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# Country and community information



# Cambodia

# ActionAid in Cambodia



## Cambodia facts:

- The population is 13 million people
- Average life expectancy is 57.4 years
- Nearly one third of adults are illiterate
- 77% of the population live on less than \$2 a day

*Cambodia is the second poorest country in Asia. It shares a border with Vietnam, Laos and Thailand. Over the years Cambodia has suffered huge political, economic and social upheaval, especially through three decades of civil conflict and war with neighbouring Vietnam. Between 1975 and 1979, communist Khmer Rouge forces committed genocide, killing 1.7 million people – a quarter of the population – and displacing millions more. Since 1993 there has been a range of coalition governments, and relative peace has been restored to the country.*

*A large percentage of Cambodia's land mass is taken up by low lying plains, home to the Mekong river and the 1,000 square mile Lake Sap, both of which provide a large amount of naturally occurring resources that have sustained local people for generations. In recent years, however, local and*

*foreign corporations have moved in to exploit the areas. This has left many local people unable to access the waters and therefore unable to provide a living for themselves and their families.*

*About 94% of the Cambodian people are ethnic Cambodians, known as Khmer. Minorities such as Chinese, Vietnamese, Thai and Cham-Malays (who inhabit the mountainous regions) make up most of the remaining 6%. The country's major religion is Buddhism.*

## Making a difference to the poorest people

ActionAid started working in Cambodia in 2004, focusing on helping communities in poor, rural areas where many people are still displaced or affected by the conflict that afflicted the country for so many years. In the areas where we work, almost everyone is involved in farming. There is very limited access to safe water or healthcare facilities and only one in five children go to school. Only 1% of households have electricity.

The first stage of any project supported by ActionAid is to work with the community to identify the most important local issues. The next step is planning how best to tackle their problems. Every project we are involved with in Cambodia is different, but the main types of work are described below.

## Food security and land rights

Cambodia's natural resources are being exploited and depleted and naturally occurring disasters such as droughts



and floods have been made worse by illegal logging. Rapid loss of forests and increasing soil erosion in wetlands and grasslands are destroying the livelihoods of people who depend on them for their income. Land disputes are also common in Cambodia. As there is no formal property ownership system, powerful individuals and corporations are increasingly taking over land and leaving poor people landless.

ActionAid is working alongside communities to help them regain access to their land and educate farmers about land use and better agricultural methods. We are assisting indigenous people in retaining their traditional, communal form of land ownership, as well as promoting the introduction of crops that are better suited to the highland areas. We are also helping community organisations monitor forestry and fishery policies and helping prevent outside groups from taking their land.

**Mr. Nong Sarom, 48, is a fisherman in Kien village, at the edge of one of Cambodia's many lakes.**

**(ActionAid partner) AARR helps us with our fishing community so that it can become better and better. They provide us with the skills and knowledge to protect our natural resources so we can understand and help each other. Now when we go to the local authorities, we speak very clearly. We always inform them about the illegal forest cutting and work with them. This helps build our relationship.**

## Women and health

Women in Cambodia generally suffer very poor health and nutrition and domestic violence is also common. There is very little provision for healthcare in rural areas, and widespread gender inequality means that women are often uneducated and find it hard to recognise health problems. ActionAid is training local female health volunteers so they can identify and treat women's reproductive problems, act as midwives and increase their community's medical self-sufficiency. We have also set up a community health centre that offers free reproductive tests and primary healthcare.

In addition, we are assisting women who have been rescued after being trafficked into the sex trade. We educate women about their rights, and offer training in skills such as tailoring and small loans. This helps these women get back into mainstream society and earn an alternative living.



## HIV and AIDS

Cambodia has the highest percentage of people living with HIV in Asia. The government's response to the epidemic is slowing the rate of infection among some sections of society, but there are still an estimated 170,000 people nationwide living with the virus, including over 40% of sex workers. Many thousands of children have lost their parents to the disease.

Most Cambodians lack access to voluntary counselling and testing for HIV, as well as to diagnosis and treatment of sexually transmitted infections. Many also cannot get general information about HIV/AIDS. Therefore, there is considerable need for essential HIV-prevention services, particularly among vulnerable and migrant populations.

In response, ActionAid Cambodia is working with a number of families living with HIV/AIDS. We provide support for voluntary testing, income-generating schemes and home-based counselling. We also help infected and affected people to form support networks of their own to deal with the stigma and discrimination associated with the virus. In the future we plan to work with some of the country's estimated 12,000 HIV-positive children.



*ActionAid has increasingly been working with Cambodian monks, who have good local knowledge and strong connections to the local people. Many monks are educating communities about HIV/AIDS and building support networks for people living with the virus. This includes providing food and making home visits. Highly respected by everyone, the monks also raise funds for those affected by HIV/AIDS.*

The health centre recently built by ActionAid doubles as a safe place for local children who can't go to school to get a basic education, by providing tuition and help with homework. We also negotiate with schools to try and reduce their fees, and we are working with the government to give teachers a fair wage.

We are helping displaced women to demand permanent housing and land, and providing female leaders of poor urban communities with leadership training and the skills they need to negotiate effectively with the government. We also encourage communities to work together to make sure their voices are heard by those in power.

## Urban poverty

High unemployment has led many poor people to migrate to the capital, Phnom Penh, but most find themselves unable to survive once they get there. The slums and squats are close to bursting point and lack safe roads, sanitation and water systems. Although education is supposed to be free, low wages mean that teachers are forced to demand payment from families each day, denying many children an opportunity to go to school. Women and children often suffer the most from the lack of basic services such as water and healthcare.

Thanks to the generosity of our supporters, ActionAid is able to do so much more to improve the lives of some of the world's poorest families. Since 1972 we have helped millions of people throughout the world, giving them the chance to enjoy a healthier, happier and more dignified future. Cambodia is just one of over 40 countries where we work.

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ActionAid is a registered charity no. 274467

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