

INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUE:
CONNECTING PAST AND
PRESENT IN CAMBODIA
AT YOUTH FOR PEACE

Long Khet

. . . [S]haring about the past is a way of reconciliation too.
—Tum Lot, a sixty-one-year-old survivor of the Khmer Rouge regime

Cambodia's history is marked by decades of civil war and post-war recovery. Between April 1975 and January 1979, the country suffered under the rule of the communist Khmer Rouge regime. During this time, more than 1.7 million people died from starvation, forced labor, torture, and execution. The immensity of this mass atrocity committed by Khmer Rouge cadres has left Cambodians with deep wounds and psychological trauma. This violent past continues to affect every sphere of people's lives and remains a subject of political controversy and conflict. The legacies of the conflict include dehumanization, deep distrust, stereotypes, and divergent collective memories. Furthermore, despite the high levels of trauma across generations, little attention has been given so far to the practices of trauma work. The post-war generation receives little formal education on the recent past, relying on their parents' accounts, which often transmit trauma, uncertain identities, and victimization. Both children of the former Khmer Rouge and children of victim-survivors have limited knowledge about the root causes and functioning of the KR regime and about their parents' experiences.¹ Youth are often marginalized; hierarchical social values that place greater value on the knowledge of elders prevent youth from civic engagement. At the same time, many youth are socialized into an environment that is marked by structural—and often physical—violence.

The lack of formal education about the Khmer Rouge regime has resulted in Cambodia's young people experiencing conflicting narratives, primarily between the children of the survivors and those of the perpetrators. These descendants depend largely on family narratives for information. Many of the youth simply do not believe that these large-scale atrocities happened.² Such confusion and misdirected anger reflects a dangerous potential for the legacy of Cambodia's transitional justice efforts to be erased.

Within this context, Youth For Peace,³ a Cambodian NGO actively seeking to promote and inspire young people to develop initiatives for peace and social justice within Cambodian society, initiated a project called Intergenerational Dialogue to promote broader understanding about the history of the Khmer Rouge, to provide a platform for truth telling, and to involve youth in the reconciliation of victim-survivors' memories.

The project raises youth awareness about the importance of history and about the past experiences of survivors. After participation in the project, the youth participants' attitudes and behaviors change due to their improved understanding of the history of the Khmer Rouge, the root causes of the atrocity, and the reality of survivor stories. The young participants play important roles in the process of healing and truth telling during the project implementation. They actively listen to the survivors and acknowledge, learn from, and validate their suffering. The youth feel sympathy and love toward the older generation and praise the struggles they have overcome in their lives.

With the aim of generating healthier relationships and increasing social resilience, the Intergenerational Dialogue project complemented the ongoing retributive transitional justice process happening at the national level—Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC)—by providing comprehensive restorative justice at the grassroots level. Combining official and grassroots initiatives helps to bring more comprehensive and long-lasting social reconciliation in Cambodia and increases social resilience against violent mobilization.

The Intergenerational Dialogue project includes activities in areas such as history education, truth telling, and memorialization. It combines individual, relational, and community levels of society and addresses the attitudes and behaviors of victim-survivors of the Khmer Rouge and the post-war generation. Men and women contribute equally to the project, and multiple measures are in place to ensure the safety and dignity of all participants.

1 BurcuMünyas, "Genocide in the minds of Cambodian youth: transmitting (hi)stories of genocide to second and third generations in Cambodia," *Journal of Genocide Research* 10, no. 3, [2008] 413–439.

2 Münyas, "Genocide in the minds of Cambodian youth"

3 "Youth For Peace Cambodia," Youth For Peace website, accessed September 19, 2014, <http://www.yfpcambodia.org/>

About Youth for Peace

Youth for Peace (YFP) started its activities in 1999 and formally registered as a youth NGO in 2001. Cambodian society has culturally viewed youth as inferior and inexperienced, leaving them with a lack of opportunities to participate in social work and social change. YFP's overall goal is to empower youth to become agents of peaceful social change. The organization strategically targets key youth groups and other relevant stakeholders by addressing different levels of change including personal, relational, cultural, and structural change. YFP has pursued its program in peace building, societal healing, and reconciliation through innovative and participatory approaches. These approaches focus on both the inner transformation of individual young people and the transformation of community mindsets to build a culture of peace.

YFP organizes various activities related to peace, leadership, personal development, and reconciliation. The organization encourages youth activism and volunteerism. YFP mobilizes large numbers of youth, and works in close contact with young people through dialogue and participatory approaches. The organization places great emphasis on the participants' creativeness, ownership, and self-initiative. YFP has adopted new topics and target groups; today, it deals with a broad range of peace-related issues in society, working with in slums, rural areas and urban areas.

At the same time, recognizing the deficit of memory work around the conflict, YFP has established several community memorial committees that initiate community-owned memory initiatives (legacies of memory) tailored to each community's needs. In this area, YFP also works in partnership with the Peace Institute of Cambodia (PIC), which delivers important background and grassroots research and documentation work on issues of peace, conflict, reconciliation, truth telling, and memorialization. The aim of this work is to promote a culture of peace and a culture of democracy through education, research, and advocacy-driven networking. PIC intends to establish a National Peace Learning Center, which will include a Peace Museum, Research Library, and Resource Center.

Intergenerational Dialogue as a Means to Connect Past and Present at Youth For Peace

Youth for Peace defines intergenerational dialogue as a dialogue between young and old generations about the history of the Khmer Rouge regime and other Cambodian conflicts during the civil war. It is a way of passing on the memory of historical and traumatic events to another group or generation through mutual understanding. Intergenerational dialogue is a crucial method to bring about social healing in grassroots communities; provide a platform for truth-telling about the past of Khmer Rouge atrocities; and bridge the relationship between victim-survivors, former Khmer Rouge cadres, and post-war generations—all of which can contribute to building democracy and peace.

YFP's Intergenerational Dialogue project includes different themes and activities to engage young people in learning about history of the Khmer Rouge. The process uses participatory learning approaches such as performing the stories of victim-survivors, taking field visits to local sites of mass killing, drawing memories of atrocity through art therapy, and attending community concerts and exhibitions. During the Intergenerational Dialogue project activities, YFP invites participants including victim-survivors to collectively organize traditional rituals such as a water ceremony in which past pains are washed away, and almsgiving dedicated to the spirits of the dead. At the end of the program, victim-survivors receive photographs of the drawings they made about their personal memories of the atrocity.

Stories of victim-survivors who grant permission to use their stories or photographs are recorded for publication purposes. The process is very meaningful for the victim-survivors to heal as well as for the young people to learn from the memories of the senior generation.



A YOUNG PERSON INTERVIEWS A SURVIVOR OF THE GENOCIDE AS PART OF YOUTH FOR PEACE'S INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUES.
PHOTO COURTESY OF: YOUTH FOR PEACE.

The Intergenerational Dialogue project intends to:

- Support the healing of survivors by releasing the pain that has been buried in their memories.
- Bridge the gap between the survivor generation and post-war generation in a setting where both generations have a safe space to tell their stories and experiences. Sharing the survivor generation's experience with the post-war generation is part of the process of transformation from negative to positive. It is also part of the process of breaking the silence about the Khmer Rouge history.
- Encourage youth to better understand the history of the atrocity; to prevent it from happening again; and to participate in peace processes such as memory initiatives, reconciliation, and healing.
- Enable youth and adults to reflect critically about the factors that lead to the social problems and political crisis during the period of the Khmer Rouge regime—and especially how they can learn from the past and apply its lessons today.
- Help youth get involved in social activities to become agents of social change while also building understanding with one another, building trust together, and raising their shared team spirit.

Components of Intergenerational Dialogue

The Intergenerational Dialogue project at YFP brings victim-survivors and the post-war generation together to learn and share from each other about the Khmer Rouge regime. Victim-survivors above the age of forty-five are invited to participate in the program along with young people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two. YFP conducts the workshop primarily in grassroots communities, selecting and working with a group of between twenty-five and thirty young people. Youth and victim-survivors are invited to participate in the whole set of activities. The activities begin with a workshop entitled Understand, Remember, Change, and follow with the actual intergenerational dialogue, an art and memory workshop, field trips, and the water ceremony to wash away the painful memories. The program is conducted in the community around mass killing sites in order to situate the history within specific places. The activities are planned so that they take place when community members have free time, such as when they finish farming and other obligations.

1. The Understand, Remember, Change Workshop

The interactive three-day Understand, Remember, Change workshop provides young people who participate in the program with background information about the history of Democratic Kampuchea, the Khmer Rouge tribunal, reconciliation, and reparation. The first set of activities is designed to improve young people's understanding of the history of Democratic Kampuchea. Youth get exposure to the Khmer Rouge ideology, the cause of the communist takeover, how the revolution attracted its participants, and the major events that led to the genocide. These sessions aim to help youth raise questions and engage in discussions about the sociopolitical, economic, and ideological factors that brought about the Khmer Rouge experience.

The Understand, Remember, Change workshops promote holistic understanding of a diversity of historical narratives; they give equal space to stories documenting the experiences of both the victims and perpetrators. A whole section of the Understand, Remember, Change workshop focuses on helping youth understand the psychological and cultural factors behind collective violence. Therefore, the workshop generates discussions on how to be critical and analytical about politics and leadership—rather than having blind obedience—and seeks to empower today's youth to have moral agency.

The last section of the Understand, Remember, Change workshop focuses on the future. This section introduces youth to the concept of reconciliation not as “forgive and forget”—which has been the dominant message in Cambodia—but as a term that has different meanings for different people and communities, contingent on cultural contexts. This section introduces other countries' experiences with mass violence and their ways of dealing with it. The workshop also touches upon the steps taken since the end of the Khmer Rouge to deal with the crimes committed under the regime. In ways that are understandable and relevant to youth, this section of the workshop focuses on the tribunal process, introducing its mandate, procedures, and possible benefits and pitfalls.

2. Intergenerational Dialogues

The actual intergenerational dialogues take place at village pagodas (religious centers) in communities that the facilitators visit prior to the Understand, Remember, Change workshop. The dialogues include village Achaa⁴ members, village teachers, older residents, and youth. The dialogues focus on the expectations and perceptions of the Khmer Rouge tribunal. YFP facilitators lead the dialogues and students who have completed the Understand, Remember, Change workshops serve as participants. The students are encouraged to listen as well as to ask questions. These dialogues are not presented as older community members teaching the youth historical facts, but rather as an opportunity for youth to be exposed to the diversity of historical narratives and perceptions among rural Cambodians. Each dialogue runs for three to four hours and takes place on consecutive days. The dialogues are led using large and small group discussion tactics and role-play exercises. The program is adjusted according to the needs and interests of the community participants as determined during the preparation.

⁴ Achaa are the religious people in the village, who typically form a 'pagoda committee' or religious committee.

3. Art Workshop and Exhibition

With this activity YFP gives space and provides resources for the community members to integrate artwork into the local memory culture process. In the art workshops, victim-survivors share their painful memories through drawings, a process which enables opening a discussion about the violent past. This, in turn, initiates fruitful intergenerational dialogue and exchange.

The exhibition of artwork of the villagers, the youth, and the monks involves the whole community. It is combined with concerts, youth theatrical performances, and “lucky draw” lotteries to attract the community. Furthermore this exhibition often is shown in conjunction with other exhibitions. One of these is a traveling exhibition about Case 001, the first case before the ECCC.⁵ Another, called “Rescuers: Picturing Moral Courage,” is an exhibition created in cooperation with a US-based organization called Proof: Media for Social Justice.⁶ The Rescuers exhibition shows examples of people who helped others in times of war in four different countries. It highlights the importance of non-compliance and solidarity. These activities are followed by community concerts and performances by trained youth, thus reinforcing a strong relationship between memory and culture.

4. Visit to Local Mass Killing Sites

The purpose of this visit is to give participants the chance to learn about the history of the local mass killing and memorial sites and to inspire both generations to have an active discussion about the past events at these places. Using the site as a tool of history allows the participants the opportunity to remember in a deeper way. It enables youth to better understand the specifics of life under the Khmer Rouge. Being at the places instead of just talking about them generally leaves a much greater impression and ensures an authentic experience of history.

YFP includes schoolteachers—especially history teachers—and assists them in linking this activity to the school curriculum. During these visits, YFP staff and students organize a Buddhist ceremony of offering food for the monks. This is a healing concept that helps in remembering and praying for the dead. Additionally, after visiting the local mass killing places, the elderly and students are invited to join a “water ceremony” in which the youth wash their elders in a river, symbolically washing away the bad luck and pain that the victim-survivors experienced. This ceremony induces a closer relationship between the different generations.

Impact on Victim-Survivors and Youth

After their participation in the project, youth participants changed their attitudes and behaviors. These changes came about through understanding the history of the Khmer Rouge, understanding the root causes of the atrocity, and facing the reality of survivor stories. The young participants play important roles in the process of healing and truth telling during the project implementation. They are the ones who actively listen to the survivors and the ones who acknowledge the survivors’ past suffering. The youth feel sympathy and love toward the older generation and praise them for overcoming the struggles in their lives. As one youth said, “I heard the Khmer Rouge (KR) history from my grandfather and my uncle. They spent . . . time to tell me their experience. I really pity my grandfather because his brother was killed at Phnom Khiev Mountain at Pailin province. Then he was moved to the jungle where the KR forced him to do hard work, and he faced health issues. I had many questions rise up in my mind. For instance: Who created this regime? Why do they kill innocent people? Why do other countries support Khmer Rouge? How can I be involved in reconciliation and memory culture process? And more. I did not know how I could find answers.

5 “Case 001,” Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) website, accessed September 3, 2014, <http://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/case/topic/1>.

6 “Proof: Media for Social Justice,” Proof website, accessed September 20, 2014, <http://proof.org/>.

Fortunately, I was selected to join the Understand, Remember, Change workshop. It is a great workshop, in which I learnt more about Khmer Rouge history: for example, how the KR came to power because of two factors—external and internal. The external factors were China and North Vietnam’s support of the KR by offering technicians and weapons. Within the country, there were many reasons, such as bombing by the USA, corruption, land issues, KR ideology, and so on.

The Khmer Rouge killed more than three million innocent people throughout the country. I really hate the war. Learning about the past is a way to prevent genocide from happening again in my country and in the world too.

Regarding these activities, I am very happy because I have a chance to be involved in the process of reconciliation and to build memory culture for the next generation. I will bring what I learnt from this program to share with my relatives, neighbors, and friends.”

—Hun Mary, fifteen-year-old female student of AnlongVil High School in Battambang province

Victim-survivors are also pleased to participate in the project. They express relief when they tell their stories to members of the next generation who actively listen to them. These are moments when young people see the real feelings and suffering of the survivors and they want to share the sadness of the survivors. The survivors wanted to honor the dead in a variety of ways. Some wanted to prepare stupas⁷ to honor the remains of the dead.

Some wanted to create symbolic memorials and compile testimonies for new generations to learn from. Others wanted to preserve the canals⁸ built by the Khmer Rouge. One elder reflected,

“I feel happy to see the young generation curious to learn about my past. I was sixteen years old during the Khmer Rouge time. I was in a female mobile brigade⁹ at Aumorny Village. Then Angka¹⁰ transferred me to ThmorKorl and Samrongkhong where there was a prison. Many innocent people were killed in this place—about ten thousand. I was really sad because my nephew and relative died at that time. In the mobile brigade, Angka ordered me to work more than eight hours per day. I lived in a frightening situation and did not get enough food. During the rainy season I received rice soup and in the dry season I only got a small bowl rice.

I did not forget what I experienced in the past. I feel sad when I talk about it but it is better [than remaining silent]. I expect that the ECCC will provide justice to me and other victims. I am very happy when the judges decided to sentence KaingGuekEav, alias Duch,¹¹ to his whole life in the jail.

Regarding memory culture, I think we should build a local museum, compile victims’ stories, and conserve the mass killing sites as a way to educate young people about the Khmer Rouge history and prevent genocide from happening again in Cambodia.

7 Stupas are Buddhist commemorative monuments that usually house sacred relics associated with the Buddha or other religious persons. After the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, many stupas were built to preserve the skulls and bones of those killed by the Khmer Rouge in order to worship the spirits of the dead and reunite their remains with their spirits.

8 Many people were evacuated from the city and other places to dig canals, which were part of the irrigation development during the Khmer Rouge regime. Canals are widely known by and associated with people who survived the Khmer Rouge regime.

9 Female adults and youth units comprised of mostly healthy and fit workers were set up by the Khmer Rouge regime to fulfill the need for rural labor.

10 According to the glossary of terms related to the Khmer Rouge regime provided by the Documentation Centre of Cambodia, Angka or Party refers to the leadership organization within the Khmer Rouge. It cannot be used as a term for individuals.

11 KaingGuekEav, alias Duch, the former chairman of the Khmer Rouge S-21 Security Center in Phnom Penh.

It is great that YFP creates space for young people to learn about Khmer Rouge history from survivors. It's not only the ECCC that can find justice and reconciliation; sharing about the past is a way of reconciliation too."

—Tum Lot, sixty-one-year-old survivor of the Khmer Rouge

Finally, the project contributes to building ongoing cooperation among adults, youth, schools, communities, and local authorities. It encourages youth to ask adults—including parents— questions about their experiences, and it encourages adults to share their own past experiences with young people.

Lessons Learned from the Intergenerational Dialogues

YFP learned that documenting the testimony of the survivors for use in future dialogues would improve the project and create sustainability for the program. The testimonies could help youth feel compassion and empathy for the survivor generation. The young generation could also use the stories of survivors in public performances as part of putting themselves in the survivors' shoes. Therefore, the plan to document the project process in the future will be beneficial to Cambodia and will serve as a model of reconciliation in other contexts. Filming the process can also be used to engage the young generation in the classroom.

Through the dialogue process, the youth heard the stories of the survivors. In return, they organized the water ceremony for the survivors—which was very important for creating a sense of give-and-take and of sharing. YFP leaders observed that young people are curious about and want to understand survivors' lives and experiences.

However, YFP also noted certain negative effects of bringing survivors and post-war generations together. In some cases, the dialogue reinforced the trauma of the survivors as they spoke about their painful memories. The staff of Youth For Peace discussed this kind of negative impact critically in order to reduce the risks it might pose in the project in the future. [Other sites considering a similar project might proactively discuss whether this or any other type of negative impact—such as the transfer of trauma to the next generation—is a potential concern, how often the negative impact might be an issue, and strategies that might mitigate trauma or negative effects in the relevant community.—Ed.]

Nuts and Bolts: Aim and Objectives of the Project

Intergenerational dialogue is a dialogue between young and old generations about the history of the Khmer Rouge regime and other Cambodian conflicts during the civil war. It is a way of passing on the memory of historical and traumatic events to another group or generation through mutual understanding.

What: What is Intergenerational Dialogue? What does the project intend to focus on?

Intergenerational dialogue is a crucial method to bring about social healing in grassroots communities; provide a platform for truth-telling about the past of Khmer Rouge atrocities; and bridge the relationship between victim-survivors, former Khmer Rouge cadres, and post-war generations—all of which can contribute to building democracy and peace.

It focuses on the following:-

- Support the healing of survivors by releasing the pain that has been buried in their memories.
- Bridge the gap between the survivor generation and post-war generation.
- Encourage youth to better understand the history of the atrocity.

Whom: Whom does it focus on?

The Intergenerational Dialogue project at YFP brings victim-survivors and the post-war generation together to learn and share from each other about the Khmer Rouge regime. Victim-survivors above the age of forty-five are invited to participate in the program along with young people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-two.

How: How does it function or work?

YFP conducts the workshop primarily in grassroots communities, selecting and working with a group of between twenty-five and thirty young people. Youth and victim-survivors are invited to participate in the whole set of activities. The activities begin with a workshop entitled Understand, Remember, Change, and follow with the actual intergenerational dialogue, an art and memory workshop, field trips, and the water ceremony to wash away the painful memories. The program is conducted in the community around mass killing sites in order to situate the history within specific places. The activities are planned so that they take place when community members have free time, such as when they finish farming and other obligations.

Schematic “HOW TO” of an Intergenerational Dialogue

This is a basic schematic to use while thinking about using Intergenerational Dialogues. The schematic is by no means comprehensive and is at all times flexible. It serves primarily as an outline or checklist to help develop programs using intergenerational dialogue as a strategy to engage young people in learning about history.

Step 1: The Understand, Remember, Change Workshop

Questions to Consider	Tasks and Outcomes
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the contemporary issue? 2. What is the historical context you are seeking to share? 4. What change are you seeking to achieve? 5. What types or groups of people will be involved? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify the issue and why it is relevant. 2. Identify the objective and specific outcomes for workshop. 3. Identify the method which will be used within the larger context of the program or project. 4. Identify the actors who will be involved. 5. Gather relevant information and facts.

Step 2: Intergenerational Dialogues

Questions to Consider	Tasks and Outcomes
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Where does it take place? 2. Who is involved? 3. What are the needs and interests of the community? 4. What discussion tactics and exercises will you use? 5. What are the opportunities for the youth to learn? 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identify the stakeholders and participants. 2. Define the main elements and process. 3. Identify who will lead and facilitate exercises and activities. 4. Decide location and length of dialogue. 5. Identify potential opportunities and challenges you may face in the intergenerational dialogue. 6.

Step 3: Art Workshop and Exhibition

Questions to Consider	Tasks and Outcomes
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Where does it take place?2. Who is involved?3. What art activity or activities will you use?4. Where will you present your exhibition or performance?5. Are there other artistic projects that you could collaborate with?	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Define the main activities and timeline.2. Identify who will lead and facilitate activities.3. Create a plan for what will happen to art or performance after end of project.

Step 4: Visit to Local Site

Questions to Consider	Tasks and Outcomes
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What site will you visit?2. How will the visit contribute to participants' understanding?3. How can teachers and/or other community members be involved?4. What are ceremonies could be observed?	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Identify and understand the importance of the place.2. Consult with teachers and/or community members to identify areas of collaboration.3. Use of history as a tool of understanding.4. Identify and convey importance of ceremonies.

Conclusion

Survivors' stories form the core of the Intergenerational Dialogue project. The project contributes to truth telling, healing, and building better relationships between survivor generations and post-war generations. Through this approach young people actively engage in reconciliation efforts at the grassroots level and the victim-survivors are relieved of their painful memories, although this may not be permanent relief. The experience brings empathy and compassion to survivors. It also builds community spirit through collective activities such as the community festival, water ceremony, and art exhibitions.

The Intergenerational Dialogue project is a very meaningful way for Cambodian people to deal with their own past, and the issue of trauma especially. The project breaks the culture of silence and fear within today's society. Through this process, young and old are empowered to reflect and speak out, and thus to build democratic processes—from the grassroots and beyond.