

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The crucial aims of this thesis have been to examine the current circumstances surrounding Khmer communities in terms of exploring their own poverty reduction notions, to analyze their level of marginality beyond the official government interventions, and to identify the adaptive strategies used by them as paths out of poverty. From the results discussed earlier, I have been able to highlight how the poor people have constructed their perception of poverty and how they have been marginalized by some aspects of the poverty alleviation programs, in order to comprehensively understand their livelihoods discourse. This final chapter will briefly summarize the major findings of the study, focusing on the theoretical and empirical interpretations of the context the poor Khmer find themselves in. This is followed by an evaluation of the significance of the study and an outline of the recommendations for development policy practice.

6.1 The Poor Khmer: Perceptions and Poverty

The poor Khmers' perceptions of the alleviation strategies introduced by the government form the first finding in this study. Descriptively, poverty is comprehended by them in terms of material deficits, including a shortage of income, landlessness and a heavy reliance on agricultural production, generational poverty and unstable employment. In particular, when it comes to the link between poverty and landlessness, the Khmer people and outsiders' views in this regard vary, as discussed in previous chapters. There are two opposing views; the view of the former poor who believe that landlessness or limited land is as one of the main causes of the Khmer's poverty, and the Khmer's own views, that this aspect is not a cause but rather a symptom of the actions taken by the Vietnamese government, NGOs and researchers. In other words, the Khmer villagers claim that agricultural land is a valuable asset for their income-generation activities, because they are very experienced at farming,

having practiced it for many generations. Although migration to urban areas is a choice they have made recently, the purpose of this activity is to earn enough money to buy or mortgage land back home and pursue agricultural work again. As well as the issues of landlessness and poverty discussed in Chapter 3, I have also explored the reasons behind Khmer landlessness, and that it is due to the agricultural development policies on irrigation construction and market integration, all of which have led to production pressure. Therefore, the Khmer assert that if they had sufficient plots of land, they would be able to support their daily lives.

In contrast, from the view of outsiders, landlessness is rather an effect of poverty, as the poor Khmer have been forced to sell or lease their land in order to cope with their hardships. Outsiders assume that the sale of land allows the Khmer to become involved in other employment opportunities, those with a higher income. This means that, according to the Vietnamese government and NGOs, the results of selling their land are that the Khmer have ended up in a worse situation than they were before, financially, since they have lost the parcel of land they had to farm, leaving them even fewer subsistence options. Also, researchers note that the typical reason for the Khmer's landlessness and poverty is their low level of education and lack of skills. All of this has led to contradictory thinking about this matter.

Also, due to the high land prices in the Mekong Delta as compared to the amount budgeted in the national poverty reduction program, agricultural land support issues under Program 134 have not been implemented across the Khmer landless and poor households, whereas other ethnic groups in Vietnam have been able to benefit. Therefore, the vicious circle of poverty and landlessness within Khmer villages and the top-down poverty schemes of the government have remained controversial.

Furthermore, the cultural logic of poverty and views on social aspects have led to perceptions about the Khmer forming with regard to educational attainment, religion and labor networks. In reality, disagreement between the Khmer and the government, the Vietnamese researchers and NGOs concerning the religious practices, are part of the reason for the Khmer's poverty. Nonetheless, most Khmer people state that this activity reflects their sense of belonging to the community and to their ethnic background. In other words, even though incomes and landlessness are

important causes of Khmer poverty, they themselves talk of being able to satisfy their basic needs before looking at other aspects of life. Moreover, from the Khmer point of views, social relations within their community have the potential to contribute to an improvement in Khmer households' livelihoods as a whole.

On the other hand, an analysis of the perceptions of poverty given by the interviewed Khmers shows that there is a need to examine these issues in line with a discussion as to the diverse ways of looking at the meaning of poverty. It is clear, that the domination of development activities through such organizations as the World Bank and ADB has led to specific discourses prevailing over developing countries, which find themselves obliged to define poverty in relation to economic income. It must also be recognized that the measurement of poverty using income presents a great technical advantage - it is uni-dimensional and thus allows for a complete ordering of households according to income level.

Before analyzing the theoretical debates, this study presented the overall approaches taken with respect to the measurement of poverty. The 'monetary approach' usually makes use of poverty lines to measure poverty, while the 'entitlement approach' draws attention to a much wider range of the causes of poverty and also gives policy options. Following this point when looking at the goals of the Khmer, as stated earlier, a closer parallel can be drawn to the entitlement approach than the monetary approach. Sen (2000) recognizes the crucial link between income and poverty, but disagrees that it is the primary driver needed to obtain a good life. The Khmer's perception fits more with Sen's approach to poverty, because they are able to satisfy their basic needs before looking at other aspects of life.

As I have argued here, the causes of impoverishment in the Khmer community within Le Tri commune lean towards taking the entitlement approach, even though at first sight it might seem that the views presented reflect the monetary approach, since they continue to mention issues that reflect economic issues, including unstable and low incomes and landlessness. In fact, they focus on incomes simply as a means to achieve their other goals - the entitlements in their lives. In actual fact, the goals the poor Khmer mentioned to me were being able to relax and spend time with their family, to be seen as equals and not as poor people, to live without worries, to have a

voice in their community, to engage in support for others and to make contributions to their temples. What is interesting from my experience here, is that the Khmer care more about moral enrichment rather than economic attainment, such as being able to carry out collective cultural practices in order to create an opportunity for the powerful and rich to gain respect, or to build their social relations in the community. This rationality, indeed, fits with Scott's view (1976). More to the point, Dietz (2001) views the definitions and analyses of poverty as varying, as they may be constructed by local people based on their perceptions of poverty at a given time.

Similarly, the research of Diem in terms of the poverty experienced by women living in the Lo Gom slum community in Ho Chi Minh City makes the same points as my study. According to her findings, from an outsider's point of view the local people are poor and lack good facilities, whereas the locals' perception is that being poor does not quite mean that people lack money or infrastructure, or face environmental problems that can be measured by a certain standard. Here, I will argue that between the two perspectives: the national government's/PACODE's (an NGO) and the poor Khmer's, the perceptions on poverty might mean that interventions aimed at combating ethnic poverty are focused on the deviation aspect of poverty; that is, what the Khmer desire and are involved in. Furthermore, this in turn might help to explain why poverty reduction efforts might need to be decelerated in some way.

6.2. Government Interventions

Formerly, during the colonial French and US administrations, Khmer society in the Mekong Delta experienced tremendous upheaval, including economic, historical and political change, and here I revealed the fundamental causes of the Khmer farmers' path towards poverty. Since 1975, national policies and other relevant policies have been launched that have targeted the Khmer communities, and their lives have to a great degree been changed for the positive, though superficially. The lives of the Khmer people living in An Giang Province; for example, have not improved - they have suffered since the 'South-West' war in 1978. So, different from Khmer communities in other areas of the Mekong Delta, they have struggled to overcome the war's consequences and reconstruct their lives from the beginning.

Generally, Khmer villagers remain impoverished, particularly in terms of practical matters that limit their development. In recent years, the Vietnamese government, based on its assessment of the different ethnic groups and their living conditions, has promulgated a number of poverty reduction policies aimed at helping the ethnic poor improve their livelihoods. However, an important question in this approach is: how much have these interventions impacted upon the poor?

As presented earlier, I have examined the role that national assistance programs aimed at alleviating poverty among ethnic groups have played in the Mekong Delta, including the agricultural development policy, national Program 134 (introduced in 2005) and Resolution 25 introduced during 2008. Based on the local government's statistics, the incidence of poverty among the Khmer community is higher than in other ethnic groups, and my research of a Khmer community in Le Tri commune in An Giang Province is representative of this view. As a result, the programs implemented in this area have as their aim to improve the housing conditions of the Khmer and create off-farm employment opportunities for local ethnic people.

The second finding of my research is that these programs have also had unfavorable outcomes during the implementation process, and in some cases these have led to marginalization in the community, although there have been some favorable outcomes for the local Khmer people as well, such as the provision of housing, clean water and a credit scheme for animal husbandry, as well as other non-farm training. Davies and Young (1996) point out with regard to the ethnic minority that they have had to face many more social and economic dimensions to their marginalization. In the case here, the Khmer's decision-making rights with respect to land and resource use have been denied by the regional development process and by the resource management framework, so that they have been left powerless to control their own livelihood practices. They have therefore had to deal with risks in relation to agricultural development, such as the indirect impacts of mechanization, as a result of which Khmer wage laborers have found it difficult to find work. Scott (1985) argues that the introduction of new technology, mechanization and intensified fertilizer use tends to widen the gap between the rich/landlord class and the

poor/landless class. Mechanization promotes large-scale farming and increases the potential for small-scale tenants and the landless to be excluded, and my study of the Khmer community here provides evidence of this.

In addition, the Khmer face job uncertainty, even after receiving training from the local government program and receiving the help of external organizations (such as state agencies and landowners) and lack the mobility to seek employment in other areas. On the other hand, although national Program 134 aims to improve the housing conditions in the area and provide better shelter, the source of local people's household income generating activities has not been impacted by the poverty alleviation strategy in place. Moreover, the poor Khmer face limitations in terms of participation and decision making, especially the Khmer women and elderly who only receive uneven support from the national programs. Regarding this, it is clear that trying to reduce poverty by running two schemes at the same times runs the risk of any outcomes reflecting local power structures, rather than being focused on the priorities of the poor.

In relation to the poor's visibility and lack of visibility, during a savings and credit program run in a slum community in Ho Chi Minh City, it was discovered by Diem (2003) that the poorest households experienced difficulties in terms of their livelihood strategies and were excluded from or could hardly gain access to the development initiatives. According to her, this support program did not provide a long-term solution for the poor. In the same vein, in my study area, the experiences of the poor Khmer households targeted by the Resolution 25 support reveal that they have failed to search for jobs having finished training, due to a lack of labor market information. Meanwhile, increased agricultural mechanization has pushed those who rely on seasonal wage labor to undertake non-farm activities in other provinces or in urban areas, and as a result, they have experienced problems as part of a vicious circle of events.

I argue that assistance assigned to households with little regard for the sustainability of the development interventions put in place is doomed to failure. Ortigas (2000) mentions that government poverty-alleviation programs are characteristically "delivered development", planned from the top and with people as

the objects, saying that such assistance programs are normally developed by the concerned departments of an executive branch. Aid is also passed through provincial governors, city mayors, municipal mayors and on down to local officials, so something is lost as a matter of course in this “long trip” from the top to the bottom of the bureaucratic machine (Ortigas, 2000). In relation to the explanations for Khmer experiences of state development assistance, scholar VTX stated the following during an interview:

Concerning the issue of poverty reduction policies in Vietnam, the government applies contemporary assistance for the poor following the patch-aid type, which is unstable and no sure means of developing a livelihood; in other words, this cannot solve the root of the poor problem. Each of the offices has a program for combating poverty, but there is no overall control and they manage it themselves. So, when looking back at the problem, most local people attempt to cope themselves, while the nation state remains passive. Therefore, the poverty reduction efforts in Vietnam are not sustainable or easy to change. When poverty statistics for the whole country are produced, the basic rate counts only poor and escaped from poor, but the percentage of difficult households or threshold households is the majority (all these households are vulnerable to falling into poverty). Thus, although Vietnam has made remarkable progress in terms of poverty reduction, rural people still suffer hardship.

(KIP interview in 2010)

Johnson (2001) states that comprehensive poverty reduction programs should focus on rural institutional change, to create a democratic society and stimulate the participation of rural people in decisions made on resource allocation (Johnson, 2001 cited by Van, 2008). In practice, the poor Khmer people in this study are no longer waiting for national support to arrive to combat poverty, they have proactively strived to cope based on their own flexibility and diversify, to search for income generating activities. This can be characterized as a strategy adopted by the poor. However, their consistent and coherent response is to emphasize the threat to their survival; therefore, Scott (1985) points out that in such circumstances, local poor people often display their own power and use their own weapons to resist marginalization.

6.3. Adaptive Strategies in Response to the Poverty Reduction Programs

When faced with impoverishment, local people's survival is mostly supported by private initiatives implemented inside households or in the community. The local people are not always passive and in fact have been able to create defense mechanisms based on their accumulated skills and experience in order to create alternative livelihood strategies and develop social networks. Each household has its own way of surviving and developing livelihood practice and strategies. The results of my research have found that local, poor Khmer households have adapted to their poverty by being flexible and modifying their own work strategies when working as agricultural wage labors, on livestock husbandry and in subsistence production activities. Meanwhile, I also found that the poor Kinh households are also flexible in terms of having diversified their income sources; more so than the Khmer, through both on-farm and off-farm activities. Moreover, both the Kinh and Khmer households have sent young members of their families into the workforce, plus have taken advantage of a variety of subsistence and income generating opportunities. Therefore, Middleton (2001) contends that labor plays a critical role among the resource base, that which enables people to cope with poverty.

The theoretical discussions here have centered on theories related to adaptive strategies, consisting of social capital and livelihood discourse, in relation to the poor Khmer villagers. The Khmer have organized social aspects of their lives, such as labor networks, and attempted to adapt their livelihoods as a consequence of the contradictions found within the national poverty reduction programs. Migration has been used by both the poor Khmer and Kinh villagers, based upon their social relations. From the perspective of Yos (2008), this has become a critical feature of livelihoods in developing countries, when a prosperous urban economy is seen to "pull" the stagnant peasant economy, which in turn experiences a "push" effect (Yos, 2008). Similarly, the general finding among local people in Le Tri commune, and especially the poor Khmer group is that migration networks are very important in their locality. In recent years, the labor networks of the Khmer households have grown, more than they did in previous periods. So, the point emerges here that among Khmer communities in the Mekong delta, and at my study site in particular – Le tri

commune, poor landless Kinh and Khmer people have begun to obtain paid employment based on their labor groups, demonstrating the significance of social and human capital. Put simply, the migrants move to places where friends, family members, neighbors or others from their village have moved previously, to become unskilled labor, mostly in the urban areas of Binh Duong and Ho Chi Minh City.

This contact is critical for a household's break from poverty, but changes in the sphere of work as a response to poverty in many developing countries has led to a process of household restructuring and adjustment. On the other hand, Al-Serhan (2010) argues that households need to have information and contacts and to be connected to economic growth, saying that households that lack information and contacts have been less successful in diversifying their livelihoods as a way out of poverty. Therefore, social contacts provide information on work and economic opportunities and are therefore critical for most successful households. Like in previous research such as Bebbington's (1999) in India, Bolivia, Burkina Faso and Indonesia, who identified correlations between social capital and poverty, "on the basis of which they infer causal relationships". In contrast and in practice, the view of the Khmer with regard to migration and concerning Resolution 25 is that their spontaneous mobility is not a quick fix for the issue of sustainable poverty reduction, because firstly most jobs are unskilled and often seasonal or short term in nature, and secondly, the local people would actually like to return home if employment opportunities arose their locality. Therefore, the expanding of social relations, as a strategy for adapting and for promoting livelihood security, is an essential among the poor Khmer, and has enabled them to connect with others.

Furthermore, the Khmer have attempted to conceptualize their cultural mobilization and the changes that have taken place in the characteristics of their cultural dynamic. Their traditional festivals have been shared with the outside world in recent years, acting as a bridge for cultural exchange, not only with different ethnic groups such as the Cham, Kinh and other Khmer living in An Giang Province, but also with tourists as well. Moreover, other issues influencing change in their cultural practices, such as feasts, include declining finances and the timing of some celebrations reflect the expenditure-minimizing strategies used by the Vietnamese.

Taylor (2004) states that despite the local Khmer having adopted local institutions such as land sales, migration in search of employment opportunities, religious intensification and ethnic affiliations, these adoptions are not in themselves panaceas, but also a response to the inequalities that divide delta society (Taylor, 2004:265). However, to some extent, the matter of cultural capital regarding ethnicity, as the theoretical challenge in this study, has not yet reflected how deeply the poor Khmer people have oriented their religious practices in order to cope with their poor circumstances, so this area clearly requires further research.

In general, the findings of the study support the statement of the Participatory Poverty Assessment, which indicates that although a large number of government initiatives and programs exist or are planned, implementation and coverage relies primarily on local authorities and local resources that are rarely sufficient. Thus, the programs are small in coverage and do not necessarily reach the poor. Given the hardships and uncertainties faced by the Khmer, and despite poverty reduction strategies being implemented in this locality, I argue that it is difficult for national programs to satisfy the aim of sustainably combating Khmers' poverty, if appropriate adjustments are not made to address the shortcomings in the design of the process underpinning Resolution 25 in terms of the vocational training courses, and if there continues to be a lack of cooperation between the local people and the policymakers in forming and implementing a more effective process for the program. If these changes do not take place, the program will not reach its desired goals and aims, and will not meet the needs of the people.

6.4. Significance of the Study and Recommendations

In this study I have attempted to make a critical contribution towards assessing the impacts of a poverty alleviation program on the lives of a Khmer community in the Mekong Delta, and the ways in which they have organized themselves to cope with this program and other state interventions. The limited understanding of policymakers with regard to the realities of the people's lives and the ways in which these people construct their livelihood strategies in order to escape poverty and improve their lives, can be seen as a major cause of the ineffective strategies designed to tackle this issue.

As a result, through intensive field research in a Khmer community in Le Tri commune, I have provided insightful information about the shortcoming of the Vietnamese national poverty reduction programs, in relation to the social and cultural logic of poverty, and have shed light on whether sustainability within the Khmer community is possible in terms of escaping their poverty. My findings will help the government assistance programs and development agent understand the need to gain an insight into local people's perceptions of the problems they face, as well as their views on the causes of poverty, and their needs. In other words, in my view, government interventions aimed at helping rural villagers, not only poverty alleviation programs, need to focus on the local context and on local practice, and require the participation of local stakeholders using a bottom-up approach. As scholar VTX from the Mekong Delta told me, the national poverty reduction programs need to focus on a comprehensive form of execution that includes more than one leader within the management process. Government should pay more attention to gathering together all the sources of information and funds needed, and to not allocating responsibilities to each sector separately. Taking this approach will help give new insights into the Khmers' poverty and will assist them secure a livelihood in times of hardship. I have also touched upon the impacts of the Vietnamese government's national poverty reduction programs upon the local people, but further research is required on this aspect, particularly taking into account other ethnicities.