



QSA Notes

12 months into the pandemic, how are Cambodians faring?

| QSA PROJECT MANAGER



A gift of gardening equipment and watering cans, Cambodia.Cambodia

With the COVID-19 crisis, we have seen a dramatic increase in extreme global poverty, with up to 100 million people added to the existing population of 648 million in 2019. Despite being relatively unaffected by the health aspects during the first 12 months, Cambodia has been disproportionately affected due to its trade exposure and reliance on international remittances.

From early on, an economic slump led to widespread dramatic income losses. In rural communities characterised by abject poverty, the impact has been most severe. Families have resorted to desperate coping strategies, including cutting food and health expenditures and taking out high-risk loans to cover expenses.

Rising food prices have increased food insecurity among families with little or no savings, food stores or land, high debt levels and insecure housing. The pandemic also exacerbated the risks for children in terms of malnutrition, dropping out of school, exposure to domestic violence, child labour and child marriage.

Two recent surveys provide an insight into how COVID-19 continues to impact Cambodian families: QSA partner, Khmer Community Development (KCD), conducted a study in May 2021 to assess the magnitude of the problems caused by COVID-19 in Kandal Province, and in March-April 2021, World Vision surveyed 621 households in three provinces and Phnom Penh.

Livelihoods diminished

KCD's target community was highly reliant on agriculture, with 56% of households depending on agriculture, but one-third had a second source of income from casual day labour. Ninety-five percent reported a significant impact on their livelihoods, and one third had lost jobs and had no income. More than 50% relied on savings, over 50% also borrowed money, 15% could not repay loans, and 15% sent their children to work. The World Vision survey that included urban households found three-quarters of respondents lost their primary source of income or had it reduced, with average weekly family incomes dropping to \$35, down from \$63. Households in Phnom Penh were



Fish farming.

more affected due to more severe closures in the capital, with 95% reporting their income had been lost or reduced.

Reduced food security and nutrition

KCD found that more than 25% of households were only eating two meals per day. Nevertheless, 80% of households had not reduced the

quality and quantity of food because they had savings and access to protein and green vegetables from home gardens. Eighty percent had one week of food stock or less.

KCD respondents retained access to nearby markets during COVID-19 restrictions, but they reduced food spending by up to 40% with price increases.

World Vision's findings show only half of the families have sufficient income

to cover food expenses fully and 38% reducing spending on food. In Siem Reap, average weekly household food spending declined from \$25 to only \$16. Overall, 44% of respondents had no food stocks at home, and 70% now rely on less preferred and less expensive food, 50% reduced portion sizes, and 34% reduced the number of meals per day.

What's next?

KCD's research has informed the direction of their assistance programs in target communities, and several of the recommendations are already integrated into their work.

It's encouraging that families supported by QSA partners to implement home gardens with new permaculture techniques have fared relatively well during the pandemic. In project areas supported by QSA, reports indicate households have maintained food security or lessened the impact of food shortages and price rises with homegrown fruit and vegetables.

QSA's Living Gifts catalogue will be available soon. It's a practical way to directly support families across QSA's projects, however, any donation, no matter how small, will go to support communities in need.

NOTE: An expanded version of this article is on the QSA website at www.qsa.org.au

QSA is a member of the Australian Council for International Development and is a signatory to the ACFID Code of Conduct. The purpose of QSA is to express in a practical way the concern of Australian Quakers for the building of a more peaceful, equitable, just and compassionate world. To this end QSA works with communities in need to improve their quality of life with projects which are culturally sensitive, as well as being economically and environmentally appropriate and sustainable.

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