Internal migration in Cambodia—a case study of push-pull factors of migration into Phnom Penh

Marcia Walton
School of Natural and Built Environment
University of South Australia
North Terrace, Adelaide
South Australia, 5000

Telephone: +61 0415 052 635
Email: walml002@students.unisa.edu.au
Internal migration in Cambodia-a case study of push-pull factors of migration into Phnom Penh

Abstract

Cambodia’s capital, Phnom Penh is one of the fastest growing cities in the world. Much of this growth is driven by rural-urban migration. This paper discusses research in progress at the University of South Australia that is investigating why Cambodians are leaving rural areas to live in Phnom Penh. Rural-urban migration presents Phnom Penh with significant challenges to its social structure and urban fabric. The research seeks to build a conceptual model of the push-pull factors of internal migration within Cambodia. The research strategy is to develop a case study of the push-pull factors of in-migration to Phnom Penh drawn from a combination of available literature, interviews with key informants and readily accessible census and inter-censal survey data. The broader purpose of the study is to offer new understandings of rural-urban migration and the social drivers of urbanisation in South East Asia.

Keywords: rural urban migration, push-pull factors, urbanisation, urban planning
**Introduction**

This paper discusses work in progress on a research project at the University of South Australia that is investigating the drivers of urbanisation in Cambodia. The specific focus of this research is a case study of migration into the Cambodian capital Phnom Penh, one of the fastest growing cities in the world. It addresses the question of what is driving the population of Cambodia to move to the cities? The research seeks to build a conceptual model to understand rural-urban migration and the drivers of urban growth in Cambodia, and in South East Asia more generally.

Contextual information on Cambodia salient to a discussion of internal migration and urbanisation is provided and the purpose of the research is addressed. A discussion of work in progress on a conceptual model to scope the research and understand the push-pull factors at work in rural-urban migration in Cambodia is offered and the paper is then summarised in conclusion.

**Background**

Cambodia is a country in South East Asia with a current population of more than 14 million people. Phnom Penh is the capital and largest city with a population of more than 1 million people according to the 2004 inter censal survey. In 2004 the city had a total population density of 2,696 persons per square kilometre and covering an area of 375 square kilometres. Cambodia's urban economy is dominated by the garment industry, tourism and construction. The country contains many significant historical sites including the ruins of Angkor Wat, which attracted almost 4 million overseas visitors in
2007. Oil and natural gas deposits were discovered in its coastal waters in 2005 with significant implications for the nation’s economic future (Wu 2007). GDP growth is very strong, averaging close to 9% over the last 10 years. However 34.7% of the population still live below the national poverty line. Poverty is concentrated in rural areas but the rapid influx of migrants into the cities is creating a new urban poor (ADB 2008).

According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB 1999) the urbanisation rate of Cambodia has been extremely rapid at 8.4% annually, which is arguably the highest in the world. This high rate of growth has been predominantly the result of repressed large-scale rural-urban migration after the Paris Peace Agreement of 1991, which followed three decades of war and civil unrest. Phnom Penh itself has had a turbulent history. Its population has waxed and waned dramatically over the last thirty-five years. On March 18, 1969, American B-52s began a four-year bombing campaign that brought Cambodia into the Vietnam War. The US dropped 540,000 tons of bombs, killing up to 500,000 civilians (Vickery 1984). Refugees from rural areas subjected to the American bombing swelled the cities. The social destabilization created by US aggression drove support for the Khmer Rouge insurgency against a pro-American government. Fighting between government forces and the Khmer Rouge from 1970 drove refugees from the countryside to Phnom Penh. The city’s population swelled from half a million in 1970 to nearly 2 million in early 1975 when the Khmer Rouge captured it. The Khmer Rouge who sought to return Cambodia to an agrarian society then evacuated the city. The Khmer Rouge were expelled by a Vietnamese invasion in 1979 by which time the city
had been reduced to less than 50,000 inhabitants and most of its infrastructure had ceased to function (Vickery 1984). After their expulsion from the capital the Khmer Rouge regrouped on the Thai border and waged a guerrilla war against the government installed by the Vietnamese until peace accords were signed in 1991. The long years of war have severely constrained the development of Cambodia. The Human Development Index (HDI) in 2007/08 listed Cambodia as a poor developing country ranked at 131 among 177 countries. The average life expectancy is 58 years and 77 percent of the population lives on less than $2 per day (HDR 2008).

Despite impressive economic growth in recent years and the recovery of Phnom Penh as a major urban area only 10 percent of Cambodia’s population is in waged employment. The garment industry is the largest industry producing 80 percent of Cambodia’s exports and employing 250,000 people, mainly women and teenage girls (Abella 2005; Acharya 2003; Maltoni 2007, Webster 2004). As a consequence of war and civil unrest women greatly outnumber men in Cambodia. Twenty-nine percent of households in Phnom Penh and 23 percent in the other urban areas are headed by women (Webster 2004, World Bank 2008).

There are approximately 150,000 squatters in Phnom Penh, a significant proportion of the city’s population. The squatters work as food sellers, small business people, as construction workers and in the garment industry (Ooi & Phua 2007). According to the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia (ESCAP 2007) the urban population of Cambodia is currently 20.3% of the country’s total population with the
majority (40%) living in Phnom Penh, almost double the figure of 12.6% in 1990 (ADB 2008, ADB 1999; Webster 2004; ESCAP 2007; Maltoni 2007).

Phnom Penh is challenged by a lack of basic urban infrastructure and services. The water supply and drainage is significantly degraded, especially in squatter areas. The urban infrastructure in general dates from colonial times and much of it is 70-80 years old. Mains water pipes in many cases cannot withstand normal pressure from elevated storage and public transportation systems do not exist in many urban areas. The rebuilding of urban infrastructure is particularly difficult in Cambodia because the Khmer Rouge destroyed all land possession records in the 1970s. The legal status of much urban land is unclear making planning difficult (Webster 2004). A similar problem exists in rural areas where landlessness is rising because of unclear property rights and rising land prices, a process, which is encouraging migration to the cities. A study by Oxfam (2000) found that about 12% of rural Cambodia’s population is landless.

Cambodia’s rate of urbanisation is expected to continue increasing to a level of about 36% of its population by 2030, according to the World Bank (2008) by which time the urban population is predicted to be approximately 8.61 million people (United Nations 2002). The expectation is that over the next few years Phnom Penh will increase its share of the urban population, growing at a rate of approximately 3.5% annually (World Bank 2008; Webster 2004; Maltoni 2007). A rapidly expanding economy drawing in large numbers of migrants from rural areas will potentially present significant challenges to the urban fabric of Phnom Penh and the livelihood of its people.
Urbanisation in Asia

As discussed, the rate of urbanisation is high in Cambodia with the majority of the internal migrants relocating to Phnom Penh. The proportion of the world population living in cities is rising generally. It is estimated that more than 60 percent of the increase in the world’s urban population over the next thirty years will be in Asia. Much of this will occur in China and India but also in South East Asia. There are currently nine cities in Asia now with populations of more than 10 million people out of 23 such cities in the world. Indeed urban growth rates in most parts of Asia are more rapid than the rest of the world. However, the processes that drive urbanisation are not homogenous across countries in the region. Many countries in Asia have quite different economies and political structures. Nor is the structure of cities the same. In many cases emerging mega-cities are essentially metropolitan regions characterised by massive populations and territorial extent (Ooi & Phua 2007).

Hardoy and Satterthwaite (1995) describe cities where vast numbers of people compete for the most basic elements of life, such as basic accommodation within reach of employment with an affordable rent, or land on which a dwelling can be built without being evicted. In such cities new urban dwellers compete for access to education, for medical treatment and for access to clean drinking water. In this context, Ooi and Phua (2007) argue that local authorities in rapidly growing cities in Asia often lack the capacity to provide the infrastructure needed to address basic economic and social needs. Urban governments are failing to make the connection between economic development and the implications for urban growth. In particular there is often a failure to provide
adequate housing with implications for the growth of slums. Ooi and Phua (2007) suggest that urban authorities must come to grips with the relationship between economic development and the growth of cities. A narrow focus on economic growth which neglects migration patterns and sound urban planning can encourage the development of the distressing urban environments described by Hardoy and Satterthwaite (1995).

Nevertheless it is clear that the problems identified by Hardoy and Satterthwaite (1995) are not evident in well-planned cities such as Singapore and Hong Kong. Understanding what drives processes such as rural-urban migration and other factors that create urbanisation in each national context is the key to good planning.

**Urbanisation in Cambodia**

As a broad generalisation Guest (2003) suggests that the level of internal migration in countries in the Asia region is increasing rapidly. This increase is predominantly a movement of people from rural to urban places. When discussing urbanisation Hugo (2003) suggests that of the many profound changes that have swept Asia during the last 50 years the most profound and far reaching is the doubling of the proportion of population living in urban areas.

ESCAP (2007) attributes rural-urban migration to the development process of countries. That is, the significant social, economic and political consequences of population changes make it essential to understand how the distribution of people between rural and urban areas evolves over time.
According to much of the available literature since 2003, migration in and around Cambodia has started to become a key area both for research and project activities (Deshingkar & Grimm 2004; Haque 2005). The main focus of the literature has been, and still is to a great extent, internal labour migration, particularly, rural-urban flows, with a specific attention to strongly defined groups of migrants such as garment factories workers. The literature suggests that the garment sector represents the main effective pull factor in Cambodia providing, in the last ten years, more than 250,000 jobs, mostly for young female migrants coming from the provinces surrounding Phnom Penh (Abella 2005; Acharya 2003; Maltoni 2007; Lee 2006a; Lee 2006b). This research seeks to discover what other factors might be bringing migrants to cities such as Phnom Penh. Such factors might include environmental issues or climate change-induced migration. Reuveny (2007) argues that we can predict the effects of climate change on migration by exploring the effects of environmental problems on migration in recent decades. People can adapt to these problems by staying in place and doing nothing, staying in place and mitigating the problems, or leaving the affected areas. The choice between these options will depend on the extent of problems and mitigation capabilities. People living in less-developed countries may be more likely to leave affected areas, which may cause conflict in receiving areas. Hienonen (2006) suggests that in the Tonle Sap Lake Region of Cambodia, the interconnections between migration, environment and all water resources are apparent. These interconnections as yet not widely studied even though the study of water related migration could yield important socioeconomic information for the development aims of the Mekong Basin, the urbanisation trends and the future
problems in the poor settlements of Phnom Penh. This research is developing a conceptual framework to make sense of these processes.

**Conceptual Framework**

Conceptual frameworks come in various forms, with varying degrees of linkage to theory. They may be visual, translated as a mind map or flow diagram, or alternatively in text, for instance as dot points or principles. For the purpose of the proposed research, the conceptual framework will be compiled from a combination of literature and available data. Common techniques include mind mapping of key elements and linkages (thus capturing the implicit theories), or more formal systems analysis. For the purposes of the proposed research a conceptual map is used (Robson 2002; Punch 2005; Ross and McGee 2006).

The following framework (Figure 1) is designed to ‘frame’ the discussion and map the investigation. It is a housing for concepts and systemic understandings. It is also a ‘scoping’ device, helpful to consider what information is needed to study the issue efficiently (Robson 2002; Punch 2005; Ross and McGee 2006).

This framework will be used in a selective way to inform the study. It is not necessarily useful to populate every possible aspect and layer of the framework with detailed information, as that will not help to provide either valuable contextual information or specific information needed to enlighten the analysis (Robson 2002; Punch 2005; Ross and McGee 2006).
Figure 1: Conceptual Framework
The conceptual framework seeks to map the drivers of internal migration in Cambodia as a series of push-pull factors that bring people to the city. Among critical pull factors identified so far are the need of rural workers for short-term employment between harvests and the political and economic dominance of Phnom Penh, which draws rural workers to the city in search of jobs and opportunities. A perception that the quality of life is better in the city than in rural areas also pulls people to the city. Push factors include environmental and climate change issues that are affecting the capacity of rural areas to provide a livelihood for the population. The promise of employment in city industries such as the garment trade brings people to the city that are being pushed from rural areas by environmental change and landlessness. A push-pull conceptual model offers a dynamic framework to make sense of these processes.

**Research strategy**

The strategy pursued by this research is a case study of the push-pull factors of in-migration to Phnom Penh using a combination of available literature, interviews with key informants and readily accessible census and inter-censal survey data.

A case study is about the understanding of a particular case in depth, recognising its complexity and context (Punch 2005). In this research, the case or phenomenon under scrutiny is rural urban migration into Phnom Penh. In this sense, the strategy has an instrumental focus. This is essentially what Stake (1994) termed a collective case study. The aim is to address the case from several directions to learn more about the phenomenon, the population and the general condition. The research follows Yin’s
approach (1984), which suggests a case study investigates a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clear and in which multiple sources of evidence are used to make sense of the situation.

*Data collection and analysis*

This study is drawing on available statistical data on migrants into Phnom Penh and will be collecting qualitative data from interviews with key informants in Cambodia to evaluate the push-pull factors of migration.

Interviews are planned with eminent scholars in the field contacted via email or telephone in the first instance and where possible geographically interviewed face-to-face using a semi-structured interview technique. Narrative and statistical data is being examined from Cambodian Government documents, Cambodian census material, NGO documents, The World Bank, United Nations, the Asian Development Bank, and the Cambodian Department of Planning.

When looking at the question of why the people of Cambodia are moving then the variety of push-pull factors of migration have to be considered. Statistically urbanisation rates and urban-rural population figures are the most pertinent information as they indicate the volumes of people movement.

Triangulating narrative accounts from documents and interviews with the statistics will allow the rates of urbanisation to be linked to the reasons why people move. Discovering
the push-pull factors in comparison to population figures will provide an indication of who moves from where and for what reason.

Conclusion

This research will add to the current knowledge base by uncovering why the people of Cambodia are moving from rural areas to cities such as Phnom Penh. Understanding the push-pull factors of migration into Phnom Penh might provide us with a more nuanced social understanding of the rapid urbanisation of South East Asia and neighbouring regions. Asia’s burgeoning economies are in some instances producing metropolitan conurbations characterised by slums and widespread social distress. In other cases good urban planning has brought forth well functioning cities. Uncovering the contextual drivers of urbanisation and the dynamics of rural-urban migration might increase our understanding of why some cities in Asia and elsewhere are challenged by social distress and others are not.
References


