

# THE SAMLOUT PROJECT



GLOBAL VILLAGE CAMBODIA

*Dear Sir or Madam,*

*Early one Friday evening in fall 2010, while working for an NGO in a city in northwestern Cambodia, I came across a waiter at the local restaurant who told me he was a teacher by day. The young man beamed with passion as he talked about a high school located in a remote village and it quickly became obvious that his heart was in education and in rebuilding his country. Learning that I was a musician, he told me about an abandoned piano that had been placed in a corner at the school he taught. Nobody there played music, he told me, and no one had any interest in the abandoned instrument. I told him that I was a pianist and he quickly arranged for me to visit the school.*

*That Sunday we left the city on his motorbike. I was mildly anxious, as I had read that the area we were headed for was in the most war-torn district of Cambodia. A three-hour ride later, and after nearly colliding with a cow along the narrow road, we arrived in the village of Samlout where the school was situated. The school year hadn't started yet and a small, but spirited teaching staff of men and women in their twenties and thirties were the only people we encountered on the school grounds. I introduced myself and they were all very welcoming. Some asked questions about music, and two expressed a strong desire to unlock the potential of their abandoned piano—and music in general. I learned that the teachers had moved to the village from different parts of Cambodia to help build the school.*

*Returning to the school one morning a few weeks later, I was greeted by an enchanting sight: I saw the sun rising behind a distant mountain and a schoolyard filled with hundreds of young students attending morning assembly, all dressed in black and white. That day I visited several classes to talk to the students about music, art, and life in Cambodia. Engulfed by eager curiosity, I started to realize the unique potential of this beautiful place.*



**The above is my effort to share with you** my education project now being launched in Cambodia in Southeast Asia. Having entertained the vision for quite some time, and having attended philanthropic projects around the world, I have now found the perfect setting for Eastern and Western musical traditions to come together and uplift an area in desperate need.

The objective of this project is to introduce music education at a rural high school and to help the surrounding region transition from a tumultuous past and an impoverished present to a harmonious future. Inherent in the project is the goal of creating a model for introducing music education that will empower people and further their ability to communicate internationally beyond the limits of conventional language.

At a recent Fulbright conference I attended in Washington D.C., one of the ideas presented was that every country should have a cabinet-level representative for unborn generations. This thought came to resonate with me, not only because it eloquently summarizes the discussions that took place that day, but because it brings together two distinct features of the challenges that face us when striving for mutual understanding in our world:

- (i) That coming generations will be born into a world where an increased interconnectedness between cultures should be balanced with an emphasis on learning languages that, by nature, are capable of both transcending and celebrating cultural differences, and,
- (ii) That creating and acting on a long-term vision for making a difference in today's world cannot be left to the individual citizen alone, but must be shared by more influential structures in society.

These features have inspired guidelines for this new project. Is it possible, then, to find a context in which a project of this kind can be successful today? I found that in Samlout, not only are the basic requirements met, but all the desired ingredients come together to form one unique opportunity. At Samlout High School, educational structures currently exist that can be utilized to keep organizational costs at a minimum. Further, any available resources can be fully allocated to have a direct impact in children's lives. Above all, the teaching staff's strong spirit and the school's extraordinary growth during its brief existence speak for themselves. This is the place where we can set an example of music education uplifting a region, a school, and its students for generations to come.

I invite you to join me in this evolutionary venture.

Yours sincerely,

*Mathias Aspelin*

Mathias Aspelin

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## Methodology and Expenses

### Methodology

When I visited Samlout High School in 2010, I spent a few days teaching the piano to one very talented English teacher. Since then, he has continued learning music and will be of invaluable help during the early stages of this project.

During the first stage, I plan to focus on “teaching teachers.” Once a few teachers reach a certain skill level, I can focus my time both teaching students and assisting other teachers. In this way, I hope to gather momentum to jumpstart the program.

During the second stage, a curriculum will be designed that includes both Western and Eastern musical traditions. At this stage, a person well versed in indigenous Cambodian music will also be involved.

In this project I am grateful to draw not only on my own enthusiasm, but on the expertise of those whose experience exceeds my own. Currently, I am in touch with people in organizations such as the Quincy Jones Foundation and *El Sistema*. I have also recently been introduced to Scott Neeson, a former President of 20th Century Fox International. He founded his own Cambodian organization eight years ago and has offered to lend his advice to this project.

### Projected Expenses

In the 2012-13 school year, during the early stages of the project, an initial budget of \$5000 is our target. This amount will allow for necessary components needed to make music instruction available to both students and teachers.

The following equipment is needed to get the project off the ground:

- Two pianos or keyboards with benches and headphones
- A set of ten music stands
- A CD-player
- Basic instruction materials (method books, sheet music, CDs with musical examples.)

Thanks to the low cost of living and low salary levels in the area, we will be able to keep salary costs at a minimum. All music education will take place in facilities provided by the school and one room will be designated for individual and group instruction. This way we will be able to keep fixed costs low.

## A Letter from the Director of Samlout High School

At Samlout High School we are working hard to meet the challenges we face in providing a high-quality education in our rural area. Human resources is the most important element in developing the country and it is our goal to enrich these resources, both in quantity and quality. We are also dedicated to developing access strategies in order that all children can be offered an opportunity to receive a national education. Due to limited resources in staff and facilities, our students are given the option of attending either morning or afternoon classes. The school currently has a staff of 30, 23 of whom are teachers.

Our objectives are the following:

- To ensure a high level of attendance and eliminate student drop-out
- To improve the effectiveness of learning and teaching
- To create a better school environment
- To construct and implement a student dormitory in an orderly and cost-effective way

### Samlout High School—the First Ten Years

About ten years ago, in response to the policies of the government, the authorities and the Samlout community decided to come together to build a school. The resulting Samlout Secondary School, founded by His Excellency Sur Kheng, had five classrooms and was attended by 115 students in 2001. All students came from primary schools in the Samlout district. Over the past ten years the growth and success of this school has been notable.

During its second year of existence, the school's attendance grew to 266 students. And during each subsequent year, the number of students has continued to increase.

In 2003, the school was transformed into Samlout High School in order to give those who had passed ninth grade exams an opportunity to continue their studies at the high school level. In 2004 the school had one class of 37 tenth grade students.

By 2006, the student body had increased to 528 students. There was now a class of 24 twelfth grade students—twelve girls and twelve boys. Twenty of these students passed their final exams that year.

In 2007, the school had fifteen classes of which six were at the high school level. Four graduates from the school received full four-year scholarships from the government.

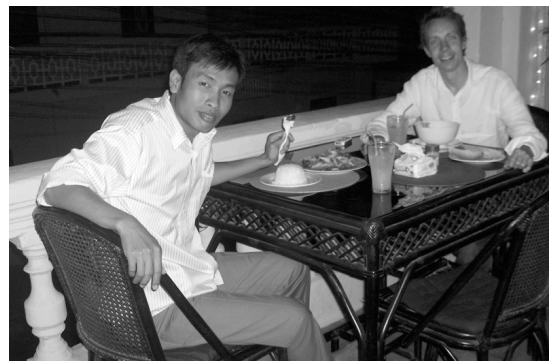
By 2008, the number of students had increased to 880, and by 2009 to 992.

During the 2010-2011 school year, 1134 students—512 girls and 622 boys—attended Samlout High School.

Sincerely yours,

*Sokhom Huot*

Director of Samlout High School





## Biography, Mathias Aspelin

Mathias Aspelin is a pianist and composer originally from Finland. He grew up in a middle-class family in the Scandinavian countryside and began to study the piano at age nine. Merging the Western classical piano tradition with an affinity for improvisation, he started performing at an early age. At age sixteen he was invited to perform for the Prime Minister of Finland.

Mathias was among the first students in the region to be offered an opportunity to attend a newly established International Baccalaureate high school. After finishing the IB-program he went on to study art, philosophy, and science in the West.

Mathias holds a BA in mathematical sciences with a "university best result" in philosophy from Balliol College, Oxford, and an MMus (TKA honor society) from the USC Thornton School of Music. At USC he was a Fulbright grantee and a recipient of the Quincy Jones Merit Scholarship. Prior to his studies at USC, Mathias studied music at Berklee College of Music in the U.S. and at the Sibelius Academy in Helsinki, Finland. He was a winner in the John Coltrane Scholarship Competition in 2004 and has been a part of the Mancini Institute summer program for emerging professional musicians. He has performed in the U.S., Europe, and Central America.

Mathias is enthusiastic about the strong connection that exists between good societies and rich cultures, and between 'the good society' and the young citizen's access to a high-quality arts education. His goal is to be an ambassador for the arts and to share his passion for music and aesthetics with people in underserved areas. After finishing his studies he has strived to distance himself from Western materialistic values and pursued a global frame of reference in understanding the full responsibilities of the lower-middle to upper classes in not shutting their eyes to the plight of geographically distant others.

Apart from music performance, Mathias has become involved with various arts advocacy initiatives. Recently, he spent time in Venezuela, learning about the well-reputed and internationally implemented *El Sistema* music education program. And, during 2008, he played an active role in the U.S. "Secretary of the Arts" petition that gathered a quarter million signatures. The objective of the petition was to give the arts a significant and visible role in the government.

While in California, Mathias was active as a music educator. For two years he also taught the piano at the Jackson family compound in Los Angeles. Mathias is a member of the Quincy Jones Musiq Consortium and El Sistema NYC.

Beyond his musical pursuits, Mathias recently edited and helped oversee the posthumous publication of his mother's autobiographical narrative about living with cancer.

Mathias' philosophical influences range from the great thinkers of times past—Plato, Kant, and John Niemeyer Findlay among them—to modern day heroes and true Artists making a difference in today's world.

## **Samlout and Surroundings**

### **Samlout**

Samlout is a village in the Samlout District, located 267 kilometers northwest of the capital, Phnom Penh. A 100 square kilometer area around Samlout has an approximate population of two hundred thousand and an average elevation of 153 meters above sea levels.

### **Samlout District**

The Samlout District of Battambang Province is the most war-torn area of Cambodia. Its population consists entirely of returnees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs), who lived under the rule of the Khmer Rouge for nearly 30 years, only to be driven from their homes by fighting after the coup d'état of 1997. Samlout has the highest percentage of land mine victims and other destitute families in Cambodia.



### **The Samlout Uprising**

The Samlout Uprising, or Samlout Rebellion, was an incident that took place in 1967 in Samlout, in which the rural peasantry revolted against the Sangkum regime of the then Head of State, Prince Norodom Sihanouk. The incident is seen by some academics as the starting point of the Cambodian Civil War, which ultimately led to the victory of the Communist forces of the Khmer Rouge and the establishment of Democratic Kampuchea.

## **Cambodia**

Cambodia is a tropical country in Southeast Asia flanked by Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam.

### **Physical**

Through it from the north flows the Mekong River, and to the west is a large lake, the Tonlé Sap. The climate is tropical monsoon, and most of the land is marshy or forested. A short coastline faces south-west on the Gulf of Thailand.

### **Economy**

Cambodia's economy is overwhelmingly agricultural, and rubber is a major export. There is limited light industry, notably garment making. The prolonged civil war and the Khmer Rouge regime's policies of resettlement decimated the economy but there has since been a significant recovery.

### **History**

Cambodia was occupied from the 1st to the 6th century ad by the Hindu kingdoms of Funan, and subsequently Chenla. The Khmer people overthrew the Hindu rulers of Chenla and established a Buddhist empire, centered around the region of Angkor. The classical, or Angkorean, period lasted from 802 to 1432, with the Khmer empire reaching its peak during the 12th century. After 1432 the empire went into decline and suffered frequent invasions from Vietnam and Thailand. Continuing foreign domination forced Cambodia to seek French protection in 1863, and from 1884 it was treated as part of French Indo-China, although allowed to retain its royal dynasty.

After Japanese occupation in World War II, King Norodom Sihanouk achieved independence within the French Union (1949) and full independence in 1953. Sihanouk abdicated in 1955 to form a broad-based coalition government. Cambodia was drawn into the Vietnam War in the 1960s, and US suspicions of Sihanouk's relations with communist forces led to his overthrow by the army under Lon Nol in 1970, following a US bombing offensive (1969 – 70) and invasion. The Lon Nol regime renamed Cambodia the Khmer Republic. The regime soon came under heavy pressure from the communist Khmer Rouge. Following the fall of Phnom Penh in 1975, the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot renamed the country Democratic Kampuchea and launched a bloody reign of terror, which is estimated to have resulted in as many as two million deaths, or nearly a third of the population.

Border tensions led to an invasion of the country by Vietnam in 1978, and the overthrow of the Pol Pot regime two weeks later. The Vietnamese installed a client regime under an ex-Khmer Rouge member, Heng Samrin, who proclaimed a new People's Republic of Kampuchea, but conflict with Khmer Rouge guerrillas continued. International relief organizations were active in Cambodia from 1980. A government in exile comprising anti-Vietnamese factions and led by Son Sann, the Coalition Government of Democratic Kampuchea (CGDK), was recognized by the United Nations in 1983. Civil war lasted until 1987, when inconclusive peace talks were held in Paris. These later moved to Jakarta, and in 1990 a peace agreement ended 13 years of civil strife. A UN Transitional Authority enforced a ceasefire and installed an interim Supreme Council, under Prince Norodom Sihanouk as head of state. The Council included representatives of the former government, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) led by Hun Sen, and the three former guerrilla movements:



the Party of Democratic Kampuchea (the former Khmer Rouge); the Khmer People's National Liberation Front, led by Son Sann; and the National United Front (NUF), led by Norodom Ranariddh, son of Norodom Sihanouk.

Multiparty elections were held in 1993, and UN peacekeepers supervised the process and helped to repatriate and rehabilitate some half million refugees and released prisoners. No party won a clear majority of seats, but a democratic monarchist constitution was adopted; Sihanouk became king and a coalition government headed by the CPP and NUF was formed, their leaders becoming co-premiers (1993). The Khmer Rouge refused to participate in the elections and continued to launch guerrilla attacks for some years; by 1999 it was effectively quiescent. In 1997 the NUF leader, Prince Ranariddh was ousted by Hun Sen's followers, who were victorious in elections the following year. The elections of 2003 again produced no clear outcome; a coalition was formed and in 2004 Hun Sen and Prince Ranariddh once more agreed to share power. Later that year, Sihanouk abdicated and was succeeded by his son Norodom Sihamoni.

Capital:	Phnom Penh
Area:	181,035 sq km (69,898 sq miles)
Population:	13,327,000 (2005)
Currency:	1 riel = 100 sen
Religions:	Buddhist 88.4%; Muslim 2.4%
Ethnic Groups:	Khmer 88.1%; Chinese 4.6%; Vietnamese 4.6%
Languages:	Khmer (official); Chinese; Vietnamese; French

Source:  
Oxford  
Dictionary  
of World  
History



(All photos were taken during my stay in Cambodia in 2010)