



# Reading Development in the service of Education For All

From pilot action to national policy,  
challenges and lessons learned

by

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## 1. The special context of Cambodia

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Cambodia experienced civil war for the last three decades of the twentieth century. The most tragic period of those decades, and of Cambodia's history, was the four years of genocide perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge regime which held power from April 1975 to January 1979. Approximately two million Cambodians, including almost all intellectuals, were killed or died in forced labor.

In addition to the human destruction, all social and economic structures were destroyed. Culture and education that together represent the soul of the nation and the source of all other civilizing influences were most affected. Pagodas and schools were destroyed or turned into prisons. Instead of going to school, all children and adults were forced to work in the rice fields. At the point in January 1979 when the Democratic Kampuchea regime of the Khmer Rouge was ousted by the intervention of the Vietnamese army and the new regime, the People's Republic of Kampuchea, was established, Mr. Raoul Jennar in his book entitled "*Les clés du Cambodge*", reported that: 90% of Cambodians who had held a certificate or a degree higher than the primary school level were dead or in exile.

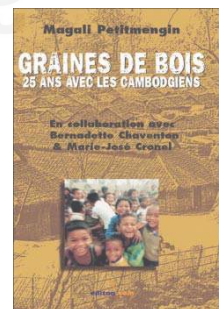
In the 80's, civil war between the four main Cambodian political factions continued to tear the country apart and led to ongoing insecurity in the country. Consequently, hundreds of thousands of Cambodians fled into exile and became refugees in neighboring countries, mainly in Thailand.

The civil war in Cambodia was one of the geopolitical consequences of the Cold War. The fall of the Soviet Union in 1989 and resulting change in the global political climate, led to negotiations between the four conflicting parties and the countries concerned. Ultimately, a peace agreement was signed in Paris in October 1991. This agreement allowed Cambodia to organize elections under the supervision of United Nations in 1993 and to benefit from the assistance of different international partners and NGOs.

## 2. SIPAR's background

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In 1982 a French woman, Mrs. Magali Petitmengin, visited Cambodian refugee camps in Thailand. Touched by the misery of these refugees and in particular by their lack of access to education, she decided on her return to France to found an NGO to help these refugees. SIPAR (Soutien à l'Initiative Privée pour l'Aide aux Réfugiés) was established in France to help in the reception and integration into French society of South East Asian refugees, mainly Cambodians selected by the French Government from camps in Thailand.



*Graines de bois, 25 ans avec les cambodgiens*  
written by Magali Petitmengin

At the same time in the camp of Phanatnikhom in Thailand, an education program was developed and implemented by a team of volunteers to prepare refugees for their relocation in France. In 1989, a French language school for vocational training was opened in Site 2 refugee camp for young Cambodians. It gave them the opportunity to learn different skills useful for their return to Cambodia. SIPAR participated in strengthening education through the use of teaching guides designed for and written by a team of Cambodian teachers. These teacher guides were originally prepared for teachers of refugee camps on the Thai – Cambodian border but were used later by the Ministry of Education in Cambodia. They consisted of a collection of fifteen volumes on three subjects, geography, natural sciences and mathematics for five levels of primary education.

A first children's library was also created and developed in Site 2 refugee camp in 1989, but it suffered from a critical lack of children's books in the Khmer language. Its purpose was to provide additional educational resources to improve the development of children, to enrich their culture and appetite for knowledge. Inevitably, the vast majority of books were translated from French and Thai, and lacking appropriate training and support, librarians had an uphill struggle in carrying out their mission with children.

### **3. SIPAR in its new mission**

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Following the peace agreement signed in Paris in 1991, the Cambodian refugee camps in Thailand were closed and over 300,000 refugees were repatriated to Cambodia under UN control.

Already known by the Cambodian education authorities through its various teaching guides, SIPAR was asked to provide support to the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) and to play a role in rebuilding the country by focusing its mission on the development of primary education. Following this request from MoEYS in 1990 SIPAR undertook to revise and correct the books so that they complied with the national curriculum. SIPAR then reprinted and distributed 95,000 teaching guides to many primary schools in 17 provinces of Cambodia.

From 1992, the mission of SIPAR undertook pedagogical support in four Provincial Teacher Training Colleges (PTTC). This pilot project was designed to help strengthen the quality of pre service training provided by teacher-trainers and at the same time to provide technical support to the Provincial Office of Education to improve the in-service training of teachers.

In the same year, 1992, the books from the first children's library in Site 2 refugee camp were repatriated to Cambodia. The objective was to continue the educational activity as a pilot action in a country where books and children's libraries were non-existent.

The first children's library was installed in a small wooden building outside one school. With the means at hand and few children's books - most were foreign titles translated into Khmer with handwritten labels stuck to the original pages - the SIPAR team tried to build on these meager resources by developing awareness sessions with both parents and public schools, designing and introducing edutainment activities as well as research books and documentation to meet the needs of children of different age groups.

Despite many difficulties, the first local library earned a good reputation for its educational role among teachers, provincial education authorities and parents. At the same time, the first school library was set up in another province and used as a supplementary resource for teaching reading as the government textbooks were still very weak. Between 1993 and 1995 more school libraries were developed in two other provinces

#### 4. School Library Program

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Following the success of the first schemes in these four provinces, a project to set up children's libraries in primary schools and to train librarians was designed and attracted funding from the European Union in 1996. The mission of SIPAR was thus reoriented towards reading development activities by increasing school libraries for children, their teachers and their communities. In 1999, the EU renewed its support for a program to create 30 more new school libraries in a further three provinces for a period of three years.



Based on the achievements of the previous program, a new agreement with the MoEYS to extend the network of school libraries was signed.

In 2002, two major achievements took place in the partnership between SIPAR and the Ministry of Education:

- For the management of the school library network at national level: the appointment and training of national officers in charge of school libraries within the Teacher Training, Primary Education and Early Childhood Departments of the MoEYS.
- For the implementation and management of school libraries at sub-national level: the appointment and training of officers at the Provincial and District Offices of Education.

In the same year, an external evaluation was conducted in order to evaluate the impact of school libraries on the communities. The results demonstrated that the school libraries were not used by the community because most people consider schools as administrative offices reserved only for pupils and their teachers.

It was revealed that people were afraid to drop in and children, reluctant; especially when they didn't have uniforms. (All students in Cambodia must wear uniform: white shirt and blue trousers or skirt.) Furthermore the school opening hours were not compatible with the working hours of parents and other community members (villagers, children not attending school, youth, Buddhist monks etc.) and most of these libraries did not offer books adapted to adult or young people.

In term of mission strategy, SIPAR then faced two new challenges in:

- The formal education sector: to continue to develop school libraries in primary schools which support the MoEYS in reaching its objective of managing a national library network and the training of librarians within the framework of the national Child Friendly School program..
- The non-formal education sector: to launch new projects outside the public school system that provides access to reading and education that meet the needs of local communities. This is crucial in Cambodian where around 40% of adults have a very low literacy level and where the lack of access is a real brake on the reduction of poverty and achieving the millennium objectives.

In 2005 following the creation of 100 school libraries in 16 provinces and the training of 500 librarians, the Ministry of Education, recognizing SIPAR's experience, asked SIPAR to extend its intervention to the national level. Thanks again to financial support from European Union, a new five-year project (2006-2010) entitled "Development of a literate environment for improving the quality of education and the fight against illiteracy in Cambodia" was launched. This project was in close partnership with the MoEYS and aimed to support three pillars of activities:

- Strengthen and expand the school library network nationwide.
- Develop Centers of Education for All (CEFA), equivalent to Community Reading Centers at commune level in three targeted provinces, according to the new decentralization reform.
- Produce and increase the quantity, quality and variety of children's books in the Khmer language.

Between 2010 and 2012, after twenty years of effort in school library development and capacity building at all levels, a network of school libraries was established; an Office of Management of School Library Development and Librarian Training was created within the Department of Curriculum Development (DCD); and the primary school library standards<sup>1</sup> were published and disseminated.



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<sup>1</sup> Sample evaluated measurements that determine the state of a library by focusing on human resources, material resources, documentation and functioning. All related persons, especially school management members and librarians, must know these measures in order to develop school libraries with quality and efficiency.

The development and implementation of school libraries is the result of the close collaboration and mutual trust between SIPAR and several departments of the MoEYS such as the DCD, Primary Education Department and Teacher Training Department, jointly with two Organizations: SVA and Room to Read.

After focusing on the support to the setting up of libraries, the building of book collections, the training of trainers, training of librarians and disseminating primary school libraries standards, our current activities are mainly focused in collaborating with associate Departments, especially the DCD on:

- The implementation and development of Referral Libraries<sup>2</sup>, a new pilot project led by DCD
- The introduction of trainee teachers to the pedagogical use of libraries and books during their two-year pre service training in the eighteen PTTC.
- The design and organization of training sessions for librarians in conformity with national standards.

a. Partnership between SIPAR, SVA and Room to Read: complementary synergy

Before 2009 these three NGOs all collaborated with the MoEYS but worked separately in the field of reading development. Each NGO had its own target provinces, target schools and training contents. In fact each NGO has its own approach to children libraries:

- SIPAR is focusing on reading for discovery, for development of curiosity, for pleasure and for personal development
- SVA is more focusing on reading for culture transmission, especially by using the traditional storytelling
- Room to Read aims mainly in reading for academic learning, reading as it links with school programs

These different approaches are complementary and represent three pedagogical dimensions for the field of reading development in Cambodia.



Since 2009, the three NGOs have found common ground in working together in the primary school library development sector. In this new collaboration, a school library development working group was created in order to enhance the MoEYS school library development, school librarian training and the elaboration of national reading policy. The conception, publication and dissemination of primary school library standards was one of the main achievements to come

<sup>2</sup> A library already in service and whose director and teaching staff have a strong will to develop it qualitatively.

The final goal of a Referral Library is to perform the following functions:

- Ensure the normal service of a library for students and teachers of the institution as well as for the community.
- Receive directors, librarians, teachers, community members, education officers of the provinces and districts in study visits and exchanges of experience on the creation, management, use and sustainability of school libraries.
- A library that receives librarian's practicum during their basic training.

from the effective collaboration between the three NGOs and the MoEYS. Two main common action plans for the future are to advocate for and facilitate the creation of both a regular Reading Day and a Librarian Training Center in Cambodia.

## 5. Reading For All Program

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The needs in this initiative are evident, but the MoEYS and the majority of development partners (multi and bilateral cooperation, donors, banks and NGOs) seem to agree that priority should be given to basic education (primary + lower secondary).

As stated before Cambodian has a unique educational context having lost an entire generation and with the consequence that cultural habits were broken in the family, the community and the nation. With 90% of teachers, professors and writers killed and almost all written materials destroyed, the habit of reading was destroyed smashed at the roots. As a result most to Cambodians “Reading” means “Working”. The rapid development of access to other media such as radio and TV also acted to stifle reading culture.



Based on the results of evaluation and the real needs in terms of reading and access to Education for All, SIPAR has also concentrated on reading development in Non Formal Education. It has tried to increase reading habits in the community with a slogan “When people don’t reach for books, we must make the books reach people”. Under this initiative, since 2000 different activities related to Reading for all have been launched and developed to get the message across to populations in the most remote areas where non-formal education is not available.

### a. Mobile Libraries



In 2000 SIPAR also instigated a mobile library program to serve the suburbs of Phnom Penh and surrounding provinces. It has converted mini-vans into mobile libraries, run by driver-librarians who have been trained in reading related activities. . They provide children with different experiences such as storytelling, free reading, games, and creative activities as well as a book loan service to them and their families. In addition small book



lending units are entrusted to local voluntary correspondents. This can greatly increase access to books for all. These libraries operate in the disadvantaged suburbs of Phnom Penh, villages in Kandal and Kampong Speu provinces. They also reach out to community preschools, centers for vulnerable women and children (in partnership with other NGOs such as Nyemo and CWCC), orphanages, Disabled Children Rehabilitation Centers and Hospitals (in partnership with UNICEF and la Chaine de l'Espoir association). In all these locations, but particularly in the community preschools, parenting programs and centers for vulnerable women and children, specific activities that familiarize children with books from an early age are implemented with the objective of and to enriching relationships between parents and their children through the joy of reading together.



Eight mobile libraries each with an experienced team consisting of a mobile librarian, accompanied by young Cambodian volunteers have developed and introduced an innovative procedure for conducting reading-related activities that gives regular access to supplemental reading materials for children and their families. This initiative reaches out to 80 target villages that had no extracurricular framework for reading.

By empowering local volunteers, often the village chief, a retired teacher, a shop keeper, a high school student, or preschool teacher in a community preschool, the program introduces new practices of lending books to children and their families, in these communities. All the activities run by the mobile libraries are complementary to SIPAR's school library programs and serve to bridge the gaps between school and home. (It should be noted that Cambodian students only go to school for half a day, 4 hours, so there is little time for reading practice in the classroom. When the schools do have a library, the limited amount of reading materials available mean that they cannot provide a lending service.)

In villages reading activities conducted by SIPAR's mobile libraries together with the book-borrowing facilities increase children's learning time and reading practice in a child friendly climate. As mentioned before families are often reticent about entering the school library. Parents better support reading practice of their children if they can easily access books near their homes and profit from an introduction to the process via the parenting education program. The adaptability of the method, the use of local volunteers and the rotation of reading materials around the sites is beneficial. In future establishing membership to an Associative Resource Center with fees to be paid by the communities will ensure the continuity of the project and its easy transferability to other provinces in the country.

#### b. Commune Centers of Education For All

This project involves the creation of Centers of Education for All (CEFA), which were designed to act as community resource centers in partnership with Commune Councils and the Department of Non-formal Education of MoEYS. The project was started in 2002 and set out to provide rural populations with a wide range of rich and various documentary resources. Topics include literature, agriculture, health, and environment. These commune libraries are located in the heart of communes in Kratie, Prey Veng, Kandal and Kampong Cham provinces.



They are directly managed by the commune council through a management committee. Local volunteer staff act as animators and are responsible for daily activities. SIPAR provides technical support to Commune Council members and the animator to ensure efficient and sustainable access to books and information.

#### c. Reading Corners in Pediatric Hospitals



The first reading corner in Pediatric Hospital was initiated in 2008 when UNICEF requested SIPAR support to introduce a play area in the National Pediatric Hospital in Phnom Penh. Following a yearlong successful pilot, the partnership with UNICEF was strengthened in 2009 and a project that set up reading corners for children-patients in 9 more provincial hospitals was initiated. The training and the monitoring of the reading corner animators (local contractual staff) was undertaken by the SIPAR team.

Extension of this project to other provincial pediatric hospitals in Cambodia is under consideration.



In addition, another partnership has just been consummated with La Chaine de l'Espoir, a French medical NGO founded in 1988 to give access to medical care for the poorest children. This partnership has taken SIPAR into a new area of education by combining reading activities with school support activities tutoring poor children-patients who need long stay hospitalization or consultation. The school-reading corner is located in Pavilion of cardiac children of Calmette Hospital in Phnom Penh.

#### d. Libraries in prisons

“Every institution shall have a library for the use of all categories of prisoners, adequately stocked with both recreational and instructional books, and prisoners shall be encouraged to make full use of it”. This is how the United Nations defines the Standard Minimum Rule 40 for the Treatment of Prisoners. It is also specified in articles 13 and 37 in the new law on prisons promulgated in December 2011 in Cambodia.

In partnership with the General Department of Prisons of the Ministry of the Interior of Cambodia and the Office of High Commissioner for Human Rights of the United Nations (UNHCR), four libraries were opened as a pilot project in 2011 in the provincial prisons of Battambang and Siem Reap as well as, Phnom Penh Correctional Centers 1 and 2. Within the framework of the reform of the prison system, and to strengthen education opportunities, self-training and social reintegration of prisoners, a huge project to develop libraries is on the way for 2012-2014 in 26 prisons of Cambodia with co-funding from the European Union. In the future, more than 70 prison guards and 70 prisoner assistants will be trained in librarianship and free reading tuition will be made available to 15,000 prisoners, to guards and their families.



## 6. Publishing program

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In 2000, after conducting several studies on the taste and needs of young people and teachers, SIPAR launched a Publishing Program to publish educational and fiction books in Khmer language. This was SIPAR's response to the crucial needs of books for libraries and for general public both in Phnom Penh and in other provinces in Cambodia. The main objectives were to provide good quality supplementary reading materials for formal and non-formal education structures, to extend the choice of Khmer books available for children, teachers, educators and general public, to support the emergence of the publishing sector, to develop human resources and to enhance skills in this sector.



a. Different book collections

With technical support from an international publishing specialist and regular training sessions given by authors, editors and graphic designers, a seven person Cambodian team is working on every aspect of book production: editorial conception, text writing, text translation, copy editing, layout, marketing, promotion and distribution. SIPAR has created a number of series:



✓ **"Picture Books"**

This collection is unique of its kind in Cambodia. It is made up of books for children from 0 to 3 years old who can start to handle and become familiar with books even before learning to read.

✓ **"First Stories"**

This collection is created for children who are starting to read (3-7 year-olds). Each book contains an easy to read short story with pleasing illustrations.

✓ **"I Would Like to Read"**

This series was launched in 2004 with the object of giving the penchant for reading to 8 year-olds and up. It consists of traditional Khmer tales and foreign contemporary stories. The illustrated stories are accompanied by cartoons, games, documentary pages, activities, jokes and riddles.

✓ **"I Can Read"**

This new collection, launched in 2012, aimed at competent readers from 10 years upwards who want to enjoy reading alone with suitable well illustrated stories.

✓ **"Youth literature"**

This encompasses world literature so that the Cambodian public can discover universal literature. International classics such as The Little Prince, Pinocchio and Pipi Longstocking are translated and published in this collection.

✓ **"Discover the Animals"**

This collection allows young readers to explore the animal kingdom with large and beautiful illustrations accompanied by short emotive texts. It includes a series of books on animals classified in different categories, with their habits, way of living and their specific characteristics.

✓ **"I would like to know"**

Created in 2001, this collection is composed of documentary books for young people from 12 to 16 years-old. They are small encyclopaedias easy to read for pleasure and to stimulate interest and enquiry into very varied subjects including history, geography, nature, and the sciences.

✓ **"Easy way to"**

Launched in 2006, this collection was created for populations in rural areas, particularly farmers, and is designed to inform on a range of subjects in agriculture and health.

✓ **"Individual titles"**

*Stay Alive My Son*, by Pin Yathay, is the autobiography of a Cambodian who survived the Khmer Rouge regime.

*Apsaras of Angkor* is a splendid book with photographs to discover Cambodian arts and culture through the royal ballet and the temples of Angkor.

*Cambodia year zero* is the testimony of a Frenchman who lived through the fall of Phnom Penh, in April 1975.

b. Book production

As publishing is still in its infancy in Cambodia, it is extremely difficult to find information on the topics of science and culture and even more so to find authors and illustrators able to simplify this information and make it accessible to young Khmer readers.

The creation of documentary books using Cambodian resources takes much time. A minimum period of two years is needed from the choice of the topic to final publication of the book. . Nevertheless, the publishing program of SIPAR must fulfil a double mission: first to publish good quality books in the Khmer language for Cambodian children, and second to train Cambodian young people in the various stages of book production: writing, illustration, editing, copy editing, designing, production, and marketing.

This training takes time and prolongs the production schedule. However, it is important to keep a constant cycle of production in order to regularly provide new books to the young readers. Therefore, SIPAR at times needs to work with foreign publishers and publish titles that already exist in foreign editions. This requires great care in selection to ensure appropriate content and presentation.

At the present time, SIPAR's publishing program is funded by institutional and private donors and this does not give the sustainability needed for a viable independent publishing house. So SIPAR is looking to the future and currently considering an economic model to transform itself into financially autonomous publishing house.

## 7. Challenges

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Despite the major evolutions and achievements in reading and book sector in Cambodia observed during these last years, we are facing many challenges such as:

a. In the school library sector

The need of capacity building of technical staff in related MoEYS departments, especially in the Department of Curriculum Development (which is in charge of school library network management) and in the Teacher Training Department, is crucial to develop the national policies on solid basis.

By officially recognizing the function and position, MoEYS has begun to encourage librarians and taken a major step in according them the double shift of salaries as teachers when they work fulltime<sup>3</sup> but the official basic training for librarians remains only 9 days and the absence of any librarian training center is a major obstacle for library development and its sustainability.

The development of referral libraries represents a sound strategy for facilitating the training of new librarians as well as offering valuable experience to help primary and secondary school directors to create and manage their own school libraries. At this stage, the referral library project is a pilot scheme with 10 sites in 8 provinces; one primary/middle school and 9 high schools. It is led by DCD and was developed in close collaboration with SIPAR. It marks a new and important step for an institution such as a Department of Ministry of Education to have the ability to initiate and implement such a scheme through its own initiative in collaboration with partners. It now needs to be extended and then, with the collaboration from other organizations, officially recognized as a full project by MoEYS.

b. In non formal education sector / public reading sector

Developing reading for the general public is fraught with difficulties both in development and sustainability. First of all, there is no clear national policy and no central institution to support, develop and manage a public reading network. The Department of Books and Reading within the ministry of Culture and Fine Arts is not very active, it concentrated only on management of the National Library in Phnom Penh. For almost 20 years the Non Formal Education Department within MoEYS, supported by development partners such as UNESCO and NGOs, has run the Community Learning Centers (CLC). In theory these have a reading component but fewer than 250 CLCs exist in the whole country which has more than 1600 communes. Most of the CLC that do exist do not work because of their inflexible conception and the high running cost. The small decentralized budgets at commune level, the lack of motivation and transparency in management, the weak capacity for community mobilization by leaders seem to be the principal obstacles for community reading development and sustainability.

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<sup>3</sup> In Cambodia the primary school teachers work only part time. When they work fulltime, the MoEYS give them a double salary.

Over the last 10 years, SIPAR has supported the creation of Centers of Education For All (CEFA) at Commune level. These are conceived as more flexible in conception than CLCs and involve from the beginning members of Commune Council, village chiefs, pagoda support committees, and school directors. CEFAs offer thousands of books of all kinds and are open free to all but the attendance remains low (an average of 18% of the population of the commune says that they go to their CEFA and borrow books. Those that do are mainly young people and children). More than one third of the 29 CEFAs still have difficulties in collecting funds to pay regularly incentives to local animators and to renew printed resources. The CEFAs are currently directly run by Commune Councils and linked with the Non Formal education Department. They should be recognized as Reading Centers or the Library Section of CLC within the national non formal education framework in the near future so that both can more easily share common issues, experiences and lessons learned.

SIPAR is using its experience to develop a new approach by using CEFAs and mobile libraries as Resources Centers:

- To send books as near as possible to the people far from educational services at the lowest cost,
- By tailoring, wherever necessary, the places and means of reaching people to the particular local situation
- By regularly enriching the stock of books through a borrowing system from the resource center.

The role of local actors for book promotion is crucial for the everyday functioning and future sustainability of trading. These 'book promoters' are sensitized and trained by experienced librarians and have a high level of motivation and commitment. They are recruited from a wide number of sources: young volunteers sent on mission to rural communes, village or school volunteers from youth clubs, local voluntary correspondents based in villages, community based preschool teachers, parenting facilitators, and staff in hospitals or health centers. Without such voluntary local book promoters, the will to volunteer and the willingness to share resources, Reading For All will continue to face difficulties of sustainability in Cambodia.

SIPAR will continue to manage and develop Reading For All with partners such as UNESCO while continuing to collaborate with the Cambodian government with regard to its form and future. The cooperation with the department of primary education, DCD and the department of non-formal education of the Ministry of Education will be ongoing in line with the national Education For All Policy, within the framework of reading development and the fight against illiteracy.

## SIPAR at a glance

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SIPAR is an international non-profit organization which has been established in Cambodia since 1991. SIPAR is one of the main players in the educational field, combating illiteracy among young people and adults through promotion of books and reading.

Over 20 years, SIPAR has developed a network of reading places, fixed and mobile, in order to support reading development in Cambodia. These reading places are kept working thanks to generous donors and partners.

Furthermore, SIPAR, aware of the publishing situation in Cambodia, and the lack of books in Khmer language for young people, initiated a publishing program in 2000, with several series for readers from birth to adulthood.

The SIPAR network achievements to date include:

- 230 Primary school libraries, located in all provinces of Cambodia
- 29 Commune libraries (Centers of Education for All: CEFA), located in the countryside
- 8 mobile libraries that daily serve 100 sites in the disadvantaged areas around Phnom Penh
- 10 reading corners in pediatric wards in 10 hospitals
- 4 libraries in 4 prisons
- 2000 librarians trained
- More than 80 titles edited and printed – a total of more than one million copies

