A VALUABLE LIFE

Seeing transformative practice among Phnom Penh’s waste pickers

VOLUME II

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Chapter 3

Exchange and the creation of wealth

Introduction

The peace was broken

In September each year, Cambodians commemorate the spirits of their ancestors in a two-week long religious festival called Pchum Ben. The last four days of the festival are marked with public holidays, which did not diminish the steady stream of garbage trucks arriving at the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite. Despite the presence of raw material to be sorted through, the dealers stopped work and the waste pickers visited relatives in their birth province or rested at home. During this time, Chenda and other women who stayed behind in the village spent hours preparing elaborate meals before dressing in their best clothes to visit nearby pagodas to appease their ancestors. I was struck by the scene of these beautifully dressed women crossing the deserted dumpsite to attend ceremonies in which they offered food and gifts to monks. Back in the village, I watched families perform similar ceremonies in their homes by making offerings to ancestor spirits on small altars.

After the calm of Pchum Ben in 2008, waste pickers were met with alarming news on returning to work; the prices for recyclables had dropped dramatically, and in most materials by more than double (see Figure 3.1).

Initially, one of the recycling dealers said it was due to the border dispute between the Thai and Cambodian governments. Throughout the second half of 2008, tensions had risen between both countries over ownership of Preah Vihear temple and the land surrounding it on the border between them. During the first half of October, two separate military clashes resulted in the deaths of three Cambodian soldiers and one Thai, with many others wounded in the exchange of fire or by landmines. As a response to the conflict, the Thai government closed their border crossings thereby stopping the recycling.

26 Prices had already started falling prior to Pchum Ben, but the waste pickers were shocked at how dramatically the price had fallen after the break.
27 Preah Vihear temple was first registered as being in Cambodian territory when a Franco-Siamese border committee drew a map in 1907. The map was disputed in the 1950s by Thailand and the two countries took their dispute to the International Court of Justice. In 1961 it ruled that the temple was indeed in Cambodian territory, but the court could not make a determination on the land (some 4sqkm) surrounding the temple. Following the Khmer Rouge period, the Thai military secured the area and essentially ran Preah Vihear as a religious tourist destination. In mid-2008, Cambodia sought Thailand's participation in a joint registration of Preah Vihear as a World Heritage site, hoping to gain UN funds to preserve it. Due to internal politics precipitated by the ousting of then prime minister Thaksin Shinawatra in a coup in 2006, the then Thai foreign minister declined but acceded to the Cambodian request to go ahead with the registration. The registration was successful leading to an outpouring of nationalist sentiment in Cambodia. Meanwhile, it provoked deep outrage from Thai nationalists. Since that time, both countries increased the presence of military at Preah Vihear and other sites with dubious border demarcations. While it is unclear how long the border crossings were closed during the period of conflict, interviews with recycling dealers located in the west of Cambodia revealed businesses were still not trading with Thai companies in January 2009.
trucks and other Cambodian exports from entering into Thailand. This resulted in an immediate increase in export of recyclable material to Vietnam. A recycling dealer on the dumpsite explained:

I still have not sold the plastic to my traders. Before I could take the products to go to Thailand and Vietnam but now I have a problem with Thailand. I have to take the materials to the industry in Vietnam. But if everybody is now selling to Vietnam, the industries in Vietnam have stopped buying or they have lowered the price [due to oversupply]. I will keep the plastic and metal here until my traders buy again and the price goes up. I have not sold any of my products since Pchum Ben.

With one of the major markets suddenly closed, the recycling dealers either used their own capital to continue to buy at substantially reduced prices or simply stopped buying.

It had a significant impact on the waste pickers. Most either put down their tools or began stockpiling collections under their homes, inadvertently attracting more flies and rodents to the village. As the uncertainty deepened over the first month, the waste pickers became increasingly frustrated and worried about the future. A male waste picker told me:

This has never happened before; if it has it's only been for a few days, maybe two to three days. The price of plastics has never come down this much. Before the price of soft plastics was 800 riels per kilogram [US$0.20/kg], it was low, but now it has become even lower, it is 300 riels per kilogram [US $0.08/kg].

I met with a man who collected tyres during this time. He looked like he'd lost weight since I saw him last. He said:

Before I could make about 1200 riels per kilogram [US$0.30/kg] from the metal inside the tyres, but now only 100 riels per kilogram [US$0.03/kg]. Now nobody collects tyres, but before there were a few of us who collected them.

What began as a period of uncertainty had by late October been accepted as a condition of the new market and the majority of waste pickers had begun collecting again and selling at the reduced prices. By the beginning of December 2008, beyond Stueng Mean Chey, the global recycling industry had become a casualty of the developing financial crisis. As consumer demand for goods, cars, appliances and new homes dropped, so did the demand from mills, factories and production plants for scrap and other recyclables. Media in the United Kingdom and United States reported that prices of recyclables had dropped by as much as 90 percent and ships loaded with recyclables bound for China were arriving without buyers (James 2008).28

In tandem, the border conflict and the recessionary forces of the GFC kept the prices of

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28 I found more than 25 newspaper articles during that period with headlines such as 'Crash of trash: Recycling goes bust' and 'Back at junk value, recyclables are piling up' by Matt Richtel and Kate Galbraith, _New York Times and Star Tribune_ (Richtel and Galbraith 2008a, 2008b).
recyclables on the dumpsite and throughout Cambodia at these low levels for ten months. The families in the village coped with the drop in prices in numerous ways, but not necessarily by working longer hours or more days in the week. As I described in Chapter 1, during the months of November 2008 to March 2009, the pickers worked on average 18 days per month and generally were able to earn minimum wages during this time. Instead of working longer hours, many simply cut back on purchases, extended their loans, stopped payments to older or younger kin and sought more aid from organisations.

For example, Kunthea, a single mother of five children, previously sent money home to her mother (in her rural homeland) who was caring for her two youngest children, both under five years old. During this period, she said she was able to care for herself and her three older children, who lived with her at Stueng Mean Chey, however, she worried that she could no longer send money to her mother. To add to their concerns, obtaining credit became more difficult for some of the waste pickers. Chenda tried to borrow 15,000 riels (US$3.75) from a moneylender to buy rice when an aid group was reselling rice at a reduced rate, but the moneylender refused. She said, ‘If the dealers buy at the normal price I don’t need to worry.’ Her neighbours loaned her rice instead.

Contributing to this uncertainty brought on by global economic forces and a diplomatic stand-off was the assumption held by most people at Stueng Mean Chey that the dumpsite would close at the end of 2008, as earlier announced by the municipality. Despite all of these factors, the pickers returned to work, accepting the lower prices and hoping that things would eventually get better. Only a few of the men in the village changed jobs during this period. Rith, a father of five, began fishing in nearby swamps, and a few of the younger men found casual jobs in construction. By March 2009, the dumpsite had not closed and prices had begun to rise again.

This period of uncertainty demonstrated how quickly and, in this case, severely the recycling industry in Cambodia was impacted by regional and global events. It also highlighted the limited role waste pickers played in determining the price of recyclables, which appeared to be subject to global forces passed on through the dealers. Against this external force the waste pickers often had less power in the moment of exchange with their dealers to request better rates. The dealers too said they were in the same position with their trader-exporters, who generally set the prices for them. To a certain extent I suspect this pattern continued up the production chain, where prices were defined by global processes of supply and demand within wider chains of value creation.

While some of the waste pickers sought work elsewhere, not one person in the village searched for alternative dealers or buyers, either during this period or when the dealers took leave during religious holidays. Not only did the waste pickers have to accept whatever prices their dealers set, their daily income was dependent on the dealers’ arrival on the dumpsite and their willingness to buy. Still, it was clear to me that the relationship held elements of co-dependency as both pickers and dealers relied on each other through this period. This picker-dealer relationship at Stueng Mean Chey in Phnom Penh showed both similarities and differences to other studies on waste-picking groups in cities elsewhere and I believe it is central to discourse about the pickers’ mode of production.
In this chapter I move outwards from the waste pickers’ core activity, the creation of value through production, to explore how this activity generates other meanings. In my introduction above, I have described the relationship between waste pickers and buyers in the context of the late 2008 GFC in order to highlight the importance of the exchange relationship and its centrality to the creation of both economic and social value. I begin by introducing comparisons from other waste scholars to question the degree of agency waste pickers have in such relationships with dealers. I continue to question the categories others try to force the waste pickers into, and illustrate the ways in which there were variations in exchange practices that differentiated the community at Stueng Mean Chey.

Theoretical differences: Workers or sellers, factory or urban commons

Waste pickers have been the focus of research studies since the mid 1970s (Abad 2012; Baldisimo 1985; Birkbeck 1978; Bursapat 1984; Furedy 1984, 1993; Harahap 1984; Keyes 1974; Medina 1997, 2005, 2007; Meyer 1987; Samson 2011; Sicual 1991, 1992; Tevera 1994; Vogler 1981). Many of the earlier studies concentrated on socio-political structures and profiles of waste pickers within informal economic sectors. Chris Birkbeck (1978) and Daniel Sicual’s (1991, 1992) theoretical discussions on modes of production were different than these other studies and have been recognised as significant by more recent researchers, such as Martin Medina (2007, p. 254). Birkbeck’s study in Cali, Colombia, resonated strongly with me as his study focused on a community of waste pickers at a dumpsite, while Sicual’s study of a community of ‘scavengers’ in West Java included pickers who collected on the streets of the city. Sicual’s description of their autonomy has been influential in my analysis of life on the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite.

In 1978, Birkbeck argued that while waste pickers in Cali are able to choose their working hours, factories that use their product dictate the prices of recyclables on the dumpsite, thereby creating an exchange relationship that is similar to that of any of the recycling factories’ casual outworkers. Birbeck (1978, pp. 1173—74) proposed therefore that the waste pickers essentially sell their labour to these factories; and that because the price for their labour is lower than elsewhere, the relationship is exploitative. Birbeck (1978, p. 1173) argued that the waste pickers are ‘self-employed proletarians in an informal factory’. Nevertheless, he found that the Cali waste pickers themselves are more concerned in their continued ability to work rather than improving their wages and working conditions (Birkbeck 1978, p. 1184).

In 1992, Sicual (1992, pp. 23–6) challenged this title of ‘self-employed proletarians’ as he found that the West Javanese pickers differed in that they possessed some of their means of production and therefore could not be proletarians, but were rather ‘peasants engaged in forms of hunting and gathering’. Drawing on Marxist theory, Sicual (1992) centred his argument on the premise that waste is a semi-public resource, with the dumpsite being an urban commons. Sicual argued that as the factories do not provide tools, machinery, or even access to the waste, the waste pickers use their own resources within the family unit to turn discarded waste into commodities. Therefore, Sicual (1992, p. 27) argues, they do not sell their labour, they sell commodities.
Sicular (1992, pp. 16, 25, 26, 30) further contends that 'technically' picking is similar to hunting and gathering because the waste pickers collect, gather and exploit available resources, in this case from a dumpsite, to subsist. They creatively adapt their lifestyles to the conditions they face, taking advantage of whatever is available. However, 'structurally' it is similar to peasant production, and instead of the factories exploiting the waste pickers directly, they are exploited or controlled through unequal market exchanges. Sicular (1992, pp. 31-2) classifies the waste pickers as peasants because their production depends on personal relationships with buyers that are often characterised by dependency and vertical reciprocity or patron-client ties. Although waste pickers enjoy being their own boss and choosing their working hours, Sicular (1992, p. 28) argues that there are regular and visible forms of control that ensure allegiance to particular buyers. These buyers 'extract surplus by underpaying' the waste picker. And Sicular's West Javanese, and Birkbeck's Colombians, continue to participate in these unequal exchanges because they guarantee security, stability and a daily wage.

In this chapter I explore such relations of exchange on the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite, profiling the dealers and buyers, conditions of exchange and control. Overall, my analysis is more aligned with Sicular's arguments than Birbeck. As I have previously shown, the Phnom Penh waste pickers had access to the means of production and, as I shall detail in this chapter, dependent and unequal exchange relationships existed between the Phnom Penh waste pickers and their main recycling dealers. Due to the absence of a legal framework that determined ownership of the waste, the waste pickers did not own the means of production but, during my fieldwork period, they had access to possess it. I also found multiple ways in which the Phnom Penh waste pickers attempted to rebalance unequal exchange relationships. This was something not given prominence by either Birbeck or Sicular, possibly because it did not occur in Cali or West Java, or maybe it was not apparent to them. Such efforts to rebalance relationships by waste pickers once again provides interesting insights about their agency and complicates perceptions of waste pickers' willingness to endure controlling relationships that verged on exploitation.

Additionally I discuss other forms of exchange that were present at the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite to show how waste pickers had other avenues through which to maintain balance in their relationships with dealers. Both of the above studies concentrate on the exchange of recyclables as raw materials for future factory production, or as Sicular termed it, 'waste-as-ore'. Recyclable objects, however, were not the only commodities exchanged for money on the dumpsite. Things, in various forms and composition, were also exchanged with speciality buyers. At such times these exchanges more closely resembled those at an open and free marketplace, rather than the patron-client relationships with their recycling dealers. The fact that there were multiple forms of exchange on the dumpsite reinforces my proposition that waste pickers had access to the means of production.

29 Thank you to Howard Morphy and Rick Kuhn for providing insight into this.
Types of exchange

In this section, I briefly describe the types of exchange that occurred on and around the dumpsite through my own experiences of apprenticeship under Chenda. At the end of a work day (we only ever worked during the day) Chenda and I methodically sorted her collection of objects and things we had claimed, separating them and placing them in different rice sacks according to the categories set by the dealers. First we gathered all of her rice sacks in any form, usable, broken or mere pieces, and put these to the side. After acquiring those that could be used as containers, we then retrieved all of the plastic bags within her collection, often amounting to more than two sacks. After this, we separated the remaining plastic and metal objects into various sacks to sell to different dealers: tin cans and hard plastic pieces and objects went into one sack, while all of the softer plastic matter went onto another. Small metal pieces, including nails, buckles from belts and bags and copper wiring, went into yet another sack, including all of her aluminium cans, while small cosmetic containers, glass bottles and other things that were sold by the amount rather than their weight were in another. In a final sack she put anything she had claimed for use in her home.

When we were finished, Chenda tied up the sacks containing plastic bags and rice sacks, but left the other sacks open. Calling over one of her dealers, a woman called Mom, she then sold her plastic bags and rice sacks at the site in which she packed them. One of Mom’s workers carried the heavy sacks to her truck. Chenda and I then carried her collection of metal cans, hard and soft plastic and individually counted objects to her second dealer, Chay, who had set up a temporary stand. For the above objects, Chenda only ever sold them to Chay and Mom and never any other dealer, even if other dealers’ prices were higher. If Mom or Chay did not arrive on the dumpsite at the end of Chenda’s shift, she stored her collection on the dumpsite overnight. Her relationship with these dealers was exclusive.

Chenda, however, carried her smaller collection of aluminium cans, hard metal pieces and copper wiring back to her village and stored them under her home until she had a day off from working on the dumpsite. Instead of selling these more valuable items to her metal and plastics dealer, Chay, she instead sold them to a scrap trader located close to her home who offered her a higher price per kilogram. The small pieces of metal required a finer level of sorting and she often did this outside her home on her days off. The money from this sale to the scrap trader enabled her to purchase fresh food for that day and pay off any loans or rent she had owing with the remaining amount. This stored metal was a form of short-term savings scheme that paid dividends on an ad-hoc basis, generally once or twice a week.

Finally, Chenda also sold any of the things she had claimed to buyers who specialised in particular objects. These were numerous and include such things as jewellery, watches, mobile phones, shoes or even mango seeds. In most instances, Chenda sold these things to the first speciality buyer who approached her, either when she was sorting at the end of her shift on the dumpsite or when they visited her in the village. The speciality buyer set
the price, although she sometimes haggled over it and if she thought the offer was too low, she didn’t sell, waiting for the next speciality buyer to approach her. Therefore, these offers to exchange were often refused without fear of retribution, indicating that there was little social relationship about to be put at risk by not accepting the offer. There was an interesting distinction between the dealers and the speciality buyers and below I explore both: to begin with, I discuss the complex exchange relations I observed between waste pickers and recycling dealers on the dumpsite, and then, I return to the more open-market exchanges with speciality buyers and scrap traders.

**The recycling dealers**

There were about ten small family businesses buying recyclables and other objects from the waste pickers on the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite; they each specialised in buying different types of materials or objects/things and as a consequence approached the business in their own way.\(^{30}\) Of these small businesses, all of which I call recycling dealers, there were two main types: the plastic and metal dealers and the plastic bag and rice sack dealers.

**Plastic and metal dealers**

The most prominent plastic and metal dealer at the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite was one of Chenda’s dealers, Chay, a 42-year-old woman who first started buying recycling from the waste pickers in 1984 (Plates 156–61). Although she considers herself ethnically Vietnamese, she has never lived in Vietnam but is fluent in both Vietnamese and Khmer. As a young girl she worked in child labour camps in Battambang during the Pol Pot period and moved back to Phnom Penh with her mother in 1981.\(^{31}\) She was 14 years old when she started buying recycling along the streets of the city with a friend. Three years later she learned about the dumpsite and started buying from the waste pickers, tying a cart to her bicycle, which is called a ‘k’chay’. Although it had been more than 20 years since she had first used a ‘k’chay to transport recycling, the people of the dumpsite continued to call her ‘Chay’.

Chay bought different types of plastics and metals, each with different prices. She asked the waste pickers to sort their day’s collection into different sacks according to price. The first price included all kinds of soft plastics, typically water bottles, plastic cups and plates, and soft plastic packaging. This she bought for up to 900 riels per kilogram. The second sack included tin cans and hard plastics, which she bought for up to 400 riels per kilogram. Chay also bought more valuable metals such as iron and copper, all of which she weighed individually but paid according to the number of grams.

There were also things that she paid not according to their weight but by quantity, including aluminium cans, refillable glass bottles, compact discs (CDs) and digital versatile discs (DVDs), ceramic bowls and plates that were in good condition, and other random

\(^{30}\) This is different to the buyers studied by Birbeck in Cali, Colombia, who specialised in only one type of material.

\(^{31}\) The ‘Pol Pot period’ is a local term referring to the Khmer Rouge period (1975–79) when the country was under the rule of Khmer Rouge leader, Pol Pot.
things (see Table 3.1). Chay also bought two types of unbroken glass bottles, particular brands of soy sauce or chilli sauce bottles and one or two brands of beer bottles that were reusable.

**Table 3.1: Recycling Prices on the Dumpsite in September 2008**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Price (riels)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Copper</td>
<td>15,000r/kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hard metal</td>
<td>1500r/kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aluminium cans</td>
<td>3 for 200r or 6000r/kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soft plastics</td>
<td>900r/kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tin cans and hard plastics</td>
<td>400r/kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rice sacks</td>
<td>200r/kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plastic bags, clear</td>
<td>150r/kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plastic bags, coloured</td>
<td>130r/kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pillow stuffing</td>
<td>800r/kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoes</td>
<td>1 pair for 500r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large sauce bottle</td>
<td>1 for 100r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small sauce bottle</td>
<td>5 for 100r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beer bottles</td>
<td>4 for 100r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spoon</td>
<td>1 for 100r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fork</td>
<td>2 for 100r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steak knife</td>
<td>1 for 300r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small cosmetic container</td>
<td>3 for 100r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDs/DVDs</td>
<td>4 for 200r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chip packets</td>
<td>5 for 100r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mango seeds</td>
<td>6 for 100r</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Generally, the waste pickers had to earn their collection to the area on the dumpsite where Chay had set up shop for the day. She would usually sit on a large fold-out reclining chair, the kind you would see by the beach or pool, with an equally large beach umbrella that would shield her from the sun and rain. A staff member would hand the waste picker a large wire mesh basket and put it in front of Chay. The waste pickers would slowly empty their collection into the wire mesh basket, and as they did so, Chay held out her hands feeling the weight of the objects, quickly selecting objects she did not want to buy and tossed them over her shoulder with her right hand. She scanned for water bottles that had remnant liquid inside and quickly opened any bottles and poured the liquid over her shoulder. Her left hand held a stack of notes, all small denominations. When the wire basket was full or the bag was empty the waste pickers lifted the basket up onto the scales and peered over looking at the weight. The needle of the 100 kilograms scales was set at minus 4 kilograms and was therefore clearly ‘weighted’ in Chay’s favour. Chay paid according to the number of kilograms registered after zero kilograms. She weighed the more valuable metals on a smaller set of scales to her left. These scales started on zero kilograms. After the contents were weighed, her staff emptied the wire mesh basket into larger sacks, ready for the next client.

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32 The metal basket only weighed 1.5 kilograms, so Chay swindled the waste pickers 2.5 kilograms for every basketload.
The smaller objects, such as plastic bottle tops, often fell through the wire mesh baskets and surrounded Chay’s feet. She brushed these objects away to the side. Behind her were all of the objects which she had eliminated as not being acceptable to buy, and these she diligently gathered up at the end of the day along with the small objects which fell through the wire mesh basket and loaded them onto her truck, although not paying for them. I collected data on her sales and for one day she had 43 night-shift clients in the morning and 110 clients in the afternoon, buying 994 kilograms of soft plastic and 744 kilograms of tin cans/hard plastic, 6.5 kilograms of other metal and 76 random bottles and other objects for re-use.

Chay and her husband owned a house and large shed along the road to the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite. They also rented a piece of land opposite on which they stored all of the soft plastics they bought from the waste pickers. Metal and hard plastics were stored in the shed on their property. Chay worked two shifts per day. In the morning she started at first light, as early as 5 or 6am until 9am, buying from the waste pickers who worked during the night. She had two workers who were responsible for loading the recycling she bought onto a flatbed truck and driving it back to her house. She then returned to the dumpsite in the afternoon and bought recycling from the waste pickers who had collected during the day.

Back at Chay’s property, her husband supervised up to six staff members who sorted through all of the recycling Chay bought at the dumpsite and repacked it ready to be sold or shipped to trader-exporters in Phnom Penh, Vietnam or Thailand. Her daughter or youngest son looked after all the refillable glasses bottles, sometimes buying them directly from the waste pickers at the dumpsite and organising for their cleaning and subsequent sale in Phnom Penh. Chay’s oldest son and his wife had their own business buying plastic bags and rice sacks.

Chay said she sold about five tonnes of soft plastics every week. Her clients bought the materials from her home and transported them in a semitrailer truck to the Vietnamese or Thai border, where they were reloaded onto another truck and taken to yet another trader. Chay did not know what became of the plastic and metal once it reached the next destination in Thailand or Vietnam.

**Plastic bag and rice sack dealers**

One of the plastic bag and rice sack dealers at the dumpsite was a team consisting of a mother (named Mom) and daughter (Thida) (Plates 148–50). Before they bought and sold recycling at the dumpsite they were rice farmers. At the time, Thida, was 20 years old and studied English at university in the evenings. They started their business two years earlier and owned a house adjacent to the dumpsite. Unlike Chay, their land was small, making it impossible for them to store the plastic bags and rice sacks that they bought each day, so after each shift they transported the materials directly to another trader-exporter in the city who bought them before exporting the goods to either Vietnam or Thailand.
Both mother and daughter worked together to buy plastic bags and rice sacks from the waste pickers each morning and afternoon. Unlike Chay, Thida usually carried the scales around the sorting area with her. She weighed the plastic bags and rice sacks at each picker’s area and paid according to the amount of kilograms. Sacks were worth up to 200 riels per kilogram and clear bags were worth 150 riels per kilogram. Unfortunately for the waste pickers, Thida’s scales were generally set between minus eight and minus ten kilograms, so they lost more than eight kilograms every time they weighed a sack. To compensate for this loss, the waste pickers often stacked three sacks on top of each other and weighed them all at once. Thida used her mobile phone as a calculator. People generally debated with the daughter over the weight, though this was done in a friendly manner and she often relented, handing the pickers an extra 1000 riels (US$0.25). Mom hired one or two men to carry the sacks away. The plastic bags were loaded onto one of their trucks, while workers hired by Mom unpacked the rice sacks, usually at the bottom of the hill, shaking them out and removing any unwanted excess before repacking them.

I occasionally accompanied Thida while she bought and sold the plastic bags and rice sacks. She sold the plastic bags directly to her trader-exporter for the same price she bought them at the dumpsite, making only a small amount of money from the discrepancy between the scales, perhaps only 20,000 to 40,000 riels per day (US$5 – $10.00). However, as she hired workers to repack the rice sacks, she was able to sell them for double the price (400 riels per kilogram) and this enabled her to make considerably more earnings, an estimated 200,000 riels (US$50.00) per day for the family.

Rain had an impact on the price Thida paid to the waste pickers for plastic bags and rice sacks. Once it rained and the bags and sacks became wet their weight increased, so Thida and the other dealers cut the price per kilogram to 120 riels per kilogram and also took ten percent off the final weight. For example, if a waste picker had 50 kilograms of rice sacks then Thida would only pay for 45 kilograms at 120 riels per kilogram if they were wet. The dealer Thida sold to, however, only reduced the weight by ten percent but not the price per kilogram. Buying wet rice sacks and plastic bags was risky because if they dried out before Thida was able to sell them to her trader-exporter then her profit would be decreased. Thida said that once she left her wet plastic bags in the truck overnight and lost 100 kilograms in weight by the next morning, losing more than 40,000 riels (US$10.00). To avoid such risk, when a storm was approaching, the plastic bag and rice sack dealers often stopped buying from the waste pickers. This frustrated the pickers who then needed to store their sacks at the dumpsite overnight, running the risk that they would be re-claimed by others before they could be sold the following morning.

Dealer costs

Unlike the waste pickers who required little start-up capital, the dealers needed significantly more. Among the list of resources was their need for a truck to transport the recyclables off the dumpsite and to their trader-exporters. Some dealers, like Chay, required land and shelter to store and sort the recyclables.
There were variable costs such as petrol and vehicle maintenance, in addition to the informal daily payment made to the dumpsite controller of 5000 riels (US$1.25) to use the roads on the dumpsite.33

Most of the regular dealers employed casual workers. Many of Mom’s workers were relatives and acquaintances who travelled to Phnom Penh to work with her between farming seasons. Her workers were paid according to the weight they were able to re-sort. Mom paid 3500 riels (US$0.89) for every 100 kilograms, while Chay paid 100 riels for every kilogram. The two men loading and driving the trucks for both Mom and Chay were paid 10,000 riels (US$2.50) per truckload. They generally loaded two trucks per day. One of Mom’s truck loaders told me that he felt the work was easier than collecting on the dumpsite. He had worked with Mom for three years, and before this he worked as a waste picker.

Relations between dealers

Relations between dealers were generally reserved and guarded. During the few months preceding the closure of the dumpsite, Thida married the son of one of her trader-exporters. With their combined knowledge of the industry, storage capacity and trucks, they tried to start buying metals and plastics. The waste pickers said that Chay got very angry with her for competing with her business and apparently went to the police (to what end I do not know). Chay would not confirm this rumour, but Mom and Thida were not seen at the dumpsite for the last three months it was open, losing any money she had loaned to her clients. Rather than becoming a client of another similar dealer, Mom’s clients simply stopped collecting plastic bags and rice sacks. Chenda and some of the other women in the village who were among Mom’s clients said they preferred to stop collecting plastic bags and rice sacks rather than exchange with the other main bags and sacks dealer who was known for being rude. The fact that a picker would stop collecting a particular material because the dealer was absent highlights the importance of social relations between pickers and dealers, relationships that were certainly more complex than those between dealers and their competitors. In the following section, I explore in greater detail the waste pickers’ attitudes towards the dealers on the dumpsite.

Relations within patron-client exchanges

Each dealer established relationships with pickers differently depending on a number of factors. These factors included the dealer’s length of service on the dumpsite as well as their consistent presence every day. In this section, I unpick the factors that determine relations to show that some are based on what seems like bonded labour, but in fact is much more mutually obligated and beneficial.

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33 This informal payment was not mandated by the municipality and there was no receipt issued upon payment, therefore, it could be considered the equivalent of a bribe.
Perceptions

In a quantitative survey I asked 45 waste pickers at Stueng Mean Chey on one day what they valued most about their recycling dealers. A healthy majority of pickers, 73 percent, thought Chay was the best dealer, followed by her direct competitor, Mrs Maly, another metal and plastics dealer. Over 50 percent of those who liked Chay said they valued her because she came to the dumpsite every day, even when it was raining. As Leakena said:

For Mrs Chay, she always helps me to buy my recycling and she never stops her business and continues to buy the recycling from me and other waste pickers, so I always sell my recycling to her.

Other attributes they liked about Chay included the fact that she lent them money, had been buying from the waste pickers for a long time (more than 20 years) and that she was friendly and occasionally gave them gratuities.

Just as Sicular found in West Java, the waste pickers valued the guarantee of being able to sell their recyclables at the end of the shift. This provided them with a sense of security and stability within their overall production, and a sense of satisfaction at the end of a hard day. Once again, price was not a determining factor in relationship formation for the waste pickers. For the waste pickers on the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite, however, the exchange relationship was not considered worthwhile if the dealer did not conduct business with the picker in a friendly and pleasant manner. Leakena said:

Some dealers are not polite to the waste pickers. Some dealers always use bad words and do not respect us. So the waste pickers don't sell their recyclables to those dealers anymore.

Although the waste pickers were in a subordinate position within the exchange relationship with their recycling dealers, they said they would not tolerate abusive or disrespectful interactions, and if they did encounter any they would attempt to forge a new, long-term and ongoing relationship with a different dealer.

Obligation and allegiance

The primary condition of the relationship between pickers and dealers was exclusivity. After establishing a relationship with one dealer the waste pickers could not sell to another dealer buying the same types of materials, even when their dealer was not there. The dealers enforced this condition of exclusivity through two means: threats to waste pickers and other dealers, and by extending credit. My informants in the village said they were also afraid of being deserted by their primary recycling dealer, thereby leaving them without an income source. So the condition of exclusivity was generally abided amiably. Moreover, some dealers on the dumpsite were afraid of the bigger and more powerful dealers, like Chay, and refused to buy from a client of a competitor. During a focus group, the participants said:
Chenda:

When I collect I’m always afraid my dealer won’t buy from me. Last month when we had heavy rain, my dealer would not buy from me, so I had to keep it until she bought again. When my dealer does not come to the dumpsite I can’t sell to another dealer.

Me:

Why?

Leakena:

If you sell one day to one dealer and then another day to another dealer, the dealers won’t buy from you anymore, especially plastic bags.

Vichara:

Or sometimes if I try to sell my recycling to other dealers, they always ignore me and won’t buy my recycling, they only buy from their own clients.

Some dealers on the dumpsite said they were afraid of upsetting the longer-term and more aggressive dealers and refused to buy from one of their clients. It was also partly dependent on the supply and demand factors of the different recyclables, with more animosity between dealers of low-grade recyclables, such as plastic bags and rice sacks.

One day I asked Mom, who had only been a dealer on the dumpsite for three years, if she was ever worried her clients might go to one of her competitors. She answered, “They won’t go because they owe me money.” Dealers who were relatively new on the scene often extended credit as a way of initially facilitating allegiance. The loans were usually only for small amounts between 10,000 and 50,000 riels each, offered without interest to clients who need not make repayments as long as they continued to sell their specific type of recyclables to her or him. It was a mutually agreed arrangement and only lightly enforced by the dealers.

For example, after the death of her sister-in-law a few weeks after childbirth, Chenda stopped collecting for a month to help look after her newborn niece. Mom met her by accident one day and coyly asked her for a repayment of her loan considering she was no longer selling to her. Chenda apologised and said that she would start to collect again soon and sell to her again and the matter was dropped. Both Birbeck and Sicilar found that dealers in Cali and West Java used the same tactic of extending credit to form allegiances.

In contrast, Chay, as one of the most popular and reliable dealers, admitted that only some of her clients had borrowed money from her but not all of them. She even seemed relaxed about buying from other dealers’ clients. She said:

When the waste pickers cannot find their own dealer they can sell their recycling to me. It’s not a problem.
Another day, however, Chay became quite annoyed when she noticed that a few of her clients had started selling their tin cans and hard plastic for a higher price to a scrap trader in the village. She said:

I'm so angry. I will not buy from clients who only sell me their soft plastics, they must sell me their tin cans and hard plastics too. The soft plastics are very hard for me to sell. I won't buy their soft plastics anymore if they act like this.

While Mom had to manage allegiance through extending credit, Chay’s reputation for her reliability meant she was able to simply threaten to stop buying from an individual. Chay’s comment also highlights one of the ways in which the dealers were seen to be obligated back to the waste pickers. Both dealers bought recycling materials from the waste pickers that were difficult to sell or had a small margin of profit. For Chay, the soft plastics were harder for her to sell thereby exposing her to risk. However, the tin cans and hard plastic were easy and more profitable. Similarly, Mom bought plastic bags when she made only a small profit from their sale and exposed her to higher associated risks through the concurrent exchange of both plastic bags and rice sacks she was able to make her business a success. The sale of both low- and high-quality recyclables enabled the waste pickers to earn more with decreased competition. The dealers accepted the heightened level of risk as they benefited in the long-term through loyal clients and overall profits. Additionally, Chay admitted she felt a moral obligation to the waste pickers to buy from them every day (including on weekends). Chay said:

The waste pickers tell me to come every day or they cannot get money to feed their families, so if I am absent I ask my daughter to come for me.

Chay’s feeling of responsibility towards the waste pickers also reflects the differences in class and status between the dealers and pickers; in this regard their relationship involves the same patron-client dynamics that Sicul found in West Java. Although there were obvious power imbalances, the relationship was considered mutually obligated and beneficial for both sides.

**Exchange wealth = price x weight**

The prices set by the main recycling dealers on the dumpsite were generally lower than most scrap traders in the city for the same materials. I was told that the reason for this was that the recyclables gathered from the dumpsite were highly soiled and required more labour-intensive cleaning than recyclables separated at the source (that is a household or factory). Due to this, the dealers said recyclables from the dumpsite were harder to onsell, particularly during the global economic downturn experienced in 2008 and 2009.

During my fieldwork I rarely witnessed a waste picker negotiating or haggling with their dealers about prices at the time of exchange. It did seem that the waste pickers were aware of price differentials (that is between the village trader and the dealers on the dumpsite)

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34 Another occurrence of a waste picker showing some agency within unequal relationships.
but that overall this was not an area of choice or conflict since a variety of factors operated to maintain people’s relationships with particular dealers (loans, loyalty, reliability, etc.). Rather than focusing on prices, the waste pickers debated over the weight registered on the scales. Through this process of bargaining, and sometimes deception, the picker could tilt ever so slightly the scales back in their favour.

As I briefly mentioned above, most of the dealers’ scales did not start at zero kilogram but generally at between minus 2.5 kilograms (for metals and plastics) and minus 8.0 or minus 10.0 kilograms (for plastic bags and rice sacks). A few of the waste pickers believed that some dealers had adjusted a spring inside the scales so that the overall weight appeared even less.

In what I argue to be an attempt to rebalance this structural imbalance, the waste pickers often put heavy objects inside their sacks before they sold it to the dealers. In sacks of plastic bags they repeatedly put heavy bags of leftover food (often cooked rice) inside the sack, careful to put it in the middle fully surrounded by plastic bags. I witnessed Mom's daughter checking inside sacks that were unusually heavy, breaking a glass bottle to use the sharp edge to tear the sides of the sack and check inside for hidden unwanted material. In their collections of soft plastic to sell to Chay, waste pickers sometimes poured a little bit of water into as many bottles as they could to increase the overall weight. Alternatively they collected used batteries or leftover food and put it inside the opaque coloured bottles so Chay and the other dealers would not notice it. Vichara, Dara and Chenda were honest about this during a focus group:

Vichara:

The dealers don’t really trust us when we sell our recycling to them because they are worried that we put something inside, like waste or not important things mixed with the recycling, when we sell to them.

Chenda:

The dealers tells us, ‘Don’t put shoes, mats, dirt, coconuts or anything else with your recycling,’ but the waste pickers still put those things in their recycling every time they sell to dealers. If we agree not to do this, if we don’t do it then we don’t make much money.

Dara:

For Mrs Chay I like her the most because she doesn’t care about my recycling, even if I mix something with it, like waste or anything else when I sell it to her. She always takes my recycling every time I sell to her. But for other dealers they always look very carefully in my recycling because they are afraid that I have put waste inside. If they catch me, they take out the waste and extra things and they reprimand me and warn me not to try this again. The reason I do it is because I want to increase the weight of my recycling, so I must put extra things inside before I sell it to the dealers.

Evidently, the dealers were aware that the waste pickers did this and only sometimes made a fuss, but otherwise paid workers to sift through the product to eliminate the unwanted material before they sold it to their trader-exporters. In the end it became another cost to
their business. Birbeck (1978, p. 1178) similarly found that pickers in Cali increased the weight in their collections. He witnessed pickers in Cali throwing water over paper to increase the weight and occasionally putting stones inside sacks, but his analysis places emphasis only on the dealer's exploitative actions rather than incorporating the ways waste pickers displayed their agency in the relationship.

The relations between pickers and dealers on the dumpsite were vertically dependent and involved patron–client dynamics that reflected their respective social status. The dealers held the balance of power within the exchange relationship, as evidenced by their ability to dictate non-negotiable prices as well as exclusive conditions. Yet dealers made concessions to buy lower-grade recyclables from the pickers, put up with occasional deceptions and kept promises that ensured the waste pickers could earn a daily wage. As prices for recyclables seemed to be set by regional and global events and distant dynamics of supply and demand, the outcome of exchanges between picker and dealers was often negotiated through a discussion of weight/heaviness. Both sides considered weight to be a flexible, unfixed category in which to create wealth.

**Free-market exchange**

Any object or material that was not one of the four bulk types (plastic, metal, plastic bags and rice sacks) could be traded by any picker with any dealer as an exception to the exclusivity conditions. This included the small pieces of metal and wire Chenda sold to the scrap trader who lived close to her village and the variety of other things she sold to specialty buyers. Claiming, sorting and selling these other things outside their primary dealer relationship allowed them to earn additional income through exercising choice and therefore individual agency. In this section, I focus on the exchanges made between pickers, scrap traders and specialty buyers on the dumpsite and in the village.

The scrap traders located close to the village were small in scale compared to others I visited elsewhere in the city. The scrap traders' main source of materials came from cart-pullers who purchased recyclables from homes and businesses throughout the surrounding areas (see Plate 165). Residents and anyone else in the area were also able to sell their recyclables directly to the scrap trader at higher rates than by selling them to the cart-pullers.

By carefully sorting and often burning off or removing any plastic coating on the metal, Chenda and the other waste pickers were able to get higher prices from the scrap traders than if they sold the unprepared (unprocessed) metal on the dumpsite to Chay. Unlike the cart-pullers who were locked into a conditional relationship with the scrap trader, the exchanges the waste pickers had with the scrap traders were unconditional, like any in an open marketplace. For example, Chenda was able to enquire with various scrap traders about the price per kilogram for each metal type before the exchange and decide if she wanted to sell it at that time or wait for the price to improve.

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35 The pickers in Cali collected paper and cardboard, however at Stueng Mean Chey paper was only collected in the dry season and by just a few waste pickers, who spent time to dry the paper out on empty land beside the dumpsite (Plate 143).
Speciality buyers differed to traders in that they typically did not have a store or temporary stand, instead often roaming the dumpsite and surrounding villages looking for customers who had found ‘things’, i.e., whole objects that still had some use value. There were, for instance, buyers who only bought pairs of shoes. One such female buyer generally paid 500 riels a pair and, after cleaning and repairing them with her husband, sold them at local markets for between 3000 to 8000 riels each (US$0.75—$2.00) (Plate 143). She said she started the small family business after her husband was injured while working in construction. Another buyer taught himself how to repair electronic devices, first buying radios and watches from the waste pickers, but in recent years started to buy and repair mobile phones. He said he generally bought two to five phones per day, worth varying amounts depending on their condition and model. One day Chenda found a mobile phone and, after testing it with my battery, she was able to sell it to a specialty buyer on the dumpsite for 60,000 riels (US$15.00). These windfalls and other stories of finding similar ‘treasure’ often filtered back to rural villages and attracted new waste pickers. I also wondered if these types of windfalls encouraged the longer-term waste pickers to keep working when perhaps some of the excitement had worn off.

Sometimes the speciality buyers only operated in particular months of the year. During the peak of the mango season, specialty buyers came to the dumpsite and offered the waste pickers 100 riels for six whole mango seeds that were later used to grow seedlings. In the drier months, some specialty buyers bought mattresses and pillows to onsell the stuffing inside for new bedding and pillows (Plate 143). Apart from these regular seasonal specialty buyers, the pickers occasionally encountered ad-hoc and sometimes unusual object hunters. For instance, over a month in 2008, a new speciality buyer came to purchase the wrappers of a particular brand of potato chips. The snack manufacturer was holding a competition to win a motorbike and meet a famous Khmer singer on television and each packet constituted an entry ticket. As the buyer wanted to enter the competition as many times as he could, he offered the waste pickers 100 riels for every five packets collected. I never found out which one he really wanted to win most, the motorbike or the chance to meet the famous star.

Some of these things were of little monetary value, and not all waste pickers chose to incorporate the things within their production. The waste pickers, however, all knew there was a possibility of finding things of significant value in those ‘eureka moments’ when waste becomes treasure. Reflecting this real possibility, there were two competing speciality buyers who bought jewellery and other objects such as precious metals from the waste pickers. Both had been dealers at the dumpsite for more than 20 years. One was a man called Ta Pi Roy, because ‘Ta’ means elder and ‘Pi Roy’ means 200, the amount of riel he used to give away to children. His competitor was a woman called Mrs Mao; she said she bought between two and 20 grams of gold, silver or platinum every day from the waste pickers on the dumpsite. She bought the gold for US$20.00 per chi (one chi is equivalent to 3.75g) and sold it for US$22.00 per chi; silver she bought for 3000 riels per chi (US$0.75/chi) and sold for 7000 riels per chi (US$1.75/chi).
Mrs Mao was well into her sixties and said she continued to work as a speciality buyer for the income and the exercise: ‘It enables me to offer money to the monks for my next life.’ Ta Pi Roy used to be a plastics and metal dealer like Chay but transitioned to precious metals and jewels for the higher profits and reduced effort. Ta Pi Roy also bought foreign money, printer ink cartridges, cameras and mobile phones. He often carried large amounts of cash in case a waste picker found diamond jewellery. Both dealers carried small scales and various instruments and chemicals to test the substance and quality of any precious metal found and offered cash on the spot (Plate 145). If the thing was particularly valuable, the waste pickers often refused to sell to Mrs Mao or Ta Pi Roy if they considered the price too low and searched for a better price in the city. Although these speciality buyers often set the first price, waste pickers openly haggled and could freely choose to walk away and find another buyer. All of these things still had use-value or resale value in their current form on the local/city market, and in this sense, they were easier to sell and prices could be compared, demonstrating that different factors applied in exchanges involving such high-value goods.

Once again, these things were always traded as if the exchange was occurring in an open and free marketplace; the waste pickers were able to set their own conditions for the sale and there was never an obligation to sell, despite friendly relations between buyers and waste pickers. Although the exchange of these things to buyers and metal pieces to scrap traders usually amounted to small to medium income for the waste pickers, it is important as it identifies variations in the kinds of transactions possible depending on the value of the goods. Such variations in the types of exchange available to the waste pickers were not apparent in the previous studies by Birbeck and Sicular. In these open-market exchanges, I also suggest that the wealth created can be said to represent their surplus labour value or profit, within their processes of production.

Discussion

The existence of this second mode/type of exchange external to the conditional and exclusive arrangements with the recycling dealers is not the only point of difference between my study and those of Sicular and Birbeck. Disparities are also evident within the exchange relationships had between the pickers and dealers. Birbeck (1978, p. 1174) argued that factories exploited the waste pickers in Cali by dictating low prices, resulting in the waste pickers symbolically selling their labour power. Dealer prices on Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite, however, were not dictated by local or regional factories but rather they were just as likely to be influenced by distant dynamics of supply and demand as well as regional and global events. The dealers also did not just capture the waste pickers’ labour but invested capital and hired their own workers to transport, unpack, re-sort and repack. As the waste pickers had access to the means of production, I also do not wish to label the waste pickers as casual factory outworkers or ‘proletarians’. Just as Sicular argues, I believe they did not sell their labour but sold commodities created within their social processes of production. I also contend that the waste pickers in Phnom Penh were able to extract a profit external to the conditional dealer exchanges.
Yet I am slightly troubled by Sicular’s term ‘peasants engaged in forms of hunting and gathering’. Firstly, the term hunting and gathering traditionally represents the appropriation of natural resources (Cook 1973, p. 38), however, the objects and things gathered on the dumpsite had past human labour power. The waste is therefore better represented as a raw material than a natural resource. Secondly, the waste pickers mainly produced commodities for monetary exchange rather than objects and things to consume in their homes, whereas it is traditionally the contrary with hunting and gathering groups. His use of the term ‘peasants’, however, is fitting in that the waste pickers’ work was centred upon household reproduction rather than profit, although as I have argued, small amounts of profit allowed the waste picker to reduce their working hours and enjoy more leisure time. Another similarity to peasants is how the waste pickers were obligated to exchange with an outside power holder, in their case their recycling dealers. Other studies of peasants have also shown how groups respond to exploitation through acts of resistance, whether hidden or covert (Adas 1981; Scott 1985).

It could be argued that the waste pickers’ manner of hiding foreign matter within their sacks and recyclables before sale was an act of resistance when confronted by the dealers’ faulty and inaccurate scales and the power imbalance within the relationship. It may be problematic to interpret it as resistance since there was a tacit understanding that this was part of the process of negotiating price in the case of low-valued commodities where weight was the determining factor rather than quality or price of the individual item. If the latter argument is acknowledged, and combined with the finding that both sides of the conditional exchange felt obligated and endured sacrifices, could these relations be more equal than otherwise imagined?

Following from this, there is a need to move away from terms which seek to position the waste pickers as, once again, vulnerable, destitute and exploited, to more positive labels that highlight their agency, intentionality and creativity. Labels such as ‘petty commodity producers’, ‘petty capitalists’ or ‘petty bourgeois’ more positively reflect an individualist and independent grassroots mode of production, while allowing for the recognition that they own very little capital. Hill Gates (1997) book on petty capitalists in China describes small-scale private production managed within family units, whereby the focus is on the production of commodities for the market. She describes this mode of production as dynamic, calculating and creative and often involving exchanges based on personal ties. There is something in the descriptions of Chinese petty capitalists in Gates’ book that resonates with the work and exchange practices of the waste pickers in Phnom Penh.

I had a sense that the waste pickers were proud of their earnings and relished the occasions when they found things of higher exchange value they could sell to speciality buyers. There was skill involved in spotting such things, particularly jewellery. Through smart exchanges with dealers and buyers, individuals were not only creating wealth that enabled them to buy food and things for their families but also other forms of value – moral values about being a good provider that were much admired by other residents in the village. In the next chapter I explore how consuming found things from the dumpsite created other forms of personal, social and spiritual positive and negative value for the waste pickers.
Every little bit of metal and plastic retrieved amounted to more potential positive value, and some waste pickers took the time to remove metal buckles and zippers from bags, clothing, belts and suitcases.
Plate 140

Waste pickers carry their surplus value home at the end of their work day or night – things found to use in the village and higher-grade metal objects to store and sell on their rest day.
Children regularly helped adults in the village sort through the metal pieces retrieved from the dumpsite and stored under their homes. The metal pieces were grouped accordingly: copper, non-magnetic and magnetic metals.
A few families living close to the dumpsite recycle sacks by firstly cleaning and drying them. Then, sewing the pieces together, they form larger sacks which are purchased by the dealers to carry the recyclables they buy from the waste pickers.
Other waste pickers also collected a variety of objects and things, from pillows (selling the filling inside to make more pillows), shoes (which were cleaned and repaired and sold at markets), leftover food (such as cooked rice, which was sold as animal feed) and paper (which was dried before it was sold to scrap traders).
Adults and children quickly gathered together whenever anyone in the village had something valuable to sell to a specialty buyer, like Ta Pi Roy, keen to learn of the positive value to be found on the dumpsite.
There was a real possibility of finding things of significant value within the waste, and specialty buyers, like Ta Pi Roy, pictured above, were able to make considerable profit buying rings, gems and other jewellery from the waste pickers.
By using hydrochloric or nitric acid, a specialty buyer was able to determine if even the smallest piece of jewellery found on the dumpsite was a precious metal, such as gold, or merely its imitation. The bubbles in the bottom-right photograph indicate the piece was made of copper, which had little value for the waste picker who found it.
It was not a secret that the dealers used mechanical spring weighing scales they had manually set between minus 2.5 and minus 10 kilograms, therefore clearly ‘weighted’ in their favour.
Plate 148

Mom's daughter, Thida (pictured above) did most of the buying while her mother stood guard over their new purchases until their workers had carried them to the truck. This meant that the process was rather slow and waste pickers often expressed their frustration at having to wait.
Waste pickers stacked two to three sacks of recyclables on top of one another during the exchange with Thida so that they did not lose as much money from the inaccuracy of the scales.
Plate 150

Employees of rice sack dealers empty and repack the rice sacks at the bottom of the mountain, eliminating any foreign matter hidden inside the sacks by the waste pickers in an attempt to increase the weight and get a better price.
Other employees of these dealers washed the plastic bags and rice sacks in two old wells at the edge of the dumpsite, where once there was a village.
Plate 152

Sacks of either clean or unclean plastic bags retrieved from the dumpsite often gathered on the edges waiting to be loaded onto trucks.
Other dealers weighed the pickers’ sacks next to their truck and loaded them straight on, re-sorting and cleaning the contents at another location.
Trucks used by dealers were generally poorly maintained and often overloaded with recyclables bought from the waste pickers.
Plate 155

Mom sold her plastic bags to this trader-exporter, who stored the bags at his home until there was enough to sell to a buyer either in Phnom Penh or in a neighbouring country.
Chay typically sat on a fold-out chair next to a large beach umbrella, and requested that her clients carry their metals and plastics to her to sell them.
Plate 157

The waste pickers slowly poured their recyclables into a basket in front of Chay’s feet while she quickly picked out anything foreign she didn’t want to buy.
The basket was then placed onto the scales before one of her employees emptied the contents into larger sacks.
Assisting Chay were young males she recruited from the many who worked as waste pickers.
Inside a large shed erected directly in front of Chay's home, other employees sorted the tin cans and hard plastic objects purchased from the waste pickers.
On a vacant block opposite her home, Chay and her family sort and store all the soft plastic bought from the waste pickers, once again employing male and female waste pickers to assist in the large task.
In areas of the city, residents discard their garbage at communal dumpsters, although the infrequency of the collection often results in rubbish overflowing and these areas often become sites of production for city pickers.
Garbage truck employees retrieve recyclables they find as they manually load the garbage into the trucks, storing the recyclables in baskets or sacks tied to the side. They split the earnings evenly among the team.
Plate 164

Small scrap traders, like those pictured above, operate throughout the city. They are of varying sizes and generally owned and operated by families in the front of their homes.
Rather than putting recyclables out for the municipality to collect, as is the case in Australia, in Phnom Penh, households and businesses instead sell their recyclables to cart-pullers who roam the streets. In a negotiated and often long-term arrangement, the cart-pullers borrow the carts as well as the finance to purchase the recyclables for that day from a scrap trader, on the condition that they return and sell what they have bought to the trader.
Scrap traders generally employ teenagers to help the cart-pullers unload and weigh their collections. The plastic bottles and aluminium cans bought by the cart-pullers are generally much cleaner than those collected by the waste pickers on the dumpsite and are exchanged at higher prices.
Family businesses in the capital clean bottles, removing labels, so they can be refilled again in local factories and sold in markets throughout the city.
At another site, family members and casual workers cut off labels from plastic bags used in garment factories before the bags are transported to be recycled.
Small-scale dealers and traders sell their metals to larger recycling depots. At one of the depots I visited, employees worked in teams to load trucks according to metal types.
Recycling depot trucks transport the metal to the nearest border crossing, in this case in the south-east of Cambodia, neighbouring Vietnam.
At the border zone between the two countries, the truck pulls over and is met by an empty truck arriving from Vietnam. After positioning the Vietnamese truck alongside the Cambodian truck, a group of local residents begin to transfer the metal from one to the other by hand in a process that takes over an hour.
Once empty, the Cambodian truck returns back to the recycling depot to be loaded again.
Chapter 4

Consumption and the creation of meaning

Introduction

Less than halfway into my fieldwork a new family moved into the village, a single mother, Maly, and six of her children. Maly grew up in a different rural village than most of the others but had known one of the families since she was young, Sarath, a motorbike taxi driver, and his wife, Romduol, a waste picker. Romduol had asked the head of the community if Maly could rent a recently vacated house on the communally rented land. Sarath borrowed money from a nearby moneylender on Maly’s behalf so she could rebuild the house, and Maly’s older teenage children started to work on the dumpsite each day to repay the loan. She was unable to work on the dumpsite herself having only recently given birth. The birth was complicated by a tragic series of events: she was forced to have a caesarean operation, which she could not afford, but a distant relative heard of her plight and offered to pay for the operation and look after her newborn until she regained her strength. When she moved to the village it had been more than three months since the birth and her relative had not returned her baby and refused to answer her calls, and she still suffered pain from the operation.

Soon after her arrival in the village, two aid groups offered to house and school two of Maly’s younger children, a boy aged ten and a girl aged nine. Maly’s youngest, a girl aged six, stayed with her during the day as her older children, Devi, a girl aged 16, and boys Samnang, aged 14, and Vichet, aged 13, began to work on the dumpsite with the assistance and teachings of Romduol. With all three teenagers working together, they were able to earn enough money to feed the family, as well as pay 10,000 riels each day to the moneylender. I remember Maly telling me how her oldest son, Samnang, typically earned less than his slightly younger brother, Vichet. ‘It’s because he always finds things,’ she said. She explained how Samnang was better at finding meat, vegetables and other food they could eat together and things they needed in their new home such as plates, knives, spoons, cups, pots and pans. I once saw him meticulously cleaning a belt he had found and later proudly wearing it around his waist holding up an ill-fitting pair of trousers he had found a few days earlier.

The ability to collect objects and things on the dumpsite enabled this troubled family to survive at a time when they had very little. It was one of only a small number of cases I witnessed when waste picking literally became a means of survival during a time of hardship and upheaval. Through their exchanges with Romduol’s dealers,
family was able to pay off the loan for the house in approximately six weeks. When Samnang and his brother and sister returned to the village with found things, such as food, equipment and clothing, this enabled their family to devote more of their cash income to paying back the loan, as well as establish their new home with the things they needed.

Samnang’s finds also drew the attention of other waste pickers in the village. On a number of occasions, I witnessed neighbours, both male and female waste pickers, stopping in front of Samnang’s home, interested in viewing his latest discovery. His mother would proudly pull out his most recent finds from inside their home and show them to neighbours who looked on with approval and admiration. Whether Samnang realised it or not, I believe he was helping his family foster important social relations with their new neighbours in the village. They were emulating core social norms, and at times rituals, surrounding the consumption of discarded matter that was unique to this community.

Until this point in the thesis, I have been examining the life of the waste pickers on the dumpsite from the perspective of exchange with the outside world. That was only one area in which the reclaimed materials from the dumpsite gained value. The dumpsite enabled the creation of commodities that were used for domestic consumption, such as food, clothing, toys and adornments. In a different sense the consumption of reclaimed materials provided an arena for value creation and the creation of social relationships within the community. Furthermore, it was in the pickers’ consumption of these reclaimed materials that they in many ways came to internally define themselves as a group.

Within this group, I consider why they consumed things, that is items with an identifiable and common form and function, in certain ways and the meaning of such acts. I then consider this meaning in two specific contexts: things that can be used to create positive social value through actions (exchange, gift) and things that can instead create negative value (anomalies). Positive value is discussed in the context of examples of sharing food reclaimed on the dumpsite and negative value is explored through the events that surround the windfall discovery of things such as gold jewellery and money. The purpose of this chapter is to further contextualise the manner in which pickers transformed the waste in ways that produced both material benefit but also the potential to produce non-material losses.

**Acts of consuming discarded things**

Within the discarded garbage on the dumpsite there was an abundance of things to be found with potential use-value. The waste pickers often collected all types of clothes, shoes and fashion accessories, including earrings, bracelets, hats, watches and belts. They also found food, cooking equipment and
materials to maintain their homes. Children played with toys from the dumpsite, teenagers sat sharing audio devices (digital audio players with headphones) they had found and women tested found cosmetics products, make-up and nail polish, on each other.

One day I saw Sothy wearing a striking bracelet. She told me she had found it on the dumpsite and proudly announced it was from India. She added:

I saw someone sell this kind of bracelet at Stueng Mean Chey Market for 20,000 riels [US$5.00].

These types of found things were sometimes exchanged as gifts to immediate family members or with neighbours. As everyone in the community was a waste picker, using or gifting found things from the dumpsite carried no stigma. In fact the opposite was the case. Showcasing a particularly good find was like coming back from a shopping day with bargains. One afternoon, as Chenda modelled a found pair of shoes around the village, in jest, Dara asked her where she got her new shoes. Chenda’s playful reply was, ‘Phsar Lerr [from the market on top, on top being a reference to the dumpsite].’

At other times, things were collected and worn as identity markers. In Photoessay 1, portraits of waste pickers at home or on the dumpsite show how found clothing was worn as symbols of personality, either expressions of individuality or cultural belonging. Sometimes clothing and accessories were collected because they were strikingly different and worn in jest to elicit some laughs and then discarded again (the picker in the image at left parades the dumpsite in a fur coat despite the heat and humidity).

On the whole, stores at local markets catered to the demographic of the area. Reflecting their limited buying power, the women in the village said that the goods at the local market were often cheap and of low quality. Discarded things within the waste came from across the city, including middle and high-income areas, and included things originally purchased from a wider range of stores. Showing me some lingerie she had found, Bonavy explained:

Things from the dumpsite are often better quality than things I can buy from the local market.

As a consequence, the dumpsite gave the waste pickers the chance to use things that were out of the ordinary or otherwise unavailable to them and, on occasion to consume things that were usually out of their price range. An example of this was when the waste pickers found expensive brands of food or beverages on the dumpsite. When I was away for a few days I was told on returning about
three trucks that had dumped full bottles of wine spritzer. Samphou, my research assistant at the time, said ‘the women purchased ice so they could enjoy the wine cold.’ On another occasion, one truck dumped a load of small packets of chips, and another truck dumped chocolate bars, presumably from a factory. Screams of joy were heard from the children as they rummaged through the piles to eat as much as they could gather.

Most of the found meat that was brought back to the village included uncooked pieces of pork, chicken or fish, or the remains of chickens, cats and dogs. I witnessed how social norms about sharing within or between families depended on the quantity of meat or food that was found. If a small quantity of meat was found it was typically shared only within the family home, thereby reducing the cost of the next meal. If a larger quantity of meat, or any food for that matter, was found, it was loosely shared with other families in the village. During fieldwork I found no pattern in the distribution of food that followed kinship rules or other hierarchies; found food was simply shared among the relatively small population within the village when abundant.

Some families took advantage of the food they found to treat themselves or their family members. One day Chenda found approximately a kilogram of uncooked pork meat. She grilled five pieces of the pork on meshed wire over a clay bucket stove using pieces of wood found on the dumpsite. The rest of the pork she placed on a plate and sat it on her roof to dry and consume in the days to come. As she no longer needed to buy meat from the local seller or passing merchant, she instead bought a warm can of beer for her father. I watched as her mother reached for a purple plastic bag hanging on the wall and carefully pulled out two beer glasses they had found on the dumpsite. Her father poured the beer into the two glasses and handed one to Chenda before they ate the pork together. On another day, her brother found a bag of uncooked chicken feet. He fried the meat with lots of salt and spices and later shared the meal with two neighbours while they drank rice wine together. I recorded many other examples of eating found meat and other food from the dumpsite in my field notes, such as turtle, snake, small birds, fish, soft drinks, candy, bread, rice, all different types of vegetables and fruits and even a bag of fried bananas that were still hot when it was found.

Sometimes the meat smelled bad, and sometimes the food appeared spoiled, but the villagers reassured me that they knew how to prepare the food so they did not become ill. Chenda said:

Sometimes the quality of the meat is low but we mix it with lots of salt and then fry it.

As I watched Chenda’s father hand out slices of found oranges to three of his grandchildren one day, I wondered if the found food provided the villagers with a
variety in diet that they would not normally have been inclined to purchase themselves. When I expressed concern about the possibility of becoming ill from eating spoiled food, they said to me, time and again, ‘We don’t get sick.’

After some time on the dumpsite, I felt I understood a little better the joy the waste pickers experienced when they found something they could use. From their perspective, it was like having a small windfall, even if in most situations it was only modest elation. I likened it to my own feelings of excitement when receiving something for free, an often short-lived rush of happiness (positive value). In the village, things found and worn one day were often replaced by something else soon after and in so many examples the re-use of the thing was brief, with it discarded again seemingly without thought or regret (another added benefit or form of positive value). Taken as a whole, the villagers were acting upon the same types of things and in the same manner as the wider urban Cambodian society, except that many of these things had been found on the dumpsite rather than purchased at a store or market.

Consuming (wearing, eating, using, imbibing) things discarded by the residents of the city, including those of the middle and upper classes, allowed pickers to be them (the other) while retaining themselves: to mimic but to retain their difference. As a group they were subverting wider Cambodian social norms regarding the avoidance of waste and creating alternative values and value of waste. The acceptance of such action thereby separated and distinguished their social totality. As a result, these practices of subversion acted to strengthen social relations between waste pickers living in the village.

Yet I found that overt displays in front of outsiders of these subversive consumption practices or for that matter wealth in general were frowned upon and discouraged by the members of the group. It was one of the pickers’ means of maintaining their community’s viability, a concept similarly explored by Munn in her study of Gawa, which I return to later in this chapter. For the moment, I argue that by consuming discarded matter found on the dumpsite, the villagers were engaging in acts to create positive value realised as material benefits, as well as defining themselves internally as a group. Their social totality enabled these forms of value to be created at the same time that the social totality was valued in its very practice (followed social norms).

Discarded things become instruments of social relations

One of the most prized foods found on the dumpsite was dog and cat meat. I wondered where these animals had come from: were they strays that had died on the

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36 There is of course a whole body of literature on mimicry in post-colonial studies. The subject population mimics the dress and actions of the coloniser in ritual events in an attempt to appropriate the power of the coloniser, and in some cases to mock it.

37 Anthropological literature on food (Fischler 1988) similarly notes its ability to act as a collective identity marker of distinction from others. Eating food that other groups consider inedible leads to the food both becoming symbolically valuable but also assimilates the diner into the group’s social norms.
By the end of my fieldwork, Maly’s teenage children were no longer working on the dumpsite. All except her youngest daughter were being schooled and most were also being housed by four different aid groups. Maly was proud that her children were doing well at school, although she was saddened that Samnang, who was boarding at one of the facilities, no longer wanted to visit his mother on the weekends. Maly did not need to work on the dumpsite as she was able to live off the aid groups’ monthly gifts of money and provisions, though she or one of her children would occasionally venture onto the dumpsite to do a day of picking to earn extra. I imagine this was also a way of continuing to be seen to engage in activities considered commonplace among the other villagers, and thereby feeling part of the group (as well as continuing to be eligible for support offered by aid groups).

By sharing things her children had found on the dumpsite with her neighbours, Maly slowly became trusted by the community again. Once again, acts upon waste were not merely a means of survival or even simply about reproduction. These acts were embedded in, and articulated with, the development of social relationships in the village, in both positive and negative ways. Furthermore, these acts internally and externally defined the group, again with positive and negative consequences. This was demonstrated in the previous example, whereby their peculiar reputation of consuming reclaimed food drew the attention of entrepreneurs and created positive value for both.

**Consumption of things not purposefully discarded**

The search for ‘treasure’ like the mobile phone Samnang found, or items of jewellery or even cash, was often laborious and unrewarding, yet had the positive value potential of a windfall in economic value as well as a redefining of one’s social identity and status among fellow waste pickers, which I explore in this section.

When Chenda and I collected together I often saw her and others pick up wallets and bags and check the pockets for money or other valuables that may have accidently been left inside by a forgetful owner. One day, after picking up a medium-sized suitcase, Chenda carefully checked all the pockets before walking over to a small fire someone had lit and gently laid the suitcase over it to burn away the plastic and fabric, later returning to retrieve the metal wire that remained. On one occasion I saw a female picker who had stumbled on a small pile of used wedding envelopes and I watched as she meticulously checked inside each envelope to see if any money had been mistakenly left behind.

On another day, in the late afternoon as the light disappeared over the horizon, Borin held up what looked to be a pile of money. On closer inspection in the dimming light, the money was fake, the kind often used in Chinese ancestor worship.
ceremonies (‘hell money’). ‘My heart!’ he exclaimed, smiling as he touched the left of his chest. ‘For a moment, I thought I had become a rich man,’ he added.

Others were similarly tricked by imitation jewellery. A woman collecting close to me one day showed me some bracelets and a ring she had found in a plastic bag along with a collection of discarded bathroom products. We went to meet with her nephew who had a small bottle of what he said was acid. Using an eye-dropper, he dabbed the bracelets and ring with the liquid. The spots fizzled revealing the jewellery to be made of imitation gold.

Knowing I would be interested for my research, the women in the village usually told me when they or one of their neighbours had found jewellery or other things of significant exchange value. One afternoon, Reaksa told me how Kunthea had found some silver jewellery and how she had sold it to Mrs Mao for 70,000 riels (US$17.50). She added:

I’m happy to hear that Kunthea found silver because she is one of the poorest in the village and she has many children to look after on her own.

On another day, Chenda said she had found an earring made from platinum and sold it to Ta Pi Roy for 30,000 riels (US$7.50).

Three months ago my nephew found white platinum that was worth $200.00 and the day before the election I found gold. I made 70,000 riels (US$17.50).

Found pieces of precious metal and gems provide an unexpected and irregular bonus to a picker’s regular earnings, usually under US$20.00, which was often used to pay off debts or enabled the waste picker to rest for a few days. I never spotted any jewellery of value myself. I guessed this was probably because I had not developed the skill of recognising such items within the mass of garbage, like Chenda and her peers could, who had collected over many years.

Whenever a waste picker found something of great exchange value on the dumpsite, such as jewellery or even money, news spread quickly to the village. During my fieldwork, I heard about a waste picker finding a gold ring worth US$300.00 and another who found a platinum bracelet worth US$400.00. On another occasion, Chenda was the one to relay the news to me:

Yesterday one family found a diamond necklace. Ta Pi Roy offered her $1500.00 for it but she kept it and went to sell it to someone else for $2200.00.

Another informant told me about his friend who had found a diamond ring a few years back. He added:
He paid off his debts and bought a motorbike. He still collects recycling today.

To me, these individuals were incredibly lucky to have found such treasure. Yet the waste pickers viewed these opportune events quite differently. One morning everyone was talking about a teenage girl who had found a bag with US$2000.00 in it. Sopheap's mother said:

After the girl found the money she gave it to her mother and then asked for $100.00 to share with her friends from the dumpsite. The girl's mother used to call her daughter bad names, but after she found the money she only uses good words with her now.

As the story was being told, Sothy came in and added that the teenage girl who found the money lives next door to one of her relatives. She said:

The mother went to buy a lot of fruit and they prayed together and they also went to the place in front of the palace to pray too. The mother took the girl to a monk to have her body cleaned. Today the family will celebrate a ceremony and invite monks to their house. They asked the monk to clean their bodies and pray, so that they don't have bad luck in the future.

Sopheap explained to me:

If we find something valuable at the dumpsite and we don’t pray then we will die. We believe that a spirit gave us the money or the gold.

She added:

If we find little things on the dumpsite we don’t need to pray and offer gifts to the spirits, but if we find a large amount of money or gold then we need to offer something to the spirits. If we don’t, then we could get sick or die. But it's only when we find something on the dumpsite. We don't need to offer anything when we find something on the street or if a rich person gives us money or when our family has success.

After all this conversation about finding money and gold, I went to work on the dumpsite and while I collected, I wondered why the spirits gave to some pickers and not others. When I returned back to the village before lunch I asked Sopheap about this.

It depends on the person’s past life, I believe all of the gold and money that I have found belonged to me in my past life, it was my property from my past life, I already owned it. If I did a good deed in my past life, then I might find gold in this life. This is what the monk told me.
She continued to talk about spirits.

If we find something on the dumpsite and it is very valuable we cannot keep it, we need to sell it. If we don't sell it then a problem will arise that will make us sell it. I believe that the valuable things that I find at the dumpsite I can't keep them because the spirits don't want us to keep them, we need to sell it and spend the money straight away. Just spend.

I asked others about this. Sina said:

Some people always did good acts in their past life. So in this present life they have a chance to collect gold.

Kunthea added:

If someone is lucky, it is not because their ancestors are giving them the gold. It depends on their past life and if they were good and gave offerings and held ceremonies. So in the present life they can have luck to collect their gold on the dumpsite.

Sothy used an example of a gold ring.

Sure, there are spirits who take care of the ring. Even if the spirit owns the ring, it isn't their wealth. The wealth doesn't belong to them. The wealth belongs to us. It's our luck and wealth from our past life because we did good deeds in our past life. This is our wealth.

Sothy continued:

Every day, I light an incense stick to try to find my property from my past life. But I'm not lucky. When I see someone find valuable things or money on the dumpsite, I want to find it too. But I'm not lucky. I didn't give alms, I didn't give my property to other people in my past life.

Interviews with many of the villagers confirmed similar beliefs; that if they found money or jewellery on the dumpsite it belonged to them in their past life. Some of my informants added that they must have offered the equivalent of the found thing in alms or gifts to the poor in their past life. This good deed returns to them in their ability to reclaim money or jewellery on the dumpsite in this life. Thereby, acts of gifting within self-other relations had the potential to create positive value for the actor in a future life. Similarly, ongoing acts of gifting with spirits and ancestors in this life creates positive value potential in the form of spiritual assistance.
Conversely, ignoring the actions of assistance by spirits and keeping the wealth would result in the creation of negative value, with the person or a family member becoming ill. The waste pickers believed that the excess of the wealth reclaimed must be followed by excess in spending and gifting. Such actions reduce the potential for negative value to be created.

There are two features of the above I wish to explore briefly: the apparent inconsistency between my informants’ Buddhist beliefs in reincarnation and their ideas regarding the supernatural, and Buddhist notions of asceticism versus their interest in wealth — both of which are not unique to this community but instead have been methodically explored by religious studies scholars working in Cambodia (see edited books compiled by Kent and Chandler 2008, and Marston and Guthrie 2004). In the wider Cambodian society, the religious practice of Theravada Buddhism is fused with a mixture of animism and Brahmanism and is often either called ‘syncretism’ or ‘synchronism’ (Marston and Guthrie 2004, p. 4). Consequently, belief in the supernatural is a fundamental aspect of religious practice in Cambodia, as is the special focus on the worship of mountains in which supernatural powers reside (Bertrand 2004, pp. 133, 166).

At the same time, their religious practices centre upon the Buddhist belief in reincarnation, the conviction that souls are reborn acquiring or losing merit in a cyclical process until they reach a complete detachment from the world, or nirvana (Keating 2012). Neal Keating (2012, p. 75), an anthropologist who has studied religious discourse in Cambodia related to land concessions, found that in everyday discourse acts of merit translate to status in the next life.

An example of this belief was evident during a conversation on reincarnation I had with two mothers in the village, Ravy and Kunthea, who both condemned their improper action or lack of positive transformative action in their past life for their lowly status in this present life. Kunthea said:

I was born into a poor family and at times I have not had money to feed my family. I think that maybe in my past life I didn’t make good in my life and I didn’t do ceremonies, so in this present life I am born into a poor family and will always have a difficult life for myself and my family.

Ravy said:

Some people who are born into rich families never did bad things in their past life and they always did good. So in this present life they are lucky to be born into a rich family. For me, the reason I was born into a poor family was because in my past life I never did something good. I never held ceremonies or went to the pagoda and offered food to the monks. And that is why I face difficulty in this life.
Kunthea added:

I haven’t made any mistakes that have made my life harder in this present life. But I think maybe I made a lot of mistakes in my past life. So in this present life I’m not lucky, I was born into a poor family and I have always faced a lot of difficulty in my life.

In this sense, gift giving in general (as well as those given specifically to spirits or ancestors) is an act of positive value transformation to create the potential of merit in current and future lives. This was also evident in Munn’s study of Gawa, where she found that acts within self-other relationships had the perceived capacity to expand or contract potential value further in other spaces and/or in other times for the actor, what she (1986, p. 9) termed as ‘intersubjective spacetime’. The Gawans, Munn (1986, p. 11) proposes, were concerned with ‘constructing a present that is experienced as pointing forward to later desired acts or material returns’. In the case of the waste pickers it is a future life, but in the Gawan case it is more directly convertible back into present rewards, though in both cases the spiritual dimension is part of the real world in which people live.

In a similar vein, the transformative action of gift giving by the waste pickers in a past life can be realised over ‘intersubjective spacetime’ as wealth returned in the form of money or jewellery on the dumpsite. Gift giving, however, requires resources to gift (that is forms of excess wealth). This relates to the second point I wish to discuss following scholar in cultural psychology Didier Bertrand (2004, p. 168), who writes:

…the desire for wealth and success in school exams, work, or social promotion … may seem contradictory to the Buddhist ideal of morality, asceticism, and inner spiritual development. But in Cambodia, where sacred words are used both to exorcise and to teach morality, the desire for material success and well-being is believed to be complementary to the Buddhist path.

Neal Keating argues that this connection between merit and wealth is only increasing in the more recent neoliberal economic period following the UNTAC-sponsored elections after the period of Vietnamese occupation. Keating (2012, p. 76) writes:

In the neoliberal Buddhism of the Khmer Riche, the postulates of reincarnation and merit are ritually recombined with that of the market to legitimate new inequalities and practices of domination. The acquisition of merit becomes imbricated with the acquisition of capital.

39 Munn’s theories derived from her fieldwork in Gawa have not only been influential within studies on value, but also anthropological inquiries related to understandings of time, a topic in which she subsequently published additional papers.
For my informants, who believed they were born poor and predestined to have a difficult life because of improper action in their past life, their present-day relations with spirits and ancestors was of vital importance. I heard how these supernatural beings could aid and assist the waste pickers, not only in finding wealth from a past life but also when they were ill, injured or facing a problematic circumstance. For example, when a member of the family became ill, a mother or father would ask ancestors for their assistance in curing the sickness, and would promise a gift in return when the family member regained their health.

For Bertrand (2004, p. 167), this overall praxis involving relations with the supernatural is an outcome of ordering processes in times of loss.

The role of these practices is to re-establish order amid the loss and separation at different individual, familial, and social levels through access to information that permits the individual to find underlying meaning and to reorganise disorder for the self and others.

Bertrand's emphasis on order and disorder has striking similarities with the religious studies work of Mary Douglas (1966) on ritual and pollution. Later I ponder Douglas' theory in relation to Munn's theories on value creation (as well as the theories of ownership outlined in the previous chapter) to explore how these incredible acts of finding jewellery or money on the dumpsite could be considered to be either a deadly curse or a sanctifying blessing. Below I present two corresponding yet poignant cases:

**A death caused by keeping wealth**

Towards the end of my fieldwork period, Thida, a 17-year-old female waste picker, was tragically killed on the dumpsite. Samphou hurriedly told me the news as soon as I met him in the early morning, perhaps less than two hours after the accident.

Cindy, Cindy, Thida died this morning. A cart tied to the top of a truck fell on top of her while she was picking. I heard that her collecting tool went into her eye and someone took it out and a lot of blood came out.

The next day I remember reading an article about the accident in the *Cambodia Daily* newspaper. Further to the details I had heard in the village and on the dumpsite, the article reported the distressing news that two private medical clinics close to the dumpsite refused to admit her because her family did not have money for treatment (Naren 2009).

Over the day, the villagers discussed reasons for the accident. Heng said:

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*For a sense of the complexity within spiritual healing practices, I refer you to the work by anthropologist Jean Langford (2009), studying such practices of families who have emigrated to the United States.*
There is a Buddha tree on the dumpsite and now the leaves have turned yellow.

Leakena explained to me:

I think the spirit that lives in the Buddha tree was angry and that is why she died. Every year the dealers hold a ceremony on the dumpsite to ask for safety and peace but this year no one did a ceremony.

She said that another man was injured in the same morning.

The truck cut off his big toe. I’m afraid of going to work on the dumpsite because two accidents have happened.

A few days later, Kunthea admitted that a fortune teller had warned her away from the dumpsite.

Before I left for the province I went to a fortune teller and the fortune teller told me not to go to the dumpsite because the evil spirits are looking for human spirits. When I came back from the province the villagers told me that Thida had died.

These were some of the many speculations to explain not the cause but the reason for her death. Some of my informants believed that a spirit or ancestor was upset because a gift of assistance had not been repaid. No one in the village discussed the individual risks they take or the danger they face each day on the dumpsite. Nor did the villagers discuss the actions of the private medical clinics that refused to treat her. Only a teenage mother did not blame the spirits. Instead, she suspected that the private rubbish collection company had killed Thida when its staff took her to the doctors, so they would not feel obligated to pay compensation for the remainder of her life.

The most common reason I heard, however, was that her sister had found a diamond a few weeks earlier and must have kept it or must not have offered something to the spirits. Either way, she had angered the spirits who in turn took Thida’s life. One such person who believed this was Sothy, who said:

Her sister collected a diamond, not her. Her sister found the diamond maybe less than one month ago. When her sister found a diamond she didn’t offer something to the spirits. And Thida was acting so strange the week before she died. She always decorated herself when she came to collect recycling on the dumpsite.
Kunthea had heard that it was Thida herself who had found the diamond and she had not sold it, which is why she died. She warned me again:

We believe that when we find a valuable thing on the dumpsite we have to sell it, but if we keep it we will die.

**A life respected by gifting wealth**

One month before the closure of the dumpsite, Heng found a diamond earring. It was early in the morning and Reaksa rushed to tell me. I found his wife, Nuon, who showed me the earring; it had ten small gems. The gems looked like diamonds but none of us could be sure. As his wife hailed a motorbike taxi driver, I asked if I could join them. Heng said he was too nervous to go, so Nuon, her cousin-in-law and I squashed onto the back of a motorbike as the driver started the engine. I assumed we would head to a market. Instead, I was caught by surprise when the motorbike turned into the grounds of a nearby pagoda. Reaksa and Nuon asked to see a monk in residence. We waited nervously for him to finish meeting with others. When it was our turn, we sat on the ground surrounding the monk. Nuon explained how her husband had found the earring and asked for the monk’s help to sell it. The monk picked up his mobile phone and made some calls. Next he asked for the earring and said he was going to a market to show it to his contact and find out if the diamonds were real. The monk hailed a motorbike taxi and off he went with the earring. We waited for over an hour. When he returned the monk said they were indeed diamonds and he could sell the earring for US$500.00. When Nuon agreed to this, the monk went to a room behind us and came out with five US$100.00 notes. Nuon, not ever seeing a $100.00 note before, asked how much it was worth. She asked the monk to change one of the $100.00 notes into small change and later gave the monk 20,000 riels (US$5.00) for his assistance.

On our return back to the village, Nuon told me not to tell the villagers how much the earring was worth; ‘Tell them I sold it for $200.00,’ she said. Heng was very happy to hear the news and everyone was keen to find out how much money they had made. I wondered if they would make an offering to the spirits of the dumpsite. I watched their movements closely for the remainder of the day. In the late afternoon, I was asked to accompany a villager to help them seek medical care at a free local clinic. The clinic was in a rented room directly facing the hill of the dumpsite. As I waited for the doctor to arrive, I saw Heng walking up the hill carrying a weighed down plastic bag.

> I knew the doctor and the villagers always thought he gave them more medicine if I corroborated their claims of ailments.
Excited, I ran up to follow him and arrived just as he was placing a whole uncooked chicken on a plate on the ground. He held three incense sticks and stuck them into the ground next to the chicken before lighting them and I took some photographs before leaving him in peace to make his respects to the spirits. Later I saw his younger brother retrieve the chicken and take it back to the village.

Heng and Nuon left for the province the next day and when they returned a week later their lives remained largely as they were before finding the diamond earring. Heng said he spent the money on repairing his parents' home in the province. He continued to work on the dumpsite.

In my view, both cases highlight the importance of principles of egalitarianism for the community of waste pickers, as well as how prestige and status was mediated by acts of morality, not by accumulation or displays of wealth.42

For example, by conforming to and actioning pre-established customs and rituals, Heng ended up with little additional wealth as a result of finding the diamond earring, yet his status in the village rose. As the gold and diamonds were a symbol of his wealth and good deeds in his past life, the event symbolised a revaluing of his identity and status in his previous life. Where before his past life was representative of negative action, this event instead re-imagined actions in his past life more positively. Moreover, that a spirit of the dumpsite was willing to help Heng find his past wealth also meant that in his current life he has positive relationships with spirits and ancestors and that he was worthy of their assistance. Finally, that he gifted the wealth to his parents was another social act symbolising virtue.43

On the other hand, the death of Thida was understood by many to symbolise the anger of spirits who had been wronged by the withholding of wealth, either by Thida or her sister, or by the dealers of the dumpsite who did not perform a ceremony. Furthermore, Thida was seen to be acting 'so strange' by 'decorating herself' – an act of displaying wealth that did not fit within the norms of the community. In the next section, I explore further why actions involving the claim on found money and jewellery came to be a perilous measure of morality within the waste pickers' social world.

Discussion

As I stood on the dumpsite one day taking everything in, I thought about my pre-fieldwork reading. I couldn’t help but ponder Mary Douglas' (1966) observations on

42 This was unlike the trend amongst the Khmer Riche (Keating 2012).
43 I imagine that these actions of gifting also meant that feelings of jealousy and resentment towards the person who made the discovery were instead replaced by feelings of respect and admiration, thereby quelling any discord.
pollution. I thought to myself, 'If dirt or waste is what is considered matter out of place in most environments (as argued by Douglas) then what is out of place here?' It obviously wasn't dirt or waste. What struck me first was the people were seemingly out of place; through my (subjective) lens they were juxtaposed against a background of rotting garbage and massive trucks billowing smoke. Their presence seemed anomalous, yet I had learned of the waste pickers' systems and norms on the dumpsite that aimed to protect and provide equal opportunity to those who chose to work there. I had also witnessed the waste pickers themselves strongly defending their right to be there. Even after Thida’s death, and I imagine the numerous other deaths, the waste pickers never questioned their place on the dumpsite.

Next I thought about the valuable things found on the dumpsite. It is hard to imagine that the money and jewellery found by the waste pickers were ever meant to be waste at all, rather matter misplaced. I expect these things were lost or discarded by accident, the spatial bond to its previous owner severed unexpectedly and without their consent. Perhaps this is an apparent inversion of Douglas' theory. For on the dumpsite, it was the most expensive of things, in this case, money and jewellery, that were not abandoned by previous owners and therefore considered 'matter out of place', an anomaly that requires ordering. On closer reading of her text, I realised that the practices and beliefs of the waste pickers on the dumpsite and in the village more closely reflected an extension of her thesis, for as she argued, these anomalies (money and jewellery) or matter out of place were similarly considered dangerous and potentially polluting. Her theory provides an understanding as to why, in many instances, Buddhist monks were called upon to perform acts of purification after a person had found something of immense value, as well as their roles in acting as the interface with the formal economy (wider Cambodian society). Both roles provided forms of protection for the waste pickers from possible danger or repercussion.

In addition, Douglas (1966, p. 38) writes:

There are several ways of treating anomalies. Negatively, we can just ignore, just not perceive them or perceiving we can condemn. Positively we can deliberately confront the anomaly and try to create a new pattern of reality in which it has a place.

On the dumpsite, I found that anomalies such as money and jewellery were negotiated/confronted socially through the adaptation of wider Cambodian religious beliefs in Buddhism, animism and Brahmanism. Such beliefs changed the social relations of these things, from being the misplaced possessions of anonymous individuals or groups to become a socially recognised possession from the finder's past life. An interesting yet tangential comparison can also be made with the work on inalienable possessions within theoretical discussions of the gift. In expanding Marcel Mauss' theories on gifts, Chris Gregory (1982) proposes that within gift economies, objects are inalienated from the givers, they are not disowned. Similarly, Annette Weiner (1992) argued of the power of inalienable possessions which often have a
cumulative identity through multiple owners, in which case purification becomes a way of disengaging it from the object’s past and appropriating it.

In Chapter 2 I explored the importance of ownership and acts of possession and reclamation within the production processes on the dumpsite. I detailed how the organisation of production was predicated on the idea that the objects and things the waste pickers claimed were previously abandoned and thereby considered a common resource. This right to reclaim and possess was based on moral norms; they were not, however, prescribed by Cambodian law. This foundation, while fundamentally moral in nature, becomes unstable when the things they reclaimed and possessed could be socially considered to be the property of others. From this moral ambiguity, cultural logic may determine that any economic value obtained from the reclamation of such things should be given away or spent with haste; the money becomes symbolically polluted and contaminating (Parry and Bloch 1989, p. 23). In the village and on the dumpsite the wealth was considered morally problematic, but by gifting it to his parents, Heng was able to subvert any negative potentiality into positive outcomes, ultimately the revaluing of his own self in the eyes of others in the community. It was yet another example of the waste pickers’ determination to transform waste, and all its negative connotations and possibilities, into positive value potential.

In using the binary opposition of positive and negative, Munn (1986, p. 269) states that these are not always representative of the potency of actions, but at times they are ‘intrinsically moralistic’. Munn (1986, p. 271) argues that such moral binaries are processes of ordering, of encouraging members in a social totality to exercise their ‘will’ in the interests of the ‘viability of a given social order’. The viability of the waste pickers’ continued ability to work on the dumpsite in a way rested on the classification of their actions by those external to the community as the re-use of abandoned things as opposed to the notion of their theft of misplaced possessions – therefore being perceived as moral as opposed to immoral. At the same time, it seemed that outward displays of wealth also threatened this viability.

In the next chapter I explore how the waste pickers acted to encourage others, external to their social world, to believe they were the poorest of the poor in the city, forced to work with waste as a survival mechanism. While in Munn’s study the Gawans were concerned with acquiring fame, status and honour within the surrounding islands, the actions of the waste pickers at Stueng Mean Chey, however, perpetuated their external representations as poor, lacking and deprived. By being perceived to be in a state of impoverishment by the wider Khmer society, they were more likely to be pitied rather than the other perception commonly held, which degraded the waste pickers to the status of inhuman. In my eyes, both labels were unnecessarily negative considering the positive aspects of their work: the amount of money they were able to earn, the social uses they made of found things and the overall benefits of their recycling practices for the environment.
This series of mainly triptychs is an exploration of family routines in the village. Some are time sequences, in which three consecutive photographs taken in succession sit side-by-side, while others are grouped together by theme, usually everyday practices such as cooking or categories of familiar material objects.

As I discuss in Chapter 1, the village was distinct in Stueng Mean Chey primarily due to its communal leasing arrangement with a private landowner. Each family rented a two-meter by three-meter plot of land for 10,000 riels (US$2.50) per month and remained responsible for their own shelter. While in an urban area, the lease lacked basic facilities, such as water, power and sewerage. Visibly, it was the poorest settlement within the wider community, with most of the other plots of land being smaller and owner-occupied, like that of Sopheap’s family’s home.

The photoessay begins by looking out the door of Sopheap’s house on a rainy day. The ground-floor space of her home was a common area of congregation, particularly for the children of the village, and more so during the days of unrelenting rain during the wet season, as seen in Plate 173. Although Sopheap was not the designated community leader, she had all the hallmarks of a benevolent matriarch — consistently kind, gracious and helpful to the families living in the smaller stilt homes directly opposite. As her home was surrounded by a tall brick fence with a heavy gate (glimpses of which can be found in Plates 178, 181 and 217), families stored their bicycles in her home at night and often left their valuables with her for safekeeping when they went for a trip to their homeland.

The composition of the community changed over the duration of my fieldwork. Some families moved in and others out, and even among the core group of residents only a few still had their original home when I bade them farewell. Some families were forced to flee the village after disagreements with neighbours, most often after a violent confrontation. Another couple left after they discovered they had been robbed of their life savings, a gold necklace worth more than US$2000.00. The abandoned homes either fell down as people reclaimed bits for their own repairs or were re-inhabited after the chief offered the vacant homes and land to families within the community or new families with close ties to existing residents. The change in composition is not immediately apparent in the images,
which were taken over the course of my fieldwork, though the impermanence of their homes and therefore the potential transience of their lifestyle is clear.

Plates 174–80 show a range of entertainment practices: children gathering together to watch television, playing card and board games indoors during the wet season, and taking over communal outside spaces in the dry season. Women often gathered together to share magazines found on the dumpsite. The ease of relations within and between families was evident in the practical jokes and playful banter between village members, as seen in Plate 181.

Plates 182–91 explore the daily routines of preparing meals, cleaning dishes and washing clothes, clearly showing a gendered division of labour. Once again, these photographs depict a range of material things reclaimed from the dumpsite for use in daily life, from the equipment needed to prepare meals such as pots, pans and strainers to those needed to serve such as bowls and cutlery. Wood collected from the dumpsite was often used as fuel in clay stoves, and as seen in Plates 185–7, homes were built to allow for the ventilation of smoke (Plate 184). In Plate 188, this family had taken over an abandoned neighbouring plot to build a temporary, outdoor kitchen, offering additional ventilation and space to prepare meals. Over the period of my fieldwork, some families had upgraded their clay stoves to single-burner butane stoves, as seen in Plate 187. These photographs also show the range of meats, fish and fresh greens the families consumed, purchased from roaming sellers or nearby stores, or found on the dumpsite. Plate 189 shows how families often ate meals together, with mothers feeding and tending to their younger children and Plates 190 and 191 show how the women used tubs to clean up after meals and wash clothes.

Plates 192–5 illustrate the processes of maintaining their homes, predominantly the role of the men in the village, but often with the assistance of the women. Simple tools were used, as were recycled pieces of wood. In one instance, the men of the village gathered together to move one of the homes when a piece of land became vacant.

Next, Plates 196–8 briefly show common grooming practices, such as men cutting hair and women removing lice. Plates 199–202 then follow the women and children as they leave the village, showing how it is partly bounded by brick fences. In Plate 200 I show a sample of homes in the vicinity of my informants, many of which are owned or rented by fellow waste pickers. Nearby shops sold a range of fresh and dry ingredients or alternatively pre-prepared meals, as well as a range of snacks, desserts and seasonal fruit. The following plates examine
material things from the dumpsite and used in the homes of the villagers, including photographs, radios, clocks and calendars, as well as electronic devices, shoes, bags, clothes and small suitcases.

Plates 211 and 212 depict a teenage couple shortly after the birth of their first son, and as he grows during my fieldwork period. The photoessay also shows children as they get ready for school and explores moments in which pickers have sought medical supplies from aid groups as well as traditional healers. Plate 217 shows instances during which monks visited the village seeking alms and times when the villagers dressed in their finest clothes to cross the dumpsite to visit the nearest temple on spiritually significant days of the year.

Overall, the photoessay shows the intimacy and familiarity of relationships within and between families, the variety of things found on the dumpsite and used within their homes and to some extent the ordinariness of everyday life in the village. I end with two triptychs in an attempt to encapsulate both the ordinary and extraordinary aspects of things from the dumpsite in their lives. The brightness of the yellow flowers reclaimed and given to the young boy to play with in Plate 280 is in juxtaposition to the dullness of his surroundings, showing the ordinary potential of wasted material things to fascinate and prove positive value. While the ring held by the hands of a woman clearly having laboured on the dumpsite in Plate 220 represents the most extraordinary of positive value potential of waste, the boy’s outreached hand symbolises the danger of such anomalies to the community.
Chapter 5

Wealth redistribution and the creation of difference

Introduction

Chenda was the first to speak up when I asked how the wider Cambodian society perceived waste pickers.

One day, I was standing near a woman and she said, 'You smell bad so you should stand far away from me.' When I heard this, I felt so angry with that woman. But I didn't say anything because, what could I say, my clothes smelled bad.

I asked the others who had joined the focus group discussion if they had any other stories to share. Once again, Chenda, in her own way, spoke for the group:

Rich people call us minoo toak teib [swine people]. But according to the law they should consider that the waste pickers collect recycling with their own energy. We don’t steal from anyone. We are good people.

During the conversation members of the group retold stories of being shamed, compared to animals or, in their words, 'looked down on' by others as being 'not good'. They told of how people regarded them as immoral. During a different focus group discussion on the topic of human rights, held later in my fieldwork, I noted that Chenda once again raised the topic.

For me, I want to get one more [human] right. I want to be protected from those who always look down on me. I want to say to those people, 'You don't have the right to make me feel ashamed and look down on me because I have the right to work hard for my family, even if I work on the dumpsite.'

My field notes record that other women sitting around the audio recorder responded with nods affirming Chenda’s representation.

In this chapter, I explore the continuous tensions within the social totality of the waste pickers as value was created and destroyed during intersubjective experiences with others. These intersubjective experiences comprised everyday interactions with fellow urban residents from outside the picker community (such as people seeking to attain merit), as well as encounters with people who are clearly outsiders (such as foreign tourists). I focus on how they each distinguish themselves (create meaning) in
the presence of the other, especially in the context of gift exchange. The valuation of each other that occurs between outsiders and pickers can in some cases produce positive exchanges through which both gain material and non-material benefits. More specifically I provide detailed accounts of the frequently ambiguous exchange relationship between pickers and aid groups, and how their somewhat needless symbiosis manifested distinctions that sometimes produced unfortunate consequences. These examples reveal how the processes of value creation on the dumpsite and within the social world of the waste picker were relatively autonomous. While these processes articulated closely with aspects of other people's lives, they also intersect other value-creation processes operating in the wider national and international domain. The purpose of this chapter is to analyse the effect of these disarticulated and intersubjective experiences as they relate to identity formation among waste pickers. I frame the analysis within the parameters of gift exchange, for it is within this frame that much of this intersubjective experience occurs.

I begin by exploring the ways in which waste picker identity and values are perceived, interpreted and challenged by outsiders within processes of disarticulation. The waste pickers believed members of the wider Khmer society viewed them as having lesser value and felt the wider society dehumanised them. I argue that waste, and its stench, is a sense-provoking sign that was used by non-pickers to exaggerate the difference between themselves and the waste pickers. As the space in which the waste pickers lived and worked was often visited by aid group personnel, foreign tourists, local Buddhists and journalists, I also explore the encounters between waste pickers and these others who came into their world (that is the village and dumpsite). Some of these individuals felt empathy or pity towards the waste pickers, which when acted upon in exchanges created distinctions beyond what I witnessed everyday. This sometimes led them to produce another distorted collective identity, that of being impoverished. Through examples, I explore the ways in which the waste pickers used the pity of outsiders to attract and elicit free gifts, and in so doing turn a negative value-creation process into a positive return.

I then detail my findings and analysis of the waste pickers' relationships with aid groups. I present data on the gifts offered and received in the village and problematise the ways in which the gift-giving by aid groups was uncoordinated and led to inequitable (re)distribution of aid gifts among families. I found that although the gifts were often wrapped in conditions and obligations, the waste pickers negotiated their way around the rules of exchange. In so doing, I highlight how their resilience and unwillingness to let go of their own values is an act of agency (once again) calculated to regain balance in relationships that were inherently unbalanced. Finally, in considering how others interact with the waste pickers I show something more of the strength of their sociality as it accommodates, transforms and dissembles the values of others.

44 In this thesis, I use the term 'aid group' to describe not-for-profit and non-government organisations that are focused on humanitarian aid (relieving suffering) and development aid (alleviating poverty).
45 In the term 'gift' I also include non-material forms or services such as education programs.
Waste as stigmata

Chenda and the other villagers’ experiences of feeling shamed are mirrored in much of the waste picker stories documented in empirical research throughout the world (Beall 2006; Chikarmane and Narayan 2005, 2009; Gauley 1999; Huysman 1994; Medina 1997, 2005, 2007; Samson 2009, 2011). The research shows that waste pickers are commonly stigmatised by the wider society in which they live regardless of whether the activity of informal sector recycling collection on a dumpsite, or within the city, is deemed legal or illegal by local authorities. Furthermore, waste pickers often come from marginalised groups such as ethnic or religious minorities, providing additional grounds for their stigmatisation by others. This research further shows that waste pickers are typically victims of abuse, ridicule and discrimination, and are often perceived as a social threat, both as carriers of disease and as perpetrators of crimes.

The pickers contact with waste constitutes a powerful point of differentiation between them and outsiders. Within the anthropology of waste, discourse has focused on the cultural and social associations with waste, not only as a contaminant but as a social taboo, positing stigmatisation of waste pickers as a consequence of them being transgressors of moral norms and at odds or disrupting their own value-creation processes (Douglas 1966; Hawkins 2006; Reno 2009). Similarly, within the anthropology of the senses, bad smells can be considered to destabilise or destroy social order (Bubandt 1998).46

Most notable within such discourses is the work of Mary Douglas (1966) (see previous chapter) who argued that notions of purity are not only used to demarcate things and objects but are also used to differentiate between, and sometimes discriminate against, people. Douglas (1966, p.4) wrote:

Ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created.

Within her examination of purity, Douglas (1966, p. 38) argued that it is the intersubjective experiences of groups that create social classifications. Perceptions of what conditions create order and stability are created within these groups. For the stigmata is not within persons or bodies, as writers on stigma Crocker, Major and Steele (1988) similarly argue, but within the social context that defines it as devalued.

46 The waste pickers in Stueng Mean Chey were not from a minority group, although they were predominately rural in-migrants. I elaborate on this distinction further below.
47 Nils Bubandt’s ethnography of odour in Eastern Indonesia (1998) expands on the semantics of smell, and is of particular relevance to this thesis. Similar to the pickers, Bubandt found that bad smells while unwanted were a necessary part of everyday life and represented the ambiguous nature of moral values.
In sociologist Erving Goffman’s book *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*, Goffman (1963, p.3) describes stigma as an attribute that is deeply discrediting, causing the individual to be reduced ‘from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one’. In Chenda’s case, when members of the wider Khmer society had called her ‘*mín尾 toak teih*’ she was not only reduced from a whole and usual person but downgraded to the status of animal. Goffman (1963, p. 19) argues that once a discrediting attribute becomes known or apparent it results in the spoiling of the person’s otherwise normal identity. It is this spoiling of waste picker identity within the broader Cambodian society that causes individuals and the group to be devalued.

In his work, Goffman (1963, p.4) describes three types of stigmas or ‘deviant conditions’: bodily afflictions, character flaws and those based on race, ethnicity, or religion. Although waste pickers in other countries may be members of a minority group, this was not the case for the waste pickers at Stueng Mean Chey. Instead, I argue that the waste that pickers handled became the discrediting attribute, both in terms of a bodily affliction and a character flaw. This is illustrated in Chenda’s words as she believed others devalued her because they thought she was morally flawed as a transgressor through association with their waste, and physically afflicted by the traces of waste on her body (and the stench this waste emitted). Chenda had transgressed societal rules of purity, which requires the disposal (externalisation) of rubbish (or masking through perfume, etc.), thereby fouling both the wider society’s cleaning and value processes and herself, and consequently causing her categorisation as morally flawed and physically afflicted.

The feelings of disgust and suspicion experienced by outsiders towards the waste pickers were, I posit, types of ‘subjective states’ (as labelled by Munn) created by the pickers’ actions upon waste on the dumpsite. As I have summarised (see Introduction and Chapter 2), Munn theorised that value is created through action within sociocultural processes involving self-other relations. These self-other relations are to a greater or lesser extent ‘intersubjective’ (that is involving the subjective states of participants). Munn (1986, p. 16) writes:

> ... the social relations formed in any mode of spacetime are to be understood as involving relations between the subjectivities of actors. Certain subjective states such as consent, refusal, happiness, or anger... may be crucial to the value of different spacetimes. In these respects, value transformations involve transformations of subjective states (emphasis added).

So while positive value was being created by the waste pickers’ actions within their social world, as I have shown in previous chapters, the subjective states of outsiders, where waste represents negative value, instead contested the creation of positive value, ultimately leading to processes of disarticulation.

Munn (1986, p. 16) described crediting and discrediting attributes as ‘qualisigns’,
similarly positing that these are ‘a condensed marking’ signifying positive or negative value created from action. This could be is aligned to Goffman’s use of the term ‘attribute’. Moreover, Munn argues that in acting in the world, actors (that is pickers and those others they interact with) also create parts of their identity.

Munn (1986, p. 11) writes:

… not only do the agents produce their world in a particular form, but they may also be seen as producing themselves or aspects of themselves in the same process.

By ignoring societal norms and value-creation processes regarding purification and morality, the waste pickers, in effect, created this aspect of their identity. Yet their actions on the dumpsite also created an alternative identity. I also found that not everybody shared the same response of disgust or fear towards the waste pickers.

**Intersubjectivity on the dumpsite**

During my many hours of apprenticeship, I was faced with a fairly regular procession of visitors to the dumpsite, mostly foreign tourists. There was at least one group every week, often many more. Prior to my fieldwork in 2008 I had come across numerous blogs written by travellers encouraging others to visit the dumpsite. An example of the type of descriptions written by travel writers and bloggers includes this one by Jeff Koyen (2006, para. 1–3) on the urban travel blog Gridskipper:

> For a glimpse into the true lives of Phnom Penh’s poorest, take a tuk-tuk to the Stung Meanchay garbage dump, where several hundred people survive on society’s leftovers … Visiting sites of human misery is a tricky thing. On one hand, conscientious travellers can help by documenting the plights of the poor. On the other hand, ungodly hellholes such as Stung Meanchey can become day-tripper tourist attractions … Done right, a few hours here can be rewarding and genuinely helpful. Don’t just bring your camera; fill your tuk-tuk with as much fresh fruit and bottled water as possible. The kids will clamor for the former, the parents for the latter.

Koyen was somewhat correct in noting that the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite had become one of the city’s tourist attractions. Prior to its closure in 2009, Stueng Mean Chey was an option on tourist itineraries along with the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, a former torture and detention centre during the reign of the Khmer Rouge, and the Killing Fields, a memorial site and mass grave from the same period.

Famous Americans also reportedly visited the dumpsite. A newspaper article on a 2008 visit by US Senator John McCain’s wife quoted an aid worker saying, ‘She even hugged some of them, regardless of their dirty clothes’ (Taiwan Times 2008). Meg
Ryan (2009, para. 4) also wrote an article published in *Eilke* magazine detailing her visit and unfortunate clothing faux pas:

I am standing here in open-toed sandals, and at this very moment I am contracting a disease not yet known to man, a hybrid medical horror. Once I die from it, it will bear my name. It will be what I’m remembered for, my true legacy. Something will finally trump that scene in *When Harry Met Sally*.

Unfortunately I was not on the dumpsite when Cindy McCain or Meg Ryan visited the site, and although I did not conduct detailed interviews or focus groups with visitors and tourists to the dumpsite, I often approached visitors and had brief conversations with them. During such conversations, I found many were struck by the conditions in which the waste pickers worked. In a similar way to Meg Ryan, they were shocked by the surroundings, but for the most part they did not look away with disgust. Instead, they often expressed their shock at witnessing, and their empathy for, the waste pickers at work, making comments and asking questions such as: ‘It breaks my heart to see people this way;’ and ‘[i]s there anyone helping them?’

Earlier in this chapter, I described how Chenda told me the manner in which members of the wider Khmer society had ‘looked down’ on them. But on another occasion while we were sitting among a group she also admitted that this was not the case for everybody. She said:

Some people who visit the waste pickers on the dumpsite feel pity for us.48

Leakena added:

I like it when people feel pity for me because then they care about me and my situation, and they might help me.

Indeed they did. I witnessed tourists giving out money to waste pickers on the dumpsite and many even returned with gifts of food, clothing and medicine. A Korean tourist came back three times to distribute large quantities of rice and meat to families. Through his interpreter he told me how he had cried when he saw the waste pickers working on the dumpsite. Other visitors I spoke to vowed to support one of the many organisations that had been set up to provide aid to waste-picking families. In these brief experiences, I suggest that the tourists were empathising with the waste pickers rather than dehumanising them.

48 Chenda and the other villagers often used the Khmer word *amut* which when translated can be either ‘pity’ or ‘compassion’, but when I asked my research assistant to explore the difference in the English terms, the villagers said that ‘pity’ was closer to what they meant in this case.
I was collecting beside Leakena one day as a group of tourists arrived with a local tour guide. The guide said he was with a travel company who had recently added the dumpsite to their list of destinations during a half- or full-day tour in the city. Proudly, he told me there were seven different nationalities within the group of 18 tourists he had brought to the dumpsite. Back at her home later that day I asked Leakena how she felt when tourists were looking at her and the other waste pickers:

If they come and give us some money or food, then it’s okay, they feel pity for us.

I asked her why she would want people to feel pity for the waste pickers. Perhaps a little cynically, I wondered if it was because of the gifts they received. Erasing my doubts, she explained simply:

If they come and don’t give us anything then it means that they look down on us, as if we are animals, so we don’t like it when they don’t give us anything.

I believe that each time there were visitors on the dumpsite, the waste pickers felt they were subjects (or objects) in a process of revaluing – as either worthy and therefore human, or unworthy, tainted, flawed and likened to an object or animal. When these brief intersubjective experiences sometimes resulted in a random gift exchange between waste picker and visitor on the dumpsite, the act of receiving a gift reaffirmed the waste picker’s humanity. In these instances, the gift itself was not of most value to the waste pickers but instead it was the process of the gift exchange that acted as a signifier of value. This had consequences in how they behaved around others and how they attempted to construct and maintain their external social identity.

It seems to me that something else occurred in these moments of exchange and identity formation. I believe that the tourist’s perception of the waste picker as impoverished and suffering, and therefore worthy of their gift, generated an alternative social identity that the waste picker could take on like a mask as and when they required it. The mask is not for the purpose of deception however, it is one used merely to play a role, to enable an identity that would allow for mutual benefits to flow between actors in their potential exchange. Pickers benefited in the exchange through occasional gifts and the feeling that outsiders valued them, and the outsider had the benefit of revaluation of their own existence that in some cases leads to material change in their lives.
Identity and pity

This alternative social identity envisaged by the tourists — that of the impoverished and suffering waste picker — is not the norm I witnessed on a daily basis in the village and on the dumpsite. In this section, I show how the waste pickers' collectively portrayed this modified identity so that they would be more likely to engage in similar gift exchanges, and therefore be regarded as human, and seek to align their identity and actions within very different value-creation processes separate from waste as negative value.

In international media and in the online narratives of tourists and aid workers, waste pickers are often described as the poorest of the poor. The internet is replete with narrative descriptions and images of suffering Stueng Mean Chey waste pickers constructed by such authors. A caption on a BBC website accompanying a photograph of the waste pickers reads:

The poorest people of Phnom Penh end up living in Stung Meanchay. When there is nothing else left, this is where they come (Field 2009, image 2, para. 1).

Similarly, a journalist for the Asia Literary Review wrote,

It’s easy to find Stung Meanchey, one of the hottest, filthiest and most depressing places on the planet... Stung Meanchey has been around for a long time and has for just as long been a livelihood of sorts for the poorest of Phnom Penh’s poor (Mohan 2008, para. 1).

National Geographic also supported this claim:

Knee deep in trash, Phnom Penh’s poorest families struggle to build a life from what others throw away (Hile 2003, para. 1).

And it continues, a descriptive yet judgemental journalist for the Tokyo Reporter wrote:

...for thousands of workers toiling atop its reeking mounds, the dump provides a dubious means of survival (Tokyo Reporter 2008, para. 6).

A New York Times article describes the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite as ‘one of the saddest sights in the city’, and quotes an aid worker as saying ‘this is the closest thing to hell on earth I’ve ever seen’ (Barboza 2003, para. 1,5). Furthermore, Christopher Shay, an expatriate journalist writing for one of the daily newspapers in the city, suggested that the waste pickers at Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite had become ‘international icons of third-world poverty’ (Shay 2009, para. 1).
The websites of aid groups working in the area also supported this narrative. Two organisations used highly emotive videos with dramatic music and voice-overs on their websites. On the Cambodian Children's Fund’s (CCF) website a video interview with the organisation’s founder, Scott Neeson (2012), had him stating that Stueng Mean Chey is ‘home to some of the world’s poorest children’, and ‘it’s a day by day survival’. He goes further to contend that his organisation not only rescues these children but also gives them their first chance at a childhood.

In the video Neeson continues:

I’m always surprised at how quickly the children transform, within 48 hours the kids are kids again, they’re washed, they’re cleaned and they’re fed, it’s really difficult to communicate unless you see it for yourself. They start their childhood very, very quickly. It’s a real joy. It’s the one thing we offer them, the chance to have a childhood.

Similarly, the Pour un Sourire d’Enfant (For a Child’s Smile, commonly known as PSE) website (2012, para. 1—2) describes how founder Christian des Pallières visited the dumpsite in 1995 and saw only the absence of things he believed should be there:

He is absolutely terrified to discover hundreds of children collecting rubbish, day and night, under dreadful hygiene conditions. And the worse is, that those children are eating this revolting trash... There’s no care, no school, no food, and simply no hope for them. Christian and his spouse, Marie-France, decide spontaneously to do everything to get them out of this misery.49

Another example focused on the plight of children is this quote on the website of a local aid group, the People Improvement Organisation (2012, para. 1):

The workers at the dump are mostly children, barefoot and shirtless, some as young as four, who work to earn less than a dollar a day. Many children at Stung Mean Chey start work as early as 3am and often leave well after 7pm.50

I suggest that these representations of children by the many aid groups can be considered plainly inaccurate, anachronistic or simply emotive exaggerations calculated to raise funds. Their words and images seemed to be chosen to elicit an emotional effect on their audience, with the purpose of demeaning the waste pickers. Yet the aid groups were not completely to blame for these representations.

This was evident during my initial interviews in the village when adult waste pickers

49 This quote was from the homepage of the organisation’s website in 2012. As at 23 March 2014, the homepage states, ‘...on the day we saw children eating in the filth of the dump-site in Stung Meanchey in Phnom Penh in Cambodia. It was appalling. Having seen that, it was not possible to continue to live normally. Something had to be done’ (para. 1—2).

50 This quote was similarly from the homepage of the organisation’s website in 2012. As at 23 March 2014, the homepage states, ‘The wastepickers and their children, barefoot and shirtless, some as young as 4, used to work long hours to earn less than a dollar a day’ (para. 1).
presented me with the same narrative of suffering that I had read in the international media and on the internet prior to my fieldwork. During initial attempts at data collection, the waste pickers under-reported their average daily earnings and slightly exaggerated the number of hours and days they worked each week. It was not until I had developed closer relationships with key informants in the village and the dealers on the dumpsite, and after I had started to sort and sell recycling myself, that I began to get a better idea of their earning potential. In a focus group discussion held in the later stages of my fieldwork, members of the village stated that they themselves did not think they were the poorest residents of the city despite the difficulties in their lives. They told me they felt fortunate to be able to work on the dumpsite and earn an income by working hard. Sothy even confirmed the positive economic potential of the dumpsite, stating that at first she also did not believe people who told her that ‘easy’ money could be earned on the dumpsite:

When I was in my province, it was difficult to earn money from my small rice field and I couldn't get any benefits from it. I spoke to someone in my village that used to work as a waste picker and they said, ‘[y]ou should go and work on the dumpsite because it is easy to make money there.’ I thought about it for three months before I came to live here because I was afraid that I couldn’t earn enough money to feed my family.

The focus group participants acknowledged that they were poor and lead difficult lives, but they also admitted that they were fortunate to be able to earn adequate incomes that surpassed that which they could earn in their home province. In addition, families maintained strong ties with their homeland where many still owned land, offering some reassurance or a fallback position if life became difficult in Phnom Penh.

The perception of the impoverished suffering waste picker seen in media, tourist and aid group narratives is therefore not entirely the everyday experiences I encountered though it is certainly evident in interactions with waste pickers and outsiders. But the collective representation of themselves as pitiful came to represent for me a means through which they could be most valued by outsiders.

**Gifts exchanges and aid: Theoretical discussions**

The tourists were not the only people to visit the dumpsite and engage in gift exchanges with the pickers. On a few spiritually significant days of the year, people with strong religious beliefs seeking to attain merit (hereafter called a merit-maker) also handed out alms to the waste pickers. Waste-picking families also had ongoing relations with aid groups who intermittently offered gifts. The actions and meaning associated with the giving and receiving of such gifts has been the subject of anthropological studies for many years (Gregory 1982; Mauss 1967; Parry 1986; Strathern 1988, 1992). On one end of a spectrum of categorised gifts is the free gift,
one in which there is no obligation to return the gift at any time. At the other is a system of gift exchange in which a gift is reciprocated by another of roughly equivalent value or higher. The local-level giving that comes with development aid poses challenges to such categories as these gifts are neither free from obligations nor is there always a system of reciprocal exchange.

In development anthropology literature, scholars have focused on the exchange of gifts in the name of aid, charity and merit-making (Bornstein 2009; Bowie 1998; Eyben 2006; Kochuyt 2009; Korf, Habullah, Hollenbach and Klem 2010; Magazine 2003; Mosse and Lewis 2005; Parry 1986; Simpson 2004; Stirrat and Henkel 1997). Among this group, anthropologists R.L. Stirrat and Heiko Henkel (1997) argue against the possibility of a free and pure gift in the context of international aid, alms and charity. They point out that giving free and pure gifts, such as alms to the poor, allows the giver to acquire merit in a future life and, therefore, in an abstract manner the gift is returned, 'the circuit of reciprocity is completed' (1997, p.70). Using this argument, the alms handed out by local Buddhists to the waste pickers on the dumpsite, similarly, were reciprocated to the giver in their next life.

In the gift exchanges I witnessed on the dumpsite and in the village, following Stirrat and Henkel, I suggest that there was always reciprocity, even if only in an abstract non-material, symbolic and spiritual form. When I asked members of the village if they preferred to receive a gift from a local Buddhist or a tourist, most respondents chose the latter. Their reason given was that the Buddhist receives merit in return, while the tourist gives gifts because they feel empathy. The waste pickers may have felt that the tourist gift was more genuine than the merit-making Buddhists' gift, likely because they sensed it was motivated by an emotional and therefore individual reaction, the tourist gaining experience in return. In the same way that the merit-maker practises giving to highlight their virtue, so too I suggest does the tourist. Nonetheless, alms are largely unconditional at the dumpsite and have greater meaning within the waste picker's value system because of their shared religious practice. The point of difference between the two givers is that the merit-maker's actions are codified in religious doctrine and reinforce distinctions in status embedded in Cambodian culture.

In the same manner, Stirrat and Henkel (1997, p. 66) argue that a 'seemingly free' or pure gift donation to an international aid group is often 'transformed into a heavily conditional gift when it reaches the ultimate recipient'. They describe how these gifts become 'entrapped in a system of rules and regulations that are antithetical to the spirit of the free gift' (1997, p. 76). Furthermore, Stirrat and Henkel (1997, p. 69) argue that this often creates:

...a series of problematic relations, frequently ambiguous in terms of their meaning and often paradoxical in terms of their implications. Most notably, while the gift is given in ways that attempt to deny difference and assert identity between the rich giver and the poor receiver, a gift in practice
reinforces or even reinvents these differences.

The gift exchanges between the waste pickers and others, be they tourists or merit-makers, reinforced the distinctions between the giver and the receiver as noted by Stirrat and Henkel above, but they were largely free from obligation and therefore unambiguous. In contrast, I explore in greater detail below the paradoxical implications of aid group support to the waste pickers, the forms of aid and the types of gifts, as well as the ambiguous relationships between aid groups and waste pickers.

**Gifts exchanged by aid groups**

I often witnessed encounters between aid workers and the waste pickers in the village and on the dumpsite. On a few occasions, villagers asked me to accompany them during visits to particular organisations. I also tried to meet with at least one representative from each aid group to find out more about their programs. Table 5.1 illustrates the ways in which the aid groups supported the waste pickers, including but not limited to clean drinking water, food, shelter, education, medical access and equipment to aid in their health and safety.

There were at least 11 aid groups with a presence among the communities of waste pickers, providing a range of services that included health, education and alternative livelihood training. Eight out of the 11 organisations featured in Table 5.1 offered education programs for children and young adults, most commonly in the form of before- or after-school classes that supplemented government education, and in some organisations this extended to all-encompassing overnight boarding schools. Many offered excellent learning opportunities, including English lessons, Khmer script classes, traditional Khmer dancing and even sports programs.

Furthermore, four organisations provided vocational training for young adults and five organisations provided alternative income-generation training for working waste pickers (usually women). Three of these programs also provided monthly monetary stipends. The table also shows that the waste pickers had access to seven medical clinics located within walking distance that provided free medicine and, in most cases, free consultation by qualified doctors or nurses. Approximately half of the aid groups were local not-for-profit organisations (shaded) and the remainder were founded by expatriates, all having strong

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51 From the perspective of the waste pickers, I was able to record detail of the support offered but I was not able to corroborate all details with the organisations. Therefore, readers from such organisations may see gaps between what I have presented in Table 5.1 and what they provide.

52 In reviewing the stories of why and how these foreigners had started their individual not-for-profit organisations, they typically began with their first visit to the dumpsite as a tourist and each reported feeling so distressed by the experience that they began fundraising and eventually started an organisation. They often did so with little prior experience in aid and development programs.
fundraising ties to other countries. The only group to focus on community development rather than aid and education was the international organisation World Vision.

Towards the end of my fieldwork, I conducted a survey on the gifts the villagers regularly received from aid groups, the results of which are shown in Table 5.2. The data shows that some families received a considerable amount of aid while others a minor amount, and many families were regularly assisted by more than one organisation, sometimes for the same gifts. Moreover, the data shows varying levels of support and gifts received by families, sometimes irrespective of their size or composition.

In general, those who had school-aged children attending different education programs received more gifts. For example, in Family 1, the children attended three different education programs and received the largest amount in cash (120,000r or US$30.00 per month). However, single-parent families did not always receive more support than two-parent families with the same number of children. This was most likely because the aid groups distributed gifts differently. Some organisations provided a standard amount of rice per child, i.e. four kilograms per child per week. Another organisation selected 20 families who attended their education programs to receive 50kg of rice per month, even though the family sizes were different.

For example, Family 3 and Family 5 said that they received rice from up to three different organisations, each group not knowing about the others’ gifts, which often meant that these families had a surplus of gifted rice at the end of the month. For example, Family 3, comprising of a single mother with four children, received 85kg of rice per month (much more than they could consume), which was worth roughly between 200,000 to 300,000 riels (US$50 to $75.00), as well as receiving 100,000 riels (US$25.00) cash. Family 5, comprising of two working parents with four children, received 75kg of rice a month worth roughly 160,000 to 260,000 riels (US$40 to $65.00), as well as 28,000 riels (US$7.00) in cash. Yet Family 9, a single mother with two children, received no rice, simply because the aid group providing her children with supplementary education did not have a rice program.

With regards to education, the data also indicates almost all of the school-aged children attended supplementary classes held by organisations. Out of a total of 37 school-aged children residing in the village, 25 children attended regular school and supplementary classes offered at nearby premises of aid groups and nine children attended boarding schools run by aid groups. Only three school-aged children out of 37 were not attending supplementary classes or living in a boarding school run by an organisation. Two of these children were being held back because they were young.

53 For many reasons, I was unable to cross-reference the information given by my informants with each of the organisations that supported them.
and one child (13-year-old Pisey) had insisted on working on the dumpsite to help
his single mother, Maly (see previous chapter). All three were eventually attending
both school and supplementary classes. Some organisations provided education
services to all school-aged children in one household, while other organisations
provided support to only one or two siblings. It was not uncommon for children
within the one family to attend education programs run by different organisations.

Admittedly the data in the two tables comprises only a very small sample of the
larger waste-picking community in Stung Mean Chey and therefore is only reflective
of the situation in the village I worked in. It does, however, illustrate the
uncoordinated manner in which gifts were given to the villagers.

(Ambiguous) relations with aid groups

In most cases the gifts of rice, money, food and other items were given conditionally
to the families; there were rules to be followed if the gift exchange was to take
place.\textsuperscript{54} For example, the aid groups who provided supplementary education for
children, had two common conditions or rules: in the first, the children had to attend
the supplementary classes on a frequent basis; and in the second, the children were
not to work on the dumpsite. If either of these conditions were not followed then
the additional gifts of rice, money, food and other items were withheld, with the
children ultimately forfeiting their place within these education programs.

I found that the education programs were highly valued in the waste-picking
community. Both sons and daughters were equally encouraged and supported by
their parents in attending regular school as well as the supplementary classes run by
aid groups. In most cases, therefore, the families were in agreement of this first
condition. The rule supported their own values concerning their hopes for a better
life for their children. As Dara said:

\begin{quote}
I want my children to get high knowledge and I want them to get a good job.
I don’t want my children to be poor like me because if they get some
knowledge they will have a bright future and it is easy to find a job.
\end{quote}

With regards to the second condition, however, I found that overall opinions held by
the villagers regarding risk, as well as opinions held by villagers regarding children
being on the dumpsite, differed from those generally held by the aid workers. As I
have explored in the previous chapter, the families believed that illness and injury
were mediated by the supernatural, not always as a consequence of being on or

\textsuperscript{54} Not all gifts or services had conditions placed on them. For example, one organisation provided free drinking
water and access to showers close to the dumpsite. These services were well used by the families living next to
these facilities, but I rarely saw my informants take advantage of these free services, despite their village being
within a short walk (closer than the dumpsite). The villagers told me it was easier for them to buy water by the
bucket from a nearby home as they would not have to carry the heavy buckets as far. The same organisation had
a breakfast program open to all children living in the area that was well used. Most days I saw children walk there
with a spoon in their hand before they went to school.
working in a dangerous place. Therefore, families undertook different acts of precaution to protect their children than those recommended by the aid workers, who often strictly forbade the children's presence on the dumpsite.

In the village, I found that children who helped their parents by working on the dumpsite with them or on their behalf were well regarded in the village. I witnessed how children often tried to emulate their hard-working parents and, similarly, their parents sought to instil their work ethic, teaching their children about aspects of their work. During school holidays, I witnessed how children pleaded with their parents to be able to go to the dumpsite and earn a little spending money for themselves. It was well known in the community, however, that aid workers made surprise visits to the dumpsite on Sundays and during holidays to see if the children who attended their education programs were working on the dumpsite. The aid groups not only made their rules explicit, they took action to ensure the families were abiding by them.

By making the gifts conditional, it appeared that, by and large, the aid groups were attempting to exert control over the families they supported by changing their behaviour. Although the many aid groups fostered relations with their recipients differently, at one extreme the aid groups attempted to subvert and undermine the parents' authority over their own children. For example, as I detailed earlier, Maly's second-oldest son, Pisey, continued to work on the dumpsite after his brothers and sister all had places within the education programs run by the aid groups. His older brother, Samnang, was away during the week at a boarding school run by an aid group but came home on the weekends. On one such weekend, Samnang went to deliver water to his brother on the dumpsite when he unfortunately injured his hand. Maly explained:

He accidently fell down on the dumpsite. I washed it [the wound] with water but his hand became swollen. Then I took him to the doctor by the dumpsite [run by an aid group] and the doctor there asked me to take him to the hospital because he needed stitches. We caught a moto-dap to Kantha Bopha [a hospital providing free services on the other side of the city]. Last night, Samnang went back to school. They called me and said they will not allow Samnang to come home anymore because I made him work on the dumpsite. I had only asked Samnang to take water to his brother who was working.

Maly was angered by their threat to forbid Samnang from coming home on the weekends. From that time onwards, I saw little of him – eventually he began to tell his mother that he wanted to study instead of visiting her. I witnessed how Maly and many of the families in the village endured these ambiguously problematic and unbalanced relationships with obvious levels of distrust. Most families, like Maly, simply tolerated the aid groups' rules if it meant that their children could have the chance to attend the supplementary classes and boarding schools. At other times, they found ways to accommodate the rules of the aid groups.
In order to derive the most benefit, families shared their knowledge and experience of the aid groups’ rules, conditions and strategies of control. For example, prior to establishing a relationship with a family, typically the aid group would conduct an assessment in order to determine if the family met its selection criteria. For some of the child-focused organisations, their criteria required that the children needed to be full-time waste pickers. Another organisation selected a family if one or more members, usually parents, were working on the dumpsite and the aid group determined that the children were at risk of becoming pickers. Others assessed the families based on need, with only the poorer families being selected.

I heard of a few instances whereby families encouraged children to go to the dumpsite to work for a few days with the hope that an organisation would find them and then accept them into their programs. A woman who lived near the village, but was not a waste picker, told me:

My youngest sister, her name is Vannary, went to help Sothy collect recycling on the dumpsite last Saturday, because I wanted my sister to have permission to study at the organisation near the dumpsite and I already told the teacher that she worked on the dumpsite. Today the teacher gave her permission, so now she can go to study.

Just as the dealers knew that their customers put heavy things inside their sacks to make more money, similarly the aid groups also knew that some families tried to thwart their rules and conditions. As a result, some aid groups were more thorough in their screening process. Chenda told me how one organisation:

...interviews parents first and then interviews their son or daughter on their own to make sure the parents are telling the truth about their situation.

I checked with a staff member at the same organisation and they confirmed this with me:

We interview parents and their children separately to ensure parents don’t lie.

Chenda admitted that she had not passed the screening process and was subsequently excluded from ongoing relations with the aid group we were discussing. This was despite the fact that she is a single mother supporting not only her own daughter but also her elderly parents. The same organisation supported her neighbour’s family, even though they had two working parents. Yet Chenda’s negative experience enabled one of her brothers to subvert the assessment with the same aid group by ensuring his eldest daughter told the same story that he told during the interview process and this enabled his daughter to attend the aid group’s boarding school.
In a final example, a mother told me how her children would also attempt to circumvent the aid groups’ strict rules about working on the dumpsite. She noticed that her children would wear their normal clothes onto the dumpsite, as opposed to more appropriate picking clothes that would cover their bodies, so that if an aid worker was approaching they could quickly drop their sack and collecting tool and tell the aid worker they were on the dumpsite to give a message to a relative. The aid groups’ ban on children working on the dumpsite did not prevent the children from occasionally visiting, foraging or collecting on the site.

When the waste pickers valued the gift, such as education for their children or things such as rice or money, they either conformed to the rules and conditions of the gifts or attempted to circumvent them to their advantage. In these instances, they did not completely disregard the conditions but instead found ways to navigate around them as needed. They continued in their attempts to uphold their own values and norms.

**Unfortunate consequences**

There were, however, other negative consequences of their continued practice of receiving aid from these groups. In this section I discuss three of the more apparent concerns: firstly, the families had to remain in the village; secondly, the unequal distribution of aid created hostility and competition between residents; and thirdly, as a result, from time to time, local leadership was undermined.

Ongoing relationships with aid groups discouraged families from improving their living conditions, thereby quelling forms of agency and self-improvement. As a result, villagers were reluctant to move back to their homeland village or move to a better home with more facilities near the dumpsite because they feared that they would no longer qualify for the support. For example, when the closure of the dumpsite was imminent in 2008, I often heard people say they would not move away from the village because their children would not be able to attend the aid groups’ education programs.

Even new villagers did not want to leave once they had arrived. For example, Phala and her husband were temporary members of the village and had previously earned enough money to rent a small brick home connected to water and sewage. Phala’s husband was a recycling collector on the streets of the city, and prior to the birth of their first son she had worked in a garment factory. When they were forced to rely on her one income they had trouble paying bills and, as a consequence, had moved into the village. I asked Phala if she would rent a similar home again when she went back to work. She answered, ‘[n]o, if I move to a nice house my children cannot go to study at an organisation.’ Another family had also declined to move residence even after the aid group offered to rehouse them outside the village.
The varying and ad-hoc nature of the total aid gifted within the village often caused conflict among residents, especially as villagers continued to compare the level of aid they received relative to others. This often resulted in arguments and hostility. One of the women in the village, Sina, said there was a lot of jealousy between the adults of the village. This became particularly apparent at Christmas, which was a traditional time for giving by the international aid groups. In the days leading up to 25 December 2008, Sina was summoned by an aid worker who had a new tarpaulin for her roof. After she had walked to the aid group’s office, the staff member realised she had already given Sina a tarpaulin, so decided to give her 10kg of rice instead for her troubles. Sina told me she was afraid that the other women in the village would be jealous of her, so she told her neighbours it was one of her regularly received monthly rice gifts. On the same day, Romduol was enraged that families with children attending one organisation received 50kg of rice while the parents of children at another only received 5kg of rice. She could not understand why there was such a difference. And another woman became very distressed because she learned she had missed out on a gift of meat from an aid group when most of the other villagers had received it.

The lack of coordinated giving among aid groups produced inequitable distribution of gifts, an outcome that often prompted social discord within the community. This was especially the case with rice, which when unevenly distributed by the various organisations resulted in disputes between those who received more and those less. I believe that the discord was heightened by the obligation the pickers felt to remain in the village. To a point it can be argued that they stayed in the village and continued to pick waste in order to receive gifts; they reciprocated by enduring the risk of picking in order to receive what had in a sense become their due. This troubling situation for some paradoxically perpetuated a social totality that reinforced inequities, but for most, their agency was always apparent, choices were always being made. Many of the aid groups would have preferred to see the pickers leave, but clearly the gifts on offer were too highly valued to pass up. The ambiguity associated with differences in aid group giving, however, only caused perceptions of imbalance between recipients and heightened tensions associated with the daily pressures of life in the village.

Lastly, I also witnessed how gifts undermined village leadership. During the time when the prices of the recyclables dropped (see Chapter 3), some of the families in the village did not pay their rent to the village leader, Bonarith. After being two months in arrears, the landlord demanded that the money be paid and everybody in the village became worried that they would be evicted the next day. I suggested that they lobby the aid groups for assistance. The villagers asked around and one of the aid groups paid all of the rent owing to the landlord and subsequently offered to pay half of each family’s monthly rent (5000 riels or US$1.25) from that moment onwards. Yet, this act later caused conflict in the village over who had paid some rent and who had paid none in the preceding months. Some families had benefited more than others and this was deeply upsetting for those who believed they had previously
paid more from their own pocket. Following the incident, villagers began expressing	heir distrust in the village leader, Bonarith, spreading rumours that he had used
some of the rent money for himself and how he was helping some families receive
gifts from aid groups but not others.

These negative reactions, once again, highlight villagers' beliefs in the importance of
equality and equity, as previously shown in the mutual respect for such practices in
their organisation of production on the dumpsite, and the consumption of things in
the village.

Discussion

The aid groups generally handed out free things and provided free services. The
waste pickers felt no obligation to reciprocate with a gift of the same or higher value.
What was expected or often demanded by explicit rules was that the recipients mirror
the same values of the aid group giving the gifts. These relationships often became
problematic as the waste pickers, who held their own set of norms and values, did
not always obey and follow the values of the aid groups. As a result, the gifts given
by aid groups were, as Stirrat and Henkel described, similarly entrapped in systems of
rules and conditions, which either supported or contested the waste pickers' values.
In effect, their receipt of these conditional gifts placed them back at the bottom of
the social order, once again devaluing them. The gifts could also have simultaneously
supported and contested the waste pickers' values and hence create contradictions,
i.e. as to the virtue of work. Stirrat and Henkel (1997, p. 72) further suggest that aid
gift exchanges with poor recipients occur in asymmetrical relationships that can
develop into systems of patronage and control. This was certainly evident in the
relations between some of the aid groups and the families in the village. In the most
extreme cases, the children who attended the aid groups' education programs,
particularly those in boarding schools, were being indoctrinated to adhere to values
of the aid workers at the expense of those held by their own families.

Some aspects of the relationships pickers had with the aid groups were similar to
those had with their dealers (see Chapter 3). They were both unbalanced and
involved patron-client dynamics, though there seemed to be more effort by the aid
groups to exert control and exercise power than by the dealers. However, I have
highlighted the inherently flexible nature of the waste pickers' communal values in
which it was considered appropriate to lie to aid groups and circumvent rules and
conditions. The value of education services meant that villagers would contrive
circumstances that met the aid groups' criteria. This contrivance was not considered
inappropriate; indeed subverting the rules of outsiders to their benefit was a core
social practice and was seen on a collective scale. So what could be considered lying
and cheating in other societies is here an expression of resistance against the aid
groups' attempts at control.

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Finally, in this chapter I have shown how the intersubjective experiences with outsiders created continuous positive and negative value potentialities and outcomes. While Munn's study of Gawan fame highlights the positive communal value created by individual acts, the same could not be said for the waste pickers, who instead constantly wrestled with the negative associations of waste and defamation; clearly the communal value they created was often within processes of disarticulation. This communal value is perhaps epitomised by the villagers' continued resilience in the face of ridicule and humiliation, their attempts at subverting processes of disarticulation and their ability to largely maintain their values as others attempted to subvert them.
This short photoessay features a replica of my contact sheets, showing the sequence of images on my digital camera or rolls of medium-format film during two gift exchanges, the first example occurring on the edge of the dumpsite and the second in the village. Both examples feature merit-makers, but these exchanges were, nevertheless, similar to those initiated by aid workers and tourists who similarly came laden with gifts to distribute.

Highlighted are the tensions within the gift exchanges, as the giver attempts to control the organisation of people and transactions within the exchange. In the first instance, the givers request that the waste pickers form a line and sit down before the exchanges begin to encourage an orderly affair. In the second instance, I had arrived as the exchange, mediated by two government representatives in white hats, was in full process. Sensing the limited amount of gifts available and the possibility of being the one to miss out, the waste pickers quickly resisted any form of control and orderliness, instead lunging their bodies and open hands towards the givers in an often frenzied encounter.

The exchanges reinforced or weakened the social position of the waste pickers in the eyes of the givers and ultimately themselves. These gift exchanges also underscored for me the importance of principles of equity and equality within the community and the often negative consequences of interventions by outsiders.
Chapter 6

Closure and the destruction of value

Introduction

In this final chapter I narrate the words and actions of the waste pickers when the municipality closed the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite in July 2009. This account focuses on political processes impacting the waste pickers. I do not, however, wish to move away from my spotlight on value, for as Christopher Hann (1998, p. 32) argues, ‘the analysis of value … must lead on to analysis of the political and social conditions which determine access … in other words to the analysis of distribution and property relations’. Within the waste pickers’ production processes, the inseparability of their actions from waste dialectically results in value-creation processes being enmeshed with politics of property relations.

Before outlining what happened in 2009, in the first section of this chapter I go back in time to 2003, five years before my fieldwork began, and explore in detail a study by the Japanese Government that set in motion the process that would lead to the eventual closure of the dumpsite and the establishment of a new landfill 10km from Stueng Mean Chey. The study exposes past intersubjective relations between the waste pickers in Stueng Mean Chey, the municipality and representatives of a foreign state (Japan). It also highlights neoliberal political processes of modernisation whereby global subjectivities based on notions of scientific reasoning and instrumental rationality are imposed on local practice (Gardner and Lewis 1996; Springer 2010a, 2010b).

The Japanese Government’s study, and the others that I detail in this chapter, highlight the opportunity that was squandered in this instance to bring about economic and environmental improvements through jointly determined development with waste pickers. To support this claim, I draw comparisons to waste pickers in countries such as India, Mexico and Brazil and the ways they have secured access to waste and legitimised their place within formalised waste management systems. It becomes apparent, nonetheless, that such progress came at a time when peers in other parts of the world, like Phnom Penh, had become further disenfranchised as waste became a contested resource through recognition of its positive value potential.

Planning for change

A feasibility study for change in waste management

In 2000, the Municipality of Phnom Penh (hereafter the municipality) sought the support of the Japanese Government to conduct a development study on waste management in Phnom Penh (JICA 2005a). The focus of the development study was to determine present and future waste generation needs in the city and scope a feasibility study for a
new landfill. Previous research conducted by the municipality in 1995 and 1997 had identified three possible locations (JICA 2005a, p. 5.01). The development study was to scope the feasibility of each of the three proposed sites and prepare a plan for the construction of a new sanitary landfill at one of the locations. Advice was needed on expanding the waste collection services in the city and developing a plan for the closure of the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite. The 26-month study began in 2003 and was completed by JICA, primarily with external partners.55

The JICA report (2005a, 2005b) was highly critical of the municipality’s existing solid waste disposal methods. The authors argued that the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite was unregulated and overflowing with little effort made by the municipality to minimise negative environmental impacts.56 Without operational plans the site was being mismanaged and waste unsystematically dumped (JICA 2005a, p. 4.12).

Among the list of concerns by the authors (2005a, p. 8.02) was the presence of ‘500 waste pickers’ working ‘without any rules or control’. In particular, the report (2005a, p. 4.12) noted concern for the frequency of pickers involved in work-related accidents, including purportedly at least one death each year. Although the authors (2005a, p. 8.02) acknowledged the positive contribution made by the waste pickers to the city, they stated that the pickers were a hindrance to the municipality and a hazard to themselves.

The waste pickers provide an important role in solid waste management by recovering recyclable materials and reducing waste volume; however, their activities interfere with landfill operations and put their lives at risk.

In their recommendations to the municipality, the authors (2005a, p. 7.47) counselled that the waste pickers be banned from the new landfill rather than finding alternative approaches to incorporating waste pickers within the city’s waste management system.

Implementing change

In 2004, the JICA study team (2005a, p. 8.01) concluded that the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite would soon reach capacity. They also estimated that a new city landfill would take three to four years to construct, therefore requiring measures be implemented to extend the life of Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite until the new landfill was operational. Following recommendations from the study team, the municipality leased private land next to the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite to expand the existing dumping area. The study team envisaged that this would extend the life of the dumpsite until early 2007 (2005a, p. 7.34). Furthermore, JICA assisted the municipality to conduct urgent improvements on the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite and supported the municipal department responsible

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55 Midway through the study, the Municipality of Phnom Penh requested that the study be expanded from 16 months to 26 months to enable recommendations to be tested through pilot projects. The external partners included a Japanese research firm, Kokusai Kogyo Co., Ltd. and regional research firm, Indochina Research Ltd (JICA 2005a, p. 1-2).
56 The study team comprised of 14 researchers employed by JICA/Kokusai Kogyo Co. Ltd and 14 counterpart staff from the municipality, who jointly authored the main and summary reports (JICA 2005a).
for waste management, Phnom Penh Waste Management (PPWM), in the preparation of operational plans for the site (JICA 2005a, p. 8.05).57

The JICA team (2005a, p. 3.13) also advised the municipality that it would be an ‘unrealistic measure to eliminate waste pickers from the disposal site right now’. Instead they recommended that the municipality conduct several pilot projects to reveal the best method of ‘controlling’ the waste pickers working on the dumpsite. JICA assisted PPWM to conduct pilot projects with the waste pickers in an attempt to implement new rules and systems for picking (JICA 2005a, p. 8.05). JICA’s aim from their perspective was to limit the potential for waste pickers to interfere with the operation of the site.

Waste pickers from the perspective of waste managers

Although the pilot projects occurred before I commenced fieldwork, the JICA report and later comments I sourced from the waste pickers reveal interesting insights about past relations between the municipality (and JICA) and Phnom Penh’s waste pickers and how a system was tested that allowed for waste pickers to be included within operations on the new landfill.

The aim of the pilot projects was for the study team and PPWM to work in collaboration with the waste pickers to develop and test new rules for pickers while on the dumpsite (JICA 2005a, pp. 8.02, 8.06). Prior to the pilot projects the study team conducted focus group meetings and one-on-one interviews with waste pickers to learn about their work.58 The findings of the JICA study team differed from my own observations and conclusions on a number of points. For instance, in a supporting report, the authors (2005b, p. 10.13) state:

One of the features of waste pickers at SMCDS [Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite] is their large number and diversification. In addition, they rarely helped each other or were organised. On the other hand, most of the respondents of the interview survey and meeting participants recognised the chaotic situation of SMCDS as a serious problem and agreed with the proposed waste picking rules.

In 2008 to 2009, I similarly found the waste pickers to be a diverse population. The waste pickers were not organised in terms of having a representative body, union or formal organisation to defend their working rights and conditions, but I did, nonetheless, find daily instances of waste pickers helping fellow waste pickers, i.e. sharing information about dealers, aid groups, recycling prices and local conditions on the dumpsite. Nor did I find the working situation on the dumpsite to be ‘chaotic’. In Chapter 2 I detailed how the waste pickers respected and followed social norms of production that promoted

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57 JICA, in cooperation with the municipality’s Department of Public Works and Transport, constructed and installed new infrastructure such as a road, enclosing bank, leachate collection and treatment facilities, pumps and pipes. A weighbridge was also installed at the site to measure waste volumes and contents (JICA 2005a, p. 8.05).

58 The topics covered within the study included the types and volumes of recyclables they collected, their income and working hours, details on their health and living situations, problems they faced while working or in their home and lastly possible solutions to these problems (JICA 2005a, pp. 3.14–3.15). In addition they observed the number of adult and child waste pickers working on the dumpsite over a six-day period (JICA 2005a, p. 3.15).
principles of equality and equity and they were conscious of the need to follow safety procedures.

On the JICA finding that waste picker respondents to its survey agreed with its proposed waste-picking rules, the supporting report (2005b, p. 10.14) further explained:

Most of the interviewees and meeting participants were selected from those who cooperate with NGOs, which resulted in the unanimous agreement with the proposed rules. It is highly likely that some waste pickers, in particular those who earn more than the average, would oppose the proposed rules.

As an unidentified aid group implemented aspects of the research with the waste pickers in partnership with the study team, the authors (2005b, p. 10.14) acknowledge that the aid group’s involvement may have distorted the results, although they did not elaborate.59 Inevitably, even though the study team had received ‘unanimous agreement’ from those they consulted prior to the new rules being implemented, the study team (2005b, p. 10.14) stated that they anticipated opposition and resistance when the rules were introduced during the pilot projects.

Since the number of waste pickers is very large and they are considerably diversified, the team expected a lot of difficulties in introducing waste picking rules. In addition, Cambodian people are generally not familiar with basic social rules. These elements required careful preparation before the start of the trial.

In another instance in the report the authors (2005b, p. 10.18) reveal the basis of this supposition:

In general, Cambodian people are not familiar with social rules such as traffic rules and do not respect them much. Social rules cannot take root in the society without a tacit understanding that other people also follow rules. Since waste pickers are not familiar with rules and do not trust each other, it seems difficult to introduce rules regardless of their contents.

JICA’s assumptions regarding the absence of social rules among the waste pickers and the wider Cambodian society illustrates potential problems experienced by foreign aid agencies, donors and lenders conducting research and creating development plans for countries that are often very different from their own. Understanding the pre-existing social environment ahead of implementing projects is also often fraught with limitations, especially that of time, sometimes leading to ill-conceived planning and implementation that can subvert the ultimate aim of these projects.

Moreover, such ethnocentric assumptions could also be representative of modernisation theories and practices that frame developing countries and their residents as irrational and in need of deterministic development programs based on instrumental rationalist beliefs.

59 The study team stated that they felt they needed to have the ongoing cooperation of the aid groups if they were to establish their own beneficial relationships with the waste pickers (JICA 2005b, p. 10.14).
(Gardner and Lewis 1996, pp. 12, 13). In his study of development, violence and neoliberalism in Cambodia, geographer Simon Springer (2010b, p. 931), however, argues that such assumptions are a result of neoliberal processes that are supported by the rise in so-called experts of development. Springer (2011, p. 96) suggests that the discourse from these experts of development ‘triumphs at the expense of the non-conformist, the unusual, “the Other”’.

Experimenting with the rules

Despite the incongruity in JICA’s assumptions, the pilot projects’ process through which JICA defined and attempted to implement rules highlights the waste pickers’ own social norms and practices in action. There were three main rules JICA aimed to introduce: register and issue identification cards (ID cards) to full-time waste pickers working on Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite; reorganise the waste pickers by dividing the dumpsite into different working areas and establishing a system of rotation which allowed for the trucks and heavy machinery to work in separate areas from the waste pickers (JICA 2005a, p. 8.07); and lastly, prohibit the buying of trucks and riding on trucks (JICA 2005b, p. 10.15). The study team and PPWM held 11 meetings within the villages surrounding Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite to explain the new waste-picking rules (JICA 2005b, p. 10.15).

The meetings suggest that JICA sought to cooperate with the waste pickers in developing the new rules for picking on the dumpsite, however, the system of registration and the issuance of ID cards appeared to be an ill-fated attempt by JICA and the municipality to exercise control over the waste pickers. The registration process enabled JICA and the municipality to collect personal details of waste pickers and decide who to allow and forbid on the dumpsite. In the supporting report, the authors (2005b, p. 10.14) stated:

Since the registration system and the issue of ID cards make it easy for the operator of a disposal site to control waste pickers, the registration system is generally one of [the] main components of waste picking rules... the registration system could be a powerful tool for PPWM to grasp the entire picture of waste pickers and to control them.

The JICA study team (2005b, p. 10.16) registered the waste pickers at the community meetings and for two weeks on the dumpsite in November 2003, with a photograph taken of each waste picker for the ID card. Additionally, PPWM distributed some high-visibility jackets to registered waste pickers and administered vaccinations against tetanus and hepatitis B. In all, 1106 households were registered with a total of 2907 individuals, although only 2215 of these met the requirements for an ID card; waste pickers had to be spotted three times on the dumpsite over several days and later collect the card. PPWM issued 1456 cards to adults and over 400 to child waste pickers (JICA 2005b, p. 10.17). Although it appears that the ultimate objective of the ID card system was to control the...
waste pickers, its only function in effect was to obtain personal information about the waste pickers working on the dumpsite at the time. According to my informants, waste pickers were never asked to show the cards during the JICA trial or after it.

Inadvertently, I argue that the ID cards at the time in a way legitimised the waste pickers presence on the dumpsite and their entitlement to access the waste. As I have argued in previous chapters, the waste pickers regarded the dumpsite as an urban commons. For those who instead viewed the dumpsite as municipal land, the new ID cards signalled the waste pickers' rights to enter and work on the dumpsite and access the waste to derive benefits from it. At this historical moment, who owned the waste on the dumpsite was still ambiguous, however, the JICA study and its ID card trial acted as a legitimising practice that validated the waste pickers' entitlements to this raw material.

More specifically though, in the registration process the municipality had an opportunity to actively discover and then exclude child waste pickers, however, it did not do so. Instead, JICA and the municipality ignored national child labour laws by not only registering child waste pickers but also issuing ID cards to registered children over the age of seven years (JICA 2005a, p. 8.07). The registration process and issuance of ID cards also signalled JICA and the municipality's apparent approval of child waste pickers. With this action, the municipality also legitimised children's presence on the dumpsite. That the registration and ID card system was not maintained, however, is perhaps another example of ill-conceived and deterministic planning by an international donor.

**Dividing the dumpsite**

In late 2003 and early 2004, the JICA study team and PPWM conducted the series of pilot studies whereby the dumpsite was sectioned into different working areas. During the pilot projects the waste pickers were not allowed to enter into the roped-off area designated for unloading trucks and bulldozers. At the end of each rotation, the areas were swapped and the waste pickers able to collect recyclables from the newly arrived waste. JICA recruited five former waste pickers to act as assistants, as well as four police officers to stand guard around the roped off area. Three trials were conducted to experiment with the number of hours between the rotation times. Buying trucks was banned during the pilot projects (JICA 2005b, p. 10.21).

The first pilot reportedly started with a number of problems. Rule books had not been distributed prior to the trial and the municipality could not afford to give every registered waste picker a high-visibility jacket so they withdrew this from their plan (JICA 2005b, p. 10.22). The rotation time of six to seven hours was too long, resulting in the newly arrived waste being levelled and compacted without the waste pickers getting the chance to pick through it and the layer becoming too thick to sort underneath (JICA 2005b, p. 10.22). The authors (2005b, p. 10.22) also reported that the truck buyers 'openly resisted' not being able to have access to the truck loads that they usually bought from the drivers and in turn 'provoked other waste pickers' to protest and attempt to get inside the roped off area. The study team (2005b, p. 10.22) found that many of the waste pickers 'expressed their discontent with the new rules'.
Prior to the second pilot, new rule books were distributed to the waste pickers. This time the rotation time was reduced to two hours and the dumpsite operators did not level the waste after it had been unloaded from the trucks. Every two hours they rotated the spaces and allowed the waste pickers onto the piles of unloaded waste. Once the waste pickers had picked through the surface of the piles, the assistants asked the waste pickers to move aside to enable a bulldozer to level the piles of waste and once again allowed the waste pickers to work through this newly distributed waste. The re-levelling work was appreciated by the waste pickers, but with only one bulldozer, the study team (2005b, p. 10.23) assessed the process was likely to be unsustainable.

The waste pickers commented that the two hours was still too long an interval and for the third pilot the rotation time was shortened to 30 to 40 minute intervals and the study team (2005b, 10.23) reported that this ‘won the most support from the waste pickers’. In the summary report, the authors (2005b, p. 10.23) stated that the pilots were successful in improving the efficiency of the unloading times and reducing the wait time for the garbage trucks entering the site.

At the end of the pilots, the study team interviewed 60 waste pickers. Two thirds of interviewees said they preferred the rotation times be set at 30 minutes and many said they wanted the rotating spaces to be closer together so they would not have to carry their sacks long distances (JICA 2005b, p. 10.25). Half of the waste pickers surveyed said that their income decreased, the rest of the waste pickers felt that the rotation system had no effect on their daily earnings (JICA 2005b, p. 10.25). The study team (2005b, p. 10.25) added that ‘more than 70 percent of them [respondents] agreed with the waste picking rules’. The study team (2005b, p. 10.27), however, felt that PPWM would require an additional bulldozer and staff if it were to continue the rotation system on a permanent basis.

Five years later, I discovered that some of the villagers still had their registration cards. Those that did not have cards were not concerned as the waste pickers had never been asked to present them. When asked about their experience of the pilots, many of the waste pickers could not recall them. However, Rachany said she remembered how the waste pickers had ignored the police and assistants:

One year, the Japanese didn’t allow us to go into the dumping area. They lay a long string around the dumping area. But the waste pickers did not agree. We ran towards the dumping area. In the end, we entered the dumping area and collected recycling as before.

After the pilots had been completed, the authors (2005a, p. 8.38) stated that they learned that the waste pickers worked in ‘patterns’ (not in a chaotic and unruly fashion as they had previously assumed) and admitted that their first pilot did not match these patterns. It appears, once again, that the team did not fully understand the work of the waste pickers prior to the implementation of the pilots.
JICA’s attempts at regulating the waste pickers’ production practices is conceivably an example of Aihwa Ong’s (1999, p. 217) theories on forms of graduated sovereignty, whereby weaker groups of the population are given over to regulation by transnational entities. Her theories are in line with Foucault’s concepts of governmentality, as more recently extended by James Ferguson and Akhil Gupta to ‘transnational governmentality’ or by Wendy Larner and William Walters (2004) to ‘global governmentality’; loosely defined as the regulation of people according to government rationalities by international agencies beyond the government (Ferguson and Gupta 2002; Miller, Burchell and Gordon 1991; Larner and Walters 2004). In this case, JICA attempted to regulate the production practices of the waste pickers in line with modernist, neoliberal and/or ethnocentric ideals of rational reasoning, international development, practices of authority and morality. Forms of governmentality are also evident in the attempts by aid groups to influence and exert control over the families in the village with regard to their own children. Nonetheless, the accounts detailed above show (once again) the waste pickers’ willingness to accommodate outsider values, while simultaneously exercising agency in an attempt to meet their own social norms, needs and value transformation practices.61

**Missed opportunity**

The pilot project to control the work of the waste pickers was never fully implemented and the waste pickers continued to collect recyclables on the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite as they had been doing before, up until the closure of the dumpsite in July 2009. The relative success of the final pilot project with a rotation time of 30 to 45 minutes showed that an opportunity existed for the municipality to allow the waste pickers to continue working under less hazardous conditions and indeed improve the operational efficiency of the dumpsite. Despite the opportunity and the fact that waste picking reduces the total volume of waste at the site, in 2008 and 2009 the municipality instead continued to assert that the waste pickers would not be allowed to work on the new landfill to be located in an outlying suburb of Phnom Penh, Choeung Ek in Dangkor district.62

That the municipality seemingly failed to follow up enforcing the new rules imposed by outsiders suggests that at the very least this was due to the expense, particularly the need for a second operational bulldozer and additional drivers. I also imagine that there was probably nothing in it personally for those government employees involved. Allowing the status quo to continue at Stueng Mean Chey, while preparing new systems of control for Choeung Ek, was probably the most viable option once JICA finished its project. As was evident in Phnom Penh, the involvement of a foreign aid agency increased pressure on the municipality to create policies and rules regarding waste pickers, though in the end they were simply neglected and ignored.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Daniel Sicul’s (1992) research on city pickers and itinerant buyers in Indonesia similarly questions the motives of governments that have historically

61 Interesting comparison could be made with ethnographies by James Scott’s study of hill tribe communities in South East Asia (2009) and Howard Morphy’s work with the Yolgnu people of Northern Australia.
62 The new landfill is referred to both as Choeung Ek Landfill/Dumpsite or the Dangkor Landfill/Dumpsite.
exploited the work of waste pickers, benefiting from their activities but offering little social support or equipment to reduce health risks. Apart from the pilot projects instigated as part of the JICA report, I found no other evidence of the municipality providing ongoing support to the waste pickers.

**Commerce and waste management – community versus private**

In this section, I review literature on community–government partnerships within waste management systems throughout the world. I provide examples of successful projects where waste pickers and other informal waste workers have been integrated within formal systems, allowing them to secure legitimate and authorised rights to access waste to derive benefits. Through these examples, I aim to further highlight how the waste pickers in Phnom Penh could have been included within the municipality’s plans for the new landfill at Choeung Ek. I then discuss why many governments instead often involve the private sector and the impact this can have on existing informal waste workers. Lastly, I detail the history of public–private partnerships in Phnom Penh before detailing the account of what actually happened when the dumpsite was closed and the new landfill opened.

Before I begin, I wish to briefly outline some of the complexities of waste management in developing countries and the types of public, private and community partnerships. The management of waste has traditionally been the responsibility of governments, usually at the local level, as mismanaged urban waste dumped indiscriminately into the streets and open spaces poses serious health and environmental risks for the local community (Van de Klundert and Lardinois 1995, pp. 9–10). Historically, the growing amount of waste generated in expanding cities, such as Phnom Penh, however, has put a strain on local-level governments. Environmental and civic engineers from Thailand and Bangladesh found that expenditure on solid waste management can be as much as 40 percent of the local-level government’s operating costs in developing countries (Glawe, Visvanathan and Alamgir 2005, p. 5). In Australia, the costs of collection and disposal of waste are incorporated within local-level government taxes, but sociologist Martin Medina (2010, p. 5) argues that this does not work as successfully in developing countries that have large informal economies and generally inefficient local-level governments.

Local-level governments unable to raise the necessary funds to deliver adequate waste management services can approach the private sector or community groups or collectives. In short, their involvement can come in two formal modes: government can privatisate aspects of the waste management service (either collection or disposal) or it can sell, or grant access to the physical waste (Cointreau-Levine 1994, p. 2–3). In the first mode, governments can enter into contracts or franchises with private companies or community groups to do the collection service or operate a landfill. These companies or organisations generally charge user fees or disposal fees to recover costs of running the service or operation. As a consequence of the increased global value of recyclables and compost, in the second mode, governments can sell access rights or award concessions to the actual

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6 The use of the term ‘formal’ in this chapter refers to processes, outcomes, sectors and professions that are recognised by the government as legitimate and lawful. Conversely, the term ‘informal’ refers to those not recognised by the government.
waste. In this second mode, the focus is on waste as a commodity processed by private companies, community collectives or both to retrieve fiscal value. So the distinction between these two modes of public–private–community interaction is broadly, on one hand, a service paid for by fees and on the other, a service paid for by extraction (or a combination of both).  

Community-based partnerships in waste management services

It was in the 1980s that researchers interested in solid waste management began to study the role of waste pickers and workers within formal waste management systems. Australian urban studies scholar Christine Furedy (1984, 1990, 1992, 1993) was a significant contributor to this research in Asia. Furedy's earlier paper (1984) recognised the role of waste pickers and other informal workers in the effective re-use of solid waste, but noted the severe health and environmental problems associated with their activities. Despite the risks, Furedy (1990, p. 3) later advocated for a 'socially-responsive view of solid waste management'. She found that in many areas without government-provided social welfare, recycling and reusing things was a pattern of self-help in many cities. Furedy (1990, p. 2) argued that governments were ill-informed about the breadth of recycling activities completed by the informal sector, mostly, she argues, because waste-picking communities did not have a voice. Community organisations and aid groups were more focused on the pickers' health and wellbeing, and their activities were directed at emergency assistance rather than advocating for their rights as productive workers (Furedy 1990, p. 1). This was still the situation I encountered in Phnom Penh almost two decades later, as I have explored in the previous chapter.

While more developed countries were grappling with issues concerning ecological factors, Furedy (1990, p. 2) argued that waste management in developing Asian cities also had to consider how waste is 'intimately linked with the lives of street dwellers and many other disadvantaged people'. In 1992 Furedy was one of the first to publish research on the achievements and limitations of community-based waste management projects in Asia, specifically Bangalore, Manila, Madras, Jakarta and Kathmandu. At the time, community groups were experimenting with new approaches to waste management through which waste pickers became 'legitimate waste collectors' within waste management systems, and in which social, economic and ecological goals could be relevant (Furedy 1992, p. 54). The projects included neighbourhood composting in Jakarta, street waste collection by the poor in Madras, and a community–government partnership in Metro Manila that formalised itinerant buyers by providing them with identification cards, equipment and a uniform. Furedy (1992, p. 54) was hopeful that these experiments could be 'translated into practice on a larger-scale' and 'form the basis for community action to ameliorate solid waste problems throughout the developing world'.

64 Governments can also allow qualified waste companies to compete with other companies in an environment of open competition, whereby those creating the waste (households and businesses) can choose which company to use. Companies can either charge for services or generate profits from the value of the waste as commodities (or both) (Cointreau 1994, p. 2–3).
Other recent studies on waste pickers have addressed the impact of technological and regulatory developments within waste management systems based on scientific reasoning and instrumental rationalisation (Frykman 2006; Medina 2002). These studies continue Furedy’s advocacy for waste pickers to be engaged as stakeholders even as these systems begin to involve new technology within highly regulated environments. This view is supported by other studies that have explored waste pickers’ vast economic and environmental contributions to Third World cities (Frykman 2006; Hayami, Dikshit, and Mishra 2006; Hua-lin 2009; Madsen 2006; Medina 1997; Scheinberg and Anschütz 2006; Zhou and Xiong 2008, 2010). I believe that Martin Medina was one of the first researchers to quantify the economic contribution made by waste pickers. Medina (2002, p. 13) stated that:

[In] Bangkok, Jakarta, Kanpur, Karachi and Manila scavenging saves each city at least US$23 million a year in lower imports of raw materials, and reduced need for collection, transport and disposal equipment, personnel and facilities.

Since this research focus on community partnerships in the 1990s, there has been a significant growth in the establishment of organisations advocating and practising community-based waste management, predominately in Latin America and India (Bonner 2008). Many such organisations aim to implement social measures to improve the working conditions for waste pickers and fulfil environmental goals for cities (Chikarmane and Narayan 2005, 2009; Dias 2000, 2011; Gutberlet 2008; Samson 2010). A quick review of internet resources and literature on community-delivered door-to-door waste collection services in Asia reveals there are webpages and case studies about services in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Laos, Philippines, Nepal and India. A few examples include a service in the southern city of Chennai, India’s fifth most populous city, where aid groups have assisted waste pickers in establishing a waste collection service in partnership with the local-level government. Waste pickers have been offered financial loans to purchase carts and residents pay a fee for the service, while the waste pickers also get to recover recyclables within the garbage (Medina 2005, p. 26). In Mumbai, women waste pickers have negotiated an agreement with the local-level government whereby trucks from vegetable markets are diverted to a composting facility built with support from an aid group (Anagal 2009, p. 247).

In Latin America and parts of North Africa groups of waste pickers have formed cooperatives and micro-enterprises, and created partnerships with local governments to provide low-cost, low-tech waste management services. In Mexico City, open dumpsites were closed in the 1980s and 1990s and replaced with separation plants whereby waste pickers have access to waste placed on large conveyer belts before incineration (Frykman 2006, p. 8). Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, community-based cooperatives paid waste pickers equal amounts at the end of the week, often amounting to three times that of the minimum wage (Johannesessen, Mikkel and Boyer 1999, p. 33). Furthermore, a Brazilian local-level government played a key role in the formation of one of the stronger independent waste pickers’ organisations in the region (Dias 2011, p. 2).
Waste picker labour unions have also been active in advocating for waste pickers to be legitimised within waste management systems in developing countries. Within Asia, this has been most evident in India. For example, in Pune, India’s eighth-largest city with a well-established manufacturing industry in glass and metal, there is a strong waste pickers’ union, Kagad Kach Patra Kashtakari Panchayat (KKPKP), with over 6000 members who are dump and city pickers, itinerant buyers, waste collectors and other informal recyclers (Anagal 2009; Chikarmane and Narayan 2005; KKPKP 2011). Apart from advocating for better working conditions for waste pickers, the union also responds to everyday challenges faced by informal waste workers. They mediate when issues arise with government officials and health service providers, offer educational incentives to encourage children to attend school, support a credit cooperative, offer emergency relief funds for families, run a small recycling trading business which offers stable prices for members, organise social events and builds alliances with international organisations. The union has advocated for the cessation of child labour within the recycling industry by calling on the local-level government to stop children from entering landfills and dumpsites (Chikarmane and Narayan 2005; KKPKP 2011). While waste pickers have very low social status within the city, they have received generous support from the state and local government (Anagal 2009; Chikarmane and Narayan 2009). In a landmark decision to formally acknowledge and support the contributions of the waste pickers to the city, in 2002 the Pune local-level government was the first and only to pay for medical insurance for registered union members (Chikarmane and Narayan 2005, p. 15).

While some of the community-government partnerships I have outlined above began after the JICA study team delivered their final report to the municipality, by 2004 much had already been written by Furedy and other scholars on alternatives to waste management that included waste pickers within a new landfill or collection service delivery. The apparent success of the pilot projects on Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite showed that there may have been a place for waste pickers on the new landfill at Choeung Ek that supported the municipality’s aims while also incorporating the waste pickers within the city’s formal waste management system. From the 1980s there were, however, just as many scholars and researchers studying successful government and private business partnerships, sometimes to the detriment of waste pickers. I describe them below to provide a background to the public-private partnerships in Phnom Penh.

Private sector partnership in waste management services

American civil engineer Sandra Cointreau-Levine (1982, 1989, 1994, 1999, 1998) was a cautious advocate of private sector involvement in waste management. Her reports show that in the 1980s and 1990s governments in developing cities in Asia began involving private companies within solid waste management services. Overall, Cointreau-Levine and her co-authors’ assessments showed an improvement in efficiency in private company collection services over government-operated collection services. For example, in 1987, Bangkok’s municipal government contracted solid waste management services to a private firm in three districts and found the costs were less per tonne of waste collected and

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residents were satisfied with the level of service (Cointreau-Levine 1994, p. 22). In Kuala Lumpur, in the 1990s Cointreau-Levine (1994, p. 26) found that private firms were more efficient than public services, as private trucks could collect 8.5 tonnes per vehicle, whereas the public services only collected 5.7 tonnes. Cointreau-Levine (1994) argues that private sector involvement proves most effective in areas where individuals, businesses and industry have strong values regarding environmental awareness and cleanliness and are therefore willing and able to pay for proper collection and disposal services. Other studies particularly in Africa and as I witnessed in Cambodia, however, have shown that privatised services can often result in household garbage only being collected in wealthier neighbourhoods that can afford the fees, while residents in high-density housing areas have to walk great distances to dispose of their waste themselves at communal dumping sites (Hiltunen 2010; Mugagga 2006; Samson 2003).

Waste picker advocates argue that neoliberal and modernist policies promoting privatisation of and increased levels of technology within waste management systems hinder the work of those within the informal waste sector in developing countries. Scheinberg and Anschutz (2006, p. 257) point out that in many cases conditions are deteriorating for informal waste workers, particularly those who collect recycling on the streets of the city. Researchers and members of KKPKP Poornima Chikarmane and Lakshmi Narayan (2009, p. 7) found that garbage workers in India, Philippines and Thailand have 'displaced waste pickers or relegated them to dumpsite collection. Squabbles between the waste pickers and the collection crew are also fairly common'.

In Phnom Penh, the JICA report details the history of public–private waste management partnerships in the city. The Municipality of Phnom Penh first negotiated franchise agreements with private contractors in 1994 to manage the city’s waste and since this time the franchise has changed hands five times due to financial difficulties (JICA 2005a, p. 1.01). In each instance, JICA states that the municipality negotiated 50-year contracts with private firms giving them each monopolies on the door-to-door waste collection service in the entire city. Prior to 2001 and included in all but the current franchise agreement, these private firms also operated the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite (JICA 2005a, p. 4.28).

In 2001, however, when the municipality was faced with negotiating yet another 50-year franchise agreement, this time with a company called CINTRI (Cambodia) Ltd, it took advice from the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (NADC) and took over the operation of Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite while also starting a secondary collection service in a pilot area comprising only one percent of the city’s population (JICA 2005a, p. 4.28). Although the Norwegian agency advised the municipality against granting a monopoly franchise, instead the municipality entered into the 50-year franchise with CINTRI in 2001, granting them exclusive access to charge residents (in all but one percent of the population) fees for waste collection services (JICA 2005a, p. 4.28).

66 The six private companies included French contractor Pacific Asia Development, a Cambodian company called PCC (no further details supplied), an East German company called ENV, Cambodian company PSBK Ltd and a subsidiary of Canadian company CINTRI (Cambodia) Ltd (JICA 2005a, p. 4.28).
The municipality did however take over the operation of the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite.

The JICA study team were highly critical of the franchise agreement. Among other issues, the team (2005a, p. 4.30) noticed that the agreement lacked 'specific performance specifications', thereby making it difficult for the municipality to 'monitor and enforce quality and standard of services'. In addition, all of the five franchise agreements had been negotiated in lieu of a competitive bidding process – ‘based only on direct negotiations between the two parties’ (JICA 2005a, p. 4.30). JICA also were critical of the per-tonne price CINTR1 was required to pay to dispose of waste at the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite and the future negotiated rate at the new sanitary landfill in Choeung Ek (JICA 2005a, p. 4.40). Finally, the municipality has no say in how much the company charges residents of the city for waste collection services (JICA 2005a, p. 4.39). The authors of the report (2005a, p. 6.11) state that:

Most of the basic conditions for the justifications for engaging the private sector are not secured under the current SWM [solid waste management contract].

To evade the financial woes of its predecessors, CINTR1 quickly negotiated with the state-owned electricity company to collect household fees for waste collection in the one bill and this is conceivably the reason why CINTR1 has continued to operate where others folded (CINTR1 2011, para. 1). A study conducted in Phnom Penh, however, found that overall performance was ‘still low’ and littering in the city’s streets remained ‘very high’ (Kum, Sharp and Harnpornchai 2004, p. 101). Furthermore, although CINTR1 has the rights to provide the waste collection services throughout the city (not including the one percent within the pilot area recommended by NADC), they generally only service the areas where electricity services are connected. The contract, however, restricts the municipality from servicing areas that CINTR1 ignore (JICA 2005a, p. 13.08). Springer argues that privatisation of services in the country has resulted in the securing of wealth and advantage for the elite (Springer 2010a, p. 4). Springer (2011, p. 2558) writes:

While the transfer of ownership from the public to the private sector maintains the ostensible goal of making public holdings more capable, efficient, and profit generating, the Cambodian characteristics of neoliberalisation modify this idea through the country’s patronage system, so that efficiency and competency are of little concern, and profit for well-connected powerbrokers becomes the primary motivation.

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67 In an attempt to solve this, the United Nations Development Program started the Solid Waste Management Project in two small areas, Sangkat Beoung Tompun, and Sangkat Phsar Deum Tkov. They attempted to develop a ‘bridging system’ between unserved communities and CINTR1, whereby the local council received 35 percent of the total fees collected, which it distributed among its community waste collectors, while 65 percent is transferred to CINTR1 for the operation cost of secondary collection (Shrestha 2005, p. 16).
Springer (2011, p. 2559) maintains that privatisation processes also often result in corruption, ‘as the bulk of financial remuneration mysteriously disappears from state ledgers’.

In light of this common perception among foreign donors, JICA, who had intended to fund aspects of the construction of the new landfill for Phnom Penh, insisted that the municipality re-negotiate the franchise agreement with CINTRI to increase the price per tonne and allow the Municipality to service the areas that CINTRI were ignoring. CINTRI refused to renegotiate on the two conditions and JICA withdrew their offer of funding assistance. As a consequence, the municipality funded the construction of a small sanitary landfill with a shortened life span at Choeung Ek by selling the earth that was excavated at the site. The construction of a second larger landfill on adjacent land would supply the earth to cover the top layer of the first landfill.

In Phnom Penh, the municipality’s partnership with the private sector came in the first mode I discussed above (that is privatising an aspect of the waste management service). Disposal services continued to be operated by the municipality, largely independent of the support of foreign aid. The JICA report highlights the flawed nature of the monopoly franchise agreement negotiated with CINTRI. Although the agreement was in the first mode, in the next section I detail how both CINTRI and the municipality sought to transform the actual waste gathered within these services into a commodity, attempting to assert ownership of waste after it was put on the curb by a householder or business.

Waste picker scholars (Chikarmane and Narayan 2009; Dias 2000, 2011; Samson 2009, 2011) argue that governments are increasingly involved in limiting access to waste where it was previously socially recognised as a common resource for the poor. Their findings indicate a shift in the valuation of waste: governments accessing waste and realising positive value potentiality. During my fieldwork, there was news in the media in Phnom Penh to indicate that the municipality and CINTRI had similarly changed their perceptions of waste.

In August 2008, CINTRI unveiled plans to collect organic waste and convert it to fertiliser. At the time, fertiliser had tripled in price in the previous year (Khoun 2008).
and a spokesperson from CINTRI, Seng Chamroeun, was quoted in a newspaper article (Khoun 2008, para. 4):

We want to make a large quantity of compost to supply farmers. In addition, we can reduce garbage pile-ups.

The newspaper article (Khoun 2008, para. 3) also stated that CINTRI would ‘soon begin combing the refuse piles at Stueng Mean Chey landfill site for appropriate organic waste’ and embark on a public awareness campaign for residents to separate their household garbage and enable CINTRI to divert organic waste away from the dumpsite. Three months prior to CINTRI’s announcement, however, the municipality had similarly announced their plans to build and operate a new composting facility next to the new landfill at Choeung Ek (Chun 2008). Phnom Penh’s governor, Kep Chuktema, was quoted by a newspaper (Chun 2008, para. 8):

In [the] future, we will teach citizens how to distinguish between different types of rubbish because rubbish is a kind of business.

The governor had acknowledged in this statement the potential positive value of solid waste. The journalist (Chun 2008, para. 8) added that the municipality ‘plans to employ scavengers to reclaim recyclable items’.

The announcements highlighted, once again, the lack of specificity in the 50-year franchise agreement between the municipality and CINTRI. When I spoke to the deputy governor of PPWM, Simen Leng, he stated that the municipality ‘owned’ the waste and CINTRI would not be allowed to divert organic waste without the municipality’s permission.71 Both the municipality and CINTRI wanted to capitalise on the growing value of fertiliser made from organic waste produced by the city’s residents. Yet there was no public discussion on who owned the actual waste. Moreover, although organic waste was of little positive value for the waste pickers, both the government and the private sector had their own plans for involving waste pickers within their recycling programs. Both saw the waste pickers as a group that could readily be converted to wage labour as and when needed. The announcements foreshadowed a new chapter of contestation for Phnom Penh’s waste. In the governor’s words, waste had become a business, signalling a shift in value and values of waste in the city.

The dumpsite closes: Thoughts and actions

Shortly after I began my fieldwork, the governor of Phnom Penh, Kep Chuktema, announced that the new landfill would open early the following year. His announcement in May 2008 came two years after the JICA study team had forecast that the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite would reach capacity. The governor’s address was the first official announcement of the pending closure of the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite and he

amounts of fertiliser these organisations produced was/is sold to Cambodian farmers as a greener alternative to chemically based fertiliser.

71 When the new landfill opened at Choeung Ek in July 2009, neither the municipality nor CINTRI had built composting facilities.
outlined that the waste pickers would be unwelcome at the new landfill (Chun 2008, para. 10). The director of PPWM, Sao Kunchhon, was also quoted in a newspaper (Mom 2008, para. 16) as stating:

According to our plan, we will not allow rubbish collectors to work at the new site and we will build a fence around it.

When I asked Ravy her thoughts and what she would do, she simply said to me:

I do not have any plans because I heard that the dumpsite will close since 2007 but the dumpsite still continues. So now I believe the dumpsite won’t close anytime soon.

On 28 August 2008, the manager of the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite, Mr Svay Lorn, held a public meeting for the waste pickers in conjunction with two aid groups, Community Sanitation and Recycling Organisation (CSARO), which runs programs to encourage recycling and more recently community partnerships in waste management in new slums on the fringes of the city, and PIO, which operates non-formal education and vocational programs for child and youth waste pickers. At the public meeting, which was attended by over 100 waste pickers and a film crew from a national news channel, Mr Svay announced to the waste pickers that the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite would close on 31 December 2008, with the new landfill opening on 1 January 2009. Representatives from the two organisations both spoke after the announcement providing details of vocational training programs they planned to run in order to re-skill some of the waste pickers in household cleaning, craft making with recycled materials and sewing and dressmaking. The waste pickers shouted out questions to the representatives and manager of the dumpsite mostly about the vocational programs. Their responses highlighted the re-skilling programs’ limited capacity and strict application guidelines. One female waste picker, however, asked Mr Svay a question about the ID cards they had been granted many years before:

Female waste picker:
If I have an ID card from PPWM, can I go to the new dumpsite to collect recycling?

Mr Svay:
No, waste pickers are not allowed at the new site because at the new site we will be covering the waste with soil. The people who live close to the new site complained to the municipality that they do not want the dumpsite to be like it is here, smelly with many insects with a negative affect to their health. Maybe you can get a job working with CINTRI or within a recycling company.

The meeting was called to an end before the remaining questions were answered. On our way back to the village after the meeting, Leakena said that the dumpsite will not close until after Khmer New Year (April 2009). She said:
I strongly believe that they will allow waste pickers to work at the new dumpsite.

Ravy and Reaksa were walking with us and I asked them what they planned to do. Ravy said:

I do not have any ideas. I think I will do the same as the people in my village.

Reaksa added that she would like to stay living where she is because her children are studying at education programs run by aid groups. In the early evening I sat with Bonavy and her husband. Bonavy said that she believed the dumpsite will close on 1 January 2009 and it will not be delayed any further.

We won’t go back to the province, we will work as construction workers or collect recycling on the streets of the city.

I asked the community leader, Bonarith, and his wife, what they would do once the dumpsite is closed and he said he would send his wife to live in their homeland.

I will continue to live here because my children are studying here [at an aid group].

His wife said she would sell vegetables or fish. She added:

I think this job does not need a lot of money and it’s not a hard job.

The following day I held a focus group with a small number of women in the village on the looming closure of the dumpsite. I asked them how they felt about the municipality not allowing waste pickers into the new landfill to collect recycling.

Rachany:

Even if they do not allow waste pickers at the new dumpsite, I will try to go and if they do not let us I will come back. I will find a new job. I can be a seller. It is hard for me if the government does not allow waste pickers to go there because I am not sure about my new job as a seller. For many years I have worked on the dumpsite.

Ravy:

I do not know what I can do. They are the government and I am a waste picker. I cannot argue against them.

Their responses reflected the community’s insistence that they abide by and respect the law. I also felt that they recognised their powerlessness, but this did not mean, however, that they did not hold strong emotions. Yet they were largely ambivalent about finding alternative forms of income. I believe this was because the pickers had created a sociality that centred on waste – their concerns about not being able to access the new landfill was not just about how they would earn an income; as Leakena said, ‘the dumpsite is my life.’

Rumours and delays
Although the dumpsite manager publicly announced to the waste pickers that the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite would close at the end of 2008, the actual date changed six times between October 2008 and when it eventually closed in July 2009. And although Svay had insisted that waste pickers would not be allowed to work within the new landfill, the waste pickers had various sources of information to suggest the opposite. Kean said she heard that waste pickers would be allowed to work on the new landfill if they had an ID card.

If they don't have an ID card they cannot enter the new dumpsite or collect at the new dumpsite. I heard that some waste pickers have this card.

When I asked her if she had an ID card herself, she said she had never seen one. She had been a waste picker for only a few years.

Prior to the public meeting, Chay, the dealer I wrote about in Chapter 3, had said quite confidently that she would continue to buy recyclables from the waste pickers at the new landfill. Only a few months later in December 2008, however, she told me that she had spoken briefly to a municipal official who said there would be a yearly fee for her to run her recycling buying business at the new landfill. Chay stated:

The government said that recycling dealers will need to pay money to the government to be able to operate at the new site. We will need to pay every year. I have not yet discussed this with the government. They will allow waste pickers to work at the new site, they won't need to pay any money. I plan to find a large house or build a house to store the recyclables close to the new dumpsite, this is my plan.

Svay and the municipality, in contrast, continued to assert that the waste pickers would not be allowed to work in the new landfill. The waste pickers simply kept on working on Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite in the same patterns as they had always. I did not witness waste pickers working longer hours to save money for the day the dumpsite closed. A few young men found alternative work within the construction industry but came back to waste picking a few weeks later, complaining that the work was too hard for too little money.

The new landfill takes form

Towards the end of 2008, the municipality had made significant progress in their construction of the new landfill at Choeung Ek. On my first visit, I was amazed at the size of the site. Three large interconnected pits had been dug, engineered with angled walls and strong straight edges. The pits were surrounded by rice farms and were almost entirely free of litter and garbage. The order within the concave shape surrounded by open space was in direct contrast to the convex mountains of waste accumulated at Stueng Mean Chey with its pockets of high-density dwellings surrounding it.
Shortly after my visit to the new landfill, I asked if some of the people in the village wanted to see it for themselves. With a favourable response, I called for a tuk-tuk and people crammed inside. On the way, there was a lot of discussion about the distance to the new landfill, specifically the affect it would have on their life and the impact it would have on waste management within the city.

Leakena:

Even if the government allows the waste pickers, I will not go to collect at the new dumpsite because it is far and I won’t have anyone to cook and look after my children.

In her support, there was a lot of moaning about the new landfill being so far away. Sambath added:

The company [CINTRI] will need 200 trucks to collect the waste in the city in order for the city not to stink like garbage.

I asked them what they expected to see. Bonarith said:

The new dumpsite is a big and deep lake. There is a circular path down to the bottom of the lake. The trucks cannot go straight to the bottom of the lake to dump but the trucks will go step by step in a circular manner. After the waste is dumped, they will add a truck of soil on it.

Sann said that he heard that the municipality had not built a fence around the new landfill yet. The passengers seemed to have a good picture of the new landfill before they arrived.

Once there, the villagers muttered to each other in low voices how it will be difficult to work there because there was no easy way down into the pit and it would be dangerous to use the same roads as the trucks. Leakena said that there is no market close by to buy food and water. Leakena, Kunthea and Heng agreed that the land surrounding the landfill must be privately owned and they would be unable to build a house next to the landfill. I heard others debating about the length of time it would take for the large pit to be filled. Someone said within a few months it would be filled, while another said it would take a few years.

Back at the village I held a quick focus group discussion to record their thoughts about visiting the new landfill. Their responses were overwhelmingly negative.

Sambath:

When I was there I felt hopeless because it is a deep hole and it is far from the city. I will not go to work there and I think it is better if I go to work as a construction worker. It will be not only difficult to work there but it will be difficult to live there too. It was very far and I will feel lonely to live there.

Kunthea:
I thought that the new dumpsite was a smooth field like the old dumpsite making it easy for me to collect. But when I was there it was a deep hole, making it difficult to go in and come out because the path down into the deep hole is made only for the trucks and the waste pickers cannot go up the same way as the trucks. It will be too dangerous.

Leakena:
The new dumpsite is constructed to skip the waste pickers. I heard from others that it will be easy to work on the new dumpsite but when I was there I realised it is not so. It was a big and deep hole. If the landowner rented their land to the waste pickers, I still think that the waste pickers cannot live there during the wet season because the land is used for paddy rice fields. There was no village and I worry that my little girl will fall into the water [in the paddy fields].

Kunthea:
And I think if I move to work there it will be very difficult for me to look for help from aid groups or the police when I have an emergency situation at the new dumpsite.

I wondered how many would consider collecting recycling on the streets of the city. Bonarith, the community leader, quickly said:

In the city they do not allow the waste pickers there. I learned this information during training I did with the other community leaders. The government does not allow us to collect on the street because they are afraid that we will break the plastic bags and create a mess. The village leader told this information to all the people in each village.

Once again, the waste pickers were willing to accept this directive from the municipality. So if they were not going to collect at the new landfill nor on the streets of the city, I wondered what they would do?

Leakena:
I can’t imagine what will happen so I can’t plan. I’ll wait until the time comes then I will start to think about that and immediately try to find a job. I know the dumpsite will close but I do not know what to do after that.

Up until the very evening of the closure of the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite, almost all of the villagers continued to work in the same routines. Many expressed their worry about the looming closure. Kunthea often said she was having difficulties sleeping due to her growing anxiety.

The aid groups were not easing their worries. Although I heard of aid group plans for income-generation activities and creating jobs for the waste pickers, the aid groups were tight-lipped, neither sharing the information with the waste pickers or the other organisations. In a newspaper article (Mom 2008, para. 9) published at the time of the
governor’s announcement in May 2008, a representative from Pour un Sourire d’Enfant (PSE), Sry Chanratha, was quoted:

We don’t have the ability to help them yet… But we are trying to find funding from other NGOs in order to assist them to get real jobs and houses.

As my worries for the waste pickers heightened, I invited representatives from each of the aid groups supporting the waste pickers to a morning meeting to discuss their plans and share information. The meeting was attended by over 20 representatives, and while individuals shared details of their aid group’s current programs mostly focused on child waste pickers, they gave very little details of new projects or programs to assist the adult waste pickers with jobs or loans after the closure. All of them expressed their concerns for the families, however, none of the organisations were prepared to advocate for the entitlement rights of the waste pickers, or assist the pickers in negotiating access to the new landfill.

On the very last day that the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite received waste from the city, the waste pickers continued to collect recyclables and at the end of the day sold their collections to their dealers and buyers. I expected spontaneous gatherings on the dumpsite with drinks and food shared in remembrance of the riches the dumpsite had provided and joint commiserations about the end of their profession and the life they had created for themselves. But there were no such gatherings. Back in the village it was quiet. Some said they were packing their things to take a short visit to see relatives in their homeland.

20 July 2009

The next morning, news spread to the village that the last truck had departed the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite at about 6am and all trucks in the city were diverted to the new Landfill. The municipality held a ceremony at 8am with more than 20 dignitaries in attendance to watch as the first trucks unloaded at the site (Mom 2009). Phnom Penh deputy governor, Chea Sophan, spoke at the event and was quoted in a newspaper article (Mom 2009, para. 8) stating:

We will not allow the scavengers to work here and even if we did, they wouldn’t have any garbage to collect because we will bury it every two days.

At about 9.30am, a group of us at the village decided to visit the new landfill, and once again I called for a large tuk-tuk to take us there. We were all relatively quiet on the 10km journey. On arrival we were able to drive straight through the entrance of the landfill, past the office and over the weighbridge on the same road as the trucks as we made our way to the bottom of the deep pit. To my astonishment, there were about 20 waste pickers from Stueng Mean Chey already there, collecting excitedly from the small mound of waste that had accumulated. No one from the municipality had tried to stop them. There was no fence prohibiting their entrance, no guard to remove them and the bulldozer operator
simply looked on with ease. Everyone from the village was thrilled and planned to come back the next day.

Many of the villagers made their own way to the new landfill on the second day and when I arrived at about 9am there was already more than 50 waste pickers collecting recyclables on the site. The bulldozer driver had warned the waste pickers that they needed to store their collections on the banks of the pit, not on the bottom. This was the only directive given to them by the municipal staff. By the third day, the number of waste pickers had swelled to over 100, including several women selling food and drinks to the waste pickers on the site.

In the opening week, the waste pickers were charged high prices for transportation to and from the dumpsite by moto drivers who pulled a wagon of waste pickers from and to the village, but by the second week the price had substantially dropped to 1000 riels (US$0.25) per person each way. By the third week, the manager and workers on the landfill refused to let me in and I began to hear similar stories from staff of aid groups. It became apparent that the municipality was barring any visitor or expatriate from entering the landfill. The free gifts that the waste pickers received from merit-makers and tourists would not continue at the new landfill, despite the landfill being within one kilometer of a common tourist daytrip, the Killing Fields.

The waste pickers had cut a path leading from a side road to the edge of the landfill to enter without using the municipal roads or going past the weighbridge and office. Even when I attempted to enter via this shortcut, dressed in my usual picking clothes, I was spotted by a landfill worker and sent away. The municipality clearly did not want the new landfill to become the icon of poverty in the capital that was Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite. Although they forbade foreigners and unofficial visitors from entering the site, they did not put a ban on child waste pickers, nor did they cover the garbage every two days with soil.
Within the first month of the new facility at Choeung Ek opening, I was told that the municipality had negotiated an exclusive deal with only one recycling dealer that could operate at the landfill. The deal, which was secret at the time, secured the dealer monopoly rights to buy the recyclables collected on the landfill by waste pickers. According to my informants, this dealer offered lower prices than they could otherwise get from their Stueng Mean Chey dealers with whom they had long-term patron–client relationships. As the value of recyclables had started to rise again after the GFC, the waste pickers expressed their anger to me at being forced to sell at reduced prices. When I spoke to Chay she said that the municipality had demanded a yearly fee to operate at the new landfill. It was too high. I will wait a few months to see what happens,’ she said. Unable to either enter the new landfill or speak to the new landfill manager, I came to the realisation that my fieldwork was over – 17 months after I began.

Eight months after the opening of the landfill, a regional newspaper reported on the exclusive contract with the sole recycling dealer at the new landfill. The journalist, Yos Katank (2010, para. 9), wrote that the sole trader was paying the municipality’s landfill operators US$750.00 per month for exclusive rights to buy from the waste pickers inside the landfill. By this time, the municipality had erected a wire fence around the landfill and Chay and several other dealers were buying from their customers outside the new fence. The waste pickers had simply penetrated the fence by cutting a hole in it and were coming and going as they pleased. Yos wrote that it was not that simple, however, as these outside dealers stated they faced constant harassment from the police and landfill operators. In another story on Radio Free Asia (Sek 2012, para. 1), waste pickers reported that they too faced harassment from the police and authorities, who were attempting to ensure that recyclables gathered from the landfill were only being sold to the single dealer operating within the bounds of the landfill site.72

Discussion

The municipality had negotiated the arrangement with the sole dealer to the detriment and exploitation of the waste pickers. Its action was an attempt to regulate the exchange practices of the waste pickers, but without the need to provide provisions or support to the waste pickers through their disavowal. Although it appeared that many of the pickers circumvented the attempted monopoly established, the municipality has, nevertheless, been effective in limiting media coverage of the waste pickers as well as curtailing access to the landfill by aid groups, tourists and merit-makers, and thereby reduced their opportunities to create positive value potential through exchanges with others. In both regards, the municipality pushed the waste pickers out of the public and development industry’s imaginary.

72 Such an arrangement is not new in the region. Advisers on urban environment and development Scheinberg and Anschütz (2006, p. 264) conducted research on the opening of a landfill in Bangkok that underwent a similar process of modernisation and privatisation, including the 'official' denial of access to waste pickers. Soon afterwards, the private company managing the landfill 'allowed [waste pickers] to continue picking under the condition that they sell only to that company – at even lower prices'. In Delhi, journalist Avalok Langer (2011, para. 6) also reported that a private company arrived at one of the dumpsites and allegedly told the waste pickers that the company had been given the contract to 'mine recycling' and if the waste pickers wanted access, they needed to pay them.
The changes made it harder for the waste pickers to gain maximum value for their labour since the absence of competition and reduction in the number of specialist buyers reduced options they previously had available to them. The waste pickers also worked longer hours, travelling to and from the landfill, and this also resulted in the additional input costs of transport. Overall their earnings decreased as well as their ability to create surplus value. To the municipality’s disadvantage, the new arrangement meant that less material was being removed from the landfill by the waste pickers and thereby potentially decreased the life of the landfill. By hindering the activities of the waste pickers, the municipality was wasting their productive potential and may actually have been adding to the long-term costs associated with operating the new facility.

In Chapter 3, I detailed how the waste pickers had resisted dealers’ attempts to unfairly manipulate the price paid through the use of faulty weighing machines by hiding non-recyclables within their commodities for sale. Similarly, by carrying their collections outside the landfill perimeter, the waste pickers used their agency once again to subvert the municipality’s attempts at appropriating the positive value potential the waste pickers had created from their actions.
Conclusion

The aim was to write a visual and textual ethnography on the complex social world of the waste pickers based on well-grounded fieldwork within an economic anthropology framework. I wanted the thesis to encompass narrative and analysis, balanced by hundreds of photographs, enabling the reader to gain a strong sense of place and practice. To achieve this I allowed my photographic production to shape my fieldwork experience, the data that I collected and ultimately the analysis that I drew. This was one of the reasons why I positioned myself within the ethnographic text.

In the end I hope the thesis illustrates the many ways in which the pickers created economic and social value through the reclamation of waste. Taking a Marxian approach to the production of value, drawing on Nancy Munn’s theories on the transformation of value and identity, I have challenged the characterisation of picking as merely a survival strategy for poor and transient populations. Over several chapters I have demonstrated the ways in which the pickers were able to create value through a multitude of public acts of ownership within wider social relations. What is more, the combination of text and images elucidates the complexities of their lives that I believe are poorly understood by those external to it.

The processes of value transformation meant that picking was a flexible form of self-employment for those with very little capital, which offered more opportunities than other options available. The waste pickers felt proud of their earnings and relished the occasions when they found things of higher exchange value. Such acts also created other forms of value – moral values about being a good provider.

This was, in part, due to the manner in which the pickers had formed a cohesive social group with distinctive norms, practices, obligations and entitlements that regulated activities and incorporated waste in their daily lives in a way that was unique to the group. The community reinforced largely egalitarian communal values that enabled individual pickers and the community as a whole to create and realise additional personal, social and economic value from the dumpsite. These acts were embedded in, and articulated with, the development of social relationships in the village. Furthermore these acts internally and externally defined the group.

As their value creation processes centred on waste and the dumpsite the pickers had to negotiate tensions within relations with outsiders, which were framed by stigma and in some cases voyeuristic fascination. This includes the fraught nature of their engagement with aid workers, which was seemingly ill-conceived and non-egalitarian in spite of the aid workers overarching desire to help the community. The pickers’ attempt at undermining processes of disarticulation, and their ability to largely maintain their values as others attempted to subvert them, reveals their agency and the group’s social cohesion.

I have similarly highlighted the process through which resources formerly seen as urban commons were (and continue to be) appropriated and exploited by more powerful groups to the detriment of waste picking communities. One can imagine ways in which the
positive value-creation processes of waste pickers, as they operate in the local domain, could be linked to positive processes in the interconnected world outside. For example, as recyclers, they make an environmentally positive contribution, and as individuals, they are earning their living through enterprise. Various processes of articulation and disarticulation both nationally and internationally result in the value-creation processes of the waste pickers being mostly disregarded. I believe there is a failure to connect with the detailed reality of the pickers' lives and hence there is often the development of solutions that do not build on the value that local communities have created.

Instead, global values are validated and local processes are considered demeaning, backward, exploitative and inefficient; this view sees these inherently out-of-place people, dealing with matter out of place, as ultimately polluted. In juxtaposition to the degrading and inaccurate claims in the media and by aid groups, in this thesis I have attempted to revalue and re-theorise the waste pickers as productive petty capitalists who should be recognised for their agency, skilfulness, creativity, contributions to the environment and their capacity to apply themselves to the transformation of value.
Postscript

On a visit to Phnom Penh in July 2011, almost all of the families lived in the same village close to the old Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite, and travelled daily to Choeung Ek to collect recycling when required. All continued to work as waste pickers except one family, a single mother of five who started working as a seamstress in a small factory making bags for an aid group to sell overseas. The same aid groups continued their support of families within the village and there have been fewer media reports on the waste pickers. Access to the landfill is still not secure for the waste pickers as the municipality has announced that it is considering changing the ownership status of the waste from a semi-public resource to privately owned.

In 2012, the municipality held negotiations with more than 15 private companies to discuss opportunities for the waste collected from homes and businesses in the city to be purchased (MPP 2012, para. 1). On the municipality’s website, the meetings with two companies in particular have been highlighted. The first was with Malaysian company Puncak Niaga Holding Berhad, which has offered to invest and manage the landfill (MPP 2011a, para. 1). The second company is Green Asia Energy Corp (now Green Asia Global Corporation), which submitted a proposal in June 2011 to build a waste-to-energy plant at Choeung Ek (MPP 2011b, para. 2). By incinerating 1200 tonnes of the city’s waste every day, the company claims it could produce 30 megawatt hour of electricity, which it could sell to the state-owned electricity company at a cheaper rate than that sourced from Vietnam (MPP 2011b, para. 3).

Following their proposals, the municipality granted permission for each company to conduct feasibility studies. Most recently, it was announced that Green Asia Global Corporation has been selected as the preferred private partner (Danapal 2012, para. 8). Since this time, Green Asia Global Corporation has committed only to conducting a more lengthy feasibility study and there have been no further media announcements on the progress of the waste-to-energy plant since July 2012 (White and Chhay 2012). In 2014, according to media reports (Sen 2013, para. 6), the Choeung Ek landfill appears close to capacity and the few images of the landfill show a scene that resembles the former dumpsite at Stueng Mean Chey.

Photo at Choeung Ek landfill, Dangkor district by Pha Lina, courtesy of the Phnom Penh Post as featured in article by David Sen (2013).
Appendix

Supplementary plates
Plates 233 to 273

Tables and figures
Table 1.3
Figure 3.1
Table 5.1
Table 5.2
Plate 257
VOLUNTEER PROJECT!

To feed hungry children!

at the CITY DUMP

JOIN US NOW!

YOU DON'T HAVE TO BUY THE FOOD WITH US! YOU CAN GIVE THEM THE FOOD YOU WOULD AVERAGELY USE SEVERAL TIMES A WEEK,

CALL IN NOW AND ASK FOR DETAILS OF NEXT TRIP!

SUNDAY

LIVE MUSIC 60¢ BEER

$1.00 drinks (50¢ more)

House wines 52¢ off

Plate 264
Table 1.3: Comparison of Earnings of Four Waste Pickers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Waste pickers</th>
<th>Over study period (between November 2008 to April 2009)</th>
<th>During March 2009 (when prices had risen slightly and the plastic-bag dealers returned to the dumpsite)</th>
<th>Pre-GFC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Daily average take-home earnings (not including the metals stockpiled under their home)</td>
<td>Daily average take-home earnings (not including the metals stockpiled under their home)</td>
<td>Daily average take-home earnings (not including the metals stockpiled under their home)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Rs) + Hours + kg</td>
<td>(Rs) + Hours + kg</td>
<td>(Rs) + Hours + kg</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 1: A 26-year-old male, the sole breadwinner for a young family. His wife stayed at home caring for their toddler. The couple admitted that they were keen savers. No regular donations from aid groups except rental assistance.</td>
<td>14,000 3.65 10.4 88.7 24,300 6.06 87% 10% 3%</td>
<td>19,900 4.90 10.6 30 (97%) 1 (3%) 0 (0%)</td>
<td>620,000 153.15 1,101.5 275.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 2: An 18-year-old male, married to a 16-year-old wife with a newborn. New to full-time waste picking. Known to be a heavy drinker. Minimal donations from aid groups.</td>
<td>8,000 2.00 9.2 93.3 12,800 3.20 63% 36% 1%</td>
<td>8,400 2.00 9.4 92 (65%) 11 (35%) 0 (0%)</td>
<td>241,000 60.25 479.50 119.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 3: A 26-year-old single mother with one child. Also supporting her parents. Receives generous donations from various aid groups.</td>
<td>12,900 3.13 9.6 83.8 15,300 3.83 47% 47% 6%</td>
<td>18,400 4.60 10 16 (52%) 10 (32%) 4 (14%)</td>
<td>320,600 80.15 524.60 131.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 4: A 38-year-old single mother with five children. Only a few years of waste picking. Moderate donations from aid groups. She was sick for a few weeks in February and borrowed money from lenders, and worked more intensely in March to repay the loans.</td>
<td>9,400 2.35 10.4 66 11,300 2.83 55% 30% 15%</td>
<td>13,100 3.20 11.2 23 (74%) 7 (22%) 1 (4%)</td>
<td>343,900 85.98 627.90 156.98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 3.1: Prices of Recyclables on the Stung Mean Chey Dumpsite between June 2008 and February 2009
Table 5.1 and Table 5.2

Table 5.1 is an overview of support provided by aid groups to the wider waste-picking community at Stung Mean Chey. The data was collected from interviews and online research conducted while the Stueng Mean Chey Dumpsite was still in operation. With this table I aim to provide a general overview of the type of aid and support activities offered by the organisations. As aid programs are subject to change over time, the table is to be considered a guide to the common forms of assistance and not to be considered to be an exact report of the programs offered. There are organisations not listed as I was unable to obtain information about their activities, including a few church groups offering services and gifts. The aid groups shaded in grey are local not-for-profit organisations.

Table 5.1: List of Organisations Providing Assistance to the Waste Pickers and the Services and Gifts they Offered

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation name</th>
<th>Children's education programs</th>
<th>Medical</th>
<th>Alternative income generation</th>
<th>Rice</th>
<th>Vocational training</th>
<th>Water</th>
<th>Information</th>
<th>Loans</th>
<th>Monthly stipends</th>
<th>Water filters</th>
<th>Clothing/boots</th>
<th>Housing support</th>
<th>Meals</th>
<th>Mosquito nets</th>
<th>Orphanage</th>
<th>Community building</th>
<th>Compost facility</th>
<th>Daycare</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
Table 5.2: Gifts and Services Received in Each Household from Aid Groups (shaded grey are the single-parent homes).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>No. of school-aged children (under 18) living in the home</th>
<th>Two-parent or single-parent family</th>
<th>No. of organisations providing regular support</th>
<th>No. of children in out-of-school education classes</th>
<th>No. of children in live-in boarding schools</th>
<th>Money received per month (in total)</th>
<th>Rent assistance per month according to cost as a percentage</th>
<th>Total amount of rice received per month in kilograms</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>120,000r</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Household supplies and boots</td>
<td>68kg</td>
<td>Study materials, clothing and meals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100,000r</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Study materials, clothing and meals</td>
<td>85kg</td>
<td>Study materials, clothing and meals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>80,000r</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Snacks, household supplies, clothing</td>
<td>50kg</td>
<td>Study materials, clothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>28,000r</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Study materials, clothing, household supplies</td>
<td>75kg</td>
<td>Study materials and clothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20,000r</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Snacks, household supplies, clothing</td>
<td>50kg</td>
<td>Study materials and clothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20,000r</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Study materials and clothing</td>
<td>32kg</td>
<td>Study materials, meals and clothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20,000r</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Study materials, household supplies, snacks and clothing</td>
<td>10kg</td>
<td>Study materials, clothing, and snacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20,000r</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Study materials, clothing, and snacks</td>
<td>50kg</td>
<td>Study materials, clothing, excursions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20,000r</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Study materials and clothing</td>
<td>50kg</td>
<td>Study materials and clothing and snacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20,000r</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Study materials and clothing</td>
<td>50kg</td>
<td>Study materials and clothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20,000r</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Study materials and clothing</td>
<td>50kg</td>
<td>Study materials and clothing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20,000r</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Study materials and clothing</td>
<td>50kg</td>
<td>Snacks and meals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20,000r</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Study materials and clothing</td>
<td>50kg</td>
<td>Snacks and meals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20,000r</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Study materials and clothing</td>
<td>50kg</td>
<td>Snacks and meals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>20,000r</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Study materials and clothing</td>
<td>50kg</td>
<td>Snacks and meals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15kg</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Study materials and clothing</td>
<td>15kg</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Two</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Study materials and clothing</td>
<td>50kg</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>Study materials and clothing</td>
<td>50kg</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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