

# “We Have Hope”

Learning and Leadership  
for Street Vendors  
in Phnom Penh, Cambodia



**I**t's already hot, humid, and busy at the Phsar Douem Kor Market in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and it's only ten a.m.

Some customers on scooters and motorcycles roll through the market to their favourite stalls while other customers walk, leaning over baskets of limes, carrots, cucumber, and bok choy—any fresh fruit or vegetable they could possibly want.

Vendors escape the full blaze of the sun under brightly striped umbrellas while around them rise the smells of the market—vegetable skins, spilled produce, and damp baskets. From three of the market's sides swirl the sounds of traffic. Pedestrians weave confidently in and out of the endless stream of tuk-tuks, motorcycles, cars, and trucks.

Right at the edge of the road, just outside the main market, **NUB SOUEN**, her children, and grandchildren sit in the shade under a patchwork of tarps. Here, Souen, a street vendor, spends each day, from six thirty in the morning until nine at night, selling potatoes and small juicing oranges. Her children, ranging in age from 3 to 14, also spend many hours here. The older children are out of school for the summer, and, in Cambodia, younger children don't begin school until age 6.



Nub Souen spends up to 15 hours a day at her market stall. Photo: B. Leifso

As Souen says, it can be very difficult to work and look after the children at the same time, but she doesn't have a choice. If she doesn't work, she doesn't have money to feed the family. This is particularly a problem when the children are sick, and she must stay with them at home. When that happens, the family has to borrow money to buy food.

This is the same vicious cycle mothers and grandmothers who work as street vendors throughout the world face: they may, at times, make enough money for survival, but rarely do they make enough for childcare. And as workers in

the informal economy, they do not have access to social protections and programmes that would help their families gain more security. Yet, like Souen, street vendors persist, working hard every day in the hopes of supporting their families and educating their children in order to break the cycle of poverty.

At 50, Souen has been working as a street vendor for 14 years, and she has dark circles under her eyes from the long days and from the worry—one of her children spent the previous day in the hospital for a fever and intestinal illness, an added cost to the family. Still unwell,

*As a street vendor, Souen lives with daily insecurity. She fears that...authorities will shut the market down, and she will be forced to relocate to an area where there is no natural customer traffic. Making a living will be even harder then, and her dreams of sending her children and grandchildren all the way through school and into formal jobs will be that much harder to achieve.*





A busy day in Phsar Douem Kor Market in Phnom Penh, Cambodia. Photo: B. Leifso

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he hovers nearby, wet cloth to his forehead as the younger children play on a parked tuk-tuk.

While the children may be bored or sick, Souen is grateful that at least they are safe. When she began street vending, the family faced harassment that verged on violence. As Souen recounts, her

children were then very small, and police would sometimes haul them on to the back of the police truck and threaten to throw them in the garbage.

This was just one of the difficulties the family faced on a daily basis—security guards also harassed them, and local authorities demanded bribes against

evictions. As Souen says, police would often simply take their goods. On those days, when, as now, every penny counted, the family would earn no income.

But when an IDEA organizer visited the market in 2013, these threats to Souen's income began to change. IDEA, or The Independent Democracy of Informal



Economy Association, is a unique and strong leader in Cambodia's labour landscape. Unlike many Cambodian unions, it is not associated with any political party and remains committed to independently improving the economic and social conditions of informal workers like street vendors, domestic workers, tuk-tuk and moto-taxi drivers, and waste pickers.

Established in 2005, IDEA provides services to its members like legal assistance and training in relation to laws, rights,

and the right to organize. It also works with local and government authorities to create social protection policies and standards of work guided by ILO conventions. As a member of the street vendor organization StreetNet International, IDEA shares with its members the good practices in organizing, mobilizing, advocacy, and capacity-building it learns from street vendor organizations around the world.

While there is no formal research on how many street vendors work in Phnom



Along with street vendors, IDEA serves domestic workers, tuk-tuk and moto-taxi drivers, and waste pickers as reflected by the motorcycles lining its front office. Photo: B. Leifso



IDEA's staff and volunteers are dedicated to organizing and empowering informal workers. Photo: B. Leifso

Penh, they are a visible part of daily life on every street, selling everything from fresh and cooked food to cold drinks to flowers for temple offerings to household products. IDEA currently counts around 600 street vendors as members, and it often works with them individually by offering advice, helping them assert their rights, and negotiating with local authorities when vendors are threatened with evictions and confiscations.

It's no surprise, then, that when Souen told the IDEA organizer about the police harassment, particularly

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with the children, IDEA took the problem to authorities and to the media, even drawing the attention of the Prime Minister. The case became a major story, and the police were forced to stop taking these actions. Now, the police no longer threaten to throw children away, and authorities, as Souen says, "know better than to ask IDEA members for bribes." Many vendors, especially those who are not members of IDEA, are still evicted or asked to move regularly, but when Souen is asked to move her stall, usually it is just a little further back from the roadway.

For Souen, life at the market has improved in other ways since she joined IDEA. Because of the trainings she has taken through IDEA, she knows her rights and has learned how to advocate for herself and for other vendors. She has become a local leader. When other vendors experience problems, Souen accompanies them to meet with the market manager. Now, the market manager listens, and security guards respect her. If the problem still isn't solved, Souen says, "We have hope because we know IDEA will come. There is support. This makes me feel confident."

Still, as a street vendor, Souen lives with daily insecurity. She fears that, as happens in so many other cities throughout the world, authorities will shut the market down, and she will be forced to relocate to an area where there



Souen and her children sheltering from the hot sun at work. Photo: B. Leifso

is no natural customer traffic. Making a living will be even harder then, and her dreams of sending her children and grandchildren all the way through school and into formal jobs will be that much harder to achieve.

She hopes more change—and more stability—is possible through empowering herself and others. As she says, IDEA members in the market "feel a

little bit stronger in mind. Before, we didn't know our rights, but now we know we are citizens. We can solve our problems."

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**T**hirty-five-year-old PHENG RATHANA began vending ten years ago because she had difficulty finding another job and needed to contribute to her family's income. Running a cold drinks and coffee cart seemed like a creative way to use her previous restaurant industry experience, and Rathana is a person who thrives in creativity and colour. She wears a vivid print dress, and the outside of her home is painted a bright blue, a vibrant contrast to the orange drinks cart parked on the home's threshold. Rathana's 3-year-old daughter is equally lively, playing with colourful plastic trucks on the floor and bringing a doll over and over again to her mother to reattach its arm. Between fixing the doll's arm and preparing a naptime bottle, Rathana slices limes, scoops ice, and pours syrup for a few customers' drinks.

When she began vending, her cart was ideally situated. Her many neighbours were regular customers, and the business was successful. But Rathana also had to pay US \$100 a month in rent to station the cart on the pavement in front of a house. Soon after she began



Rathana cares for her daughter in their home, which doubles as a workplace. Photo: B. Leifso

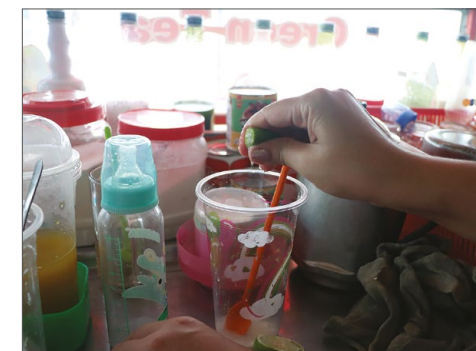
vending, Rathana says, the house owner saw how well the cart was doing and began an almost decade-long campaign to evict Rathana because she herself wanted to sell there.

Rathana didn't know who to turn to. "This was our income," she says, "We couldn't just leave." Then, a tuk-tuk driver suggested that she may be able to find support through IDEA. Three other vendors in her community were having similar problems, so Rathana rallied them,

and they visited IDEA together. Rathana became an IDEA member soon after and, with IDEA's help, began a decade-long battle against eviction.

By participating in IDEA trainings in negotiation skills, non-violent tactics, and in helping her understand her rights as a citizen and vendor, Rathana learned that the house-owner did not own the pavement. In fact, the pavement was public space and belonged to city citizens who, like her, pay service fees.

*As Rathana says, the right to the pavement is important for street vendors because, "Here, all the poor sell on every street. People have a right to sell, have a right to be secure, and have a right to survive—poor people don't have enough money to open up a big shop."*



And, as Rathana says, the right to the pavement is particularly important for street vendors because, "Here, all the poor sell on every street. People have a right to sell, have a right to be secure, and have a right to survive—poor people don't have enough money to open up a big shop."

With IDEA behind her, Rathana was able to ward off three formal eviction notices, and the local authority finally called a meeting and offered her compensation to move. The offer, however, was too low for Rathana to accept. To break the stalemate, IDEA called for a meeting with the next level of government, which demanded the local authority negotiate fair compensation.

Rathana still did not want to leave her place of business, but because her family is so poor, she could not keep fighting. The agreed-on compensation was enough to pay back a loan the family had to take out to cover the protracted battle, but the family had to find a home that could double as a vending site. For the past three months, the family has lived in the Sangkat Chbar Ambovll district. "There is less income here," she says, "but we didn't have a choice."

Now, Rathana worries the family will not have enough money to keep sending their children to school. But, as her heartbreaking battle attests, she is also



Rathana's cold drinks business is slower since the family's move to Phnom Penh's Sangkat Chbar Ambovll district. Photo: B. Leifso

both tenacious and optimistic. She says that she and her husband learned many skills through this experience. "Now we are happy because we are able to help other people with what we've learned."

People in her community can come to her when they experience difficulty on a day-to-day basis. "We know how to communicate with neighbours now," she says, "so we avoid problems through negotiation. We know how to handle issues without violence,

and we know about process. We can also offer solutions based on training and experience." Through IDEA, she also trains others on their rights in workshops and advocates for them individually. Currently, she is helping a vendor in her old community through an evictions issue.

"Sometimes we have success, sometimes we don't," she says, "but each time it's a learning experience."

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Rathana prepares a cold drink for a customer. Photo: B. Leifso

Street vendor **DY THONA** also looks to the future, always thinking of ways to bring more security to her livelihood. Thona operates a cart on a busy street just outside the gates of a hospital, doing a brisk trade in hot noodle soup, coffee and tea, cigarettes, and cold drinks. Customers, including hospital visitors, patients and staff, and passing tuk-tuk drivers, often stop to eat at the table and chairs she's set up nearby. Behind them, roosters crow through the hospital grounds while on the street, cars, tuk-tuks, and motorcycles speed by.

Thona looks tired from years and years of vending, but her passion in improving her conditions holds firm. She herself laughs when she comments on her singularity of focus, saying "Even when I am at home or at IDEA meetings, I am thinking about what I can do with my stall."

Thona is 37 and has been vending for close to 20 years. As she says, with a grade eight education, "I didn't know how else to survive. I didn't have skills."

When she began vending, she was harassed by local authorities daily though the why, when, and where they wanted her to move fluctuated daily.



Dy Thona has been selling drinks and simple meals outside a busy hospital for close to 20 years. Photo: B. Leifso

*"Everything seemed dark," she says. "I couldn't understand the reasoning or policies. I didn't know how to speak. I had a fear of selling here. I didn't know what to do, or what I could depend on."*

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But in 2007, during one particularly long campaign to remove vendors from outside the hospital gates, a tuk-tuk driver spoke with Thona about the benefits of joining IDEA. She began participating in trainings from negotiation to advocacy. These trainings, says Thona, "educated us, helped us learn. We learned about rights, how to talk with local authorities, how to solve problems, and when to get further help."

Today, Thona is not afraid to speak up. When authorities ask her to move, she is able to ask why and to refuse to move. As a result, her income and space have greater security. More, the authorities now listen to her, and because of this, she is able to help solve problems for other vendors.

In fact, over the 11 years of her membership, Thona has not only become a leader in her community, but also a leader within IDEA as a whole—she was the elected representative for street vendors on IDEA's General Council for two terms. Her work there took her to India for an Exposure Dialogue visit with members of the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), a national union of self-employed, poor women workers, including street vendors.

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Like IDEA, SEWA is also a part of StreetNet International. Membership in StreetNet regularly brings about this kind of global collaboration, which increases an organization's (and its members') awareness of options for organizing within the informal economy.

Thona smiles broadly when she's asked of this visit. "The food was very difficult to eat," she admits. But then, with seriousness, she speaks of what she learned from SEWA, like its focus on women, on literacy, and on empowerment through the individual and family. She was especially impressed by SEWA's non-violent approach to problem solving and how it can bring about profound change in fighting evictions. She also learned about other services SEWA offers, like the credit and savings banks and low-interest loans it provides for its members.

Thona believes similar access to low-interest loans through IDEA would help her achieve more income security. With such a loan, she dreams she could open a small shop in her home—a hope many vendors share but cannot achieve because of prohibitive start-up costs. Not only would a shop in her home lessen harassment from authorities and the worrying threat of eviction from road redevelopment, but it would provide Thona with more stable income as she would no longer have to worry about closing the stall due to storms,



Thona must buy a large amount of inventory on a regular basis to run her stall. Photo: B. Leifso

heavy rain, or traffic accidents. A shop in her home would also help her mitigate against age—currently, Thona has to move her cart and goods from storage to the vending site and back every day, a job that is heavy and difficult. Finally, a shop would protect her from the potential violence that many women vendors throughout the world face.

Given the rise in the cost of goods and the lack of capital informal workers have, a shop is now just a dream for Thona. But it could become a reality. IDEA is seeking to develop a low-interest loan programme in partnership with OXFAM over the next few years.

It's not just members who are gaining capacity. Through its membership with StreetNet, IDEA itself is strengthening its capacity to improve the individual lives of its members beyond credit and loan services. With StreetNet and the Solidarity Centre, IDEA is also piloting a programme unique to Cambodia in Women's Leadership Training, which engages the key StreetNet goal of addressing gender imbalances in street vending leadership. In this program, 30 women leaders meet and receive training once every six weeks in negotiation and leadership skills and in strategic organizational and policy decisions. Then, they take their new skills into their communities and take on leadership roles in IDEA itself. The next

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time the group meets, they discuss what went well and what they could improve in the future.

In the meantime, Thona continues to work hard every day for her stall, for her livelihood, and for the benefit of the street vendors around her. "Where I used to feel alone in my struggles," she says, "I now have brothers and sisters in IDEA. I am always looking to tell more members about it. If we can have more members, we can experience together, and not feel alone."

**S**EM SAMOL is part of the future IDEA members strive to improve for the next generations of street vendors. In this 25-year-old woman, so much of IDEA's collective effort is bearing fruit. Samol operates a drinks cart on a busy road in Segankat Tuekthla, just a half-block down from a major television station. She also helps her sister with a meal stall, serving soup and sizzling barbequed meat. This morning, hair tucked back under a pink Hello Kitty hat, Samol is running both stalls on her own, and she is busy ladling soup into bowls, wrangling noodles, and serving drinks. She is quick, efficient, and confident in each movement. It's hard to believe that just three years ago, when she joined IDEA, Samol was timid.

Samol had previously worked in a tumultuous household as a domestic worker, so when her sister asked her to help with the food stall, she readily agreed. Her life became the stall and home, home and the stall—she did not feel brave enough to venture further.

Securing their site to vend also became difficult for the sisters as the TV station's security guard kept asking them to move further and further away from the gates.



25-year-old Sem Samol on a busy morning tending her drinks stall and her sister's food stall.  
Photo: B. Leifso

They didn't know how to move and keep serving the station's employees, with whom the sisters had a good relationship. They didn't know how other street vendors coped. Help soon arrived, however, when an IDEA organizer visited the neighbourhood and explained the benefits of joining.

Samol in particular has dived into the rights and negotiation-based trainings. As she says, "they have helped me to be confident and brave. Now, the TV station's security guard is constantly telling me to move, but I don't. The traffic police have also told me I have

to move, but I say, I've been here three years already. What's changed now?"

Being young, single, and without children to support, Samol says she's been able to take a wide swath of training, including Citizen Journalism, where she learned to discern news stories from propaganda. Through an IDEA partnership with a youth organization, one that reflects both IDEA's and StreetNet's commitment to improving the lives and livelihoods of future generations of street vendors, she's also learned computer skills, which have allowed her to volunteer in IDEA's offices as an administrative assistant. Through volunteering,

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she's learned business skills, like how to do a report and how to communicate effectively with IDEA's diverse membership. The latter is a skill she can take with her into the field when she organizes new members, which itself requires persistence. "Some vendors welcome us, and some don't. It takes a long time to build trust."

Samol also serves as a mentor to current members. She leads trainings, teaching mentees how to develop relationships with other street vendors and authorities. She helps identify potential new leaders, which is particularly important in a culture that trusts the community leader structure. In fact, other street vendors trust Samol so much she's been elected as the street vendor representative to IDEA's General Council.

As for herself, she hopes through more training—currently she is participating in IDEA's intensive Women's Leadership Training—and her volunteer work, she will gain enough skills to move into a different job. "But," she says, "I want to keep organizing, too, to help people be fiercer and braver."

In the meantime, Samol is no longer only treading the well-worn path from home to the stalls—she's saved up and bought herself a motorbike. "I go to different parts of the city myself," she says. "In every place, there is a new experience."

Persistence and hopefulness—these are traits IDEA's street vendors share. They

*Samol serves as a mentor to current members, leading trainings and teaching mentees how to develop relationships with other street vendors and authorities.*



Stalls like Samol's line Cambodia's busy streets. Photo: B. Leifso

persist through the daily struggle to earn a living and through the uncertainty of evictions, and they persist in seeing that other people in their communities share in the benefit of their experience. Where each of them once felt alone, they now feel connected to a broader, empowering support system through IDEA and StreetNet, and work to bring others into this system so that they too experience a more hopeful future.

by Brenda Leifso

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**STREETNET:** StreetNet International, an alliance spanning five continents, was launched in November 2002 in Durban, South Africa to unite organizations whose membership comprises street vendors, market vendors, and/or hawkers (mobile vendors). StreetNet promotes the exchange of information and ideas on critical issues that affect street/market vendors and hawkers, as well as practical organization and advocacy strategy.



**IDEA,** or The Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association, remains committed to independently improving the economic and social conditions of informal workers in Cambodia, including street vendors, domestic workers, tuk-tuk and moto-taxi drivers, and waste pickers. To learn more, please visit IDEA via the web at <http://www.ideacambodia.org> or in person at #216AB, St 271BIS, Trapaing Chhouk Village, Sangkat Toek Thlar, Khan Sensok, Phnom Penh.



**SIDA:** This material/production has been financed by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Sida. Responsibility for the content rests entirely with the creator. Sida does not necessarily share the expressed views and interpretations.

