



March 2010 and I have just returned from another MAG challenge event Cycle Vietnam to Cambodia, before boarding the flight home I took the opportunity of visiting the families we helped one year ago. It's quite hard to describe what it was like heading back down those bumpy roads wondering whether or not the houses would even still be there, passing children playing at the side of the road in the dust wearing scraps of clothing and water buffalo lazily munching what little grass there was in the late afternoon heat.



It took us a while to find the houses we built, maybe I didn't pay enough attention on the journey last year but it seemed that there were more houses and less palm trees dotted around. We eventually pulled up at the bigger house we built where we all attended the blessing ceremony and the poverty of the area hit me once again. My memories of this house are all wrapped up in the experience of the last day, the bright sunshine, green trees, red earth, the vibrant orange of the monks robes and the family all dressed in their best with huge smiles on their faces. The reality is, despite the wonderful new house they have, these people live in real poverty, something which is difficult to contemplate even after spending so much time there.

I headed down the path past a newly built hut to the house with my translator Rith and gifts for the family, they were so thrilled to see us again and didn't stop smiling the whole time I was there. Pek, the father of the family, was out collecting palm oil but soon



appeared and shook my hand furiously. He told me that the house had enormously improved their lives, he kept saying he was so happy that the worry of providing a home was no longer necessary and he just needed to concentrate on feeding his family. I gave him photos of the team building and of them going into their new house which the whole family marvelled at.



I'm pleased to report that the house has a new extension to one side and a room at the back, built with the remnants of wood from the old house. They also have a covered porch area over the steps and plenty of space for cooking under the house. I asked them what they thought of

the building skills and if the house was in good condition, it was wonderful to hear that they were very complimentary and said that we did a really good job.

It was the same story at the second house, set back from the road behind the trees it was even more difficult to find but once we were there last years experience came flooding back. The family were all once again totally thrilled and their beaming faces reflected the same happiness with their improved quality of life. This house also has had a couple of extensions and was looking like new.

As an enormous red sun began to set it was time for us to be on our way back to Siem Reap, on the journey back I watched as these wonderful Khmer people gathered their families together and lit fires to make their evening meal. My



emotions were all over the place as I thought about the contrast between these people and the life we live, it was once again a fantastically humbling experience, no bad thing to be reminded of. It was sad to leave after only a few short hours but it was wonderful to see them so happy. We can't give them everything they need and even if we could there are too many others in need to even count but the contribution we made last year has made such a massive difference to their lives and their genuine happiness just shone out of them.



Community Challenge Cambodia achieved something special last year, whatever has happened over the last twelve months and whatever happens in the future.

The time and effort it took along with the money raised has not only made a much needed contribution to MAG's work clearing landmines but has helped change the lives of two families across the other side of the world who are still in bewilderment that we came to help them.

Lesley Achim, March 2010

