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TRADE DEVELOPMENT

The next Batman film: Made in Cambodia?



Animation schools in Cambodia are using the power of international trade to reach the poor. In recent years, a number of institutions have emerged to train young Khmers how to draw the characters used in advertisements, cartoons and films. One of the institutes is run by a French school whose graduates have worked on blockbusters such as the Harry Potter, Shrek and Batman movies. These schools are tapping into a multi-billion-dollar global industry and demonstrating Cambodia's potential to participate in high-tech services trade while, at the same time, lifting young people out of poverty.

Computer animation has become increasingly sophisticated in recent decades. Since it took off in the 1970s, animation has expanded from cartoons to live films and animated movies, as well as advertising and video games. It has moved from two-dimensional graphics to three-dimensional, or 3D. It has also become a highly tradable service. Exports of animation from South Korea were estimated to be worth almost US\$400 million in 2012. Furthermore, South Korea, historically a back-office for the American animation industry, is increasingly becoming a global exporter of its own content, gaining additional revenue from royalties and distribution rights.

While Cambodia's contribution to the industry is still small, demand is growing worldwide for good, low-cost animation. Industries beyond film and television are increasingly using animation to get their point across: institutions use animation in instructional or promotional films; governments use it in public service announcements; and it is used in more industrial settings, too, for example in architecture and in courtroom evidence.

At least three institutions in Cambodia are developing students' technical skills related to 3D animation, each with different aims. Phare Ponleu Selpak (PPS) is the most overtly service-minded. It is a Cambodian non-governmental organization that started in 1986 to bring together children from a refugee camp on the Thai border and teach them the visual and performing arts. The institution's courses range from circus acrobatics to traditional music. The visual arts program includes a computer animation studio, 1000 Hands, that specializes in cartoon animation, with a focus on educational and public service projects. The studio has done projects for UNICEF and Phnom Penh's biggest public hospital, and is working on a feature-length cartoon for Oxfam Quebec.

Objectif 3D is a French animation school that recently established a campus in the outskirts of Phnom Penh. It specializes in post-high-school education and teaches 3D animation, a technique used in many cutting-edge films. Alumni of O3D have worked in a number of internally recognized projects, including Shrek the Third, Batman Begins, Madagascar 2 and two of the Harry Potter films. The institute was originally targeted to French students but is now open to both foreign and Khmer students.

A third institute in Cambodia is owned by an Indian company based in Kolkata. Called the School of Animation, Digital Asia, it opened in 2003 and is part of a conglomerate that includes an agriculture project, an aviation school and a film studio. The animation school has philanthropic and social objectives in addition to making good products, according to the institute's website.

These private initiatives demonstrate that a developing country such as Cambodia can seize the opportunities that technology has opened in high-value-added services niches. With time, these institutes could do even more for the local economy. Ideally, they could serve as a catalyst to attract specialized FDI. To enable this process, however, the Government should take care to support these and similar initiatives with policies that foster the development of the high-tech and creative services industries, such as a recent United-Nations-led effort to increase Cambodians' access to broadband internet. The Government should execute stable and predictable policies in the internet and communications technology (ICT) and telecom-related industries—areas in which it has lagged. With continued growth of the creative arts community, a good policy environment and more hard work by these animation schools, the Western cinema audiences could see more Cambodian handiwork on the big screen.

The World Bank Office



No. 113 Norodom Blvd. Phnom Penh - Cambodia
Tel: (855 23) 861 300
Fax: (855 23) 861 301/302

Visit our website:
<http://www.worldbank.org/cambodia>

This note reflects the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the World Bank and the donors.

For further information,
please contact:

Julian Clarke
Senior Trade Specialist
(jclarke1@worldbank.org)

Vannara Sok
Operations Officer
(vsok@worldbank.org)

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