



Sothea collects bricks that have already cooled.

Outside the furnace: A child laborer pursues education for a better future



TAA Sothea's lanky frame and gentle demeanor give little hint of the gritty circumstances of his life and upbringing. Sothea has spent most of his 16 years living and working in a brick factory compound in Ba Kaing Commune. When the school day is over he helps his parents keep the furnaces going with a steady supply of wood, while attending to other tasks as needed.

"My parents work day and night full time," he says. "They cannot rest because the wood is not going to burn well if they don't keep an eye on it."

Sothea says that his parents get paid 500,000R (\$125) every time they complete a task given by the factory owners. The deadline for completing each task is usually five to six days. The work can be irregular, however, making it difficult to support Sothea, five other siblings, and a brother-in-law, all of whom live in a small house in the compound.

In addition to assisting his parents with the furnaces, Sothea transports bricks around the compound, and lays them out to cool after they have been baked.

"It's tiring because I use a lot of energy," he says.

Sothea does not get paid a regular wage by factory owners. He only receives a daily allowance from his parents of 2,000R (\$0.50) in the morning and 1,000R (\$0.25) in the afternoon on school days. If there is money to spare, his parents give him 10,000R (\$2.5) from each paycheck they get.

Sothea is one of a shockingly high number of children in Cambodia aged 5-17 who work as laborers and receive little to no compensation.

According to a report* recently released by the International Labor Organization (ILO), 19 percent of Cambodia's 4 million children were economically active in 2012. Of this number, 17.4 percent, or 74,650, worked in offices, kiosks, workshops, shops and factories like Sothea.

Children who work in brick factories are particularly vulnerable because they are exposed to heat, dust and fumes – conditions that the ILO regards as hazardous. The ILO reports that in 2012 only 2.9 percent of child laborers in Cambodia worked in hazardous conditions, making Sothea's story all the more extraordinary and unique.

Sothea estimates that 20 children live in his brick

factory. Of these, eight do not attend school and instead work upwards of eight hours per day on a daily wage of 16,000R (\$4). The youngest is 12 years old.

Despite facing limited opportunities and resources, Sothea is determined to make a better life for himself and for his family. The first and most important step, he says, is getting a good education.

Sothea first understood this during a child protection group meeting conducted by LICADHO staff at his school in 2012. During the meeting, he realised that he does not have to work in the brick factory his entire life because education gives a person options.

“I am good at a math,” he says. “I want to become an accountant. But in order to become an accountant, I have to study hard and learn more about this kind of work.”

Now, as part of LICADHO’s child protection group network, Sothea attends meetings at least once a month to discuss child rights and child labor issues with other children and youth, and to encourage his community to send their children to school.

“I joined because I want to educate my co-workers at the brick factory not to work but to go to school,” he says. “I share about children’s rights, such as the right to go to school and travel anywhere.”

According to the ILO survey, approximately 11 percent of the country’s children did not attend school in 2012.

Fortunately, Sothea has never witnessed any abuse toward children in his brick factory. And when a worker got injured, the factory owners paid the hospital expenses.

“I have never seen abuse in my factory, but I heard about child abuse in other brick factories, where the manager beat a pregnant woman,” he says.

Despite the relatively good treatment from the factory owners, Sothea worries about his family’s security. They do not have a strong support network, as his parents’ home province, Svay Rieng, is several

hundred kilometers to the southeast.

“When something bad happens in my family, there is nobody to help us,” Sothea says.

Moreover, his parents do not have a written contract with the owners and can lose their job if they are injured or become too old. This is why they want to return to Svay Rieng to start a farm or work in the garment industry, which is less physically demanding.

Most of all, Sothea worries that if his family stays at the brick factory, the money they make will not be enough to help him finish school and become an accountant.

“I don’t have enough money to go to school because my parents cannot give me the money to go



to school,” he says.

To Sothea, advocating for children’s education is personal. He sees education as the bridge to a better life – a life that he can only dream about for the moment - while he attends school, plays football with friends, and helps his family at home and at work.

“I think children should not work for brick factories,” he says. “They should go to school, because if they work in the factories, they will work there their whole lives.”

To access the full ILO report, “Cambodia Labour Force and Child Labour Survey 2012: Child Labour Report 2013,” please click the following link: <http://bit.ly/JzrlVD>