



*Intervention of Mr. Chetra Khieu (Damnok Toek)*

*Perspective from a Grassroots Organisation*

**Policy and Culture: Change needs to focus on policy over culture.**

### Roots for child labour in our context

In Cambodia, child labour is not a cultural question but a structural one and is linked to various factors such as:

- History of poverty: there are factors that trap the parents in the poverty cycle such as health issues, low education, social problems (drug use, gambling, etc.), low income, high debt, emergency situations, etc.
- Lack of eligible workforce resulting in children having to work instead of adults, especially in the fields.
- Parents need to pay back loans with horrific interest rates often to loan sharks: Families find themselves in debt and are unable to repay loans resulting in debt bondage where children are forced to work until the debts are repaid. Families also become involved in gambling, substance abuse, fall into the trap of human trafficking and exploitation, and unsafe migration. We observe that child labour mostly occurs to supplement the family's income and or compensate a labour shortage.
- Health and social issues of family members: children are forced to work to support the family because the parents are sick.
- Drug addiction of parents and children or gambling issues
- Corruption

These issues are the roots not only of child labour in Cambodia but also of a) migration to Thailand when parents looking for work in Thailand take their children with them; and b) human-child trafficking, which occurs when parents 'sell' their children to allow the family to survive.

**In 2020, it was found that 7.5% of Cambodian children, aged 5 to 14 years old are in the workforce.**

### Progress on the ground

Things are improving slowly. We see changes on the ground that have been initiated and accompanied by ILO, UNICEF, and other international organizations. We see a change and impact on grassroots levels.

In the past few years, we have seen the National Authorities becoming more involved, and things have started to change in several ways. Firstly, laws and policies have been established and implemented. For example, government policies and controls have been adopted in the fisheries sector, in garment factories and others. Secondly, there is now greater collaboration between different authorities, which can be seen in the efforts to

dismantle organised begging gangs. **Today, if we witness a case of child abuse and/or child labour, we inform the authorities who take action.**

### However, child labour still exists in Cambodia

Despite improvements such as higher income, children going to school, laws and enforcement of policies, child labour still exists.

The persistence of child labour in the 21st century ultimately stems from increasing poverty levels and low education rates. This is apparent in the Cambodian context where parents are forced to make desperate decisions to repay debts and be able to afford daily costs.

The US Department of Labour stated there has been a failure to take active measures to investigate, prosecute, convict and sentence public officials who participate in or facilitate the worst forms of child labour. Corruption is a big issue when it comes to law enforcement.

Child Labor in Cambodia is still a complex issue and we see it mainly in the following activity sectors:

- Brick factories
- Construction
- Agriculture
- Begging
- Prostitution
- Scavenging
- Vegetable selling

### Our response - What Damnok Toek Does

Damnok Toek has been working in the field of child protection for over 23 years to prevent the **trafficking and exploitation of children**. We are working towards making Cambodia a country where children are able to flourish within their extended family environment.

Damnok Toek's projects are based **on prevention, protection, and reintegration services** offering employment opportunities, education, alternative care solutions, skilful parenting, healthcare and psycho-social counselling in order to mitigate the risk of child labour.

**Our social workers work in the communities seven days per week.** They identify and work with child labourers, street-involved children and youth facing substance abuse issues. Our Drop-In Centre serves as the entry points to support children who are living and working on the street or children left behind by migration. The aim is to refer children to DT's Non-Formal Education (NFE) Centre, which provides education from grade 1 to grade 6. NFE helps children who never attend school gain access to accelerated education so they can be reintegrated into the public education system. NFE also is used to prevent the child labour. We run the centre for half the day so that children can be at school and away from work places but during the other half day, children are free to help their family. Children in Cambodia are seen as active members who need to contribute to support the family; however, we seek to provide a balance between the children's education and working.

We have an **office located at the Thai-Cambodian** border, which identifies unaccompanied children, deported from Thailand and provides immediate support services. Damnok Toek also works directly with families in order to prevent family separation or forced labour of

children before it occurs.

In 2021, we served 1344 children in our programs such as the Drop-In Centre, providing around 6143 services including education, shelter, rehabilitation, and employment.

### What is needed?

Cambodia has a long road ahead to eliminate child labour but through closer collaboration between the NGO sector and the government, gaps within the system can be addressed. This would include the introduction of further legal frameworks, enforcement of laws and regulations, and increased social programs directly targeting the causes of child labour. Until these areas are addressed, the children of Cambodia will continue to be the victims of obstacles preventing child flourishing.

Coordination and collaboration between relevant stakeholders is needed. Government, International Organisations, international NGO's and Grassroot Organisations need to work together to address gaps within the system.

Grassroots organizations have to be part of this collaboration and coordination. We are the witnesses of what is improving and what needs to change in the field. We see on the ground how things can change when we work all together.

### Conclusion

Thank you for including us in this panel. We think it's really important that the information from grassroots organizations like ours are taken into consideration on an international level. Thank you to the moderator and the speakers on this panel for the work you do to help our children.