

# The Prevalence and Vulnerabilities of Disabled Persons and Children in Riverkids Communities

A collaboration between Riverkids and the National Institute of Education, Singapore

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## **Introduction**

This report shares some of the findings regarding perceptions on disability and most importantly, the prevalence of disability amongst children within the Riverkids slum communities in Phnom Penh. With acknowledgement of the high degree of vulnerability and marginalisation children with disabilities in Cambodia face, this report examines in particular the challenges children with disabilities face in terms of their mobility, educational status, health status and financial situation of their family, and constraints their parents or main caretakers face in raising them. Perceptions on disability within the Riverkids communities were also looked at as they could play a huge role in determining children with disability's access to social participation in community events and education. Recognising Riverkids commitment to empowering its clients and so as to better provide much needed aid to children with disabilities so that they may get more equal opportunities to participate in school and the community, a few recommendations have been included at the end of the report.

## **Methodology**

The research group conducted 25 general household surveys where we went door-to-door within the Riverkids community, and surveyed the main caretaker of randomly selected households regardless of whether the household has any children with disability or not, so as to get an idea of the community's general perception towards disability. The group also conducted more in-depth semi-structured interview sessions with 7 parents of children with disabilities and 4 children with disabilities from Riverkids communities. These interviews were aimed at gathering more details and descriptions pertaining to the relational and emotional aspects of the lives of the family and children with disabilities; their situations,

experiences and opinions. In addition, it gave more opportunities for participants to express their concerns or issues that they feel are important, so as to get a clearer picture of what kinds of help this group of people most require.

## Disability in Cambodia

- The Cambodian Socio-Economic Survey (2013) estimates that there are only 5% of the population with disabilities; though the World Health Organisation's global prevalence rate is at 10-15% (2011).
- According to Handicap International (2007), **more than 50% of people with disabilities in Cambodia are under 20 years old.**
- The Access on Disability Development (2007) report states that **43% of people with disabilities are unable to read and write** as compared to less than 9% of non-disabled persons.
- **Children with disabilities are 30% unlikely to be attending school**, as compared to 15.9% for children without disabilities (Ministry of Education Cambodia, 2012). Thus, **children with disabilities are twice as unlikely to be attending school.**
- UNICEF (2007) approximates that there are **20 children who develop permanent disability from accidents or injuries per day** in Cambodia.
- As of date, there are **no national policies or systems within the national healthcare sector for mandatory medical check-ups on babies and young children** to determine their physical health and functional development (Handicap International, 2015). Hence, impairments could worsen due to late detection and late interventions.

Though there are more positive signs of the Cambodian government's acknowledgement of the equal rights that people with disabilities deserve and the need for a more inclusive education system than before, the implementation and enforcement of disability laws and policies have not been ideal. Information about these laws is very limited within Cambodia even amongst government officials, law enforcement officers, the general public, and people with disabilities themselves, especially those living in the more remote and rural areas of Cambodia. Thus, the **equal rights that people with disabilities deserve are not widely acknowledged in Cambodia.**

People with disabilities are hence still one of the poorest groups in Cambodia and have **very limited access to basic social services such as healthcare and education**, and there are **very few non-governmental organisations that offer community-based services to children with disabilities** (World Health Organisation and World Bank 2011).

### Prevalence of disability in Riverkids' communities

For this study, 7 parents with children with disabilities, 3 children with disabilities (those being younger than 18 years of age) and 2 adults with disabilities from Riverkids' communities were identified and interviewed.

### **General profile of participants**

- Families with people with disabilities have unstable incomes and earn on average about 4USD a day or less.
- The causes of disability amongst participants are either inborn, attributing from traffic accidents or due to delayed treatment of medical illnesses.
- The disabilities prevalent amongst participants are blindness, physical deformity and intellectual disability/delayed cognitive development.
- The 3 children with disabilities are attending state schools and Riverkids' educational programmes; with the school fees being free for them.
  - None of them have ever been enrolled into a school catering specifically for children with disabilities.
  - They all shared that they were the only children with disabilities in their schools.
  - They do not have any problems travelling to school and are able to walk to school by themselves every day.
  - They felt that their teachers treat them well and take good care of them. However, there are cases of physical and psychological bullying from their classmates.
- None of the participants are receiving any form of aid from the Disabled People Organisations (DPOs) in Cambodia, but are receiving aid from Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) for reasons not related to their disability.

- The aids received are in forms of educational aid, food aid and free general medical treatment (not specific to disability).
- None of the participants are receiving any form of aid from the government.
- None of the participants are currently undergoing any medical treatment for their disability.

### **Constraints of parents with children with disabilities**

Due to their high level of poverty, all participants cited financial difficulties to be the biggest problem they are experiencing with regards to raising their children with disability.

Specifically though they cited these issues to be their major challenges:

- Their children with disability seemed to have a higher frequency of falling ill as compared to their other children without disabilities, and the children with physical deformities in their limbs were unable to learn to walk until they grew much older. Hence, transportation costs to state hospitals and health centres were high as tuk-tuks or motor taxis have to be hired to bring their children to access medical services.
- Medical scans and treatments related to disabilities were expensive and shared to be only available in private hospitals. Thus, parents were unable to afford these services for their children.
- Parents also shared that they had difficulty taking care of their children with disability as they needed to work. Most of the main caretakers, the mothers, earn income as trash collectors. They would have to leave the house and travel long distances to collect trash along the streets. The arduous nature of the job makes it both difficult and dangerous for mothers to bring along their children with disability, despite there being no other family member who can take care of the child at home.
  - However, 2 of the 7 parents indicated that they would not consider sending their child to a special school where their children with disabilities would be sheltered and taken care of there. They would prefer their child to be with them and take care of them themselves.

Therefore, the higher costs of living in Phnom Penh, a lack of suitable jobs that guarantees a steady and stable income and the opportunity costs for parents looking after their children with disabilities, makes these families with people with disabilities especially vulnerable and disadvantaged within their community.

### **Parents' concerns for the future of their children with disability**

- There were 2 parents with female adult children who became blind in their adulthood, resulting from illness. They hold little hope for their adult children's future as they are blind and felt that they would not be able to do anything, much less be able to do any work to earn an income.
  - Case study:

A blind man that was interviewed, who became blind at 8 years old due to measles, has been making a living through begging though he has studied Music before. He is able to move around in his house by himself, but shares that it is difficult to travel outside the house due to the many vehicles and bad traffic conditions on the roads in Phnom Penh. When he does travel outside, he uses a walking stick to help him move around.
- The other parents whose children have either physical deformities or delayed cognitive development believe that there is hope for their children if they are able to continue receiving education. They feel happy that their children are able to study alike other children without disabilities. Due to their children's disability, parents do not think they are capable of doing hard physical labour in the future, and hence see attaining education as a means of ensuring that their child might have a career in a less physically-demanding work environment.
  - Case study:

Marn, a 50 year old mother who has an adult 23 year old daughter with delayed cognitive development and speech slurring is worried for her daughter's job prospects. Her daughter has attended a Riverkids programme before, where she learnt handcraft-making skills but stayed at home after graduating from the programme. The daughter later went on to another NGO programme where she learnt laundry washing and ironing skills and though she managed to get a job after that, she quit shortly. Her daughter now stays

at home and Marn hopes to try enrolling her daughter into another Riverkids programme to learn sewing skills.

Ensuring the rights to education and training for people and children with disabilities is an important step to take. However, the assurance of job opportunities with employers' stigma against people with disabilities might hamper their ability to contribute productively to society in future. Perceptions of other people against those with disabilities are equally important in the capacity building of those with disabilities. Thus, general community attitudes will be looked at next.

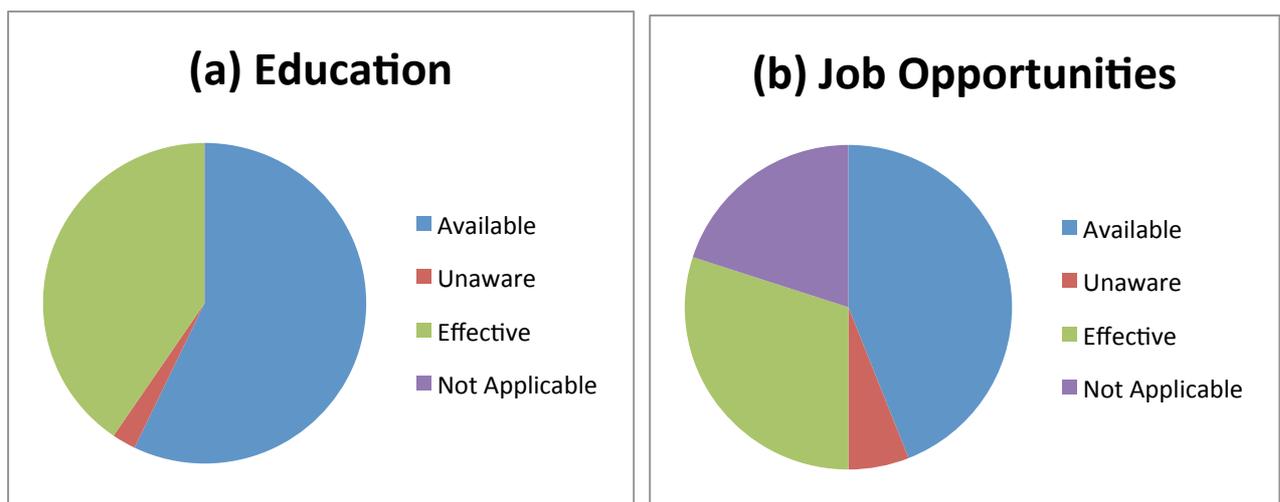
### **General community attitudes**

The general community attitudes are derived from the social perceptions that they have with regards to education for disabled children, gender differences and vulnerabilities that may force them to beg for a living.

### **Education and job opportunities**

- All the 25 families under the household survey feel that education should be given to children with disabilities on par with the children who do not have any disabilities.
- They voiced out that children with disabilities should be treated equal and not discriminated and that disability should not be seen as a hindrance to receiving education.
- They feel pity for the disabled people and count them as one of us as their culture in the community is that all poor people are the same regardless of who they are and what they do. They feel normal and satisfied to live in a community that has disabled people.
- The 25 families under the household surveys expressed their sadness for the children with disabilities who are put at home without going to school.
- Many felt that their parents should be more understanding to let the disabled children to get some education.
- However 3 out of 25 felt that parents' decision to send their disabled children to school depends on the severity of disability of the child and also the parents' confidence for the safety of the child outside their home.

- All the 7 parents who have disabled children view education as an important part of their child’s future.
- They either send their children to the education programmes offered by River Kids or to public schools.
- All of them are aware of and have good impressions of NGO and other organizations helping to nurture teenagers with disabilities to undergo skills trainings.
- But 5 families pointed out the concern that even if these people finish the skills training, the companies are not willing to recruit them.
- Among the 7 families with disabled children, 5 feel that the public schools in which their disabled children study are supportive and conducive to their children’s education.
- The remaining 2 families have concerns that a special school would be more safe and suitable for their child.



(a) Education for disabled children through inclusive or special schools  
 (b) Opportunities for disabled teenagers through skills training offered by NGOs etc.

The above pie charts (a) and (b) include the comments given from the families whether the service is available to them, their awareness, the effective of the service or they are not applicable to the service due to other reasons such as child too young or can’t afford to send to the service provider.

### Gender differences

- 21 out of 25 families agreed that girls with disabilities will find it harder to marry than girls without disabilities as boys will prefer fully-abled girl as bride and that boys will find

it a burden to support a girl with disabilities due to her inability to work, move around etc.

- The rest of them preferred love as an important factor for marriage and not just the physical appearance alone.
- 23 out of 25 commented that girls with disabilities will find it harder to marry than boys with disabilities because disabled boys may still be able to move around in public and also to work in some jobs.
- From the remaining families, one said that it is still love between the couples that will lead to marriage and the other family suggested that disabled girls marrying disabled boys will solve the marriage.
- All of them believed that a single woman with disabilities will find it very hard to survive. Two of them said that it will be better if she is supported by her immediate family members.

### **Vulnerabilities to begging**

- 22 out of 25 families stated that disabled children are vulnerable to begging as they can get more money than other children. They also agreed that they will beg not because they are disabled but it is due to their poverty.
- The rest said that it depends on their family and that they don't see any children with disabilities on the streets begging.
- All of them felt pity for the disabled children who beg for a living and voiced out concerns that the future and safety of these children are put to risk.
- None of them said that they will let their child with disabilities to beg(if they have one), except one woman who said that if her family is in a very desperate situation to get money or food, she would let her child beg.

### **Limitations**

The surveys were conducted with the women of the families, with rarely any man at the houses due to their work schedule or because of single mothers being heads of the households. So, there might be a slight bias to answers from the point of the women as

compared to men. We suggest that more men can be interviewed if there is a follow up to this research.

About half of the families interviewed had children studying in Riverkids programmes. The tendency for them to support education for disabled children was evident. Randomized interviews can be done in the future with families which are unaffiliated with Riverkids so that we can also find out about their opinions.

## **Recommendations**

While Riverkids' School Support, Afterschool Tuition, and Get Ready programs for teenage girls and boys offer Cambodian children a shot at building a better, brighter future, we felt that more assistance could be provided to help families with disabilities in their everyday living. For instance, Healthy Mum Happy Baby has good potential for further development as it protects maternal health and reduces the number of birth defects or impairments in children. As stated in the World Health Organisation's report on Developmental Difficulties in Early Childhood (WHO, 2012), the impact of certain impairments can be avoided or even reversed, should there be health screenings for new-borns and early detection, early intervention and appropriate referral to the relevant institutions who would be able to provide the necessary medical help. In addition, by ensuring that mothers are healthy and receiving sufficient nutrition during their pregnancy, it helps facilitate a smoother delivery and less complications arising in the process.

We have also identified several exemplary programs and initiatives by NGOs like CABDICO, Friends International, Handicap International, and Person with Disabilities Foundation that could be replicated by Riverkids to extend its reach to a wider audience, in particular the slum communities in Phnom Penh. They are:

- Quarterly home-based visits, or home based rehabilitation, where physiotherapy sessions are conducted to help clients become more adept at activities for daily living (ADL). Exercises conducted during these sessions could help improve the child's physical capabilities and learn to become more independent. Sufficient time could also be set aside for interaction between the caregiver and child with disability

through games and play so that a stronger relationship and rapport can be developed.

- Several social networking groups within the community can be set up and facilitated where members, parents with children with disabilities, provide one another with financial and moral support, sharing amongst themselves their knowledge and expertise on caring for their children, as well as their worries and concerns in hopes of lightening their emotional burden. This would also allow people with disabilities to become more “visible” in their communities and to change people’s mindset through discussion, such that disability does not have to be a taboo topic, as is more openly received.
- Transport subsidies should also be given to poor families because many of them are unable to afford the huge transport costs that they would have to incur should they require to travel long distances to and from school, or to and from hospitals. To ensure families with people with disabilities are not marginalised from education or healthcare services, adequate transport to encourage greater accessibility to these facilities have to be arranged.
- Lessons on road safety could be implemented into the Riverkids educational curriculum as there have been cases of disability resulting from injuries through road accidents. Teachers could educate students about road safety so as to prevent potential traffic-related injuries and disabilities.

## **Conclusion**

In sum, we hope that our findings would be of help to Riverkids in their aim to understand more about the disabled population within their communities and also to adapt their programmes to suit the needs of people with disabilities. While we do appreciate Riverkids for its tireless efforts in helping children from disadvantaged families, as seen by the very comprehensive list of programs offered, we recognize that much more could be done for households with people with disabilities. In fact, it is necessary for these families to receive more financial assistance from the government and NGOs so that they are able to achieve, at the very minimum, functional living that guarantees their health and safety. For it is only when their basic needs are met that these families are likely to express greater interests in

“higher” goals of education for their child. Once again, we strongly encourage Riverkids to collaborate with other NGOs like Friends and Handicap International so that knowledge and expertise can be shared and best practices be replicated on a larger scale. Since partnerships also help achieve greater economies of scale, majority of its clients would certainly receive stronger and more effective support than before. After all, for target programs to be genuinely effective, each and every stakeholder needs to play an active and participative role in society to ensure that operations run smoothly and become truly sustainable in the long run.

## **List of some Disabled People Organisations (DPOs) in Cambodia**

1. Association of the Blind in Cambodia (ABC)
2. Capacity Building of People with Disability in the Community Organization (CABDICO)
3. Cambodian Disabled Independent Living Organization (CDILO)
4. Cambodian Development Mission for Disability (CDMD)
5. International Committee of the Order of Malta for Leprosy Relief (CIOMAL)
6. Cambodia Trust (CT)
7. Deaf Development Program (DDP)
8. Komar Pikar Foundation (KPF)
9. Marist Solidarity Cambodia (MSC)
10. National Centre of Disabled Persons (NCDP)
11. Parents Association for Children with Intellectual Disabilities (PACHID)
12. Battambang Provincial Disabled People's Organization
13. Svay Rieng Provincial of Women with Disability Forum
14. Takeo Provincial Women with Disability Forum
15. Kampong Speu Provincial Disabled People's Organization
16. Kampot Provincial Women and Children with Disability Forum
17. Kampong Cham Provincial Disabled People's Organization
18. ROSE
19. Research and Development (ReaD)
20. Cambodian Disabled People's Organization (CDPO)