Case Study - Project HALO
strengthening community coping mechanisms

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Servants to Asia's Urban Poor

*The most wide-spread disease on this planet today is not cancer or AIDS, it is the feeling of being uncared for, unwanted – of being deserted and alone.*

Mother Teresa

1. THE PROJECT CONTEXT

1.1 Servants to Asia’s Urban Poor

Servants to Asia’s Urban Poor is an international network of Christian teams living and working in Asia’s city slums. We strive to do small things with great love - to empower the poor to help themselves. Servants entered Cambodia in 1993, under an agreement with the Ministry of Health to provide health services in the poorest district of Phnom Penh. As well as initiating a number of health and development programs, we have tried to live amongst the poor, sharing their lives, their joys and their struggles.

Children affected by HIV/AIDS in Cambodia

Cambodia will never be the same. AIDS is claiming the lives of men, women and children\(^1\) - leaving behind shattered families and vulnerable orphans. Disturbingly, the heartbreak and horror of AIDS is hitting Cambodia at a faster rate than any other country in Asia.

The Ministry of Health conservatively estimates that there are approximately 60,000 children orphaned by AIDS today in Cambodia, growing by another 50% within five years.

Orphanages and institutions are not the solution. The cost of maintaining a child in one of these institutions is many times that of other forms of care.\(^2\) Aside from the adverse psychological and social effects associated with institutionalisation, orphanages undermine traditional models of care and alienate children from their families and culture. Clearly, new and creative solutions must be found to fit the Asian context.

(Picture above: 5 year old Srey’s mother is HIV+, her father died a year ago)

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\(^1\) Approximately 170,000 Cambodians are now infected with HIV (Report on Sentinel Surveillance in Cambodia, NCHADS/MoH, 1999). The HIV prevalence rate amongst adults is 3.5%.

1.2 Servants response to HIV/AIDS

a) HIV/AIDS education: The answer to halting the onward march of the AIDS epidemic is not cure but prevention. And the best hope for prevention lies in changing human behaviour. Servants have responded to this challenge with conviction and compassion by reaching out to the most vulnerable groups in Cambodian society with straightforward facts and education about HIV/AIDS. Servants has developed courses for different high risk groups such as factory workers, commercial sex workers, transvestites, students, Christian youth groups and Buddhist youth. Our educators often travel out into the community to meet and train people in the places they feel most comfortable - such as snooker halls, bars and brothels.

b) HIV/AIDS homecare: Overstretched Government hospital facilities have buckled under the avalanche of need and so Servants helps support AIDS patients in their homes and communities rather than in an institutional or hospital setting. Servants has also mobilised compassionate people in each community to be our hands and feet in ministering to the sick. These volunteers help provide the day to day care and encouragement that the patients often lack. The volunteers are initially trained in basic nursing skills, health and hygiene. They also meet together on a weekly basis for mutual support, prayer, debriefing and ongoing training. Servants medical staff take care of the more advanced stages of AIDS and provide medical backup to the volunteers.

1.3 Our Vision

In late 2000, Servants to Asia’s Urban Poor launched an initiative unique to Cambodia, called Project HALO. Project HALO (Hope, Assistance & Love for Orphans) helps Cambodian communities to care for over 300 children whose parents are dying or have died of AIDS. Our vision is to see Cambodian communities, supported by the church, caring for their own orphans.

2 PROJECT HALO - STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY COPING MECHANISMS

2.1 At a fraction of the cost of supporting a child in an orphanage, Project HALO is able to support a grandmother (or aunt or uncle for example) who would otherwise be unable to care for their orphaned relatives. Sometimes, when the oldest child is in their late teens, and there is a support network of neighbours and/or extended family, we consider setting up a “teenager-headed household”.

Infrequently, when there is no extended family available, we recruit compassionate Cambodian couples who are willing to take in orphaned children as their own. These families are carefully screened and trained.

All these solutions allow the children to stay in their own communities, with their own friends and extended family support networks. These children have lost their parents, why take away everything else they know and love as well?

We provide support in a variety of ways designed to promote independence:

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3 The name, Project HALO, reflects our integral mission approach: “Hope” refers to our message of hope in Jesus Christ that we desire to bring to those we are in contact with (spiritual needs). “Assistance” refers to our desire to see the physical needs of the children met (food, housing, clothing etc.) And “Love” refers to the emotional needs of the children, including dealing with their grief and loss.
2.2 **Guidance, Encouragement and Follow-up**

One of the critical success factors of Project HALO is the careful monitoring, visiting and relationship building with each and every orphan and family. Our Cambodian staff are strong Christians, skilled in giving appropriate advice and guidance to the families and children and often provide a listening ear and encouraging parental figure to the bereaved children. Before the parents die, staff get to know the family and gently encourage the dying parents to plan for the future care of their children. Our staff provide a sense of stability and continuity for the children through the difficult period of their parents' death and ensure that the children are not exploited or forgotten.

2.3 **“Big Brothers” & “Big Sisters”**

Perhaps one of the most exciting components of Project HALO is our "Big Brothers and Sisters" program. These youth mentors are young Cambodians from local Christian churches, who volunteer to take on one orphan each as their "little brother or sister". They visit regularly and we all go on outings together once a month. It has been heart-warming to see the bonds forming between these bereaved children and their "big brother" or "big sister". We also feel privileged to have been able to play a part in encouraging middle class Cambodians to reach out to their poorer neighbours.

2.4 **The Memory Book**

The death of a parent can have a devastating effect on a young life. However, given appropriate support and information, children can be helped to understand what has happened and can learn to live with their loss. "My Memory Book" is a colourful activity book developed in Cambodian by Project HALO which helps bereaved children to deal with their feelings of grief and at the same time provide a keepsake which will be an invaluable memory of their parents in years to come.

**CASE STUDY 1 - GRANDMOTHER FREES HERSELF FROM LOAN SHARK’S GRIP**

At this stage in her life 69 year old Ownga expected to be supported by her daughter and son-in-law. But when they died of AIDS, her plans were shattered and her two grand daughters naturally looked to her for comfort and support.

Project HALO initially supported them with school fees and rice each month. Now, with a small loan from Project HALO she has been able to avoid taking out expensive monthly loans from the local loan shark and increased her income by about 20%. Using a savings box from Project HALO she is saving enough each month to buy next month’s goods. She is now almost self-sufficient.
2.5 **Savings, Loans & Income Generation**

For the poorest of the poor in Cambodia, day to day life is either “feast or famine”. Some days they have plenty, other days they go hungry or are forced to take out expensive loans to pay for emergencies. Project HALO provides budgeting advice to families caring for orphans, teaching them how to save for emergencies. We provide them with “piggy banks” and monitor their level of savings each month. Occasionally small business loans are made at no interest to help families begin earning an income. Our staff work closely with each family to make a plan for the point where they are able to stand on their own two feet.

2.6 **Education Sponsorships & Vocational Training**

Education is the one chance a poor child gets to break free of the cycle of poverty. Project HALO has a policy of encouraging every child to attend school or other training. In Cambodia, students must pay their teachers a small fee to study each day, so the poorest families find that education is beyond their reach. We support a large number of children to attend their local school with school fees, uniforms and stationery. In many cases, these children have never had the opportunity to attend school. In other cases, children were working in order to pay for their school fees. Project HALO also sponsors a number of teenagers, who had dropped out of school, to attend vocational training in hairdressing, sewing, mechanics, electronics etc.

2.7 **Emergency Relief - housing, rice, clothing etc.**

For a poor family living hand to mouth, any extra burden can spell disaster. Project HALO ensures that every family in the program has the very basics of food, shelter and clothing. In some cases, we provide building materials and the family provides the labour needed to fix up their home. A small number of the most vulnerable families receive an emergency allocation of rice each month until they can get on their feet. Other emergency items sometimes provided in cases of hardship include: cooking utensils/pots & pans, mosquito nets, sleeping mats & blankets, second hand clothing & shoes. Project HALO works hard to ensure that we are not creating dependency and works closely with each family to make a plan for becoming independent.

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**CASE STUDY 2 - TEENAGER HEADED HOUSEHOLD NOW ON THEIR FEET**

During the long illness of his parents, Arit (oldest son, 19) used to sweat every day carrying coal to support the rest of his family. Family income was supplemented by the two younger boys (12 & 14) who scavenged for recyclable rubbish. Food was often lacking and the family built up a substantial debt. None of the children were able to attend school.

We initially provided emergency support such as rice, clothing and funeral expenses. With encouragement and financial support, the two youngest boys are now back in school. Sokhun, 16 (pictured with Arit), is top of the class in a sewing course to which she has been sponsored by Project HALO. Arit hopes to learn to drive a car one day.

*photo: Jim Loring/Tearfund*
Case Study 3 - children lose mother and home within one month

Sunthy (14) and her two younger brothers lost both their parents to AIDS in 2001. The children were anxious not to be put in an orphanage; they wanted to stay in their own home, within the support network of their neighbours and friends. With the agreement of neighbours, who were providing food and care for the orphans, Project HALO put up the money to buy new walls, a door and a roof for their decrepit house. The neighbours pitched in to help rebuild.

However, tragedy struck the first night they slept in their new home. A huge fire swept through the slum, burning hundreds of homes and leaving thousands of families homeless. The children lost the few possessions they owned: school books, clothing, treasured photos of their parents. Servants was heavily involved in the relief work and is currently working with other NGOs on a long term solution to this crisis.

2.8 Parenting & Life Skills Training

Project HALO occasionally runs courses teaching care givers essential parenting and life skills such as nutrition, basic health and hygiene. In the future, we would like to provide more services in this area as well as produce some posters and educational materials that can be used in the community to teach vital life skills.

2.9 Care for HIV+ Babies

Servants staff hold a weekly clinic for a number of HIV+ children, providing basic medicines, milk powder, nutritional supplements and advice. Although Servants doctors strongly promote breast-feeding, in the case of HIV positive mothers, the rate of infection passed from mother to child has been proven to be reduced from 27% to 8% when antiviral drugs are provided at birth and breast milk is replaced with hygienically prepared milk powder. After compassionate counselling where mothers are given the options, Medical staff carefully train and follow up mothers with HIV/AIDS, helping them to care for their children and teaching them health, hygiene and nutrition.

4 The number of infections from mother to child is increasing and it is estimated that some 7500 children have died of AIDS in Cambodia already.
Appendix 1 - Summary of Servants Programs and Contact Details

**Our Mission:**

To improve the health & quality of life of the poor

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**Public Health**

1. HIV/AIDS Homecare
   - Compassion volunteers
   - Barefoot nurses
2. HIV/AIDS Community Education
3. TB tracing and treatment (with the Govt.)
4. Community Sanitation (Toilets, wells, water filters, drainage, playgrounds)

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**Voices**

1. Child Health & Well-being
   2. Children orphaned by AIDS (Project HALO)
   3. Disabled Children (The Little Conquerors - TLC)

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**Women’s Health**

1. Family Planning
2. Train TBA’s (village midwives)
3. Support Govt. Clinic (obstetrics, births)
4. Clinic in brothel

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**Savings & Credit groups**

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**Servants Cambodia**

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