



ATSAF Academy
Academy for International Agricultural Research for Development

Junior Scientists Tandems

Final Report

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Start and end date of career exploration stay: 07 Nov 2023 – 07 May 2024

Title: Rural (out-)migration and the impact on the remaining population and their local agriculture activities in Kampong Thom, Cambodia

Funded by the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ)





Cambodia, Study Focus and Project Description

Through a personal recommendation of my fellow comrade and ATSAF scholarship holder Janika Hämmerle I became aware of the research of Carla Baldivieso and the ATSAF Academy MSc Career Exploration Scholarship - Junior Scientists Tandem Program. I am grateful, that I have had the opportunity to join PhD student Carla Baldivieso, who is also an ATSAF Academy Scholar in her research of the Governance of aquatic systems in Cambodia and the collective action and social learning processes. That is also how I first got into contact with WorldFish, my local partner CGIAR research institute and the Community Fish Refugee (CFR) Project. In my geography studies, I always found myself at the verge of social and natural sciences. My studies focus on the complexity of societal problems and future challenges related to housing, mobility, migration, climate resilience as well as food security and water scarcity. The CFR project combines several of these key aspects and focuses on how food security and water scarcity can be addressed, but also on how the current agricultural structures in Cambodia can be changed towards greater climate resilience for the people working in agriculture. Because while Cambodia is characterized by its recent history and is developing rapidly, the majority of the labor force is still employed in agriculture and at a same time a strong migration process is taking place in rural areas. Rural to Urban migration makes up 60 percent of migration in Cambodia, which is plausible, as the agriculture sector employs the majority of the Cambodian labour force (Heinonen, 2006, p.454). Especially during the dry season, many people migrate to urban areas to work on construction sites and in factories to bridge the time to the seasonal harvest (ibid.). Within Cambodia rural migration occurs mainly in the major cities such as Phnom Penh, Sihanoukville, Siem Reap, Battambang and in the market towns along the border with Thailand (ibid.).

Most studies focus on the impact of migration on the destinations rather than on the families left behind and the places of origin. Therefore, this study focuses on the impact of rural (out)migration on the families left behind and their agricultural activities. Initial interviews with the rural population show that due to Covid-19 and the global financial crisis, the necessary agricultural investments are not generating the required revenue, and many are leaving their homes due to debt and the prospect of better job opportunities. To secure the future food production CFR Project has been founded to ensure the productivity of rice field fisheries and to enhance wild capture fisheries (Kim et al., 2019, p.6).

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CFRs are natural or human-made ponds that hold water throughout the year and serve as a sanctuary for fish throughout the dry season. They contribute to the maintenance of fish populations and aquatic biodiversity. They are also an integrated agricultural system that provides water for animals and in some cases for domestic consumption. The study focus will be within the area of most interest for the CGIAR Asian Mega Deltas Projects (AMD) and therefore directly connected with a CFR Project site frequently visited by the WorldFish Institute Cambodia.

Research Design and Data Collection

For the exploration stay qualitative case study research on rural (out)migration dynamics and its impact on a local community in Boeng Ream, Kampong Thom, Cambodia to understand its effects on the agricultural activities on the remaining population within selected households was conducted.

The exploratory research phase took place from the 11th of December 2023 until the 15th of December of 2023. During the exploratory field research week, several Community Fish Refuge (CFR) Projects were visited to determine a suitable focus research area for conducting the in-depth case study. The second CFR visited, was currently preparing a fish stock survey for the next day. We were invited to participate, and I was able to gain a deeper insight into the working field of CFR community management. This also gave me the opportunity to help to classify the fish to understand the current state of condition of the project site.

Fig. 1-3: CFR Fish Stock Survey



A total of eight different villages participating in the Community Fish Refuge (CFR) project were visited and explored.

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The sites were then evaluated and considered for selection. The decision for the Boeng Ream CFR was made in close consultation with WorldFish Cambodia, which had a special interest in the research results of the village.

In order to gain a better overview and understanding of the Boeng Ream community, a community mapping exercise was planned and conducted on December 14, 2023. The researcher arrived at 8:40 in the morning to start the preparation for the community mapping which started around 9:30am after everyone arrived and took place until 11:30am. There was a lot of fruitful discussion among the participants, and there was lively participation in the activity, and everyone seemed eager to draw the mental map as accurately as possible. The map will help to better understand the village structure and positioning within the village in the upcoming interview phase.

Fig. 4-7: Community Mapping Exercise at the Boeng Ream Village



During the second and third week of January the main part of the research took place. Between the 08.01.2024 and the 19.01.2024 31 interviews were conducted in the dedicated research village. The first Interview was held with the village chief who gave me already during the exploratory research week his consent to conduct interviews with the villagers. With his help I also maintained a list of possible households I could interview. In cooperation with a local translator and cultural broker, we walked around the village and asked every household if they are working in agriculture and/or have a member who migrated within Cambodia or internationally. The interviews were conducted in Khmer language.

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First results show that 14 households had a family member migrated internationally and 11 households had a family member migrated nationally. 5 households had family members who migrated international and national. It is interesting to note that only 26 of the 30 interviewees were still farming. The other four either had to return their leased land, were able to give up farming due to remittances from family members who had migrated or could no longer afford to maintain their land.

The fourth week of research in Kampong Thom province took place from 18.03. to 22.03.2024. As the financial support of the project expired after 4.5 years, the Project Closing Workshop took place. Participants from GIZ, WorldFish, GFA Consulting Group and villagers who are closely involved in the Community Fish Refugee Project took part in the workshop. Following the two-day workshop, several CFR visits took place.

Fig. 8-11: Impressions of the CFR Project Closing Workshop





Experiences and Interactions

I already have work and research experience for my bachelor thesis from previous experiences when I completed my internships at the regional office of a German NGO in Hanoi, Vietnam from the end of 2018 until October 2019 and March 2020. The combination of my fascination for Southeast Asia and my previous experiences in Vietnam with my successful on-site research was therefore a great motivation for me to get another opportunity to do academic research in an international context. So, to a certain extent, the region and the aspect were not foreign to me. I had no difficulty finding accommodation for the next six months and getting used to the challenges that come with living abroad, such as a big culture shock, homesickness or the feeling of being so far away and somehow alone. Nevertheless, I was aware that every new experience also brings new difficulties and that Cambodia, although it is a neighboring country, is not Vietnam and communication styles and cultural aspects will be different. And as expected, the first month after my arrival was the most difficult in terms of getting used to the country. And as expected, the first month after my arrival was the most difficult in terms of settling into everyday research life, as communication with the local research center did not work so well at first. Before I left Germany, I announced myself and said that I was looking forward to getting to know everyone and that I wanted to present my research ideas and my design so that everyone was on the same page. Upon arrival, I went to the research center, expecting to be introduced and shown around so I would know where to work and who everyone was, and that I could give my presentation. However, when I arrived, the research center was empty, the director was not in the building and no one knew about my appointment for the presentation, and I was out of the center within 10 minutes, and I only had the chance to talk to the secretary about my visa extension. After returning home, I contacted my local contacts at the research center again by email, explained the misunderstanding and asked for another meeting. In the meantime, I worked from home, as - another misunderstanding - I didn't know that I had a real workplace at the research center. When I arrived at the research center to give my presentation, I was told that again no one was there, and the presentation would be given online. This was a big disappointment for me as I had hoped to finally meet everyone in person, but during the meeting I learned that my main local contacts were often working remote and that I actually had a place to sit and work at the research center. From then on, I went to the research center every day and slowly got to know everyone, and my first trip to the rural area was planned for mid-December.

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All my trips to the rural areas were very interesting and I learned a lot about the research project and the work of WorldFish and other German and international organizations. The actual research phase, where I conducted my interviews, was again a challenge. It was the first time I really had to work as a lead person responsible for how the translator, the tuk tuk driver and I work together and how we can achieve the daily goal. After a few conversations, we figured out how to communicate with each other and how to best approach the potential households. It wasn't always easy, especially as a woman it was difficult to make myself heard in the rural areas of Cambodia, but also within my small research team. However, the biggest challenge was to process everything I have seen and learned from the people I have interviewed. The rural areas of Cambodia are still mainly characterized by great poverty, and my research village is no exception. The whole village has no running water, not everyone has a proper house, electricity or a toilet. Combined with the personal stories, it takes a lot of energy and work to process what you have experienced when you return to the more developed urban areas, which form a stark contrast to the rest of the country. I am very grateful for the opportunity that the JST scholarship gave me, as it not only helped me to gain experience in international research and write my master's thesis using my own data collected in the field, but also to grow beyond myself and give a voice to those who are usually hardly considered in migration research. I am looking forward to the next phase in which I will evaluate and analyze my data and write up the results in my Master's thesis.

Fig. 12-14: Impressions of the Field Research Trip

