

The State of Cambodia's Children: An Urgent Call for Action

This research report examines the state of children in Cambodia, focusing on three major areas of concern: education, shelter, and social security. Despite significant progress in recent years, a considerable proportion of Cambodian children continue to face substantial challenges in these areas.

Introduction

Children represent the future of any nation. In Cambodia, children account for a significant proportion of the population. Yet, many of them continue to grapple with challenges that hinder their growth, development, and life prospects. In Cambodia, children constitute a considerable share of the total population. According to the 2019 General Population Census of Cambodia, approximately 31.8% of the population is under the age of 15. This demographic structure underscores the potential of the nation's youth in shaping Cambodia's socio-economic development and future prosperity.

Education

Education is the cornerstone of growth and development. However, educational access and quality remain major challenges for many Cambodian children. Despite free and compulsory education policies, an estimated 22.5% of children aged 5-14 are involved in child labor, which often leads to school dropouts [1]. This involvement in labor activities not only deprives these children of their childhood but also forces many to drop out of school, thereby truncating their educational journey and limiting their future opportunities.

Moreover, even for those who can attend school, the quality of education is a major concern. This challenge is multifaceted and rooted in a combination of factors. A key issue is the inadequacy of teacher training [2]. Many teachers in Cambodia lack the necessary training and pedagogical skills to deliver quality education. This deficiency is particularly evident in rural areas, where the majority of the country's poor reside.

Insufficient resources further compound the problem. Many schools, particularly in rural and remote areas, grapple with a shortage of basic educational resources such as textbooks,

teaching aids, and classroom infrastructure. This resource constraint hampers effective teaching and learning, adversely affecting educational outcomes.

Taken together, these challenges—limited access to education due to child labor and compromised quality of education due to inadequately trained teachers and insufficient resources—paint a sobering picture of the state of education among Cambodian children.

Shelter

Shelter is a fundamental human right, yet many Cambodian children lack access to safe and secure housing. Factors such as poverty, land disputes, and urban development have resulted in a significant number of children living in inadequate housing conditions or experiencing homelessness.

Poverty is a primary factor that limits access to adequate housing. Many families, particularly those in rural areas or from marginalized communities, lack the financial resources to secure decent housing. As a result, children in these households often live in substandard conditions, such as makeshift structures or overcrowded dwellings, without access to essential services like clean water, sanitation, and electricity.

Land disputes, often stemming from unclear land ownership rights and forced evictions, further exacerbate the housing challenge. These disputes can result in children and their families losing their homes, leading to displacement and, in extreme cases, homelessness.

The rapid pace of urban development in cities like Phnom Penh has added another layer of complexity to the shelter issue. While urban development can bring economic opportunities, it also often leads to the displacement of low-income households, pushing them into slum areas or onto the streets, where children are particularly vulnerable.

Living in inadequate housing conditions or experiencing homelessness exposes children to a host of risks. They face heightened health risks due to exposure to environmental hazards and lack of access to clean water and sanitation. Insecurity is another major concern, as these children are often at risk of violence, abuse, and exploitation. Moreover, the instability associated with inadequate housing can disrupt children's education and limit their future prospects [3].

Social Security

Social security for children is vital for their survival, development, and protection. Nonetheless, Cambodia's social protection system remains inadequate, particularly for vulnerable children. Challenges include inadequate funding, limited coverage, and lack of coordination among different programs [4].

One of the primary challenges is inadequate funding. The resources allocated to social security for children fall short of what is required to ensure comprehensive coverage and adequacy of benefits. This funding gap undermines the capacity of social security programs to protect children against poverty, deprivation, and their adverse consequences.

Coverage is another significant issue. Many vulnerable children, including those living in remote areas, children from marginalized communities, and street children, are often not covered by existing social security schemes. This limited coverage leaves these children without the necessary safety nets, exacerbating their vulnerability to risks and shocks.

Coordination, or rather the lack thereof, among different social security programs is a further challenge. Without effective coordination, these programs often operate in silos, leading to inefficiencies, overlaps, and gaps in service delivery. Furthermore, the lack of a coherent and integrated approach can complicate access to services for beneficiaries, particularly those who are most in need.

The inadequacies in Cambodia's social security system have serious implications for children. Without effective social security, many children are left vulnerable to exploitation, including child labor and trafficking. They are more likely to suffer from malnutrition due to inadequate access to food and healthcare. Furthermore, they are at a heightened risk of falling into, or remaining trapped in, poverty.

Conclusion and Call to Action

This report underscores the urgent need for action to address the challenges faced by Cambodia's children in education, shelter, and social security. It is incumbent upon policymakers, non-governmental organizations, donors, and society at large to prioritize these

issues and commit to ensuring every child in Cambodia has access to quality education, safe shelter, and robust social security.

This call to action demands a multi-faceted approach involving policy reform, increased investment, capacity building, and advocacy. Only through concerted, collaborative, and sustained efforts can we hope to significantly improve the state of Cambodia's children and secure a brighter future for the nation.

Sources

[1] Findings on the worst forms of child labor - Cambodia (no date) DOL. Available at:

<https://www.dol.gov/agencies/ilab/resources/reports/child-labor/cambodia>

[2] ILO, Social-protection.org. Available at:

<https://www.social-protection.org/gimi/ShowCountryProfile.action?iso=KH>

[3] OECD (2018) Findings from Cambodia's experience in PISA for Development, Education in Cambodia. Available at:

<https://www.oecd.org/pisa/pisa-for-development/PISA-D%20national%20report%20for%20Cambodia.pdf>.

[4] Our network, CRIN - child rights international network, CRIN. Available at:

<https://home.crin.org/>