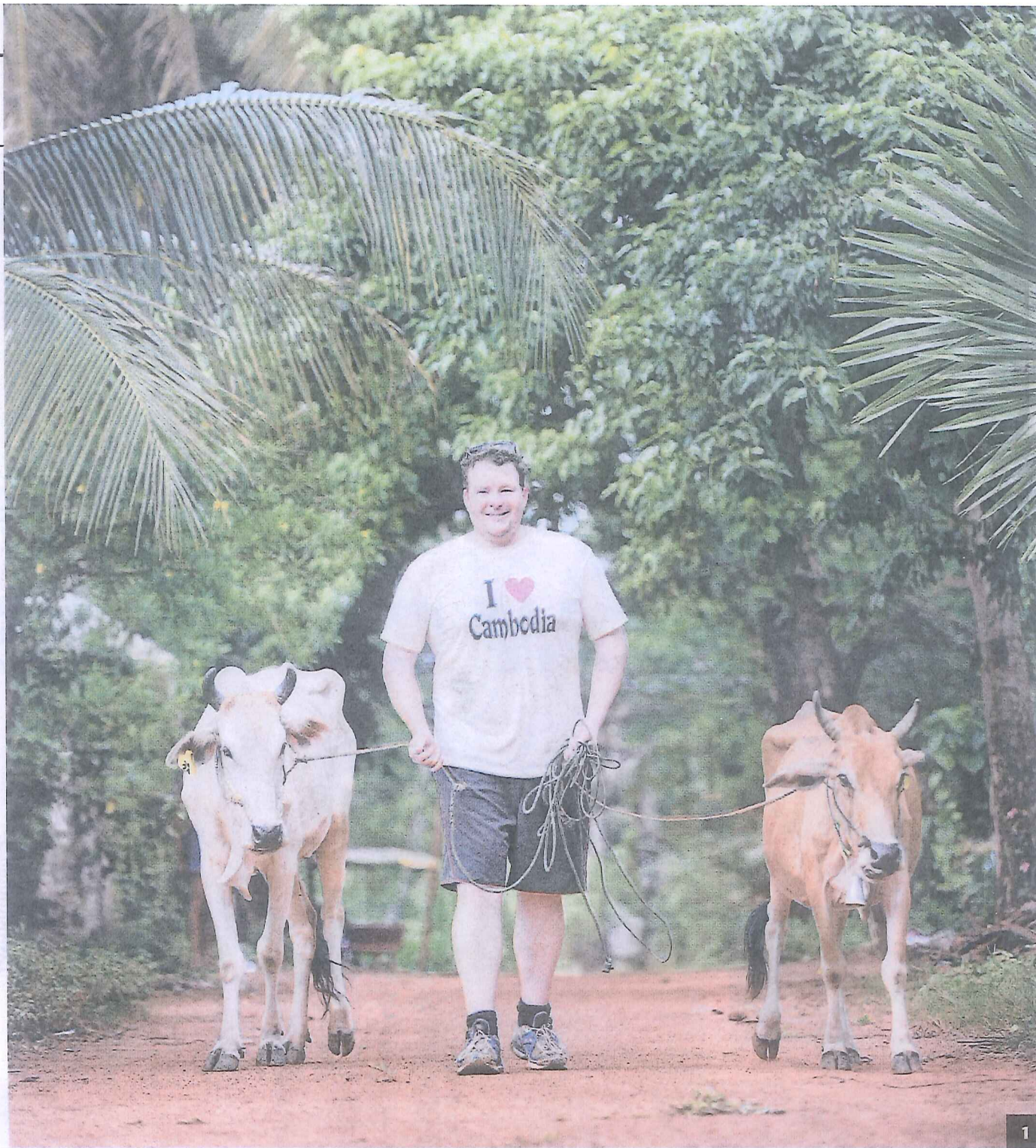


1 Andrew "Cosi" Costello walks two of the charity's new cows in the village of Chambork
 2 Two orphaned boys, aged 14 and 11, with their cow outside their rural home in northwest Cambodia
 3 Cosi and his interpreter Jet take a tuk-tuk to visit the charity's cows on the outskirts of Siem Reap

ANDREW Costello sits in the back of a tuk-tuk, feet up on the seat, wearing shorts and sneakers and a T-shirt stamped "I love Cambodia". Beside the burly host of *South Aussie with Cosi*, translator and fixer Chan Vicheth sports dark business slacks, a check shirt and a permanent grin. Costello has barely taken a breath since touching down at Siem Reap International Airport less than an hour ago, as he and "Jet" map out a plan for the next five days.

It's Costello's sixth visit to the impoverished Asian nation where his charity Cows for Cambodia is slowly changing the lives of some of the country's poorest rural families. On this trip, there are 13 families to visit and the same number of cows to vaccinate and pregnancy check. After that, there are funds to buy another eight pregnant cows and give them new homes.

First though, there are problems to iron out. Jet explains some of the cows appear to no longer be pregnant, and the farmer who agreed to service any new cows has



BREEDING WEALTH

words and pictures **nathan dyer**

A simple South Australian idea to buy and lend pregnant cows is changing the lives of some of Cambodia's poorest rural families

sold his bull. "And some of the families have taken out the ear tags, because they are worried it makes the cows itchy and they will get an infection," says Jet.

As the tuk-tuk rattles into town, small wooden stalls line the road selling strings of tiny sachets of everything from washing powder to peanuts. Petrol stations are simple rows of oily jerry cans and re-used soft drink bottles lined up on benches. "Nothing is sold in bulk, here," explains Costello. "Most people can't afford to buy more than what they'll need for the day."

In a country still recovering from the murderous Khmer Rouge years – an estimated two million Cambodians died between 1975 and 1979 – poverty is entrenched. Eighty per cent of Cambodia's 15 million people live outside cities and provincial towns, many surviving on

“ IF YOU HAVE A COW IN CAMBODIA IT'S LIKE HAVING A FULL-TIME JOB

subsistence farming. The average income is roughly \$2.90 per day. Many earn far less.

Even relatively better off Cambodians, such as Jet, often struggle to make ends meet. One of 10 children from a poor farming family, Jet joined the monkhood aged 16 when his father died.

"I knew my mother could not support me to study, so I became a monk," explains the unfailingly good-humoured university graduate. With a 19-month-old daughter and a pregnant wife, he now earns \$34.67 a day as an English-speaking guide showing

Westerners around the famous Angkor Wat temples. For a full-day private tour he can earn \$57.80. But that's only when someone books him. This year tourist numbers are down. In September, Jet took just one tour.

Despite overwhelming poverty and their country's dark past, Cambodians are famous for their good humour and generosity towards visitors. "That's what really struck me the first time I was here, that happiness

and enthusiasm in the face of poverty," says Costello recalling his first trip to Cambodia in 2011 to visit a friend working in the capital, Phnom Penh.

A visit to the notorious Killing Fields had a profound impact on the big bloke from Kadina. "I thought how can these people be what I consider the happiest people in the world when they've faced so much grief and have absolutely nothing compared to us," he says.

Touring the famous temples in the country's north, Costello wondered if he could use his agricultural background to make a difference. "If you have a cow in Cambodia it's like having a full-time job, an income stream, but cows are out of reach for probably about 80 per cent of the population," he says.

"A lot of rural families start by farming a few chickens, because it's cheaper, and their intention is to farm chickens until they save enough to buy a pig, then farm pigs until they can save enough to buy a cow. I thought if I could help poor families somehow fast-track that process, I could help them achieve financial freedom a lot quicker than they otherwise could."

Costello recalls how he withdrew



\$US600 (\$A693) from an ATM and asked his tuk-tuk driver, Hoing Buan, to help him buy a cow and give it to a family. It didn't work out, but he returned to Adelaide with the idea still bouncing around his head.

Three months later he was back, this time with the idea to lend, rather than give, a pregnant cow to a family and let them keep the calf. "By sheer chance I hired an interpreter to fix some of the problems I faced the first time and that interpreter turned out to be Jet," says Costello. "Since then, Jet has been a key reason for the success of this whole thing."

With Jet's help, Costello purchased his first cow for \$US650 (\$A751) and lent it to a family. "I thought I'd do one as a trial and if that was successful then I'd continue to grow it," he says.

Cows for Cambodia has now raised \$15,000. After this trip the charity will own 22 cows, each with yellow ear tags marked SA. Each family is loaned a cow once. When a calf has been born, the cow is moved to another family. Cows purchased become assets capable of producing up to 10 calves, each worth around \$693 to the recipient families. "To put that into context, most of these families live in homes worth about \$300," says Costello. "It's like saying to someone from Adelaide, 'I'm going to give you a new house'."

Born in Kadina, the son of a policeman and a nurse, Costello paid his way through a degree in agriculture at the University of Adelaide's Roseworthy campus. With a career in

agriculture beckoning, he and best mate Anthony "Tomo" Thomson won an SAFM competition to race around the world. On return, Costello was offered a position with the station's Black Thunders road crew, eventually landing a gig on the breakfast show.

An appearance on Network Ten's *The Biggest Loser* in 2008 gave him national exposure and soon after Costello pitched the idea of a South Australian travel show to Channel 9. Now filming its fifth season, *South Aussie with Cosi* promotes the state in 46 countries.

Although he describes Cows for Cambodia as his way "of giving something back", Costello is careful to point out it's not a free ride. Each family is given a load of hay with their cow, but it's up to them to ensure the animal remains healthy throughout the pregnancy. A contract signed by each participant clearly states the cow cannot be sold and it is only the calf that will remain with the family.

"I don't believe in giving handouts, because I don't think that works," says Costello. "What I believe in is giving people a 'hand up', and that's what we're trying to do," he continues. "We're giving these families an opportunity to break the poverty cycle."

The morning after arriving in Siem Reap, Costello and Jet are on their way to visit the first of the charity's recipient families. Beyond the sprawling outskirts of the tourist town, thick jungle and green rice paddies form the landscape. Fifteen minutes later, crumbling Ba Kong temple rises above the treetops. Nearby, a cow is tied to a wooden stake. "This is Adelaide,"



says Costello proudly. "Our first cow." Adelaide's carer, Svay Bo, a tall and slender woman of 38, says the cow is doing well but she is worried about "insects". Jet explains they have medications to help that. Bo smiles and thanks Costello. Adelaide is tied to a tree and given three injections. A multi-vitamin to give her the nutrition she needs to remain healthy and produce a calf; a seven-in-one vaccine to prevent a range of diseases including

leptospirosis, which can be transferred to humans; and a treatment for worms, lice and liver fluke.

Elders' southern zone livestock production manager, Mark Dearing, developed the three-step health plan back in Australia. Roseworthy-based Dearing says he was only too happy to lend a hand after hearing about the charity from a colleague who met Costello through friends. >>>



Farmer Svay Bo walks her cow "Adelaide" near the crumbling ruins of Ba Kong temple

"The moment I met Cosi his energy for the whole thing was infectious," says Dearing, who researched health issues for Cambodian livestock before Virbac Australia supplied the products free.

To earn money, Bo's husband works in construction in town. She hopes the calf will be female so she can breed from it and help pay for her 15-year-old daughter's dream to become a teacher. "We have never owned a cow," she explains through Jet. "But now I am very happy and I wish for more cows."

Costello is much-loved in the villages where word of his charity has spread. As he and Jet continue their rounds, messages of gratitude greet them at every stop. Around midday they pull into the thatched home of three young boys whose parents have died of tuberculosis. The orphans were one of the first families to receive a cow. Aged 15, 14 and 11, the boys listen closely as Jet explains about the vaccinations. After the injections the youngest empties a bag of freshly cut grass into a feed trough.

Seventeen-year-old Won Mouch's life is a daily struggle. Born with a deformed left arm, the shy high school student grows herbs in a small patch by her home to support her family's meagre income. "Please tell her she is doing a very good job," Costello tells Jet, standing beside the small enclosure Mouch has built for her cow. "It won't be too long before she has her own calf." Jet relays the message and the young girl smiles broadly, gently stroking the neck of her cow.

Hours later, Costello slumps in the back of the tuk-tuk exhausted, his once white T-shirt now red with dust. "It's been a great day," he yells above the roar of the small motorbike as Buan swerves to dodge potholes in the fading light. "Pregnancy rates are better than expected and only four were missing their ear tags."

Rather than just donate, Costello encourages the charity's followers to get involved. Six groups have now visited the cows and their families. "People see the SA ear tags in the cows and they know they're part of something," says Costello. "They become ambassadors for what we're trying to do." With no marketing budget, the charity relies solely on support from Costello's 102,700 Facebook followers.

For those who know him, Costello is firstly a family man. Wife Sam and children Matilda, Charlie-Rose and Harry are never far from his thoughts. It's no surprise having children is the first criteria for the charity's recipients. "I look at these kids and I can't help thinking of my own," says Costello standing outside the simple stilted home of a new recipient, deep in the rice paddies. "The opportunities my kids have back in Australia are mind-blowing compared to these guys."

While the head of the village helps identify about half of the families chosen, Costello randomly selects the rest, working with Jet to determine families he thinks will make the most of the opportunity. "This lady has an amazing chicken coop but no chickens, because she's still saving up to buy them," says Costello, outside another thatched home. "That says to me this is someone who's willing to have a crack." Once selected, Jet talks with each family about the program and informs them they have a cow. "I can always tell by the look in people's eyes at what stage of Jet's explanation they're up to," says Costello, grinning.

Although there are plans to buy land, perhaps some bulls, and put Jet on as full-time in-country manager, for now Cows for Cambodia remains small-scale. Twenty-two cows placed with 22 families. Each match with the potential to change lives.

As they travel back into Siem Reap for the final time this trip, Buan pulls up at the house of Mao Sophea, one of the charity's earliest recipients. It's dark and the family's cow is inside. The mother-of-three, who works as a cleaner in Siem Reap for \$55 a month, explains she was worried about mosquitoes so her husband made room inside. "I am very happy now I have my own cow," she says.

Asked what she will do with any money earned from having a calf, Sophea is emphatic. "Our first priority is for the education of our children, so they can have better lives than us," she says. "We have had a very poor life because we have no education, but knowledge will give my children a better life and that is what we hope for." ●

To donate visit southaussiewithcosi.com.au/cosis-corner/cows-for-cambodia