

CHAPTER 3

THE MULTIPLE DEFINITIONS OF POVERTY AMONG KHMER VILLAGERS IN LE TRI COMMUNITY

Chapter 3 provides a critique of the different meanings of poverty to various actors. Examining Khmer perceptions on impoverishment will help explain why some ethnic groups' poverty rates stay high as compared to others. The first part of this chapter begins with the natural and socio-economic characteristics of Le Tri commune, and continues with the historical development and poverty profile of the area. Furthermore, the extent to which development interventions, rural development, access to services such as health and education and business credit are available in this study village, will also be examined in relation to the different meanings of poverty within the Khmer community in An Giang Province in particular and in the Mekong Delta as a whole.

3.1. The Local Setting

3.1.1. Natural and Socio-economic Characteristics of Le Tri Commune

Tri Ton District belongs to An Giang Province and its topography consists of hills and mountains, with temperature differences between day and night being high and sometimes influenced by mountain floods in the wet season/annual flooding season. In the autumn the upper paddy fields cannot be cultivated due to a lack of water; whereas, in the wet season certain problems impact upon agricultural production and living conditions, such as soil acidity, and with the lower paddy fields flooded and with unsafe sanitary conditions. Due to the topography of the area, the arable land is deficient in general; however, the district borders Cambodia for 13.55 kilometers, and this is an advantage for the local people in terms of trade and cross-border migration in search of work. The total population of the District is 32,727 households and 132,625 people, in which poor households add up to 6,482 (24.82%).

The Khmer account for 12,683 of the households, or 38.75% of the total number in the District, and poor Khmer households account for 14.25% of the total poor households and 30% of the total number of Khmer households (Triton Statistical Yearbook, 2009). Most of the Khmer live across ten communes and one town along the mountain slopes.

Le Tri, one of thirteen communes in Tri Ton District, is in a mountainous area and is populated by a number of ethnic minorities, and is connected with Tinh Bien District in An Giang Province. It has a special type of terrain (half is a plains area and half is mountainous), and it covers 2,670 hectares, of which 1,810 ha is under agriculture, 628.1 ha is forestry, the multi-purpose area is 81.90 ha and the area used for residences is 90.47 ha (Figure 3.1). Between the Khmer and Kinh people living at the research site, the Khmer occupy about 50% of the total population and live in an area around the communal Buddhist temple.

Early on in the history of the area, the Khmer people started to reclaim the mountains and hills for agriculture in *Bay Nui* (seven mountains) specifically, and in An Giang Province as a whole. Nguyen (2008) contends that some literature mentions that land reclamation in former Chau Doc Province (now in An Giang Province) took place very slowly, and by 1910, only about 25,000 ha of farming land had been reclaimed. The Khmer often cultivated on the reclaimed land inside the forest, and there was still a lot of fertile land left untouched (Nguyen 2008). Later, they began farming in the lower elevation areas – on the plains, which were often inundated and contaminated with alumina. These activities were also linked to the local geographical and cultural characteristics, as many places in the area are contiguous to the mountains and hills. The upper paddy fields are usually located at the base of the mountains, and can grow only one crop per year owing to their dependency on rainfall. The soil in the area is mainly alluvial - formed at the base of *Dai Mountain* and the *Vinh Te* canal coastal plains bordering Cambodia, distributed mainly in the communes but with some higher altitude fields (upper paddy fields). The lower paddy fields are also called ‘wet rice fields’ (floating rice). One of the floating rice varieties was imported from Cambodia in the early twentieth century and was then grown extensively in the lower paddy fields, in what is considered to have been the

beginning of large-scale wet rice farming among the Khmer people in An Giang Province.

Apart from their regular farmland, the Khmer in An Giang Province also use deforested land, where they grew rice, corn and peas – the same as many ethnic minorities in the mountainous areas of southeastern Vietnam and the central highlands. Such deforested farming land in the mountains and hills is worked differently to that along the rivers and coastal areas of the Mekong Delta.

In late 1975, according to elders of the village, the Khmer Rouge began to attack the southern Vietnamese border, threatening the agriculturally important Mekong Delta area, arriving at the research site in 1978. Mysliwicz (1988) believes that the Pol Pot regime intended to reclaim the ancient Khmer empire, which once covered most of southern Vietnam. The border attacks increased in frequency and brutality, and during that time nearly half a million people were left homeless and uprooted, and over 100,000 hectares of farmland had to be abandoned due to the fighting (Mysliwicz, 1988:9). In addition to the suffering resulting from the Khmer Rouge atrocities, the war and the influx of refugees disrupted Vietnam's rice bowl region at a time when there was already a serious food shortage.

After the border war ended in 1979, ethnic Khmers from other provinces or from near the border of Cambodia came back to their homeland and established a new village called An Lap commune, the name of which changed to Le Tri Commune in 1989. Kinh people were also included in this development. Although land nominally belongs to the state, peasants who stayed on their own land during the Khmer regime or returned immediately after 1979 were allowed to re-occupy their former holdings, provided that local officials could provide each family with a minimum parcel of land of about 2,000 square meters (in addition to the common paddy). Under pressure from the Khmer people, the state also seized some land from the Kinh people and redistributed this to the Khmer farmers. Mysliwicz (1988) contends that displaced peasants who returned to their homes or came from other provinces to find their land occupied, were encouraged to settle their conflicts amicably or with the help of local officials. According to state policy, land was distributed to households based on the number of laborers per household. For example, in 1982, after returning home after

the war, Mr. Chau T (An Giang Province, as Khmer farmer, and with four family members, received 0.8 hectares of land or 0.2 hectares per person. However, in 1984 the central government collected together all this land and redistributed it according to the size of each family's assets before the war. The land distribution process relied on the local administration and local authorities, so households with a good or close relationship with the local officers were given better plots of paddy land than the others, that is those located in favorable positions and more fertile. In contrast, the poor or those with no relationship with the local authorities received plots in unfavorable areas, such as those with acid sulphate soil, inundated land and poor irrigation conditions.

Later on, and up until the post-socialist market reforms took place in the late 1980s, the agrarian economy in An Giang was predominantly cashless. To align with the goal of national development and ensure an improvement in socio-economic conditions and the living standards of local people, large-scale water projects were initiated in the local area in order to support the intensification of rice production in the Mekong Delta. Since the construction of an irrigation system (Canal 2) in Le Tri Commune in 1992 by the government, farming systems been dramatically improved, with crop frequencies rising from one rice crop per year to three, and with a greater diversity of vegetables grown also (Participatory Research Appraisal, 2006). Thanks to the upland irrigation system introduced recently in some areas, people are able to grow one rice crop in the wet season, plus an additional crop (such as green peas, peanuts or corn) or a second rice crop. Farming is the most important activity in the area, and is combined with a number of other activities as mentioned above. All the wealthy groups take part in these additional income-earning activities. However, yields have sometimes been low due to the lack of water pumping stations, leading to deficient water supplies. Furthermore, in order to increase household income, the Khmer community relies on its cattle raising skills, and they have built a good relationship with the Kinh in order to develop a cattle husbandry model called *nuoi chia*¹ (or 'normal cows' in English) (Van, 2008). On the other hand, in recent years

¹ *Nuoi chia* is a husbandry system in which a poor person receives a female calf from the owner. When the cow gives birth the first time, the calf belongs to the owner if it is female. If not, it is sold and the money divided equally between the owner and the farmer. The second calf, whether female or male;

young people have begun to migrate to the urban areas in search of work as unskilled wage laborers. From my group discussions with the local people and my observations in the field, I ranked the recent occupations of the households in Le tri commune (see Table 3.1). Poor households generate their income from a variety of sources depending upon the income-earning opportunities open to them, as illustrated in Table 3.1. One point to mention is that this calculation overlaps within the income-generating activities; for example, some poor Khmer households have a few high-elevation fields involved in rice farming for their subsistence as well as work as agricultural labor, but say that working as hired labor is crucial as an income source. In total, 85.2% of the households in my study consider agricultural wage labor to be their main source of income, while 29.6% are involved in livestock production, after which 18.5% of respondents said they carry out farming activities such as rice cultivation. Although the income from remittances is less than from other sources (only 7.4% of poor Khmer villagers rely on this income source), it still helps them improve their lives (Table 3.1).

Table 3.1: Poor Khmer Households' Income Generating Activities and Income Ranking in Le Tri Commune

Activity	Percentage of Households Involved (%)	Ranking
Agricultural Wage Labor	85.2	1
Livestock Rearing	29.6	2
Rice Cultivation	18.5	3
Remittances	7.4	4
Trade	3.7	5

Source: Group discussion with the author in 2010

belongs to the farmer. Later, the rule is repeated. During the rearing period, if the cow dies for whatever reason, no compensation is paid. In cases where the contract is ended by the farmer, the cow will be returned to the owner.

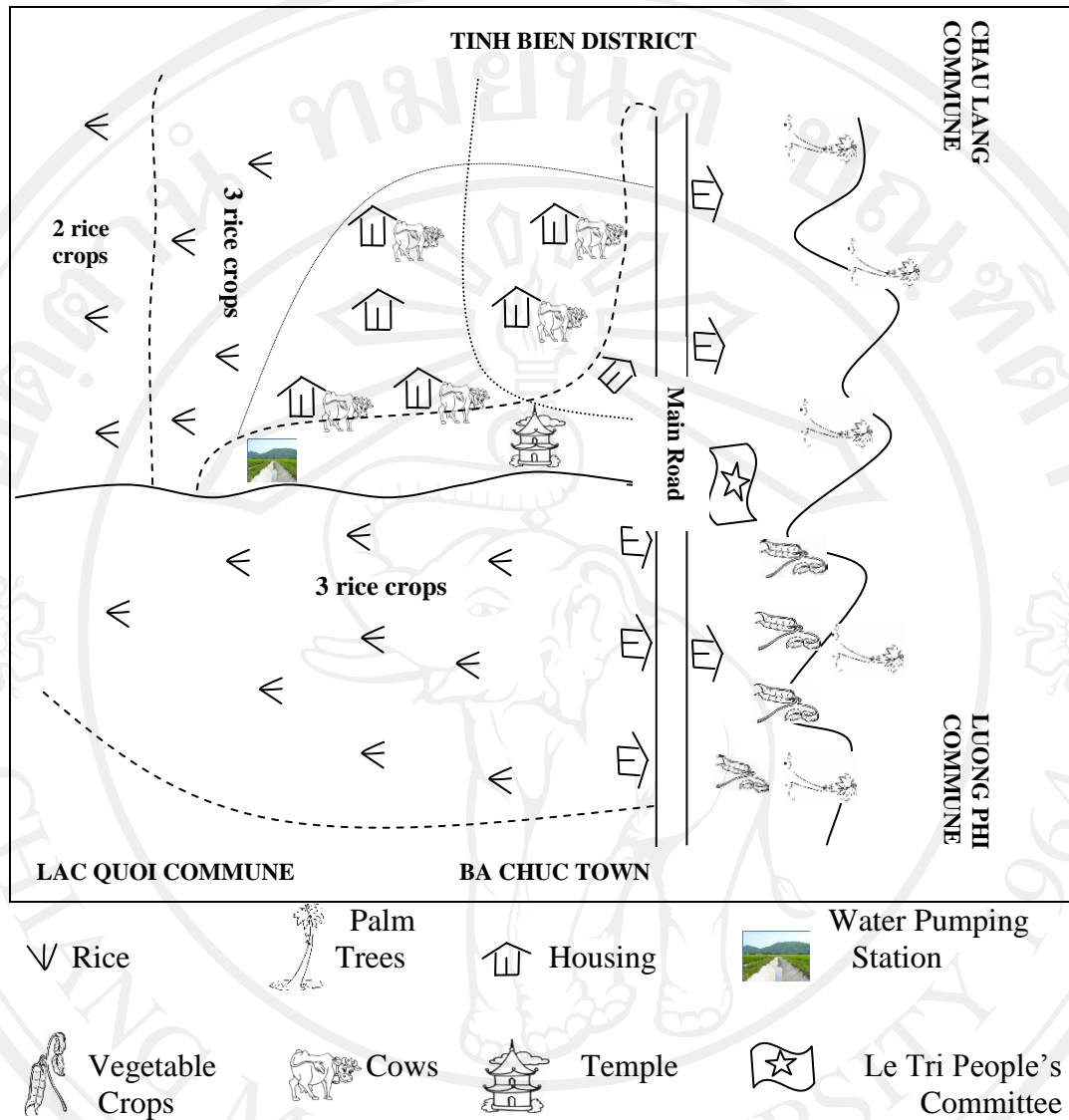


Figure 3.1: Map of Le Tri Commune Drawn by Khmer Villagers, 2010

3.1.2. Poverty Profiles

During the 1990s, many research projects on poverty were carried out in the Mekong Delta, providing a broad picture of the overall level of poverty there. Poverty remains a critical problem in the region, and despite a considerable decline in poverty levels since 1998, there are still around four million people living in poverty in the Mekong Delta (MDPA, 2004), the largest proportion of poor people anywhere in the country. In addition, the Mekong Delta has the highest percentage of people

vulnerable to a return to poverty due to adverse economic shocks. The Mekong Delta is also prone to natural disasters, and all this means a precarious existence for the poor who live there. The Khmer group is one of four ethnic groups in the area, according to the latest census held by the General Statistics Office (GSO) in 2009. About 1.26 million Khmer in the Mekong Delta represent 6.49% of population as a whole, and 53% of them are under the poverty line, as mentioned in the introduction chapter. An Giang Province, at the head of the Mekong Delta and bordering Cambodia, has not only a plains area but also mountains, and its population is approximately 2.2 million, with there being about 90,000 Khmers making up 6% of the population. Of these, 35% are considered poor, as shown in Table 3.2.

Most of the Khmer are engaged in survival strategies which include working as agricultural wage labor, running small businesses and carrying out other non-farm activities alongside agriculture. My classification of poverty here is based on the criteria set by the Labor and Social Welfare Service in An Giang Province, in which poor households in rural areas have an average income/person/month below 400,000² VND, and poor households in urban areas have an average income/person/month below 500,000 VND. Every year, local staff carry out a household survey in order to update their information and make sure that the classification of poor households is objective. Based on these criteria, then according to statistical records from the Provincial People's Committee for 2006 and 2010, it is clear that the proportion of poor Khmer out of the total number of Khmer households is higher than in other areas (Table 3.2). In particular, the proportion of poor Khmer households out of the total number of Khmer households (35% for 2010) is higher than the proportion of poor households (3.5%) for An Giang Province as a whole. In Tri Ton District, the same figures are 30% as compared to 10.25%, and in Le Tri Commune, 36.02% as compared to 27.5%. At the end of 2009 when I conducted my research, there were 434 poor households in Le Tri Commune - 38.5% all of households, of which 313 were Khmer (Annual Report People's Committee, 2009).

² Current exchange rate (in 2010) : 20,000 VND = USD \$1

Table 3.2: Poverty Profile for the Khmer Population in An Giang Province and Le Tri Commune (%)

Component	2006-2008	2009	2010
Overall Poverty Rate (whole population) in An Giang Province	7	5	3.5
Poor Khmer as Proportion of Total Khmer Households in An Giang Province	45	40	35
Overall Poverty Rate (Kinh and Khmer) in Tri Ton District	18.25	14.25	10.25
Poor Khmer as Proportion of Total Khmer Households in Tri Ton District	43	38	30
Overall Poverty Rate (Khmer and Kinh) in Le Tri Commune	30.39	26.44	27.50
Poor Khmer as Proportion of Total Khmer Households in Le Tri Commune	40.11	38.50	36.02

Source: Report on socio-economic development in the Khmer regions of An Giang Province, up to 2010.

This section will focus on the poor Khmer living at my research site, which I chose because Le Tri commune is one of the poorest communes (27.5% are poor) in Tri Ton District, An Giang Province. There are a total of 1,500 households in the commune containing 6,230 people, of which 748 households are Khmer with a population of 3,049 (over 50% of the commune). In Trung An village there are 541 Khmer households containing 2,185 people, of which 28.8% are poor. An Thanh village, the comparison village, has 513 total households and 2135 villagers, in which there are ten Khmer households, accounting for about 14.62% of the poor households in the village (from annual socio-economic reports of Le tri commune, Trung An village and An Thanh village, 2010) (Table 3.3). The distribution of Kinh and Khmer households in the commune is also different; most of the Kinh people live alongside

the road, whereas the ethnic Khmers then to gather in the *phum* (commune) or *soc* (village) around a temple.

As can be seen clearly, most of the poor are Khmer, as there are 262 poor Khmer households out of a total of 368 poor households at the site. In particular, eight out of ten Khmer households in An Thanh village are below the national poverty line (Table 3.3). Furthermore, although a number of policies and programs aimed at combating poverty have been promulgated in Le Tri commune, poverty rates have only slightly decreased within the village since 2006, with the number of households in poverty dropping from 600 in 2006 to 399 households in 2010, of which the Khmer poor comprise 286. Moreover, 34 Kinh and Khmer households fell below the poverty line in 2010 (due to application of a new national poverty line which has increased the household income level used from 200,000 VND to 400,000 VND), meanwhile the number of households escaping from poverty was quite stable – staying at the same level in 2007 and 2010 (Figure 3.2).

Table 3.3: Poverty Profile at the Research Site

Parameters	Le Tri Commune	Trung An Village	An Thanh Village
Kinh and Khmer Households	1,500	736	513
Khmer Households	748	541	10
Poor Kinh and Khmer Households	368	253	75
Poor Khmer Households	262	216	8
Poverty Rates (%) for Kinh and Khmer Households	24.53	34.38	14.62

Source: Annual socio-economic reports for Le tri commune, Trung An village, and An Thanh village, 2010

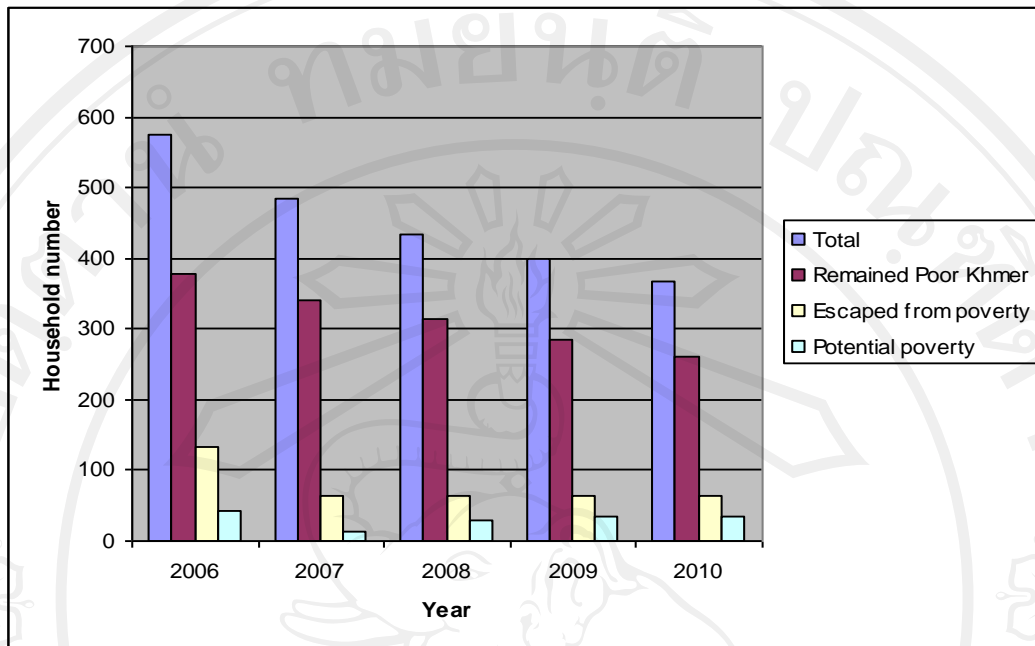


Figure 3.2: Number of Households in Poverty, 2006 to 2010

Source: The report of annual poverty reductions in Le Tri commune between 2006 and 2010 (adapted by Hoa, 2010)

As mentioned earlier, in response to the high level of poverty among the Khmer groups in the Mekong Delta, and based on their basic needs as well as their living conditions, the government has introduced programs and resolutions in order to deal with the problem, and in particular Program No.134 and Resolution 25, which have supplied housing and improved incomes through the introduction of credit schemes (Figures 3.3 and 3.4). Program 134 has been adapted from a national program in order to provide better living conditions in the provincial area. In order to accelerate the implementation of Program 134, the Prime Minister in 2008 issued Decision No. 74/2008/QD-TTg in support of land settlement, productive land and occupational solutions for ethnic minorities in the Mekong Delta up to 2010, and in order to create better conditions for household production development and improvement, plus a sustainable life. The latter element is contained within 25/DA-UBND which was passed on 8th December 2008 at the An Giang provincial level, through resolution 74/2008/QD-TTg, then passed on 9th June 2008 by the Vietnamese government.



Figure 3.3: House Built under Program
134



Figure 3.4: One Component of
Resolution 25

From the above history of the study village, one can appreciate why the Khmer inhabitants have stayed poorer than other ethnic groups in the Mekong Delta, in particular by looking at the internal and external mechanisms that have operated in the area.

3.2. Meanings of Self-Generated Local Khmer Poverty

The definitions and approaches to poverty among different societies in general and different actors in particular are diverse, so here will be considered as socially constructed discourses. In this section I will present the findings from my interviews concerning the notions of poverty, examining how and to what extent the poverty discourse has been constructed in the Khmer community and within the context of the Mekong Delta. Different to other, previous studies, the rural poor households in this study are defined and characterized on the basis of a poverty line, the purpose being to align this criterion with the real-life situation. The income level set as the poverty line, as mentioned earlier in Chapter 1, means that I classify the poor as those with an income under 400,000 VND. As mentioned by PACODE (a care organization belonging to an NGO), using this approach means that data on poor people (as defined by the GSO) is easier to find and gain access to, since data is used to calculate the governments' poverty line and is used in other official documents. However, any statistics on monthly income among the poor rarely reveal the practical conditions that exist, and according to the Kinh, the Khmer have many children who are dependent,

so income alone may not be a reliable criterion to use when deciding who is poor or not. In addition, as reflected by the officials I spoke to, the level set for the poverty line itself is not thought to be realistic; they feel that the minimum income required to meet basic needs for a person in the study area, regardless of other needs like entertainment, education and health care, ranges from between 400,000 to 450,000 VND per month, which is much higher than the MOLISA poverty line. Following the view of MPDA (2004), the poverty line is normally used for selecting those localities who should receive aid, so my study adopts this tool used for monitoring and classifying poor households in order to examine the impacts of the poverty alleviation programs put in place.

As mentioned earlier, among the three ethnic groups in the Mekong Delta (the Khmer, Hoa, and Cham), the Khmer make up the majority and face significant socio-economic difficulties. The poor Khmer are similar to those in other ethnic groups; they have little or no agricultural land and have less job opportunities. Concerning the perception of poverty among the Khmer group and based on my group discussions and in-depth interviews, there is a long list of reasons given for the Khmer's poor socio-economic status, including a shortage of capital, inter-generational poverty, a heavy reliance on incomes from agricultural production and high levels of landlessness, as the following sections will explore.

3.2.1 Economic Aspects

According to my findings, the poor are viewed as those who lack money and have no agricultural land, so have to work for others and usually have to travel far from home. Similar to the findings of the Mekong Delta Poverty Analysis in 2004 (MDPA), I found that more than 80% of the poor Khmer are engaged in off-farm work (such as seasonal agricultural wage labor and cattle raising), and about 10% in non-farm activities (carrying fruit from the mountains for sale at about 2,000 VND per ten kilos, collecting wood, catching crabs and snails, plus collecting other natural resources to earn extra income; working as mobile vendors selling vegetables from house to house in the village) which involve low pay and manual labor and are often not available, and so do not provide enough to meet the household needs. When I

asked the respondents to give an estimate of the amount of income earned by a typical poor household, they said approximately 40,000 to 70,000 VND per day.

Chau P (32 years-old), is the head of a family covering three generations, and is also the main laborer in support of his old mother and two children. His family are a poor Khmer household in Trung An village in Le Tri commune, and according to him have had a 'poor-book'³ for about fifteen years. He works as seasonal agricultural labor (his main income source) and attempts to work very hard. He usually travels to other provinces and to Cambodia in order to help with the rice harvest, with pesticide spraying and applying fertilizer. However, these are not reliable or sustainable income sources, due to increased agricultural mechanization, which has left manual work limited in nature in recent years.

(Household interview, 2010)

Other Khmer farmers spoke about the burden faced due to debts and loans (from relatives, neighbors and the agricultural bank) used in order to feed their families and/or treat illnesses, or for setting-up income generating activities. Mr. Chau T, a poor Khmer villager, spoke to me about his situation:

I am always worried about paying my debt to the Agricultural Bank, because I had to mortgage my 3,000 square meters of cultivated land over a six year period when my mother was sick. Since that time I have not been able to afford to take my land back, because I am the main laborer in the family and we have only one income source. As a consequence, with my low and unstable income, I can only just support my family and pay back the loan interest every month. As far as I am concerned, our lack of income is the crucial reason for our poverty.

(Interview with Mr. Chau T, 45 years-old, in December 2010)

The local authorities also state that the Khmer's inability to save money is due to the fact that most of their everyday earnings are spent on food for their family, meaning there is little left by the end of the day. In other words, most of the poor Khmers rely on seasonal agricultural work, do not run small businesses and so do not

³ People are given a 'poor book' when they fall under the poverty line set by the government. Government officials are given the authority to decide who is eligible for a poor-book, and once given, it enables poor people to receive government support.

have the same ability to enter into reliable income generating activities as the Kinh. The local poverty alleviation staff also told me that the poor tend to passively rely on government support, and I found that a number of the Khmer households, in contrast to most of the Kinh, are aware of the different government policies and programs available to them, such as loans given by the Social Policy Bank to start up new income-generating activities. Interestingly, some of the Kinh who have escaped from poor told me that they do not want to escape poverty any more, because they would like to continue to use the poor-books in order to access government services, such as lower or exempted school fees and health insurance cards. An example of this type of case is Mrs. Thu But, a Kinh with a big family covering four generations and who has managed to escape poverty:

My family escaped poverty early this year due to our household economy; however, we have four generations living in a small house with limited space. As a result, the poor-books previously given to us by the local authorities were not appropriate for my family; however, I need a poor-book in order to get assistance from the local poverty reduction programs, such as with health insurance, education support and house building. If we do not have a poor-book, we will not receive any assistance and will not be able to save money in order to buy a bigger house.

She told me that she disagrees with the national poverty line constructed for poor people, because:

The government has defined poor households using a new poverty line basing on the market, one which does not take into account existing human resources. In this area there are many dependents in the families those who have escaped poverty when being based on income, but whose lives are in fact still very difficult. Therefore, the current poverty line (of 400,000 VND/person/month) for poor households is not suitable, and there is still a lot of pressure on those households close to the poverty line or who have just escaped.

(Interview with Mrs. Thu B, 55 years-old, from the former poor Kinh group of households, 2010)

In relation to the above argument, the Kinh people consider poverty to be about “feeling poor”, rather than looking at what “causes them to be poor”. The head of the poverty reduction programs in An Thanh village told me that Kinh people in practice have greater demands and essential needs than the ethnic people, and that the poor Khmer households, although they view income as an important aspect of being poor when compared to those who are better-off and formerly poor, they do not see income as the end goal in terms of leading the life they want. My evidence shows that most of the young migrant farmers work short term as off-farm laborers for about one week and then return home and relax for some days before returning to work; “.....you are lucky [to] interview me at home, because I usually go outside the village to earn money as agricultural labor. Now you see me as I am staying at home to relax, having saved some money” (statement from Khmer farmer in 2010). In other words the Khmer say that an increase in money would not amount to not being poor; rather they refer to how money can help them meet their basic needs during their daily lives.

There is little doubt that economic factors determine the earning sources and that the unique spending patterns associated with the economic activities carried out play a vital role in explaining low levels of income and poverty. The better-off Khmer and Kinh households have no economic worries or burdens, they have money to access knowledge and education services, can afford to sent their children to school, have enough assets to provide for the family, can save money, can develop their businesses and have enough land to further increase their income (Figure 3.5).



House of Better-off Khmer family



Poor Khmer Housing

Figure 3.5: Housing of Better-off and Poor Khmer Farmers in Trung An, Le Tri Commune (picture taken by the author in 2010).

3.2.2. Economic Logic of Poverty

Having little land or landlessness are part of the reason why the Khmer communities are poor, though landless agricultural households are particularly prevalent in the Mekong Delta, where they comprise 89% of the total number of households who rely on agriculture (Scott and Chuyen, 2004). In particular, the majority of poor Khmer households is landless or has only small plots of land, and the development of local businesses and the creation of job opportunities within this group have also been very slow, common strategies used to alleviate poverty in the Khmer community. The problems of poverty and landlessness are interactive, and local people with these problems tend to fall into a vicious cycle. This issue is quite complex when one analyzes the root-causes of the Khmer's landlessness in this region.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, after the land reclamation activities took place in 1910 in An Giang Province, then according to the elders I spoke to, most Khmer households had their own farm land pre-1975, though they suffered oppression at the hands of the two colonial regimes, the French and US. Nguyen (2008:100) points out that most cultivated land owned by the Khmer people came to them through inheritance (they inherited the land from their grandparents/parents, or they reclaimed land themselves and thereafter owned it), or was family land handed down from one generation to another, becoming the common property of the family or clans). For a

long time, the Khmer lived on agricultural activities, such as growing rain-fed rice, raising livestock, hunting and fishing.

Later, this land system among the Khmer communities ended after the border war in 1979, and as a consequence, when they returned to their homeland, they fell into poverty as a result of being homeless and landless. This was a difficult time for the Khmers, as they needed to reconstruct their lives, though they were supported significantly throughout the land distribution process by the government. Therefore, it can be seen that the root cause of landlessness among the Khmer households was the war with the Khmer Rouge and its consequences.

In the early 1990s, these changes accelerated with the introduction of the *Doi Moi* policy. Thanks to the development of irrigation systems, floating rice and rain-fed rice systems were replaced by irrigated rice across all regions of the Mekong Delta, including the Khmer villages. The irrigated system is a much more diverse system. As well as advances in commercial agriculture, during this period and up to 1992, over 20% of households in the village (about 236 Khmer households) (household interviews, 2009) lost their agricultural land due to the construction of the irrigation system. However, being aware of the need to re-develop local agricultural activities, most farmers were pleased to donate land to this work, without receiving compensation. As a consequence, the pattern of farmland ownership changed for all people in the village; some households lost all their land, other had to mortgage or sell the rest of their land, having seen it fragmented by the irrigation development project; other mortgaged part of their land for gold when they faced problems (such as disease and low productivity), or had to sell land if their incomes dropped. The mortgaging and sale of land have since been the most common occurrences among both the Kinh and Khmer.

Since that time, Khmer farmers have also encountered problems resulting from changing agricultural practices (such as changing from soybean to rice, or from double to triple cropping with short duration rice grown) which have led to a decrease in the rice yield, a falling of profits from rice, the spread of diseases and insects, and the increased use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. In particular, there was an epidemic of the *Nilaparvata lugens* planthopper and a rice fungus in 2000, and this

led to low yields, with, in the worst cases, farmers going into debt. Sometimes now, farmers have to “buy high and sell low” or buy materials on credit, and this increases the risk of failure. In addition, the Khmer language acts as a barrier, for most of the agricultural training courses are run in Vietnamese and cannot be adapted to the Khmer’s circumstances. Added to these issues, unfavorable market movements, those that increase production costs and decrease income, have left many peasants in a vicious cycle of debt and, as a consequence, they have either had to put down their land as collateral, or sell their land outright, either legally or illegally, in order to pay off the debt, with some becoming landless households and seeking out insecure jobs such as seasonal wage labor and unskilled workers.

Added to the above issues, mechanization has been a significant issue, with the introduction of 49 different farming machines in the commune leading to a reduction in the use of agricultural labor in recent years. This type of development has, alongside the national poverty reduction programs focused on the agricultural sector in the Mekong Delta, led to the limited participation of poor groups, and especially the Khmer. In fact, the Khmers in the Mekong Delta have missed out on many of the benefits accruing from the recent liberal reforms, as a lack of capital, knowledge and experience has excluded them from the development programs.

Key questions to address are: how can farmers afford to learn all these new technologies? And; how are they supposed to analyze market information, plus obtain enough capital, labor and draught power in order to build the required fields? As a consequence, the development of agriculture is a new challenge for the poverty alleviation strategies, and raises wider concerns about social differentiation among the farmers. Therefore, agricultural modernization, such as investment in agricultural machinery, the construction of irrigation systems, the introduction of drainage and flood control systems, and the application of new crop varieties and fertilizers, is the main reason why indebtedness has become so widespread among the Khmer community, as they have been pressured into integrating with the market and adopting commercialization.

Hence, heavy debt, plus the risks and failures associated with production, have pushed the Khmer people into a corner. Add to this the institutional land reforms that

took place in 1993 and 2003, under which land use rights can be transferred, leased, inherited and used as collateral, have driven vulnerable households into insolvency, forcing them to use their land as a last resort - for survival and to pay debts. Therefore, highlighting an alarming and quite recent socio-economic trend in the Mekong Delta, Xuan (1998) states that a number of the poor have become poorer, and that even some non-poor people have fallen below the poverty line. The case study of Mr. Chau T is an illustration of this:

Mr Chau T (45 years-old) has five members, none of whom own any agricultural land because one part of their former land was to the irrigation construction project in 1992 and the remainder was sold to help pay off debts in 2007, due to crop failures. Now the household is classified as poor in the village, and the family has a poor-book. The husband and wife work as seasonal wage labor, earning an income of about 600,000VND per crop, but currently due to the arrival of harvesting machines, they are now excluded from the development process and become unemployed. As a result, they make a subsistence living by looking for rice on the farm after the harvest, by borrowing money from their relatives, or receiving food from the local temple.

(Household interview, 2009)

Thus, most of the Khmer villagers in this study said that landlessness is a crucial part of being poor and is a key reason for their poverty. If they had more land, they would be able to farm and have enough food for their families and for business purposes. In relation to this, I came across contradictory opinions regarding the causes of landlessness and why it is widespread in the Mekong Delta, especially among the Khmer community. Land use is an asset that people can pledge or sell/mortgage to other households; therefore, having no land or less land can lead to poverty, as a result of land use rights being transferred. In other words, after mortgaging or selling land, owners receive more revenue and can use the land for longer. As a consequence, having no or only a little land is not a problem over the short term. By the same token, the Care Organization (an NGO) has recognized that many Khmers bring this situation upon themselves due to indebtedness, or because they sell/lease the land. So it can be seen that the Khmer tend to only consider the short-term advantages of selling their land, not the long-term consequences. Landlessness problems eventually

lead to poverty issues, but are not the direct cause of poverty as the local Khmers believe; however, any household that sells or mortgages its land to pay off debts is more likely to fall under the poverty line. The Khmers' opinions fall into line with Scott's theory on stratification, which argues that farmers prefer to own their own land, even in small amounts (Scott, 1976). In reality, the Khmer farmers' situation is that many of them are in danger of losing their means of livelihood because they have used all their land collateral with the banks or have sold/mortgaged their land to the Kinh or better-off Khmers. Therefore, about 80% of Khmer households in this research site had to be agricultural wage laborers as the second preference by Scott.

In this regard, my survey can help explain the issues that exist from different angles. The critiques given by intellectuals, NGOs and scholar in the Mekong Delta say that the root cause of the Khmer's not succeeding in business and their land scarcity is their low level of education (this issue will be discussed in more detail in the next section); for example, only 74% of Khmer children are enrolled in primary schools and many Khmer boys are sent to temples to "attend a Buddhist education", rather than receive vocational training. According to Professor VTX (interviewed in 2010), almost all the extension staff who attend training courses are Vietnamese, where they learn about agricultural production activities. As a consequence, the Khmer farmers are unable to apply the methods taught on these courses, on their own agricultural fields.

In these circumstances, national poverty alleviation Program 134 introduced policies aimed at supporting production land and the supply of piped water, in which agricultural land is one of the necessary matters addressed in order to resolve the landlessness issue among the Khmer community in the Mekong Delta. However, the Program has not been applied to the Khmers in my study because high land prices on the market when compared to the national program funds, have meant that not enough land has been bought and distributed to the poor Khmer households. As a result, the existing difficulties with respect to the social and economic life of the Khmer have continued, causing significant pressure in each locality. As Mr. L, vice-head of the Bureau for Tri Ton District Labor Invalids and Social Affairs pointed out to me:

The situation of “hidden” sales and mortgaged agricultural land among the ethnic Khmer is complicated. Many ethnic minority households currently have certificates of land use rights, but actually have “empty hands” and are still employed as hired laborers by others. In comparison, households on the Program 134 list have assets and a lot of cultivated land, though this aid program is no longer able to support them due to the fact that market prices are higher than the amount of money in the fund.

He continued:

...there are some subjective and objective reasons for this circumstance. Some of those poor Khmer households who lack the capacity to overcome life and business risks and uncertainties tend to choose short-term solutions such as mortgaging or selling their land. Many families should receive support in order to redeem their land, but have already sold it. Unfortunately, we also cannot collect enough exact data on this....

(Interview with district authorities in 2010)

In brief, land sales and mortgage losses, the threat of agricultural modernization, pressure due to failures in production, plus the loss of land to the local government irrigation construction project, appear to have played a major role in causing the cycle of poverty and landlessness among the poor farm and poor landless Khmer households.

3.2.3. Cultural Logic of Poverty

When asked about the causes of poverty, the most common answer given was a “lack of education” and a lack of schooling among a considerable part of the Khmer population, and particularly among Khmer women. Statistically, the high rates of illiteracy and the high school drop-out rates among Khmer villagers can be seen as important causes of poverty.

Some non-poor Kinh and Khmer households told me that the reason for poverty among the Khmer is their low education levels. Table 3.4 shows that more than 60% Khmer people in the area are illiterate and that 28% did not finish primary school – though they reached a fairly high level of schooling before dropping out,

normally to the second grade. When compared to the Kinh group, then regarding higher education (college/university) there is a big gap between the non-poor Khmer and the Kinh, with the former three times less likely than the latter to attend – at 11.1% and 3.6% respectively. Emphasizing these cultural factors, the leaders and intellectuals I spoke to place a great emphasis on education and training as paths out of poverty, and note that poor ethnic people feel that the formal education sector has excluded them. Some locals expressed exasperation that despite sustained efforts by the ethnic Vietnamese group to “raise” the Khmer’s intellectual level to on a par with their own, the economic situation of this group has still not improved. One scholar (VTX) told me that the Vietnamese education system in rural areas is inadequate, and that almost all pupils have difficulty understanding and coping with their lessons. Also, the ability of the teachers is limited. Furthermore, a small proportion of Khmer pupils still struggle with the official curriculum and repeat their years in school, leading to high dropout rates. Meanwhile, indicators in relation to educational attainment suggest it is an increasingly inferior education system that the Khmers experience.

Table 3.4: Education Levels among Different Groups in Le Tri Commune

Social Groups		Illiterate	Elementary	Secondary	High School	College/ University	No. of HHs
Kinh (%)	Non-poor	0.0	44.4	18.5	25.9	11.1	6
	Former Poor	16.7	46.7	16.7	13.3	6.7	8
	Poor	27.8	51.9	17.7	1.3	1.3	24
Khmer (%)	Non-poor	50.0	17.9	21.4	0.0	3.6	6
	Former Poor	57.1	28.6	14.3	4.8	2.4	9
	Poor	61.1	27.8	9.3	1.9	0.0	27
Average		41.4	36.3	14.6	5.1	2.5	

Source: Data taken from household survey by the author and students of An Giang University carried out in 2010

With respect to religious practices and traditions, these often conflict with regard to poverty, though poverty is seen as bad because deprivation involves suffering. However, the salvation offered by religions is not based on material wealth, and certain types of poverty can even be beneficial in reducing the distractions that might otherwise be seen as interfering with a spiritual life (Loy, 2010). In relation to this, the Khmer in this study devote their energies and scarce material resources to merit-making and temple refurbishments, and views on this vary among actors. Care Organization told me that outsiders see these activities as a “development barrier”, which means that outsiders view these expenditures as a hindrance to further development of the Khmer group. Taylor (2007) analyzed the notion of “moral accumulation”, which was advanced by provincial officials in a recent poverty study to explain why the Khmer remain the poorest group in the Mekong Delta. The argument follows that they care less about economic enrichment than they do for moral attainment. In this regard, Mr. Chau S, the Khmer vice-head of Trung An village, told me:

.....due to longstanding religious practices, most Khmer people have ideas and organize major religious events that are not linked to their existing capabilities. For me, this results in a lack of awareness of their limits and what is a reasonable expenditure for the family. As far as I am aware, the majority of the Khmer poor do not know why they are poor, as they work hard throughout the day, but in my view the reason is due to them having job instability, and also them not being aware of how to calculate a reasonable revenue and expenditure profile, which means they always have uncertainty in their lives.

(KIP interview with local staff in 2010)

When conducting my fieldwork, on the other hand, I found that the local authorities, even the local Khmer staff, are satisfied with the achievements that have been made in recent years in terms of reducing the time and money the Khmer people spend on their traditional ceremonies, festivals, weddings and funerals. When I asked about this, most of the interviewed Khmer said that they now only contribute some or make an offering, and only then when and if they can afford it. The Kinh and Khmer groups follow different religions - Theravada Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism

respectively. As can be seen in Table 3.5, the contribution made to temples by the Khmer group is higher than the Kinh group - 69.05% as compared to 7.89%. Among the group, the poor Khmer pay the highest proportion, as compared to the non-poor and former poor groups; sixteen households as compared to six and seven respectively. According to them, this reflects their strong sense of belonging to the community and their ethnic background; furthermore, it helps provide them with the support, encouragement and comfort they are in need of due to living in poverty. Neang T's family exemplifies this, for she is a widower with two daughters of fourteen and sixteen years of age and her family belongs to the poor group in the commune. Although her income is just enough to cover her daily expenditure, she always contributes ten kilos of rice to the temple each month, because in good faith she hopes that her husband's soul will be satisfied.

Table 3.5: Different Household Groups and their Contribution to the Temple

Ethnicity	Social Group	No Contribution	Contribution	Total
Khmer	Non-poor	0	6	6
	Former Poor	2	7	9
	Poor	11	16	27
	Total	13	29	42
	Percentage (%)	30.95	69.05	100
Kinh	Non-poor	5	1	6
	Former Poor	7	1	8
	Poor	23	1	24
	Total	35	3	38
	Percentage (%)	92.11	7.89	100

Source: Data from household survey carried out by the author and students from An Giang University in 2010

In terms of the different situations found among the Khmer villagers, when I spoke to the better-off Khmer households in the village, they said that they do not expect the situation to change much over time; that many of the Khmer will continue

to use the money provided by the poverty reduction program in inappropriate ways.

As Mr. Chau S said:

Ms. Neang C (36 years-old), has a younger brother who has attended Buddhist education since 2000. At that time, and due to a lack of money, her family wanted to have a party (pre-ordination ritual) to celebrate her brother becoming a monk, so she decided to sell her cattle, which was being supported by the provincial poverty reduction program. At the party she celebrated with guests from the village providing beef, fruit and wine. As a result, she became indebted to the program because she used its funds in the wrong way.

(Household interview, 2010)

When analyzing this case study in terms of the cultural and social aspects, I would like to adopt Berry's (1993; cited by Wong, 2007) observations in terms of cultural activities such as funerals, marriages and initiation rites. He contends that these collective practices create a golden opportunity for the powerful and rich to gain respect and create obligations among their kin and neighbors, by organizing a party, offering donations or contributing food.

In the same vein, the Vietnamese scholar NVC states that:

This matter belongs to...Khmer cultural life and cultural traditions; they do not think of their contributions to the temple as a waste and a cause of poverty. For example, an ethnic family offers a free party for villagers in the event of a store opening; this actually has great significance for two reasons in terms of cultural issues and economics. Food is used to express their sacred cultural belief in the spirits, plus provides an opportunity to create a network with other people in the village; they also gain respect from everyone in the village. So, as far as their perception is concerned, the money is not wasted, as local staff tend to say.

He then expressed his opinion in response to my question as to why local Khmer villagers usually donate to the temple, even though they are impoverished:

...Going back to the Khmer situation, it is really meaningful to them, and of course they do not think this kind of activity causes their

poverty, as the local staff say. In another example, most Indonesian women who work on the islands spend their time decorating trees at resorts, while Indonesian men watch cock-fighting. However, I myself think their work actually helps to attract tourists, and; therefore, supports their income.

(KIP interview with scholar in 2010)

Hence, due to their religious orientation the Khmer do not consider these contributions as being related to or causing their poverty, as many outsiders feel. When NGOs and Vietnamese researchers explore the poor Khmer villagers' views on religious culture and the state, and their contributions to the pagodas, they tend to adopt the "moral economy" approach of Scott (1976) and the "rational peasant" approach of Popkin (1979), which somewhat controversially elicit key characteristics in terms of peasants' nature. What is distinctive about this "economic" view taken by Scott is his unwillingness to consider "non-rational" behavior, that is, the importance of social relations and the influence of another culture's norms and values. Meanwhile, Popkin's approach is typical of analyses based on the economic paradigm. Taking into account these two theorists' views and based on the Khmer context regarding the cash economy and the cultural logic of poverty, I argue that the Khmer people could be inclined to adopt both approaches, though they see themselves as being poor people in economic terms, but rich in terms of morality, and that their actions are indeed rational. In other words, they lean towards the "moral economy"; engaging themselves in the "political economy" only according to the situation and when something is at stake for them.

3.2.4. Social Aspects

As well as the economic aspects and the economic logic of poverty, the findings from my interviews also reveal what people feel when issued with the poor-book mentioned earlier. When I discussed this issue with the Khmer and Kinh villagers, I learned that different people have different understandings and feelings. Several of the interviewees said that this does not make the poor Khmers feel ashamed or poorer; they feel that the government has acknowledged their poverty and will give them the attention they need by giving them the poor-book. This discourse

seems to be widespread among the local authorities and non-poor Kinh groups; that most of the poor Khmer villagers are used to depending on support. However, I argue that the Kinh hold these views much more than the Khmer I spoke to. In other words, they feel relieved and relaxed when they have a poor-book, as they can send their children to school and take them to hospital if necessary, without worrying about payments, plus can receive the benefits of other provincial poverty reduction programs. The poor Kinh households feel poor because other people portray them as being poor, and as a result, they try to improve their living conditions in order to escape this situation.

I spoke with Mr T, 50 years-old and with two sons who have studied at secondary school and high school. Despite this, he complained because the local staff withdrew his poor-book, meaning his sons could not continue their studies at high school. Although his family's income has improved, being able to afford to send his son to school is a significant challenge.

(Household interview, 2010)

Although this discourse is firmly entrenched among the poor Khmers in the Mekong Delta, who see themselves as overwhelmingly poor and likely to depend on outside intervention in order to move out of poverty, this attitude – a dependency on external support, is not only popular among the poor Khmer groups, but also the poor Kinh poor and the former poor Kinh as well.

According to my poor Khmer interviewees, they feel a part of their community because they are still shown respect from the better-off members, and their explanation for this is that people are not seen as inferior because they are poor. Instead, people share the idea that everyone is doing their best to get on in life, and; therefore, there is nothing to criticize or disrespect. They claim that respect is very important, due to the affect it has on them. When explaining the meaning of respect, they receive this from both the other poor plus better-off Khmers, and this helps to motivate them; they feel supported and encouraged to keep trying their best - to improve their situation. In one example of this, Mr Chau H is elderly and lives alone and so is classified as poor – but his family has lived at a neighbor's house for over 50

years, simply by borrowing money. In short, poor Khmer people do not feel isolated from the community due to their poverty.

3.3. Summary

In terms of the Vietnamese government's point of view regarding poverty, they believe it can be measured using a standard poverty line based on income, and this approach produces a variety of perceptions about poverty among different actors, including among the poor Khmer. According to the Khmer I interviewed, the causes of poverty include low levels of income (inherited/generational poverty), a lack of sustainable work, a lack of cultivatable land and a low education level. While the Khmer believe a lack of land is important, leaders and intellectuals tend to think that a low level of education is the main reason why the Khmer tend to be poor in the Mekong Delta. Moreover, when it comes to religious concerns, views vary, for while the Khmer see religion as offering riches in terms of morality, outsiders such as researchers, the state and NGOs, consider attention to religious issues as a "development barrier". Therefore, the notion of poverty varies between the State, academics and NGOs on the one hand, and the poor on the other. In other words, I have revealed here the contradictory aspects of poverty in relation to what the Khmer think and need, and this might help explain why the poverty reduction efforts made so far have been slow to progress in a number of ways.