

24 April 2007: Begging some difficult questions

Study looks at foreign children begging in Thailand

By Nattha Keenapan



A woman begs with a young girl on the streets of Bangkok. Children are often hired for use by beggars trying to attract sympathy. (UNICEF/Robert Few)

It's a typical weekday morning inside the Ban Phumvet reception home for boys in Nonthaburi – and it's typically hectic. Toys are scattered across the floor of an open-air classroom where around 20 children are about to begin their first lesson of the day. In front of them is a small whiteboard covered with the Khmer alphabet.

For most of these children, it has only been a few weeks or less since they were on the streets begging. Their journey began with severe poverty in their hometowns in Cambodia, and its end – a life with a decent chance of a better future – is not yet in sight.

Puen, 11, sits down quietly in the noisy classroom ready to begin his language class. This shelter is not new to him and many of his classmates are not strangers. The children at Ban Phumvet, who range from two to 17 years old, have been rescued from the street and will stay at the shelter before being sent back to Cambodia. Many, like Puen, have been through this process before; and many will be back again.

"I went back to Cambodia [after being caught last time] and found that my father had left us for another woman" said Puen. "Now my mother and I don't have a home. My mother told me to come here again to beg so that we will have enough money to build a house. She said I can go to school when we have the house and she will buy me a bicycle."

Puen was found begging in Chon Buri earlier this year by a government "raid and rescue" team, made up of officials from the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security and local police.

Just a month before he was arrested, Puen and his younger brother had been deported to Cambodia after a year spent begging in Thailand, followed by several months in Ban Phumvet. They returned here with their aunt from their hometown in Poipet, just over the border from Aranyaprathet.

Cambodians make up the largest group of non-Thai beggars in Bangkok.

While earlier studies on begging in Bangkok focused on the fact that many child beggars are forced to beg, a survey published in October last year by the NGO Friends International and the United Nations

Inter-Agency Project on Human Trafficking in the Greater Mekong Sub-region, entitled The Nature and Scope of the Foreign Child Beggar Issue in Bangkok, suggests that most Cambodian child beggars come voluntarily with their mothers or relatives.

According to Friends International, which works with street children in Cambodia, Laos, Burma, Indonesia, Honduras and now also in Thailand, child beggars rely on informal networks of friends and family to facilitate their journey to and stay in Bangkok.

"Most of the children who come back are among those who receive the least support in terms of education, training and reintegration services. A lack of family support systems or income earning opportunities means that after deportation, children quickly return to Thailand," said Claire Ann Milligan, project coordinator of Friends International in Bangkok.

The organisation provides education and vocational training to children in four state-run shelters in Bangkok, funded by Unicef Thailand. They are Ban Phumvet (aka, Pak Kred Reception Home for Boys), Ban Raitipung (Nonthaburi Home for the Destitute), Ban Metta Remand Home and Ban Kredtrakarn (Kredtrakarn Protection and Occupational Development Centre). The training, which is given in Khmer, is intended to prepare the children for their return to Cambodia and to reduce the chances of them returning to the streets of Bangkok.

The precise number of child beggars in Bangkok is unclear. The Ministry of Social Development and Human Security reports that approximately 300 street children were assisted from 2005 to 2006. The International Labour Organisation reported in 1998 that over 1,000 children had been caught begging in Bangkok, nearly all of them Cambodian. A recent US State Department report estimated that there are 20,000 children on the streets of Thailand's major urban centres.

"Cambodian children feel that it is their responsibility to take care of their parents," said Chantana Sueprom, a Khmer-speaking staff member of Friends International at Ban Phumvet. "Although they want to go to school, they would rather work to earn money for their families."

In Cambodia, poverty, debt, natural disasters and disease are on the rise, according to the World Bank's 2006 poverty assessment. The country remains one of the poorest in the world, with an average life expectancy of just 57 years.

Economic and social destruction from more than 30 years of conflict have left a legacy of malnutrition, poor health and severe poverty. Nearly 50 per cent of all Cambodians are children – and more than half of them are working.

UNICEF estimates that between 10,000 and 20,000 children are working on the streets of Phnom Penh alone. Many of these working children scavenge rubbish from dusk till dawn just to earn 2,000 riels (16 baht) a day.

As most child beggars in Bangkok earn 200 to 300 baht a day, the coins and small notes dropped into their paper cups amount to more than most families earn in Cambodia.

While it is a cause for concern that child beggars are not in school – child protection experts are even more worried about the dangers children face on the streets. Many children also sell flowers or other small items like sweets and tissues at night in red-light districts. The risk of them being lured into the sex industry is both obvious and real.

"Even if they are with their families, they are in an exploitative and dangerous situation," said Amanda Bissex, chief of child protection at UNICEF Thailand. "They are subject to physical and sexual abuse, drug addiction and illness, including HIV/AIDS."

"One problem is that these children are often treated as illegal immigrants, not as victims of trafficking," said Bissex. "In addition, people are so concerned about trafficking that they forget there are children who have not been trafficked but who are in a situation that can be just as dire. Such children also need special services and care."

Unlike the victims of trafficking, who are provided with psychosocial services and educational and vocational activities, most non-Thai child beggars who come to Thailand with their families do not get any such support, either here or in their country. This means they are far more likely to return to Thailand.

The unlucky ones are simply picked up by the immigration police and deported. The luckier ones, like Puen, are found by rescue teams and transferred to shelters like Ban Phumvet, where more services are now becoming available.

"We help the government to provide non-formal education, recreation and life skill activities for children in their mother tongue, to better prepare them for their return and hope that they won't be forced back," said Friends International's Milligan, adding that services in the four shelters will also be provided in Lao and Burmese, in the near future.

At the same time, UNICEF is working with both the Thai and Cambodian governments to develop sustainable return and reintegration services for victims of trafficking and vulnerable migrants that focus on income generating opportunities for families to ensure they have the money to send their children to school.

"Given the economic disparity between Thailand and Cambodia, children will continue to come here despite the government crackdown on beggars," Bissex said. "And they may end up in other forms of employment that are much worse."

Puen said he is one child who will not be returning to Thailand.

He said he will tell his mother that his dream is to study and use computers – an amazing piece of technology that he encountered for the first time at a shelter on the Thai-Cambodian border when he was deported late last year.

"It was fun. I want to study computers. I want to work in anything where I can use a computer," he said. END

Note: Nattha Keenapan is a Senior Communication Assistant, UNICEF Thailand.