

# Get the rope down the pit!

I live 5 minutes away from a slum on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, Cambodia.

Slums are to be seen in almost every third world country, and they don't stop growing. I have seen these shantytowns of despair in Manila, Bangkok, Johannesburg, and Rio de Janeiro. Humanity has existed on earth for thousands of years, yet we are experiencing a kind of humanity that has never before existed: the slum community. Most slum communities are less than fifty years old. More than one billion souls now live in slums. The United Nations predicts that the population of the world's slums will increase to two billion by 2020.

In the slums of Phnom Penh you often find seven or more family members competing for sleeping space in some small scrap-metal hut. Most of the family members are out every day working. Children as young as 5 or 6 are busy scavenging through rubbish heaps and along the roads and the market places of the city.

Two years ago I became frustrated with the fact that in spite of all the programs we had in the slums, the good schools different missions had set up, medical help, church activities, camps, and sport, the children were still going out every day to the streets.

I went to see a mother whose boy had been working for years. Va, 13 years old, would start his rounds at 3 every morning, pulling his cart up and down the streets picking up scrap metal, boxes, cans, anything that would end up at the recycle warehouse.

In that little wooden shack I asked Va's mother, "*How much does your son earn a day?*"

*"About a dollar, sometimes a bit more."*

I said, "*Here's a plan. We give you each week the same amount your son would get for working on the streets. You sign a contract that says: 1) you will now stop sending your boy out to work and 2) you make sure he goes every day to school.*"

She signed the contract. From that day on, Va has never been back on the streets. He attends school every day and even goes once a week to church.

Then we tried it with another needy family. Then another. And kids were finally leaving the streets. I've told my friends many times: "*The best thing I have witnessed while serving in Cambodia is when a parent puts their signature down on the contract, and by doing so breaks the chains that has kept their son or their daughter in bondage for so long.*"

I wish I could say that all those we wanted to help have left the streets for good; unfortunately some have decided to keep to their old ways. But for those who are out of the pit, we praise the Lord.

**I tell the parents who have signed the contract: *“If you do not keep to your word, we will not be able to help you. We will make sure your child is not out on the streets. Some nights we will even come over to your house and check if your child is in. We will also sneak into school and make sure your child is attending class.”***

**In the long term, the idea is to reduce the amount we give to the families and help the parents start some kind of micro-business so they eventually provide for their own children. This would be step number two of the whole process.**

**Not too long ago while travelling on a train in France, I opened my Bible to the story in Luke 14, where Jesus, during a meal, had healed a sick man. Jesus turned to the folks at the table and said: *“If your son or your sheep fell into a well on the Sabbath, would you not pull him out?”***

**The following day while going on a long walk on a beach, that verse came back to me. I could picture a huge well, an immense pit. It was not one child who had fallen into it but hundreds of children: boys and girls who had come to big cities like Phnom Penh, Siam Reap, Bangkok, or elsewhere to look for a better life. They had fallen into the pit of child labour. They had joined the many children who have already spent years collecting rubbish for a living. The pit was just too deep to get out. They were damned to stay down there in the filth, for who knows how many years.**

**Then I saw a rope near the well, a rope long enough to reach the children. As long as the rope was being held firm from the opening of the well, those children would be able to climb out and be free.**

**But then I saw a number of people around the well.**

**Some, who wouldn't do anything to help because it *“just wasn't the right time for that kind of work. And it was the Sabbath.”***

**Others were concerned that such an initiative would cost too much money.**

**Others felt that more research was needed before trying to get those children out.**

**Others who actually had a heart for children had set up a “children’s program” around the well, singing Gospel songs. A puppet show was presented and made the children down in the pit smile and even laugh at times. Before the team left they threw some candies down the pit.**

**The thing is: *the children were still in the pit*, still spending their lives scavenging through piles of trash for a living.**

**The “sponsoring program” described above is very much like a rope. As God’s people (in and out of Cambodia) give generously, others can keep that rope down in the pit. Only when the children are out of the pit for good can we get them properly plugged into a school and into a church.**

**A day or two later I picked up *l'Express*, a French secular magazine. I got reading an article about President Lula of Brazil. With 70% of the Brazilians behind him, very few presidents in Latin America have ever been so high in the polls.**

**When Lula was a child, he suffered from hunger and poverty, worked on the streets and lived in the slums. He says: "*My mum had 8 children. One worked in a coal mine, another sold fish, another in a bar. I was 7 years old when I was out with my brother Chico, selling oranges and peanuts on the streets.*"**

**President Lula's program known as "Bolsa Familia" is now saving the lives of over 11 million families. Each family gets around 30 dollars per month per child to get them into school. Lula says: "*If we give a bit of money to people who have nothing, they won't go out to buy a car or the latest flat screen TV, but they will go out to buy what they really need such as beans, rice, milk, flour, socks and shoes. "Bolsa Familia" has tremendously energized the small villages across Brazil. When a poor person gets 30 dollars from our program, he walks back home thanking the Good Lord.*"**

**Under Lula's government, 214 vocational training schools have been established in Brazil (compared to only 140 schools built throughout the whole of the twentieth century).**

**I would love to see Cambodian brothers and sisters with a heart for street children give an hour or more every week to be the mentor to children who are "*coming out of the pit.*" These "mentors" would come together regularly to pray, share ideas and encourage each other.**

**A friend of mine knows of a similar program in Latin America. The organization out there gives a weekly allowance to the school teacher. At the end of the week, only if the child has attended every class does the teacher then hand the allowance to the parents.**

**When I was a 4 year old boy, back in France, I fell into a well. (I have no idea how I got there!) I called for help. The neighbours came out. A man got a ladder and pulled me out. I thank God for this man.**

**I wonder how many children in Phnom Penh are stuck down in a well. Some would say 20,000. How many more across the whole of Cambodia? I wouldn't know. But as long as there is one down there, we need to be doing something.**

**--*Timothée Paton***