

## Two case studies on everyday forms of corrupt practices in Cambodia

*The two case studies presented below are part of a research project conducted by the Center for Social Development (CSD) focusing on micro-level corruption entitled “The Impact of and Attitudes towards Corruption.” Such research helps shed light on the interconnection between corruption, power and poverty in contemporary Cambodia, which as the case studies show, does not point towards it being part of the Cambodian culture. The cases presents a first-hand account by Christine J. Nissen of the Phnom Penh-based CSD of qualitative fieldwork she undertook on the themes of corruption, power, and poverty in Cambodia. These include the corrupt practices that households face in their everyday lives when they come in contact with the police, markets, school systems, health clinics, tax authorities, the civil registrar, courts, transportation, etc. As the two case studies try to illustrate, poor women face numerous problems in their everyday encounters with local government institutions and patrons. The fear of ‘the powerful’ bring women to do things like sell their land, further contributing to and deepening their poverty. Unfortunately, the triangle of corruption, power, and poverty that poor women find themselves in prevents them from making improvements in their everyday lives. Moreover, as the cases show, corruption in the two primary service sectors of education and health, can have serious consequences on poor families, including illiteracy, unemployment, chronic disease, and even death.*

Over a period of four months living in two small provincial towns in Cambodia (from January to May 2004), I was struck by how frequently the theme of corruption, power, and poverty cropped up in the everyday conversations of villagers. Neighbors would gather to talk about their day and then discussion would usually turn towards a recent bureaucratic event: high gasoline prices, troubles over land issues or a family member’s sickness. Initially, my presence may have influenced the discussion, however, over time I realized people did not discuss these issues because of my interest in them, but because of their impact on everyday life.



BOU SAROEUN

The two case studies are representative of typical situations women face in poor households. The first case is a group interview with nineteen poor women using parts of the qualitative participatory corruption appraisal methodology from the World Bank study *The Poor Speak Up: 17 Stories of Corruption* by Rathi Hardjono and Stefanie Teggemann (Eds.). The women discussed their everyday problems, mapped institutions to which they pay bribes, voted for the institution at which they felt paying bribes was the biggest problem, and drew up the causes and impacts of paying bribes to these institutions. The second case is based on an interview with a woman who faces serious

poverty-related problems as a result of losing her land to powerful people, the subsequent death of her husband and the more recent death of her youngest child. Now she does not have a house, she has difficulties in feeding her other children and she is in debt as a consequence of expenditures on medicine and health care for the child that died.

I experienced that many Cambodians, in spite of their illiteracy and lack of formal education, had firm ideas about the reasons for corruption but lacked ways to resist this practice.

## Case 1: From a group discussion

I have arranged a group meeting with ten poor women in the community I live in. We meet at an unoccupied house guarded by a young woman and her husband. The land and house are owned by people in Phnom Penh, but the family earns a living selling the fruit grown in the garden. I have announced there will be a small gift for the participants, since the meeting is planned to last several hours. To my surprise nineteen women and their children turn up for the meeting. The rumor of the gift has attracted all the neighborhood wives and their sisters. A member of the commune council is also present, with the task of reporting back to the commune chief about the issues discussed. This, however, does not seem to have much effect on what the women say and I am happy the commune council member also participates in the debate.

The group of women represents families who farm rice, fish, work as day laborers on plantations, or sell cakes, fruits, or sweets along the road. Most of the women have between five and ten children, many of whom do not attend school. The women explain that the children often do not attend school because they can not follow the class or because the family can not afford to pay to have them in school, or pay for their snacks there.

We start with a round of discussion during which the women describe their general problems. One young woman explains that she wants to get a job to earn money for her family. But to get a job in the first place she needs money to pay a bribe. Money which she does not have, She explains:

“I cannot get a job because I have no money to get a job. I cannot get a job because I am a woman.”

Another young woman adds:

“I cannot find a job; I have finished high school but need to pay bribes to become a teacher. I cannot afford that.”

The older women sitting beside them nod. There is general agreement that there is no reason for the children to attend school, especially the girls, because they are poor and will not get a job anyway, even with an education.

I ask them to write down all of the institutions in the area. One of the young women writes, while the others list the institutions one by one. They come up with twenty-three institutions. Then they write on small pieces of paper the amount of unofficial fees they have paid during the last year and attach these notes to each institution to which they paid the fees. Afterwards, we attempt to identify those institutions that they feel paying an unofficial fee to represent the biggest problem. Each woman votes for two institutions using stones. The result is clear. The women are especially concerned about paying unofficial fees at the hospital (64%) and to the general police (30%). Several of the women have consulted the referral hospital during the last year and they pay both the official fee of 40,000 riel (\$1 = 4,000 riel) and an unofficial fee to the doctors and nurses in order to receive treatment. For this reason, most of the women choose to consult private clinics instead, but they explain that it is the same people in the private clinics that also work in the hospital.

We discuss their votes and the reasons for which they need to pay this unofficial fee. One woman mentions to the other women’s amusement and agreement that they pay bribes to men because men need money to buy beer and go to prostitutes. They also mention that some men are pressed by their wives to bring home money so the wives can buy jewelry.



## Case 2: A landless mother

I met Ms. Mon through my translator. She is a rather tall woman by Cambodian standards with curly black hair in her thirties. Her father was killed in 1975 and after the end of the Pol Pot regime in 1979 she moved to a village in Kampot province. Here her mother owned some land by the seaside from which they made a living. She lived with her mother, husband and children. In 1990, her mother sold the land because they were afraid of losing it to powerful people:

“We were afraid that if we did not sell the land, then they [district chief] would take the land for free. We are afraid because they have power. They [district chief] just said that if we did not sell, they would take the land anyway. However, if we agreed to sell we would get a small amount of money to buy things to eat. Also we would be able to stay here until they need the land.”

Several of their neighbors lost their land without compensation and sometimes the army would intimidate a family into moving away from the land they owned. The family did not dare to take such a risk. They stayed on the land after it was sold, guarding it for the new owner without paying or being paid. Three months ago the new owner told them to move away. He had sold the land to someone else.

Ms. Mon’s husband died six years ago, leaving her alone with four children and her old, sick mother. All the money they had at that time was used to treat her husband, but the money was not enough to save him. She knew the school principal well and decided to give her oldest son to him so he could take care of her son and feed him. This is common practice for the poor in Cambodia she explains to me, because then there is one less mouth to feed. The son is sixteen years old and studies in sixth grade. She has three other children, but they do not attend school. She says she cannot afford to send them to school because they would have to buy something to eat at the school, sold by the teachers. Her three children would each spend 200-300 Riel a day, a total of 700 Riel which she does not have.

We sit in her small, poorly built hut constructed out of palm leaves. She is sitting on the only wooden bed and I sit on a plastic chair borrowed from one of the neighbors. She tells



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me she has lived here since she moved from their land. The land she lives on now belongs to the school, but the principal lets her stay because she does not have anywhere else to go. She cannot start growing any vegetables for the household, or for selling, because she never knows when she will have to move away.

A few years ago, Ms. Mon married a man who lives close by, as his second wife:

“It is very miserable, but he helped to buy some wood to build this house and provides a little food now and then. I had a child with him, but that child died one month and five days ago. Now I am in debt to the private clinic that treated the child.”

She starts crying. She is not happy being this man’s second wife and suffers great pain from the relationship. However, a single woman with three children is vulnerable and easily intimidated, so she married for the sake of the protection that having a husband brings, even though he only occasionally comes by.

The doctor who treated her sick child at the private clinic is also the mid-wife at the hospital, and a member of the commune council. Ms. Mon explains that she went to the referral hospital with the child, but since she only had 25,000 Riel she could not get him treated—the cost was 40,000 riel. Instead, she consulted the private clinic where she did not need to pay the money up-front and could pay back little by little, or pay in kind by working there. Ms. Mon explains:

“At the hospital, they said that the child was difficult to treat. They said that because I did not have any money, they did not want to treat him.”



Ms. Mon feels very powerless and she is desperate about the future and does not know if the situation will ever be better. She tells me when she has no food to feed her children she sits on the roadside hoping for passers-by to give her food or money. From time-to-time, a neighboring woman comes by with some food for her children. Sometimes she gets some rice from her brother who lives about thirty kilometers away. When I arrive there is no food in the hut and she does not know when, or how, she can pay the money back she owes to the private clinic.

Ms. Mon is well-respected in the community, but her status is low as she has no economic or social capital. She is expected to work for the principal and private clinic owner whenever they desire, but as she is in debt to them she earns no money. They act as ‘patron’ for her and she is obligated to show them respect, be loyal and do as they command, which also is the case with her husband. These

patron-client relationships keep Ms. Mon in helpless poverty.

Just before I leave Ms. Mon, she tells me with sincerity that she has a dream of going to France one day.

### Conclusion

Corruption, power and poverty are interrelated in Cambodia and can not be dealt with separately. The corruption function as an end in itself; canalizing money from the poor to the rich, leaving behind an increased gap between rich and poor and a society where informal structures have taken control over the formal institutions. This affects all parts of Cambodia social life.

Christine J. Nissen,  
 Research Coordinator  
 Center for Social Development, Cambodia.

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