

Slavery is real and the West profits from it – Cambodia's construction boom highlights how

November 8 2018, by Laurie Parsons



Blood bricks supply Phnom Penh's construction industry. Credit: Thomas Cristofolletti, Ruom | Copyright Royal Holloway University of London

Modern slavery is a prominent term of late. Thus far, efforts to deal with

it have tended to focus on criminality [and the explicit imprisonment of people involved](#). Yet tackling modern slavery in a meaningful sense isn't merely a question of identifying culprits and freeing victims. To do so is merely to treat the symptoms of the issue.

The conditions that shock us about modern slavery – the forced labour, the toiling children, the captivity – are not acts perpetrated by distant strangers in far off lands, but component parts of a system from which we in the West greatly benefit.

Take Cambodia for instance. The recent [Blood Bricks research project](#), from which colleagues and I recently organised an exhibition of photographs, exposes debt-bonded labour in the brick making industry. These striking visual accounts of daily life in production show adults and children alike compelled to work in horrific conditions. But they also highlight [modern slavery](#) as a fundamentally structural issue, deeply enmeshed in systems of global commerce and growth.

Despite their immediate impact, though, the reaction to these and other images tends in the longer run to be to compartmentalise; to place them in the box marked "out there", too far from our everyday experience to relate to. After all, it isn't long since Cambodia's capital city Phnom Penh was a ghost town, forcibly evacuated by the Khmer Rouge of its two million inhabitants and left as an eerie wasteland: empty, silent and rapidly returning to nature.



Phnom Penh: a city on the rise. Credit: Thomas Cristofolletti, Ruom | Copyright Royal Holloway University of London, Author provided

Yet today this is a city on the up. The once sleepy French colonial capital is in the midst of an internationally-funded building boom.

Condominiums and office blocks are springing up like rice stalks: 30,000 building projects have been registered since 2000, and some 16,000 condo units [will be added in 2018](#)

This much-celebrated urban turnaround is [rooted firmly in international investment](#) to which the UK is a significant contributor. British companies have a stake in many of these buildings and [help to construct many more](#). Plus, the UK imports more than US\$1 billion worth of goods from Cambodia each year, making it Cambodia's [largest European](#)

[trade partner](#). British consumers, like those in many other Western nations, therefore benefit from cheaply made goods made in countries to which they pay little attention.

A vicious cycle

Scrutiny of such trading relationships has long been buried beneath good news stories of Cambodia's urban growth. Yet the long shadows of Cambodia's edifices of wealth and progress conceal a deeper darkness. They are built from bricks moulded by the country's poorest inhabitants, bonded into labour in the kilns that fire the nation's growth. This is a job that nobody chooses, but which chooses its participants through structural conditions.



Veasna, a smallholder farmer in a village with high migration to brick kilns, sprays pesticide over his field. Credit: Thomas Cristofolletti, Ruom | Copyright Royal Holloway University of London, Author provided

Those who enter the brick industry were the poorest farmers in some of the poorest regions in Cambodia. Their families have always had little of anything. In recent years their struggles have been rendered unsustainable by the twin forces of market and environment, which intensify vulnerability via a [vicious cycle](#) of risk, borrowing and debt.

First of all, the unfettered advent of microfinance has resulted in a transition to farming on credit, leaving smallholders with huge debts in advance of their harvest, hoping a successful crop will clear them.

Then, climate change lies in wait to tip the odds against them. While, in years past, the gamble made by smallholders may have paid off more times than not, today they are at the mercy of a further axis of misfortune. Cambodia's changing rainfall patterns have ravaged smallholder agriculture in recent years, as the predictable rhythm of early and late season rains has given way to an [onslaught of floods and droughts](#). Almost every year is now a story of coping rather than doing; of managing in whatever way possible the task of farming in an environment no longer suited to the age-old methods.

Farmers try everything, from irrigation to new techniques to piling debt upon debt. Yet regardless of their struggles, the odds are stacked against smallholders and every year the army of landless – stripped of their ancestral plots by debt – grows larger. The result is a rootless, desperate and indebted workforce, highly vulnerable to exploitation, either in the brick kilns or elsewhere.



The odds are stacked against this workforce. Credit: Thomas Cristofolletti, Room
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And herein lies the problem. Modern slavery in the form of child labour and debt bondage is endemic in the Cambodian brick-making industry. It is not a question of a few kilns, but every kiln. Almost every brick on which the nation's construction boom rests is fired in kilns where children labour and adults languish for years in bondage.

Yet this is an issue that can't be resolved at its endpoint alone. What has allowed debt bondage to become so prevalent and normalised is the way in which Cambodia's poorest have been made to bear the burden of their changing climate without provision for their well-being, or protections

against the vagaries of the market.

Not only is the West overwhelmingly responsible for the emissions [driving changes to the global climate](#), it is also increasingly the beneficiary of its impacts. As long as we allow ourselves to profit from international supply chains, while renegeing responsibility for those who work in them, we shall remain complicit in the practices that purport to shock us around the world.

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