

**Life History of Dr. Set Seng,  
Director, Phnom Penh Teacher Education College (PTEC)  
~Our long journey together since 2000  
toward the development of Education in Cambodia~**



Dr. Set Seng, the Director of Phnom Penh Teacher Education College (PTEC), has been one of the counterparts of JICA projects since 2000 (STEPSAM, STEPSAM2, STEPSAM3, and E-TEC projects). He is specialized in chemistry education and has been contributing to the development of education in Cambodia with PADECO for more than 20 years.

**- Please tell us about your childhood. What was your dream?**

I was born in Pearang District, Prey Veng Province (about 40km away from the capital city, Phnom Penh) in late 1970s in a family of farmers. At that time, Cambodia was in the hardest time in its history and people, including my family, was facing a lot of difficulties during Khmer Rouge regime.

I was lucky enough to have a place to learn in a walking distance from my home when I became the age of primary school in 1981. But it was just under mango trees at the beginning and we moved to a monks' house later.

Actually, I had never dreamed of becoming a teacher in my childhood, but I wished to be a government official as it was a common dream of people in remote areas to have better life.

When I was small, I was not a good learner, as I spent most of the time in the rice field helping my parents as I am the eldest child in the family with two sisters and one brother. However, when I was at high school, I studied hard to successfully pass the Grade 12 completion exam (national examination) in 1994.

At that time, only two students from my high school, including myself, could pass the exam. In Prey Veng province, there were only 8 students who passed it. This

motivated me to go to Phnom Penh for university.

- [So, was it the time that you decided to be a teacher?](#)

No. Actually, it was not so easy. When I passed the Grade 12 completion exam, everybody around me didn't expect me to continue to university, as my family couldn't afford to support me to study in Phnom Penh. And I didn't have any relatives in Phnom Penh, either.

But my father brought me to Phnom Penh to look for a pagoda which can allow me to stay. We visited many pagodas for 3 days, however, we couldn't find anyone and we decided to go back home with hopeless. It was very hard and we didn't have any idea.

Several days later, however, we came back to Phnom Penh again and found a man we had known before at a pagoda who could accept me to stay with him. There was a family living in the pagoda who were selling Cambodian noodle (Kuyteav) and I helped their business all day long from 4:00am till 6:00pm for 3 months just for 3 meals, and learnt nothing except an English class for 1 hour from 6:00 to 7:00pm. The English teacher allowed me to learn free of charge. I was too busy to register for university and just only Agricultural university was still open for registration. I applied for it and spent one year at its pre-university course. I moved to a new pagoda near the agricultural university, where I could eat after monk. I made good relationship with a cook (a nun) of the pagoda though helping her in the kitchen, so that she always kept food for me.

After completing the pre-university course, I applied the entrance exam for 3 universities. Actually, I wanted to study agriculture, but only the faculty of chemistry at Royal University of Phnom Penh accepted me in late 1995. Meantime, I got married and my wife's family was famers just next to the pagoda I stayed, in the suburb of Phnom Penh. Therefore, I helped working in the farm planting rice and vegetables and I sometimes worked at a garment factory at the night time while studying at the university, while my wife worked in a small NGO as an early grade teacher for children from the poor family. That was my starting point to be a teacher.

- [Then, what was your journey to be the counterpart of JICA project?](#)

After completing the bachelor degree in 1999, I advanced to the National Institute

of Education (NIE) to be a chemistry lecturer. When I completed NIE in 2000, it was a coincidence that JICA has started STEPSAM and they requested Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS) to recruit outstanding students to work as lecturers in NIE and work as counterparts with STEPSAM Project.

There were two choices for me at that time; being a chemistry teacher at high school somewhere in the country or remaining at NIE to be a chemistry lecturer and a counterpart of the STEPSAM. As I already had a wife and a child, I wanted to stay in Phnom Penh. Therefore, from a strong encouragement of my wife, I decided to challenge to take an exam to be a lecturer at NIE and a counterpart of the STEPSAM, though it was very competitive.

I remember that Mr. Takahashi (PADECO) was one of the interviewers. At that time, my English was very poor but I tried my best to talk and talk without caring of right or wrong, so I still can't believe, but I could pass it and became the chemistry lecturers at NIE and the counterpart of STEPSAM in 2000.

- [What did you learn from JICA projects and how it impacted on your career?](#)

It was very good learning opportunity for me. STEPSAM was the most impactful for my development, as we had many trainings, workshops, and weekly meeting with JICA experts, where I could develop myself. I remember that I was required to submit reports very frequently, but my reports were very poor at the beginning. I really appreciate Japanese experts who helped me to improve them. At the same time, I could improve my English as well. It was truly a great experience.



Dr. Set Seng at STEPSAM2

During the STEPSAM, I got chance to have a 3-month training at Aichi University of Education in Japan in 2002, and then got a scholarship from JICA to take a master degree in Okayama University in 2004. Then, I continued to be a counterpart at the STEPSAM2 after coming back to Cambodia.

Then, I could continue my degree to Ph.D under JSPS scholarship, and I joined in STEPSAM3 and E-TEC continuously, which couldn't happen if I didn't encounter JICA in 2000. My life might be totally different.

Through JICA projects, I learned discipline, responsibility, punctuality, attitude, ways of planning, ways of mentoring, communication, etc from Japanese experts.



Dr. Set Seng (wear in gray) at STEPSAM3

- [How are you applying what you learned through JICA projects to your current work?](#)

The ways of working and managing, that I learned through JICA projects, are very effective at my current work as well. We need to have ownership and it is important to be creative to do new challenges.

Normally, people in Cambodia tend to stay in their comfort zone. But at PTEC, I keep encouraging my staff members to be creative as we need to do new things to have new result for the country. We plan together, we follow-up together, we see the results together, and we solve problems together, through regularly meeting based on what I learned through the JICA projects.

Now there are around 300 staff members to manage at PTEC and at attached schools, which is not easy for me. But I always open the doors of my office, so that



Dr. Set Seng (center) at E-TEC project

anyone can visit my office easily to discuss what they want. I believe problems never end unless we talk. And I consider all of staff members, including the top managements to cleaners, as PTEC family and place the teacher education quality as common goal for the country. This is the mindset that I learned through JICA projects.

- What is your goal to achieve in your career?

I don't have any particular goal of my career, but my dream is to see the education in Cambodia to be more developed; I wish every school to be able to provide opportunities of good learning to students, students can get the skills of creativity, critical thinking, and collaborative communication, etc. I want to be involved in it and I want to commit for it as much as I can.

A country can be developed only by human resource, and human resource comes from schools. Therefore, good education is crucial.

Although we still have a lot of challenges at TEC, but we will try our best to improve. Now we have plan to develop more TECs in other regions. We are happy to share our experiences and support it.

- Looking back your childhood, and imagine that primary school yourself is here. What message do you want to tell to the boy?

Never give up! Be positive!

Don't place too much pressure on yourself, but keep going and you will be successful.

If I look back myself in primary school time, I can't believe that I could complete my high school, university, master degree, and Ph.D, because of my family status. But if you continue your effort, surely you'll reach the better place.

Whenever we move, we can go.

Even we face hardship, the God never let us die.



Dr. Set Seng at the e-Interview (July 2023)