Outlook

# Isolated Cambodians join the global village

## The internet has the potential to revolutionise local economies and lifestyles across the developing world

**Rajiv Chandrasekaran** in Rovieng

This dusty farming village deep in Cambodia's northern hinterland has been cocooned from even the weakest winds of development by mountains, impenetrable jungle and the brutal Khmer Rouge, which kept outsiders away by sprinkling land mines in the countryside and ambushing traffic on the only road into town.

Like countless other Cambodian villages it has no telephones or electricity. Paved roads and mail deliveries are alien concepts. Most people in this hamlet of 128 families eke out a living as subsistence farmers, making less than $40 a year.

But lately the villagers have been doing some unusual things. Schoolchildren ogle pictures of Thai movie stars, even though they have never seen a movie. They make friends with children in other cities without leaving town. Women weave scarves that are sold in far-off countries.

The changes are the result of a couple of desktop computers, a set of solar panels and a satellite dish that have connected the village to something called the internet. "I don't really know what the internet is, or how it works," says the village chief, Mit Mien. "But it is changing our lives."

Funded by a non-profit organisation called American Assistance for Cambodia, Rovieng's entry to the information superhighway is one of several projects around the world that aim to bridge the growing gap in access to information technology between rich and poor nations. Supporters say that the internet has the power to change traditional patterns of development, giving isolated people access to markets and information that could haul them out of poverty.

In Rovieng's schoolhouse, with its concrete floors and splintering wooden desks, pupils take a three-month course on the basics of how to send email and browse websites.

The impact on Rovieng's economy is even more significant. Several young women have revived the village's traditional silk-weaving industry, which died out during the Khmer Rouge's reign of terror in the 70s. The scarves are sold through the village's website (www.villageleap.com) to customers around the world, and the profits are being ploughed into a pig farm.

"This is the best job in the village," says Chan Hat, 43, a rice farmer who now cares for 10 piglets. "It's much better than working in the field." Chan earns about $30 a month at the pig farm, which is what he made in a whole year from growing rice. He hopes to use his newfound wealth to buy a luxury item for the first time in his life: "I want a TV. Maybe one day, if I keep working here, I will be able to afford one."

Chan has eight children, ranging in age from one to 21. His new job means that his children will be able to stay in school instead of being forced to work in the rice fields.

Residents express surprisingly few reservations about the internet's power to expose people to alien cultural influences, or to change social structures by making young female weavers some of the richest residents, and giving children skills that their parents do not possess.

But whether it makes sense for governments, international lending institutions and aid organisations to spend their limited development budgets on such projects is the subject of debate. Many development specialists and even some technology executives, including Microsoft's chairman Bill Gates, have questioned the wisdom of wiring the developing world at the expense of immunising, educating and helping to feed the 1.2bn people who make less than $1 a day.

But other development experts and politicians argue that devoting more money to setting up internet connections in poor villages will provide people with a degree of self-sufficiency in the long run. "The idea is to be able to give the people the information and the means they need to grow out of poverty themselves," says Vinod Thomas, a World Bank vice president.

**'I don't really know what the internet is, but it is changing our lives'**

Although more than one-third of people have access to the Net in the world's richest nations, the figure is less than 0.1% in poor countries. Residents of developed nations account for more than 85% of internet users, according to the United Nations.

The UN economic and social council has set an ambitious goal of putting an internet-connected computer within 1.6km of most of the world's villages. It is hoping to raise more than $1bn from the private sector and developed nations over the next few years to fund the project.

"We are trying to strike a balance," says Mark Malloch Brown, director of the UN development programme. "Information technology has enormous power to change development, but it's not a short-term thing that should take the place of everything else we are doing. A computer still cannot fill a stomach, produce clean water or pay for vaccinations."

Efforts to wire the world have been energised by the production of increasingly cheap computers, solar panels and satellite dishes. And efforts are under way to develop new types of technology that may be better suited to remote communities. Scientists in India are testing a $200 hand-held computer with wireless internet access and a picture-based operating system that even illiterate farmers can use. Researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology have constructed mobile internet community centres inside metal shipping containers that have been transported to villages in Costa Rica and the Dominican Republic.

Bernard Krisher, who heads American Assistance for Cambodia, says telecommunications companies should donate unused satellite capacity to poor countries. "They have a social responsibility to do this," he said. "It's like drug companies offering low-cost Aids medicines, or the Metropolitan Opera filling its empty seats with students who pay a few dollars. These companies should donate 30% of their airtime, which probably isn't even being used today, to the developing world. It wouldn't cost them anything."

Krisher has had to hire two full-time computer teachers and another staff member to maintain the satellite link, the solar panels and computers. Grazing buffalo knocked over the satellite dish, so a bamboo fence has had to be built around it.

Then there is the language barrier. Few villagers speak or read English, and there is little on the Net written in Khmer. But most young people in the village embraced the concept. "We may not know too much about the internet, but we are very happy to have it," said Pon Lay Heng, 19, who now weaves scarves instead of toiling in her family's rice fields. "It has given us a future." *Washington Post*