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## **Disproportionate Effects of Climate Change\_one view from Rural Cambodia**

Hannah Litchfield MMASc

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## Disproportionate Effects of Climate Change: one view from Rural Cambodia



by Hannah Litchfield

MMASc. Global Health Systems candidate, Western University

November 22, 2021

In the Spring of 2013, I travelled to rural Cambodia for a latrine building project with [Habitat for Humanity, Canada](#). A close friend suggested we participate in a building trip while in our second year of university. Together, we chose to participate in the Siem Reap, Cambodia mission because we knew relatively little about Southeast Asia and were incredibly interested in exploring and learning about the culture.

As I waded through the swampy rice fields in a village fifteen kilometres outside of Siem Reap alongside Mum, my group's Khmer language translator, Mum chuckled: "I hope you are not afraid of a little mud." Our boots sank into the damp, brown mess. At the risk of losing my footing, I looked out over the massive rice fields, expecting to see the characteristic peaks of green grass and neat rows of walking pathways and, instead, realized that I was looking at a small lake. The effects of the rainy season were impossible to ignore and had clearly devastated the crop yield in this particular area.

As we made our way to the building site, I asked Mum if flooding like this was normal. He commented that, while the Spring is usually very rainy, it had become much worse in recent years. Farmers were no longer able to rely on their yield as a sustainable source of income and it was leading to tremendous stress throughout local communities.

"All we do is worry. We never know if there will be enough: enough food, enough water, enough rice, enough shelter. We never know if it will be taken away. It brings great sadness to our

people, to live without knowing”

As we conversed further, I learned that his home had been lost to flooding only two years earlier and he had been forced to move to another village several kilometres away. This was devastating to Mum, as his connection to the land of his birth was incredibly meaningful.

“This was very hard for me. I was separated from my village – my people and my ways of life – and knew no one. My village was my family and I consider my family to be my home. So, in a way, I lost two homes that day. I could have gone to the city, but could not bear to be that far away from all that I knew.”

Mum’s story has lived in my subconscious for the past eight years, seven months, and one week. His story so perfectly exemplifies how the impacts of climate change disproportionately affect the most vulnerable – those without the skills, support or financial means to truly recover.

As stated in the Cambodia Climate Change Strategic Plan, poverty is the main national development priority and is disproportionately experienced in rural, agricultural communities (NCCC, 2013, p. 1). The National Climate Change Committee states that, “households engaged in agricultural activities currently have the highest incidence of poverty and as such they are also highly vulnerable to climate change.” (NCCC, 2013, p. 1). Due to its location on the Gulf of Thailand, Cambodia is exposed to severe weather fluctuations (NCCC, 2013, p. 8). For hundreds of years, communities have adopted practices in order to mitigate the damage associated with weather extremes. For example, in Mum’s village, every home was raised on large stilts, in preparation for seasonal flooding, and communities collected rainwater in large basins in order to prepare for sudden changes in water accessibility during the dry season (M. Phan, personal communication, April 2013). Unfortunately, the cyclical patterns of drought and flooding have been dramatically exacerbated by climate change, devastating the livelihood of rural Cambodians. Agriculture accounts for 57.6% of national employment with the majority of farmers living in poor, isolated, communities with little access to diverse sources of income (NCCC, 2013, p. 5). One of the biggest concerns is the lack of resources, infrastructure, social support, and overall capacity to respond and adapt to devastating events, such as flooding. As stated in the Lancet article, *Managing the health effects of climate change*, “climate change will have its greatest effect on those who have the least access to the world’s resources and who have contributed least to its cause” (Costello et. al., 2009, p. 1694). Furthermore, in *Climate Change, Human Rights and Social Justice*, Levy and Patz state that developing countries are 80 times more likely to experience a devastating weather-related disaster in comparison to developed countries (Levy & Patz, 2009, p. 315). Additionally, poorer, rural populations, “generally lack access to protective and preventive services and lack the socioeconomic resilience to withstand the adverse consequences of these events,” leaving vulnerable nations in an inescapable cycle (Levy & Patz, 2015, p. 315). Overall, it is clear that adverse weather events related to climate change has impacted rural Cambodia in the worst way possible – by damaging the only source of income in communities ravished by poverty.

Travelling to the capital city of Phenom Penh, however, I could see that poverty existed on a continuum. There were high-rise governmental buildings, malls, public swimming pools, schools and universities. Citizens held occupations such as doctor, lawyer, teacher and business owner with some safety and reliability around a paycheck. Clearly, there were far more opportunities to thrive in an urban setting, with improved access to resources, economic diversity, and support systems. According to the National Climate Change Committee’s Strategic Plan for 2014 – 2023, Cambodia is experiencing economic growth, is gradually improving infrastructure, and has a rich natural resource base contributing to its overall improvement in GDP (NCCC, 2013, p. 10). The report notes, however, that limited human

resources, capacity and technology, lack of resilience to natural disasters, more frequent and extreme climate events, and poor adaptive capacity among citizens, makes effective and equitable climate intervention incredibly challenging (NCCC, 2013, p. 10). Overall, Cambodia is in the midst of positive socioeconomic changes, however, this experience is inequitably distributed across the population, favouring urban dwellers in positions of socioeconomic privilege.

What is abundantly clear is that socioeconomic disadvantage exists both between and within countries on a socioeconomic gradient. Take the UK, for example. In Health impacts of climate change and health and social inequalities in the UK, Paavola acknowledges that there exists a disproportionate risk of flooding for socioeconomically disadvantaged households or individuals living with disabilities, chronic illness or dependent on social services, due to their over-representation in low-income coastal communities (Paavola, 2017, p. 65). Furthermore, their capacity to adapt or recover is limited based on low income, lack of access to social support systems, or the inability to recover uninsured assets (Paavola, 2017, p. 65). Comparing the UK to Cambodia, it is clear that the UK has the upper hand in terms of higher GDP, better access to healthcare services, educational opportunities, and diversity in the economy. Zooming in further, however, it is clear that the poorest of the poor on the socioeconomic scale experience worse outcomes as a result of climate change in both low- and high-income countries.

Overall, it is interesting to look from a wide, medium, and narrow lens when it comes to the impacts of climate change and compounding disadvantage. As negative bio-psycho-social economic factors increase, so does the impact of climate change on the population, which can be acknowledged on a global, national, or community level. I am happy to report that Mum and I still communicate over Facebook and were able to connect in anticipation of writing this post. I asked him, “if you could tell Canadian students anything about what it is like to experience climate change in your village outside of Siem Reap, what would you say?” Here is Mum’s response: “We are learning that these changes will never go away and have to manage as best we can. We all worry. We don’t have the money or education to do anything else – so all we can do is pray that we will be taken care of. We don’t know when the next drought or flood will come, but simply know that it will. We don’t know if our homes will be here in one year from today. All we can do is stick together and pray for our land and our people.” - M. Phan, personal communication, October 2021

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