

LOCKDOWN, DEBT AND JOB LOSSES

The impact of the pandemic on Cambodian farm workers



Image: CCFC

The Southeast Asian state of Cambodia remains predominantly rural. Despite industrialization and booming economic growth in recent decades, over 70 percent of its population continues to live and work in the countryside, overwhelmingly as agricultural workers on farms. But how has the coronavirus pandemic and associated lockdowns, which we tend to associate with urban areas, affected the countryside?



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Philip Degenhardt, director of the [RLS Southeast Asia Regional Office in Hanoi](#), spoke with **Chanra Keo**, General Secretary and co-founder of the [Coalition of Cambodian Farmer Community](#) (CCFC), to find out more.

CCFC is an association of small-scale farmers and land-affected communities that works towards addressing land issues, natural resource extraction, and forced evictions in nine provinces across Cambodia.

Thank you, Ms. Keo, for taking the time for this interview. Could you start out by giving us an overview of the current situation in Cambodia?

Overall, we think the situation regarding the COVID-19 pandemic is not so critical here. The infection numbers are not rising as fast as in other countries, and the total cases are 125. There are only two newly confirmed cases and 122 recovered.

The Ministry of Health updates the rate of COVID-19 infections on a daily basis. They use various media to educate the people, such as posters, banners, videos and programmes on national television, and also provided masks and other protective equipment in some cases. However, we're seeing that people don't change their behaviour. There are still gatherings here and there. Besides, when the government takes action against COVID-19, they also take advantage of the current pandemic to control groups whose work and activities are critical of them, such as NGOs.

More than 100 factories were temporarily shut down so far. In this regard, the government cooperates with the private sector. The government shares the responsibility for paying the salary of workers from temporarily closed factories. The company pays 30 US dollars and the government pays 40, so one worker gets 70 dollars per month while staying home. However, this assistance is not widely provided and is only for bigger companies with thousands of

workers. There are many others, like entertainment workers and massage workers, who don't receive any assistance. In that sense, the intervention is neither equal nor fair.

Freedom of expression is now narrower than before. One journalist was arrested when he criticized Prime Minister Hun Sen's quote about the government not being able to help tuk-tuk drivers who have lost their income because of COVID-19. It is threatening for anyone to speak or raise issues regarding COVID-19, especially if they scrutinize government interventions.

How is the pandemic affecting the food supply in the country?

Food prices have increased nationwide, and it's genuinely a financial struggle for the poor. Borders with neighbouring countries like Thailand and Vietnam have been locked down for weeks. Cambodia imports a majority of its food from these countries, so when the borders were blocked, the number of imports dropped accordingly. This affected food prices. For instance, one kilogram of beef normally costs around 35,000 Cambodian riels (8.50 US dollars), but during the pandemic, the price rose around 20 percent to 42,000 riels.

How is the situation of farmers and small-scale producers in this regard?

The situation of workers and farmers is not satisfactory at all. Currently, our communities face many issues that are unrelated to the disease directly but harm their livelihood, as the situation here has not yet returned to normal. Many workplaces are still closed, like karaoke boxes, garment and footwear factories. Many workers have lost their jobs and are now depending on their family members who are farmers and now face even more pressure than usual.

In Cambodia, around 90 percent of farmers are indebted. They receive their capital from micro-financers, or are financially dependent on other family members who have migrated from the rural areas into more economically dynamic regions as agro-industrial workers or

informal workers. When COVID-19 came, these family members lost their jobs, and now they don't have money to pay for the farmers' debts. Therefore, it is understandable that they do not have any capital to (re-)start production.

Many of our members are also farmers who cultivate agro-industrial crops like rubber and sugarcane. These farmers are suffering from the low price of their products on the markets these days, due to the drop in demand. The price has fallen so much that they cannot make up for farming expenses, let alone pay back the loans they took out from micro-financers.

Earlier this month, I visited a rural community near Phnom Penh. The community is severely affected by the virus outbreak and its impacts, as local residents are losing their jobs and income sources. Putting food on the table has become an everyday struggle for them, while mass gatherings are no longer allowed. Their fundamental rights to freedom of assembly and expression are affected. As a result, the problems they are facing are not voiced to the public and they have to cope with these problems themselves.

What is CCFC's strategy to cope with this situation?

We are trying to augment our labour fund to support our members. Together with partners, we submitted several petitions to ministries at the end of April seeking their support. We asked the Ministry of Health to provide small-scale farmers and poor urban communities with masks and food aid. We submitted an open letter to the Ministry of Economy to ask for intervention on the suspension of returning loans because workers and farmers have been suffering from the loss of income. We also sent a petition to the Ministry of Agriculture and Land Management to furnish farmers their land and the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries to provide them with technical support for Good Agriculture Practices.

We began collecting information and documented farmers who need support, hoping to strengthen their capacity to cultivate food during the pandemic. We are also seeking outside funding to respond to this food emergency. In reality, many farmers do not fear COVID-19—

what they fear is the scenario of running out of food for daily meals because many of them cannot afford the current exorbitant prices.

We have also cooperated with our farmer networks at the regional level to keep updated about the situation in other countries and to update them about the situation in Cambodia. With our network, we joined a statement seeking a long-term solution to improve farmers' living conditions.

Do you see any chances for positive momentum coming out of this crisis?

Cambodia acknowledges its status as an agricultural country, yet our daily food is still mostly imported from neighbouring states. Since COVID-19 broke out, it has been a good time for reflection, to see how and what Cambodia can do to promote sustainable agriculture and food sovereignty in regard to either ecological agriculture or Good Agriculture Practices, as the government has encouraged as well.