Rural Development in Cambodia:
The View from the Village

Judy L. Ledgerwood

She has three children, two girls and a baby boy. Their life has been getting better, she says. They saved enough to buy a bit more land, so now they have just over two hectares. They have paid for their house plot and hope to save enough over the next two years to buy a raised wooden house. The thatch hut they live in now floods with the rains.

Life has been better since the 1993 elections because they have since stopped coming to coerce men into being soldiers. Her husband became a policeman to avoid the draft. This arrangement costs three chi of gold (about $150), but it worked only for about a year. "Why?" I asked. Because there were two bosses and only one received the money. The other had not, and so they fought. Her brothers are educated. She is the only one in the family who is illiterate. Her brother earned his Bac Dap (baccalaureate). Her relatives took him to Phnom Penh to try to attain a position in the bureaucracy, but it was far too expensive. It takes $3,500 to $4,000 to buy one's way in. Her mother sold part of her rice fields to pay, but the deal did not go through. So he has no position. Now her other brother, the young man who sits behind her (she pats his knee), has to pay to pass his exams for the eighth grade. They are worried that they will not have enough money to pay the bribes.

They are worried now, because of what they hear on the radio: FUNCINPEC accuses Hun Sen of this. Hun Sen accuses FUNCINPEC of that. They don't want to go back to war. They don't want the men to be taken away again. I try out my theory that the rich are so rich now that they will not be willing to live without the aid money, without the investment money. They stare at me unconvinced. "What do you know?" their expressions seem to say. What do I know? They have decided to keep more rice this year, to sell less, just in case. Rice stocks might see them
through turmoil ahead. As we talk, she pulls the string that rocks a fat little baby boy in the hammock.¹

**Introduction**

In most discussions of Cambodian political and economic development, the vast peasant majority, living at subsistence level, is generally invisible and silent. While “the people” are frequently noted in the Khmer press as supporting certain politicians or parties, very little has been written about life in rural Cambodia, and scant data are available for making policy decisions.

This chapter begins with three basic premises: First the vast majority of the Cambodian population lives in poverty in rural areas; second spending for economic development and assistance programs is unduly focused on the capital, Phnom Penh; and third, while rural development is touted as critical, the rural context and dynamics of rural development in Cambodia are inadequately understood. Given these facts the chapter addresses three topics. The first section reviews the scant data available about the lives of rural peasants based on recent research. The second and third address a number of the issues and debates that underpin efforts (or the lack thereof) to promote rural development in Cambodia. The final section makes preliminary suggestions for strengthening research on and the design of rural assistance programs in the Khmer countryside.

**Rural Cambodia**

Eighty-five percent of Cambodia’s population lives in rural villages. Most of these people are rice farmers who practice one form or another of subsistence agriculture. Over 85 percent of the land under cultivation is in lowland rain-fed rice fields that produce an average of only 1.3 tons per hectare; average rice production per hectare is much higher in neighboring countries—over two tons in Thailand and over three tons in Vietnam. Food consumption is estimated at 260 to 290 kilograms of paddy per inhabitant per year, but in many areas with low soil fertility and high population pressure, farmers are unable to produce at these levels. Since 1990 harvest levels have been dramatically affected by drought and floods, particularly in 1991, 1994, 1995, and again in 1996. In 1997 flooding occurred again, particularly hard hit were Kompong Thom and Siem Reap provinces.
Land Ownership
Before 1975 land was privately owned. Land-holdings varied in size around the country, with an average of 2.2 hectares reported in 1961. Certain regions, most notably the northwestern province of Battambang, had areas of much larger holdings; but according to the 1956 Cambodian census, 55 percent of landowners had less than one hectare. In the village in Kandal Province where May Ebihara conducted research in 1959–60, 42 percent of the villagers owned less than one hectare of land, with most of the rest holding between one and two hectares.

Under the ravages of the Khmer Rouge during the Democratic Kampuchea (DK) period (1975–79), all agricultural lands were collectivized. The population was organized by age and sex into work teams that labored long hours at agricultural production and at the construction of a vast network of irrigation canals. During the course of the regime 1.5 to 2 million Cambodians died of exhaustion, malnutrition, disease, or were executed. Cambodian farmers' most bitter complaints about these times concerned rampant violence and the lack of food. They say they produced as much or more rice than they had before but were not allowed control over the product of their labors. While they starved the rice was taken away on trucks to feed soldiers and cadres or to be exported.

After 1979, with the establishment of the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK), a system of agricultural collectives known as Krom Samaki, or solidarity groups, was formed. Krom Samaki were composed of 10 to 15 families each. Each family was allocated a small plot for its home, while all other land was held as the property of the state. There were three official levels of collectivization, though there seems to have been greater variation from place to place. Level-one groups farmed as a collective and distributed the crop according to the number of persons in each family, with able-bodied workers receiving a greater share. Level-two groups divided up land and equipment among families (though all land was still owned by the state), but tasks such as transplanting and harvesting were performed by the group. Level three was essentially farming of private plots but with labor exchange among members of the group. The Krom Samaki were extremely unpopular and were eventually discontinued. Though they continued to exist on paper throughout the decade, most areas had quietly returned to farming private plots by the mid-
1980s—though with formal state ownership of property.

In spring 1989, with the withdrawal of Vietnamese troops at hand and negotiations under way for a settlement to Cambodia's civil war, the PRK announced a return to private ownership of property. In the land redistributions that followed, farmers were allocated between 0.1 and 0.2 hectares per family member, which meant land holdings ranging from 0.5 to 2 hectares per household. Holdings were divided based on residence in the village and land farmed since 1979 rather than any prerevolutionary claims to land. In some areas this distribution was conducted unfairly; local village, subdistrict, and district leaders received more and better quality land than other villagers. In the village where Ebihara conducted research in 1959–60 and again in the early 1990s there was evidence that considerable care was taken in how the allocation of land was made. Since land was of variable quality, located at varying distances from water sources and so on, it was divided into small parcels so that individuals could have some good land and some of lesser quality. In this village landholdings are smaller today with an average of 0.68 hectare, as opposed to 0.88 hectare in 1960. In 1992, 79 percent of the villagers owned less than one hectare.

It is also important to note that while the land distributions formally began in 1989, many farmers still did not have deeds to their property in 1996. In the 1993 election campaign, the Cambodian People's Party (CPP), the party of the old PRK government, ran on a platform that promised farmers titles to the lands they farmed. The CPP alleged that other parties would try to return lands to their pre-1975 owners. During 1992 and early 1993 cadastral offices around the country worked furiously to give farmers deeds to their lands to assure CPP votes in the elections. Yet many farmers still have only a piece of paper declaring that they have filed claim to a certain piece of land, not the final documentation verifying that such a claim has been approved.

Rural Communities Today
The first Socioeconomic Survey of Cambodia (1993–94) of the Ministry of Planning includes statistical data on rural households for the first time since 1962. But the survey provides only a hazy image of life in rural areas. The average household size in rural Cambodia is 5.4 people. An average of 20 percent of households are
headed by women. There are 88 men for every 100 women, a gender ratio more skewed than in urban areas. Thirty-one percent of rural residents have completed less than one year of formal schooling. Eighty-two percent of rural households have no toilet. Ninety-six percent cook with firewood; less than one percent have electricity for lighting. Twenty-one percent have a radio, and nearly 6 percent have a television (this is higher than those houses having access to electricity because the televisions are battery powered). The percentage of household expenditures on food, beverages, and tobacco in rural areas was estimated to be 67 percent of the monthly total. Household income in rural areas is estimated to be less than a third of the average urban household income.

With regard to social organization at the village level, we know first that Khmer villages are highly variable. While the work of Éve-line Porée-Maspero and others documented a high degree of social and cultural variability throughout Cambodia before independence, it is certainly even higher today. Some communities, particularly those in the central and southern plains, are made up primarily of the original residents who returned home after the forced population shifts during the period of Democratic Kampuchea. In other areas many residents remained throughout the DK years, but district leadership has been brought in from other areas. Elsewhere in the country, particularly where there has been fighting during the last 10 years, villages are made up of people who have fled other areas, who were brought into the area as soldiers of whatever political faction, who returned from the refugee camps in Thailand, and so on. Obviously the sense of community in such areas is much less well formed than that in the central plains villages, where people have lived in relative peace since 1979.

Second, we know that with the return to private property and the land redistribution of the late 1980s, differences in wealth are reemerging. In the Kandal Province village where Ebihara and I conducted research, this differentiation is not yet as marked as it was before the revolution. Ebihara notes that there were no socioeconomic classes within the village when she conducted her original research in 1959–60, but villagers recognized relative degrees of wealth among families based primarily on the size and number of rice fields owned. She reports that in prewar periods there were more relatively wealthy people than those who were destitute. Today many are
considered to “have enough” (neak kuasom), meaning that they have enough rice to eat and possibly some surplus to sell, and there are fewer people in the top or bottom categories. Those said to be “poor” (kra) include elderly people without able-bodied labor, female-headed households without male labor, and families struck by serious illnesses that incurred high medical expenses and loss of labor.

In some areas close to Phnom Penh a different phenomenon is occurring. Land speculators are buying up large tracts, anticipating the growth of the city. At the same time rising housing costs in the city center are resulting in urban sprawl, as the new poor occupy lands on the flood plain surrounding Phnom Penh, often as squatters. In areas where land has higher value, on the edges of urban centers and along the Mekong and Bassac rivers, numerous conflicts over land ownership have arisen. Most of the cases registered to the United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) Human Rights Office in 1992–93 were cases related to land ownership. A common pattern during this period was for armed soldiers to appropriate at gunpoint tracts of land that were then divided into plots and sold to new migrants. Previous landowners were left with little or no recourse as local-level officials are unwilling or unable to stand up to armed force.

Third, we know that in some areas labor exchange (provas dai) and other forms of community cooperation are reverting to prerevolutionary patterns. At the same time agricultural production in other areas is characterized by cash payments for agricultural labor. This is the case in the Angkor Borei district, where farmers grow dry-season rice. Because the peak labor period is virtually the same for all farmers, there is neither time nor adequate labor to practice traditional exchange patterns. Hence farmers in this region hire large numbers of laborers, often from other districts.

Fourth, we know that some rural communities have taken it upon themselves to organize local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to encourage cooperative community activities, such as organizing ritual activity or working a communal field. Local NGOs that work at the community level are only beginning to establish themselves and become known to international organizations and possible donors.
The Urban-Rural Disparity in Development Assistance

While Cambodia's GDP grew at an average 5.9 percent from 1990 to 1995, these data include 20 percent growth in the urban and hotel sector and 15.2 percent in construction. The rural sector in the same period was stagnant as rice production grew at -0.1 percent and livestock at 3.8 percent. Since the July 1997 coup d'état Ministry of Finance officials have revised estimates of economic growth for 1997 from 6.5 percent to 3 percent or less.

There is a similar pattern to the distribution of aid resources. Indeed most aid money, like most of the millions that poured into Cambodia during UNTAC, remains in Phnom Penh. Of the estimated $2 billion in total economic and financial assistance received from the international community between 1993 and 1996, the majority of funds did not leave the capital. This was obvious to an elderly woman in rural Kompong Speu Province, who in December 1995 asked me, “Why do you foreigners only give money to Phnom Penh?”

Examples from two areas, health and education, help to show the trends. The Ministry of Health received 6 percent of the national budget in 1994 and 8 percent in 1996. Donor assistance for health committed to date, however, focused on urban areas and on specific provinces. Phnom Penh, with 7 percent of the population, received 43 percent of the 1994 total donor aid for health and over 70 percent of the assistance for capital investment in the health sector, including construction of hospitals. At the provincial level aid was concentrated in three provinces: Kandal (where Phnom Penh is located), Battambang, and Banteay Meanchey (the provinces with the highest numbers of repatriated refugees). The central lowland provinces, home to more than two-thirds of the population, received only 21 percent of the aid.³

These efforts at the central level are arguably necessary before projects can be designed to reach rural areas. But the harsh reality remains that in most rural areas health care is nonexistent. The current medical system in Cambodia is renowned for being particularly profit oriented.⁶ Though health care is theoretically provided by the state, in practice, no one is treated without cash payment in advance. Babies are delivered at home by traditional midwives. Maternal mortality rates were estimated at 600 per 100,000 live births in 1993; comparable statistics for Thailand in 1992 were 137
maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. Premature delivery and delivery complications cause about two-thirds of infant mortality. Nearly one-fifth of the children do not survive to age five. Where health care is available at the district level, it is often priced well beyond the means of the average farmer. Virtually everyone in rural Cambodia self-medicates with medicines available for purchase in the local markets.

Post-coup cuts in foreign assistance will worsen the health situation. The Ministry of Health reports that the cut in German aid will diminish the national pharmaceutical budget by approximately a third. This poses particular problems for the treatment of tuberculosis and malaria.

Government spending on education, about 7 percent of the budget in 1994, was up to 12 percent of the budget for 1996. In 1994 international NGOs funded about 48 percent of the total foreign aid to education, multilateral organizations about 35 percent, and bilateral donors about 17 percent. As is the case with the health sector most of this assistance was focused on Phnom Penh. Over 40 percent of this aid was absorbed by higher education. This means that not only is the aid restricted to Phnom Penh, where the institutions of higher education are located, but it is further focused on the male children of the wealthy elite, who can afford higher education for their offspring.

In 1993–94 only 15 percent of the student body at the University of Phnom Penh were women. Women constituted 12.6 percent of the students at the Royal University of Fine Arts, 12.6 percent of the medical school, 5.5 percent of the law school, 4.6 percent of the Agricultural Institute, and only 1.5 percent at the Institute of Technology. While a decade ago it was possible for intelligent poor children to make it to university under a quota system established by the socialist government, this is no longer the case. Since the early 1990s admission and advancement at all of the institutes of higher learning are contingent on families paying informal fees to education officials.

Approximately 40 percent of the funding is directed to the primary level, which is the only level available in most rural areas. The typical primary school in a rural area serves two to three villages, and there is an average of only three secondary schools per district. Even more striking considering the problems of education in rural areas is the rate at which children drop out of school. Only 400 out of every
1,000 students who begin first grade complete all five years of primary school, and only 320 actually graduate. According to an Asian Development Bank (ADB) study, "approximately 80 persist to the end of lower secondary school and 60 to the end of upper secondary school." The education system suffers from a wide range of problems, including lack of facilities, undertrained staff, lack of books and materials, low pay for teachers, and an ineffective curriculum.

Education is also priced beyond the means of many farmers. On the basis of a household survey the ADB concluded that "the government spends an average of 20,000 riels ($8) per primary student each year, while parents paid an average of 160,000 riels ($64), or eight times that amount." Since teachers are not paid a living wage by the state, they must supplement their meager income by charging students additional fees to attend.

The government expenditures for agriculture in 1996 were only 4 percent of the total budget. Much of the aid for agriculture since 1993 has been in the form of funds for mine clearance and rural road rebuilding. Many of these projects were in areas of northwestern Cambodia where most of the repatriated refugees settled when they returned from the border camps.

A vast gap exists between central government ministry planning and activities and farmers' lives. Agricultural extension agents are trained but not deployed to rural areas. Government officials act in those areas where NGO or other aid funds are being expended but not in a generalized fashion. The new Ministry of Rural Development has plans for local-level representation and activities but has yet to establish local connections. It is difficult to say what impact the July coup will have on the plans of the Ministry of Rural Development and the Ministry of Education. The ministers from both were from FUNCINPEC and fled the country after the coup. They were replaced by two defectors from FUNCINPEC. The use of these positions as political payoffs does not bode well for any serious action being taken by these ministries for some time.

Except at particular development project sites there is virtually no connection between the ministries at the central level and rural residents. After the 1993 election of the coalition government, central ministries and provincial administrations were divided between the CPP and FUNCINPEC. But from the district level down no change has taken place. So today's district, subdistrict, and village leaders are
the same ones from the PRK and State of Cambodia (SOC) period. Because of the conflicts and divisions between political parties and ministries at the central level of government along with those between personalities in ministries and at the provincial level, local-level rulers are left to rely primarily on their personal (mostly pre-1993) connections up the chain of command—or to run matters themselves.

Local elections scheduled for 1997 were canceled. Without any power sharing at the local level FUNCINPEC was reluctant to devolve control over, or funding for, development projects to the local level. There was a similar reluctance from within the CPP, since government structures throughout the PRK period were organized with power emanating from the central level. After the coup it is even more likely that the emphasis will be on top-down administration and maintaining political and economic control. In the short to medium term, there is virtually no chance that the focus will shift to allowing local level input on rural development projects.

Before the coup the need to grant project funding to rural areas was generally acknowledged, and planning for future socioeconomic development stated that this should be the case. Early in 1997 the National Assembly passed the First Socioeconomic Development Plan, 1996–2000, which focuses on rural development and poverty alleviation programs. The plan’s goals for public investment, which will cost some $5 billion—almost three-quarters of which is expected to be financed from foreign sources—state that roughly 60 percent of the public investment needs to be allocated to rural areas. While this is an admirable goal, given the current political situation and cuts in international aid, there seems little chance that these plans will be carried out quickly, if at all.

**Problems for Rural Development Planning and Implementation**

The problems with designing effective rural development initiatives in Cambodia are complicated by the upheavals of the last 25 years. A 1995 ADB planning document listed some of the constraints on agricultural and rural development as follows:

- shortages of key inputs (water control, fertilizer, improved seed, credit, and transport); inaccessibility [due to] very poor rural infrastructure, including roads and communications, and a limit-
ed domestic market; insecurity, banditry, and land mines in several areas; a limited technical capacity in government departments, with a poor data base, ineffective research facilities and virtually no extension service; a skill base among the rural population limited largely to traditional subsistence practices, and with low literacy and numeracy levels; and a disinclination toward community or group action, aggravated by the memories of experience under the Khmer Rouge regime.10

This section addresses three of these concerns: the lack of available data on rural communities, the issue of correctly analyzing social relations with respect to organizing community development (often addressed in the development literature as a “lack of absorptive capacity”), and people’s alleged lack of motivation to participate in development schemes. In the first instance the problem is very real; in the case of the latter, the Khmer context is little understood and the problems are overstated in the current literature.

Lack of Data
Written materials on rural village life in Cambodia before the upheavals of the last 25 years are scant. Far more research was conducted by Westerners, particularly French scholars, on the archaeological wonders of Angkor Wat and early Khmer history than on contemporary society. Most materials written in Khmer or French about prewar Khmer society that were stored in the country were destroyed during the years of war and revolution. Libraries hold only a fraction of the Khmer-language materials published before 1975, and ministries lack documentation of baseline data in their particular fields. Information exists as fragments, often only as oral knowledge.

The picture of rural life, as viewed from the city, is also skewed by the ongoing security concerns of the last 25 years. Before 1970 some Khmer traveled widely across the country to visit relatives in the provinces where their ancestors had been born, especially at the New Year and at Pchum Ben (the Festival for the Dead). During the civil war between Lon Nol’s government forces and the Khmer Rouge insurgency from 1970 to 1975, large numbers of people fled rural areas to the cities to escape fighting. During the Pol Pot regime people were forcibly relocated throughout the country, mostly but not exclusively from urban centers to rural areas. People returned to
the cities after Democratic Kampuchea fell, but given that many former urban dwellers had perished or fled abroad, most residents of Phnom Penh after 1979 were born in rural areas. Between 1979 and 1989 the movements of Cambodians were restricted, and many people who moved to urban areas did not subsequently travel extensively in the countryside—except for young men in the military—because it was widely believed to be too dangerous. While the perception of this danger changes over time with reference to particular geographical areas, it is my impression that, in general, urban Khmer today have far less firsthand knowledge of rural life. This began to change again in 1989 as NGOs started to undertake community development work at the village level, most employing urban Khmer staff for such projects.

Statistical information used by the government for policy-making, including census data, agricultural production levels, and reports of economic activities, usually originates at the district level. However, these statistics are often extremely unreliable and may be further distorted as they are consolidated further up the information chain to the central level.

After 1989 it became easier for foreigners to travel to rural areas, and in the early 1990s NGOs were permitted to hire Khmer staff. Consequently a series of small-scale studies were produced on subjects ranging from the state of rural hospitals to the problems of returnees. Other reports have focused on specific issues, from rural credit to education. These studies tend to be highly localized, focusing on only one or a few communities, and their conclusions are based on research conducted over a very short period, such as a few weeks or at most, a few months. They give us some snapshot images of life in particular places at particular moments, but it remains extremely difficult to extrapolate from these reports generalizations about Khmer social and economic relations in rural areas.11

The Debate over Village-Level Social Relations
The issue of the current status of village-level social relations has important implications for Cambodian and international efforts to promote development at the community level. This issue was raised in a paper presented at the July 1996 meeting of the International Consultative Group on Cambodia. It states:
The NGO Working Group on Community Development underscores as issues the lack of community cohesion and organization, the lack of participation of people in the development process, the inability of people to access resources and develop skills, the lack of cooperation among NGO, government, and local community groups, the lack of donor interest in long-term community development work, and the lack of security conditions necessary to ensure development.\textsuperscript{12}

The reference to a “lack of community cohesion” reflects the widely held view that Khmer society has been significantly altered by the events of the last 20 years.\textsuperscript{13} Society is seen as having become atomized; people are said to be willing to provide a smaller range of types of assistance and only to a limited group of people. John Vijgheen has discussed this shrinking circle of relatives (\textit{bong-poun}) and asserts that needy kin are often just given food so that they will not starve, but they are not given equipment, land to farm, or investment capital.\textsuperscript{14}

Viviane Frings pursues this argument a step further, arguing that Khmer do not really care about each other any more, that they “have not learned anything from the socialist propaganda and organization.” She writes:

\begin{quote}
when Cambodians do help, they always try to take some advantage out of it, even if the persons they help are their relatives. They do not help for free and do not think that they have a moral obligation to do it. They expect the persons they help to be grateful to them whatever the conditions of the help.\textsuperscript{15}
\end{quote}

Mutual aid, according to Frings, has become associated with forms of collective organization imposed by the state. She goes on to state that since there were no collective organizations at the village level in prerevolutionary Cambodia, Khmer peasants have not changed but rather returned to prerevolutionary patterns of not helping each other.

This school of thought, characterized by the work of Frings and often repeated by development workers in Cambodia, is carried to extremes in a recent study by Jan Ovesen and others entitled, \textit{When Every Household Is an Island}.\textsuperscript{16} Asserting essentially that the village is
nothing more than a collection of houses, the authors conclude that these clusters do not constitute a socially or culturally significant entity, let alone a moral community. They write:

The common picture is that the traditional social cohesion and self-help mechanisms in the villages that were destroyed under Pol Pot are now slowly returning to normal. There is an element of wishful thinking in this view, for it is questionable whether such a “normal,” traditional social cohesion on the village level ever existed in the first place. It is less questionable, however, that the deterioration of social solidarity appears to be continuing still, and that it is reinforced by the liberalization of the economy and the consequent monetarization of most social relations beyond the nuclear family.¹⁷

This view of Khmer society is very seriously mistaken. Based on research conducted by Ebihara and myself, data collected in the village in which she first conducted research 30 years ago and revisited several times in the early 1990s, suggest that intravillage cooperation is still very much alive.¹⁸ The bonds within a village are not those of artificially created “solidarity groups” but bonds of kinship. The only way to understand the connections that bind the residents of a village is to trace their bilateral kinship linkages (through both the husband’s and wife’s sides of the family) by birth and by marriage over several generations. Since Ebihara specifically focused on kinship relations and social organization in her original research, she is now able to trace these ties through three generations to understand the connections of each household to another.

Most of the inhabitants of this village returned to their native place after the upheavals of the Democratic Kampuchea period. Thus many have known each other since birth and are related to one another in some way, by blood or marriage. Most of the households in the village are connected not only by kinship but also by long-term friendships, with the complex reciprocal obligations that such relationships bring. They demonstrate a kind of tolerance for one another’s personalities and habits that is found only in people who know each other well. Other communities, however, may be composed of those without such long-standing bonds.

It is true that the extreme violence and deprivation of the DK
period made people watch out for themselves. But there is ample evidence from the village where we conducted research that people still help one another in a variety of ways, including sharing food, donating or lending cash, exchanging labor, providing emergency financial and other assistance, and giving psychological support. The social circles in which assistance is provided may have shrunk, but Ebihara and I interpret this as owing largely to villagers’ limited resources—i.e., their restricted capacity to give money and land to others—rather than to a lack of concern for their neighbors. While limited material resources may reduce the number of people or the size of the circle of bong-poun that people might be able to help, our research indicates that Khmer “traditional” systems of mutual assistance and monitoring behavior are still active in this community.

Moreover the notion that the Krom Samaki agricultural collectives represented some kind of “real” community whose passing is to be mourned is not an attitude commonly expressed in Khmer rural communities. Quite to the contrary villagers, even the widows and other female heads of households whom the kroms were designed to help, consistently expressed a preference for a return to private ownership of property.

Contrary to the atomization school of thought, Khmer rural villages are interwoven communities capable of organizing for socioeconomic development programs. There is, however, a range of types of villages in different parts of the country, depending to a large extent on whether or not they reconstituted themselves with much the same prewar population after the upheavals of the DK period. I return to this point below.

Questions of Motivation
The issue of what constitutes a village is directly related to the common assumption among aid workers in Cambodia today that villagers will engage in development-project work only if they are paid. This is sometimes referred to as the “food-for-work” phenomenon. Since the World Food Program, Oxfam, and other agencies over the last decade or so have offered villagers food as payment for working on development projects, rural villagers are now said to balk at the notion of undertaking project labor without compensation.

That people won’t want to work unless they receive some benefit in return is not a shocking concept. Gabrielle Martel’s account of
life in a village in Siem Reap Province in the 1960s includes two stories about the ability of villagers to organize for community labor. In the first case government officials ordered villagers to provide labor to repair a roadway. The roadway did not service their village, and they had nothing to gain from the project. The villagers sent a token group representing the village so as to appear to participate in the construction, while in reality doing as little work as possible. On the other hand Martel notes that when flood waters washed out a bridge that everyone used regularly to go to market, the villagers immediately organized a work group and repaired it.19

That thousands of rural communities all over Cambodia are in the process of organizing their meager resources and labor to rebuild Buddhist temples speaks volumes as to the villagers' abilities to accomplish goals they articulate themselves. By reconstructing temples, they are rebuilding the hearts of their communities and at the same time gaining Buddhist merit for this life and the next.

Much of this discussion about a lack of motivation on the part of villagers all too closely echoes French colonial visions of Khmer as indolent. If one is a firm believer in the intelligence of the common farmer, the logical explanation is that a refusal to participate is likely linked to a lack of interest on the villagers' part, a clear sign that the project was designed without the input or approval of the local population. It likely also reflects the villagers' belief that the only ones to benefit from such a program will be corrupt officials.

It is certainly not always easy to establish clearly what it is that communities want for themselves, or to motivate participation in development projects when farmers are already overworked and short of hours in the day. But it is also too easy to abandon this difficult task by saying either that there is in fact no community to serve or that people are unwilling to help themselves.

**Conclusion**

Given these problems the uncertainties of post-coup politics and the limited data that planners have as a base for designing national rural development policies, is it possible to make any statement about remedies? At present this may only be done in the most general terms.

First, some social development programs are best left entirely to the national government, and aid programs should directly fund the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) for these tasks. The most
important areas are health and education. The Ministry of Health has strengthened its organizational structure and planning capabilities at the central level and has as its stated goal improving care at the district level, making it more available and affordable. For both the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Education a key factor lies in their ability to pay a living wage to teachers and local healthcare providers. Their services can be afforded by rural residents only if their cost is subsidized by the state in the form of adequate salaries.

Aid programs that provide funding for health, education, or agricultural services should not be cut. Cutting such funding does not hurt the Hun Sen government; it hurts poor Cambodians. The U.S. decision not to cut support for maternal and child health programs is a positive case in point.

Second, there is a clear need for more local-level research in conjunction with planning for development programs. Since rural villages vary greatly in terms of specific conditions, it is only logical that something that works in one area may not work in another. Before plans can be drafted for a particular area, research should be done in the region to try to understand community composition and characteristics.

Such research should be carried out by local researchers, who are most likely to be able to rapidly assess the social characteristics of the community. Therefore more training of Khmer social science researchers is urgently required. Support should be offered to organizations that train Khmer staff to conduct research programs for development. To date these include the Cambodian Researchers for Development, the Khmer Women's Voice Center, the Cambodian Development Resource Institute, and the UN Fund for Population Activities' work in conjunction with the Ministry of Planning to train interviewers for the 1998 census. Funding should also be made available for a limited number of Khmer to undertake graduate training abroad.

Other ideas to be considered would include linking higher education to requirements that young people provide a set number of years of service in rural areas after they finish their studies: as teachers, as health workers, and as agricultural extension agents. One way to facilitate this process would be to require that institutions of higher education recruit students based on a quota system, so that different areas of the country are represented. Graduates could then be
required to return to their native areas to perform their years of service.

Certain other social development programs are best left to local organization and control. The best examples of these are the projects of small-scale local NGOs. While it is often difficult for international donors to identify successful local organizations, it is not impossible. Some international donors are already channeling funds to local NGOs, either directly or through international NGOs acting as intermediaries.

Two other endeavors are under way that merit further study for possible use as models striving to attain in form and content true community-based development. The first is the RGC’s program called the Social Fund. Under this program local communities present projects they have designed themselves to funding agency representatives for approval. Social Fund program staff visit the sites and assess the viability of the projects, and a committee then decides on funding approval. Follow-up visits confirm that project work proceeds and that appropriate assessment is made at project’s end.

A second program, funded by the UN Development Program, is a pilot project called Seila. In five provinces Seila strives to combine local participation and decision making with national-level policy-making. Development committees are elected at the village, subdistrict, district, and provincial levels. Province- and district-level committees are provided funding to allocate to worthy projects that are proposed from the bottom up. The idea is that if local-level committees express the opinions of their communities then development will be truly participatory. Each committee also has a number of slots reserved for women, thus assuring female participation in the decision-making process at every level.20

It is still too early to assess the success of these projects. While they sound ideal there is a strong likelihood that the newly created structures will immediately come to mirror the established patron-client structures that dominate Khmer political life. It is certainly simplistic to assume that forming a new committee through elections will automatically create a nonbiased and representative body. Local-level officials (almost all of whom are members of the CPP), their position strengthened by the July coup, are likely to resist strongly any activities that seem to threaten their exclusive authority.
The crisis at the national level means that the need to shift funding, focus, and control to rural communities will remain unaddressed into the foreseeable future. There seems little chance that central-level officials will concentrate their energies on Cambodia's rural communities, except in order to exert additional political control. It seems likely that community-based rural development programs will remain largely on hold.

In the face of the political upheavals of 1997 rural Cambodians are again hoarding rice, saving their money, and waiting for the storm to pass. Peasants interviewed in June and July 1997 did not express support for either political party; rather there seemed to be widespread resignation. Many people commented that widespread violence and political oppression were "normal" (thommada). Some dared to express a certain level of anger that their leaders continue to fight over power and will not let the people live in peace. Some quoted the Khmer proverb that says: "When elephants fight, it is the ants that get trampled."

Still the rebuilding of temples by communities all over Cambodia tells us that Khmer villages are capable of organizing for their own benefit. Cambodians, like most people, are cooperative when it is to their benefit. Rather than overidealizing an imposed form of collectivity from the recent past, development planners should focus on understanding the varying range of patterns of social organization in contemporary villages and tailor their efforts according to those specific conditions. Such specialized planning and program design is necessary if government funding and foreign development aid is to begin to reach beyond Phnom Penh to the 85 percent of Cambodians who live in rural villages.

Notes
Judy L. Ledgerwood


9. Ibid., p. 18.


11. A considered effort must be made to preserve and utilize these small-scale studies. At least two libraries in Phnom Penh, at the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC) and at the Cambodia Development Resource Institute (CDRI), have collections of these valuable research reports.


15. Ibid., p. 61.


