

THE PLIGHT OF URBAN SOCIOECONOMIC GROUPS

Most Marginalized Groups

While this PPA has primarily focused on the rural poor, it also has to be recognized that more than 10 percent of urban Cambodians are classified as living in poverty. The PPA conducted FGDs among 15 different socioeconomic groups in Phnom Penh ranging from sex workers to garbage collectors, cyclo-drivers to garment workers, and monks to street children. The one noticeable characteristic of the urban poor, apart from those who had regular employment, is the need to meet their subsistence needs on a daily basis. They truly live a hand-to-mouth existence, as they cannot rely on others to support them.

The poorest urban socioeconomic groups are the garbage collectors and street children. In many respects the garbage collectors and the street children are difficult to distinguish, except the garbage collectors are generally older. What street children said about their lives is important, if despairing:

Our mothers abandoned most of us when we were very young. We did not always run away from our families, as some people like to tell you we did. But here we are on the street.

Sometimes it looks as though life on the streets is exciting, but this is after we have sniffed glue, drank the leftovers from liquor bottles, provided sexual services for old men and been chased around by the police....

Unless someone helps us we cannot go to school, and anyway, do the teachers at school know what life is like on the streets for the poor?

Our main aim is to live from one day to the next, not caring whether we live or die. The main thing is to have some excitement if possible.

These street children would like to have enough food to eat each day. Having to scavenge through rubbish bins for leftovers is not very satisfactory, although unlike very poor children in rural areas, these street children do not actually go hungry. They would like to have a secure home to live in, or at least physical shelters where they could safely sleep at night and store what few personal possessions they have acquired. Street children would also like the police to stop verbally and physically abusing them. They think that most police officers do not have much sympathy for street children. Many would also like to avoid having to provide sexual services to men, though a minority of them looks upon this as easy money. The idea that providing such services might lead to STDs, including HIV/AIDS, does not appear to unduly worry most of the street children, although the girls would rather not get pregnant. All street children would like to have access to public health services provided by personnel who are nonjudgmental. Like the police and teachers, public health workers are viewed by street children as neither very sympathetic nor empathetic.

Street children would also like to learn to read and write but find they are excluded by teachers from schools. Teachers are biased against street children, the participants claimed. And they feel humiliated trying to explain to teachers their individual circumstances. They would also like to be trained in vocational skills, such as motor mechanics, hairdressing, carpentry, tailoring, restaurant work and even the use of computers. They recognize that without support from some organizations they cannot afford to be trained. These children are not confident that

the Government will do anything positive for them, and given their experiences with the police, teachers and health workers, this is hardly surprising.

The work of garbage collectors is dirty and dangerous, and they receive low returns. And yet, they are marginally better off than street children given they do not generally provide sexual services in return for daily meals. They are, however, often exposed to dangerous toxic wastes at Phnom Penh's poorly planned garbage dumps. Some of the garbage workers remarked that they often get dizzy, but the medicine they buy makes them feel worse. The garbage workers are not provided with protective clothing to handle waste, particularly boots, gloves and masks, nor are they educated about hazardous materials and other risks they incur.

Their greatest need, urged the garbage workers, is being paid a decent wage and having some job security. In the PPA, few of the garbage workers had any idea of the implications of being unionized, and even though they liked the idea, they are frightened they would lose their current livelihood. Working in garbage does not lift the poor out of poverty but in the short term it provides food security. The Government should ensure that minimum environmental health standards be enforced, including the design of environmentally sound landfills and reliable techniques to dispose of toxic waste.

Female Garment Workers, Sex Workers and Cyclo-Drivers

Female garment workers explained they left the countryside in search of employment because there were no opportunities to earn income at the village level. Their families did not have enough land to support another adult person. While these same garment workers acknowledged the money they receive each month is better than nothing, they also spoke frankly about the consequences:

We had to leave our villages because there was no work. But this was very sad, as we could not maintain contact that easily with our families. Being young women from the countryside, we knew nothing of the big city and were easily fooled by some bad people, including young men who took advantage of our love for them to rob us of our honor.... We also have to work long hours and dare not complain if we are feeling faint and sick, especially during that time of the month for women; we know this is our duty.

The young women said they sometimes work up to 12 hours per day to earn enough money to cover their living expenses in Phnom Penh and have a little left over for entertainment and sending home to the village.

The young garment workers who agreed to participate in this PPA also stated that working conditions in the garment factories were not very good. They were often exposed to dangerous fumes, electrical wires, machines without safety covers and abusive supervisors. These women were aware that unions were trying to improve their working conditions and also their pay rates and other benefits. The problem for them is that they fear the unions will lose them their jobs because their supervisors are constantly telling them that the company has the support of the Government and that if the workers demand too much, the company will close its factory in Cambodia and invest elsewhere. As bad as the working conditions may appear to be for young women from the rural areas, this work is often the best they can obtain. If there had to be a trade-off between better working conditions and higher wages, these young garment workers would choose higher wages.

During discussions with these young women, they were asked whether they realized that garment factories chose to operate in Cambodia because of low wages and the tariff-free export quotas companies could access in developed countries. The young women knew about the low wages but not about the political economy of international trade quotas, which of course is hardly surprising. Yet one young woman quickly responded:

If these jobs will not exist for a long time, this will be a problem for all of us. But if we are aware of this fact then we should use our time in the factory to acquire as many skills as we can. The trouble is that the employers don't want to teach us too much.... But still we can learn more than in the village.

These young women agreed that they would like to know more about additional employment opportunities that may be developed because of new investment opportunities opening up. They would also like to have an opportunity to have additional vocational education but realize that if it is not on-the-job, given the long working hours, it would be impossible to take advantage of such opportunities.

Sex workers who agreed to participate in the PPA made the point that they became sex workers because this was a better option than remaining in the village as very poor women. According to one woman in her late 20s:

I am a sex worker to feed my family. There is nothing else I can do otherwise my family will suffer. I am suffering from AIDS and might die before my family can look after itself. This is a terrible situation to be in, but I can do nothing about it....I think this must be the lot of the poor.

Clearly not all the poor who are working in Phnom Penh are in the same terrible position as this woman. But with the growth in HIV/AIDS there are likely to be many more of these stories. Back in this woman's village, no one had any knowledge of HIV/AIDS, or if they did, they did not admit it to the PPA team. The real consequences of HIV/AIDS was illustrated by a young sex worker who intended to return to her village to marry:

I do not have AIDS but many of my clients don't want to use a condom, and if I insist upon them doing so they don't want to be my client any more. So I end up only having clients who do not tip me very well. The temptation is there not to be so insistent, but I also think of what would happen if I went back to the village with AIDS, like some of the women I know.

With the current HIV/AIDS epidemic and its disproportionate impact on poor women from the rural areas, it is difficult to decide whether paid sex work is a panacea for poverty of individual households in the rural areas. These sex workers know that AIDS has no known medical cure but resort to the argument that they have no other choices available to them. They would be interested in some form of vocational education, including tailoring, nonsex work in the hospitality industry, the use of computers and financial management. They would also be interested in training associated with agricultural technologies and food processing that would be useful back in their villages.

These sex workers would also like prostitution to be decriminalized so that police and brothel owners could not collude to make life difficult for them. They want the Government to continue promoting the use of condoms. With these two measures, it is argued that the working conditions of sex workers would improve, although one of the sex workers believed that clients would then seek out freelance sex workers with whom they would not have to use safe-sex methods.

Other young women also work in vulnerable occupations in Cambodia, particularly Phnom Penh, where they are employed as the promotional hostesses to market a range of products, most notably those associated with alcohol and tobacco. A 19-year-old woman from a village in Svay Rieng, working as a "beer girl" in a popular restaurant on the outskirts of Phnom Penh, highlighted her vulnerability:

My family did not want me to go and work in Phnom Penh, but because I am considered attractive they realized it would be easier for me to make money more than my other sisters. When I was recruited to promote beer I was told I would get a monthly salary, housing and food. This was partly correct but I was also told I needed to sell a lot of beer and that the company expected me to sell more beer than girls from other companies. The problem is that some of the other girls chose, or were forced, to sleep with some clients, and I found I could not sell much beer unless I did the same. My boss did not tell me I had to, but it was clear that unless I sold more beer I would lose my job.

The PPA did not fully investigate the socioeconomic background of young women working as promotional hostesses, but few of them came from nonpoor backgrounds. There were instances where young women had become pregnant and then were abandoned by their baby's father, or were separated from their spouse. The promotional hostesses liked the tips they received from their customers, but did not like that their income depended upon the amount of beer, wine or whiskey they sold. They would rather be paid a flat wage by the company. They have been told by the companies they work for that their wages will be paid only on a commission basis.

In between transplanting and harvesting rice, a number of cyclo-drivers converge upon Phnom Penh in the hope of earning some money by transporting people around the city. Unfortunately for many of them, business is not very good, and they barely make enough to cover their daily expenses. A group of cyclo-drivers from Prey Vieng told the PPA team:

It is difficult to make money in Phnom Penh, as we have to compete with moto-drivers that charge their passengers less than we do and can carry more in one day than we do.

To make KR2,000 to KR3,000 each day in Phnom Penh is very difficult. Ideally we would like to send some of our earnings back to the village, but this is getting really difficult as we have barely enough money on a daily basis ourselves to live on.

At certain times of the year there are clearly more cyclo-drivers in Phnom Penh than are needed. Cyclo-drivers would like the Government to promote the use of cyclos, particularly among tourists and to this end would like to be trained in basic English, French, Japanese and Chinese. These men would also like to be provided with clean clothes, basic tools and access to credit so they could purchase their own cyclos. Cyclo-drivers would also like



Figure 8: FGD with monks from rural Cambodia in Phnom Penh.

access to low cost dormitories or housing shelters because currently they, or at least those participating in the PPA, slept on the streets at nighttime, either in their cyclos or in hammocks.

Monks

A PPA was facilitated among a group of monks, all of whom come from very poor families throughout Cambodia. They are well aware of the social and economic dimensions of poverty back in their own villages and in Phnom Penh. For instance, they argued:

People are not poor because they are not good Buddhists.

The rich in Cambodia always seem to think the poor are poor because they have not accumulated

enough merit. We know this is not true but even many of the poor believe it so we have to change the way they think.

Anyone who argues we monks are not poor has to understand why we became clergy in the first place.

The monks rejected most of the arguments concerning karmic causation and explained that poverty has its origins in the secular power structures of society rather than the sacred world of supernatural spirits. The monks straddle the rural and urban divide and have the potential to understand the specific nature of poverty as it affects different groups in Cambodia. Joining the monkhood offers a prestigious path out of poverty that is not available to young women.

These young monks recognized that unless concrete steps are taken to reduce poverty in the countryside, the spiritual condition of many poor people will deteriorate. They argued that while Buddhism is undergoing a renaissance in the rural areas, the poorest communities cannot afford to support a congregation of Buddhist monks. And it is in these communities that Buddhism is needed because it can provide meaning to peoples' lives. This argument is not designed to use Buddhism as an "opiate" but rather to understand the cultural dimensions of poverty. While not all of Cambodia's poor are Buddhists (the upland ethnic minorities and the Chams and Vietnamese believe in other ideas), the argument has a veracity that transcends poor Buddhists in Cambodia.