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Dear H.E. Ith Sam Heng

In response to our newly published report “Blood Bricks: Untold Stories of Modern Slavery and Climate Change from Cambodia”¹, we are pleased to hear that the Ministry of Labour and Vocational Training has raised concerns about debt-bonded labour in the brick-making industry. We welcome the opportunity to engage with the Cambodian government on this matter.

While child labour is an important problem that our research identifies, the focus of our study is on the reasons why families become indebted, and the role of unregulated microfinance, climate change, and other factors which push families into debt-bonded labour.

Moving forward, our hope is that dialogue between Royal Holloway researchers and the Cambodian government could be productive in shaping plans for the Decent Work Programme for Cambodia 2019-2023 which we understand is a key government priority at moment. Key recommendations from our report we would welcome discussing include:

Increased social protection and rural livelihood support. The research highlights the poor social protection afforded to rural farmers in terms of public health facilities and support for rural agriculture. This leaves small subsistence-oriented farmers very vulnerable in the face of climate change in the countryside. We urge the government to focus more on providing stronger social protections to the poorest. This recommendation is in line with the ILO’s (2016) recommendations in its Cambodia ‘Decent Work Country Programme’.²

¹ To download the report, please visit:

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/596df9f8d1758e3b451e0fb2/t/5bc4d7cdc83025e41e7b10a0/1539627177544/Blood+bricks+high+res+v2.pdf>

² https://www.ilo.org/asia/publications/WCMS_533564/lang--en/index.htm

Increased regulation of the microfinance sector. Microfinance requires a regulatory overhaul, particularly with regards to loan amount, interest rates, and the purpose of loan. The National Bank of Cambodia made a good start in this direction in 2017 with the capping of interest rates on microfinance loans, yet much more needs to be done to ensure that the industry does not continue to plunge rural families into unsustainable debts.

Enforcement of Cambodia's Labour Law and Trafficking Law in curbing debt-bonded labour. Cambodia's Labour Law states that: 'Hiring of people to work to pay off debts is forbidden'. The Trafficking Law also creates a clear criminal offence of debt bondage. Enforcement of these laws, and the prosecution of kiln owners, not labourers, is needed. We believe this could begin with the cancellation of all outstanding debts to kiln owners, as advocated by LICADHO in their 'Built on Slavery' 2016 report.³

We look forward to positively engaging with the Cambodian government on matters concerning decent work, microfinance regulation, and climate change.

Yours Sincerely,

Professor Katherine Brickell
Dr. Laurie Parsons
Ms. Nithya Natarajan

³ https://www.licadho-cambodia.org/reports/files/221LICADHO_Built_On_Slavery_Report_ENG.pdf