

# Crafting Laos and Cambodia

THE CREATIVE RESOURCE GUIDE:



# The Creative Resource Guide: Crafting Laos and Cambodia

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Crafting Laos and Cambodia**

**Published by:**

Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF)  
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ISBN: 9789811416088

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# Preface

The Asia-Europe Foundation (ASEF) is delighted to present The Creative Resource Guide: Crafting Laos and Cambodia, a new series on crafts and innovation in Cambodia and Lao PDR. Published through our arts & culture portal culture360. ASEF.org, this series of country-specific guides looks at different types of organisations (e.g. Not-for-profit, NGOs, private businesses) that have combined century-old creative practices with new design approaches, to produce unique objects and products.

Researched and written by Magali An BERTHON, a freelance cultural documentarist with extensive research knowledge in Southeast Asian textiles and sustainable processes, this guide presents a directory of 20 most pioneering organisations in Cambodia and the Lao PDR engaged in crafts and design initiatives around 3 main thematic areas: heritage preservation, innovation and community empowerment. For each theme, the guide also features one in-depth interview with a key player in the sector. A series of interactive maps visually documents each section: the silk production cycle (preserving ancient traditions), the most innovative upcycling techniques for textiles, metal, plastic and paper (innovation beyond traditions) and the challenges faced by such initiatives in terms of empowerment of local communities particularly women. Most of the initiatives featured are in fact success stories in terms of improvement of working conditions and training opportunities, ultimately addressing gender inequality. In selecting the featured initiatives, strong attention was given to initiatives run by local Cambodian and Laotians as well as to projects located in the peripheries and rural areas, away from the main urban centres.

The objective of this guide is to provide an overview of the most innovative projects in Cambodia and the Lao PDR that can be of use to other organisations who are facing similar challenges. The Directory offers the opportunity to connect with like-minded professionals and eventually setup new collaborations. Through this new series, culture360.ASEF.org continues to respond to the existing gaps in the information on arts and culture in Asia and Europe. In doing so, it also contributes to the Agenda 2030, particularly SDG 16.1 (access to information) <sup>1</sup>.

We invite you to discover new crafting initiatives in Cambodia and Lao PDR and we look forward to continuing this series next year, with new exciting initiatives merging arts, crafts and design in Asia and Europe.

Valentina RICCARDI  
Senior Project Manager, Culture Department, ASEF  
Singapore, May 2019

<sup>1</sup> Ensure public access to information and protect fundamental freedoms, in accordance with national legislation and international agreements - <http://indicators.report/targets/16-10/>

# Introduction



*‘Craft, like history, is a tool that people use to negotiate their roles and places within the material and social environment.’<sup>2</sup> Anthropologists Clare M. Wilkinson-Weber and Alicia Ori Denicola efficiently outlined here the value and the potential of hand making in empowering local communities. Artisanal skills are usually passed from generation to generation, often within families, ensuring the perpetuation of century-old techniques. Moreover, these skills have the potential to be activated and integrated in contemporary approaches to bring exciting economic opportunities. In that sense, crafts have been included in wider sector of the creative industries, which comprises design, architecture, advertising, digital, R&D, fashion, and publishing.*

The Creative Resource Guide considers how crafts and design can be effective agents of social change in countries such as Lao People’s Democratic Republic (PDR) and Cambodia. These two adjacent Southeast Asian countries each

possess a distinctive artistic heritage rooted in a rich history marked by local particularism, religious beliefs, but also ethnic diversity, regional cultural exchanges, and colonial influences. In Lao PDR and Cambodia, handicrafts are mostly the product of independent makers, cooperatives, and makers groups, mostly composed of women, who live in rural areas. Recent regain of interests from designers and students for handmade products have also led to collaborations in a dialogue between design and craft. Design is an emerging field, which is only taught in handful of schools in the capital cities of Phnom Penh and Vientiane. Craft and design sometimes overlap to produce objects of utilitarian and aesthetic value, turning away from mass-manufacturing standardisation. In this book, the projects presented will respond to this wider definition of contemporary crafts where creativity meets cultural heritage.

This guide showcases the different models of organisations involved in the field, from transnational institutions to non-profits and social businesses, highlighting the dynamics of this growing sector. Working in different scales and capacities, these companies often implement professional development and vocational training programmes to help makers develop their technical and marketing skills. To work with underprivileged or marginalised communities, these organisations follow fair-trade guidelines and often provide health care benefits. Finding new markets remains key to ensure sustainable revenues, which would afford makers and their families a long-term perspective.

Though makers appear as the recipients of professional development and training programmes, their active role in the field is central to these endeavours’ success. In countries such as Cambodia and Lao PDR, where the majority of the population still lives in the countryside, developing these activities has the potential to generate invaluable sources of income to alleviate poverty and fight phenomena of rural exodus.

This book presents an overview of a variety of existing artisanal skills through the example of a selection of Cambodian and Laotian organisations. UNESCO describes handicrafts as ‘made without restriction in terms of quantity and using raw materials from sustainable resources.’<sup>3</sup> The book highlights projects that creatively engage with local resources, as well as some initiatives that focus on heritage conservation and fair-trade practices with a social impact.

**The objectives of the Creative Resource Guide are to provide:**



A directory of contemporary creative initiatives in Cambodia and Lao PDR divided in three separate themes: heritage preservation, innovation, and community



In-depth interviews of key players sharing their experience in the field



An overview of the challenges and recommendations to get in touch with makers’ groups and implement fruitful collaborations

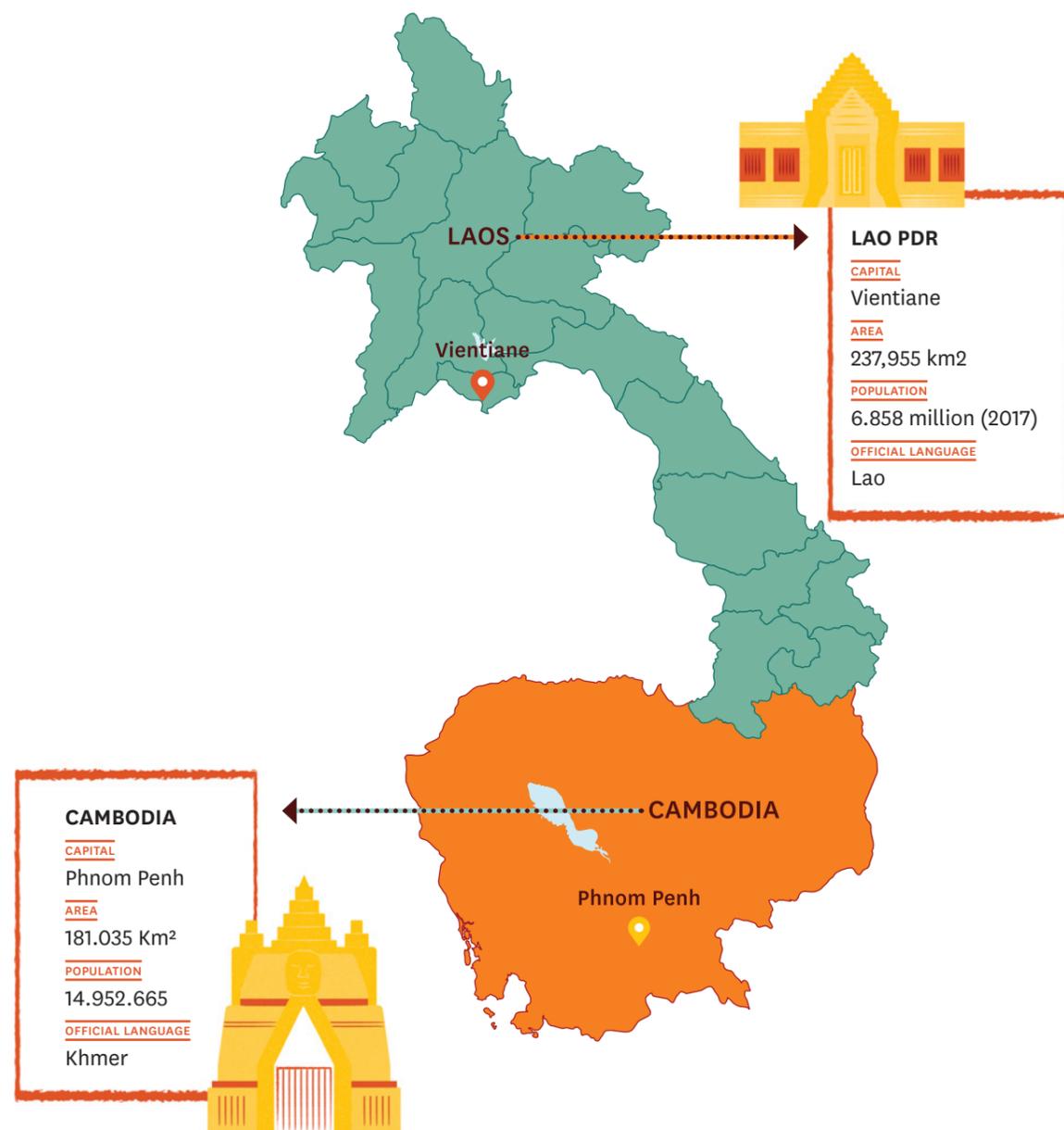
The Creative Resource Guide is based on a series of interviews, periods of fieldwork, and a survey relying on NGOs and governmental reports and a number of press articles, as well as research on key organisations in the sector. Organisations were chosen for their authority, seniority, ethical practice and for the quality of their products. Due to Cambodia and Laos PDR’s respective contemporary history, these initiatives are often the result of foreign investment. In this book, emphasis has been given as much as possible on local projects founded by Cambodian and Laotian people. Capital cities and touristic hubs such as Vientiane and Luang Prabang in Lao PDR, and Phnom Penh and Siem Reap in Cambodia usually welcome the majority of the projects. In addition, particular effort was made to showcase a range of programmes located in remote areas or involving resources and makers based outside the main urban centres.

This Creative Resource Guide is non-exhaustive and focuses on the genesis of each initiative, the making processes and the social and environmental impact. It was designed for designers, researchers, educators, artists, heritage policy makers, non-profit managers, and social entrepreneurs as well as anyone with an interest for Southeast Asia, crafts, and cultural customs. For the purpose of clarity and concision, after the introduction, this book will use the term “Laos” to designate Lao PDR.

<sup>2</sup> Clare M. Wilkinson-Weber and Alicia Ori Denicola, eds., *Critical Craft: Technology, Globalization, and Capitalism*, London: Bloomsbury, p1.

<sup>3</sup> UNESCO/CCI Symposium, “Crafts and the International Market: Trade and Customs Codification,” Manila, 1997.

## LAOS AND CAMBODIA: COMMON THREADS

**BUDDHISM**

Buddhism of the Theravada tradition is the primary religion of both countries. Animist traditions and beliefs in ancient spirits also remain quite prominent, especially in rural areas. Laos welcomes in particular a wealth of religious monuments such as That Luang, the golden-covered sacred stupa (temple), in Vientiane.

**COLONISATION**

At the end of the 19th century, the Southeast Asian region was marked by French colonisation. Cambodia became a French protectorate in 1863 and Laos in 1893, uniting its territories into one country. The French associated Laos and Cambodia to Viet Nam to form the larger colony of Indochina. Both countries reclaimed their full independence in 1954.

**ETHNICITY**

Khmer people are the main ethnic group in Cambodia, counting for about 90% of the population. Cambodia also welcomes indigenous ethnic minorities such as the Khmer Loeu living in remote mountainous and forest areas of Ratanakiri, Mondulakiri, Stung Treng and Kratie province. Immigrant populations of Chinese, Vietnamese and Cham origins have also been established in Cambodia for centuries. At the opposite, Laos counts a highly diverse population in terms of ethnicity. About 49 distinct ethnicities consisting of 160 ethnic groups live across Laotian lands. The dominant Ethnic Lao counts for 52.5% of the total population.

**GARMENT FACTORY**

Since the 1990s, Cambodia has heavily relied on the garment industry to support its economy, employing about 500.000 people (2013). Factories, which are mostly foreign-controlled by Chinese and Malaysians, are spread around the capital city of Phnom Penh and in the neighbouring province of Takeo. In 2018, monthly salaries have increased up to 182 USD. In Laos, there are only about 30,000 people working in the garment industry. The demand is higher, but due to an insufficient minimum wage reaching only 77 USD, many workers prefer to go to Thailand instead.<sup>4</sup>

**HANDICRAFTS**

As in other parts of Southeast Asia, Laotian and Cambodian crafts are perpetuated through oral transmission from generations to generations. Handicrafts are often practiced as a cottage industry, a secondary activity complementary to farming. The main Laotian and Cambodian crafts are weaving, ceramics, gold and silverware, and woodcarving. These artisanal practices primarily responded to functional needs and specific rituals linked to the rural society daily life. The Lao and Cambodian royal courts also respectively established royal workshops to commission the production of high-quality objects.

**HERITAGE**

Cambodia and Laos both welcome UNESCO-protected heritage sites. In Cambodia Angkor Wat in the northern province of Siem Reap is considered one of the largest religious complex in the world extending over about 400 square kilometres. In 1995 UNESCO inscribed the town of Luang Prabang as a World Heritage Site to ensure its preservation. This international recognition has contributed to turn these destinations into major touristic sites.

**RURALITY**

Cambodia is an agricultural country with approximatively 79% of its population living in rural areas.

Laos is a landlocked country with 60.35% of its population living in rural areas (2016).

**TOURISM**

Tourism is a major sector of the Cambodian economy, exponentially increasing since the 2000s. Cambodia welcome more than 6 million tourists in 2018. Laos PDR has encountered a similar tourist boom and welcomed nearly 4 million tourists in 2017. Tourism, and especially mass-tourism, also brings local challenges. It affects the quality of the products and leads to the emergence of a tourist taste, either pushing towards a more 'traditional' visual, or praising simplified versions of the complex artisanal techniques.

**WAR**

Both Cambodia and Laos have encountered internal and regional political upheavals over the course of the Viet Nam 20th century. As collateral victims of the war, these countries received massive aerial bombardments orchestrated by the United States in the 1960s and 1970s to forbid traffic with

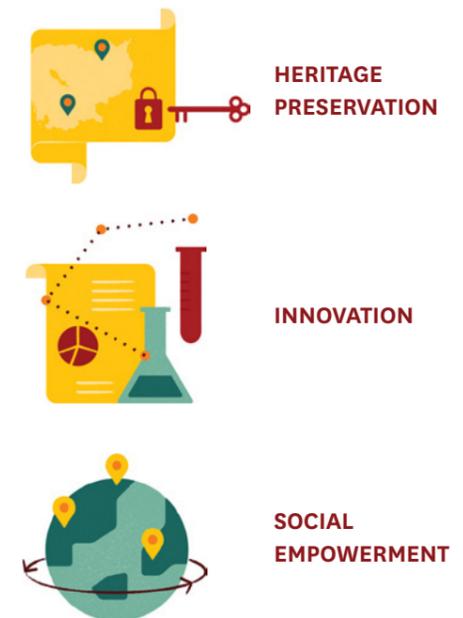
Viet Nam along the Ho Chi Minh trail. The Laotian Civil War (1959–75) opposed the Communist Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao Government. In parallel, Cambodia was caught in the turmoil of the Khmer Rouge dictatorship from 1975-1979, resulting in the death of nearly 2 million people.

**YOUTH**

Laos and Cambodia are countries with a young population. Lao youth makes up for about 60% of the total population. Cambodia reaches 65% of young people under the age of 30.

**A FEW NOTES ON THE DIRECTORY**

The Cambodian and Laotian initiatives presented in this directory were divided in three main categories:



These projects were selected according to a series of common criteria:

- ➔ An engagement with artisanal skills—ancient and contemporary
- ➔ Their attachment to local resources
- ➔ An openness to innovation and creative
- ➔ A level of seniority with a demonstrated authority in the sector
- ➔ Their structure as a community-based organisation, a non-profit organisation, or a social enterprise
- ➔ Each project's presentation is intended as a concise overview articulating the history, the specificities and the positive impact.
- ➔ Unless otherwise stated, all quotes are from interviews conducted on the field, personal email or Skype exchanges between the researcher and the organisations.

<sup>4</sup> Clean Clothes Campaign. Facts on Laos' Garment Industry. <https://cleanclothes.org/resources/publications/factsheets/laos-factsheet-2-2015.pdf>

## CHAPTER 1

# Reclaiming Heritage



Cambodia and Laos both welcome protected heritage sites, which attract flows of tourists from all-over the world. In Cambodia the spectacular archaeological site of Angkor Wat in the Northern province of Siem Reap is considered one of the largest religious complex in the world, extending over about 400 square kilometres. As the former capital of the Khmer Empire, the site has concentrated the remains of successive ambitious construction plans over centuries leaving exceptional Hindu and Buddhist temples to study, and to visit. Rediscovered in the early 20th century by French colonial explorers, this major archaeological complex has continuously garnered major interest, welcoming more than 2 million of visitors every year.

At the centre of Laos, Luang Prabang, located at the confluence of the Mekong and Nam Khan rivers, has also been recognised for its distinctive architectural style. The city center offers a unique atmosphere with its juxtaposition of Laotian traditional houses, a number of remarkable Buddhist temples, and antique buildings in the French Indochinese colonial style. In 1995 UNESCO inscribed the town of Luang Prabang as a World Heritage Site to ensure its preservation. As a result, this major recognition significantly increased the town's appeal and established it as a key tourist destination. In Laos, UNESCO also recognised the ancient temple complex of Vat Phou in Champasak province.

Beyond these architectural and archaeological splendors, Cambodia and Laos have both managed to revive and conserve a wide range of century-old artisanal practices. Following UNESCO's definition, "the "intangible cultural heritage" means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artifacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage" (UNESCO, 2003). This broad definition includes practices in Cambodia and Laos, especially by ethnic minority communities, such as lacquer, silver plating, silk weaving in the ikat and brocade techniques, pottery, paper making, and wood and stone carving.



Weaver on her loom at the Luang Prabang outdoor workshop © Ock Pop Tok

In the second half of the 20th century, especially as a result of the Viet Nam war that wreaked havoc in the region, Cambodia and Laos both experienced dramatic situations of political upheavals. After 2 decades of civil war and isolation from the international community, the 1991 Paris Peace accords opened Cambodia to the emergence of foreign aid presence and the massive involvement of NGOs. Similarly, Laos remained closed to Western aid, investments and trade between 1975 and 1985. Since the 1990s, the state's funding for the craft sector in both countries has been limited. This lack of governmental support pushed other key players—mostly international NGOs and expatriate individuals partnering with local people—to become active agents of the revitalisation of handicrafts. Pursuing grassroots development and preservationist objectives, these initiatives have benefited from the boost of the tourism industry and the attractiveness of heritage sites in Cambodia and in Laos. Anthropologists Susan Falls and Jessica Smith have defined this type of project as a Transnational Artisan Partnership (TAP), a structure combining philanthropic and artisanal practices implementing “working relationships between Third-World artisans, skilled in crafts, and organisations (either for-profit or not-for-profit) that are funded, managed and/or run by First-World designers, activists or entrepreneurs” (Falls and Smith, 2011).

This model will often appear in the directory of this Creative Resource Book. It is especially prominent in this first chapter dedicated to organisations that support artisanal practices

in Cambodia and Laos and cultivate discourses on the importance of these expressions of intangible heritage. These initiatives carry programmes that often rely on local makers with remarkable hand skills while also implementing design and marketing strategies borrowed to the West to reach an international customer base.

Textile production is particularly represented in this section. Silk weaving is a century-old practice common to both Cambodia and Laos that was mostly destined to domestic consumption and trade. In Cambodia, the sector collapsed under the destructive Khmer Rouge regime due to the shutdown of weaving activities and the destruction of mulberry tree plantations, which are essential in the subsistence of silkworms. It was reactivated in the aftermath of the civil war. In different contexts, Laotian and Cambodian women still wear traditional silk garments for ceremonial events (wedding, engagement, funeral), which keep a ritual significance. The textile culture is still very strong in Laos. Laotian girls learn to weave at a very young age and produce textiles which will become part of their dowry. With phenomenon of globalisation and mass-tourism, textiles—and silks in particular—have become prized commodities for international customers. Developing weaving thus offers invaluable sources of income to rural makers. The appreciation of these textiles also participates to a larger movement of cultural preservation, which ensures the transmission of skills in rural areas and amongst ethnic minority groups.

## Caring for Young Khmer Weaving Programme

FOUNDED

2003

FOCUS

Vocational training in weaving; indigo dye farming

WHERE

Takeo and Kampong Cham provinces

MORE INFORMATION

pidankhmer.org

### HISTORY

Caring for Young Khmer (CYK) is an organisation launched in 1991 as an extension of Caring for Young Refugees, a Japanese NGO established in Tokyo in 1980 to provide support to the young Cambodian refugees in camps in Thailand. Caring for Young Khmer has been focusing on community-based vocational programmes in rural areas, with a specific focus on underprivileged villages. In 2003 CYK opened a weaving centre for young women in Trapeang Krasaing village, Bati district in the southern province of Takeo. Historically, this area has been known for its silk weaving activities with a specialty in sampot hol, the Cambodian ikat technique. In terms of management, CYK is operated by a Cambodian team. However, the organisation still receives the active support of Japanese funding and strategic counseling.

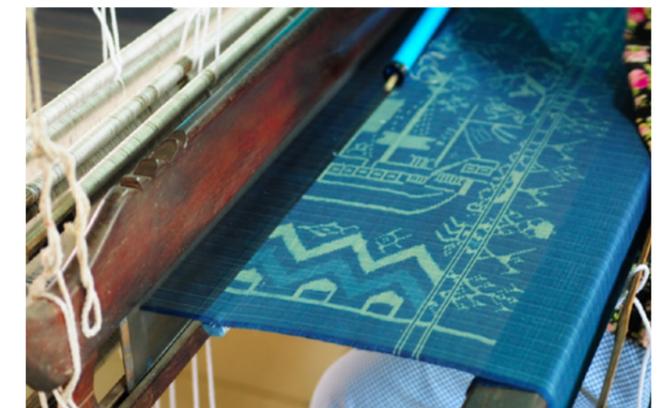
### FOCUS ON SILK WEAVING

Since its foundation, CYK has been offering numerous weaving training courses for different levels of skills. Apprentices recruited in villages receive training for one year where they learn to weave 5 to 7 complex ikat patterns. After the training period at the centre, the most skilled women are selected to continue the practice at home. They may install a loom loaned by CYK for one to two years and if the weavers decide to pursue, they get to keep the equipment. In terms of impact, CYK calculated that by 2014, the centre had welcomed a total of 180 weavers who have graduated from their training programme. The organisation has also conducted mobile workshops in weavers' communities to train them in specific ikat techniques which were attended by about 700 weavers in Takeo province. Since 2008, CYK has also supported farmers in the production of indigo paste in Kampong Cham province, a dyestuff which is then used in silk weaving.

### THE PIDAN PROJECT

The organisation has also launched the specific training programme called Pidan Project, which gives advanced

weavers the opportunity to learn the art of pidan weaving techniques. The term pidan designates a type of pictorial silk ikat hanging which usually depicts auspicious scenes from the life of the Buddha, which was specifically prominent in Takeo province and had nearly fully disappeared by the early 1990s. These spectacular polychromatic hangings were usually woven by women in villages and donated to Buddhist temples to make merit. A handful of local silk workshops have been instrumental in its revitalisation—CYK offering the most active programme. Once the weavers have been trained over the course of a year, the NGO continues to support them by regularly commissioning silk pidan pieces that are sold in its shop in Phnom Penh.



Silk and indigo pidan in the making © Magali An Berthon

Beyond its local implantation in Takeo province, the NGO has bridged close relationships with the National Museum of Cambodia. The museum has lost most of its textile collection during the civil war. CYK commissioned weavers to make contemporary pieces reproducing missing pidan textiles based on the museum photographic archive. This project has been followed in 2016 by an exhibition in the museum to promote these new textile acquisitions and the invaluable contribution of the pidan weavers.

## Artisans Angkor

FOUNDED

1998

FOCUS

Cambodian crafts (lacquer, metalware, stone carving, wood carving, silk)

WHERE

Siem Reap province

MORE INFORMATION

[artisansdangkor.com](http://artisansdangkor.com)

### HISTORY

Artisans Angkor is a social enterprise founded in 2003 dedicated to the design and production of Cambodian handcrafted goods. The company stemmed from the French NGO La Ligue Française de l'enseignement (The French League for Education) which had launched an ambitious vocational programme in Siem Reap area in 1992. With European and French funding and under the approval of the Cambodian Ministry of Education, the goal was to encourage young Cambodians to get involved in the country's post-civil war reconstruction effort by learning manual skills in construction work and agriculture and participating in the restoration of Angkor temples. The original plan implemented a variety of workshops focused on manual skills including masonry, woodworking, stone-cutting, lacquering, and sericulture. Artisans Angkor has since continued to train Cambodians in rural areas with no prior experience in crafts. The semi-public organisation developed into a handicraft brand selling high-quality souvenirs including silk clothing and accessories, silver-plated and lacquered decorative gifts, and stone and wood carvings inspired by Angkorian art.

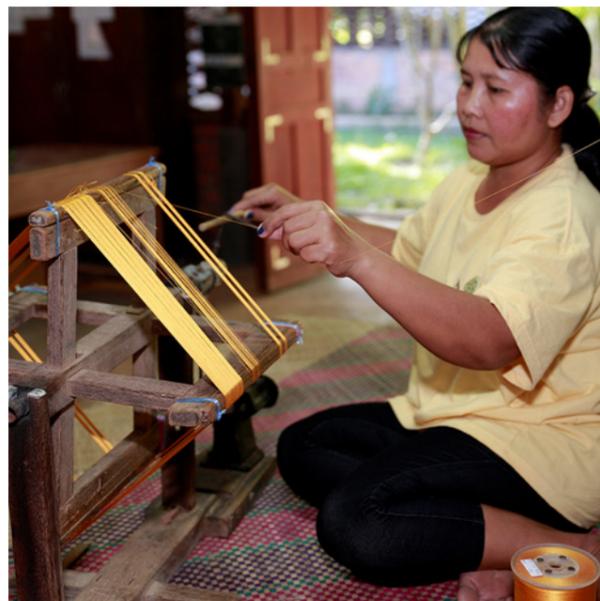
### FOCUS ON CAMBODIAN HANDICRAFTS

Considered one of the largest employers in Siem Reap province, Artisans Angkor is a large social enterprise managed under a French and Cambodian joint partnership. It provides employment to over 1100 people, including 800 artisans, of which half are involved in making silk accessories and garments. The company runs a total of 48 workshops to supply its flagship stores in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap with handcrafted goods. Well-known by urban Cambodians from the upper middle class, the craft company however mostly focuses on international customers in its commercial strategy. The enterprise sells a large range of handwoven silk products including scarves in ikat and damask in sophisticated colour palettes.

Combining social impact and discourses of cultural preservation, Artisans Angkor has been promoting the revival of Cambodian craftsmanships. The artisans develop an imagery inspired by the temples of Angkor, Angkorian art that was found on stone carving and bas-relief, and Khmer mythical tales that appeals to a large tourist customer base.

### PRESERVING ANGKOR HERITAGE

Highly involved in Siem Reap area, Artisans Angkor has collaborated with APSARA Authority, the organisation in charge of protecting and managing the site of Angkor. Under the supervision of archaeologists, Artisans Angkor's craftsmen have, over the years, reproduced statues of lions that were missing on the Terrace of the Elephants, a sandstone Vishnu bas-relief at Kbal Spean in the northwest of the province, and dozen of heads of Devas and Asuras, gods and demons, at Angkor Thom South Gate.



Silk weaving in Puok village © Artisans Angkor

## Traditional Arts and Ethnology Center (TAEC)

FOUNDED

2007

FOCUS

Ethnic minorities traditional arts and crafts

WHERE

Luang Prabang

MORE INFORMATION

[taeclaos.org/](http://taeclaos.org/)

### HISTORY

The Traditional Arts and Ethnology Centre (TAEC) is an institution rooted in the quiet hills of the city of Luang Prabang. In 2006 Tara Gujadhur, an American anthropologist specialised in sustainable tourism, and Thongkhoun Southvilay, a Luang Prabang native working as a museum professional, discussed together the ambitious idea to create a museum and resource centre as a showcase for Laos' ethnic diversity. A year later, the 2 friends eventually solidified their project by opening a space in Luang Prabang that combined an exhibition gallery, an ethnology centre of research, and an active educational platform. Between 2007 and 2016, TAEC has attracted over 120,000 visitors including international tourists and Laotian citizens and the centre keeps expanding its reach.

### FOCUS ON LAOS' ETHNIC CULTURAL TRADITIONS

As a regional leader in cultural heritage management, TAEC is dedicated to the promotion of the country's remarkable cultural diversity, by presenting the traditional arts, music instruments, costumes and customs of the numerous ethnic groups living in Laos such as the Hmong, Akha, Hmong, Tai Dam, and Kmhmu people. It functions as a creative hub connecting visitors and researchers to local ethnic groups through community engagement, exhibitions, and public programming. There are about 400 objects from 30 ethnic groups in the centre's permanent collection that are conserved and documented for research and potential exhibitions. Beyond the sole scope of the museum, TAEC closely works with communities in villages to document their artisanal and artistic practices and record life stories. This type of actions encourages collaborative work with ethnic groups who can reclaim a sense of cultural pride.

### SUPPORTING LOCAL HANDICRAFT PRODUCERS

TAEC also aims to foster livelihoods development in rural areas, thus helping to actively reduce the pervasive phenomenon of exodus to larger cities. The centre has put a specific focus on supporting rural artisans from all-over the country in continuing to practice their crafts such as weaving, embroidery, crochet, jewellery-making, and basket weaving. For instance, TAEC has implemented training programmes on product design, marketing, and business development, with particular attention to ethnic minority women and youths who are amongst the most underprivileged in Laotian society. With Tara Gujadhur's expertise in sustainable village-based tourism activities, artisans can learn practical tips to improve their income opportunities and secure new markets. TAEC also sells products in its own shop online and at the museum. Eager to follow fair-trade principles, the organisation ensures that 50% of the sales directly returns to the makers themselves.



Basketry on display © Traditional Ethnology Art Center (TAEC)

## Ock Pop Tok

FOUNDED

2000

FOCUS

Weaving Handicrafts

WHERE

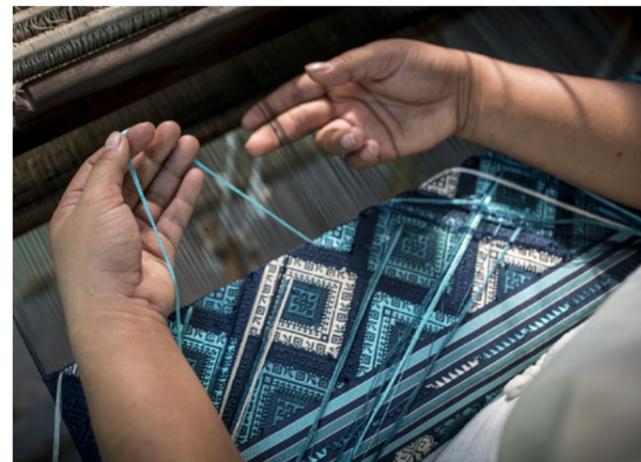
Luang Prabang

MORE INFORMATION

ockpoptok.com

### HISTORY

Ock Pop Tok was founded in 2000 by a British photographer Joanna (Jo) Smith and Veomanee (Veo) Douangdala, a Laotian weaver based in Luang Prabang. Ock Pop Tok means 'East meets West,' a name that summarises this partnership well, as much as it has defined the ground dynamics of this project. Jo Smith and Veo Douangdala first decided to open a textile gallery where local weavers could produce and sell their designs and where visitors, especially foreign tourists and expatriates, could engage with each other through the theme of textiles, crafts and Laotian rural culture. A precursor in the production and promotion of Laotian textile crafts, Ock Pop Tok developed into a larger social enterprise of over 78 employees mixing an international and local team. In addition to a large shop in the inner city, the enterprise opened the Living Crafts Centre in the serene outskirts of the town close to the Mekong river, currently welcoming 55 weavers working on a full time capacity. Open to the public, the centre includes an open-air workshop with floor looms set for the weavers, a shop, a restaurant called Silk Road Cafe, and a bed and breakfast with 4 bedrooms. In 2014 Ock Pop Tok's contribution was recognised by the Lao Handicrafts Association Award for Innovation; and in 2015 it won the Responsible Tourism Award in Asia for cultural preservation.



Weaving intricate silk brocades © Ock Pop Tok

### EAST AND WEST: BRIDGING CONTEMPORARY AND TRADITIONAL WEAVING

Capitalising on the idea of cross-cultural exchange, Ock Pop Tok has played an essential role in introducing Laotian textile ancient techniques to a Western audience. Relying on responsible tourism, the organisation has fostered creative collaborative programmes in Laos. It offers numerous classes throughout the year for adults and children interested in learning a variety of textile techniques mastered by local makers such as dyeing, silk brocade, ikat weaving, and batik. These introductory workshops also bring awareness to the value of the textiles being produced by on-site textile artisans. Moreover, Ock Pop Tok encourages its weavers to take their craft to another level, developing contemporary designs (scarves, hangings and accessories) while keeping an artisanal hand which could appeal to the international taste.

### VILLAGE WEAVER PROJECTS

Ock Pop Tok is an active organiser of the Lao Handicrafts Festival and supports makers which embody the ethnic diversity of Laos. For instance, at the Living Craft Centre, Zu Xiong who belongs to the Hmong community develops beautiful indigo batik cloths. While Kieng, originally from Pakse, masters the complex know-how of brocade weaving to create beautiful Lao Tai traditional patterns on silk, hemp or cotton bases. In 2018 Ock Pop Tok won the ASEAN Business Awards in Laos for SMEs for Corporate Responsibility and Promising Women Entrepreneur. The social enterprise has focused on an eco-conscious production and provides social benefits and fair pay to its staff composed of nearly 99% of women.

Beyond Luang Prabang, the organisation has established a series of partnerships with weaving communities throughout Laos, creating sustainable sources of income for about 500 artisans in villages. Ock Pop Tok remains committed in developing a balanced business open to the global market, while conserving precious sets of skills rooted in Laos rural and ethnic heritage.

## Phaeng Mai Gallery

FOUNDED

1990

FOCUS

Weaving School and Gallery

WHERE

Vientiane

MORE INFORMATION

artofsilklaos.com/index.php



### HISTORY

Kongthong Nanthavongdouangsy Saisnith was born in 1963 into a family of weavers in the remote city of Xam Neua in the province of Houaphanh, not too far from the Vietnamese border. In a traditional fashion, her mother was eager to transmit her craft to Kongthong and her sister Viengkham at a very young age. Kongthong's father died in 1964 as a victim of the Laotian civil war (1962-1975), which opposed the Communist Pathet Lao and the Royal Lao Government. After the war, her family started a weaving studio with other members of the community. After earning a Master's degree in Education from the University of Philology at Pyatigorsk (Former Soviet Union), Kongthong decided to pursue her mother's legacy. She became a master weaver and, with her sister, she co-founded Phaeng Mai Gallery in the early 1990s. As the organisation's Head of Technique and Materials Development, she trains women's weavers and develops new designs. Women have the possibility to continue weaving from home and take care of their family at the same time. Kongthong's contribution was recognised by major transnational institutions supporting the preservation of cultural heritage such as UNESCO and the ASEAN. In 2016, she received the Gold Medal awarded by the Laotian government.

### EDUCATION IN WEAVING

Phaeng Mai Gallery is dedicated in perpetuating the weaving and dyeing techniques specific to Laotian culture and local ethnic minorities. The studio is open to all, both locals and foreign visitors. It provides a two-year course and a short course adjusted to the student's prior experience.

In addition to her activity at Phaeng Mai Gallery, Kongthong is often invited as a craft consultant for different organisations such as the International Trade Center (ITC) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) to share her expertise on textile handicrafts. She worked extensively in several areas of Laos

and has also travelled to Buthan and Thailand to train local weavers and develop new products in silk and cotton.



Training centre for weaving apprentices © Phaeng Mai Gallery

### THE ART OF LAO SILK

Clients visiting Pheang Mai Gallery in Vientiane may find a rich range of handcrafted high-end souvenirs. The family business prized itself for presenting silk and cotton products in a reinterpreted contemporary Laotian aesthetic which is colourised in sophisticated natural dyes. To expand its reach internationally, Pheang Mai Gallery also develops a line specifically for the export market which includes more traditional styles reproducing antique patterns. Keeping a handmade touch, the clothes, scarves and cushions showcase different textile techniques including weft ikat and brocade in the Lao Tai style. This weaving technique uses discontinuous supplementary weft to create intricate stylised motifs combining geometric shapes to auspicious elements such as temples, birds, dragons, elephants, and flowers. By creating modern designs rooted in Laotian weaving, the weavers at Pheang Mai Gallery actively continue to preserve their culture while generating a sustainable source of income.

## INTERVIEW

## Eric Stocker, master lacquerer



Buddhas in gilded lacquer and eggshell © Eric Stocker - Angkor Artwork

## Angkor Artwork

## FOUNDED

2008, with his brother Thierry Stocker

## WHERE

Siem Reap, Cambodia

## MORE INFORMATION

[www.linkedin.com/in/stocker-eric-7b56a017/](http://www.linkedin.com/in/stocker-eric-7b56a017/)**What brought you and your brother to Cambodia?**

I started at the age of 16 as an apprentice in Chinese and Japanese lacquer restoration at the Guimet Museum. After finishing my training and my work as a 'compagnon du devoir', I worked with the Mobilier National working on the restoration of national furniture for 27 years. Eventually, the European Union asked me to go to Cambodia to revive lacquer work. I trained my younger brother Thierry and he joined me in 2008 in Cambodia. I had already been there for 10 years.

In 1998 in Cambodia, I started by finding lacquer trees, training the resin-tappers, people who bleed the trees. Cambodia at this time was a little rustic. There were only 2 hours of electricity per day, no tourists! But it was amazing because there was everything to rebuild. It was one of the best moments of my life.

**How did you launch your own lacquer studio?**

After that, we launched the semi-public craft company Artisans Angkor with other companions, with the support of the group Vinci. After ten years, it was time for us to take our own way, I decided to set up my own company. Now we are 22 people and I keep going! It is the only workshop still existing here in Cambodia. Artisans Angkor moved on to develop lacquer with acrylic varnish. For me, lacquer from the tree is the core of my practice. We have our own collections and then I continue to train apprentices. I am very happy.

**How many people have you trained?**

I have some craftsmen which have been there for almost 15 years. Half of my employees are people with hearing disabilities. I train deaf young people with the support of the NGO Krousa Thmey. This is how I work here. I have 20 people who have stayed. I recently hired 3 young women, but we usually stay around 20 people. We practice the art of lacquer, eggshells, gilding, but I also incorporate other techniques. I use also shagreen marquetry, lamb leather marquetry and sheath-making. So I play with textures. But lacquer is at the heart of our work.

**And precisely, is there an old tradition of lacquerware in Cambodia?**

It's a 9000-year-old tradition in Japan, and 3000 years in China. Gradually through the silk road, it arrived in Myanmar. Lacquer helped men to protect their boats and houses, to protect its different types of wood and basketry. This resin was usually used daily in the rural areas. And then it became an art by adding color, gilding, and engraving. In Cambodia the tradition was a bit more specific. Lacquer was used to varnish sandstone statues and bas-reliefs since the 10th-11th centuries.

**And when you arrived in 1998, there were still people who had a knowledge of lacquer in Cambodia?**

If the European Union commissioned me to come, it's because there was really nothing left here. It was mostly due to the massive use of chemical varnishes. It is so easy to open a box with pre-made product. I am part of the 120 remaining master-lacquerers of Asia and South-East Asia who promote the use of vegetal resin coming from trees. I tried to reproduce what I learned when I was at the Guimet Museum. When I arrived to Cambodia, I was in the slaughter-houses to recover pig hair to make our own brushes, I looked for natural pigments. I trained people on how to collect the resin from the trees. So I relaunched the whole sector. It took about a year and a half.

**How do you supply your resin today?**

I currently work with 6 families based about 150 km from where I am in Siem Reap. These families work for 6 months of the year and recover 300 kilos of lacquer which I need to train my young people and make our products. I am the last one to do that in Cambodia. Japan has been supporting me. In September last year I received more than 120 main lacquerers from 12 Asian countries. Each year, the master lacquerers gather in one country, and last year it was Cambodia. The Japanese play a crucial role in that as they have funding to organise large events. Lacquerware, contrary to the modern world, takes a very long time to make. It is expensive and there are constraints. It takes at least 3 months to make an object.



Lacquered tableware © Eric Stocker - Angkor Artwork

**What kind of pieces do you develop?**

We create artistic pieces and tableware: plates, large cups, folding screens, and panels... About 20% of the pieces are sold in hotels in Siem Reap and then the rest is developed for designers and decorators. My main customers come from Australia, California, and New York. The designers commission special orders and we execute them. The Cambodians from the middle class are now starting to come as well to buy decoration, but it's still marginal.

**And who will take over your practice?**

I have 20 people of exception who are trainers themselves with a remarkable know-how. In terms of development and marketing, I will probably take a French 'compagnon', carpenter or cabinetmaker. To deal with a hotel manager, a designer, or an interior designer, I think that I will need somebody of experience, happy to live in Cambodia, with my team and be able to deal with artistic development. I do not want to retire now. I am 61 years old, I am still in full form! But I am thinking about it already. It takes about 10 years to be a good lacquerer technically. There is not yet an art school in Cambodia which trains to become creative. In Chiang Mai, Thailand, they have just opened a contemporary design programme because until then Thai artisans only produced heritage pieces in line with tradition.

I am also concerned in saving mahogany trees which produce the lacquer. I would like to create a conservatory for the lacquer trees, also to preserve how to collect the resin and how to make the tools, so it can continue after I retire. The craftsmen I am working with have tremendous skills. But we saw how knowledge was lost very quickly here in two generations. It is fragile. I want to ensure the continuity of the craft. I remain optimistic.

# About Silk



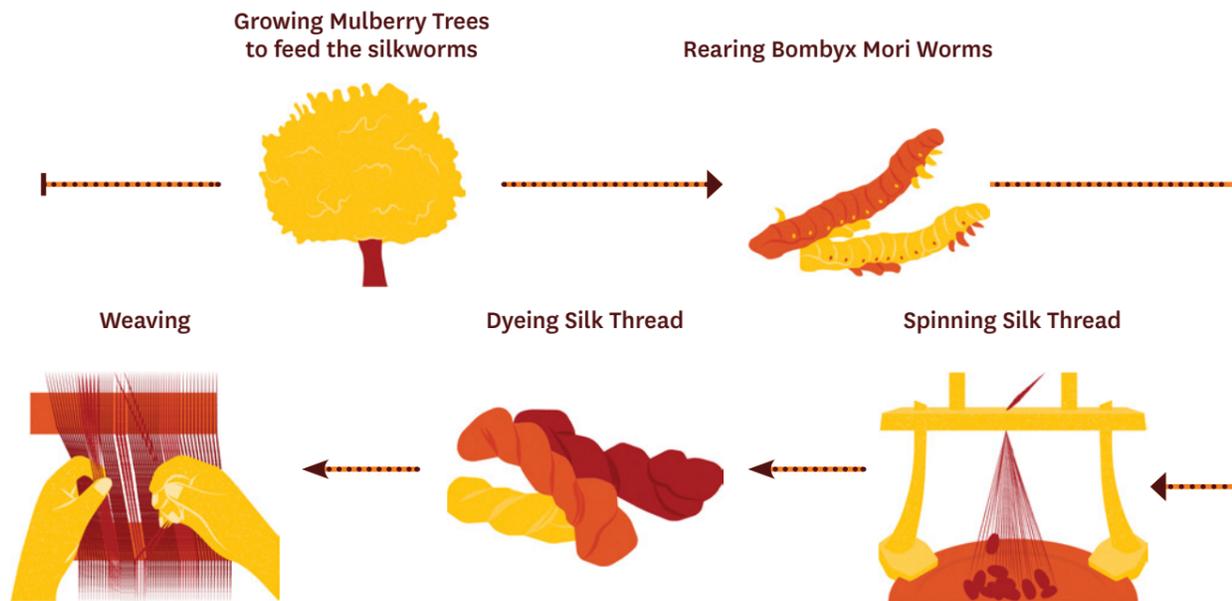
are the primary producers of silk textiles in Laos and Cambodia.

## Golden Silk

- Cambodia and Laos both produce golden silk cocoons which need to be hand-processed.
- Yellow Bombyx mori cocoons are found in northern Laos, while only yellow cocoons are found in the south.
- Cambodia produces only 1 tonne of golden silk per year.



## Sericulture Chain of Activity



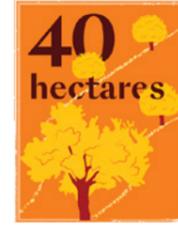
## Silk Facts

### LAOS



1 kg of raw Lao silk costs on average 180,000 LAK (about US\$23).  
 There are 2 kinds of silks available in Laos. The rest is imported.  
 Domesticated Silk Bombyx Mori  
 Wild Silk Philosymia Riccini or the Eri Silkworm

### CAMBODIA



There are 40 hectares of mulberry tree fields in Cambodia.  
 There are about 100 active silk breeders in Cambodia. One silk farmer sells an average of 6 kg of golden silk per year.  
 About 390 tonnes of industrially-produced white silk are imported annually from China and Viet Nam.



## Products

- Silk Rolls of Fabric
- Scarves
- Tube Skirts called Sinh in Laos and Sampot in Cambodia
- Clothing
- Home Textiles



## CHAPTER 2

# Innovation Beyond Tradition



In Southeast Asia, handicrafts are often associated with the preservation of a lost heritage as covered in the previous chapter. However, connecting artisanal practices to contemporary approaches can also lead to innovative developments. In this chapter, we will consider a selection of inspiring projects and personalities which make their mark as design and craft creators and as active cultural heritage supporters. The input of foreign entrepreneurs remains a recurring factor in the development of pioneering initiatives in Laos and Cambodia. In many cases, it is the serendipitous story of a traveller coming to visit these countries as a tourist and who finds an interesting idea, an unusual product or technique, or a promising yet unexploited opportunity. These projects usually rely on local resources and skills to develop cosmetic products, recycled goods, or contemporary designs with the goal to make a positive impact. What remains remarkable in many of these organisations is the incentive to build a positive chain reaction implementing environmental-friendly production processes and socially-responsible business models.

As it was stated in the introduction of the Creative Resource Book, Laos and Cambodia are still mainly established as rural countries producing invaluable natural resources. In addition to rice, Cambodia grows a large range of fruits crops such as coconuts, sugarcane, bananas, oranges, and mangoes, but also numerous herbs, plants and spices used for cooking. Similarly, Laos produces rice, but also vegetables, beans, sugarcane, tobacco, cotton, coffee, and tea. The richness and diversity of these natural resources are an inspiration to creators launching small lines of specialty teas and coffees in Laos, or eco-conscious cosmetic products using local coconut oil, lemongrass or jasmin flower scents.



Cambodian artisans preparing banana paper © Kumae

Due to the economic boom, the urbanisation of capital cities, and the effect of mass tourism, pollution has become a major problem which strongly affects Cambodia, generating massive amounts of solid waste. According to the international NGO ACRA Foundation, Phnom Penh inhabitants use about 10 million plastic bags every day. Laos now also suffers the expansion of landfills near Vientiane and Luang Prabang, which are poorly managed. Beyond governmental campaigns trying to influence behaviour change, reducing waste and recycling may also lead to innovative thinking. Even small to medium companies are considering their impact on the environment. With the support of NGOs and local organisations, they implement programmes maximising the consumption of local resources and recycled materials such as paper and plastic.

In certain cases, creative endeavours emerge from the most dramatic aspects of Laos and Cambodia's histories. Laos and Cambodia were both caught in the crossfire of the Viet Nam war. During 9 aerial bombardments between 1964 and 1973, the United States dropped more than 2 million tons of bombs on Laos, mostly cluster bombs releasing thousands of bomblets in the size of a big fruit, and about 2.7 million tons of bombs on Cambodia. Since the end of the Viet Nam War, collecting these lethal war remnants has become a difficult task and a necessity. This instituted carpet bombing operation left the lands scarred by millions of unexploded bombs and the populations are still injured or killed by unexploded ordnance (UXO). How to handle these deadly scraps? With the support of dedicated NGOs such as Mines Advisory Group, a handful of initiatives collaborate with local craftsmen to turn the reclaimed metal into upcycled

designs in Laos. The brand Article22 presented in this section collects this material to create contemporary jewellery. Ma Te Sai, a fair-trade handicraft shop located in Luang Prabang, also successfully sells very popular handmade objects (cutlery and bracelets) made of recycled metal. Similar initiatives exist in Cambodia, especially Rajana Association of Cambodia, a non-profit organisation which trains small communities of makers and underprivileged youth from rural and urban areas to make Cambodian handicrafts, including a line of jewellery made of bomb metal remnants.

If the initiatives presented in this chapter are often supported by foreign entrepreneurs, they provide virtuous models which could also encourage local innovators and risk-takers to start their own projects. One of the strengths of both these 2 countries is their youths. In Laos, about 60% of the population is below the age of 25 years old, living especially in rural areas in the provinces of Savannakhet, Vientiane and Champasak. Similarly, Cambodia counts nearly 50% of its population below 25. The new generation is highly acquainted with social media, porous to new trends and extensively using Facebook and WhatsApp, which can help to boost local businesses and artisanal projects. Additionally, a significant number of Cambodians and Laotians from the diaspora return to their home country with the desire to contribute to its social, environmental, and economic development with ideas borrowed to the West. These demographic factors will most likely impact the creative and tech industries in the near future, allowing more Cambodian and Laotian people to combine local know-how with contemporary aesthetics, sustainability, and new technologies.

## ARTICLE22

FOUNDED

2013

FOCUS

Jewelry made of recycled bomb snatches

WHERE

Ban Naphia village, Laos / New York, USA

MORE INFORMATION

[article22.com](http://article22.com)

Peacebomb bracelets made of recycled aluminium © ARTICLE22

### HISTORY

In 2010, American designer Elizabeth Suda, who worked as a merchandiser for an American high-end fashion brand—travelled to Laos to conduct research on textiles craft practices. Instead, she discovered the Ban Naphia artisans community near the city of Phonsavan in the Xieng Khouang province. This area, which welcomes the well-known archaeological site Plain of Jars, had suffered the most from the massive American bombing operation during the Viet Nam War. Suda found out that bomb shrapnels were spread on farmers' lands, hidden under roads and houses, nested near schools and public buildings. Local metalworkers had been collecting, recycling and producing common objects such as spoons in the area since the late 1970s. Elizabeth Suda returned to New York and co-founded with Camille Hautefort the jewelry brand ARTICLE22 in 2012, named after the 22nd article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, with the idea to support this local industry and accelerate the process of unexploded ordnance clearance.

### UPCYCLING METAL SCRAPS INTO LUXURY JEWELRY

ARTICLE22 first launched the Peacebomb bracelet, a fine engraved piece of jewelry derived from bomb casing scraps. Elizabeth Suda and Camille Hautefort have continued to develop their own designs, relying on the work of Laotian metal craftsmen and working specifically with villagers from Ban Naphia. The metal is collected by the Mines Advisory Group (MAG) and treated locally. Artisans purchase it to nearby foundries. In addition to bomb pieces, scrap

aluminum and metal from plane parts are used to fill Article 22's orders. The material is then melted in a clay oven, poured into moulds, and finally polished by hand. The brand now produces a large range of designs including bangles, earrings, necklaces, and pendants which combine the company's signature upcycled war metal with other materials such as gold, diamonds, stones, and leather.

### WORKING LOCAL / SELLING GLOBAL

ARTICLE22 counts about 150 retailers internationally while keeping a strong grounding in the Laotian territory. Since 2013, the company has reinforced its work on the local production chain. With the support of Manivone Sorabmixay who has joined as the Laos Country Manager, the brand responds to a sustainable business model by paying pays artisan families a minimum of 5 times the local minimum wage. Donations to the Village Development Fund have also been implemented yearly to help villagers to benefit from micro-loans and electricity communal areas. ARTICLE22 has also partnered with the non-profit organisation Legacies of War to keep supporting UXO clearance.

Beyond providing an international marketplace for Laotian makers, ARTICLE22 offers design products with a purpose. It brings awareness to a dramatic aspect of Laos history. Investing in the local metal industry is a practical and creative way to contribute to healing a country which still holds the scars of the Viet Nam War.

## Khang

FOUNDED

2008

FOCUS

Womenswear fashion

WHERE

Vientiane, Laos

MORE INFORMATION

[facebook.com/khangfashionandlifestyle/](https://facebook.com/khangfashionandlifestyle/)

EMAIL

[phaengmai@etlao.com](mailto:phaengmai@etlao.com)

### HISTORY

Viengkham Nanthavongdouangsy grew up in a family of weavers based in Xam Neua in the province of Houaphanh. She co-founded Phaeng Mai Gallery with her sister Kongthong Nanthavongdouangsy Saisnith (a project featured in chapter 1 'Reclaiming Heritage') in the early 1990s. She learned as a child how to master a range of complex artisanal techniques in silk weaving and brocade. Beyond her extensive training in textiles, Viengkham has been passionate about fashion from a very young age. While working with her sister on textile design products, Viengkham started to develop her fashion project in 2008 as a special line of products sold at Phaeng Mai Gallery. She eventually launched her own label entitled Khang in 2016 with a runway show at the Lao Fashion Week. Khang is the Laotian term to designate the shellac resin excreted by the lac insect, an indigenous species in Southeast Asia, which gives a saturated red and purple colour.

### DEFINING LAOTIAN FASHION

Keeping textiles at the core of her creative approach, Viengkham uses her own handwoven fabrics, especially silks developed at Phaeng Mai weaving centre, in the dresses, skirts, and blouses she designs. She then works closely with a team of seamstresses to hand-sew her clothing line. Her goal is to create luxury products which express a strong sense of femininity with a modern twist. If Khang has now gained a prominent position in Laotian fashion, Viengkham still mostly designs for an international client base, relying on export. Benefiting from this international recognition, she also welcomes tourists in her label's showroom in Vientiane who are looking for original clothing responding to high standards of craftsmanship.

### THE FUTURE OF FASHION DESIGN

The figure of the designer remains rare in artisanal and creative industries in Laos. Viengkham wants to use her experience to support and empower a new generation of fashion and textile designers by encouraging them to develop a contemporary approach and bring in fresh new ideas. She has become a member of the board committee of Lao Fashion Week. The organisation has established the



Lao Fashion Week 2018 ©Khang

non-profit programme Lao Young Designer Project<sup>5</sup> since 2014 to foster young Lao talents. The initiative supports young designers in creating their first collection. They also send the awardees in exchange programmes with a network international fashion schools such as ESMOD, International School of Fashion & Business, in Paris, France, the London College of Fashion & Design in Hanoi, Viet Nam, and the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts in Singapore. Viengkham advocates for a Laotian style which still incorporates the exceptional richness of handmade textiles, combining traditional techniques with an innovative aesthetic. Her active participation to Lao Fashion Week contributes to the development of the fashion design sector. This fast-paced growing industry has the potential to bring professional and economic opportunities to her country, and in particular to its youth.

<sup>5</sup> Lao Young Designer project <https://laofashionweek.com/-Lao-Young-Designers-Project->

## Samatoa

FOUNDED

2004

FOCUS

lotus fibre weaving

WHERE

Siem Reap

MORE INFORMATION

samatoa.lotus-flower-fabric.com



Cutting lotus stems to collect the fibre © Samatoa

### HISTORY

Awen Delaval, a French telecom engineer working in Paris, went on a life-changing trip to Southeast Asia in the early 2000s and visited Cambodia which was still recovering from several decades of political conflict. He learned that lotus fibre had been woven in Myanmar to make special robes worn by Burmese monks, a technique well developed in the surroundings of the Inlé Lake, about 500 kilometres north of Yangon. Growing out of mud underwater and blooming into sheer white flowers, lotus has remained a strong symbol in Buddhist cultures as the expression of purity and resilience. Awen Delaval realised that this local cottage industry could also be developed in Cambodia where lotus plants also grow in abundance, which prompted him to consider how it could provide new opportunities to rural people in difficulty. He eventually moved to Cambodia to create a lotus farm in the area of Siem Reap and launch the weaving project Samatoa in 2004. It took a few years and a series of trial and errors to establish a fully integrated process which ensures the quality of every step of the production chain from fibre to scarf. The initiative has received the support of UNESCO in 2012 and the French Government in 2015, with the additional backing of the international luxury group Kering since 2015, seduced by the products and convinced of the potential of lotus fibre.

### SUSTAINABILITY IS KEY

Set as a social enterprise, Samatoa strives for female empowerment, employing a total of 50 women, in charge of

spinning, weaving and sewing textile accessories, who are paid double than the minimum wage. In Cambodia, after harvesting the flowers, lotus stems were usually discarded. Championing circular economy, Samatoa recycles about 200 tones every year. Spinners cut the stems by hand, using a knife, so they can extract the inner fibre and spin it into a yarn. One spinner produces an average of 200 metres of thread per day. This lengthy process remains painstakingly demanding, which explains the high price for lotus fibre weaving. To balance the cost and offer a variety of designs, Samatoa has developed a collection of scarves mixing silk and lotus, also experimenting with local natural fibres such as pineapple, banana, kapok, and water hyacinth, using eco-friendly dyes as well.

### PIONEERING NEW TEXTILES

Combining artisanal skills with innovative thinking, Samatoa continues to expand its reach by pioneering eco-conscious fibre manufacturing. In 2018, it has launched the Lotus Tec®, a new fibre composite made of lotus stems waste and plastic from recycled bottles. This fibre showcases performant properties such as softness, durability, and elasticity, which could be used in various applications in the textile and fashion sector. Already selling its mid-range to luxury scarves to a client base of tourists in Cambodia, Samatoa thus aims to reach international designers and manufacturers to increase the production capacity and create a much larger lotus industry in Cambodia.

## Kumae

FOUNDED

2013

FOCUS

recycled banana-fibre paper products

WHERE

Siem Reap

MORE INFORMATION

kumae.net



Turning banana paper into accessories © Kumae

### HISTORY

Kumae was founded by Takuya Yamase, a 26 year old Japanese man born in Tokyo and raised in Fukuoka Prefecture. After finishing high school, he visited Cambodia as a tourist in 2012. He was shocked to discover the harrowing size of the garbage dumpsite near the village of Anlung Pi, about 25km away from the touristic hub of Siem Reap city. Local villagers, adults and children alike, work on the landfill to find food scraps, collect plastic bottles and metallic cans to resell them to recycling centres. The dumpsite was established in 2012 after a private contractor bought a large piece of Anlung Pi's land, turning a peaceful rural area into Siem Reap outdoor disposal area, creating major health and safety issues for the families living nearby. Instead of continuing his studies in Japan, Takuya Yamase returned to Cambodia and settled in Siem Reap, where he taught Japanese to children living near the landfills while working for a Japanese tour company. With the idea to prevent locals from working on the dumpsite, Takuya Yamase considered the possibility to develop paper products after he found out about banana paper making techniques in Africa, thinking that he could find a similar application in Cambodia. After a series of trials and errors, he launched Kumae and the banana paper project in 2013.

### EXPLORING PAPER MATERIALS

Kumae develops 2 kinds of eco-conscious paper material: one 100% banana fibre paper and a composite called Ashi. Banana paper is obtained by extracting the fibre from banana trunks by hand. It is an artisanal process which gives paper

a unique texture that cannot be reproduced industrially. After the extraction, fibre are boiled for several days to be softened and threshed. Mixed with water, it becomes a paste spread into frames to make sheets of paper. Ashi is a compound material made of 70% banana fiber and 30% recycled bottle fibre, which makes it durable and water resistant. Both materials offer numerous applications. Founder Takuya Yamase has collaborated with a Japanese designer to create a collection of sustainable printed bags, wallets, and pouches. It takes about 5 days for each product to be made from start to finish.

### COMMUNITY-BASED PROJECT

Kumae is the result of a close collaboration between Takuya Yamase and the villagers of Anlung Pi with the help of one local advisor who has become an integrated member of the organisation. Takuya Yamase employs 11 people full time. All coming from the village, they are mostly young women from age 19 to 38 who take care of the whole artisanal chain from fibre extraction, paper making to the production of the finished goods. A successful initiative, Kumae has now 3 shops opened in Siem Reap area, benefiting from the constant flow of tourists buying paper products. In the beginning the goal was to provide new opportunities to the community of Anlung Pi besides the hardship of working on the dumpsite. The company has now slowly expanded its vision. In a near future, Takuya Yamase hopes to open a vocational training school where people from the community could learn sewing for free.

## Bodia Cambodian Apothecary

FOUNDED

2010

FOCUS

Natural cosmetics

WHERE

Phnom Penh

MORE INFORMATION

[bodia-spa.com/our-products-6-presentation.php](http://bodia-spa.com/our-products-6-presentation.php)



### HISTORY

Bodia was the first affordable yet qualitative chain of spas to bloom throughout Cambodia from Phnom Penh to Siem Reap in the late 2000s, founded by Sylvain Perrier, a French businessman based in the country since the late 1990s. In the beginning, the massage therapists would use products sourced in an organic farm based in Thailand. With the success of the spa business, Bodia expanded its activities and launched its own brand of natural cosmetics made with raw materials procured directly in Cambodia. In 2010, Antoine Bancel, an engineer passionate about herbs and plants, and Quentin Clausin, art director and designer, both joined the adventure of Bodia Nature, now called Bodia Cambodian Apothecary. The company uses its high-end products in the spas and distributes them in several retail outlets throughout the country, attracting tourists visiting Angkor Wat and an urban clientele of expatriates.

### RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT IN CAMBODIA

Bodia has implemented an ambitious research lab in the south of Phnom Penh with a staff of about sixty people, the only R&D lab of its kind in Cambodia. Mixing French know-how in cosmetics with ingredients coming from the Cambodian soils, the company has relied on the services of a French expert to experiment and create original products respecting international standards. Free from synthetic additives, colorants, and conservatives, the brand explores the wide realm of Cambodia's natural resources, looking in particular at plants with medicinal qualities known and used in ancestral Khmer culture. Lotus seeds, lemongrass, ginger, and now charcoal and moringa oil, which is extracted from a local tree with antioxidant properties, are, amongst others, used in bath, massage, and aromatherapy products. For instance, it takes nearly 300 kilos of fresh ginger to obtain a small flask of ginger essential oil.

### CULTIVATING CLOSE PARTNERSHIPS

To find the best raw materials in the country, Bodia works closely with local cooperatives and organic farmers. For moringa oil, the organisation has collaborated with Baca Villa, a Cambodian social enterprise established in 2005 in Siem Reap area which combines a guesthouse and an organic plantation supported by José Manuel Ramos, a Spanish agronomist. The charcoal comes from burnt recycled coconut shells produced by Sustainable Green Fuel Enterprise (SGFE), another social enterprise implanted in Phnom Penh providing sustainable alternatives to wood charcoal for Cambodian fuel consumption. Bodia has also an eye on packaging and design and extends its reach towards Cambodian handicrafts. Partnering with the ceramic workshop Lo YuYu located in the village of Bakong near Siem Reap, they have designed a delicate collection of handcrafted candle holders and essential oils burners made of local clay glazed in celadon, establishing further ties and support towards Cambodian local initiatives.



Candle holders crafted in collaboration with Lo YuYu © Bodia Cambodian Apothecary

## INTERVIEW

### Emi Weir



Portrait of Emi Weir © Ma Te Sai

Founder of Ma Te Sai, a shop and brand in the heart of Luang Prabang's old city presenting a selection of sustainable fair-trade handicrafts developed in collaboration with local craft communities

2010

WHERE

Luang Prabang, Laos

MORE INFORMATION

[matesai.com](http://matesai.com)

### How long have you been in the business in Laos and how do you collaborate with makers groups?

Ma Te Sai has existed for 8 years and I have been in Laos for 10 years now. Beyond selling products at the shop, we also design a large range of our products ourselves. I would say that we co-design, we co-create with the makers. I sometimes design things, but mostly we work with the ethnic groups to ensure we preserve their identity. It's possible because I spend so much time in the villages. If you don't spend that amount of time, it would be very hard to do that. I tend to keep my suppliers and give them as much work as possible. I do sometimes bring in new products with interesting patterns from certain tribes which I encounter through consultancy work. I also buy some handmade fabrics from other parts of the country which I then give to my sewers in the villages. They love discovering new fabrics they may have never seen before! Some tell me: I want to make a sinh (tubeskirt) out of it! My relationships with makers in this country are far-flung and long-lasting. The idea is always to bring them more work. Ma Te Sai enables producers to work, which will help them work with other organizations as well and get more experience.

### What is the specificity of Ma Te Sai as a handicraft company?

I worked for Ock Pop Tok for years and at the time they were doing a lot of silk, less cotton that they do now. I wanted to create a shop bringing handicraft products and local goods, coffee, and tea, bamboo ware, and a selection of books... Things that tourists would want to see when they visit Laos. We started with people who we still work with now, such as the Lao Disabled Women Center, and their recycled products do really well. Having a range of handicraft products made us a little bit different, beyond just being a textile company.

We are trying to slowly develop a brand in Singapore with pop-up stores to reach new markets while still supporting our groups of producers. The idea is to develop our online platform as well, trying to see how we can combine low-cost retail and online sales.

### Could you tell us about the situation in handicraft in Laos and Luang Prabang in particular?

There is a lot more retail shops in Luang Prabang but in terms of actual people doing the deep work, there is probably not a huge amount of newcomers. Because in Laos, crafts have been classified as a heritage business. So they won't let foreigners open a business without a local Laotian



Emi Weir with Yao women © Ma Te Sai

partner. This has created a bit of a stop for foreigners to come and copy designs. This probably explains why it may stifle the growth of craft exports in some ways. Plus the freight costs.

I noticed that Laotian craftspeople are starting to receive more support from the government and from overseas organisations. More support is going into the villages directly, some have been sponsored to go to the Folk Art Market in Santa Fe. Some people received training in Vientiane which was funded by the Ministry of Commerce. Laotians are starting to recognise that they have a special industry with handicrafts.

### What about Laotian people getting involved in the craft industry? Are they usually makers themselves, do they come from the city?

Yes, mainly there are maker groups considering wholesale and becoming bigger. So the producers are the ones expanding the most the craft sector in Laos. For instance Ban Nayang which produces all the cotton for the Luang Prabang market, is developing remarkably. Similar phenomenon with Savannakhet, and all the producers that we work with. The ability for the producers to grow is happening because they are getting help from either the government or foreign projects. It is great because they are getting stronger. They need more support and work than just from small organisations like Ma Te Sai.

### For the producers, do they touch on a local market or basically simply the tourist market?

It is very hard to generalise. From my experience, tourism is definitely providing opportunities. The people who are located far away from tourism will get less access to a market. But in saying that, Savannakhet is not a tourist area but the makers there, from the Phu Tai tribe, do really well thanks to the large Thai market. And in Houaphanh, the silk market, is also doing very well because they have been servicing the high-end Laotian market for so long. It will most

probably continue this way because of the quality of their work.

Whether they can stay in fashion and design for the Laotian people, it is up to them and to trends. Because more Laotian women are now wearing more cotton and they are changing in their tastes. And you have also the influence of the Chinese coming in.

The expertise is different and Houaphanh is an anomaly because it is an amazing silk area. We work with them but they have worked with a lot of people for years, even if they are based in a remote area.



Collection of handwoven home textiles © Ma Te Sai

However these 2 areas and groups of producers have strongly conserved their designs and their quality. I saw them in a training in natural dyes in Huey Hong when I was in Vientiane. And I thought that was surprising because often weavers do not use natural dyes because it is costly. In the long term, they might be able to develop specific high-end heritage pieces for customers looking for this kind of quality.

### What about the young generation?

I personally think that if a cottage industry wants to evolve and especially to bring in the youth, I think they need to develop sewing, design, people going to the workshop, language abilities. Young people would want to get involved to help these groups of producers take their work to the next level. I have witnessed personally that tourism can actually be a huge accelerator not just in numbers but in bringing the youth and talents back in the villages.

And then they can help to design new products and implement new initiatives. This has been quite striking in Na Yang, the cotton village. They have started to sew products which they sell at the night market now. That instigated a huge amount of added value when they realized they could start sewing in the village, leading them to develop a new range of products.

### Do they have access to social media and how does that help the handicraft sector?

Yes absolutely. Everyone here is on their phone and we're all doing business on WhatsApp. If they're doing business with Thai, they go online. Laotian are all on Facebook! And the younger they are, the faster they get on social media.

I have also seen them looking at new ideas, new trends. However when you are in a Laotian language zone, they tend to have only Laotian contacts and so the ideas still come mainly

from Laos. They are being influenced through their network.

### Is there any interest for sustainability in Laos in the use of local resource?

From the retail point of view, it is incredibly challenging. We don't have the capacity to survey all processes. My job is really to sell for the producers to support their livelihood. The only thing I can do is to question them and try to source more sustainable materials. For instance with bamboo I am not sure that the products are made in a sustainable way. The weavers, especially when it is about textiles, they do understand the heritage. It depends on the tribes but the Yao, for instance, really care about their embroidery work and the patterns. It really matters that their products are handmade and well made. The Tai Lu call the cotton they use "Lu Phai Lu" which means the cotton from the Lu people and they really value its quality and its use. So we discuss this a lot. The communities are also impacted by the massive Chinese and Vietnamese investment on agriculture. It is quite sad to see what is being done to the villages without the people having much control. This must happen as well in Cambodia. If young people get more involved in the villages, it can also be a way to fight rural exodus.



Collaborating with artisans from many ethnic groups © Ma Te Sai

# Upcycling Initiatives in Laos & Cambodia



## UPCYCLING OR CREATIVE USE

Process of giving a new life to discarded materials and by-products, reducing waste by creating new materials or products of better value

### METAL

#### RAJANA CRAFTS, PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA

- > Association launched in 1995 with the support of the British NGO Southeast Asian Outreach UK
- > Since 2000 Operated by Cambodians
- > Bullets and bombshell scraps are transformed into jewellery by Cambodian artisans.



### PAPER

#### FRIENDS INTERNATIONAL NGO FRIENDS 'N' STUFF PROGRAMME

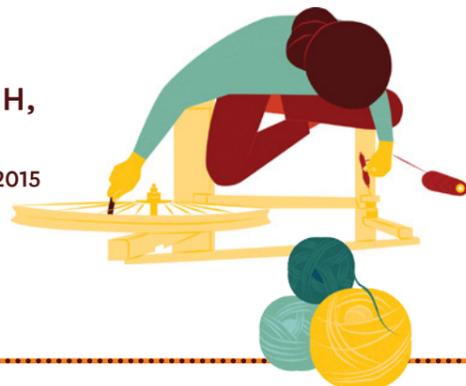
- > Focusing on children's empowerment in Cambodia since 1994
- > Using recycled materials (newspaper, rugby balls, tires, cutlery, food packaging, magazines) to make handcrafted objects
- AT LAOS BRANCH:
  - > Recycled bags made out of old rice and grain sacs collected by impoverished children living in the streets of Vientiane area
- AT CAMBODIA BRANCH:
  - > Recycled paper jewellery made by mothers in difficulty



### TEXTILE

#### TONLÉ, ZERO-WASTE FASHION BRAND, PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA / USA

- > Founded by Rachel Faller, led as an integrated zero waste model since 2015
- > All of the fabrics made of recycled materials from Cambodian garment factories discards
- > Employs 30 people in the Phnom Penh workshop earning fair wages and benefits



### PLASTIC

#### THE GREEN GECKO PROJECT, SIEM REAP, CAMBODIA

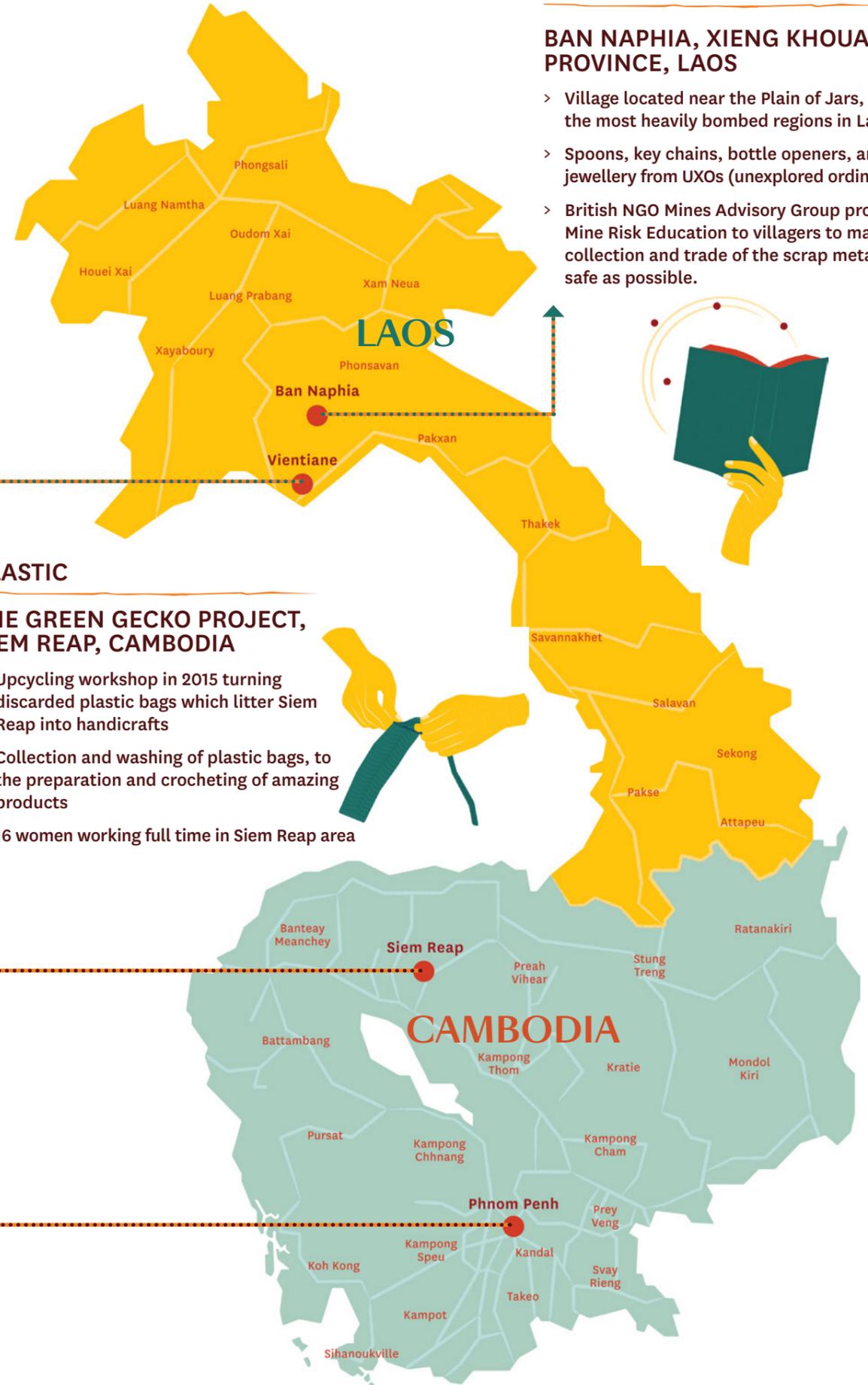
- > Upcycling workshop in 2015 turning discarded plastic bags which litter Siem Reap into handicrafts
- > Collection and washing of plastic bags, to the preparation and crocheting of amazing products
- > 16 women working full time in Siem Reap area



### METAL

#### BAN NAPHIA, XIENG KHOUANG PROVINCE, LAOS

- > Village located near the Plain of Jars, one of the most heavily bombed regions in Laos
- > Spoons, key chains, bottle openers, and jewellery from UXOs (unexploded ordinances)
- > British NGO Mines Advisory Group provided Mine Risk Education to villagers to make collection and trade of the scrap metal as safe as possible.



# Community Empowerment



As stated in the introduction of this Creative Resource Book, Laos and Cambodia are countries deeply rooted in their rurality. Agriculture still occupies more than 40% of the Cambodian population and above 60% of the Laotian population. Rice remains the main crop grown locally and farmers organise their yearly activities around its cultivation in the rainy season. Local producers usually work individually or with their family members. Farmer organisations in the form of groups and cooperatives are not very developed, which limits the scale of production, access to larger markets, and lowers bargaining power to set up market prices. Smallholders also encounter a number of challenges due to phenomenon of climate change and industrialisation, leading to destructive droughts and soil and water pollution. In both countries, regions with less production potential or located away from the main trade hubs suffer increasing economic disparities. Expanding rural activities beyond farming and fostering different types of cottage industries would significantly improve the villagers' livelihood. International and local NGOs have understood the potential of these developments to create additional sources of income. Additionally, globalisation and tourism have double-edged effects. On one hand it has opened countries to a large flow of foreign visitors, creating a fruitful and still growing hospitality industry, and bringing new markets and economic opportunities. On the other hand it has accelerated rural exodus and caused the disappearance of precious ancestral skills transmitted within families for generation. In this complex context, developing artisanal goods and creative practices appear as a valid solution to reduce poverty and inequalities.



Under this premise, populations who are the most vulnerable are women and youth. In Laos, women account for more than half of the agricultural work force. However their contribution to the sector has not been properly taken into account. Laotian women face social and cultural habits rooted in patriarchy. They tend to have less access to education than men. And in Cambodia, women living in remote villages are often unemployed and even if they do have an activity, their average income only reaches \$50 to \$70 per month. 70% of women work in conditions of precarious employment and 60% have not attended secondary school. The literacy levels are still low with 22% of women unable to read or write properly. According to the National Survey on Women's Health and Life Experiences conducted by the Cambodian government and supported by UN Women, 'one in five women in Cambodia has experienced sexual and/or physical intimate partner violence.'<sup>6</sup> Supporting women to generate their own income rebalances the family dynamics and establishes them as a force in the household. This positive outcome also directly benefits the children. Women are primary caretakers and they use their money to buy medical supplies and to send their children to school.

All the organisations presented in this chapter focus on empowering rural communities and fragile segments of the populations in particular. Taking the form of social enterprises, these initiatives incorporate in their structure a variety of social benefits such as vocational training, access to primary education, and health care. They also respond to International Labor Organization (ILO) and fair-trade policies, paying their staff higher than the average wage. Without external funding, it is however challenging to keep these companies running while fulfilling their social goals. When working with makers groups, the difficulty is

to implement a sustainable chain of distribution to ensure durable sources of income. In Cambodia producers receive the support of the Artisans Association of Cambodia (AAC), a membership-based organisation established in 2001 which gathers 50 companies working in the craft sector. The majority of members are dealing with textile production such as Artisans Angkor and Samatoa featured in the previous chapters and Mekong Blue presented in this section. Others produce recycled accessories, wood carving items, and souvenirs goods. The AAC supports its members by building a stronger network to be able to compete with other Southeast Asian craft countries including Laos. It also participates in international trade fairs such as Maison & Objet in Paris or Berlin Bazar in Berlin, which gives the selected attendees invaluable exposure and orders from international clients. Similarly, the Lao Handicraft Organisation (LHA) represents about 120 companies across Laos working in textiles, vegetal-based products made of rattan and bamboo, jewellery, and pottery. LHA also organises a yearly festival showcasing over 200 artisans in Vientiane to reach potential buyers and traders from other Asian countries, especially Japan and Thailand. These associations provide training in marketing, commercial strategy, design, trends, costing and shipping, and quality control.

Finally both Laos and Cambodia are multiethnic countries, especially Laos with 47 ethnic groups such as the Yao, Hmong, Akha and Lahu people. Cambodia only counts 1.4% of indigenous people, mostly living in remote provinces of Ratanakiri, Kampong Thom, and Preah Vihear. The handicraft sector can also bring invaluable employment opportunities to these communities who are often struggling for survival, by encouraging them to conserve their traditional skills and engage with eco-tourism.

<sup>6</sup> National Survey on Women's Health and Life Experiences in Cambodia. Cambodia Ministry of Women's Affairs, 2015. <http://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/11/national-survey-on-women-s-health-and-life-experiences-in-cambodia>

## Fair Weave

FOUNDED

2013

FOCUS

Textile accessories

WHERE

Phnom Penh and Phnom Srok village

MORE INFORMATION

fairweave.com



Weaver with the scarf she has just made © Fair Weave

### HISTORY

Chomnab Ho arrived in the region of Phnom Srok in Northwest Cambodia in 2002 when he was put in charge of a local silk development plan implemented by PASS (Projet d'Appui au Secteur de la Soie), a project funded by the French Agency for Development (AFD). Working as a marketing and technical advisor, this young Cambodian stayed in this remote area away from the main tourist circuit for 5 years, where he managed to build long-term relationships with silk producers and weavers. Of the over 400 tonnes of silk thread used in the country every year, Cambodia imports about 399, mostly from Viet Nam and China, and produces only one tonne. Phnom Srok remains one of the only domestic sericulture regions where farmers still grow a variety of indigenous golden silk cocoons. Chomnab Ho implemented a series of training programmes to improve silk reeling, dyeing and weaving processes. This in-depth experience led him to spend invaluable time with villagers and understand their social and economic difficulties. Chomnab Ho then returned to Phnom Penh and kept in touch with the weavers in Phnom Srok. He launched his own artisanal brand called Fairweave in 2013 with a specific focus on female empowerment.

### SUSTAINABLE INCOME FOR WOMEN

Phnom Srok is a rural district in the east of Beanteay Meanchey province where populations mostly pursue agricultural activities. Local youth and women in rural areas are still amongst the most vulnerable in Cambodian society

along with ethnic minorities. They encounter major barriers in terms of access to quality education. Besides working in the fields or in the informal economy by trading goods and food products at the market, women struggle to find full time employment. Chomnab Ho noticed that certain women living in Phnom Srok had learned weaving from a very young age and that he could develop a market for them. To the present day, Fairweave employs a total of 60 women, of which 25 are based in Phnom Srok. They produce textiles as a side activity and work from home, which provides them a regular source of income and prevents them from migrating to another province. It also allows them to continue to take care of their children. Additionally, the social enterprise has hired 6 women as full time staff at the company's studio.

### FRESH NEW HANDICRAFTS

Chomnab Ho belongs to a new generation of Cambodian entrepreneurs with a remarkable experience in the field and the ability to link contemporary design to local know-how. As the managing director, he designs all the products and organises various training programmes for his weavers. Fairweave strongly focuses on natural fibres and dyes, developing collections of silk scarves, but also a line of handwoven cotton throws. The organisation also uses a small quantity of Khmer golden silk produced in Phnom Srok. Fairweave mostly sells in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap shops and has started to export its textiles to Japan, Australia, America, Germany, Switzerland.

## Mekong Quilts

FOUNDED

2001

FOCUS

Quilted textiles

WHERE

Svay Rieng province, Cambodia and Binh Thuan and Hau Giang provinces, Viet Nam

MORE INFORMATION

mekongplus.org

### HISTORY

Mekong Quilts is a social enterprise finding its origins in Viet Nam. In 2001 Thanh Truong, a dentist based in Ho Chi Minh City, launched the initiative Vietnam Quilts with the support of Mekong Plus, an NGO she co-founded in 1994 with Bernard Kervyn, Gilberte Do-Huu and Robert Eberhardt. Thanh Truong was making quilts and patchworks as a hobby. She started to train 35 women in difficulties living in rural areas on how to cut and sew handmade patchworked quilts. The first pieces were sold in an informal way at friends and volunteers' homes. The project was a success and led to the opening of a first store in Ho Chi Minh City. In 2009, Vietnam Quilts changed its name for Mekong Quilts when a branch of production was launched in Svay Rieng province in Cambodia. Shops also opened in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap to encourage this new development. Mekong Quilts finally added another handicraft initiative to diversify its activity with objects and accessories made from local raw materials such as water hyacinth and bamboo.

### QUILTING IN CAMBODIA

In 2007, the production unit in Svay Rieng involved 16 artisans living in this remote province bordering Viet Nam in Rumdoul district. Quilting is a slow and precise activity which requires little resources to start. In remote villages such as Rumdoul, phenomenon of rural exodus is very common. Adults often leave the village to work in factories. They also migrate far away to Phnom Penh or Siem Reap urban centres, and even to Thailand to find work. With Mekong Quilts, the craftswomen who work on quilts or on papier-mâché products can therefore stay close to their home and take care of their children. For the adult-sized and baby quilts, they use a range of artisanal techniques such as patchwork, stitching and embroidery on high-quality silk and

cotton fabrics. Makers also develop custom orders. Between the Vietnamese and the Cambodian production centres, more than 200 women have benefitted from working at Mekong Quilts. Craftswomen have managed to generate a sustainable additional income supporting their household.

### INCREASING OPPORTUNITIES

To keep developing, Mekong Quilts relies on 5 stores in Viet Nam and Cambodia and an online shop (mekong-plus.com), reaching mostly foreign tourists visiting these countries. In addition, the organisation sells its products internationally. Increasing distribution channels appears as the most direct way to ensure employment for the makers and potentially hire and train more women. The profits generated by Mekong Quilts' sales also go the other actions carried by the NGO Mekong Plus to support micro-financing, scholarships, health, and hygiene and agricultural education programmes.



Handmade colourful quilts on display © Mekong Quilts

## Nature Bag

FOUNDED

2006

FOCUS

Accessories in natural fibre

WHERE

Luang Prabang

MORE INFORMATION

naturebag.org



### HISTORY

Bill Newbrough, an American native from Iowa, worked for 30 years as a consultant in real estate and communications. He travelled to Laos in the 2004 and saw for the first time bags made artisanally by a community of Khmu people living in the northern area of the country. In spite of their lightweight net-like aesthetic, these bags are remarkably durable with impressive elastic properties. Made from a tropical form of kudzu, a plant also called Japanese arrowroot, they were commonly used by the Khmu to carry a day's harvest. Sensitive to environmental and social causes, Bill Newbrough saw in these products the potential to preserve an indigenous knowledge, support an eco-friendly activity and provide sources of income to the Khmu. He started to collaborate with different groups to build a market for this vegetal bag, launching the JungleVine Foundation<sup>7</sup> in 2006. To develop a sustainable production chain, he partnered with Bonsou Keoamphone, a guide who founded a poverty reduction programme for the Khmu people. With a certain marketing flair, Bill Newbrough trademarked this specific species of kudzu as 'JungleVine' and renamed the Khmu bag 'Nature Bag.' He spent the last decade developing appealing bag designs with different colours and standardised sizes to reach local and international distribution, especially in the United States.

### 100% NATURAL FIBRE

Kudzu (*Pueraria phaseoloides*) plants grow naturally in the tropical forests of Laos in higher altitudes without any chemicals or irrigation device. Khmu people harvest these abundant climbing perennial vines, keep the stems and strip the pulp to collect the fibre in the form of thin white ribbons. After washing, drying and spinning the raw fibre into a fine cord, Khmu artisans start weaving the bag from the bottom up, following an ancestral technique passed from generation

to generation. The process takes about 2 weeks for each piece. By promoting a non-timber forest product as an expression of the Khmu culture, the JungleVine Foundation encourages holistic forest conservation practices.

### SUPPORTING THE KHMU COMMUNITIES

The Khmu are about 500,000 people in Laos, which is the largest ethnic group in the country. The JungleVine Foundation has been teaming with about one hundred of Khmu artisans living in 4 northern provinces Oudomxay, Luangnamtha, Bokeo and Phongsaly, and now expanding to Houaphanh and Luang Prabang. With kudzu fibre weaving, these makers based in isolated areas can continue to work from home and supplement their farming activities. The communities secure a sustainable livelihood and directly benefit from Nature Bag's growing market, especially by strengthening their connections with the rest of Laos territory.



Accessories made of kudzu 'JungleVine' © Nature Bag

<sup>7</sup> Jungle Vine Foundation <https://www.naturebag.org/pages/about-us>

## Mulberries / Phontong-Camacrafts

FOUNDED

1993

FOCUS

Accessories in natural fibre

WHERE

Vientiane and Phonsavan, Xieng Khouang province

MORE INFORMATION

mulberries.org



Reeling silk threads from golden cocoons © Mulberries

### HISTORY

Kommaly Chanthavong is the founder of 2 major organisations in the Laotian handicraft landscape: Mulberries silk farm and Phontong-Camacrafts Cooperative. Born in 1950, Kommaly Chanthavong grew up in a family of farmers and silk weavers in the province of Hua Phan, Xam Neua in the eastern part of Laos. She started weaving at the age of 6. She was only 11 when she had to flee her village destroyed by U.S bombing targeting the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Kommaly eventually arrived to Vientiane. In 1976 she founded a first silk production initiative with 10 female weavers from her home region who were also victims of displacement, selling textiles in local markets and government-backed shops. The small cooperative expanded into Phontong Handicraft Cooperative in 1980 and integrated a silk-making cottage industry: a small-scale business or manufacturing activity operated in a person's home, often in a rural environment. She then partnered with Camacrafts, a non-profit organisation supporting rural women making handicraft. With the support of the Laotian government, Kommaly eventually established Mulberries silk farm as a social enterprise on a land in Xieng Khuong province. Once the land was cleared of UXO ordnance, the organisation could plant mulberry trees and start the sericulture process. Kommaly's initiatives now involve about 3,000 farmers, weavers and makers in 35 villages in the country. In 2015 Kommaly received an award from the Philippine Ramon Magsaysay Foundation, honouring her contribution in the preservation of artisanal silk weaving and her commitment towards women empowerment.

### ORGANIC SERICULTURE

In Xieng Khuong province, the land had first to be cleared of UXO ordnance, before the organisation could plant mulberry trees and start sericulture process. The 45-hectare model farm has integrated the whole process of silk production from mulberry tree farming to sericulture, also including natural dyes planting and cattle-raising. The producers have become experts in spinning the finest qualities of silk threads, rearing a hybrid type of golden mulberry silk cocoons. Following organic farming, the cattle's manure is used to fertilise the plants and water comes from the nearby river to supply agricultural lands. To the present day, the successful initiative has trained a thousand of rural villagers from 14 provinces in silkworm rearing and silk spinning.

### FAIR-TRADE HANDICRAFTS

Following a holistic chain of production, the silk produced at the farm is used to weave complex textiles in natural dyes in the weaving workshops on site. The handwoven products are then sold in a shop in Vientiane, online, and for export. In addition, the Phontong Handicraft Cooperative brings together about 450 Laotian artisans based in 35 villages in the whole country. They develop silk accessories and hangings, basketry and other decorative objects. The producers under Camacrafts are mostly women of the Hmong ethnic groups who draw from their ancestral embroidery and batik techniques to produce redesigned handicrafts. Mulberries and its sister organisations efficiently contribute to support rural women and their families. The income generated compliments their primary work at the farm and usually goes to their children education and for medical supplies.

## Other initiatives worth mentioning

### Watthan Artisans Cambodia

FOUNDED

2004

FOCUS

Handicrafts (weaving, tailoring, silversmithing, woodcarving goods)

SUPPORT

Artisans with disabilities

WHERE

Phnom Penh

MORE INFORMATION

watthanartisans.com



### Afesip Fair Fashion

FOUNDED

2003

FOCUS

Clothing and textile accessories

SUPPORT

Women victims of trafficking, violence, and sexual exploitation

WHERE

Phnom Penh and Kompong Cham province

MORE INFORMATION

fairfashioncambodia.org



### Weaves of Cambodia

FOUNDED

1999

FOCUS

Handwoven silk textiles

SUPPORT

Weavers and farmers with disabilities

WHERE

Preah Vihear

MORE INFORMATION

weavescambodia.com

### Huey Hong Centre for Women's Skill Development

FOUNDED

1998

FOCUS

Handwoven textiles accessories

SUPPORT

Rural women

WHERE

Huey Hong Village, Vientiane

MORE INFORMATION

houeyhongvientiane.com



### Lao Disabled Women

FOUNDED

1990

FOCUS

Recycled paper and textile handicrafts

SUPPORT

Women with disabilities

WHERE

Vientiane

MORE INFORMATION

laodisabledwomen.com



### Saoban

FOUNDED

2005

FOCUS

Eco-friendly fair-trade textile accessories

SUPPORT

Rural communities across Laos

WHERE

Vientiane

MORE INFORMATION

saobancrafts.com

## INTERVIEW

# Chantha Nguon



Weaving silk in Stung Treng province © Mekong Blue

Co-founder of Mekong Blue, a social enterprise specialized in silk textile accessories and vocational training in sericulture and weaving for women

2001  
WHERE  
Stung Treng, Cambodia  
MORE INFORMATION  
[mekongblue.com](http://mekongblue.com)

### Tell us about yourself and how you settled in Stung Treng.

After 10 years living in the refugee camps of Thailand, my husband and I returned to Cambodia in 1993 for the first democratic election since the civil war. We decided to head to the jungle to Ratanakiri province to dig gold and rubies thinking it was safe, considering the Khmer Rouge factions had left this area. After more than 11 months and finding no gold and no rubies of any worth, we were severely malnourished and weak from malaria. We then left the jungle to go back to Phnom Penh. On the way back we spent a night in Stung Treng before catching the cargo boat and I fell in love with the green landscapes and the rivers there, which reminded me of Battambang where I was born. So we decided to go back to Phnom Penh just to say goodbye to friends and gather our belongings and headed back to Stung Treng to settle.

### What is the story of Mekong Blue?

Stung Treng Women Development Center (SWDC) was conceived from Center of Destination, a hospice I set up with my partner Kim Dara Chan in 2000, to support homeless victims of HIV/AIDS, sex workers, and general population.



Sadly, after 1 year of operating, we stopped receiving funding to run the hospice. We then joined the National women's empowerment project called Neary Ratana (Women Are Diamonds) which mainly provided literacy education. Economic opportunities in Stung Treng are extremely limited. Education is a low priority, especially for girls, who are often expected to stay home and help with the housework, then start families very young.

My idea was to add vocational training to keep women in classes but also help to improve their lives and skills. That eventually led to Mekong Blue in 2001, a SWDC weaving program to help generate income to support women and children in Stung Treng area.

### What kind of support does the makers get from working at Mekong Blue?

Women from Stung Treng who apply for our 6 month vocational training say they want more choices. More skills and knowledge. We also give them a health insurance under NHS of Cambodia, we provide free lunch, free health care, kindergarten, school sponsorship to their children. At SWDC, we have implemented kindergarten to provide care and education for 100 children. And since 2006, we have provided scholarship to 100 students from grade 1 to grade 9 each year. We also organise computer and English classes for girls and boys. On site, a health center has been open to support our female trainees and their children.

### What's the impact on women?

The weavers are working full time at the centre. The team leaders and administrators are also weavers. They received training to become able to manage the weaving units by themselves. I have to say that the women's lives have totally changed. Many of them have been able to build their own house from the income they received through Mekong Blue. Children are now able to go to school so that they can have a better future than their mothers. More generally, I do feel that women need more support in Cambodia. There are many things that should be done more to support and to empower women in Cambodia. This is such a broad topic and demands a lot of work.

### How is Mekong Blue developing and what are your future projects?

We are struggling to find markets to sell Mekong Blue textile products. We would like to receive supporting in training weavers to create marketable but funding is tight. From our ideas and dreams to turn it into reality is a long journey! We won't make it happen without external support. However we keep our social support to women and children of the community as much as we can.

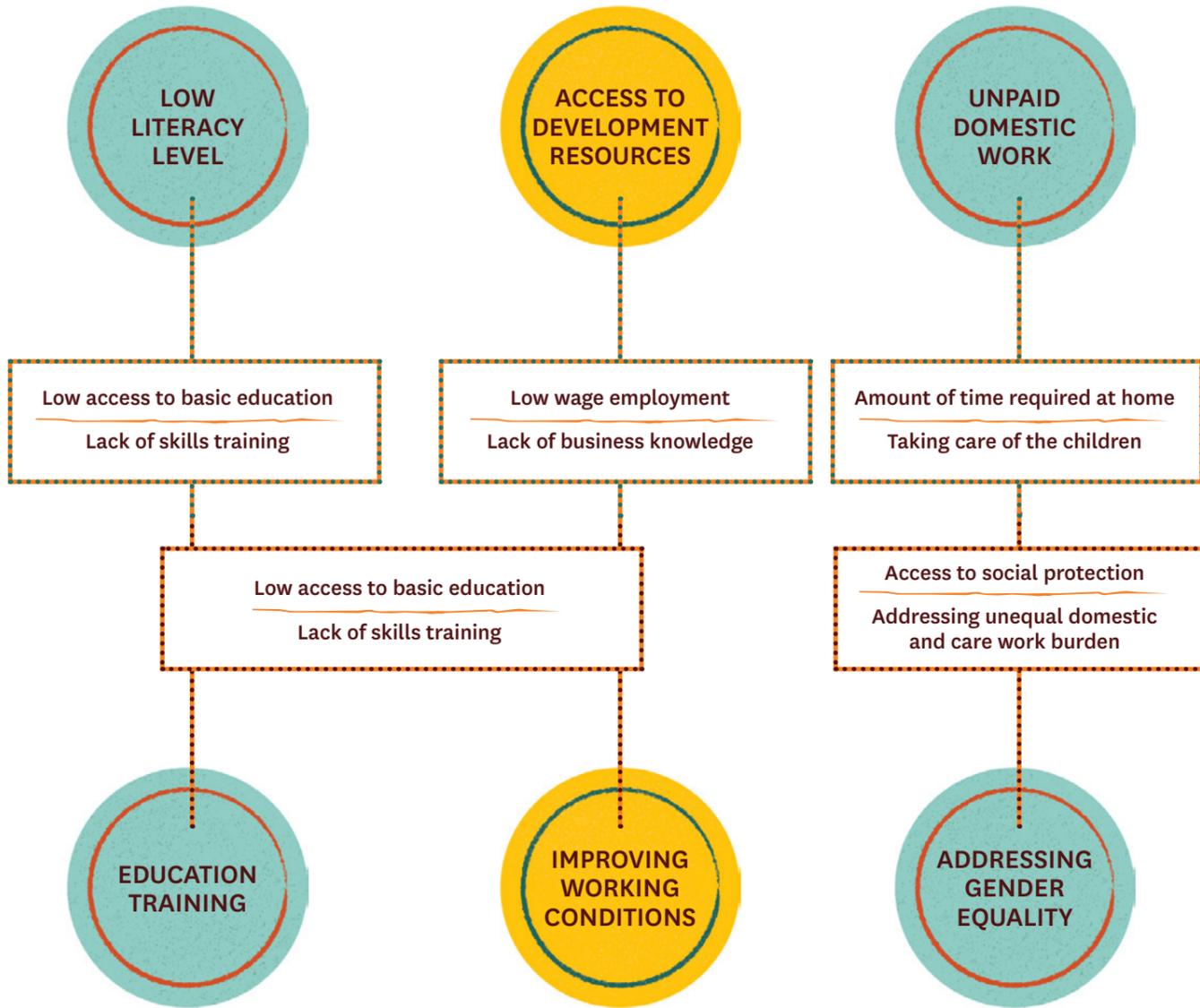
Due to the competitive market on textile sales, we had to let go about 100 weavers in 2010 and another 14 this year. The cost to make silk products is very high. As an NGO, we don't have any funding to export and distribute our textiles widely into other countries. As a result we unfortunately cannot afford to keep all the weavers we trained at Mekong Blue. That said, we hope that the women who left our weaving centre are better prepared for a new life. Some have started their own business, some bought small pieces of land to grow vegetables and raise cows. I must say that we have been doing well in protecting the young girls from prostitution and slavery, training them to develop life skills that they can use.

### And finally, how do you imagine the future of the Cambodian handicraft sector?

For the past 20 years handicrafts have not been growing much in Cambodia. In the sector, we are all developing projects individually with not much support from our government. So most businesses are set up as NGOs in order to get funding. Consequently Cambodia is heavily dependent on donations, both from the government and from NGOs. So when funding stops, most businesses drop! Certain NGOs are luckier and receive the support of donors committed on the long term such as certain foreign missionary groups or churches, so they survive. To me, if we manage to reach larger markets to sell our products, the sector will have better future. I have been advocating for this since 2008!

# Women in Laos & Cambodia

## OBSTACLES TO ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT



## LAOS

**90**  
percent

Vendors in fresh food markets are women

UP TO  
**4**  
times

more house chores and care work than men

**71**  
percent

of agriculture-reliant population are women



Female artisans members of Mekong Quilts © Mekong Quilts

## CAMBODIA

**69**  
percent

Women literacy rate vs 85% for men (2010)

**2.5**  
per 1,000

mortality rate for women vs. 4.1 per 1,000 for men

**25**  
percent

Women-headed households

## Conclusion



This book has offered a limited but rich overview of creative practices showcasing different aspects of Laotian and Cambodian cultures. Each project showed that crafts can be revitalised with contemporary approaches to bring sustainable opportunities for economic and social development. The future of the creative industries and handicrafts lies in innovative perspectives which still value ancestral skills and local resources, as it is exemplified by Samatoa and Bodia Cambodian Apothecary. The sector can benefit rural communities and limit issues of rural exodus leading many villagers to go to the city centres and even abroad to find work. Certain long-established pioneering organisations such as Artisans Angkor have managed to reach a solid clientele, mostly tourists visiting heritage sites such as the Angkor archaeological complex in Siem Reap. Similar observations may apply to Ock Pop Tock, an authority in high-quality artisanal weaving in the area of Luang Prabang, which invites visitors eager to learn about Laotian textile traditions to discover crafts in an open-air workshop.

With a strong capital base and a business model combining social impact and traditional handicraft with a modern twist, these companies successfully comfort the consumers on the legitimacy and quality of their products. For organisations located in remote areas or working with marginalised communities such as Mekong Blue in Stung Treng or Mulberries in Xieng Khouang province, it can be more difficult to reach suitable markets. New technologies play a crucial role in providing a larger marketplace, connecting makers directly to consumers.



Preparing bobbins of coloured threads © Fair Weave

Most of the projects selected have a presence online either with a website or through social media, and especially on Facebook which is very popular in Cambodia and Laos. In her interview, Emi Weir, founder of Ma Te Sai, mentioned that WhatsApp is also used to pass orders and make business. For the preparation of this Creative Resource Book, it has been sometimes challenging to connect with certain makers groups, which could benefit from more support in communication and marketing. The websites were not always up to date and communicating through emails was sometimes challenging. Social media and Facebook are used extensively in Southeast Asia, but not necessarily for professional purposes.



Working with makers' communities © Ma Te Sai

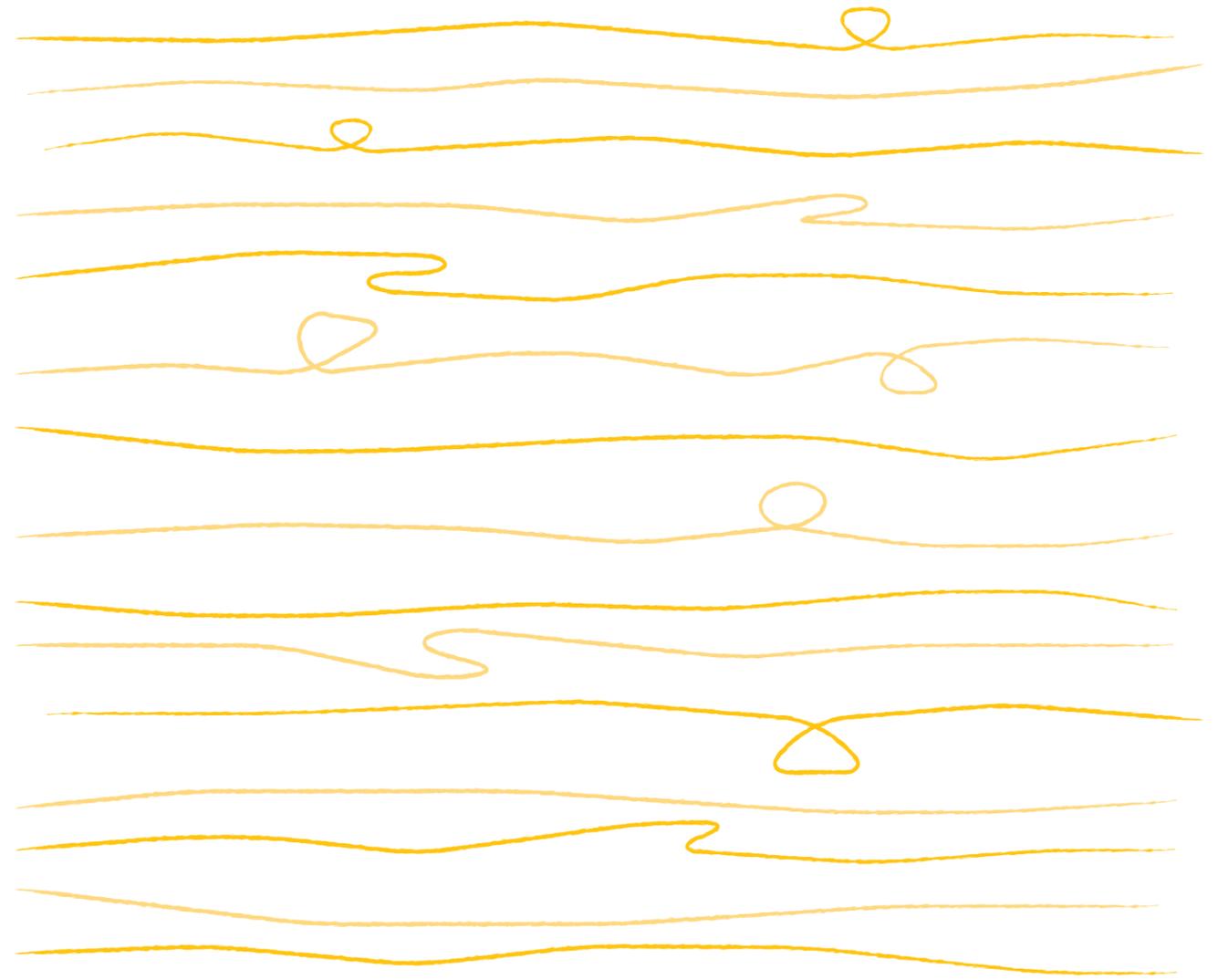
One advice to work with communities in Cambodia and Laos is to persevere. Projects created by foreign non-profits are usually more developed in terms of marketing and communication. To reach initiatives launched by local cooperatives and independent entrepreneurs such as Phaeng Mai Gallery, it can be helpful to contact associations

regrouping different members such as Artisans Association of Cambodia (AAC) or Lao Handicraft Organisation (LHO). These corporations also ensure that their members are working towards a variety of goals such as empowering people with disabilities, preserving regional cultures, protecting against human trafficking, fighting poverty, and supporting rural and indigenous communities.

Successful projects are grounded in the remarkable ancestral knowledge available in each culture but also in utilizing local plants, forest timber products, and other natural materials. To compete with mass-produced and imported goods, design strategies must foster a distinctive aesthetic while respecting these human, technical, and natural resources. It is in a holistic dialogue between designers, product managers, and craftspeople that the Cambodian and Laotian creative industries can thrive and continue to elevate a century-old heritage.

### THERE IS MORE WORK TO DO TO

- Ensure equality between men and women in terms of wages, including a fairer workload distribution in and out of the household.
- Develop training in communication, marketing, and technology to reconnect rural communities to urban centres, and reach international marketplaces.
- Consider available local resources, organic farming methods, and implement fair-trade practices with farmers
- Encourage upcycling and any production process respectful to the environment while also being beneficial to the workers health and safety
- Cultivate design and craft synergies which are considerate of the communities identities



#### **BIOGRAPHY**

Magali An BERTHON is a freelance cultural writer, researcher and documentarist with particular interests in Southeast Asian dress and textiles, local craft cultures, post-colonial perspectives, and sustainable processes. She has gained international experience working as a designer in the craft sector in Cambodia and as an adjunct instructor in graduate programmes in the United States. She is also a regular contributor to [culture360.ASEF.org](http://culture360.ASEF.org), *Selvedge Magazine*, and the online Bloomsbury Design Library, among others. Magali An is also a PhD candidate in the History of Design Department at the Royal College of Art, London focusing on the dynamics of silk heritage in post-conflict Cambodia on an AHRC scholarship. She produces the web documentary “Tissus & Artisans du Monde” (World Textiles & Artisans), an online multimedia journey combining film, photography and essays showcasing highly-skilled textile artisans, especially from mainland Southeast Asia.

[www.tissusetartisansdumonde.fr/en](http://www.tissusetartisansdumonde.fr/en)

Reclaiming Heritage / Caring for Young Khmer Weaving  
Programme / Artisans Angkor / Traditional Arts and Ethnology  
Center (TAEC) / Ock Pop Tok / Phaeng Mai Gallery / Interview with  
Eric Stocker / About Silk / Beyond Tradition / Article22 / Khang /  
Samatoa / Kumae / Bodia Cambodian Apothecary / Interview with  
Emi Weir / Upcycling Initiatives in Laos & Cambodia / Community  
Empowerment / Fair Weave / Mekong Quilts / Nature Bag /  
Mulberries / Phontong-Camacrafts / Watthan Artisans Cambodia  
/ Afesip Fair Fashion / Weaves of Cambodia / Huey Hong Centre  
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Interview with Chantha Nguon / Women in Laos & Cambodia