MANUSCRIPT REVIEW and EVALUATION

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VULNERABILITY and RESILIENCE: PERCEPTIONS

and RESPONSES to PSYCHO-SOCIAL DISTRESS

in CAMBODIA

by Jo Boyden and Sara Gibbs

The authors declare:

"The aim of this case study is to identify the impacts of the
Cambodian conflict and social reconstruction on children,
their families and communities, and to examine the nature of
national and international institutional responses".

and conclude that:

"Indeed the present report is intended to be the precursor to
a longer term programme of primary research on these
issues...".

The study clearly aspires to encompass an exceedingly wide range of subject matter, conceptual, historical, institutional, and in consideration of the practical application of its findings. Consequently, by its ambitious nature, the study rightly confounds any attempt to constrain it within a statement of a defining "thesis" which is to be systematically examined in a style which might satisfy academic purists.

Nevertheless, one major value of the study is its exploration of broad fields of theses, assumptions, pronouncements, opinions and the arguments supporting them, relevant to the subject matter. This is covered in the report's rich and widespread quotations from a listed bibliography of over one hundred sources.

<u>The work entailed in reviewing and selecting from this literature and relating it to the situation in Cambodia constitutes a valuable contribution in its own right to anyone interested and concerned in this field.</u>

The literature illustrates that the subject matter of the study had been previously approached fragmentally by a variety of authorities proceeding from a host of circumscribed theoretical perspectives. The theoretical positions inevitably, however inadvertently, are highly selective in viewpoint and will have determined what observations are likely to be focussed upon as foreground and given significance, while leaving much else in the twilight of the background, or have remained unobserved and unrelated altogether. This poses particular problems when it is necessary to move on to determine courses of intervention and action. - "What is to be done about what?".[1]

One influential respondent states the implications of this situation very well:

"We just have no theoretical model to deal with a situation as complex as the one here in Cambodia. We simply don't know how to do it.....heads of the UN agencies...discussed this in depth. We looked at the governance, social regeneration and the alleviation of poverty. But with psycho-social issues - and how to support social regeneration - we got stuck. we couldn't find a way to go forward".

The authors do not include their excellent literature review in the list of methods that they employed:

"The data were gathered using a variety of methods, observation, roundtable discussion, key informant interviews, focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, time lines and life histories".

They themselves recognise very well the inadequacy of the tools available to them and for those who will follow them:

"...the difficulty of developing methods for gathering the information that are appropriate to the cultural and social context and to the issues in question...".

The scope of issues that are raised is formidable and the parameters of each issue extend out and overlap the concerns of many other issues.

The study introduces itself with a firm statement and a sweep of issues: "The severity of the impact of conflict ... (political violence and disruption) ..is not in doubt. But the form it takes and how individuals are thought to respond, and how they can best be supported in coping is more controversial".

An immense territory of critical issues is then covered by documenting the growing awareness that much in the social sciences, and in human behaviour, organisation and institutional activities which has been considered to be <u>universals</u> is in fact profoundly culturally determined by its origins in <u>Western</u> observation, experience and thinking. This Western orientation is shown to have obscured much of what is significant in non-Western societies in general and in Cambodia in particular, has led to much confusion in understanding, and proved dysfunctional in practice.

Particularly relevant is the myopic Western perception of self-identity and the bio-medical bias of psychological concepts. The limitations of this perspective have been recognised in practice in the West and fairly recently accommodated perhaps in the term "psycho-social".

In this regard the study might well be read to illustrate an interesting parallel between:

1. The fact that in development circles (certainly in United Nations circles) while paying fulsome lip-service to the importance of social goals and activities, it has proved easier to construct economic models and measures and remain vague about their inseparable relationship to the social aspects of development;

2. The concepts emerging from cultures that have given a high value to individualism in constructing models and measures for dealing with the problems of the psyche while remaining vague about the way in which the individual and the social interrelate. This remains poorly explored and unexplained and the social continues to remain nebulous; lacking also is the emergence of new models and the action that the hyphenated addition of social in "psycho-social" would imply.[2]

In both fields, approaching from quite different perspectives, social has been identified as a vital element, but social has to a great degree remained a missing link in comprehensive thinking and in application in regard to what the authors call for:

"Effective programmes and policies in the psycho-social field need to be inclusive and multi-sectoral, addressing social structural issues as well as those to do with individual social and psychological well-being".[3]

The study goes some way to detail what some of these social ingredients might be and to argue the Cambodian holistic case of trying to put together a perspective of the human condition as experienced as a whole, irrespective of the many different ways of examining it.

The study continually and forcefully draws attention to these grey areas. On the one hand, the report expresses the destructive aspects of Cambodian "economic liberalisation" and echoes other work suggesting that the economic impact of external aid agencies themselves has also seriously distorted both the economic foundations and the social aspects of development, and on the other hand states quite unambiguously that "A focus on individual functioning is really not sustainable or appropriate...".

"This exercise involved 200 villagers, 42 teachers and teacher trainers from provincial towns and districts, 50 government employees and 30 graduates from social work training courses and revealed serious concerns about increased violence and mistrust, a breakdown of social relationships, and a lack of healthy coping mechanisms..."

The authors also list the wide range of respondents which they involved in the staggeringly short period of just six weeks in Cambodia. From these sources they again provide abundant and fertile quotations and mini case histories. These put flesh on the bones of the study which makes the work very readable.

The study in its chapter on <u>Conclusions and Recommendations</u> is a dense-pack summary of the situation and points in many directions for advancement of our knowledge and planning. The recommendations are very varied in terms of scope and complexity.

One notes that the host agency to the present study in Cambodia was "The International NGO Training and Research Centre". Spelling out more fully the recommendations for training and research might be particularly valuable for such an organisation in widely promoting the necessary activities, as well as for others in Cambodia and beyond.

<u>It would strengthen the report if the recommendations could</u>

be extracted from the text, recapitulated and grouped in an individual listing and where possible be stated more specifically by defining encompassable research areas. Could the authors place those who may be undertaking the further work even more in their debt by adding a sentence or two to each item indicating some guidance or suggestions as to how the recommendation might be tackled and what might realistically be involved in terms of priority, resources, realisation and possible time frames for action and likely completion?.

For example, some of the recommendations in the text read:

"...vital that aid interventions should be closely monitored and regularly assessed..."

"...Excessive demands on debilitated government structures..."

"...interagency friction..."

"...discontinuities at the policy level..."

appropriately pacing "...indigenisation of the non-governmental sector..."

"...institutional and human resource development..."

"... better advocacy and closer collaboration between the various civil society actors..."

"Policy and programme content needs to be evaluated to see to what extent it is really is appropriate".

How do the authors visualise acceptance by whom and what can they say about "appropriate" ?;

All of this:

"...reinforces the need for better co-ordination in both policy and institutional terms".

What institutional structures might be responsible for this work? Who is/will be trained to set up monitoring systems and maintain them? To whom might assessment be reported etc.,

"...greater use to be made of appropriately trained village-based para-professionals".

"reinforce the moral authority and leadership role of these local figures and strengthen their work ..... through capacity building in basic counselling and problem-solving skills".

<u>Who is to be trained to do what?</u>

"...high levels of social engineering and political violence has left a poor legacy in Cambodia for communalism or collective action".

<u>What then must be done to introduce community participation processes that "...take into account concepts of community that are meaningful to the people themselves..." ?</u>

"...important to draw as much as possible on local constructions and interpretations of conflict and therapeutics".

"Careful attention needs to be paid not just to coverage but also content of services".

<u>Again, what organisation, staffing and processes might serve these many interrelated purposes?</u>

"... need for in-depth work to be carried out in Cambodia that focuses on the psycho-social problems of children and their families and the social structural and cultural, as well as the economic and political factors that influence the attempts of communities and individuals to rebuild their lives".

"Support for research on psych-social issues..."

<u>What are the in-depth psycho-social studies to be?</u>

<u>(and perhaps economic-social issues? in the light of what they say about the negative effects of "economic liberalisation, and destitution further attacking family integrity").</u>

"Developing research methods suited to the investigation of sensitive and potentially distressing issues with children is a major consideration itself... However there are many alternative approaches... which do not require that findings be gathered according to set format".

<u>What are the some of these alternative approaches? References and examples?</u>

"Effective programmes and policies in the psycho-social field need to be inclusive and multi-sectoral, addressing social structural issues as well as those to do with individual social and psychological well-being".

<u>How do the authors conceive of the steps required?</u>

Readers may not be familiar with the <u>"truth commissions"</u> that the authors mention as having had value in other conflict-torn societies. Although they are of the opinion that Cambodia is not

ready for such an innovation, <u>can they give some details or indicate the references where information can be found?</u>

"Further work is needed on the psycho-social impacts of armed conflict on Cambodian children specifically..."   "...as well as the factors mediating their resilience and vulnerability..."

<u>In the light of their experience, what can the present authors foresee as the nature of such further work which will extend or differ from their present contribution?</u>

In the body of the report there appear other areas for enquiry which do not appear in the recommendations in the final chapter.

For example:

Section 2.2.1. In relation to the importance of "positive role models"... "...hardly any information concerning the alliances made by children and youth based on peer groups ..."

Section 2.2.2 "The extent to which families and individuals can rely on (such) systems of mutual aid ..has to be established. This could be an important area for future research".

Section 2.5.2. There is reference to the value of perhaps an enquiry into the "role humour plays in people's lives and its possible use as a coping strategy".

Section 3.2.4. "...information on hazardous child labour ..is sparse and unsystematic..."

In recognising that a clear difference emerged in the perception of ex-patriates and Cambodians, the authors noted:

Section 3.4.1. "...little systematic information of the many and varied symptoms of mental health distress..."

and add:

Section 4.1.3 As yet there is little systematic evidence of Khmer perceptions of pathology in mental health and social behaviour and further work needs to be done in this area...if interventions are to be appropriate".

There is their sombre assessment:

Section 4.3.1. The authors point to "The reluctance of donors to concede the persistence of very real threats to peace..." among which is the military situation, the proliferation and availability of armaments and related lawlessness, the profusion of land-mines and the subsequent unavailability of land in a

traditionally agricultural country, and corruption in government and business.

They see the result of this reluctance as a " serious discontinuity between programme strategies and social and political reality ".

Recognising the aid agencies as major players and the comment quoted that the agencies "move things from one difficulty to another difficulty", Section 4.3.4 declares "It is vital to draw on local knowledge and concerns as a basis for programme and policy planning and development ...   implies participatory methods as yet little known or utilised in Cambodia".

"...the outside agency working as facilitators rather than executors".

and:
Section 4.4.3. "To gain the skills necessary to develop more constructive relations with the aid community the government requires assistance with both human resources and institutional development".

As asked previously, how do the authors see these objectives being promoted and achieved?".

Cambodia is perhaps unique in the manner in which the destruction was attempted of all existing institutions and bonds of allegiance, including that of the family, and the normal means of socialisation of the child were removed or undermined over such a short but intensive period of time. The apparent residual effects of the reversal of power relationships between children and adults and the endeavor to change the ways in which people thought, acted and related to each other raises many questions. However, generally the study very effectively emphasises attention to resilience, coping resourcefulness and reconstruction rather than the more conventional concept of passivity/receptivity of children and their vulnerability, which perhaps has been concentrated upon elsewhere.

Cambodia's problems and suffering, uniquely compounded in terms of the scale, intensity and ferocity of the catastrophe of its recent history, nevertheless might well be contemplated as an extreme and accelerated microcosm of the world-wide problems of the global changes of social breakdown that have been taking place in the human condition and which as yet, everywhere, has been so poorly managed socially in the name of "development".

Thus it is that the authors have clearly had the difficulty of isolating the problems which are specific to Cambodia and need special and urgent attention, and those which are inseparable from those that trouble mankind at the end of this twentieth century and need urgent attention.

The creation of satisfactory economic/social/psychological models, the invention of inclusive multi-sectoral development programmes and the organisation and delivery of appropriate aid and innovative action is obviously a long-term objective not just for Cambodia alone.

In this regard, although the study does not say so, it may well be the case that an understanding of the Cambodian situation might correct our Western limitations and truly contribute to a higher level of insights and understanding of what might be underlying universalities of human behaviour. Perhaps, too, such a broadening of insights might suggest ways in which the West might more effectively organise and tackle what ails the human condition in its own culture and its more fortunate societies.

Finally, the two authors modestly and frankly acknowledge that:
"The findings are necessarily partial ..." and "The research does not attempt to come up with a comprehensive Cambodian perspective, <u>the aim being to identify key issues and raise important questions rather than seek conclusive answers</u>".

Having taken on such a huge canvas in such a limited time the outcome can only reasonably be expected to be insightfully impressionistic, to stimulate rethinking and fresh thought, and point the way to the need for further exploration and much closer attention to detail. This the study does most successfully, and it has achieved the above aim.

<u>The report certainly should prove a valuable publication.</u>

1   In the social sciences as in nuclear physics what is being observed is altered by the instruments of observation. Perhaps even more than in physics the social sciences have nowhere yet the remotest outline of a unified theory of human behaviour which embraces the bio-physical, psychological, individual, family, group, community, national, international, social, economic, political, religious, and spiritual. Therefore, by necessity we
resort to fragmentary examination of the human condition and find it difficult, if not impossible to give appropriate weight to one set of findings in relation to another.

2   It indicates much to note that Cambodia has no translation for "psycho-social" and for "citizen" the word is "subject".

3   Note how in the founding United Nations Charter social development was given emphasis but in practice was placed mainly as the responsibility of the financial agencies. Fifty years on it was thought necessary to have a Global Summit on Social Development, at a time when member nations tend strongly to see social as the cinderella dependant of the economic, and that the social services painfully achieved in the affluent nations are being everywhere declared unaffordable.

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David Drucker is a British social worker (Columbia; LSE) whose early work was clinical and psychoanalytically-oriented; later he moved to the international social work arena. He has worked in the Mediterranean, Southeast Asia, Africa and Lithuania, where he has been involved with the training of local and indigenous social workers and worked with international organizations (World Bank, UNICEF, etc.), often engaging local villagers in planning for the resources their own communities need.

"The basic principles of good psychodynamically-informed social work practice shine through all that David Drucker does in fascinating ways. From the contrast between Mr Drucker's work in these unfamiliar venues and our own, I think much can be learned which will help with our inner city and other disenfranchised populations."
                                                          Harriet W. Meek, Ph.D.

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David Drucker

Abbreviated Curriculum Vita

- involved in the International Social Work scene for more than thirty years e.g (among much else)

- teaching a special programme in a British University (Swansea)to senior personnel (many of whom had played a major part in independence movemments and were then junior ministers in new governments and such like) and subsequently setting up field programmes in the eastern mediteranean countries, the Sudan and the middle east;

- initiating a programme in post Sukharno devastated Indonesia;

- producing a defining study (Korea, Hong Kong, Thailand, Phillipines, Pakistan, Burma)for the UN Economic Commission for Asia and the Pacific East (now ESCAP);

- explorations of the curricula of social work in some countries in Asia with special reference to the relevance of social work education to social development goals. ECAFE/UNICEF. 1972.See also, Social Welfare: An evolutionary and development perspective. Shankar Pathak, Mcmillan, India, Ltd., 1981;

-inventing a Mobile Training Scheme for Nepal, Afghanistan and Laos and operating this in Nepal;

- assigned as a member of the SE Asian Region planning team of WHO

- Serving in India Bangladesh Thailand and Burma: with UNICEF in Burma attempting village level bottom-up planning and subsequently recognised as an expert and consultant in community water and sanitation projects in the Asia region:

- heading up a project in the 23 refugee camps in Thailand for the mentally disturbed and physically handicapped;

- producing a special edition of UNICEF News on Community Participation UNICEF NEWS No.124 Dec. 1986 (English, French, Spanish, German, Japanese editions). Editor and signed articles:-

    "Community participation: now you see it, now you don't."

    "Listen,listen to the people. Klong Toey Slum, Thailand." *(about a form of research specifically for social work)*

    "Of latrines and video cassette recorders, Pakistan."

    "Human oneness: traditional healers among Cambodian refugees."

    "Experts on tap, not on top."

- Consultancies with the World Bank, UNDP, UNHCR, WHO, UNICEF, CARE International ILO, HABITAT, UN Volunteers (9 countries in Africa, five in Asia and six Pacific Island States)etc.,

- Currently assisting in setting up a programme in Lithuania. (organizing the field placement program at a new school for social work)