

Country profile

Cambodia

World Vision

GEOGRAPHY

Cambodia is a south-east Asian country, slightly smaller in area than Victoria. Central plains account for two-thirds of the land area. These are surrounded by densely forested mountains, with the Gulf of Thailand to the south. Cambodia's major water sources are the Mekong River and Tonle Sap (Great Lake).

The tropical climate combines a dry season (November to May) and monsoonal or heavy rains (May to November). Rainfall variations can result in periodic droughts or floods.

PEOPLE

The majority of Cambodia's 14.5 million people live in rural areas. Most Cambodians are of Khmer origin and there are several ethnic groups living in the mountains.

The capital is Phnom Penh and the national language is Khmer. Over 95% of Cambodians are Buddhists. Under the Khmer Rouge (1975-78), all religious practice was banned. In 1979, Buddhism was reinstated as the official religion. There are small numbers of Christians and Muslims.



Map courtesy of The General Libraries
The University of Texas at Austin.



Villagers meet regularly at the local rice bank. World Vision is working with residents of this remote village to improve health and livelihoods.

HISTORY

Cambodia traces its Khmer origins to the Angkor civilisation, which was most powerful between the ninth and 13th centuries. In 1863, to avoid Thai domination, Cambodia became a French protectorate, although the monarchy continued. In 1953, Cambodia gained independence from France and King Sihanouk sought to keep the country neutral.

From 1969, the country suffered attacks as a consequence of the war in Vietnam, and began to be torn apart by civil war. By 1975, thousands of Cambodians had been killed and many had fled to the cities for refuge. In 1975, the communist Khmer Rouge led by Pol Pot captured Phnom Penh and seized power. The entire country was re-organised to create an agrarian society closed to the outside world. Schools and newspapers were closed, transport and services were largely destroyed and money was abolished. Those suspected of opposing official political views were tortured or killed. People were ordered out of cities and put to work growing rice and digging canals.

An estimated 1.7 million people died through hunger, illness, overwork and execution. In 1979, Vietnamese troops swept into Phnom Penh establishing a new government led by men who had fled during the rule of the Khmer Rouge. However, the country continued to be wracked by fighting between the Vietnamese-backed government, the Khmer Rouge and other resistance forces.

In 1991, a United Nations-sponsored peace treaty was signed and a peacekeeping force set up to oversee the ceasefire and elections. A coalition government including royalists and former communists came to power, and gradually the Khmer Rouge threat subsided. Currently the government is democratically elected, and is led by Prime Minister Hun Sen.

ECONOMY

Agriculture, including fishing and forestry, employs nearly 75% of the population. Rice and rubber are the main export crops. About 85% of cultivatable land is devoted to rice and since most villages are close to a water source, fishing is an important activity. Income is supplemented by raising livestock and growing fruit and vegetables. Production has been hampered by a number of factors including: lack of irrigation, fertilisers and pest control; landmining of farmland; and flooding.

Cambodia's industry was largely destroyed between 1975–78. The sector's development has been restricted by a lack of adequate transport and a shortage of spare parts and power. Most fuel, raw materials and consumer goods are imported. Apart from precious stones, few mineral resources have been developed.

International aid has played a vital role in the country's reconstruction. The funds have been used to rebuild infrastructure, promote economic growth through agriculture and tourism, and improve governance.

LIVING CONDITIONS

Home for many Cambodians is a small dwelling on stilts made of wood or bamboo, which often houses multi-generational families. The staple diet is rice and fish, which is often the only source of protein. Most people live in villages of 100 to 400 families. The events of the 1970s continue to have a dramatic impact on family life. More than one-fifth of households are now headed by women. These families are more likely to suffer economic hardship and, as a consequence, malnutrition and premature death.



World Vision has helped this community build a well in the village. Women and children can now collect clean, safe water without trekking long distances with heavy loads.

Comparatively speaking...

CATEGORY	CAMBODIA	AUSTRALIA
Population	14.5 million	21 million
Urban population	22%	89.1%
Population with an improved water source	65%	100%
Adult literacy rate	76%	99%
Population living on less than US\$2 a day	77%	0%
Primary school enrolment	89%	96%
Under-5 mortality rate (deaths per 1000 live births)	90	6
Children underweight for age (<5 years)	36%	0
Life expectancy at birth	61 years	82 years

Source: UNICEF, *The State of the World's Children Special Edition*, 2009.

Whilst progress has been made to address health issues, the lack of safe drinking water and sanitation means Cambodians face the spread of diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria; HIV and AIDS is also an issue. The government is seeking to improve this situation by establishing a basic healthcare system. Landmines are a problem in Cambodia, with agricultural land made unproductive in some parts of the country because it is mined.

EDUCATION

Educational recovery has been a high priority, with six years of primary education now compulsory. However, levels of attendance for girls, especially in secondary school, is poor. Attendance also varies according to region and drop-out rates are high. Teachers' wages are low, meaning the quality of education is generally poor. Teachers have to supplement their wage, by charging informal school fees to students, or by taking on extra work.

WORLD VISION AUSTRALIA IN CAMBODIA

- assists sponsored children, their families and communities with basic needs such as clean water, education, health and nutrition
- works with government health service providers to improve the quality of their healthcare, particularly children under 5 and mothers
- provides training for farmers to increase food production, while other people learn small business skills
- works to educate, involve and empower communities in child protection issues
- supports programs to assist young people who have been trafficked for work, who work in brick factories, or who have been sexually abused
- works with urban slum communities under threat of displacement
- educates communities about land tenure and land rights.

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