3 Emerging rural food markets in Kampong Thom (Cambodia)

Right to food, gender, and shifting food cultures

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Preamble

On our way to the villages – where we are going to conduct the interviews – the scenery of the agricultural landscape and the omnipresent entrepreneurial activities and movements of people convey an air of hope in this country that has a painful ‘recent’ past of genocide and civil war (Figure 3.1).

As we by-pass a man on his motorbike, transporting a bunch of fleshy, well-fed farm chickens, one of our Cambodian colleagues observes: ‘The

Figure 3.1 Transport of farm chickens. © Fenneke Reysoo

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good quality farm chickens are transported to the urban areas to be eaten by the well-to-do, and the agro-industrial skinny chickens are brought to the rural areas to be consumed by the poor'. Then, he bursts out into spontaneous laughter. The flow of chickens illustrates new ways of food exchanges. This chapter zooms in on an emerging food market, with new actors and foodstuffs, in rural Kampong Thom. It aims at stimulating a reflection on the implications of marketed food from a right to (adequate) food and gendered social justice perspective.[1] Ultimately, the readership will be able to assess by itself whether the cynical jokes and outbursts of laughter triggered by the chicken transporter can be seen as an ironical reaction to the unbearable effects of neo-liberal globalization.

Introduction

While an increasing dependency on cash and non-farm activities is a well-known pattern in agrarian change studies, in food security studies, not much attention is paid to how marketed food items are introduced in remote rural areas that transition to commercial crop cultivation. This chapter aims at providing an ethnographic account of the emergence of rural food markets in the Province of Kampong Thom. It describes a setting where rural populations and peasants increasingly have to purchase their daily food instead of producing it themselves. By building on the analytical frame of the right to food, the chapter revolves around the dimensions of availability, accessibility, and adequacy of food items that are currently sold by mobile food vendors, village grocery holders, and retailers.

The right to food refers to 'the right of everyone to have *access* to safe and nutritious food, consistent with the right to *adequate* food and the fundamental right of everyone to be free from hunger' (FAO, 2005: iii; my emphasis). Availability and accessibility refer to the means through which food is produced or acquired and the need for duty bearers to identify and eliminate structural and institutional barriers that may prevent specific groups from realizing their right to food immediately and in the future (Bourke-Martignoni, 2020, p. 151). Adequacy of food refers to 'the availability of food in a quantity and quality sufficient to satisfy the dietary needs of individuals, free from adverse substances, and acceptable within a given culture' (CESCR, 1999).

In terms of availability, this chapter presents the emergence of a variety of food outlets and looks at the range of obtainable (new) food items. The dimension of accessibility is assessed by focusing on the economic and physical constraints (money, transportation, time) of the population. The dimension of adequacy is approached through an analysis of changing food cultures, especially with regard to vernacular categories of appreciation (taste, texture, freshness, modernity). Furthermore, since issues of gender equality are directly linked to the right to food, these three dimensions of the right to food will be scrutinized by paying attention to the different effects on

women and men, youth and elderly, and resource-poor and well-to-do people. Gender is understood here as a range of personal and social possibilities marked by power differentials that structure the socio-economic and political context.

Methodology

This research is the result of teamwork with researchers from various countries and disciplinary backgrounds (see Introduction). We have used a mixed-method approach by creating two data-sets. On the one hand, we collected empirical data during three qualitative interview rounds (October 2015, and January and March 2016), and on the other hand, we implemented a questionnaire-based household survey ($N = 600$) in 2016 and 2019 (Torrico Ramirez, 2017, 2019). For the qualitative interview rounds, we used a methodological approach inspired by the ECRIS method developed by social scientists of LASDEL in Niamey, Niger (Olivier de Sardan, 2013). The ECRIS method is very well suited for qualitative team research in remote and underserved areas (no hotel accommodation, bad roads). In a first stage, our team in Kampong Thom, composed of ten researchers/interviewers (seven men and three women), elaborated interview guides around the four topics of land commercialization, farming systems, gender relations, and food security. In a second stage, the team drove from the provincial town of Kampong Thom to the villages. Eight villages were selected based on the characteristics relevant to our overall DEMETER research project: rapid agrarian change, which – as we hypothesized – challenged gender equality (SDG5) and the right to food (related to SDG2, which is framed in terms of food security and freedom from hunger).

Except for the most remote villages where we stayed for morning and afternoon interviews, in all the other villages, we made observations and conducted the interviews in the morning (in Khmer and with audio recordings). Afterwards, we returned to our hotel, had lunch, and wrote 'hot summaries' of each interview in English. Each afternoon, our team met to discuss the insights gained and the topics to be addressed more deeply the next day (iterative process). A total of 96 semi-structured interviews were conducted with women and men, small farmers, newcomers, local traders, and authorities (Commune chiefs, councillors, and village heads). Once back in Phnom Penh, all interviews were transcribed in English and coded in the qualitative data analysis programme NVivo.[2] Eventually, patterns of food supply emerged by continuous comparisons as recommended by Glaser and Strauss (1967) in their seminal 'discovery of grounded theory'. One of these 'grounded discoveries' was the importance of mobile food vendors and village grocery stores. They are important not only for the procurement of food locally, but also for creating non-farm income-earning opportunities, especially for women. Interestingly, a food market analysis conducted in Cambodia a decade earlier by the World Food Programme found that "… only one

out of five villages had a market within the village and more than 40% of the surveyed villages reported that the market is 'far away'" (WFP, 2010, p. 20). Less than a decade later, our research shows a very different picture.

Research setting

The livelihoods of the inhabitants in our research area, as in many other upland villages in Cambodia, changed dramatically over a short period. Some 20 years ago, many families were making a living from cultivating upland rice, collecting wild vegetables and plants, and hunting game from the forest. These livelihoods were profoundly affected by massive deforestation (late 1990s) and the arrival of a large-scale rubber company under a regime of economic land concessions (ELCs) granted by the Government of Cambodia in 2008 (Gironde et al., 2015; Milne and Mahanty, 2015).

In a visualization of this land transformation, using satellite images over the period 1998–2016, we can see the speed of deforestation and the expansion of ELCs in our research Communes. The reconstruction not only shows the rapid depletion of the forest and the expansion of (dirt) roads related to the ELCs, but also the speed and size of 'small-scale' deforestation over the last 20 years (Figures 3.2 and 3.3).

The migratory dynamics over the same time span are illustrated by the demographics in one of our research villages, Dang Kdar (1999–2013),

Figure 3.2 The research area in 1998
Source: Google earth, 1998/Image landsat/Copernicus

Figure 3.3 The research area in 2016
Source: Sentinelhub/Sentinel-2 L1C image on 16 April 2016

which expanded fourfold from 374 families (668 women and 614 men) in 1999 (Suon, 1999) to 1,452 families (2,873 women and 2,582 men) in 2013 (Community Database (CDB), 2014). When asked in 2016 to recall and compare the situation with five years back, almost the entire sample population reported having less access to forest areas (95% of the sample), water areas (91%), and grazing areas (89%) (Gironde et al., 2021). Strikingly, only 5.5% of the sampled households in Kampong Thom accessed the forest in the year 2018 (Torrico Ramirez, 2019; Figure 3.4).

The depletion of the forest and the closure of lands have led to at least two major changes that DEMETER team members Reysoo and Suon (2017) have captured in their article entitled 'In the forest we had plenty. Gender, Food Culture and Diet Change in Rural Cambodia (Kampong Thom Province, 2000–2015)' and Gironde et al. (2021) in their article entitled 'No cash, no food. Gendered reorganization of livelihoods and food security in Cambodia'. Both articles analyse how the rapid agrarian transition pushes smallholders out of home-food production and into commercial agriculture or wage work and how it impacts on food security of men and women, young and elderly, resource-poor and well-to-do families.

In this process of change, dietary regimes changed from the products of subsistence farming, including fishing, gathering, and hunting from the wild, to a high dependency on cash to buy food. One of the village heads, when asked to assess changes over the last 20 years, concisely remembers this transition.

> Before 2000, we were located in the logging area (Forest Concession). The logging company employed few local people, but most villagers continued to do farming inside the logging area, deep in the forest and

Figure 3.4 Deforested area and cassava fields. © Fenneke Reysoo

> mostly illegally. We needed to travel far from home, and we were afraid that the forest authority and logging company would arrest us. After 2000, we lived in the economic concession of the rubber company, and some of us could access plots of lands on an individual basis to do farming (leopard skin strategy). We then could do both farming on our land and working in the rubber company. In addition, we started to find non-farm jobs in the urban areas. More precisely, almost all families in my village have allocated some labour to non-farming activities to earn money in order to supplement the family needs – my family too. Without engaging in non-farm activities, we cannot make a good life.
>
> (Village 7, October 2015)

At the moment of the field research 2016

In 2016, a company-related infrastructure of dirt roads reached the Communes of Kraya and Beong Lvea.[3] The Commune of Kraya is composed of eight villages totalling a population of 13,644 (almost equal male: female ratio), living in, 3,189 families with an average family size of about 4.6 persons (CDB, 2014). The number of female-headed households (read women without men) varies from 15% in the village of Dang Kdar to 2% in the village of Trapeang Pring. In addition to the eight officially recognized villages, the Commune also counts six unofficial villages: new settlements, two of which are social land concessions inhabited by forcibly evicted peasants (see

Paramita, 2014). By the time of our research, six ELCs were covering 27,900 ha (ranging in size from 2,000 to 8,100 ha) (information provided by a Commune clerk, February 2016).

The Commune of Beong Lvea is composed of six official villages, with a total population of 15,807, living in 2,331 families with a variation of family size from 2.9 to 8.5 persons. In four villages, women significantly outnumber men (CDB, 2014).

The main village of Dang Kdar is situated at the crossing of two important dirt roads and has become a commercial centre with a number of micro enterprises. Another commercial centre, in the Commune of Beong Lvea, called 'Two Cottages' (Rong Pi) is situated at the bifurcation of two other important dirt roads just before entering the big rubber plantation (conceded in 2008). Four of our research villages in the Commune of Beong Lvea lay 'behind' the rubber plantation, which makes their access to 'Two Cottages' (for selling agricultural products and purchasing food) more challenging (see below). Relevant for this chapter is that

> 82% of our sampled population participates either in wage employment, self-employment or both. Accordingly, salaried and self-employment activities have become essential livelihood strategies to compensate for the reduction in cultivated areas, as well as the virtual disappearance of livestock and gathering activities.
>
> (Torrico Ramirez, 2017, p. 15)

At the provincial level, wage employment is the major source of income. The main wage labour opportunities consist of day-labour work on bigger cassava farms or on nearby rubber plantations. Other sources of income come from running a small self-employed or family business. Among the household members that participated in wage labour, 63% are male and 37% female (Torrico Ramirez, 2019, p. 34). Women's lower participation in wage labour is mainly due to their workload in reproductive activities, especially when they have to take care of children under ten years old (Gironde et al., 2021).

Market integration is thus almost universal, and people need to access food from the market because of shortfalls in their own food production. But what does the local food market look like? And what kinds of foodstuffs are made available?

Emergence of rural food markets and gender[4]

The transition to cash crops induced market activities: mobile middlemen came to the villages with trucks to buy the harvests, and some buying stations were established, especially for cassava. At the same time, other exchange activities emerged. Goods, such as fertilizers, pesticides, and weedicides; foods, such as packaged noodles and soft drinks; and services, such as beauty shops, repair shops, and karaoke bars, entered the area or were created locally to

satisfy new consumer needs. In the following paragraphs, we focus on how food items are currently marketed. Interestingly, women are particularly involved in the small grocery business and mobile food vending. It is one of the self-employment niches available to women due to a number of socio-demographic, economic, and cultural determinants: lesser school accomplishments, work–family responsibilities, lack of financial start-up capital, and gender-specific cooking skills. Moreover, for mothers with (young) children, activities close to home allow them to reconcile an income-generating activity with care work. However, even if food outlets are mushrooming, their success is not self-evident and depends on financial resources for start-up investment, distance to wholesale outlets (district towns), and competitiveness. Their success is also dependent on the purchasing power of the clients. Not surprisingly, these components are highly gendered.

Mobile food vendors

In the literature, mobile food vending is mainly treated as an urban phenomenon in (big) cities of developing countries, and despite our intensive search, little to nothing is hinting at mobile food vending in rural areas. More strikingly, street food vending is almost never presented as a contribution to achieve food security and/or the right to food. Notwithstanding, a few scholars have pointed to the important function of hawkers as a source of food (Adhikari, 2011; Babb, 2018; Sohel et al., 2015; Steyn et al., 2013). In Nairobi, Sohel et al. (2015) demonstrate how important they are to offering a wide array of affordable meals to low-income households struggling with rising food prices. In this sense, vended street food can offer benefits to consumers who may lack time, money, and facilities to cook for themselves. The street food sector provides both employment for women, and inexpensive and nutritious food for the urban poor (Adhikari, 2011, p. 7). These foods 'contribute significantly' to local diets, especially among the urban poor, since they 'are convenient, cheap and easily accessible' (Steyn et al., 2013, p. 1372).

Street vendors generally have low levels of education (many of them are early school leavers) and cannot access the formal labour market due to the lack of sufficient qualifications. Many of the hawkers and food vendors in urban areas are women, and mostly 'women without men' (singles, divorcees, widows, or separated) who have to fend for their families. Thus, street vending converges at the intersection of three main domains of opportunities: no need for formal education; flexible working hours, which, in turn enables vendors to combine work and family responsibilities; and low capital requirements to start. Often, female food vendors prepare food as an extension of their usual homemaking tasks. This leads Babb (2018, p. 119 on Peru) to argue that the petty commerce of food vending, like housework, has a reproductive function in maintaining family and society.

Whereas mobile food vendors in rural areas seem to be non-existent in the literature, in our research Communes, mobile food vendors burgeon. Some,

Figure 3.5 Our research team members buying a snack from a female food vendor. © Fenneke Reysoo

both women and men, come at regular hours of the day (often early in the morning) and go from door to door. Others announce themselves through megaphones. Whereas women transport their wares on both bicycles and motorbikes, we have not observed male hawkers on bicycles, and couples sometimes use motorbikes with a side-span.[5] Mobile food vending is also an economic niche for persons with a disability (Figure 3.5).

From the villagers' perspective, the presence of mobile vendors is a welcome timesaver for those housewives who have to engage in wage work. The disadvantage, however, is that foods from the mobile vendors are not always fresh and are slightly more expensive than at the grocery stores.

Grocery stores

At the commercial centres of Dang Kdar (Kraya Commune) and 'Two Cottages' (Beong Lvea Commune), there are mechanics, beauty shops, karaoke bars, restaurants, and grocery stores. The story of one of the female grocery holders (30 years) illustrates household strategies. She started her business in 2004, because her husband did not want her to go to the field and do agricultural work when they had their first baby. A shop would allow her to combine the two tasks of raising a child and earning an income. She answered our

questions while breastfeeding her youngest baby and lying in a hammock. During the interview, she continued serving customers. They purchased little things in small amounts: a motorbike driver bought petrol from a bottle, an elderly woman bought a packet of cigarettes, children bought sweets, a young woman bought a small piece of fresh cabbage, a little boy bought three packages of instant coffee, and two schoolgirls on a bike also bought sweets.

She told us that many villagers buy on credit. She lends money to customers whom she trusts and to whom she is socially connected. Generally, they pay back within ten days. Those who come from farther away and who are less well known are given fewer opportunities to buy on credit. The Pchum Ben festival (October), when families prepare big meals, is a particular moment of the year when customers ask to buy on credit.

Running a grocery store comes with entrepreneurial challenges of competition and accommodating to the seasonality of the purchasing power of the local population. Not surprisingly, stories of failure are many. A female grocery holder says that she had little money to invest and that she could not buy big stocks of merchandise at a time. In her village, others started a grocery business, and everyone sold more or less the same items, which led to market saturation (village 7). In addition, now that the road to the village exists and a more regular taxi connection to the district town of Kampong Thmar (from early morning 3 a.m.) is available, more grocery stores have been launched. The competition has become fierce and entrepreneurs with more operational investment capital, often men, bail out smaller entrepreneurs, often women.

Increased competition triggers a gender hierarchy among food vendors. The in-migrating traders are often men who have more investment capital and better connections with the outside world, as illustrated by a 34-year-old man who runs a thriving business in one of the villages. Some years back, he was a farmer with a cow cart. Sometimes, he proposed to transport firewood for others. When cutting wood in the forest became illegal, he offered other services. He invested in a van, a tractor, and a plough. This diversification led to 'time poverty' and overburdening. He chose to continue the least 'hard' work, namely wholesaling vegetables. In his van, he drives twice a week to Phnom Penh and buys many vegetables on credit (which he pays back at the end of the day by WING money transfer after his sales). The daily turnover ranges between 50 and 200 USD. His wholesale depot is located in the district town of Kampong Thmar, and his wife sells groceries at the crossroad village (with two helpers). His story illustrates the gendered dynamics of micro-entrepreneurship: men's activities tend to be more capital-based and impersonal, whereas women engage in business drawing on social relations in their nearby neighbourhoods (Reysoo, 2015; Ypeij, 2003).

Availability and accessibility of food

In rural Kampong Thom, local food markets were literally emerging under our eyes. Many interviewees hinted at the importance of food vendors for

the availability of and access to food. 'Where there are people, there are food sellers' (village 8); 'Here, there is no market centre. If we need some food, we buy it from the food vendor who comes along the way from house to house' (village 5); 'When I opened the shop, there were only three or four grocery stores. Now there are many' (village 4); and 'Since the road has been connected to the village in 2014, more and more food vendors have come to the village' (village 7). These statements reflect the increasing availability of food outlets in the area.

Overall, the services of the mobile vendors are much appreciated by the buyers in the most remote and underserviced villages. Our interlocutors recall how in former days they had to travel long hours to the district market and to spend their (scarce) money on transportation. Today, with the widespread availability of bikes, motorbikes, and hand-tractors, they can more easily travel to the new commercial centres, especially the men.

Evidently, food vendors and grocery stores ensure the availability of food in the researched Communes. However, availability does not mean accessibility for all. Many of our interlocutors agree on this by using variations of the statement: 'Today you can buy anything at the market whenever you want to, provided you have money'. The latter part of the statement touches upon the issue of purchasing power and the underlying physical, structural, and institutional barriers to accessing food. Not all individuals and families have equal opportunities to buy food all year round. Indeed, access to food is becoming a steady source of stress for land-poor families who have become entirely dependent on cash to buy food. Demand for wage labourers, and hence access to cash, is seasonal and follows the cassava cultivation cycle, which has become the main cash crop in the area. An interlocutor shares, 'When people cannot sell their cassava for decent prices, they will have less to spend in the local grocery store' (village 7). Accordingly, with the volatility of cassava prices, food prices are fluctuating. The increase in the price of major food items was the most important shock experienced by 56% of the sample population. Other important shocks are the fall in the price of output (43%), increase in the price of inputs (40%) and harvest failure due to draught, flooding, or pests (38%) (Torrico Ramirez, 2019, p. 24).

The problem of food accessibility is thus closely related to the lack of money in some seasons. Related to seasonality, economically speaking, some food items are much more expensive than others, especially meat. One woman told us, 'There are petty traders who travel to my home every day. I spend a lot. Fish, pork and beef are extremely expensive'. To contextualize her statement, in the area male day labourers earn approximately 20,000–28,000 KHR (5–7 USD) per day and women 20,000–24,000 KHR (5–6 USD). Beef costs 40,000 KHR/kg (10 USD), chicken 25,000 KHR/kg (6.25 USD), pork 20,000 KHR/kg (5 USD), and fish 10,000 KHR/kg (2.5 USD). Low-quality rice costs 1,500 KHR/kg (0.375 USD) but is generally bought in bigger quantities (per bag of 50 kg). Better quality rice can go up to 3,000 KHR/kg (0.75 USD). Depending on family size, our interviewees spend

around 20,000 KHR (5 USD) per day for three meals, and others report 10,000 KHR (2 USD) per day for two meals. In view of these figures, one kilogram of beef equals almost two days of wage work, and an entire day's income is spent on meals.

When money gets scarce, accessing enough food becomes difficult, and people can only buy small quantities at once. Because women bear the main responsibility for cooking, their duty of provisioning in this context comes with the anxiety of, 'Do I have enough money to cook a meal?' In addition, there is an expectation that meals must be tasty and delicious, which becomes a source of stress when money and ingredients are lacking. Time poverty also increases food insecurity. As women spend more time in productive activities away from home, both farming and non-farming, less time is available for food preparation (Johnston et al., 2015). This is deemed detrimental to family diets as highlighted by Komatsu et al. whose study shows that 'Women who spend more time cooking have more diverse diets' (2018, p. 262).

Adequacy and cultural acceptability of food

The concern with adequacy touches most importantly on the presence of the full range of food components to prepare a meal. The pillar of the three daily meals is steamed rice complemented with non-rice food (*mahoub*). Non-rice food has two elements: meat and vegetables. The entire dish gets tasty with condiments and supplements such as salt, fish sauce, soy sauce, or fermented fish (*prahok*). Freshness and taste have been and continue to be a core cultural criterion for the assessment of food quality. In earlier days, the villagers avoided eating vegetables collected the day before or meat not recently slaughtered. They were not used to storing or stockpiling food. Today, the food supplied by the mobile vendors and grocery stores is not always fresh and many complain about (potential) contamination by chemicals of the foods on offer.

The underlying question, rarely mentioned in the discussion on the adequacy of food in the realm of the right to food, is what culturally acceptable food is. The notion of cultural acceptability goes beyond the adequate quantity (as measured by food consumption scores) or quality (as measured by the household dietary diversity scores[6]) and resonates with the spirit of CESCR: 'The right to food is more than the provision of sufficient calories; it includes the cultural acceptability of food' (CESCR, 1999, *General Comment 12,* paragraph 9).

From an anthropological point of view, culturally acceptable food comes with the daily techniques of cooking and the meaning of food in a particular context. In line with Sutton (2016, pp. 349–369), who considers cooking a 'housecraft' that is mastered by women, in our research setting, it is also the women who organize labour and time to provision, plan, cook, and serve meals.[7] They have to provide the ingredients (from the land, the forests, or from the local market) and calculate the quantities. As elsewhere, in rural Cambodia, cooking methods come with particular know-how. Rice is

cooked or steamed; eggs are boiled or fried; fish is fried, grilled, or dried; maize is roasted; sweet potatoes are baked, and relish is stewed (with more or less water/ simmering). When zooming in on the preparation of rice, we unveiled rules of washing the rice well and of cooking it in enough water to allow correct steaming, without draining or stirring. In the spirit of the code of conduct (*chbab srei*) that steers the decent behaviour of women, mothers hand down these skills to daughters. With age, women generally gain prestige with their cooking skills and their art to serve the meals nicely. Cultural acceptability of food comes thus with behavioural expectations for women's roles in feeding the family.

Furthermore, cultural acceptability of food comes with vernacular categories of food appreciation, which differ from scientific discourses on calories and nutrients. Scientific insights into nutrition, such as nutrients necessary for physiological development and physical activity according to gender and occupation (Golay, 2009), contrast with emic meanings of food that are organized around local categories of 'delicious' and 'not delicious' (Komatsu et al., 2018). Among the ethnic Khmer, who compose 99% of the population in our sample in Kampong Thom, a culturally acceptable meal consists of the staple rice, accompanied with relish (*mahoub*) that adds taste and facilitates swallowing (it lubricates the rice). When there is little relish, the amount of rice is increased. As long as there is rice, our interlocutors define themselves as food secure. During rice shortages, however, they have to adapt, and the last resort solution is to eat rice porridge. Referring to rice porridge and rice soup is somewhat shameful, because it reminds people of the hunger periods during the Pol Pot regime.

Our interlocutors master a semantic scheme to assess the quality of rice. They distinguish between low-quality rice (*raing chey*) and high-quality rice (*romdoul, pka malis*), the former being hard to eat, without smell, and considered to merely fill the stomach. High-quality rice is said to be 'delicious', soft, tasty, and smelling good. Hard rice ('*it is hard like stone the next day*') is cheap and eaten by the poor. It fills the stomach and gives a sense of satiation (*krob krorn).* It provides energy and power. Sar et al. (2012) relate this to the starch structure since rice starch contains 50–70% of caloric energy and is a direct source of glucose that is rapidly digested. Villagers also massively consume monosodium glutamate (MSG) as a taste enhancer. MSG is an amino-acid (code E621) and enhances taste while inhibiting hunger reactions; strikingly, 80% of the total global production of MSG is eaten in Asia (Kiéma, 2017).[8]

Overall, there is a widespread narrative among adult villagers that the 'taste is not as before'. They say that food sold in iceboxes (especially meat) is not delicious, because it lacks freshness. Some mothers also ascertained that they never buy ready-made food or cooked food (*mahoub*) from the market. If for some the argument is that they have too many children and that it would cost too much, for the majority there is the strong idea that home-cooked food tastes better. In terms of changing food cultures, we thus observe both resistance and innovation.

Indeed, meals and separate food items get new meanings. While our interlocutors continue to mobilize criteria of taste, deliciousness, freshness, and appearance (colour) to assess the adequacy of the food items, they also integrate new values, such as modernity and fanciness. In the meantime, the fear of contamination by chemicals is also on their minds, not surprisingly, since food at the local market is sourced increasingly from commercial agriculture and the food industry. Some of these food items, such as snacks, packaged food, and soft drinks, are connoted as modern and fashionable and hence desirable. These changes in food culture make me think of what Sahlins (1985) has referred to as a historical process. Thus, each time when rice is lacking or fast-food snacks are eaten, the cultural category of a 'traditional Khmer meal' is put at risk in practice, and is undergoing a transformation of its meaning. The role of children is particularly noticeable, since their desire for industrially produced fancy snacks and sweets (containing much salt, fat, and sugars) is often satisfied by adults, especially fathers, who are prone to pamper their children. What does this mean in terms of nutritious adequacy?

A closer look at the packages of some of the popular sweets illustrates the change of the nutritious food components. A 30 g package of tapioca starch/wheat flour chips contains 151 calories, of which 66 calories come from fat (90% saturated), sodium and sugar, but no vitamin A, vitamin C, calcium, or iron. It contains certified food colouring as well as antioxidants (E319, E320; E321). It is produced by LIWAYWAY Cambodia Food Industries Co Ltd. Other packages (crab crackers, green peas) of the Flying Horse Brand also contain large amounts of salt, sugar, and palm oil.[9] What we observe today in Cambodia is similar to what Richards (1939) observed in the first exhaustive anthropological study on changing food cultures (among the Mbembe, former Northern Rhodesia). Already then, she critically observed that '[I]n urban areas the new use of European foods, white flour or polished rice, have robbed the people of many of the most valuable constituents of their former diet' (p. 3).

When thinking of contemporary Cambodia, this is worrisome. In 2010, a STEP survey[10] on the prevalence of non-communicable disease risk factors was initiated on the observation that Cambodia 'is presently facing the threat of emerging obesity (…)' (2010, p. 2). People are eating below-standard quantities of fruits and vegetables, and there is a tendency to eat more meals away from home, men more than women. The nutritional transition to energy-dense nutrient-poor (EDNP) foods (Anggraini et al., 2016) occurs among populations suffering from structural or seasonal financial stress; they access EDNP foods that are more affordable and accessible than healthy foods. This explains why obesity has shifted to the poor. So on the one hand, the emerging food market brings food items to land- and resource-poor families and thus satisfies the criteria of the availability and accessibility of food as key dimensions of the right to food. On the other hand, the shift from fresh food from the forest and home-grown food to industrially processed packaged foods challenges the dimension of adequacy (in terms of nutritional components) and comes with both resistance to and acceptance of new food items.

Conclusions

> Before, farmers brought vegetables, fruit, and meat from the villages and forests to market, but now farmers bring everything from the market to villages.
>
> (village 3)

Entering the frontier area of Kampong Thom triggered a feeling of bewilderment. What had been a primary tropical forest two decades earlier has completely disappeared. Livelihoods of local people have been devastated. Local farmers have been evicted from their lands and from their home-food production. Incorporated in the market economy and commercial agriculture, many have turned into land- and money-poor masses, a kind of rural proletariat, whose access to adequate food is challenged and, therefore, their right to food susceptible to being violated.

Struck by the 'immediacy of the details' (Geertz, 1973, p. 24), we inferred that food vendors and grocery stores play a key role in feeding an increasing number of non-food farming families. 'Before' diets were more nutritious (based on home-production, collecting from the common natural resources, hunting, and fishing), and only additional condiments had to be purchased. When access to natural resources and home-production decreased, people started to buy food at the emerging local food markets, and food vendors came to the villages. With this came a number of advantages and disadvantages in terms of price, time-savings, and quality.

A range of industrially processed nutrient-poor food items were introduced, especially sweets (mostly for children), alcohol, cigarettes (mostly consumed by men), snacks, instant noodles, and soft drinks. Whereas the volume of these food supplies has increased with the growing number of grocery shops and mobile food vendors, and availability has expanded since the latter travel on a daily basis to the most remote villages, the right to food is challenged. The large majority of people do not earn enough cash to access food all year round, and the worst-off not even enough rice. In the lean season, people suffer from structural food shortages. Moreover, the adequacy of food is ambiguous. Many new food items are appreciated, not only because they are time-savers and desired, but also because of their modernity. However, there is also growing concern about the quality of purchased foods and about the chemicals that are used to produce, process, and conserve them. Middle-aged adults complain about the poor taste and lack of freshness of food from the market as compared to food formerly obtained from the forest and their own homesteads. Yet, children adore eating the sweet or salty snacks. Collaterally, their health is put at risk for non-communicable diseases, such as obesity.

Policy makers and (local) authorities do not seem to problematize this nutritional transition in terms of food accessibility and adequacy, which are two important dimensions of the right to food. They have also overlooked the

important role of local food vendors, mobile or stationary, with regard to questions of food security and the right to food. Taking these activities and actors into account is important for formulating appropriate right to food strategies. Food vendors, often women, offer a wide array of affordable, accessible food items, which are increasingly the backbone for low-income households struggling with rising food and diminishing cassava prices. They also offer income-earning opportunities to women. Yet bigger, and mostly male, entrepreneurs are evicting smaller enterprises run by women, because of more investment capital, access to family labour, better means of transportation, more commercial connections, and, eventually, access to larger markets.

The main characteristic of a frontier area is that changes occur at an extraordinary rapid speed and that social and cultural dynamics evolve under our eyes. In January 2016, the Somang Reak Reay Market ('lucky and happy market') was under construction in the Commune of Beong Lvea, a huge infrastructure inviting wholesalers to the area and threatening to extinguish small local grocery holders in the villages and at the two crossroad markets – and perhaps also offering new opportunities for mobile vendors to access foodstuffs more easily and dispatch them into the remotest villages.[11]

This chapter is just a snapshot of empirical observations in the field where local peoples' livelihoods transitioned from home-produced food to commercial agriculture. The second survey conducted by our team in 2019 hints at socio-economic dynamics of peasants returning to grow their own foods. Future research is needed to confirm this trend. It appears, indeed, that, in general, female-headed households place more emphasis on the cultivation of food crops than their male counterparts do. It might be that the out-migration of men leads to a higher prevalence of female-headed households and more own food production. Expansion or reduction of local food trade may vary accordingly. But ironically, at this stage, we observe that farm-fed fleshy chickens travel from the rural areas to the cities, whereas the rural populations have largely become dependent on agro-industrially processed foods that are cheaper, thus more affordable, not always adequate, and the nutritional quality of which is impoverished.

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Notes

1. 'The United Nations Millennium Development Project's Task Force on Hunger has shown that 80 per cent of the world's hungry live in rural areas' (Ziegler et al., 2011, p. 34).
2. For this chapter, we analysed the nodes 'income', 'gender relations', 'food security', and 'food culture'.

3 Until 2007, the road conditions were very bad and even worse during the rainy season (July–September). Only in 2014 did the road to access the area improve.
4 The market – in the understanding adopted here – is nothing more and nothing less than an exchange mechanism, where mutually beneficial transactions can take place. However, those without purchasing power cannot participate in the market.
5 Our survey (2019) shows that the most common means of transportation has become the motorcycle; 86% of the households in the sample reported owning at least one. Second position is held by the bicycle, in 37% of households. More men than women use motorbikes, whereas women outnumber men in using a bicycle.
6 The Household Dietary Diversity Score (HDDS) is calculated by summing equally weighted response data on the consumption of 12 different food groups in the last 24 hours. In terms of gender, it appears that men have a slightly higher dietary diversity than women in Kampong Thom (Torrico Ramirez 2019, p. 44).
7 We find that for household expenditures related to food, preparing meals, clothing and footwear, and education, the women are the main decision makers with a percentage of around 40–60%. These are the highest for food expenditures and preparing meals (55.7% and 63.96% respectively; Torrico Ramirez 2019, p. 37).
8 The American certified nutritional therapy practitioner, Craig Fear, presents a warning about the changes in food culture in Cambodia on his blog 'Fearless eating'.

> The use of MSG is {just as} rampant. Knorr is making an absolute killing over here. People use it in everything but especially soups, unfortunately. There are tons more junk foods made with the typical industrial chemicals that preserve color and flavor packaged foods. And you'll always find a section of the local market that sells this stuff; look at the food labels and you'll start to see the same ingredients over and over, namely vegetable oils, corn, wheat, sugar and a litany of chemical flavorings (such as 'natural flavors') and colorings all hidden behind bizarre, unpronounceable chemical names (azodicarbonoamide anyone?)

https://fearlesseating.net/cambodian-food/, 10.06.2020.
9 These are explicitly *halal*. *Halal* refers to an Islamic ritual to ascertain that animals are bled to death during the slaughter process. Ritually speaking, sweets cannot be *halal*. It is a pure marketing strategy.
10 STEP survey method developed by the WHO is a simple, standardized method for collecting, analysing, and disseminating data on key NCD risk factors in countries, such as trends in body-mass index, underweight, overweight, and obesity.
11 As of August 2021, the market is composed of 200–300 shops; people are selling food, meats, vegetables, clothes, and groceries. The market is led by Mr. Song Sam Ang and situated in Kampoub Ambil village.

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