

EMPOWERING CHANGE: STORIES OF EMERGING LEADERS



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Oxfam extends its heartfelt gratitude to the remarkable community leaders whose stories are featured in this booklet. Your courage, resilience, and unwavering commitment to your communities have been the driving force behind the success of the FIRST project.

A special thank you to the co-implementing partners and third parties part of the FIRST project, your dedication has been instrumental in achieving meaningful, lasting change.

The stories in this booklet were collected and written by the local Kiripost Media whose skillful storytelling has beautifully captured the voices and experiences of these inspiring individuals. Oxfam also acknowledges the editorial support of Bunly Than, Naratevy Kek, Mariana Anton, and design support of Kimheang Tuon who ensured these stories were captured with care and authenticity.

We wish to thank everyone who contributed to making this possible and for inspiring others to continue building a more inclusive and equitable future. Specially, we share our sincere appreciation to the European Union for their continuous support and generous financial contribution.

A WORD FROM THE NATIONAL DIRECTOR

Stories have an extraordinary ability to inspire, connect people, and drive change. They remind us of the resilience, determination and courage of everyday heroes who become beacons of hope and inspiration to their communities. The stories shared in this publication are a testament to the strength, perseverance and hope of local leaders from different corners of Cambodia whose work is shaping positive change, empowering communities and creating lasting impact.

At the heart of these narratives are remarkable community people — farmers, workers, union leaders, youth, women, elderly — whose dedication and care for their communities inspire us all. They are the main contributors in shaping a more just and inclusive society, showing us that lasting change can only be achieved through commitment, passion, teamwork and perseverance of local people. By telling their stories we aim to honor their contributions, acknowledge their efforts and inspire others to take action in their own communities.

This publication marks the culmination of the “Fostering an inclusive and shock responsive social protection system in Cambodia” (FIRST) Project implemented between January 2021 to June 2024, with our dedicated co-implementing partners, HelpAge Cambodia (HAC), Cambodian Disabled People’s Organization (CDPO), Center for Alliance of Labour and Human Rights (CENTRAL), Cambodia Children’s Fund (CCF), Youth Resource and Development Program (YRDP) and third parties, Cambodia Alliance of Trade Unions (CATU), Coalition of Cambodian Apparel Workers’ Democratic Union (C.CAWDU), Coalition of Cambodian Farmer Community (CCFC), Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (CENTRAL), Cambodian Labour Confederation (CLC), Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA). Together we worked towards contributing to a social protection system that is inclusive, rights-based, and shock-responsive in design and delivery, and strengthening the social contract between the government and its citizens. Through this project, we’ve seen firsthand how grassroots leadership is pivotal in creating sustainable, positive change, and we are proud to share these impactful stories with the world. We remain committed to working alongside these leaders and our partners, ensuring that the values of inclusivity, collaboration, empowerment, and accountability continue to guide our collective efforts.

We also acknowledge with profound appreciation the European Union’s invaluable support for this initiative. Its steadfast commitment to social protection has been instrumental in advancing the social protection progress



in the country. Through its strategic support to civil society and grassroots organizations, the European Union has played a critical role in building awareness, strengthening capacity, improving access to social protection, and fostering a stronger collaboration between local communities and government stakeholders.

As we reflect and celebrate the efforts of our community leaders, we are reminded that their achievements are also a call to action. The stories in this publication urge us to reflect on how we can support such efforts. We all have a role to play, either standing in solidarity, contributing with resources, or amplifying their voices.

To the European Union, our partners, and the community leaders featured in this publication: thank you for your vision, support, and courage. To our readers: may these stories inspire you to act, connect, and dream of a more inclusive and equitable world.

Sophoan Phean
National Director, Oxfam in Cambodia

EMPOWERING CHANGE:

SREYNEANG'S JOURNEY FROM STUDENT TO COMMUNITY LEADER

Sreyneang, a recent high school graduate from the Neeson Cripps Academy at the Cambodian Children's Fund (CCF), has emerged as an inspiring leader in her community through her involvement in CCF's Social Protection initiative. Now 20 years old, she attributes much of her growth and confidence to the FIRST project – a three-year initiative funded by the European Union through Oxfam and implemented in partnership with CCF.

Reflecting on her journey, Sreyneang shares how the project has transformed her life "Before, I was the girl afraid to step up and do something," Sreyneang says. "But joining projects like this has helped me a lot. I learned how to communicate and talk with many different people. I have learned a lot about how to help other people in my community. It has made me more confident."

Being involved in the project, Sreyneang has developed excellent communication, teamwork and problem-solving skills, that she applies daily. Her English proficiency has also improved, enabling her to lead a public speaking class for younger students where she shares her knowledge and mentors the next generation. In this role, she's found that empowering others has, in turn, empowered her.

Born in one of Cambodia's poorest provinces, Sreyneang's mother brought her to Phnom Penh at the age of six, hoping to secure a better future and educational opportunities. From an early age, Sreyneang showed a natural dedication to leadership and her community. Her commitment earned her the role of facilitator for the FIRST project implemented by CCF, where she together with another student now lead efforts to increase awareness about social protection among vulnerable families.

As a facilitator, Sreyneang together with other team members organized events and conducted house visits to inform families about social protection benefits, including access to Equity Cards and ID Poor program. "The community and families say they are very happy because some families do not know what benefits they can get. By sharing information, it empowers people to make sure they access the services available to them," says Sreyneang.

Through her efforts, Sreyneang has made a tangible impact, helping families gain access to government support and empowering them to take control of their lives. She has inspired many in her community, especially young people, to get involved in social activism. "I see that many in our community have reduced poverty because they now know about social protection. In the future, I want to see many more people in the community have this knowledge," she adds.

Her role in the project has also given her the confidence to join the Child Committee in her CCF community, known as the Girls to Grannies Village, where she mentors younger students and helps address community issues.

With no close family of her own—her mother passed away years ago and her father remarried—Sreyneang has come to deeply value the support network around her. "I think it's really important for young people like me to be involved in creating change in the community," she says. "The community will be developed by the young generation equipped with knowledge to share with everyone."

She hopes her own journey can inspire others. "I would like to be a role model for younger girls in the community. I hope to inspire them. I try to do good and to be a good role model for the next generation. They can learn from me."

Academically, Sreyneang's dedication shines through in her love for chemistry and physics, and she dreams of attending university. Her ultimate goal? To open a school in her community, creating educational opportunities for children like herself. "My dream is to go to university and one day open a school in my community to help children like me get a good education," she says. "When I start university, I will continue to help my community and volunteer at weekends to be a teacher for the younger students."

Sreyneang's story is a powerful example of how young people, given the right support and opportunities, can drive positive change in their communities. Her journey from a hesitant girl to a confident leader and advocate will continue to inspire those around her for years to come.



Before, I was the girl afraid to step up and do something. But joining projects like social protection has helped me a lot. I learned how to communicate and talk with many different people. I have learned a lot about how to help other people in the community. It has made me more confident.



- SREYNEANG



I am proud of myself that I can develop my skills as well as help to improve the community wellness through social protection schemes," Dara says, grateful for the opportunities the project has offered.



- DARA





DARA'S IMPACT AS A YOUNG LEADER IN SOCIAL PROTECTION

Dara, a 19-year-old and a recent high school graduate from the Neeson Cripps Academy at the Cambodian Children's Fund (CCF), has witnessed how his dedication to social protection initiatives is having an impact on his community. Through his involvement, he has grown at the personal level while helping his community flourish.

Dara is a naturally curious and humble student, passionate about research and exploring new ideas. Over the years, he has led various student projects, becoming a youth leader focused on promoting social protection within his community. Reflecting on his journey, Dara says, "It is an open door for me to change my community with my knowledge, skills, and experiences."

Since 2022, Dara has been actively involved in social protection initiatives, from information-sharing sessions in the community to presenting his experiences to peers and collaborating in workshops with organizations at the national level. His interest first sparked when he was invited by CCF staff to participate in an interview with Oxfam and Social Protection leaders as part of the FIRST project implemented by CCF and Oxfam, and funded by the European Union. Captivated by the work's potential impact, he chose to stay involved, becoming a proactive leader in raising awareness about social protection.

In his role as a youth leader, Dara has coordinated groups of volunteers to host small community events to promote understanding of social protection. These events, supported by CCF staff and local authorities, aimed to improve community well-being by empowering people with the knowledge they need to access services. "Some people had ID Poor cards, but didn't know how to use them," Dara recalls. "After my team shared information, they knew how to regularly access the benefits from the provider."

Dara's passion for sharing his work extends beyond his local community. He has also collaborated with students from Go Ahead School in Kampong Thom province, sharing his experiences and spreading awareness about social protection on a larger scale.

Dara's involvement in social protection has also inspired him to engage in other community-focused projects. These include transforming local wetlands into community spaces and organizing youth-led events that amplify young voices in his community.

Dara's story shows how young leaders can leverage their skills and knowledge to create lasting change. His work continues to inspire his peers and the wider community, proving that even small actions can have a significant impact on people's lives.

FARMER SOWS SEEDS OF AWARENESS

ABOUT HEALTH EQUITY FUND

In the quiet village of Broma in Kratie province, a remarkable woman named Sophat Chhoeun stands as a beacon of hope and resilience. At just over 50 years old, Sophat is not only a single mother to six children, but also a fierce advocate for her community's welfare. Her tireless dedication has earned her the admiration, affection, and gratitude of those around her.

Sopha's journey as a community leader with the Coalition of Cambodian Farmer Community (CCFC) began in 2014. Balancing her responsibilities as a parent and a leader, she demonstrates unyielding strength in the face of adversity.

Sopha is dedicated to supporting families in her community who face challenges related to land ownership and access to resources. She takes the initiative to raise awareness about their rights and provides guidance in times of difficulty, becoming an inspiring figure in her community.

There have been instances where community members faced challenges in obtaining ID Poor Cards. In response, Sopha began assisting people apply for Health Equity Cards, which help reduce healthcare costs and provide valuable access to medical services and other benefits.

As a community leader, Sopha is committed to expanding her knowledge and skills. Her involvement in the FIRST project, implemented by CCFC and Oxfam with financial support from the European Union, provided her with trainings and insights into social protection programs. She actively shares what she has learned with her community, helping them access resources and support.

Yet, the journey has not been without challenges. Many in her community often face delays in obtaining ID Poor Cards, with only a few applications getting approved despite collective action and advocacy. Nonetheless, Sopha remains resilient and determined continuing her work to help her community secure their cards. "I am not upset about this, rather I am happy to help my community," Sopha said with a smile.

Sopha often reminds local authorities of the importance of ID Poor Cards for her community, emphasizing that she may seek additional support if approvals are delayed. This approach has proven effective, as it often prompts a timely response, resulting in the issuance of cards.

Sopha's journey has been far from easy. Her husband passed away due to a serious illness four years ago, leaving her to care for her children on her own. Her husband was a source of inspiration, encouraging her to help her community. Currently living in Phnom Penh to support her youngest child, Sopha balances her work as a construction laborer with her commitment to community service.

Her ability to explain and articulate complex issues to her community and local authorities has made her a trusted leader. Her community deeply respects her for her sincerity and the tangible impact of her efforts.

The reason Sopha works in this field is because she has a "very pure heart" to help others, despite her limited formal education. "I may not have much education, but I use what I have to help my people. Some people in our community have higher education, but they might use it for themselves and not others. That's where we differ," she adds.

While she remains devoted to her community, Sopha faces financial challenges in her work. At times, she borrows money from neighbors to organize meetings or skips work to fulfill her commitments. She calls on organizations to provide increased support to her and her community, ensuring their voices are heard and their needs addressed.

Sopha's work is a testament to the power of determination and compassion. Through her resilience and tireless advocacy, she continues to inspire hope and raise awareness, proving that no task is too difficult when driven by a purpose greater than oneself.



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- SOPHAT



Through grassroots advocacy and collective effort, I've witnessed firsthand the transformative power of social protection in my community. Each family that gains access to healthcare and support inspires me to keep fighting for fairness and dignity for all—because no one should be left behind.



- KONG

KERT KONG'S MISSION TO BUILD AWARENESS AND BREAK BARRIERS

In the rural village of Taneng, Svay Rieng province, 47-year-old farmer Kert Kong has become a trusted advocate for social protection. As a commission representative for the Coalition of Cambodian Farmer Community (CCFC), Kong has dedicated himself to equipping his neighbors with the tools and knowledge they need to access critical benefits. His efforts have already transformed the lives of 106 farming families, enabling them to secure free healthcare and other vital support.

Kong's journey with CCFC began at the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2019 after being selected as a beneficiary under the FIRST project, funded by the European Union and implemented by CCFC and Oxfam. This initiative aimed to help vulnerable communities navigate key social protection schemes: the Health Equity Fund Cards and ID Poor Cards.

Seeing how the pandemic deepened struggles for those facing land disputes, job losses, and systemic discrimination, Kong realized that social protection can alleviate these hardships. Motivated by this vision, he joined CCFC and began participating in extensive training sessions that helped him build his leadership skills and deepen his understanding of the benefits.

Over the past three years, Kong has become a confident and effective leader. His work has resulted in tangible outcomes – 106 families have gained access to free healthcare services and vital social protection schemes, including both Health Equity Cards and ID Poor Cards. “After sharing information about the process to get these cards, the first success was the authorities’ facilitation in providing IDs for poor and low-income families. In my village, 10 vulnerable families were able to receive the card.”

With the support of CCFC and local authorities several members received Health Equity Fund Cards, which significantly reduced the cost of medical checks. “Some 44 individuals received those cards, allowing them to have

health check-ups without spending money. They use the cards at community health centres and major hospitals, such as Preah Ang Duong and Calmette Hospital,” he said. “It helps to reduce the cost, especially for pregnant women and elderly people who are jobless. They said without the card they would have to spend around 250 USD.” The visible impact of the Health Equity Fund Cards has sparked widespread interest among villagers. As people began to understand the difference these cards could make, they turned to Kong and CCFC for help in securing their own.

While there have been positive developments, challenges remain. Kong noted that people with Health Equity Cards in nearby districts experienced discrimination at some health centres, forcing them to travel to facilities outside their district for treatment. “Some state health centres don’t accept Health Equity Cards and doctors have allegedly questioned patients about the cards and how they got them,” he said.

In response to these issues, Kong encourages community members to report incidents to the Ministry of Health’s hotline. During the launch of project, the Ministry of Health urged people to report such incidents by calling the ministry hotline. This would enable the ministry to intervene and ensure proper redress.

Following his participation in the program and inspired by the stories of discrimination against those who are not receiving adequate care, he has pledged to advocate for fair and equal access to social protection. Looking ahead, Kong pledged to continue to advocate to ensure that Health Equity Cards are fairly distributed to vulnerable communities, including poor families, the elderly, pregnant women, people with disabilities and farmers.

Kong’s work exemplifies the profound impact of grassroots leadership and the power of one individual to inspire an entire community.

MISSION TO ADVOCATE FOR FREE HEALTHCARE FOR THE ELDERLY

Vanda Ou, age 67, is on a mission to ensure the elderly in Cambodia can access the life-saving benefits of the National Social Security Fund (NSSF), including social pensions and free healthcare. As President of the Cambodian Ageing Network, which represents over 35,000 members across Cambodia and is supported by HelpAge Cambodia, she was awarded a grant as part of the FIRST project implemented by HelpAge Cambodia and Oxfam with financial support from the European Union. Her aim is to raise awareness about the NSSF, and help the elderly understand and secure the support they need during illness, medical emergencies, and financial hardship.

HelpAge Cambodia envisions a society where the elderly can lead dignified, active, healthy and secure lives. It works with marginalized seniors, advocating for their right to healthcare, economic security, and social services while promoting their equal participation in society.

Vanda explained that, unlike Cambodia, other ASEAN countries often provide government support such as pensions and easy access to healthcare services, such as free medical check-ups, medication and treatments for their older population. To match this level of support, she advocates for the expansion of NSSF to ensure Cambodian senior individuals have access to free healthcare and income security, such as social pensions.

“Our efforts focus on advocating for the distribution of NSSF cards to the elderly in Cambodia,” Vanda says. “These cards serve as a reliable means of support, ensuring that they receive the necessary assistance in times of illness or medical emergencies in their life.”

Upon receiving the grant, Vanda and her team began educating senior Cambodians about NSSF’s benefits, especially for those who are unemployed, financially at risks or living with a disability. “Our mission is to raise awareness about the NSSF, making sure that NSSF cards are available to every older person and especially older women and the elderly with disabilities in Cambodia,” Vanda says.

Since the establishment of the Cambodian Ageing Network in 2018, Oxfam has been a stronger supporter of this mission. The network is present in 14 provinces with plans to expand further.

Vanda expresses gratitude for the support of the FIRST project. “If it wasn’t for the project’s support, our mission might have faced significant challenges,” Vanda said, adding a heartfelt appeal to the government, stakeholders and non-governmental organizations to join in supporting this cause. She emphasised that sustained support would enhance the quality of life for Cambodia’s older population.



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- VANDA



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Being older and disabled doesn't prevent me from participating in social work; instead, I want to be someone who is a hope for other people who are struggling in their lives.

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- SAMET

CHAMPIONING THE RIGHTS OF THE ELDERLY AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

Samet Chhorn, 75, has been working hard to ensure the elderly in his community can access inclusive and comprehensive social protection.

Driven by a passion for community work, Samet has dedicated nearly two decades to ensuring that the elderly in his community can access inclusive and responsive social protection. "Being older and disabled doesn't stop me from engaging in community work; instead, I want to be a source of hope for other people who are facing challenges in their lives," he says.

As Vice-President of the Cambodian Ageing Network, Samet builds awareness in his community about rights and benefits available to the elderly, particularly related to social protection.

Samet's path to advocacy wasn't easy. In the 1980s, he was paralyzed during military service, but he never let that stop him. Instead, he turned his focus toward helping his neighbours and improving the community. In 2008, he was elected President of the The elderly's Association, where he now serves as an advisor. Through the FIRST project, implemented by HelpAge Cambodia (HAC) and Oxfam, with financial support from the European Union, Samet amplified the network's mission to help the elderly access essential social services.

Samet recalls how he began simply by listening during HAC and Oxfam meetings. But as he learned more, he felt a growing determination to advocate for the importance of social protection. "In the past three years, I've gained a lot from the project. I know more about government social protection policies and schemes, such as cash transfer, family packages, Health Equity Fund and the ID Poor identification process," Samet says. His participation in national forums has also given him a voice to speak up on behalf of the elderly.

The HAC and Oxfam project aimed to empower people to use their voice for change, promote the well-being of the elderly

without any discrimination. Samet's biggest challenge has been discrimination and lack of support from health centers and local authorities in the process of registration to Health Equity Fund Cards and the National Social Security Fund (NSSF). "There is a lack of attention from health centers and authorities for those seeking healthcare and applying for ID Poor Cards," he explains. "Even when I visit the hospital, the staff often appear indifferent and sometimes they walk away upon hearing that I have the Health Equity Fund Card or NSSF"

Despite these setbacks, Samet tirelessly advocates for better treatment and educates his community about how to access these schemes. "Before the trainings, no one knew what social protection system meant. Now, they are aware and know how to advocate with authorities. Now it's easier to work with the authorities."

By May 2024, Samet has provided training to people in more than 40 villages in Battambang, observing a significant increase in public awareness and community involvement and engagement from authorities. "I have sacrificed physically and mentally over the years, but my goal is to see my community and province thrive with people who are aware of their rights and supported by all stakeholders ensuring no one is left behind," he says with hope in his eyes.

His achievements are a testament to his commitment, and he hopes to inspire others to persevere as he has. "No matter how hard it is, if people put commitment into what they are doing, I believe they will achieve what they want; just like me. I put a lot of effort into my work and have achieved good results," he affirms.

While he has seen progress, Samet believes more support is needed to ensure everyone understands their rights and the social protection system. "Things are better than before, but I need more support as some people are not yet aware of their rights and the social protection system," he says.

CHAMPIONING SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITY

Malis Moch has dedicated her life to ensuring that people with disabilities in Cambodia can access the social protection they deserve. As the Director of the Khmer Disabilities Women and Children Development Forum in Svay Rieng province, she has become a powerful advocate for inclusion, equality, and dignity.

Malis Moch knows firsthand the barriers that people with disabilities face in her community – discrimination, limited income, and restricted access to essential services. These challenges often leave individuals and families in dire conditions, struggling with poverty, hunger, and neglect.

Determined to make a difference, Malis, launched an initiative to promote social protection and secure Health Equity Cards and ID Poor Cards for people with disabilities. Her organization's projects include the promotion of social protection and savings initiatives, job placement services, small businesses assistance, and wheelchair distribution and mobility therapy.

Malis highlights the persistent challenges faced by people with disabilities in accessing healthcare. Many cannot afford transportation to hospitals or long-term medication due to financial constraints. "Lack of equipment and lack of money have made them sick at home, unable to access health services. Sometimes doctors do not care," Malis explained with compassion.

She also noted that difficulties arising from lost or delayed ID Poor cards. For many, these delays result in worsening conditions. Malis emphasized how these struggles extend to education. "Children with disabilities who want to go to school cannot study because they lack aid, such as wheelchairs, glasses and crutches. The issue of ID Poor cards for people with disabilities is not yet prioritized by the authorities," she said.

She recounted a heart-wrenching example of an elderly couple caring for a child with disability who were denied a disability card. This denial not only limited their access to essential support but also highlighted the gaps in the current system. She advocates for a dual system where individuals receive both ID Poor and disability cards to address their needs comprehensively.

Under her leadership, Malis has engaged with authorities at different levels, although bureaucratic delay – sometimes stretching up to a year – remain a challenge. Despite these delays, her persistent efforts and clear communication channels have paved the way for progress. Thanks to outreach education, more authorities now understand the challenges people with disability face resulting in more people receiving disability cards.

Over the past three years, Malis has gained new knowledge and personal skills. From community outreach and data collection to organizing meetings and presenting findings to local authorities, she has become a versatile and effective advocate. "I've had to collaborate with local communities to understand their challenges, needs and any recent updates related to their situation, as well as gather information on people with disabilities, including those who may not have official documentation," Malis said.

She flashes a smile as she reveals that her confidence has also improved. The FIRST project implemented with the financial support from the European Union has enabled her to host meetings with village leaders and disability advocates to address specific needs and concerns regarding equity and disability cards. She then analyses the collected data to create clear reports for local authorities. "It's a good project and for the past three years, I have focused on helping society without salaries or allowances. I want to show our abilities and commitment to keep doing this work. Our goal is to empower people with disabilities to speak up for themselves and be courageous," she said.

Malis remains optimistic about the future. Her unwavering dedication has already transformed lives and inspired hope among countless individuals with disabilities. "If I don't take action, people with disabilities will still be left behind," she said. "I volunteer my time because I believe when we do, there will be social change. We want authorities to treat everyone fairly and use respectful language towards people with disabilities", she said.



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The EU-FIRST is a good project and for the past three years, I have focused on helping society without salaries or allowances. I want to show our abilities and commitment to keep doing this work. Our goal is to empower people with disabilities to speak up for themselves and be courageous.

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- MALIS



My journey has shown me that disability is not a barrier to achievement—discrimination and lack of opportunity are. Through advocacy and action, I am committed to breaking these barriers so that every person with a disability can live with dignity, independence, and equal opportunity.

- SOVANDETH



BATTLING DISCRIMINATION TO WORK FOR EQUAL RIGHTS FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

At just one year old, Chhorn Sovandeth contracted polio, leaving him unable to walk. Today, at 55, he is the Executive Director of the Kratie Disabled People Organization (KDPO), an NGO dedicated to advocating for the rights and inclusion of people with disabilities in Cambodia.

“When I grew up, even though disability has not stopped me from doing things, I’ve overcome a lot of obstacles. Our society was filled with discrimination, which has been a common mindset in Cambodia,” Sovandeth said. “People didn’t see our potential beyond pity, and rarely gave us opportunities to demonstrate our capabilities. Even our parents, with good intentions didn’t want us to try new things, leave home, or left alone to develop independence,” he said.

Reflecting on the changes he has witnessed, Sovandeth, is heartened by the progress Cambodia has made in supporting people with disabilities. He has also noted a shift in the attitude of the government, which pays more attention to the issue. “Now, we have laws to protect and promote the rights of people with disabilities. We have national policies and other legal mechanisms that talk about people with disabilities,” he said.

These legal mechanisms have laid the foundation for greater inclusion, but Sovandeth is quick to point out that more work is needed. “We are also pushing for law enforcement to be more effective so that people with disabilities can live equally in society.”

His vision extends beyond legal protections, as he is actively working to improve access to healthcare, education, and employment for people with disabilities, ensuring they can lead independent and dignified lives.

In 2009, Sovandeth founded KDPO with support from the provincial Department of Social Affairs and other organizations. Officially registered in 2010, KDPO has become a cornerstone for disability advocacy in Kratie province.

The organization has spearheaded initiatives to create jobs for people with disabilities, helping them earn an income and improve their quality of life. By providing opportunities for financial independence, KDPO ensures that families can send their children to school and break the cycle of poverty.

KDPO has benefited from the FIRST project implemented by CDPO and Oxfam with financial support from the European Union. With the support of the project, he has been able to improve the lives of people with disabilities by working with local authorities. “We are proud that local authorities have more understanding and have ideas to facilitate our engagement. They’ve begun ensuring that National ID Card registration locations are accessible to people with disabilities.” Under Sovandeth’s leadership, KDPO has also worked with local authorities to integrate the needs of people with disabilities into development plans. This includes promoting their involvement in social and community activities.

KDPO partners with various organizations to equip people with disabilities with skills and education in order to attend vocational training, pursue further education, and gain practical skills like motorbike repair and garment production. Sovandeth strongly believes in the transformative power of education. “When they can go to school, they get educated, they get skills and knowledge, meaning that they will be able to increase their living standards,” Sovandeth noted. The organization collaborates with institutions to secure scholarships for students with disabilities and ensures schools provide accommodations like ramps and accessible facilities.

Sovandeth’s journey exemplifies resilience and determination, transforming personal challenges into a lifelong mission for equality and inclusion.

UNION LEADER CHAMPIONING SAFETY FOR FELLOW EMPLOYEES WORKERS

In the sprawling oil palm plantations of Sihanoukville province, Sarom Me, the Vice President of the Workers Union at Mong Reththy Investment Cambodia Oil Palm, representing Cambodia Labour Confederation (CLC), stands as a vocal advocate for her fellow workers. Her mission is to ensure that every employee has access to the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) and its benefits.

Sarom is well aware of the risks that come with working amidst the towering palm trees. “Falling branches and coconuts, snake bites, bee stings, and even forest fires,” she listed, as she stood under the plantation’s shade. These dangers underscore the importance of social protection, which provides workers with access to free medical care in the event of work-related accidents or illnesses.

Sarom noted that at her company some workers hold NSSF cards, granting them free hospital care in case of a work-related accident and health issue, while others remain without them, leaving them vulnerable to significant medical costs.

Without the card, workers often face medical bills as high as 460,000 riels (\$115), she added. Although the company sends injured workers to the hospital and covers medical services, delays in reimbursement add to the workers’ challenges. “For those who don’t have a NSSF card, work accidents can be more problematic, especially financially. NSSF is a shield and protection for us and offers many benefits,” Sarom said.

One of the biggest challenges faced by workers is that often they don’t receive their NSSF cards, despite monthly NSSF deductions from their wages. Additionally, they also have to wait a long time after submitting registration

requests to their employer. “Workers do request the cards, but only those who requested them first receive them. There is a long wait time for everyone else,” she adds. She estimates that only about 70% of workers have received their cards so far.

To address these challenges, Sarom joined the FIRST project, implemented by CLC and Oxfam with the financial support from the European Union where she underwent training on the importance of social protection. Equipped with this knowledge, she now shares her knowledge with fellow union members about their rights and how to access benefits.

“Other social protection programs have not yet been accessed because not all workers have received their NSSF cards,” Sarom said. She advocates with her company to speed up the process of obtaining NSSF cards for workers. This would ensure they receive the benefits and avoid high costs in case of a work accident.

Sarom is also focused on improving workers’ financial well-being. She plans to request a wage increase from \$5 to \$5.50 per day, a modest yet impactful raise to help workers manage their living expenses.

In the future, Sarom envisions a community where everyone has equal access to additional social protection programs, such as ID Poor cards and risk allowances working for those in hazardous jobs. “These programs would benefit workers, especially those in high-risk situations,” she said, adding that increased wages will help workers cover their expenses.



I am committed to ensuring every worker has access to social protection and benefits they deserve, especially through NSSF, which serves as a vital shield against the risks we face every day.



- SAROM



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The road ahead may bring new challenges. While things are running smoothly now, I fear that without continued support from Oxfam, our progress may stall. Ongoing collaboration is crucial to help us face whatever challenges come next.

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HAS SIEM:

EMPOWERING SIEM REAP'S TOURISM PLAYERS

Amid the bustling streets and serene temples of Siem Reap province, Siem Has is carving out a unique role as a champion for the city's overlooked tourism workers. She serves as a facilitator, ensuring the voices of workers are heard and their rights are protected.

Whether they are tuk-tuk drivers navigating narrow alleys, street vendors catering to visitors, or small business owners keeping the city alive, Siem is there to guide them, encourage their participation in their communities and help them access information to improve their livelihoods.

At 39, Siem is more than just an advocate – she is a catalyst for change for more than 600 Cambodia Labour Confederation (CLC) members she represents. Siem's dedication stems from her personal journey of transformation through the FIRST project, implemented by CLC and Oxfam. The trainings equipped her with deep knowledge about citizen rights inspiring her to advocate for her community and guide them toward solutions that improve their livelihoods. The project has also built her confidence and developed her ability to communicate effectively with a range of people including government officials.

Siem's work focuses on helping tourism workers address challenges with confidence and clarity. She offers clear and actionable steps to help members navigate problems, sharing effective recommendations and drawing on her knowledge and experience. Her leadership style is marked by confidence, composure and a collaborative approach. These skills allow her to inspire others and provide practical solutions to the obstacles they face.

"Sometimes, I go directly to meet local authorities and other parties to solve the problem. I've seen that problems can be solved in the moment without taking a long process once members are well educated and know how to respond to challenges," she adds.

Despite her achievements, Siem acknowledges that challenges remain. Misunderstandings between her members and local authorities can create tension. While some situations can feel intimidating, she remains committed to peaceful and productive dialogue, reassuring her community that solutions can be found through collaboration.

Siem believes that additional support from stakeholders could strengthen her efforts. "Workshops and seminars can provide us with the skills to navigate challenging situations peacefully and productively," she recommended. These opportunities would enable her and her members to address issues more effectively while maintaining confidence and resilience.

Siem knows the road ahead may bring new challenges. While things are running smoothly now, she fears that without ongoing support, progress could stall. That's why she emphasizes the importance of continued collaboration with organizations like Oxfam. With the right resources, Siem believes she can help her community face whatever challenges come next.

A TIRELESS ADVOCATE

FOR ID POOR CARD AWARENESS AND SOCIAL SUPPORT

Kob Karimash, a local leader at the Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA), has been a diligent advocate, teacher, and guide for her community, helping residents understand and access ID Poor cards. Her work has been crucial in ensuring that vulnerable families receive the aid and support they deserve.

Karimash, 37, is a food vendor who understands firsthand the challenges faced by workers in the informal economy, including daily discrimination, difficulties in dealing with authorities, and limited awareness of their rights.

From her breakfast snack stand in Russey Keo district in Phnom Penh, Karimash shares her story of joining IDEA as a regular member and gradually proving herself as a capable, determined leader. As a Muslim woman facing different struggles, her exceptional skills and commitment quickly earned her a leadership role in her community.

For nearly eight months, Karimash has been instrumental in driving IDEA's mission, showing an unwavering dedication that has established her as a vital advocate for social protection within her community.

Under the FIRST project, implemented by IDEA and Oxfam with financial support from the European Union, Karimash has helped vendors in her neighborhood understand social protection, register for ID Poor cards, and learn about other available support.

As a local leader, Karimash assists self-employed workers and their families with enrolling in the voluntary social insurance for self-employed under the National Social Security Fund (NSSF), as well as the ID Poor Program. Much of her work involves educating her peers about their rights and the benefits of various social protection schemes.

"I inform vendors who have small businesses along the street and talk to them about the importance of the ID Poor cards and Health Equity cards. I share lessons on social protection and how to negotiate with the authorities in our community," she says.

Karimash dedicates her free time to educating others in various ways. She organizes study sessions, gathering around 25 people at a time to learn together. She also makes house visits to those needing extra help and meets with people who seek her guidance on specific issues. Despite her busy schedule, she conducts two to three

community visits per week. "Before, their knowledge of the importance of the ID Poor Card was limited, now they have improved so much," she says.

The main challenge street vendors face is obtaining approval from local authorities for ID Poor cards, which are crucial for accessing government support. In her community, residents often encounter obstacles when trying to secure ID Poor cards, including frequent rejections by authorities or even outright discrimination. For the largely Muslim population Karimash serves, these issues are compounded by religious discrimination.

Sometimes, people who qualify for ID Poor cards find their names on the eligibility list but are still rejected by authorities, despite clear financial need. Karimash' advocacy helps them navigate complex bureaucratic processes, teaching them how to build relationships with local officials and persist through the application process. She notes there is a gap in awareness in her community regarding the various benefits of the ID Poor card. "Some believe it's only good for medical purposes, but it is crucial to inform them about other benefits, such as scholarships, maternity support, and financial assistance."

However, engaging the community sometimes comes with challenges. Many residents, facing financial pressures, prioritize their immediate earnings over learning about these schemes. While she acknowledges that community involvement is crucial, she notes that "not everyone is cooperative." Despite these obstacles, her dedication remains steadfast: "Do I give up on them? Of course, not; I am still happy to work on these issues."

Karimash chose to work with IDEA because she saw an opportunity to support low-income individuals facing similar challenges to her own including motorbike taxi drivers and tuk-tuk drivers, to scrap collectors, domestic workers, and street vendors. "I joined IDEA to actively contribute to their effort and help raise awareness about the ID Poor Program," she explains.

Before joining, Karimash often felt her voice was overlooked. Now, with the knowledge and experience she has gained, she is loudly heard in the community. She has become confident, especially when addressing authorities. Previously, they ignored her, but now they listen because she speaks with truth and knowledge.



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I admit community involvement is key, but "not everyone is cooperative." Despite this, my commitment never wavers: "Do I give up on them? The answer is no; I am still happy to work on it." //

- KARIMASH



គាំពារសង្គម
ដើម្បីអន្តរកាលប្រឹក្សា
ដោយយុត្តិធម៌

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Through training and advocacy that I received, I've grown from a quiet observer to a confident leader. I often step in to facilitates problem-solving for members, often consulting when tuk-tuk drivers have disputes with authorities. //

- SINAT

CHHEANG SINAT: FROM THE STREET TO LEADERSHIP

Chheang Sinat, a street vendor and former tuk-tuk driver, shares how joining the Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA) has transformed his life and empowered him to advocate for informal workers' rights.

When Sinat first joined IDEA 11 years ago, he was hesitant and stayed in the background. However, over the years, he became a confident leader, now actively representing and advocating for members' rights.

Originally from Kandal province, Sinat now runs a small family business. Since joining IDEA in 2013, his life has seen steady improvements. As a tuk-tuk driver, he was drawn to IDEA after witnessing members support each other through challenges. "I thought it would be great if I would be able to be involved with them. I believed the organization would help my work," he says.

Initially shy and reserved, Sinat listened quietly as others negotiated on behalf of drivers in disputes, often related to accidents or altercations with authorities. After about five or six years of training and involvement, he began developing his confidence, communication skills and problem-solving abilities. "I thank IDEA for offering opportunities to its members to participate in training and different workshops organized by them, its partners and the government," he says.

Sinat now facilitates problem-solving for members, often consulting when tuk-tuk drivers have disputes with authorities. As a leader responsible for Prek Ho in Takhmao, Kandal province, he oversees about 300 members alongside two other leaders, ensuring they are trained to be professional and responsible. He tries to unite and encourage more people to join IDEA because he knows the benefits they will receive. He is more confident and knows

how to negotiate effectively with authorities and other parties.

One challenge Sinat highlights is the competition in the tourism sector. Traditional Khmer tuk-tuks are losing popularity to newer, modern transportation options, and drivers working through online app services face frequent issues, especially regarding disciplinary actions. Sinat, and other leaders, step in to help these drivers navigate their issues with the companies. Sinat confirmed, "Mostly, they still cannot solve their problems themselves, so I and other leaders need to help them."

Tensions also arise between street vendors, drivers, and police. Local authorities often close major roads during official visits, disrupting vendors and traffic. However, officials frequently inform IDEA members in advance.

He credits partnerships like the FIRST project implemented by IDEA and Oxfam, for strengthening his advocacy work, giving him valuable knowledge about social protection schemes. He raises awareness among IDEA members about access to the National Social Security Fund (NSSF), including healthcare, pensions, among other benefits.

With over 20,000 members nationwide, IDEA continues to play a crucial role in advocating for workers in the informal economy. However, Sinat emphasizes the need for sustainable donor funding to support its expanding mission. He encourages more vendors and drivers to join IDEA, envisioning a stronger, more unified network.

Sinat's journey is an inspiring example of leadership in the informal economy, showing how determination, support, and access to knowledge can empower individuals to create meaningful change.

RIM SIVMEY: CHAMPIONING SOCIAL PROTECTION FOR YOUTH

"If you don't know that you have the rights to health insurance and other social assistance, how can you claim it?" asked Rim Simey, 22, a founder and leader of a youth club aiming to promote social protection and labour rights.

Born in Siem Reap province, Sivmey moved to Phnom Penh in 2023 to pursue a bachelor's degree. While at university, she joined the FIRST project and formed a youth group to promote labor rights and social protection among young people.

Sivmey was unaware of the workers' right to health insurance and other social assistance programs for rural youth until she joined the training programs and activities on social protection and labour rights implemented by YRDP and Oxfam under the FIRST project. With the new knowledge, she knows that many working and rural youth were not registered in the NSSF schemes by their employers or received social assistance from the government.

"During the training, I learned a lot. It motivated me to help others by giving back to society what I know about the benefits of social protection," said Sivmey. With knowledge and skills received from the project, Sivmey together with seven active youths formed a youth group called Youth Network for Labor Rights and Social Protection (YNLSP) in 2023, with passion to support new graduates and working youths to access social protection benefits.

With the support from the project, YNLSP conducted awareness raising and building knowledge of youths in Siem Reap province on importance of social protection, including access to grants, accommodation, insurance, and their rights at work. This is when Sivmey transformed herself from a trainee to a trainer of social protection and labor rights.

To ensure that young people benefit from social protection, Sivmey led her group to facilitate dialogues with youth working in the cafes, restaurants, and mini-marts. She documented 32 cases of labor violations mostly related to NSSF registration, affecting 150 working youth, and submitted them to the relevant authorities to take action.

Despite her achievements, Sivmey wants to see more changes. She points out that many individuals living in rural areas remain unaware of the importance of social protection in improving their livelihoods and health. "Universal social protection coverage will complement the principle of leaving no one behind," she added.

Sivmey's story is a powerful reminder that informed, passionate young people can ignite meaningful change, inspiring other youth to claim their rights and build a brighter future.





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Through the FIRST project, we have supported many rural students and working youth to be aware of their rights to social protection and accessing health insurance and social assistance.

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- SIVMEY



Many university students work part-time without NSSF cards, denying them free healthcare and vital benefits. Students deserve support during illness, financial aid in hardships, and decent jobs after graduation.



- YEUM

GRADUATE RAISES AWARENESS OF LABOUR RIGHTS AND NSSF AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

Son Yeum is empowering students to understand the role and benefits of the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) by promoting it to his peers.

Son Yeum, a 24-year-old from Prey Veng province, graduated from the Royal University of Phnom Penh with a Bachelor's degree in Sociology. In 2021, during his third year, Yeum was awarded a grant to raise awareness about labor rights and the significant role of the (NSSF) among university students.

The grant was provided under the FIRST project, implemented by Youth Resource Development Programme (YRDP) and Oxfam, and funded by the European Commission. The grant allowed him to participate in training sessions on labor rights and social protection, igniting his drive to share this knowledge with his peers. The main goals of his work was to first empower students with a clear understanding of labor rights as they prepare to enter the workforce and to raise awareness about the NSSF and its benefits. "If individuals have an NSSF card and fall ill, they can receive medical treatment at partner hospitals or national healthcare facilities without paying, or at a reduced cost," Yeum said.

Yeum recognizes that many university students work part-time while studying, yet their employers often fail to provide NSSF cards. This leaves them without access to free healthcare and other critical benefits. "Every student deserves support when they're unwell, financial aid during hardships, and decent jobs after graduation," he said.

To address this, Yeum and his team have taken the initiative to organize workshops and trainings featuring experts with in-depth knowledge about the NSSF, enabling students to gain comprehensive insights into the NSSF's benefits, including free medical care at partner hospitals and affordable access to other services.

One of the main challenges, Yeum acknowledged, was the limited availability of human resources. With the team consisting entirely of students, time constraints often made leading and facilitating the project difficult. Despite these obstacles, Yeum proudly said that the team has gained invaluable learning experiences contributing to their personal and professional growth.

Yeum's project has successfully empowered students and young people about their labor rights and the significance of the NSSF, to better understand their rights as employees, navigate workplace conditions, and confidently advocate for fair treatment when necessary.

Focusing on youth and university students ensures that this critical awareness reaches the future workforce, potentially creating a positive long-term impact on labor practices.

Through the project, Yeum and his team have gained expertise in various areas, such as document processing, proposal writing, and effective transferring knowledge to peers. They also completed the Trainee -to-Trainer course, enabling them to share information about the social protection system and its benefits for youth, including the NSSF schemes such as healthcare, employment injury and pension, and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) program.

"Completing the project has brought about significant personal growth. Through the implementation of the project, I underwent a transformative journey, evolving into a professional capable of effectively sharing knowledge with others," Yeum said with a smile.

Although the project has concluded, Yeum remains committed to promoting social protection among his peers. He advises young people to verify their NSSF enrolment at work and negotiate their employment contracts to safeguard their interests.

COMPELLED TO SUPPORT COMMUNITIES AND FACTORY WORKERS WITH ACCESS TO SOCIAL SECURITY BENEFITS

Chhen Chom, 32, from Samraong Tong district in Kampong Speu province, has gone from being a mere worker to actively sharing information about social protection and working to help follow factory workers access benefits.

As an active member of the Cambodian Alliance of Trade Union (CATU), Chhen Chom oversees the wellbeing of his fellow factory workers, particularly in securing healthcare protection through Cambodia's National Social Security Fund (NSSF).

In 2015, Chom began working in a factory where he witnessed firsthand how many workers were unaware of the importance of the NSSF. Even those who were registered often faced difficulties using the service. This inspired him to encourage his fellow workers to access the benefits provided by NSSF and help them understand that these benefits are their rights.

Driven by his commitment, Chom has spent the past three years participating in short training courses offered through the FIRST project, implemented by CATU and Oxfam and funded by the European Union. These courses provided him with the knowledge and tools to inform and empower other factory workers.

Despite his busy schedule, Chom actively shares what he learns by conducting awareness sessions to help workers register for and effectively use the NSSF. His efforts have significantly raised awareness and increased engagement among his peers.

While there have been some improvements in how doctors and healthcare services treat workers using the NSSF

cards, Chom acknowledges that challenges remain. "Eighty percent of workers still find it difficult to use the service. This is something I want to change", he said. "What we try to do, and focus on, is how to use this service. To me, the social protection system is a state responsibility that the government must provide for people who, for example, lack income, people with disabilities or single mothers," Chom said.

One of the biggest obstacles Chom identified is the lack of widespread dissemination of information about social protection. "In my opinion, the government's efforts to disseminating information are not yet widespread because village and commune levels have not effectively reached people in the countryside," he said. "Generally, people get information on social media, but most people and workers do not pay much attention to it," he said.

To address this gap, Chom continues his efforts through CATU, working directly with communities and factory workers to raise awareness. He went on to recommend that institutions involved in social protection establish village-level programs and suggested holding quarterly workshops at the commune level emphasize the importance of social protection, ensuring that low-income individuals can access this life-saving service.

Chom's dedication to empowering factory workers reflects his passion for ensuring equality and access to essential services. By educating others and advocating for improved access, he hopes to create a system where everyone, regardless of their circumstances, can benefit from their right to social protection.



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What we try to do, and focus on, is how to use NSSF service. To me, the social protection system is a state responsibility that the government must provide for people who, for example, lack income, people with disabilities or single mothers. //

- CHOM



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As factory workers we earn little, making it barely possible to afford healthcare or surgery, which is very expensive. However, since learning about the NSSF benefits, the cost of treatment is no longer a concern.

- YEAB

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CHAMPIONING FACTORY WORKERS WELFARE: YEAB SORN'S ADVOCACY FOR SOCIAL PROTECTION

For nearly 20 years, Sorn Yeab has worked as a factory worker, spending the last eight as a union leader. At 32, she serves as secretary of the Coalition of Cambodia Apparel Workers Democratic Union (C.CAWDU) at NEWSIGHT Garment Co., Ltd. where she has dedicated herself to advocating for her colleagues, particularly in accessing National Social Security Fund (NSSF) benefits.

Living in Steung Meanchey, south-west of Phnom Penh, Yeab understands firsthand the challenges workers face, including labor exploitation and limited social support. In 2019, she joined an Oxfam initiative, and later the FIRST project, which deepened her knowledge about the NSSF. The project implemented by C.CAWDU and Oxfam with financial support by the European Union, helped Yeab understand the wide-ranging benefits of the NSSF scheme, which include free healthcare, pensions, workplace injury support, and labor protections.

"We've gained valuable knowledge that we wouldn't have otherwise received. As factory workers, we never expected to learn about the NSSF in such depth. This knowledge has been incredibly helpful for our workers, as it allows them to reduce the frequency of health checks required in our industry," she shared.

Thanks to her efforts, over 700 workers at her factory now have NSSF cards. However, many still struggle to use them effectively. She remains committed to helping her fellow workers navigate these challenges. "Before joining the FIRST project, I, like many others, wasn't very familiar with the NSSF card. I had no idea who to contact or how to address any problems that might arise with it," she shares. Through trainings, she learned how to address issues with NSSF and how to connect workers with the appropriate

contacts, empowering her to assist her peers more effectively.

Beyond acquiring valuable knowledge, Yeab has become a key resource for her fellow workers. She shares information about the advantages of having NSSF and supports them in obtaining their cards, while also encouraging her employer to register employees with the program.

"As factory workers we earn little, making it barely possible to afford healthcare or surgery, which is very expensive. However, since learning about the NSSF benefits, the cost of treatment is no longer a concern," she explained.

This knowledge enhances Yeab's ability to advocate for workers' rights, enabling her to identify and address violations of labor laws. Her advocacy has been particularly impactful for pregnant workers, as she highlights the NSSF's coverage of checkups, maternity allowances, and improved medical services. "Pregnant women can receive checkups and an allowance, starting from the first week of pregnancy until maternity day. General patients can also access free examinations, and the quality of service has improved," she said.

While service delays persist at some hospitals, Yeab has seen progress crediting union leaders for raising concerns with local authorities. Her efforts have ensured workers can access services at both government and private facilities.

Recognizing the transformative impact of capacity strengthening initiatives, Yeab encourages organizations to continue raise awareness on social protection programs. Her advocacy not only improve healthcare access for her peers, but also empower them to stand up for their rights.

FINDING STRENGTH

IN THE QUEST FOR LABOR RIGHTS

Phan Bory, a passionate former union leader, and fervent advocate for workers' rights has devoted his life to empowering workers and helping them understand and claim their rights, including the right to social protection. A former Central for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (CENTRAL) supported union leader at Y&W Garments Co. Ltd. Bory, now 33, recalls with a smile the deep-rooted passion that drove him into labor activism: his strong desire to support others, advocate for labor rights and spread awareness of the importance of unions. For Bory, the path to labor activism was fueled by compassion and a sense of duty. "I want to make myself resilient," he explains. "When I am resilient, I can help other union workers. I am trying to help as much as I can," he said.

In 2021, he attended protests outside local factories and saw firsthand the challenges faced by workers who were unaware of their rights. This experience prompted him to connect with CENTRAL, a Cambodian organization that advocates for fair treatment and protections for workers. "After I saw this [that many workers did not know their rights], I really wanted to do something to help them because they were seeking assistance and they needed someone to empower them on the rights in their workplace," Bory said.

His commitment only grew as he learned more through CENTRAL, and soon, Bory took on a leadership role within the factory union. This involvement opened doors for him to participate in the FIRST project, a joint initiative by CENTRAL and Oxfam financially supported by the European Union that aims to increase social protection awareness among unions and workers. "After I got to know CENTRAL and the work they do, I became a leader of the factory union, which gave me the chance to be involved with the FIRST project to educate unions and workers on social protection, including awareness of the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) scheme."

Through his work with the project, Bory not only learned about social protection policies, but also gained tools to educate and support his fellow workers. However, his journey was not without obstacles. He recalls the difficulties in promoting awareness, as many workers were initially skeptical of the NSSF and unsure of its relevance to their lives. "Some workers do not understand it [social protection] and think it is of no importance to them," he

explains. There were other challenges within the workplace itself. "Another thing is with the workplace. When fellow workers engage with union leaders, they face criticism from their supervisor and employer," he added.

Despite these setbacks, Bory's determination was strong. He found ways to connect with workers, build trust and encourage union workers to enroll in the NSSF program. He shared his knowledge with fellow workers and employees on NSSF principles, the process for requesting benefits, and the importance of resolving disputes over their rights with the NSSF.

"After we saw that most of the union members did not understand the benefits or know the process of accessing them, we did a lot of activities, such as trainings and meetings, and we explained and informed them on how to exercise their rights," he said.

Determined to fulfil his mission, Bory began organizing weekly meetings to disseminate information, using social media platforms, such as Telegram groups to reach a wider audience. Each time he received news, important updates or information, he would call for a meeting to ensure his members stayed informed.

During Bory's tenure as union leader, his most important success was negotiating legally entitled compensation for the union members after his factory closed down. In early 2024, when Y&W Garments Co. Ltd, abruptly shut down, leaving thousands of workers without their final pay, Bory stepped up to negotiate on their behalf. His persistent advocacy led to a breakthrough, securing legally entitled compensation for 3,753 workers, including their last month's salary and severance pay. This achievement stands as a testament to Bory's commitment to and his ability to effect change.

Looking forward, Bory is hopeful. He envisions a future where more workers are informed about their rights and feel empowered to claim them. "Even now, union awareness about the NSSF and labour rights is limited", he says, "but I believe the situation will improve if relevant sectors come to the table and make trainings more widely available." Through his strength and commitment, Bory Phan has become a beacon of hope for his fellow workers, helping them realize the power that lies within their rights and in their collective voice.



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Union awareness about NSSF and labor rights is still limited," says Bory Phan. "But I believe the situation will improve if more sectors collaborate to make training widely accessible.

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- BORY



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Some workers still spend their own money on medical treatment instead of using their NSSF benefits. I guide them on how to use their cards to avoid unnecessary expenses. //

- CHANTHORN

TIRELESS ADVOCACY

FOR THE RIGHTS OF 600 FACTORY WORKERS

Union leader Pen Chanthorn recounts her experience of unfair dismissal, which fueled her passion to fight for her coworkers' rights. Over three dedicated years, Chanthorn Pen successfully registered about 600 factory workers with the National Social Security Fund (NSSF). Today, she actively advocates for greater awareness of NSSF's benefits, urging support from non-governmental organizations and NSSF itself to reach more workers, as only half of the factory workers are aware of their membership rights and entitlements.

Working at a glass manufacturing factory in Siem Reap since 2019, Chanthorn noticed that only a small fraction of the workforce—around 40 of 600 employees—had NSSF memberships. Seeing this gap, in 2021 she formed a union to push for broader NSSF enrolment. After receiving training from the FIRST project implemented by Center for Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (CENTRAL) and Oxfam with financial support from the European Union, Chanthorn equipped herself with essential knowledge and skills to guide her fellow employees. Her efforts paid off when she successfully registered all 600 factory workers for NSSF membership, a moment she recalls with a proud smile.

Chanthorn soon realized that many workers remained unaware of their rights. Despite the training and awareness raising, Chanthorn believes that there are still many more people who are not aware of social protection. "Only five out of ten people know about the benefits of NSSF", she explains. "When some NSSF members are sick, they spend their own money on medical treatment instead of accessing their NSSF benefits", she adds. "Some factory workers reach out to me when they were in need of medical treatment asking how to use NSSF cards," said Chanthorn. She patiently guides them, explaining how to use their cards for medical expenses rather than paying out of pocket.

Chanthorn found the motivation to demand that the factory register all workers for NSSF memberships once she realized it was employer's legal responsibility. She first gathered union members to organize a collective request for NSSF enrolment. "I collected the names of employees without NSSF memberships and submitted them to the factory, requesting that they be registered with NSSF," she recalls.

When this request was ignored, the union members, with support from CENTRAL, filed a formal complaint with the NSSF. The complaint led to a \$10,000 fine for the factory, which angered management. In response, Chanthorn recalls that factory managers began making things difficult for the union. "There have been threats from factory managers and human resource department since 2022. By 2023, I was fired," she adds.

In response, factory workers protested against her firing, leading to negotiations with the factory. Ultimately, she was reinstated, vindicated by her adherence to labor laws. "The company was unsuccessful in trying to expel me from the factory because I did not commit any act in violation of the labor law," she explained.

Chanthorn's advocacy also extended to securing fair wages. When she started in 2019, the factory paid her below minimum wage, a situation she fought to change. "I started working in 2019, but it was not until 2021 that the factory paid me the minimum wage," she said. Thanks to union efforts, the factory agreed to pay the garment workers the minimum wage. This change ensured broader benefits, including paid maternity leave at 70% of regular wages.

Looking back, Chanthorn's journey is a story of resilience and dedication to her peers' rights. Her advocacy continues to inspire a stronger sense of unity and awareness among factory workers, one that pushes for fair treatment and rightful access to labor protections.

EMPOWERED WORKER RISES TO UNION ACTIVIST

Having spent a decade working in the entertainment industry, Chheng Kimyan knows all too well the risks involved. Now, she is empowering her union members to be aware of the benefits of signing up to the National Social Security Fund (NSSF) and the protection it can offer.

Trade union activist, Chheng Kimyan, has worked in the entertainment industry for 10 years. During this time, she has faced many challenges, from drinking alcohol with clients to a dangerous night commute home.

Determined to increase safety and support for her peers, she currently received support from the FIRST project implemented by Cambodian Food and Service Workers Federation (CFSWF) and Oxfam. It focuses on sharing knowledge about labour rights and raising awareness about the importance of social protection, as well as protecting workers' interests.

Before joining the union, Kimyan worked in the entertainment industry where her role was promoting beer brand, Cambodia Brewery Limited. She worked in the sector for about 10 years, from 2005 to 2014.

Kimyan said her workplace did not provide membership to the NSSF. This meant that when she got injured at work, the company did not cover the cost of her treatment.

Working in the entertainment industry, Kimyan is vulnerable to many risks because it requires her to drink with clients and commute late at night. "Sometimes, we fall off our motorbikes and have to cover the expenses for medical treatment ourselves," she said.

In 2014, she first heard about social protection. "If a worker is injured while working, it is the company's responsibility to cover the expenses for medical treatment. However, I did not have much knowledge about social protection.

"That is why I decided to join CFSWF, a union working on social protection issues," Kimyan said, adding that she started her journey helping workers protect their interests as a volunteer. By 2022, she had received training under the FIRST project about social protection. This allowed her to share her knowledge with others, particularly women working in the entertainment and beer industries.

"By participating in the training, we realized that as workers, we have some rights at the workplace which we are legally able to demand from the company," she said. Upon this realization, Kimyan was motivated to work for the union. "After I attended training, I shared the lessons about social protection with members of the union.

"As an employee, we have the right to receive health insurance covered by the employers. After we demanded additional benefits at the workplace, including coverage of health and injury, the employers asked us to fill in an application to be a member of NSSF. However, this success does not come without challenges."

Employers registered some workers as members of the NSSF around 2013. At first, it was difficult to demand health and injury coverage from the company. In addition to the expense the company has to cover, employers are reluctant to provide some information for the NSSF.

"Employers do not want to register their employees to be members of NSSF because doing so requires the company to provide details about finance and sales. Employers do not want to disclose such information," Kimyan said.

Despite this, Kimyan played an instrumental role in achieving NSSF membership for many of her peers, even though it took three years.

Kimyan added that authorities are often unhelpful with demanding companies deliver NSSF membership. She said that at that time registration for NSSF membership was not common in the entertainment and beer industries because they fall under the informal economy.

"People discriminate against us as we work in the beer and entertainment industries," Kimyan said, while encouraging workers to join a union that works to protect their interests. "I want the government to stop perceiving a union as a rebellious movement because we work to prevent workers from being exploited and ensure their labour rights are protected."

Kimyan works to make sure that workers can access ID Poor Cards and NSSF membership. She said that some people who work in the entertainment industry get the ID Poor Card, but others have not received it yet.

Kimyan wants organizations and the government to help people working in the entertainment industry access ID Poor Cards and NSSF membership. She also wants the government to ensure that all companies provide NSSF memberships to their employees.

"Additionally, I do not want to see people working in the entertainment industry being excluded from the formal economy, because they are vulnerable due to their working conditions."



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As an employee, we have the right to receive health insurance covered by the employers. I do not want to see people working in the entertainment industry being excluded from the formal economy, as they are vulnerable due to their working conditions and deserve the same protections as any other profession. //

- KIMYAN



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Everyone should pay attention to what matters, like the NSSF. It's important for our well-being, and even though we pay, the benefits are worth it. //

- RATANAK

TRADE UNION LEADER SHINES AT EDUCATING UNIONS ON THE BENEFITS OF SOCIAL PROTECTION

Serey Ratanak is educating unions and their members about the benefits of joining the social protection system and for their voices to be heard.

Born in Phnom Penh, Ly Serey Ratanak is the Vice President of the trade union at Coca Cola. His journey from being unaware of social protection to becoming a trainer and advocate is inspiring.

Before joining the FIRST project implemented by Coca Cola and Oxfam, Ratanak had little involvement in social work. However, after attending training sessions, he developed a keen interest in labour rights and began participating in various workshops. This newfound passion led him to become a trainer, helping other unions to understand their rights.

Through the project, unions and representatives of each enterprise can active in social protection, and raising awareness among target groups. Ratanak's experience as a participant broadened his understanding of union advocacy and the social protection system, boosting his confidence to share his knowledge with his peers.

Now a trainer, Ratanak is dedicated to extending his knowledge to other employees in his company. "Before, I never know what social protection system was or the National Social Security Fund (NSSF), and I never expected I could be a part of educating unions about social protection awareness. The project helped me a lot, and other unions voted me as their representative," he said.

Ratanak's goal is to empower the union so that employees know their rights and understand the NSSF, which is crucial for their well-being. To help his company about social protection, Ratanak follows a three-step process: training a groups of 20 people about social awareness and how

to access NSSF, assigning unions to deal with authorities or relevant sectors to purchase it, and following up with unions to find solutions.

Despite facing challenges such as low participation and limited understanding among some union members, Ratanak remains committed. "The big challenge is that the unions themselves are not interested in NSSF; most of them have heard about it, but when I asked, they didn't know what exactly it was. I made a schedule for them to join a training session, but when it started, some of them didn't come," he said.

Although many unions failed to participate in the training, Ratanak said that the majority of employees in his company already have NSSF. He continues to work with those who do not, raising awareness and improving situation. "They are better; they know how to purchase it, how to use it and the benefits of it, and they spread it to their neighbours. Even though some of them don't want to participate or understand it, it is still better than before."

Ratanak has recommendations to ensure that social protection awareness is accessible to all. He encourages citizens to participate in activities such as workshops that train them to understand the importance of social protection including the NSSF and Poor ID cards. "All people should pay attention to things that matter to them, for example, the NSSF. It is really important for them to ensure their well-being. Even though we have to pay money, it still has benefits for us," he said.

Ratanak also request that the government provide more forums or discussion platforms about the social protection system, giving citizens the opportunity to join, raise their problems, and find best solutions together."



FOSTERING AN INCLUSIVE AND SHOCK RESPONSIVE SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM IN CAMBODIA (FIRST)

FIRST aimed to contribute to a stronger social contract between the Royal Government of Cambodia’s social protection institutions and the Cambodian citizens, by ensuring a more inclusive, rights-based and shock-responsive social protection system. By promoting the active participation and consultation of Cambodian civil society organisations (CSOs), the project contributed towards building trust and cooperation between rights holders and duty bearers.

We reached more than 500,000 individuals (40% women), comprising of formal and informal economic workers (street vendors, market sellers, domestic workers, waste collectors, tuk-tuk driver, service workers, construction workers, farmers), people with disabilities, elderly people, women and children and ID poor households who are prone to risks and economic shocks.

PROJECT IMPACT

73.9% of people we worked with said the project improved access to social protection benefits for themselves and their communities, with 75.3% gaining better access to vital schemes.

3,031 emerging leaders (1,174 women) were empowered to mobilize communities, advocate for change, and drive lasting impact within their networks.

87% of people we worked with said the project enhanced their resilience and ability to cope with future shocks.

86.2% of people we worked with expressed satisfaction with the project’s outcomes.

3,160,707 people were reached through awareness campaigns on social protection benefits.

66.9% of people we worked with experienced substantial positive changes in their communities due to the project.

OUR PARTNERS





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