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COMMUNITY LEGAL EDUCATION CENTER

LEGAL AID ACCESS: Self-Financing Paralegal Feasibility Study in Phnom Penh, Cambodia: Community Legal Education Center, NGO Special Studies



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INTRODUCTION

- ❑ The Community Legal Education Center (CLEC) is known as a project NGO in Cambodia for their work in legal aid activism, access to justice, labor rights, and technology activism. The CLEC mission is to build legal capacity, and in doing so, provides legal aid and other support systems to empower Cambodian citizens, communities and their members vulnerable to and victims of rights violation. Due to the lack of lawyers in Cambodia, CLEC proposed an idea to institutionalize community-based paralegals in the country to limit the disparities for poor people and rural people.
- ❑ CLEC trained the first cohort of community-based paralegals in 2003. Through this initiative, CLEC has been able to produce a total of 58 paralegals in Cambodia who reduce disparities in some rural communities Cambodia.
- ❑ As champions of community-based paralegals in Cambodians, Virak Yeng, Executive Director of CLEC, along with the Access to Justice Program team (AJP) wanted to expand the vision by developing a curriculum, selection criteria, program structure, and finances to establish a sustainable program.

What We FOUND?

The study wanted to examine and assess the significance and need of community-based paralegals in the country by creating four surveys that would address the question from four perspectives: the service user, the existing paralegals, the law firms & legal aid organizations, and law graduates.

- One of the most promising results is that all organizations surveyed think paralegals should be officially recognized in Cambodia, and they would be willing to advocate on their behalf.
- Service Users indicated that there is a need for paralegals legal in the country, a majority indicated that they would be willing to pay for service or in-kind fee, and the person who assisted them with settling legal matters were from within the community

Recommendations Made to NGO

- In selecting the next rounds of paralegals, the selection criteria should community members, leaders, law graduates, and a wide variety of ages.
- The curriculum should be comprehensive by including tangible experiences and exposure to the legal system. Writers of the curriculum should consider having paralegals-in-training develop and learn "hard skills" that could appeal to the public and private sector.
- To limit replication of similar events and programming, CLEC should consider coordinating with NGOs doing similar work.
- To limit further financial burden and overhead, CLEC should consider collaborating with NGOs with a similar organizational identity to create a sustainable paralegal program and create strong alliance for institutionalizing community-based paralegals in the country.
- CLEC should to explore the different models of community-based paralegals being deployed in neighboring countries
- To limit future and further opposition, CLEC needs to gain allies internally in public structures, private sectors and externally with NGOs

Career Connections

- ❑ This fellowship further confirmed my passion to work on changing infrastructures on global issues related to human rights
- ❑ It was also gave me the opportunity to combine my research skills and be practical as well. We had to meet with stakeholders like the UN and other NGO's which also confirmed my passion about leadership
- ❑ It was an opportunity to get work with amazing people who care about basic well being of people

What is the PURPOSE?

- ❑ The purpose of the "self-financing program" is to create a sustainable legal aid access system for disadvantaged people, especially Cambodian rural people. The controversy of the paralegal profession in Cambodia is that it is not formally recognized in Cambodia, but can be trained informally. Due to the closed justice and bar association system, paralegals are seen as a possible threat to a corrupt justice system. Community-based paralegals are different from the regular paralegals because they actually live and work in the community of their choice and train and educate citizens and advocate on their behalf.
 - ❑ Objectives of the Cambodian "self-financing paralegal program" include:
 - to train graduates of the paralegal program to have a comprehensive knowledge of theory and practice to address issues facing rural communities and in different markets;
 - to lessen the legal access gap between disadvantaged persons and the privileged;
 - to increase the number of paralegals in Cambodia; and to help move the initiative to institutionalize paralegal practice/profession in Cambodia.
- To achieve this objectives, CLEC wanted to conduct a feasible study to help direct the initiative. The feasibility study was executed through a set of three surveys.

What Skill Used/Learned?

- Skill Used:**
- Leadership
 - Research
 - Evaluation
- Skills Learned:**
- Interview skills dealing with cultural languages
 - Navigating NGO and International Human Rights Protocols

Words of Advice

- Start thinking early about what you like to work on
- Don't compromise on what you want to learn and your passion but be flexible to change and adapt
- Explore other schools for funding and fellowships

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