

THE MAJOR CONCERNS OF THE POOR

Lack of Food Security

From Chapter 3 it is made very clear that this PPA identifies the lack of food security as a major indicator of poverty. Table 2 illustrates this concern region by region from a tabulation of findings in the sites where the PPA was conducted.

Table 2: Major Indicator of Poverty: Lack of Food Security

Region	Percentage
Coastal	86
Northeastern Mountain	78
Tonle Sap	75
Mekong Basin	54

Source: PPA Frequency Tables.

This lack of food security has many widespread effects. It influences health and nutritional standards. It pushes people, mainly girls and women, into physically dangerous and culturally detrimental activities, such as commercial sex work. It also forces the villagers to have less concern for environmental considerations because they need to use these natural resources in a nonsustainable manner.

The lack of food security has a gender dimension. According to some of the female FGD participants, women will go without food so that other adult household members and their children can have enough to eat. This lack of food security also has an ethnic dimension in that upland ethnic minorities are starting to lose access to their traditional food resources in the forests.

Food insecurity is widespread among the upland ethnic minorities in the Northeastern Mountain region, where 17 out of 19 of the FGDs undertaken reported that

not having enough food to eat was the major problem that the poor in these communities faced. However, food shortages among these ethnic minority groups affect the entire community, not just simply poor households living within these communities. During an FGD in a Kavet village in Ratanakiri, participants described what it is like to have lack of food:

This year we have had flash flood after flash flood that have destroyed all our crops, not just the rice we grow but also our vegetable and tuber crops as well. Right now, none of us has any real food to eat, except some leftover rice seed from last year, which we should keep to plant when we can. All of us have been trying to share what we have. We eat cassava, tree roots, tree leaves, and whatever we can find in the forest. If we can hunt down a pig or deer then we need to share it with everyone. Some people have left their houses for the time being and set up camp in the forest where they can survive.

In an FGD in Mondol Kiri, a Phnong woman described the problems associated with lack of food security:

Heavy rains have not affected our crops, but last year armed men we did not know stole all our crops during the hot season, and we did not have much food. We tried to appeal to the district authorities, who provided a bit of rice, and then some outside group came and distributed some strange tasting rice to us. When we first ate it most of us got sick, but we had to eat this rice until we could harvest our own crops.... It was a terrible time.

In an FGD in Preah Vihear, several Kuy people suggested that the communal approach to problems of food insecurity is changing. An elder Kuy male explained:

Anyone who has lived with the Kuy, including people from Phnom Penh during the time of Pol Pot, will know that it is our custom to share everything we have, including of course, all our food. When Angka (reference to the Pol Pot regime, or Democratic Kampuchea) demanded we send food to Kampong Thom, we only did so after everyone had enough to eat. During that time, no one died of hunger. Since then there are some Kuy who only think of themselves. So now we have a situation where there are some households who go without food while others never go hungry.

In the past, community-enforced norms would clearly ensure that even if there was little food to go around, it would be shared by all people, hence alleviating to some extent the threat of food insecurity. The breakdown in these norms may either mean individual Kuy households will have to devise new coping strategies or community norms will have to be re-established.

In the Coastal region, food security is also a major issue, but as an older woman observed during an FGD involving Khmer in the province of Koh Kong, it is not new:

I cannot remember when we ever had enough food to eat everyday of the year. Before Pol Pot, we still had to struggle to get enough rice, and it was only after the harvest that we had enough to eat. In Koh Kong, you can try to catch a few fish from the sea, but we Khmer are not very good at doing this. Or you can go into the forest looking for food, but now that much of the forest has been cleared this is very difficult. Also, a big man from Phnom Penh has taken over a lot of the land near our village for agricultural activities, but he does not like to employ us. I estimate that until the harvest, my family will have to eat rice porridge every day. We have not eaten any solid rice for more than four months.

Her view of food security was contradicted by another older woman during a FGD in Kandal province who argued:

Before Pol Pot, we always had plenty of rice to eat. I never had to worry whether I would get enough rice to eat. In fact, we got sick of eating too much rice some times. During Pol Pot, we did not have much rice to eat but we did not starve. It was during the time when the Vietnamese were in the country when we had less because they came here to settle, and now it is even worse. During Pol Pot's time, I knew what it was like to be hungry, but now I know

what it is like to starve. This makes me different from my children who have never experienced anything else.

In this woman's village, people who have a little surplus rice help the poor, but clearly it is not enough. Other participants in that Kandal FGD made the point that irrespective of community assistance to the very poor, if there is little food to go around, it is impossible to meet the needs of all poor households in the village.

Some Khmer PPA participants contended that if the Vietnamese living in Cambodia have problems with food security, they would simply send their daughters to sell sex in Phnom Penh. This stereotype was tempered by a Vietnamese participant:

Our mothers and grandmothers always used to tell us when we were young that sometimes there would never be enough food to eat, that it was necessary to go without, so it comes as no shock to us when we face food shortages. We just have to think of finding food from somewhere, looking for paid work or trying to sell something. To say that we would sell our daughters so we could have enough food is wrong. Daughters have their obligations to the family, as do sons, but these obligations do not mean they have to become sex workers. Of course, some do, but so also do some young Khmer women.

In the event of food shortages, many women have commented that they will go without food. During a PPA among the Cham in Kampot province, some women added that their culture expected them to sacrifice in times when there is not enough food. Most of the males claimed that they would never like to see their wives consume less food than themselves. They pointed to one of the Islamic tenets that ordains men to provide for their wives. Men that could not would be shamed in traditional Cham culture, a view that is somewhat different in traditional Khmer culture where women must ensure that men do not go without food. In some of the FGDs involving non-Khmer women, several women acknowledged that they would go without food if necessary.

In Phnom Penh, the problems associated with lack of food security partly depend on the socioeconomic group.

Street children will rummage through garbage disposal bags and bins, particularly outside restaurants, to hunt for food. They also try to beg restaurant owners or patrons to give them a bowl of noodles or a plate of rice. Sometimes they are able to convince bakeries to give them leftover bread and cakes, and occasionally they are able

to convince fruit sellers to give them a piece of fruit. Such sources of food are not always guaranteed, as one street child illustrated:

The old restaurant manager was really good to me. He would let the staff give me food and even sometimes let me sit out in the kitchen and eat. I would go there at least once a day, usually during the middle of the day. But then a new manager came along, and he got the police to get rid of me. They beat me and told me that they would send me to jail if I ever came round this restaurant again.

Cyclo-drivers, who on average are older than most street children, try to pay for their meals because they want to retain their dignity, according to those who participated in this assessment. This is sometimes difficult, as they also want to save money to send home for other relatives. One very old cyclo-driver, who used to drive cyclos in Phnom Penh before war broke out in 1970, spoke despairingly:

Back in my village in Svay Rieng we have always been poor, but I could come to Phnom Penh between harvests and make enough money each day to feed myself and still have some money to take back to my family in the village. Nowadays I can scarcely make enough money to buy my own food because people don't want to use cyclos, or they don't want to pay us so I sometimes have to look through rubbish bins for food. I did not start my life off as a beggar, but now I have to become one to have enough food to eat.

Importance of Natural Resource Management

Hunting and gathering are not the preserve of only upland minorities in Cambodia. The poor everywhere spend much time gathering edible roots, tubers, vines and plants for their daily food consumption. If they are lucky, particularly if they live close to or in forested areas, they can hunt for wild boars and antelopes. Even rodent infestation has some advantages for the very poor in providing sustenance. The problem is that the rodents are likely to appear during the early dry season when rice is being cultivated and when people usually have enough food. Yet the PPA participants make the cogent point that as their access to forests is being restricted for conservation purposes or forests are disappearing due to logging, an important source of alternative foodstuffs is being denied to them. The same of course applies to inland freshwater fishing in the numerous streams and rivers. For the poor, it cannot be stressed strongly enough how important it is to more effectively manage the remaining natural resource base in Cambodia.

Garment workers try to skimp on their food so they can save money for sending back to their villages. Sex workers said how much they can spend on food depends on their income for the day. And the promotional hostesses admitted that what they get to eat each day depends on how close they are prepared to sit with a customer. Only monks stated they never had to worry about whether they would get enough food to eat.

Sex workers and the promotional hostesses who participated in this PPA understand fully well the lack of food security back in their own villages. This is one of the reasons they left their villages, but interestingly, both groups remarked during the PPA that their food security depends to some extent on how they can “please” their clients and customers. On the one hand, it provides a “skillful” worker with food security for an interim period, but on the other hand, it has its attendant risks, including physical violence, pregnancy and STDs. Most of these young women are aware of such risks, a point that is reiterated in Chapter 6, but it is a reality they live with.

Life Crises and the Lack of Assets

In Chapter 3 there was some focus on both household-specific and community-wide shocks. This section deals with the nature of shocks affecting households as reported in the PPA and the consequences of having no assets.

Cambodians have a saying, *Kror kror choh kom aoy tae chheu*—being poor is better than suffering from ill health. Sickness can reduce a household to poverty very quickly. People in more than 40 percent of the PPA villages cite ill health associated with malaria, tuberculosis, typhoid, dysentery and a range of reproductive tract and upper respiratory tract infections as being one of the major reasons for their fall into poverty. The situation is compounded when there is neither a functioning health center in the locality (this is true for 57 percent of communes in which the poor villages are located) nor affordable medicines. Indeed, many of the FGD participants complained that most of the medicines available are not effective and the side effects have sometimes been worse than the actual illness.

Under such circumstances, the poor risk losing whatever savings they have (not much in even the best of circumstances) and/or incurring debts that they cannot repay. Consequently, they are forced to sell assets including land and draft animals. Often when death occurs, they lose not

only family members, which is emotionally a traumatic experience, but if the deceased is young, they also lose their productive labor. A 23-year-old former Khmer Rouge soldier in Banteay Meanchey best illustrated this point:

I am living in a poor family of 12 members. My mother fell ill years back. We did not have anything but rice land and draft animals. In order to save our mother's life, we had to sell them to pay for the cost of her treatment. Afterward, we became hired laborers and at the same time went to the forest to cut wood to sell. However, now the Government does not allow us to do that, and we do not know what to do anymore. I request the Government to pay attention to assisting people living in poor remote areas, particularly demobilized soldiers.

Such households, while being poor in the past, were not necessarily living in poverty as they had access to rice land and draft animals.

A 41-year-old woman in Kratie province put the importance of this issue for the poor into poignant context:

Malaria-carrying mosquitoes bit two children of mine. I spent all of my money on treating their illness, but it did not work. I could not go out and earn money because I tried to look after both of them. Eventually they died, and now I have neither my two children nor any money. The Government should provide me with rice so that I have enough to eat now and rice land so I can grow rice in the future.

Malaria prevention is helped by the use of insecticide-impregnated mosquito nets, and the Government is launching a major malaria-reduction campaign in the countryside, about which many of the villagers in the PPA are aware. Participants also pointed out that living in poverty increases their vulnerability toward being infected with malaria more than for those people not living in poverty. While malaria affects most of the rural poor, it is much worse in the upland provinces, where the ethnic minorities are found, than elsewhere in Cambodia. In Phnom Penh, malaria is not so much a problem although street children are affected by dengue fever, according to their statements during the FGD.

Poverty can also occur when large families, especially among the Khmer, have to organize wedding ceremonies for their daughters. While the groom's family should contribute toward some of the costs associated with the wedding, if both families are poor, then it is an

The Costs of Ill Health in Battambang

Samouth's family has 14 members. They used to be one of the richest families in the village but now they are among the poorest. Samouth's father was shot dead two years ago and that left Samouth and his mother to work the land. Recently Samouth's mother was overcome with some strange illness, and the family had to sell its buffalo, plow and leveler to pay for the hospital expenses in Battambang. His mother is supposed to receive treatment free of charge but she is charged for everything, even the plastic bag to dispose the rubbish. It is uncertain how long she will remain in the hospital because no one can determine what is her illness. It is most likely that Samouth will have to sell part of the rice land to pay for his mother's yet-to-be diagnosed ailment to be cured.

additional burden. It leads to a situation where families need to borrow to pay for the wedding. According to PPA participants, this tradition even creates problems for the households who are not poor. It appears that most poor families avoid lavish weddings. But living in communities where such rituals are an indicator of prestige, it is sometimes very difficult not to overspend. And as many of the FGD participants declared, the poor have their dignity and desires for tradition.

Interestingly, none of the FGD participants in the countryside brought up the issue of HIV/AIDS. There can be no doubt if a disease like malaria contributes to further impoverishment of the already poor that HIV/AIDS will also have a profound impact on rural communities. This issue was raised by the PPA team in selected FGDs, and it then transpired that some people had heard of HIV/AIDS, and that people who had been to Phnom Penh were likely to catch HIV/AIDS from sex workers. Of course, the impact of HIV/AIDS is a major concern for sex workers who participated in the PPA. This is elaborated in Chapter 6; most sex workers have rural origins, and they know what the consequences of HIV/AIDS are for them and their families.

Community-wide shocks and disasters include loss of crops and other material possessions due to drought, flood, storms, wind damage and landslides. During the PPA there was extensive flooding throughout Cambodia and most of the PPA participants were able to relate the damage to houses (one FGD was conducted in a nearly submerged house in a flooded village in Siem Reap). In the lowlands, PPA participants were able to show PPA team members the damage done to rice crops. More than half of the schools in the PPA villages either collapsed or were damaged by the flooding, making it both difficult and dangerous to attend school.

Access to and Ownership of Land

Access to and preferably ownership of land is a major concern of the poor as it is for any group of farmers in three of the four regions in Cambodia. It is a major concern for all FGD participants in the Coastal region, 81 percent in the Tonle Sap region and 79 percent in the Mekong Plain region. In the Northeastern Mountain region, where the person-to-land ratio is extremely low, this concerned some 30 percent of participants. The land issue in Cambodia is very complicated given the impacts of the previous three decades of turmoil.

The most basic land problem, according to FGD participants, especially among the lowland Khmer, is whether they have been able to get access to additional land since 1989 (when land was handed back to individual households by the State) because their households have grown in size. It is clear that some households benefited more than other households because they received land that is more fertile and lived in areas of relative peace and stability—not all of the countryside was involved in fighting during the 1980s. Moreover, these issues were unimportant to upland ethnic minorities, most of whom retained communal ownership of land.

In the Khmer kinship system, daughters and sons have generally had equal rights to shares in property and inheritance. Traditionally all members of the same kinship group could inherit land. Parents often made the transfer of land to children after the marriage of children, with equal parts transferred to daughters and sons. It was common for the son-in-law to move in with the family of the wife and to work for the father-in-law for a certain period after marriage before the married couple established its own household.

For most FGD participants, the pre-1975 situation in Cambodia is less relevant than what has occurred over the past decade, in relation to household size. A 61-year-old woman from Kandal province elaborated:

Before, we had enough to raise the children but my family has fallen into poverty because we have eight children....We did not have enough to eat so we sold our draft animals and then our land to pay for food, the treatment of illness, clothing and our children's weddings....But when you have eight children you cannot give them all much land.

Interestingly, while many FGD participants considered large families to be a major issue, this was in the

context as to whether they could have access to land or not. As reported in Chapter 6, women's concerns with large families are not only linked to whether there is enough land but other reproductive health issues, something that concerned male participants to a lesser extent.

It is not surprising that in the world's fifth most heavily mined country, land mines were an issue for some participants. A widow in Battambang relayed how access to seemingly productive land can even reduce relatively prosperous farmers to poverty:

My family had about 20 hectares of land, three tractors, a sedan, motorbike and a full range of farming implements....One day my workers drove over anti-tank mines that we did not know about and the tractors were destroyed. Later, the drivers died, and I had to sell other assets to provide compensation to their families and organize their funerals. Not long after, my husband fell ill with depression and died. There is nothing we can do about the fact that we have become poor.

The confiscation of land is also an issue that concerns some of the poor, particularly in border districts. In Kampong Cham, a 30-year-old woman complained that people from neighboring Viet Nam had killed her husband and seized their land. This forced her to rely on wage labor to keep her and her two sons alive, but with one of her sons seriously ill, she is in an extremely vulnerable position. Accounts of land confiscation are readily available from the media in Cambodia. Many FGD participants related how land disputes have led to violence.

Confiscation of land is not a major issue for most of the poor in the Northeastern Mountain region, except as will be demonstrated in Chapter 7 where this is now changing in some communities because the shortage of land per se is not the major problem. Rather, it is the restriction of access to traditional hunting and gathering domains that angers people. As will be described in Chapter 6, it is not possible to treat all of Cambodia's poor as a homogenous category. Indigenous concepts of land entertained by upland ethnic groups are not the same as the mostly utilitarian concept of land entertained by lowland peoples, whether they are Khmer, Cham or Vietnamese. Nevertheless, it should not be assumed that upland ethnic groups do not also understand issues associated with the market value of land.

In some provinces, such as Svay Rieng, surprisingly some FGD participants argued that there is not a shortage of land but of capital and equipment needed to clear the land of large bushes and stumps. In several of the

FGDs facilitated in Kratie, it was also discovered that people lacked the resources to clear land. Participants claimed there are large areas of uncleared land in parts of Cambodia, including the upland provinces of the northeast. As one 55-year-old man in Kampong Speu argued:

All the uncleared land in my district or in other districts is useless for the poor unless it can be cleared. We are told there is a lot of vacant land in Cambodia that is suitable for farming but if this were so, none of us would be living in poverty....I can say there is a shortage of suitable land that the poor can access.

For the most part, the FGD participants are not convinced there is enough suitable land unless the nonpoor agree to share their land. They are also realistic enough to know that the nonpoor will not willingly share their land without some kind of pecuniary agreement.

What the poor living in the lowlands of Cambodia do not realize is that the ethnic minority groups occupying these vast tracts of “unoccupied” land in the Northeastern Mountain region do not believe they are occupying a vast land frontier. The land that they occupy, and this was made abundantly clear during the PPA, is their traditional land, and it should be used to support their traditional practices. What is a possible land frontier for lowland groups in Cambodia is anything but that for the ethnic minorities in the region.

Nonexistent or Limited Access to Educational Opportunities

The poor are concerned that they have limited or no access to educational opportunities. More than 34 percent of FGD participants made this point, but it varied from region to region. In the Mekong Plain region, only 24 percent of participants considered this a major concern compared to more than 43 percent in both the Tonle Sap and Coastal regions. In the Northeastern Mountain region, 50 percent of participants considered this a major concern. One of the reasons this is less of an issue in the Mekong Plain region is that the Government has built more schools there than elsewhere because of the greater population density.

Villagers made a clear linkage between lack of education, particularly literacy, and poverty. The PPA did not quantify the extent of illiteracy among participants,

but all team members during the course of the PPA were aware that very few of the participants in the PPA could read or write. Those who could were mostly male, which is consistent with other research and data on female illiteracy in rural Cambodia.

Villagers also offered interesting perspectives on education that seemed to reflect their own lack of self-esteem. For instance, there is consensus among participants in a rural district of Sihanoukville that lack of education is a cause of lack of empowerment among the poor:

We are poor as we have no money and no idea as to how we make life better for ourselves. For this we need education, but without education we are ignorant and narrow-minded.

Education is not just about making money but also having dignity in society, having people recognize you as a good person. This is what we, the poor, lack in comparison with people who are not in our position.

There are mixed views about the importance of education in the Cambodian context, which were expressed by participants in Kampong Cham:

There is a school in the neighboring commune but the teachers are not always there. We have to buy books for our children that we cannot afford, and at the end of a few years in school our children return to the rice field not being able to read and write.

Schooling is not much good if one cannot read and write after being at school....And we know some rich people who also cannot read and write. Not having enough education is a major problem but not having the means to survive is more of a problem.

The Phnong participants in Mondol Kiri noted the conflict between survival and identity and the role of language:

Not being able to speak the Khmer language, let alone read and write it, puts all of us at a major disadvantage with Khmer-speaking people.

If we just learn Khmer and forget our own language we will lose our identity as well. We have pride in our cultural identity even though we are poor. But if we lose our identity, we would end up being very poor Khmer. Poor Khmer have no status in their society, but we still have status in our society.

Many ethnic Cambodians determine the value of education not only by how it can help to alleviate their poverty but also how it influences their cultural identity, which is intrinsically linked with their self-esteem.

Factors Hindering Access to Education

- Distance from nearest school;
- Shortage of teachers and irregular teaching schedules;
- High cost of clothing;
- Lack of teaching materials;
- Extra fees charged by teachers; and
- Low salaries of teachers.

FGD participants are highly critical of teachers who observe irregular teaching schedules and charge excessive extra fees. According to most of the FGD participants, they are charged a minimum of CMR2,500 per child per term; in some cases families have been asked to pay up to CMR10,000 per child per term, which is nearly beyond the reach of the very poor. While villagers understand that teachers have to get by on low salaries, they resent teachers who collaborate with local authorities to gain advantage at the expense of the poor. Teachers, according to FGD participants, should behave better than local authorities.

Flooding and Drought

The poor rely almost exclusively on agriculture for their survival. Most of the villagers in this PPA argued that they have access to either the least fertile land or land that is subject to excessive flooding, which in effect means that they have access to the least productive land.

Nearly 60 percent of FGD participants claimed that both flooding and drought are major concerns of the poor. Not surprisingly, more than 65 percent of participants in the Mekong Plain region identified flooding as a major concern compared to 60 percent in the Tonle Sap region, 50 percent in the Northeastern Mountain region and 36 percent in the Coastal region where the flooding patterns differ. In the Mekong Plain and Tonle Sap regions, flooding occurs gradually as water levels rise in the Mekong River Basin. In the Northeastern Mountain and the Coastal regions there is more flash flooding because of the topographical nature of the land. FGD participants argue it is difficult to avoid flash flooding.

As was mentioned elsewhere in this report, flooding during the PPA period was at its worse in 40 years in Cambodia. While it affected large numbers of people in the Mekong River Basin, it was the poor who were disproportionately affected. According to FGD participants

in a number of Mekong Plain region provinces, the poor were more likely to lose their lives than the nonpoor because the latter could flee to higher ground. In Kampong Chhnang, Kampong Thom and Kampong Cham, the PPA participants complained that despite the Government's good intentions, it was the better-off villagers who received emergency flood aid first. The PPA team members noted in the three provinces where floods were occurring that provincial officials failed to perform any form of needs assessment.

Drought is much more of a problem for the poor than excessive flooding. Many participants identified at least four planting seasons where drought has been a major problem. In addition, drought also affects their ability to grow vegetables and sufficient fodder for their livestock. During times of excessive flooding they can more easily catch fish than during the dry season. Of course, the other effects of excessive flooding—damage to housing and rural infrastructure—is also a huge problem.

There are many requests for the rehabilitation of existing irrigation systems or the supply of pumping equipment. In the province of Kampong Speu, FGD participants complained that an irrigation system built during the Khmer Rouge period, when many friends and relatives died from overwork, had not been rehabilitated due to the advice of international experts:

Some years ago we were told that an international expert had decided that the irrigation system we were forced to build under the Khmer Rouge was useless and could never work for us.

This international expert does not know what he is talking about. He was not here during the Khmer Rouge period to know whether it worked nor did he come and ask us whether it worked or not. Are we, the poor of this commune, people who know nothing?

Not being able to take advantage of irrigated agriculture during the dry season was a concern to more than 53 percent of FGD participants in the Mekong Plain region and to 43 percent in the other major rice-growing region, the Tonle Sap. Only 33 percent in the Northeastern Mountain region and 50 percent in the Coastal region expressed a similar concern with the lack of irrigated agriculture.

But the issue goes beyond water for agricultural purposes. There is also widespread concern about the quality of water for drinking, cooking and bathing. In nearly

25 percent of the FGDs, participants noted that unclean water leads to diarrhea, dysentery and other water-related infections, which take their toll on the very young, weak and older people. Many of the poor households lack access to a well or even water jars, as one participant in Battambang province described:

In the wet season, as we have neither wells to draw water from or water jars to collect water, we all use the rainwater that can be found in the ruts along the roads made by vehicles. In the dry season we use water from a distant stream, but it is not very clean either.

In the province of Pursat, notorious in Cambodia for its alleged poor water quality, a FGD participant underscored the village situation:

In the dry season there is very little water so we have to get up very early in the morning to compete with one another to get what water there is. The water is not very clean and often some of our children get diarrhea.... But we know in villages where they have a lot of good clean water people neither compete with one another nor do their children get sick.

The poor in this instance appear to think that the lack of access to potable water contributes to unavoidable conflicts that would not exist if there were enough drinking water. Fighting over access to a basic need such as drinking water contributes little to social harmony in a society that still has to heal the scars of more than three decades of internal conflict.

Lack of Micro-Finance

More than 35 percent of FGD participants stated they could not get access to any form of credit, whether it be to purchase basic foodstuffs or support micro-enterprise activities, including locally based trading activities. More than 50 percent of FGD participants in the Tonle Sap and Northeastern Mountain region considered this a major concern while around 20 percent in the Mekong Plain and Coastal regions indicated it as an issue.

All FGD participants strongly argued that the worst possible scenario was the necessity to borrow money to purchase basic foodstuffs, particularly rice. It is bad enough having to provide services, such as unpaid labor, to meet debt repayment obligations but for most of the poor this is a nonmonetary transaction. The opportunity costs of foregone wage labor earnings do not enter into the calculations in poor villages where such

opportunities are nonexistent. The angst of borrowing was dramatically described by a 45-year-old woman in Oddar Meanchey:

Under the Khmer Rouge, we never had to borrow money to buy rice as they would always ensure that we had some rice to eat. But now people like me must borrow money off moneylenders at very high interest rates. It is really impossible for us to escape poverty. Like a rat we are caught in a trap that we cannot escape.

The need for credit to treat chronic health conditions or emergency illnesses has already been documented in this report. Here the need for decent credit is highlighted in relation to agriculture needs, particularly farming failure, as one 32-year-old man elaborated:

I used to grow rice and sell my labor to earn a living.... My rice farming was not profitable because even though I had land it was necessary to borrow money from private sources for land preparation and the purchase of fertilizers.... After the harvest, the lenders came to collect their loan. After repayment, the surplus rice I had left to support me was sufficient for one to two months.... To grow rice I had to borrow repeatedly, and my debts simply kept accumulating. To settle my debts I had to sell my land little by little, and now I have no land left. Now I am totally dependent on the sale of my labor.

Unfortunately, there are many stories like this among the poor who live in provinces such as Prey Veng. Indeed as this account illustrates, rice farming has failed many of the very poor, and they need alternative sources of income to survive.

During the PPA it was evident that many of the villagers understand that using credit to finance rice-farming activities will not reduce their poverty. A demobilized soldier and his spouse in Siem Reap elaborated:

It is very difficult for us to survive as we do not have any money to invest in a small business.

If we had access to credit we would initially buy five pigs and ten chickens and repay the lender on the sale of the produce, but it is very hard to get credit extended on such terms that would leave the borrower with anything at the end of it all.

That 11 percent of the FGD participants throughout Cambodia had similar ideas about credit demonstrates that for a small minority this is a major concern. There seems to be a pent-up demand among a significant portion of the poor for access to micro-finance.

Poor Physical Infrastructure

It is evident that much of Cambodia has very poor physical infrastructure and that has affected the ability of the Government to promote social and economic development in the countryside. Nearly 35 percent of FGD participants expressed a major concern for this deprivation. By region, that anger was mentioned by 79 percent of participants from the Coastal villages, by 38 percent in the Mekong Plain and 30 percent in the Tonle Sap.

Surprisingly, only about 8 percent of participants in the Northeastern Mountain region identified lack of physical infrastructure as a major issue. The PPA team assigned to this region spent more time traveling between sites than in any of the other three regions.

Initially the team was at a loss to explain why so few participants in the Northeastern Mountain region expressed concern. Some locals suggested that because of limited market penetration, there was little concern with physical infrastructure. Certainly the market has not penetrated upland communities to the same extent it has lowland communities. Another argument was that upland peoples feared that better physical infrastructure would bring outsiders wanting to exploit local natural resources. This argument is underscored by roads built in some remote areas by logging companies so they can haul logs for processing elsewhere. Another argument is that upland peoples see the survival of their culture as a major priority threatened by the more dominant lowland culture expanding their territory. This issue is examined more closely in Chapter 6, but it does illustrate that poverty issues for the ethnic minorities are more complex in most instances than for the dominant ethnic groups.

The inability of parents to send their children to school, to transport the sick to faraway health centers and hospitals and the costs associated with accessing the market are major issues expressed by most participants. The inability to send children to school in terms of acquiring skills in literacy have already been mentioned and the consequences of having to transport people long distances because they are ill will be discussed in a coming section. A general concern raised is the impact of poor physical infrastructure on the supply of goods and services both to and from the village.

A farmer in Battambang explained how the physical infrastructure influences the market:

When we have good crops there is no market because the access road is very poor. All the inputs we use—corn and bean seeds, fertilizers and pesticides—are very costly. But if we do not sell our produce, we do not have any money to buy rice. In the wet season the road is very muddy and accessibility is extremely difficult. Then the traders do not come. When they do come they give us a very low price. If we do not sell the corn and beans then the bugs will destroy them. It is useless if we grow these crops under such circumstances.

In Kampong Speu the impact of poor infrastructure in the marketing of vegetables was highlighted by one participant:

We can grow vegetables, but it is difficult to access the market because the roads are very poor. Should we persist with trying to sell these vegetables, we will find that the very high transport costs will result in us making no profit whatsoever.

Just how long it takes some of the poor to reach a district market, as well as a health center, is illustrated by a participant from Koh Kong province:

If we want to go anywhere we need to spend 5-6 hours because we can only travel by footpath. It takes us 6 hours to reach the district market of Sre Umbell. Taking vegetables to the market like this will only result in the vegetables not being sold as the market demands very fresh vegetables. And if someone gets seriously ill, he has to be taken in a hammock or oxcart in long distances to a health center. Sometimes he dies before reaching the health center on the long difficult path.

In some PPAs it was stated that goods and services provided by the poor to buyers outside the village are sold at a very low price, while goods and services purchased by the poor from outside the village are high. Unequal exchange due to market imperfections exacerbated by poor physical infrastructure only serves to intensify poverty.

Decreasing Access to Community Natural Resources

It is very clear that the poor rely on the local natural resource base, whether it be fish in the inland streams, rivers and lakes and both timber and nontimber products

from the forests and areas surrounding the villages. Of the four regions, both the Coastal and Northeastern Mountain regions identified this as a larger concern than the other two regions. This is partly because the natural resources of the Coastal region have been subject to serious depletion over the past decade, particularly the coastal zone fishing resources. In the Northeastern Mountain region, the native forests have become subject to both legal and illegal logging. In both instances the poor feel they have no control over the depletion of these resources.

In the Coastal region, an FGD participant argued that when only local fisherfolk were fishing in the coastal zone there was enough fish for everyone. The participants were not aware that provincial governors had awarded concessions to commercial fishing companies from Thailand, and therefore did not realize these companies could fish in areas that used to be the preserve of local fishing communities. They criticized the new fishing techniques that catch all species and sizes of fish leaving local people with little. At the same time, logging has continued in the hinterland thereby constraining local

communities of the traditional products they used to rely on from the forest and nearby areas.

The limited access to a traditional resource was illuminated by a participant in Mondol Kiri:

A logging truck can leave the forest, and it is surrounded with armed guards to ensure that other armed groups, which are often found in the forest, do not steal the logs. But if we even dare take one small log from the forest, we will be stopped by armed guards who tell us they have been assigned to protect the forests from illegal loggers like us. In the past there was no such law. It should be directed at the loggers, not us. It is they who plunder the forests where our ancestors lived in harmony.

Unfortunately, there are many similar accounts that the poor can provide to illustrate their concern with loss of control over, or even continued access to, the traditional natural resource base. In addition, conflicts over access to natural resources have led to an upsurge in social conflict among the poor themselves. In some instances, there have been outbursts of violence, particularly in a context where the natural resource base has shrunk quickly.