



ECONOMIC TRAJECTORIES FOLLOWING FORCED EVICTIONS IN PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA: AN ANALYSIS OF DISPLACED WOMEN'S NARRATIVES

Colleen McGinn¹

Abstract

This paper explores how forced evictions affect displaced women's economic conditions. Forced evictions – “the involuntary removal of persons from their homes or land, directly or indirectly attributable to the State” (OHCHR, 1996, p. 2) – are a worldwide phenomenon, and one of the most common triggers of forced migration globally. They are widespread in Cambodia. Twenty-seven in-depth narrative interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of 22 displaced women to explore post-displacement adaptation. Economic circumstances proved to be crucial to understanding overall risk and resilience. The nature and degree of economic harm experienced by participants varied widely. Harm affected different groups differently, along patterns that were consistent with pre-displacement socioeconomic status and influenced by the degree to which their financial and social capital was embedded in their former neighborhoods. Harm to livelihoods especially affected the poor, including renters who were unable to earn incomes in new locations. Harm to assets affected homeowners with relatively stable incomes, but lost enormous value of their properties. A third category lost both livelihoods and assets in a catastrophic double blow; this group tended to include shopkeepers others who both lived and worked on their property. Finally, some women reported that forced eviction had had a relatively benign impact on them. Narratives in this category were idiosyncratic. However, overall these women had superficial ties to their former neighborhoods or else found new housing nearby, and had intact livelihoods. This paper argues that a housing/shelter focus to advocacy, policy, and assistance strategies is too narrow, and poorly addresses the livelihood crisis that are experienced by the displaced. Key recommendations include: compensation at full market value for seized properties, and broad urban planning measures to protect and encourage affordable rental housing within the city, proximate to diverse livelihood opportunities.

Keywords: forced eviction, risk and resilience, Cambodia, Livelihoods, urban planning

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Colleen McGinn, PhD

Introduction

Forced evictions, that is, “the involuntary removal of persons from their homes or land, directly or indirectly attributable to the State” (OHCHR, 1996, p. 3) are a worldwide phenomenon; every year over 2 million people are displaced by forced evictions worldwide (COHRE, 2006). Sometimes referred to as “slum demolitions” or “development-induced displacement,” forced evictions represent one of the most common triggers of forced migration globally. Policy, programming, and research surrounding forced migration tend to overlook them, however. The converse is also true: the large body of literature on forced evictions that is grounded in urban planning and related disciplines is often poorly-informed by forced migration research. People who have experienced forced migration, however, have much in common with those displaced by disaster or conflict. Forced evictions represent a catastrophic loss of home, livelihood, and community to those who are affected, and they are often carried out under conditions of violence. Scholars, policymakers, practitioners, and ultimately affected populations would benefit from better dialogue and cross-learning between these fields.

Forced evictions have become widespread in Cambodia in recent years; it has been estimated that as many as 400,000 Cambodians have been uprooted nationwide since 2003 (Licadho and The Cambodia Daily, 2012). Such evictions are highly controversial from political and legal standpoints, and there is a considerable body of literature reflecting these perspectives. However, in-depth analyses of the impact of these evictions on the lives of those displaced are relatively scarce. This paper presents findings concerning the impact of forced evictions on displaced women, with an emphasis on medium-term socioeconomic outcomes. It is based on an analysis of twenty-seven (27) in-depth narrative interviews conducted with twenty-two (22) women who had been forcibly evicted from one of five Phnom Penh neighborhoods (Boeung Kak Lake, Borei Keila, Dey Krahom, Group 78, and Reak Reay). The data was collected in 2009-2010 support of a doctoral dissertation for the Columbia University School of Social Work on the psychosocial effects of forced evictions on women in Phnom Penh (McGinn, 2013). The material presented here is adapted from parts of this dissertation.

Literature Review

Forced evictions are not unique to Cambodia. They are a common but often overlooked impetus to forced migration across the globe: according to The Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (2006), over 5.5 million people worldwide were displaced by forced evictions between 2003 and 2006.¹ Those subject to forced evictions, as defined by the United Nations (UN), have legitimate claims to the property from which they have been evicted, and their claims have been subverted by authorities who have denied them adequate compensation. As much as 22% of Cambodia’s land has been sold for economic concessions or other development projects in recent years (Licadho and The Cambodia Daily, 2012). In many cases, the contested property was inhabited or otherwise in use by local populations. This controversial “land grabbing” has become a major political issue in Cambodia (Engvall and Kokko, 2007; Hughes 2008).

¹ This figure continues to be widely cited; there is no more current estimate of forced evictions at the global level.

Forced evictions have been carried out on a large scale in Phnom Penh since 1990 (Ballard and Runsinarith, 2007), fueled in part by rising property values. As Postlewaite (as cited in Fleischman, 2009) explained:

A decade ago, Phnom Penh lacked even a single traffic light. Today, as land speculators rake in profits... all over the city, shanty towns and old villas are being sold for land value and razed to make way for high-rise apartments, office buildings, shopping malls, and new villas. (p. 13).

Some evictions of entire communities have been carried out by armed agents, and accompanied by violence; land rights advocates and activists are also at risk of being arrested or harmed (Amnesty International, 2009). Evictees are usually resettled in locations on the outskirts of the city. There is no consistent policy, but the usual pattern is for renters to be transported to a remote, barren field where they are given small plots to build basic encampments, whereas homeowners might be given a newly-built rowhouse. Other homeowners may receive a cash settlement (typically at far below market value for the property), and some are not compensated at all. These people do not go to designated resettlement areas.

Migration in Cambodia and worldwide is propelled by both pull and push factors (Maltoni, 2007); people leave their hometowns and provinces in search of a better life, or to escape hardship or difficulty. Contexts of forced migration, however, are characterized by extreme stress, including deepened poverty, exposure to violence, social breakdown, and family stress. It is clear from Derks (2008), Lim (2007), and other scholars of internal migration in Cambodia that Phnom Penh serves as a “pressure valve” for the rural poor; the capital city is the destination when livelihoods collapse, or for those seeking opportunity. Living conditions for many in Phnom Penh, however, remain marginal; according to the most recent UN estimate, 78.9% of Cambodia’s urban residents live in slum conditions (UN-Habitat, 2012)². What then happens when entire urban neighborhoods are displaced? Where do people go, and what becomes of them?

Soto (2011) has commented that “housing, land and property rights affect men and women differently; hence these issues are not gender-neutral and require a gender equality analysis of the problem” (p. 3). In Cambodia, these issues tend not to be official – women have the same legal property rights as men – but they are often the more socially and economically marginalized, and this is likely to be exacerbated in the event of a forced eviction. There are large numbers of female-headed households in Cambodia, especially among those who lived

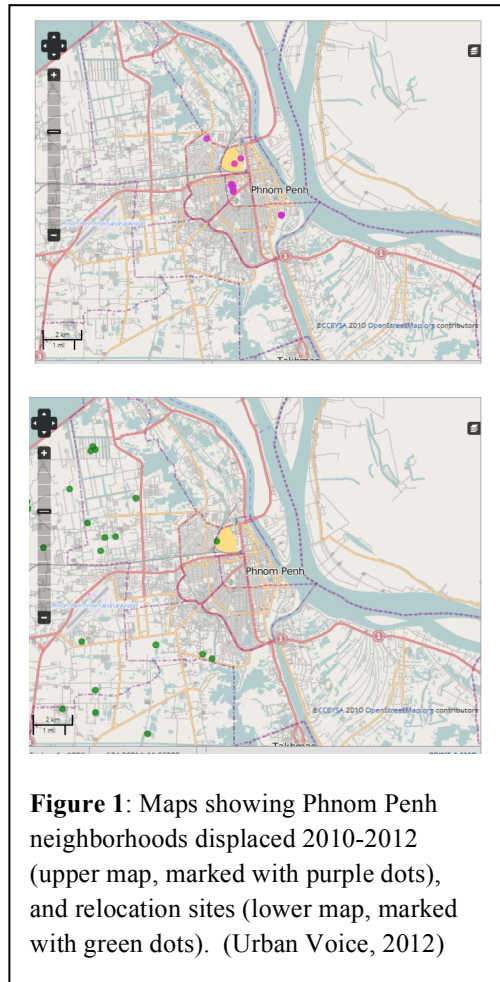


Figure 1: Maps showing Phnom Penh neighborhoods displaced 2010-2012 (upper map, marked with purple dots), and relocation sites (lower map, marked with green dots). (Urban Voice, 2012)

² Many within Phnom Penh regard this figure to be inflated because any area with sewerage systems that do not meet UN standards are automatically classified as “slums” regardless of other characteristics. However, I have been unable to find any written references that confirm this, or calculations of alternative estimates.

through the war years. Women tend to be overburdened at home, with full care-taking responsibilities for children and the elderly, while also contributing significantly to household income. There is evidence that the evictions are exacerbating these circumstances, in part because they lead to separation of family members: women, children, and the elderly find themselves on the margins of the city (*see* Figure 1), unable to support themselves and dependent on remittances from men earning a livelihood elsewhere.

The research focus on women is thus particularly advantageous for capturing the overall impact of forced evictions on family systems, functioning, composition, and livelihood strategies, and how these in turn influence adaptation and coping, i.e., the “constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the resources of the person” (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984, p. 141). In terms of forced evictions, women’s experiences are nested within their gender roles as both disadvantaged family earners and as caregivers. The Housing Rights Task Force (HRTF) (2012) argued that the disintegration of community ties especially affects women both socially and economically:

The families build not only their homes, but also a social network of friends and families that ensures their survival. These networks are important to people, especially women, as they can rely on them to support them in their social and economic activities... These relationships are non-quantifiable and carefully interwoven into the fabric of the life of the urban poor and assist greatly in their survival and development. Forced evictions destroy these crucial networks (p. 8).

Despite important contributions to the research on forced evictions in Cambodia, the emphasis in the literature to date has been on political, legal, and urban planning analyses. There has been little in-depth investigation of these evictions from a forced migration or social impact perspective. Little is known about what happens to affected people over time. A fuller understanding of these processes is essential for the development and implementation of informed public policy or programming.

Methodology and Design

This study utilizes narrative analysis to examine the experience of forced evictions on displaced women in Phnom Penh, with a particular focus on the dynamics that underpin their risk and resilience. Qualitative methods are the most appropriate approach to this study because they are best suited to an in-depth exploration of human phenomena, capturing the world-views of those involved and the complexity and contexts of participants’ lived experiences. Grounded in constructivist and inductive enquiry, qualitative methods explore and interpret phenomena and experience in a nuanced and complex way.

Narrative analysis is a “family of methods for interpreting texts that have in common a storied form” (Riessman, 2008, p. 11). Story-telling is universal. It constitutes the first form of discourse that children in all cultures learn to organize and explain events, and represents a developmental milestone (Stern, 1992). Narratives can be understood as stories that “include a temporal ordering of events and an effort to make something out of those events” (Sandelowski, as cited in Rubenson, Hanh, Höjer, and Johansson, 2005, p. 393) and are a means through which individuals describe and give meaning to their experiences, choices, and actions (Rubenson et al., 2005). They are “sense-making tools” (Freeman, 2002, p. 9) and how “individuals excavate and reassess memories” (Riessman, 2008, p. 8). This study specifically utilized narrative methods, because stories are a universal means through which individuals interpret and explain

their past experiences and perspectives and integrate these into views of the present and expectations about the future.

Narratives are also well-suited to inductive approaches to research. While the research design was informed by theory, the emphasis was on discovery, description, and interpretation in order to generate an explanatory framework, rather than test a hypothesis. The tenets of Stress and Coping Theory were applied, including the identification of risk and resilience factors. Stress and Coping Theory proposes a transactional model that considers how cognitive appraisal processes, personal characteristics, and situation conditions interact to structure an individual's stress response and their strategies to cope with a given stressor and, ultimately, frame their responses and outcomes (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984). All of these processes lend themselves to narrative understanding and expression.

Twenty-two women displaced within two years prior to their first interview were invited to share their experiences of forced eviction and its aftermath. In-depth interviews are "guided conversations" (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002) designed to elicit individuals' eviction experiences, and the meanings they attribute to the event (or process) and its outcomes. Interviews are often used over ethnographic methods when "topics of interest do not center on particular settings but... on establishing common patterns or themes" (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002, p. 85). Open-ended questions invited participants to tell their story of displacement, and how they managed the multiple losses associated with forced eviction and its aftermath. Probes were utilized to bring out certain themes in more detail. I returned to five of the women for a second life history interview, to more fully frame and nest the displacement experience within the broader course of their lives.

Research fieldwork was conducted in 2009-2010 in the greater Phnom Penh area. All participants had lived in one of five evicted central-city neighborhoods: Boeung Kak Lake, Borei Keila, Dey Krahom, Group 78, and Reak Reay. Sample size and variability in qualitative research vary considerably (Sobal, 2001), and data was collected until the point of saturation, that is, when new conversations became repetitive rather than revelatory. Sampling for the interviews was purposive. I sought to identify a diverse group of women with different backgrounds, experiences, and characteristics that were salient to the issues at hand.

Given that this study is of persons who *previously* lived in geographic communities that no longer existed, locating informants was a logistical challenge. "Snowball" or chain-referral techniques were used to identify potential participants. In other words, "participants or informants with whom contact has already been made use their social networks to refer the researcher to other people who could potentially participate in or contribute to the study" (Mack et al., 2005, p. 5-6).

I recruited female Khmer Research Assistants with skills and experience in qualitative interviewing, as well as transcription and translation. There are advantages to having interviewers who share a common ethnicity and gender with participants (Hiller and Diluzio, 2004). The important benefits of having local Research Assistants include that they serve as cultural interlocutors and mediators, and facilitate the endorsement of gatekeepers and community leaders that is essential for a foreign researcher (Pinto, Schmidt, Rodriguez, and Solano, 2006). Six Research Assistants were involved in conducting interviews, and in transcribing and translating them. Interviews were audio recorded with permission and transcribed in Khmer verbatim. A written English translation was then prepared, guided by translation protocols outlined by Baker (1992). This translation was then verified by a Senior Translator.

“Like weight bearing walls, personal narratives depend on certain structures to hold them together” (Riessman, 1993, p. 18), and should be analyzed in terms of overall arc and content as well as what is revealed in particular fragments of monologue and dialogue. After an initial close reading, I meticulously coded and analyzed the transcripts using ATLAS software. Grounded theory conventions were used to identify, develop, and code passages from the texts; thematic anchors were then grouped into broad categories. Modalities of coping and sources of risk and resilience within and across narratives were identified through an iterative process of inductively-generated explanatory frameworks. Noteworthy, ethics approval for this research was granted by the Columbia University’s Institution Review Board.

Findings

Overview

The women who participated in this study embody disparate experiences, with highly varying attitudes, outcomes, and explanations for their life conditions. There is no uniform forced eviction experience, but rather a multiplicity of circumstances as varied as the population of Phnom Penh itself. If “narrative reconstruction is an attempt to reconstitute and repair ruptures between body, self, and world” (Williams, as cited in Riessman, 2008, p. 23), then the women in this study mobilized different resources – material and otherwise – to cope and adapt, including constructing different kinds of narratives to understand their experiences and rebuild their lives and livelihoods. As Borden (1992) commented, “narrative processes can be understood as reflective efforts to cope with negative life outcomes and to deal with the impact of change and loss” (p. 135).

Despite a common neighborhood, and often similar compensation packages, outcomes and responses were highly differentiated, which poses challenges for social service agencies, policymakers, and advocates. Nevertheless, some clear patterns did emerge, largely following socioeconomic axes. As Alexander (2007) argued, “disasters tend to reinforce the power structures that create and maintain poverty, disadvantage and marginalization” (p. 56). However, a second critical factor proved to be the degree to which participants’ economic interests and social networks had been embedded in the geographic neighborhood itself. This factor is only partially associated with pre-eviction economic circumstances, and proved to be a critical influence.

Four post-displacement economic trajectories are the focus of this paper. This research was inductive and used constructs from Stress and Coping Theory to guide interpretation of the data, not to test a hypothesis *per se*. Indeed, doing so would have been counter to my chosen methodology, which generates explanatory frameworks, which emerge from close analysis of narrative data. I have thus utilized tenets of Stress and Coping Theory to explore key themes and inform a nuanced analysis of risk and resilience factors. Because the narratives consistently demonstrated that post-displacement economic circumstances were central to the broader range of psychosocial outcomes (McGinn, 2013), a detailed analysis of post-displacement socioeconomic trajectories is warranted. This paper thus concerns matters that are narrower in scope than the entire range of Stress and Coping Theory. To help focus the analysis of the issues at hand, I have further utilized Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) Theory and the strong/weak ties constructs within Social Network Theory. DRR is the dominant approach to disaster prevention and preparedness today. It has been defined as “the broad development and application of policies, strategies and practices to minimize vulnerabilities and disaster risks throughout society, through prevention, mitigation and preparedness” (Mitchell and Aalst, 2008, p. 4). The

data collected suggest that this approach is applicable to populations at risk of or experiencing forced evictions, and moreover that existent DRR frameworks may be well-suited to assist policymakers and agencies interested in assessing and mitigating the impact of forced evictions. Forced evictions have impacts resembling a disaster on affected communities; however as disaster management and forced eviction literatures rarely “talk to” each other, key learnings are lost.

DRR programming is based on population vulnerability and capacity analysis. This framework underscores that hazards and disasters do not have a uniform impact but rather are structured by various factors, including “risk conditions, societal vulnerability, and the limited capacities of households or communities to reduce the potential negative impacts of the hazard” (Baas, Ramasamy, DePryck, and Battista, 2008, p. 4). This approach often emphasizes livelihoods. Disaster risk reduction has important parallels with stress and coping theory, but with an emphasis on securing physical needs (shelter, food, etc.) rather than on psychological adaptation. Social stratification, networks, and capital are, however, seen as key determinants of individual, household, and group coping capacities. This overall vulnerability and capacity analysis is highly consistent with risk and resilience approaches to policy and praxis in support of people struggling with adversity.

Wilson (1998) has demonstrated that social networks mediate individuals’ migration experience. Within the very broad scope of Social Network Theory, strong ties “describe the social relations between ego and close friends and/or kin... [which] form a dense network in which members know each other,” whereas weak ties “describe the relationship between ego and his/her acquaintance network” (Wilson, 1998, p. 397). The “strength of weak ties” (Granovetter, 1973) has been widely recognized in the migration experience insofar as key *new* information regarding housing, employment, and other basic needs disseminates through it. Those with a large circle of acquaintances are more likely to access information quickly. Wilson (1998) further distinguished between dense and diffuse social networks. Diffuse networks are geographically diverse, whereas dense ones are localized and have considerable overlap (i.e., the individuals in one person’s network also know each other). The evidence in this study highlights that those with diffuse social networks were more resilient than those with dense, localized ones.

The four post-displacement economic trajectories that are documented in this paper emerged over the course of data analysis, and it was ultimately found that, participants’ overall adaptation processes were profoundly grounded in their post-displacement socioeconomic circumstances. This in itself is unsurprising, given a context of widespread poverty in Cambodia. What was less expected was that the nature and degree of socioeconomic harm experienced by participants varied so widely. This is a very significant finding, insofar as it contrasts sharply with published news media and NGO reports on the forced evictions in Phnom Penh, which tend to collapse diverse populations together into an artificially uniform portrait. Harm, that is, “physical or psychological injury or damage” (AH, 2009, para. 1) was not universal, and moreover, different families were harmed in different ways. While the overall outcomes were highly consistent with post-eviction livelihood capacity, many of those with higher socioeconomic status (SES) also experienced grievous harm. A typology of these four socioeconomic trajectories is summarized below. The following sections constitute more detailed discussions and extended excerpts from an exemplar narrative from each category. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of these findings for advocacy, public policy, and post-displacement assistance strategies.

- *High levels of livelihood harm* are found among those whose ability to earn was tied to a particular locale (whether a particular neighborhood or the city center in general). While this includes small business owners, this category is especially characteristic of the urban poor who worked in the informal sector prior to eviction. Unable to find affordable housing in downtown Phnom Penh, they are pushed into destitution after their eviction, because of an inability to find work or income-generating opportunities in new locations.
- *High levels of asset harm* are concentrated among those of higher socioeconomic status (SES). While these people usually have the resources to keep the family out of deep poverty, compensation packages that are offered are far below market values for their properties. They also tend to be long-term community residents with strong and meaningful ties to their neighborhoods. Eviction thus represents an enormous loss of the family's (often extended family's) savings and net worth, even when livelihoods are left intact.
- *High levels of both livelihood and asset harm* are found among more successful entrepreneurs with businesses operating from or near their homes.³ These families simultaneously lose both valuable properties and significant incomes. Once-prosperous (or at least secure) families thus tumble into poverty.
- *Benign Impact*. Some are, in fact, not particularly harmed by their forced eviction, and a few actually come out ahead. It is notable that the pathways within this category are far less consistent than for the others in this typology; many of the narratives are highly idiosyncratic. Nevertheless, there are some factors that do emerge that help explain why and how some of those affected by evictions are so resilient.

High levels of livelihood harm

For some evictees, the impact was not just loss of home and community, but a plunge into terrible poverty. This tended to especially affect those who were already poor; whereas prior to eviction, nearly all did report some sort of income, adequate shelter, and food security. Lives that were described as *pibaak* (difficult) before eviction became *yaab* (very difficult) or *vithania* (wretchedly difficult). Only two described their original circumstances in terms of outright destitution, whereas after the evictions there were many in dire circumstances, without adequate food or other basic necessities.

The process through which livelihoods were so affected – even among those with regular salaries – was much the same as the impetus behind the evictions themselves: soaring property values (and rents) in central Phnom Penh, together with a lack of affordable transportation. Research participants clearly articulated how they were unable to afford to buy – and sometimes even rent – new homes in the vicinity of their previous ones, which were prized precisely because of access to income-generating opportunities. As Reachny⁴ explained,

It's much more difficult than before because we can't earn money here, it's very far, we have to spend a lot of money and time go to Phnom Penh and even though we have our own motorbike, it's very difficult... and it's very quiet even though we would like to set up a business [there are no customers].

Reachny's succinct explanation emphasizes that evictees are willing to work, but they cannot due to lack of customers and high transportation expenses in remote areas.

³ Cambodian entrepreneurs typically operate businesses out of the ground floor of their homes, and live in apartments upstairs.

⁴ Pseudonyms are used throughout, and identifying details have been masked.

Location-dependent earning potential crosses socioeconomic lines in Phnom Penh; the poor, professionals, and everyone in between benefits from living near the city center. Those with white-collar jobs were usually able to maintain their livelihoods despite expensive and inconvenient commutes. Many of the poor, by contrast, ended up destitute because their livelihoods collapsed altogether. It should be understood that there is no public transportation system in Phnom Penh at all, and one may not be in place until 2035 (Di Certo and Channyda, 2012). It is very expensive to make trips back and forth between new locations and the city, and modest earnings are swallowed up by transport costs. As Vanna explained:

[My husband] goes and comes back every day. It is not the same as when we lived in Phnom Penh. He needs to pay for one liter of gasoline to come back home. [He can't profit] after paying for the gasoline... There is no hope at all!... [In Dey Krahom] I could sell meatballs and fertilized duck eggs on Saturdays and Sundays... What about here? There is no Saturday or Sunday... There is nothing.

Vanna's despair is grounded in her family's inability to make a living. Camped out on a roadside, she was surrounded by other poor people. There were no customers for any goods or services that she could sell; nobody in this remote location had extra time and income to enjoy. When she declares that here "there is no Saturday or Sunday," Vanna is not referencing her own leisure. This comment encapsulates how poor people like her are dependent on *neak mien* ("people who have," i.e., those who are not poor). It is not a weekend for herself that she needs, but to be amidst those who enjoy them. Her follow-up comment that "there is nothing" indicates that there is nothing left over from others' disposable income for her and her family. Living amidst a concentration of poverty, there is no way for Vanna to earn a living.

Those who received compensation in the form of a replacement property or a small plot in a relocation camp found themselves at a considerable distance from the city.⁵ Many were relocated to Damnak Troyeung, which is more than 20 kilometers away. While there are many garment factories in this area, families without young unmarried women may not be able to benefit from available employment opportunities.⁶ The Dey Krahom renters eventually found themselves in a barren encampment in a neighboring province. However, even those who rented or purchased new homes almost always found themselves far away from their former neighborhoods. What they could afford was usually far beyond the city center, away from both jobs and customers. The result was an abrupt, sometimes catastrophic drop in income.⁷ As one housewife (Sina) explained,

[My household's income] is less than before!... It's decreased by about 50 percent... When we lived [at Boeung Kak Lake], every Sunday, my husband could be a motorcycle taxi driver whenever we ran out of money... In his free time, he could work at night and could earn some money. There is no nighttime work here; he does not know where to be a driver here [because there are no customers]; there are only robbers.

Sina's observation conflates poverty and safety. She is, of course, making a literal observation that it is not safe to be out at night in her new location. Her comment, however, also underscores how violent crime further undermines the livelihood capacity of families like her own. Her

⁵ There were two exceptions in my sample, both of whom had been given units in a new apartment building very near their former homes in Borei Keila.

⁶ Garment factory wages are very low; the minimum wage is \$61 per month (Kunthea and Worrell, 2012).

⁷ There is no concomitant drop in expenses in these peri-urban areas. Electricity, water, and food are all *more* expensive, and education and health expenses also increase due to transportation costs. The only thing cheaper is, typically, the land itself.

family's income has been cut in half, not only because he "does not know where" to find customers but also because it is unsafe for him to pursue this option. Insecurity in remote locations, away from the hustle and bustle of downtown Phnom Penh, further compromises livelihood capacities.

Phun, who had previously enjoyed a modest but stable livelihood in Group 78 selling coconuts, echoed these points:

Here, it is ten times more difficult than there... Business doesn't earn; selling this and selling that doesn't work. It is difficult: I have a business; I sell Chinese noodles in the market, but it is not going well... Since moving here, it is just difficult to make money. It is so difficult; nowhere could be more difficult than living here. I am almost crying these days. I used to make a lot of money, and now I don't know what I can do to make money.

Phun is a woman who had endured repeated hardship over her life course: she had repeatedly been forced out of her home under adverse circumstances, ranging from marital dissolution to communist "liberation" of her prosperous farming family's lands in Vietnam's Mekong Delta. And yet, "nowhere could be more difficult" than her current location. Perhaps, of course, she is being rhetorical. She had endured hunger before. However, the effects of poverty were being felt in new and different ways than she felt in her difficult youth. By the time of her life history interview, her youngest daughter had dropped out of school, the family had exhausted assistance from extended family, and a lack of livelihood opportunity had forced her household to scatter. It was this that pained her more than hunger:

Even when I was renting a place to live before, I had never been in tears; I'm telling you the truth, I had never been separated from my family with one living here and one living there. We always lived together, even when we were *pibaak kraw vethania* ["difficult poor wretched"] all my children and grandchildren were living together, not husband lives here and wife lives there, never. After the eviction, we separated, husband is there, and wife is here.

One of the most striking characteristics of the data is the uniformity of responses about being unable to earn a living on the outskirts of the city. Most participants had assumed that they would continue their usual means of income in the new place and indicated that they were taken aback by the lack of customers. They did not anticipate that it would be so difficult to support themselves.

Chanthon's narrative is exemplary of the process by which eviction from the city center harms a family's livelihood. When interviewed, Chanthon was in her early 50s, married, with three sons in their late teens and twenties. A former renter at Dey Krahom, the family had first been transported with other former renters ineligible for compensation by the 7NG company to Damnak Troyeung, some 20 kilometers away. They initially built a shanty settlement along the roadside, for lack of anywhere else to go. After many months, the company moved them to a relocation camp in a neighboring province, where she was interviewed. She had set up a small business selling produce in the camp, where she lived with her chronically-ill husband, and one adolescent son. Conditions in the camp were abominable: people had been allocated 4 x 6 meter land plots, on which they had constructed flimsy makeshift shelters. There were inadequate water and sanitation facilities, and no meaningful livelihood opportunities. Residents were desperate and destitute. Of Chanthon's two older boys, one was in prison and the other had

been trafficked to Thailand to work on fishing boats after the forced eviction;⁸ “brokers” had come through the camp recruiting young men. (A second interviewee in this camp had also had sons trafficked to Thailand.)

Chanthon gave a striking narrative detailing her struggles to sustain herself and her family following their eviction from Dey Krahorn. These passages paint sharp contrasts between their lives before and after, and lay out the burdens she has endured and the feelings that they have evoked. Chanthon describes numerous strategies for managing her situation within the highly exploitative underground economy that operates in the camp, including “loan sharks” and human traffickers. Chanthon began by describing her family’s livelihood in Dey Krahom: “The most convenient place to live in was Dey Krahom because it was near a business area... It was in the city, it was convenient for our businesses, even though we sold only small things, we could get enough profit to eat with.” This is a typical description of how Phnom Penh’s poor evaluate their circumstances: food security. It contrasts with efforts by external agencies and advocates concerning the forced evictions, which almost always take a stand concerning adequate housing.

Chanthon describes her struggles to keep her family fed, first squatting along the roadside:

After the eviction I moved from Dey Krahom to Damnak Troyeung... We didn’t have anything to do [to earn money], we went to *bach trey* [“scatter fish,” a technique to catch fish in shallow water without equipment]... We didn’t have anything to do for nearly a year... [We] sold an old motorbike for \$160... It helped us eat but by the time we arrived here, we were really completely out of cash... [The money from selling that motorbike] helped us for a very long time, nearly one year.

After they were moved to the relocation camp described above, their circumstances hardly improved. Conditions in the camp were abominable; while they now had possession documents for tiny land plots, there was no food. Chanthon clarifies that her neighbors were in similar circumstances, both before and after the eviction:

Everyone lived as I did in Dey Krahom, to sum up, nobody was idle... It was very easy to make money there because it is in the city... [People in Phnom Penh can] spend money and buy things without feeling bad... We don’t have anything here, and we have to be thrifty... Nobody buys our things.

Chanthon highlights the past industriousness of herself and her neighbors, as well as the fundamental dilemma of their new lives: a lack of customers. In this comment, she emphasizes that they are hardworking people; they are not poor because they are lazy, but because there is not enough money circulating in the local economy. If everyone is “thrifty” then nothing is exchanged and commerce has ground to a halt. This comment highlights the intrinsic dilemma of life in peri-urban areas. In a truly rural location, there would be a farming economy of sorts, and the possibility of wild foods or a small garden. In the city, there is business. But on the outskirts of the city, there is no viable livelihood at all.

Chanthon and her family became dependent on handouts from NGOs and relatives, but those had been exhausted. The next step was to borrow from moneylenders:

⁸ Conditions on Thai fishing vessels are notorious. Cambodian men are often trafficked and sold to deep-sea trawlers, where they work under slave-like conditions (Winn, 2012).

Two days after we arrived here [in the relocation camp, an NGO] gave us rice. My cousin saw that I had nothing so he gave me capital to start up my business but now I lost that \$20 of start-up capital [short laugh], and then I put my document possession into pawn for \$20, and don't know when I can pay it and the interest back yet.

The consequences of this desperation were deeply felt as Chanthon and her family spiraled into desperation. "I never have any tasty food to eat, nothing, and no one dares to eat anything... How can I save money...I can't find a solution... I've [discussed with others] but we don't know how to manage." Again, we see an emphasis on food security as the measure by which the poor evaluate the depth of their own poverty. Chanthon was arguably in a better position than many, insofar as she had a small stall in the camp's market area, from which she sold produce. But, since her customers themselves could not afford to pay, this business was unsustainable, and she was on the brink of losing her last asset.

Talking about, talking about this selling, [here in the camp] there are always people buying on credit... They owed me for a long time like this, and so I had to pawn my possession document for \$20... If we lose our property, we have to walk out... There are a lot of households who have lost their property... Poor people become poor because of this... Because poor people are trapped.

The harshest consequence of that entrapment was that Chanthon's middle son had gone off to work on one of the Thai-owned fishing boats, which are notorious for their barbaric treatment of workers. She was also now too far away to visit her oldest son, who was in prison; previously she had often visited him, bringing healthy food for him to eat. Deepened poverty was also taking its toll on relations within the household, and on her health:

When we don't have [anything, my husband] feels frustrated so he curses his wife and child... I don't know what to do here, I don't have any idea, I don't know what I should sell, I have become old now, my eyes aren't so good, my eyes hurt and are always teary... I don't know what to do since I can't make money, so I just persevere in pain.

In this passage, Chanthon collapses deteriorating family relations, physical health, and poverty, moving fluidly back and forth between the pillars of her despair. The arc of Chanthon's narrative emphasizes a life of hard work, a progressive series of ever-more desperate strategies to feed her family since their eviction from Dey Krahom. She then concludes with a statement of hopeless suffering. Without any viable livelihood, there is nothing left that can be done but "persevere in pain."

Chanthon's narrative presents a typical downward spiral toward greater poverty among the working poor who are evicted. Other socioeconomic groups were also affected, however. Several participants who were better off also absorbed serious blows to their livelihoods, but managed to avoid slipping into dire poverty. Dina's family is a case in point. Dina was from a relatively comfortable background, a graduate student who had been living with her elder brother and his family at the time of their eviction from Boeung Kak Lake. They had accepted a replacement flat some 15 kilometers from the city, while Dina herself chose to move into a small apartment near her university campus. Although her brother continued to work as a police officer, his mother-in-law's income had been consumed by commuting expenses, and his wife quit her job outright due to the distance. She instead tried to set up a small business, but it was failing. As Dina explained:

It is an area that is difficult to run a business in... About [the new] place, there is no problem [about the house]. The problem is about business. Because at first, when [my brother's family] had just moved there, [his wife's] selling went very well, but now it is quiet, people are gone, like it or not there aren't any people now [because the other residents left the new homes due to lack of work]... At Boeung Kak, the husband and wife and mother-in-law all worked; their income was big. In the new place, the mother-in-law still works but she pays more for a motorcycle taxi, and [my brother] travels back and forth, and his wife opened a shop, but now it doesn't go well. Right after they moved into [the new flat], they spent lots of their savings, not a little. They had to fix up the house, spent at least \$4,000 - \$5000, we couldn't just move in and live in it.

Again, we see that the greatest predicament is not the house itself. "The problem is about business." Although this family is middle-class, they echo Chanthon's dilemma of not having enough customers. We can see that this condition worsened over time; at first many people were living in the new replacement flats, but they left due to lack of income. Dina also makes some other important comments. Although she indicates that the new home was "no problem," a moment later she explains how much money it had cost before it was habitable. While we did not see her brother's new house ourselves – the interview was conducted in Dina's campus apartment – it is typical that new homes that are built as compensation have unfinished interiors. It can also be very expensive to connect water and electricity. While it might be "no problem" for a middle-class family like Dina's brother's to finish the home, for those with less means, this can be deeply problematic indeed, and helps explain why so many families over-extend themselves financially even when they are "given" a new house.

Regardless of socioeconomic status prior to eviction, every research participant engaged in entrepreneurial activity who went to a location far from the city faced serious difficulties, and usually crisis. It is well documented that "most Cambodians are self-employed or work in family businesses in the informal sector" (EIC, 2008, p. 12). In Phnom Penh, 50.0% of workers are self-employed or unpaid family labor, and 85.3% work in services (EIC, 2008), a category that encompasses the informal sector. To these people, the greatest threat posed by forced evictions is thus usually not to their homes, but to their livelihood capacities.

Stress and Coping Theory indicates that individual adaptation strategies would be grounded in their cognitive appraisal of the threat, and assessment of strategies to address it. Meanwhile, the literature and assistance strategies concerning forced evictions in Phnom Penh tends to conflate all displaced persons into an undifferentiated category, and also to focus on shelter and housing to the exclusion of more salient stressors. However, we see that for this many people – including renters and many others who were poor prior to displacement – the chief socioeconomic crisis is one of livelihoods. Applying a vulnerability and capacity analytical framework, leads us to very different assessment of this population's risk and resilience factors. While it is obvious that adequate shelter is necessary, it is entirely insufficient to compensate for the loss of previous homes and communities. Indeed, numerous participants who were given new flats or rowhouses reported that they were living in superior housing to that which they had been displaced from, but their overall circumstances were much worse, and lacking food security, education, and health care. The renters, who include many of the poorest, are largely excluded from compensation housing, but the crux of their post-displacement crisis is livelihoods. Livelihoods, meanwhile, are in turn nested in economically diverse urban settings in which there are customers with enough disposable income to purchase the kind of goods and services that are sold by small shopkeepers and poor people who work in the informal sector. The dominant approach to addressing forced evictions in Phnom Penh through focus on shelter and housing is inadequate to meeting this population's needs.

High levels of asset harm

It is something of a myth that those who are displaced in Phnom Penh's forced evictions are only low-income squatters and slum-dwellers. On the contrary, "upper poor," middle class, and professional families are also affected, many of whom assert that they already hold or are eligible for full legal title.⁹ In some cases, the chief wage-earners in these families held office jobs, and owned vehicles so that a new extended commute was more an inconvenience than completely catastrophic. However, these families too experienced significant financial harm as a result of their forced eviction, although in a different way: loss of assets rather than livelihood.

The compensation packages that are offered (typically, US\$8-10,000 or a new rowhouse in a distant location) are uniform within a given neighborhood, i.e., all those who are eligible receive the same compensation.¹⁰ When there are two houses within a single compound, or multiple households are present, extra compensation packages should be available, although study participants indicated that this process is fraught with problems. The amount of financial compensation is invariably not enough to purchase any but the most marginal property in Phnom Penh. The compensation packages thus disenfranchise – sometimes massively – homeowners, who also tend to assert that they are not squatters, but rather hold full legal title. As Naree explained:

We didn't have any choice, they gave only \$8,000 to the people... Some people were smarter than us so that they got two compensations, but I who am married with children and so ignorant, we had a big house, but we got only \$9,500... We got as same as those who had a small cottage, because we were honest... My house was very big, twice or three times bigger than other households, but they gave me only a small amount.

Here, Naree expresses her anger at how unfair the compensation process was. She asserts that there was no opportunity to negotiate a fair price, but then she emphasizes that those with savvy dishonesty did succeed in securing more. The implication is that the company could have – and indeed did – pay more but refused to. This exacerbates the injustice of the situation and demonstrates the amorality of the Sour Srun company itself. Naree paints the compensation process as deeply corrupt and unfair, disenfranchising those who deserved to be treated fairly, while rewarding others who cheated.

Cambodians typically live in extended family units, and there are often a multitude of relatives living together in a large home or compound. Living amongst those who are financially secure may be "country cousins" pursuing better education or employment opportunities, and they may have few resources of their own to fall back on. A home may also represent years (if not decades) of the entire savings/investment of an extended family. The loss of this home represents a financial crisis, even when livelihoods remain largely intact. This group also tends to be especially attached to their homes and communities in other ways, and have dense social networks.

The most exemplary narrative for this process is Dawy's, a woman with a remarkable life course: a thirty-six-year-old who grew up amidst genocide and war, which claimed the lives of her parents. Dawy spent much of her youth in an orphanage and then a Thai refugee camp,

⁹ This study does not purport to evaluate the legality of any individual family's ownership claim. This is a complicated topic, and one that has already been written about at length elsewhere. In this study, many participants claimed to hold full legal title, but some did not. Homeowners with higher income did tend to assert that they had legally owned their property (and often fetched and displayed various documents).

¹⁰ There is no specified government policy that specifies certain compensation packages, but this is typically what is offered in the city.

which she describes as “a kind of prison” where she was forced into an arranged marriage while still a teenager. (They are still married, albeit unhappily.) Despite little formal education and no family support, she had managed through a combination of luck and pluck to get ahead, learn some English, and secure a white-collar office job that paid her a decent income. She had also been actively involved in anti-eviction efforts in her former community, Reak Reay.

Dawy began by explaining her early years in Reak Reay, where she had lived since 1997. “I bought that land for \$400, and then I built the house.” She emphasized how she and her neighbors had physically created their community together: “At first, we didn’t have a proper road going to the house. [Access] was too difficult so my group [i.e., neighbors] needed to raise some money, and we also got some support from an NGO to build a road so we could easily get around there.” She goes on to describe how it came to be under threat of eviction. She asserts that “the authorities and [Canadia] company started to *samleung* [greedily gaze at] my community after they bought Koh Pich,” a nearby island in the river. Here, Dawy has emphasized her and her neighbors’ rights to their land, both because of fair acquisition (i.e., she bought it) and because they had physically improved it (built roads) with their own money and labor. The company, by contrast, is characterized as greedy. She goes on to give further details about how the compensation she was offered was unfair, especially since her house was of superior quality. “My house had tile floors, a zinc roof, and walls. We could say that my house had a better look than others’... So I couldn’t accept the price.” We can implicitly see here that uniform compensation packages are divisive in the community. The better-off had much more at stake when it came to asserting rights to more compensation.

Dawy had been very involved in community mobilization to oppose the eviction. She detailed this struggle, emphasizing that the company was intransigent and greedy. Appeals to the city government were met with ominous responses:

One day the city governor came to my community. I asked him directly, I said “Please, Uncle! I can’t accept this price because my house is big and the other houses are small. Why do big and small houses get the same price?”... He answered me, he said “Be careful, eating big food can choke you”... It was hard to solve, after he said like this.

Dawy went on to describe how she gave up her struggle, because “it was not easy,” “we were afraid of them,” “I felt tired,” and “I needed to work at my office.” This was a bitter pill for her to swallow indeed. She asserted that, “I did the math. I had more than 100 square meters so how much money should I get? That’s \$70 - 80,000 dollars! We tried to the best of our ability but we got only \$23,000.” Dawy regretted how difficult it had been to leave her home and community:

I knew that when I moved here it would have a big impact on my feelings... It was really hard for me to accept my own decision... And I also felt afraid that if I bought a new house on [city] land that I might be evicted again. Oh what would I do?... It would hurt again.

She continued to exhibit internal conflict about leaving Reak Reay. On the one hand, she tried to focus on positive points, explaining that “when I moved here it was voluntary,” i.e., she had not been physically forced out, and that “it was our good luck that they gave money to us, better than people in Dey Krahom and Sambok Chap” who had been denied any compensation. She then promptly lost her temper again.

But we still think, are we animals or human beings? Are we Khmers or foreigners living on this land?... My parents died in the Pol Pot regime... I am 100 percent Khmer! So I should have the

same rights as others! But I had no rights as a human being, we got nothing from the authorities or company... They evicted us and they gave only that amount of money... And they thought that they were being good because they gave money to us. But the truth is, we think that we were in the most *cheu jap* ["pain catch," i.e., emotional hurt] that they classified us as poor and powerless people that they must *keap sangkawt* ("squeeze oppress," i.e., control by force or power) by all means.

In this striking passage, Dawy asserts her rights as a person and as a Cambodian, contrasting her own worthiness with the actions of the Canadia Company. One of the most interesting points she makes, however, is how deeply pained she was by her treatment by powerful agents. She emphasizes that it is they, not she, who are greedy. Dawy asserts her own financial rights of course, but also makes it crystal clear that other principles are at stake. She is further humiliated by being treated as a poor and powerless person who must be controlled. She is also proud of all that she had achieved in her life against all odds, and her unfair treatment challenges her sense of self-worth.

Dawy concludes more quietly, and with comments that stand in stark contrast with Chanthon and the others discussed in the previous section:

We weren't happy because the original value of our house was 2 or 3 times more... I think it didn't affect my livelihood much because I have a job and my husband also has a job... It is not affected, but I am far from my work place... In short, I am not how things would be if I didn't have a job.

Dawy does not share the livelihood crisis described in the previous section. Nevertheless, we see here how even when a forced eviction does not threaten livelihoods, financial effects can be very serious, and very deeply felt. The eviction was financially harmful to Dawy and her family despite the fact that she and her husband both had held onto their jobs, as their compensation was far less than the value of their home.

One of the key points that Dawy highlights is her experiences during Cambodia's protracted war, and how very hard she had worked to overcome the suffering and poverty that characterized her childhood and youth. Her home and property represented all that she had achieved since then. As Dawy more explicitly discussed in her later life history interview:

When I had my own house, even though it was not very nice, it was a shelter that I had for my children's warmth... It was a small house, but it was our property. And when [the eviction] happened like that, if it were you, wouldn't you be *cheu jab* ["pain catch," i.e., hurt emotionally]? We worked very hard, saved money to build a proper house to live in; finally, they came to scream that it was their land and we had to leave. At that time, we were very *cheu jab* because I am a Khmer and I had - I said at the Phnom Penh Municipality that, I am a Khmer just like you are, we have had the same fortune. For example, during the Pol Pot regime, you were forced to leave your house, like my family. But now, why is it that I am living in a small community, a small neighborhood, why is it like that again?... This is very important, more important than our property. I have a right to dignity, to live in dignity, but they came to force us like animals... We worked until our backs sweat to earn money to buy that house to live in, then they came to say that we had no right to live on that land!

Despite her realism and savvy about what compensation she could realistically expect from the Canadia company, Dawy remains outraged at the injustice of her loss. All this is made more difficult because of her own personal history of grief, loss, desperate poverty, and helplessness during the war and its aftermath. The eviction had badly disrupted a life course

characterized by overcoming the trauma of the war years. She feels the injustice very deeply and personally. Dawy is particularly indignant that she was not treated as an equal by authorities despite the fact that they were all Khmers, who had shared the same “fortune” during the Pol Pot regime. She also repeatedly evokes the language of human rights, declaring that “this is very important, more important than our property,” and her speech is full of emotional resonance. Dawy is not parroting language learned in an NGO workshop; she speaks from her heart. Although she and her family remained financially secure following their eviction, the loss of their home was a terrible blow indeed.

Other middle-class and “upper-poor” participants’ families had also been destitute after the war, and had struggled enormously from dire poverty to reach a basic level of financial security. The material expression of this security after so many years of struggle was her physical homes. Phenomenal amounts of work and care had gone into building or purchasing homes (“we worked until our backs sweat”), which, even when very modest, symbolized what had been overcome. This group of people also tended to be very attached to their neighborhoods as communities, and have dense social networks that were embedded in it (Kanya: “Reak Reay was a poor community... [But] living there was always, we could call it vibrant”).

We also see in Dawy’s narrative interesting hints of how social stratification and power hierarchies divide communities. Dawy is rightfully proud of her professional success despite her difficult and disadvantaged upbringing, and throughout both interviews she voiced her strong commitment to justice, equity, and fairness for all. Yet, she compares the treatment of herself and her neighbors to that experienced by animals, farmers, and foreigners; it should be noted that ethnic Vietnamese and rural people are themselves highly vulnerable to forced evictions.

We also see divisions among neighborhood residents regarding offered compensation, particularly between those who stand to lose more (have a “big house”), compared to those who do not (i.e., a “small house”). Echoes of this are found throughout the narratives: those with more at stake in terms of absolute levels are more prosperous and have stronger legal claims, whereas those who are poorer tend to be disengaged from legal proceedings and community action, instead emphasizing the need for alleviation from poverty in general, even to the point of glossing over the forced eviction itself. Moreover, the social networks of these two groups do not overlap, and they describe their neighborhoods in rather contrasting ways. While there were expressions of solidarity, on the whole there tended to be considerable disconnect between these two groups on many levels. Some were even dismissive of the others. Sina was satisfied with the compensation she received for her meager dwelling at Boeung Kak Lake, and she was unconcerned about the disenfranchisement of wealthier neighbors, characterizing them in unflattering terms. “Some people who are greedy, they may think that [the compensation] is small for them, but for my group, [our houses] were only 5 or 6 meters [long] anyway, we don’t want more.” Meanwhile, the homeowners were often dismissive or critical of neighborhood renters and other poor as troublemakers: “They drank and fought with each other... They¹¹ made noise, they never thought about their futures” (Naree). The interests, attitudes, and social networks of those harmed in terms of livelihoods versus assets are thus very different.

In terms of a vulnerability and capacity analysis for homeowners with some sort of steady income, we see an entirely different source of economic harm. On the one hand their more stable livelihoods serve as a crucial protective factor against the misery of extreme poverty. On an absolute level, they indeed have more resources and are in better circumstances. On a relative level, however, they lose much more insofar as the value of their confiscated assets are very

¹¹ Naree used the pronoun *via*, which is reserved for animals; using this term to refer to people is very insulting.

considerable. Anti-eviction efforts within Cambodia often conflate the very different populations who are very poor, and those who legally own their properties. What we are seeing here is that these two groups are very different, with different outlooks and orientations. From a stress and coping perspective, the key difference is not diverging cognitive appraisals of a common threat, but entirely different situation conditions altogether. DRR theory would hold that despite a uniform ‘disaster,’ harm is unevenly distributed, and would follow at least to some extent pre-existing social stratification. The data presented in this study certainly confirms this. Homeowners and renters may live side-by-side, but their situations and interests are divergent. The dominant discourse of anti-eviction efforts in Cambodia – both community-based as well as national in scope – adopt a property rights perspective, highlighting legal ownership of land that is subverted by the state without fair compensation. This is certainly true, and the perspective of the ‘asset harm’ trajectory is consistent with this discourse. They are only one sub-population, however, and do not by and large encompass the very poor, either pre- or post-displacement.

High levels of both livelihood and asset harm

High levels of both livelihood and asset harm were especially found among more successful entrepreneurs with businesses operating from or near their homes.¹² These families thus simultaneously lost both properties (some of which were quite valuable), as well as their businesses. Once-prosperous (or at least secure) families thus tumble into poverty. Most had virtually no family resources in the immediate post-war period, and many have limited formal education or skills that would be attractive to employers. The double loss of home and livelihood represents a catastrophic loss and a return to poverty, sometimes for an entire extended family that had been deeply embedded in their geographic community.

An exemplary narrative of this trajectory is Sorya, a young unmarried former resident of Dey Krahom. Prior to her forced eviction, she lived with her extended family in a large home that served as a base for multiple businesses, including renting out pushcarts to snack vendors, moneylending, and running a small coffee shop and convenience store on the premises. They were denied any compensation at all and left in a state of destitution. The family physically scattered; Sorya herself was left to support her aging mother on marginal earnings, first as a domestic housecleaner and then as a community outreach worker for an NGO. She was also homeless for a time, before finding a place she could afford to rent (\$30 per month), in a slum, alongside an open sewer. Twenty-three at the time of her interview, Sorya was one of the only participants who had actually been born and raised in Phnom Penh. She exhibited especially strong emotional ties to her former home and community. The condition she was left in was exacerbated by the violent nature of the forced eviction from Dey Krahom; her family lost all their valuables and possessions in the process.

Sorya paints a stark portrait of her life before and after her forced eviction, emphasizing the toll on “my body and my heart,” that is, both physically and emotionally.

Comparing my situation now with the one in Dey Krahom, every day is difficult for my body and my heart. Before, I had a business, a house and enough utilities... But, now I rent a house, I do have a job but it’s not permanent... After I left [Dey Krahom], I worked at the Korean’s house [as a housecleaner] for only \$60 per month, and that money was for everyday expenses, including food, and it was not enough... So, my living is not like it was before. Before, when I opened my

¹² By contrast, those discussed in section 4.2.1 (“livelihoods harm”) worked in the informal sector at a more basic level, often selling from pushcarts or giving manicures in a neighboring market and so forth. This section concerns more prosperous small business rather than petty trade.

eyes in the morning, I saw money coming in, because I had a shop. Now, when I open my eyes, I don't know where the money is...[The eviction] has affected the children's education, my mother's health and everything. We were successful in our business, it was growing, suddenly everything was destroyed. That made our lives *don daap* [in terrible, hopeless conditions, everything lost].

Sorya's house and all of her family's possessions had been destroyed when her neighborhood had been bulldozed under violent conditions, and it is clear that this was a traumatic event for her. In the above passage, we see Sorya struggling with the enormity of what she had experienced and how it had swept away her entire life. She continued to struggle with how to manage her newly-impooverished state:

At Dey Krahom... we could earn over 100,000 [Riel per day, ≈US\$25]... Before we used to sleep on a mattress, we used to have an air conditioner and fans. If we still had our dignity, if we had money, we couldn't live in a poor person's place, but these days we have to be poor people, so we have to adapt... I look around and see [I have] nothing; I feel pity for myself when I look around and have nothing... I cannot [solve] because I don't know how to think to do another way... I am alone, I cannot depend on others, I depend only on myself.

Sorya struggles with managing poverty and the indignity of life following her forced eviction. She also expresses an association between having nothing and being alone, moving fluidly from poverty to isolation. She is unable to solve her problems, unsure how to exist in her newly-impooverished state, and deeply mistrustful. Sorya's example also underscores that there is overlap between the livelihood-harm and asset-harm groups. It is also a reminder that some households are denied any compensation whatsoever. Sorya's circumstances represent a "perfect storm" of risk factors despite her being quite prosperous and having strong social networks prior to her eviction. All were grounded in Dey Krahom, however. Sorya's extended family all lived there, and all of their livelihoods were tied to it. Their assets were entirely within the form of local property and businesses. Even their possessions were destroyed with their homes. Sorya's entire extended family lost everything that they had, including each other. They had to separate and scatter across Phnom Penh.

The first two trajectories that I outlined in this paper were composed of highly distinct sub-populations with divergent socioeconomic interests and circumstances. However, this category highlights that there can be overlap between the two. Moreover, this group's impoverishment trajectory is poorly explained by their pre-displacement economic status, and thus demonstrates that a more nuanced analysis is called for. The crisis circumstances of this group are best explained by the fact that their resources (both financial and social capital) were so densely embedded in their geographic communities.

Benign impact of forced eviction

Some families were, in fact, not particularly harmed by their forced eviction, or managed to recover fairly quickly. A few actually came out ahead. It is notable that the trajectories of those who did well after their eviction are far less internally consistent; many of the narratives are highly idiosyncratic, and offer little for policymakers and practitioners to work with. Sina's story may offer the best example of this situation. The chief reason why "I am not angry that they evicted me and I am also happy to live here" is that "when we lived [at Boeung Kak Lake, my husband] picked fights the same as now... and he had girls, he's a womanizer... But now it seems less... I don't know why, maybe he doesn't have a lot of money anymore so he doesn't have many girls." The participants' explanations and interpretations of the more positive forced

eviction experiences are quite varied.¹³ Nevertheless, there are some factors that help explain why and how some of those affected by evictions “landed on their feet.” These include:

- Livelihoods were unaffected, or they were able to quickly find new jobs. (Konthy: “What is better [here than at Boeung Kak Lake] is having a factory near the house.”)
- Solid social support and/or benefactors in the new location. (Bopha: “I live nowadays thanks to that old woman, I tell you the truth... [The family living next door] gives me soup every day”).
- Limited personal or financial investment in the evicted house or community. (Sokhan: “I heard that somebody bought the land [where we rented a house] and whatever, but I didn’t pay it any attention... I thought, why ask about other people’s matters? I care only about our business, our family... I don’t care [about anything else].”)
- Availability of new housing nearby. (Pola: “Oh there were some [difficulties], like moving, and I was tired, moving around it was tiring, but I am happier [now].” Pola was living only a few blocks from her former residence in Borei Keila.)
- New housing is of equal or superior quality. (Bopha: “Yes, [this house is] more developed than before. I got a cement house; it’s more developed but I myself have not developed.” [laugh])
- Matter-of-fact attitude: (Sokhan: “Of course I [lost money], but what could I do; when it’s lost it is my money, but when I earn profit it is also my money; that’s what I think.”)
- Presence of other more salient/pressing issues in their lives. (Pola: “It is very difficult eh, my problem, it is so difficult, that’s why I wander around these days, don’t want to work anymore... I always go out wandering, my family, it’s like a violent family... I do not want to talk [to my husband], I never stay at home.”)
- Miscellaneous idiosyncratic reasons (Dina: “Now that we live only just three people, me with my younger brothers, it is another way of life. Because at Boeung Kak, I was under my older brother’s supervision whether I liked it or not, I got pressure from my big brother. Living here, I am the biggest”).

It is difficult to select a single exemplar narrative from among those who expressed more positive, or at least neutral, experiences with forced eviction, because these narratives are so thematically diverse. It is important to acknowledge that forced evictions in Phnom Penh do not affect everyone adversely. While some do not experience more than temporary disruption of their lives, the reasons and pathways are disparate. The chief lesson, however, is that maintaining livelihood capacity is essential. To some extent, people are being relocated to areas where there are garment factories. However, the minimum wage for garment factory workers in Cambodia is only \$61 per month (Kuntheart and Worrell, 2012), and they typically only hire young single women (although supplemental income can be earned by others doing piecework at home). Some families may be able to get by, but most cannot, and it will never be a pathway out of poverty. Proximity to garment factories does not solve the problem of livelihoods for the displaced.

¹³ While some participants expressed satisfaction with their eviction experience, not all did so convincingly. These “bland satisfaction” narratives carefully avoided any criticism of authorities or other powerful figures, but lacked richness and nuance, and some adopted this discourse despite obvious harm. These narratives differed remarkably from frank narratives where participants explained their more positive pathway with energy and detail. There were similarly flat narratives with other viewpoints, including politicized ones and ones that were clearly pitched toward persuading me to provide assistance personally or via an NGO. However, it is undeniable that the bland, unconvincing narratives tended to express positive outcomes. The quotes in this section are largely from participants who seemed to be genuinely satisfied with their eviction experience.

I chose Sokhan to represent the group of neutral/improved outcomes *not* because her narrative encapsulates this group's pathway – this group is too diverse and idiosyncratic for that. Indeed, Sokhan's narrative stands out as unique in several respects. I have chosen it because she best represents a model of resilience, and because she had specific decisions and characteristics that cushioned her family from the crisis their forced eviction could have become. Her example is thus the one that best presents a model that is of relevance to policymakers and practitioners.

Sokhan was a middle-aged married woman with children, some of whom had grown and others were still studying. The entire household worked in the family business of roasting and selling bananas and yams; they also had two renters living with them. At the time of her interview, they netted up to \$10 per day after expenses, 6 days per week. On Sundays, she diligently attended church services and rested; she had converted to Christianity a decade before because "I was mad that the ghost made my daughter sick very often... Then we joined [the Mormon Church], and I gave up all my ancestor incense sticks and until today, and there is no ghost or phantom harming [my family] anymore... I would not have joined, but I had to."

Sokhan was a no-nonsense woman with a keen eye for business and a strict policy of staying out of other people's trouble. In fact, she denied that she had been evicted from Reak Reay at all, instead explaining that her landlord had sold the house to the Canadia company. As a renter, she had not been eligible for any compensation, although she had received \$80 to help with moving expenses. Like most participants, she had initially moved to an area where she felt she could afford the rent, and then set about re-starting her family business. Like many others, she discovered that her business was not viable in the new location. "After moving [from Reak Reay, it] was expensive... and as for earning money, we couldn't sell or do anything, so I looked for a new way." The difference is that she had not over-extended herself in setting up a new household and was able to 'cut her losses.' Having avoided getting trapped in debt, Sokhan made a careful and strategic decision to move again to a location where she felt confident it would be "easy to earn money" even though the rent was several times higher. She proudly concludes that, "since [we moved a second time], my business has done very well."

Sokhan does acknowledge difficulties: "No one helped [us move twice]; we came by ourselves and it cost a lot, but that is okay." She emphasizes that she and her family are happy and well, and she expresses thankfulness for all that they have. "We were tired [from moving], but we didn't argue; my family didn't do that. Because, I tell you the truth, my family believes in Christianity... My children are doing fine, my business is going well, God blesses me and provides me with enough to eat, little by little." She focused on hard work and satisfaction with what she had.

Things are okay. It is normal to be tired; in everyone's life, we always feel tired, because we lack [something], we need to struggle. Sometimes we are short of cash, but just lack some little things; it is not so bad like having no food. We have never not had food... [Compared to before the eviction] incomes and expenses are different but, like this, we work very hard so we will always have something to spend. If we don't work hard, we won't have [money] to spend, that's how it is.

Several points stand out in Sokhan's account. Probably the most important is that she prioritized her business over comfortable housing for her family. Among my entire sample, Sokhan is the only one who did so. Although the rent in this second location was substantially higher than it had been at Reak Reay, business was thriving and so, therefore, was her family. This is perhaps the most important lesson that can be learned from Sokhan's narrative. If business prospers, housing can be improved at a later time. The reverse approach did not succeed for other

participants. Most had over-extended themselves in sorting out their housing in the aftermath of forced eviction, and then were caught by surprise when their livelihoods failed. However, Sokhan's economic strategy is not necessarily an easy fix. As basic housing in Phnom Penh disappears, it may become more and more difficult to pursue this route.

A second critical factor that may explain Sokhan's resilience is that her strong but diffuse social network also remained exceptionally intact after the eviction. She did have close ties, but they were not within her geographic neighborhood. Her network of both moral and material support was concentrated elsewhere. She was also extremely strategic in her social relations, which appeared to be small but reliable and never threatened to drain her resources or energy. Sokhan repeatedly emphasized staying out of other people's affairs, even within her own extended family. Her sister, for example, owned a home in Reak Reay, but she said, "I don't know what went on with her, it wasn't my business... For me, I didn't own a house, I didn't care, I was on my own." She steadfastly avoided getting too involved with other people's problems. It is notable that at one point she spontaneously gave a short speech about giving to beggars ("I spend 2,000 - 3,000 riel [US\$0.50 - \$0.75] per day giving to beggars, sometimes I spend 3,000 - 4,000 riel... I just do good deeds. I think, they beg because they are hungry"). Perhaps this was to emphasize her moral worth and goodness despite her steadfast avoidance of entangling social alliances. Giving to beggars represents an act of kindness that does not come with expectations or obligations for future assistance. Sokhan gives generously, but impersonally.

The social network that Sokhan does engage in is the Mormon Church. While Sokhan did express spiritual dedication, she also highlighted the many practical benefits of membership, namely that the Mormon Church pays for all hospital and funeral expenses for its members. Sokhan is thus embedded narrowly and carefully within a social network that extends emotional resources as well as a financial safety net, and does not risk taxing her own family's poor but stable existence. This is very different from the obligations of reciprocity and exchange that other participants used to describe their social ties. This social network is also unique insofar as it operates entirely independent of her geographic neighborhood. While this hardly represents a "model" to follow, it is a notable characteristic. By contrast, those whose support systems were deeply embedded in their geographic communities had no one, as well as nowhere, to turn to.

The example of those with relatively benign displacement experiences is important, as it highlights ways in which urban Cambodians are resilient, and these learnings can be used to inform public policy as well as strategies to support the displaced. This final trajectory marks an important contrast with the one that preceded it (harm to both assets and livelihood), while also confirming one of its chief findings: that the degree to which people are economically and socially embedded in their neighborhoods is enormously influential. The narratives of the 'benign impact' trajectory are diverse, idiosyncratic, and seemingly unrelated to pre-displacement economic circumstances. We do, however, consistently find that these women had social and economic ties external to, and often independent of, their neighborhoods. This was rarely the case for homeowners, but often the case for renters. Thus the strength and nature of community ties represents an enormous influence on post-displacement outcomes.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have documented women's socioeconomic trajectories following forced evictions from Phnom Penh neighborhoods. Given a context of widespread poverty in Cambodia, participants' overall approaches to coping and adaptation are inextricably interwoven within the nature and extent of material loss. The data demonstrate that forced eviction does not represent a

uniform threat. Harm is unevenly distributed, and the nature of that harm is also variable and closely tied to financial circumstances. Women from all socioeconomic strata are affected, but in very different ways. Relatively more prosperous landowners are typically more harmed in terms of absolute value of lost assets, whereas the poor tend to be more harmed by loss of livelihood capacity. Furthermore, there are women for whom eviction was incidental or even led to improved circumstances; in all such cases, however, they had been able to maintain their livelihood and housing quality, re-locate in desirable geographic locations, and recoup the value of their properties. Renters had the most mixed outcomes, encompassing both the most and the least harmed among all the informants. The diversity of issues and outcomes has important implications for policy and programming, and it is clear that the uniform compensation packages in Cambodia are often very poorly suited to individual circumstances.

Most of those affected by forced evictions are remarkably resilient in the face of considerable hardship and stress. However, the poor are especially reliant on living in proximity to those with more means, because they represent customers, clients, and sources of credit. The poor, when removed from diverse neighborhoods and concentrated together, find themselves destitute. When there is not enough money circulating in the local economy, norms of reciprocity and mutual assistance are of little relevance: there are no resources to share. They need to live in mixed-income environments with diverse livelihood opportunities in order to manage.

Some of those affected by forced eviction do indeed “land on their feet,” and even come out with improved circumstances. The narratives of these “positive deviants” are eclectic and idiosyncratic. However, several factors did emerge that were characteristic of many in this group, including uninterrupted livelihoods; new employment or successful business in new neighborhoods; compensation exceeding the value of the former home; new residence being nearby the former one; matter-of-fact, stoic attitude; higher education and financial resources; and intact social and economic networks independent of former neighborhood.

Policy and discourse surrounding forced evictions in Cambodia often focuses on the issue of housing and shelter. In this study, however, livelihood capacity overwhelmingly emerged as the most salient issue, and loss of it provoked intense crisis. The women’s voices rise almost in unison surrounding income. The greatest harm for many was not loss of home but loss of jobs and businesses. This indicates that the best approach to compensation packages would be for homeowners to be awarded full current market value for their properties. Displaced renters, on the other hand, would benefit from broad urban planning measures to protect and encourage affordable rental housing districts within the city, so that they can remain in proximity to sources of informal-sector income. There was also a very high demand expressed for ongoing livelihood programming and, more indirectly, for subsidized public transportation. Sorya, however, best captured the sentiments of the evicted women: “My solution is that, I want other NGOs to help us. Actually, I don’t have any solution to these problems. In my mind, I only want my house and land back.”

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