

SITUATION ANALYSIS OF YOUTH IN CAMBODIA

*"Youth are not the creators of problems within society; rather,
it is society that brings about the problems being faced by youth"*



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A youth at a focus group discussion in Phnom Penh

FOREWORD



The Kingdom of Cambodia is an overwhelmingly youthful nation. Two out of every three people are aged below 25 and more than 30 per cent are aged between 10-24 years, giving Cambodia the biggest youth population in South East Asia. Such an abundance of young people brings with it both enormous possibilities as well as complex development challenges.

Cambodian young people are a dynamic and promising economic, social and cultural force. Young people offer new perspectives, new ideas and a willingness to build a brighter future

But their daily struggles to survive, to complete basic education, to maintain good health, to find a decent job, to support their families, to live free from physical and mental harm and to participate fully in society are real and urgent.

Today's young people are facing a unique array of hurdles. Cambodia is undergoing rapid economic growth and with it, tremendous social change. The country is also recovering from three decades of civil war and isolation which has left an indelible mark on the fabric of Cambodian society. The generational divide between young and old is vast and young people are often feared or misunderstood.

Yet the challenges which young people face are daunting. 300,000 job seekers leave school each year, but there are simply not enough jobs for them. Migration for economic and educational opportunities is transforming the composition of village life and sending more and more young people into urban centres, exposing them to new risks and vulnerabilities. High-risk behaviour, most especially among marginalized and vulnerable youth, is exposing young people to sexual reproductive health risks, HIV and AIDS, gender based violence and drug abuse.

Following traditional values, the voices of youth are rarely considered or incorporated into development planning, even though young people constitute a third of the workforce and will continue to be the drivers of growth now and into the future. Active steps should be taken now to encourage young people's participation in decision-making at all levels.

This Situation Analysis of Youth is the first time that all available data on youth has been compiled and evaluated. It is regarded as a first step to assist policy makers, non-government organizations and youth themselves to develop a wide-ranging and inclusive National Youth Policy which will address the specific needs of young people in the areas of health, education, participation, employment and well-being and can guide further investment and interventions.

Positive trends in primary enrolment and an overall improvement in health and education indicators demonstrate that with investment and a pro-youth approach, the situation for Cambodia's young people can be improved. Young people are Cambodia's greatest resource for the future. They require our assistance and our support to nourish and guide them successfully into adulthood.

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¹ UN defines children, adolescents, youth and young people as children 0-18 years, adolescents 10-19 years, youth 15-24 years and young people 10-24 years of age.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



With young people in the age group 10-24 comprising 36 per cent of the population, Cambodia has the youngest population in Southeast Asia. Although the number of young people leaving school and looking for work exceeds 300,000 annually, unlike many countries in the region, Cambodia has yet to reap a demographic dividend that often comes with a large young work force. Despite recent rapid economic growth, there simply are not enough jobs for youth, resulting in continued pressure on public services and resources in areas of education and health.

The health, education and employment issues confronting Cambodian youth today are highly inter-related. For example, youth employment is inextricably linked with access to education and skills training, and access to health services and information is directly correlated with income. The children of poor and very poor households are more vulnerable to problems associated with poverty and social exclusion. Without policies aimed at disrupting the intergenerational disadvantages of poverty, such patterns are self-perpetuating.

There is a need for a comprehensive multi-sectoral national youth policy to address these inequalities and to help guide public and private sector investment in the areas of education, vocational training, health services and information. The present analysis identifies the human, financial, and organizational barriers to the fulfilment of young people's rights nationally, with special attention given to the most vulnerable of young people.

The study profiles Cambodian youth nationally based on data from the Cambodia Socio-economic Survey (CSES) 2003/04. An inventory of previous and current youth surveys and studies helps identify main gaps in data and analysis, while a national mapping exercise identifies geographical and sectoral coverage and gaps in youth programmes. Researchers also conducted focus group discussions with youth and parents and interviewed key informants in a small sample of six specifically selected villages to add qualitative texture to the statistical analysis and desk exercises.

A DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF YOUTH

Cambodia's youth (aged 15-24 years) comprised 26 per cent of the total population in 2004, while 51 per cent were male. Eight-in-10 (83 per cent) reside in rural areas, with the densest concentrations in the Plains and Tonle Sap regions, at 43 per cent and 28 per cent, respectively. Ethnically, 96.2 per cent of youth are Khmer, 2.2 per cent are Cham; and the remainder are indigenous groups, as well as Chinese, Vietnamese, and Lao. Most (74.2 per cent) belong to households with at least five members; and 35 per cent live below the poverty line (CSES 2004, MoP 2006). Interestingly, a higher proportion (82.1 per cent) of the 15-17 age group are in large households compared to the 18-24 cohort (70.3 per cent). More of the young women than men aged 15-17 and 18-24 are either married, living together with a partner, divorced or have been widowed.

² Statistics cited and tables presented in this section are derived from the youth profile in Appendix A.

With regarding to education, 15-17 year olds are more likely than their older counterparts to have received primary level schooling. By gender, more young women than young men have reached primary levels of schooling, but young men are more likely to have had a secondary education. More than 8-in-10 (83.4 per cent) of 15-24 year olds are literate. Literacy rates are 87.9 per cent and 78.9 per cent for males and females, respectively. Younger adolescents are more likely to be literate than their older counterparts.

Cambodia's 15-24 year-olds comprise about 32.4 per cent of the country's labour force, equally divided between the younger (15-19) and older (20-24) age groups, reflecting the high birth rates of the 1980s and 90s. In 2004, more than two-thirds (69.8 per cent) of youth were in agriculture; a decline from 83.5 per cent in 1999. For male and female youth (15-19 years old) labour force participation rates are comparable, but this changes with apparently fewer females economically active as they reach the ages of 20-24 years.

Due in part to their low level of educational attainment, unemployment is high among Cambodia's youth. Unemployment is highest in the capital, Phnom Penh, at 20.1 per cent for those aged 15-24, This could be due to youth migration because of a lack of employment opportunities in rural areas and poor returns from agricultural production.

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

The challenges and opportunities that young men and women currently face in Cambodia must be understood in terms of rapid economic growth characterised by modest reductions in poverty and increasing inequality.

Economic growth was rapid between 1997 and 2007, averaging 8.2 per cent annually. This growth has been largely fuelled by garment manufacturing and tourism, both of which employ large numbers of youths. Garment manufacturing grew at an average annual rate of 44 per cent, while tourism grew at 34 per cent yearly during the 1994 and 2004.

The majority of Cambodians (60 per cent) continue to work in agriculture, where growth has averaged 3.3 per cent per year – far below tourism and manufacturing; and today it represents less than 33 per cent (a decline from 46 per cent in 1994) as a share of the economy. Additionally, investment in agriculture has been low considering its importance to rural livelihoods, with public investment equalling only 0.55 per cent of GDP. Land tenure is generally insecure and landlessness is increasing.

With economic gains has come a decline in poverty from 45 per cent 1993/4 to 35 per cent a decade later. Rural poverty has remained high; falling from 43 to 34 percent while in Phnom Penh poverty fell from 11 to 5 percent. As poverty rates have fallen, inequality has increased over this time period; the Gini co-efficient for national consumption increased from .034 to 0.40. Inequality rose sharply in rural areas but remained constant, albeit higher, in urban areas. Inequality rose from 0.26 to 0.36 in rural areas while remaining at 0.43 in urban areas.

Rural-to-urban migration is having a profound impact on the social fabric of Cambodian society and its youth. While migration represents new job opportunities, it also removes young people from the safe haven of family and community, and exposes them to possible high-risk behaviour associated with dislocation in urban areas. For those who remain in rural communities, opportunities are limited. Some worry about the paucity of female marriage partners; others experience dwindling land resources, insecure land tenure and idiosyncratic economic shocks which result in the sale of assets including land.

EMPLOYMENT

The single most important issue confronting youth in Cambodia today is employment. The labour force is increasing by as many as 300,000 per year, and will increase to as many as 400,000 per year in the near future. The garment, tourism, and construction industries are not growing sufficiently quickly to absorb so many new labour market entrants. As a result, the Government's Rectangular Strategy, as outlined in the National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP) 2006 – 2010, details steps to develop the agricultural sector as a "third engine" of growth. On-farm employment is, however, constrained by insecure land tenure, lack of affordable credit, fragmented inputs and services, a lack of infrastructure, and poorly functioning markets. Off-farm employment seems to have great potential but more effort is needed to stimulate Small and Medium Enterprise (SME) development and agri-business investments. There is a need to attract foreign investment in agri-business and to strengthen the business-enabling environment.

Moreover, as the economic structures of the region change, there is need for Cambodia to not only absorb the growing labour force, but to prepare young people for the next generation of jobs. For example, as Cambodia's agricultural sector intensifies and diversifies, there will be a greater reliance on machinery and transport that will require skilled mechanics for maintenance and repair. There is also a need to match these opportunities with affordable credit to support SME start-ups. Even in the face of immediate needs, such medium and long range planning is critical.

EDUCATION

Education promotes economic growth through increased productivity, the acquisition of new skills and attitudes, and through the accumulation of knowledge itself. The role of education in reducing poverty and income inequality is also well established. In this sense, illiteracy is one of the strongest predictors of poverty, while unequal access to educational opportunity is one correlate of income inequality (World Bank, 2006a). Complementing the findings from a previous Cambodian Development Research Institute (CDRI) poverty study, this research found that investments in girls' education could yield some of the highest returns of any development investment, such as fostering more young female participation in the development process and welfare, and reducing some of the most pernicious effects of poverty. In focus group discussions (FGDs) with young women aged 20-24, a majority consistently said that, with even a few years of formal education, they could better plan their families and have fewer children, have better knowledge of how to provide children with better nutrition, ensure they are immunized, and procure appropriate medical care for their children. Education therefore can also be an important vehicle for improving health and promoting preventive health practices.

The Education Strategic Plan (2006-2010) outlines the Government's efforts for promoting the National Plan for Education for All 2003-2015. to achieve the Cambodia Millennium Development Goal (CMDG) of ensuring access to nine years of basic education for all young people. In support of this goal, significant progress has been made in increasing the number of primary and lower secondary schools, and improving enrolment levels in lower secondary education, and adult literacy (among those aged 15-24). A key indicator of progress in this regard is that national expenditure on education has steadily increased since 2000. Budgets have been primarily allocated for primary and lower secondary education for schools and materials, and teacher training. Policies have also been adopted to encourage greater participation by girls and disadvantaged youth (e.g., those with disabilities, ethnic minorities) in education.

The ratio of primary-to-secondary schools climbed to 7.6 in 2005. By 2004, only 14 districts were still without a lower secondary school, while 45 districts lacked an upper secondary school. This is important, as one of the key indicators concerning access to education is distance to school, which varies considerably according to sector and income quintile (e.g., 7.66 km for the lowest quintile and 3.09 km. for the top quintile). This implies costs in terms of time and transportation for the poorest families. Infrastructure has also improved in many schools. For example, parental perceptions about school have improved recently, due to factors including improvements in access to school, free registration and a pro-poor education policy.

Despite these achievements, there is wide variability in terms of educational quality, efficiency and coverage. Access to education at all levels continues to be unevenly distributed in rural and remote areas, where many of Cambodia's poor and very poor reside. Costs, including informal fees, are still a barrier and vulnerable groups tend to be over-aged or late school entrants. High rates of illiteracy are still evident in the 15-24 age group, especially among girls. Young men and women from the poorest two quintiles face considerable challenges with regard to secondary education. Although increases in secondary enrolment are evident across gender, location and socio-economic groups, gaps have increased between urban and rural areas and between the poorest and richest quintiles. High dropout rates and poor retention remain serious concerns. As a result, overall educational attainment remains low and it will be difficult to achieve universal basic education by 2015.

Not only is there a need for more classrooms, but there is also a need for more relevant curricula – teaching that is tied to the employment opportunities of the future. This suggests a need to improve the quality of education by focusing on the quality of the teacher in the classroom, curricula, instructional materials, school and system accountability and education administration. The curriculum needs a review and re-formulation to include more science and mathematics, which promote problem solving skills that can help workers to make decisions and to work together in teams, as well as more practical courses that build and strengthen agricultural and vocational skills (e.g., carpentry and basic machinery).

Measures to address these challenges to increasing the participation of the poor and girls include focusing resources on school facilities in poor rural communities; targeting subsidies for school attendance for very poor and girls; community participation in school decisions; subsidies and incentives for secondary and tertiary education; adapting curricula to local needs; media/public information campaigns on the inclusion of girls, the disabled and other vulnerable young people.

HEALTH

The broad and sweeping social and cultural transformations accompanying Cambodia's rapid economic development have shaped young people's exposure to and capacity to deal with risk situations. The rural-to-urban migration of young people for employment and education contributes to their exposure to sexual reproductive health risks, including increased risk-taking behaviour associated with HIV infection, and other health development risks, including drug abuse and gender-based violence. Additionally, access to information and communication technology is influencing changes in attitudes and introducing new lifestyle possibilities throughout the country.

Behaviour of concern includes tobacco use (by 13.6 per cent of 15-24 year-old males and 0.8 per cent of females) and alcohol consumption (20.9 per cent of males and 7.4 per cent of females). Many youth say they first consumed alcohol as early as 12 years of age. Young people report that they start to drink early due

in part to peer pressure and/or emerging new lifestyle behaviours modelled by adults.

The production, sale and use of drugs are becoming increasingly complex and appear to be spreading throughout the country. While data are difficult to come by, more than 80 per cent of known drug users are below 26. Most drug users are unemployed, sex workers and workers in labour-intensive industries, including construction, garment manufacturing, and truck/taxi driving, as well as street children.

Cambodia has achieved important success in HIV prevention in recent years. Estimates in 2006 suggested that HIV prevalence among female sex workers attending antenatal centres was at 12.6 per cent, down from 21.4 per cent in 2003. Among young pregnant women aged 15-24, the figure was 0.41 per cent in 2006. Nearly half of new infections are now occurring in married women, most of whom are infected by their husbands.

Knowledge of at least one modern contraception method is almost universal; about 99 per cent of people between the ages of 15 and 49 (compared to knowledge of a traditional method which is 47.5 per cent). However, modern contraceptive method use among young females is very low (about 2.5 per cent). Attitudes about exposing young women to discussions of sexuality are changing and appears to be increasingly accepted by parents and others in the communities.

Health knowledge and key health indicators show strong improvement. These promising trends, however, do not appear to apply to marginalized groups, street youth or other disadvantaged youth. The Government and NGOs need to continue to develop advocacy and awareness for health education programmes at the individual, household and community levels. Local authorities, Community Based Organisation (CBOs), pagodas, schools and social service providers plus medical practitioners all have important roles to play in this regard. Meanwhile, knowledge and awareness of prohibited drugs is quite high.

VULNERABILITY

A broad definition of vulnerability can be derived from the Government's policy statement on Alternative Care for Children (MoSVY 2006): Children exposed to one or more vulnerability situations have been categorised into children in need of special protection and children at risk. Children in special need of protection and at risk include orphans, abandoned children, children infected with or affected by HIV or AIDS, abused children (sexually, physically, emotionally), street children, children in conflict with the law, child victims of exploitation (whether sexual or any form of harmful labour), children with disabilities, children addicted to drugs, and children whose basic physical needs are not being met.

Vulnerability can be a function of poverty and social exclusion, physical and mental ill health, and violence and abuse. Vulnerability can also be assessed as a function of migration, where children of poor households are increasingly exposed to problems associated with homelessness, violence and abuse.

Vulnerability as a function of poverty and social exclusion: Young people living in poor households constitute 26 per cent of the country's population, of which about 35 per cent live below the poverty line. Because their livelihoods are mostly dependent on rain-fed agriculture, these youth often experience food insecurity. They tend to receive less education and have little or no access to vocational training. They live in households that are routinely in debt and have high dependency ratios. These households have dwindling land resources and poor employment prospects. Issues associated with social exclusion, including disability,

ethnicity, and the remoteness of communities exacerbate tendencies toward vulnerability and poverty.

Vulnerability as a function of physical and mental ill health: The number of street children (estimated at 10,000 to 20,000) is increasing at a rate of 20 per cent per year. They are among the most vulnerable groups in Cambodia, due to their exposure to a wide range of physical and mental health problems, lack of access to basic needs (clothing, food), and a multitude of dangers (sexual exploitation, violence and substance abuse).

Children of chronically ill parents, including parents with HIV or AIDS, are especially vulnerable to becoming single or double orphans which has consequent impacts on household income and access to education. According to 2005 Cambodia Demographic and Health Survey (CDHS) data, 9 per cent of children under 18 (or about 55,000 young people) have lost one or both parents. It has been estimated that in 2005, 20.7 per cent of orphans in Cambodia had lost parents due to AIDS-related illnesses.

Vulnerability as a function of violence and abuse: Young people may be experiencing more violence and abuse than any other group in Cambodia. Poverty, mental illness, alcoholism and gambling are all associated with domestic violence, which has either a direct or indirect effect on young people. Domestic violence is a contributing factor to downward household mobility due to property damage and the costs associated with injury and productivity losses.

Vulnerability as a function of migration: Young men and women leaving rural communities for urban employment are exposed to a wide range of issues and problems, including alcohol and drug abuse, gang violence, crime, rape and gang membership. Some tend to adopt risk behaviours that expose them to problems associated with HIV and other STIs. Young people who migrate across borders are even more vulnerable to being cheated and losing their rights, becoming subject to arrest, or working in jobs that entail health risks with no consequent health care (i.e., spraying insecticide in Thailand). Some are exposed to drug use to induce long working hours, while some women are subject to sexual exploitation and forced prostitution

PARTICIPATION AND RIGHTS

The voice of youth is not incorporated into planning processes and young people are rarely called upon to participate in village meetings, they can therefore often feel ignored. Youths are however, called upon to participate as labourers once decisions have been made. There is consequently a need to mainstream youth participation in the development planning process at the local level. This should be incorporated as a key feature of a National Youth Policy (NYP).

Youth opportunities for volunteerism are key components in the formation of social capital and the strengthening of reciprocity. However, many youths tend to equate volunteerism with work without salary. There are indications that volunteerism can work when there is appropriate support from organizations such as NGOs and community institutions (pagodas and schools). When opportunities to volunteer are coupled with vocational or skills development, youth will have better prospects for decent employment and increased civic engagement.

There is also a widespread lack of community services for youth. Parents and village leaders often view opportunities for team sports and other activities as a waste of time and scarce resources. Youth could benefit from such activities if there is strong support from the community. The attitudes and beliefs of elders and community leaders need to change to incorporate an understanding of the value of greater youth participation in social and civic affairs.

Youth voices in rural Cambodia are not yet well incorporated into local development planning.



INTRODUCTION



1.1 BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Cambodia is undergoing rapid demographic change. As of 2004, 60 per cent of the population was below 25 years of age. This situation has had major implications for Cambodia's socio-economic and political development, including labour market opportunities, access to public and family resources for youth, and the political future of a country in which the majority of the population have no experience (or even knowledge) of the Khmer Rouge regime or the country's recent conflicts. At the current pace of job creation, Cambodia will not have the capacity to compensate for the increasing numbers of young people entering the workforce annually (currently 300,000 per year, projected to increase to 400,000 per year by 2040). With the real risk of significant unemployment and underemployment, Cambodia faces the challenge of preventing increasing numbers of young people from entering both the informal and illegal economies. Additionally, as neighbouring economies grow, so too will transnational migration. A recent study by CDRI (2007) showed that cross-border demand for unskilled labour has increased, particularly in Thailand, and more recently in Malaysia. The recent trend of migrating to Malaysia has been spearheaded by the Khmer-Muslim community, and is likely to increase significantly in the future; however, migration to Malaysia is primarily conducted illicitly through Thailand.

With only half of young people completing primary school, and only a quarter proceeding to lower secondary school, there are few options for non school-going youth. Medium and Small Micro-Enterprises (MSMEs) are widely considered as the engine of growth for Cambodia's future. However, there remain real questions as to whether the current education system and business environment are structured to support these initiatives. Further complicating the picture, Cambodia's young population is also challenged by such risks as HIV, sexual exploitation, violence and abuse.

1.2 DEFINING THE CONCEPT OF YOUTH

The UN General Assembly defines 'youth' as individuals aged between 15 and 24 years, and young people between 10 and 24 years (UN General Assembly, 1995). Cambodia's Youth Department at the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) defines youth somewhat more expansively as those between the ages of 14 and 30, although the concept is said to be a relatively new cultural import to the country (Bearup 2003). This study, however, adopts the UN General Assembly definition.





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