the district and provincial levels (vertical approach). The model actively promotes meaningful child participation and aims to empower the most vulnerable.

### Empowering villages and communes

At the commune level, the VSNP works closely with the structures already in place, such as the Commune Councils, especially the Commune Committees for Women and Children (CCWC), and with local government personnel from relevant departments, and from the police. It builds linkages with other community-based organisations, civil society members, non-government organisations, and children.

Working at the commune level with local authorities is a key strength of the project – and a challenge. The CCWCs have little funding. Capacity is often weak. Committee members may lack key skills and resources. Many have competing pressures on their time. Similar constraints apply in other local authority arenas. However, by building capacity, and fostering networks of mutual support, the VSNP program has been able to strengthen confidence and response-readiness among many community leaders.





## VSNP workshops bring adults and children together!

A three-day commune-based VSNP workshop is the foundation point for building safer villages. The workshop takes place over three days in a rural community building such as a school. The event is structured to provide opportunities for adults and children, together and separately, to learn about child vulnerability to violence, including rape and about child protection and to seek solutions together with facilitators.

A workshop typically include not more than thirty community figures such as village and commune chiefs, heads and members of CCWCs including teachers and police officers, and staff from district health, social affairs, and women's affairs departments. A similar number of children from local primary and secondary schools attend. They conduct a situation analysis of child vulnerability in their locality. They commit to share what they learn with others, conduct further research, and work for solutions. Participants are encouraged to understand the interlinked nature of child protection





and child safety with common social problems at the village level such as domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and gambling.

The equal inclusion of children in the commune workshops has important effects. It ensures that the voices of girls and boys are heard and are given equal value to those of adults. It empowers children to seek solutions themselves and with adults, to the challenges and dangers they may face. And it allows for a more complete picture of the local situation to emerge – children are often more informed, or more frank, about certain issues than adults. The workshops are launched with a joint session between adults and children establishing objectives for the event, and the key themes related to child safety. Adults and children then split up to pursue separate but parallel discussions on the same topics. All discussions and contributions are recorded on flip-charts, for reference throughout the event, and as the basis for future documentation. On the final day, adults and children sit together to present their findings, commitments and recommendations to each other.



Dialog and information-sharing are key features of the workshop events. There is plenty of space for participants to air experiences, ideas and values concerning children's issues. In Cambodia, traditional culture places a high value on hierarchy, and on children's duty to obey their parents. Most Cambodian children experience corporal punishment. Girls are often valued less than boys. Traditional culture also places a strong emphasis on people's responsibilities to family members. Parents express strong concern for their children's health, education, and safety. These are important starting points for improved child protection activities at the local level.

The workshop structure was created as a result of earlier research carried out by communities and partners. The research highlighted the following issues as priority areas for child protection in the Cambodia context;

- a) Sexual abuse/violence and trafficking
- b) Labour exploitation
- c) Domestic violence
- d) HIV and AIDS, and health

Both the research and the workshop emphasises the linked nature of factors that increase child vulnerability, encouraging participants to see the issue in a holistic way. In the Cambodia context, issues with immediate and direct impacts on community and child safety include, for example, poverty, alcoholism, and drug abuse.

Literature such as flyers, posters, and summaries of the law on related matters include sexual abuse/rape, gambling, and domestic violence are also distributed at the workshops for participants and for circulation to other community members at a later date.

## Consolidating community ownership

In the period immediately after a commune workshop, the work of consolidating community ownership of child protection prevention and response begins. Workshop participants are encouraged to raise awareness of the issues among other community members, to conduct further research on vulnerability in their locality, and to use the tools learned.

CCWC members are encouraged and supported to strengthen child protection in their work plans, through, for example, improved data collection and analysis and more robust planning and reporting systems. Increased coordination and networking with other relevant actors is also fostered.

The program supports the conduct of supplementary village-based awareness-raising sessions by workshop participants with special knowledge on issues such as the effects of drug abuse or domestic violence on children. These may include members of the police, or staff from the department of social affairs. In addition, the program has limited funds to support the successful resolution of individual cases in which small monetary inputs

can achieve important results, such as keeping extremely vulnerable children in school.

The immediate workshop follow-up period often sees participants such as village chiefs tackling specific cases where children are at risk. In such cases, SC partner staff with expertise in case management are available to act as one strand in the support network identified at the workshop. The possibility to draw upon assistance and support from others often fosters faster and more effective case resolutions. Visibility for such support networks also helps to create a more effective prevention environment at the local level.

## Follow-through: From commune to district level

Follow-up workshops involving the same participants are held after around two and six months. The first follow-up workshop provides an opportunity for participants to analyse the results of their village-based research on vulnerability. That research becomes both a basis for future action at the local level and a resource for communities, partners and SC to advocate and provide evidence to policy-makers and government at the district, provincial and national levels.

The first follow-up workshop also appoints child representatives to join a Child-Youth Network. Its members' main role is to raise awareness among other children of key protection issues such as the importance of staying in school. Child representatives are invited to attend local commune meetings, and to liaise with trusted adults on any protection issues raised by children.

The second follow-up workshop at six months further consolidates





learning through the sharing of experiences, and strengthens the network-building process.

District-level workshops are also held around twice a year. These events bring together a selection of participants from the commune-based workshops. They share research, learning and experiences with higher-

## VSNP networks: Key contacts

Commune Level	District level	Provincial level	National level
Commune Council Chief/Deputy Chief,	District Chief	Governor's office/ Deputy Governor	Cambodia National Council for Children
Commune Committee for Women and children. Including health worker	Staff from the departments of Social Affairs, Women's Affairs, Education, Health	Staff from the departments of Social Affairs, Women's Affairs, Education, Health	
Police, chief of police	Police, Gendarmerie (military police)	Police, Gendarmerie (military police), Anti-Human-Trafficking Units	
Child-Youth Network, in and out-of-school children	Child-Youth network		
CBOs and NGOs	CBOs and NGOs	CBOs and NGOs	NGO Committee on the rights of the child (NGOCRC), and other fora
Teachers, head masters			
Elderly, parents			

level officials from departments of health, social affairs, women's affairs and others, and with commune leaders where workshops have not yet been held. The district-level workshops widen the scope of knowledge and support, and further strengthen the environment for prevention and response. Provincial workshops including higher-level officials are held around once a year.

# Commune-based Workshop Structure

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**1. INTRODUCTION All participants.** Introductory speeches by local authority figures; introduction of participants, introduction of program agenda

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**2. WORKSHOP OBJECTIVES What do we want for our children? All participants.**

Key inputs are recorded and written into objective statements on a flipchart.

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**3. THE SITUATION OF VILLAGE CHILDREN Adults and children in separate sessions.**

Analysis, questions and discussion points:

- |   |   |
|---|---|
| a) Are there vulnerable children or families in our locality? | e) Do we want to live with this?                          |
| b) If so, what are they experiencing?                         | f) What can we do about it?                               |
| c) Why do we think this is happening?                         | g) What are the experiences and strengths we possess that |
| d) If this continues, what are the possible consequences?     | could help our children, families, and villages?          |
- 

**4. BASIC KNOWLEDGE Learning, sharing and discussion of key child protection issues. Adults and children in separate sessions.**

- Sexual abuse and sexual violence
  - Labour exploitation
  - Domestic Violence and Victim Protection
  - HIV and AIDS, and general health
- 

**5. LOOKING AHEAD 'Children as good parents' Adults and children in separate sessions.**

What does a vulnerable child need to have at present to help them become a good parent when they reach adulthood?

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**6. OBLIGATIONS AND LOCAL POTENTIAL Adults and children in separate sessions.**

*Session for adults:* What can each of us do to help vulnerable children in our village? What do we request children to do to help them?

*Session for Children:* What can children do to help themselves? What do they request adults to do?

*Joint session:* Adults and children report back to each other, citing commitments and requests

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**7. WHAT TO DO NEXT? Based on the defined obligations from above, and including:**

- Commitment to conduct village-based research on vulnerability
- Plans for future action
- Plans for future meetings



## Workshop Snapshot

AVSNP commune-based workshop was held in rural Sala Visai commune, Prasat Balak district, Kampong Thom province, during November 2011.

The event included 30 adults, including village chiefs, CCWC member, police, and district officials from the departments of health and social affairs. The same number of children from local schools attended. The following snapshots illustrate some of the topics and issues raised.

### **Sexual abuse and violence**

Violence, including sexual violence and the rape of youth and children occurs at a high rate in Cambodia, and the incidence is rising. Children, and especially girls, are recognised to be at high risk of sexual violence in a wide variety of situations, including in the family home and in their immediate neighbourhoods and villages.

As a result, children in Cambodia either already are, or need to be, consciously aware of risks. An important part of any community-based prevention and response strategy is to include children themselves in an active manner. Thus, during the workshop, children discussed and identified situations in which they could be vulnerable. These included: when children went to ceremonies or other events alone; if children's homes did not have bathrooms (many rural homes are without these facilities); when the bathroom was far from the house; when the bathroom did not have privacy (so people could look in); when children went out at night alone; and when children had to look after animals such as cows alone.

Children suggested the following strategies to avoid danger; 'always be careful who you trust'; 'ask your parents to build a safe bathroom'; 'stay in a group when you go out'. They discussed the following response strategies if presented with an immediate dangerous situation; 'shout, don't stay quiet'; 'run away'; 'kick, bite an attacker or pull their hair'; and 'tell an

attacker that other people are close by'. They discussed indicators that a child may have suffered abuse, suggesting that these included 'when a child feels sad, or helpless, stays quiet, can't concentrate on study.' They learned that one of the most effective actions they can take was to discuss fears of anticipated or already existing harm of any sort with trusted elders, including teachers and village chiefs.

In the adult discussions, numerous anecdotal examples of sexual violence against children, including child rape, were discussed and pondered. The sessions focused on the need for adults to be aware of child vulnerability, to maintain vigilance, to raise awareness at the community level, to be proactive about prevention, and to be active in relation to response. Adults were encouraged to try to end the 'culture of impunity' by working to ensure that perpetrators are brought to court. This can be very challenging in the Cambodia context, as poor families often cannot afford to pursue a case in court and are inclined to seek compensation instead. There is also little trust in the court system. Under Cambodian law, however, rape is a criminal offence. Participants were encouraged to work to find ways to support the successful prosecution of offenders, including assisting local police with the collection of evidence and through timely reporting of cases. Various sources of potential case support such as NGOs and CBOs were also identified.

### **Domestic violence**

Domestic violence is a major issue in Cambodia and has been the subject of numerous efforts and initiatives at the national and sub-national level. In 2005 the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence and the Protection of Victims was promulgated. It requires local authorities to intervene in domestic violence cases.

At the Kampong Thom workshop, child participants were clear about the negative effects of domestic violence on children. They listed, for example:

- Cannot concentrate on study
- Cannot go to school
- Lose confidence and courage
- Feel shame, sadness, mental pressure
- Start gambling and drinking
- May be forced into heavy or dangerous work to make money for the family
- May have to run away and live on the street, or in a temple, or with relatives
- May have to work in a brothel if the family loses all its money, land, and house

Children explored the ingredients of a happy home as compared to a troubled one, described their feelings of sadness about children experiencing violence in the home, and considered how they might support other children in that situation. They discussed the linked issues of alcohol abuse, drug use, gambling and gangs. They were encouraged to share with other children in their schools and villages that children had the right to report any concerns and fears they may have to trusted adults. The workshops are designed to ensure that such adults are available to children. While traditionally many Cambodian adults express the view that the role of children is to be obedient (and thus not speak out), at the workshops key local figures commit to listening to child concerns and they acknowledge their responsibilities to do so.

In the adult discussions, village chiefs shared their experiences, frustrations and challenges dealing with cases of domestic violence. Alcohol abuse, drug abuse and gambling were discussed in detail as contributing factors



and causes. Village chiefs reported that the alcoholism that often accompanied domestic violence made the problem very difficult to resolve. Most village and commune chiefs take a graded approach to domestic violence, depending on the seriousness of the case, starting with a) engaging in persuasion b) issuing warning(s) c) persuading the parties or the offender to sign a contract/agreement to stop or d) reporting the matter to police. One commune official estimated that only around 30 percent of domestic violence cases were successfully resolved. Others shared successful outcomes, which sometimes involved the use of 'creative' strategies. In one case a repeat offender changed his behaviour after he was confronted by a group of different actors including a village chief, NGO members and a police officer 'using a loudspeaker', and then removed to spend a night in detention. Participants were provided with information on the laws on domestic violence, drug abuse and gambling and were asked to raise awareness of the legislation among other community members.





### **Child Labour**

In rural Cambodia, children traditionally provide a significant amount of physical help in the family, often for example doing a lot of housework, taking care of younger family members, and taking care of large animals. Poverty forces many children to leave school early and enter poorly paid and exploitative work situations to raise income for their families.

During the workshop children explored ideas about what constituted ‘fair work’ for children. They focused on the difference between ‘child work’, which was seen as helping out with housework in the family and was acceptable, and ‘child labour’ which was felt to be unacceptable as it interfered with study and play, or meant leaving school to enter exploitative labour situations. Children felt that ‘heavy work’ such as lifting bricks and heavy objects, carrying water, and working on construction sites was

### **VSNP Step-by-step**

- Conduct situation analyses of local child protection needs, with adults and children, during and after commune-level workshops
- Provide case management support to children, families, local authorities and others
- Support capacity-building of officials, partner organisations and SC staff
- Support meaningful child participation in community based child protection
- Promote networks and linkages, horizontally and vertically
- Conduct evidence based advocacy

unacceptable. Children were very clear on the negative effects for their futures of missing out on education.

In the adult discussion, the issue of ‘children’s responsibilities’ was more to the fore. One male participant contributed; ‘But if we don’t send our children to work, how can we make enough money? If our children don’t work, we have nothing to eat.’ This prompted a reply: ‘But what about all those people who don’t send their children to work, but still have enough to eat?’ In ensuing discussions the workshop discussed the positive long-term effects for families as well as children when children are able to stay in school.

# Real change for children

## Impact and lessons learnt

VSNP has been evaluated to have a wide impact in its target provinces, and “clearly cracks the culture of silence surrounding abuse of children”<sup>3</sup>. An external evaluation states that the program reaches a massive number of children and families. In 2003, 1.200 children in and out of school participated and contributed into the village level protection workshops, and 8.400 vulnerable children were reached with protection measures through the activities of the members of the Commune Committees for Women and Children, the children and the villagers, at schools and in the communities. In 2010, the annual program review reported that the number of children reached where almost 18.000, half of them girls.

One key recommendation from the evaluation done in 2005 was that the VSNP cycle must be completed at all levels to reach its fullest potential, and in 2010 five out of ten target districts set up District Committee for Protection of Children (DCPC) which meet every two months to discuss and solve problems raised by the CCWCs in their districts. Workshops to discuss the possibility of strengthening the Provincial Committee for Protecting Children have been held, and the program intends to carry on as long as funding can be raised. An important lesson learnt after ten years of VSNP is that building and strengthening child protection systems takes time, focused planning and sustained resources – both human and financial – for real impact, scale and sustainability.

The evaluation also concludes that “the success of the Village Safety Net Program rests on a sound relationship of the organisation and their staff

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3 Thematic evaluation (see list of references)

with the community”. The local communities where the SCN partners work have a high sense of ownership over the VSNP. The main reason for this is that the program has proven to serve the goal of protecting their own children in their community. The evaluator found that even in the absence of the NGO staff, the community leaders and the children pursue the actual work at community level. This is a very good indicator of sustainability for the program.

The evaluation report also notes another good sustainability factor; that is the link of the child protection program to the education system, which facilitates wider impact and increases the potential for sustainability and scaling up of the program.

From the evaluation, reviews and program report we can sum up the achievements, observable impacts and potential impacts:

**A community safety net for children that has the potential to last and be sustained.** The most important factor here is that the VSNP has tapped into and invigorated the roles and accountabilities of duty bearers, making them more aware and confident of their roles. The VSNP has facilitated the creation of a network of adult authorities from various levels, civil society members, and the children themselves who are aware of the rights of children and are committed to protecting children.

**Reduction in domestic violence.** This was indicated by verbal reports from village leaders, teachers, families affected and the children themselves – in the areas covered by the VSNP.

**Addressing sexual violence.** Hard to review level of prevention, but children have expressed that it is easier to report rapes by strangers out-



side the home, than to reveal sexual abuse in the family and community. VSNP has increased awareness, and broken the silence and shame surrounding the issue of sexual abuse.

**Raising children’s status and participation in community life.** The process of VSNP has highlighted not just children’s vulnerabilities but also and more importantly their potentials. Village leaders hardly realised in the beginning the level of effectiveness, reliability and commitment the children would show in addressing child protection issues.

**Improved access to basic services: better health and schooling for children.** The VSNP have contributed to mobilising the health and education sector, to pro-actively bring children who need health support to the care of health professionals, and to encourage out-of-school children to enrol and support at-risk children to retain in school.

**Hope, healing, and recovery for abused children.** Some children, who could not stay with their families, received alternative care by trusted relatives, or where placed in protective shelters for care.

**Alternatives for children at the border of being abused.** Many children do not recognise themselves that they are being or have been abused, until they learn that they have a right to be safe and that there are adults who can be trusted who will protect and not harm. As one girl in a shelter said, being interviewed for the evaluation in 2004; “we thought it was normal”.

**Reduction in trafficking of children.** In almost all areas, reports of the adults and the children indicated that the trafficking of children in

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*“Before I used to talk hard to my children, and even sometimes beat them to teach them a lesson. But now I know they learn less from being afraid. I have changed my ways”*

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*Male participant*

the commune has stopped. In the absence of clear baseline indicators, it is hard to say to what extent this is a result of the VSNP, but anecdotal evidence suggests that the program has contributed significantly.

**Cohesion in the community and increased sense of security for children.** Children and adults affirm the contribution of VSNP in empowering the local government officials, social service officers, teachers, health workers, the police, and others to speak out, work together and do their duties for child protection more consistently and effectively. The mission has given them a sense of common cause and unity. The children notice these changes, they observe that there are deterrents for offenders and abusers, and therefore feel more assured that there are adults who are there to protect them.

# Stories of change

## I. Case management

### **Supporting families and children at risk**

When village chiefs and others identify and wish to respond to a case of at-risk children and families in a community, SC partners are available to provide advice and practical support. Typically this means making initial informal and non-confrontational visits to the relevant family. Conversations are held with parents on general matters, in a supportive and encouraging manner. Providing praise and encouragement to parents is often a powerful motivator for behaviour change, said Thong Socheat, staff member of SC partner CCPCR. Sometimes ways are found to provide basic school materials for a child at risk of dropping out of school. This as well as supporting head teachers and others to monitor and assist vulnerable children is often enough to ensure the child can stay at school.

### **The use of shelters and safe houses:**

Sometimes cases are much more serious and distressing. In 2011 Thong Socheat was alerted to a case where it was found that the level of domestic violence was so extreme that the family's two children were regularly sleeping in fields outside the home, out of fear. It was later discovered that four children in the family had already died for unknown reasons. Because of the immediate threat to the remaining children's safety, they were removed from the home and placed temporarily in the care of a shelter supported by Save the Children's partner at the time. Though SC regards the removal of children to institutional care as a last resort, it is still sometimes necessary in the current environment in Cambodia. SC partner supports local authorities and others to rescue children exposed to or

at high risk of trafficking, violence and sexual abuse and to place them in temporary shelters or other alternative care while solutions are sought. Although the children at the shelters clearly and within the context of the situation received good care, educational opportunities and a short-term solution to their difficult situations, a key lesson has been that the best interest of the child always must be considered, and in the majority of cases handled by the CCWC members they manage to find solutions which allow the child to stay in her family and community.

### **Action against domestic violence and child labour:**

Sari Sotheun, 63, has been working with the Ochar commune council in Battambang province since 1979, when the Khmer Rouge regime was forced into retreat. Today Sari is head of the CCWC in Ochar, which is often a challenging job, and she is viewed as a community leader, a person who takes responsibility and is called upon in times of need. At eight pm on a May evening in 2011, for example, Sari headed out into the dark by motorbike to respond to an emergency telephone call on a domestic violence case. A woman had alerted her neighbour that her husband had already destroyed the contents of their home and was threatening her with a stick. By the time Sari, police, and commune officials had arrived, the husband had run away. Since there was a chance that he would return, it was decided that the woman and her two boys aged two and ten should be taken to an NGO safe-house for victims of violence in Battambang city. Sari didn't get to bed until very late that night. The next day she assisted in a mediation between the couple. After the husband agreed to sign a contract to refrain from repeating his violent behavior, the woman and children returned to the home. Subsequent monitoring of the family and the children over the next months indicated that the situation had stabilized, she said.





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*“We were able to get 42 children between the ages of 6 and 15 back into school”*

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Eliminating child labour is another priority issue in Ochar commune. After investigations discovered that children were living and working in local brick-making factories, the commune council and others including the International Labour Organisation took action to protect them. ‘We were able to get 42 children between the ages of 6 and 15 back into school, and we monitor them regularly,’ said Sari.

## 2. Raising awareness and prevention

After attending trainings and awareness-raising activities, villagers are more inclined today than in the past to report domestic violence cases, said San Thi, Commune Chief of Srayov commune, Stuen Saen district, Kampong Thom province.

The commune council has successfully taken action to prevent labour trafficking, he said. After the council refused to cooperate with suspicious brokers, the would-be recruiters left the area, which has a population of 19,000, of whom almost 7,000 are children, he said.

Wai Kamnit, head of the CCWC, said that she had personally been invited to work for a female labor broker, who offered her \$200 commission for every worker she produced. ‘She thought she could buy me. But my job is to prevent trafficking. I didn’t want her money. I rejected her. She disappeared and we don’t see those brokers around here anymore,’ she said.

## 3. Child participation

Narn Sreymao, 11, and Ty Thavy, 13, are members of the Child-Youth Network supported by the VSNP in Chhouk commune, Prasat Balang district, Kampong Thom province. Their main role is to raise awareness among other children of the importance of staying in school. They report any cases they see of child vulnerability to trusted adults, and they participate in commune council meetings.

Said Naim Sreymao: ‘When raising awareness about child protection in our school, we found there were around three children who were going to drop out because they lacked school materials. We tried to encourage them. We said that they could request the school for support with

the materials. We talked about what their futures would be like if they dropped out and had no education. We talked to their parents too. They are now still in school.'

Said Ty Thavy, 13: 'I know of about four children who dropped out of school at age 13-14 because of poverty, lack of school materials, and lack of food. Food was the really serious issue. They had to go and work as laborers on farms.'

## 4. Building links

Rin Ram, head of the department of social affairs in Bovel district, Battambang province<sup>4</sup>, said the key strength of the VSNP program was the 'excellent cooperation' it built up between his department and other child protection actors, including NGOs.

'We really saw the importance of linkages. For example, good networking meant that we got information on time. There was a case where a child was raped by the child's stepfather. Because we heard about it from partners in time, we could act, ensure a quick arrest, and make sure the child was safe. That was good action and a good result.'

'The VSNP approach was extremely helpful,' said So Vanna, head of the Department of Social Affairs, Battambang municipality. 'Because of awareness-raising and good cooperation, the relevant people all shared information and carried out interventions in a timely manner. That sort of cooperation and networking also meant, I believe that the incidence of sexual violence was reduced.'

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<sup>4</sup> The VSNP program operated in Battambang from 2008 to 2010

Anecdotal evidence of achievements – all crucial as input in advocacy towards strengthening systems, policy changes and legal reform. An example is how the VNNP and SCN went into partnership with Legal Aid of Cambodia, a local NGO of independent lawyers who have lobbied hard for policy changes and legal reforms. One achievement was contributing to the law against corporal punishment in schools and all other settings, which was prohibited in the Education law of 2007 in Cambodia, as well as other laws against sexual violence against and exploitation of children.

## 5. Keeping children in school

### **Poverty endangers school attendance:**

'Many children face problems like dropping out of school because the family is poor,' said Veng Noet, head of the CCWC in Prek Preah Sdach commune in Battambang province. 'Often it is not the case in this area that the children miss school completely. But they might attend only seven or ten days a month. We work with teachers to try to get them back and attending regularly,' she added.

### **Natural disasters place more at risk:**

Families living with poverty in Cambodia are often placed in extreme jeopardy if they experience shocks such as a natural disaster. In late 2011, the floods that devastated many parts of rural Cambodia and destroyed agricultural lands plunged many already extremely poor families into hunger and severe deprivation.

Secondary school headmaster Klok Chhour of Chhouk commune, Prasat Sambour district, Kampong Thom province, said he feared that the level

of community deprivation would mean many children would be forced to drop out of school in order to earn money for their families.

The school was trying to prevent this by seeking donations for at-risk children at a school 'social box' and from other sources, but the scale of the need was daunting. Klok Chhour was running out of options. 'We are also working on strengthening solidarity among our students, so they can share materials sometimes,' he said.

## 6. Police cooperation

Of 21 criminal rape cases in Kampong Thom province in the first ten months of 2011, a total of 15 cases involved the rape of a child, according to Keo Sopha, chief of the provincial police's anti-human trafficking unit. There was one further case of attempted rape of a child.

Positive relationships between the police and NGO partners such as VSNP implementing partner CCPCR were very important in supporting the successful conduct of child protection cases, he said. In many instances, NGO support for transport and other basic costs for poor victims often living in remote areas, and for police investigators who otherwise lacked funds to travel to pursue the case, has helped ensure that cases which otherwise might have foundered could proceed.

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*“It is vitally important that when children raise issues, they get a response, and they see results.”*

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## 7. Cultural shifts

### **Listening to children:**

Cambodia remains an extremely challenging environment for child protection, but some officials believe shifts are starting to take root. 'It is in our culture that we don't listen to children. But now even the government is encouraging us to listen to them. It's in the national development plans,' said Phork Sinary, Deputy Governor of Battambang municipality. 'So the idea is becoming more popular.'

Phork Sinary stressed the need for meaningful listening. 'It is vitally important that when children raise issues, they get a response, and they see results.' There were many areas in which children were far more knowledgeable than adults, she said. 'For example, children who are taking drugs know a lot more about the drugs situation among them than anyone else.'

### **Frankly speaking:**

A commune chief from Prasat Sambour district of Kampong Thom province is a supporter of child protection initiatives in his locality – but he freely admits that things weren't always so. Gesturing flamboyantly, he says with a smile, 'It's in our culture to discipline violently. After the workshop I began to take more notice of this. I began to notice this kind of culture in myself too. Now I realise we cannot do that. We have to use soft words to children.'

He added: 'There aren't many cases of serious domestic violence or fighting in this commune. Mostly it's about words (aggressive words) and .. doing this! (He uses his fists to punch the air).

'I used to be one of those too (who punch the air), with my wife. But now I do not hit anymore, now I just talk.'



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*“It is in our culture to discipline violently. After the VSNP workshop I began to take more notice of this. Now I realize we cannot do that. We have to use soft words to children.”*

*Commune chief from Kampong Thom province*

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# VSNP: Key sharing and learning points

**Conduct local research** involving community members prior to program start. Gather appropriate data and perspectives on community child protection priorities and on key local personnel. Lay the foundations for relationships of trust and cooperation.

**Ensure meaningful participation with children**, boys and girls, as they have a right to be heard, know better the risks and can suggest child friendly solutions. The VSNP has provided inter-generational exchange and adults have expressed that they have listened and learnt from children maybe for the first time. Children have proven to be true agents for change in their communities.

**Build on and strengthen existing structures for child protection**, work with existing official structures and staff at the commune, district, and provincial levels. Strengthen the capacity of the institutions. Be well informed about local government management systems, key personnel, limitations of the local bureaucracy, and of local political structures and relationships. Utilize this knowledge for more effective planning and strategy work, in short promote systems building and linkages at all levels.

**Foster dialogue and information-sharing** during the workshop process, during capacity-building and during all other support work. Encourage flexibility: the approach must always be adapted according to the local context, specific needs, and community capacity.

**Focus on building horizontal and vertical networks** of active individuals whose mutual cooperation and support can significantly enhance prevention and response work. The networks should include local

authority members, officials from district education, social affairs, women's affairs, health offices, police, other NGOs, community-based groups and civil society members working on child issues.

**Foster case management expertise** to support responses to the immediate needs of children who have been subjected to sexual and other serious forms of abuse.

**Support continuous capacity-building for staff** and partner staff, to mitigate against staff turnover, and to ensure continual learning and sharing on child protection issues. Include counseling training for all staff working on child protection casework. Incorporate training on the need for confidentiality and protection of children whose cases are documented. Conduct continual learning on the most effective practical tools to address protection issues at the local level; this is an evolving area and needs continuous relationship-building, news gathering, and sharing of experiences.

**Build robust data and documentation** systems to feed into commune, district, provincial and national-level policy making, and to provide evidence for scale-up. This includes working to align project and partner indicators, data collection and monitoring with local authority information systems. Conduct data analysis to feed into evidence-based advocacy for provincial and national policy-making and legal frameworks.

**Focus on sustainability:** Building community-based child protection prevention and response systems takes time; plan for appropriate funding mechanisms.



## References and Resources:

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<http://www.ecpatcambodia.org/index.php>

*What are we learning about protecting children in the community? An inter-agency review of evidence on community-based child protection mechanisms*. Executive summary. Published on behalf of the inter-agency reference group by Save the Children UK, 2009.

Source of more information on child protection and child rights: The Save the Children Child Protection Resource Centre:

<http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se>



## VSNP highlights:

- Provides a dynamic and continuous-learning model of community-based child protection prevention and response
- Empowers communities to engage in community-led approaches to tackling challenges
- Fosters conciliation, mediation and the use of legal measures
- Promotes dialogue and participation at horizontal and vertical levels
- Reaches the most vulnerable children
- Empowers children through their participation and through peer networks
- Fosters positive attitudes to children and challenges negative attitudes
- Supports evidence-based advocacy for awareness raising and for legal reform related to violence, sexual abuse and exploitation affecting children.

