

Bunka Gakuen Nagano Junior & Senior High School, Senior High School Division

Pandora's Box: Uncovering the Realities That Developed Countries Must Face – Reflections from Cambodia

Through an international study program in Cambodia, students at Bunka Gakuen Nagano High School came to realize that the issues addressed by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are not just abstract concepts – they are urgent, lived realities. Focusing on topics such as plastic waste and cycles of poverty, the students critically examined the relationship between developed and developing nations, and questioned what sustainability truly means.

Confronting the Reality in Cambodia

During their visit, students witnessed how plastic waste filled everyday living spaces. They learned that local residents, who had previously lived in harmony with natural materials, often misunderstood plastic as being just another natural material – a disconnect made worse by rapid lifestyle changes.

At a landfill site, students saw how issues like methane gas emissions, deforestation, health hazards, and poverty were all deeply intertwined. The sight of young children working under harsh conditions left a lasting impact on them.

From Knowledge to Personal Experience

Until this trip, the students had learned about the SDGs primarily as school subjects. In Cambodia, however, they confronted these challenges personally and emotionally for the first time. One student expressed it this way:

“The SDGs are like Pandora’s box – the uncomfortable truths of humanity that we can no longer afford to ignore.”

This experience turned academic knowledge into personal conviction, sparking a deeper commitment to social responsibility.

Rethinking Society and Human Ethics

The students reflected on the structural burdens placed on the poor, the consumer-driven systems created by wealthy nations, and the economic mechanisms that prioritize growth over well-being. Referencing a famous speech by former Uruguayan President José Mujica, they asked themselves:

“What does true wealth really mean?”

Their reflections called for ethical decision-making and a reexamination of how we live in relation to others and the planet.