

How (un)healthy and (un)safe is food in Cambodia?

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HOW (UN)HEALTHY AND (UN)SAFE IS FOOD IN CAMBODIA?

1. INTRODUCTION

Did you know that Cambodia has among the highest malnutrition rates in Asia?¹ Also, 25% of Cambodians are food deprived, which means they eat less than the minimum daily requirement of calories.²

At the same time, we find trends in Cambodia that point into another direction. Unhealthy attitudes towards nutrition have lately been creeping into a country,³ which is actually known for its healthy and light cuisine.⁴ Now, more and more foodstuff – everything from packaged Thai sweets to Whoppers from Burger King – have become available and accessible in the Kingdom.⁵ Young adults seem to be the main target of this unhealthy trend in food and beverage products, as some of the advertisement suggest (ex.: KFC, Bacchus). But what does healthy/ unhealthy even mean?

According to the general consensus among experts, healthy eating consists of a balanced diet from the different food groups: Fruits and vegetables, grains, dairy foods and protein foods.⁶ Foods and drinks which are high in calories, fat, sugar, and sodium (like soft or energy drinks, French fries etc.) should be limited, as well as the consumption of meat, because an unhealthy diet is one of the major risk factors for a range of chronic diseases, including cardiovascular diseases, cancer, diabetes and other conditions linked to obesity.⁷

Firstly, this short paper examines food security with a focus on its nutritional dimension. It aims to bring the topic to discussion and to call the attention of youth to their diet. Secondly, it looks at food safety, both at a micro level (individuals) and macro level (government, private sector companies).

1.1 Food security

Food security refers to getting enough healthy food to be well and active and is therefore given “when all people, at all times, have physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets their

dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life”, as officially defined by the Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations (FAO).⁸

Population: 15.63 million	2015 Human Development Index: 143 out of 188
Income Level: Low	Chronic malnutrition: 32% of children between 6-59 months

Fig.1: WFP Cambodia Country Brief October 2016.

In 2010, Cambodia was identified to be one of 29 countries worldwide where food insecurity is “most severe and persistent”.⁹ That makes malnourishment (or malnutrition) a huge problem in Cambodia. In general, this term refers to all types of deviations from the optimal nutritional status, though undernourishment has been the focus of most in-depth studies in Cambodia:

- **Undernourishment:** A person is not able to acquire enough food to meet the daily minimum dietary energy requirements.
- **Misnourishment:** A person gets enough to eat, but the diet does not provide necessary nutrients.
- **Overnourishment:** The intake of nutrients is oversupplied/ exceeds the amount required for normal growth, development, and metabolism.¹⁰

In Cambodia, food insecurity is considered to be more severe in rural areas, while provinces like Phnom Penh and Battambang are classified as generally food secure.¹¹

Food security and food nutrition are different and yet closely linked. We focus on the nutritional dimension more, as it not only refers to getting “enough food”, but also on the health aspects linked with how nutritional and safe food is (ex.: not getting any illnesses from food).

1.2 Food safety

The term food safety broadly refers to “handling, storing and preparing food to prevent infection and help to make sure that our food keeps enough nutrients”.¹² Individuals, the government and the private sector play key roles in food safety. As individuals, we are expected to contribute to food safety by handling food in a hygienic way, informing ourselves about the issue, consuming

food that is safe or by reporting food safety issues to relevant authorities. In parallel, the government has to ensure that the supply chain actors operate in a manner which does not put the health of the consumer at risk.¹³ Private sector companies are expected to adapt to the standards set up by the government, e.g. through obtaining internationally recognised food certifications.

1.3 Youth

Youth represent a significant percentage of Cambodia’s approx. 16 million people:¹⁴

- According to the United Nations, youth is defined as the age group between 15 and 24 years,¹⁵ representing 19% of the total population in Cambodia.
- The national definition differs slightly, including all people between 15 and 29 years. Hence, one in three Cambodian (33 %) belongs to that group.¹⁶

In this paper, when talking about young adults or youth we refer to people between the ages of 15 and 29, as the focus of our work is on youth either going to university or young graduates.

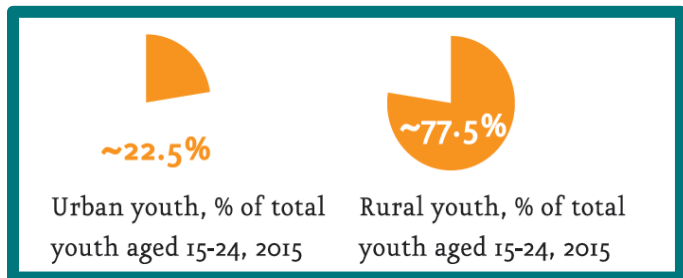


Fig. 2: UNFPA Cambodia *Cambodia Youth Data Sheet 2015*.

1.4 Research Question, Outline, Methodology

This paper aims to raise key questions surrounding food security and food safety, focusing where possible on the consumption habits of mostly educated, urban, young Cambodians. As virtually no substantial research on these issues pertaining to this population has been conducted in Cambodia (understandably so, most have focused on deprived populations faced with malnutrition), this paper draws on a variety of sources, including qualitative data not limited to academic research in trying to answer the question of how (un)healthy and (un)safe the food habits of Cambodian youth are. Additionally, the purpose of this report is to

provide avenues for further research and especially provide food for thoughts for Cambodian students.

Due to the aforementioned absence of reliable data on food habits for young Cambodians, we conducted a small qualitative survey (38 participants) among Cambodian representatives of our target audience for this paper, to be able to extrapolate overall attitudes and habits. The group was made up of young Cambodians (20-35), mostly living in Phnom Penh (though originally from all over the country), educated, English speaking. We are conscious, that this does not represent in any way “scientific” data, but believe it provides avenues for further discussion and illustrate wider trends in the country.

In the second chapter we first approach the situation of food consumption among Cambodian youth (to basically see, what’s on the “demand side”), before examining the supply: What are the significant factors restricting the youth’ accessibility to healthy food? What legal framework is currently in place? What role does the private sector play? Finally, we draw some conclusions and recommendations, which will suggest further opportunities for research.

2. FOOD CONSUMPTION AMONG YOUNG CAMBODIANS

2.1 Unhealthy nutrition in Cambodia

In Cambodia, malnutrition is widely seen as the priority issue to be addressed. That’s why so far little attention has been paid to researching potential issues of misnourishment or even overnourishment – including questions such as looking at the factors youth feel are important in choosing their daily food.

The following trends contextualize the nutrition of the young Cambodians we are targeting with this research.

➤ **Fast food:** Fast food itself isn’t a new phenomenon in Cambodia, as Lucky Burger introduced the concept in 1995. Nowadays, we witness a significant increase of international fast food chains, especially in Cambodia’s capital Phnom Penh.¹⁷ These western fast-food chains (like Burger King, KFC, Krispy Kreme or Carl Juniors, that even set up Cambodia's first-ever

restaurant drive-through)¹⁸ are becoming more and more integrated into the Cambodian food scene and especially popular amongst young Cambodian people,¹⁹ as they are new and fascinating to them and at the same time there is “a certain prestige to the whole affair”, as stated by blogger Matthew Springs.²⁰

» **Energy Drinks:** Another trend, that can be witnessed is a growth in the consumption of energy drinks. Against escalating global concerns over its harmful effects on consumers’ health, mostly linked to their high caffeine content,²¹ the popularity of energy drinks among young consumers in Cambodia has been steadily increasing during the last years. This trend can be best exemplified by the Korean energy drink “Bacchus”, introduced to Cambodia in 2009. In 2013, about 100 million cans of Bacchus were sold.²² Main consumers are students, who like the energy drink for their evening classes to stay alert.²³



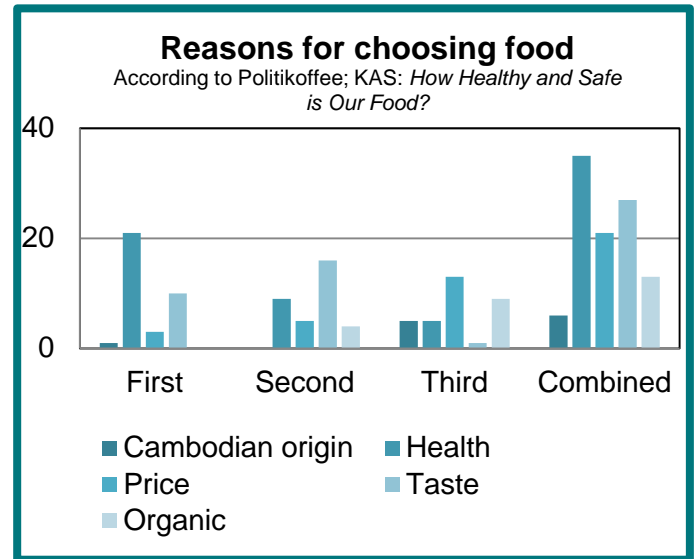
Fig. 3: Advertisements in Cambodia for Lucky Burger and Bacchus.

2.2 Causes for the change in nutrition

In our short survey, 55% of the respondents identified “health” as the priority factor they considered when picking food, ahead of price, taste or whether it is organic or not. The vast majority of respondents were also either concerned or strongly concerned by unhealthy food trends (unhealthy as defined above: The foodstuffs which are high in calories, fat, sugar, and sodium).²⁴

When we interviewed Cambodian Chef and entrepreneur Luu Meng, Director of Thalias (Malis and Topaz restaurants in Phnom Penh), – while he recognized that budget and knowledge may be factors behind changes in food habits – he listed “convenience” as one of the most important factors. According to him, the appeal of an instant noodle pack or a fast food next to a university is

not only the monetary value, but the value in terms of time saved in increasingly busy societies.



Clearly, Cambodia is not alone in this path to consuming increased quantities of unhealthy foods. A study from the Rockefeller Foundation on unhealthy food concluded, that the problem “disproportionately affects low income people (earning 2\$ - 13\$/day) given their vulnerability to what is affordable and convenient”.²⁵

» **Budget constraints:** With an annual per capita income of about 1.158, 69\$ (2015),²⁶ and 72% of the population living on less than 3\$ per day (2011),²⁷ affording food is a daily struggle for the majority of Cambodians. For instance, it was found, that garment workers spend no more than 1.50\$ a day on food.²⁸ In our survey, 79% of the respondents stated that they would eat more healthily, if they had more money – clearly suggesting that budget is a limit to eating healthily.²⁹

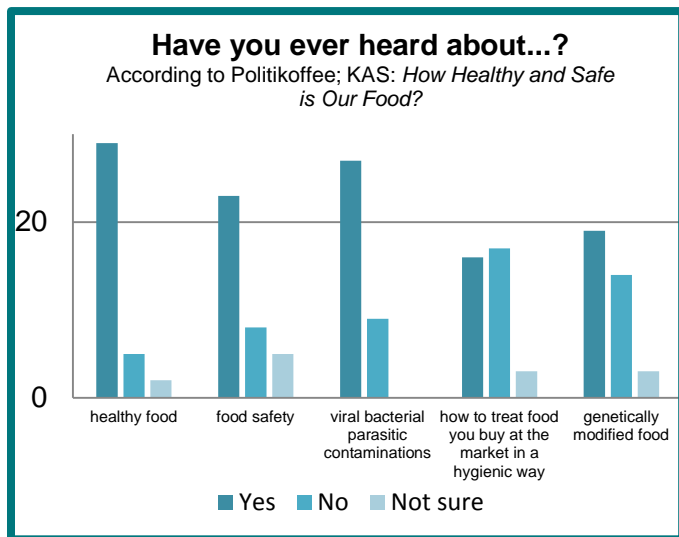
» **Time Constraints:** Most young adults tend to have a busy timetable with limited free time. This affects nutrition in the way that they are more likely to give priority to other topics over their diet, meaning that the accessibility of food (Can I easily get the food without wasting a lot of time?) in many cases seems to be more important than the quality (Is the food I’m having of good quality?).

Oum Sonita, a 21-year-old university student said in an interview with Khmer Times, that she has not really a choice as fast food saves her time: “We have no choice

as the culture has been changing due to technological advance. Therefore, we have to learn to adapt with the new environment, and time has become more and more priceless, so it is hard to compromise between being healthy and work,” she said.³⁰

➤ Lack of Nutrition and Food Safety Knowledge:

Consuming healthy food is not just about finance or time, but it is also about knowing what food to eat and not to eat, as well as how to handle the food to keep its nutrition and quality. In Cambodia, basic education about healthy diet theoretically takes place from primary to secondary school.³¹ However, our survey indicates that even among our targeted audience (young, mostly university educated Cambodians) knowledge of hygienic and healthy eating behaviour might still be limited.



2.3 Consequences

One of the consequences of unhealthy eating habits is a rise in overweight and obesity. The WHO’s definitions of “overweight” and “obese” are based on an individual’s body mass index (BMI), which measures weight relative to height. Overweight is marked by a BMI greater than or equal to 25 and obese is defined as having a BMI greater than or equal to 30.³²

According to the Global Nutrition Report 2016,³³ 17.6% of adults in Cambodia are overweight and 3.2% even obese.³⁴ Though these numbers remain low by international standards, they also indicate future trends we need to monitor.

Prevalence	Cambodia	Thailand	Germany
Adult Overweight	17.6% (4)	29.7% (45)	54.8% (94)
Adult Obesity	3.2% (6)	8.5% (46)	20.1% (94)
Adult Diabetes	8.2% (66)	9.7% (109)	62% (10)

Fig. 4: The number in between the brackets identify the countries’ rank in a worldwide comparison (190 nations in total).

Khims Sam Ath, WHO technical officer for non-communicable diseases (NCD) in Cambodia, expects obesity rates to further increase due to the proliferation of unhealthy food.³⁵ There has also been a rise in the prevalence of other NCD like diabetes or cardiovascular diseases.³⁶

Of course, the lack of physical activity also plays a crucial role when it comes to obesity. According to Ath, young Cambodians have changed their lifestyle within globalisation and urbanisation (taking up sedentary jobs in the cities, opposed to rural work).³⁷ All in all, these changes have a rather bad influence on life expectancy. In our brief survey, 90% of respondents said that they are either concerned or strongly concerned about unhealthy eating habits among Cambodian youth.³⁸

3. FOOD SAFETY MANAGEMENT IN CAMBODIA

Worldwide, unsafe food is linked to the deaths of an estimated two million people annually and is the second leading cause of death in children aged under 5 years.³⁹ Unsafe food creates a vicious cycle, especially threatening the nutritional status of the most vulnerable. Therefore, food safety is an issue in Cambodia like everywhere else in the world.

3.1 The legal framework

In Cambodia, food safety and quality management is based on the Farm to Table Approach. A national law specifically ensuring food safety for its citizens has yet to exist; a draft for a first food safety law has been released in July 2015.⁴⁰

➤ **At Farms:** Cambodians’ agricultural products remain underdeveloped as they are threatened by a number of problems including misuses or overuses of

chemical additives, pesticides and fertilizers leading to failure to meet regional and international standards and causing threats to public health.⁴¹ Hazardous substances are used not just by farmers, but also by retailers who want to ensure that their fruits and vegetables retain a fresh look for a longer period.⁴²

Therefore, in 2012 the Law on the Management of Pesticides and Fertilizers has been adopted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries defining the management of all such products that are used as agricultural inputs throughout the country.⁴³

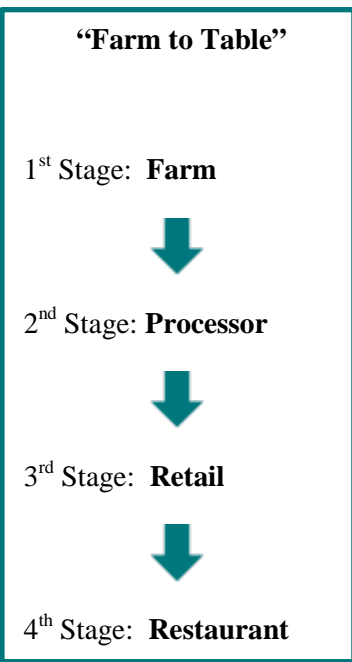


Fig. 5: The Farm to Table Approach

➤ **At Factories:**

In many cases, the quality of processed food products is low, too. Given this problem, the Ministry of Industry and Handicraft is responsible for the inspection of samples of processed foods and undertaking analysis on diverse kinds of industrial products, while the Institute of Standards assures standardized products and quality. In 2007, the Law on Standards of Cambodia has been adopted.⁴⁴

➤ **At Markets:** Based on personal observations, traditional markets seem clearly guilty of unhygienic or incorrect handling and storing procedures, as at many of those markets, meat and other products hang in the sun all day, lie on wooden tables, surrounded by piles of garbage. By Cambodian law, food products are required to be elevated from the ground and protected from contamination by sellers. Once contaminated, the products must be eliminated from the market.⁴⁵ Another article says: “Manufacturers and service providers shall be required to indicate on their products, goods, and services in Khmer language the ingredients, composition, users’ guidelines, manufacturing date, and expiration date [...]”⁴⁶

To prevent problematic foods from reaching households, state agent CAMCONTROL (which belongs to the Ministry of Commerce) is responsible for the inspection of imported foods as well as all food in the markets throughout the country.



Fig. 6: Typical Scene at a traditional Cambodian market: A woman selling meat.

➤ **At Restaurants/Canteens:**

The Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Tourism are tasked with the surveillance of food hygiene at food service operators, to make sure that customers will not be served with unhygienic food. Some regulations for these operators already exist, as summarized in the Sub-decree on Food Hygiene for Human (2003), Article 32, e.g.:

- Staff handling food must observe strict hygienic standards and wear appropriate clothing
- Food products must be protected from climatic conditions and insects
- A clean water place for washing and cleaning equipment is required
- The use of clean and sanitary equipment to cook food is mandatory⁴⁷

According to Lim Rathanak, director-general of the Department of Drugs and Foods at the Ministry of Health, 90% of the restaurants in the country would need to be closed, if hygiene and food safety standards were applied firmly.⁴⁸

Studies like one that was conducted on the microbial contamination of raw pork in 2010, had some shocking results, as indicated by researcher Chrun Rithy: “We recovered meat arriving in ten Phnom Penh markets, direct from slaughterhouses. For eight of them, meat was unfit for consumption. It is transported carelessly, allowing the bacteria to proliferate. And moreover, it probably contains more germs when buying because it is not kept cool in the markets.”⁴⁹ The study also raised

serious doubts about the quality of seafood products in Phnom Penh.

Thus, youth' accessibility to healthy food is limited by both, a poorly carried out consumer protection as well as a low quality of Cambodian food stuff.

3.2 Food safety within the private sector

There are three standards the government is urging small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) to adopt in order to ensure food safety: GMP (Good Manufacturing Practise), HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point) and ISO 22000. In 2008, it was estimated that of the approx. 530,000 SMEs operating in Cambodia, only 30 met the standards of these internationally recognised food certification,⁵⁰ among them several of the biggest rice mills. AMRU rice is one example, having been certified with as GMP and HACCP in 2014.⁵¹ Nevertheless, the vast majority of SMEs in Cambodia is far from providing reassuring guarantees on food safety.

International certification organizations, such as Germany-based TÜV SÜD, aim to help local Cambodian food producers and restaurants in raising hygiene standards and assist exporters to enter foreign markets.⁵² For Cambodian LyLy Food, which received HACCP certification, doors for exporting products to Malaysia and the United States are now open. Keo Mom, head of LyLy Food, said that his company controls quality of its production "from top to bottom," and prominently displays its food safety policy for all employees to see: "By teaching employees that the food they package can affect their children's health, our production has increased with more concern for hygiene".⁵³

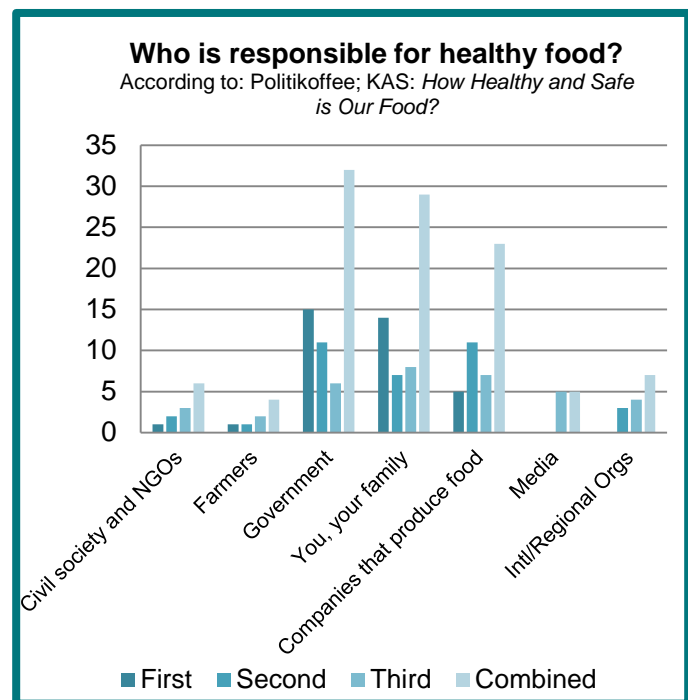
4. CONCLUSIONS

This paper intended to give a short overview on food nutrition trends focused on young, urban Cambodians as well as discuss issues of food safety. Due to its limited extent, the paper had to focus on selected aspects of those issues. Further research could for instance be done on the question of how and why societies change their nutritional behaviour in the course of time. To give an example: fast food was a big trend in the Western World (starting in the 1950s in the USA and getting to Europe

in the second half of the 20th century).⁵⁴ Though fast-food is still important in those parts of the world, mindsets on healthy foods have shifted, according to a survey conducted by Nielsen's in 2015 that polled over 30,000 individuals online. It found that 88% said they were willing to pay more for healthier foods.⁵⁵ The rise of vegetarianism further illustrates how Westerners increasingly care about what they eat. For example, in 2013, a study found out that an average of 5,000 people a week became vegetarians in Britain.⁵⁶

Specifically on Cambodia, more research around specific food habits of a growing lower middle to middle class would be useful. Research from the Rockefeller Foundation found that low income populations are "disproportionally vulnerable to foods that are cheap, convenient and readily accessible", and that over 1 billion people in developing countries could be most affected by a rise in unhealthy foods consumption.⁵⁷

As we have seen, food safety and food security remains a critical issue in Cambodia. On the individual level, the answer to the observed trends of unhealthy nutritional behaviour among young Cambodians seems to be simple: A healthier diet and regular physical activity would be starting points. Furthermore, they need to ask themselves more questions about where their food comes from and what they put in their bodies.



Based on our survey, young people are aware of the importance of individual responsibility in making

choices on food as - 37% of respondent place individuals (“you, your family”) as holding the most important responsibility for healthy food in Cambodia. This being said, more work at an individual level remains to be done as 39% believe the government holds the most responsibility.

These five simple key rules regarding the handling and preparing of food, might help:⁵⁸

- Keep clean and wash your hands before handling food and during food preparation
- Separate raw and cooked food
- Cook thoroughly, especially meat, poultry, eggs and seafood
- Keep food at safe temperatures
- Use safe water and raw materials

Despite the existing legal framework in Cambodia, there are a number of critical issues challenging food safety implementation, especially the lack of effective cooperation among the line ministries.⁵⁹ Germany could serve as a best practise example, as the so called Federal Ministry of Food, Agriculture and Consumer Protection is the only one agency tasked with ensuring safety and quality of foods at the national level, and does so quiet efficiently.⁶⁰

We also saw the insufficient implementation of laws and regulations, especially regarding hygienic standards. Therefore it may be helpful to take a look at Singapore: Since the early 1970s a special task force was created to train street food sellers about the importance and benefits of hygienic practices.⁶¹ Besides educational

measures, the government requires street food vendors to register in order to get a license. Once registered, they can operate their business in street food centers established by the government. These places meet hygienic and food safety requirements. Also, the Singaporean government implemented programs to encourage healthy consumption. For example, the Health Promotion Board of Singapore provides the public with practical information on nutritional needs and recommendations on physical activity in the different life stages.⁶²

Education will certainly be a key element in strategies and actions in Cambodia, too. Children need to seriously be taught about what is healthy food. The Mekong Project in Communities and School, supported by WHO and implemented in 2014, could serve as an example, as it covers aspects of food vendor training, food inspections and school health campaigns, by e.g. taking the children on market tours.⁶³



Fig. 7: Young school kids on a market tour.

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PROJECT CONTEXT

Politikoffee Mini-Film Series: How (un)healthy and (un)safe is food in Cambodia?

We live in both exciting and challenging times in Cambodia. We, at Politikoffee, are determined to make the most of the current national context – in which we can access an unprecedented quantity of information, against the backdrop of an uncertain political context and a civil society under increasing pressure.

In parallel to growing our weekly forum activities, bringing young Cambodians to discuss current affairs since 2011, we have launched a brand new website (www.politikoffee.com) and media activities since May 2016. With these new initiatives, we want to provide even more fellow young Cambodians with safe platforms to discuss and debate issues that matter to us.

Our new Mini-Film Series targets a tech-savvy audience via the Web and social media. We want to make policy analysis and commentary more accessible to young Cambodians by producing short, dynamic, informative and visually impactful videos. These videos will aim to help foster a culture of dialogue in Cambodia through constructive discussion and debate.

Food in Cambodia

The topic of food security, especially malnutrition, has always been of high significance in Cambodia. With current trends of growing unhealthy food habits – best symbolized by the rapid increase of international fast food chains – it becomes even more relevant.

This brief paper was produced by young Politikoffee researcher Cheng Mengchou, and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung intern Miriam Spengler. It provided the factual basis to the Politikoffee Mini-Film on “How (un)healthy and (un)safe is food in Cambodia?”.

Rather than providing an in-depth research on issues of food security and safety, it aims to introduce important questions and facts to a local youth audience, as well as provide the critical basis to the subsequent video. It also calls for further research to explore new food habits in Cambodia.

We hope you find it useful.

The Politikoffee and Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung team

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