

Raising People’s Awareness of Human Trafficking Risks in Projects Improving Connectivity

By Jet Damazo



Migration, when unregulated, can lead to trafficking and other forms of exploitation

THE PROVINCE of Ratanakiri, located in the far northeast of Cambodia and borders of Lao People’s Democratic Republic and Viet Nam, is home to semi-nomadic ethnic minority groups, who still observe a traditional way of life. Many of them are engaged in swidden agriculture and exist in a subsistence economy; they live, work, and survive on land.

With the development of roads providing

access to Ratanakiri, however, things have changed, and not always for better. A study conducted under an ADB regional technical

assistance (TA) funded by the Poverty Reduction Cooperation Fund from the Government of the United Kingdomⁱ found that these roads have had more impact in encouraging migration for ethnic minorities, than in facilitating access to social facilities and services.

The TA’s results, discussed in a workshopⁱⁱ held in Manila in July 2007, show that with the modernization and transition to a market economy of Ratanakiri, along with much of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS), its once simple ethnic groups now aspire for consumer goods, which they cannot afford with revenues from their traditional activities.

Furthermore, development activities are affecting their traditional existence. For instance, when water streams are dammed in order to build roads, farmlands are left without a critical resource, thus reducing crop yields. On the other hand, as roads are built and access to markets improves, the land surrounding the roads inevitably increase in value, attracting an influx of investors. Armed with little information, communities are either simply thrown off their land, or are conned into selling their properties.

As such, for many of these ethnic minorities, the new roads that lead into their provinces also offer a way out of hardship and poverty, and into prosperity, through migration. However, migration—when unregulated—especially for people with limited education, skills, and information, can lead to human trafficking and other forms of exploitation.

“Human trafficking has been defined as the ‘dark side of globalization,” said Arjun Thapan, Director General of ADB’s Southeast Asia Department, in his keynote address during the workshop.

While estimates have to be treated with caution as they tend to be inaccurate, one estimate shows that 600,000 to 800,000 persons are trafficked internationally beyond borders each year, in addition to those trafficked within countries. Eighty percent of victims are women and children, and half of them are minors.

"Growing media images of a 'modern' lifestyle that is a strange contrast to rural existence are shown in remote rural areas, creating aspirations among youth and adolescents for a fundamental change, often leading to unsafe migration ending in their being trafficked," he explained.

"Demand for labor from the more developed economies of the subregion, particularly for unskilled and low skilled jobs, is growing alongside as populations in these countries age and achieve a better standard of living."

Infrastructure development plays a key role in all this. "Increased physical connectivity combined with rural poverty, and visions of new opportunities for a better life, can lead to unsafe migration decisions being made by adolescents and the youth," Mr. Thapan added.

Migration in itself, the workshop pointed out, is not inherently negative. It becomes risky when people are not sufficiently equipped with dealing with mainstream cultures and business bargaining, and thus, they are taken advantage of.

The two-day workshop discussed how human trafficking can be better mitigated through a variety of different interventions. For instance, as projects are implemented, their impacts on the local communities should be continuously monitored. Then, if it is found that people from affected communities are inclined to migrate, information centers for migration could be supported.

Infrastructure projects could include information and communications campaigns that would increase awareness of the dangers of trusting strangers and recruiting agents should be provided. Relevant information on where and how reliable information on migration can be found, as well as education on labor rights and fair working conditions should also be given. Care should be taken to ensure that these interventions are done in all affected communities, including those who do not necessarily live near the new road.

With interventions such as these, the human trafficking may be avoided, and communities stand to benefit more from development projects. #

ⁱ ADB. 2005. *Technical Assistance for Preventing the Trafficking of Women and Children and Promoting Safe Migration in the Greater Mekong Subregion*. Manila. (RETA 6190, financed by the Poverty Reduction Cooperation Fund for \$700,000.)

ⁱⁱ *Exploding the Myths: Why Human Trafficking Prevention Activities are not Working, How Development Programs Might be Helping the Traffickers, and How this Affects ADB*. 25-27 July 2007, Manila.