



## Why Cambodia?

### Background

Cambodia is home to about 14 million people in Southeast Asia. It is a small country nestled between Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. This country has been at the center of unparalleled war, oppression and poverty for three decades, and is still recovering from the genocide of the Pol Pot regime which claimed the lives of up to 1/4 of the total population during the 1970s.

Only recently have Cambodians begun to recover their human resources and re-enter the modern political, legal, and social world. Despite limited progress in these realms, Cambodia still faces widespread economic hardship and poverty. With the per capita income at only \$380 per year, Cambodia ranks 131 out of 177 on the UN's Human Development Index ratings. Presently, 34% of Cambodians live on less than \$1 per day and many are unable to afford basic sustenance. Illustrating this problem is the fact that 40% of Cambodians received food aid from the UN in 2004.

### Child Labor

The children of Cambodia, who currently constitute half of the country's population, frequently bear the brunt of their country's widespread poverty. Poor Cambodians often depend on their children to generate income and consequently children are often forced to begin working at a very young age. Presently, 53% of Cambodian children between the ages of 5-17 are working—often at the expense of attending school.

Though Cambodia has seen significant improvement in its primary education enrollment rates (65%), secondary enrollment (grades 7-9) remain incredibly low at 17% for boys and 14% for girls – with rates dropping even further for the rural poor.

In Cambodia, school is technically free but not compulsory. The unofficial costs of education such as supplies, transportation and teacher demands for additional payment frequently make it impossible for Cambodian families to afford to keep their children in school—with girls generally being the first withdrawn. Because of widespread poverty, many children are

additionally taken out of school by their families and put to work. Though the income generated by working children helps ease immediate economic hardship, the longer term consequences are often devastating: it is a recognized fact that low levels of education make these children much more likely to be trafficked and fall into the grips of the brutal commercial sex trade.

### Human Trafficking

Cambodia is a widely known source, transit and destination country for human trafficking. Traffickers sometimes use coercive tactics to trick victims into a tragic cycle of debt bondage, while other times victims are used as loan collateral or sold by their parents. Children are frequently trafficked to neighboring Thailand and Vietnam for begging and street vending while others end up victims of the more lucrative and heartbreaking sex trade. In 2005, the Minister of Women's Affairs estimated that 30,000 children were presently involved in the Cambodian sex trade.

Though the Cambodian government has made modest efforts to prosecute the perpetrators of trafficking, many cases never result in convictions and there have been several reports of trafficking-related government corruption. Cambodia thus remains on the U.S. State Department's Tier 2 Watch List for its failure to comply with the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000.

Lotus Outreach believes in attacking this problem at its root. We believe that education is the most effective way to tackle poverty and its devastating side effects, such as child trafficking and sexual exploitation. We additionally believe that keeping vulnerable girls healthy and in school means keeping them out of the commercial sex trade—while at the same time giving them the capacity to build self-reliant and dignified futures.

Lotus Outreach supports a sustainable approach—one which will help Cambodia rebuild its human resources and regain its proud heritage.