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## **Permaculture in a War Zone**

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*[Submitted Paper]*

In 1979 the world saw Cambodia emerge from a series of disastrous historic events, not encountered since the second world war. Much of Cambodia's infrastructure of roads, schools, resorts, restaurants, holy places, buildings and most bridges had been destroyed during the Khmer Rouge regime. In the first few years after there was a serious food shortage and goods were bartered as in ancient times until a currency was issued in 1980.

More than one million people died, mostly men, which led to a very unbalanced population structure. About 60% of the middle aged people are women. In some areas, 35% of householders are women, which means that women now have greater responsibilities due to the unusual socio-economic standard of living in Cambodia.

Cambodian women were faced with many social difficulties in the eighties, which they met unexpectedly following the death of their husbands. They changed from working in the house to working outside, sometimes beyond their abilities. Having lost a husband, aunts, uncles and parents meant there was very little family support, and no one to share the heavy load of material and spiritual family responsibility with. Most women had to feed many infants, some of which were the orphans of their friends or relatives.

After the Khmer Rouge regime, most women returned to their homeland to find their home, furniture, dishes and clothes destroyed. There was a shortage of animals and cultivation equipment and much of the land was damaged, mines can still be found in some areas. 85% of Cambodian people live in the countryside, and now 65% of farmers are female.

Farming is the main agricultural task and traditionally women were responsible for spraying seeds on the field and extracting, transplanting and harvesting the rice. Men were traditionally responsible for the reclamation of agricultural land and plowing. At the present time, women work both inside and outside the house to make their livelihood possible. To be able to generate an appropriate standard of living after the Khmer Rouge regime, people worked very hard, lacked sanitation and became weak and sick.

To improve the lives of people in Cambodia the following problems must be overcome:

- pollution of land, water and air by factories and agricultural systems;
- loss of some seed and animal species;
- declining natural resources;
- economic systems destroyed by the Khmer Rouge;
- lack of sufficient land and knowledge to grow multi-food fruit plants;
- lack of experience in agricultural land reclamation and use of available inputs;
- large family size; and
- lack of encouragement.

In 1993, the Department of Women's Affairs of the Pursat Province communicated with Mrs Rosemary Morrow (QSA) and she was invited to come to teach us about permaculture. The intention of this was to help the people of the Province understand how permaculture works and how it is useful in a war-torn country. The specific intentions were:

- to address the problems listed above;
- to provide education on land care and land reclamation;
- to provide education on human and animal health care;
- to redistribute the resources which exceeded our requirements;
- to reduce over-exertion of the available work force;
- to make people's homes more sustainable;
- to adjust irrigation principles to include agricultural work, forestry, animal feeding; and
- to organise a social and economic quiet location.

We have tried to publicise and train people to carry out permaculture projects in five districts, ten villages and 300 families in Pursat as the first phase, and we have also established a second demonstration centre. Also, permaculture works have spread to other provinces through:

- Teacher training college Takeo Province, primary school and junior high school;
- Teacher training college Kampong Chnang, eight districts, ten villages and 300 families; and
- Prek Leap Agricultural college has built a permaculture demonstration centre so students can pursue extension works.

Permaculture students currently understand the principles as follows:

- Permaculture is a system for building sustainable human homes by environmental planning;
- The combination of traditional knowledge and modern science to create a form applicable in both city and country homes;
- Taking a natural system as a model from which to create an environment which is sustainable and can provide for human needs and an economic structure which is supported by society; and
- It encourages us to solve problems we encounter locally and in the rest of the world.

It is very important for war-torn countries to implement permaculture works to provide appropriate livelihoods and sustainable food because wars destroy people's lands and family, and in developing countries such as Cambodia, this is even more important. In order to continue and to improve this kind of work we would like to request your assistance. Further information can be obtained from:

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