

DOCTORAL THESIS

Institutional development and the socio-economic resilience of the riverine rural communities in the Lower Meking Basin, Cambodia

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Date of Award:
2013

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Abstract

This thesis aims to improve the socio-economic resilience of the riverine communities in the Lower Mekong Basin (LMB), Cambodia, through enhancing the institutional development of aspects of advantages and risks, factors of unsustainable livelihoods, engagement of external and local institutions, and external dependency. Three hypotheses are tested: (1) livelihoods are highly influenced by assets, poverty, food insecurity, hazards and local trans-boundary influences; (2) existing external and local institutions have failed to improve adaptation and resilience; and, (3) development programmes are ineffective due to insufficient funding by the central government and the short-term policies of Non-governmental Organization (NGOs). This research hinges on dependency theory, concepts of adaptation and resilience, and a sustainable livelihood framework. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were employed as the main research methods. The Upper, Middle, and Lower stretches of the Mekong River were selected as case studies.

The research discovered four main findings: (1) livelihoods in the LMB have proven unsustainable in the periods 2001-10 and 2011-20, with high rates of poverty and food insecurity due to heterogeneous growth; lack of rural diversification; insufficient assets; inappropriate strategies; and the impacts of environmental and socio-economic change; (2) neither external nor local institutions were able to reify the capacity of the villagers to adapt to shock and stress resulting from floods, drought, and high food prices: nor could they improve resilience to declines in water-related resources, i.e., water, fisheries and forestry; (3) external institutional support for sustainable livelihood development has proven ineffective due to insufficient government funds,

high aid dependency and fragmentation, incoherence of development agendas, and unclear Decentralization & Deconcentration (D&D) mechanisms; and, (4) as the main local institutions, Commune Councils (CoCs) have been weakly established with inadequate human and financial resources; poor private partnerships; limited authority in decision-making, and high dependency on external support. Hypothesis 1 is partially rejected but hypotheses 2 and 3 are proven. The research has also contributed to the extant academic literature, namely in the areas of sustainable livelihoods frameworks, and concepts of adaption and resilience.

In the interests of realising socio-economic resilience of the riverine communities in the LMB, the future efforts of governments, international donors, NGOs and CoCs should be directed towards: (1) alleviating poverty and food insecurity; (2) strengthening the capacity of adaption and resilience; and, (3) reducing external dependency. In particular, external institutions should fully support CoCs and the communities with long-term capacity building through on-job training, agricultural extension services, and private sector participation.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude and appreciation to my Principal Supervisor, Associate Professor Dr. Xiaojiang Yu, who has played a very crucial role at every stage of my study and afforded continual encouragement. My PhD study could not have been successfully completed without his patient guidance, the time he invested in me, and his friendly approach. Not only did Dr. Yu guide my academic study carefully: he also took into consideration my life, finances, and emotions.

My deep appreciation and sincere thanks are due to my Associate Supervisor, Professor Koon Kwai Wong, for his critical review and scientific guidance of the study. My thesis would not have been comprehensive without his guidance, comments, vigilant advice and kind support.

My sincere thanks go to the Head of the Department of Geography, Professor Bernhart Richard Owen, for his great leadership and his monitoring of my research progress, and to Professor Yuk Yee Yan for her support of my application for a Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Hong Kong Dissertation Scholarship 2010-2011. Also, I greatly appreciate the time spent by the external examiners on marking, and thank Dr. Estelle Dryland, Macquarie University, Sydney, for her English language editing and valuable comments.

I would like to express my deep gratitude to the Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) for my PhD Studentship monthly allowance and tuition fees, the Hong Kong Energy Studies Centre, and Professor Chuen Ho Chow for my field work subsidies. My special appreciation and sincere thanks to Professor H.E. Lav Chhiv Eav, the Rector of the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP), who permitted my study

leave from the government for three years. Also, I would like to greatly thank to Mr Reno Thou, Vice Chief of Research Office of the RUPP, for encouraging my study.

I gratefully acknowledge Sela Samath, Mouy Oum, Ratha Phol, Kearn Kim, and Sokly Eam and some staff of CRDT [Vong Hang, Pheap Hean, Senglay Ngeth, Sarith Hun, Swiss Nem, and Sorachana Seng] for supporting my field work. In addition, I would like to thank the members of the Commune Council including Siphon Em, and Lihour Man and Ann Hom for their administrative support and accommodation.

I would like to express a debt of gratitude to: Mr Nak Oul, the Director of Multilateral Aid Coordination of CDC, for providing information about foreign aid; to Mr Sosamphors Chin, the Provincial Advisor of NCDD, for insights into D&D issues; and Mr Chetra Chea, former GIS consultant at Aruna Technology Ltd. for mapping assistance; and, to the World Food Programme (Cambodia Office) for providing original maps illustrating floods and drought in Cambodia.

I would like to express my enormous thanks to my father-in-law Mr Sav Vanny Thau and my mother-in-law Mrs Soklean Ung who supported my dear wife Ms Sok Kalyan Thau during her Master's study at HKBU. Without their support, I could not have spent the last year with her in Hong Kong. Also, I would like to thank my wife, who allowed me to undertake my PhD study after only a few months of our marriage.

There are no words to describe the gratitude I want to express to my father Mr Samath Chea and mother Mrs Kim Seang Lao for their irreplaceable love and affection. Last but not least, I would like to offer my sincere thanks and gratitude to all of the respondents, key informants and friends, especially Dr. Judith Clarke, Yiu Yuk Lan, Heung Suk Yan, Chenda Seng, Lin Tao, Dong Xin, Wang Fenglong, and Huang Junyi, who were always there to help me during my stay in Hong Kong.

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