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STREET SLEEPERS

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AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH OF
HOMELESS WORKERS
LIVING IN THE CITY OF PHNOM PENH

Opinions expressed in the report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of People In Need.



TABLE OF CONTENTS

- EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	1
- INTRODUCTION	1
- METHODOLOGY	2
- LIMITATIONS	3

I. EXPLORING THE MEANINGS OF “HOMELESSNESS” AND “HOME” 4

I. 1. DEFINITIONS OF “HOMELESSNESS”

- *INTERNATIONAL DEFINITIONS*
- *“HOMELESSNESS” WITHIN THE CAMBODIAN CONTEXT*

I. 2. THE CONCEPT OF “HOME” IN CAMBODIA FROM AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE 7

- *“HOME” AS A PHYSICAL LIVING PLACE*
- *“HOME” AS A SOCIAL AND TERRITORIAL ANCHORING AND NETWORKING*

II. MEETING WITH SOME PHNOM PENH STREETS’ SLEEPERS 21

II. 1. CYCLOS, MOTOS, TUK-TUKS, AND RICKSHAWS DRIVERS 22

- *A FLEXIBLE ACTIVITY*
- *URBAN ECONOMIC STRATEGIES*

II. 2. THE WASTE-PICKERS - ETCHAY 30

- *THE HOUSING OF THE PROFESSIONAL ETCHAY*
- *THE ETCHAY SLEEPING ON THE STREETS*

II. 3. SOME OBSERVATIONS OF THE DAILY LIFE OF THOSE LIVING ON THE STREETS 34

- *THE SPATIAL HIERARCHY OF SLEEPING IN THE STREET*
- *DAILY ROUTINE*
- *REDUCED SPATIALITY -TO LIVE IN THE CITY AT THE SCALE OF A RURAL VILLAGE*

II. 4. SMALL STREET TRADERS LIVING IN INADEQUATE CONDITIONS 38

- *STREET VENDORS*
- *PROFESSIONAL BEGGARS*
- *EXAMPLES OF VULNERABLE PEOPLE WHO MANAGE TO FIND A PLACE TO LIVE*
- *THOSE IN THE PROCESS OF MARGINALIZATION*
- *OTHER GROUPS LIVING IN BASIC HOUSING CONDITIONS*

III. CHANGES OF VULNERABILITY UNDER COVID-19	45
III. 1. THE COUNTRY'S LOCKDOWN BETWEEN FEBRUARY 2020 AND MARCH 2021 AND THE ECONOMIC DOWNTURN.	45
III. 2. LOCKDOWN OF PHNOM PENH (AVRIL 2021) THEN ZONING	53
III. 3. THE ACTIONS OF THE GOVERNMENT	55
CONCLUSION	55
RECOMMENDATIONS	56
BIBLIOGRAPHY	57



Executive summary

Besides the homeless people living on the streets of Phnom Penh who are identified by government and NGOs programs, other groups of people also sleep on the streets or in basic conditions with lesser visibility. Their particularity is that they have regular paid activities. This study first explores the meaning of homelessness in Cambodia in terms of both housing and social relations. Then, it explores the pathways of some working groups who live on the streets with a particular focus on the economic consequences associated with Covid-19.

Introduction

Cambodia counts among the countries with the most rapid poverty reduction in the world. The percentage of Cambodians living under the national poverty line fell from 47.8 percent in 2007 to 13.5 percent in 2014. (source WB). However, the level of vulnerability is still high. Many families are just living above the poverty rates and could fall back into poverty if exposed to economic or other external shocks.

In 2020, Cambodia faced a range of economic challenges: Climate change, a rapid decline of fish stocks, and the loss of trade preferences with the European Union that is significant for the garment industry. Furthermore, the global economic recession triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic has hit Cambodia's economy hard and had a devastating effect on hospitality, tourism in particular. In 2021, After being contained for almost a year, the COVID outbreak spread across the country, particularly in dense areas and markets. In Phnom Penh, Population lockdown measures to limit the spread of the virus have seriously economically affected many people, among which the most vulnerable living in the streets.

Ever since Cambodia opened up again to the world after the fall of the Khmer Rouge regime and the consequent Paris Peace Agreements of 1991, a number of international organizations and NGO's have been committed to ensuring that Cambodia works its way out of poverty. They have set up programs on a number of issues to support the most vulnerable and marginalized, lacking the resources to meet their daily needs. They have set up programs on a wide range of issues to support the most vulnerable and marginalized populations who lack the resources to meet their daily needs. Their focus is on specific disadvantaged populations, such as those living in informal settlements or slum areas, poor children, women who are victims of sex trafficking and domestic violence, or persons with disabilities, to name but a few. However, although their actions have benefited countless vulnerable population groups, some people have been left behind. These people often go unnoticed in the city as they live in unsettled ways either on the streets or in inadequate housing. They are not officially registered in Phnom Penh. Some have move alone from their home place where they keep their registration, others are undocumented and cut from their family ties.

This research aims to identify population groups whose particularity is to be homeless or living in basic housing conditions and having working activities. It's a common misconception that homeless people are also workless, but in Phnom Penh, a number of people work while staying on the streets or in difficult conditions at night.

¹Some International and National organizations already work with particularly vulnerable people such as those sleeping in the streets referred to as homeless with a specific interest in street children. That population group will not be taken into account in this research.

It will explore what are their life paths leading to their actual situation and what are their daily survival strategies that they have had to develop in a capital city such as Phnom Penh. Additionally, this study will pay particular attention to the Covid-19 situation and examine how these groups are affected by it and how they cope with it. The research will contribute to the knowledge-based on how to tackle poverty in urban areas. It also aims to provide a cultural understanding of what housing and homelessness mean in Cambodia.

This research funded by PIN was carried out on a part-time basis between December 2020 and June 2021 by an anthropologist based in Phnom Penh.

Methodology

The research is mainly based on field interviews. It also includes a literature review and meetings with some key informants.

The literature review of reports, academic papers, and websites provided an overview of what is commonly described as homelessness. We found out that the usual definitions of homelessness do not entirely fit the situations observed in developing countries and would need to be adapted to different contexts and cultures.

The researcher met with a few NGOs working with the most vulnerable people in various targeted areas of Phnom Penh. The fieldwork was conducted from December 2020 until May 2021. An anthropology approach was used to better understand the complexity of the daily struggle of the urban poor while capturing the historical processes and the social roots of their vulnerability.

Due to time limitations of the study, we did not conduct an in-depth research using the method of participative anthropology, which consists of monitoring and observing the daily life of the population. We opted for qualitative semi-structured interviews using open-ended questions based on an interview guide to ask all participants a minimum set of identical questions for comparable qualitative data. However, as the discussion allowed the participants to tell their stories uninterrupted to better understand what was important or not for them, all the listed questions were not always asked to them. This interview technique allows asking spontaneously generated questions to probe for clarification of participants' responses and to follow new, relevant topics that participants want to speak about. Therefore, the results are not displayed in a statistical form.

We conducted 67 interviews with people randomly selected on the streets (cyclo, moto and rickshaw drivers, waste pickers, street sellers, construction workers, etc...).

The lengths of the interviews varied from 10 minutes to 30 minutes depending on the availability and openness of the participants. Organizing new appointments or meeting again with those already interviewed to clarify some points was difficult to do due to the mobility of the people. All the interviews were conducted in the Khmer language by the researcher. To protect the anonymity of the interviewees, their names have been changed.

Limitations

The field research was initially intended to be conducted in several districts in Phnom Penh. It began in mid-December 2020 in the old Phnom Penh in Daun Penh District as the area is well known to host many homeless people around the markets and along the riverside. A few interviews were also held in Stung Meanchey and Russey Keo Districts. Unfortunately, with the movement restrictions and the social distancing measures imposed since the Covid-19 outbreak in the country, referred to as the "February 20 community event",² the conduct of the interviews was severely limited (and even completely halted during the lockdown). The initial program of conducting interviews in different districts had to be revised in light of the new situation caused by the pandemic. Therefore, the majority of the interviews took place within the boundaries of the communes of the old Phnom Penh (Phsar Chas, Phsar Kandal 1 and Phsar Kandal, Wat Phnom Chey Chumneas and Chatomuk Communes in Daun Penh District). Meeting with NGO's street workers and conducting field work with them has not been possible due to the Covid-19 restrictions.

This research first explores what the meanings of "home" and "homelessness" are from an anthropological perspective in the context of developing countries and more specifically in Cambodia. Then, it will give voice to people who live in the streets of Phnom Penh who would tell about their daily lives, especially during the Covid-19 period.

²On February 20, 2021, a small group of travelers breaking the rules of quarantine after landing in Cambodia created a community contamination that spread quickly over the population.

I. Exploring the meanings of “homelessness” and “home”

I.1. Definitions of “homelessness”

Most definitions and typologies of homelessness have been developed by and for industrialized countries. These are generally inappropriate to street homeless people, squatters, or people living in basic conditions in developing countries.

International definitions

The term “homeless” has no standard or internationally recognized definition. It varies from one country to another. Definitions range from narrow interpretations to the ones that enclose a much broader perspective. A homeless person/squatter is generally defined as either living without a roof on the streets or staying in different accommodations without having a secure tenure, a stable structure, and access to basic necessities.

In 2009, a United Nations Group of Experts on Population and Housing Censuses³ identified two broad groups of homeless people: the Primary group that includes people living on the street without a shelter (rooflessness), and the Secondary group including people who do not have a stable place to live.

In 2017, the NGO FEANTSA⁴ designed a typology of Homelessness for European countries called ETHOS⁵. It listed four situations corresponding to homelessness: “rooflessness (without a shelter of any kind, sleeping rough), houselessness (with a place to sleep, but temporary in institutions or shelters), living in insecure housing (threatened with severe exclusion due to insecure tenancies, eviction, domestic violence), living in inadequate housing (in caravans on illegal campsites, in unfit housing, in extreme overcrowding)”.

“Adequate housing”⁶ is recognized as part of the right to an adequate standard of living in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. Its broad definition states that “everyone has the right to live somewhere in security, peace, and dignity.” Several⁷ criteria define what is considered as adequate housing such as security, privacy, access to basic infrastructure (sanitation, water, lighting, ventilation...), habitability (safety and protection against the natural elements), and location.

“Homelessness” within the Cambodian context

In Cambodia, the concept of homelessness understood as a person not having a house/roof for an extended period, is quite recent. Traditionally, in the rural areas, anyone, even the poor people could easily build a makeshift hut with the natural materials taken directly from the immediate surroundings (bamboo, wood, sugar palm leaves, straw...etc.). Only some people regarded as mentally ill and without

³ https://unstats.un.org/unsd/censuskb20/Attachments/2009MPHASIS_ECE_Homeless-GUID25ae612721cc4c2c87b536892e1ed1e1.pdf

⁴ European Federation of National Organisations Working with the Homeless people

⁵ <https://www.feantsa.org/en/toolkit/2005/04/01/ethos-typology-on-homelessness-and-housing-exclusion#:~:text=FEANTSA%20has%20developed%20a%20European,for%20transnational%20exchanges%20on%20homelessness.>

⁶ https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/FS21_rev_1_Housing_en.pdf

⁷ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights of the United Nations

any relatives to take care of them or people suffering from exclusion were seen wandering around and sleeping in random outdoor spaces.

During the difficult periods lasting from 1970 to 1998⁸, people experienced hardship leading to the loss of their homes and having to move to relocate. When arriving at a more stable settlement, they managed to build shelters or small houses. More recently, people forcibly evicted from their houses in rural and urban areas where they had lived without a prior clear settlement with the authorities have also been left homeless for a short period before being able to quickly secure basic housing.

However, if people can usually manage to find a shelter, some people are seen sleeping on the streets of Phnom Penh. The term used to name them in government and international organization programs is a literal translation of the English word "homeless" : **kmien ti lom nowe** - គ្មានទីលំនៅ - "not having a place to stay"⁹. A close term can also be mentioned **គ្មានផ្ទះសម្បែង** - **kmean phteah sambeng** - "not having a house." This last term refers expressly to the fact of not having a physical housing as the first one more broadly implies a place.

Traditionally, in Cambodia, building a house is an important act of family foundation that usually occurs when having the first child and therefore, separating from the parents' house. Great attention is given to the size, the shape as well as the material used as the house. The house is not only a shelter but also an important indicator of the socio-economic status of the owners.

In the past¹⁰, only families of great means lived in wooden houses covered with tiles. The number of roofs and spans would determine the level of their wealth. Someone living in a two roof, three spans' house was considered to be wealthy. However, the majority of the people were living in perishable houses made of a bamboo/light wood structure covered with assembled sugar palm leaves. Each nuclear family (mother, father, and children) was living in a house that they owned. More recently, with the migrations to cities or abroad, families or individuals resorted to living in rented places.

The household (a family living in a house) is the socio-economic reference unit used by the government, international organizations, and NGOs to inventory populations. The National poverty identification system (ID poor) likewise, relies not on the individual but on the household to evaluate the economic level of the people. The observation of characteristics of the house is an important indicator to identify poor families.

During the National Census, the enumerators go from one household to the other. Besides "the regular households", some unsteady people/households are identified such as "homeless people", "Boat people" (living in houseboats), "transient people" and "institutional households" (camps, prisons, hospitals,...).

The "homeless people" are defined as those "who sleep outdoors in public space", "who do not live in a building or a structure (e.g. those who live on the roadside, pavements, park, in open space outside a pagoda or market, etc...)" and who live "in the open."

⁸ 1970-1975 civil war, 1975-1979 khmer rouge regime, 1979-1998 civil war.

⁹ The version translated into French from Khmer in Chun Nath's dictionary defines ti lom nowe as "location, lieu, endroit, place". It differs somewhat from the translation given by Alain Daniel's French- Khmer dictionary, which refers more to a dwelling "domicile, address, residence."

¹⁰ The "old times" are usually referred to as the period before 1975 when the Khmer Rouge took over power. All over the country, people were moved from their original village and house.

Behind the formal phrasing of this official document, the language used in a secondary document used by the field enumerators gives a more precise insight into how people stated as **"homeless people"** are perceived. In a **"manual for enumerators"**¹¹ used out in the field, those listed in this category are described as "beggars, vagrants, and persons of unsound mind who live without a shelter." (in this English translation). We can note that these terms are those more commonly used than the more formal one: **"homeless"** kmien ti lom nowe គ្មានទីលំនៅ.

When asking some Cambodian people met randomly in the streets to define who the people sleeping on the streets are, the answer most often heard is អ្នកសុំទាន a nak som tien **"beggar, people who ask for alms/beggars"** and chn aneathea ជនអនាថា **"vagrant"**. These people are described as lazy, having drug and alcohol addictions as well as mental problems, being thieves, running away from family problems or the police in their native village. They are also mostly considered as being responsible for their fate is understood as the result of their actions in this present life or in the previous lives (according to the religious Hinduist and Buddhist concept of karma¹²).

“They can farm the land like everyone else, but they don't want to do it as they are lazy. They could work. Others have mental illnesses or a special mindset that makes them unfit for work. They do not have a family to support them and they end up on the streets.”

Sophea, female, 35 y. old Phnom Penh.

"They have done bad things in previous lives. It's normal what happens to them. We can't help them. If they want a better next life, it's up to them to change."

Seth, male, 45 y.

"There are some who come to the city to hide. They had problems in their village. They have no ID and no one wants them. We don't know where they come from. They could be bad people."

Chi, male, 70 years old (former village chief)"

Many people find it difficult to consider their rehabilitation:

"The young people sleeping in the streets are drug addicts. We have to be careful with them. They steal to buy drugs. Those who heavily use drugs don't eat anymore. They lose weight and end up dying on the street."

"You can't 'make a dog's crooked tail straight' (Cambodian proverb). You can't change them. They will stay forever like this."

If young people of working age are mostly mistrusted, it is different for older people, including women, or the disabled, who receive more compassion. People give them money or food when they stand at a crossroads. In the Buddhist religious context, they "do a good action" tve bon, which contributes to earning "merits" that will be counted in their next incarnation and will contribute to lightening their own karma.

¹¹General Population Census of Cambodia, 2008- enumerator manual.
<https://www.stat.go.jp/info/meetings/cambodia/pdf/ennumera2.pdf>

¹²Karma: The fate of a living being is determined by the totality of his past actions, those of this life and those of his previous lives.

Karma: The fate of a living being is determined by the totality of his past actions, those of this life, and those of his previous lives.

Those living in visible open places such as along the riverside and the markets are frequently rounded up by security forces and kept locked in the “Prey Speu rehabilitation center” before being brought back to the capital city of their native province even if they have been gone for years (and from where they will return quickly). People who have been locked in this center have reported countless abuses¹³.

Their eviction and their distancing from the city are said to be justified by the “beautification plan” of the city agenda of the Phnom Penh Municipality¹⁴. These city “clean-up” campaigns that promote a government political ideal generally precede international events and the visit of important foreign guests who might travel through the city and see poverty.

Not finding their place in a city that wants to show an image of modernity and high standards projects, the street people are physically and socially excluded from the new urban project¹⁵.

The city officials use the word *anatepadei*, អនាធិបតេយ្យ “anarchy,” to refer to the homeless people who are perceived as chaotic and opposed to the model of an orderly city they want to set up. They also use this word to name the demonstrations/rallies in the city.

Besides these definitions based on perceived negative behaviors of those who do not have a house and who sleep visibly on the streets, we will now explore the meaning of home and homelessness in Cambodia and try to understand how marginality can be produced. Then, we will try to identify other categories of people who sleep on the streets in a less visible way and who are not considered to be homeless.

1.2. The concept of “home” in Cambodia from an anthropological perspective

“Home” has embedded meanings. People considered very vulnerable are commonly referred to as “homeless” based on housing as they live either on the streets or in inadequate conditions. In the field, the reality of “home” is more complex. This chapter will first explore what “home” means as a “house”, a “shelter” and then explore another dimension of “home” such as the “homeland” basis for the building of a social network/structure, essential to daily urban livelihood survival.

“Home” as a physical living place

According to the World Bank, 76 percent of the population in Cambodia resided in rural areas in 2019. In rural areas, where each family with children usually lives in a separate newly built house, a distinction is made between a “house” and a “hut”- ខ្នង - *khtam*.

¹³Report Human Right Watch, They treat us like animals, 2013. -<https://www.hrw.org/node/256496/printable/print>

¹⁴<https://nextcity.org/daily/entry/phnom-penh-is-arresting-the-poor-and-sending-them-to-abusive-vocational-cen>
<https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/homeless-dont-look-good>
<https://opendevelopmentcambodia.net/news/daun-penh-vagrants-rounded-up-prior-to-asean/>

¹⁵However, some vocational training such as sugar cane street vendors have been put in place by the Ministry of Social Affairs but they reportedly failed - homeless-beggars-refuse-vocational-training-ministry 2020 <https://www.khmertimeskh.com/50718563/homeless-beggars-refuse-vocational-training-ministry/>

¹⁶<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.RUR.TOTL.ZS?locations=KH>



- *Traditional rural housing*
- *The house -ផ្ទះ- phteah*

The traditional wooden house on stilts is the main living environment of rural Cambodians. It is the anchoring place where one sleeps, eats, works, and from where one is reluctant to move away to go to the fields, the forest, the market, or the school. All family religious ceremonies¹⁷ such as weddings and funerals traditionally take place in its immediate vicinity.

One nuclear family lives in one house (parents and children). Marriage marks the time when the children must leave and build their own home. Sharing the parent's house might be possible for a while though, but when the first child arrives, it is time to move on and have a home of its own.

Daily life usually takes place under the house on the ground floor. The first floor is reserved for sleeping at night. There, people usually sleep close to each other in the same open room on mats that are unrolled at night. If there is a separate bedroom, it is usually occupied by the teenage daughter. The younger siblings sleep next to each other or to their mother. In traditional houses, the notion of a private place does not exist.

For the people living in houses covered with sugar palm leaves, the house itself was more considered as a shelter than a valuable possession. The house made of perishable materials could be easily rebuilt or moved. Solid wood houses were reserved for the wealthy few of the village. People could also freely clear pieces of land to build a new house until 2001. With the end of free access to land for housing and cultivation (2001 land law) and with the building of brick houses, housing is now becoming more sustainable.

¹⁷ The visit of the Buddhist monastery is mainly done on the occasion of the festivals of the Buddhist calendar or for particular requests of blessings. Some old people also attend the monastery on holy days or stay in huts until the end of their life (old women- Daun chi "nuns") .



- The hut- ខ្នង - khtam.

Family members may live temporarily or more permanently in a basic habitation called Khtam “hut”. It is composed of inexpensive materials (a light wood structure with sugar palm leaves assembled to form a roof or walls, or more recently using cardboard/corrugated steel sheets). Inside the hut, a light structure is built above the ground for sleeping.

The hut can be a temporary housing for a young household while waiting for the construction of the wooden/brick house. It can also be a basic shelter built away from the village close to the fields to be used to watch over the growth of rice plants and vegetables called “field hut”

Ktam Chamkar. ខ្នង ចម្ការ

For some people who have a house in rural areas and who migrate to Phnom Penh for work, the quality of housing in the city is secondary. The rented place in the city can be compared to the hut built close to the rice fields. It is a place of minimum investment in terms of comfort and renovations.

- Urban housing

The recent history of housing in Phnom Penh is very peculiar. Here is some useful data to better understand the current habitat.

Several waves of migration from the countryside to the city have taken place over the past decades. The city of Phnom Phnom has the particularity of having been completely emptied of its inhabitants on April 17, 1975 by the Khmer Rouge. At the fall of this regime in January 1979, refugees mainly composed of urban people¹⁸ came in successive waves to settle in the abandoned city. In the beginning, the State proceeded to the distribution of empty dwellings only to people selected to work in the newly recreated Ministries. Faced with the pressure of the number of new migrants coming to the city to find the means to survive on a daily basis, the state relaxed the rules for granting housing.

¹⁸ Only 30 % of the former residents came back. 70% of the actual population of Phnom Penh originates from rural areas.

The newcomers could settle freely in empty houses and apartments. This temporary occupation could later be transferred into property. During the 1980's, all the old buildings of Phnom Penh would slowly become occupied. The migrants who came to the city a few years later would not have any more access to free empty apartments. Those who had money could buy apartments (at a low price during this period). The poorest had no other solution than to settle in the interstices of the city: between the buildings, on empty lots, on the roof terraces, as well as on the stairs and corridors of the old buildings. In the early 1990's, when the country opened up to the outside world, another wave of poor migrants left the countryside to go to Phnom Penh. This is also when 300,000 refugees returned from camps in Thailand. A number of them choose to come to Phnom Penh. As the houses and apartments were all distributed, some of these new poor migrants settled on state lands (from which they would be evicted years later). After peace was restored in 1998 over the whole country, Phnom Penh welcomed new waves of rural migrants. Access to housing became more difficult. The high price of apartments made it difficult for the new settlers to have access to the real estate market. As the people who got richer moved to newly built apartments, many old apartments, usually in poor condition, were then divided into many small rooms. They were offered for rent to the new migrants.



Nowadays, the city attracts young migrant workers. Until recently, access to land was easy in rural areas. The majority of Cambodian households depended on smallholder agricultural production. Currently, the division of lands between siblings at the time of inheritance¹⁹, the interdiction of clearing open land in the forest for cultivation, as well as the land grabbing by speculators, have greatly reduced access to habitat and agricultural land for the younger generations. Moreover, the young generation has little commitment²⁰ to farming. With the opening of the country to the market economy, new needs such as motorcycles, and mobile phones have emerged. In the provinces, the exploitation of the remaining small plots of land no longer provide enough revenues to meet these new needs. Migrants travel to the cities to find sources of income, whether they are young people, a family member, or an entire family.

- Housing conditions

For those who go to the city to earn money to support their family in the rural villages, the goal is to earn as much money as possible, save it, and remit a part of it to their parents. Therefore, they would try to spend as little as possible on rent. If they can save enough money, the dream is to be able to build/buy a house/compartments on their own. Rent is an important financial burden for migrants.

¹⁹ Most of the migrants on Phnom Penh come from the heavily populated provinces of the country (Prey Veng, Takeo, Svay Rieng, and Kampong Cham)

²⁰ Being a farmer is considered a non-occupation. To the question: "what is your occupation?" Those who do farming usually say: "hot tve ey té, 'I don't do anything'".

When living in the city, the single migrants (mostly young people) retain some habits from the rural areas, such as sharing the same living space. Rent in the city is high for low wages they receive. It is, therefore, more economical for several people to sleep together in a small room, sometimes even on the same bed (girls separated from boys). A group of young girls also reported that sharing a common space gives them a feeling of security and a sense of family. As well as in traditional homes, there is usually little privacy.²¹

Compared to housing in the countryside, accommodations in the city are generally small, poorly ventilated and not opened to daylight. However, they have access to electricity and running water (bathroom/toilet). Living in the city is said to be difficult. People report having a feeling of insecurity and promiscuity. The landlords often change tenants, not giving them enough time to establish bonds of trust with the new neighbors.

"I don't like to live near people. I don't know where they come from. They can be bad people. We do not know. In the village, we know everybody, the good and the bad people. We know their hearts. In the city, we live too close to the others. It itches to live too close to others. There are often problems. We can keep quiet, but we have resentments. In the countryside, you can live separately from others. Houses are not stuck together". Sopheap

The cost of renting one room and the payment of water and electricity bills are shared with all the residents. The renting price of the rooms ranges between \$15/month for an accommodation in a slum to \$100+/month while the monthly earnings vary from \$150 to \$250. For low-skill workers, the average rental rate is \$50/60 for a single room. The city center is more expensive than the suburbs. Once the food and rental expenses are deducted, some or all of the remaining money is usually sent to the family living in the countryside. The sense of duty that is taught during childhood pressures the young migrants (especially women) to take care of the elder parents. They usually give a higher percentage of their salary than men. However, it has to be noted that the younger generation has the tendency to be bigger consumers than their elders. They feel more comfortable in the city, spend more money on clothing, shoes, outings with friends and borrow money to buy telephones, motos,... etc., thus further reducing the amount given to the family.²²

With the birth of the first child, it is time for the couple to rent a room on their own. Raising a child in the city is difficult and costly. One parent has to stay at home to take care of the child, therefore reducing the couple's earnings. It can be possible to ask a young girl, usually a family member, to come from the rural village to help look after the child. She will stay with the family and receive a small sum of money for daily small expenses. If the salary of the working parent is low, less money or no money would be sent to the grand-parents. Single parenthood is quite common. In that case, it is usually the woman who takes care of the children in case of separation/divorce (it is not a strict rule as men can also take care of the child/children).

For people who cannot afford to stop working and who have low incomes, the easiest solution is to send the children to their parents' or siblings' homes in rural areas. A part of the salary is given to them for

²¹In order to save money, some beds can be shared between those who work night and day shifts. Inside the rooms, the light is often permanently on to allow easy entry and exit depending on the work of the room occupants' work shifts (in the case of garment workers). Anyone can listen to his own music or talk on the phone inside the room.

²²It appears that the youngest generations tend to send less money to their parents and keep more for themselves.

food, clothing and educational expenses. For those who cannot rely on the family network, the solution is to leave the child with a full time “nanny”- *mé dah* - មេដាវ. That alternative can be very costly (\$100 to \$150/month). Some parents who cannot take care of the children might surrender the child to a family or another person who will raise him/her and become the “adoptive mother” *mday chenhchum*- ម្តាយចិញ្ចឹម. Another option for very poor families is to bring their children to State or NGO orphanages that will take care of their children.

We can also mention cases of parents living in rural areas who are willing to provide a good education to their children when entering high school. In the absence of boarding schools, the children might stay with relatives or acquaintances in the city. Some of them complete their studies while others drop out of school. They usually end up working informally for the family that hosts them as a way to repay their stay. The young girls take care of the children, prepare meals, and do the housework. The young boys provide some help in the family business. They can stay with the family until they get married.

Another option (only for the young boys) is to stay at the Buddhist monastery. There, they share housing and lunch with the monks. Here again, only the boys whose families have good connections with the head monks can stay in monasteries for the duration of their studies. Some might stay longer and leave when they get married. To cover their expenses and in order to gain “merits”, their families will make donations to the monastery.

When the parents do not have family members in the city to host their children, either both parents or one parent might come to the capital, find some work and rent a room.

This is the case of Dara, 35 years old who came alone to Phnom Penh. He works as a moto driver to pay the rent and the school expenses at his home village. Rice and some food are coming from his home village. His wife stays at “home” in the village to take care of the house and the lands.

Those who have left their children in the provinces might also ask them to come to the city after the completion of primary school to continue their education. Some parents spend large amounts of money on private education, hoping that their children would have opportunities that they did not have and earn good money to take care of their parents in the future. Other parents who are too poor might just ask their children to come to the city to work and financially help them.

In rural areas, it is common to see entire villages only inhabited by old people and children, the young generation having left for the city or abroad.

It is interesting to note that even the families that settled in Phnom Penh in the 1980's continue to have rural habits of living. In some old buildings, they cook on charcoal stoves in the corridors. Like in the countryside with houses made of perishable materials, no or very few renovations are made, leaving the old building in bad conditions.

Grandmother Tan came in 1980 from Koh Kong Province with her daughter. They have occupied a 12 square meters room until now. In 2021, five more people live with them: the 3 children (girls) of the daughter and two cousins. The room is windowless. The toilets and shower are shared with other rooms on the landing. Each user has to keep the place clean after using it. Everyone cleans only in front of their room that could be later used. The staircases are generally badly maintained as there is no sense of common areas that should be maintained collectively.

Those who do not have any relatives or acquaintances to help them in the city might only have the solution to sleep in the streets at the beginning before being able to find a paid activity and earn enough money to rent a room. Having connections in the city is crucial.

"Home" as a social and territorial anchoring and networking

In addition to the definition of the term **"home" as a "house/dwelling"**, we now propose to explore another aspect of "home" which has great importance in terms of vulnerability or strength in the Cambodian society : **"Home"** as **"the place where a person feels they belong"**²³ which can be translated in Cambodia as **"homeland" srok ស្រុក**.

The relation to the homeland in terms of social networking is very important in Cambodian society. The traditional phrase when two people meet is not to ask about their psychological or physical state **"how are you doing?"**, but to ask **"where do you come from?"** mok pi nah? or more precisely from which area they originated? **"neak srok nah?(meaning their native place srok kamnaet ស្រុកកំណើត)**. The name as it appears on the ID card is not used much in everyday life and does not indicate the origin of the person. Until recently, it was possible to change it easily. Homeland is the real identity marker for people in Cambodia. To be cut off from the original territorial anchorage is therefore equivalent to a social identity, and even administrative rupture as we will describe below.

One Khmer term defining the homeless people (as aforementioned)) is interesting to explore because it includes a social dimension in addition to the purely materialistic aspect of not having a house: **chn aneathea ជនអនាថា or mnouh aneathea មនុស្សអនាថា**. According to the Khmer dictionary by Chuon Nath²⁴ - it is defined as a "wanderer, unsupported, lonely, isolated, without a master, miserable." Misery is here associated with being alone, i.e. cut off from a network whether it be the family, the village community, or also an employer ("master" in the old times) or others. **"Wanderer"** also includes the notion of not having any spatial anchoring. While a physical shelter may be a basic existential need, **"home"** in the sense of **"homeland"** underpins human sociality and social networking that are essential for survival in the Cambodian context.

As observed in developing countries, the understanding of **"home"** is less based on the concept of house or shelter than on the concept of kin. In Cambodia, security, housing, and access to jobs come first from the interaction between relatives, people who originated from the same village, or people from a recomposed family-based relations network. The people defined as **chn aneathea, "wanderers"** are by definition people who do not have any place to stay and any social connections to provide them with some support. During the interviews, it became abundantly clear that those in the most difficult situations had little or no outside support, either from family or acquaintances.

²³English Cambridge dictionary

²⁴French free translation of Chuon Nath Khmer dictionary - Dictionnaire Cambodgien-Français du Père Rogatien Rondineau, Phnom Penh, 2007

²⁵SPEAK, Suzanne - Alternative Understandings of Homelessness in Developing Countries, Global Urban Research Unit School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape, Working paper No. 49 - <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/mediav8/apl/files/guru-ewp/EWP49.pdf>

In the absence of a state system that ensures the same rights for everyone, relying on family or informal external networks allows, among other things, means to find work and helpful resources for problems or situations.

For a migrant, being part of a social group is vital when arriving in the city. Finding housing and jobs in the city is almost exclusively based on having or not having a formal or informal family to rely on²⁶ Coming to town is usually arranged by family members or acquaintances²⁷ before the trip. The unskilled migrants who are born in the rural areas and come to the city are for the greater part supported by their family members or friends from the day of their arrival in the city. They are provided with a secure place to stay and a connection to possible employment. Usually, the choice of the job is not in their hands. They will do what their network can offer them such as a position as a construction worker or waiter/waitress at restaurants. Thus, it is common to find young people from the same rural area working together. Once people are part of a work network, they might stay for an extended period of time as they are expected to act in the interests of the family/community group.- (e.g. a construction worker follows his boss to successive construction sites). For family members, money is not asked for helping to secure a job but a service/favor may be requested in exchange in the future. If outside help is involved, there is usually a financial negotiation between the person offering a work recommendation and the person looking for a job. The amount of the commission varies. It can be the first month's salary, half a month's salary, or a certain amount deducted every month for a certain period. For salaries of low wages, there is usually a one-time commission payment that can be around \$30. In addition to providing housing and work, the people in the city who serve as a family base can also provide the newcomers with loans (with interest). Those who have moved to the city (or abroad) then encourage their family or friends to work in their industry. In this way, they form small alliance groups in the new location.

28

The recommendations are highly important for the recruiter. Hiring a person whose origin is known is a guarantee of security. Working with someone who is not related to a trusted group is not considered to be safe. An outsider is said to be difficult to understand **hot touk chiet**, **hot chioul chet** "I do not enter inside his heart" **hot smaer trang** "he is not the same (as us)", **hot doy yeng** "he is not like us." In case of robbery or breach of trust (e.g. debts not reimbursed), it would be difficult to find the person or ask for reimbursement from a family member.

Outside purely biological kinship ties, other forms of solidarity can be created, based on the family model.

- "Having links/social connections" **mien ksae** មាន ភ្នែក

²⁶ A study held in 2019 reveals that "Most of them (around 90 percent) came to Phnom Penh with some assistance of their families - Urban Vulnerability in Phnom Penh - World Food program: <https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000105975/download/>

²⁷ External recruiters such as **mé kyal** "intermediaries" go from one village to the other to recruit groups of people (construction/ domestic workers, prostitutes, jobs abroad). He/she manages the group recruited by collecting salaries directly and then paying back to the workers while keeping a part of it. This type of recruitment by people from outside the village is now viewed with suspicion due to cases of money extortion to get jobs that are never provided as well as human trafficking. Some poor families may also engage for money/sell their children to outsiders. The child might be able to leave this relationship until after the money is paid back.

²⁸ e.g. one village in Kampong Thom Province has special connections with hostess bars in street 130 and 136. Therefore, many of the young girls of the village willing to go to work in the capital city end up being taxi-girls. The girls interviewed said that they can earn more money than working in a garment factory, more specifically for those who get financial support from one or more lovers.

Having “links” is the term used to express the fact of having bonds with influential people who can provide help in case of need. These links go beyond simple consanguinity or the relationship to the village of origin. They are created on the basis of a proximity between people who maintain a form of contract of trust between them. Each one expresses his or her link to the other while using the family hierarchical system based on the relation “elders” **bang បង** to “cadets” **baaun ប្អូន** with the rights and duties associated with it.

Depending on the age and economic or social status, a kinship term will be given to the two people which will condition the hierarchical relationship that one intends to maintain with the other. The relationship is expressed through the terms - **uncle/aunt to nephew/niece - Grandfather/grandmother to grandchild**. For example, a boss will call his employees my “grandchildren”, **kaun chawក្មេងចៅ...** Exchanges are made on the basis of the gift-exchange theory developed by Marcel Mauss.²⁹ A service rendered will be accountable in the future. A gift results in putting people under obligations. “Elders” have a duty to protect those recognized as “cadets”. They in turn owe them allegiance. Some of these relationships are circumstantial and opportunistic and are quick to create and dissolve while others last longer.

We notice that the new generations who are born in cities are less dependable on traditional family networks and the parents' native villages. They can create their own networks based on their own encounters.

- “Being outside the circle (of social connections)” **kraw vong ក្រៅ រង្វង់**

The lack of social ties is a strong determinant to social exclusion or marginalization leading to homelessness.

The situations vary. Some people never had a solid network, other people had it and then lost it. The people living in poverty since their birth might have a network but it is often limited within the boundaries of their powerless world. They have few opportunities to connect with outsiders who could help them to get out of the circle of poverty. Without good job opportunities and low education skills, the potential to reproduce the same schema of poverty is high. Other people were previously supported by their family and friends. They have lost it completely or partially when facing various challenges such as problems with the local authorities or other villagers, family conflict and break-ups, divorce, alcohol/drug addiction, gambling addiction, bad behavior, mental problems or disease such as living with HIV or after being released from prison. Without family support or connections, they can be driven into extreme poverty. Some people also reported having good relations with their families but they said that they did not want to inconvenience them as they were poor as well and also because they were ashamed of their situation. During the field interview, we noted that a great number of the people living in the streets were single, either never married because of poverty, or divorced related to various problems such as alcoholism.

People without social networking find themselves in vulnerable positions in the city. Those people usually end up with working activities such as moto/tuk tuk drivers or waste pickers that do not require specific recommendations from other people. A number of them sleep in the streets or in inadequate conditions.

²⁹ Marcel Mauss, « Essai sur le don. Formes et raisons de l'échange dans les sociétés archaïques », L'année sociologique, nouvelle série, tome 1, 1923-1924

“My wife has left me and doesn't want to see me anymore. The whole family is against me. It's true that I drink and that I can be violent. But, it's difficult now, I'm alone. At night I sleep in my tuk-tuk.” *Bunnal, male, 52 years old, tuk-tuk driver*

Collecting waste from the streets and reselling it to waste collectors is a convenient way to get enough food from day to day without depending on others and without any initial investment. Access to street waste is free. Anyone can collect waste and sell it immediately.

After facing relational problems with her employers and family, Sokchea was left alone without any network support. She had no other solution but to be a waste-picker.

“I was married with one child but I had problems with my husband. I worked in a spa massage and I did not get along well with some of the other girls. The boss fired me. Now, it is difficult to find another job as I do not know anyone who can help me. My former colleagues did not offer to help me find another job. Now, I collect waste from the street and sell it. I sleep in the streets. I would like to find a place to rent but if the owner does not know you, he asks for high prices. My son is staying with my mother-in-law. I have not seen him for a long time. My mother-in-law does not authorize me to see him.” *Sok Cheat, female, 40 years old*

Some newly released prisoners are also cut from their family/acquaintance network. It is difficult for them to rebuild a new life.

“I just got out of prison. In my village, my family no longer wants to have any contact with me. I stole several times in the village and my family rejected me. Then, I came to Phnom Penh. The police arrested me after I stole a handbag. I was sent to prison. I just got out of prison. Nobody wants to help me - but, I don't ask for help. For my daily expenses, I just collect waste in the streets and sell it to the waste collector. I would like to use a handcart which is more convenient to carry waste but he (the waste collector) doesn't want to provide me one because he says that I'm going to sell it. It's difficult because I have to carry all the waste in bags and it is heavy. I live from day to day. At night, I find a place to sleep in front of a house. I change every day. I know some people who do the same as me. Sometimes we can be together and sometimes we have conflicts.” *Soth, male, around 30+,*

Being "outside the circle" and not being able to receive family support to find a place to sleep and a job is often correlated with the issue of not having Identity Documents. The most important documents are the National Identity card, a birth certificate, and the family book³⁰. Not having any Identification documents closes the door to job opportunities, access to social services, housing, bank, accounts and loans,....and also government assistance.

³⁰The family book is a very important document. It lists all the members of a family and their kinship. It is the primary document used to certify Khmer nationality and to apply for a wide array of government services such as birth certificates, National Identity Card, passports and driver's licenses.

In the case of loss of Identity documents or when it is time to renew the National identity card³¹ The applicants have to ask the authorities of the commune of their last registry - in majority of the cases, it is at their native homeland.³² The migrant people living in Phnom Penh (and more specifically those who are homeless or move frequently from one place to another) remain administratively registered at the family village as long as they have not purchased a dwelling in Phnom Penh or have not stayed long enough in the rented place to be recognized by the local authorities (a document issued from their original village help them to register in a new place in town).

During the interviews, the majority of the respondents reported keeping their administrative registration at their home village. Even for people who have settled in Phnom Penh for years, the territorial and identity anchoring to the *srok kamnaet* "native village" remains strong. In Phnom Penh, where the poorest do not own their own homes, the rented place in the city has no value as an identity marker. It is mainly considered a place to sleep in the evening with little social, and administrative involvement.

Therefore, the renewal of Identification cards and even the voting card is maintained at the native village. The reason given is that in the home village, the relationship with the local authorities is easier "because they know us" whereas in the city, "you have to wait a long time", "they don't respect us", "you have to pay more if they don't know us." Frequent moves and loss of documents are given as another reason. In our village, if we lose our documents³³ there will always be someone who knows us and who will redo the papers." Thus, even for a child born in Phnom Penh, migrant parents will be more likely to request a birth certificate in the rural village.

³⁴

Thus, many migrant people remain registered in the family book of their parents or siblings at their native village. They report not having "separated yet" from the parents' family book . In rural areas, married children either son or daughter, can be recorded on the "family book"³⁵ of their parents with their children if they stay in the same house. When they go to work in Phnom Penh, they keep the registration on the "family book" of their parents. In Phnom Penh, they show a certified photocopy of the "family book" to the authorities. The separation from the parents is normally done at the time of the construction/purchase of a house/dwelling. A "residence book" will then be issued by the local authorities which will allow requesting a new "family book" headed by the owners of the house.

The birth certificate can also be asked as proof of identity. According to the Law, it has to be done after the birth of a child at the commune office. Many families fail to do it and wait until it is time for their child to enter school to ask for one. Adults who have lost their birth certificate or who never had one can ask for a retroactive or a replacement one at the native village of the parents. Some relatives or witnesses might be asked to confirm the identity of the applicant.

³¹ The latest ID's have been issued in 2018. The former ones are considered as invalid.

³² Even being born and living in Cambodia for generations, some groups are still stateless in Cambodia. Among those who have difficulty obtaining identity documents, we can mention the people with an immigrant background, whether they are Khmer who used to live in Vietnam (Khmer Krom) or ethnic Vietnamese who have resided in Cambodia for a long time. Since 2013, registration programs for naturalization are underway, which should allow them to have access to the same rights as Cambodians.

³³ With the exception of a few Buddhist manuscripts, very few old documents have survived the Khmer Rouge period. In nowadays administrations and also at home, the documents are not kept long because of the action of the insects, the climate and the lack of adequate storage equipment.

³⁴ Some commune chiefs, however, refuse these registrations and recommend that the child be registered at the new place of residence.

³⁵ After getting married, it is assumed that the new couple would ask for his own family book.

The bad relations/problems with the family, villagers and/or the local authorities make the renewal of documents very difficult for those who are still administratively registered at their home village. Those who have family conflicts, who have left without reimbursing debts, or who have committed felonies might run away to the city to begin a new life.

"I do not want to go back to my home village. Only my elder sister resides there and I do not go along with her. I have asked the local authorities to provide me with a new family book but they told me to wait. I cannot wait because I have no place to stay there. If I want to have the documents done quickly, I need to pay them and I do not have enough money to give to them. I have stopped going there. For now, it is OK, I do not need documents as I am staying with my elder sister (not kinship)."

Sareth, male, 45 years old, waste-picker.

People also reported that they cannot afford to pay fees to get the documents and that they do not dare to meet with the authorities.

"I am used to not having any documents. It is too complicated to do. I do not want to go to my native place to do it. I do not have money to do it. I do not know anybody there anymore and I do not know how to do it. If I go on my own, the local authorities will look down on me. And, I cannot afford to stay there waiting for the documents. People say that they have to come several times and ask but they do not listen to the poor people. When you have money, you can get documents faster. When you are poor, they say "wait, wait, come back another day. I know that if I pay, I can get the documents easily. Meeting with the authorities is difficult. You never know if there will be problems. So, I prefer not to ask for documents."

Van, male, 35 years old

Being a chn aneathea, a vagrant without an anchorage to a specific place is a form of an identity erasure.

Getting a form of local recognition without providing any documents is however possible when residing in one urban area for an extended period of time and being known by the local authorities. However, getting a new ID, a family book, and a birth certificate without providing proper documents to support the request is much more challenging (especially without money).

Those who have been cut off from their native roots, and who move from one place to another, have no solution other than to live without documents. Invisible to the administration, they will also be more easily excluded from aid programs for the poorest.

Sophal, male, 45 years old, is a motorcycle driver based at the Phsar Kandal Market. At night, he sleeps by lying on his motorcycle. He no longer has an ID card and says that he cannot renew it without giving a specific explanation.

"I am from Prey Veng. I am an orphan. I have no family. I came to Phnom Penh when I was young and worked as a construction worker. I stopped 10 years ago because it was too difficult. It was tiring. I bought an old motorcycle and I work as a driver. For 10 years, I've been sleeping on the street, always in the same place. Nobody bothers me because they know me here. I'm used to it. I don't have an ID card or a family book. I don't have an equity card. I can't go back to my home village and ask for new documents."

Dara, male, waste-picker, 47 years old, has no ID card. He reports dealing with this issue by having a daily routine in one specific area. There, the fact that the people know him provides a kind of local identity and consequently, protection.

“I’ve been a waste picker for a long time. I left my village in Prey Veng Province a long time ago. I lost my ID card and I don’t have a birth certificate. It’s expensive to redo another one and I will face problems if I ask for it. I can’t go back to my home village and have a new one done because I had problems with people there. I have no documents, but no one bothers me here. Every day, I always do the same thing and people know me. I don’t like going too far with clients whom I don’t know. I sleep in front of a shop at night.”

For Sath, a 52 years old male, going back to the native village to redo new documents is not possible either.

“15 years ago, I had issues with a neighbor. He always parked on my field and played karaoke loudly. He wouldn’t listen to me when I was asking him to stop. One day, it was really loud. I told him to stop but he yelled at me. I was very angry and we fought. He complained to the police and said that I had stabbed him. Because he had good connections with the police, I was afraid. I left and never came back. My wife and children still live in the village. I don’t want to go back. I only have my old ID. Maybe I could have my card redone here, but it’s too expensive.”

Chantha, a 41-year-old single woman, etchai, 3 children, recently moved to a new location and could not receive government subsidies in Phnom Penh as the village chief suspects her to be registered in her native village and possibly receiving help from there.

“I am originally from Takeo. When I was 20, I came to help my aunt sell vegetables at the Olympic Market. When I was 22, I was hired to clean for a family for 60,000 riels/month. I stayed there for 5 years and then I got married. My husband was a construction worker. He died of an illness. I don’t know what he died of. We didn’t have money to take him to the hospital, so he died. I have three children aged 17, 11, and 4. The two youngest are staying with my mother in Takeo. The eldest works as a construction worker. I don’t go and see the children and my mother very often. Once a year, for the New Year, and if I have the money. I have two younger sisters who work in garment factories. I can’t do this job as I can’t see well. I am registered in my mother’s family book. She receives money from a Covid cash subsidy scheme. She does not give me any money. I asked the village chief if I could get some help too because I am poor, but he refused, saying that I had not lived here long enough for him to put me on the list of beneficiaries. He also said that if I am poor, I should get money from the place where I am registered.”

However, after severing ties with family and acquaintances, it is still possible to rebuild other forms of support and protection. For those who manage to build a shelter on a sidewalk and stay there long enough to show that they are honest and that they will not cause any trouble, a form of informal common-interest contract can be made with the local residents. Thus, those who sleep in front of or

next to a store can be tolerated by the owner because their presence will provide protection against possible thieves at night. The shop owner can also ask the person to do some shopping for him during the day or to sweep the sidewalk. The person who provides a form of help and protection in exchange for small services is called **neak tipeung**, អ្នកទីពឹង, “the **“person on whom we can rely on”**”. This exchange is based on trust for mutual benefit.

Some people would only stay in the streets briefly before being able to find a more sustainable solution. People who are new to street life following a series of bad issues can turn the situation around by asking people they know (even from afar) for help. Asking for help is equivalent to laying down the foundation for a dependency relationship based on reciprocity. What is requested today can be returned in another form, later on, depending on the needs of the person who is helping. The assistance is requested directly. The person who is being solicited may or may not agree to help. A refusal will not be badly perceived.

However, after a series of demands for help not followed by any good results and the loss of money could end the relationship and leave the requester helpless.

Based on these observations, we underline the importance of including the loss of family-based networks to a lack of physical shelter to define what is homelessness in Cambodia. Social exclusion such as “belonging nowhere” is a major component of homelessness.

After having defined some elements to better understand homelessness in Cambodia, we will now meet with people who live on the street or in precarious conditions and try to understand what their daily lives are.



II. Meeting with some Phnom Penh streets' sleepers

Besides people identified as beggars and vagrants, other groups of people sleep in a less visible way on the streets of Phnom Penh or in inadequate living conditions. For the Phnom Penh residents and the Municipality, they are clearly differentiated from the first group of people. They are not considered homeless people and are not regarded as a nuisance. They are seen as poor or very poor people who work and do have a place in society although low. They are broadly described as migrant workers who occasionally leave their houses in rural villages to come to the city to earn a living for their family. On the field, the interviews showed a more nuanced situation.

After having brought some thoughts on the concept of home and homelessness in Cambodia, we will now try to identify some people living in the streets while working, the reasons that led them to that situation and how they cope with it.

The number of workers sleeping on the street or in rough conditions in Phnom Penh is difficult to assess. It fluctuates with the seasons, individual stories, and the economic context (such as during the Covid-19 outbreak). Some of the people interviewed consider that they are homeless in the sense of "not having any place to stay", others do not. There are a range of different situations.

During the field visits, some workers (individuals or groups) who sleep on the streets have been identified. They can roughly be grouped into four main categories (which are not rigid as there is fluidity in between some of them):

- The migrants who have a house in the rural areas and who sleep intermittently on the streets of Phnom Penh - They do not define themselves as homeless although they spend most of their lifetime on the streets. (cyclos, motos, tuk-tuk and rickshaw drivers, occasional waste-pickers).
- Those who have just faced economic problems (loss of work and inability to pay rent) or social problems (divorce that leads to leaving the family home) and who sleep on the street for a short period (occasional waste-pickers, street vendors) - We have also included some people who are victims of the economic effects of the Covid-19 in this category.
- Those who have been living on the streets in the long term and who are very poor and vulnerable (single and poor, marginalized and drug or alcohol sellers and users), who are struggling to find enough money on an ongoing basis to pay for rent, and who cannot rely on a relational network to house them. We also encountered those who have always known this way of life and who do not come out of it, like street children who become adults and still live on the streets. (small occasional jobs, waste pickers, small street vendors)
- We can also mention those who stay at their place of work in basic conditions (mobile workers staying at buildings or road construction sites, car parking and laundromat workers, helpers of commercial booths on the markets, domestic workers).
- We can also add those who live on small boats (fishermen, small sellers on the riverside).

II.1. Cyclos, motos, tuk-tuk and rickshaw drivers

A flexible activity

Transporting people and goods over short distances in the city has long been a way to earn money quickly, independently, and freely. Cyclos, then motorcycles, tuk-tuk and now, rickshaw are widely used daily by the people in Phnom Penh.

Dating back to French Indochina, the “cyclos-pousse” have been a very common daily means of transportation until recently. In the 1990’s, the opening of Cambodia to the outside world led to an influx of motorized transportation. Fast motorcycle-cabs (motodoup ម៉ូតូឌុប or “moto double”) were quickly preferred to the slow cyclos. Trailers pulled by a motorcycle (in Khmer reumk រ៉ឺម៉ក from the french word remorque “trailer”) called by foreigners tuk-tuk³⁶ appeared first in Siem Reap³⁷ and then in Phnom Penh. Initially designed to transport tourists, they quickly conquered Cambodian families. The tricycle rickshaws (kang bei កងប៊ី - “3 wheels”), imported from India have made a recent appearance. They are fast, more secure, easy to maneuver, and energy savers. Connected with online booking and payment applications, they now supplant motodoup and tuk-tuk.

The drivers of these light vehicles who live in Phnom Penh with their families and who manage to earn enough money usually stay in a rented room. Those who are single or divorced usually share a room with other people. Those who need to save for their family living in the province or who have money problems (recent divorce, loans to repay,...etc.) may stay on the streets. However, they do not consider themselves homeless. They claim to have a place of residence in the province. It can be a house that belongs to them or the house of their parents or siblings’ with whom they are staying when coming back to the province (where they are registered on the family book).

Over the last two decades, the traditional cyclo has been on the verge of vanishing, faced with the emergence of faster modes of transport like motorbikes, tuk-tuks, and rickshaws. The moto and the tuk-tuk that could be seen at each corner of the streets in the 2000’s in central Phnom Penh are now also disappearing. People prefer to use the security and comfort of the rickshaw.

The cyclo drivers who sleep on the streets said that they do not consider themselves homeless as they have a house in the provinces. They report coming to work in the city intermittently.

“I come from Prey Veng Province to work as a moto driver. My land is very small and we needed extra income to feed the entire family. I have a house there. Before, I was coming to Phnom Penh only during the dry season when there was no work to do in the rice fields. Now, I stay longer as I sold my land. My wife sells some groceries in front of the house. I go back to my house when I have money to give to the family.” Suon, a 63 years old male.

“I have been a cyclo-driver for a long time. Before, there were a lot of people leaving the village during the dry season to come to work in Phnom Penh. Then, the richest bought motos and then tuk-tuk. I am poor so I could never afford to buy a moto. I have too many children so it is difficult to find enough money to raise them. At night I sleep on the streets to save money for my family.” Sareth, male, 69 years old.

³⁶tuk-tuk : a word initially used for the three wheel rickshaw used in Thailand. It is improperly used for the Cambodian remark : a trailer pulled by a motorcycle

³⁷originally pulled by bicycles to transport tourists to Angkor

Rickshaw drivers have greater economic resources than cyclos or motorcycle drivers. Many of them are former tuk-tuk drivers who sold their tuk-tuk to buy a more lucrative vehicle. Young people or people who had other jobs also entered this profession attracted by the promise of quick profits. The ease of use of smartphone applications to easily order a rickshaw at a fixed price has quickly conquered a growing customer base in the city.

The purchase price of a new rickshaw is between \$3,500 and \$4,700. A bank loan is often necessary to purchase a rickshaw. Several interviewees told us that they had taken out a loan with AEON Specialized Bank Mall.³⁸ For this, the applicants have to provide an ID, proof of a minimum of \$100 monthly income and proof of residence.

The majority of rickshaw drivers have a place to stay. Although rickshaw drivers have more money than cyclo drivers, some of them also sleep on the street at night. There are several reasons for this. As for the cyclo and motorcycle drivers, some come alone from the provinces and prefer to save the price of renting accommodation in the city. We also met with individuals who lived in a rented room, but they found themselves on the street after having to deal with divorce or/and had economical problems. Many of them reported having taken loans, especially for the purchase of the rickshaw. With the economic crisis caused by Covid (drastic drop in the number of customers), the repayment of monthly installments becomes the priority.

Renting a room is expensive in the capital city of Phnom Penh. Roth, male 48 years old, is a migrant worker who chooses to save money by sleeping on the street.

“Ten years ago, I was a motodop. Then I had a tuk-tuk made in Siem Reap to transport tourists. It worked quite well during the high season. More recently, rickshaws arrived with the PassApp and Grab (smartphone Apps). It worked very well and a lot of people who were not tourists used it. I bought a rickshaw by taking out a loan. The repayments are high, \$130/month. So I have to work a lot. Before, I used to come home more often with my motorcycle. Now I’m staying in town longer to pay off the loan. I can rent my rickshaw to other people when I go to visit my family in Prey Veng Province, but it’s hard to find someone I can trust. I can’t rent a place to stay and pay for my loan at the same time. So I sleep in my rickshaw at night.”

Those who do not have a fixed address, money, and an ID card can count on their relationship network to help them to acquire or rent a rickshaw.

Chin, a 40 years old male, born in Kampong Cham Province, separated from his wife and 2 children (living in Phnom Penh), following bad investments that led the family to ruin.

" In 2014, I was living in a house with my family. I invested all my own money and my family's money in a company promising a good return on investment. The company's managers ran away abroad with the money. My family was very angry with me. My parents have a grocery store next to the airport. They lost all their savings, about \$400,000. As I did not have any money left, we (my family) had to leave the house that we were renting and live with my brother. My wife is still staying with my brother who is repairing motorcycles.

³⁸AEON Specialized Bank Mall offers personal loans up to \$5,000 .

³⁹Daily rental prices vary between \$3 and \$5.

I wanted to re-invest more money with another investment project but my family rejected me. My brother helped me to find another job. He advanced the money to buy the rickshaw and registered it under his name. I now have to work to pay him back. Since my wife doesn't want me to live with her anymore, I sleep in the rickshaw every night and work during the day. I also come here (close to Cambodiana Hotel) during the day to relax as I cannot sleep very well at night."

Dara, male, 30 years old, born in Phnom Penh, divorced, one child. Although homeless, he was able to benefit from an AEON loan, thanks to his family network.

"I divorced two or three years ago. My wife kept the family book. I don't have an ID card. I don't have a place to live either. At first, I worked in a factory. I was earning about \$10/day. It was difficult. Since I have no place to live and no ID, my brother borrowed money from the AEON bank so I could buy a rickshaw. I pay him back \$123 every month. Before Covid, I was earning 70,000 Riel/day, now, it's 30,000 Riel/day. My whole family is poor. My brother is a guard. My parents are dead. At night I sleep in my rickshaw. I could rent a room near the factories, where it's cheaper than in the city center (\$30-40/month). But since I don't have any ID, it's difficult".

Yalin, male, 54 years old, born in Takeo, father of 3 children, finds himself on the street following a series of problems.

"I used to have a good job. I worked for a child protection NGO. I was accused of corruption and I was fired. My wife lives in the Stung Meanchey District. She sells takeaway food. She earns 30,000 to 40,000 riels a day. Our rent is \$170 a month plus \$30 worth of electricity. Our three children are grown-up. They are between 20 and 30 years old. I owe a lot of money so I can no longer pay rent, especially since Covid. I bought the rickshaw on credit with AEON. I pay back \$100 a month. I still have a few months of repayments left. I also have to pay back the loans for the purchase of two lands in Takeo, one of \$8,500 and the other of \$12,000. I have to pay back \$288/month. Currently, I earn 20 -30,000 riels/day while before COVID, I earned \$20 the best days. For the past two months, I have been borrowing interest-free loans from friends for my daily expenses. For the first month, I borrowed \$30, and for the second month \$150. This month was particularly challenging due to the November 28th COVID event⁴⁰. I am staying here because this is my work area across from the Royal Palace and I do have problems with my wife. She has moved and she doesn't want me in her new home."

Rent prices in the city center are high. The poorest can find cheap housing in the suburbs of Phnom Penh. Since these locations are far from the work areas, a driver reports only coming back home at night occasionally to save time and fuel.

"My family home is in Russey Keo District. It's far away and congested in the morning and evening. There are not many clients in this part of Phnom Penh. The best areas are in the city center. So, at night, I stay here and sleep in the rickshaw. When I'm too tired, I go home and rest the whole day. " Dara, male, 32 years old.

⁴⁰interview made on December 2020

Even if considered poor, it appears that being a cyclo driver is generally more understood as a form of self-employment rather than a last-resort survival activity. Compared to other groups of people living in the streets, the cyclo drivers share a sense of community and to some extent, pride. During difficult periods, they attract compassion from some inhabitants of Phnom Penh. They were among the first in the Daun Penh area to receive help from individuals and self-help groups during the Phnom Penh lockdown.

The particularity of the driver's activity is flexibility. Anyone can decide to come to work in town on an occasional basis. Until recently, the migration of cyclos and motorcycle drivers to the city depended on the agricultural calendar: plowing, transplanting, and harvesting rice. The use of power tillers, the end of rice transplanting, and the monetization of the agricultural labor force⁴¹ as well as the use of fertilizers and chemicals have helped to reduce the time spent working in the rice fields. In addition, the investment in the purchase of a rickshaw, often in the form of a loan, requires more working days to recoup the amount invested or to repay the loan. Therefore, for many migrants, the seasonal migration to the city transformed into longer stays.

Motorcycle drivers are younger than the cyclo-drivers. Some work full time as for many, it is a⁴²secondary activity. They are becoming increasingly rare. They have to compete with tuk-tuk and now rickshaws which bring more comfort and security (theft and accidents). They are not as united as the cyclo-drivers. Most of them sleep in a rented place with their family or alone. The ones who sleep on the streets did not have family support. During the survey, we only met male cyclo, moto, or rickshaw drivers. This profession, with a few rare exceptions, is masculine.

Urban economic strategies

Joining an association

Many of the cyclos, motodop, tuk tuk and rickshaw drivers join associations that provide them with support in case of conflict with customers, police, traffic accidents, and help them to better know their rights.

The cyclo driver association CCCA (cyclo Conservation & Careers Association) is very active. Its goal was initially to provide support and educational training to cyclo drivers in order to upgrade their standards of living. It also intends to maintain cyclo drivers in Phnom Penh as part of the city's heritage. The drivers can buy or rent cyclos from the association. A cyclo is rented for 2000 riels/day. This rental system is very convenient for intermittent migrants. In 1999, 1500 cyclos were registered in Phnom Penh; this figure is down to 200 in 2021. This profession, which is not very remunerative and physically difficult, does not attract the younger generations who prefer to have a motorized work tool. The oldest one is reported to be 82 years old.

⁴¹the traditional farming practices costing a lot of man's labor

⁴²However, with the decrease in the number of cyclos drivers, the head of the association acknowledges that most drivers no longer pay the daily rental fee.

In 2018, Prime Minister Hun Sen launched the "Cyclo Foundation" providing cyclo drivers access to free medical treatment at public hospitals and a subsidy of \$52.50 each month. Today, the cyclo drivers can still be seen around some markets such as Phsar Kandal, Phsar Chas, Phsar O Russey, Phsar Thmey. They are made up of small communities of people who have known each other for a long time and who help each other. Cyclo drivers can rely on regular customers such as shopkeepers who have booths in the markets. Those need trusted people to transport them or their goods from their homes to the market or to the buyers. Older people, especially women, also keep the habit of using cyclos to get around with limited speed.

Rath, a 62 years old male, like many of his companions, sleeps on the streets of Phnom Penh.

"I have been working at Phsar Kandal Market for more than 20 years. At first, I didn't go home to Prey Veng very often because my village is very far away and the road was very bad. When the road was rebuilt, I was able to come back more often. Here, we all know each other. Uncle Sambath (head of the CCCA association) is very active. You can call him if there is a problem and he intervenes very quickly. I work with people from the market who know me well. I carry the goods from their houses to the market. I sleep on the street so I don't have to pay rent in town. I can bring more money back to the village."

Aware of the fact that cyclos drivers sleep on the street, the CCCA association created several places in town where they can sleep in a closed and secured place. These places are close to the markets Phsar Kandal, Phsar O Russey, Phsar Depot, Phsar Chas, Phsar Thmey, Phsar Doy Mek). It costs 2000 riels/ night to sleep there (since recently, payment is no longer required). However, according to the president of the association, only 15% of cyclo drivers sleep in shelters. 15% sleep with parents or acquaintances. The majority of them (70%) still sleep on the street.

When asked about this situation, some of the bicycle drivers explained that they prefer to sleep freely on the street rather than in the confined shelters where the regulations are strict.

"You have to get back to the shelter at a fixed time in the evening. When all the cyclos are parked, you're stuck against each other. If we stay on the street, we get more room and more air. And, you can still have some clients, even late at night. Now, it is free but before, you had to pay to sleep there. That's not very helpful." Met, a 68 years old male.

"A friend of mine offered me to sleep in an apartment that he rents for \$250/month shared with 8-9 people. But, I have to add the fee for the parking of the cyclo at night. The cheapest rooms are far from the center of the city. It is too difficult to have to travel there at night and in the morning. I prefer to sleep with my friends on the street. We don't spend money and we're freer. We've known each other for a long time. We're used to being together." Map, Male, 57 years old



Pigalle, Flickr

Usually, cyclo drivers and moto drivers do not mix but at night, they might sleep close to each other for security reasons. A group of cyclos and motordoup sleep every night in front of a bank at the corner of Street 130 and Street 13. Before Covid, the site was lucrative for motorcycle drivers. The go-go bars, which were very active at night, allowed them to work with the consumers of the bars as well as with the girls when going back home or to the hotels. Some cyclo and motorcycle drivers only sleep with one eye and remain available for part of the night for potential clients. The others lock themselves in their mosquito nets to wake up only in the morning.

Chanrith, a 43 years old male is a motorcycle driver. He mainly works at night and only sleeps in shifts.

“At night, I stand at the crossroads of the streets. I sleep with one eye open to catch customers. I don’t sleep a lot because I have to be vigilant as the customers might give more money for night rides. When they are drunk, they sometimes give more money. During the day, I always find some moments to sleep. I do not sleep long and then I wake up. Sometimes I’m very tired.”

Tuk-tuk drivers can also rely on several associations. Two rival (and politized) associations are particularly active. IDEA, Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association and the CCDA, Cambodia for the Confederation Development Association. Clashes between the drivers of these two associations have been reported in previous years.

Two other small associations have been set up to protect their exclusive access to specific areas such as the Phnom Penh International Airport and the Tonle Bassac area. (The Tuk Tuk Association works in front of the Phnom Penh Airport and TTTA -Tonle Bassac Tuk-Tuk Tourist Association - operated in front of Aeon Mall)). When joining the association and paying a fee, the drivers have to respect the rules such as waiting for their turn to take passengers and charge the same price.

The drivers share information such as road congestion, localization of policemen, robberies, conflicts, accidents...etc, through social-media groups. Some of them are also reported to be part-time policemen, playing the role of vigilante in the city. Some drivers work hand by hand with the police as they provide them with some useful information. In return, they will not be bothered.

Having access to the most gainful areas

For drivers waiting for customers, it is important to be positioned in the most lucrative areas. Some locations are very profitable such as in front of the hotels used by international tourists (higher fares and tips), inter-province bus stops, hospitals,...etc. However, to be able to pick up clients in front of these places, one must first pay an access fee for the ben ឃុំ (bus/car drop off) to the caretaker of the place and then give the individual another smaller sum of money each month. According to interviewees, the entrance fee for parking in front of Naga Casino to pick up customers is around \$450 to \$500 followed by monthly payments of \$100. In front of the luxury hotels, the entrance fee is around \$300 followed by monthly payments of \$30.

In front of inter-province bus stations, the entrance fee can start from \$100+ with an additional \$5/ \$10 monthly payment. In front of busy restaurants and bus stops, \$10 to \$15/month is usually enough. A limited number of places are sold at each lucrative ben area. To be able to get one, one has to wait until one place becomes available and buy it from the person leaving the area. In this case, the name of the first tenant is kept. This street code prohibits those who do not have a place at the ben to pick up customers from this area.

Going back and forth to the rural village

Some migrants are able to maintain both a rural and urban life by going back and forth from their place of residence to their workplace. Transportation between the provinces and the capital has been facilitated with the upgrading and construction of new roads in recent years. Fast and cheap trips are now common. With the possibility of money transfer with services like Wing, for a lesser amount than the cost of one transport, the return to the village to give money to the family has also become more flexible. The drivers interviewed say that they return to their village on average every 5 or 8 weeks for those who live in remote areas and every 4 weeks for those who live near the capital city. The visit to the village varies from 3 days to an entire week.

“ I try to go back home every month. Either a friend lends me his motorbike and I only use 2 liters of gas, or I use a collective taxi and it costs me 20,000 riels a round trip. If I take a taxi, it's more complicated because it stops at the provincial capital. If no one comes to pick me up, I then have to pay for a motorcycle trip to the village which is far away.” Vuthy, male, 52 years old.

Some migrants, more rooted in Phnom Penh and with weaker family relationships, return less often. They mainly travel on special occasions such as weddings, funerals, New Year's holidays, or the Pchbun Ben Festival. However, even if they only go there occasionally, the house in the province remains their geographical and relational anchorage. This is especially true for older people like cyclo drivers.

It is now different for the younger generations. Due to their increasingly smaller inheritance shares of land and house and the selling of what remains, they no longer have a home or a piece of land of their own in their native village. They are also more drawn to the city and its multiple opportunities of work than to continue as farmers. Those who are not married to a woman from the village, return even less often. Some find a spouse while working in the city. If he/she is from another province, it will contribute to loosening the ties to the home village of one of the spouses. However, the link is maintained with the parents on one side (more often on the daughter's side) when the grandchildren are cared for.

“ I only go occasionally to my parents' home. When we have some free time, we go to my wife's parents place as the grandmother takes care of the two youngest children.”

vanna, male 33 years old, moto driver.

“ I have a wife and 5 children. Only the youngest, who is 17-year-old, is still staying at home with my wife in Prey Veng Province. The other children work on construction sites in Phnom Penh. We don't live together as they constantly move to new construction sites. We don't see each other very often, only on New Year's holidays.”

Pon, Male 53 years old.

Although a large number of cyclo drivers are indeed intermittent migrants who have a home in the provinces, we also found out that a number of them are not attached to any home. They no longer have any links with their families back home, or they no longer have a family there. They sleep in their cyclo all year round. This is the case of Piseth, male, 60 years old.

"I have been a cyclo driver for a long time. My cyclo is very old. It is damaged but I do not want to change it. I am used to it. I haven't had a house to live in since I got divorced. My wife stays in the village. I don't go back there anymore. I work at the Phsar Kandal Market. People know me. I have been a cyclo driver for a long time. Now, younger market customers use motorcycles or tuk-tuk instead. You can carry a lot of goods with a bike over short distances. I work mostly with regulars. It's easy, I know the way to their house. I sleep on the street close to Phsar Kandal. It is easier so I can come quickly if I am called." Some have never had a home in the provinces

"I am 42 years old, I am an orphan. My parents died when I was a child. I am from Kampong Cham, but I am no longer in touch with the other members of my family. I am alone. I've never been married as I've always been poor. I've been a cyclo driver since 2000. I've never had a home. I'm used to staying on the street" - Rath, male.

Tola, a young cyclo driver, says that he left his father's home to come to Phnom Penh to help his homeless mother.

"I am 20 years old. I have been a cyclo (driver) for 4 months. I previously lived with my father in Kampong Cham. About 10 years ago, my father left my mother for another woman. I went with him. I was born in Svay Rieng. This is where my mother's family and my two other siblings live. My mother was very poor when my father left her. She went to Phnom Penh alone to try to find money. She has had a very difficult life. She doesn't have much strength.⁴³ She doesn't have a home to live in. She called me and asked me to support her. This is my duty to look after my mother. I came to Phnom Penh two years ago. First, I worked as a construction worker. I was earning 25,000 riels a day, housed and fed twice a day. But, it was too hard so I quit. My mother lives on the street in front of Wat Ounalom. She earns some money by looking after the cars in the parking lot and doing some traditional coining⁴⁴ healing **Kors kyal**. She knows a man who rents cyclos. She rented one for 50,000 riels/month for me to be a cyclo driver. Now, since Covid, I don't make much, between 4,000 and 10,000 riels/day. We don't have much to eat. At night, we sleep at the crossroads (Riverside Road and Sothearos Road in front of the Wat Unalom Monastery). At night, about 10 people sleep there."

For some cyclo drivers, the camaraderie between cyclo drivers has turned into a new family. The ingestion of alcoholic beverages (some of which are perceived as medicine to better cope with fatigue)⁴⁵ in groups helps in social cohesion with other cyclo drivers but it can also lead to the distention of links with the family in the province.

While the man, absent for too long, no longer finds his place, the woman left in the province then can take control of the house/family.

⁴³During the interview, the mother was under the influence of alcohol.

⁴⁴A coin lubricated with tiger balm is rubbed across the shoulders and back, leaving red tiger-like stripes.

⁴⁵Some traditional wine (preferably of black color) is reported to give strength and to favor sleep.

“Us, the cyclo drivers, have all known each other for a long time. We are (like) brothers. We have been together for a long time. In the evening, we get together to drink. Then we sleep well. We eat a little and drink “medicine wine” sra thnam ស្រាថ្នាំ which gives us strength. My family in the province distanced themselves from me. I don’t get along with my wife anymore. She wants to take care of everything and does not want me to intervene with the family.” Chen, male, 63 years old

During the lockdown period, some cyclo and motorcycle drivers remained in town while they were out of work. When asked about this, the drivers said that they were taken by surprise by the government’s decisions and that they could not leave Phnom Penh in time. However, behind the speech about having a house in the village, it appears that the street has become their permanent residence.

II.2. The waste-pickers - etchay

Some waste-pickers etchay អេតចាយ were also spotted sleeping on the street at night.

More than 2000⁴⁶ etchay are reported to live in Phnom Penh. Many of them work at the municipal landfill. They collect materials from the waste trucks and process them for recycling. Coming from the same commune in the province of Prey Veng, they operate on the basis of a family network that welcomes newcomers from their family group and trains them in the trade.⁴⁷ They live and stay in a village set up at the landfill site.

Other small groups or individual etchay collect waste in the streets of Phnom Penh. They can be divided into two categories. The first one includes small families or individuals who engage in this activity in an organized manner in collaboration with a specific depot.⁴⁸ In the evening, they stay in dwellings that they rent or they are accommodated more summarily in a “depot”. The second group is composed of people who sleep on the street at night. These are either people who have recently been through hardship economically and socially or people who have known the streets for a long time. The latter are treated as vagrants by the inhabitants of Phnom Penh as the people belonging to the first group are identified as workers. A number of the people from the second group are reported to be very poor and addicted to alcohol or drugs. People from the first group often use handcarts, while those from the second group only have large bags to carry their collection.

We can also mention that there are larger organized communities such as ethnic Vietnamese people who control the whole waste process (collection, separation, packaging, transport for resale in Vietnam) and live together in the same villages.

We previously described the process for the migrants obtaining employment by using their networks. For those who do not have or cannot use networks and who are in a difficult economic situation, collecting waste on the street and selling it to depots is the easiest and most immediately remunerative solution. This free activity can be facilitated by a network of family or friends but it can also be conducted without any external support. The etchay work freely in the streets of Phnom Penh. Anyone can go in the streets that he chooses, according to their own schedules, and collect what they want. That goes by the “first come, first served” rule.

⁴⁶IGES 2017- Development of Waste Management Strategy and Action Plan of Phnom Penh, Cambodia.
<https://www.iges.or.jp/files/research/scp/PDF/20170718/Yagasa.pdf>.

⁴⁷A Valuable life : seeing transformative practices among Phnom Penh’s waste pickers, vol. II,
 Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, Australian National University, 2014

⁴⁸A warehouse where they can resell their waste collection at any time.

The main sources of etchay waste collection are the household waste piled up in bags on the streets waiting to be collected by the garbage trucks. The etchay of the first group use handcarts so that they can collect more and so earn more money. With cash flow, they can buy from private individuals or shops in larger volumes of objects and resell them to the depot. They work on a regular basis, often with regular collection routes. The etchay of the second group collects garbage less regularly and sometimes in conjunction with other activities (street vendors, informal guards, dishwashers,... etc.). The etchay of the two groups that we have met mainly collect aluminum cans, cardboard, plastic (water bottles), and metal (hard and soft).

The products collected are resold by weight at numerous small or medium-sized depots located in different parts of the city. These small depots then resell the sorted waste to a larger depot which will resell it in Thailand or Vietnam for recycling. Each link in the chain makes a small profit on resales. Needy individuals may also sell their waste directly to the depot. They will get a better price than selling it on their doorstep to the etchay.

According to interviews conducted in February/March 2021 with 3 small depots (1 in the District of Daun Penh and 2 in the District of Russey Keo), the purchase/resale prices of the main products were distributed as follows (the prices are fluctuant):

The cardboard is bought by the etchay to individuals at 200/300 riels per kg and resold at 400/500 riels/kg to the small depot which resells it at 600 riels/kg to the large depot.

The aluminum cans are purchased 2000 riels/kg, resold at 3000/4500 riels/kg to the small depots who resell them at 4000/6000 riels/kg

The plastic bottles are bought at 200/300 riels/kg and resold at 400/500 riels/kg to the small depot who resells them at 500/600 riels/kg to the large depot.

The housing of the professional etchay

The owners of the small depots seek to retain etchay so that they will sell their collection exclusively to them, thus providing them with a larger volume of waste to resell it to the large depot. They provide these etchay they trust with a handcart with the promise that in return they will sell their collection to them. The handcarts are rented for about 20,000 riels/week. Some owners of depots do not charge for the rental of handcarts to the etchay with whom they have long-term loyalty. Both are engaged in a patron/client relation. This protection and help come with a dependency. The owner of the depot can also lend money to the etchay. The longer the debt repayment lasts, the more the etchay will remain attached to the depot and sell them the exclusivity of his collection.

The owners of the small depots can also advance money in the morning to allow the etchay to buy a larger volume of waste from individuals and businesses. In the evening, after weighing the collected products, they will deduct these small loans from the total profits.

"The depot manager lends us 50,000 riels in the morning. We can buy more from people. In the evening, he buys us everything we have collected and gives us back the money difference. Usually, we have between 20,000 and 30,000 riels left for us."

Sovanna, 53 years old, Stung Meanchey District

To maintain close relations with the **etchay**, some of the depots even have accommodations for them.⁴⁹ The conditions of the accommodation within the depot itself are usually very basic.

In Tuol Sangkae Commune, Russey Keo District, Seth rents a piece of land (\$300/month) for the past 3 years. He built a warehouse used as a waste disposal site as well as a basic living space for the **etchay**. The warehouse accommodates 7 people (including a couple with a child). These people do not pay rent. They sleep in small rooms set up between mountains of metal and cardboard waste. A basic toilet and a bathroom had been built on one side of the land. Handcarts are provided to the **etchay** for free. The depot manager explained to us that this is a way to ensure that the **etchay** will only sell their collection to him.

Here, the relational network works to bring together people in need who originated from the same village. The seven people living in this depot are all from the same village in Prey Veng Province. Some people have been working with the owner of the depot since the beginning while others came more recently. One couple with one child came back from Thailand 6 months ago as they faced job suspension.

" My husband and I worked in Thailand. I was earning 10,000 bahts/month (\$324). Since we didn't have a passport, it was very difficult to live there. The bosses can do whatever they want, you can't complain otherwise, they would call the police. You will have to leave without being paid. Getting a passport is too expensive and the process is too complicated. We came back to Cambodia because of Covid. A family member in our village gave us the telephone number of the head of this depot who is from the same village. We called him. He said that we could work with him and we came here. Here, we earn less than in Thailand but we manage to get enough to live day to day."

The etchay sleeping on the streets

Apart from those **etchay** who have regular incomes allowing them to rent a room, or who are housed at the depot, some **etchay** sleep on the street. They are not linked to any specific depot. They sell their collection to the nearest depot when their bag/cart is full. They generally work occasionally according to their needs and opportunities. They are poorer than the people described above. They live from day to day and have limited social networks.

We met with two single men (29 and 34 years old) selling their waste collection outside a small depot close to Phsar Kandal Market. They say that they have known each other from a recent prison stay. They had spent the day together. One of them carries waste in two large bags suspended to a PVC tube.

The first man is 34 years old. Compared to the usual skinny people living on the riverside, he is well-shaped.

" My family is from Kampong Cham. My parents were farmers. They came to Phnom Penh in the late 1980's. They both died. I have 5 brothers and sisters, but we no longer have any contact with each other. One lives in Canada, the others are in Phnom Penh. I have been sleeping on the street since I got out of prison. To make a living, I help my friend to collect waste. Before, I used to be in the military in Takhmao. I had problems and I went to jail. I do not have friends anymore. I cannot contact my brothers because they do not want to see me anymore. I am alone. I don't have an ID anymore. I have never stayed on the streets before. "

⁴⁹ Usually, only a payment for "electricity and water" is asked.

The second 29-year-old man is used to staying on the streets

"I come from Kampong Tralach in Kampong Chhnang Province. I left home when I was 16 because I had problems. People didn't like me because I used to steal a lot. I came to Phnom Penh and I stole for a living. The police arrested me and I spent four years in prison. Now, I need to survive by myself. Nobody is helping me. Today, I earned 8,000 Riels (\$2) working as etchay, \$1 for the aluminum can bag, and \$1 for the plastic bottles bag. With this money, I can eat. At night, I sleep on cardboard on the sidewalk in front of stores. I have to move around a lot because the store owners chase me. I am helping my friend because he doesn't know how to live on the streets. Today, we will be eating together."

The chief of the depot reported that he did not trust the two of them and did not want them to use one of his handcarts.

"They're drug addicts and thieves. Don't talk to them. Sometimes they're with the drug gang on the riverside. They use drugs, they steal to do drugs. I do not trust them. If they ask for one of my handcarts, they would use it for a while and then resell it."

"Homeless" is the equivalent of "familyless" or "networkless." The most vulnerable are the single, recently divorced (men and women) and especially single women with children without family support either because the parents have died, or because the relationships with them are complicated.

We noticed that some street groups reconstitute the model of the family. The 34-year-old man interviewed above was found two months after our meeting living with a group of homeless drug addicts who were making their living from garbage collection. He had recreated a new informal family and declared to have a wife and children (a newly met woman with her children).

For the etchay who have stayed for an extended period of time on the streets, solidarity exists among some of them.

Two women sit on a mat between an old cyclo and an etchay cart in front of the monastery of Wat Ounalom. One is 57 years old and the other is 60 years old. The 60-year-old woman is in a very poor condition due to alcohol and does not work. The youngest woman is an etchay. She has a close relationship with the older woman and prepares a meal for the two of them on a small gas stove on the sidewalk:

"I'm from Svay Rieng. I have a house and land there. I'm divorced. My husband stays in the house. I do not want to go back. I have a nephew in Phnom Penh who works for an "organization". He sometimes helps me. I've been doing etchay for 2 years. I collect cans in front of the Royal Palace. I sleep in the cyclo in the evening (an old cyclo used to transport her belongings). Before Covid, I used to collect a lot of cans. I made about 70,000 riels a day, now it's 20,000 riels. I spend 10,000 riels a day to feed both of us. We're two poor people. She's weak, so I take care of her. I'm used to being on the street. We are like sisters." The 60-year-old woman is originally from Kampong Cham.

"I have lived in Phnom Penh for 30 years. I am very weak so I cannot work. Rich people pity me and they give me gifts (begging). I have no ID card, no equity card. I did not ask anything. I do not know what to do. When I am sick, I am treated for free in Calmette. I go there and I get down on my knees, join my hands and ask to be treated. The etchay give me food when I have nothing to eat."

II. 3. Some observations on the daily life of those living on the streets

The spatial hierarchy of sleeping on the street

These different groups of homeless people do not sleep in the same places. Drivers choose to sleep in places exposed to the public, lighted but more secure. The street etchay sleep together in small family groups in more isolated places. Vagrants and beggars sleep alone in places out of sight. What also differentiates the working groups from those who are called vagrants and beggars is the way they sleep. A social hierarchy can be read in the way of sleeping.

Traditionally, in Cambodia, social values are attributed to the positioning of the bodies in space. People higher in the social hierarchy will always be placed higher (chair, platform) than people of a lower social status. In the same way, one is careful not to place one's head higher than that of a hierarchical superior⁵⁰. (For example, when bowing to someone or walking past them, one should bend down). Sleeping at ground level under the feet of passers-by signals a person who is very low on the social scale.

The first stage of the traditional habitat is defined by the construction of a roof under which a small platform is set up high up (bed/floor on small pillars above the ground). Similarly for a hut, a small floor/platform is built even a few dozen centimeters above the ground (distancing from rainwater, insects, ...etc., as well as an expression of a form of humanization in not living on the ground like the animals). The most vulnerable people (vagrants and beggars) often sleep on the ground (on a cardboard or a mat) or on banks along the riverside. Each one sleeps in separate locations, especially in the case of drug addicts. Personal belongings are hidden in various more or less safe places such as in shrubberies or flower beds in public gardens. Those who sleep alone are particularly vulnerable. Thefts of their meager belongings are reported to be frequent. Unwanted in the city, they often change their sleeping places for fear of raids or are forced to relocate by the inhabitants of the stores behind the sidewalks where they sleep.

We met with a few etchay who were sleeping on the street on cardboard boxes next to their carts or bags or in hammocks. A social step above the beggars, they set up a sleeping area with a mosquito net. Others gather at night in hidden places where they build a somewhat more durable semblance of a hut with cardboard and other objects retrieved from the garbage. Over time, this ephemeral shelter can turn into a longer-term slum.

During the lockdown in April 2021, etchay people driven from the riverside had taken over streets in the old Phnom Penh. Several groups had built small shelters out of cardboard boxes and retrieved objects on Street 172, once a busy tourist street, and on Street 130.

Cyclos, tuk-tuk, and rickshaw drivers often sleep in their vehicles or in a hammock and are therefore not in direct contact with the ground. Some cyclo drivers simply sit on the passenger seat and fold their hoods over their heads. Their personal belongings (spare clothes, toiletries, hygiene, medication, and documents) are kept in the trunk under the seat. Others opt for more comfort and stretch a hammock between their cyclo and a pole or put a wooden board between the seat and the footboard to extend their legs. Tuk-tuk and rickshaw drivers sleep either on the back seat of their vehicle or in a hammock stretched between the front and the back. They can also sit more comfortably on the full length of the vehicle by adding a board between the two benches (tuk-tuk and rickshaw).

⁵⁰ Paying respect to the King once required servants to bow down under the dust of the King's august feet. In Grégory Mikaelian- Le traité de sacre des rois d'Oudong (XVIIe SIÈCLE), Udaya 08, 2007. http://www.yosothor.org/uploads/images/Udaya/UDAYA_ISSUES/Udaya_08/02_Mikaelian%20Gregory_UDAYA08.pdf

To ensure more privacy the curtains of the rickshaw and tuk-tuk are lowered. The vehicles are then covered with a mosquito net (or the net is hung inside the vehicle). These mosquito net walls provide a sense of a basic shelter, ensuring some privacy and protection.

Some rickshaws look like tiny houses. The part behind the passenger seat becomes a closet where multiple things are piled up (clothes, cooler, sound system,...etc.). To some extent, the vehicle can be compared to the "field hut" *ktom chamkar* built in the countryside at a distance from the main house. It is like a secondary dwelling where one can rest on the working site.

The people sleeping in their vehicles do not define themselves as homeless since they claim to have a home in the provinces. However, during the interviews, we noted that the reference to the house in the province must be understood in a broad sense of family, territorial, identity, and administrative anchorage. A certain number of people do not always personally own the house to which they are attached. It can then be the house of the parents or of one of their siblings (where they are registered administratively).

Sleeping on the street is more difficult for motorcycle drivers. The seat of a motorcycle does not offer the comfort and protection of a tuk-tuk or a rickshaw. However, some manage to sleep lying on their backs using both seats (driver and passenger). One motorcycle driver reported that he used to fall off the motorcycle in the early days, but now he got into the habit of not moving. Some moto drivers stretch a hammock between their motorcycle and a pole. At the corner of Street 13, several moto drivers sleep side by side in hammocks in a lighted area at night. Some say that they only sleep in shifts (during the night and the day). In this area, close to the night bars, they are often working on standby, available for a drive at any given moment. During the day, they keep their personal belongings in small bags which they pile into a large common bag. During the daytime, the bag remains under the surveillance of a "brother" who is working there as a security guard.

Some sleep with only one eye in a squatting position. Reth, a moto driver who is 36 years old, reports sleeping fractionally in a position that does not show that he is sleeping. He does not want to show that he is a homeless person.

Reth, , a 47 years old male, was born in Phnom Penh in the district of Russey Keo. He is very active and says that he wants to become a "businessman". He stays at the northeast corner of the surrounding wall of Wat Unalom monastery. He has written his name, phone number, Facebook account, and ABA bank account on an electric pole, on his helmet, and on a small metal table installed at the corner of the street that he calls his "office":

"I am homeless. I have brain and liver problems because I drink a lot. I go to the hospital every month to get free medication. I buy extra vitamins. I don't have a house to sleep in. I sleep here, in my "office". I sleep crouched against the post without giving the impression that I am sleeping. I don't want to lie down on the sidewalk. I would be ashamed and afraid to fall asleep and be robbed. I also sleep during the day at times. Sometimes when I'm really tired, I go to my sister's house. She owns a grocery store near the airport. She is divorced with two children. I don't eat with the family. I buy dehydrated soup from her store. I eat with her sometimes but not often. She doesn't want me to stay at her place. I sleep on the roof of her apartment. If I drink, she asks me to leave right away. I have never been married because of my drinking problem. I would like to get married to a doctor who takes care of me. I know people here, but I stay away from them."

On the streets, cyclo drivers are more united with each other than moto taxi drivers. They meet in small groups at the same place every night. Over the years, they have recreated small fraternal groups based on family or on shared ties to the same village or town in the provinces or with people whom they have known for a long time. Motorcycle drivers have not developed the same brotherhood ties among themselves.

Rickshaw drivers are generally quite independent from each other. At night, each one isolates himself in his vehicle. They can be found along the streets and sidewalks of tourist areas. In December 2020, a large number of rickshaws and tuk-tuks (more than 50) were parked near the traffic circle of the Chun Nath statue in front of the Naga 2 casino at night. The proximity of the police station and the public toilets/showers allowed for some semblance of comfort and safety. In February 2021, they had to find other places to sleep after the land of the police station was sold to make way for a new housing project. Other groups of homeless people were also spotted close to Sorya Mall Street. Many of them returned to their home province when the lockdown was announced.

Some can also enjoy a quiet night by asking the "owner" of the sidewalk for permission to sleep in front of their house. Sleeping in front of a dwelling is normally free but some owners may ask for a contribution. A woman selling drinks with two small children reported paying 4000 riels (\$1) a day to the owner of a store to sleep in front of his house. This financial burden weighed heavily on her daily budget.

The choice of a place to sleep on the street is firstly based on safety. A quiet dark place does not offer the same safety as a brightly lit, noisy, public place. Sleeping areas are usually negotiated with the owner of the building. If trust is established, people who sleep in front of a store act as night watchmen. In the early morning, there is no trace of their nightly stay. On the other hand, beggars and vagrants suspected of being in search of doing something illegal are often chased away by the owners and by the police. Some etchay gather in groups and look for an isolated place. They might settle down in the long term, creating a small slum.

Daily routine

The main expenses of the homeless people are food, hygiene, and fuel for those who have motorized vehicles.

Small markets and street canteens provide take-away food or food on-site. Respondents report eating 2-3 meals a day. Depending on the portion size, they pay between 3,000 and 5,000 riels for each meal. Some prepare meals with reserves of rice, dried fish, and vegetables brought with them from their last visit to the village. Those who work with their families, such as some etchay groups, cook on small gas stoves.

Working homeless people try to maintain a neat exterior appearance. They use public toilets and showers (500 riels/toilet and 1000 riels/shower). It is also where they wash their clothes. They dry them at night on the outside grates of the showers while making sure that they are not stolen. Living on the street is particularly difficult for women who need more privacy for their hygiene (especially during menstruation). The poorest people who stay on the riverside take advantage of the river to satisfy their basic needs.

The migrant drivers usually work more hours than the ones staying in rented accommodations in the city. Their schedules are organized around their families (taking their children to school, eating dinner at home, having days off). Those who are based in the provinces and sleep alone in the streets of the city tend to work longer hours. They try to work as many hours as possible so that they can earn enough money and go back more often to the village. Those who do not sleep well at night, take naps during the day.

The people interviewed reported that they did not take care of their health and waited for the last moment until they were severely ill to go to the hospital to seek treatment. Those who are not documented and who do not have access to assistance from the government or NGOs are living in very precarious situations.

At night, there is a danger of being robbed. Cyclo drivers report that sleeping in a group is better as thieves dare to look for money and cell phones in the bags and pockets. They criticize young drug addicts who wander around at night and collect waste to survive.

"They take drugs. A small piece of Ice (methamphetamine) costs 20,000 riels. Afterward, they don't sleep or eat. They are restless. We put all our stuff in the trunk under our seats. If we sleep in the cyclo, they can't steal anything. We have to be grouped together, otherwise they catch the person alone. They hold down the arms and legs so they can search the pockets."

The relationship between street people and the police is complex. There is a certain tolerance for those who provide minor services. Posted on the same street corners, they can provide the police with insight and provide a certain amount of vigilance. It should also be mentioned that a number of motorcycle, tuk-tuk, and rickshaw drivers are reported to be police officers working part-time. It allows the police to have an extensive network of informants throughout the city (drivers who are not police officers can also play the role of informant and receive a form of protection in return).

The municipality/police might accept street people on the condition that they do not settle permanently in one location without the permission of the owner. If they do so, they will be evicted. Otherwise, they can pay some money to the owner.

The police are particularly feared when they round up homeless people living in close proximity to the riverside or markets to send them to Prey Speu rehabilitation center (see above).

A depot manager reported that he is not bothered by the police. He makes good relations with them by occasionally offering them beers.

Reduced spatiality: To live at the scale of a rural village

Many uneducated migrants who come to work in Phnom Penh have very limited knowledge and interest in their surroundings. The city is primarily perceived as the place "where you can find a job and where you can earn money." Once settled in a rented room with a job, travel remains limited within this "home-work" geographic space. Thus, garment factory workers in the outskirts of Phnom Penh rarely go to the city center. They stay within the limited perimeter of the factory, their room, and the market, mimicking daily life as in their native village. The Royal Palace remains the main place visited with a group of friends. People do not dare to venture into places where they don't know anyone to protect themselves against possible situations. The city has begun to be attractive for those who have been there for a while and who earn enough money and dare to enter the stores and shopping centers.

When asked about it, a long-time etchay in Stung Meanchey District said that she only goes to the riverside once a year for the Water Festival. During the New Year's Day and Pchum Ben Festival, she prefers to return to her home province. On her days off, she stays at home or in a nearby environment.

Drivers know the streets of Phnom Penh but very rarely leave their vehicles to enter specific places. For the newer rickshaw drivers, it has to be noted that the Pass App and Grab GPS navigator system used does not encourage them to understand and memorize the city streets as their elders.

II.4. Small street traders living in inadequate conditions

- Street vendors

In Phnom Penh, many people survive on a daily basis by selling drinks, cakes, dried and salted shellfish, pickled fruits, or fresh fruits on the streets. They either buy products from the markets and resell them to make a small profit,- or they make them by themselves or they resell the products made by others. Many of them live in very basic conditions.

Bopha, a 63 years old female, sells a few small bottles of soy milk around the Phsar Kandal Market. She walks around and offers her merchandise on a wicker tray.

"I am alone. I came from Tbong Khmum Province many years ago. My husband died and my children dispersed in Phnom Penh. I have no contact with them anymore. I have no family. I am housed by my "boss", who took pity on me. I have a small place to sleep in a corridor. My "boss" makes soy milk. I buy the soya milk bottles 2000 riels/piece from her and I resell them 2500 riels/piece. I sell between 5 and 10 bottles a day."

Sarun, female, 26 years old (married, with 2 children) is sitting on the riverside banks with a cooler on wheels, waiting for customers. At night, she sleeps on a small boat with other members of her family.

"I came from Kampong Cham to Phnom Penh with my parents when I was a child. My parents were fishermen. As the fishing was not good, they came to Phnom Penh to look for other opportunities. My mother started selling drinks on the riverside. I've been helping her since I was a child. Since I got married, I have been selling drinks separately from her. I buy packets of chips, cakes, and drinks at the Phsar Kandal Market and resell them at a higher price to people walking around. I buy a can of Coca-Cola for 1,500 riels and I resell it for 2,000 riels. I buy water for 500 riels and I resell it for 1,000 riels. At present, people like to buy their children bottles of soapy water to make bubbles. I buy it for 2,500 Riels and I resell it for 3,000 Riels. Before Covid, I was earning 20,000 to 30,000 Riel/day, now it is only 16,000 or 17,000 Riel. I also need to buy ice to put in my cooler. I sleep on my elder sister's boat. There are 6 of us in all. The boat picks me up at night here on the riverside every evening and we head North (Russey Keo District) where we can stay at night⁵¹. During the day, I use the public toilets. My children wash and go to the toilet in the Tonle Sap river. I am registered on my family's book. My whole family is still registered in the village of Kampong Cham even though we have not lived there for a long time"

⁵¹ Three months after the interview, floating houses and boats living along the Tonle Sap and Mekong rivers were evicted by the Phnom Penh Municipality in Mid-June 2021.

A 31-year-old man is sitting on a sidewalk on Street 154 with a 6-year-old child. He reports being housed by his mother-in-law. Although he was born in Phnom Penh, he says that he is from the province of Prey Veng, the native land of his wife. By marriage, he is now part of a family network of his wife from Prey Veng.

"I am from Prey Veng Province.⁵² I was born in Phnom Penh (!) in 2000. My parents were poor. They came to look for money in Phnom Penh. I occasionally work with a telephone repairer in Phsar Kandal. I put plastic covers on telephones. I don't have much work. Now, I'm waiting for my wife. She helps Mother (in-law) who sells take away food. We live with Mother in Chak Angkré (south of Phnom Penh). Mother gives us money from time to time. We get the food from Mother. I don't have an ID card. It costs \$50 to redo one. I don't have any money on my own."

- Professional beggars

By professional beggars, we refer to those who have made begging a regular job. They have a safe place to sleep at night. They usually stay in the same spot on the riverside and wait for passersby to give them money. Some have a bathroom scale and offer people to weigh them for a small fee. The people interviewed clearly wanted to be differentiated from the young drug addicts/sellers who ask passersby for money.

Sovan, transgender, 41 years old, no family.

"My parents were very poor. They had a small piece of land in Kampot but it was not enough to feed the family. We came to Phnom Penh when I was 13. Every day, I sit on the riverside and I beg. Cambodians and Vietnamese are the ones who give the most. The foreigners (westerners) like the Chinese give sometimes. I am not like the people who are drug-addicted and sleep on the riverside. I don't drink, nor do drugs. I don't have anything to do with drug addicts. I have my own locations to beg. Every night I sleep at the same corner of a building. People know me, I do not face any problem of insecurity. On the riverside, the most difficult times are when there are raids by the municipal agents. We are sent to Prey Speu. It's terrible because, for the first few days, they don't give us any food. I'm honest, I don't do anything wrong. I help those who have no money to eat. I buy food for them. Before Covid, I could earn about 30 to 40,000 riels/day. Now I only earn 10,000 riels."

Chivan, male, 42 years old, disabled, earns his living by offering bystanders to weigh themselves on his bathroom scale.

"I am originally from Prey Veng. I have 3 brothers and sisters. Two of them are mechanics in Phnom Penh and one works in Ratanakiri. My mother lives alone in Prey Veng. She is too poor, I can't stay with her. Before Covid, I earned between \$8 to \$10/day. The tourists pity me and give me a few extra dollars. I used to rent a place to sleep for \$50. Now, I do not earn so much money as people do not walk along the riverside anymore because of Covid. I sleep in a booth in Phsar Kandal Market. The owners allow me to sleep there. I am not afraid of thieves. I do not have an equity card. I never had an ID. I never asked. I'm just registered in my mother's family book. We don't help each other much in my family. It's every man for himself. Here, I sit next to a woman who sells drinks."

⁵²In fact his wife's native land" meaning that it is his circle of relations

We help each other. When we live on the riverside, we are afraid of being rounded up by the municipal agents and sent to Prey Speu. Last time, it was very difficult. We had nothing to eat. After a few days, we were sent back to our native province. I had nothing to do in Prey Veng, so I came back to Phnom Penh. Afterward, I got sick because I was very stressed during the detention in Prey Speu. Now I am always afraid to be taken away again. When I will earn more money again, I will rent a room."

Among those who live permanently on the street, we can also mention the children of people who already lived on the street. Some have been able to seize the opportunity to be educated and trained for stable jobs by NGOs, others, with or without parents, have returned to the street. The youngest beg and sell roses to people in restaurants. The older ones alternate between begging (women and children), selling flowers in restaurants, collecting small amounts of garbage, or getting involved in criminal acts.

- Examples of vulnerable people who manage to find a place to live

Some very poor people without any connections can however manage to create their own network if they are recognized to be "good people" monus laha who do not create any problems. Chantha accumulates small jobs in order to pay for a room and survive on a daily basis. She rents a small room in a slum located along the railway track.

"I came to Phnom Penh in 2008, I was 45 years old. My husband had just passed away and I had nothing. I didn't know anyone in Phnom Penh but it was the only place I could hope to earn some money for survival. I was on the street at first. I'm from the Baphuon District in Prey Veng Province. When my parents died, the land was divided. I sold my share to my siblings. It wasn't much money. When my husband died, I had nothing left. My siblings said that they would look after my 7 children. I couldn't stay with them while doing nothing. I came with my eldest daughter to Phnom Penh without knowing anyone. At first, I met someone who helped me to work on a construction site. Then I met other people who helped me find accommodation. I pay \$50 for a room. As it was too difficult for me to work on construction sites, I worked in restaurants washing dishes. My eldest daughter got married in Phnom Penh. She has two children. Now she is divorced. She lives with me with her children. I am now employed by Cintri as a street sweeper. I earn just over 700,000 riels/month. In addition, I do etchay to earn more money. I pick up a few cans and objects that I find in the garbage every day and I resell them to the depot. After work, I buy fruits at the market and I resell them here as the market is far away." Sovanny, female, 65 years old.

Reflecting the flexible work arrangements, daily income earned among the waste pickers is variable. The reasons range from being related to a depot and having a cart, personal motivation, good health, strength, and finding valuable products.

- Those in the process of marginalization

Migrants of the first generation tend to remain trapped in low-wage, low-skilled jobs. Some succeed in obtaining stable jobs and earn a decent living while others become more marginalized following a series of misfortunes, irregular jobs, and low wages often coupled with costly alcohol, drug and gambling addictions.

Chantha, a 51 years old female, is sitting with a group of three women and a man on a bench along the riverside. She is barefoot and smells of alcohol. She says that she sleeps on the street. Her story is one of descending into the street life due to alcohol and behavior problems.

"In 1991, I came to Phnom Penh. I was beautiful. When I was young, I worked in bars. Then I was trained by Nyemo⁵³ to do housework and cooking. I worked as a maid for western families and I could get decent money. Then they told me to stop. Nyemo did not offer me new jobs. Then, I worked in restaurants as a waitress. Until recently, I was working in a Chinese restaurant in Sorya Mall. I was earning \$170 a month. It closed in December 2019. Then I worked at the restaurant "On The Corner" on the riverside where I made \$120 a month. With Covid, I was only paid half my salary. Since I had a reduced salary, I didn't come very often. One girl made remarks to me because I didn't show up on time. My salary went down to \$20-25/month. I quit. Now my friend (lover) gives me some money. I sleep at night on the banks of the riverside. People say that I am not easygoing and they do not want to employ me. Now, my main problem is the fear of being round-up by the police if I sleep on the riverside. "

Lida, a 41 years old female, is sitting on the sidewalk in front of Wat Unalom. She works occasionally. She says that she receives help from her boyfriend who earns a little bit of money every day.

"My former husband is a night guard at Phsar O Russey Market. He earns 120\$/month. I no longer live with him. I have a "husband" here. During the day, he looks after the cars parked in front of Wat Unalom. People come here at the end of the day to go for a boat ride. My husband helps them to park, he also helps them to carry their bags to the boat. He gets tips from people but some do not give anything. I was renting a room until recently. On January 7 (2021), the owner kicked me out because I could not pay anymore. Since I am separated from my husband, I sometimes wash dishes in restaurants. I have three children who are being raised by a family in a village. Before, we (with the first husband) paid \$150/month, then \$100, and now nothing. I have an equity card. At night, I sleep with my 'husband' under cardboard boxes."

- Other groups living in basic housing conditions:

This time-limited study does not allow for the exploration of other social groups who live in basic housing conditions. Those living in slums, which have already been the subject of several reports, will not be discussed here. In the course of our fieldwork, other particular groups have come to our attention. These are not strictly speaking homeless people, but people who live in very basic conditions while being dependent on other people. Some newly arrived migrants do not live in their own accommodation to start at the beginning. If they do not already have a city network, they might end up living on the street or on construction sites. Their living conditions are particularly challenging. We mention here a few avenues of research that would require further exploration.

- *Workers on construction sites*

⁵³ Nyemo Cambodia is a local NGO providing vocational training to improve the quality of life for vulnerable women and children.

The construction sector absorbs a large number of untrained young migrants. Some workers work continuously and manage to chain one job after another. Others work intermittently. The large building sites provide work over several months. Married skilled workers who get better salaries rent accommodations in the city to house their families. Young, single, unskilled workers often sleep on the construction site. The better-off are housed by the contractor in barracks (especially in the early stages of construction). The less well-off sleep on the construction site in sometimes dangerous conditions⁵⁴ Some are accompanied by their families.

We were able to meet workers who work and live on a construction site in Koh Pich. The construction site was well advanced and the workers were sleeping inside the structure (floor/roof/wall). Inside a large space under construction, we notice small spaces dedicated to the informal sleeping of the workers. Mats were spread out on the concrete floor or wooden pallets. Ropes on which clothes were hung were used as a partition bringing a semblance of privacy. A few small gas stoves indicated that food was being prepared inside the building. Plastic waste also indicated meals purchased outside.

In a corner of a large space, a very skinny and untidy woman was sleeping on a sheet of plasterboard with her three children stuck against her. The construction site was very noisy. Workers were cutting metal beams with a grinder near the sleeping family.

"I am 38 years old. I have three children (2, 3, 6 years old). My husband works on the construction site. I am originally from O Reang O, in Tbong Khmum Province. My mother and my 2 brothers and sisters live in the province with my mother. I do not have a place to live, neither in Phnom Penh nor in the province. I follow my husband on the construction sites. He earns about 150\$/month. We have been married for 8 years and we have lived in Phnom Penh for 2 years. Previously, I was working in a garment factory. We rented a room. Since the birth of my second child, I have been sick. It is now difficult for me to work so I stay with the children. My husband only works occasionally so we don't have enough money to rent a room. I follow my husband on the construction sites. I shower at the water pipe of the construction site when the other workers leave. I am the only woman. My brothers and sisters are married. They are poor so I can't ask them for help. My husband is an orphan. We have an equity card. It is in my family's village. I go to the village from time to time."

- Other vulnerable groups to be explored

Other groups of people live in difficult conditions. We can mention young people who come alone from their village and who are hired by city employers who provide them with lodging (meals taken separately).

This is the case of the young motorcycle and car washers who sleep in a corner of the garage.

"I wash cars and motorcycles. I earn \$120/month. My wife lives with me. She cleans the inside of the cars. She earns less because she only cleans the inside of the cars while I wash the cars and motorcycles. At night we sleep on a folding bed under a mosquito net. We save money so we can pay a nanny to take care of our child." A young couple, 28 and 26 years old, Street 19.

⁵⁴ e.g. In June 2019, a seven-stored building collapsed in Sihanoukville, killing 28 workers and injuring 26.

Young boys and girls (often underage) are employed in these garages. Housed and fed, their earnings are often not fixed and vary according to the profits of the garage. They are usually paid 1,000 riels per vehicle washed and can expect about \$80/month. In months when there are few customers, their income can drop drastically.

In large markets like O'Russey, helpers of the commercial booths sleep on folding beds in front of their bosses' stands at night to protect them from possible theft. We can also mention the small jobs such as the helpers to store motorcycles in the parking lots, the dishwashers, the helpers to transport goods, the helpers in the stores who sleep in their boss's store, the small street vendors. All these people do not have their own space. In the morning, the mat where they slept or the folding bed is stored against a wall like in their native village. Some are paid by the month, others receive only small sum of money by the day depending on the work done.

Sovan, male, is 33 years old, he helps with the delivery for a wooden pallet manufacturer. He sits with the trailer driver under the Stung Meanchey interchange, waiting for a ride.

"I come from a very poor family. My family came from Takeo when I was very young. I have two brothers and sisters. In Takeo, my parents do not have a rice field or a house. In Phnom Penh, they rent a house in Kleang Russey Market. I sleep with them. My mother is a street vendor. My father is sick, he stays at home. Before, he was a motorcycle driver. I am not married. I am too poor. I will never get married. I help to put pallets on a trailer and unload them at the customer's place. The boss (owner of the pallet warehouse) pays the trailer driver who gives me some money when there is work to do. He gives me about 3000 riels for a delivery. I can pay for a meal. I don't have a monthly salary. I don't have work every day. Now, we wait for the boss to call us when there is a delivery. We wait for hours. Some days, there are several deliveries, some days nothing. Sometimes, I sleep with the driver of the trailer under the interchange of Stung Meanchey. But, it is more difficult now. The police arrest the people who sleep here."

Chantha male, 23 years old. He works as a helper in a store that sells bags of rice around O Russey Market.

"I came from Pursat 7 months ago. I found this job through a friend. I sleep in the shop and I eat on my own. This is my first job in Phnom Penh. I had to come here because, there is nothing to do in Pursat ."

Earlier we mentioned domestic workers who come from the countryside to work for a family in Phnom Penh. It may be a young cousin from the countryside who comes to help a couple with children. There are also domestic workers hired by wealthier families. The majority of them do not have a private place to stay.

Although they are often paid very little in the beginning, these shadow workers can gain experience and expect to earn more money as time goes by. They gain experience and change jobs. Their strength lies in their extreme flexibility to leave a job. A reproach from their boss, the promise of another better-paid job and they leave, often overnight. It is quite common for newcomers to stay in a job for only a few months and then quickly change. Sometimes a whole group leaves a boss under the direction of a leader. The single person or the group will find another place to go through their network of connections. Only those who have been abruptly dismissed due to misconduct or conflict and who do not have strong networks may find themselves on the street.

We can also mention the aging people who do not have the strength or the beauty of youth to continue their work and end up on the streets if they do have any family/friends to support them (aging prostitutes and taxi-girls, massage girls, construction workers,...etc.)

The majority of these isolated workers are not protected by specific labor laws and social protection measures.



III. Changes of vulnerability under Covid-19

In addition to the health vulnerability to the COVID-19 due to poor living conditions, the people living on the streets of Phnom Penh have been at the front line of people who have been economically impacted by the COVID-19 situation.

When interviewing people about the impact of COVID-19, their first answer is the reduction of their incomes. Those who survive from day to day or who have debts, have faced stressful economic difficulties in 2020 and have even been rendered resourceless during the lockdown in 2021.

III. 1. The country's lockdown between February 2020 and March 2021 and the economic downturn.

The slowdown of the local economy in 2020 and the lockdown in 2021 has had a significant economic impact on Phnom Penh's homeless people who are engaged in economic activities.

Up until the end of February 2021, Cambodia had no (or very few) official internal contamination from COVID-19 due to the screening of arrivals into the country and the implementation of a mandatory quarantine of outsiders. The closure of the country to tourists (the country no longer issued tourist visas) and the fear of outbreak within the country had greatly reduced or shut down the activities of many hotels and restaurants. Homeless people who worked in the tourist areas of the city center where we conducted interviews were particularly affected.

At first, cyclo, motos, and rickshaw drivers reported having their daily incomes dropping sharply with the absence of foreign tourists in the studied area. The first two epidemic clusters (November 2020 and January 2021), during which residents did not leave their homes much, further reduced the number of their incomes. The February 2021 cluster could not be contained and led to the lockdown of Phnom Penh in April and the spread of the virus throughout the country. This last episode was particularly difficult for people on the street..

Before COVID-19, the cyclo drivers in the old quarters of Phnom Penh had a relatively lucrative business during the tourism season. Occasionally, tour operators used their services to drive groups of foreign tourists (including some travelers on cruise ships). This activity has been completely suspended due to COVID-19.

"My house is in Kampong Cham Province. My wife and my 6 children live there. The elder children work but the 3 youngest stay at home (ages 5, 12, and 20 years old). My wife stays in the village. She cultivates the rice field. Before COVID, I transported the tourists to the tourist spots and the local people to the markets. I used to earn between 30,000 (\$7.5) and 40,000 riels (\$10) a day. Now I earn between 15,000 (\$3.75) and 25,000 riels (\$6.25) per day. Before, I could earn a lot with tour operators. From time to time, we carried groups of foreign tourists through the streets to the Royal Palace. With the tip, we could earn between 50,000 - 60,000 riels (\$15) for half a day. Now it's over. I borrowed \$3,000 from the farmers' association to repair my house. I don't know how I'll be able to pay it back."

53 years old male cyclo driver

Meeting with a group of male cyclo drivers sitting in front of the sanitary block, Sotheaeros Boulevard next to the Royal Palace. A 55 years old male driver:

"I have been a cyclo driver since 2003. My wife stays in Prey Veng. I have five children. Only the youngest one, 17 years old, is still at home. The others are working on construction sites in Phnom Penh. Here, we (the group of cyclo drivers) have known each other for a long time. We help each other. We all come from the provinces of Prey Veng and Svay Rieng. We are all very close, we are like the same family (bang-baaun). Before COVID, I earned between 15,000 and 20,000 riels a day. Now it's more like 6,000 to 10,000 riels. If I eat three meals a day, each one costing 5,000 riels, I have no money left to go to the public restrooms and even less money to send home to my family. If I cook the rice that I get from my home, it can be OK. Otherwise, I eat less."

The **etchay** have also been impacted by the absence of tourists. The volume of garbage collection has been reduced accordingly. In Daun Penh district, many guesthouses, hotels, restaurants, and bars have drastically reduced their business or indefinitely closed. In addition, during outbreak periods, the fear of contagion caused Cambodian families to stay home and not visit restaurants that were still open. The volume of the collection of lucrative materials such as aluminum beverage cans decreased with the alcohol ban. The etchay also reported difficulties in purchasing waste directly from individuals who feared direct contact with street people and preferred to keep their distance and stay at home.

Maly, a 37-year-old woman, living in a depot - (March 17, 2021)

"Before COVID, it was easier, we would leave with the handcart in the morning. We could earn between 40,000 and 50,000 riels a day. People were coming out of their houses to sell us waste when we passed by on the street. Now, they are afraid of COVID and they stay inside their homes. We only earn 20,000 riels a day and we have to go further. It takes more time and it's more tiring."

On the other hand, for this etchay couple, the closure of hotels and restaurants has been beneficial.

"Since the hotels and restaurants closed, some owners took the opportunity to make repairs. They threw away a lot of materials like metal and electrical appliances. I was able to buy a lot of them and resell them well." A woman we met on street 130.

Due to the combined effects of partial withdrawal of EBA preferential trade scheme and COVID, the decline in orders in garment and footwear factories also forced many workers into partial or total unemployment. They lost their overtime pay and suffered layoffs (permanent) or job suspensions (temporary).

In December 2020, we met with two women who were sleeping in hammocks near a police office next to the Naga 2 Casino. They were both from Sa'ang Commune in Takeo Province. They said that they had no place to live after losing their jobs.

Tevi is 35 years old. She is accompanied by her two children aged 12 and 8.

"I used to work in a garment factory. The boss of the factory told us that we had to stop working for a while. They also said that they would take us back later. Then, I had no more money to pay the rent. The landlord didn't want to wait for me to go back to work. He said that the factory is now closed and that I will never be able to return to work. He told me to leave. I have been sleeping on the street with my two children for two weeks. I hope that my sister will be able to help us. My mother passed away and I have no one to take care of the children. I am separated from my husband. I don't know where he is. He used to give some money but not anymore. I have to support the children alone. With COVID, it is very difficult to find another job. Many people are looking for work. Those who used to work in restaurants don't have jobs anymore so I don't know what kind of job to look for. I'm waiting to hear from my sister to see if she can host me, my children, and my friend temporarily."(November XX event)."

Next to her stands her friend, a 37 years old woman. She is divorced and lives alone in Phnom Penh. She reportedly has 4 children (ages 2, 8, 12, and 16).

"I am a beer waitress for the "San Miguel" brand. Since COVID, people go out less in restaurants. Now, I only work occasionally. My rent is \$65/month. The landlord did not want to lower the price. I couldn't pay for the last two months. Last week, the landlord put a lock on my door and told me that I would be able to get my belongings back after paying my two months of late rent. I couldn't pay. I couldn't get inside my room to get any spare clothes. I've been sleeping on the street for a week and I am wearing the same clothes. My three oldest children have been living with my siblings for a few years now. I feel ashamed. I don't dare to ask them for help because they are poor too. I don't want to go back to my mother's place in Takeo Province because there is nothing to do there. I have to work to feed my children, and I don't want to bother my mother. The 2 years old child is in foster care for which I pay 150 US\$/month. I was able to reduce the payment to \$100 but now I can't pay anymore. My problems started a year ago. My husband left me. He was working in Thailand at a pig farm. He used to send \$50 now and then. Now I have no money and I don't know what to do. I would like to find a job again, but I don't know anyone hot skoal ke (to recommend me)."

On the other hand, those who can rely on a relational network can more easily find small paid activities if they lose their job.

A 49 years old woman, married, 4 children - dishwasher in a restaurant located on a sidewalk on Street 13 behind Wat Unalom Monastery

"Before Covid, I was a cleaner in a school. I earned \$130/month. In addition, I sold candies and cakes to the students. My husband is a policeman. He earns \$250/month. We live with my mother-in-law. We only pay for the electricity in our room. As I had no more job with the closing of the school, my mother-in-law proposed that I wash the plates at her restaurant. She gives me 20,000 riels a day. If the school reopens, I hope to get my job back."

The people interviewed reported having received general information on COVID-19 provided in the streets (3 do's 3 don't). They also said that they received free masks.

However, the precautionary sanitary measures have been difficult to implement with minimum personal and environmental cleansing facilities. Frequent hand-washing and maintaining social distance are very difficult to comply with while living on the streets.

III.2 Lockdown of Phnom Penh (April 2021) then zoning

The situation worsened with the “February 20th community event” and the fast propagation of the virus in the city leading to a lockdown. In the studied area, Psar Chas and Kandal I et Kandal II communes, the lockdown lasted 4 weeks (2 entire weeks of lockdown and 2 weeks in the orange zone in April/May 2021).

During the lockdown of Phnom Penh, the injunctions of the municipal guards shouted in the loudspeakers “go to your house” sounded like an impossible order for those who have no place to stay. People who usually slept on the riverside were dislodged (access to the riverside was forbidden). The people evicted from the riverside settled on the sidewalks of some streets close to Phsar Kandal market. Some of them even built shelters in the streets.

The lockdown period was particularly difficult for the homeless. We witnessed Phnom Penh municipality's security guards beating vagrants and tuk-tuk drivers with sticks for the simple reason of being in the street. To the injunction “go home” a homeless man answered, “this is where I sleep.” He had to move to an uncertain destination.

Movement restrictions

Many migrant people had the option of returning to their native village as the lockdown was quickly implemented. They got trapped in the city. Cyclo drivers say they learned about the closure of the roads around Phnom Penh too late and could not get back to the provinces in time. Some of them decided to stay in the city.

“I didn't want to go back to my village without any money and be a burden to my family. I stayed in the city because I can manage on my own. At first, we didn't understand that it was a total lockdown and that we couldn't leave the city. I was afraid that we would not have enough to eat. But thanks to the help of the association (of cyclos) and thanks to donations from people and organizations, we received food. We even helped distribute free meals to children.”

Cyclo driver, male, Phsar Kandal, 58 years old

Over a shorter distance, Siphah, male, 38 years old, rickshaw driver could not get into his accommodation located in a red zone.

“Previously, I rented a room for \$60/month (including water and electricity). My wife works in a garment factory. Since our home is located in Cham Chao District, and in a confined area (red zone) because of COVID, I cannot go home at night. I stay here (Street 51) where we can move around a bit. I try to earn some money but it is very difficult as people do not leave their houses. But if I stay with my wife in the red zone, I don't earn anything. Now, I just hope to earn enough to eat every day. Here I am with my baang boon. I sleep here in my rickshaw. In Street 51, there were many people who were sleeping here until a few weeks ago. Many have returned to their home villages in the provinces. We are quite desperate. This is the second New Year that we have been in this situation”.

With the ban on entering or leaving Phnom Penh and Takhmao, an etchay couple (the man 51 years old the woman 52 years old) who came to Phnom Penh for a short period of time could not return to their family home in the province. They stayed for a week on a street corner close to Monivong Boulevard. Their two hand carts were loaded with aluminum cans and cardboard boxes that they couldn't sell to the depot due to its closure. They slept on cardboard boxes under a mosquito net on a corner of a sidewalk. Their personal belongings were piled up in a cardboard box, kept next to a police post. They prepared their meals on a small gas stove. (21 April 2021)

"We are from Kampong Speu. We have a house and a small piece of land in Kong Russey District. We are poor (they have an equity card in Kampong Speu). For 22 years, we have come from time to time to Phnom Penh as etchay to earn some money. We only have one son. Now, he lives in our house with his wife. We don't like to live with them all the time because they often have arguments. When we come to Phnom Penh, we rent a handcart for 20,000 riels for a week. To save all the money, we stay with people we know in Phnom Penh or we sleep on the street. Now, the streets are blocked, we can't go back to the depot to sell our waste collection or go back to Kampong Speu. It is very difficult, people do not leave their homes to sell us waste like they had done previously. As the depots are closed, we can no longer sell what we have collected. Now we have no money and we can't buy any more waste from people. Our two carts are full. We can make about 30,000 to 60,000 riels per cart. We have to sell the contents of our carts before returning to Kampong Speu. At this time of COVID, it is difficult. Yesterday, a bystander gave us 6 boxes of instant noodles. We still have some rice that we brought from our house in Kampong Speu. We don't know how long we will have to stay here. We can't go anywhere. We are waiting".

The ban on moving from one area to another and the inability to meet with people in distant locations has also created difficulties for those who depend on relational networks to survive.

With the lockdown, a 37-year-old male motorcycle driver was cut off from his support base.

"It's very difficult because I have no money to buy food. I would like to go back to my family in the provinces where there is always food. We have rice, vegetables, and fish. Here in Phnom Penh, I have to pay to eat every day. My brother stays in another district. I can't go there. We call each other on the phone and we will try to meet at a fence so I can get some food. I sleep in a hammock next to the motorcycle."

No more revenues

During the lockdown, the daily life of the etchay became more difficult. The small depots where they sell the waste collections closed. With the ban on alcohol, there were no more aluminum beer cans to collect. However, the etchay continued to collect waste and to accumulate it in the hope of being able to resell it later. Large piles of sorted waste accumulated in some streets while waiting for the depots to reopen.

The homeless etchay were chased away from the riverside by the police. They set up small makeshift camps on previously commercial streets in front of closed stores. They say that the store owners permitted them to sleep in front of their homes to protect the place from possible robberies.

In these extreme situations, solidarity, based on the recreation of informal groups on the model of the family works.

On April 2021, a small group of etchay gathered on a sidewalk of street 130, a very touristic and animated street before the COVID which hosted many taxi-girls bars. In this street where all the shops were closed, they had built two small shelters with materials recovered from the garbage. An etchay family composed of a man, his five children, and his mother-in-law lived in a large shelter. A woman with a neater appearance stayed in a smaller shelter. The woman said that she met with the etchay family four months ago. She had been accepted within the family as the new wife of the man. She called the man "my husband", the man's mother-in-law "mother", and the man's five children "my children."

Large bags full of trash surrounded their shelters. The small group had connected a plastic pipe to the water system in front of a closed bar. According to the "husband," the owner of the bar had allowed them to use the water in exchange for some payment for water consumption(?). They used the water to shower themselves (by filling a plastic bucket) and to wash the dishes after having meals together. Since they were not allowed to go to the riverside, they (especially the women) had to go to the public toilets, which are 300 meters away, and pay 500 riels each time. The mother-in-law said that she was ethnic Cham. She used to live on a boat with her husband. After her husband died, she sold the boat and slept on the river shore. She could not recall the exact number of children she has (7 or 8) who have dispersed. She remains with her son-in-law and her five grandchildren. She says that her daughter, the mother of the children, left with another man. She praises the resourcefulness of her son-in-law who "always manages to find enough money to feed the whole family." She reported having the equity card level 1 card but had lost it. In addition to being etchay, the "husband" strips electrical appliances for metal parts and repairs some of them. He reported that the small group was staying in a shelter next to the Psar Chas before being dislodged by the police. At the time of the lockdown, the group moved to Phsar Kandal in the hope of collecting waste. The five children were given a meal every day by the NGO "Met Samlang" during the lockdown.

The woman tells her life story (27 April 21)

"I am from Battambang. I am 41 years old. My mother died a month and a half after I was born. My father could not take care of me. He put me into foster care with a family to whom he gave money from time to time. I barely met with my father. The woman who took care of me became my mother. When she left for Sihanoukville to look for work, I followed her. There, I got married but my husband was mean. I had a daughter. As I was very poor, the NGO Mlop Tapang took care of me. I was enrolled in tailor training. I stopped going to the NGO when my daughter died. She was 6 years old. She had dengue fever. In the morning, I gave her a massage, and then I went out to sell morning glories. When I came back, she was dead. At that moment, I stopped my training with the NGO and I worked with a group of people doing entertainment during the weddings. I was a singer. The boss would give me some money and I could sleep at his place. I have liked singing since I was a little girl. Before Covid, I used to sing at wedding parties. Since Covid, wedding parties are forbidden, so I can no longer make money. Since I had no job and no money, I left Sihanoukville and came to Phnom Penh about four months ago. I slept alone on the riverside. I met people who were doing etchay and I did the same. Now I have a "husband" and "children", which makes it easier."

Sokha, a 57 years old woman, sits on a sidewalk on Street 13 with her 16 year old son eating a meal donated by an NGO. She benefits from the compassion of the owner of the place where she is living.

"I am from Prey Veng, next to Neak Lueng. I came to Phnom Penh in 1981 with my parents. My father was a soldier. When we came here, the houses had already been distributed to the people. We bought a house five chi⁵⁵ of gold. Then we had problems and we sold the house. I got married in 2000. I had three children. My eldest son was a novice monk for one year in a monastery and then he left. He disappeared. I don't know where he is now. I had a daughter. Her husband killed her. He asked her to sell drugs. One day he was angry because she didn't sell enough drugs. He hit her with a piece of wood and she died. He ran away and the police never found him. I have only one child left. I used to sell cakes in the markets. My husband was a motodoup. He died in an accident. Now I am an etchay. Before Covid, I earned 10,000 riels/day. My 16-year-old son lives with me. He is very weak because of heart disease. An orphanage took care of him when he was small but now he is back with me. He sells roses in restaurants to foreigners. I buy the roses for 1200 riels each and he sells them for \$1 each. At the moment, my son eats the meals given by (the organization) "Met Samlanh". I have five brothers and sisters. One is a soldier. The others live in Tuol Sangkae. We see each other from time to time. We can't help each other because we are all poor. Before COVID, I used to sell cakes in the streets. Now I can't sell anything. I stay at home and only go out to get food from the NGO. I'm afraid of the police. They shout and ask us to go home. I go out so that my son has something to eat. I can get donations too. I have the equity card level 1 card. I rented a room for \$45/month. I can't pay but the owner understands and doesn't ask me for money. This is because I have known him for a long time."

Homeless people particularly in need reported that they have coped with the lack of income by skipping or rationing meals.

" Since I do not earn much money, I eat less. Before Covid-19, I could pay for 5000 riels meals. Now, I ask for smaller and cheaper portions. Some days, I only eat rice or only one meal a day"
Chiel, a 45 year old male moto driver.

The burden of having to pay back loans

The psychological burden adds to the economic difficulties. Among rickshaw or motorcycle drivers, many have taken out loans MFI⁵⁶ s either to buy a rickshaw, renovate/construct a house, pay private clinic bills, school fees, a wedding banquet, a moto, or a car with land titles as collateral.....before COVID-19. In March 2020, the loan restructuring policy initiated by the National Bank of Cambodia created some relief for borrowers by extending the repayment period.

The concern for repayment has created anxiety and distress. Many respondents spontaneously reported being very worried about their ability to repay loans at the end of the extension period. Given the deterioration of their economic situation with Covid and their difficulties in repaying even the interest payments, they often take out other very high rate loans from private lenders, thus entering into a spiral of debt and impoverishment.

⁵⁵ One chi = 3,75 gr of gold

⁵⁶ MFI: Microfinance Institutions

piling up. I took out more loans to pay off the previous loans but the interest is very high. I don't know how I'm going to pay it all back. For the moment, it's even difficult for me to have enough to eat every day. I am making arrangements with friends. They give me some money to help me." Tuk-tuk driver, male, 42 years old

"I am a motodoup. When the agents of the "organization" offered to take a loan, it seemed easy. All the neighbors in my village were doing so. Sometimes people borrow money and say that they want to start a business, but in fact, they buy a motorcycle or a car with the money. I don't know the name of the organization, but I think it was a government entity(!). I borrowed \$10,000 to buy a motorcycle and build a nice house to replace my old house. Now I'm not making any money because of COVID and I don't know how to pay back the interest. I'm afraid I'll have to sell the land and the house when it will be time to repay the loan. I sleep on the streets in Phnom Penh to feed my family. It is OK as I know that I have a house in my village. However, if we do not have a house anymore, life would be very difficult." Motorcycle driver, a 38 years old male.

"We are etchay. We took out a loan of \$4,000 with repayments over 4 years. We've already paid off one year. It was to pay for our son's wedding. Now we are thinking about having enough money to buy food. I hope we can pay it off without selling the land." A couple of etchay working together.

Those who do not have a land or a rickshaw as a guarantee can borrow at high rates from private lenders whom they know. Borrowing small amounts is possible with micro-credit. Repayments are sometimes spread over a long period of time. Among friends, loans of \$100 are common with interest payments of \$3 to \$5 per month until the \$100 is paid back. As there is no set date for repayment of the total amount, the interest payments paid in the long term may even exceed the amount originally borrowed. In cases of emergency (need to repay a loan for which the land is the guarantee), additional loans may be requested at very high rates (15% per month). The inability to repay debts that pay off other debts sometimes leads people to flee to the anonymity of the city and live without papers. The inability to repay friends may also lead to conflicts.

Thea, male, 37 years old, is a rickshaw driver, he rents a room where he lives with his wife and their two children (13 and 4 years old). He is parked next to the night market in Daun Penh district, in front of an inter-province bus stop. He says that he is very worried about his ability to pay both his loan and his rent. (December 2020)

"It is very difficult right now. There are no more tourists and people don't travel much. Before COVID, I earned between 70,000 (\$17.5) and 100,000 riels (\$25) per day for the good days. Now I earn between 20,000 (\$5)-30,000 (\$7.5) riels/day. My wife is a garment factory worker. Working full time and adding overtime hours, she used to earn about \$300/month. Since the beginning of 2020, she works less. Her salary has gone down to \$180/month. Our rent is \$70/month (\$45 rent + cost of water and electricity). The problem is the rickshaw reimbursement. I still have to pay back \$140/month for 3 years. Since we have kids, we are forced to have a place to live. It is becoming difficult to pay the rent. If we can't pay the rent, we might have to send the children to the family in the province. My wife can stay with friends and I will have to sleep in the rickshaw."

Four friends are sitting around a folding table on Street 63. They are sharing a few dishes accompanied by a bottle of traditional alcohol (hidden under the table in this period of alcohol ban) to celebrate the New year. They are a tuk-tuk driver, a rickshaw driver, a motorcycle driver, and a guard. They all come from the same village in the province of Svay Rieng. At night, they sleep next to each other. (April 13, 2021)

"I am a motodoup. Here, it is far from the place that I rent with my wife. During COVID it is difficult to move around so I have to sleep here with my friend in his tuk-tuk. He always sleeps in his tuk-tuk with his daughter (11 years old) as his wife has left him for another man. We can sleep here without any problems because the guard of the building is a relative. It is very difficult at the moment with the COVID in Phnom Penh. Those who dare to leave their houses order rickshaws with mobile applications on their smartphones. They are afraid to sit behind me and get infected by being too close to me. I hardly have any savings left. I am very worried about the lack of money. I borrowed \$10,000 from an "organization" to build a house in our village. My wife is a garment factory worker. We have a child who is looked after by my wife's parents in Svay Rieng. I have to pay back a \$360/month loan. Now I only pay the interest but it is difficult. If you don't pay on time, they will fine you, and you will have to pay even more. I don't earn money anymore and my wife only works when the boss asks her to come. I am afraid that they will take my land. The second problem is that we have to pay the rent for our room in Phnom Penh. The landlord does not want to lower the rent. Now it's getting harder to pay for everything: the interest on the loan, the rent, and the daily expenses. I am very worried. I think about it all the time. Now, my friends who had some savings are helping me. But they also are facing problems so they will need their money back soon." Sovan, male, 32 years old.

III.3. The actions of the Government

Since 2007, the Cambodian government has developed a mechanism to identify poor and vulnerable households "Identification of Poor Households" (ID Poor). It has resulted in the issuance of an equity card which enables vulnerable people to access basic benefits such as social transfers, healthcare, and other targeted services. The poor households are selected with interviews using standardized poverty criteria. The eligible and registered household receive either \$20 or \$30 a month, as a basic benefit. They can also receive top-up amounts for pregnant women, children under two, the elderly, people with disabilities, and people living with HIV. The applicants for equity cards must have a legal status and be documented (e.g. being registered on a family book, having a birth certificate, an address,...etc.)

Many people do not have access to the government and NGOs assistance as they lack official documentation and (or do not have access to) formal family registry. Therefore, they cannot access social protection schemes.

With the household normally identified as the unit on which to build up studies and programs, vulnerable people who are living alone such as the ones who live on the street and do not have any more contacts with their family as well as those who are undocumented, are often left out of government and NGOs programs (with the exception of street children who receive assistance).

The migrant workers who sleep on the streets or in basic conditions in Phnom Penh are usually registered in a family book in their home village. To apply for equity cards and be eligible for any cash relief during the pandemic, they need to return to the village in the province. The majority of the people interviewed in Phnom Penh who have an equity card reported being the recipient of the card at their home village. However, this administrative procedure is rendered very difficult or even impossible for people who are undocumented or who cannot have access to their former documents (such as those who are still registered in the family book of their parents and have distended the links with their family, who have left a long time ago, who escaped problems with the police or who do not have enough money to travel). These people are invisible to the administration and do not receive help to solve this issue.

"I left my village a long time ago. I didn't get along with my aunt since my mother died. I think that my name is still in her family book as I was living with her. I cannot even ask her for a copy of the family book as she does not want to see me anymore. I do not want to go back to the village and meet with the local authorities as they will see that I am poor (ashamed) and they will do nothing to help me. I cannot ask for an equity card as I do not have any documents and I do not want to go back to the village. I did not ask for a birth certificate from the local authorities as they would ask me for money and I would have to wait a long time and come back many times. Going there is costly. I have to do the journey within one day as I cannot stay there overnight. I do not know what to do. Here, the local authorities cannot help me as they do not know me and I do not have an address. I do not want to meet with them because they might cause me some trouble as I do not have documents." Sary, female, waste-collector, 42 years old.

For those who are not beneficiaries of the ID poor scheme and who are outside the relationship networks, life can be even more difficult.

"I am from Takeo. I am 41 years old. I have 2 children. I am an etchay. I came to Phnom Penh when I was 15 years old with my aunt. I helped her to grow vegetables and sell them at the Olympic Market. When I was 22, I worked as a maid for a family. I slept in their house. I earned 60,000 riels per month. At 27, I got married. My husband was a construction worker. He got sick. Since we had no money, he didn't go to the hospital. He died. I don't know what his illness was. I don't have an equity card. I don't know how to get one. Nobody came to tell me how to do it. I don't have any identity papers. I am still registered in my mother's family book in Takeo Province. She has an equity card but not me. I have 2 children. I just moved from Boeng Trabek to Stung Meanchey because the rent was too expensive and there were problems. When I asked for the equity card here in Phnom Penh. The commune chief did not want to give me one. He says that I haven't lived here long enough. That's because I don't know the people here." Saren, female, 42 years old.

To be a beneficiary of an equity card in rural areas is easier because households are more easily identified than in urban areas where people frequently move from one place to another. In rural areas, the local authorities know all the families living in their area, which is not the case in the cities.

The housing situation is an important and visible indicator of poverty. The equity card and the benefits attached to it may not be renewed when one of the attribution criteria changes, even if the economic situation of the people has not changed.

"Before, I had the equity card. But, I don't have it anymore. I took out a loan to rebuild my house which was very small and in bad shape. I built the house but I still have to pay off the loan. Now, they said that I have a nice house so I can't get an equity card anymore. I told them that I built the house using a credit and I was as poor as before, but they did not want to give me a new card. I am now in a very difficult situation." Sarun, etchay, 37 years old, male.

In 2020-2021, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected all population groups, but particularly the most vulnerable. According to UNDP **"poverty is forecast to almost double in Cambodia."⁵⁷** During the lockdown, the government, NGOs, and private entities provided aid (mainly food distributions) to the most affected people.

On May 11, 2021, the government initiated an **"emergency social assistance program"**. It aimed to provide one-time cash transfers to low-income households, those affected by Covid-19 lockdowns, and families with members who died of or were infected with the coronavirus. Undocumented people and people who do not have a fixed address are excluded from the scheme.

CONCLUSION

This study allows us to question who are those defined as homeless and to help understand that they are not a constituted social group, whose members share common characteristics and an exclusive way of life on the bangs of the rest of society. Other people live on the street or in precarious conditions while being actors in the economic life of the city. These people who are not attached to a physical home in Phnom Penh are however often invisible in the eyes of the administration and do not benefit from aid or rights to which they could claim.

⁵⁷ <https://www.kh.undp.org/content/cambodia/en/home/stories/2021/lifeline-for-vulnerable-cambodians-as-poverty-doubles-during-cov.html>

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Work with the authorities to help all the poor to be documented, with proper ID, and with the guarantee it is done with no extra fees asked.
- To identify at-risk individuals who are registered in a household but live outside to increase the precision of targeting the homeless people.
- Expand NSSF/equity fund to informal workers who do not have a formal status.
- Advocate for the creation of State-run temporary homeless shelters to help the ones who face sudden problems and give them time to reorganize their lives and prevent them from ending up living on the street.
- To expand the “emergency social assistance program” launched in May 2021 to safeguard the rights to a longer-term adequate standard of living, health, and social security.
- Increase coverage of and access to social protection schemes to informal workers
- To consider the informal economy and provide to street workers protections and rights accordingly to the labour law
- To develop with the National Employment Agency a specific program for uneducated people at risk when they lose their source of income, programs which could offer them free training and help them to retrieve a job, making a link with potential employers. It is about helping the ones with no network to find a job.
- Train people in financial literacy so that they know better how to manage their money and to understand better about contracting loans and what it implies for them in the long term, just not following what the “others” do. (UN Habitat)
- Provide information at a specific service center to access medical and social assistance.
- Establish a 24/7 hours clinic for the poor where they are sure to be looked after even if they don't have ID or/and money, as the death of a spouse, following an illness, is one of the major causes for people ending up living on the streets.

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