

Program for Advancing Strategic International Networks to Accelerate the Circulation of Talented Researchers
Japan-ASEAN Collaboration Research Program on Innovative Humansphere in Southeast Asia:
In search of Wisdom toward Compatibility Growth and Community in the World

Dispatch Report

Livelihood changes and social life in transforming Southeast Asian rural communities:
Collaborative research in Cambodia and its neighboring countries

Year: September to November 2015

Place of fieldwork: Cambodia

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1. Research background

As a part of the research group analyzing the essential qualifications for achieving a “peaceful society” in Southeast Asia and the world, this study will examine actual changes in Southeast Asian rural communities in the 20th and 21st centuries with a special interest in two areas of people’s lives: livelihoods and social life. Both are crucial for exploring historical changes in rural communities in the region and for estimating the future of human society. The study focuses on Cambodia and its neighboring countries and will conduct collaborative research with young students and scholars in these countries.

2. Research purpose and aim

I planned to visit Cambodia twice in FY2015. The duration of each visit was two months; the first was from September to November 2015 and the second was from December 2015 to February 2016. The purpose of these visits in FY2015 was to study the potential for a “peaceful society” in Cambodia and other Southeast Asian countries through collaboration with Cambodian scholars and students.

The concept of a “peaceful society” is, frankly speaking, abstract and difficult to understand not only for Japanese academics but also Cambodian researchers. In my understanding, this is related to people’s social life as a whole, which includes religious worship, QOL, and so on. However, in this project, I focus on the study of transforming livelihoods and connectivity in people’s lives as factors constituting the foundation of a “peaceful society.”

3. Results of the fieldwork

During the first visit, from the end of September 2015, I visited three universities almost every day; the Royal University of Phnom Penh, the Royal University of Agriculture, and the Royal University of Fine Arts. This helped me to think about the issue of a “peaceful society” from the perspective of interdisciplinary collaboration. As well as the discussions with Cambodian colleagues, I collected the latest

information on the relations of state and society in Cambodia through reading local newspapers as well as watching local TV. This especially contributed to updating my knowledge on recent Cambodian politics and development policies.

Besides the activity in Phnom Penh, I also conducted a one-week period of rural fieldwork in a commune on the Cambodia-Thai borderland, which I visited during the last dispatch in February 2015. Although the fieldwork period was short, I conducted interviews with all village chiefs in the commune and was thus able to collect information intensively on local history and agricultural practice. Moreover, I studied features of the development process and the potential of rural villages in the area in collaboration with our Cambodian colleagues who specialize in the land use system (Royal University of Agriculture) and soil science (Royal University of Phnom Penh).

Finally, on the day before my return to Kyoto, I participated in the 2nd National Conference of Agriculture and Rural Development, which was held at the Royal University of Agriculture on 21st November 2015. I took this opportunity to give a presentation on a unique feature of international collaboration in the education of Cambodian students, titled “A New Challenge in the Education of Rural Development: A Case of Interdisciplinary Fieldwork for Sustainable Livelihoods Studies (2013-2015).” I made this presentation in Khmer and believe this contributed to strengthening the mutual understanding between our Cambodian counterparts and myself.

4. Implications and impact on future research

Although I had spent only one week on rural fieldwork, I learned a lot about the reality of Cambodian society from the everyday life in the capital city as well as the conversations with our Cambodian colleagues. One of the obvious pieces of progress was considering a political framework imperative to regarding the transformation of rural society and livelihood activities in the country. Over twenty years have passed since the rebirth of the government of the Kingdom of Cambodia in 1993. Following the cessation of hostilities, a number of development programs were implemented by collaboration between international and national organizations. It is definitely important to study whether or not these recent collaborations are able to bring about changes in the people’s vision regarding authority. It is also significant to review if interventions by outside actors in recent years are able to produce a shift in the power relations of patron-client networks that determined the social order in the former Cambodia. Recent changes in the society, such as the expansion of mobility of people and information, the rise of social movements, and the development of civil society’s role in advocacy to the government, are all significant factors for the consideration of a larger framework for analyzing the future direction of livelihood transformation and the potential for a “peaceful society” in Cambodia.