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It Takes the Internet to Raise a Cambodian Village

Small-Scale Projects Try to Reverse Urbanization

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Heng Sinith for The New York Times

Preparing rice, top, in Robib, a village in Cambodia. Students at the Wakako Hironaka School, middle. Bernard Krisher, below, a former journalist, has brought the Internet to one of Asia's poorest countries.



TOKYO -- Overlooked in last month's Group of 8 discussions about the challenge of a growing "digital divide" between the information rich and the data deprived was the work of Bernard Krisher, a 69-year-old former journalist who is trying to bring the Internet to one of the poorest regions in Asia.

Most recently, Mr. Krisher's nonprofit group, American Assistance for Cambodia, has been toiling to create a permanent Internet connection to a primary school in the village of Robib, a cluster of six rural communities in north central Cambodia, more than a nine-hour drive from Phnom Penh. [On Monday, the group plans to announce that it has succeeded.]



The Internet link is being provided at no charge by Shin Satellite in neighboring Thailand. By placing the village directly on the Internet, Mr. Krisher, an American who worked as an Asia correspondent for Newsweek for decades, says he hopes to assist in the economic transformation of a region of Cambodia in which the average per capita income is about \$37 a year.

In addition to providing computer education and Web access to a village school attended by 400 young students, the Internet project is supporting the creation of a small woven-silk industry in the village, which plans to sell silk scarves and table runners on the Internet. Once production begins, Mr. Krisher said, it might be possible to generate as much as \$2,000 a month in revenue.

"We're trying to show that the Internet can really help a single village," said Mr. Krisher, whose nonprofit group is based in Tokyo, where he lives.

"If this is copied elsewhere around the world it might help eliminate the digital divide."

Though the effort is on a small scale, Nicholas Negroponte, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology computer scientist who is also engaged in the effort to aid Cambodian villages, said the project demonstrated that the global impact of the Internet could ultimately serve to reverse the disparity between urban wealth and rural poverty.

"The Net will reverse urbanization," said Mr. Negroponte, director of the M.I.T. Media Laboratory. "The past 150 years of development have been one of urbanization. To be rural has meant to be poor. The Net could bring some of the same opportunities to the rural world and maybe even turn being rural into being rich."

The e-commerce effort has been created with the help of the Hotel Okura, a luxury hotel in Tokyo that has agreed to process credit card purchases made from the village's Web site, whose server computer is in Phnom Penh (www.villageleap.com). The plan is to ship the products by express mail through Cambodia's postal service, with the intention of reaching customers anywhere on the globe within two weeks.

A number of the Robib villagers are now being trained in the once traditional weaving skills of the region - skills that atrophied under the brutal reign of the dictator Pol Pot in the 1970's and the years of strife afterward, isolating the country and disrupting traditional trade patterns.

A satellite dish provides a continuous 64,000-bits-a-second connection to a small group of computers in the village, which are powered for part of each day by a small solar power system. The hookup is also being used for a simple experiment in telemedicine that American Assistance has organized.

A group of doctors at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston has agreed to answer health-related questions from villagers via e-mail, as well as offer general guidance on diseases like malaria and H.I.V.

"This is not what we usually think about when we talk about telemedicine, where a doctor may transmit an X-ray to a colleague for a second opinion," Mr. Krisher said.

Part of the challenge of Mr. Krisher's effort lies in helping recreate the social structure of the village, which was disrupted by the Khmer Rouge military under Pol Pot.

"It was a nice, traditional Cambodian village," Mr. Krisher said. "They had some old, dilapidated schools, and the Khmer Rouge arrested all of the teachers."

Mr. Krisher's commitment to Cambodia grew out of his years as a foreign correspondent for Newsweek. While many of the magazines' other reporters were drawn to Vietnam alone, Mr. Krisher traveled widely in Asia during the 1960's and 1970's. He became close with the Indonesian leadership and through those relationships was introduced to Prince Sihanouk of Cambodia.

Although the two men initially had a mercurial relationship, they ultimately became good friends, and Mr. Krisher kept in touch while the prince was in exile when the Khmer Rouge were in power.

Helping to erase the digital divide in Cambodia.

When Mr. Sihanouk returned to Cambodia in 1990, he asked Mr. Krisher to help the struggling country. In 1994, Mr. Krisher founded and became publisher of The Cambodia Daily, a small English-language newspaper in Phnom Penh.

He also raised money for and helped found the Sihanouk Hospital of Hope, in Phnom Pehn, which is now the nation's largest hospital.

Mr. Krisher set up American Assistance for Cambodia in 1990, running it with his wife, Akiko, and his daughter, Deborah Krisher-Steele.

The hope is to construct 200 rural schools in Cambodian villages, under a program in which donors contribute \$14,000 to build small school houses, with matching funds from the World Bank.

Mr. Krisher said he thought the Internet added a powerful lever to his small village-level projects. He said he received three or four e-mail messages from children at the Robib school each day, asking questions about his home in Tokyo.

"This is it," Mr. Krisher said. "You have to do things in a micro way that doesn't require a vast amount of money. My basic philosophy is to build a small sample and make it work and then just copy that."

<http://www.villageleap.com>