

THE CLIMATE CHANGE-MODERN SLAVERY NEXUS IN CAMBODIA

Cambodia's capital city, Phnom Penh, has experienced an incredibly fast construction boom. Building projects demand bricks in large quantities, and there is a profitable domestic brick production industry supplying them. But the bricks are cheap and the labour is even cheaper; workers are typically paid a piece rate of approximately US\$0.007 per brick. In fact, this industry relies upon a multigenerational workforce of adults and children trapped in debt bondage – the most prevalent form of modern slavery in the world. Research enabled by the [ESRC-DFID Joint Fund for Poverty Alleviation Research](#) on 'Blood Bricks' focuses on Cambodian brick kilns to examine how a high vulnerability to climate change can facilitate trafficking into new industries and greater susceptibility to modern slavery.

THE CHALLENGE

Cambodia has repeatedly been named one of the most climate-vulnerable countries in the world. As a country heavily reliant on agriculture, a combination of flooding and foreign investment in both the construction and garment industries has seen many workers leave farming to take up jobs in factories or construction sites. Low levels of regulation in these industries has resulted in multigenerational families of adults and children from rural villages working in hazardous factories on the outskirts of the country's



Cover photo: Atith stokes the fire of a kiln at night to minimise the extreme temperatures he faces. **Credit:** Thomas Cristofolletti/Ruom. © 2018 Royal Holloway, University of London.

capital city. In many cases, unable to pay back a local money lender, the family's loan was transferred to a brick kiln owner, upon which time they became bonded labourers in the factory in order to pay off the debt. Due to the low rate of pay, families are often unable to earn back the amount 'owed' (LICADHO 2016).

THE RESEARCH

Mixed methods research was carried out by Royal Holloway, University of London and a Cambodian scholar from the Royal University of Phnom Penh. It combined qualitative interviews with construction industry informants and victims of modern slavery working in brick kilns and construction sites; a quantitative household survey and interviews in brick kiln-sender villages; analysis of longitudinal secondary data (National Institute of Statistics 2016); and geographic information system (GIS) mapping of villages with high levels of out-migration to kilns. Together the evidence identified exploitative labour practices on brick kilns which had been engendered by structural precarity in rural villages.



We have to work here [on the kiln] because of debt; if not we would have decided to leave this place long ago. This is our unsolved problem, but the loan from the kiln owner is interest-free. If the owner permitted, all of us would go back home because of our hard work. People prefer to rent land for growing rice or vegetables. But as for us, we're in debt so we can't do these things. If we had enough money we would repay the kiln owner the loan.

(Kosal, debt-bonded brick worker)

Accounts from those involved speak to the multiple and structural factors that facilitate debt bondage, such as the impacts of climate change; absence of state support for agriculture and rural development; lack of social protection or affordable and accessible health services; the largely unregulated microfinance sector; corruption and weak rule of law; and the operations and ethics of global corporate companies working in sectors from construction to fashion.

THE IMPACT

The research has strengthened awareness of the connections between climate change and severe forms of labour exploitation. Specifically, it has contributed to a deepening understanding of how climate change has exacerbated vulnerability in rural areas, in a context where millions of rural farmers across the global South are leaving agriculture and moving to urban work, particularly to more vulnerable forms of urban work (Rigg *et al.* 2018; Bernstein 2010; Bryceson 1996). Furthermore, the research has offered policy recommendations to a number of actors, including the Royal Government of Cambodia, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and the UK government with regards to the Modern Slavery Act 2015.

The project research report's findings (Brickell *et al.* 2018) have been communicated by a wide range of national and global media outlets, including BBC World News (TV), ABC News (TV), *the Guardian* (online), *The Independent* (online), the Thomson Reuters Foundation (online), Al Jazeera (online), *the South China Morning Post* (print/online), *The Conversation* (online), *Southeast Asia Globe* (print/online), and *The Phnom Penh Post* (online).

At a national level the findings were raised with Cambodian government officials during a meeting organised by the International Labour Organization in Phnom Penh, and the Minister of Labour has responded to say that he will investigate the claims made in the research report. The *Blood Bricks* project report also features a foreword by Tina Redshaw, Her Majesty's Ambassador to the Kingdom of Cambodia, who states, 'I welcome the valuable contribution this study makes to greater understanding of certain aspects of our diplomatic mission in Cambodia including education, human rights and good governance, climate change, modern slavery and child protection.'

On a global scale, Urmila Bhoola, the UN Special Rapporteur on Contemporary Forms of Slavery, including its causes and consequences, has commented, 'I congratulate the team on this ground-breaking report and I have no doubt that it will contribute significantly to improvements in the life of the people who are currently working in brick production in slavery-like conditions.' The project report has further attracted interest from organisations working in a range of areas. The project team have been contacted by a Denmark-based responsible energy

organisation to contribute to developing a framework for companies undertaking sustainability commitments in supply chains. The team have also contributed to a report that will be submitted to the UN's review of the UK's compliance with the UN Convention against Torture, led by the anti-torture organisation REDRESS. Finally, the team have secured extra funding from the UK Global Challenges Research Fund to return to Cambodia and undertake further research around the issue of air quality in kilns where garment offcuts from global fashion brands are being burned.

In terms of the UK, the project report's findings speak to the inefficacy of the UK Modern Slavery Act 2015 in tackling instances of modern slavery in UK supply chains overseas. In addition to the recommendations made in the research report around suggested improvements to the legislation, the project team submitted evidence to a Home Affairs Select Committee call in September 2018 which is reviewing the Modern Slavery Act. The team are currently in discussion with a legal firm around taking the project findings further through legal action.

FURTHER READING

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Blood bricks: examining the climate change-modern slavery nexus in the Cambodian construction industry

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THE IMPACT INITIATIVE

For International Development Research

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CREDITS

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