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1. Survey Purpose

This study provides a preliminary survey on the beggar situation in Cambodia's capital city, Phnom Penh. Cambodia is a low-income Southeast Asian country struggling with socio-economic recovery as a result of decades of civil war.¹ Over the last decade, Cambodia has achieved high rates of economic growth, and poverty reduction has been a main policy target for the government. While no one could deny that the economic progress and active government policy have contributed significantly to poverty reduction, many Cambodians still live in poverty. According to the World Development Indicators (World Bank, 2013), the poverty ratio in Cambodia was 49.5% in 2009 based on the \$2 (PPP)-a-day poverty line.² Those who visited Phnom Penh may notice the presence of many beggars in the markets and tourist sites. Although the beggar situation does not fully reflect the poverty situation in a country or region, it at least serves as our first impression of the situation and may provide us with some useful information.

A 2002 study by a Non-Governmental Organization, Womyn's Agenda for Change, provides detailed information on the beggar situation in Cambodia (see WAC, 2002). WAC (2002) conducted interviews with 30 female beggars in various markets and tourist sites in Phnom Penh in an effort to figure out the reasons and factors that caused women to become beggars in Phnom Penh and identify the problems they faced.³ While WAC (2002) provided a detailed study, our survey conducted in December 2012 can be considered a good comparison to WAC's (2002) findings.

2. Survey Scope

This survey was based on interviews with beggars conducted between December 26 and 28, 2012. The markets and several of the main tourist sites in Phnom Penh were selected for our survey since they are the places where beggars gather most. Given our time and budget constraints, the provinces were not considered in this survey. It is worth noting, however, that this survey should not be subjected to selection bias since its aim is not the collection of data for any sophisticated econometric analysis. Rather, it aims to obtain a basic understanding of the beggar situation in Phnom Penh; however, a few caveats should be mentioned. First, approaching beggars for interviews was somewhat difficult since they feared that security guards may force them from their sites. Sometimes, they begged only when they were sure that it was safe to do so.⁴ Therefore, we had to

make them feel safe enough for the interviews. Secondly, some beggars told us that the authorities had forcibly mobilized many beggars to the outskirts of Phnom Penh a few months prior to our survey.⁵ This significantly reduced the scope of our interview. Nevertheless, we were able to interview 16 beggars, all of whom are women. Figure 1 shows our interview activity at the Central Market.



Figure 1: Author during an interview at the Central Market, Phnom Penh. (photo taken on December 27, 2012)

3. Findings

From our interview, we obtained the following information.

- (1) Concerning places where beggars come from, in 2002, WAC found that more than half of the female

* I am indebted to Sereyvicheth Chunly for his help on the interviews.

¹ However, Cambodia is expected to move to the lower middle-income group at the end of 2013.

² It is worth noting that, based on the \$1.25 (PPP)-a-day poverty line, the poverty rate was 18.6% in 2009. According to the most recent data reported by the Ministry of Planning (2013), the poverty rate in Cambodia was 19.8% in 2011 based on the national poverty line.

³ See WAC (2002) for more detail.

⁴ We were told about this by some beggars whom we interviewed at Central Market (also known as 'Phsar Thmey').

⁵ Although we did not witness the mobilization ourselves, a vendor in front of the Royal Palace also told us about it.

beggars interviewed had come from Prey Veng, a province in southern Cambodia. From our survey in 2012, among those whom we interviewed only one answered that she was a resident of Phnom Penh; the rest were from Prey Veng.⁶ This indicates that Prey Veng is still a significant source of beggar inflows into Phnom Penh. Moreover, nine of 15 beggars from Prey Veng revealed to us that they were from the Angkor Sar commune, in Mesang district.

- (2) The age structure of beggars we interviewed was between 17 and 70 years old, in which the mean and median were 36 and 31 years, respectively. Thus, we can see that they were from various age groups. The large majority were in their 20s and 30s. WAC (2002) had stated that these age groups comprised only about one-third of 30 beggars interviewed.
- (3) Concerning their literacy, although some had spent several years in primary school, almost all revealed to us that they did not go to school and could not do basic reading and writing.
- (4) All beggars interviewed were married and had children. Nine of them had one or two children. The woman who had the most children was 57 years old. The youngest, age 17, from Prey Veng, had one child.
- (5) Concerning their husbands' situation, about 50% told us that their husbands were daily-paid construction workers; however, some had to support their families because their husbands were ill and stayed at home.
- (6) We also asked about their daily earning from begging and their expenses. Most told us that they could earn about 10,000 Riel (about 2.5 US\$) a day. Adjust this with the consumer price index (CPI), and comes to around 5,500 Riel in 2002.⁷ This figure is higher than the beggars' daily earning found by WAC (2002).⁸ Although a few told us that they spent almost all their earnings on food and shelter, more than half had managed to save a few thousand Riel for their families.
- (7) To get some information on their situations in their hometowns, we also asked whether they possess land for farming or not. A large majority revealed that they have land, but that the land is too small to produce enough crops for their own consumption. A few told us that they lack sufficient financial resources to buy seeds and fertilizer for cultivation. Therefore, their land went fallow. Furthermore, some said that because their family members had fallen sick, they had already used their land as collateral for loans from moneylenders in the village.

4. Future Plan

This study conducts a basic survey on the beggar situation in Phnom Penh in December 2012. From the results of our interview, we obtained some useful information as described above. Based on this preliminary information, we hope to extend our study by conducting a more detailed survey on the villagers in the Angkor Sar commune, in Mesang district, Prey Veng, which is a main source of beggar inflows into Phnom Penh. This may help us to figure out the main factors that force them to come to beg in Phnom Penh. Also, in closing, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Saitama University for its generous financial support (Project Number: BP36) for this survey.

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⁶ The woman beggar who revealed to us as a Phnom Penh resident told us that she was born in the Neak Loeng commune, in Peam Ror district, Prey Veng. But she said that she first came to Phnom Penh when she was about three or four years old. She is married with one child. Her husband was sent to a rehabilitation center for glue-sniffing addiction treatment.

⁷ The CPI data in 2012 is not available to us yet. Therefore, we use CPI data in 2011 for this calculation. The data is from World Bank (2013).

⁸ WAC (2002) found that most beggars interviewed in 2002 earned less than 4,000 Riel a day.