



Australia Awards

Research on Untold Stories and Navigating the Just Transition of Informal Waste Pickers in Battambang's Landfills and Dumpsites

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Background: Waste Management Context

Global & National Overview

Rapid urbanization and shifting consumption patterns are driving a sharp rise in solid waste generation, including in Cambodia.

10,000+ tons

produced daily — ~4 million tons/year
(60% organic | 20% plastic | other)

Plastic Waste (Cambodia Plastic Action Roadmap 2026):

Only 5% properly managed • <2% recycled
• ~95% mismanaged

On-going reforms & investments in waste management system

Municipal waste systems continue to rely on landfills and open dumpsites

MSW Generation Growth

2.5M
tonnes in 1990

4.78M ^{+91%}
tonnes in 2020

0.78 kg
per capita/day (2020)
vs. global avg 0.74 kg

Projections to 2050

 **2030: 1.16 kg/capita/day**

 **2050: 2.13 kg/capita/day**

Overall MSW expected to grow ~36% by 2050

Informal Waste Sector & Waste Pickers in Cambodia



Socio-Economic Profile

- Locally called "Ed Jai": collect, sort & sell recyclables (plastic, paper, metal)
- Street pickers, door-to-door collectors, landfill/dumpsite pickers
- Driven by poverty, low education, lack of formal employment opportunities
- Social marginalization and rural-urban migration push people into the sector



Policy & NGO Responses

- Colombia, Brazil & India have legally recognized waste pickers as public service providers (ILO, 2019).
- Cambodia: waste pickers are NOT formally recognized by the government
- NGOs (COMPED, IDEA) act as key intermediaries and advocates for informal workers' rights (Michaels et al., 2020, IGES and UNEP, 2018)
- Perspectives and roles of waste pickers remain under-documented in Cambodia's waste management planning.



Health Risks & Livelihoods

- Face extreme physical/social hardship; severe trauma and long-term illness
- Low income: \$41–\$80/month
- Unstable earnings, hazardous conditions, no social protection

Gender Dynamics

Women are over-represented in the most dangerous and lowest-paying parts of the waste value chain

~3,000 waste pickers in Cambodia:
~300 in Siem Reap **~64% women** • **~100 children**

Sources: Shekar & Sharma, 2024; Thodukayil et al., 2024; Koy & Serey, 2025; Schroeder, 2023; ILO, 2019; Michaels et al., 2020; World Bank, 2024

'Hell on earth': the great urban scandal of family life lived on a rubbish dump

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About this content

*Poppy McPherson in Phnom
Penh*

Tue 11 Oct 2016 07:30 BST

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Overall Research Question

Overall Objective:

- To examine the social, economic, and institutional dynamics shaping Cambodia's informal waste sector through a gender analysis lens, generating evidence and policy insights to support an inclusive and just transition in waste management.

Q1: Social, economic, and gender dynamics:

What shapes waste pickers' participation in Cambodia's informal waste sector.

Q2: Experiences, Risks, and Livelihoods

How women, men, and marginalized groups experience risk and working conditions on-site.

Q3: Policy and Institutional Actions

What's needed to enable safer livelihoods and support an inclusive, just transition.

Research Design and Methodology

- **Exploratory research approach through case study:**
 - In-depth interviews with waste pickers, key informants, and focus group discussions, field observations, and desk review.
- **Non-probability sampling methods: purposive and convenience sampling**
 - Focus Group Discussions: 26 waste pickers: 12 men and 14 women.
 - In-depth Interviews: 28 waste pickers: 13 men and 15 women
- **24 institutions for key informant interviews**
 - Ministries, Provincial and Municipal Authorities
 - Development partners and NGOs
 - Private sector: waste collection companies, recycling enterprises, and junk shops (Etjai)
- **2 site visits to waste disposal locations in Battambang:**
 - Slaket Dumpsite
 - Ta Kream Landfill

Key findings



Slaket Dumpsite → Ta Kream Landfill

Dumpsite at Slaket Commune

- **Uncontrolled open** dumping with limited safeguards: burning, posing health and environmental risks.
- **Long-standing dumpsite:** (7 ha) in operation since 2010 and operated by CINTRI.
- **Still operational:** receives 2–3 loads/day.
- Prior to the closure announcement in 2023: **38 families** lived and worked and currently only 16 families



Landfill in Ta Kream, Banan District

- **Modern controlled landfill:** 21 hectares with a capacity of 313,703 m³, to operate until 2032.
- **Management and governance:** Provincial Administration, with oversight from PDoPWT reflecting a more formalized system.
- **Waste transport:** Municipal waste is delivered by private operators.
- **Operational transition:** since 2023 - operations remain in a piloting or adjustment stage as waste flows continue to shift.
- **32 waste pickers:** both residents and migrants.

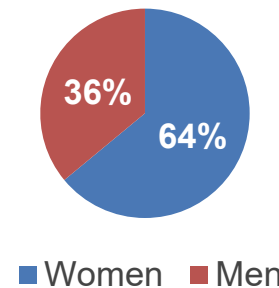


Journey of Transition into Informal Waste Picking

Who Are the Waste Pickers in Battambang

- **Livelihood of last resort:** driven by low income, limited education, and few alternatives, worsened by COVID-19 and the border conflict.
- **Mixed workforce:** long-term residents and migrants drawn to the sector by lack of alternatives
- **Intergenerational entrapment:** many inherited the occupation from parents, with limited pathways out
- **Women carry a dual burden:** a significant share of the workforce, often combining waste picking with primary caregiving
- **Gender split at the sites:** 64% women, 36% men among informal waste pickers at the dumpsite and landfill

Informal waste pickers
at dumpsite and landfill



"Before coming here, I stayed in Andoung Chenh. My parents were already collecting waste there, so when this dumpsite opened, we moved together because there was more opportunity to earn." (Female Waste Picker)

Livelihoods & Income

- **Below living-wage incomes:** monthly earnings of US\$40–250, driven down by low-value materials at Ta Kream and high-value recyclables intercepted upstream.
- **Slaket income cut nearly in half:** since Ta Kream opened, as fewer waste trucks deliver to the old site.
- **Seasonal and volatile earnings:** vulnerable to waste volume changes, recyclable price drops, and site closures
- **Irregular pay cycles:** income paid only every 3–4 weeks, pushing families toward cash advances and credit from depot owners
- **Reliance on supplemental work:** many households turn to additional informal labor (e.g. casual work) to cover gaps.



Living Conditions: Two Sites

- **Ta Kream provides basic housing:** provided accommodation and free electricity, but clean water and sanitation remain inadequate
- **Slaket housing is highly precarious:** self-constructed shelters from scrap materials directly on the dumpsite
- **NGOs partially fill the gap at Slaket:** compensating in part for the absence of state services
- **Basic welfare needs unmet at both sites:** safe housing, sanitation, and facilities remain inadequate, especially for women.
- **Site of residence shapes vulnerability:** Slaket workers face compounded disadvantages compared to Ta Kream



Security and Safety Risks

- **Occupational safety risks:** pickers face respiratory issues from toxic fumes and injuries from sharp objects; protective equipment is self-financed and inconsistently used
- **Social insecurity at Slaket:** women report heightened fear staying alone in their tents at night.
- **Drug-related tension:** presence of drug users raises safety concerns and erodes trust among neighbors
- **No access to labor protections:** as informal workers, no parental leave, regulated hours, or maternity benefits



Gender & Household Dynamics

- **Women bear a disproportionate double burden:** labour-intensive waste sorting during the day alongside household chores and caregiving.
- **Lack of childcare exposes children to risk:** limited affordable childcare forces mothers to bring young children to hazardous worksites.
- **Unpaid care work constrains economic participation:** limits women's ability to pursue training or alternative employment.
- **Unequal control over household income:** women often have less control despite contributing significantly.



Social Protection & Security Gaps



- **IDPoor cards are the main safety net:** basic healthcare access through IDPoor health equity cards, the primary form of social protection available.
- **Low awareness limits uptake:** many eligible workers don't know these programs exist.
- **Informal status blocks NSSF access:** most lack formal contracts, making them ineligible, while voluntary contributions are unaffordable at subsistence income.
- **No protection against shocks:** workers remain without occupational injury protection, maternity benefits, or retirement support, leaving them vulnerable to illness, injury, or site closure.

Skills Development & Training Gaps

- **Limited awareness of TVET opportunities:** most waste pickers don't know about available government training programs.
- **Access barriers to vocational training:** information gaps, distance, cost, and scheduling constraints.
- **TVET rarely covers green economy skills:** existing programs seldom include recycling, waste management, or jobs relevant to workers' experience.
- **Untapped potential in entrepreneurship and green skills:** training here could open meaningful transition pathways.
- **MRFs as an underused training site:** an opportunity for on-site skills development and formal employment



Financial Exclusion & Debt Dependency



- **No access to formal financial services:** lack of investment capital or collateral blocks business startups
- **Reliance on informal loans and cash advances:** widespread dependence on depot owners for daily survival
- **High-interest debt traps workers:** reduces ability to save or invest
- **Financial exclusion blocks alternative livelihoods:** prevents investment in micro-enterprises or skills training
- **Economic exit is nearly impossible:** without formal credit or savings, transitioning out of the sector remains out of reach for most

Key Discussions and Policy Implications

Toward a Just Transition: Recognition & Formalization

- **Recognize waste pickers' unseen green jobs:** essential work currently excluded from formal planning and Battambang's green city agenda.
- **Plan the transition alongside infrastructure:** Slaket closure and Ta Kream expansion risk displacing livelihoods without a parallel social plan.
- **Prioritize integration, not displacement:** a just transition must go beyond infrastructure to include workers.
- **Establish formal waste picker cooperatives:** enabling collective bargaining, formal contracts, and partnerships with municipal authorities and the private sector.
- **Legal recognition as the foundation:** required for accessing NSSF, labor protections, and social security.

Strengthening Social Protection & Gender Inclusion



- **Beyond ID Poor coverage:** workers need comprehensive protection covering injury, maternity, unemployment, and retirement.
- **Revisit NSSF for informal workers:** reduced contribution rates, simplified registration for self-employed and informal workers.
- **Gender-responsive formalization:** subsidized childcare, maternity benefits, gender-sensitive OHS standards.
- **Raise awareness of existing programs:** to increase uptake among eligible worker
- **Include women in governance:** explicit representation in cooperative and community decision-making structures.

Multi-Stakeholder Actions



- **Leverage TVET for green skills:** recycling technology, circular economy entrepreneurship, waste operations management
- **Formalize MRFs as employment hubs:** stable jobs, fair wages, OHS protections for waste pickers.
- **Expand financial access for informal workers:** microfinance and savings to break debt cycles, enable investment
- **Coordinate across stakeholders:** government, NGOs, private sector, and waste picker communities
- **Embed decent work in circular economy policy:** social protection and inclusion as Cambodia modernizes



Thank you !

Welcome
for comments and questions

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