

With 70 percent of the total population under 30 years of age, more than eight in ten of them (83%) were in rural areas, Cambodia has a majority youth population. The youth group should be able to contribute tremendously in a fast-change country. But the issues confronting Cambodian youth today are therefore deeply inter-related.

Economic and Social Context: As the situation of youth in any society is highly contextual, the challenges and opportunities that youth and young women currently face in Cambodia must be understood in terms of rapid economic growth characterized by modest reductions in poverty and increasing inequality. Economic development has also featured significant demographic shifts in Cambodian society, as the population is increasingly young and highly mobile.

This migration is having a profound impact on the social fabric of Cambodian society and its youth. While migration represents new job opportunities and the capacity for income, it also removes young people from a safe haven of family and community and exposes them to new lifestyle attitudes and behaviors associated with dislocation in urban environments. In such situations, many young people rely on social networks of friends for comfort and support, while others may engage in unsafe and high-risk behaviors.

Employment: The single most important issue confronting youth and young women in Cambodia today is employment. As observed, the labor force is increasing by 300,000 individuals to 400,000 per year. Most new employment is in the garment, tourism, and construction industries. These sectors, however, are not growing sufficiently fast enough to absorb so many new labor market entrants. The current status of vocational training opportunities is not sufficient to meet the increasing demand for services and manufacturing needed in a changing economy. As a result of economic crisis, there were 40% of the total garment workers lose their job. In this sense, there is a real need for forward looking policies and long term planning exercise and processes that match education and vocational training programmes with the needs of Cambodia's economy and society.

Education: There is widespread agreement that role of education in reducing poverty and income inequality. In this sense, illiteracy is one of the strongest predictors of poverty, while unequal access to educational opportunity is one correlate of income inequality. Community perceptions also suggest improvements in terms of access, including the availability of schools, free registration, and a pro-poor education policy. 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. Dropout rates and retention are a serious concern since it is one thing to encourage higher enrolment, when survival rate is what counts in the long run. The poor are at the greatest risk of dropping out due to a variety of pressures, including community and individual factors. High rates of illiteracy are still evident in the 15-24 age groups, especially among girls.

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

a. Vulnerability as a function of poverty and social exclusion Young people living in poor households are one of the most vulnerable groups in Cambodian society. Most 15-24 year olds live in rural areas, which represent 26% of the total population. Some 35% of the populations live below the poverty line. They rely primarily on rain-fed agriculture and as a result, often experience food insecurity. They tend to receive less education and have little or no access to vocational training.

b. Vulnerability as a function of physical and mental health Street children are among the most vulnerable groups in Cambodia. The number of children living on the streets may be increasing by as much as 20% due to rural-urban migration. As many as 10,000 - 20,000 young people may be working on the streets, half of whom are female.

c. Vulnerability as a function of violence and abuse Young people may be experiencing more violence and abuse than any other group in Cambodia.

d. 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 and rape and gangs.

Participation and Rights When vulnerability is high among young men and women, their prospects for civic participation are low. In rural Cambodia, youth voices are not yet well incorporated into local development planning. Youth often feel ignored in the early stages of the planning process, but are expected to participate in development projects as labor contributors. At the same time, many youth seem to indicate that they are not interested to participate as it is the duty of the village leaders and elders to make such decisions. In either case, many youth do not appear to have much sense of ownership over the development planning process.

With respect to family-based agricultural production, most youth lack access to extension services and affordable credit for inputs such as fertilizers. Their ability to become more efficient and productive farmers is therefore undermined by a lack of ability to participate in agricultural extension projects operated by NGOs and others. There is a real need to better target such services toward rural young people who will be the farmers of the future.

As for decision making in community development, most project priorities at the local level concern infrastructure such as schools, roads, canals, and irrigation. Little attention has yet to be focused on social aspects of youth development. Youth voices are not well incorporated into the planning process, although they are called upon to participate as laborers once the decisions were already made. Youth are rarely called to participate in any village meeting because elders believe that youth have less experience in decision-making and thus youth voices and input are routinely ignored. They also often do not have an opportunity to participate in village meetings. In this sense, there is a need to mainstream youth's participation in the development planning process at the local level. This should be incorporated as a key feature of a National Youth Policy (NYP).

Gender: There were slightly more males (51%) than females (49%) among youth. The Cambodian tradition can be one of the barriers for youth participation such as the young woman are not allowed to be away from the family, they are supposed to take the family and children, the involvement in the society is the roles of men. A traditional barrier of preventing youth from seeking to understand about reproductive health before marriage. Most of youth, even over 18 years old (legal age) are always based on their parents (old persons) guidance for their future even marriage.

Women were traditionally assigned a lower status than that of men, received lower levels of education, and were typically not well represented in public decision-making processes outside the immediate household. Especially, idealized gender roles and behaviors are embodied in the *Chbap Srey* and *Chpab Pros* (*The traditional code of conduct for women and men*). The codes give men higher status and authority as the head of the household, and exhort women to be faithful, modest and obedient and to accept their husband's behavior no matter what he does. Domestic violence is often correlated with spousal control, and attempts by husbands to control their wives' behavior are often a precursor to violent behavior. Gender disparities are rooted in entrenched social attitudes and cultural tradition. There are also high gender based violence and few women in decision making position. Example, About 23 percent of women have experienced physical violence, only 8 percent of commune councilors and 16 percent of national assembly members are women.

Drug: At the present time, Illicit Drug Use, Alcoholic Consumption and HIV/AIDS, Traffic Accident are also the big problems among the youth and the participation of young in fighting HIV is very important and effective among youth themselves (peer education). But Sexual and reproductive health is a sensitive topic in Cambodian social context. They are shy to participate and in some cases, their parents are the barriers. Drug has an epidemic spread, especially across borders from the neighboring countries. The trend of drug in Cambodia is very high according to the recent research conducted by many institutions. The numbers of people abusing drugs in Cambodia are rapidly increasing because of lack of information, law enforcement,

guidance on such substances and low education as well as poverty. Moreover, the much-understated incidence of unsafe sexual practices whilst under the influence of drugs is one reason for the increased number of HIV/AIDS positive.

Health: The broad and sweeping social and cultural transformations accompanying Cambodia's rapid economic development have resulted in changes that induce increased risk behaviors on the part of youth. The migration of young people without families for employment and education contribute to sexual reproductive health risks and increased risk-taking behaviors associated with HIV/AIDS infections and other health development risks, including drug abuse and gender based violence. However, sexual and reproductive health issues such as pregnancy in 15-19 year-old age group and abortion cannot be solely attributed to migration nor are they only an urban phenomenon. Access to information and communication technology is influencing changes in attitudes and introducing new lifestyle possibilities throughout the country.

Volunteerism: Broadly speaking, youth opportunities for volunteerism are key components in the formation of social capital and the strengthening of reciprocity. However, many youth tend to equate volunteerism with work without salary. There is some indication that volunteerism can work when there is appropriate support from various institutions such as NGOs and community institutions (pagodas and schools). When opportunities to volunteer are coupled with vocational or skill development youth will have better prospects for decent employment as well as 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 not a good use of scarce resources. Youth could benefit from such activities if there is strong support from the community. In this sense, the attitudes and beliefs of elders and community leaders need to change to understand and value the greater youth participation in social and civic affairs.