12 months into the pandemic, how are Cambodians faring?

Last year, the COVID-19 crisis broke the downward global trend in extreme poverty[1] set in motion since 1997. For the first time in over 20 years, we have seen a dramatic increase in extreme poverty, with up to 100 million people added to the existing population of 648 million in 2019. Many of these affected people are in countries already struggling with high poverty rates.

Cambodia has been disproportionately affected by COVID-19, despite being relatively unaffected by the health aspects during the first 12 months of the pandemic due to factors including its trade exposure and reliance on remittances from international workers.

From early on, the collapse of critical industries such as textiles and travel and the resulting economic slump led to widespread income losses from unemployment and business closures. The Asian Development Bank estimated in mid-2020 that 390,000 Cambodians would lose their jobs that year[2].

In rural communities characterised by abject poverty, the impact has been severe. Families have resorted to desperate coping strategies, including cutting food and health expenditure, leaving young children at home alone while parents search for work, and taking out high-risk loans to cover expenses. The pressure to migrate in search of employment for Cambodians often means undertaking unsafe and risky international travel. Workers returning due to the pandemic present a double strain for already resource-poor families who, having lost remittances income, now must feed and shelter additional family members.

In addition to lost income, rising food prices have increased food insecurity among the most vulnerable families with little or no family savings, food stores or land, or high levels of debt and insecure housing. The pandemic also exacerbated the risks for children in terms of malnutrition, dropping out of school, exposure to domestic violence, child labour and child marriage, and an increased risk of family separation and higher admissions to residential childcare institutions (orphanages).

For the first time in 2020, the Cambodian Government provided small cash allocations to the most impoverished families[3]. The new Cash Transfer Programme reached an estimated 540,000 households formally defined as the most deserving by the IDPoor Programme[4].

Cambodia had only 400 cases of COVID-19 and no deaths until February 2021, when an initial outbreak in the southeast and the capital of Phnom Penh spread to many other parts of the country.

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[1] Kharas and Dooley, *Extreme Poverty in the Time of COVID-19*, May 2021
https://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2021/05/KHARAS_paper1.pdf

[2] Asian Development Bank, *ADB Loan for Cambodia's COVID-19 Response,* 2 September 2020
https://www.adb.org/news/videos/adb-loan-cambodia-covid-19-response

[3] Unicef, *COVID-19 Cash Transfer Programme helping families with the most basic needs,* 19 June 2020
https://www.unicef.org/cambodia/stories/covid-19-cash-transfer-programme-helping-families-most-basic-needs

[4] The IDPoor Programme is part of the Cambodian Government's plan to reduce poverty and support socioeconomic development. https://www.idpoor.gov.kh/about/process

In May 2021, as the number of cases passed 20,000, the Government introduced an emergency social assistance program, providing one-time cash transfers to low-income households, those affected by lockdowns, and families with members who had contracted the virus. However, Human Rights Watch described the Government's food aid in these determined 'red zones' as haphazard[5] with relief packages being inadequate for addressing the food emergency. The aid packages consisted of 25 kilograms of rice, six bottles of soy and fish sauce, plus a carton of dried noodles per household, regardless of household size.

Two recent surveys provide an insight into how COVID-19 continues to impact already-vulnerable Cambodian families:

- QSA partner, Khmer Community Development, conducted a rapid assessment survey[6] in May 2021 to assess the magnitude of the problems caused by COVID-19 in their target communities in Kandal Province to identify the groups most affected and the main issues facing them in terms of health and sanitation, nutrition, education, livelihoods and children's wellbeing. 147 households were surveyed by phone.

- A World Vision survey[7] conducted in March-April 2021 through face-to-face interviews of 621 households in Siem Reap and Preah Vihear provinces in the north of the country, Kampong Chnang (central) and phone interviews in the capital, Phnom Penh.

Livelihoods

KCD found that the target community was highly reliant on agriculture, with 56% of households depending on agriculture. Before COVID-19, around one-third of all households had a second source of income from casual day labour, but most lost this income during the pandemic. Since the pandemic, 95% reported a significant impact on their livelihoods, and one third had lost jobs and had no income. More than 50% of respondents reported relying on savings; over 50% also borrowed money from neighbours, family or friends; and 15% were unable to repay loans. In addition, more than one quarter had engaged in high-risk jobs. and 15% sent their children to work.

Results from the World Vision found survey were a little different from KCD due to the inclusion of urban households. Three-quarters of World Vision respondents lost their primary source of income or had it reduced, with the average family income per week dropping to $35, down from $63 before the pandemic. Households in Phnom Penh were more affected by the loss of income than those rural areas, probably due to more severe closures in the capital, with 95% reporting their income had been lost or reduced.

Food security and nutrition

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[5] Human Rights Watch, *Cambodia: Lockdowns Hit Low-Income Families Hard*, 8 June 2021 https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/06/08/cambodia-lockdowns-hit-low-income-families-hard

[6] Khmer Community Development, Preliminary Findings: KCD Needs Assessment During COVID-19 Pandemic, May 2021 (unpublished)

[7] World Vision International Cambodia, *Survey on the Impact of COVID-19 on Vulnerable Households in Cambodia,* 27 May, 2021 https://www.wvi.org/publications/research/cambodia/survey-impact-covid-19-vulnerable-households-cambodia

KCD found that more than 25% of households were only eating two meals per day. Nevertheless, 80% of households reported they had not reduced the quality and quantity of food because they had savings and access to protein and green vegetables from home food gardens. 80% had one week of food stock or less in their homes.

KCD respondents retained access to nearby local markets during COVID-19 restrictions, but due to price increases of up to 40%, they had to reduce their spending on food.

Reduced food security was evident in World Vision's findings, with only half of the families having sufficient income to cover food expenses fully and 38% reducing spending on food. For example, in Siem Reap, average household food spending declined from $25 per week to only $16 per week. Overall, 44% of respondents had no food stocks at home, rising to 76% in Phnom Penh residents who had no access to home gardens. In response, 70% now rely on less preferred and less expensive food (probably less protein and more rice), 50% have reduced portion sizes, and 34% have reduced the number of meals per day.

Education

In response to COVID-19 restrictions, Cambodian schools have been closed almost continuously since March 2020, except for a short period in early 2021.

Government schools have provided remote teaching via online classes, YouTube and TV broadcasts. However, KCD's survey found that only 40% of families could provide their children with a device such as a phone and a tablet to help them with school work, slightly higher than World Vision's findings (32%).

Still, many students have no access to these programs without technology at home, including internet access or television, let alone study materials. In both surveys, around 30% of respondents expressed concern about their children missing school and not learning during school closures. In addition, World Vision found that while 50% of households had access to a smartphone, 59% lacked internet access at home, 47% of parents and carers reported not having time to support their children, and only 2.7% had access to a computer.

What next?

KCD's research has informed the direction of their assistance programs in target communities, and several of the recommendations are already integrated into their work. For example, KCD is developing online resources on agriculture to improve food security, provide equipment and advice to create home food gardens and help families build food processing capabilities. Volunteers are being trained in local communities to provide technical support to enable families in the target areas to access these online resources. KCD will also work with local authorities to provide emergency food supplies during lockdowns for vulnerable people, including pregnant and lactating women and children under five years.

While Cambodians have largely complied with Government's sometimes harsh lockdown measures, this has been difficult for many vulnerable communities. For example, during the extended lockdown in April-May 2021, food transport vehicles were banned from entering Phnom Penh,

resulting in food shortages and dramatic cost increases. Fortunately, those in rural areas have access to local produce, but with incomes slashed, they have reduced spending on food.

In KCD's target communities and other project areas supported by QSA, reports indicate the benefits of permaculture and home gardens. Even when faced with job losses and reduced incomes, households in these areas have maintained food security or lessened the impact of food shortages and price rises with homegrown fruit and vegetables.

Cambodia launched a very effective vaccination program, mainly with support from China, and 36% of the total population is now fully vaccinated[8], one of the highest rates in the world.

While Cambodia has so far managed to avoid the worst of the health impacts, it's clear the economic and social effects of the pandemic will be profound and long-lasting. Moreover, in a country with pre-existing socioeconomic vulnerabilities and nascent government social protection and support systems, the pandemic will exacerbate vulnerabilities, with more people slipping below the poverty line leading to an increase in associated health, nutrition, education and social protection risks.

It's encouraging to see that families supported by QSA partners to implement home gardens with new permaculture techniques have fared relatively well during the pandemic. KCD is now expanding its food security and income generation programs, responding to families who want to establish food gardens and food production and income generation activities, including fish farming and mushroom growing.

[8] Out World in Data https://ourworldindata.org/covid-vaccinations?country=~KHM (8 August 2021)