

INTRODUCTION

Background

My poverty is having no land, buffalo, hoe, rake, plow, transport, mosquito net, cooking pots or even plates to eat from and spoon and fork to pick up the food. This means I cannot possibly get enough food to eat because I lack the things I need to keep me alive for much longer.

The “voice” is of a woman in her mid-60s living in Kampong Thom, who in her lifetime has known the comforts of prosperity and the cruelty of war and in the return to peace is left with nothing.

The Royal Government of Cambodia, with technical assistance from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), conducted a nationwide Participatory Poverty Assessment (PPA) between late October and mid-December 2000. This PPA was part of the preparation of the Second Socioeconomic Development Plan, 2001–2005. The primary objective of the PPA was to provide a qualitative assessment of poverty involving the participation of the poor themselves. It also acknowledges that poverty is multi-dimensional and more than the lack of income. This report includes a synthesis of the findings of the PPA and suggests how they can be of use to local communities, the Government, civil society and international funding agencies.

The current poverty line in Cambodia is the cash equivalent of KR54,050 per capita per month. This is based on the cash value of what it takes to consume 2,100 calories of energy and 58 grams of protein per day per person and to cover basic items like clothing and shelter. This is equivalent to US\$0.45 per day, which is considerably less than the World Bank’s “dollar-a-day” adjusted measurement for extreme poverty. As explained in

The People Assessed

The Cambodia PPA involved 154 villages in 70 communes of all 24 provinces and municipalities and 15 nonrural urban socioeconomic groups. Thirteen percent of the PPAs were conducted in the villages of ethnic minorities. People targeted for the PPA included the rural poor, women and children, farmers and fisherfolk, ethnic minority groups, female-headed households, demobilized soldiers, orphans, street children, sex workers, plantation workers, garment workers, garbage collectors and cyclo-drivers.

Chapter 2, the PPA has not simply relied on this poverty line to decide who is living in poverty in Cambodia; it also has included additional criteria developed by the World Food Program (WFP), which provides a sharper poverty focus. It is interesting, though, to briefly note the quantitative poverty assessments that were made in Cambodia prior to the PPA. These quantitative poverty assessments¹ are summarized below:

- *1993/94 Baseline Poverty Profile*, based on data from the 1993/94 Cambodia Socioeconomic Survey (CSES). It found that poverty was relatively low in Phnom Penh (only 11 percent of people living below the poverty line) but much higher in other urban areas (37 percent) and highest in rural areas (43 percent). Nationwide, 39 percent of the population were below the poverty line: 22 percent with per capita spending lower than the food poverty line. Poverty rates were highest in households headed by farmers (46 percent) and lowest in households headed by public sector workers (20 percent). More than 75 percent of the poor lived in households headed by farmers.

¹ See the results of the poverty profile and poverty assessment in the Government’s 1999 publication of the Cambodia Poverty Index prepared with support from United Nations Development Programme, Swedish International Development Authority and World Bank, and the World Food Program’s poverty mapping exercises prepared in 2000.

- *1998 Poverty Assessment*, based on data from the 1997 Cambodia Socioeconomic Survey. It found that of the 36.1 percent of people nationwide living in poverty, 11.1 percent were in Phnom Penh, 29.7 percent in other urban areas and 40.1 percent in rural areas.
- *1999 Poverty Mapping*, arranged by WFP using data from the 1997 Cambodia Socioeconomic Survey and the 1998 National Census. The WFP also developed its own criteria (explained in Chapter 2) to guide poverty mapping of each commune in Cambodia. This poverty mapping has resulted in identifying three categories of poor communes.

As explained in Chapter 2, the PPA linked its selection of communes to these quantitative assessments of poverty, the most influential being the WFP's mapping. The identification of poor communes was substantiated by local authorities, community members and nongovernment organizations (NGOs).

Sociohistorical Context of Poverty

There is an important sociohistorical and political economy context to poverty in Cambodia that sets it apart from most of its neighboring countries.² During the American war with Viet Nam, it was subjected to aerial bombardments. It was also during that period an innocuous Maoist rebel group, known as the Khmer Rouge (Red Khmer), gained tremendous momentum once its ambitions were supported by the forces of the then-deposed prime minister who was trying to regain power after being overthrown in a coup. But it was the Khmer Rouge, led by a man called Pol Pot, who marched into the country's capital of Phnom Penh in 1975 and took control. And so began, simplistically speaking, a three-year reign of horror in the name of social experimenting to return the country to an agrarian society. People in the cities were marched to the countryside and made to work along with rural people manually digging canals and planting rice to feed an already somewhat impoverished

nation. Up to two million people are believed to have died from disease, starvation or outright murder at the hands of the Khmer Rouge cadre (of people who disobeyed orders, of people whose "crime" was to be educated or prosperous) in that period that lasted until the end of 1978 when Viet Nam invaded to push out the Khmer Rouge and erect a new government. Opposition and outrage quickly divided into four major factions, including the Khmer Rouge, that remained in armed conflict for all the 1980s. It simmered only in 1991 when all the factions signed a peace pact that allowed for a United Nations peacekeeping force of military and civilian components to operate as an interim government and prepare the country for elections and ideally, some degree of democratic stability. Internal conflict did not subside completely although a Cambodian government was installed with the unique compromise situation of having two prime ministers, and two political parties, share power. The constitutional monarchy was restored and some degree of peace settled into the shattered remains of the kingdom of Cambodia. The Khmer Rouge, which had backed out of the earlier peace agreement, continued pockets of banditry and rebellion against the Government until an amnesty program for rebel soldiers was initiated in the mid 1990s. The final demise of the radical rebels and that brutal chapter of Cambodian history were marked with the death of Pol Pot in 1998.

The peace dividend is just now starting to pay off, but the destruction of both physical and social infrastructure and loss of trained people who were murdered long ago or more recently have emigrated abroad remains devastating. The number of Cambodians severely traumatized as a result of the internecine conflict that tore the society apart still lingers.

Many older Cambodians made it clear through the PPA discussion that before war engulfed their society in the early 1970s, Cambodia was a much better society to live in than it is today. By "better" they meant they were not as poor. This is a matter for further analysis, but it does pervade perceptions about poverty in Cambodia held by an older generation of Cambodians and cannot be overlooked.

Poverty in Cambodia is not a modern phenomenon, although its dimensions have changed over the years. There are recurring themes in Cambodian culture that address notions associated with poverty. Some of these recurring themes are briefly examined in this report.

Cambodians, or at least ethnic Khmer, believe Cambodia is rich in resources. They believe there are enough resources for all people who can be considered belong-

² See the following for a reasonably diverse view of Cambodia's recent past: David Chandler, 1988, *A History of Cambodia*, Chiang Mai: Silkwork; Jean Delvert, 1961, *Le Paysan Cambodgien*, Paris Mouton; May Ebihara, 1968, "Svay: A Khmer Village in Cambodia" (unpublished PhD thesis), New York: Columbia; Hu Nim, 1982, "Land Tenure and Social Structure in Kampuchea," in B. Kiernan and C. Boua (eds), *Peasantry and Politics in Kampuchea, 1942-1981*, London: Zed; Ben Kiernan (1985), *How Pol Pot Came to Power*, London: Verso; Marie-Alexandrine Martin, 1994, *Cambodia: A Shattered Society*, Berkeley: University of California Press; Eva Mysliwiec, 1988, *Punishing the Poor: The International Isolation of Kampuchea*, Oxford: Oxfam (UK); Laura Summers, 1995, "The Sources of Economic Grievance in Sihanouk's Cambodia," *Southeast Journal of Social Science*, Vol.14 (1), pp.16-34; Paula Uimonen, 1994, *Responses to Revolutionary Change: A Study of Social Memory in a Khmer Village* (unpublished MA thesis), University of Stockholm: Department of Anthropology.

ing to *srok khmer* (literally the Khmer village). They point with pride to the archaeological grandeur of Angkor Wat and to what Cambodian people used to be capable of doing in the past. It might be questioned whether all the Angkorian “God-Kings” were wise, but most certainly Jayaraman VII, who built a portion of the Angkor temples, is credited as being a king that exemplified all the virtues of someone who truly cared for his subjects. Cambodia’s historic richness is also seen as extending to the perceived abundant natural resources with more than enough land to cultivate rice and other crops and a climate that is not particularly harsh.

Given that perception, which only until recently would have been true, it is hard for Cambodians to understand why the last three decades of the 20th century involved extreme hardship for them. Nowhere in Cambodian history is there mention of Cambodians being hungry or dying from starvation like many of them did during the 1970s and early 1980s. During this time, there was little or no food to see most people through the period between the planting and the harvesting seasons. It is one thing for some households in the village to experience food insecurity, but it is quite another for most of the community to be finding themselves in a similar position. As the findings from the PPA demonstrate, some people continue to know nothing else but regular periods of persistent hunger.

A recurrent theme in the discourses of poverty is the economic gap between towns and countryside. The Khmer Rouge exploited this theme to mobilize the rural poor against the towns, including the urban poor. The rural poor were the only moral Khmer, believed the Khmer Rouge (although many of them were also brutalized by the ruling cadre). The urban poor were “immoral,” irrespective as to whether they worked in a bar, tire factory or drove a cyclo, although it was the “parasitical” rich that received the most contempt from the Khmer Rouge. The rich, in this simplistic view of the world, simply live off the work of the poor. While rural people may think it is

wrong that the towns consume most resources, they believe there is little or nothing they can do about this.

Another recurrent theme is that some regions are more prosperous than others. For instance, Battambang in northwestern Cambodia is considered by many as the country’s “breadbasket” because of its very fertile soil. People do not believe that anyone could ever be poor in that province, although in reality there are many who are now living in poverty there. In a similar manner, local communities living around the perimeter of the Tonle Sap are considered prosperous, as are *chamcar* farmers living along the banks of major rivers, for example in Kampong Cham and Kandal provinces. People living in close proximity to the Tonle Sap have access to as much fish as they need, which is a measure of well-offness, while *chamcar* farmers have access to a reliable source of water and the means to access markets.

The Khmer Rouge treated such farmers very harshly during the time they were in power.

Conclusion

A number of quantitative poverty assessments have been undertaken during the past decade in Cambodia. But quantitative surveys traditionally measure poverty in consumption terms, leaving aside other important factors that impact the poor. It is widely recognized that poverty is multidimensional in nature, involving a host of sociological, historical and cultural factors. The Cambodia PPA was meant to incorporate that multidimensional aspect. What follows is a report that utilizes the strength of quantitative assessments in locating where the poor live, with a more qualitative understanding of why people are poor. The two approaches are designed to be complementary in enhancing a better understanding of poverty. At the heart of the PPA’s strength is the voices of the poor. This report reflects those voices.