Improving health, food security, education, and economic development in rural Cambodia in ways that are self-sustaining by the individuals and communities we serve.

Note from the Executive Director

Hello All.....

Welcome to Trailblazer Foundation's Fall 2015 newsletter, which reports on our activities during July, August, and September. News of our field work in Cambodia is highlighted in four of the articles below, and I want to focus here on two important strategic decisions we made in the last month.

First, during our annual Board Retreat, the Board of Directors and U.S. based staff spent the better part of a weekend evaluating Trailblazer's mission, niche, theories of change, and principles of action. The upshot of this assessment is that we continue to believe in the importance of our work: using water projects as the foundation for improving the health, food security, education, and economic opportunities of rural communities in Cambodia. We re-affirmed our commitment to this work through a refined mission statement (see above), and by bringing to the forefront our tagline of "developing ripples of sustainability through community water projects."

Earlier in September, the Board approved hiring Tom Skeele as our first-ever Communications and Development Director. Given the important role this position will have for Trailblazer Foundation, I am very pleased to introduce Tom to you all. He brings 25 years of work history and experience in nonprofit management and community development - with an emphasis on communications and fundraising. You can read more about Tom's background below.

As always, our important work, and our ability to grow the staff to meet the growing needs of our organization, could not happen without your support. On behalf of the staff and Board, I offer a deep-felt thanks for your support - financial and emotional. It keeps us going in every way possible.

All the best,

Chris Coats
Health

*Latrines - Not So Glorious, But Very Important, Work*

Latrines. They may be Trailblazer Foundation's least glorious project area, yet building latrines are one of our most important services - especially when it comes to advancing health in the rural communities where we work. These projects tie Trailblazer Foundation directly into a worldwide health strategy known as WASH.

WASH stands for "Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene," a group of interrelated public health issues which are the focus of many international development organizations (especially in many Asian countries, like Cambodia). WASH programs are widely considered to hold great potential for improving health, life expectancy, student learning, gender equality, and other key benefits in developing countries. For Trailblazer Foundation, WASH is a complementary framework to our focus on using water projects to advance sustainable community development as a whole.

It is within this context that Trailblazer Foundation (TF), along with our local partner Trailblazer Angkor (TA), was pleased to recently complete the construction of 62 new latrines in the Ballangk commune, outside of Siem Reap. On August 1st, TF and TA held a "Hand-Over Ceremony" with the commune residents, to acknowledge these latrines were built, the contract with each new latrine owner was completed, and it was time for each family to enjoy their new toilet.

These agreements, signed at the start of the project, required each family who received a new latrine, to make a $12.50 deposit (a significant amount of money for these families), which they got back once they built the walls and roof of their latrine. The families also provided some of the dirt and labor for building the latrines. This commitment of involvement by each family is Trailblazer's way of ensuring the villagers have "skin in the game," so our work is not a hand out, but rather a hand up.

We are grateful to the Rotary Club of Thomson Valley (Loveland, Colorado), S.S.K.I.D.S (Simple Suppers for Kids in Desperate Situations, Greeley, Colorado), and two individual donors, who through their combined contributions of $7,500, made this project a reality. Sixty-two families, approximately 350 people, in rural Cambodia now live a cleaner and healthier life.

Food Security

*Hydroponic Gardens - Going with the Flow*

Trailblazer Foundation's Food Security program has four objectives:

[1] conduct field research, through various test plots, to determine how best to enhance local, nutrient-poor soils so they are more productive;

[2] provide our findings to local villagers, through a farmer training program;

[3] establish producer-buyer relationships with high end tourist restaurants in Siem Reap, where these farmers can sell their crops;

[4] work with local villages to establish farming cooperatives that will sell their lettuce, herbs, and other crops to these restaurants.
So far, the biggest challenge to our Food Security program has been making the local soils, heavy in clays and sands, more productive for growing food. Through our research and development, we have learned it takes years to develop the soils through adding compost and organic fertilizers, and that lengthy process limits opportunities for local farmers.

To complement this slow-going process, and to begin meeting the demand we’ve identified with our new tourist restaurant partners, earlier this year our field staff launched a new hydroponics pilot project. We started with two table “plots” for testing the best ways to grow the lettuce and herbs these restaurants want. This past summer, our staff built two more hydroponics tables, as well as a cover to protect these trial plots from too much rain.

We look forward to sharing stories of our hydroponic crops being sold to local restaurants, and consumed by happy tourists, in the near future.

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**Education**

*Integrating Local Needs With International Resources*

At a recent annual meeting, Trailblazer Foundation's Board of Directors re-doubled the organization's commitment to building schools, as part of our overall strategy to empower and improve the communities we serve in rural Cambodia. Two days later, we received word from donors with the British Schools Foundation in Beijing, that they were pledging $30,000 toward a school construction project in 2016. What timely, and great, news.

As with all of Trailblazer Foundation's projects, we have looked to the Siem Reap Province's "Integrated Workshop" process to identify where, and for what grade levels, this school will be built. This Integrated Workshop is held every November, when the chiefs from the many communes in the Province come together to pitch the infrastructure needs of their villages. This needs assessment starts at the villager level, and works its way through the process to where Trailblazer Foundation signs agreements to work with certain villages to complete certain projects.

Villagers initially share their infrastructure needs with the village chief, who shares the collective village needs with the commune chief, who then shares the larger list of commune-wide needs with the district chief. All of these projects are reviewed at the November workshop, and posted for outside non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to review and adopt for the following year.

Trailblazer is one of only a handful of NGOs that are invited to this annual meeting, and we are honored to be included. More importantly, through this bottom-up process, we develop our annual work plan based on the needs and requests of the villages with whom we work. We then set out to find the funding necessary to complete these projects, and that is where our institutional, individual, and corporate supporters play a critical role.

As for the new funding for a school construction project in 2016, what a great situation for Trailblazer Foundation to be in - to know we already have a substantial portion of funding committed for building a school next year. This project that has been on the list of projects to be completed since last year's Integrated Workshop. We look forward to reporting that we have successfully raised the remaining funds for at least one school construction project during 2016.

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**Economic Development**

*A Village Fund that Supports its Villagers*

Trailblazer Foundation is most well-known for our work in helping the villages in Cambodia's Siem Reap Province secure clean, healthy, and abundant water - because water is life.
Yet, we also realize that our partner villages do not just need pure and plentiful water. They also need to make a living, so they can feed and educate their families. Thirty-six percent of Cambodians live below the poverty line, and most of those people are in rural areas (where Trailblazer focuses our efforts).

Typically in these situations, one of the greatest challenges to economic development is access to capital, even small amounts of funding, to start a new business or turn a craft into an income. Many rural villages in the Siem Reap Province had little-to-no access to international aid prior to Trailblazer's arrival. This is why we helped create a Village Fund process, an innovative approach to microfinance that enables villagers to get the capital they need to start or grow a business.

Presently, Village Funds consist of thirty loans across five villages, for a total of $5,280,000 riels, or US $1,300 dollars. With these funds being owned and managed locally, villagers can more easily obtain a micro-loan, and loan terms can be optimized to meet local needs. Loans are given to villagers to support such enterprises as the buying livestock, or fertilizers for their crops, securing medical care, starting a small business, or purchasing a motorbike or bicycle so they can have better access to work and school.

One of the great ironies of life in the Siem Reap Province is that, while almost two million tourists come to experience Angkor Wat each year, very little of that economic influx makes its way to the nearby rural villages. During our eleven years working with these communities, Trailblazer has found that access to our Village Fund loans has been a critical ingredient to many villagers improving their economic opportunities and situation.

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Staff/Board Profile

Meet Tom Skeele, Our New Communications and Development Director

In 2004-05, Tom Skeele took a seven-month trip around the world. During that time, two things occurred that led him to now being Trailblazer Foundation's first-ever Communications and Development Director: he visited Siem Reap and the Angkor Wat complex, and he decided he would someday change his career to work in an international context.

Upon his return to the U.S., Tom sought out volunteer consulting opportunities with nearby nonprofits that had projects in countries he had visited during his trip. Tom was living in southwest Montana, and Trailblazer Foundation - just four hours south - was one of the organizations with whom he worked.

Next, in 2010, Tom made that career change, shifting his advocacy work from conserving natural communities in the U.S. Northern Rockies, to sustaining human communities in developing countries throughout the world. Since then, he has served as a senior manager, and fundraising and communications consultant, to nonprofits and social enterprises in the areas of economic development, poverty alleviation and livelihoods, education, environmental conservation, health, human rights, renewable energy, sustainable community development, and women's empowerment.

Fast forward to today, and Tom is pleased to be leading Trailblazer's efforts to better tell its impressive story, and to boost TF's organizational resources so it has more success stories to share. As Tom said, "I love serendipity, and I love helping take organizations to their next level. Working with Trailblazer again, especially at this point in its history, is a great event and a great opportunity for me."

You can see Tom's full bio on the staff page of our website, [at this link](#).
Volunteer Profile

Nick Munro and Cortney Ward,
Digital Developers Gone Afield

As a smaller organization that is committed to doing more with less, volunteers are vital to Trailblazer's success. With more and more villages in Cambodia requesting our services, we increasingly value the support we get from volunteers - primarily in the field, but also here in the States. So, imagine our delight when we get a "two-in-one" team, such as with Nick Munro and Cortney Ward.

Nick and Cortney, who call San Francisco home, are both in the interactive digital design industry, directing teams of designers and developers on projects for Fortune 100 companies, design agencies, independent organizations, and all others in between.

Recently, Nick spoke with Trailblazer's Executive Director, Chris Coats, about his and Cortney's experience with Trailblazer. Nick explained that he had initially volunteered in Peru. Then, as he and Cortney were planning their trip to southeast Asia, they decided to find a similar volunteer experience. As Nick said, "Luckily, we found Trailblazer."

When asked what Nick liked most about his experience, he explained that, "Trailblazer proved the importance of the interaction between an organization and the people they are serving. The communities were so involved, that it made the work that much easier and fulfilling. Seeing the direct impact to each family, in only a few days, was beyond our expectations."

The support that volunteers like Nick and Cortney provide Trailblazer Foundation is beyond our expectations too. While we count on volunteers, we cannot expect their help - simply because they are just that, volunteers. So, we thank you, Nick and Cortney, for your time and commitment to Trailblazer. It means the world to us.

NOTE: Nick and Cortney's enthusiasm for their volunteer experience is palpable in this short video they produced about their time with Trailblazer. Also, you can read Nick's complete interview with Chris at the bottom of this link.

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