**Royal Holloway**

**Geography for Schools**

**Lecture Series**

Blood Bricks: Untold Stories of Modern Slavery and Climate Change from Cambodia

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**A-Level Syllabus:**

* AQA Global Systems and Global Governance, urbanisation, population and the environment.
* OCR Global Connections, global governance – human rights, climate change.

*Blood bricks embody the converging traumas of modern slavery and climate change in our urban age*.

Cambodia is in the midst of a construction boom. The building of office blocks, factories, condominiums, housing estates, hotels, and shopping malls is pushing its capital city upwards. But this vertical drive into the skies, and the country’s status as one of Asia’s fastest growing Southeast Asian economies, hides a troubling side to Phnom Penh’s ascent.  Building projects demand bricks in large quantities, and there is a profitable domestic brick production industry supplying them. This industry relies upon a multigenerational workforce of adults and children trapped in debt bondage – one of the most prevalent forms of modern slavery in the world. Tens of thousands of debt-bonded families in Cambodia extract, mould, and fire clay in hazardous conditions to meet Phnom Penh’s insatiable appetite for bricks.

Blood bricks reveals more than just the vertical aspirations of a business elite built on modern slavery; rather it also foregrounds stories of climate change. Phnom Penh is being built not only on the foundation of blood bricks, but also climate change as a key driver of debt and entry into modern slavery in brick kilns*.*

By moving from the city, to the brick kiln, and finally back to the rural villages once called home, researchers have shown how urban development is being built on unsustainable levels of debt taken on by rural families struggling to farm in one of the most climate vulnerable countries in the world. In trying to repay loans taken on to cope with the destructive impacts of climate change on agrarian production, families from rural villages across Cambodia are forced to leave their homes to live and work in brick kilns from which they may never escape.

Kiln owners repay farmers’ debts and offer a consolidated loan. In return, farmers and their families are compelled to enter into debt bondage with the kiln owner until the loan is repaid, if ever.

Blood bricks highlight how climate change continues to impact upon workers’ lives through unseasonal rain that halts brick production and deepens levels of debt. The excavation of clay for bricks, and the emission of noxious gases into the atmosphere through the burning of pre-consumer garment waste in the kiln, also contributes to the dynamic relationship between modern slavery, environmental degradation, and climate change.

Modern slavery and climate change are too often considered separate from each other in policy and planning debates. They are interconnected challenges that require joined-up approaches to tackle them within, but also beyond, Cambodian borders.

**Definition of modern slavery**

Modern slavery is the severe exploitation of other people for personal or commercial gain. From the outside, it can look like a normal job. But people are being controlled – they can face violence or threats, be forced into inescapable debt, or have had their passport taken away and are being threatened with deportation. Many have fallen into this oppressive trap simply because they were trying to escape poverty or insecurity, improve their lives and support their families. (<https://www.antislavery.org/slavery-today/modern-slavery/>)

**Activity** (30 minutes using Blood Bricks video and infographic handout, Fig. 1)

* Explain what factors have led to modern slavery in Cambodian brick kilns;
* Assess the different ways in which Blood Bricks demonstrate the economic and environmental interdependence of the contemporary world;
* Evaluate why climate change is a human rights issue.

**Further reading**

* Blood Bricks website (blogs and project report): <https://www.projectbloodbricks.org>
* Modern slavery, environmental destruction and climate change (report): <https://www.antislaverycommissioner.co.uk/media/1241/fisheries-field-forests-factories.pdf>
* Slavery is real and the West profits from it – Cambodia’s construction boom highlights how (news article):

<https://theconversation.com/slavery-is-real-and-the-west-profits-from-it-cambodias-construction-boom-highlights-how-105906>

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