Angkor Wat—you may know it as the world’s largest religious monument, located outside of Siem Reap, Cambodia. The great irony about life in Siem Reap Province is that, while almost two million tourists visit Angkor Wat each year, very little of that economic influx makes its way to the nearby villages.

Trailblazer Foundation works with the poorest communities in the province. Without technical and financial support, these communities cannot develop beyond a level of subsistence, and remain in a state of poverty where survival is a struggle.

Trailblazer is most well known for helping our partner villages secure clean and abundant water—because water is life. For each of more than 50 villages, we start by working with the community to dig wells and construct water filters.

In addition to pure and plentiful water, these villages also need ample food to feed their families, good education facilities for their children, and opportunities to make a living. Our four program areas—health, food security, education, and economic development—represent a well-rounded strategy for not just giving our partner communities a proverbial fish, but helping them learn how to live in ways that are self-sustaining.

Trailblazer Foundation chooses our projects based on an annual local government assessment of village needs. We are honored to be one of only a handful of NGOs invited to this annual meeting. Through this bottom-up process, the villages themselves identify their needs. Their requests, in turn, direct our annual activities, which are “developing ripples of sustainability through community water projects.”

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The Buddha once said: “Without health, life is not life; it is only a state of languor and suffering.” Trailblazer Foundation’s first priority is the health of our partner communities.

In Cambodia’s Siem Reap province, water-borne diseases are the greatest threat to health. Our Health Program focuses on providing clean water, working with partner villages to dig wells, construct bio-sand water filters, and build latrines—a critical step in advancing rural community health.

Trailblazer Foundation also works to reduce insect-born disease by distributing mosquito netting for a family’s beds, and flip flops for their feet.

Our work ties into a worldwide health strategy known as WASH (Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene) to improve health, life expectancy, student learning, gender equality, and other key benefits in developing countries. WASH complements Trailblazer’s focus on using water projects to advance sustainable community development.

Food security is of utmost importance for any human. Malnutrition is a leading cause of sickness and death in Cambodia, and access to beneficial foods is the most direct route to countering this threat.

First, we build wells so villagers do not have to transport water long distances for their crops. A well allows villagers to irrigate gardens or create fish ponds for improving their own food supply, as well as provide income from the sale of excess vegetables. Our goal is to establish a well for every three to five families in these rural villages.

One way to break the cycle of poverty is to give children the opportunity to go to school. Building new government-supported schools is one of Trailblazer Foundation’s top priorities. Since our inception in 2004, we have built six schools and two libraries.

These schools have been well received by villagers and the federal government alike. Once completed, Trailblazer signs the deed over to the appropriate government agency, which is then responsible for providing the staff, salaries, and curriculum. This is critical to ensuring that the school will be sustained over time.

Trailblazer reduces another barrier to education: transportation. We provide hundreds of bicycles to our partner villages so students can travel to school. Not every village has a junior and senior high school; they are often shared between villages. Without a bicycle, many secondary level school students would simply drop out, because their school is just too far away.

Next, Trailblazer provides villagers with training on best agricultural and aquaculture practices. Our knowledge about these techniques comes from our agricultural test plots, where we research crop varieties and organic growing methods that result in the best yield.

As part of mentoring our partner villages in developing their own fund, Trailblazer requires villagers to make a small contribution to the fund whenever they receive our assistance in other program areas. That way, our program work also helps provide capital for their Village Fund.

Finally, Trailblazer provides technical training to the Village Finance Committees, and to villagers who want to establish farmer cooperatives for selling their excess crops.