

# MORTGAGED FUTURES

## Education is considered the best way to keep children out of work

By **Sithav An**  
*Economics Today*

A pained expression flashes over 10-year-old Kia faces when he admits he is illiterate. "I know everything about the rice field, but when I see letters I can't read them," he said with a tinge of sorrow. "I cannot read or write because I've never gone to school."

Dressed in dirty clothes and standing in a rice field in Sothear village in Prey Veng province's Preah Sdech district, Kia keeps a watchful eye on two nearby cows that he cares for everyday to earn money to feed his family.

"My parents want me to go to school, but I do not have enough materials for studying, like pencils, notebooks and writing slate," he said. "And the school is very far from my house. It takes over 30 minutes to reach it."

Kia is one of 1.5 million children below the age of 15 who work in Cambodia, according to estimates by the International Labor Organization (ILO).

In Prey Veng province, many children work to earn money to support themselves and their families. The luckiest among them occasionally attend school but usually only if they happen to live near one.

While children in rural areas tend to be put to work in farming-related activities, the labor of children who live near the country's economic trading hubs is used for other purposes.

"I earn around 5,000 riels to 10,000 riels per day selling eggs here, but I have an opportunity to continue my studying," said 12-year old Soeung at the Neak Loeng ferry dock.

The youngster is currently enrolled in grade 5 at a school near his house. He yearns to continue onto secondary school, but he doubts that

his parents will be able to afford it.

"My parents have no jobs, so I have to earn money by myself," he told *Economics Today*, adding that his father spends most of his time gambling and his mother is a housewife.

"I wish to continue my studies until university for a better life," said Soeung. "But my dream will end here because I have nothing, including money."

For some time now, development experts around the world have argued that the futures of children who are denied an education are being mortgaged.

"All children should be able to go to school," said Haidy Ear Dupuy, advocacy and communications manager for World Vision Cambodia, in a telephone interview with *Economics Today*. "And if families have the possibility, with the help of NGOs, to send their children to high school, they will have a better future" because they'll be able to get better-paid jobs.

The ILO also argues that ensuring children are educated today is a useful way to prevent future generations of children from having to work. Adults who had the opportunity to go to school as children are more likely to send their own children to school when they become parents, according to a study, "Education: The Right Response to Child Labour," released by the ILO in June.

Unfortunately, several hurdles must be overcome before children like Kia and Soeung have the opportunity to graduate high school.

Economic hardship in the family is the main reason Cambodian children are put to work and denied the right to an education.

"Sometimes children can go to school, but they will drop out after completing primary school because their family cannot support their education," says Haidy Ear Du-



puy before pointing out that, like Kia and Soeung, many Cambodian children have to work to feed themselves and their families.

According to a 2008 study by World Vision Cambodia, thousands of children work in some of the country's worst workplaces such as garbage dump sites and brick factories.


"There are many forms of harmful labor that have children working many hours in dangerous and exploitative conditions," said Haidy Ear Dupuy in an email to *Economics Today*. "These destroy the future of young people."

Excessive labor in unsafe conditions endangers not only the child's development but also critically hinders the country's overall development.

"Child labor constitutes a key obstacle to achieving universal primary education and other Millennium Development Goals in Cambodia," according to a 2006 report entitled "Children's Work in Cambodia" released by the ILO, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the World Bank Group.

It not only harms the welfare of individual children, but also slows broader national poverty reduction





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and development efforts, the report said. Children who are forced out of school and into labor are denied the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills needed for gainful future employment, thereby perpetuating the cycle of poverty.

The report drew a bleak picture of child labor practices in Cambodia. About 16 percent of children are already economically active by the time they are six and over half of all children are economically active by the age of 10, the report said.

School enrolment rates in Cambodia peak at 91 percent at age 11 after which there tends to be a dramatic spike in drop out rates as children join the informal workforce, research by UNICEF and the ILO has found.

The ILO has begun working with the Government and other partners to improve educational opportunities for children so that Cambodian children can build a better future for themselves and the country.

World Vision Cambodia is among the organizations that help children to continue their studies.

One of its projects—called “Battambang Street Children Center”—

was launched about three years ago. The center provides children with food and informal education, explained Haidy Ear Dupuy. In exchange for attending school, the center grants small loans to children’s parents so they can start small businesses. The project is slated to end in 2010, unless further funding can be secured.

“Education is very important for their future life, it means they have better jobs,” agrees Sun Tek, who coordinates activities for the Cambodian human rights organization LICADHO in Battambang province.

But at least two conditions must be met to eliminate child labor in Cambodia, he said.

“Parents must have the will to send their children to school and second the Government and the Ministry of Education should facilitate the conditions for their enrolment, such as providing the school uniform or school supplies,” he told Economics Today by phone.

Until that happens, the aspirations children like Kia and Soeung have to pursue their studies will be unfulfilled. ■

## Fast Facts about Child Labor

According to the International Labor Organization, there are 218 million child workers worldwide, 168 million of whom are aged between 5 and 14 years old. They often engage in hazardous work and work long hours.

Most of the children have no access to education or vocational training. Child labor is closely associated with poverty, and many poor families depend on the income that a working child generates to support them. If a family cannot afford to send all of their children to school, priority is given to boys to attend school at the expense of girls, according to the ILO report.