

The Meter Man

Ek Sonn Chan's work is credited with providing more than a million Cambodians with clean, affordable drinking water

BY Floyd Whaley

Ek Sonn Chan and a small team of Cambodian water utility workers pulled up outside a lavish compound in the capital city of Phnom Penh. The owner of the compound, a powerful local general, had been paying a low flat fee for unlimited water use.

Chan, then in his first year as head of the Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority, had told customers—particularly the wealthy—that they would need to have meters installed in their homes and pay for the water they used. The general's security guards scoffed at Chan's teams on previous visits to the compound.

When it came time to force the situation, Chan himself went to the compound and told his workers to start digging up the pipes outside to cut off the water supply to the general's home. As his men began digging, the general emerged, drew a gun, placed it against Chan's head and said: "Stop now!" Chan and his men obeyed.

But Chan did not quit. "The next day, I hired some armed militia men," he says. "Eight of us went to the house and disconnected his water supply. The general lived without water for a few days. Eventually, he came to see me in my office, and he allowed us to put the meter in."

The harrowing encounter was one of dozens that Ek Sonn Chan has experienced as the head of Phnom Penh's public water provider since 1993. It was not the first time he had faced danger and difficulty in his life.

In the 1970s, not long after earning



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— Ek Sonn Chan, head of the Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority

his degree in engineering, his entire family was lost in the killing fields of the Khmer Rouge. Alone in the world, he worked as a farmer and later in the city's abattoir. He moved up the ranks as a city employee until he reached the level of commerce director.

In 1993, Chan was named the head of Phnom Penh's water authority. It was an extremely unenviable position. The water lines laid decades earlier by the French had corroded and, as one report put it, "had been augmented haphazardly into an indecipherable maze of connections. No blueprints had survived the Khmer Rouge, nor had the engineers who understood

them. The entire labyrinth was riddled with holes and so porous that disease-laden sewage easily seeped in."

To make matters worse, the water agency itself was in ruins from years of war, followed by decades of corruption and mismanagement. Only about 20% of the city had running water, and that was available for about 10 hours a day at very low pressure. The 500 employees of the authority were earning less than \$20 a month, and legal connections to water service in the city were unobtainable. Illegal connections were sold for as much as \$1,000 each.

Chan's first order of business was to comb the ranks of the agency for its best and brightest. He formed these workers into squads to repair the system's myriad leaks, install thousands of meters of pipeline, and close hundreds of illegal connections—including those of the rich and powerful. By reforming its accounting system, the agency gained enough credibility to obtain financial assistance from international organizations such as the Asian Development Bank and the World Bank.

Today, Phnom Penh still has very limited infrastructure, but it has one of the best performing water systems in the region. From producing 65,000 cubic meters of water in 1993, the authority now provides 300,000 cubic meters per year, an astonishing 460% increase. When Chan took over, there were fewer than 27,000 legal connections. Today, that number has increased by 700% to 190,000 connections.



FIXING LEAKS Under Ek Sonn Chan, the Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority fixed the city's water system leaks, installed thousands of meters, and closed hundreds of illegal connections—including those of the rich and powerful.



WATER CARTING SERVICE A girl struggles to pull a water cart as she goes down a street in Phnom Penh. Clean water in Cambodia's capital was often scarce before the Phnom Penh Water Supply Authority reformed the system.

for Government Service. Recipients "address issues of human development in Asia with courage and creativity" and "have made contributions which have transformed their societies for the better," according to the foundation's website.

Chan "raised prices, resulting in strong revenues and an enviable reputation for paying the authority's debts ahead of schedule," the award states. "He made cheap water available to the city's poorest neighborhoods. New and refurbished water-treatment plants ensured that this water met World Health Organization water-safety standards. At the same time, he professionalized the authority's workforce, building its technical capacity and instilling in its employees a work ethic of discipline, competence, and teamwork.

Most significantly, he is credited with "bringing safe drinking water to a million people in Cambodia's capital city." ■

The authority boasts a collection rate of 99.9%, with 100% of customers using meters, compared with 12% in 1993. This widespread use of metering and efficient collections allowed the authority to offer cheap, clean water and lower-cost payment plans in the city's poorest neighborhoods.

About 18,000 very poor families in the city have been given water connections through subsidies or very

manageable payment plans, says Chan. And the days of paying bribes in order to get water are over. The authority guarantees that water will be connected to any home in Phnom Penh within 3 days of receipt of the application with no extra charges.

In 2006, the Ramon Magsaysay Foundation, named for the Philippine president who died in a plane crash in 1957, gave Chan its prestigious Award