

Special Focus

Local Impacts of Covid-19 in Cambodia: Introduction

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The purpose of this Special Focus section is to investigate the lasting impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic at the local level in Cambodia. As the pandemic was unfolding, social scientists of Southeast Asia produced a plethora of rapid responses as they sought to engage constructively with policy (Rakhmani and Sciortino 2023; Shin et al. 2022). Now, as the larger threat has receded and restrictions have been lifted, we are left with the task of understanding what the impacts of the pandemic have been—and to draw insights for the region post-pandemic (Shin et al. 2022).

Our contribution relates to both the timing and the scale of our inquiry. Most of the current literature on the pandemic is based on data collected while it was still unfolding, with projections extrapolated from that time. Our Special Focus section is based on data collected two to three years after the pandemic had receded and is therefore able to provide a more reliable account of its lasting impacts. At the same time, existing Covid-19 literature is largely pitched at the national scale, often focusing on particular sectors or activities (Brickell et al. 2023; Kien et al. 2024). By zooming in to the local level, we are able to examine how these general trends have been experienced in particular contexts by members of rural society and to look at the interactions between different sectors and activities.

Alongside the study by Swift et al. (2024) of Karen communities in Myanmar near the border with Thailand and the study by Yi and Green (2024) of rice-farming villages in Battambang, Cambodia, the three studies in this Special Focus section contribute to an emerging body of case study research that facilitates an understanding of the pandemic in local contexts. They will likewise provide an update to our understanding of the roles that agriculture and natural resources can—and cannot—play in providing safety nets in the context of deagrarianization and urbanization trajectories in Southeast Asia.

We expect the impacts of the pandemic to have been socially and spatially uneven both within and between communities. We therefore selected cases where the landscape and associated livelihood trajectories demonstrate meaningful variation, both in Cambodia and throughout Southeast Asia—namely, a lowland rice village, an upland cash crop village and a peri-urban village (Rigg 2020).

Additionally, each village chosen has specific contextual features that make it more broadly relevant. Lowland Doun On's deagrarianization trajectory is intimately linked to the plethora of opportunities afforded in the tourism boom town of Siem Reap and through international labour migration to opportunities across the Thai border. Upland Veal Veng's trajectory is that of an indigenous Kuy village located in a forest that has become a hybrid Khmer-Kuy village set in an agricultural landscape, with villagers adapting to the economic integration required by cash crop (cassava, cashew and rubber) production. Finally, peri-urban Prey Svay's population is heavily reliant on the garment industry for incomes, while its livelihood trajectories are tied to fluctuating land prices and related speculation.

The research was conducted as part of a single project examining the effects of Covid-19 in Cambodia. Each of the authors of the case studies adopted the same broad method. First, a census was conducted to get a snapshot of the current locations and activities of individuals in the village in question, as well as household-level information about livelihood activities, pandemic impacts, landholdings and indebtedness. Then, follow-up interviews were conducted in two

main stints over two consecutive years. In addition to conducting their own research, the authors also made short visits to each other's villages, strengthening our abilities to make informed comments and comparisons across the case studies. The principal investigator, Astrid Norén-Nilsson, also participated in the field research and took part in the review of case study drafts.

The Covid-19 pandemic is only the latest of a series of crises afflicting Southeast Asia (Horton et al. 2008; Rigg et al. 2008; Thomalla et al. 2018). Focusing on the local impacts and responses to the pandemic, we follow social science literature on previous crises by conceptualizing these responses in terms of short-term *coping* with *livelihood shocks* (Kien et al. 2024; Nguyen et al. 2020; Waibel et al. 2020) and of longer-term adapting within the constraints and affordances of existing *livelihood trajectories* (Biddulph 2020, p. 73; Dijk 2011, pp. 101–2). Central to understanding livelihood trajectories in Southeast Asia are the concepts of *deagrarianization* and *smallholder persistence* (Hajdu et al. 2024, p. 3). Deagrarianization refers to the process whereby agricultural activities and local natural resources become less central to rural livelihoods as non-farm and off-farm activities rise in importance; smallholder persistence refers to the way that deagrarianization has not led to land concentration and depopulation of the countryside on the scale that might have been expected (Rigg 2020, p. 30).

One explanation for this is that people choose to retain a home in the countryside as a form of *rural safety net*. Rural safety nets can take the form of a fallback location for unemployed labour migrants. Typically, these are conceptualized as having two components: (i) well-developed social capital in a rural village, which means that people returning to the village may be looked after by relatives and neighbours and therefore can live more affordably while riding out a shock; and (ii) traditional livelihood activities in the form of agriculture and natural resource-based activities, which might prove an alternative source of livelihood during a period of unemployment (Hajdu et al. 2024; Rigg 2020; Rigg and Salamanca 2009; Silvey 2001). Nevertheless, it is acknowledged that these affordances

should not be taken for granted; not all rural communities exercise solidarity towards those who have left, and many of the resources that underpinned traditional livelihoods (household access to agricultural land; availability of forest and aquatic commons) may no longer be available (Li 2009).

This Special Focus section investigates such dynamics in Cambodia, where the response to the Covid-19 pandemic was a public health success story. The robust and proactive public health response included movement restrictions, testing, quarantining and a swift vaccine roll-out with high coverage (Chhim et al. 2023; Nozaki et al. 2023). The government also launched two key financial assistance responses under the emerging social protection agenda: the cash transfer programme for poor and vulnerable households during Covid-19 (National Social Assistance Fund 2025) and unemployment benefits for suspended garment and tourism workers. This Special Focus section complements the national public health story (Angtola and Kimkong 2022; Chhim et al. 2023) with local livelihood perspectives, providing contextualized empirical evidence regarding the relationships between general socio-economic vulnerability and the specific vulnerabilities relating to the pandemic.

Our contextualized results paint a partly different picture from that which has emerged from the small body of literature on Covid-19 in the region so far. Livelihoods in the Cambodian villages we investigated were only moderately affected; three years after the worst of the pandemic, a majority of residents in the peri-urban village of Prey Svay and lowland village of Doun On reported that the pandemic had had no impact on them. These results suggest that some garment workers may have been much less adversely affected by the pandemic than has been suggested by previous research (Brickell et al. 2023; Sharpe et al. 2022). The divergence in results between ours and previous studies plausibly stems from the contextualized livelihoods approach we took that allowed us to understand the plight of garment workers in a broader social perspective.

In lowland Doun On, most villagers reported that the pandemic had little or no impact on their livelihoods, except for some high-

earning households that were already highly indebted. Typically, these households had been working in tourism and construction and lost their income streams because of plummeting tourism arrivals and the closing down of related construction projects. As a result, they were unable to keep up debt repayments, and many were forced to flee their homes. These findings in Doun On contrast with the prevalent assumption that it was the poorest households who were most vulnerable to Covid-19 (UNICEF et al. 2022). On the other hand, the findings are in line with other recent scholarship that has highlighted the extent to which vulnerability to the pandemic was intertwined with vulnerability caused by over-indebtedness (Brickell et al. 2023; Yi and Green 2024).

Another source of vulnerability lay in integration into the cash crop economy. This could be seen in the case of the upland village of Veal Veng. Here, the pandemic increased the price volatility of cash crops (mainly cassava, but also cashews), and the border closure with Vietnam caused a fall in incomes. This situation contrasted with that of lowland Doun On, where much of the production—especially of rice, chickens and ducks—was for personal consumption or could be traded within the village. Hence, villagers who farmed in Doun On were often more resilient than villagers who were more dependent on tourism and construction, or their counterparts in upland Veal Veng who were dependent on cash crops.

Rural safety nets were able to dampen some of the economic shock to smallholders (Hajdu et al. 2024; Rigg et al. 2016) afflicted by Covid-19. But these rural safety nets operated in uneven ways within and between our case study villages. Li (2009) has argued that rural safety nets are limited by changing conditions in rural worlds in Asia, including rural dispossession, with decreased access to land, diminishing natural resources and the decline of what used to be traditional rural skills. Our findings support this argument but also qualify this picture. The pattern we discerned was that people during the pandemic continued to pursue types of livelihoods that they were already familiar and comfortable with. In Doun On, returning villagers who had worked away from the village in construction

and tourism only engaged in agricultural work or traditional village livelihoods such as weaving baskets as a temporary and partial solution. Their focus was on finding new sources of waged labour. In Prey Svay, factory workers who lost fewer than forty-five working days tended to just rest at home and wait to return to their factories. Even Veal Veng, where villagers had not worked outside the village before the pandemic, confirmed this general pattern of fidelity to known livelihood activities. As Veal Veng villagers sought to cope with the pandemic by diversifying their livelihood activities, their diversification strategies were *within* agriculture and natural resource-based activities rather than a diversification *out of* these.

Consequently, if we are to speak of a rural safety net, then it has different characteristics than offering a return to rural livelihoods. In the case of Doun On, the village provided a rural safety net in terms of direly needed accommodation and social networks that could help secure new employment outside of the village. In Prey Svay, some garment workers who had to cope with loss of income engaged in natural resource-based activities such as basket weaving, mat weaving or raising chickens. But this was not a village of outmigration but one of commuting. The workers resided in their family homes in the village, and work that could fall into the category of a rural safety net typically involved work already carried out by the worker or by family members. Villagers in upland Veal Veng did not suffer the severe loss of incomes that some of the villagers in lowland Doun On or peri-urban Prey Svay did. Nevertheless, it was in Veal Veng that villagers were most likely to report that the pandemic had affected their livelihoods. Our interpretation is that this was because of the lack of diversity in their livelihoods. The cash crop landscape was bereft of the traditional options that forests used to afford in Veal Veng, and these have not been replaced by the sort of non-farm options that have become established in the two lowland villages.

The articles in this Special Focus section also point beyond the role of rural safety nets seen in isolation to thinking about the interplay of different types of safety nets more broadly. As past rural safety net strategies are no longer viable or even desirable to the same

extent as before, emerging, urban-based safety nets come with state social protection and factory compensation. These social safety nets, in the form of state payments and factory payments, were indeed crucial to mitigating the impact of the pandemic in Prey Svay and surpassed the rural safety nets in importance.

On the other hand, these emerging safety nets were not sufficient to soften the impact of the pandemic on highly indebted households. In Doun On, poorer villagers who received state benefits through the cash transfer programme for poor and vulnerable households during Covid-19 were able to ride out the storm, but for high-earning households with big debts, neither rural nor state safety nets were enough to compensate for their lost income streams.

Taken together, these village studies demonstrate how a singular economic shock, in this case the Covid-19 pandemic, could be experienced very differently in different landscapes, in different villages, as well as between households within villages and between individuals within households. One striking theme throughout the research was the increased vulnerability created by over-indebtedness in many households in both rural and urban settings, emphasizing a concern that is being raised in Cambodia and beyond (Green 2022, 2024; Guermond et al. 2025). A second striking theme was the effectiveness of cash transfers to reach intended beneficiaries through an approach that combined national government policymaking, local authority identification of beneficiaries, and private sector provision of local internet banking services. This seems to be a significant step in the direction of Cambodia developing state-provisioned welfare, a political agenda that has been given a momentous boost by the pandemic.

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