

Siem Reap, Cambodia – Nit's family lives in a shaky thatch hut a short walk from the magnificent Ta Prohm ruins in the Angkor World Heritage Site. Her grandfather abandoned his family 15 years ago, and with no farm land, everyone has done their bit to stay together. Like her mother, aunt and grandmother, Nit now sells bracelets, postcards and magnets to tourists.

The streetwise education of an impoverished 10-year-old means Nit has quickly grasped the imperative of survival maths and emotional marketing. Though not “forced” to work, she knows whatever she earns helps her family buy food. She knows her small size gives her a better chance to earn than her older relations.

The Cambodian government has viable plans to keep children in the formal school system and help make Cambodia free of the worst forms of child labour by 2016. The government has singled out 16 types of work (including selling souvenirs) that it considers hazardous to children younger than 18 and it intends to remove the some 313,000 children estimated to be in those jobs. It's a goal that labour experts believe is possible, although there is less consensus about the tactics required.

Sometimes the police chase Nit and her young friends to frighten them away. When caught by police, who sometimes destroy their merchandise, Nit says it's scary and she cries. Others in a huddle of nearly 30 children holding cheap souvenirs express similar thoughts. However, quietly, Nit also mutters her relief – “I'm happy when the police force us away”. Working, she believes, is for adults.

To accommodate all students within its limited infrastructure the Cambodian school system operates with two shifts of only four hours each. So Nit and children like her can - fortunately or not – work half of each day and still make it to school. As well as her uniform and school supplies, Nit also needs money to pay the low-salaried teacher a “gratitude” fee each day and to buy breakfast or snacks. Even if she doesn't sell anything she can still go to school, she says; she won't buy food and she'll owe the teacher.

Still, it's not easy for them to keep the balance between selling and studying. Nit's 15-year-old aunt recently quit school to sell magnets and postcards full time. Around 5 per cent of the 2,016 children living in the Angkor complex did not register for the 2010-2011 school year.

For those who do register, getting to school regularly is also tough. Some are too tired. Some get carried away by their selling success. Chan Teou, now 16, started hawking souvenirs outside the Angkor Elephant Terrace when she was 12. “When I sold well I didn't feel like going to school,” she says. “Going to school you don't get money, only knowledge”.

Although selling souvenirs among the Angkor temples is considered physically safer than some of the other forms of work that children in Siem Reap town do (such as construction or restaurants, domestic housework, or scavenging at night) it still is not free of shame, especially when foreigners come along with their own children.

“I felt embarrassed chasing after tourists,” explains Teou. But she also felt inadequate when she earned little or nothing. “I felt embarrassed when I didn't make good business”.

Teou is relieved she no longer has to work to help her family. She is now back in school, one of the newest participants in a programme the International Labour Organization (ILO) is funding to remove children across Cambodia from the worst forms of work by 2016 by helping them return to school. This support can include help with uniforms, books, stationery and in some cases, a bicycle – Teou had dropped out of school again in late 2010 because she had no transport to make the hour-long commute from home.

The ILO programme, variations of which have been used in other countries where child labour is rife, such as Nepal and Pakistan, is only part of a broader effort with other agencies to help the Cambodian government reach its 2016 goal. For example, the World Food Programme also offers a “food scholarship” – 30 kg of rice, 1 dozen cans of tuna, 5 litres of cooking oil, 7 kg of beans and 1 kg of salt per month – to very poor families who keep their children out of work and in school.

Joseph Menacherry, Chief Technical Adviser of the ILO's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour, says the 2016 goal sounds “very abstract but is very real”, although he acknowledges that more funding will be needed.

Progress in the fight against child labour will be one of the subjects discussed at the ILO's Asia Pacific Regional Meeting, which will be held in Kyoto, Japan from 4-7 December 2011. The meeting, which is held only once every four years, will bring together Governments, employers and workers' representatives from

about 45 countries in the region, to discuss current work-related issues. It will be the first time such policy-makers have met since the global financial and employment crisis began, in 2008.

In addition to the 2016 goal, the Cambodian government has set a preliminary target of 2012 for wiping out the worst forms of child labour in four cities: Kep (scavengers), Poipet (porters), Phnom Penh (flower sellers) and Siem Reap (souvenir sellers, scavengers and shoe-shiners. According to Mr. Menacherry, these preliminary goals have nearly been achieved through a combination of measures that involves listing all children who work, talking with parents, making agreements to send children to school, non-formal learning centres, vocational training for older children and livelihood and microfinance opportunities for parents, and vigilant community monitoring.

In 2008, a baseline survey found around 2,000 working children in Kep; by February 2010 this had been reduced to 350. Similarly in Poipet, the number of working children fell from 1,000 to 350.

Not far from the Angkor complex, a police chase is kicking up dust in the Chom Lung primary school yard, but this one has everyone giggling. It's a rowdy recess game of police chap chor, or "police-catch-the-thief", a Cambodian version of tag in which the girls and boys switch between roles.

On a recent morning 13-year-old Theng Sreymak joyously plays on both sides. She is back in school after being pulled out five years ago when her mother took her to Thailand to work cutting sugar cane. Even though her mother sent Sreymak back after a few years, to resume her education, the cousin she lived with made her stay home and bake cakes for selling.

The ILO made a deal with Sreymak's cousin. She was given her uniform, books and materials and enrolled with seven other children in a special bridge class in the Chom Lung school that allows them to catch up (although Sreymak also joins the Grade 4 class most days because, as she demurely concedes, she is smart enough). At Chom Lung, 31 other former working children have been re-enrolled into regular classes, and children who have never attended school are also being helped with the option of a non-formal education course.

So far in Siem Reap town, 349 children, 179 of them girls, have been removed from work and enrolled in school. Mr. Menacherry believes that, with additional funding and continued will, Nit and children like her will join Sreymak in the classroom. "Come back in 2016 – we'll show you miracles are possible," he says.