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Sophorn gave up her work as a garment worker to take care her baby after giving birth to her.

ASEAN'S PUSH ON NATIONAL CARE POLICIES COULD HELP MORE THAN A BILLION PEOPLE

Throughout the year, ASEAN Member States will hold various meetings with the primary objective of moving forward the ASEAN Community Vision 2025 of a peaceful, stable, resilient, outward looking, connected and empowered region with vibrant, sustainable, and highly integrated economies.

With this year's theme of "ASEAN Matters: Epicentrum of Growth" under the Government of Indonesia's chairship, the ASEAN is expected to

focus on strengthening economic recovery from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Parallel with its effort to realize an integrated economy, the ASEAN bloc is also on a journey to introduce a 'care-sensitive dimension into national and regional gender policies'. In 2021, during the peak of the pandemic, ASEAN leaders agreed to work on the 'Comprehensive Framework on Care Economy'.

The International Labor Organization estimates, in Asia and the Pacific, 1.1 billion people spend eight hours in the day doing unpaid care work – taking care of dependents – as well as indirect care tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, domestic work and the collection of fuelwood and water. Women perform 80% of the total hours of care work and spend 4.1 times more time than men on doing this physical and mental labor for free.

The Framework is the first essential step on achieving greater gender

equality by recognizing unpaid care and domestic work and its invaluable contribution to the functioning of our societies and economies. It focuses on six broad strategies that are expected to address the current and future societal needs arising from demographic change, societal inequalities, and sustainable development challenges.

At the 42nd ASEAN Summit plenary session held in May this year; Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. proposed to address the concerns of the region's ageing population. "Consistent with Asian tradition of valuing our elders, we must view this both as an opportunity and as a challenge, especially in terms of adequate social benefits on one hand and social empowerment on the other," he said.

This is a significant statement as the demographic shift in the region will intensify women's care work in the future. The current care models

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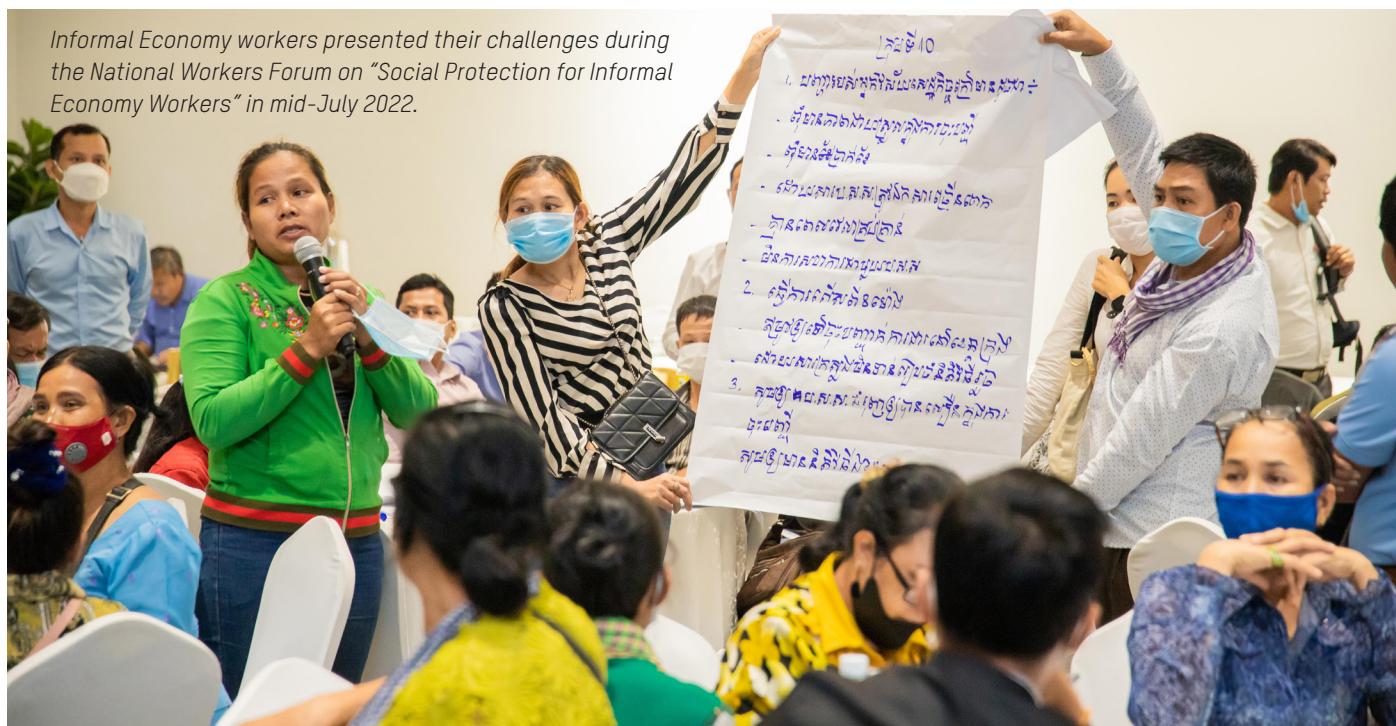
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Informal Economy workers presented their challenges during the National Workers Forum on “Social Protection for Informal Economy Workers” in mid-July 2022.



and investments within ASEAN predominantly focus on maternal and childcare roles, overlooking the impending demographic shift. The Framework acknowledges that low fertility rates in several countries of the region and changes in women’s workforce participation could affect the traditional system of families taking care of the elderly. It speaks about the need to ‘create effective responses -- both intelligent policy making and practical solutions to help societies prepare for the challenges on institutional care, community-based care, training and support for care-givers’.

A momentum has been built in the region and countries like Cambodia and Indonesia are working on national action plans for care economy. But more needs to be done. In the past 20 years, the gender gap in unpaid care work has decreased by only 7 minutes -- from 1h and 49min to 1h and 42min. At this rate it could take almost 300 years to fill this gap!

Most ASEAN member states lack comparable statistics to measure progress in women’s unpaid care and domestic work. Other than Cambodia and Thailand, member states do not have national sample survey data on how many hours individuals devote to paid and unpaid work. Integrating

time-use surveys and other household and labor force surveys into national statistical systems can help quantify the economic effects of policies geared towards reducing women’s burden of unpaid work and increasing their labor force participation.

Economic growth in the region has enabled the provision of infrastructure such as clean water, sanitation, transportation, and food, in urban spaces. However, these “engines of liberation” that enable women to spend less time doing very low productivity tasks are yet to reach those living in rural areas.

ILO’s estimates there are 244 million informal workers in the ASEAN region. The Asia and the Pacific region hosts the largest share of the world’s women domestic workers, at 52.1 per cent. A total of 67 per cent of domestic workers are covered by country labour laws and/or regulations specific to domestic workers. Increased investments in universal social protection schemes, including social protection floors, and targeted programs for women and girls, can enhance the impact of existing social insurance and assistance programs implemented by ASEAN member states. Caregiver representation, voice in social dialogue and ability to collectively bargain for better benefits

and work conditions are some of the ways in which women and their care work can gain visibility in policy processes.

Redistributing unpaid care work requires tackling gender norms between women and men. In 2020 an Asian Development Bank study in Lao-PDR found that men would like women to take up more paid work, but there was no recognition that this shift might require a rebalancing of roles in the household. Instead, men perceived household work to be a waste of time and preferred not to participate in domestic work or household chores. The study further mentions that despite the understanding among women and men that unpaid care work should be reduced, there is little encouragement for redistribution within policy dialogue, community norms, or in practical terms, at the household level.

The way ahead for ASEAN is to encourage more regional cooperation and the unique context of the region necessitates learning from each other, offering valuable insights that may not be readily available from global perspectives. ASEAN has an opportunity to establish itself as a policy leader on care in Asia by championing the outlook that spending on care is an ‘investment’ in its future.

CAMBODIA IS ONE STEP CLOSER TO INCLUSIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS

Koh Kong province is considered the rising star of Cambodia's west coast. The province is known for its beautiful beaches, mangrove forests, and greenest along Cardamom Mountains. The province hosts special economic zones which are home to multi-million dollar car manufacturing, electricity spare parts, and textiles and garment factories.

From the city centre, it took us 40 minutes along the muddy road to meet one key informant, Thor Sreymeas, a 34 years old garment worker and a mother of two.

Sreymeas dropped out in grade three due to extreme poverty and family responsibilities. Before she moved to Koh Kong in 2016, she worked at a sugar farm in Kampong Chhnang province where she met her husband and later moved to Koh Kong after they married.

We sit down with Sreymean and her beautiful family inside her old wooden, but cosy house. Sreymeas is on maternity leave, when we interviewed her, and just a week away from delivering a baby boy. When asked if she is ready, she responded with a big smile, "yes, I am ready."

She told us, with her beautiful smiles, "I am ready and least worried compared to when I gave birth to my first child". Sreymeas continued, "Back then we were very worried because we did not have any money. We needed to borrow money for labor. We were very worried back then."

“ I now have an NSSF card after working with a factory here in Koh Kong. This card [NSSF] will help me cover my labor- expenses. I'll also get a US\$100 allowance from Prime Minister Hun Sen, ” Sreymeas.

She also explained to us the payment process and required supporting documents. Sreymeas is very knowledgeable about NSSF coverages and benefits. When asked how she got to know all those things, she told us she has attended training series provided by NSSF agents and union representatives, the word of mouth from fellow workers, and her experience giving birth to her second child.

Sreymeas's story and the positive impacts of NSSF coverage on her resilience is an eye opening for us. This strongly reasserts the urgent need for and importance of inclusive social protection for the Cambodian people, especially women and mothers.

What Sreymeas and other women who share the employment status is



Sreymeas and her beautiful family posing for a picture inside their house.

benefiting from this social scheme came along away with the Government of Cambodia political will to ensure an inclusive development and sustainable development goals. It requires supportive policy framework, the Social Protection Policy Framework 2016-2025, the oversight institution, National Council for Social Protection, and the public investment.

The progress so far is commendable despite being relatively new to social protection. The National Social Security Fund is currently covered 1.4, out of 4.1 million wage workers. And for the past 28 months, USD837.05 million was allocated to the social assistance policy like IDPoor programme and cash-based transfer covering 706,060 poor and vulnerable households across the Kingdom. The Cambodia's

government also spent a total of US\$20.07 million between June 2019 to October 2022 supporting 181,542 pregnant women and 106,820 children under two years old.

Cambodia has also made a new chapter in its social protection systems by introducing a pension fund in 2022 for private sector employees, a scheme which used to be only available to public servants, and promises social security benefit to sex workers by 2023

Sreymeas is more fortunate because she is covered by NSSF. But, there are tens of thousands of women and mothers who are not yet included in social protection systems. There are street vendors, the majority of whom are women and mothers,

who are not yet included in the social protection systems. There are small scale farmers, despite their long-standing contribution to our food security, who have not yet benefited from the policy. And of course, youth and working age students who are not provided with unemployment and healthcare benefits. And more groups of population, you name it.

Prime Minister Hun Sen is visionary for saying, “[social protection] would not harm the economy, but would improve the health and development of the Kingdom’s workforce”. Investing in social protections is a win-win policy.

While it might seem a little too early to rush in, expanding social schemes, investing more on social protection betting on the fiscal space, international experiences look

promising and encouraging. A study on investments in social protection in Japan, Mongolia, the Republic of Korea and Thailand found positive impacts on GDP. In Japan, one additional dollar spent on social protection generates an accumulated expansion of GDP by \$1.7 after two and a half years. South Korea has the highest multiplier effect, with an accumulated increase of \$3 after 10 quarters. In Mongolia, the accumulated multiplier effect is \$1.5 after eight quarters. All were driven by the effects on household consumptions and private investment, thanks to investment in social protection.

In Cambodia, the joint impact assessment of the General Secretariat of the National Social Protection Council (GS-NSPC) and UNDP found that Cambodia’s cash transfer programme

alone contributed to 0.45% of GDP growth, reduced poverty by 3.4% and the unemployment rate by 0.62% in 2021. The National Social Protection Council is now collecting inputs to prepare “National Social Protection Framework 2023”. Oxfam and partner organisations are ready to bring the voice of the community we represent to the policy formulation and dialogues.

Building inclusive social protection systems is critical to our future generations and economic competitiveness. Just like you, I am optimistic that Cambodia can do it now.

The original op-ed was published on the Phnom Penh Post newspaper on 29 May 2023 and the Post Khmer on 1 June 2023.

ASEAN RECOGNISES SOCIAL PROTECTION IN ITS JOINT COMMUNIQUÉ

Sitting in a small restaurant in bustling Bangkok, being served by a 21-year-old Cambodian waiter triggered a lot of emotions for me. The waiter came from Banteay Meanchey, a province bordering Thailand. He has been working there alongside a few friends from the same province, unaware of the potential dangers and his vulnerability of being away from home if his job stopped tomorrow. This is not a unique story as Thailand is both a key destination for migrant workers from neighbouring countries, and a country of origin for migrant workers to other countries. There are migrant workers across ASEAN- from Cambodia to Thailand, from Thailand to Malaysia, and from Malaysia to Singapore. Whilst labour migration contributes to both the country of origin and country of destination, the lack of protection and rights for these migrant workers have been a major concern.

Earlier this month it was good to see social protection gaining policy momentum in Southeast

Asia with ASEAN members having the courage to challenge the conventional assertion that universal social protection systems are not affordable. In Phnom Penh on 5th August 2022, under Cambodia’s Chair, ASEAN included social protection in its Joint Communiqué of the 55th ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Meeting. Now Cambodia is entrusted with the key role to lead the development of ASEAN Regional Guidance on the Role of Social Work and Service Workforce Strengthening in social protection. This illustrates Cambodia’s and ASEAN’s growing commitment to elevate social protection to new levels of multinational investment and cooperation. Potentially, it will benefit millions of people by addressing this previous under-investment and lack of coverage in the Southeast Asian bloc.

This milestone marks a significant upturn in interest and commitment to social protection. Amongst Southeast Asian member states, only Singapore, Brunei, Malaysia, and Thailand are

considered to have strong social protection systems. As long ago as 9th October 2013 the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection was adopted with commitments to build interlinked and mutually reinforcing regional political, economic and cultural communities. The ASEAN Joint Communiqué in 2020 again referred to these commitments so it was disappointing that in the 2021 Joint Communiqué there was no mention of social protection despite the tremendous impact of COVID-19 on the livelihoods of millions of people within the region. This was a regrettable step backward in ASEAN’s joint effort.

However, now in 2022 Oxfam hopes this cooperation among the ASEAN member states will benefit millions of migrant workers and their families. It means that 2.8 million registered migrant workers in Thailand (2019), 1.98 million migrant workers in Malaysia (2019), 1.4 million migrant workers in Singapore (2019), or 6.9 million migrant workers in ASEAN



ASEAN foreign ministers during the 55th ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Meeting on August 3. Photo: Hong Menea/Phnom Penh Post

bloc, will have a greater chance of accessing social protection benefits. This workforce makes an important economic contribution to both sending and host countries. In Cambodia, migrant workers sent their families a total of US\$3 billion in remittances in 2021 alone. In Thailand 2020, financial remittance was reported to be US\$7.88 billion and the Philippines reports US\$34.88 billion annually. At the same time, host countries benefit from billions of dollars in tax revenue and the increased labour force.

There will be a long journey ahead with difficult negotiations but with this cooperation, ASEAN member states can work towards better, more coordinated social protection policies and legislation that provides migrant workers and their families with access to social protection.

This cooperation will also make ASEAN better prepared for the increasing risk of climate change and global epidemic.

A 2021 World Bank study found that COVID-19 has added 88 million to the estimated total of 150 million people globally now living in extreme poverty. This means that 150 million people are

living on less than US\$1.90 per day. Here in Cambodia we have been hit hard with a report of economic growth in 2020 contracting 3.1% and those living in poverty increasing to 17.8% in 2019-2020 (compared to 13.5% in 2014).

This economic challenge increases with climate change which is now "on our doorstep". In a recent study, scientists estimate that up to 132 million people will be falling into extreme poverty in 2030 due to climate change. Cambodia is highly vulnerable to the risks and impacts of climate change- ranking 46th out of 163 countries.

A stronger social protection system and multinational cooperation across ASEAN will help to prepare for the unprecedented climate change and pandemic impacts. In the worst-case scenario, farmers can access compensation for lost crops, youth and women can access unemployment benefits when they lose their jobs and senior citizens can access pensions and healthcare in the absence of available support from their families.

This cooperation will contribute to

ASEAN being better prepared for the rapidly ageing population who are the most vulnerable and the least protected.

Thailand's ageing population is expected to reach 22.8% in 2035, Singapore's over 65s will be 26.6% of the population in the same year. Vietnam estimates to have 20% of its population ageing by 2038 and here in Cambodia, we are not immune with the Kingdom's population older than 65 years estimated to be 7.7% of the total population by 2035.

Oxfam and partners are committed to working with The Royal Government of Cambodia and countries in the ASEAN bloc to advance these commitments and make them a reality for the people of the region.

Let us make ASEAN a better home, our home, a home for all.

The original op-ed was published on Phnom Penh Post newspaper on 25 August 2022.



Workers shared their proposition to the government to improve their living condition.

SOCIAL PROTECTION NEED FOR INFORMAL ECONOMY WORKERS IN CAMBODIA

Ms. Sim Ath has been a street vendor for 4 years, along with her husband, a tuk-tuk driver. They have three children, but only her six-year-old child is in her current care, and other two stay with their grandmother. As a street vender, Sim Ath earns around 15,000 riels to 20,000 riels per day, but it requires her to ride her motorbike from one place to another switching locations from morning till evening, facing various risks while selling steam banana and potato along the road. This income could only cover her utility and housing cost while other necessities such as food and loan payment are still lacking.

Ath said that she is reluctant to visit the hospital, and instead choosing other cheaper options such as over-the-counter medicine or other herbal medicine whenever member of the family is getting sick. "When I am sick, I dare not complain because I am poor. If I really needed to go to the hospital and it could cost me

more than 100,000 riels, I would have nothing to pay for that," said Ath.

National Social Security Funds or NSSF card is relatively a new information to Sim Ath as an informal economy worker. Similarly, it is still vague for other informal economy workers when it comes to the social security system as well as its benefits because they are not yet legally recognized and included in the registration process to receive such benefits.

In mid-July, Oxfam in collaboration with ILO organized a National Workers Forum on **"Social Protection for Informal Economy Workers"** to disseminate and to discuss the current situation, need and issues faced by informal economy workers; and barriers to accessing social protection benefits. There was a presentation on the key findings of the research study on "Contributory Capacity of Informal Economy Workers to National Social Security Fund" and

the group discussion on how we can work together to promote the inclusion of social protection at policy level.

There were 170 participants from government ministries, development partners, private sectors, civil society organization partners, trade unions network members, local/union leaders, and informal economy workers attended this forum. The platform was a space for the participants to demystify what informality means, share, and discuss on necessary procedures such as registration for social protection which will promote a better coverage of social protection to the informal economy workers, especially women.

Ms. Sophoan Phean, Oxfam National Director, said "Social Protection is an important tool in supporting vulnerable people, especially informal economy workers who have actively and significantly contributed to the development of their family and

country economy. More importantly, it addresses the socio-economic impacts of Cambodia resulting from Covid-19 outbreak and other shocks and takes part in preventing the risks of falling back into poverty.”

Other informal economy workers especially women are the most vulnerable groups, facing various risks including instable income, discrimination, unsafe and unstable working conditions, low income, as well as limited space to participate in the association.

Ms. Francesca Ciccomartino, Representative from the European Union in charge of good governance, human rights and decent work, said in her remarks that “The protection of formal and informal workers is at the heart of a comprehensive approach taken by the EU globally to promote decent work in its four pillars of social protection, productive employment, standards and rights at work and social dialogue.”

This National Worker Forum a part of the project “Improving Synergies



Ms. Sim Ath, a street vendor at Derm Kor market

between Social Protection and Public Finance Management” implemented by Oxfam, ILO, UNICEF and Global Coalition for Social Protection Floors (GCSPF) with the generous financial support from the European Union. This project aims to strengthen national social protection systems through technical support, explorative research, and capacity development, focusing on

public financial management system, budgeting, and financing of social protection. The project focuses on supporting the royal government of Cambodia to strengthen and expand the national social protection system through system strengthening activities towards effective, evidence-based, and inclusive financial, and budgeting processes.

SOCIAL PENSIONS FOR OLDER PEOPLE IN CAMBODIA

More than 200 older people from different Older People’s Associations (OPA), representing more than 30,000 older people in the 25 capital/provinces across the country, gathered for a two days event under the theme “**Social Pensions for Older People in Cambodia**” held in mid-September 2022 in Battambang province. This was the Second National Forum on Older People in the year.

HelpAge Cambodia, Oxfam and UNDP, in partnership with the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation organized the 2nd National Forum on Older People to understand the opportunities, challenges and practical needs of the older people during and after the Covid 19 pandemic and raise awareness on the national policy framework and programs to support the older people and mobilizing inputs for policy

dialogue on the development of social pension and social protection for older people in Cambodia.

There were more than 200 participants from relevant ministries, development partners, civil society organizations, and representatives of older people across the 25 cities and provinces. Eminent guest speakers representing key ministries such as the Ministry of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation, the Ministry of Planning, the Ministry of Economy and Finance, and the General Secretariat of the National Council for Social Protection shared and presented the progress of the National Social Protection Policies and Programs for older people in Cambodia.

Looking back, on 4 February 2021, 150 elderly people of the Older People’s Association in the 25 cities and

provinces representing nearly 30,000 older people had gathered at the 1st National Forum on Older People to explore and discuss topics related to “**Social Protection and the Older People’s Association in Cambodia**” in Phnom Penh. Five priorities have been identified in which allowance support to sustain the livelihood of the older people is the utmost priority that the association called on the Royal Government.

75 year-old Mr. Thiv Sam Ath from Prey Kuy village, Kampong Thom province said, “I lost a job and income when I get old. I need subsidy from the government to cover my daily expense such as food and medicine.”

President of the Cambodia Aging Network, Ms. Ou Vanda representing more than 20,000 members, also emphasized the importance of the

benefits for the elderly to help them not falling back into poverty and vulnerability.

Ms. Phean Sophoan, Oxfam National Director said, “The elderly are an important human resource for family and society. Elderly still face issues of discrimination, employment, decision-making in the family related to health, and being lonely – the finding report of context analysis on the most marginalize and discriminated groups.” “At the same time, migration has shifted the family’s economic and care burden on the elderly people – they are forced to earn income and care for grandchildren and other family members, losing opportunities to participate in social activities and selfcare. In contrast, social protection schemes have not yet fully covered the elderly people. Oxfam has collaborated and supported directly with HelpAge Cambodia in empowering and raising collective voice of the elderly people to better access social protection schemes, access to decent employment, and full protection, especially in times of crisis,” Sophoan added

Mr. Tum Vira, Executive Director of HelpAge Cambodia, emphasized that despite the great efforts made by the government to address the plight of vulnerable people, including the

elderly, as indicated in policies, legal instruments, and social assistance programs, older people still experience many problems and needs that remain unresolved. The needs and issues of the older people were identified in the 1st National Forum on Older People in early February 2021 and proposed for the Royal Government interventions in which “Cash support program is the first and foremost priority for the older people, of any amount or the age group.” If we compare with the countries in Southeast Asia, including Timor-Leste, only Cambodia and Laos do not have social pension programs or cash support programs for the elderly in general. I hope that the results of today’s forum can provide additional evidence and become a necessary input for the Royal Government to respond and take further consideration with the preparation of the “Family Package Program”.

According to a recent research report on **“Income of the Elderly and Social Protection in Cambodia during and after the Covid-19 pandemic,”** conducted by the National Institute of Social Affairs in early 2021, approximately 55% of the elderly participated in the study indicated that their incomes were affected and did not meet their basic living needs even though 45% of them

have received government’s support through the cash transfer program during the Covid 19 pandemic. The report also emphasizes that most older people need old-age benefits to sustain their livelihoods, especially during and after crises such as the Covid 19 pandemic.

In addition to this report, the National Institute of Social Affairs also conducted a study on “The Needs and Challenges of Older People in Cambodia” at the end of 2018 in five provinces of the Kingdom of Cambodia. The report confirms that family members or children’s support is a significant source of income for the elderly (up to 71%), and they have very few chances to generate income. The report also points out that most older people fall into poverty as they get older due to the distribution or donation of their properties to the children. Older women, in particular, are likely to depend on family members more than men, as most involve unpaid work, such as housework, caring for grandchildren, etc.

The recommendations in the two study reports urge the Royal Government to consider developing cash support programs for older people to improve their well-being and keep them from falling back into poverty or vulnerability.



Group photo of participants in the National Forum on “Pensions for older people” in Battambang province on 13-14 September 2022.

CAMBODIA'S WOMEN GARMENT WORKERS HAVE BEEN PROMISED A DECENT LIFE: NOW WE MUST SUPPORT THEM TO CLAIM THEIR RIGHTS



A female garment worker in a factory in Phnom Penh.

The government is now offering maternity leave, a pension fund and other social benefits that could give women stability and security. Sopharith Sin and Roland Chauville explain how a new project will support them to get a better deal.

Across the globe, women in the garment industry are too often deprived of basic labour rights, with millions in informal work and pushed into poverty with low pay, long hours, no sick or maternity pay and unsafe workplaces.

But in Cambodia at least, that is changing. Here, in the garment industry – historically a sector where Cambodian women have been particularly vulnerable – the government has launched several social protection schemes. The National Social Security Fund (NSSF) in particular, has reported that in 2020 alone, it paid a total of 80,000 female garment workers maternity allowances from the government totalling US\$7.9 million. This month, the government also launched a new pension fund for private-sector workers.

Yet, even with such protection now available, big challenges remain: how

do we ensure women workers know they are entitled to social protection? What about unethical employers who don't comply and fail to offer these life-changing benefits to workers? What about the quality of services for apparel industry workers such as healthcare and responses to complaints?

TACKLING THE BARRIERS TO SOCIAL PROTECTION

Addressing such challenges will be the focus of a new Oxfam in Cambodia and Laudes Foundation project: "Inclusive National Social Protection Initiatives that Respond to the Needs of Apparel Industry Employees", or INSPIRE, to support the government to improve the lives of apparel industry workers. The overarching goal is to reduce vulnerability by supporting workers to get better access to social protection.

Our project will address the remaining

barriers to social protection such as lack of access to information; non-compliance by employers; and lack of services for workers. It will focus particularly on workers on short-term contracts, who face some of the biggest barriers to access.

We will do this in four key ways:

Awareness raising campaigns and communication activities;

Strengthening the capacity of trade unions to better represent and negotiate workers' social protection needs and entitlements;

Supporting unions to influence social protection policy through meaningful participation in multi-stakeholder dialogues and decision making at regional and national level, including the Social Protection for All (SP4All) platform, an organisation supported by various civil society organisations

(CSOs) in Cambodia that seeks to raise public awareness on social protection and campaign for change, as well as share knowledge around social protection;

Evidence-based research and advocacy, policy briefs, and position papers during Cambodia's chairmanship of ASEAN and for other platforms, such as the Asian People Forum.

Partnership will be at the heart of everything we do and the project will be jointly implemented with four local NGOs and trade unions: the Centre for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights, the Cambodia Labour Confederation, the Cambodian Alliance of Trade Unions, and the Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers Democratic Union.

We will also be working closely with strategic partners, such as the National Social Protection Council (NSPC), National Social Security Fund (NSSF), Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training, Ministry of Economy and Finance, Ministry of Women's Affairs, international brands, employers and other stakeholders to strengthen and safeguard inclusive social protection.

WHO WILL BENEFIT?

This initiative will support workers across 12 provinces and two municipalities. It will also support the Royal Government of Cambodia to integrate gender-sensitive approaches into its social protection policies.

It is expected to benefit a total of 23,000 people directly and 735,000 indirectly. More importantly, it is anticipated that around a million people will benefit from public awareness campaigns, position papers, evidence-based research, and other communication activities.

Sophoan Phean, National Director of Oxfam in Cambodia, believes that "access to social protection is critical for workers and their households, as it helps to sustain their well-being, build

resilience, and reduce the risk from global shocks or the pandemic".

Jill Tucker, Head of Labour Rights Programme at the Laudes Foundation, says: "Contributory social security schemes like the NSSF strengthen the social contract and provide a basis for workers to demand support and protection when they experience illness, workplace injuries or economic shocks. Fulfilling this promise hinges in part on workers' voices being better represented and reflected in policy discussions. Through collaboration with Oxfam on the INSPIRE initiative, we believe apparel industry workers in Cambodia will be able to access the benefits they are entitled to."

HOW RESEARCH REVEALED THE NEED FOR THE INSPIRE PROJECT

The need for a project like INSPIRE was revealed in a research study, Social Protection For The Apparel Industry in Cambodia: Gaps and Opportunities, jointly commissioned by Oxfam in Cambodia and the Laudes Foundation. This revealed barriers to women claiming their rights, such as non-compliance by employers, lack of legal enforcement and lack of information for workers, that have become the focus of the project.

The project was then developed through consultation and workshops with partners and industry representatives. We collected inputs from local experts, trying throughout to take an inclusive, participatory approach with local ownership that has given beneficiaries and partners a fair say in how the project will work.

THE BENEFITS ARE THERE – NOW IT'S TIME TO MAKE SURE WOMEN GET THEM

Now we are up and running, the project has a unique opportunity to change women's lives, presented by the expansion of benefits for Cambodian women workers in recent times.

The NSPC reported that, between January 2018 and March 2022, approximately 300,000 female workers in the formal and informal sector benefited from cash support totalling US\$30.1 million. And at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic in Cambodia, workers who were laid-off also received support in the form of cash transfers: a total of at least 560,000 households benefited from this scheme in 2020 alone.

The workshop to launch the project had a great response, with significant media coverage from local and regional media and bloggers such as the Phnom Penh Post, the Khmer Times, JUST STYLE, and Community 99.

Now we need to build on this positive response to support real change in the lives of Cambodia's women garment workers. For too long, women in Cambodia faced precarity, poor conditions and risked poverty for simply having a child. Now policy changes are at last giving them a chance to live a decent life with more stability and security. We must do everything we can to support them to claim their rights.



INCLUSIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION IS CRITICAL TO ACHIEVING GENDER EQUITY IN CAMBODIA



Kourn Nath, a garment worker and a mother of four, calls for inclusive social protection.

Named after the late King Father, Sihanouk province is one of Cambodia's top tourist destinations, thanks to its beautiful beaches and tropical islands. It is also the Kingdom's only deep seaport and logistic hub hosting multi-million dollars transport and logistics facilities, including textiles and garment factories, which creates a lot of job opportunities for the people.

And just 20km away from the city centre, there are special economic zones which host many textiles and garment factories. The vast majority of garment factory employees here are women who migrated from nearby provinces like Takeo, Kampot, Prey Veng, and other rural areas.

Kourn Nath, a mother of four, works in one of those factories for more than five years. Just like her fellow colleagues, she dropped out in third grade. It takes her two hours every day commuting to and back from work which costs her \$20 dollars per month using bus service.

When asked how she is coping with COVID-19 pandemic, she pauses for seconds before responding. Nath said her life hit the rock bottom. She made no income other than just her minimum wage.

Nath is a courageous mother who raises four kids alone. She has a big dream, a dream of sending her kids to college for an education and job opportunity. But that dream is too fragile. Her eldest son just dropped out in eighth grade three months ago, so he can look after his younger brothers and support the household works. The youngest son walks about 10km to school every day because he could not afford a bike.

With only access to an NSSF card which she used once when she gave birth to her fourth son, her family is vulnerable to extreme poverty should she no longer make any income or be unemployed.

I understood her challenges and hardship of being a working mom,

the responsibilities and the loads, especially with the least support Nath could have. I myself am a full-time working mom of three children, and I can tell that raising kids is socially and financially challenging.

Imagine you were Nath or imagine a society where mothers need to get back to work after a few days of delivering their newborns; children have to drop out of school and work to support their parents; persons with disabilities beg on the streets because there are no job opportunities for them; and older persons need to work to their very last breath.

Well, it was exactly Cambodia not long ago. And many in need, just like Kourn Nath and her children, are still struggling with these hardships every day. It is why a system of support, inclusive social protections in particular, is vital to achieving gender equity and poverty reduction efforts in Cambodia.

Social protection is not a new concept.

It has long been mainstreaming into policy settings in many countries to protect people from unforeseen life contingencies. It is set out, in Article 22, as a human right in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Social protection is also a key target of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for 2023. And Article 36 and 75 of Cambodia's Constitution also entitles every Khmer citizen to social security.

The World Social Protection Report 2017-2019 of the International Labour Organisation notes that 4 billion people worldwide are left without social protection. And only 29 percent of the global population enjoys access to comprehensive social security. The report indicates that 7 in 10 unemployed workers receive no unemployment benefits; 4 in 10 people lack access to essential healthcare; 6 in 10 families have no access to child support; and 3 in 10 elderly persons have no access to pensions. And only 41.1 per cent of mothers with newborns receive a maternity benefit whilst 83 million new mothers remain uncovered. The report recommended that, in countries in Africa, Arab States, and Asia in particular, social protection coverages be extended to ensure at least a basic social protection floor for all.

Here in Cambodia, social protection

has also taken policy momentum. The Royal Government of Cambodia has launched several social protection schemes. Amongst those social protection schemes is the National Social Security Fund which has greatly benefited employees in the formal sector, particularly those in the apparel industry. Through this scheme, NSSF reported that in 2020 alone a total of 80,000 female garment workers received maternity allowances from the government which accounted for US\$7.9 million.

The National Social Protection Council also reported that approximately 300,000 female workers both in formal and informal sectors, who have given birth between January 2018 to March 2022, benefited from cash support which accounts for US\$30.1 million. It also reported that at least 560,000 households with an IDPoor card benefited from this scheme in 2020 alone. And at the peak of COVID-19 pandemic in Cambodia, garment factory workers, not all, who were temporarily laid-off also received support in the forms of cash-based transfer programmes. And of course school feeding and scholarship programmes for vulnerable students in primary and secondary education.

These are positive policy interventions and we shall applaud the government for this effort. But there is also a need

for recognition of policy loopholes in the social protection system. It is evident that Cambodia has yet guaranteed at least a basic level of social protection floor for all. And it is true that social protection in Cambodia is underinvestment.

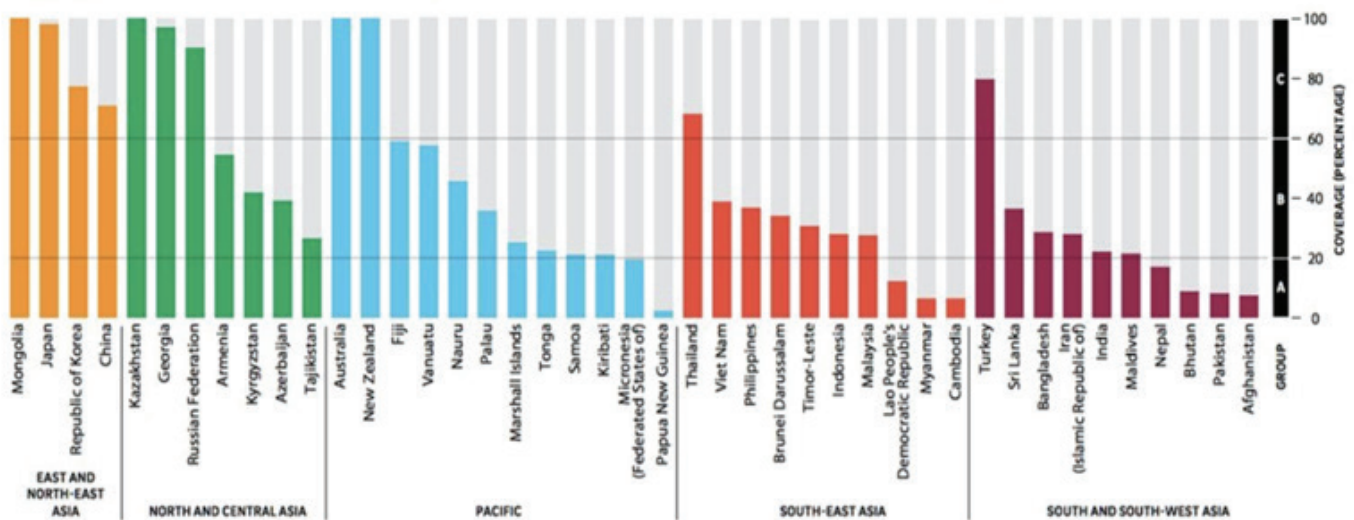
A social protection floor here is defined by the International Labour Organisation as "a nationally-defined set of basic social security guarantees which should ensure at a minimum that all in need, throughout their lifecycle, have access to essential healthcare and basic income security". A social protection floor is built on four social security guarantees. Firstly, the access to essential healthcare and maternity care. Secondly, basic income security for children so that they can have access to nutrition, care, and education that are critical to their cognitive development. Thirdly, basic income security for persons in active age, but unable to earn sufficient income resulting from maternity, health condition, disability, and unemployment. And fourthly, basic income security for older persons in the form of pension funds.

In the case of Kourn Nath and her children, despite their hardship and poverty, she is only able to access essential healthcare and maternity care via the contributory scheme like National Social Security Fund.



Kourn Nath, doing household work.

Aggregate social protection coverage of at least one scheme in the Asia-Pacific region



Source: ESCAP-ILO Report

Source: ESCAP/ILO Report Aggregate social protection coverage of at least one scheme in the Asia-Pacific region

ADOPTED FROM ESCAP (2020) THE PROTECTION WE WANT: SOCIAL OUTLOOK FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC.

Cambodia has yet substantially invested in social protection. In 2015, the World Bank indicated that countries globally spent 1.5 per cent on average of their GDP on social protection programmes. A research study in 2020 commissioned by UNDP found that Cambodia's share of budget allocated to social protection is estimated at only 0.9 per cent of GDP which was significantly below the global average. The finding asserts that Cambodia is capable and has sufficient fiscal space to create an inclusive social protection system.

A stronger investment in social protection will strengthen the resilience and well-being of Cambodian peoples throughout their lifecycle. This investment will bring people like Kourn Nath and her family out of poverty and reduce income and gender inequalities. And it will benefit

Cambodia for generations because of a better protected and educated population.

Inclusive social protection can play a more far-reaching goal in building a society where mothers don't need to rush back to work after a few days of delivering their newborns; children don't have to drop out of school or work to support their parents; persons with disabilities don't need to beg for living because there are income security for them; and senior citizens don't need to work until they die because there is pension fund available. It is a beautiful society we all want, isn't it?

Whilst Cambodia is now ASEAN Chair under the tagline "ASEAN A.C.T – Addressing Challenges Together", it is politically and economically beneficial that Cambodia pushes forward an inclusive social protection agenda in the ASEAN Summit 2022. It will create a stronger alliance of multilateral cooperation and support on top of

domestic financing.

Oxfam and partners are ready and committed to support the government to advance this agenda. This commitment is well reflected in our work. We have built partnerships and implemented several initiatives that support the National Social Protection Council, the Ministry of Women's Affairs, NGOs and trade unions, to build robust social protection systems and to promote public awareness amongst apparel industry employees, street vendors and workers in informal sector, persons with disability, and far-reaching vulnerable and Indigenous communities across the Kingdom.

Together we can challenge the conventional assertion that universal social protection systems are not affordable.

The only question is that – does Cambodia have the courage to fight this winning war?



Ms. Phean Sophoan, Oxfam National Director, received a certificate of appreciation from H.E. Dr. Aun Pornmoniroth, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy and Finance, and Chairperson of the National Social Protection Council, 13 February 2023, Phnom Penh. ©NSPC

CAMBODIA MADE A STEP CLOSER TO INCLUSIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEMS

Inclusive social protection is critical to achieving gender equity and poverty reduction effort in Cambodia. Social protection has taken policy momentum in Cambodia. The Royal Government of Cambodia has recently initiated several social protection schemes, National Social Security Fund (NSSF) in particular, which greatly benefit apparel industry employees. Through this scheme, NSSF reported that in 2020 alone a total of 80,000 female garment workers received maternity allowances from the government which accounted for USD\$7.9 million.

The National Social Protection Council also reported that approximately 300,000 female workers both in formal and informal sectors, who have given birth in the past four years, between January 2018 to March 2022 benefited from cash support which accounts for US\$30.1 million. And at the peak of COVID-19 pandemic in Cambodia, workers who were laid-off also received support in the forms of cash-based transfer programs. And a total of at least 560,000 households

with an IDPoor card benefited from this scheme in 2020 alone.

The National Social Protection Council led the national policy dialogue “**Social Protection Week 2023**”, this 13-15 February 2023, to influence the policy outcomes and increase awareness and support amongst the Cambodian public on social protection system in the country.

Building on the traditional partnership with the National Social Protection Council (NSPC), Oxfam are pooling resource to support this extraordinary cause along with other development partners (DPs). This year Social Protection Week 2023 organized to reflect the theme: “**Good Governance and Public Trust – Strengthening Transparency and Accountability for the Social Protection in Cambodia**”.

The Social Protection Week 2023 was organized to: (1) serve as a forum for the respective ministries, institutions, development partners and all relevant stakeholders to discuss challenge

and best practices at the national and international levels as well as the future plan of expanding and strengthening the social protection in Cambodia; (2) raise awareness on the importance of the social protection in socio-economic development among stakeholders; and (3) strengthen the collaboration and engagement among the government and relevant stakeholder in extending the social protection in Cambodia.

In the opening remark by the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy and Finance, and Chairperson of the National Social Protection Council, **Honorable His Excellency Dr. Aun Pornmoniroth** said, “the Royal Government of Cambodia plans to spend \$465 million in 2023 through cash-transfer program to support the poor and vulnerable households. This decision confirms the strong and continued commitment of the Royal Government of Cambodia to invest in social protection policies.



His Excellency Dr. Aun Pornmoniroth, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Economy and Finance, and Chairperson of the National Social Protection Council, during the opening remarks. ©NSPC

During the Social Protection Week 2023, **Ms. Phean Sophaon**, Oxfam National Director joined a panel discussion on “Formalization and Extension of Social Security Coverage.” She discussed the awareness of the public and their readiness to the National Social Security Fund as well as the accountability and

policies of the Social Protection to the government.

Ms. Sophaon said that “Social Protection Week is an open forum that provides opportunity to related ministries, institutions, development partners and civil society to discuss challenges and exchange

best practices at national and international levels and extend and strengthen the Social Protection as well as improving its awareness for the economic development among public institutions, employers and employees, civil society, and the public.”



Oxfam and our partner join the panel discussion on “Formalization and Extension of Social Security Coverage.” From left: Mr. Holger Thies, Senior Advisor of GS-NSPC (moderator), Dr. Somethea Chhau, Deputy Director General of the General Department of Policy of the Ministry of Economy and Finance, H.E. Dr. Sophanarith Heng, Deputy Director General of NSSF, Ms. Sophaon Phean, Oxfam National Director, Ms Samphors Von, Deputy Secretary General of IDEA and Mr. Finn Koh, Social Protection Programme Manager of ILO.

In the closing remark, the Minister of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation and Vice Chairman of the National Social Protection Council,

His Excellency Vong Soth gave his remarks that strengthening the efficiency and transparency of the Social Protection in Cambodia is even

more needed to meet with the modern lifestyle of the people in the age of globalization and the Industry 4.0.



His Excellency Vong Soth, Minister of Social Affairs, Veterans and Youth Rehabilitation and Vice Chairman of the National Social Protection Council, during the closing remarks. ©NSPC



Mr. Geoffrey Petkovich, Oxfam Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam Director, during the closing remarks. ©NSPC

Oxfam and partner organization have long been supporting the Royal Government of Cambodia, through the National Social Protection Council (NSPC), National Social Security Fund (NSSF), etc., and other government organizations to strengthen the inclusive social protection system in the Kingdom. This strong partnership is reflected in this joining effort in Social Protection Week 2023.

Mr. Geoffrey Petkovich, Oxfam Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam Director, in his closing note congratulated the Royal Government of Cambodia, through the National Social Protection Council, as the Chair of ASEAN in 2022 for successfully incorporating social protection into the 55th ASEAN Joint Communiqué. He also noted that this tremendous effort has paved the way for the preparation and formulation

of regional Social Protection Roadmaps, a guiding principle for the implementation of the ASEAN Social Protection Charter.

In his remark, Oxfam also congratulated the leadership and team members of the National Social Protection Council for initiating and organizing this superb “Social Protection Week”.

These initiatives are made possible with the collaboration with our partners and the generous financial support of many institutions and philanthropies. We are grateful for their longstanding support of this extraordinary cause.

