

# Cambodia - the context

Region: Asia



16.4 million 

people live in Cambodia

65% 

of the population is aged under 30 years



Above: A map of Cambodia's regions (Wikipedia).

Cambodia, officially called the Kingdom of Cambodia, is in the Southern portion of the Indochina Peninsula in Southeast Asia, sharing a border with Thailand, Laos and Vietnam

As in the rest of Southeast Asia, Cambodia's climate is characterised by two main seasons: the monsoon, which usually brings heavy rain from mid-May to October, and the dry season from November to April.

Cambodia has a population of roughly 16.4 million<sup>4</sup> (about 7 million fewer people than Australia). At just over 180,000 km<sup>2</sup>, its landmass could fit into Australia approximately 43 times.

## History

Cambodia's recent history is a tragic one, perhaps most known for the atrocities of the Khmer Rouge under Pol Pot's rule in the 1970s, but its history prior to this is not without its sorrows, with centuries of contested land, power struggles and colonial dispossession. At the same time, throughout history Cambodia has played a significant role in the Southeast Asian region, greatly shaping the cultures and customs of the modern-day countries across the Indochinese Peninsula.

Archaeological records show that people were living in Cambodia as early as 4000 BC, farming the land and residing in traditional wooden houses. The original inhabitants of Cambodia were called 'Khmers' and they are still the country's predominant ethnic group today.

The region now considered Cambodia was first subject to foreign influence between 500 BC and 500 AD, when Brahmans from India travelled to the area, bringing with them religion, governance structures, written language and large-scale irrigation, which enabled extensive rice production. While adopting these forms of Indian culture, the Khmers retained sovereignty, ruled by the Khmer Royal Family.

Over the next few centuries, much of the country's famous temples, including the world's largest religious monument and UNESCO world heritage site Angkor Wat, were built in a period that is known as a religious flourishing, with both Hinduism and Buddhism coexisting peacefully. In this time, the region saw substantial political, religious and cultural progress.<sup>5</sup>

Between 1000-1300 AD, Khmer rule expanded to include much of the Indochinese mainland, incorporating large parts of present-day southern Vietnam, Laos, and eastern Thailand.<sup>6</sup> This period saw the emergence of the 'Angkor' civilisation and the adoption of Theravada Buddhism as the state religion.

### References

4. 'Cambodia' *CIA World Factbook*, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cb.html>, date accessed 7/1/20.
5. Ponchaud, F. 2012, *The Cathedral in the Rice Paddy - The 450 year long History of the Church in Cambodia*, Phnom Penh.
6. Encyclopaedia Britannica, Cambodia, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Cambodia/The-Khmer-state-Angkor>, date accessed 06/01/20.



Above (top to bottom): A traditional Angkor style statue; Buddhist monks in Siem Reap.

Around 1300 AD, Angkor dominance of the region started to fragment, falling to Thai and Vietnamese rule. Political instability and subordination to other regional powers characterised the next four centuries. Between 1603 and 1848, with loyalties in the Khmer Royal family divided, 22 monarchs occupied the Cambodian throne.<sup>7</sup>

In 1863, seeking stability and greater autonomy, Cambodia became a protectorate of France, which historians have argued saved Cambodia from being divided up among Thailand and Vietnam. From the late 19th century up to World War Two, Cambodia experienced a short period of relative peace.

During the early 1940s, Cambodia was briefly occupied by Japanese forces, before becoming an autonomous state of the French Union in October 1945, ruled by the Khmer monarchy. Complete independence was not achieved for the nation until 1953. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, emerging political unease and tensions would largely set the stage for the infamous Khmer Rouge.

In April 1975, following five years of civil unrest, the Khmer Rouge forces captured Phnom Penh and ordered the evacuation of all cities and towns. Over two million displaced people died from execution or enforced hardships. In 1979 the Vietnamese invaded and drove the Khmer Rouge into the countryside leading to 13 years of further civil unrest. The Khmer Rouge destroyed nearly all infrastructure in the country. Institutions of higher education, money, and all forms of commercial industries were non-existent in 1979, so the country had to be rebuilt from nothing.

Under the Khmer Rouge, the Church was almost entirely destroyed, including the 19th century gothic revival Cathedral, Notre Dame, in Phnom Penh that had only opened in 1962. Incredibly, four churches (Ta Om, Sihanoukville, Bokor Mountain and Phsar Touch) survived the destruction. Catholic leaders, religious, missionaries, and lay faithful were persecuted and martyred, yet the seeds of Christ's message of love and renewal had been planted.<sup>8</sup>

UN-sponsored elections in 1993 helped restore a sense of normalcy, as did the rapid diminishment of the Khmer Rouge in the mid-1990s. A coalition government formed after national elections in 1998 brought renewed political stability and the surrender of remaining Khmer Rouge forces.

Today, the war is over, but the people of Cambodia still suffer from the landmines, diseases and lack of infrastructure left behind. It was only in December 1998 that the Khmer Rouge factions laid down their weapons and surrendered to government forces, ending the civil war in Cambodia.

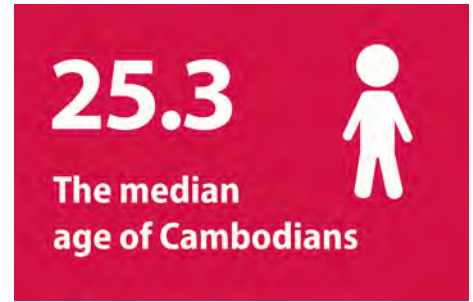
#### References

7. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Cambodia, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Cambodia/The-Khmer-state-Angkor>, date accessed 06/01/20.
8. Ponchaud, F. 2012, *The Cathedral in the Rice Paddy – The 450 year long History of the Church in Cambodia*, Phnom Penh.

# The people

## Demographics

Most Cambodian people (97.6%) identify as Khmer. Other ethnicities in Cambodia include Cham (1.2%), Chinese (0.1%), Vietnamese (0.1%) and other (0.9%).<sup>9</sup> Khmer is also recognised as the official, national language, spoken by 96.3% of Cambodians.



Urban centres are rapidly growing - the annual rate of urban growth is currently at 3.25%, compared to 1.46% in 2014. However, most Cambodians still live rurally and experience a very different quality of life from their urban compatriots. The country is also very young; the current median age of the total population is 25.3 years old, with a total life expectancy of 64.9 years of age. In 2015, more than 65% of Cambodians were aged under 30 years.<sup>10</sup>

## Religion

At almost 98% of the population, Buddhism is the national religion of Cambodia. Muslims make up 1.1% of the population and Christians 0.5%. Those remaining fall into the category 'other'.<sup>11</sup>



Above: All smiles, Cambodian people are well-known for their friendliness.

### References

- 9. op.cit, CIA World Factbook, date accessed 7/1/20.
- 10. Maurel, O. 2015, 'Cambodia: understanding the post Khmer Rouge society', Le Journal International, [https://www.lejournalinternational.fr/Cambodia-understanding-the-post-Khmer-Rouge-society\\_a3190.html](https://www.lejournalinternational.fr/Cambodia-understanding-the-post-Khmer-Rouge-society_a3190.html), date accessed 23/12/19.
- 11. op.cit. CIA World Factbook, date accessed 7/1/20.

## Disabilities

The number of Cambodians living with disability is contested, with few reliable sources of statistics. However, a 2014 study used a sample size of 74,112 individuals to estimate 10% of the population over the age of five years had some form of disability (disability was defined as people who experience some difficulty seeing, hearing, walking, concentrating, caring for themselves or communicating).<sup>12</sup> Females are slightly more likely to have some level of disability than their male counterparts (11% vs. 9%).<sup>13</sup>

Since the 1980s, thousands of deaths and disabilities have been caused by the millions of mines that were laid by the Khmer Rouge and government forces. A large proportion of Cambodian people also suffer mental health problems having lost family members and witnessed untold trauma.<sup>14</sup> In 2019, the country recorded 77 landmine casualties: 12 people were killed, 49 injured and another 16 had amputations. This is an increase of 33% on the 2018 figures. Since January 1979 to December 2019, there have been a total of 64,855 landmine casualties with 19,780 people killed, 36,026 injured and 9,049 amputated.<sup>15</sup>

In Cambodia, people with disabilities are among the most vulnerable, as they lack access to education, training and employment, and are excluded from communities. Many of these people have unique and valuable skills and talents, which they often do not get to develop.<sup>16</sup>

*Below (top to bottom): a woman from Chomnoam parish attends Sunday mass with a student from the local school; Young women in Battambang doing traditional Khmer dance.*



*Above: Thanks to Catholic Mission projects these people with disability are supported to live, work and play.*

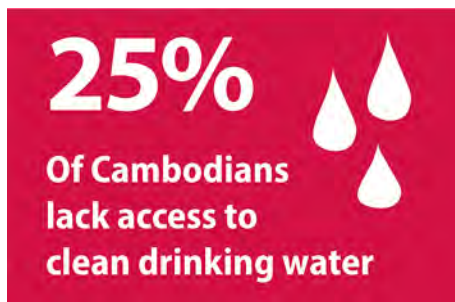
In Cambodia, public awareness of disability is slim and education to promote the full inclusion of people with disability is rare. While the rights of people with disability are recognised in the Cambodian constitution, discrimination and marginalisation, remain a problem. Cambodians with disabilities are generally among the poorest of society, which is magnified by the obstacles they face in gaining access to basic resources, training and employment.<sup>17</sup>

*Given such a strong need, Catholic Mission's partnerships and projects in Cambodia have a particular emphasis on supporting people with disability to live independent and fulfilling lives as integrated members of society.*

### References:

- 12 'Demographic and Health Survey 2014 The Experiences of Cambodia –the adoption of the Washington Group short set disability questionnaire', *National Institute of Statistics of Cambodia*, <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic-social/meetings/2016/bangkok-disability-measurement-and-statistics/Session-7/Cambodia.pdf>, date accessed 20/12/19.
- 13 'Cambodia Demographic and Health Survey 2014', 2015, *National Institute of Statistics*, <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FR312/FR312.pdf>, date accessed 21/01/20.
- 14 *Cambodia Tribunal Monitor*, <https://www.cambodiatribunal.org/history/cambodian-history/khmer-rouge-history/>, date accessed 23/12/19.
- 15 'Cambodia Demographic and Health Survey 2014', *op.cit.*
- 16 *International Labor Organisation*, [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed\\_emp/@ifp\\_skills/documents/publication/wcms\\_115096.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_emp/@ifp_skills/documents/publication/wcms_115096.pdf), date accessed 20/12/19.
- 17 March 2002, 'Country Profile on Disability – Kingdom of Cambodia', *World Bank*, [http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DISABILITY/Resources/Regions/East-Asia-Pacific/JICA\\_Cambodia.pdf](http://siteresources.worldbank.org/DISABILITY/Resources/Regions/East-Asia-Pacific/JICA_Cambodia.pdf), date accessed 20/12/19.

## State of development across the country

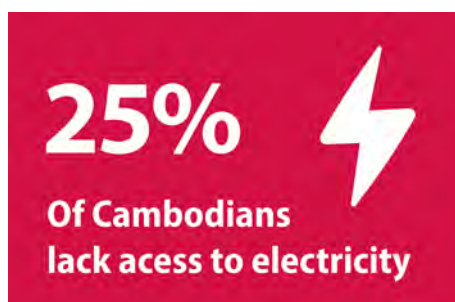


In recent years, the Cambodian government has done a lot to reduce poverty and stimulate development, but major disparity and inequality persist. The country has seen high and steady economic growth (7.7% between 1995 and 2018), making it one of the fastest growing economies globally. This is largely thanks to garment exports and tourism.<sup>18</sup> The UN estimates that 13.5% of Cambodians now live below the national poverty line, down from 53% in 2004.<sup>19</sup> Poverty continues to fall, but the rate of this decline has slowed greatly.

Almost 35% of the population experience multidimensional poverty (not just income-based poverty, but also with respect to education, health and living standards).<sup>20</sup> More than 70% of Cambodians live on \$3 a day or less, meaning almost three quarters of the national population are vulnerable to falling below the poverty line.<sup>21</sup>

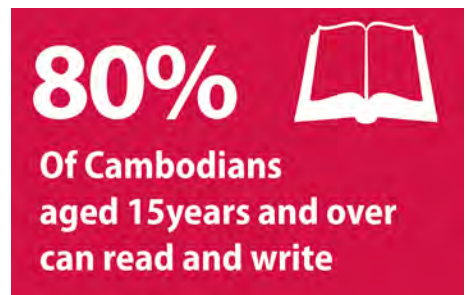


The greatest inequality lies in the gap between urban and rural inhabitants. While poverty has been reduced by 60% in Phnom Penh, it has only been by 22% in rural areas. This is in the context of a country that is still 85% rural.<sup>22</sup>



Despite its ongoing recovery, Cambodia is still one of Southeast Asia's least developed countries. As of 2015, 25% of Cambodia's population (3.8 million people) did not have access to improved water, and 44% (6.8 million people) did not have access to improved sanitation.<sup>23</sup> In 2015, 80% of Cambodians aged 15 years and older could read and write and were thus considered literate. Educational outcomes reflect gender inequalities with 86.5% literacy rate for males and 75% for females.<sup>24</sup> By comparison, Australia's national literacy rate is 99%.

Cambodia is ranked 146 out of 189 countries on the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index.<sup>25</sup> For Cambodia to continue progressing its development, investment in infrastructure is essential, as well as diversification of the economy, fostering entrepreneurship and building new skills to address emerging labour market needs.<sup>26</sup>



Above (left to right): teenage girls hang out in Battambang; young Cambodians play traditional music at a Church celebration.

### References:

18. 'Cambodia Overview' - World Bank, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/cambodia/overview>, date accessed 13/08/19.
19. Development Assistance in Cambodia, *Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade*, <https://dfat.gov.au/geo/cambodia/development-assistance/Pages/development-assistance-in-cambodia.aspx>, date accessed 13/08/19.
20. 'Human Development Reports - Cambodia', *United Nations Development Programme*, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/KHM>, date accessed 13/08/19.
21. 'Cambodia and the ADB', *Asian Development Bank*, <https://www.adb.org/countries/cambodia/main>, date accessed, 7/1/20.
22. Maurel, O. 2015, *op.cit.*
23. 'Cambodia Overview' - World Bank, *op.cit.*; "Improved water" and "improved sanitation are WHO terms used to refer to water systems, which by nature of their construction are protected from contamination and sanitation facilities that separate human excreta from human contact.
24. 'Cambodia', *CIA World Factbook*, date accessed 7/1/20.
25. 'Human Development Reports - Cambodia', *op.cit.*
26. 'Cambodia Overview' - World Bank, *op.cit.*



Above (clockwise from top left hand): Chomnoam parish Priest celebrating mass; celebrations for the feast of the Assumption; children praying; teenage girls participate in prayers of the faithful; the congregation deep in reflection.

## The Church

The Church in Cambodia is relatively young and small, with a rich and inspiring history. While the Catholic Church was first established in Cambodia some 450 years ago, it has spent the last 30 years rebuilding after it was totally devastated in the 1970s. Across the country the Spirit is moving and thanks to many dedicated, faithful servants, lives are being changed by genuine encounter with the love of Jesus Christ.

There are three ecclesiastical districts in Cambodia: The Apostolic Vicariate of Phnom Penh, the Apostolic Prefecture of Battambang and the Apostolic Prefecture of Kampong Cham. Historically, Phnom Penh and Battambang have been the major hubs of Catholic community.

Across these three districts, there are 63 parishes and 73 priests, of which only nine are native Cambodians, who were ordained in the early 90s following the end of the Khmer Rouge and associated unrest. With around 20,000 baptised Catholics in Cambodia, this translates to roughly 275 Catholics for every one priest. This can be compared with a ratio in Australia of 1,824 Catholics for every priest. Cambodia has one major seminary located in Phnom Penh, St Jean Marie Vianney Catholic Major Seminary, which currently hosts seven seminarians. A further three Cambodian seminarians are studying in Thailand.

The scars from the Khmer Rouge run deep and the Catholic Church in Cambodia is doing so much to help the people and the country heal. For Bishop Olivier Scmitthaeusler M.E.P, Apostolic Vicar of Phnom Penh, “education is a priority because we are now living with the first generation of Christians. They have been baptized 20, ten and five years ago and education is a way for them to deepen their Christian and cultural roots, to help them become leaders in the Church and in their families and to build a better Christian family.”<sup>27</sup>

References:  
 27. EWTN, 'The Church in Cambodia: Teaching History', <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/church-in-cambodia-teaching-history-1778>, date accessed 23/12/19.

The first missionaries arrived in Cambodia in 1573 from Portugal. Catholicism was met with some initial hostility from the local Hindu and Buddhist religious establishments; however, by 1590 the King allowed Cambodians to be Baptised. At the beginning of the 17th century, the Church in Cambodia was a very small community, comprised mostly of Portuguese colonials and merchants. Over the course of that century, with the arrival of the Dutch in Asia, Catholics from across the continent sought refuge in Cambodia, including Portuguese Catholics from Indonesia fleeing Dutch oppression, and Vietnamese and Japanese Catholics escaping persecution.

The Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith sent the first Apostolic Vicars to Cambodia in 1659, with instructions to establish local churches bound to Rome. This meant the creation of a local clergy, a responsibility to stay in close contact with Rome, avoidance of any political engagement and a call to adapt to the manners and customs of the country and the Khmer people.

Following Cambodia's establishment as a French Protectorate in 1863, the Khmer Church was born, with the way opened for missionaries to preach and teach, build hospitals, schools, churches and convents. Catholics from other countries, especially Vietnam continued to arrive in Cambodia en masse, that the number of Khmer Catholics was very small, and the Catholic Church in Cambodia was known as mostly foreign.

Although given a mandate to train a local clergy, the first missionaries to Cambodia struggled to make this vision a reality. Between the years 1888-1939, the seminary of Cambodian mission trained 115 priests, all of whom were ethnically Vietnamese and only 34 were born in Cambodia. On November 7, 1957, Simon Chhem Yen became the first Khmer to be ordained.

Gradually, several parishes began celebrating the liturgy in Khmer and by 1966 this was extended to all Cambodian Catholic churches, so that the Church could become truly local. From then, any missionary arriving in Cambodia had to spend three years learning Khmer and familiarising themselves with local culture and customs before they could begin traditional mission, and so, "the use of Khmer became the steppingstone to an expression of faith more in tune with the culture of the people."<sup>28</sup>

From 1970, when General Lon Nol came to power, resentment towards Vietnamese living in Cambodia grew to the point of racial hatred and violence. Being closely associated with the Vietnamese community, the Catholic Church also experienced persecution and destruction of property. This continued under the Khmer Rouge, when it came to power in April 1975, with many Catholics being martyred and the eradication of Church leadership. Apostolic Vicar of Phnom Penh, Bishop Joseph Chhmar Salas, and Apostolic Prefect of Battambang, Bishop Paul Tep Im were both tragically killed.

Throughout these years of sorrow, by God's grace Catholics scattered around the country held firm; "like yeast in the dough, they lived their faith without ever being able to get together."<sup>29</sup> ne woman remembers, "On Sundays it was not possible to meet for prayer, but each prayed by himself in his heart. Even at night we did not dare whisper prayers, nor even light a lamp without being suspected of espionage. So, everyone prayed alone in their heart."<sup>30</sup>



Above: A young boy and girl participate as altar servers

On 14th April 2020, it was 30 years since the first public mass was held, after the Church was destroyed in the 1970s. The milestone was marked with mass at the public venue in Phnom Penh where it was celebrated in 1990.

References:

28. Ponchaud, F. 2012, *The Cathedral in the Rice Paddy*, p.155.
29. *ibid.*, p. 230.
30. *ibid.*, p. 234.

# The inclusive symbols of the Catholic Church in Cambodia

## Jesus with a disability

The Apostolic Prefecture of Battambang has two very special and symbolic icons; 'Christ with a disability' and Mary of the Inclusive Love. Bishop Enrique Figaredo Alvargonzalez explains the reasoning behind the development of these icons, saying, "We are coming from a very concrete history of destruction in Cambodia – a society destroyed by war, by many ideologies – and we are trying to build a Church, a place that welcomes everyone, and a place that helps the people to find themselves as the children of God."

'Christ with a disability' is a crucifix depicting Christ as an amputee with one leg missing, or as Bishop Enrique 'Kike' Figaredo Alvargonzalez puts it, "Jesus is in solidarity with people who suffer from landmines." He continues, "the people suffering today join the sufferings of Jesus to save the world. It says something important to me and all of us – the mystical body of Christ is missing something – and this missing part can be lack of understanding, lack of kindness, lack of dialogue, lack of love. As followers of Christ we have to help to fulfil (mend) this leg."



## Mary of the Inclusive Love

Mary of the Inclusive Love is a carving present in all the parishes of the Apostolic Prefecture of Battambang. She holds Jesus with open arms, welcoming all who wish to draw near. In the middle of the figure are two children; one holds a book symbolizing wisdom, the other plays the flute bringing together art, music and tradition in praising God.

In the lower part are three children; one child gives a hug of welcome, a sign of solidarity to include two other children with disability. One child is using a wheelchair, holding a dove to represent peace and the other child uses a crutch and holds flowers, a sign of love and God's greatest commandment - Love one another as I have loved you. The crutch and the wheelchair are like a sacrament that restores their dignity and makes communion between people with and without disability.

The cloak of Our Lady, which surrounds them all, symbolises the family we belong to in the Church. We are all included under this cloak, all under the love of God. At the bottom, lotus flowers, the most emblematic flower in Cambodia, represent glory, purity and holiness.