

Conclusions

1 Negative impacts for urban poor largely avoidable?

Over twenty years Phnom Penh's skyline has changed almost beyond recognition. It's population has doubled, it has received millions of dollars in foreign aid and today attracts investors from across the globe. Yet when we take a look under the bonnet we see that what has been an upward economic trajectory for some *phnom penhois* has not been the story for much of the population, in particular the urban poor. With over 150,000 residents displaced since 1990¹ the story has been far from positive and in many cases has compounded and exacerbated what was already a very precarious existence. This perennial tension between the well connected elite and the disenfranchised urban poor is a drama played out in varying forms throughout many, if not all, cities. Phnom Penh has followed a similar course to many of its neighbouring capitals which in their post colonial state have struggled with, avoided or mismanaged the marrying of city development with progressive policies on relocation and social housing. Indeed Phnom Penh has followed the clichéd patterns of newly emerging nations almost to the letter with the urban poor shouldering many of the downsides. What few people recognise is that most of it could have been avoided. The disingenuous equation often put forward by the RGC (and even some bilateral partners) is that pursuing an active development agenda means that some people have to lose out. The truth is that with some basic planning much of the impact on the urban poor *was* largely avoidable and indeed there could have been an upside for developers, the RGC *and* the urban poor. A simple example being the Prime Minister's granting of land to some of the Boeung Kak families. Had the land been 'donated' at the outset of the project, and donors and NGOs encouraged to partner this sensible action, then the upheaval of thousands of families could have been avoided, the international standing of Cambodia raised rather than lowered and thousands of NGO staff hours used *towards* the project instead of *against* its injustices. While the RGC continues to avoid pinning down a genuine pro poor urban policy the outlook remains turbulent. Part of the problem has been the sclerotic state of the planning system.

2 Formal Planning interventions: a lack of vision?

Phnom Penh is to a large extent a product of its former colonial masters, the French. However this blueprint for the city holds little influence today. The French backed urban masterplan (*Le Livre Blanc*), which was developed in 2007, has been quietly shelved in favour of what appears to be a *laissez faire* approach to planning in which large developers, in close association with municipal authorities, are virtually free to dictate what gets built where. Instead of a continuation of the existing grid system (which for all its limitations does respect the geography and hydrology of the area) the outskirts of Phnom Penh are already beginning to resemble the direly uninspiring suburbs of Bangkok and Hanoi. The so-called 'satellite cities'² of Camko City and Grand Phnom Penh are emblematic of this myopic vision of the city³. They have been developed in isolation, in the mould of the 'gated community', an enclave for the embryonic middle class with the

1 Sahmakum Teang Tnaut, *Facts and Figures 11; Displaced families in PP (updated)*, STT, Phnom Penh, 2010

2 Calling the developments 'satellite cities' seems to be a misnomer. A satellite city by definition can not be contained within the boundaries of the city to which it is supposedly a satellite.

3 Philip Lawton, *The Ruins of the Present: Urban Development in Phnom Penh, Cambodia*, 2011

'unattractive, chaotic and opportunistic' urban poor driven to the outskirts of the city⁴. For the moment the developers' initial progress has waned due to limited demand and internal financial difficulties (and Camko has faced charges back in South Korea linked to corruption and money laundering) but it seems that these developments will be the blueprint for the future. Social housing and indeed a strategy and vision for the general growth of the city seem to be consigned to promising but toothless sub-decrees and policies, a number of which have not progressed beyond the draft stage. This lack of city wide strategies on issues such as drainage, sewerage, transport and most pertinently, the handling of development induced displacement and urban poor settlements, does not bode well. The heavy handed treatment of residents has undoubtedly opened up valuable city sites for private developers but, as in the case of Borei Keila and Boeung Kak, has come at considerable cost to the Government's internal and international reputation. However the situation is far from irretrievable and whatever course is taken, Phnom Penh is undoubtedly set to grow. It is not a Jakarta or Mumbai where the sheer weight of population alone is enough to deflate any sense of defining the problems let alone implementing solutions. Once referred to as the Pearl of Asia, Phnom Penh is well placed to recapture that title – and still has the potential to do so.

3 Urban Poor Policy Interventions: a very mixed bag

Some Governments have an urban poor policy but fail to implement it. The RGC has simply never produced a coherent policy. Legislation on resettlement has been put off intermittently throughout the 20 year period and the latest Circular 03, supported by GIZ, takes some tentative steps towards policy on 'resolution' of urban poor settlements but its take up (let alone implementation) by the MPP has been lukewarm. The closest thing to a policy was the formation of the Urban Poor Reduction Unit (UPRU), housed at the MPP in 2001, which drafted the Urban Poor Reduction Strategy (UPRS) but again this was initiated by foreign intervention (UN Habitat) and remained largely impotent in its short tenure. UNCHS played a promising role from 1996-2000 but from this time onwards UN Habitat's influence withered as it fell increasingly under the wing, both physically and policy-wise, of the MPP. The MPP's biggest coup in terms of urban poor intervention came via the ACHR's establishment of UPDF. This provided the closest thing to a ready made 'urban poor unit' for the MPP and in turn allowed the UPDF unhindered access to communities. It has achieved some success in providing savings and credit, infrastructure improvements and in some cases new housing but has done little to secure all important tenure rights and protection from forced eviction. Indeed those organisations that have not aligned with the MPP, however well intentioned or well planned their interventions, have been increasingly sidelined. Therefore some urban poor residents have experienced *both* infrastructure upgrading and forced eviction within a period of 12 months. This schizophrenic approach is not building up resilience and trust among the urban poor but rather is compounding suspicion and instability.

With no formal RGC policy on urban poor, NGO and donor interventions have filled the void with varying degrees of impact. Typically there has been little connection between interventions with each donor pursuing a specific agenda. Some advocate close collaboration with the authorities, others encourage community groups and NGOs to work independently. Some interventions have looked at health, some at education, others at infrastructure. Some have worked well, others less so, but with no overarching coordination the impact has inevitably been piecemeal. Attempts to secure the holy grail of pro-poor urban policy, namely tenure security,

4 STT 8 khan survey

looked promising with the establishment of LMAP in 2002 but urban settlements ended up being sidelined by the project and in some cases (eg Boeung Kak) excised unilaterally from the process. It has been a largely unedifying display. The thinly disguised collaboration of State and Commercial developers, the muted pleas of donors regarding forced eviction, the intimidation of NGOs and community leaders; none of it points to a progressive Government approach nor an inspiring donor response.

4 Activist Voices: a new era?

One of the most striking aspects of this period has been the rapid growth of community groups and their almost equally rapid collapse. Perhaps this is not surprising. Social groups built on thin foundations are unlikely to flourish in any conditions. Since 2001 community leadership has been widely compromised and abused by the influence of the Government/developer nexus. Leaders have been in place physically but many are no longer trusted by their community. However from this barren landscape individuals have begun to emerge, bubbling to the surface not through the channels of networks or patronage but through their own instinctive response to intensely pressurised situations. Facing intimidation, threats, violence and imprisonment a new breed of community activist has emerged, many of whom are women. Tep Vanny aged 32 is one such figure. Is she, and those like her, the new era? The RGC's de facto policy of attrition, the gradual

Tep Vanny was a latecomer to the area. When she got married in 1993, her husband's parents bought them a home in Boeung Kak Lake. They had begun to build a home with their two children. But she felt she had to act, as part of her community's struggle, and she became more vocal after the long term leader of the women gave up on the cause. "We can do more than take our husband's clothes, wash them, and hang them," Vanny told Boeung Kak's women. "Are we strong? This is a woman's struggle." In May 2012, thirteen of the women, including Vanny, were convicted and sentenced to two-and-a-half years in prison. She and her friends have been smart about attracting outside attention and their struggle attracted international media. The sentences were reduced, but the Boeung Kak Lake women continued their fight. Vanny and her friends led a demonstration of over a thousand protesters during the ASEAN and East Asia Summits held in Phnom Penh. "What motivates me is the injustice, to be strong for my community. But it's not justice only for my community," says Vanny. "It's for everyone, every community affected by development. I want to show that everyone needs to understand their rights so that the government has to take notice."⁵

grinding down of resistance over time using a well established set of tactics, has proven highly effective in the short term. The Achilles heel to this is people such as Vanny; ordinary people forged into activists often against even their own intention but driven on by the raw injustices they have witnessed. It is this type of catalyst that is hard to contain or predict and that may one day lead to wider protests – hopefully nonviolent, and much good work is being done by NGOs to support this. The RGC has generally been careful to hamper public debate without resorting to extreme, public displays of violence. It can also be speculated that Cambodians are reticent to revisit the 'revolution' days of the 1970s or that they are traditionally 'submissive'. The one certainty is that the RGC is treading a fine line between allowing an exploitative approach to 'developing' urban poor settlements and provoking widespread unrest. The RGC can either continue this approach or try to work with these young shoots. It can happen. It is not a question of funding nor of human resources. It is a

5 Excerpt from Vital Voices <http://www.vitalvoices.org>

question of political will – of switching the mindset from despising and fearing the urban poor to accepting and building a new relationship.