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Sahmakum Teang Thaut Organization • a Cambodian Urban NGO

Facts and Figures #46

March 2022



COVID-19 and the Help Provided

Assessing the Cambodian Government's response to requests for help from urban and rural poor communities during a pandemic



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Sahmakum Teang Tnaut (STT) was found in 2005 and officially registered in 2006 as a local NGO supporting urban poor communities. STT started as a small NGO that focused on technical upgrades in poor communities and since grown to produce community maps, research and advocacy in order to achieve its goal of helping urban poor and vulnerable communities realize their rights to land and housing.

For more information contact:

Tel: (855)23 555 1964

E-mail: director@teangtnaut.org, Web: www.teangtnaut.org

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/teangtnaut>

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/STTCambodia>

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I. Introduction

The Cambodian Government had mixed responses to the requests of urban and rural poor communities during COVID-19. On 28 April 2020, communities from around the country went to meet with Government officials to submit a joint-request signed by 141 communities calling for help at the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak.¹ Community members submitted a document to the Government with five key requests.² However, some of the community members were detained by police and interrogated like criminal suspects.³ International and local human rights groups condemned this, and community members pleaded that the Government listen to their requests.⁴

This research assesses the Government's actions during the COVID-19 pandemic and compares them to community requests for help. The research process comprised of interviews with 45 community members, and news report analysis, as well as Government law and policy review. The findings show that the Government did well in some areas, and poorly in others. Finally, STT submits, alongside the support of community members, the following recommendations to the Government:

Community request	Government response	Recommendations
Distribute medical and preventative supplies to the most vulnerable.	The Government did provide medical supplies, but not all communities received them.	The Government needs to utilise ID Poor and make sure that all communities that require assistance, get it. ⁵
Ease or suspend MFI debts.	The Government implemented some policies, but research suggests they were not effective.	A variety of recommendations for MFI loans exist already, and this report reiterates those. ⁶
Suspend rental payments and taxes on sales.	The Government did not suspend rental payments.	Rental protections are not strong in Cambodia. Working with low-income renters, like Factory Workers, may help to improve rental laws and policy. ⁷
Provide stay-at-home payments.	The Government provided payments to some groups.	The Government made some efforts by providing payments to some groups, but they need to expand their capacity to reach groups by implementing ID Poor. ⁸
No evictions during COVID-19.	The Government did evict communities.	Stop evicting communities during a pandemic. In addition, develop an eviction policy that abides by human rights norms. Stop evicting communities without providing them with an opportunity to get legal support.

¹ CCHR, *Stop harassing community representatives over petitions for help during the Covid-19 outbreak*. https://cchrcambodia.org/media/files/press_release/755_jsocrdk_kh.pdf

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ ID Poor website: <https://www.idpoor.gov.kh/>.

⁶ MFICAMBODIA, *Cambodia's microfinance over-indebtedness crisis*. <https://www.mficambodia.com/>

⁷ STT's website, *Low-income rental housing in urban areas*. <https://teangtnaut.org/low-income-rental-housing-in-urban-areas/?lang=en>.

⁸ ID Poor website: <https://www.idpoor.gov.kh/>.

II. Objectives

The objective of this research is to assess the Government's response to community requests for help during COVID-19. Communities from around the country submitted five key requests to the Government in 2020, and this research measures the Government's responses and actions.



III. Research Methodology

This research uses a mixed-methods approach. These include:

- Review of legislation and policy produced by the Cambodian Government during COVID-19.
- Interviews with community members from around Cambodia that submitted requests to the Government in 2020.
- Desk review of relevant literature and news reports.
- Field research.
- Interviews with NGOs.

This research is not statistically representative but provides evidence of the experiences of 45 communities throughout Cambodia during COVID-19. Sahmakum Teang Tnaut (STT) is thankful to all communities that helped to produce this research.



IV. Key Findings

Overall, this research finds that the Government did not respond to all the requests for help from communities. The Government reacted to help communities in some ways and did not react at all to other requests.

Positively, the Government provided medical supplies to communities, offered payments, and enacted policies to reduce MFI debts. But these solutions were often not effective or did not reach all communities that STT spoke to.

However, communities reported, and STT observed, that the Government did not respond to requests to reduce rental payments and did not stop evicting communities even during a global pandemic. These findings are explored further below.

Community request number 1: Distribute preventative medical supplies to the most vulnerable.

The Government did aid its most vulnerable people by providing them with medical supplies. In November of 2020, the Prime Minister asked the Ministry of Health to distribute face-masks to poor communities across Phnom Penh.⁹ However, of the 45 community leaders that STT spoke to for this research, all indicated that they had asked the Government for hand-sanitizer and/or other medical supplies, but none had received a response.¹⁰



⁹ PNN news, *Phnom Penh Authority Distributes Masks to Citizens After Receiving from the Royal Government's Strategic Repository*. <https://news.pnn.com.kh/news/3607>

¹⁰ STT Questionnaire results.

Community request number 2: Ease or suspend debt to MFIs, banks and private money-lenders.

On 27 March 2020 the National Bank of Cambodia released a circular on Restructured Credit during the crisis of the COVID-19. The circular aimed to maintain the stability and support economic activities affected by the outbreak of COVID-19 especially for vulnerable groups such as tourism workers, garment factory workers, construction workers or any workers facing the drastic reduction of their income and in debt. The circular was effective until 31 December 2020.¹¹ Following that announcement, on April 20 2020, the National Bank of Cambodia released another letter to inform the head of the banks and microfinance institutions to request for their assistance in helping vulnerable groups.¹²

However, these measures were ineffective, according to a study by The Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO) and Equitable Cambodia (EC). Their research shows that restructuring of loans did not occur for a variety of reasons. Two main reasons emerged:

- Indebted families being unaware of the Government restructuring policy;
- MFIs not agreeing to restructure – even when asked to by their clients.
- Restructuring increase the total amount of debt.

Therefore, the Government may have attempted to comply with Community Request 2. But, in reality, community members rarely got any relief on their debt during the COVID-19 pandemic. Instead, loans became much harder to repay during COVID-19 for poor families because of a loss of or a reduction in income.



¹¹ NBC, *Directive on Credit Restructuring During the Affected by the Outbreak of Covid-19 National Bank of Cambodia*. March 27, 2020. https://www.nbc.org.kh/legislation/prakas_new.php

¹² NBC, *Request for waiver of other fees related to credit or exemption from other fines for customers of the National Bank of Cambodia*. April 20, 2020. https://www.nbc.org.kh/legislation/prakas_new.php

Community request number 3: Rental suspension and suspension of all taxes on sales

The Government did not suspend rental payments despite direct requests from 37 of the 45 communities that STT interviewed. The request was made because income for workers throughout communities had decreased or workers had lost their jobs. Many families who rented houses or areas to sell or do business had less income to pay rental fees.

Community request number 4: Stay-at-home payments

The Government did provide economic relief to its citizens through payments. On 24 June 2020, the Prime Minister launched a pay support program to “to facilitate the living conditions of the poor and vulnerable people suffering from the impact of COVID-19”.¹³ The program provides 120,000 riel (approximately 30 U.S. dollars) per month to poor families, with level 1 families further assisted with 13 extra dollars and level 2 families receiving 9 dollars extra depending on the number of people in the family.¹⁴



In addition, factory workers in locked-down areas of Phnom Penh were eligible to receive payments in 2021. The Government provided a one-time payment of 160,000 riel (approximately \$40 US Dollars) to a potential 59,000 workers from Phnom Penh and Kandal locked-down areas.¹⁵

Finally, on 13 May 2021 the Government released the ‘Decision on the mechanism and procedure for the implementation of the social assistance program as cash for the people and families who have financial difficulties, the people and families who are infected with COVID-19 and have financial difficulties, and families of people who died of Covid-19 in the event of February 20, 2021’. This sets out the policy to provide support via cash payments to vulnerable poor families, factory workers, and people who had family members die during COVID-19. This provides for a one-time payment of between 156,000 (approximately 39 US Dollars) and 760,000 riels (approximately 190 US Dollars).¹⁶

Of the 45 communities that STT interviewed, nearly half received some type of payment support from the Government.¹⁷ Although this support is positive, a greater number of communities should have received support. The reason for which they did not receive support should be further investigated by the Government.

¹³ Xinhua news, *Cambodia launches cash relief program for poor, vulnerable households during COVID-19*. http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-06/24/c_139163610.htm

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Phnom Penh Post, *Gov’t gives financial aid to lockdown-affected workers*. <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/govt-gives-financial-aid-lockdown-affected-workers>

¹⁶ NSPC, *Decision on the mechanism and procedure for the implementation of the social assistance program as cash for the people and families who have financial difficulties, the people and families who are infected with Covid-19 and have financial difficulties, and families of people who died of Covid-19 in the event of February 20, 2021*. <https://nspc.gov.kh/laws-and-regulations>

¹⁷ STT Questionnaire results.

Community request number 5: Relocation and eviction issues

At least 11 communities from around Phnom Penh were evicted or issued with a notice to evict during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Community/Location Name	Phum	Sangkat	Khan
Banteay Sloek ¹⁸	Phum 4	Tomnub Toek	Chamkar Mon
Boueng Chhouk A Community ¹⁹	Boeung Chhouk	Sangkat Kilometer 6	Russey Keo
New Airport ²⁰	Kompong Talong	Boeung Khyang	Kandal Stoeung
Samrong Tbong ²¹	Samrong Tbong	Samrong Tbong	Prek Pnov
Boeung Samrong ²²	Duong	Prek Pnov	Prek Pnov
Preytea ²³	Prey Tea	Chom Chao 3	Porsenchey
Express way(Beoung Tamok) ²⁴	Cheng Meng	Samrong Krom	Porsenchey
Stoeung Kambot ²⁵	Lorkambor	Svay Pak	Svay Pak
Chbar Ampov ²⁶	Champous Kaek 1	Prek Thmey	Chbar Ampov
Boeung Tompun ²⁷	Phum Sansomkosol 2	Boeung Tompun	Meanchey
Boeung Tamok ²⁸	Koh Rogneang	Pon Sang	Prek Pnov

This finding demonstrates that the Government prioritized its own agenda over the health, safety and right to housing of communities evicted or issued with notices to evict. Leilani Farha, the Special Rapporteur on the right to adequate housing issued a letter to Governments around the world at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. As the letter notes, everyone deserves a home for their safety, especially during a pandemic, and forced evictions during a pandemic are a violation of international law.²⁹

¹⁸ STT's website, Stop evictions: *Banteay Sleuk community should not be evicted during the pandemic of COVID 19*. https://teangtnaut.org/evicted_banteaysleuk-community/?lang=km

¹⁹ STT's website, Stop Evictions: *Boeung Chhouk A community should not be evicted during the Covid-19 Pandemic*. <https://teangtnaut.org/%e1%9e%94%e1%9e%89%e1%9f%92%e1%9e%88%e1%9e%94%e1%9f%8b%e1%9e%80%e1%9e%b6%e1%9e%9a%e1%9e%94%e1%9e%8e%e1%9f%92%e1%9e%8f%e1%9f%81%e1%9e%89%e1%9e%85%e1%9f%81%e1%9e%89%e1%9f%96-%e1%9e%9f%e1%9e%a0%e1%9e%82/?lang=en>

²⁰ VOD news, *Citizens in land dispute over new airport project*. <https://www.vodkmer.news/2021/09/01/residents-in-land-dispute-over-new-airport-project-protest-after-company-cutting-off-the-road-with-machinery/>

²¹ STT's website, *Khan Prek Pnov Authorities Come to Disassemble a Structure's Samrong Tbong Community Members*.

<https://teangtnaut.org/%e1%9e%80%e1%9e%9a%e1%9e%8e%e1%9e%b8%e1%9e%a2%e1%9e%b6%e1%9e%87%e1%9f%92%e1%9e%89%e1%9e%b6%e1%9e%92%e1%9e%9a%e1%9e%85%e1%9e%bb%e1%9f%87%e1%9e%91%e1%9f%85%e1%9e%9a%e1%9e%bb%e1%9f%87%e1%9e%9a%e1%9e%be/?lang=en>

²² RFI news, Land issue: *Authorities and Boeung Samrong residents' discordance with more than 30 families when authorities carry out procedures*. <https://www.rfi.fr/km/%E1>

²³ VOD news, *More than 100 families protest after soldiers over land dispute*.

<https://www.vodkmer.news/2021/11/03/more-than-100-families-protest-after-soldiers-make-land-titles-deed/>

²⁴ Cambodia Daily, *Many houses in Tom Nop Kob Srov were demolished without compensation*.

<https://www.cambodiadaily.com/2021/10/30/11/13/57611/>

²⁵ Rasmei Khampuchea Daily Newspaper, *30-meter boulevard project's gone smoothly*.

https://www.rasmeinews.com/archives/423531?__FB_PRIVATE_TRACKING__=%7B%22loggedout_browser_id%22%3A%22ff0e5d1fb93d410ea714ec1df2925b-cee93954c7%22%7D

²⁶ VOD News, *Citizen Representative in Land Dispute with Borey Peng Huot Company Arrested*.

<https://www.vodkmer.news/2021/10/25/a-representative-in-land-dispute-with-borey-peng-huoth-arrested/>

²⁷ VOD News, *Land Dispute Victims in Boeung Tumpun Gather to Protest, Demand Government Urgent Address*.

<https://www.vodkmer.news/2021/01/31/land-conflict-at-boeng-tom-pun-protest/>

²⁸ 40 villagers (4 families) in Koh Reang village, *Prek Pnov district insist on the authority to clear the land after the Boeung Tamok sub-decree came into force*.

https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=2943066945926439&id=100006694878158&m_entstream_source=permalink&refid=52

²⁹ OHCHR, COVID-19 Guidance Note: *Prohibition of evictions*. https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Housing/SR_housing_COVID-19_guidance_evictions.pdf



Case study: Forcefully evicted from their house

Sou Sreyneang is an urban poor woman living in a small house in Prek Pnov district, Phnom Penh. The expansion of National Road Number 5 in 2003 and 2015 affected her livelihood, and her husband died in 2000. Living as widow, her house was destroyed by the local authorities, and her children left her because they felt ashamed.

She didn't have ID poor card and had no support from the Government. She has requested for an ID poor card from her Sangkat authorities four times since 2018. During COVID-19, she has nothing to eat and her health suffers.

Fortunately, in March she had the opportunity to raise her concerns with H.E. Keo Ouly, Director of Identification of Poor Households Department of Government, on a Facebook live show organized by Samahkum Teang Tnaut. One day later, an officer from the Phnom Penh DeCastro Office of Planning arrived at her home to conduct an interview.

Although the process was long, Sou received an ID poor card. With this, she receives daily Government payments to the amount of 128,000 riels per month. It hasn't solved all her problems, but at least she is able to look after her health and some of her daily expenses.



Sou Sreyneang's house along the National Road Number 5.

V. Conclusions

This research has shown that the Government has only partially responded to the requests of communities, and sometimes these responses were ineffective, or did not reach all necessary groups. The Government also failed to respond to the request to not evict communities during the pandemic. Communities should be commended for bringing requests for help to their Government, and the Government should take these requests seriously.

VI. Recommendations

1. The Government needs to continue implementing ID Poor; without this, poor communities may be unable to get healthcare and be properly targeted for support. Implementation should be urgent and greater funding should be allocated towards this.
2. A variety of recommendations for MFI loans exist already, and this report reiterates them³⁰ and asks that the additional evidence herein is considered in support of those recommendations.
3. Rental protections are not strong in Cambodia. Working with low-income renters, like migrant factory workers, may help to improve rental laws and policy.
4. Evictions during a pandemic threaten the lives of people being evicted and can threaten others by placing people in situations where transmission of the COVID-19 virus is more likely. The Government must stop evicting people during the pandemic. In addition, it must develop an eviction policy that abides by human rights norms and stop evicting communities without providing them with an opportunity to get legal support.

³⁰ Right to relief, [http://: voices. mficcambodia.com](http://voices.mficcambodia.com).



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Tel: (855) 23 555 1964

Website: www.teangtnaut.org

UV: <https://urbanvoicecambodia.net>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/sttcambodia>