



Field Trip Report

Field Trip Group 1: Khmer Community Migration Stream: The „Miniature“ of Tran De District, Soc Trang Province in Binh Hoa Ward, Binh Duong Province - Report

Our Field Trip Group visited Binh Hoa Ward to study the effects of migration on Khmer migrants from Soc Trang. Our schedule consisted of visiting a Khmer pagoda in Ho Chi Minh City, talking to researchers on the subject and conducting various interviews with Khmer migrants at the Field Trip side. We also interviewed shop owners and housing owners, as the Khmer often live in small garage-like rooms that are divided into upper and lower floor (on the ground) that form a neighbourhood. The houses are mostly separately build and could be compared to a big western-style garage. Some are stuck together and form something like an apartment complex but do not exceed two floors in height. We also interviewed the regional office, that was called “people’s committee“ by our translators.

Step 1: Framing

During the Summer School topic group discussion on migration issues in the Mekong Delta on Thursday (March 21th, 2019), the question whether labour migrants are successful when they move to urban areas came up. Many possible scenarios and explanations were given but it was hard for the researchers present to give a definite answer. Hence this question came up again during the Field Trip group discussion. We decided that this is the issue that should be discussed as the migration is still a current issue of which the consequences are still being followed.

My own research and the group presentation with my teammates from the University of Bonn turned out to give everyone a good overview about the forms of migration and the strong labour migration stream. It became obvious that there was so much academic information about it because the stream of labour migration was very constant and strong. As for the other background information, we found that the nationwide migration to urban areas was a very important movement currently happening due to the limited working opportunities in rural areas. Manual labour being replaced by machines but also the tiring farming work and the little work possibilities outside of that made it hard for young people to find work that would give them a decent and stable income. The divergence of income between rural and urban were mentioned as push- and pull-factors for labour migration. Remittances by labour migrants back to the rural hometown seemed to be a common phenomenon according to the academic literature. The separation of Kinh and Khmer cultural lives became apart from the point when we researched the expansion of the Kinh South (Doi Moi), when they were trying to integrate the “barbarians“, namely Khmer and other minorities, that lived in the Mekong Delta. Restrictions in religious freedom of the Khmer and discrimination were mentioned in the academic works. All this should be kept in mind while I will discuss our findings later.

As we had all the academic data, we were looking for that very thing we were missing: the explanation about how their current lives look like. The big pictures issues here are that our



research was meant to find out how well integrated the Khmer were in their new surroundings while they could still maintain their own cultural identity and way of life. With integration there is always the danger of assimilation and one people becoming extinct because of assimilating so much that the original roots become untraceable. This clearly shows the beneficiaries from our Field Trip research: The Khmer people and the preservation of their unique way of life.

I find it important to mention at this point that some Khmer people I interviewed asked me why I conduct these interviews and one asked me whether I wanted to do something about their poor living conditions. I want to hereby state that some of the people I interviewed were in difficult financial situation. Though their lives were not in actual danger, it seemed like they were stuck in poverty with no way out.

Transdisciplinary research seemed to make sense at this point. The economy specialist in our field trip group (My) somehow helped us to understand the economic points of poverty. The University of Bonn specialists in South East Asian studies (Lan Anh and me) could give a good overview on the region, the Khmer people and their history as well as on the academic background. Our specialist from Transdisciplinary studies from the University of Vienna (Clemens) could give us insights into the aspects of Transdisciplinary research and could set up the presentation of collected data very well. Our social science and community development specialists (Kim and Diem) gave insights on social security and an overview on living and working conditions in the country were like. It is probably worth mentioning that our Vietnamese team members, in addition to the translators, helped us with translation as well.

The inclusion of non-academic actors happened as we conducted the interviews with the Khmer people and with the “people’s committee“. It seemed to make sense to directly ask them about their living conditions to understand how well adapted they were to the new area. Conducting fruitful interviews and analyzing the data in the short time span we were given was probably the most challenging task. A coordinator, or a team leader that keeps track of time would have been very useful. After finishing this program, it comes to my mind that we should have probably chosen one beforehand.

Our research question was then settled as “How well do the Khmer migrants adapt to the new environment, considering economic, social and cultural aspects?“. In the migration topic group discussion during the Summer School on March 29th, 2019 this questions partly already came up and could not be clearly answered so we decided to deep dive into it with our research.

Step 2: Research Process Implementation

As mentioned before, one of the Khmer people I interviewed asked me whether I was planning to do something to help their poor living conditions. Here I want to present my summarized findings first of all to possibly do something about the poor living conditions in the future.



Most of the people I interviewed were living in those very small garage-like one-room housings that were often settled in buildings our translators used to call „apartment blocks“ or „boarding houses“. They looked like student dormitories from the outside (because of the many separate small rooms) but felt like garage-like one-room apartments on the inside that included a loft-style upper floor. Most of the households that I interviewed seemed to have a rather tidy interior and were taken care of though the living space itself was small. However, one of the people I interviewed seemed to not have a refrigerator and also had a cockroach running around in the living room and entrance area that was only chased away once we came in to conduct the interview. Another household seemed well off judging by the facilities they had but the interviewee told us they had bought everything on credit and were still paying it off. This gave the household a financial burden and not every family member could afford three meals a day. I find it also necessary to mention that all of the households we interviewed had two or more people living in one of those housings, which adds to the poor living condition. When we asked people whether they wanted to move somewhere else, they said that housing (near the workplace) was very difficult to find and that they were feeling safe in the area they lived so they did not want to move to an unsafe area where the crime rate was higher.

Regarding the family life it is important to mention that many Khmer migrants sent their children back home to the Soc Trang province that they originally came from to stay with their parents or parents-in-law for the period of their education. Local kindergartens and schools were not considered as good and the area not as safe as back in the hometown.

Though some small Khmer festivals were organized by the Youth Union, a „people’s committee“ organization, many Khmer stated they would have wanted to have days off on official Khmer holidays to visit their hometown but the big factories they worked at did not give them any days off so they mostly only had the option to visit the local festivals. Given the fact there was no Khmer pagoda nearby, the Khmer were also restricted in their religious activity and many stated only going to a Khmer pagoda 1-4 times a year. Many stated to go to a pagoda when visiting their hometown, and most seemed to visit their hometown at least once yearly to see their family members but with one or two exceptions, no one had contacts in the hometown that were not family members. In general, their current surroundings were their home, though to many they did not “feel like home“, their social contacts and cultural identity was formed in the boarding houses and the closer neighbourhood. Besides the Khmer that were married to Kinh, none spoke of good relations to Kinh people though several interviewees insisted that they were paid the same salary as the Kinh people that were doing the same job. Most of the people interviewed had a health insurance that was either sponsored by their current job or was from their hometown, or that they got with the help of a relative.

As an additional remark it is important to say that almost all of the Khmer we interviewed said that they would like to come back to live in their hometown one day. Many hoped to save enough money and move back. Some doubted how realistic their plan was while others mentioned realistically that their home was already in the new area and most family members had moved here as well. Still the “dream“ of moving back to their hometown lingered in the air



for all. It seems that none were really feeling at home even if the new place was already home for them since many years. It seemed mostly the festivals and their family that they missed. The new community forms „little Soc Trang“ for the migrants, some even meeting their marriage partners there when both originally came from Soc Trang. Some traditional “Soc Trang restaurants“ in the area and Khmer shop owners surely do their part in creating the atmosphere of a home away from home that is yet not exactly home.

From our interview with the people’s committee we could find out that the stream of migrants towards Binh Duong started with the establishing of an industrial zone and has been steadily growing, so much that the original local people in that area only make up a small percentage of the population. As for the industrial area, I would like to say that even though the area is made up of a lush green scenery, the pollution seemed very strong. Some of my team members and I felt sick and dizzy during our interviews and the observation of the factory worker’s commute. Several times I felt a racing of my heart and unable to eat due to nausea. As some of my team members experienced similar symptoms, I can guess that this is caused by environmental pollution. Skin rashes or allergies due to the water quality happened to some of us as well. The people’s committee had posters hanging in their office to warn against these type of skin problems. These environmental pollution factors surely take their tolls on the migrants as well.

The people’s committee was aware of the pollution but since Vietnam is a state that is very centralized and where reports are made from the lowest institution to the highest but decisions to counteract are made top-down (the other way round), they could only tell us that they monitor the pollution issues but not what was being decided to do against them. The committee was also aware of the constant stream of migrants and the problems coming with the industrial and private pollution of street but seemed to not have any active public campaigns against it. Besides the basic facts about the migration, the committee did not seem to be able to tell us how the Khmer were becoming a part of the society or whether it was seen as a good thing or as a problem that they migrated here. The only thing they seemed really concerned about was the proper registration of the new migrants to make governmental tasks easier.

It is to mentioned that the Youth Union seemed rather engaged in integrating the Khmer community into the local community, according to a Youth Union representative. The representative stated that they organized sport events for young people and tried Khmer community members to join. When asked whether this kind of integration attempt was successful, the representative stated that mostly it was successful but some Khmer groups and certain Khmer community members actively stayed out of them. This could be a hint for a strongly separated Khmer identity, which is not necessarily the marker of good or bad integration. It can be interpreted in several ways. However, it should be stated that there is still a clear Khmer identity and even though some feel looked down upon by Kinh, they live in peaceful co-existence with them.



Step 3: Reflections and Outcome

Analyzing our results and reviewing the interview chart we created, we could see that most people were not living in poverty: at least from their incomes they do not seem in any urgent situation that needs attention. Here, again, I want to point out that this is not the case for everyone and we only interviewed a limited amount of people due to the short time we had at hand. Due to interviews where the interviewee also pointed out loans, we can see that there seems to be people who find it hard to make a living without falling into debt. This situation should be considered by academic and non-academic actors alike. The living conditions most of the boarding house inhabitants seem also very small and not very inviting. The community is somewhat separated from the rest of the city though it must be considered that not many “locals“ live in that area at all due to the newly established industrial zone.

Considering the situation of the Khmer migrants, several things need attention: for the building of a new community, there needs to be more programs of integration and also more religious activities and a Khmer pagoda. The newly established zone brings migrants with all kinds of religious and cultural backgrounds and to create a good and peaceful community, the government should show more initiative. The separation of Khmer migrants from the rest of the family needs attention. Even if the government only wants to keep Khmer migrants in Binh Hoa to make the administration process easier, they do need to create a better environment for families. That includes school and child care facilities that are safe and reliable.

For proper integration of the Khmer migrants, the Khmer people should be more spread out across the country and not living in “slums“. At the same time, to protect the Khmer unique ways of life the community’s cultural and religious practice should be supported more efficiently. Little Khmer festivals in the living area are a good start but there needs to be more religious practice and days off on Khmer holidays so that they are able to actively practice their religious activities. One might think that the Khmer become more and more disconnected from their religion if they do not have any time to practice it. The same assumption can be made for cultural activities.