The Educational Potential of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia

Between July and October 2017, the Handa Center spoke with Cambodian university students and practitioners to learn their views on the impacts and legacies of the Khmer Rouge Tribunal.

Executive Summary

In Cambodia, four decades have passed since the traumatic events of the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) regime. Since the establishment of the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC), both formal and non-formal initiatives aiming to share DK history with the young generation of Cambodians have grown substantially. The ECCC is a hybrid tribunal set up to try the senior leaders and those most responsible for the crimes of DK. The research conducted for this report sought Cambodian views on the connection between the ECCC and various education initiatives currently underway in Cambodia.

The report, which draws on data gathered through focus group discussions with 83 university students and 16 expert practitioners, finds that the ECCC could make a considerable contribution to the education field in Cambodia, and that this potential has yet to be fully tapped. During conversations about the ECCC, students identified the potential for the Tribunal to educate their generation about the past as its biggest potential legacy; ranking this higher than judicial, psychological, or capacity-building legacies.

Responses gathered by this research also identify a low level of awareness among youth concerning existing programs and opportunities available for students who are interested in learning more about DK history. Students often made recommendations for programs or initiatives that in fact exist already. Closing this awareness gap would improve the effectiveness of existing programs and could improve the overall understanding of the DK period.

By opening up the discussion on the educational potential of the ECCC, this report hopes to motivate educators and students alike to more actively engage with Cambodian history in creative and thought-provoking ways. Although the ECCC may be drawing to a close, it is not too late for it to leave a positive legacy in the educational space.

The full results of this research are available in a longer-form article which will be published on Handa Center’s website.
Focus group participants’ primary sources of knowledge of the ECCC and the DK regime reveal the important role of family and audiovisual media in education, and suggest a present lack of engagement with the ECCC itself.

Key Quotes from Students and Interviewees

Some people say that such things did not happen in the way they told. But with the testimonies, I know that it’s no longer one-sided, and I can evaluate the facts and see what is true.

Female law student, Royal University of Law and Economics, 19 July 2017

It help[ed] me to know what happened [under] the Khmer Rouge. If we learn through the book, it is not deep. This is the kind of evidence that shows the regime really existed.

Female media student, Department of Media and Communications, Royal University of Phnom Penh, 14 September 2017

We see learning about Khmer Rouge history in the past is not accessible generally, except for the academics who are interested in this area. Now, the Ministry has included this subject in a national curriculum.

H.E. Tun Sa Im, Undersecretary of State, Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport, 10 September 2017

Students studying law need to understand history, because history is the product of politics. They need to know about this to understand the law.

H.E. Hor Peng, Rector, National University of Management, 28 August 2017
As a historian like me, we cannot say anything without documents. So, the ECCC helps me a lot to get the documents for me, in order to support my viewpoint, my own critical thinking, and my teaching too.

Professor Sambo Manara, Panassastra University of Cambodia, 17 August 2017

I want the Ministry of Education to include the knowledge of the Khmer Rouge regime into the educational system... when I was young in primary school until I graduated from high school, I had no knowledge of the Khmer Rouge regime.

Female law student, National University of Management, 18 July 2017

The purpose of the Tribunal is for the next generation who did not experience the regime, so they can know what happened during the regime.

Female English student, Western University, 27 September 2017

As a historian like me, we cannot say anything without documents. So, the ECCC helps me a lot to get the documents for me, in order to support my viewpoint, my own critical thinking, and my teaching too.

Professor Sambo Manara, Panassastra University of Cambodia, 17 August 2017
The top 5 student responses to the question, ‘What is the most important legacy of the ECCC to you?’ reveal the importance of education about the past for the younger generation.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of response</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>No.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Teach/advise the next generation about what happened/learn the truth</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Provide justice/reconciliation for victims/Cambodian people</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Prosecute and/or punish the Khmer Rouge leaders</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>10</td>
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<td>4. Healing/address suffering of the past</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>9</td>
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<td>5. Documentation</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3</td>
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Participant Recommendations to the ECCC and History Educators

- Increase the use of technology and social media as outreach and information tools.
- Embed history education in formal education at earlier levels.
- Translate and create Khmer-language documents.
- Enhance critical thinking and contextual understanding.
- Showcase a wider variety of stories.
- Localize and globalize DK history education to make it more interesting and informative.

Making information more accessible, engaging and readily consumable by youth will be the next challenge for academic institutions, civil society advocates, policymakers, and the ECCC. This can also help bring different institutions and organizations together to more cooperatively achieve their common goals.

Thank you to the British Embassy in Phnom Penh for generously supporting this research.

For further information, please visit krtmonitor.org or handacenter.stanford.edu