

Building Community Capacity for Poverty Reduction Initiatives in the Tonle Sap Basin—A Glimpse from a Baseline Survey

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1. Introduction

CDRI has engaged in two significant studies on poverty in Cambodia. In 2007, the institute completed a poverty assessment in 24 villages of six provinces around the Tonle Sap Basin (Ballard 2007) and CDRI's *Moving Out of Poverty Study* (MOPS) undertook an in-depth study of nine villages in all four of Cambodia's rural agro-ecological regions—Tonle Sap plains, Mekong plains, plateau/mountain region and the coast (Fitzgerald & So 2007). Both studies provided indications of the determinants of and contributing factors to poverty status and suggested policy implications for poverty reduction.

CDRI in January completed another study that explored factors that can build community capacity for poverty reduction initiatives in the Tonle Sap Basin. This study looked at the determinants of poverty associated with the knowledge and capacity of communities in 11 villages of five provinces around the Tonle Sap. The research methods employed were (1) social wealth ranking, (2) focus group discussions of livelihood activities and community assets and (3) questionnaires on household livelihoods, household income and expenditure, household assets, shocks and agricultural land. The study aimed to map the knowledge and livelihood activities and the poverty status of the villages. Furthermore, the study sought to identify the knowledge needed to improve households' livelihood practices.

The study was funded by the Japan Fund for Poverty Reduction and administered by the Asian

Development Bank. The study covered 638 poor and very poor households from among 1590 households in eight villages under two ADB projects: the Tonle Sap Environmental Management Project (TSEMP) and the Tonle Sap Sustainable Livelihoods Project (TSSLP).² The TSEMP was concluded in December 2008 and the TSSLP will finish in June 2010. This study will thus also serve as a baseline on improvements in local livelihoods and poverty resulting from these two projects. The survey also covered three villages not under the TSEMP and TSSLP as controls. This article provides the preliminary findings from the study.

2. Poverty Determinants in Study Villages

Jalilian (2008), citing Weiss and Khan (2006), argues that poverty determinants are based on three broad categories:

- Personal factors: These include low skills, poor literacy, large family size, lack of assets and possibly ethnicity and gender.
- Locational factors: These include poor access to physical and social infrastructure such as roads, utilities, health and education.
- Structural factors: These include poorly developed market information, finance and credit.

Preliminary findings, particularly from focus group discussions, indicate some determinants of poverty among the study households. These include housing condition, agricultural land, transportation, source of agricultural power, sources of energy, access to cash or credit and sources of income. Lack of assets and poor access to credit for livelihood activities, for example, are major contributors to households falling into poverty. While the rich households may own 2–15 ha of agricultural land, the very poor ones own less than 1 ha. In addition, the poor and very poor households are not able to access credit for productive purposes but may obtain small loans for coping with shocks. Unstable income sources such as selling labour in inland villages and small-scale fishing using traditional gear in floating villages also push households into poverty.

3. Poverty Status in Study Villages

Wealth ranking revealed the poverty status in each village. It was found that in the 11 study villages, poor and very poor households were 32 and 20 percent, respectively, of the total.

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² More information on TSEMP and TSSLP is available at http://www.adb.org/Projects/Tonle_Sap/livelihoods.asp, accessed on 15 January 2009.

It should be noted, however, that the samples of the poor and very poor in each village differed from their actual numbers (Table 1). The study tried to interview all poor and very poor families, but because the data collection coincided with a busy time for villagers or because some had migrated temporarily to the Cambodian-Thai border, some of the target respondents could not be met.

Bangkoul and Ta Daok ranked first and second in numbers of the poor and very poor, with 96 and 94 percent of families falling into those categories. Tnaot Kambot and Daun Tro, which are located in Siem Reap province, had the fewest poor and very poor families, 24 percent.

Prior to the survey, a number of poor and very poor families had migrated to the border or to Thailand. Prek Krouch in Battambang province and Srei Ronget in Kompong Thom had the highest migration of the poor and very poor families at 38 and 33 percent, respectively.

There are at least three main reasons that people migrate: (i) low productivity of agriculture due to natural calamities such as drought and floods, (ii) destruction of crops by insects or animals and (iii) the presence of a village network that facilitates migration.

Most of the households migrating to the border are involved in agricultural activities such as harvesting, while those who migrate to Thailand are engaged in construction work and fruit collection.

It was reported that those who migrate to Thailand as construction workers can earn 20,000 riels (200 baht) per day for men and 16,000 riels for women. Those migrating to Thailand as fruit collectors, on the other hand, get almost the same wage as those who harvest rice, potatoes, corn and beans along the border,

12,000 riels per day. However, migrants have to pay all the expenses that such migration entails.

4. Knowledge, Skills and Capacity in Study Villages

The education of respondents is also useful in explaining the capacity to attain and use livelihood knowledge and skills. Preliminary findings indicate that fewer than 2 percent completed high school (12 grades). And, while 53 percent completed primary school (six grades), 35 percent had never attended school. This suggests that education among the respondents is low. These respondents are household heads and thus will never have a chance to attend school again.

Em (2008) reviews definitions of knowledge and suggests that—in the context of this study—knowledge is useful information for action or livelihood activities. Skills, on the other hand, enable use of knowledge for producing certain output, while capacity creates the ability to produce a different quality and quantity of output. This implies that a knowledgeable person is not always able to produce a determined output but that a skilful and capable person can make things different. Knowledge and skills can usually be ascertained through occupations and sources of income, while capacity can be judged by the ability to cope with problems arising from livelihood activities.

Preliminary findings reveal that villagers around the Tonle Sap make a living from five main occupations and have 16 sources of earnings. These occupations are fishing, livestock raising, growing cash crops, growing rice and selling labour. The 16 sources of income are fishing, selling labour for rice production, growing cash crops, self-employment, rice production, selling labour for construction, selling labour for other non-agricultural work, employment in NGOs, government

Table 1: Total of Poor and Very Poor in Each Village

Village	Total families in the village	Total of poor and very poor families in the village		Total of poor and very poor families absent during survey		Total of poor and very poor families present during survey	Poor and very poor families interviewed	
		No.	Percent	No.	Percent		No.	Percent
Krapeu Pul	107	80	75	25	31	55	54	98
Ta Daok	105	99	94	0	0	99	81	82
Russey Ta Man	214	93	43	0	0	93	80	86
Bangkoul	69	66	96	0	0	66	56	85
Phsar Leu	91	54	59	10	19	44	44	100
Prek Krouch	243	78	72	30	38	48	48	100
Daun Tro	169	40	24	4	10	36	36	100
Phum Bei	107	61	57	7	11	54	54	100
Tnaot Kambot	194	46	24	7	15	39	39	100
Peam Bang	119	76	64	10	13	66	66	100
Srei Ronget	172	119	69	39	33	80	80	100
Total	1590	812	56	132	16	680	638	94

Source: CDRI survey, January 2009

or companies, selling labour in fishing lots, migration work, vegetable and fruit production, raising livestock, dependency, working in garment factories, work in local business and collecting forest products. The occupations or livelihoods are not necessarily sources of earnings alone but may also be sources of the household's food supply. For example, rice production could be a source of income if it provides enough for sale as well as a source of household food supply. These livelihoods and sources of earnings indicate the existence of relevant knowledge and skills.

Hence, improving income sources or food production means enhancing existing knowledge and skills and/or the delivery of appropriate new knowledge and skills. This further signifies that farmers will eventually build the capacity by themselves to improve output. However, enhancing livelihood activities does not end with improving and delivering knowledge and skills. It is important as well to make natural resource management sustainable through other projects and pro-poor policies.

5. Factors Affecting Poverty Status in Study Villages

Additional factors may be involved in alleviating poverty. To improve agricultural productivity, Em (2008), citing Swanson (1985), confirms that each farming household may have a number of supports, including research, extension services, government policy and planning, education, credit, agricultural input and market information. These supports are direct and indirect contributors to poverty reduction.

The MOPS found that village poverty is high among those who rely on common property resources. The baseline study documented the common resources in each village. Community assets include common property resources and five other areas: natural, social, human, physical and economic assets.

- Natural assets comprise agricultural land, forest or flooded forest and water resources. Half of the study villages are in flood areas. People in some of these villages may not have the right to own agricultural land, although they can produce crops during the dry season. Their fishing depends on common fishing areas and flooded forest. Poverty in these villages tends to be higher than in inland villages. In addition to having access to common fishing areas in the Tonle Sap, inland villagers can own agricultural land and have other income sources such as selling labour and collecting non-timber products. However, conflicts over fishing lots, conservation regulations and the fisheries law

are barriers to fishing areas.

- Social assets are the relationships among villagers and outsiders who may support community development, general participation in community development, the health of the village population and development projects. In the study villages, such relationships were observed in the exchange of labour for agricultural activities or housing construction. However, labour exchange is gradually being replaced by hired labour in both floating and inland villages. Development projects, especially credit agencies, also significantly support livelihood activities, even though disadvantaged groups cannot access these services due to the need for collateral. Private moneylenders and agricultural input suppliers provide loans on the basis of trust and the trader-client relationship: villagers can buy agricultural inputs on credit and are expected to sell the harvest to the supplier. This is also true of fishing gear in floating villages.
- Human assets are affected by training, formal education and access to health care and other local services. Generally, literacy is low in disadvantaged groups due to unstable incomes and insufficient school infrastructure. Children in floating villages were found often to drop out of school at grade 6. Beyond primary education, the floating villages do not have schools. Children in inland villages can attend secondary school in other villages if one does not exist in their village; in many cases, however, they drop out at grade 9. The focus groups also noted insufficient medical facilities. For example, some poor villagers still give birth with the help of a traditional midwife; if there is a complication, it can be beyond the capacity of the village or nearby health centre.
- Physical assets in this study include draught animals and infrastructure such as religious places, roads, markets, water supply and transportation. The pagoda is a common resource in both floating and inland villages. In the floating villages a pagoda frequently serves as a shelter during high floods in addition to being a place for ceremonies, meetings and primary school education. Road access was found to have improved in most inland villages. However, access to some floating villages continues to be difficult due to the ban on boating near the boundaries of fishing lots and fish traps in canals, streams and rivers of other fishing lots. For example, gaining access to Peam Bang village through Stung Stoung means going through about 10 fishing lots

with fish traps; access from Phsar Krakor across the Tonle Sap Lake in small boats can be dangerous due to high tides and waves.

- Economic assets in this study are those that villagers can easily convert into cash. These include cattle, poultry, vehicles, jewellery, agricultural land and housing land. Credit agencies and private moneylenders or traders are other important sources of funds in emergencies. The focus groups revealed that most people in inland villages rely on cattle, agricultural land, vehicles and, to some extent, housing lots for urgent cash, while in floating villages they rely on fish stocks, boats and boat motors. Credit agencies extended less support to floating villages than to inland villages due to the lack of variety in collateral. Private moneylenders and traders can provide cash advances, but in return the villagers have to sell their catch at a lower price.

The availability or shortage of community assets directly and indirectly impacts on poverty around the Tonle Sap. Some assets can be improved through the provision of knowledge and capacity, while others can be made more accessible and available for specific geographic areas, characteristics or needs. The TSSLP provides capacity building and infrastructure improvement to communities. Hence, information on village assets from the baseline survey can contribute to poverty reduction approaches.

6. Implications for Further Analysis

The preliminary findings suggest that, besides limited access to basic health care and education, lack of agricultural land and limited access to fish-abundant areas, cash and credit mainly trap households in poverty. Poor knowledge and capacity to cope with challenges such as drought and pests also result in losses of farm production, food shortages and indebtedness in times of shocks.

Agricultural production remains pivotal for households' income and daily consumption. Road access to markets and villages has significantly improved, but access to floating villages still has challenges. Mobile phones provide nationwide coverage, including to floating villages. This means that information on supply and demand, farming inputs and markets is relatively accessible. In this situation, what interventions can help the poor to benefit? What is the implication for extension services and training of rural communities in poverty reduction initiatives? The answers to these questions will be sought from the

full report in March 2009.

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