

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u4qUnAG4j1M&feature=youtu.be&t=1m34s>

1:34

FRED DE SAM LAZARO: He says he was moved by the plight of so many hungry children and decided to stay and find a way to get them into productive lives and off the street.

Those streets are being transformed today. The old temples and new high-rises are being spiffed up to attract foreign tourists and investors. But Phnom Penh has also lured thousands of children and their families from the impoverished rural areas of a country still recovering from the genocidal Khmer Rouge era between 1975 and '79, a period in which an estimated two million people died.

It's a difficult existence. The children are often forced to support the family, or at least fend for themselves. For many, it's a losing struggle, says Marot.

SEBASTIEN MAROT: The biggest problem we're facing now is actually the — the serious increase in drug use in this population, which is relatively new. It started in late '90s. There was no drugs before. And, suddenly, it exploded, and now 80 percent of the kids are using, some glue-sniffing, a lot of amphetamine, and heroin is increasing.

FRED DE SAM LAZARO: The government, struggling to control the flow of drugs from neighboring countries, has responded with a crackdown on the street. The police are always on the lookout for young people like these, most engaged in petty crime and prostitution to support their drug habits.

SEBASTIEN MAROT: The government needs to show that there is no more street kid, that the cities are clean, so they do — they destroy our building work by trying to get quick fixes. And that's putting kids in prison. That's cleaning the streets and putting people away, out of the eye. But that's not a solution.

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5:08

FRED DE SAM LAZARO: Friends International started and runs three of Phnom Penh's finest restaurants, training grounds for students and a source of income for its programs.

Seventeen-year-old Kunthea was recruited by Friends International on the street. She was selling flowers to support her family after her father died.

TEENAGER (through translator): My experience with Friends International has been great. Now I can read. And I love cooking the most.

FRED DE SAM LAZARO: But having Kunthea enter a training program meant she was no longer able to help support her family. She still lives at home with her mother and three siblings.

So an important part of the Friends International approach is to help not just the youth, but also their parents. It now employs Kunthea's mother, Sok Chenda, to sew handicrafts that are sold in its boutique, another business that funds Friends International programs.

SOK CHENDA, mother of student (through translator): Friends International helped me a lot. Without them providing me training and vocational skills, I could not feed my four children.

People say, why do you put your kids in Friends International? They won't make any money. Better to take your daughter to work in the garment industry, so she can make money.

But I don't. My children will have a better future than me.

FRED DE SAM LAZARO: Many graduates of Friends International have already gone on to a better future. In two years, Darun Rin says he picked up culinary and interpersonal skills and even a bit of English.

DARUN RIN, restaurant owner: They trained me how to — like to cook the food, to serve the food to customer, and how to talk friendly.

FRED DE SAM LAZARO: Darun Rin got a job as a chef for the Singaporean ambassador, then went on to open his own restaurant, and is thinking of more.