Social Work Experience in Cambodia
Edited by Emily Pritchard

Chloe Walker, University of Montana Social Work and Sociology Senior, spent Spring Semester 2014 interning abroad in Cambodia. Below is a brief interview with Chloe about her time there. For more about Chloe’s experience, visit her travel blog: http://chloewalker.blogspot.com/

What organization did you intern with in Cambodia?

“The Cambodian Organization for Children and Development (COCD) is a non-political, non-religious, non-governmental agency that works to protect children. COCD takes a holistic, system-related approach to development and understands that there are many factors that affect child protection. After developing its strategic plan at the end of 2012, COCD established its 4 primary goals and directions: child protection and development, economic empowerment, social empowerment and COCD capacity building. I really appreciated this approach because its takes into account how being socially and economically empowered have an extreme impact on child protection, just as availability of basic necessities (food, clean water, education, sanitation facilities, etc.) and protection from abuse do. COCD works to empower families and communities as well as work with schools, build schools and sanitation facilities, provide direct protection to sexually and physically abused children...the programs are extremely well-rounded.”

As an intern, what were some of your tasks/projects?

“In terms of work that I did specifically, it varied. When I first arrived COCD believed that their website had been hacked. Much of the information was lost and false information was put up on the website. I spent my first weeks reviewing reports and writing content for the website. I essentially
reorganized, rewrote, and re-uploaded all the content that is currently on the site. Other projects included reviewing current project reports and writing summaries to add to the 2013 annual report (and doing other work to this document), creating a truncated version of the strategic plan, interviewing beneficiaries and writing case studies for the website and donors, and primarily authoring a US Embassy small grant application. I was able to finish tasks faster than what my supervisor expected, which worked out well because I was able to gain more experiences that definitely aided in my lifelong learning and career-related skill building.”

How were your first weeks at the organization?

“I can honestly say that the organization exceeded my expectations, despite the fact that I tried not to have any. Everyone treated me with such warmth and kindness and I am very grateful. I became friends with the Khmer people that work there and it was an excellent way to get to know the culture and pick up bits of language. They love to practice their English skills and loved to listen to me stumble my way around some Khmer phrases with my silly American accent. An Australian woman, the only other native English speaker at the agency, helped me immensely not only to orient myself to the agency but she also showed me around Phnom Penh and made me feel very welcome and at ease.”

Describe your typical work day. What did you do with your time off?

“My day generally began with my alarm going off between 6:00 am and 6:30 am…Work started at 8:00 am and I lived fairly close so I could leave around 7:50. When I got to work I usually popped in the downstairs office and said hello to some coworkers and then headed upstairs…Cambodians love
to eat (and nap) so lunch is two hours, from 12:00-2:00. Most of the time I would go with two of my coworkers to a local Khmer place which generally consists of picking 3 entrees of whatever the cook decided to make and a plate of rice. This was particularly fun for me because I always told them to get whatever and I had an opportunity to try it, even though many times I had no idea what it was I was eating... Lunch with them didn’t generally take very long so some days I would go back and skype with family members or I’d go to the market if I needed something... Then work would resume at 2:00 pm until 5:00 pm... My nights played out differently. Sometimes I’d just hang out at home and cook and I spend my time reading or watching a movie or something. Other times I’d go out to dinner with a friend or do homework at a coffee shop. It’s not advised to walk around alone at night, especially recently as there had been a lot more purse snatching instances. It’s unfortunate because it gets dark here around 6:30 so if I wanted to go more than a few blocks I’ll grab a tuktuk, but random evening ‘wandering’ around is not something I did. Then I’d shower and go to bed usually around 10:00 pm.”

“Weekends provided a much better time to explore. It’s nice to get up in the morning before it gets too hot and head to the markets or shops. Sometimes just wandering around Wat Phnom is fun because it’s shaded and there are always a lot of things going on and I love to people-watch. There are endless amounts of restaurants to try out with any kind of food you could want. Weekends are also good for doing boring things like laundry.”

**What was your living situation like?**

“I lived by myself in an apartment. The apartment was very nice; it was spacious and had a large bed, a western style bathroom and a kitchen with an oven, which is rare. It was very close to work and to the Russian Market, which I loved, and it was also not in an area where a lot of expats live. I liked this because it allows you to see more of the culture and the way that the locals who live nearby interact. The building in general was great and so were the guards who were always on duty, another thing that was comforting. I had never lived alone before; I’d always had roommates so that was a tough transition for me. There are always people posting on Facebook who are looking for roommates so moving in with other people was definitely an option if I wanted it. However, I decided it would be a growing experience for me and I decided to stick with it and I’m glad I did. I’d learned to enjoy being alone more than I ever had and it was a nice oasis from the chaos of the city sometimes.”
Upon reflecting on your internship experience, are you more or less committed to a career in Social Work? What experiences have contributed to this?

“I am definitely more committed. I know now though that working a desk job the majority of the time is not what I want to do right now. I am the kind of person who thrives on interaction with people so for my next social work job, I am working directly with clients on a daily basis. However, after seeing such animosity and marginalization in Cambodia, I am all the more inspired to do my part to help where I can. Cambodia stole my heart and I am determined to make a difference, wherever that may be. When you see so many people who struggle to have the basic necessities in life and who are treated unfairly, when you see people who live in oppressive social systems…you wonder why more people haven’t been helping all along.”

Now that the internship is complete, what would you say was the greatest reward about this experience? What was the greatest challenge?

“I have learned so much about the world, but the most rewarding thing is what I’ve learned about myself. Outside of the initial loneliness and isolation I felt during my first weeks, the biggest challenge and biggest reward are closely linked. I have learned to be a more positive person. Negativity and complaining rarely have a valid place in the world we live in in the United States. I am not claiming that everything is jolly and perfect here, but I have gained such an incredible
perspective and the little things that used to bother me don’t really any more. I have such a passion for living a life that makes a difference as well as one that makes me happy. We have amazing opportunities and resources here to make life the best it can be and to positively impact those who are around us. I feel like I have more of a zeal for life and finding joy in little things, because I know how fortunate I am to live the life I do.”

“This is also one of the biggest challenges I’m currently experiencing…I am trying to have patience because not everyone has had the experiences I have, and I am sure that I had a complaining spirit about me before I left. I truly have no room to judge and I’m working on trying to share my new mentality rather than be frustrated because others don’t share it.”

Do you have any words of advice for future interns as they prepare for international internships and living in a new country/culture?

“My advice would be to pick up a bit of the language before leaving, something I had only done minimally before arriving. Also, say yes to nearly everything, especially when locals invite you to things. While I was grateful for some of the western friends I made, my favorite times were spent doing things with Cambodians that totally expanded my experiences and made them all the richer. For someone like me, who hadn’t really done much traveling beforehand, there isn’t much that you can do to prepare. It was shocking in every possible way, many being positive ways. I think that understanding the history in the country and being up to date on the current political happenings is the best thing to do. All of this history is still so relevant and knowing about it will be priceless in your interactions with the locals.”