

Phnom Penh, Cambodia: 21-year-old Yeth Chenda recently found a job as a receptionist in a rural hotel in Kampot, Southern Cambodia, with the assistance of an International Labour Organization (ILO) job centre project.

Her new salary is US\$80 per month; modest by some standards, meagre by others, but in Cambodia it keeps her safely above the national poverty line. It also puts her in a tiny minority of Cambodian young people - and an even smaller minority of young women - fortunate enough to find decent work.

Across the globe the economic crisis has had a dramatic, and negative, impact on young people seeking jobs. Cambodia has the youngest population in South East Asia, with just over six million people under 18 years-old. For these young people the single most important issue confronting them is employment. Every day, 700 more enter a jobs market that has few opportunities for them.

Cambodia's youth employment challenge is a complex mix of issues, including early school leaving, poor quality education and insufficient waged work that drives young people into informal sector jobs - often meaning poor working conditions and low salaries. On the rare occasions that formal sector jobs become available, more often than not employers say that Cambodian graduates are simply not equipped with the mix of soft and technical skills needed.

The vast majority of Cambodian young people end up in low paid agricultural jobs with little or no access to the vocational training that would give them – and their country - a step up towards a more productive, prosperous future. Young women like Chenda also find their gender and their age often combine to put them at a disadvantage. They are offered poorer pay or find themselves in unpaid work. For both sexes, migration – either from countryside to the city or internationally – is an increasingly tempting option, but it can also result in exploitation.

“Cambodia's economic growth has been accompanied by a rise in the number of young workers who can't get decent work and as a result they suffer higher levels of economic uncertainty,”. says ILO Youth Employment Specialist, Matthieu Cognac, warning that the consequences can be long-lasting. “A poor employment record in the early stages of a young person's career can harm their job and income prospects for life. A coordinated, long-term employment policy, with a focus on youth would benefit Cambodia, just as it has in other parts of Asia”.

30 year-old Sila Chy agrees that what his peers need most are the conditions that will allow them to apply their ideas and potential. “Young Cambodian people are enthusiastic about making the country a better place. All they need is the skills and the opportunities to do so,” he says. The 30 year-old now owns numerous restaurants in Phnom Penh, but started modestly: “I set up my business beginning with just \$500,” he recalls.

Youth employment issues will be one of the top agenda items for the Cambodian delegation that will attend the ILO's Asia and the Pacific Regional Meeting (APRM) in Kyoto, Japan, from 4-7 December.

The APRM will bring together representatives of governments, workers' and employers' organizations from more than 40 countries throughout Asia, the Pacific and West Asia (the Arab States). Held just once every four years, it will be the first such opportunity for countries to discuss work-related issues, such as youth employment and skills development, on an international stage since the economic crisis hit.

In Cambodia, the ILO is also planning a National Youth Employment Forum in December. Sila Chy, as both an entrepreneur and President of Cambodia's national Junior Chamber International intends to play a leading role in the meeting. “I want to give inspiration to other young people so that they can do well also” he says.

This high level dialogue, will involve UN organizations, the Government, and key stakeholders with an interest in youth employment and youth enterprise. It will look at ways of getting national and international development organizations, financial institutions and the private sector to collaborate on solutions. The forum is expected to result in a national action plan on youth employment, backed by a joint statement, signed by the Prime Minister, Hun Sen.