

Child Labour in Cambodia - A New Direction

Although Cambodia is emerging as one of the brightest economic growth stories of Southeast Asia, over 313,000 children are trapped in the worst forms of exploitation such as drug trafficking and prostitution. But the end of all worst forms of child labour in the country is within reach, according to Elaine Moore, a Phnom Penh based journalist, and Allan Dow from the ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific in Bangkok who sent us this report.

06/10/2010

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PHNOM PENH (ILO Online) - On a hot afternoon in Cambodia's capital city Phnom Penh, 10 year old Leap beckons to tourists riding by on the back of a lumbering elephant.

Struggling to carry her basket of snacks she runs along a dusty road next to the golden Royal Palace offering rice cakes and sweets from a container too big for her small arms.

Leap has already been working for five hours and, most likely, will still be out here at midnight. Working alone, Leap is a small vulnerable girl who has never been to school and who will be lucky if she earns two dollars today. Leap says she has no choice. If she were to stop working, her mother and younger brothers would go hungry.

In another part of the city, seven year old Doung Paeaktra crouches down near a riverbank sifting through a pile of rubbish. He's looking for plastic he can sell to a recycler. With his father dead and his mother at home nursing a new baby, Doung is the sole provider for his family.

Access to education has improved in Cambodia but child labour persists – Leap and Duong are two of the children still left behind. While primary school enrolment has risen from 75% in 1997 to 91% in 2005 most of the children attending school are combining their studies with work.

For many more the situation is truly desperate and the sad story of a happy childhood being denied to Cambodia's children is far too common.

Across the country children of the very poorest families are engaged in hazardous activities that place them in constant danger. Over 313,000 children are trapped in the worst forms of exploitation such as drug trafficking and prostitution. Others spend hours in salt fields, work in factories or load carts with bricks to meet the demands of the booming construction industry. An ILO supported survey in 2003 reported one in every ten children in the capital above the age of seven was engaged in child domestic labour – working in the homes of others.

The [ILO's international labour standards](#) specify only non-hazardous light work should be carried out by those between the ages of 15 and 17, but many Cambodian children, their parents and often the employers are either unaware of this rule or just routinely ignore it.

The apparent paradox of Cambodia's rapid economic growth is a complicating factor – though one that can also be used to advantage to get children off the streets and into schools. Cambodia is one of the brightest economic success stories of Southeast Asia. Just thirty years after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime, and its anti-urban policies, gleaming new office blocks have opened in Phnom Penh. Cambodia's capital city, and indeed the country's overall economy, is growing rapidly.

Working with the Royal Government of Cambodia and its Social Partners, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has recognized that the only way children like Leap and Doung can stop working is if the income they bring home is replaced.

"In many cases families of child labourers want to send their children to school but they find it hard to survive when the money the child earns stops, especially if there is an emergency at home such as a new baby or a death in the family," says MP Joseph, Chief Technical Advisor of the [International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour \(IPEC\)](#) in Cambodia.

One of the ILO's responses has been to pioneer a livelihood scheme to help decrease, and eventually eliminate, a family's reliance on its children for income. This IPEC programme encourages parents and other adults from the country's poorest families to work together to create savings groups.

In a small village in southern Cambodia, local women explain how their savings group has helped them set up small businesses and supplemented that with training in finance and administration.

"Before the group things were very difficult and the children had to work," says 60 year old Pan Phen. "If I had problems I would have to go to the money lender who charges 20 per cent interest monthly. Now I make more money and in our group the interest rate is just 3 per cent."

Pan Phen borrowed 40,000 riel (USD\$ 10) from the group and now makes sweets which she sells outside a local factory each day. "All (six) of the children I look after are now in school," she adds proudly.

Each of the 25 families in the group contributes between one and five dollars per month. Once enough money has accumulated they can apply for loans of up to 200,000 riel (\$50) to set up a micro business and increase their income.

Working with local NGOs, government ministries and the Women's Enterprise Development and Gender Equity Project, the IPEC project has organized self help groups in seven provinces across Cambodia.

More than 160 groups have been set up and 18,280 child labourers or at risk children have been removed or prevented from engaging in the worst forms of child labour and are now enrolled at schools like Anlong Kong Thmey.

The Cambodian Government along with the ILO is working to identify and rehabilitate all the children scavenging along the riverbanks of the capital with the objective of eliminating this worst form of child labour by the end of 2012.

The end of all worst forms of child labour in Cambodia is within reach and the Cambodian government has committed itself to take on the challenge. But in order to stay the course it will require continued support of those inside the country as well as a continued financial commitment from donors to ensure that every child in Cambodia is given the start in life they deserve.

The tourist brochures call Cambodia a "Kingdom of Wonder". And so it is. Perhaps soon, it would also become a "Kingdom Without Child Labour".