

A NOTABLE EXCHANGE IN CAMBODIA

CUFA's executive officer **Peter Mason** travelled with Cuscal CEO John Gilbert and his wife Deborah to Cambodia. Here, he shares his experience of the journey.



John Gilbert in Cambodia, at one of the CUFA development sites where a new cooperative's head office is taking shape.

The Cuscal CEO and World Council of Credit Unions (WOCCU) director, John Gilbert, recently opened two savings bank (credit union) buildings in northwestern Cambodian villages.

The completion of the buildings is a tangible achievement of the work done by the Credit Union Foundation Australia (CUFA) in Cambodia, in partnership with WOCCU. John's involvement in their opening created a great opportunity for CUFA to showcase its work in the country.

The construction of new savings bank buildings in remote Cambodian villages is central to CUFA's and WOCCU's program to improve the image of savings banks and strengthen their operations. After a year's hard work, we're seeing some exciting results, and having John Gilbert open the new buildings was certainly a highlight.

After arriving in Cambodia, John and Deborah were driven to the CUFA Training Centre in Phnom Penh. Here, John spent time with 30 people from village savings banks, community savings groups and emerging credit unions attending a three-day seminar with CUFA's in-country trainer, Carolin Mackaway, sharing some valuable insights on the worldwide credit

union movement with them.

We then navigated our way through Phnom Penh's chaotic traffic to the open road to Cambodia's northwest for the five-hour journey to Battambang in northwestern Cambodia. By sunset, we'd reached the outskirts of Battambang to be greeted by the huge kneeling statue of "the man who lost his stick" – a representation of a well-known figure from Cambodian folklore.

THE OFFICIAL CEREMONY

The next morning's 5am start did not allow time for sightseeing, but the day was still greeted with excitement. Our convoy of LandCruisers tackled the two-hour journey with relative ease to begin with, only to be out-maneuvered by locals on motorbikes, tractors and cycles as the road deteriorated from sealed, to dirt, to what later took on the look of bomb-damaged terrain.

After shuddering our way through the last hour of our adventure, we arrived in the village of Knach Romeas. Music enveloped the area as locals prepared for the official opening ceremony and we could hardly see the building for the brightly striped marquees in front.

The event was clearly important. Hundreds of chairs were set up for the villagers, savings bank members and official guests. John was the first speaker and gave the gathered members of the Village Savings Bank some words of encouragement and shared information on the credit union movement in Australia and around the world.

After some entertainment, the ribbon cutting and unveiling of a plaque to commemorate the event, the doors of the new building were swung open for inspection. John and Deborah ('John Wife', as she became known) were then invited to plant a tree to signify the growth of the community's Savings Bank before scrambling back into the LandCruisers to navigate their way down

the dusty, potholed road to the next opening at Nirontarak Pheap.

WORK IN ACTION

Proceedings there were similar to the first, but this time John and Deborah opened accounts (John's initial excitement at the thousands in local currency he was depositing dissipated after he was told it was roughly the equivalent of US\$75c).

On their third and final day in Cambodia, John and Deborah visited the construction site of the Khemera Savings Bank, a cooperative run by women for women.

Of his time in Cambodia, John said, "I was delighted to be a part of bringing CUFA's and WOCCU's work in Cambodia to life. It was an outstanding experience to witness the tangible outcomes of our work in action."

'I was delighted to be a part of bringing CUFA's and WOCCU's work in Cambodia to life.'

– Cuscal CEO and WOCCU director John Gilbert.

"Establishing these village savings banks has had a huge impact on restoring communities' faith in financial institutions and their willingness to participate in a credit union. Many in these villages now have a stronger belief in the ability of a community savings bank to be part of a plan for greater prosperity. We couldn't have hoped for a better result. You can imagine the economic benefit to these communities. Where before many villagers buried their money, they are now saving it and contributing to growth and economic activity." ■