

POVERTY AMONG ETHNIC MINORITIES

Social Exclusion of Ethnic Minorities

Cambodian society, like in many other Asian nations in the region, has a complex approach to its ethnic minorities. As argued elsewhere in this report, some ethnic minorities are more readily accepted than others. The ethnic minorities featured in this PPA where the Kuy, Stieng, Prov, Kavet, Phnong, Kroeng, Tumpuon and Lao from the upland provinces of Rattanakiri, Mondol Kiri, Stung Treng, Preah Vihear and Kratie and the Muslim Cham and Vietnamese in lowland provinces. There are other ethnic minorities in Cambodia, including several significant upland minorities (especially the Jarai), and Chinese and Thai, who do not feature in this PPA. The Chinese do not feature because the PPA teams and workshop participants did not consider them poor.

As a very broad generalization, most Cambodians regard the upland ethnic minorities as “legitimate” inhabitants of Cambodia but don’t seem to make citizenship an issue for the Chinese and Thai. Only the ethnic Vietnamese have the most problematic status for social and historical reasons, even though the 1993 Constitution accords the same rights to all citizens irrespective of their ethnic or racial background. It is useful to deal with the problematic status of the ethnic Vietnamese first because it is a complicated issue.

At several of the PPA sites close to the border with Viet Nam in Kampong Cham, there was considerable criticism of the Vietnamese, with the ethnic Vietnamese-Cambodians being lumped together with the migrants. In one instance, a group of women participants claimed Vietnamese from across the border supported by troops

took land belonging to poor people in their villages. That this may happen in isolated incidents, especially along the border, must not be discounted but the problem is that all Vietnamese people living in Cambodia are affected by such accusations. As a Vietnamese female hairdresser from Ho Chi Minh living and working in Phnom Penh argued during an interview for this PPA:

I came to Cambodia looking for work because I realized it was easier for me to find work here than in Saigon where I come from a really poor family. Whenever there is some criticism of Viet Nam or at least the Vietnamese, all of us Vietnamese tend to be blamed for the wrongdoings of other Vietnamese. I will not say that all Vietnamese are honest and reliable people but in general we are no worse than other non-Cambodians living and working in Phnom Penh.

Other immigrant groups and expatriates living and working in Cambodia usually are not the subject of criticism by the ethnic Khmer majority, even where they are not poor. Only the Vietnamese are accused of migrating to Cambodia to extract resources from the country, enrich themselves and then return to Viet Nam. The irony is that Vietnamese illegal immigrants are likely to be considerably poorer than other immigrant groups in Cambodia, but whether they experience the same levels of poverty as other Cambodians is another matter.

Many Vietnamese living in Cambodia consider themselves Cambodians. They are not migrants, temporary or permanent, from Viet Nam. They are ethnic Vietnamese who have lived in Cambodia for generations, but after Pol Pot came to power in 1975, the situation worsened for most Vietnamese and many naturally sought refuge in the neighboring country. One Vietnamese participant spoke for many:

Some Cambodians think we are rich, even poor Cambodians who live close by and know that we too are quite poor. Yet it is assumed that because we are quite good at catching fish that we must have more money than the Cambodians but everyone knows that we are always forced to pay money to officials from the Department of Fisheries—the Khmer refuse to do this.... We are not anti-Cambodian as it is well known. Our children go to the local school when we can afford to send them and we speak Khmer just like other Cambodians.

The poorer Vietnamese are at a great disadvantage in relation to poverty targeting than other Cambodians because of the racial discrimination they experience. All poor Cambodians experience a form of cultural discrimination that also has a class basis but poor Vietnamese are doubly disadvantaged.

In the context of mainstream Cambodian society, the Vietnamese, again both migrants and ethnic Vietnamese, suffer a form of social exclusion as they are not considered to have a legitimate right to reside in Cambodia, despite the 1993 Constitution that recognizes this right. They do have the right of access to neighboring Viet Nam but this option is not realistic for most Vietnamese living in Cambodia because they believe they would be even poorer in rural Viet Nam. Culturally, however, they are not organically disconnected from the broader currents of Vietnamese culture, and they do have a reference point that a number of other ethnic minority groups lack in Cambodia.

The Khmer ethnic group in Cambodia does not look down on the Cham or have the same apprehension about the Cham in the same way it does the Vietnamese. One of the participants in the FGDs conducted in a Cham community in Kampot stated:

If you study our community carefully you will find that we are poorer than neighboring Khmer communities in this commune. They have slightly bigger and better rice lands, more draft animals, a health center, a school and some outside political support. We do not begrudge the Khmer communities these things as they too are poor but we wish people could understand our poverty.... Yes we are Cham and are supposed to be well organized, but being well organized does not mean we are rich.

During the PPA it was difficult to get the Cham to complain about their poor standard of living because they did not want to be seen criticizing other Cambodians, perhaps due to their shocking treatment at the hands of Pol Pot's cadres during the late 1970s. Cham appear

grateful for the fact that other Cambodians gave them a great deal of cultural space after the demise of the Pol Pot regime in late 1978.

There can be little doubt that the upland ethnic minorities experience a great deal of social exclusion, albeit unintentional, from the mainstream of Cambodian society. Culturally this had a significant impact on how poverty affects these groups. Being poor is one thing, but not being able to understand the dominant ethnic group or being misunderstood by the same group creates its own set of problems. Take the example from an FGD in Mondol Kiri involving the ethnic Phnong, which had to be facilitated by a commune leader who was the only person lingual in both the local language and Khmer. One villager expressed the situation keenly, according to the commune leader's translation:

Even to communicate with you people we have to use someone who can speak both our languages. It is really difficult to understand one another.... You were probably told that it would be easy to work with us because we listen to everything our leaders tell us, but these leaders have to be really good and understand us as well. Poor leaders cannot last in our community.

The Phnong do not like the conclusion readily reached by lowland peoples that they simply follow their leader, but they realize it is now necessary to rely on someone who can deal with lowland groups. It is noted when lowland groups move to the upland areas the culture of the lowlanders prevails, particularly in the use of language. The Phnong along with other ethnic minorities would like to learn Khmer but they would only encourage it if attempts were made by officials to learn their language.

The social exclusion experienced by upland ethnic groups in Cambodia is quite different to that experienced

Figure 6: A group of ethnic Phnong who participated in a focus group discussion in Mondol Kiri.



by other ethnic groups in Cambodia. While poor Khmer do not always understand the culture of nonpoor lowland ethnic minority groups, they have some idea of their social setting. Similarly, there is some understanding of the Cham, so it is more possible to understand their social realities. It may be very difficult to promote a subtle awareness of difference, which is not what any of the ethnic minorities participating in this PPA expect, but it is not too difficult to accept that ethnic minorities may have to be treated differently. The remainder of this section will focus on the findings of the PPA as they relate to ethnic minorities.

Food Insecurity and Diminishing Natural Resources

In the upland provinces, ethnic minority groups rely less on the traditional foodstuffs that lowland Cambodians (consumption of nonglutinous rice, fermented fish and vegetables) and more on the types of foodstuffs they can forage from the forests that surround their villages. While upland ethnic minority groups will also eat nonglutinous rice, it is the glutinous rice they prefer along with edible wild plants and herbs and wildlife that can be found in great abundance in uncleared forest areas. Going without rice is a major problem for the upland ethnic minorities, but they are also used to starchy foods such as manioc and cassava and can get by without rice if they need to do so. This is not preferred, however, and glutinous rice must still be seen as a basic foodstuff.

From the FGD conducted in 19 different sites in the four upland provinces, it appears that food shortages do not occur at the same time of the year as in the lowlands, or they occur at any time of the year given the nature of shifting cultivation in upland provinces. For instance, during an FGD involving the ethnic Phnong in Mondol Kiri, an elderly woman stated:

Many years ago, if fire swept through our swidden land this would create many difficulties for us in the short term because our crops would be destroyed and within a short while we would be hungry. As fire can occur any time from the fourth month of the dry season [February] this would mean even before the beginning of the heavy rains we would be hungry. These days there are more and more fires as people are clearing more land and this creates some difficulty. Another problem relates to sudden flooding

during the wet season and to counter this we have to plant crops higher up where the soil is not very good. In more recent times there is also the problem with people stealing our ripening crops. This never happened in the past.

Several related issues are raised here. The first involves natural disasters, whether they be fires or floods, and the second addresses what appears is a breakdown in the social cohesion in some communities. Even the natural disasters, as a man in the same FGD pointed out, are linked to human activities:

Before, no one apart from us was living here, but now other poor people from areas a long way from here are coming to live. We are not opposed to them coming here, but they do not have the same ideas in relation to the area we live in. They do not take any notice of forest spirits, laughing them off; and their actions annoy the spirits and we all suffer. This means that fires get out of control and streams flood very quickly.

This could possibly point to the fact that while the upland provinces are relatively underpopulated, they have a fragile ecosystem that can only accommodate lower population densities.

A slightly different perspective on food security was provided by a mixed group of ethnic Kavet minority in Rattanakiri who were trying to come to terms with the fact that nontraditional foodstuffs are fast becoming a feature of their diet, often with implications for food security:

Before other people came to our area we used to trade wild animals and forest products in exchange for dried fish and fish sauce, but after these people came to settle nearby they opened up a market selling all sorts of things.

Some of the things they sell like instant noodles, cakes and biscuits and sweets, our children want to eat because they think they taste good. Even the older people quite like some of these foods. But we do not have the money to spend on them so we have to exchange some of the wild foods that we can gather, and this is now starting to affect our health....And we seem to be more hungry than in the past.

The Kavet are not starving but the impact of including nontraditional foodstuffs in their diet, especially when these foodstuffs are of dubious nutritional value, is not without consequences for this ethnic minority group. People in the lowlands of Cambodia complain about not having enough money to buy some of the nonvillage-

produced foodstuffs, partly because they do not have enough local food sources. While the traditional food base is shrinking in the upland provinces, it would also appear that adapting traditional diets to include processed food has important ramifications for food security.

For lowland ethnic minorities, the problems of food security are more or less similar to those of the lowland Khmer. Fish supplies appear to be considerably on the wane for some groups, however. All the ethnic Cham who participated in an FGD in Kep commented that in the past they could supplement their agricultural sources of foodstuffs with fish and other marine products from the coast in Kampot, to which they live in close proximity. But times have changed, as one older male participant complained:

I can never recall catching fish to be a major problem. Two of us could drag a net up the river from its mouth at the coast and in a few minutes catch as much fish as we needed. Fish were so plentiful that we released the small ones back into the water. But now we can spend many hours and only catch small fish, the ones we used to throw back into the river. These days you need a boat with a big engine so you can fish far offshore. We cannot afford to do this.

The FGD participants wanted the Government to take action against commercial fisherfolk with bigger boats and nets who do not care whether their practices are unsustainable or not.

The Vietnamese are among those fishermen accused by ethnic Khmers of using unsustainable practices, such as dynamite, grenades, cyanide and electricity-stunning methods, to catch freshwater fish in the waterways of the Tonle Sap. The Khmer also accused the Vietnamese of shaping traditional fishing instruments and designing nets so that they could catch all species, not just the fish that are plentiful. The Khmer also claimed that if the Vietnamese only caught fish for household consumption, then they would not need to use the tools and techniques that they do.

In response, a Vietnamese participant observed:
If you observe the Khmer carefully you will see that they use the dynamite, grenades, etc. and are not frightened to challenge fisheries officers. If we try to challenge these officers we will be in trouble. We do have our own fishing tools, such as those used for catching eels, which are better than the traditional fishing tools used by the Khmer, but the Khmer also use these fishing tools as well. It is true that we

sell as much of our fish as we can but this is only to pay for basic necessities such as rice.

Such an explanation does not satisfy many Khmers who believe it is now harder than ever to catch freshwater fish in any great quantity. However, for the Vietnamese to shoulder all the blame is quite another issue. It is possible that the poor, irrespective of their ethnic background, find satisfying immediate basic needs a greater priority than issues associated with environmental sustainability.

Disenfranchisement of Land Use Rights and Access to Natural Resources

Indigenous land rights issues are very important to upland ethnic minorities but there is a very strong perception among all ethnic minority groups who participated in this PPA that the Government either does not care for such issues or does not understand them. In Rattanakiri, FGD participants were able to relate in some detail the problems that another major ethnic minority in Rattanakiri, the Tumpuon, has been experiencing at the hands of high-ranking military officials. According to one of the ethnic minority participants:

A big military man fooled some Tumpuon people into "selling" him a large area of land. This is strictly forbidden among the Tumpuon, as it is among us, but this big military man forced all the villagers to place their thumbprints on a document none of them could understand, and he gave them all gifts. Now the people have to fight him in Phnom Penh, and I do not think they can win.

There are increasingly many instances where the Government may have ignored traditional land rights in the awarding of forest concessions to both local and nonCambodian concessionaires. In Stung Treng, a Lao participant complained about the loss of land to logging companies:

A few years ago a foreign logging company started logging in the forest where we hunt for wild animals, chop down trees for our own use or to earn some money and where we gather other things for our own use. Immediately soldiers with guns were sent to tell us that we could not chop trees down in this area, and that if we did they would shoot us. To frighten us they fired their guns into the air and

disappeared. From time to time these soldiers come through the village, searching underneath our houses for small logs and demanding food and drink.

This is an extreme case but the fear and uncertainty this has created is very stressful for ethnic minority groups who are unable to seek legal redress. In another PPA a Lao participant argued:

If these logging companies provided us with local employment opportunities, either by working in the forest or providing us with saw milling equipment and training to make wooden products that we could sell then that might be alright... Yet there is no evidence that these companies want to do this.

Such a response implies that some ethnic minority groups are prepared to meet logging companies halfway on this question of logging in areas of “eminent domain,” but it should not be assumed that all ethnic minority groups subscribe to that position. The Tumpuon participants apparently do not, as one man argued:

The land we occupy is not for logging companies to chop down trees or other commercial activities to take place. This land is sacred land, this is where the spirits, both good and bad, dwell and to disturb this land will create disharmony in our communities and might lead to the same situation that the Jarai are in, where the outside force can destroy your community.

Poverty is a major problem for upland ethnic minority groups like the Tumpuon, but they are clearly astute enough to realize that commercial logging activities are not going to reduce their poverty and understand how their traditional lifestyle might be lost forever. It needs to be impressed upon the Government and private sector that traditional concepts of land among the upland ethnic minorities are fundamentally different to those of

Figure 7: This is the “normal” condition of a good interdistrict road in the upland provinces of Cambodia (Mondol Kiri).



lowland groups. This is a critical issue given the fact that there are likely to be significant agricultural development prospects in the upland areas.

Even where the Government has good intentions in relation to protecting the local environment, there are some problems. In Mondol Kiri, some of the Phnong participants expressed concern over new regulations that would restrict what activities they could undertake in forested areas. According to one villager:

A government official came to the village and posted a notice in Khmer that we could not read so we had to ask the Khmers living here to explain what was in the notice. They told us we could not hunt certain kinds of wild animals that we like to eat when we can catch them, could not chop down trees of less than a certain size or clear land for our agricultural activities... We don't know whether this is correct or not, but a district policeman told us that if we paid him something he would ensure that we could continue doing what we always have done.

In some respects the problems the Phnong face with official regulations and how to circumscribe them are widespread throughout Cambodian society. What makes the situation unique for ethnic minority groups such as the Phnong is that they cannot even understand the language in which the regulations are written.

In the lowlands, environmental legislation enacted by the Government poses different issues because it involves different natural resources. The most obvious natural resource in the lowland of interest to the Government is freshwater fisheries; areas in close proximity to the Tonle Sap lake receive considerable attention from Department of Fisheries inspectors. Vietnamese community members from Kandal participating in this assessment expressed concern over the activities of local fisheries inspectors. A common complaint was:

Even when we catch fish for our own consumption, these officials will often pull us over and look at our catch. If they see a fish they like they will take it from us. It is no use complaining, as they will arrest us... Most of these officials do not care about legal regulations but only what they can get for themselves.

It appears from the PPA that the poor perceive the Government's natural resources management as against their well-being. It seems clear that there was little community-based consultation when the natural resource policies were being developed. And if there were any consultations, they did not include many of the poorest communities.

Physical Infrastructure

In the lowland areas, ethnic minorities have stated they want much the same forms of physical infrastructure as the dominant Khmer ethnic majority. However, the situation is quite complex in the upland provinces. Most of the ethnic minorities would like better all-weather roads and some assistance toward the control of flash flooding and the management of scarce water resources during the dry season. There is also interest in projects that would supply electricity.

It is the provision of all-weather roads that presents the poor of the upland provinces with an interesting dilemma, which was expressed in the following points made by a Prov participant during an FGD in Rattanakiri:

Trying to travel to the provincial capital of Banlung during the wet season is a 4-6-day roundtrip. If it is dry enough, a motorcycle can make the journey quickly otherwise it has to be by ox-cart, especially if you are taking someone who is sick to Banlung. It is also expensive to bring goods into the village and send to the market things that we want to sell. With an all-weather road we could also send our children to school if they want to study. So for these reasons we should have an all-weather road....But such a road will also bring logging trucks, which will just plunder the forests, and when they are finished the roads will be destroyed.

Logging companies using such roads to access forest concessions, and in the process destroying these roads, will do little to reduce local poverty. On balance, ethnic minority groups would like to see all-weather roads constructed through their communities, but they would also like to have some control over the traffic on them, or rather, some control over their native domain.

FGD participants in Mondol Kiri took the PPA team to a river crossing and described the advantages of having a bridge that would link them to other villages on the border with Viet Nam, and even to Viet Nam. They argued that with a bridge, the cost of providing goods and services to their village would be lower. Despite the remoteness of many ethnic minority groups from Phnom Penh, they are able to compare and contrast what happens across the border in Viet Nam, and in that respect many stated they are better informed than poor Cambodians living in lowland villages.

In Preah Vihear province, the Kuy who participated in the PPA argued, not unlike poor people living in lowland villages, that they always had too much water during the wet season and not enough during the dry season. But

unlike the lowland poor, the Kuy do not focus on elaborate irrigation schemes. They envision diversion weirs to channel water into their fields during the wet season and storage ponds during the dry season. The Kuy villagers claimed that if assistance were provided for construction materials, technical support and some food to cover periods when they could not forage during the dry season, they would provide their labor. There was also some recognition that the community would need to organize itself to operate and maintain a small-scale upland irrigation system. In this respect, ethnic minority groups are better placed to adopt a participatory approach to operation and maintenance activities than many lowland Khmer communities.

Health and Education

Few children living in the villages where PPAs were conducted have received the tetanus toxoid inoculation or have been immunized against diphtheria, typhoid and measles. Where this had occurred was because parents had taken children to neighboring Viet Nam for medical treatment and were immunized while they were there. There has been no immunization program directed at young children in the PPA sites by either the Government or NGOs. Some people understand the value of immunization but high rates of infant mortality were more frequently explained away as the actions of malevolent spirits. Any immunization program directed at ethnic minorities has to utilize culturally appropriate forms of symbolism to effectively reach out to these groups. During the PPA, few of the ethnic minority participants were convinced by the “secular” explanations offered to them by PPA team members extolling the virtues of an immunization program for children.

Most PPA participants do not expect the Government to provide public health facilities in their communities. Ethnic minority groups have relied on traditional midwives to assist in the delivery of babies and traditional healers to deal with unexplained illnesses. As most of these ethnic minority groups take a holistic approach to illness, they accept that the fate of those who are sick rests in the hands of these traditional healers. However, for accidents such as gunshot wounds, there is a recognition that traditional healers are not of much assistance. In such instances, lack of access to a public health clinic or hospital is considered a serious issue.

Education is equally problematic. Bilingual education is not offered in government-run schools in the upland provinces. There is little resistance by ethnic minorities to learning the Khmer language, except as

identified in Chapter 6, but all participants in this PPA insisted that their own cultural traditions should also be included in the school curriculum. There appears to be some recognition that a bicultural member of an ethnic minority group is less likely to be poor than someone who is not bicultural. This issue, of course, would need to be more thoroughly investigated.

In the lowlands, the Cham are not very strident about this cultural issue as they believe the mosque and home is the place where the religious components of their cultural identity should be promoted. There was no demand in any of the PPA for Islamic schools to be established at the village level, although some FGD participants were aware that some Khmer-Islam people on the outskirts of Phnom Penh are making such demands. The Vietnamese consider that a bilingual Vietnamese is less likely to be poor than a monolingual Vietnamese.

Ethnic minorities in the upland provinces would like vocational training in motorcycle and generator repair, operation and maintenance of sawmill equipment, battery maintenance, animal husbandry, food preservation, craft manufacture using traditional forest products,

tailoring, and, in one instance, aquaculture. They would also like information on available sources of credit and training in how to utilize credit and information on markets. In addition, they would also like training in how to prepare community-based project proposals. As was noted earlier, there are some different priorities between men and women that need to be recognized, something that would not be difficult to facilitate in the context of subsequent participatory needs assessments.

Interestingly, the ethnic Vietnamese did not request that the Government or some nongovernment provider support vocational education and technical training at the village level. The ethnic Vietnamese thought that if one wanted to learn about motorcycle repairs, preserving fish or improving woodworking skills, it was best to acquire competency in these fields by learning through experience. Vietnamese participants claim they understand how to utilize credit effectively; their problem is finding access to available credit. The Cham, on the other hand, are similar to the Khmer and upland ethnic minority groups in that they would prefer some forms of vocational education and technical training of relevance to them.