

Portrane man pushing for better education for Cambodian kids

A PORTRANE man has dedicated the last 10 years of his life to helping improve the education system in Cambodia.

Colm Byrne, a former teacher at Donabate Portrane Educate Together first travelled to Cambodia in the summer of 2013 to voluntarily teach with three of his colleagues.

"I fell in love with the country and its people and returned to live in Cambodia in 2014," he says.

Byrne is now the CEO of International Operations at SeeBeyondBorders, a charity dedicated to improving education in Cambodia.

In 2019, Cambodia's socio-economic indicators ranked it 144 out of 189 countries evaluated and since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, over two million people now live below the poverty line



Portrane man Colm Byrne permanently moved over to Cambodia in 2014 to help improve the education system.

of \$2.70 a day.

Currently only three percent of 15 year-olds reach minimum literacy standards.

"The Khmer Rouge regime targeted the educated with 90 percent of teachers, intellectuals and artists were killed," the charity says.

"This was followed



Byrne is CEO of International Relationships at charity SeeBeyondBorders which works with teachers to improve the education system in Cambodia.

by a lack of investment in developing teacher skills over generations

and has resulted in very poor learning outcomes for Cambodian children

today."

Over time, Byrne says he has seen first-hand

the need to empower teachers and grow their skills in order to bring about much needed change in the country.

"Working in Cambodia with tremendous Cambodian colleagues gives life a pulse and a meaning," he says.

"I 'get' far more than I 'give' and we are so enthused by the support we get from a small group of supporters across the island of Ireland. It puts fuel in our tank.

"In Ireland, we appreciate a quality education.

"Our life prospects are better because we have been fortunate to have well-educated confident teachers who have been supported by continuous professional development," he says.

"Our children can dream of their futures knowing that if they work hard, their dreams are

achievable.

"In Cambodia, children spend an average of five years at school. A school day is four hours.

"The challenge for Cambodian children is to have access to a quality education so that their dreams can come true too."

With International Literacy Day approaching on Thursday, September 8, Byrne says the challenge continues for his team.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Cambodian schools were closed for over 300 days (far longer than other countries in the Mekong region of Southeast Asia).

There was no online learning for Cambodian children and many did not return to school, he says.

"Suddenly, the potential of their life outcomes went from climbing a hill to scaling Everest."