**Climate Change, Forced Labour, and the International Labour Organization in Cambodia: Disentangling Decent Work, Economic Growth, and Environmental Damage**

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## Abstract

This paper contributes to the gap in current research surrounding the reinforcing relationship between climate change, exploitative labour, and environmental damage by analyzing bonded labour in Cambodian brickwork. Relying on the Marxist theory of labour exploitation, this paper highlights how structural economic changes contributed to agricultural dispossession and increased vulnerability among Cambodian smallholders to indebtedness and debt bondage. Relatedly, this paper analyzes the International Labour Organization as a hegemonic actor through a neo-Gramscian framework to highlight how its Decent Work Agenda and Decent Work Country Programmes are unlikely to eradicate forced labour. On these bases, it makes two independent yet interrelated contributions. First, forced labour in Cambodia is intimately linked to agrarian insecurity, driven by neoliberal economic reforms and anthropogenic climate change, and causes further local environmental degradation. Second, the International Labour Organization's Decent Work Agenda and Decent Work Country Programme are doubly ineffective in eradicating forced labour due to inconsistencies between their ideological assumptions and goals. In light of its findings, this paper advances recommendations for the Royal Government of Cambodia and the International Labour Organization, including decoupling environmentally sustainable and decent work from expectations of economic growth.

*Keywords*: brickwork, Cambodia, climate change, environmental damage, forced labour, International Labour Organization.

# Contents

# List of Acronyms

| | |
|---|---|
| **ABD** | Asian Development Bank |
| **CMA** | Cambodia Microfinance Association |
| **CPK** | Communist Party of Kampuchea |
| **CSO** | Civil society organization |
| **DWA** | Decent Work Agenda |
| **DWCP** | Decent Work Country Programme |
| **ELC** | Economic land concession |
| **FDI** | Foreign direct investment |
| **GDP** | Gross domestic product |
| **GHG** | Greenhouse gas |
| **GSI** | Global Slavery Index |
| **ILO** | International Labour Organization |
| **IMF** | International Monetary Fund |
| **IOM** | International Organization for Migration |
| **IPCC** | Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change |
| **NGO** | Non-governmental organization |
| **PRK** | People's Republic of Kampuchea |
| **PRSP** | Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper |
| **RGC** | Royal Government of Cambodia |
| **SAP** | Structural Adjustment Program |
| **SDG** | Sustainable Development Goals |
| **UN** | United Nations |
| **UNDP** | United Nations Development Programme |
| **UNTAC** | United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia |
| **US** | United States |
| **WESO** | World Economic and Social Outlook |
| **WTO** | World Trade Organization |

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# Introduction: Climate Change, Forced Labour, and the International Labour Organization in Cambodia

According to the most recently available global estimates from the International Labour Organization (ILO), approximately 25 million adults and children were experiencing situations of forced labour on any given day in 2016[1], suffering from a number of forms of coercion, including the withholding of wages and the threat of violence (International Labour Organization, 2018a, p. ii). Almost 85 percent of these forced labour practices occurred in the private economy, with half depending specifically on bonded labour (International Labour Organization, 2018a, p. 3). These are likely conservative estimates given the largely invisible phenomenon and limited national survey data for statistical extrapolation (International Labour Organization, 2012b, p. 11). What is puzzling is that global estimates of forced labour have continued to increase despite greater public awareness and near-universal commitment to its abolition, demonstrated by some of the highest member state ratifications of the ILO's Forced Labour Conventions, Nos. 29 and 105 (*Ratification by Convention*, n.d.). The estimate introduced above includes about four million more people than a comparable global estimate reported by the ILO in 2012, wherein 21 million people were victims of forced labour[2] (International Labour Organization, 2012b, p. 13).

Alongside labour exploitation, another phenomenon threatens human wellbeing and prosperity: anthropogenic climate change. Over the last three decades, the United Nations (UN) Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) has released a number of publications documenting the severity of this threat. In its most recent 2018 Special Report, the IPCC notes with high confidence that at current rates of global temperature rise, global warming is likely to

[1] Based on a reference period from 2012 to 2016.
[2] Based on a reference period from 2002 to 2011.

reach 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels between 2030 and 2052 (*Global Warming of 1.5°C*, 2018, p. 4). It further notes that irreversible impacts on natural and human ecosystems have already occurred due to global warming by 1°C, and documents the differences in ecological damage between a 1.5°C and 2°C rise in global temperature. Positing that global net anthropogenic emissions of carbon dioxide would need to fall by about 45 percent from 2010 levels by 2030 and reach net zero by around 2050, the IPCC report presents a stark picture of the environmental and political challenges ahead (*Global Warming of 1.5°C*, 2018, p. 12).

These two problems of forced labour and climate change are demonstrably wicked. Defined by their complexity, dire ramifications if not comprehensively dealt with, and multiplicity of decision-makers involved who may have conflicting values, wicked problems are inarguably huge thorns for policymakers (Churchman, 1967, p. 141). But is there any relation between them? And if so, what is the nature of that intersection? What solutions are being advanced, and are they effective? Spurred by these problems, this paper seeks to explore two research questions: 1) what is the relationship between climate change, exploitative labour, and environmental damage; and 2) how effective is the ILO in eradicating practices of forced labour? It will explore these questions in the context of the Kingdom of Cambodia's (hereafter, Cambodia) brickwork industry, focusing on debt bonded brick workers. Relatedly, this paper will assess the ILO's Decent Work Agenda (DWA) and its specific Decent Work Country Programme (DWCP) in Cambodia. Therefore, this paper proceeds on a two-track analysis. It hypothesizes that climate change, exploitative labour, and environmental damage have a reinforcing relationship in Cambodia that most heavily impacts poor, agrarian families; and that the ILO will not eradicate forced labour in Cambodia because, as a hegemonic actor, it depoliticizes and fails to confront it as an inherent part of the global capitalist economy.

This paper is organized into four primary sections. The first is a literature review that highlights influential contributions to the labour exploitation scholarship. It reviews the debate on the use of the term *modern slavery*, justifies why this paper does not rely on it, and explains the concepts of forced labour and debt bondage. It also assesses the scholarship on the climate change-exploitative labour juncture, which is critical because the existence and practice of forced labour as it is explicitly related to climate change is understudied. This gap in research surrounding the mutually reinforcing effects of environmental damage and labour exploitation contributes to a lack of robust understanding of either problem, limiting the utility of proposed solutions (Decker Sparks et al., 2021, p. 181).

The second primary section outlines the research methods and conceptual frameworks relied on for this paper. The methodology subsection highlights the authoritative sources and documents relied upon in the analysis of both questions. It also explains the case selection strategy to justify the relevance of the Cambodian situation to this analysis. The second subsection reviews and provides a rationale for the conceptual frameworks relied on for different aspects of this paper's argument, namely a Marxist lens to assess the first research question and a neo-Gramscian framework to assess the second.

The third primary section comprises the two-part analysis. First, this paper introduces the Cambodian case study, contextualizing the analysis by examining how economic liberalization impacted Cambodian society, the effects of climate change on Cambodians' traditional livelihood activities, the nature of debt bondage experienced in brick kilns, and the ecological damage that such informal brickwork causes. This situation will be analyzed through the Marxist theory of exploitation to highlight how domestic and global structural conditions have exacerbated rural Cambodians' lack of capital ownership and commodified their labour power to an extreme degree.

Second, this paper provides an overview of the ILO's origin, introduces the impetus for its DWA, and discusses the 2019-2023 DWCP in Cambodia. The ILO's history, institutional design, and present programming will be analyzed through the neo-Gramscian framework developed by Robert W. Cox to determine how it exercises hegemony. Through this lens, this paper demonstrates that as a hegemonic actor, the ILO's goal to abolish forced labour is incompatible with its underlying assumptions about development and decent work.

The fourth primary section offers a discussion that highlights the objective and contributions of the research, as well as additional considerations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion section brings the two distinct yet interrelated analyses together in order to advance recommendations for the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) and ILO. Informed by a holistic understanding of how labour exploitation relates to climate change and environmental damage, and how all relate to the global economic system, these recommendations are key steps in the efforts to ameliorate the situation experienced by Cambodia's bonded brick workers.

## Literature Review

This literature review proceeds with a discussion of the scholarship under the following themes: the scope and debate surrounding the use of *modern slavery*; forced labour and debt bondage; and the climate change, exploitative labour, and environmental damage nexus.

It is important to preface this literature review with a note on the availability, reliability, and comparability of data. The Walk Free Foundation (hereafter, Walk Free), an international human rights organization focused on eradicating modern slavery, writes extensively about this data problem. It maintains that the lack of data on modern slavery continues to significantly challenge progress on its eradication since without disaggregated data, it is difficult for governments to develop targeted interventions (2020, p. 24). Walk Free further argues that the limitations experienced by anti-slavery initiatives reflect the challenges associated with the lack of robust methodologies for evaluation (2020, p. 24). Its 2018 Global Slavery Index (GSI) further emphasizes the conservative nature of its estimates, given the gaps in existing data in key regions and indicators (Walk Free Foundation, 2018, p. 2). The ILO also consistently highlights that due to data limitations, its estimates should be considered conservative (International Labour Organization, 2012b, p. 11, 2017, p. 21).

Imprecise definitions compound this problem, as non-standardized operational definitions of what is being measured make building a shared database to analyze trends over time more difficult (Bales & Datta, 2015, p. 45). One scholar suggests that while prevalent estimates provide a range of roughly 21 to 46 million people in forced labour around the world, the truth is likely "somewhere in between these numbers" (Kara, 2017, p. 20). Thus, due to different data sources and assumptions used for statistical extrapolation, various methodologies employed, and different definitions of key terms, estimates should be observed very carefully.

## "Modern Slavery": Scope and Debate

Despite data challenges, Walk Free produces the leading global dataset on measuring and understanding modern slavery (Walk Free Foundation, 2020, p. 19). Walk Free recognizes that there is no universally accepted definition of "modern" or "contemporary" slavery: these umbrella terms are used to encompass practices including slave-like practices, human trafficking, sex trafficking, forced labour, debt bondage, domestic servitude, forced marriage, and the sale and exploitation of children (Walk Free Foundation, 2020, p. 14). For its analyses, Walk Free characterizes modern slavery as a profitable criminal industry involving situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception, or abuse of power (Walk Free Foundation, 2020, p. 14). Through the GSI, Walk Free measures the extent of modern slavery by country as well as the progress made by governments in addressing the issue, drawing together an insightful picture of the existence of modern slavery around the world (Walk Free Foundation, 2018, p. 2). The most recent GSI report estimates that over 40 million people were living in modern slavery in 2016, almost three-quarters of whom are women and girls (Walk Free Foundation, 2018, p. 2). These estimates are backed by the ILO, whose most recent publication on the scope of modern slavery was published in collaboration with Walk Free (International Labour Organization, 2017, p. 9).

Aside from organizational data, a discussion on modern slavery would be remiss without a review of Kevin Bales' contribution, a global expert on the scope and characteristics of contemporary slavery. The definition of slavery that Bales advances involves an asymmetrical power relationship between the enslaved and the slaveholder, wherein the slaveholder has complete control (Bales & Datta, 2015, p. 43). He maintains that the 2012 Bellagio-Harvard Guidelines on the Legal Parameters of Slavery advance the most inclusive operational definition of slavery, building on the 1926 Slavery Convention of the League of Nations (Bales & Datta, 2015, p. 43). Since 2016, the Bellagio-Harvard Guidelines have become the mechanism through which slavery is conceptualized in international law (Allain et al., 2020). The Bellagio-Harvard Guideline on the Exercise of the Powers Attaching to the Right of Ownership stipulates that in cases of slavery, this power should be understood as constituting control over another person that deprives them of their liberty, with intent to exploit through the use, management, profit, transfer, or disposal of that person, usually through violence, deception, and coercion (Allain et al., 2020).

These guidelines have become particularly instructive in the contemporary context where legal slavery has been completely abolished. Bales and Datta describe the paradox touched upon in the introductory section of this paper, wherein slavery persists in every country across the world despite being universally illegal, forbidden in various international legal instruments, and considered a *jus cogens*[3] violation (2015, p. 47). However, while there is no more legal ownership of human beings, slaveholders continue to gain control over others and maintain this control through violence and coercion, enjoying “all the benefits of ownership without the legalities” (Bales, 2004, p. 5). Modern slavery has become a largely invisible criminal enterprise, supported in some places by government corruption and by overriding profitability concerns promoted by global capitalism (Bales & Datta, 2015, p. 43). This is one of the key differences between old and modern slavery that Bales discusses in *Disposable People: New Slavery in the Global Economy*.

According to Bales, the differentiating characteristics between old and modern slavery have been propelled by two critical shifts. First, domestic resources across low-income countries did not keep pace with the population boom that followed World War II (WWII); and, this coupled with few work opportunities and no safety net, contributed to an unprecedented “glut” of economically and socially vulnerable people at risk of exploitation (Bales, 2004, p. 12). The second critical factor relates to the rapid social and economic change that many countries across South America, Africa, the Arab states, the Indian subcontinent, and Southeast Asia underwent post-WWII (Bales, 2004, p. 12). In many countries across the Global South[4], colonialism,

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[3] *Jus cogens*, Latin for “compelling law”, refers to certain peremptory norms accepted by the international community as fundamental, overriding principles of international law from which no derogation is permitted (*Jus Cogens*, n.d.). For instance, crimes against humanity.

[4] While no term is flawless, this paper relies on the terms *Global North/South* to accommodate increasingly complex international relations whereby globalization has connected those with access to capital across all countries and in recognition that the term *Global North* includes southern countries such as Australia. Using the terms *Global North/South* also avoids outdated and pejorative terms including *First/Third World* or *developed/developing countries*, and avoids referring to countries solely by economic indicators (i.e., *high/low-income country*).

globalization, and the modernization agenda promoted by Western states exacerbated wealth inequality and destroyed traditional familial ties based on responsibility and kinship (Bales, 2004, p. 14). It further forced governments to prioritize economic growth as a requirement for aid from global financial institutions, contributing to the loss of common land and subsistence agriculture and the suppression of agricultural investment in favour of urban development (Bales, 2004, p. 13). Amid such radical social and economic change, exploitative labour becomes one of the only options available to the abundance of people whose labour value is defined in relation to others. Thus, for Bales, the differences between traditional and modern slavery can be thought of as ways the ancient practice has been turned into a business, aptly reshaped to the realities of the new global economy (2004, p. 11).

Since *Disposable People*, Bales has published an authoritative work on the modern slavery and environmental destruction nexus. This specific intersection is of utmost interest to this paper, in addition to how these phenomena relate to the global economy. While these issues have been widely researched in isolation, how they are interconnected has not received as much attention (Brown et al., 2018, p. 7). Thus, Bales' contribution, *Blood and Earth: Modern Slavery, Ecocide and the Secret to Saving the World*, remains a sophisticatedly synthesized analysis of this relationship. In *Blood and Earth*, Bales argues that modern slavery and environmental destruction are driven by the capitalist, globalized economy that caters to Western consumption patterns (Bales, 2016, p. 12). Because slaveholders participate in the hidden criminal enterprise of illegal slavery, their operations take place outside the scope of laws and regulations, including those that protect workers or the environment (Bales, 2016, p. 13). The main implication of Bales' work here is that the two problems of modern slavery and climate change are so deeply interconnected that solutions to address illegal industries that use slave labour would also reduce the level of greenhouse gases (GHGs) emitted into the atmosphere (Bales, 2016, p. 100).

Though it has garnered significant attention, there remains a lively debate on the use of *modern slavery* to describe the various forms of exploitation that advocates of the term claim fall under it. While it was critical that this paper reviewed the literature on modern slavery, it has decided not to use the term. It instead relies on the terms *exploitative labour*, *forced labour*, and most specifically *debt bondage* or *bonded labour*, for the reasons outlined below.

Modern slavery has become a buzzword for policymakers, corporations, civil society organizations (CSOs), and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) despite wide disagreement on its scope and exclusions (LeBaron, 2020, p. 7; O'Connell Davidson, 2015, p. 2). A primary concern is that modern slavery's framing obfuscates the true nature of the problem, as scholars use terms *forced labour*, *trafficking*, *slavery*, *slave-like conditions*, *bonded labour*, *coerced labour*, and *modern slavery* interchangeably and inconsistently, without explaining or analyzing the differences and nuanced implications (LeBaron & Ayers, 2013, pp. 876–877). Since the term is subject to various interpretations, it is not used in scholarship for analytical or technical precision; instead, it is invoked for its emotive power (Pesterfield, 2021). When used by corporations, the term is also cited for shock value, used to bolster their reputation as committed to corporate social responsibility, and conceals their operation on a business model designed to profit at the expense of human suffering (LeBaron, 2020, p. 9). Modern slavery's vagueness has contributed to its ever-broadening focus, where all forced labour is recast as trafficking (even if there is no change in location), and all trafficking is labelled as slavery (Chuang, 2014, p. 611). Janie Chuang refers to this as "exploitation creep" (2014, p. 611). She argues that while widening the scope of what is considered slavery or trafficking to capture more forms of exploitation can be compelling from a human rights angle, it actually serves to protect US anti-trafficking approaches and limits the discussion on labour rights and migration policy reforms (Chuang, 2014, p. 611).

Using *modern slavery* also reflects and promotes the paternalistic tendencies in Western humanitarianism by painting people in modern slavery as passive victims waiting for rescue (LeBaron, 2020, p. 8). This patronizes and ignores the agency people have even when they are in vulnerable and exploitative situations (LeBaron, 2020, p. 8). It further reflects racism by portraying slavery as a timeless, pre-capitalist, culture-bound practice (LeBaron & Ayers, 2013, p. 878). Relatedly, Julia O'Connell Davidson argues that the framing around modern slavery casts Western actors as heroes and is predicated on a Western vision of the modernization that should take place in "traditional" societies in order to combat such forms of exploitation (O'Connell Davidson, 2015, pp. 10–11). Modern slavery has been used to celebrate the freedoms enjoyed by those in capitalist democracies in contrast to "premodern Others", thereby concealing the unequal and exploitative labour relations that occur within liberal democracies (O'Connell Davidson, 2010, p. 256). O'Connell Davidson's research explores modern slavery as a category shaped through historical change and seeks to expose the paradox within the liberal paradigm. On the one hand, it works toward human equality and freedom, while on the other maintains an ideology that continues to subjugate vulnerable populations (O'Connell Davidson, 2015, p. 26).

Anti-modern slavery efforts, therefore, often employ morality and cultural-based explanations, rather than analyses grounded in history and socioeconomic change, that serve to depoliticize modern slavery and distance it from contemporary global economic relations, obscuring the systemic nature of the problem (LeBaron & Ayers, 2013, p. 878). This depoliticization allows corporations and governments to draw a neat line between modern slavery as occurring outside the capitalist mode of production and regular "free" labour relations, enabling it to be portrayed as a randomly occurring crime perpetrated by bad, greedy people[5] with moral shortcomings (LeBaron, 2020, p. 9; LeBaron & Ayers, 2013, p. 877; Pesterfield, 2021, p. 5). This issue is at the crux of Genevieve LeBaron's book, *Combatting Modern Slavery: Why Labour Governance is Failing and What We Can Do About It*. Here she dissects the corporate structures, patterns of ownership and production, and supply chain dynamics that have made labour exploitation an endemic part of the global economy (2020, p. 11).

The type of analysis this paper seeks to engage in is more aligned with the critical scholarship advanced by the authors above. It is also sympathetic to the argument that using the term *modern slavery* is disrespectful to the transatlantic slave trade because it trivializes the intergenerational trauma inflicted by colonial slaveowners (Dottridge, 2017). Some have further argued that the modern slavery framing perpetuates an anti-Blackness and represents a failure to learn lessons from Black history (Woods, 2014). These include that legislation is not always a viable avenue for social redress. For instance, Black people in the US continue to be disproportionately under- or un-employed and incarcerated despite slavery's longstanding legal abolition (Woods, 2014). Positing the legal abolition of slavery as a singular achievement also conceals the true nature of emancipation as a process of evolving situations and expectations (Quirk, 2008, p. 530). These concerns highlight how an emphasis on criminal justice solutions, rather than on the political and economic roots of "modern slavery", fails to confront the conditions that have contributed to a surplus of people vulnerable to forced labour and that encourage businesses to systematically profit from the existence of such conditions (LeBaron, 2020, p. 8).

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[5] LeBaron's argument here refers to a quote from Bales and Soodalter's book, *The Slave Next Door: Human Trafficking and Slavery in America Today*, which she claims summarizes the way liberal paradigm scholars think of and address modern slavery: "We know that slavery is a bad thing, perpetrated by bad people" (Bales & Soodalter, 2009, p. 3).

## Forced Labour and Debt Bondage

Using the term *forced labour* is more precise than the umbrella term *modern slavery* because it captures forms of exploitation within the particular context of employment (in contrast to situations such as human trafficking or forced marriage – though categories can still overlap) (Kara, 2017, p. 11). Moreover, while forced labour does have a more streamlined definition than modern slavery, it remains subject to some interpretation. As the primary global authority on establishing and promoting international labour standards, it makes sense to start with the ILO's definition of forced labour. LeBaron correspondingly argues that aside from whether the ILO definition is the most "right", using it offers a baseline definition and a useful starting point from which to conduct research (see Appendix A for LeBaron's ten practical points for understanding forced labour) (2018, p. 89).

Through its Forced Labour Convention No. 29 adopted in 1930, the ILO has defined *forced labour* as all work or service extracted from a person involuntarily and under the threat of penalty (International Labour Organization, 2017, p. 16). There are three critical elements of this definition: work or service refers to any form of work or service occurring in any activity, industry, or sector (including the informal economy); the work or service performed takes place under financial, physical, psychological or another type of penal threat; and the work undertaken is involuntary, occurring without free and informed consent or without the freedom to leave (*What Is Forced Labour, Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking*, n.d.). The Forced Labour Convention also specifies five situations that are excluded from the definition: compulsory military service; normal civic obligations such as work in an emergency situation (e.g., a flood); and compulsory labour as a consequence of legal conviction (International Labour Organization, 2007, pp. 22–24).

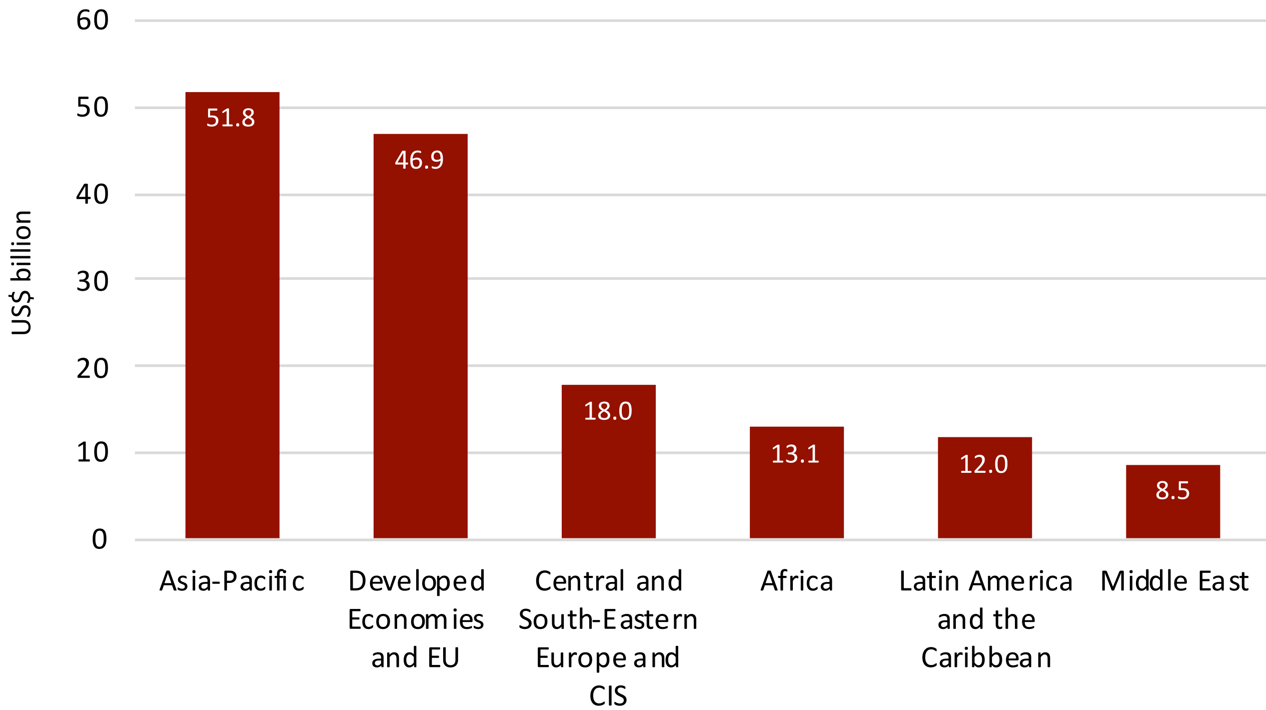
In 1957, the ILO adopted a second convention concerning the scope of forced labour. The Abolition of Forced Labour Convention No. 105 adopted in 1957, develops the definition by specifically prohibiting the use of forced labour imposed by state authorities, including: as a form of punishment for political expression; for economic development; as a means of labour discipline; and, as a means of racial, religious, or other discrimination (*What Is Forced Labour, Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking*, n.d.). Taken together, the two Conventions define a term that enables ILO supervisory bodies to address traditional practices of forced labour such as slave-like practices, various forms of debt bondage, and new forms of forced labour such as human trafficking (whether in the private economy or state-imposed) (International Labour Organization, 2012a, p. 112). The ILO also recognizes the term *modern slavery*, as discussed above, to shed light on the associated working and living conditions that violate human dignity (*What Is Forced Labour, Modern Slavery and Human Trafficking*, n.d.).

Siddharth Kara contextualizes the ILO's definition by highlighting that by 1930, the institution of chattel slavery had been abolished around most of the world; therefore, a new term was needed to describe "slave-like" conditions grounded outside rights of ownership (2017, p. 9). The ILO's definition was also predicated on the characteristics of exploitative labour practices perpetrated by colonial powers, wherein millions of people remained oppressed in slave-like conditions despite the practice's formal (legislative) abolition (Kara, 2017, p. 9). However, because the terms are not defined in either of the two forced labour conventions, governments, scholars, and legal experts have been left to interpret what levels of coercion and involuntariness make up a situation of forced labour. Kara maintains that a consensus on indicators for coercion include verbal, physical, or sexual abuse (or threats of such abuse); confiscating identification documents (and the threat of deportation); denying food or water; and manipulating debts (Kara, 2017, p. 10). Likewise, a consensus on indicators for involuntariness include the inability to leave the workplace without permission; having communication with friends and family cut off; working excessive hours without compensation or sufficient time off for rest; and lack of adequate health and safety equipment, including toilets and sanitation (Kara, 2017, p. 10). The relative strength of each indicator and the number of indicators required to establish the conditions of coercion and involuntariness is up to the assessor, thus leading to a wide variety of interpretations.

In order to advance a better understanding of the economic impact of forced labour, the ILO has also published estimates on the global profits derived, with the latest numbers from 2014 (International Labour Organization, 2014, p. iii). It estimates that illegal profits obtained through the use of forced labour equal approximately US$150 billion per year worldwide, with about US$34 billion generated specifically from economic activities including construction, manufacturing, and mining (International Labour Organization, 2014, p. 15). See Figure 1 for the annual profits generated from forced labour by region and Table 1 for the estimated number of people implicated by type of forced labour and region. Kara has advanced his own estimate of the profits of slave labour, totalling approximately US$124 billion, and additionally estimated that the average annual return on investment for a slave is 383 percent (Kara, 2017, p. 21). Bales has also contributed his estimates of slavery-derived profits, of US$13 billion per year in 2004 and about US$44 billion in 2015 (2004, p. 23; Bales & Datta, 2015, p. 44). An interesting contribution Bales makes concerns the *indirect* value of slave labour. He highlights that in Brazil, one-fourth of exports are steel-based products (for example, cars), of which slave-produced charcoal is a crucial input (Bales, 2004, p. 23). This example highlights how savings generated through the use of slave labour are hidden along the global supply chain and are therefore not captured in profit estimates[6].

[6] Estimates quoted here are not directly comparable due to different methodologies and years in which they were estimated, but serve the purpose here of highlighting how different estimates may be.

**Figure 1: Annual profits of forced labour by region**




Sourced from (International Labour Organization, 2014, p. 14)

**Table 1: Estimated number of people implicated by type of forced labour and region**

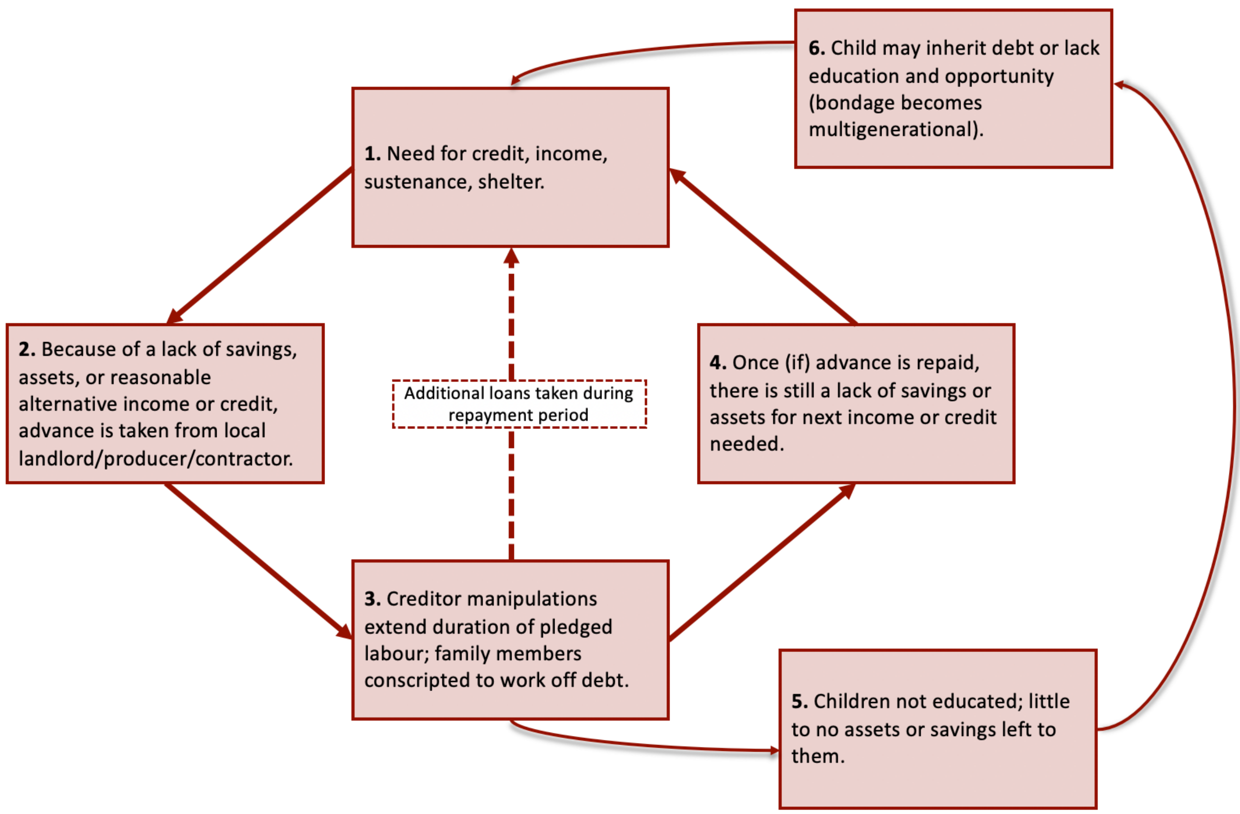
| Region | Forced sexual exploitation | Forced labour exploitation | State-imposed forced labour | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Asia-Pacific | 2,500,000 | 7,900,000 | 1,200,000 | **11,700,000** |
| Developed Economies and EU | 300,000 | 1,000,000 | 200,000 | **1,500,000** |
| Central and South Eastern Europe and CIS | 300,000 | 1,100,000 | 200,000 | **1,600,000** |
| Africa | 800,000 | 2,500,000 | 400,000 | **3,700,000** |
| Latin America and the Caribbean | 400,000 | 1,200,000 | 200,000 | **1,800,000** |
| Middle East | 100,000 | 400,000 | 100,000 | **600,000** |
| **Total** | **4,500,000** | **14,200,000** | **2,200,000** | **20,900,000** |

Sourced from (International Labour Organization, 2014, p. 17)

Within forced labour, this paper is more precisely interested in bonded labour or debt bondage. In his book *Bonded Labor: Tackling the System of Slavery in South Asia*, Kara writes that debate bondage is the most extensive form of slavery in the world and that in 2011, just over one percent of the entire population in South Asia was subject to bonded labour (roughly 17 million people) (2012, p. 5). Debt bondage involves an exchange between two parties, one with capital who provides a loan to another party without capital, who pledges their labour to work off the advance through piece-rate wages (Kara, 2012, p. 3). The deeply asymmetric power relations between the person extracting the labour and the person performing the labour mean that the lender often exploits the worker through deceit, manipulation, coercion, and physical abuse (Kara, 2012, p. 3). One of the key characteristics of debt bondage is that the worker must buy food, medicine, and other basic supplies from the lender (often at heavily inflated prices), which creates a situation of stagnating or even rising debt, despite the arduous work performed (Bales, 2004, p. 156; Kara, 2012, p. 3). In cases of especially exploitative lenders, the debt can be manipulated by purposefully recording more debt than the lender initially borrowed, deducting more for foodstuffs and supplies than the lender takes, and undercounting the lenders' piece-rate wages or dishonestly deducting wages for spoiled final products (Bales, 2004, p. 167).

Power is further skewed into the hands of the lender because the majority of bonded labourers have no other option, as they typically lack access to formal credit markets and are otherwise unable to diversify household incomes (often relying on seasonal sectors such as agriculture) (Kara, 2012, pp. 6–7). Bonded labourers are also often illiterate and innumerate, relying wholly on the lender to record their debts and wages (Bales, 2004, p. 166; Kara, 2012, p. 6). Therefore, debt bondage refers to a highly exploitative practice, especially where lenders use deceitful and coercive tactics to keep the borrower under an insurmountable level of debt, including when debt is passed down to subsequent generations or when children are seized or sold as punishment for "defaulting" on the loan (Bales, 2004, p. 20). See Figure 2 for a representation of the reinforcing cycle of debt bondage within and across generations.

**Figure 2: Reinforcing cycle of debt bondage**




Sourced from (Kara, 2017, p. 5)

## The Climate Change, Exploitative Labour, and Environmental Damage Nexus

The final component of this literature review will assess the scholarship as it pertains to the climate change, exploitative labour, and environmental damage nexus. Aside from Bales' *Blood and Earth* discussed above, this section will review reports published by the ILO and the

International Organization for Migration (IOM), as well as two research projects out of the University of London.

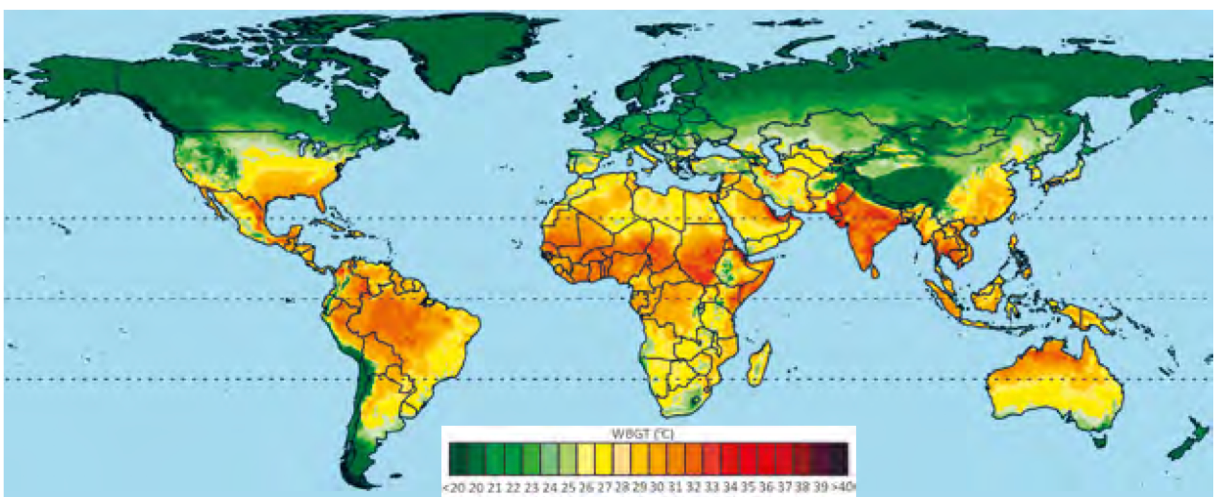
The ILO's role in highlighting the relationship between climate change, labour exploitation, and environmental damage is minimal. It identifies that its responsibility regarding climate change adaptation is to reduce the vulnerability of workers, enterprises, and governments to the effects of climate change; and to strengthen capacity at the individual and societal level to respond to, prepare for, and adapt to climate change in ways that enhance development and social inclusion (International Labour Organization, n.d.-a). In 2018, the ILO published its World Employment and Social Outlook (WESO), with a focus on "greening with jobs" through a just transition to a low-carbon economy (International Labour Organization, 2018b, p. 1). A primary implication from this research is that social protections are necessary to mitigate both poverty and environmental damage by increasing workers' adaptive capacity (International Labour Organization, 2018b, p. 105). It identifies that decent work "deficits" can contribute to environmental damage, which occurs when households without access to social protection resort to unsustainable forms of resource extraction to generate income (International Labour Organization, 2018b, p. 28). It also briefly highlights that environmental risks can result from "non-compliant" industrial activity (2018b, p. 22).

The 2018 WESO also recognizes that poor and marginalized groups are particularly vulnerable both to risks associated with environmental degradation (especially those who depend on ecosystem services for their livelihoods), as well as to labour exploitation (especially rural migrants searching for urban employment in the informal economy) (International Labour Organization, 2018b, p. 105). However, while stating that progress toward decent work has not kept up with economic growth, the 2018 WESO does not comprehensively pursue why

(International Labour Organization, 2018b, p. 9). It mentions that decoupling economic growth and development from resource exploitation and rising GHG emissions is possible, but not how it is politically and economically unfeasible for low- or even middle-income countries to do so.

A more recent ILO publication on decent work in the context of climate change is concerned not with increasing vulnerability to labour exploitation but decreasing productivity as various regions around the world become too hot to work (Kjellstrom et al., 2019, p. 17). It identifies that the impact of heat stress will be unevenly distributed across the world, with the Southern Asian and Western African subregions expected to be at higher risk of suffering from adverse consequences of climate change (Kjellstrom et al., 2019, p. 22). See Figure 3 for a map illustrating the projected incidence of heat stress worldwide in 2085.

**Figure 3: Projected incidence of heat stress worldwide in 2085**




Note: The map shows the average over 29 years (2071–2099) of projected daily maximum WBGT (afternoon values in the shade) during the locally hottest month in 67,420 small geographical areas (grid cells) covering 50 km × 50 km at the equator. Projections are based on the RCP6.0 climate change pathway; the mean of the WBGT values from the HadGEM2 and GFDL-ESM2M climate models was calculated for each grid cell.

Source: Map based on the HadGEM2 and GFDL-ESM2M climate models.

Sourced from (Kjellstrom et al., 2019, p. 22)

The report also highlights that agricultural and construction workers (industries with high levels of physical exertion outdoors) are likely to be the worst affected by the loss of productivity due to heat stress (Kjellstrom et al., 2019, p. 28). However, the report does not touch on how increasing temperatures contribute to the vulnerability of people to labour exploitation or how informal industries may contribute to further local and regional environmental damage.

The IOM, an intergovernmental organization committed to the welfare of internally displaced persons, refugees, and migrant labourers, published a short report titled *The Climate Change-Human Trafficking Nexus*, which brings together anecdotal evidence from field practitioners on how climate events impact human trafficking (2016, p. 3). Forced labour and human trafficking are distinct yet overlapping categories; thus, the publication sheds light on how sudden- and slow-onset climatic events increase human vulnerability to exploitation. Particularly in the Asia-Pacific region, which is extremely vulnerable to climate change and where internal migration from rural to urban centres is high, migrant labourers wield minimal bargaining power and are at high risk of exploitation in brick kilns, fishing boats, or in manufacturing and sex sectors (International Organization for Migration, 2016, p. 5).

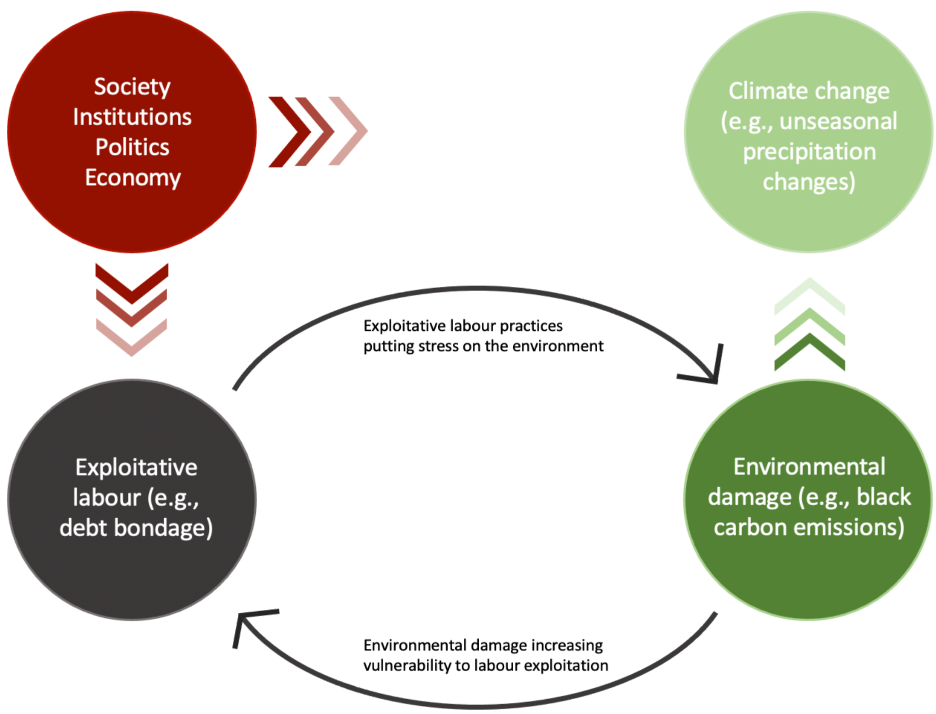
*The Climate Change-Human Trafficking Nexus* demonstrates that industries in which human trafficking and labour exploitation are prevalent also have a detrimental impact on the environment and reinforce the negative effects of climate change, for instance, in unregulated deforestation (International Organization for Migration, 2016, p. 5). The IOM report also highlights the particular vulnerability of families dependent on agriculture, as climate change has reduced yields necessary for subsistence and can entrench farmers in debt bondage (International Organization for Migration, 2016, p. 7). Its conclusion advances several recommendations, including that policymakers should mainstream climate change issues into standard operating procedures regarding human trafficking to plug policy gaps relating to the climate change and human trafficking relationship (International Organization for Migration, 2016, p. 11).

A project that has directly tried to address gaps in the literature and public policy on climate change, exploitative labour, and environmental damage is Blood Bricks. Beginning in 2017, Katherine Brickell, Sopheak Chann, Laurie Parsons, Nithya Natarajan, and Thomas Cristofoletti led a two-year research project to demonstrate how brickwork in Cambodia traps families in debt bondage to support the construction boom in Phnom Penh (*Researching the Modern Slavery-Climate Change Nexus in the Cambodian Construction Industry*, n.d.). Following several months of fieldwork, the project culminated in a report published in 2018, *Blood Bricks: Untold Stories of Modern Slavery and Climate Change in Cambodia* (Brickell et al., 2018, p. 12). Beyond the desire for urban development, the researchers found that climate change was a key factor in driving families' entry into the informal construction industry, where they become vulnerable to labour exploitation and indebtedness (*Researching the Modern Slavery-Climate Change Nexus in the Cambodian Construction Industry*, n.d.). In exposing how urban development is dependent on debt undertaken by agrarian families struggling to adapt to climate change, Blood Bricks highlights the connections between issues of climate change, exploitative labour, and environmental damage and seeks to push policy development beyond traditional silos to consider the way these challenges are interconnected (*Researching the Modern Slavery-Climate Change Nexus in the Cambodian Construction Industry*, n.d.). The research also integrates an analysis of structural factors that facilitate debt bondage, including corruption, weak rule of law, and the operational nature of global corporations (Brickell et al., 2018, p. 12).

Another report by Doreen Boyd, Katherine Brickell, David Brown, Chris Ives, Nithya Natarajan, and Laurie Parsons was released in 2018, entitled *Modern Slavery, Environmental*

*Destruction and Climate Change: Fisheries, Field, Forests and Factories*. This report also seeks to fill some of the research gap on the intersection between climate change, exploitative labour, and environmental damage by synthesizing current academic and grey literature in the four sectors named in the title (Brown et al., 2018, p. 7). The review process was based on a conceptualization of a two-way relationship between climate change, exploitative labour, and environmental damage (see Figure 4) and surveyed literature that explicitly and implicitly investigated this relationship (Brown et al., 2018, p. 11).

**Figure 4: Two-way relationship between climate change, exploitative labour, and environmental damage**




Adapted from (Brown et al., 2018, p. 11)

The report found that the literature drew a connection between unregulated and informal industries and exploitation of labour and the environment; identified that these illegal or informal channels were prevalent in the Global South; and agreed that many of these exploitative activities take place to serve the interests of consumers in the Global North (Brown et al., 2018, p. 11). Ultimately, the report highlights that agrarian communities in the Global South are most susceptible to climate impacts as a result of their precarious dependence on natural resources, thus rendering them more vulnerable to exploitative labour practices as they try to adapt to onset impacts of climate change (Brown et al., 2018, p. 19).

Thus, emerging evidence has moved beyond mere correlations to identify recurrent and multi-directional patterns of interaction between climate change, exploitative labour, and environmental damage – signaling a nexus (Decker Sparks et al., 2021, p. 182). Brickwork is just one example of an industry associated with exploitative labour that is caught up in this nexus, characterized by: labour market informality; low-wage and seasonal work; high manual labour intensity; hazardous working conditions; isolation from monitoring and enforcement; labour scarcity that engenders a reliance on vulnerable migrant labour; and illegal extraction of natural resources (Decker Sparks et al., 2021, p. 182). This paper seeks to contribute to understanding of this nexus through a sector-specific analysis of Cambodian smallholders-turned-brick-workers while advancing a second critique of the ILO's effectiveness in eradicating forced labour through its DWA. This paper returns to the reinforcing relationship illustrated above in the discussion section to bring these two analyses together.

# Research Methods and Conceptual Frameworks

## Methodology

This paper relies on secondary material as well as primary qualitative and quantitative research conducted by organizations and researchers, including by those mentioned in the literature review, to analyze the two research questions of interest. It looks predominantly to peer-reviewed literature and published books, in addition to organizational reports, analyses, statistical databases, news releases, and official communications from the ILO, other UN agencies, and organizations unaffiliated with the UN, such as Walk Free and the World Bank. To gather the literature, comprehensive searches were carried out on the University of Ottawa's library database using relevant keywords to identify scholarship on exploitative labour in its diverse forms, environmental damage in relation to exploitative industries, and theoretical material on how this intersection can be rigorously studied in order to contribute thought-provoking findings. For instance, searches included multiple keywords such as "debt bondage" and "environmental damage", or "forced labour" and "climate change". More specific searches included "brickwork", "bonded labour", and "environment*", intended to open up searches to publications mentioning either "environment" or environment*al*". Searches were also conducted on the ILO, World Bank, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation (OECD) websites in order to find publications, datasets, and web pages relevant to various discussions throughout this paper.

In terms of case selection strategy, this paper focuses on Cambodia for several reasons. Its geographical, sociopolitical, and historical circumstances have made it uniquely vulnerable to the effects of climate change and practices of exploitative labour (*The Climate Change-Modern Slavery Nexus*, 2017). Beginning in the 1980s, the country began to liberalize its market, a process that accelerated in the 1990s after the first general election was held in 1993 (Chhair & Ung, 2016, p. 10). Social protections provided by the RGC remain highly fragmented and based on a system biased toward workers in the formal economy (International Labour Organization, 2019, p. 24). This presents a problem given that rates of labour informality in Cambodia are high, with approximately 70 percent of the workforce in informal or vulnerable employment (International

Labour Organization, 2019, p. 1). The economy and society have undergone profound changes in the last forty years, and the RGC has not adjusted its policies to current market and social realities, namely the spectacular rise of the construction and garment industries (*The Climate Change-Modern Slavery Nexus*, 2017).

This economic and labour market restructuring, and the widening gaps in social support, are compounded by vulnerability to climate change. Cambodia is regularly cited as one of the most globally vulnerable countries to the effects of climate change and is one of the top three most vulnerable in Asia (*Cambodia Climate Change Alliance*, n.d.). A large majority of the population relies on agricultural production for their livelihoods, yet this sector is highly sensitive to climatic changes (Keo, 2014). Growing unpredictability in precipitation has strained agrarian families and pushed them in search of work in the construction industry as they exercise individual-level climate adaptation strategies (*The Climate Change-Modern Slavery Nexus*, 2017). This has increased rural Cambodians' vulnerability to forced labour and debt bondage, putting the country among the top ten with the highest prevalence of modern slavery, including forced labour, debt bondage, and forced marriage (Walk Free Foundation, 2018, p. 29).

These conditions, which will be expanded upon in the following section, have contributed to a situation where economic growth, migration, climate change, and exploitative labour constitute interconnected elements of Cambodian smallholders' reality. Finally, Cambodia has been a member of the ILO for over 50 years, and the DWCP of interest to this paper is the fifth iteration of such engagement between the ILO, RGC, and its national labour unions (International Labour Organization, 2019, p. 8). As such, there is a considerable amount of material to draw on throughout years of tripartite efforts to promote decent work in Cambodia.

## Conceptual Frameworks

### *Marxist Theory of Labour Exploitation*

In addressing the first research question concerning the relationship between climate change, exploitative labour (specifically debt bondage), and environmental damage in Cambodia, this paper utilizes the theory of labour exploitation developed by Karl Marx. Labour exploitation in the Marxist sense refers to the fact that workers are compensated at less than the full value of what they produce, and this surplus value accrues to the person extracting the labour (Marx, 1992, p. 396). This asymmetrical relationship between the person doing the work and the person extracting the work, who continuously accrues more capital at the expense of paying the worker for the full value of their labour, is endemic to class-based societies, including capitalism.

This paper purposefully draws on Marxism due to the breadth it offers in thinking about labour relations and exploitative labour under capitalism. This makes it especially useful in the context of debt bondage. In capitalist societies, Marx conceived of workers as doubly free, which ironically makes them not free at all (Marx, 1992, p. 272). On the one hand, workers are able/*free* to sell their labour in exchange for money (i.e., commodify their labour power), yet on the other, they are devoid/*free* of any other commodities to sell (i.e., they lack ownership over the means of production, such as land) (Marx, 1992, pp. 272–273). As such, they are compelled to sell their labour on almost any terms, just as owners of capital are compelled to extort the maximum surplus value from workers (Marx, 1992, p. 82). Under bonded labour, even though a person may have entered the situation voluntarily, whereby they agreed to undertake work in exchange for money, the labour is not truly voluntary if they have been forced by their lack of ownership over the means of production to commodify their labour power for less than its full value.

Marx further described how workers are "compelled by social conditions to sell the whole of his active life, his very capacity for labour, in return for the price of his customary means of subsistence" (1992, p. 382). Without control over the means of production, without their own capital assets, workers only have the value of their labour to sell, which makes them vulnerable to exploitation. Thus, Marx recognized that while labour may not be forced in the strictest sense of the term (that is, workers may still exercise some agency within an exploitative situation), it may still be unfree. Conversely, a standard "free" labour relationship is not inherently devoid of exploitation. In fact, Marx believed that all work under capitalism was forced. Still, this unfreedom and exploitation are particularly acute for poor and marginalized populations.

Marxist thought remains relevant due to the striking comparisons that can be drawn between his prescient writings in the mid-19$^{th}$ century and the nature of labour in the 21$^{st}$ century. His work continues to provide insights into the relationship between capitalism and unfree labour that contribute to a more robust understanding of how labour exploitation not only continues but thrives in the contemporary global economy (Rioux et al., 2019). Other schools of thought insufficiently explicate this dynamic. Liberal theorists like Amartya Sen conceive of capitalism as contributing to an expansion of human freedoms, writing that the problems that do arise are not intrinsic to capitalist markets themselves; rather, they are a result of policy's failings to regulate activities (2001, p. 142). However, the forced vs. voluntary dichotomy expressed in dominant liberal discourse neglects the agency of individuals in these situations as well as the structural conditions that constrain choice (O'Connell Davidson, 2013, p. 185). Moral explanations also overlook sociopolitical and economic conditions, positing unfree labour as an ethical shortcoming stemming from humanity's imperfect nature (Rioux et al., 2019, p. 4). Finally, Smithsonian approaches view capitalism and unfree labour as incompatible altogether, though Adam Smith himself could not explain slavery's prevalence under capitalism (Rioux et al., 2019).

The Marxist theory of labour exploitation thus provides a significant counterweight to schools of thought that encourage capitalist societies to see economic laws as indisputable when they are, in fact, the product of social relations and therefore subject to change (Rioux et al., 2019, pp. 7–8). Furthermore, adopting a Marxist perspective encourages an understanding of unfree or exploitative labour in the global capitalist economy as an inevitable outcome rather than an anomaly (Rioux et al., 2019, p. 18). Marxists frameworks are also consistent with the view that unfreedoms in the contemporary global economy are "vast, messy, and overlapping" (LeBaron & Ayers, 2013, p. 876) and that working conditions are dynamic, wherein workers may lose or gain freedoms over time within the same labour relationship (Pesterfield, 2021, p. 6). Finally, a Marxist perspective also enables this paper to analyze debt bondage without conducting primary research or fieldwork. Had this been the case, this paper may have drawn on thinking advanced by Kara on the reinforcing and often multigenerational cycle of debt bondage (see the literature review, Figure 2); however, there is not enough material with which to engage for this analysis.

In terms of anthropogenic climate change, Marx was obviously unable to consider its impacts on labour relations. He did recognize that in addition to labour, capitalist production also involved the use or transformation of materials provided by nature (Marx, 1992, p. 133). He further remarked that capitalism recognizes the value of natural products only once they are exchanged (Marx, 1992, p. 177). Yet beyond these comments, his thinking remains useful in considering how processes of environmental damage and climate change contribute to the narrowing of workers' access to the means of production (namely land).

### *Neo-Gramscian Framework of Hegemony in International Organizations*

Following a micro-level analysis of individual families' labour exploitation resulting from their struggle for climate adaptation through the Marxist lens, this paper undertakes a macro-level analysis of the ILO through a neo-Gramscian lens. Neo-Gramscian analysis adapts Antonio Gramsci's conceptualization of hegemony from its roots in fascist Italy to processes of change and power in the contemporary, globalized international order (Cox, 1992, p. 179). The Gramscian interpretation of hegemony refers to the structure of values and practices that extends throughout society and which relies on a combination of material power, institutions, and ideas (Cox, 1992, p. 179). Neo-Gramscian hegemony recognizes there are two aspects to the structure of world power that are broadly consistent with one another, an objective and the subjective, wherein the objective aspect refers to the material forces of a state and the subjective aspect consists of the degree of others' acceptance of the dominant rules as legitimate and proper (Cox, 1980, p. 376). This is a key feature of hegemony – the subjective rules and interests of the hegemonic state or class are presented as natural and those of general society. At times, concessions are made to placate subordinate classes to maintain the illusion that the hegemonic order works in the interest of everyone (Cox, 1980, p. 376). Thus, once this subjective aspect of hegemony is secured, there is little to no need for violent enforcement.

However, the dominance of one core state does not sustain a global hegemony. Certain ways of "thinking and doing" become hegemonic when they are imposed on or emulated by other states (Cox, 1992, p. 179). While the hegemonic international order begins with an intrastate political, social, and economic revolution promoted by the core state's dominant class, it eventually transcends national borders to be reproduced in other contexts (Cox, 1983, p. 171). But because peripheral states who have emulated or acquiesced to the hegemonic order have done so through passive revolution (i.e., they may have incorporated some cultural or economic aspects of the hegemonic order, but their underlying structures have not undergone fundamental change), the hegemonic order in an international context becomes less consistent and is fraught with more tension the further it moves from the core state (Cox, 1983, p. 171).

Cox, who developed Gramsci's theory in relation to international institutions[7], posits that international organizations serve as instruments of hegemony because they become sites through which norms and interests of the dominant class are universalized, legitimated, and promoted. In other words, they support the international hegemonic order by promoting universalized assumptions as the objective underpinning for common institutions and ideology. Cox described five features of international organizations that express their hegemonic role: 1) they embody rules that facilitate the promotion of the hegemonic world order; 2) they are themselves products of the hegemonic world order since they are generally formed by core state(s) and establish procedures for membership and participation that reflect global power hierarchies; 3) they define the policy guidelines at the national level that reflect the interests of dominant social and economic forces; 4) they co-opt peripheral elites and ideas to dampen the counter-hegemonic impulse; and 5) they absorb counter-hegemonic ideas and interpret them in ways that are consistent with the hegemonic doctrine (1983, p. 172).

The Gramscian understanding of hegemony as adapted by Cox to the international order lends itself well to this paper's analysis of the ILO because it provides a framework through which the ILO's initiatives can be assessed. However, some scholars critique the application of Gramscian hegemony to processes of change in international relations, for instance, arguing that

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[7] It is interesting to note that Cox formulated his critique of international organizations while working for the ILO between 1984 and 1972, some of that time acting as the Director for the International Institute for Labour Studies (Cox, 1977, p. 386).

this analysis conceptually stretches the framework beyond its original intention and explanatory power (Saurin, 2008, p. 39). Others indicate that neo-Gramscian approaches are incapable of reconciling the structural aspects of their analysis with the intersubjective nature of the social world, sacrificing structural arguments to culturalism or historicism (Ayers, 2008). Finally, some argue that neo-Gramscian approaches downplay the material and ideological interactions between groups that contribute to change, maintaining that according to neo-Gramscians, hegemony is considered unidirectional (Steans & Tepe, 2008, p. 186).

Yet despite these weaknesses, the neo-Gramscian approach is suited to this analysis because it allows this paper to analyze how the ILO functions as an instrument of hegemony, specifically of neoliberal hegemony in contemporary global affairs. To clarify definitions, where this paper refers to the terms *neoliberal* or *neoliberalism*, it refers to the economic and political ideology characterized by: deregulation, including in financial and labour markets; privatization of public assets; reduced social expenditures; market and trade liberalization; commodification of goods, services, and natural resources; and the general subjugation of social or environmental affairs to those of the (global) capitalist market (Kumi et al., 2014, p. 541; LeBaron, 2014, p. 767). The hegemonic aspect refers to the fact that neoliberalism has become the standard (i.e., dominant), political ideology and set of economic policies promoted by Washington Consensus international institutions, including the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank. From the 1980s, these institutions, as well as the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Trade Organization (WTO), have legitimized and espoused neoliberalism as the standard package of rules to which countries should adhere in order to achieve modernization and development (measured primarily by economic indicators) along the same linear track as the Global North (Kumi et al., 2014, p. 541).

As a critical theory, the neo-Gramscian lens is concerned with the broader structure of norms, institutions, and practices in which the problem of interest is just one component (Cox, 1981, p. 129). In this case, the problem of interest is how the ILO can claim to protect vulnerable workers while working to uphold the (neoliberal) hegemonic order. Critical theories are in contrast with mainstream, positivist international relations theories such as realism or liberalism, which are based on static understandings of global power and advance solutions meant to smooth the functioning of the established order (Bieler & Morton, 2004, p. 86; Cox, 1981, p. 129). Thus, the framework described above for thinking about how values and practices change, become dominant, and retain dominance is useful here. Finally, neo-Gramscian approaches do not deny that exchanges occur between dominant and subordinate groups which shape the hegemonic order; instead, they emphasize that any reform or acquiescence to the existing hegemonic order is unlikely to fundamentally challenge underlying norms and assumptions. In this way, international organizations such as the ILO can become mediators between subjective worldviews and may even potentially become vehicles for advancing counter-hegemonic values (Cox, 1980, p. 377). However, according to the neo-Gramscian perspective, institutional change remains more likely to follow, than initiate, a revolutionary order (Cox, 1983, p. 169).

# Analysis

## Cambodia, Climate Change, and Labour Exploitation in Brickwork

### *Economic and Political Context: Impact of structural changes on land*

Cambodia has a rich history spanning millennia, the vast majority of which is outside the scope of this paper. As a result, this section will focus on changes in Cambodia's macroeconomic and labour market policies since the 1950s, with a particular focus on market liberalization occurring since the 1980s. From the Sihanouk regime in the 1950s until the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in late 1991, Cambodia's political centre swung from one ideological extreme to another, which profoundly influenced the country's economic policies (Chhair & Ung, 2016, p. 1). Between 1953 and the late 1960s, the Sihanouk regime focused on building Cambodia's industrial base, and the number of small and medium-sized private factories grew by over 5,000 percent in under 15 years (Chhair & Ung, 2016, p. 4). During this time, the economy was mixed between private and public enterprise, and agricultural production remained constant at around 40 percent of GDP (Chhair & Ung, 2016, p. 5). However, the escalation of the neighbouring Vietnam War and collusion between the Cambodian government and communist forces in Vietnam resulted in two-thirds of Cambodian-grown rice being smuggled into Vietnam to feed growing numbers of troops, which was devastating for an economy dependent on taxes on rice exports (Tyner, 2017, p. 46).

The Khmer Republic came to power in 1970 following a civil war with the Communist Party of Kampuchea (CPK, a.k.a the Khmer Rouge). It began a short-lived campaign of economic liberalization, which included devaluing the currency, removing state controls on foreign trade, and reducing state involvement in enterprise (Chhair & Ung, 2016, p. 7). Yet this liberalization failed to benefit most of the industrial sector, which was small and not capital-intensive: removing protective tariffs meant they could no longer compete with imported products (Slocomb, 2010, p. 151). The implementation of the CPK's economic policies was also marred by conflict, as this period saw ongoing violence between the Republican government and the CPK. Additionally, brutal and intensive US bombing raids over Cambodia in the early 1970s, purportedly targeting only sanctuaries for Vietnamese communist forces, destroyed swaths of forests, agricultural land,

and irrigation systems; and resulted in mass displacement as well as hundreds of thousands of casualties (Tyner, 2017, p. 53). By 1974, approximately 80 percent of Cambodia's pre-war paddy fields had been abandoned, dropping rice production levels to 65,000 tonnes (from the 3.8 million tonne peak in 1969) (Tyner, 2017, p. 54).

After the capture of Phnom Penh in 1975, the CPK rose to power over a devastated country (renamed Democratic Kampuchea). Approximately one-third of bridges had been destroyed, two-fifths of the road network was rendered inaccessible, the country's industrial production had ground to a halt, and primary export production declined to one-fifth of pre-war levels (Tyner, 2017, p. 59). In a radical and violent transition, the CPK undertook a tyrannical campaign for total control over the population, wherein approximately two million people died from starvation, disease, inadequate medical care, torture, and murder (representing about one-quarter of Cambodia's pre-1975 population) (Guillou, 2006, p. 17; Tyner, 2017, p. 1). The CPK collectivized agriculture, nationalized all sectors of the economy, and banned private ownership and money (Chhair & Ung, 2016; Oldenburg & Neef, 2014, p. 50). It evacuated cities, including Phnom Penh which housed hundreds of thousands of peasants that fled conflict during the civil war, and relocated an estimated 2.5 million people into agricultural cooperatives as part of a broader program to reinvigorate the economy (Tyner, 2017, pp. 65–66). It undertook a plan to triple the production of rice within four years in order to finance the rest of the economy (Tyner, 2017, p. 107), under two economic objectives: quickly raise living standards; and increase capital from agriculture in order to expand agricultural production, industrial development, and defence (2017, p. 110). It is ironic that while the CPK eliminated currency, they still followed the basic form of economic exchange, merely under a different commodity: farmers produced rice, rice went to government officials, and officials exported rice to accumulate capital (Tyner, 2017, p. 124).

While the CPK was overthrown in 1979 by the People's Army of Vietnam and the Kampuchean United Front for National Salvation, who formed the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), the war against the Khmer Rouge continued along the northwestern border (Deth, 2009, p. 29; Slocomb, 2010, p. 177). However, growing demands for Southeast Asian economic integration and a freer regional market ultimately pressured warring factions to resolve their differences. This led to a protracted diplomatic peace process that culminated in the signing of the Paris Peace Agreements in 1991 (Slocomb, 2010, p. 178). Throughout the 1980s, the PRK re-established state-owned enterprises to encourage the provision of basic consumer goods and public utilities (Chhair & Ung, 2016, p. 8). The PRK, which controlled large industry, finance, transport, official foreign commerce, and some large agricultural plantations, coexisted alongside collectives or solidarity groups (made up of about ten families each), that together controlled land and agricultural equipment (Chhair & Ung, 2016, p. 8). As of 1985, agricultural production's share of GDP was about 90 percent and industry's share was about 5 percent, with the majority owing to state-owned manufacturing output (Chhair & Ung, 2016, pp. 8–9).

By 1989, the PRK had privatized state-owned enterprises, abandoned collective agricultural production, abolished the state monopoly over foreign trade, and legalized foreign investment (Chhair & Ung, 2016, pp. 9–10; Slocomb, 2010, p. 182). Market liberalization accelerated once the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) organized and conducted fair and free elections for a Constituent Assembly in 1991 (Slocomb, 2010, p. 231). Despite criticisms of UNTAC for taking too long to establish the transitional authority, the election process was considered a success and resulted in a coalition government among the top three political parties (Slocomb, 2010, p. 232). In 1992, the elected executive government voted to adopt a new constitution to restore Cambodia's peace based on a multi-party liberal democratic system

(Slocomb, 2010, p. 234). The new Constitution of the Kingdom of Cambodia was signed by Norodom Sihanouk, who resumed the Cambodian throne as a constitutional monarch under the RGC and brought a formal end to UNTAC's mandate (Slocomb, 2010, p. 232). The UN was subsequently accorded an essential role in the Cambodian rehabilitation and reconstruction effort, which came to be coordinated by the UN Development Programme (UNDP).

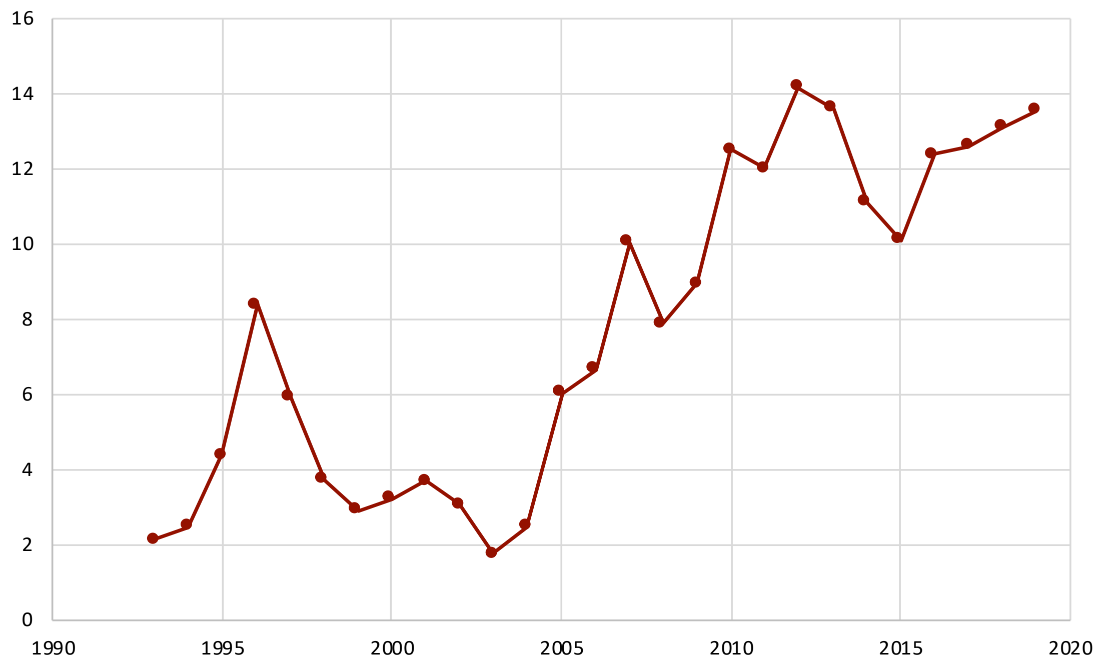
In 1994, the RGC presented its National Programme to Rehabilitate and Develop Cambodia to the international donor community, where it committed to reforming state institutions and the public service, promote private entrepreneurship and the market as engines of growth, double real GDP in 10 years, extend social services, improve rural livelihoods, ensure sustainable development, and strengthen domestic self-reliance (Slocomb, 2010, p. 236). To help finance the ambitious agenda, Cambodia adopted a three-year structural adjustment program (SAP) from 1994 to 1996, which set clear targets for macroeconomic reform in order to access IMF loans (Slocomb, 2010, p. 236). In terms of overall GDP, Cambodia's economy grew due to policies adopted in 1994, and arguably faster than that of any other post-conflict society, with GDP per capita doubling between 1998 and 2007 (Hill & Menon, 2013, p. i).

However, whether the wealth reached the rural poor was questionable. Neoliberal market reforms reduced state responsibilities to its citizenry, and restrictions on public spending made education and health services inaccessible to Cambodia's poor (Slocomb, 2010, p. 236). In 1999, the IMF and World Bank introduced the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) to enable low-income countries to qualify for additional loans, provided they had a strategy to deal with poverty (Slocomb, 2010, p. 238). The RGC committed itself to reduce the number of people living below the poverty line to 20 percent by 2015 (Slocomb, 2010, p. 238). Yet progress remained slow, and in 2003, an independent report released by the UNDP stated that the macroeconomic framework established under the IMF's guidance had not addressed key elements of poverty in Cambodia (Slocomb, 2010, p. 238).

After 1989, nearly all real growth in the Cambodian economy was concentrated in Phnom Penh, and the wealth gap between rich and poor continued to worsen (Slocomb, 2010, pp. 249–250). This inequality had been fueled by an influx in international money, including development assistance and foreign direct investment (FDI), which resulted in a boom of nightclubs, hotels, and restaurants catering to the Cambodian elite, investors, and aid workers (Nam, 2017, p. 624). Since the signing of the 1991 Agreement, Cambodia has been highly dependent on foreign aid, which has meant a large presence of international NGOs and aid workers per capita (Hill & Menon, 2013, pp. 2–3). Almost half of its gross national budget since 1992 has been sourced from international donors, including the funding of specific programs such as the Land Management and Administration Project, which supported systematic land registration across 60 percent of the country (Oldenburg & Neef, 2014, p. 64). The high presence of international aid has constrained Cambodia's macroeconomic policy space, as competing donor priorities and short timelines have contributed to erratic policy priorities, incomplete projects, and biases toward capital expenditures over maintenance (Hill & Menon, 2013, p. 3).

Furthermore, Cambodia has become a highly open economy owing in part to donor pressures as well as its membership in the WTO and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and has cultivated a highly welcoming foreign investment regime (Hill & Menon, 2013, p. 4). This has included generous incentives to attract FDI to promote industrial development (Chhair & Ung, 2016, p. 10). As of 1994, FDI inflow's share of GDP was below 2.5 percent, and by 2019, it had grown to over 13 percent (see Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Net FDI inflows to Cambodia (% of GDP)**




Data from (World Bank, 2021a).

Three-quarters of the incoming FDI in 2018 originated from China and was mainly directed toward construction projects, including infrastructure development, and commercial and residential real estate (Ly et al., 2019, p. 3). These FDI flows directly sustain construction activity: in 2018, approved residential and commercial development projects amounted to over US$4.5 billion (excluding mega-projects of at least US$1 billion), a 14 percent increase from the year prior (Ly et al., 2019, p. 11). Between 2006 and 2016, the construction sector grew at an annual average rate of 17 percent and represented the most significant contributor to national growth in 2015 (Brickell et al., 2018, p. 23). Yet alongside FDI inflows in real estate, foreign investment in agriculture and large-scale land acquisitions have enabled speculators to hoard usable land, restricting its accessibility to smallholders (Oldenburg & Neef, 2014, p. 64).

Private property rights, abolished under the CPK, were reinstated with the 1991 and 2001 Land Laws, which reintroduced the system of granting land concessions and formalized the land governance framework (Oldenburg & Neef, 2014, p. 53). These laws, as well as the sub-decree on economic land concessions (ELCs), established the right for concession holders to occupy private state land for agricultural and industrial-agricultural use to serve economic purposes (Oldenburg & Neef, 2014, p. 52). Several stipulations were identified, including that ELCs were to: be held for a maximum of 99 years; be no more than 10,000 hectares; not infringe on roads or other public infrastructure and land; and exclude lands being used for family agricultural production (Oldenburg & Neef, 2014, pp. 55–57).

While the law provided for various social and environmental safeguards, the implementation of ELCs has been compliant with the legislated requirements (Diepart, 2015, p. 14). Additionally, the rapid allocation of ELCs occurred at the same time as land was being registered under the Land Management and Administration Project, resulting in thousands of evictions of smallholders while they waited for the Ministry of Land Management, Urban Planning and Construction to recognize their land registration (Oldenburg & Neef, 2014, p. 58). Such rampant provision of ELCs has progressively concentrated Cambodia's land into very few hands at the expense of the majority of its population (Oldenburg & Neef, 2014, pp. 62–63). The net impact was a decrease in access to common resources, which profoundly impacted the rural poor (Diepart, 2015, p. 15). In the context of England's transition from a feudal to capitalist society, Marx wrote that such systematic theft of communal property through the "enclosure of the commons" created a dispossessed agricultural population, 'set free' to serve the needs of industry and earn their subsistence by working for others" (1992, pp. 886–887). A similar dynamic can be observed under the structural changes in land management and economic orthodoxy in Cambodia at the turn of the century.

The uneven development between urban and coastal areas and the rest of the country has presented increasingly divisive consequences for Cambodian society. In particular, Phnom Penh has become a strong attraction for internal migrants struggling to cope with a stagnating rural economy (Slocomb, 2010, p. 248). From 1993, the number of people employed in industrial sectors grew by fifteen percent to account for one-fifth of total employment by 2017 (Chhair & Ung, 2016, p. 17; Natarajan, Parsons, et al., 2019, p. 1581). Conversely, agricultural employment declined from almost four-fifths of total employment in 1991 to just over two-fifths by 2017 (Natarajan, Parsons, et al., 2019, p. 1581; Royal Government of Cambodia, 2018, p. 37). Within a similar period (1993 to 2013), the share of agricultural production in GDP fell from about 46 percent in 1993 to 34 percent in 2013 (Mah, 2017, p. 365). Yet despite these trends, over 40 percent of Cambodia's labour force remains in agriculture. It is also important to note that these socioeconomic shifts are likely deeper than official statistics reflect due to the seasonal and informal nature of the industrial sector, particularly construction (Chhair & Ung, 2016, p. 18).

Thus, industrial output continues to be the engine of Cambodia's economic growth, cultivated by the RGC's outward-oriented economic development strategy backed by international development and financial institutions. As the relative importance of agriculture to GDP declines (even though the sector continues to grow in absolute terms), the government has paid correspondingly less attention to the needs of smallholders and agricultural workers (Eliste & Zorya, 2015, p. 3).

### *Agrarian Vulnerability: Climate change and inadequate social support*

In addition to the structural economic changes that have impacted the sustainability of agrarian livelihoods, environmental change has put increasing pressure on agrarian ecosystems. Due to Cambodia's high exposure to natural hazards and a limited adaptive capacity to respond, the World Risk Report ranked the country ninth out of 171 (International Labour Organization, 2019, p. 16). The UNDP has also reported that even if global temperature rise is capped at 2°C by 2100, and Cambodia maintains its current investment in climate change adaptation, climate change will reduce GDP by almost ten percent in 2050 (*Impact to Cambodian Economy from Climate Change Could Be Worse Than First Predicted*, 2018). On a more granular level, over four-fifths of people surveyed by Blood Bricks' stated that they noticed a temperature rise in recent years (Brickell et al., 2018, p. 53). About three-quarters of respondents also believed the nature of rainfall had changed and that drought had become more common, and over one-third indicated a higher rate of diseased livestock (Brickell et al., 2018, p. 53). Furthermore, climate projects anticipate an increased rate and severity of floods, droughts, and tropical cyclones, underscoring the need to strengthen responsiveness and resilience (International Labour Organization, 2019, p. 16).

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) highlights that Cambodia's high vulnerability to climate threats constitutes a significant problem for the agricultural sector, as does the government's failure to prioritize productivity enhancements in agricultural development (2018, p. 1). Agriculture in Cambodia remains small-scale and subsistence-based, with 60 percent of agricultural landholdings under one hectare in area (i.e., are held by smallholders) (Brickell et al., 2018, p. 18). Forty-two percent of rural households were either land poor (meaning they owned less than 0.5 hectares of land, which does not allow them to grow sufficient food to meet subsistence needs) or did not own land at all (Asian Development Bank, 2014; Oldenburg & Neef, 2014, p. 51). A gendered dimension is visible here, as Blood Bricks highlighted that 75 percent of female-headed households in their study were landless, compared to 50 percent of male-headed households (Natarajan, Parsons, et al., 2019, p. 47).

Additionally, irrigation remains expensive and difficult to set up given the lack of infrastructure; thus, 63 percent of land remains rainfed (Brickell et al., 2018, p. 18). As such, vulnerability to precipitation changes is high, with almost three-quarters of Cambodia's rural population dependent on agriculture that is heavily sensitive to climate changes, including unpredictable rainfall (Keo, 2014). Interviews conducted by Blood Bricks highlighted that relying on rain-fed agricultural production alone was insufficient for survival, but also that those who invested in irrigation were more likely to have family members working in brick kilns (Brickell et al., 2018, p. 49). This dilemma highlights rural Cambodians' predicament, since neither option leads to a sustainable livelihood, and illustrates that vulnerability is greatest among the smallest farms. Growing pressures on the most vulnerable populations have meant that small-scale farms are shrinking while large-scale farms (above three hectares) continue to grow (Eliste & Zorya, 2015, p. xv).

Such stories also show that a family's indebtedness is driven by their agricultural insecurity and fueled by the microfinance boom in Cambodia. The majority of loans taken are "unproductive", meaning they are intended to cover basic needs such as food consumption, medical expenses, and debt servicing (Asian Development Bank, 2014, p. 15). The ADB estimates that the poorest quintile of Cambodian society (those who live on US$0.70 or less per day) took out 60 percent of all recorded unproductive loans (2014, p. 15). This reduces their future ability to pay for basic household necessities and increases their vulnerability to perpetual indebtedness.

Aside from unproductive loans to cover basic household needs, rural families are increasingly taking out loans to cover inputs for agricultural production (such as for irrigation, and seeds, fertilizers, or other chemical inputs). Another significant driver of rural indebtedness is the highly fragmented provision of social protection in Cambodia, which receives only a small share of government funds and is based on a system biased to workers in the formal economy (International Labour Organization, 2019, p. 24) despite almost three-quarters of Cambodia's workforce engaging in informal employment (2019, p. 1). The low level of state support for agriculture means that rural families have to invest themselves in the necessary agricultural inputs to maintain or increase their agricultural productivity (Natarajan, Parsons, et al., 2019, p. 1588). This has resulted in a nationwide shift toward capital-intensive and debt-funded agriculture (Parsons & Chann, 2019, p. 3). On top of this, gradual climate change and ecological shocks have increased the chance of having low crop yields or crop failure, increasing the chance that families will have to take out loans for their basic needs or to cover agricultural inputs for the next season (Natarajan, Parsons, et al., 2019, p. 1589). Climate change also increases the risk of defaulting on loans: a 2013 study on the drivers of over-indebtedness among formal microfinance borrowers identified that 30 percent of borrowers engaged in agriculture were insolvent, compared with 18 percent for wage earners (Asian Development Bank, 2014, p. 15).

Thus, climate change, together with structural economic changes, land pressures and increasing landlessness, lack of state support and state bias toward foreign investors, and insurmountable personal debt, have made it increasingly difficult for small-scale Cambodian farmers to sustain their agricultural-based livelihoods. At the same time, the demand for bricks in Phnom Penh and the promise of work in the growing construction sector are strong pulls into the informal brickwork sector. Applying a Marxist lens is useful here because it highlights how climate change and land management practices have exacerbated Cambodian smallholders' lack of ownership of the means of production. This increases their vulnerability to labour exploitation because they have been compelled by their lack of ownership over land to commodify their labour. The sudden liberalization of land markets beginning in 1989 left rural populations highly vulnerable to unregulated market forces. Weak governance and a lack of institutional safeguards further privileged the wealthy Cambodian and foreign elite (Ministry of Planning and United Nations Development Programme Cambodia, 2007, p. 11). For the land poor, or the roughly third of agricultural households who are landless, selling their labour becomes the only way to adapt to such structural and climatic changes.

**Figure 6: The Elysee development on Koh Pich (Diamond Island)**

December 28, 2017. Blood Bricks found that foundations of eight developments in Phnom Penh including a mix of condominiums, shops, restaurants, hotels, and office blocks, used bricks that were produced using exploitative labour (Brickell et al., 2018, p. 24; Cristofoletti, n.d.).

### *Brickwork: Labour exploitation, environmental damage, and brick workers' agency*

As agricultural insecurity drives rural indebtedness, rural indebtedness becomes a key driver of Cambodians' movement to brick kilns (Bateman et al., 2019, p. 112). While touched upon above, it is important to emphasize that Cambodia has one of the largest global microcredit sectors. Data from the Cambodia Microfinance Association (CMA) shows that as of 2018, over US$4.6 billion in microcredit was dispensed (Bateman et al., 2019, p. 108). Research conducted by the Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights identified that aside from one exception, all of the brick workers interviewed were indebted to the kiln owner by an average of US$2,500 (2016, p. 4). To put this into perspective, GDP per capita in Cambodia in 2016 was less than US$1,300 (Natarajan, Parsons, et al., 2019, p. 1591). In the majority of cases, workers had borrowed money first from a bank or local microfinance lender in order to pay for medical bills, agricultural inputs, or other basic goods due to crop failure or landlessness (Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights, 2016, p. 4). Once unable to repay the loan, workers transfer the outstanding balance to a kiln owner – a relatively attractive option due to the provision of housing within the kiln compound and zero-interest charged on loans (Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights, 2016, p. 4).

Having accepted a loan from the kiln owner, workers become bound to continue working until the sum is repaid (or, more often, until the sum is resold to another kiln owner) (Parsons & Brickell, 2020, p. 45). In this process, rather than debts following families as they choose to move, families follow their debts as they are resold and bought by other kiln owners. Yet the low-paying, insecure, and dangerous nature of brickwork makes it more likely that debt will accumulate rather than fall over the years; and not even death brings relief, as loans are passed down to children who continue the bonded relationship into the next generation (Parsons & Brickell, 2020, p. 45). This arrangement contributes to why kiln owners prefer families over individual workers, as well as the fact that families are less likely to run away (particularly when their children are held as collateral should a member of the household need to leave the kiln site) (Brickell et al., 2018, p. 33).

However, as mentioned in an earlier section of this paper, bonded labourers are often charged high prices for rent, food, medication, and other subsistence needs, which are tallied and added to the total value of the loan. This gradual accumulation of debt is accelerated by the fact that workers are paid per brick produced (piece-rate wages). Thus, suspension of work during the rainy season or in the event of heavy unseasonal rains often forces families to take on additional debt to cover living expenses until production resumes (Brickell et al., 2018, p. 35; Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights, 2016, p. 5; Natarajan, Brickell, et al., 2019, p. 900). In this way, debt acts as a form of labour discipline that both restricts workers' conditions and mobility and compels them to increase their productivity under the piece-rate wage system in order to improve their repayment rate to kiln owners (Natarajan, Brickell, et al., 2019, p. 912; Natarajan et al., 2021, p. 249). The piece-rate wage system also provides a strong incentive for children to work alongside parents to increase the family's income (Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights, 2016, p. 20).

As entrance into brickwork can be looked at as a climate adaptation strategy, it is ironic that bonded labourers are compelled to degrade the natural landscape around them through brick production. This is because brickwork in this context is a dirty industry, with environmental damage inflicted at every stage of the process. Brick production begins with the excavation of fertile clay soils, which contributes to soil degradation and displacement of farmers, who eventually lose access to water facilities as kiln owners acquire more land (Brickell et al., 2018, p. 29). Excavated clay is transported to kiln sites where workers begin moulding bricks, which are transported to kilns after being air-dried (Natarajan, Brickell, et al., 2019, p. 911). Kilns themselves are brick structures with at least one large opening through which workers constantly stoke fires to maintain internal temperatures of up to 1,500°C (Bales, 2016, p. 94). Once fired, hot bricks are taken out of the kilns and left to cool before being transported again to construction sites (Natarajan, Brickell, et al., 2019, p. 911).

**Figure 7: Kiln ash emptied into pond**

Kosal, whose family has a US$2,500 debt with the factory owner after selling their rice field, empties ash from the kiln into a nearby pond. For 20,000 bricks, about a week's work, his family is paid around 200,000 riel (US$50). One of their expenses is gasoline, which they purchase in order to run the brick-moulding machine, an additional US$4 per week (Cristofoletti, n.d.).

To accomplish these activities, brick workers are compelled to work long hours (that often start in the early morning and continue into the night following a rest period at the hottest point of the day) and are exposed to unsafe conditions, including brick dust, kiln heat and smoke, and unmaintained machinery (Brickell et al., 2018, p. 37; Natarajan, Brickell, et al., 2019, p. 911). These are hazardous working conditions, where one lapse in concentration could result in third-degree burns, amputation, and death (Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights, 2016, p. 13). Other injuries and long-term health impacts of working in brick kilns, including from sheer exhaustion and malnutrition, decrease workers' productivity and lead to additional medical expenses that steadily increase their debt (Brickell et al., 2018, p. 37).

**Figure 8: Brick drying**

Sothea pulls a cart with recently made bricks inside a factory in the outskirts of Phnom Penh (Cristofoletti, n.d.).

Brickwork is further tied up with illegal logging, as kilns require constant attention to continue burning for months at a time during the dry season. Cambodia has one of the fastest rates of forest loss in the world, increasing over 14 percent annually between 2001 and 2014 (*Cambodia's Forests Are Disappearing*, 2017; Parsons & Chann, 2019, p. 3). This deforestation has been accelerated by the granting of ELCs to commissionaires that have no genuine interest in agro-industrialization and instead, seek to conceal their illegal logging activities in protected forest areas (Diepart, 2015, p. 23; Ministry of Planning and United Nations Development Programme Cambodia, 2007, p. 7; Oldenburg & Neef, 2014, p. 58). To keep activities covert, workers unload illegal timber at night to be used for kiln fuel (Brickell et al., 2018, p. 29). This is another example of how resource scarcity and demand for cheap labour become like a subsidy that enables these activities to remain profitable: the use of exploitative labour is cheaper than upgrading to new technology, such as more efficient brick kilns (Decker Sparks et al., 2021, p. 182).

In addition to burning illegally logged wood, practically anything else kiln owners can get their hands on is also burned, including plastics, used motor oil, and car tires (Bales, 2016, p. 94). Waste emanating from Cambodia's burgeoning garment industry also ends up as kiln fuel, as kiln owners source material directly from dumps or purchase garment offcuts sold by middlemen who have intercepted trucks on their way to a dump from Phnom Penh (Brickell et al., 2018, p. 39). The smoke produced from garment-burning is thick, dark, and leads to unique adverse impacts on workers' health and the environment. Toxic chemicals such as chlorine, bleach, formaldehyde, ammonia, and heavy metals that have been used in the dyeing and printed processes are released into the atmosphere, contributing to local air pollution and increased GHG emissions (Brickell et al., 2018, p. 39). Burning fabric and plastics also produce a black, tar-like liquid that oozes from brick kilns and contaminates the surrounding ground and water facilities (Brickell et al., 2018, p. 39).

**Figure 9: Brick kiln smoke**

Garment off-cuts from major global brands are collected as a readily available source of fuel for brick kilns, lowering costs for kiln owners (Cristofoletti, n.d.).

Thus, in addition to the informal industry presenting problems for effective government regulation of labour protections and working conditions, brickwork contributes significantly to air and ground pollution, increased GHG emissions, and climate change in the Global South (Brown et al., 2018, p. 24). Combatting labour and environmental abuses within informal industries is also tricky because, in many cases, it means fighting government authorities who are aiding and abetting criminal activities, particularly in illegal logging (Peter, 2016). However, it is important to note that Cambodians are not passive victims of these processes. In interviews, brick workers emphasized that entrance into debt bondage is not a question of bad luck or being taken advantage of; rather, it reflects the reality of options for smallholders in a changing climate (Parsons & Chann, 2019, p. 9). Not only do bonded labourers often perceive kiln owners in a paternalistic light, showing reverence and gratitude for providing the loan (Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights, 2016, p. 6; Parsons & Brickell, 2020, p. 45), evidence shows that indebted villagers approach kiln owners of their own volition despite being acutely aware of risks (Natarajan et al., 2021, p. 250).

These realities confront liberal discourses around modern slavery that promote the free vs. enslaved dichotomy and emphasize kiln owners as perpetrators of modern slavery (Natarajan et al., 2021, p. 243). Viewing these issues through a Marxist lens exposes both the agency that exists in rural Cambodians' decisions to work in brick kilns and the structural conditions that have arranged available options in such a way that constrains freedom of choice. The "casualization" of labour, or the informality of labour in certain industries, enables labour to be commodified to an extreme extent (Li, 2017, p. 246). When this extreme commodification of labour leads to a situation where the cost of replacement is lower than the cost of maintaining workers, employers are incentivized to squeeze as much production out of one person as possible. This paradoxical situation whereby workers are simultaneously unfree and too free makes them deeply vulnerable to exploitation. Moreover, a large population of workers in this situation further devalues the market price of the only commodity they have left to sell, their labour.

Applying a Marxist perspective to the condition of indebted brick workers also allows for the understanding of bonded labour as the result of an unequal relationship between surplus production, low wages, and access to capital and credit (De Lauri, 2017, p. 137). In this way, bonded labour is seen not as an isolated feature of brick kilns but rather as a product of the fact that kiln workers have been made part of the global capitalist mode of production through structural changes, including those that took place in post-1980 Cambodia. Debt bondage as a form of forced labour is therefore actually explicative of neoliberal globalization and the global capitalist economy more so than it is an anomaly. As shown, this dynamic is influenced by climate change by exacerbating agrarian precarity and ultimately fueling further environmental damage, as the bonded nature of brickwork is such that workers are compelled to continue labouring until they no longer have debt, which is a status families in this position are unlikely to attain. The environmental damage inflicted by the existing generation of brick workers contributes to deforestation as well as local air and ground pollution that serves to displace and dispossesses more rural families. As elite and foreign investment in Cambodia's cities continue to drive demand for bricks, rural populations will continue to experience the pull into brickwork. These realities in Cambodia make the cyclical nature of climate change, exploitative labour, and environmental damage acutely visible (see Appendix B for an illustration of this relationship by Blood Bricks).

## The International Labour Organization as a Hegemonic Actor

### *Origins of the International Labour Organization and the Decent Work Agenda*

The DWA was developed in response to labour market challenges introduced by globalization, such as how economic liberalization affected the relationship between the ILO's constituents (*Report of the Director-General*, 1999). The ILO is a unique UN agency for its tripartite structure, wherein governments, employers, and trade unions create and adopt international labour standards together (Maul, 2019, p. 6), including those that underpin the DWA. The DWA also marked a resurgence in the ILO's commitment to international labour rights programmes, which for the preceding decades of neoliberal globalization, did not sit comfortably with the agenda of the international development community (Lerche, 2007, p. 426). As a precursor to the DWA, the ILO adopted the Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work in 1998, which committed ILO member states to respect the four fundamental principles and rights at work regardless of whether they had ratified the associated Conventions (International Labour Organization, n.d.-e). The fundamental principles are the freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining; the elimination of forced or compulsory labour; the abolition of child labour; and the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation (International Labour Organization, n.d.-e).

In follow up to the 1998 Declaration, Director-General Juan Somavia issued a report proposing a primary goal for the ILO during "this period of global transition": securing decent work for all (*Report of the Director-General*, 1999). Decent work refers to productive work that is accessible to all, generates a fair income, has adequate social protection, and in which worker rights are protected (*Report of the Director-General*, 1999). The 1999 Report represented a widening in the ILO's attention because it promoted the expansion of labour protections into the informal economy and arenas of unwaged work (Vosko, 2002, p. 26). Thus, it was around the turn of the 20th century when the ILO became concerned with creating jobs that were of acceptable quality, not only in the formal but informal sectors.

The ILO also began considering more explicitly the issue of exploitative labour, which it has dubbed the antithesis to decent work (International Labour Organization, 2009, p. 1). Between 2001 and 2009, the ILO released three reports on forced labour, with the one in 2005 providing the first minimum global estimate (12.3 million[8]) of the number of people engaged in forced labour

[8] Due to differences in methodology, estimates from the 2005 report are not comparable to those from 2012 and 2016.

(International Labour Organization, 2005, p. 2). This paper pauses on the 2005 Report, which states that it is imperative to eradicate forced labour to achieve a fair globalization (International Labour Organization, 2005, p. 3) to criticize the ILO's restricted analysis of forced labour. Two and some pages examine how forced labour represents the "underside of globalization", is one of the "failures of labour markets", and has been enabled by twin pressures on private actors to be competitive and on governments to deregulate labour markets (International Labour Organization, 2005, pp. 63–64). Yet as Jens Lerche points out, these issues are not coherently or analytically pursued, and forced labour is presented as the "worst forms of un-decent labour", which serves to delink it entirely from processes of neoliberal globalization (2007, p. 430). In the context of the DWA, it is useful to apply the neo-Gramscian perspective to the ILO through the five-point framework (see Figure 10) because it illustrates why the ILO is more inclined to take a reformist rather than revolutionary approach to the issue of forced labour.

**Figure 10: Neo-Gramscian framework of hegemonic features of international organizations**

International organizations play a hegemonic role because they:

1. Embody the rules which facilitate the expansion of hegemonic world orders;
2. Are themselves the product of the hegemonic world order;
3. Ideologically legitimate the norms of the world order;
4. Co-op the elites from peripheral countries; and,
5. Absorb counter-hegemonic ideas.

Sourced from (Cox, 1983, p. 172)

First, the ILO embodies and codifies rules that uphold hegemony by organizing labour participation and advancing reform strategies within the framework of capitalism (Cox, 1977, p. 387). Established in 1919 against the social and political upheaval that followed the transition from a war- to peace-time economy, the ILO's equating of "work" to the standard European employment relationship directly influenced its decision-making structure, organizational ideology, and activities (Maul, 2019, p. 86; Vosko, 2002, p. 26). Supported by the international trade union movement, this standard employment relationship became the normative model of employment for the ILO's standard-setting and technical cooperation activities around the world (Vosko, 2002, p. 26).

Once the US joined the ILO in 1934, it used the New Deal policies as a blueprint for its social and economic intervention programmes (Maul, 2019, p. 93). From the start, the task of the ILO was to maintain social cohesion by reining in the visibly destructive tendencies of unfettered capitalism on society without challenging the system itself (Maul, 2019, p. 7). As corporatism developed in the US, trade unions evolved from representations of marginalized blue-collar workers to sophisticated bureaucracies representing white-collar employees (Cox, 1977, p. 390). Enterprise corporatism in the US effectively bureaucratized the employer-employee relationship, which came to be brokered by technocrats whose purpose was to minimize conflict through administrative processing of individual employee grievances (Cox, 1977, p. 388). This form of enterprise corporatism centralized decision-making on labour standards in the hands of union leaders who represented only a tiny portion of society but who now had a stake in the management of the working-class economy (Cox, 1977, p. 394). It also meant that unions largely abandoned the "lower half" of the economy – women and marginalized groups in informal or peripheral employment (Cox, 1977, p. 391; Vosko, 2002, p. 23). The influence of the West, particularly of the US as a global superpower post-WWII, legitimized these conceptualizations of corporatism and tripartism within the ILO. This has contributed to why the ILO is unable to meaningfully confront the negative consequences of the capitalist economic system.

Furthermore, relating to the second point in the framework, the ILO is itself a product of the hegemonic order and reflects global geopolitical dynamics, making it an unlikely contender to challenge established power hierarchies. Despite the universal language of its Constitution, eight of the 12 initial seats in the ILO's Governing Body were occupied by European countries, which led it to develop labour standards best applicable to Europe's formal industrial sector, characterized by individual employee contracts and wage work (Maul, 2019, p. 68). The permanent seats on the ILO Governing Body remain today occupied by states of "chief industrial importance": Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom and the United States (International Labour Organization, n.d.-d). Consequently, the ILO's Governing Body membership and decision-making, as well as its institutional logic, remain coloured by a subjective set of ideas that continue to affect the ILO's policy advice and programming, including under the DWA.

### *Promotion of the Decent Work Agenda through Decent Work Country Programmes*

In 2008, the ILO adopted the Declaration on Social Justice for a Fair Globalization which formalized the concept of decent work and committed the ILO to promote its DWA in the context of globalization (International Labour Organization, n.d.-f). In 2014, the ILO adopted the Forced Labour Protocol and Recommendation, which updated the standards set out in Convention Nos. 29 and 105 to account for changes in the context and forms of forced labour in the contemporary global economy (International Labour Organization, 2018a, p. 4). Shortly after, the DWA gained greater recognition through its inclusion in the UN 2030 Agenda as part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), announced in 2015. SDG 8 calls for the promotion of inclusive and sustainable economic growth, employment, and decent work for all, and posits the generation of decent work opportunities as a virtuous cycle that is "as good for the economy as it is for people and … sustainable development" (International Labour Organization, n.d.-c). Target 8.7 in particular, commits leaders to "take immediate and effective measures to eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking and secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms" (International Labour Organization, 2015). Now backed by the UN 2030 Agenda, the DWA continued to be exercised through the DWCPs, representing the main vehicles through which ILO knowledge and technical expertise are delivered to countries (International Labour Organization, n.d.-b).

Utilizing the neo-Gramscian framework allows for an understanding of how, through the DWA and DWCPs, the ILO legitimizes hegemonic norms and defines national policy objectives and indicators that reflect the interests of the dominant global class. The ILO considers itself the global reference point for knowledge on employment and labour issues, the centre for normative action in the world of work, and a source of services for information and policy formulation (*Report of the Director-General*, 1999). These self-proclaimed aspects underscore its hegemonic role in contemporary international relations as a promoter of neoliberal norms. Recall that hegemony is the expression of subjective interests as universal – thus, by representing a small fraction of the world's people and economy, but calling upon itself to set universal standards, the ILO generalized the specific interests of the Western European and American industrial class. It has since promoted and legitimized the desirability of and adherence to the linear development model, which considers a country's rate of industrialization, productive output, and economic growth as markers of progress.

As the fifth iteration of the program, the 2019-2023 DWCP in Cambodia (the Cambodia DWCP) continues to provide a framework for cooperation between the ILO, RGC, and Cambodian labour organizations in order to help achieve Cambodia's 2030 national development objectives and address challenges in advancing decent work (International Labour Organization, 2019, p. 8). The Cambodia DWCP draws on lessons learned from over 50 years of partnership with the ILO and a comprehensive tripartite consultation process throughout 2018-2019 (International Labour Organization, 2019, p. 8). It works toward the overarching goal that by 2030, "all women, men and vulnerable groups in Cambodia will have access to sustainable, decent and productive work in the context of a formalizing and inclusive labour market, enhanced social dialogue and Cambodia's achievement of upper-middle-income status" (International Labour Organization, 2019, p. 9). While the Cambodia DWCP is organized around a number of international development objectives (including SDG 8), it is also aligned with the RGC's socioeconomic policy agenda, the Rectangular Strategy IV. The Rectangular Strategy IV (see Appendix C) prioritizes four strategic "rectangles": human resource development, economic diversification, private sector and job development, and inclusive and sustainable development (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2018).

What is problematic is that the ILO's promotion of decent work, including in Cambodia, occurs within narrowly defined parameters of what social justice or a fair globalization is. The ILO considers the hallmark of development to be where employment, income, and social protections are attained without sacrificing labour rights and social standards (*Report of the Director-General*, 1999). Yet this goal, despite being cast as a neutral target toward which every country should strive, is based on a subjective set of ideas about what it means to be developed, how development should be done, and when it is considered complete. It also remains contingent on sustained economic growth, which is an assumption underpinning each Cambodia DWCP policy priorities (International Labour Organization, 2019, p. 28). The assumption that economic growth precipitates development and generates decent work opportunities is subjective and largely overlooks how promoting economic growth can (and does) lead to an increase in *in*decent work (Brickell et al., 2018, p. 58). Only through this narrow lens of what development is, and by isolating forced labour from the structural conditions of the contemporary global economy that encourage it to flourish, could the ILO encourage countries to realize Target 8.7 alongside Target 8.1, which aims for at least seven percent annual GDP growth (Natarajan et al., 2021, pp. 243–244). Thus, the Cambodia DWCP is one expression of the ILO utilizing its global authority, technical expertise, and policy knowledge to issue purportedly neutral guidance that is, in fact, biased to the hegemonic order.

Regarding the fourth point in the neo-Gramscian framework, the DWA and DWCPs also represent a co-optation of peripheral elites because by drawing non-Western governments and labour union representatives into its framework of action, they become compelled to work within the structures of what Cox called "passive revolution" (Cox, 1983, p. 173). For instance, that the DWA was announced by Director-General Juan Somavia, the first representative from the Southern hemisphere to head the ILO, represents the ILO's effort to mediate interests between the Global North as backed by global capital, and member states, trade unions, and NGOs in the Global South concerned with improving the lives of marginalized workers (Vosko, 2002, p. 20). In terms of the Cambodia DWCP, the RGC and union leaders work to promote decent work opportunities for all within Cambodia, but only insofar as their policies, regulations, and programs are consistent with the ILO's established parameters. As much as ILO guidance may be helpful or constructive, it restricts the policy space of member states to pursue priorities not shared by the ILO or through mechanisms not endorsed by the ILO. By securing the support of and working in conjunction with non-Western governments and union leaders, the ILO renders threats to its legitimacy less likely because it has already compromised the potential of a concerted, anti-hegemonic challenge.

Finally, as per the fifth point under the neo-Gramscian framework, the ILO absorbs and reinterprets counter-hegemonic ideas in ways that support hegemony. For neo-Gramscians, this is an integral aspect of hegemony – the core class makes concessions to the peripheries to retain their consent of the hegemonic order (Cox, 1980, p. 376). This also works to maintain the appearance that the system functions well for everyone when it actually serves to advance the specialized interests of the few (Cox, 1980, p. 376). The ILO's DWA and resulting DWCPs are direct examples of this. The ILO's fight for decent work began with recognizing that "international capital markets have moved out of alignment with national labour markets, creating asymmetrical risks and benefits for capital and labour" (*Report of the Director-General*, 1999). Yet, the ILO was not the first to identify the problems associated with neoliberal globalization. The contradictions and inequalities entrenched in the global economy were highlighted by many NGOs, CSOs, grassroots organizations, and feminist organizations predominantly from the Global South long before the ILO chose to recognize them (Vosko, 2002, p. 27). The ILO's adoption of the DWA is indicative of a growing counter-hegemonic presence among some of its member states and where transnational coalitions between emerging labour organizations in the informal sector are growing stronger (Vosko, 2002, p. 20).

However, the DWA (including the DWCP and related commitment to ending forced labour by 2030) can also be viewed as an attempt by the ILO to internalize the counter-hegemonic challenge and filter its revolutionary aims through its own institutional ideology. In doing so, the ILO is able to advance a solution that while destined to fail to substantively address forced labour, is palatable to core states and elites benefitting from the status quo. In sum, it advances a set of solutions that is acceptable within the parameters of neoliberalism. Additionally, by advancing the DWA, the ILO dampens the counter-hegemonic impulse and presents its aims as consistent with the established order (Cox, 1983, p. 173). The DWA has been transformed from a truly radical departure in the ILO's programming (Vosko, 2002, p. 26) to become complementary to, and supportive of, the hegemonic goals for the world economy. This is evident through the DWCP's alignment with international targets that promote the concept of decent work for all based on the assumption that individuals need to grow the national (and global) economy by realizing their full productive potential (International Labour Organization, 2019, p. 30).

It is the adherence to neoliberalism that impedes the ILO from eradicating forced labour. To do so, it would have to condemn a global economy and set of practices that function to the advantage of the Global North. The globalization of neoliberal assumptions and policies as promoted by international development and financial institutions not only created the conditions in which exploitative labour thrives but continues to encourage those conditions. Thus, the ILO is unlikely to eradicate forced labour because it continues to embody rules that facilitate the expansion of neoliberalism; it remains the product and reflection of dominant global interests; it legitimizes and universalizes neoliberal norms and assumptions; it co-opts peripheral countries; and it reinterprets counter-hegemonic ideas to fit the status quo.

## Reflections on Forced Labour and Environmental Sustainability

While the ILO recognized that a link between forced labour and global capitalism existed as early as the 2005 Report *A global alliance against forced labour*, it remained constrained by its very status as an international, tripartite organization to "cocoon" the issue of forced labour in a way that made it unthreatening for the international community and domestic governments to address (Lerche, 2007, p. 431). What is particularly disappointing is that this thinking has failed to advance. Fifteen years later, the ILO's report *Ending forced labour by 2030* commits the final three pages for its reflections on the global economy's relationship to forced labour:

> "…[B]roader, fundamental questions [need] to be asked – and answered – about the systemic role of forced labour in the production of goods and services in the global economy and the systemic changes in the production of goods and services and in labour relations required to achieve the future we want in the world of work…" (International Labour Organization, 2018a, p. 27).

It further emphasizes the urgency associated with determining "just how dependent on forced labour the global economy" has become, and goes so far as to call out "those at the top of value chains whose business practices may be fostering and even directly driving [forced labour]", as well as governments who enable them (International Labour Organization, 2018a, p. 27).

However, the likelihood of these reflections constituting a meaningful counter-hegemonic challenge is dubious: the question, is forced labour "a systemic flaw on which the wider modern global economy is itself dependent?", is asked right before a paragraph on the importance of a "balanced discourse" about forced labour's nature and causes (International Labour Organization, 2018a, p. 128). This framing, including the posing of rhetorical questions and the use of counter-hegemonic language, does not alone constitute a critical analysis.

Moreover, the 2018 Report completely neglects the intersection between environmental damage, forced labour, and the global economy. As was highlighted in the literature review, where the ILO has reflected on its role in the context of climate change, it has primarily confined its analysis to how climate change will continue to adversely impact human productivity. As an international authority on labour standards, it is unsurprising that the ILO deals with climate change in the context of jobs. However, its reports on how environmental damage impacts decent work opportunities are similarly restricted by an incomplete analysis of how the global economic system encourages ecological damage. Thus its depoliticized guidance, including the recently issued *Guidelines for a just transition toward environmentally sustainable economies and societies for all* (International Labour Organization, 2016), is also unlikely to address how vulnerable groups are compelled to damage the environment to sustain their livelihoods.

## Discussion

This paper has explored two wicked problems: anthropogenic climate change and forced labour. More specifically, it has assessed the relationship between climate change, debt bondage in brickwork, and the related environmental damage in Cambodia; as well as the effectiveness of the ILO in eradicating forced labour under its DWA and Cambodia DWCP. Within these two analyses, this paper has levied an underlying critique against neoliberal hegemony.

This paper has demonstrated that climatic changes coupled with structural economic and political shifts have contributed to the unsustainability of smallholder agrarian livelihoods in Cambodia. Agrarian insecurity has pushed rural Cambodians to take advantage of the increased access to microcredit and increase their personal debts. However, continued lack of state support coupled with low crop yields have made these debt levels insurmountable and pushed the most vulnerable families into brickwork, an industry spurred by foreign investment. Having received a loan from a kiln owner, brick workers are compelled to degrade their bodies and the local environment in order to earn piece-rate wages to reduce their debts. This cycle becomes incredibly difficult to break and often becomes multigenerational as debts are passed down to children. In applying a Marxist perspective, this paper was able to identify how processes that gradually privatized land and dispossessed smallholders increased their vulnerability to exploitation by driving their loss of the means of production. This loss constrained rural Cambodians' viable options and compelled them to sell their labour at less than its full value within a coercive and often manipulative arrangement.

This paper has also argued that the ILO has limited effectiveness in eradicating forced labour due to its role as a hegemonic actor, which restricts its ability to meaningfully address the causes and enabling conditions of forced labour in the 21st century. The ILO's Western industrial origin influenced the extent to which its purportedly objective labour standards could offer protection to workers globally. The influence of powerful states in the ILO's decision-making structure further constrained its ability to speak on behalf of the globally marginalized. Its adoption and universalization of the assumptions, norms, and values of a specialized few have meant that while it appears to issue neutral technocratic guidance, its policy expertise is based on neoliberal assumptions that serve the interests of the Global North at the expense of those in the Global South. These institutional limitations have been revealed as increasingly vocal member states of the Global South continue to call attention to the crises of neoliberal globalization. In applying a neo-Gramscian lens, this paper has demonstrated how the ILO will not eradicate forced labour because as a hegemonic actor, it is more likely to respond to, rather than lead, a revolution based on securing decent and sustainable work for all.

While these analyses could have been pursued independently, the objective of this research has been to highlight the crosscutting limitations of the hegemonic order in achieving goals such as eradication of forced labour or capping global temperature rise at 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels. Relatedly, this paper sought to emphasize that without considering these dynamics in relation to one another and in relation to the structure of the global economy, solutions will continue to be superficial and undermined by policy incoherence. For instance, many of the priorities in the 2019-2013 Cambodia DWCP are predicated on sustained levels of high economic growth and incoming FDI (International Labour Organization, 2019, p. 29). These targets are incompatible with the goal of increasing access to decent work opportunities for all because they feed a machine that generates the need for forced labour to exist. Such targets are further incompatible with the goal of sustainable, low-carbon development because again, they feed a machine that requires and encourages resource exploitation.

Furthermore, acknowledging intersectional dynamics is vital because neoliberal approaches to address poverty and insecurity have, in many cases, worsened them. For instance, the proliferation of microfinance regimes in Cambodia rests on the assumption that local demand will follow an increase in local supply (Bateman et al., 2019, p. 109). However, the minority of successful Cambodian microenterprises is outweighed by the majority of rural poor who use microcredit to cover gaps in social protection left by retrenched state support, particularly in agricultural production (Bateman et al., 2019, p. 110). Here, increased access to credit has actually contributed to higher levels of indebtedness and insecurity among vulnerable groups. Thus, to eradicate forced labour, solutions must address both the demand- and supply-side forces so that the industry becomes riskier, less profitable, and has more difficulty finding workers whose best viable option is debt bondage (Kara, 2012, p. 210).

While this paper has advanced critiques of the ILO's priorities and assumptions under its DWA, it should be noted that the ILO has played an instrumental role in addressing exploitative labour practices. The ILO's involvement and renewed prioritization of decent work in the context of globalization has provided international legitimacy to the struggle against forced labour (Lerche, 2007, p. 431). It has established an arena for debate among representatives of governments, workers, and employers to discuss social justice, sustainable development, poverty alleviation, social mobility, and global wealth distribution (Maul, 2019, p. 2). Though it maintains that international organizations exercise a hegemonic role, the neo-Gramscian perspective highlights that they remain important sites of dialogue and have the potential to advance counter-hegemonic values (Cox, 1980, p. 377). Further, Cox has argued that the *responsibility* of international organizations is to support debates about alternative forms of economic organization and development strategies (Cox, 1994, p. 111). But it remains to be seen how strong a push the counter-hegemonic forces within the ILO will exert. Especially as the world reels from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ILO will continue to play a vital role in providing country-level support and guidance. However, in the long-term, and as the social and ecological crises of neoliberal globalization continue to emerge and worsen, it will become evident that the underlying ideological assumptions and priorities of the ILO are incompatible with securing decent work, or a just transition, for all.

Although the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on Cambodia have remained outside the scope of this paper, it is important to briefly highlight their potential to exacerbate current challenges. Following two decades of GDP growth at an average of 7.7 percent per year, Cambodia's economy contracted by over three percent in 2020, as growth in construction and real estate (sectors heavily reliant on FDI) stalled (Ly et al., 2020, p. 9; World Bank, 2021b). This economic contraction threatens the precarious poverty reduction Cambodia has recently achieved. Before the onset of the pandemic, around 4.5 million people remained vulnerable to falling back into poverty and between June 2020 and January 2021 alone, the World Bank estimated that at least 500,000 people had been identified as newly poor (World Bank, 2021b). As of July 2020, the

CMA had restructured the loans of almost a quarter-million people, valued at US$1.1 million (Cambodia Microfinance Association, 2020). This “extend and pretend” strategy to keep indigent clients on an indefinite debt treadmill by rescheduling their existing loans is unsustainable and dramatically increases the precarity of the rural poor (Bateman et al., 2019, p. 111). These trends present a frightening outlook because they have the potential to increase reliance on microcredit as well as insolvency among those with existing loans. Increasing landlessness, greater dispossession among the agricultural class, and the resulting relative devaluation of individual labour power are all features that Marx warned would increase vulnerability to labour exploitation.

While Cambodia’s next economic benchmark was to achieve upper-middle-income country status by 2030 (Ly et al., 2019, p. 33), there will likely be a recalibration of priorities to regain jobs lost or suspended due to the COVID-19 pandemic in order to reverse the country’s first economic contraction in recent history (World Bank, 2021b). The World Bank has already encouraged the expansion of domestic and foreign investment in high-growth and labour-intensive sectors as a mechanism to encourage job creation (Ly et al., 2020, p. 11). The emphasis on this strategy is concerning given the vulnerabilities associated with growth in real estate and construction, but it is one that international development and financial institutions, including the ILO, are likely to promote.

In order to advance recommendations at the Cambodian and ILO levels, this paper returns to the two-way relationship between climate change, forced labour, and environmental damage (Figure 4) as a guiding mechanism. This relationship highlights that the social, institutional, political, and economic factors exert pressure on both the climate and labour practices. As such, anthropogenic climate change and exploitative labour cannot be isolated from the global neoliberal political economy. Acknowledging this relationship reveals that forced labour is less a deviation from otherwise free labour relations and more a logical outcome of the way the world's political-economic system is organized (Banerjee, 2021, p. 416). This is also true for environmental damage and climate change. Recognizing this makes it evident that interventions that target exploitative labour or climate change without confronting the pressures exerted by hegemonic social, institutional, political, and economic forces will be ineffective in their aims. Guided by this understanding and the preceding analysis, this paper advances three recommendations at the Cambodian level and three recommendations for the ILO. Each triad of recommendations includes one immediate target, a medium-term target, and a long-term target.

## Recommendations

### *To the Royal Government of Cambodia*

1. **Cancel all existing debts between brick workers and kiln owners**

Immediately order the cancellation of all existing debts owed to kiln owners (Brickell et al., 2018, p. 58; Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights, 2016, p. 21). This is particularly crucial in the context of the additional hardships posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Ensure this announcement is communicated to brick workers as well as kiln owners, with an exemption of prosecution for kiln owners who comply with the order.

2. **Strengthen and enforce domestic labour laws**

Over the medium-term, amend the 1997 Labor Law to include stronger provisions and clarify enforcement. Article 15 of Section 5 of the 1997 Labor Law expressly forbids forced labour, and Article 16 forbids the hiring of people for work to pay off debts (Kingdom of Cambodia, 1997). Yet wording and penalties are weak: those guilty of violating Article 15 are liable to a fine of sixty-one to ninety days of base daily wage or imprisonment of six days to one month; and those guilty of violating Article 16 are liable to a fine of sixty-one to ninety days of the base daily wage. These penalties are incommensurate with the harm inflicted on bonded workers as well as the local environment and do not outweigh the economic benefits kiln owners obtain from using bonded labour. In the context of brickwork, if it is no longer economically viable for kiln owners to use bonded labour, they will be incentivized to invest in more efficient brick kilns to drive down labour costs (which will also decrease local levels of pollution and environmental degradation).

**3. Increase support for subsistence-level agricultural production**

Over the long-term, strengthen support for agricultural production at the subsistence level to respond to the needs of the majority of Cambodian farmers who are smallholders or currently land poor or landless. Ensure this support is sustained and regularly adjusts to changing global, regional, and local economic conditions as well as environmental conditions. Within the Rectangular Strategy Phase IV, strengthen commitments under Inclusive and Sustainable Development for the agricultural sector and rural development that pertain to management of ELCs and provision of social concession lands to poor households for family-based farming (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2018, p. 39). Prioritize public investment in rural infrastructure, including roads and irrigation, high-value seeds, and farming machinery. Relatedly, adopt risk-based approaches to the welcoming of FDI that recognize its potential to distort domestic labour markets and devalue agricultural production.

*To the International Labour Organization*

1. **Decouple decent work from economic growth in the Decent Work Agenda**

Immediately stop promoting economic growth and decent work as correlated and causal phenomena in the DWA and DWCPs. Reflect on how integrating SDG 8 into the DWA is contradictory and fails to recognize how economic growth can lead to indecent work that is environmentally unsustainable (Brickell et al., 2018, p. 59). This is particularly true for countries such as Cambodia, which are compelled to consider donor priorities such as attracting FDI in high-growth sectors like construction to sustain GDP growth. Consider how working toward achievement of these targets has encouraged the proliferation of indecent work opportunities as well as local environmental degradation.

2. **Reform representativeness in decision-making structures**

In the medium-term, diversify representation in decision-making bodies and processes. The ILO's current lack of representation in its decision-making processes is untenable in the long run (Jakovleski et al., 2019). Given that over 60 percent of workers operate in the informal economy globally (International Labour Organization, n.d.-g), and that 70 percent of Cambodia's workforce is engaged in informal employment (International Labour Organization, 2019, p. 1), there must be a rethinking of the current tripartite structure. Capturing only formal labour union representatives misses most of the workforce in Cambodia and globally who arguably need labour protections the most. Seek to strengthen and formalize engagement with CSOs and informal labour representatives that currently takes places on the peripheries of official negotiations. In addition to rethinking the traditional tripartite structure, rethink the representativeness of its Governing Body in order to ensure a more diverse set of voices is maintained. For instance, reduce the number of permanent seats in the Governing Body to include more member states on a rotational basis.

3. **Strengthen role as mediator between different worldviews**

In the long-term, build upon diversified representativeness by prioritizing and strengthening the role of mediator between the worldviews of different regions and member states. Retain legitimacy in the 21st century as an international standards-setting organization by considering the unique challenges and goals of diverse member states and allowing international labour standards and targets to reflect them. Reflect on how enduring assumptions that underpin the DWA and DWCPs may be incompatible with the goals of various societies or inappropriate given their sociopolitical and historical circumstances. Help counter-hegemonic forces come to the table to share their voices and become a site of true discussion rather than a neoliberal norm promulgator.

## Conclusion

This paper has drawn the links between climate change, exploitative labour, and environmental damage in Cambodia's brick kilns. It has also assessed the ILO's effectiveness in eradicating forced labour through its DWA. On these bases, it makes two independent yet interrelated contributions. First, forced labour in Cambodia is intimately linked to agrarian insecurity, driven by neoliberal economic reforms and anthropogenic climate change, and causes further local environmental degradation. Second, the ILO's DWA and DWCPs are doubly ineffective in eradicating forced labour due to inconsistencies between their ideological assumptions and goals.

As early as 1977, Cox argued that the hegemonic power relations within the ILO prevented it from effectively addressing the real social issues of job creation, land reform, and vulnerability and poverty in general (1977, p. 385). This paper has demonstrated that this remains the case in the 21st century by arguing that the ILO will not eradicate forced labour because it does not recognize or act upon the notion that the global neoliberal economy encourages conditions wherein exploitative labour thrives. “Modern slavery” underwrites the global economy that everyone, but especially the Global North, depends on (Bales, 2004, p. 22). As such, continued adherence to dominant economic ideology cannot be expected to lead to fewer instances of forced labour. This has implications for climate change because adaptation and mitigation strategies are similarly based on continued adherence to a system that requires environmental degradation to exist.

These analyses were necessary to undertake together in order to highlight how the failure to recognize the reinforcing relationship between climate change, exploitative labour, and environmental damage within the global economy impedes the development of coherent solutions to either problem of climate change or forced labour. As Jessica Decker Sparks et al. note, nexuses are rife with complex interactions and dynamic feedbacks, which make the risk of jumping to oversimplified solutions quite high, particularly when there is lack of data (2021, p. 183). However, the destructive impacts on human and environmental welfare mean that while solutions must begin by being grounded in evidence, they cannot wait for exhaustive research. Academia and policy analysts must get comfortable advancing solutions that can be built on, iterated, and refined over time as robust data becomes available and accessible. In this regard, this paper has advanced six preliminary recommendations, split between the RGC and the ILO, that could be undertaken immediately, in the medium-term, and in the long-term. Both sets of recommendations consider the established reinforcing relationship and should be considered building blocks for further action.

As the scope of this paper has been to examine one country and one sector, there is considerable opportunity for further research into the reinforcing relationship between climate change, exploitative labour, and environmental damage in other contexts. For instance, while this paper touched upon the intersection between brickwork and illegal logging, it did not comprehensively chart this relationship, including how it may be encouraged by weak environmental and human rights governance. The challenges described throughout this paper also point to the more general imperative to strengthen data collection, availability, and accessibility in order to determine the extent of these reinforcing impacts.

In sum, efforts to eradicate exploitative labour and encourage environmental sustainability will be strengthened by an acknowledgement of how they relate to one another within the global economic system. This is necessary in order for solutions not to undermine one another. In advancing holistic solutions, this paper is guided by a recognition of how neoliberal approaches, dominant for the last 40 years, have not been successful in eradicating forced labour or sufficiently reducing global GHG emissions. As the adverse impacts of climate change continue to worsen, and with new challenges in the world of work brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the ILO may find itself at an impasse where it is no longer possible to ignore a counter-hegemonic challenge.

# Appendices

## Appendix A: Ten Practical Points for Understanding Forced Labour

1. The ILO definition of forced or compulsory labour includes three elements: "All work or service which is exacted under menace of any penalty for its non-performance and for which the worker concerned does not offer himself voluntarily."

2. Forced labour is not absolutely prohibited; rather it is circumscribed, with exceptions allowing for specific public purposes: military conscription, civic duty, penal labour, emergency assistance, and community service.

3. Forced labour transpires through a working relationship.

4. A "menace of any penalty" is any threat, be it direct or implicit, physical or otherwise, aimed at an employee and which is meant to compel labour.

5. The ability of a person to "offer himself or herself voluntarily" will be negated by any means or methods of coercion used by an employer to compel labour.

6. Where any of the three elements of the definition are not present, neither is forced labour.

7. Degrading, exploitative or harsh labour will not, in and of itself, constitute forced labour.

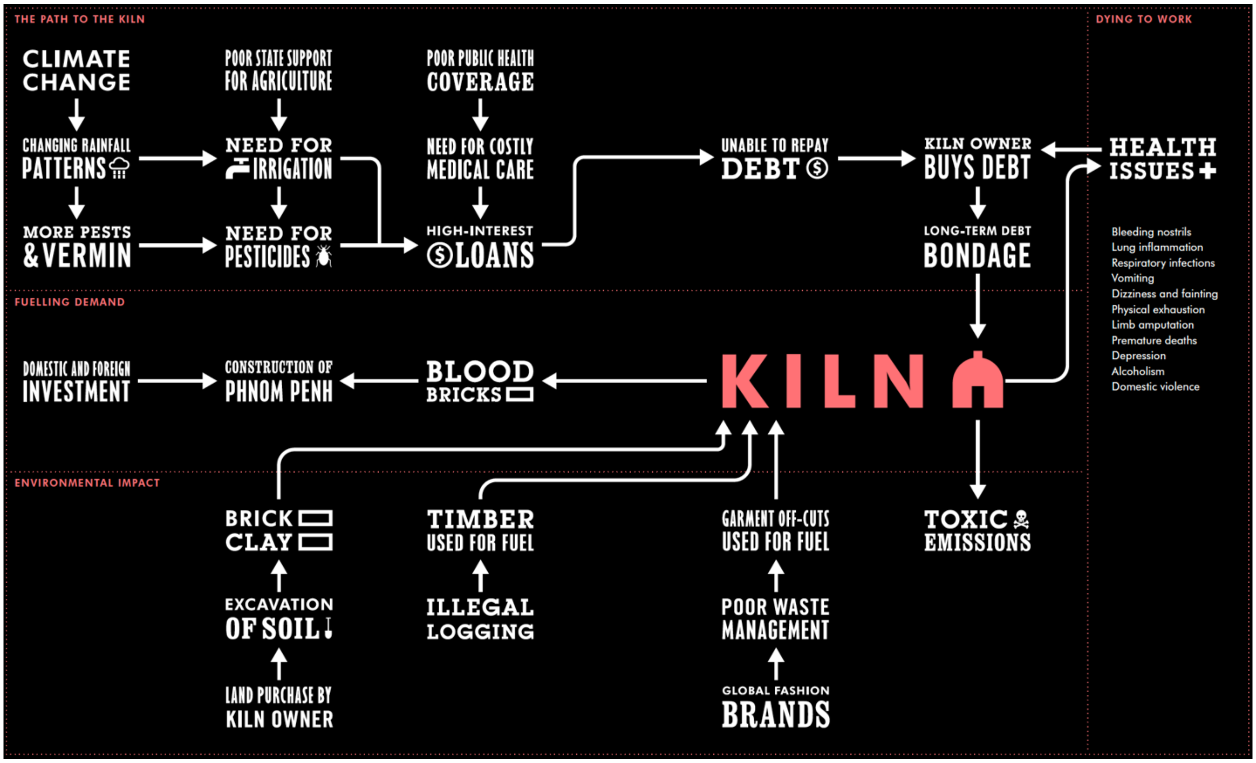
8. Forced labour does not manifest itself by compulsion brought on by economic necessity; rather, the menace of a penalty needs to be attributable to a person or persons.

9. Forced labour will constitute a human rights violation where a state agent is involved or where forced labour is transpiring and is brought to the attention of the state, that state fails to investigate with due diligence.

10. A situation of forced labour will also constitute slavery, if the forced labour is accompanied by an overarching control beyond the workplace, extending to fundamental control over a person's daily life and life choices.

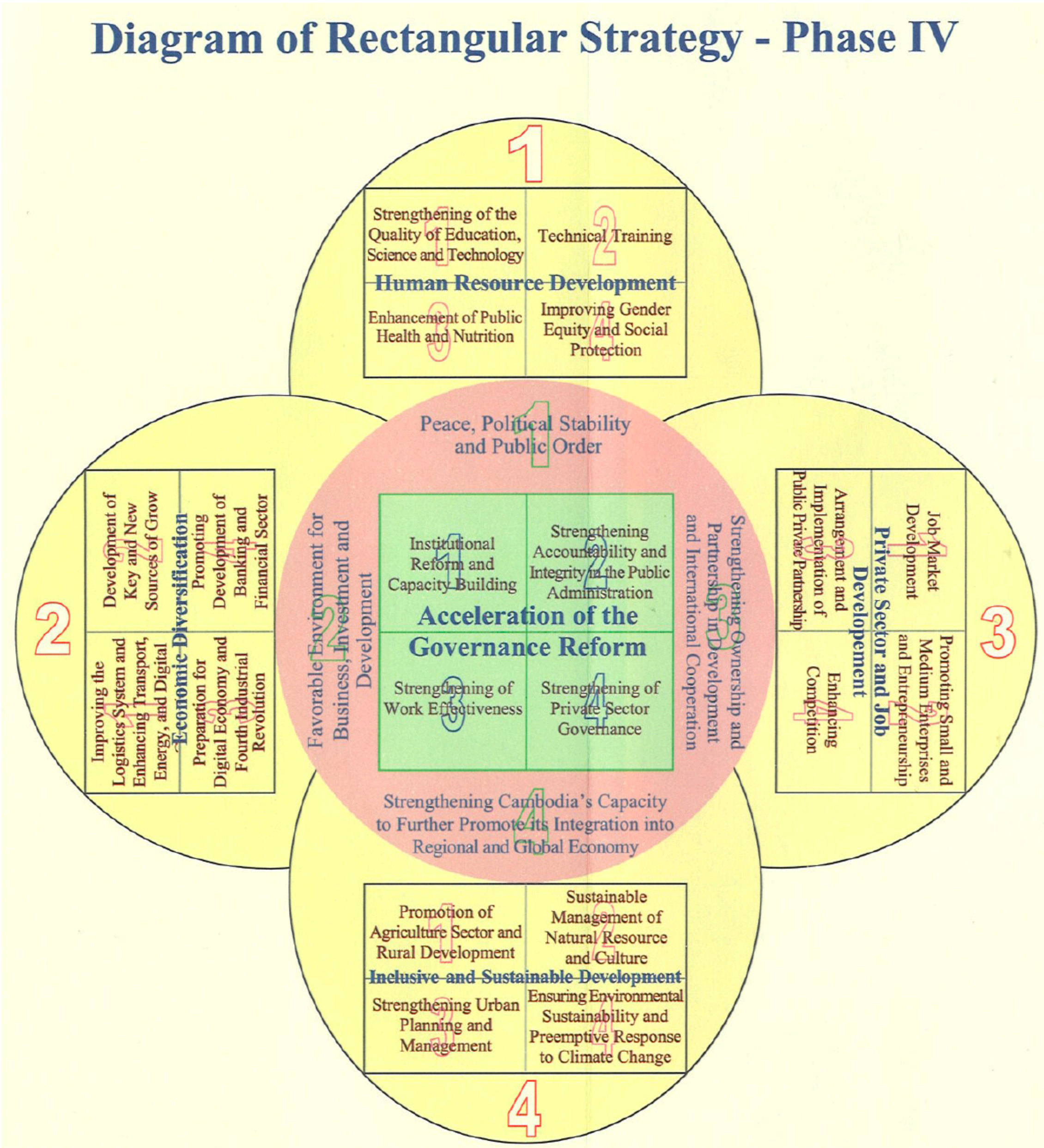
(LeBaron, 2018, p. 90)

## Appendix B: Climate change, debt bondage, environmental damage in Cambodia's brick kilns




(Brickell et al., 2018, pp. 16–17)

## Appendix C: Royal Government of Cambodia's Rectangular Strategy IV




(Royal Government of Cambodia, 2018, p. 2)

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