

# Understanding Urban Vulnerabilities in Phnom Penh, Cambodia

**11 December 2019 Workshop; Phnom Penh (Royal University of Fine Arts Auditorium)**  
*(Main language used will be English)*

This one-day workshop will generate dialogue on the concept of urban vulnerability as it relates to Cambodian cities. Much research has looked at poverty and development in urban Cambodia, focusing on deprivation, or the lack of resources to meet basic needs. In addition to UN and World Bank approaches, key local tools for measuring poverty in Cambodia include a national poverty assessment methodology and Phnom Penh municipality's definition of urban poor in terms of in-migrants and informal workers. A recent study from the World Food Program (2019) compared access to resources and opportunity among households in central Phnom Penh as opposed to those in more outlying areas in terms of assets, access to water and sanitation, economic status and debt, food security, access to healthcare, children's health and wellbeing, and migrant status (in/out migration).

Vulnerability is a particularly useful measure to work with in the rapidly changing city because it is a dynamic concept that supports measuring the shifting landscape of risk, insecurity, and resilience. As a concept it helps us "to understand the shaping of human exposure, susceptibility and coping capacity" (Krellengerg 2017: 411). In this workshop, we offer a multi-disciplinary and multi-scalar take on the concept, considering both which groups and assets are vulnerable (Moser 1998), the nature and distribution of risk, as well as structural causes of vulnerability (Adger 2006). This implies analysis of experience as well as social, political, and economic processes associated with causes and that are embedded within axes of social difference. In humanitarian contexts, key factors that are often considered in measuring vulnerability include food and shelter, physical safety, economic stability, legal/political status, social capital, and resiliency in the face of risk. As well, conceiving of vulnerability in urban areas demands consideration of susceptibility to environmental and climate-related changes, social and economic inequalities, and how urbanization and urban fragmentation influence the unequal distribution of exposure and susceptibility. Finally, vulnerability defies straight-forward spatial parameters; urban vulnerability is intertwined with rural insecurities, national-level policies, and experiences and possibilities in secondary cities. To this end, rather than seeing the city as a delimited zone of analysis, Phnom Penh represents a kind of nexus or interface where multiple groups, experiences, policies, networks, discourses, and relationships collide.

From recent research across multiple sectors, key intersecting themes in a conversation about urban vulnerability in Phnom Penh include but are not limited to:

- 1. Informal settlements:** Like many other parts of the world, urbanization in Phnom Penh has been characterized in part by the rise of informal settlements. This trend links to

models of urban growth where less attention is paid to the social inclusion and justice among urban poor and those areas being classified as informal settlements (Simon, 2015). Experience from previous schemes to improve urban poor and social order have encountered ground-level challenges, and there has not often been collaboration between authorities, the private sector, and civil society (Talocci & Boano, 2016). In recent decades, expulsion and exclusion have become defining experiences of urban poverty for an increasing number. Urban poor face insecurities regarding land tenure and livelihoods; they are at risk of expulsion just as forced displacement is part of their lived experience and sense of what it means to inhabit urban space. What lessons can we learn from neighboring countries and how can state accountability and local participation be leveraged in addressing vulnerabilities?

- 2. Migration, gender relations and labor:** A majority of the growth in the urban population in Cambodia is a result of rural to urban migration (Lawreniuk, 2016). New urban residents often tend to experience less stability and greater insecurity than their more settled neighbors. How this vulnerability translates to gender and gender relations is significant. Urbanization, infrastructural development, and environmental change in urban spaces all impact men and women differently and in ways that influence power relations and struggles for gender equality (Evans, 2019; Fauveaud, 2012). As well, the gendered dimension of rural to urban migration has implications for labor, in terms of exploitation, power, and the possibilities of social mobility (Derks 2008). What are the different drivers of insecurity for women and men, both elderly and young? And further, understanding urban vulnerability requires an analysis of the links between the insecurities households in Phnom Penh are facing, especially among newer residents, and the rural context to which they are connected.
- 3. Urban related data:** One of the greatest barriers to an accurate measure of vulnerability is the lack of adequate data on the urban population. As a measure of development progress at global and national level, the SDGs, translated into the 19 Cambodia Sustainable Development Goals (CSDGs), emphasize the need to develop more comprehensive and better quality data sets. There are recognized institutional data sources collected at the national and city levels that relate directly or indirectly to urban dimensions (such as the Cambodia Health and Demographic Survey, Population Census, ID Poor surveys, Commune Database (CDB), World bank urban population data etc.). Thus we can further explore the opportunity to work on the existing data gaps, and define what type of indicators we want to track and measure. This would help all better understand and monitor local vulnerabilities, and advance Sustainable Development Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable. Data will also help researchers better understand the inter-linkages between urban communities and their social, economic, and environmental spaces, and how all those dimensions intersects together. Lastly, recent technological development may offer more innovative data collection methods, which, coupled with new analytical methods and data visualizations tools, may help the accuracy of statistical and spatial data, and inform knowledge and information gaps.

- 4. Urban environment and transformation:** Phnom Penh has developed in the region and environment of "four-faces of rivers": the upper and lower Mekong, the Bassac, and the Tonle Sap. This positioning has historically provided great access to both river transportation and water supply along these rivers, and food production has benefitted from floodplain soil. It is foreseen that the future will attract more mixed industrial and commercial and industrial land uses, warehouses, real estate developments and food production along these access routes, both river and inland systems to all provinces (Molyvann 2003). Most of the natural system of urban lakes and canals are linked to the major roads along the rivers which serve as dikes protecting the city from flooding. These have become more vulnerable with urban system "extensification" and intensification over the built environment where a majority of urban lake are filled up. The urban vision of Phnom Penh for 2035 clearly emphasizes the city as the competitive political, economic, business and cultural center of Cambodia with sustainable and equitable development. How then, are new developments changing the urban landscape in a way that impacts residents' social, environmental, and economic stability? How are current and future plans for infrastructure design going to affect urban residents' susceptibility to various forms of risk? How to plan a sustainable urban growth? How to better integrate peri-urban areas and villages without increasing the vulnerability of their populations?
- 5. Urban Citizenship:** Among the diverse population that consider Phnom Penh home, differences in lived experience and levels of inclusion and exclusion over time have produced vastly different levels of both susceptibility to urban insecurity and social and economic capital. In Phnom Penh, aspects of urban inclusion and exclusion based on ethnic lines have their roots in colonial and postcolonial political and social relationships that have the potential to disrupt or haunt social mobility and opportunity for some in the present day (Edwards 2002). At the same time, it is important to ask whether there are other groups that face heightened forms of discrimination, segregation, or exclusion as well. This includes groups defined by age, gender, sexuality, as well as migrants (international and rural-urban) and other social groups. What are the politics and metrics of inclusion and exclusion for rights and membership in the urban community?
- 6. Governance - local, regional, national, international:** To understand the drivers of both resilience and vulnerability, it is essential to consider how urban residents interact with various forms of governance. This includes both formal institutions of power from the phum or sangkat to the national government as well as informal governance in the form of power brokers and other social institutions. In addition, the international community has played a significant role in Phnom Penh's growth and trajectory. How do these different levels of authority intersect in the lives of urban residents and their susceptibility to or resilience in the face of risk? (Fauveaud, 2014).

Cutting across each of these themes are particular groups that are at risk of vulnerability in Phnom Penh and that also represent the potential for significant forms of social power in the

city. These include, but are not limited to, youth, the elderly, and women, especially those who have migrated from rural areas. This workshop will give special consideration to these cross-cutting social groups as they are impacted by (and exert their own impact on) each of the themes mentioned above.

In this workshop, we emphasize the importance of considering local particularities not only in determining variation in the experience of vulnerability but in the very definition of the concept itself. That is, we suggest that there is utility in first discerning local or situated perceptions of what it means to be exposed and susceptible to risk and harm, and what it means to “cope” or be resilient. This workshop represents an initial step towards achieving this level of understanding that will be foundational to any subsequent study that sets out to measure vulnerability.

### **Proposed goals**

This workshop will gather experts in the field to consider:

1. A deeper understanding of how various diverse local groups and individuals conceptualize urban vulnerability in the context of Cambodia, including the sources of risk to urban households and individuals that should be measured to more accurately analyze life in the city and the effects of urbanization;
2. Development and consideration of methodological strategies that can be deployed to achieve greater access to a wider diversity of urban residents;
3. Ideal tangible outcomes for practitioners working to address urban poverty in Cambodia;
4. The role of public universities and how they could support the development of applicable methodologies and tools, and support future research projects, working in joint-collaboration with other urban stakeholders.

### **Proposed outputs**

We plan 2 outputs after the workshop:

1. A discussion paper outlining the key findings with reflections and recommendations for further areas of research (to be translated in 3 languages);
2. The outlining of a participatory mixed methods approach to study aspects of vulnerability in Phnom Penh and/or other urban areas in Cambodia that are identified in the workshop.

### **Tentative draft agenda**

8.15-8.30: registration

8.30-8.45: Introduction (Natharoun Ngo. Adam Saltsman)

8.45-9.45: Session 1-Practitioners' landscape-An overview of the work related to Urban Vulnerability: GGGI Country representative Ms Karolien Caesar. Oxfam representative Mr

Mathieu Vergez, AIMF representative Ms Emilie Traub, EU funded project representative Ms Valeria Cristofoli, PED representative Mr Pierre Larnicol.

(5mn elevator pitch speed presentation from each agency representatives)

9.45-10.00: Break

10.00-11.00: Session 2-"Urban environment and transformation"

*What are the current and future forces that affect Cambodian cities' vulnerabilities?*

Moderator: Ms Dolores Bertrais (University of Geneva). Panel: Dr Gabriel Fauveaud (University of Montreal), Mr Se Bunleng (RUPP), Dr Keo Piseth and Dr Laura Beckwith, Ms Emilie Traub.

11.00-12.00: Session 3- Settlements, Labor and Vulnerabilities

Moderator: Dr Adam Saltsman (WSU) and Dr Thuon Try (Chang Mai University). Panel: Dr Kimchoeun Pak, Mr Kimseng Meas (Un Habitat), Pierre Larnicol (PED), Ms Sath Kanyara, Ms Valeria Cristofoli.

12.00-13.30: Lunch (provided).

13.30-14.30: Session 4-Methods, approaches, and strategies for measuring urban vulnerability

Moderator: Dr Kimchoeun Pak. Panel: Dr Adam Saltsman (WSU), Dr Gabriel Fauveaud (University of Montreal), Dr Try Thuon (Chang Mai University).

14.30-15.30: Session 5-Urban related data and research: Engaging with local/international universities and researchers: possible roles and solutions.

Moderator: Natharoun Ngo (CKS). Panel: Ms Samedy Suong (CKS), Mr Se Bunleng (RUPP), Ms Dolores Bertrais (University of Geneva), Pierre Larnicol (PED).

15.30-16.00: Follow-up actions and next steps Natharoun Ngo (CKS)

### **Acknowledgements**

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