



Urbanization, Agricultural Land, and Livelihoods of Ethnic Minorities: A Case Study of the Khmer People in Dong Xoai City, Binh Phuoc Province, Vietnam

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Abstract

Urbanization has taken place in Binh Phuoc province, significantly impacting the material and spiritual lives of its people. This study analyzes the impact of urbanization on the livelihoods of the Khmer people in Dong Xoai city, Binh Phuoc province, using data from a survey of 100 households, in-depth interviews with 10 representatives, and observations of Khmer people participating in livelihood activities from 2022 to 2024. Research shows that urbanization has created many job opportunities for people, allowing them to expand their income-generating activities and easily access agricultural markets. However, state-led urban development has led to a significant reduction in agricultural land due to urban expansion, forcing many families to sell their land to meet rising land prices. As a result, farming households are struggling to earn a sustainable income.

Keywords: Agricultural land, Dong Xoai city, Khmer people, livelihood transformation, urbanization

Introduction

Urbanization encompasses not only population concentration or spatial development of urban areas but also changes in land use, access to productive assets, labor markets, and household economic structures. For households dependent on agricultural land, urban development can create new economic prospects, although it can also weaken traditional income sources and create numerous obstacles (Kan & Chen, 2022; Tong et al., 2019). Therefore, the consequences of urbanization need to be assessed not only through the lens of job creation or economic progress but also in relation to households' access to resources, their ability to adapt to changing circumstances, and the preservation of their livelihoods.

In Vietnam, urbanization and agricultural land-use conversion have emerged as important catalysts for rural livelihood transformation. Research conducted in suburban areas shows that the relationship between urban growth and livelihood change is quite complex. In the suburbs of Hanoi, some households began diversifying their livelihoods before large-scale government land expropriation, which allowed them to adapt more effectively to subsequent land-use changes (Nguyen & Kim, 2020). However, many households that adapted by diversifying their

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livelihoods after land expropriation found their livelihoods unsustainable (Nguyen, 2014; Bui, 2015). In many regions of Vietnam, many farmers whose property was confiscated during urbanization received monetary compensation but still struggled to restore their livelihoods (Nguyen, van Westen, & Zoomers, 2021).

Dong Xoai City, located in southern Vietnam, has undergone significant administrative and urban development, transforming from a provincial administrative center in 1997 to a city in 2018. Urban expansion, infrastructure upgrades, and growth in industrial and commercial activities have altered the socio-economic environment for its people. These changes have created prospects for employment, construction, trade, and services, while simultaneously increasing pressure on agricultural land and altering the working conditions of rural households, including the Khmer community.

The Khmer population in Dong Xoai comprises 1,732 people (Binh Phuoc Statistics Department, 2020). Their traditional livelihood is slash-and-burn agriculture, although by the late 1990s they had shifted to cultivating crops such as rubber, cashew, and pepper. Changes in land use rights, forest conservation policies, economic market fluctuations, and urban development have impacted these initiatives. For the Khmer community, cultivable land functions not just as a source of productivity but also as the foundation of household income via agricultural production, the inheritance of property, and a gauge of autonomy in labor oversight. As urban expansion diminishes or reallocates land, families can be compelled to pursue different economic prospects. The ability to achieve these objectives depends on factors such as educational qualifications, professional skills, family labor resources, social networks, and access to financial means. Thus, urbanization may produce diverse outcomes for livelihoods while concurrently introducing multiple challenges to livelihood progression. This study investigates urbanization as a means of restructuring household assets while creating opportunities that influence livelihood decisions to assess the pathways of livelihood flexibility and household reactions to changing conditions. The paper focuses on addressing three research questions in relation to those concerns: In what manner does urbanization influence access to arable land and agricultural livelihoods for Khmer families in Dong Xoai? How have families restructured their economic activities in response to fluctuating land accessibility and the rise of non-agricultural job prospects? What elements account for the variations in households' ability to adapt to these changes?

By responding to these queries, the investigation adds value to the subject of urbanization and livelihood transition research in two ways. The study provides empirical evidence of modifications in land access and economic activity within an ethnic minority group in a fast-advancing metropolis in Southeast Vietnam. This research analytically investigates the interplay between land-based livelihoods, the diversification of those

livelihoods, and varying adaptation capacities; consequently, it demonstrates why broader economic opportunities do not automatically lead to secure livelihoods for all families. The findings of the study establish a framework for assessing how urban development and livelihood support strategies can more adequately cater to the needs of households undergoing economic restructuring as a result of urban sprawl.

Literature Review

Research on livelihood diversification and household adaptation: Chambers and Conway (1992) defined livelihoods as relating to an individual's self-sufficiency capabilities, resources, and methods, emphasizing safety, equity, and sustainability. The authors established an analytical framework for sustainable livelihoods, clarified by Scoones (1998), providing a structure for considering the relationship between livelihood diversification and household adaptation by recognizing that agricultural intensification or expansion, livelihood diversification, and migration are overarching pathways for rural livelihood transformation.

Ellis (1998) expanded the concept of livelihood diversification, describing it as the way rural families create a portfolio of activities and social support systems to maintain or improve their quality of life. Ellis also emphasized that diversification can enhance livelihood stability by expanding income sources and reducing reliance on a single activity. Barrett et al. (2001) distinguished between diversification stemming from resource constraints and crisis management, and diversification related to the prospect of higher returns. The relationship between diversification and well-being is complex. Barrett et al. (2001) highlight resource constraints that hinder poor households from engaging in more profitable non-agricultural activities, while Ellis (1998) cautions against assuming that all types of diversification have the same impact on livelihood security. Therefore, livelihood transition should be assessed in terms of changes in household assets and access to resources, thereby establishing stable income, mitigating risks, or protecting future livelihood opportunities.

Regarding urbanization, land loss, and livelihood changes in Vietnam, research shows that land loss and livelihood changes due to urbanization do not follow a uniform trajectory. Urbanization leads to land loss, although it creates many job opportunities and people receive monetary compensation, encouraging them to proactively change their means of livelihood (Nguyen, 2014; Pham & Truong, 2018; Nguyen & Kim, 2020). Some households proactively change their means of livelihood before purchasing land, thereby engaging in non-agricultural activities that can generate higher incomes as agricultural land area decreases (Nguyen, 2014; Nguyen & Kim, 2020). However, changes in livelihoods caused by urbanization create instability for households struggling to access resources, exacerbating wealth inequality, reducing community solidarity, increasing environmental pollution, and disrupting economic, cultural, and

social balance (Tran, 2009; Dunarintu, 2012; Yen, 2013; Cham, 2014; Thuy, 2022; ...). The ability to adapt to urbanization varies among household groups due to disparities in access to resources, including age, gender, education level, and pre-land loss income (Tong et al., 2019). Comparative analyses of livelihoods after land expropriation in Hanoi, Da Nang, and Vinh show that the impacts of urbanization vary depending on the urban environment and the specific circumstances of each household (Tuan & Hegedűs, 2022). In summary, this study shows that the link between urbanization and changes in livelihoods is influenced by the timing of livelihood transition, the resources owned by households, and the type of new employment prospects.

Another concern in livelihood research relates to the disproportionate allocation of resources, which is essential to capturing emerging economic prospects. Sustainable livelihood frameworks emphasize the importance of natural capital, human capital, financial capital, physical capital, and social capital – elements that families integrate to implement livelihood plans (Scoones, 1998). For Khmer families in Dong Xoai, the distinction between "available" and "attainable" opportunities is crucial. The development of manufacturing and service sectors can increase the demand for local employment, although not all households benefit equally. Educational attainment, age, gender, work experience, family obligations, and social relationships can all influence the nature of work an individual may pursue and their ability to sustain that work.

The preceding literature review highlighted two key concerns related to our case study. First, current studies on urbanization and livelihood change in Vietnam primarily focus on land acquisition and subsequent livelihood transformation, whereas this study highlights a research gap regarding the livelihoods of Khmer families – an ethnic minority in Dong Xoai affected by urbanization. Second, this study needs to consider how the reduction in agricultural land area impacts household livelihood decisions, and under what circumstances non-agricultural employment might be a viable option to secure livelihoods. This study integrates a "sustainable livelihood framework" with an anthropological perspective on social transition and household adjustment. The sustainable livelihood framework serves as the primary analytical construct, while the anthropological perspective emphasizes the historical context of households, their local perceptions of land, and the diverse experiences encountered during livelihood transition.

To address the shortcomings of this study, this paper aims to link four key factors: 1. Urbanization and changes in circumstances; 2. Access to livelihood resources; 3. Livelihood strategies; 4. Livelihood outcomes and vulnerability. The central argument is that urbanization transforms livelihood prospects, and the impact of these transformations depends on households' ability to exploit alternative resources and engage in non-agricultural work. This argument serves as a framework for understanding

empirical findings without assuming that all observable changes are solely caused by urbanization.

Methodology

Research Design and Study Area

This research employs a case study methodology that integrates home survey data, in-depth interviews, and participant observation. The mixed-methods strategy is suitable as the research examines both quantifiable alterations in household livelihood practices and the social dynamics that influence how households perceive and react to these changes. The study was conducted on Khmer families living in Dong Xoai city, Binh Phuoc province, in southeastern Vietnam. Dong Xoai is a locality undergoing rapid urbanization, leading to changes in agricultural production, land use, and non-agricultural employment. The Khmer demographic is predominantly located in this area, and there has been a transition in subsistence practices from slash-and-burn farming to the cultivation of industrial crops like rubber, cashew, and pepper, eventually evolving into employment in factories, construction, commerce, and services within an urban setting.

Data Collection

Primary data were gathered utilizing three approaches: household questionnaire surveys, in-depth interviews, and participant observation.

The survey questionnaire was administered to 100 Khmer families in June 2024 using convenience sampling. Households were selected based on their distribution across areas where the Khmer community lives. The study was intended to document alterations in arable land and economic activities, offering quantifiable proof of disparities across families.

Furthermore, the study conducted 10 in-depth interviews using purposive sampling in 2024. Interviewees included two individuals aged 70 and over, two individuals aged 50-69, three individuals aged 35-49, and three individuals aged 20-35. This study included both men and women to gather information from demographic groups diverse in age and gender. This helped to shed more light on household livelihood stories, factors contributing to the reduction of arable land, changes in agricultural production, participation in non-agricultural work, and perspectives on opportunities and obstacles related to urbanization. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, with interviewees' identities anonymized to ensure confidentiality, while also clarifying the context of the survey results and analyzing how households perceive changes in access to productive resources.

Furthermore, the study included participant observation excursions to the study sites in March 2022, December 2023, and June 2024. This methodology was implemented in areas inhabited by Khmer families, aiming to understand their daily economic activities and the factors

influencing household choices, thereby enhancing comprehensive surveys and interviews to gain deeper insights into the context of agricultural production, labor activities, and local conditions surrounding the livelihood transition process.

Data Analysis

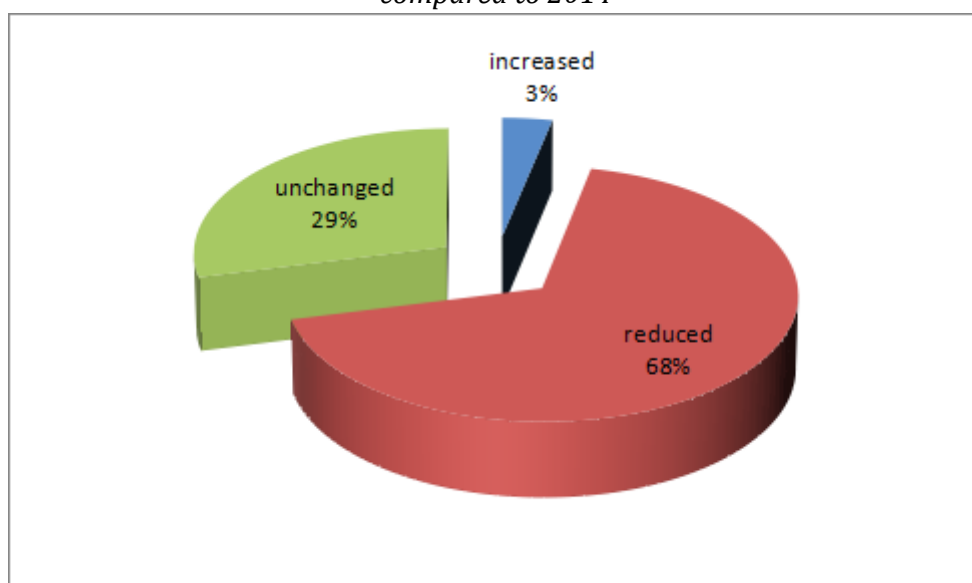
Data collected from the survey were then coded and entered. Quantitative data analysis was performed using SPSS version 23 software. This data source aimed to determine the distribution of households based on cultivated land area, recorded changes in land area, and major livelihood activities. Results are presented as the number of households and percentages, with the denominator clearly indicated for each indicator. Regarding qualitative data, we recorded and transcribed participant observations and conducted in-depth interviews to enhance data comprehension and provide insights. The authors categorized and reorganized data from interview transcripts and participant observation notes into thematic groups. These groups fit the theoretical framework and analytical structure, including items such as livelihood context, livelihood activity status, influencing factors, and adaptation and recovery strategies. Rather than perceiving land loss as a direct trigger for occupational shifts, the study explores various processes reported by households, such as intergenerational land division, land transactions, planning-related modifications, agricultural limitations, and engagement in novel employment prospects.

Findings

Urbanization with productive land and agricultural production

Based on the testimonies of those interviewed and previous analyses, prior to 1997, the Khmer people primarily relied on slash-and-burn agriculture, cultivating rice and other crops for self-sufficiency. Each plot of land was owned by a family for one to three years, depending on crop yields, after which they would leave the area and move to another forest to continue slash-and-burn farming. The area of land used by each household depended on the level of use. Since 1997, local authorities have strictly enforced forest conservation regulations, prohibiting deforestation for agricultural purposes, leading to a shift in the Khmer community towards settled farming. At this time, each household owns nearly 3 hectares of newly cultivated land in the highlands. To meet market demands, they must grow commercial crops such as rubber, pepper, cashew, and other crops. The area of land dedicated to production is the most important asset, a type of natural capital affecting the sustainability of each household's livelihood. However, rapid urbanization has led to a decline in the area of land available for household production.

Figure 1: Change in the productive land area of Khmer families in 2024 compared to 2014



Source: Author's survey in 2024

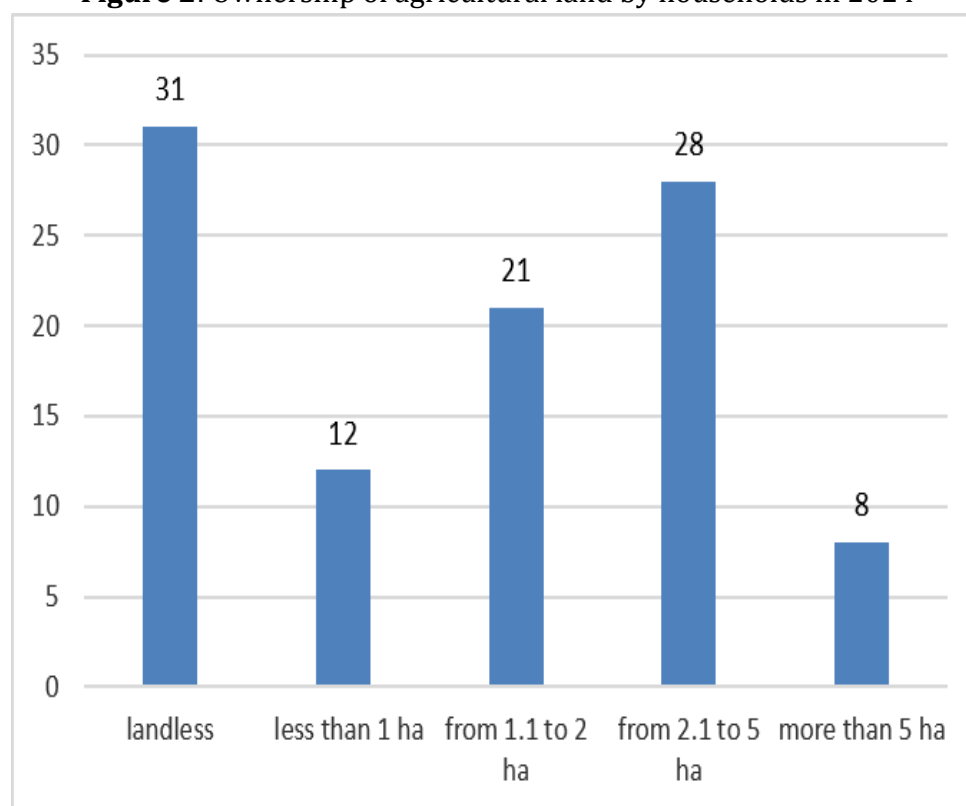
The survey findings indicate that 68 of 100 households diminished their productive land area, 29 households maintained their land area, and 3 households expanded their land area. The division of household registration, sales, and planning was chiefly responsible for the reduction in land area. A particular resident contended that:

The Khmer people in this area have reduced production land because it has been divided among children and collected by the state, and they sold it to build a house, buy a vehicle, get married, have fun, and so on. As roads are widened and urban infrastructure is invested in, land prices rise, and more Khmer people are selling. They sold their land, and now they have no production land or land to share with their children, so they are forced to work as hired laborers. A few houses in the area sold land and then went to Tan Phuoc and Dong Phu to buy it back for farming (IDV1, male, aged 63, Dong Xoai, 2024).

The survey results and IDV1's discourse indicate that the decline of cultivable Khmer land in Dong Xoai city is due to various issues. During family separation, the Khmer, similar to other ethnic groups, assign land to their descendants, with 17 households sharing land among their progeny. Planning curtailed the land allocation for 31 households, with 14 households experiencing reductions due to forestry development and conservation measures, while 17 households encountered reductions stemming from urban planning efforts. As a result, rapid urbanization has led to soaring land values, benefiting individuals. Of the 20 households that ceded land, some did so to improve their living conditions by building houses, buying cars, or purchasing agricultural land in rural areas. However, many others sold their land to meet less essential needs, depriving them of their primary source of income and forcing them to seek

work to support their families. This has led to a decline in agricultural production and inequality in land ownership. Many Khmer people are facing a shortage or lack of arable land.

Figure 2: Ownership of agricultural land by households in 2024



Source: Author's survey in 2024

Figure 2 shows that 31 households have no arable land; 12 households own less than 1 hectare; 21 households own between 1 and 2 hectares; 28 households have between 2.1 and 5 hectares, and 8 households have more than 5 hectares of fertile arable land. This shows the importance of this resource and they have purchased additional land; the remaining five households have been allocated and are using the land. Inequality arises from the factors mentioned above. Three of the eight households with large areas of arable land have recognized the importance of this resource. Notably, there are currently 31 households lacking arable land due to three main reasons: Firstly, five newly established households have not yet received land allocations from their parents; secondly, four households lack arable land due to urban development initiatives, including the construction of roads, residential areas, and other infrastructure projects; and finally, five households have sold land at various times to cover medical expenses, and as land prices increased, they built houses, bought cars, or changed their livelihoods. These factors have contributed to their lack of arable land.

Land ownership has a significant impact on both agricultural productivity and the survival of the Khmer community in Dong Xoai. The decline in arable land has led to a decrease in the number of farming

households. According to our analysis, in 2014 there were 70 households primarily dependent on agriculture. This number gradually decreased to 48 households in 2024 (Figure 3). Several factors contributed to this decline in the number of farming households, such as inefficient farming methods, lack of motivation and chuyển to other occupations, although the main cause is the lack of arable land.

The farming yield in Khmer regions has transformed in several aspects in the contemporary landscape. The most important factor is that many households have switched from growing pepper and cashew trees to growing rubber trees, because growing pepper requires large capital investment, is labor-intensive, and is prone to crop failure. They have expanded their cultivated area by growing cashew, rubber, and timber trees to maintain a stable income throughout the year. Thus, there are 61 households involved in rubber cultivation, 58 in cashew cultivation, 27 in agricultural crop production, and 5 in the planting of timber trees... Additionally, a significant number of farmers have used advanced equipment and practices in their production methods to boost agricultural output while minimizing maintenance efforts. In addition, we noted another encouraging trend: several households sold urban land and bought extensive parcels in non-urban locales for agricultural investment. Certain people invest in housing and farming land to augment their financial returns. Despite its small size, this statistic demonstrates the Khmer population's flexibility in response to urbanization in Dong Xoai. Thus, the Khmer community in Dong Xoai had a high degree of rational thought. They endeavored to enhance their profits by all available methods, as researched by Samuel Popkin (1979) on rational farmers.

Families with minimal or no agricultural land perpetually encounter feelings of insecurity.

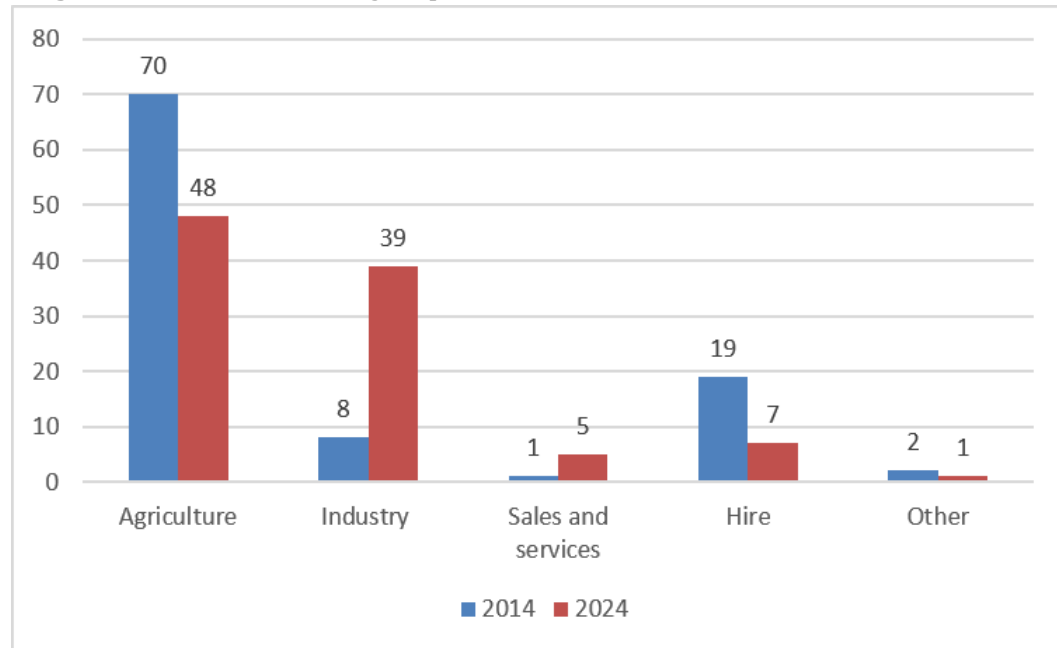
For several generations, the Khmer people have subsisted on shifting cultivation. They shifted to rubber, pepper, and cashew plantations after 2000. Many families sell their land to work as hired laborers and go to work in a company. Life has become very unstable. Today, people want to buy land, but it is prohibitively expensive. Part of the land for my house is confiscated by the state, and part is for my children. Like amputated arms and legs, I have no land (IDV2, male, aged 93, Dong Xoai, 2024).

Shifting agriculture is a customary practice among the Khmer community in the hilly regions of Binh Phuoc province. Subsequently, they have cultivated a religious system, a perspective on the world, and extensive local knowledge linked to highland production endeavors. Prior to the emergence of urbanization and industrialization, their expertise became obsolete, and contemporary knowledge had yet to develop when they transitioned to new professions. Such a situation induces psychological turmoil within the population, leading numerous Khmer individuals to perpetually lament the loss of land for agricultural pursuits.

Transforming Khmer people's livelihoods as a result of urbanization

Urbanization is a significant factor impacting the livelihoods of the Khmer community in Dong Xoai city. Compared to the past, when people were entirely dependent on agriculture for their living, there are now many different career options. The Khmer community has witnessed a significant shift from agriculture to sectors such as manufacturing, construction, and services.

Figure 3: Main livelihood group of Khmer households in 2014 and 2024



Source: Author's survey in 2024

According to the findings depicted in Figure 3, the agriculture sector serves as the primary source of revenue for Khmer households. Nevertheless, this figure has progressively diminished up to the present time. Previous examinations have focused on the transformation of this group. Emerging livelihood sectors, including industry, construction, and services and trade, have manifested and exhibited significant variability.

Industrial and construction livelihood group: This organization has proliferated quickly throughout the years. In the year 2014, there were only 8 households, but by 2024, this figure had risen to 39 households whose principal income derived from industrial and construction jobs. A female household head expressed:

Farmland is shrinking, and agricultural production is precarious due to weather and market price fluctuations, so it's not easy for the Khmer people here to make a living from agriculture. Furthermore, with improved roads, more and more industrial zones, and easier access to jobs with stable incomes, young people here mainly work as factory workers (IDV3, female, aged 38, Dong Xoai, 2024).

This escalation transpires due to several factors: firstly, the number of families with diminished arable land who lack the means to augment their agricultural capacity, rendering them unable to sustain themselves

through farming; secondly, households reliant on wage labour in agriculture perceive their current employment as unstable, arduous, and susceptible to unemployment, prompting a transition to alternative labour. Thirdly, industrial zones were established in Dong Xoai, augmenting the network of companies during the phases of industrialisation and urbanisation, thus generating employment opportunities for the Khmer community. In 2009, three industrial zones were established in Dong Xoai city, creating many job opportunities for local people. Due to the limited number of businesses at that time, the Khmer people faced many difficulties in competing with rivals. Moreover, this community has not yet developed new insights to satisfy the employer's criteria. By 2024, the number of businesses in industrial zones has risen, there is a significant need for employment, and the Khmer populace has proactively adapted and transformed their livelihoods to engage in labour. The workforce includes both men and women with educational qualifications, under 40 years old. Meanwhile, the majority of construction workers employed by construction companies are men under 50, many of whom lack literacy skills. Regardless of their actions, the Khmer people are aware of the need to adapt their livelihoods due to urbanization, overpopulation, and limited arable land. Furthermore, 12 other families have sent relatives to seek employment at companies to supplement their income; this number is expected to increase in the coming months. Some families believe that employment provides them with a more secure and fulfilling life.

However, young Khmer people still face many challenges in finding employment and working in industries. Firstly, many Khmer people aged 30 and older lack literacy skills. Secondly, the standards for work environment, discipline, and recruitment conditions in factories are very strict, in contrast to the Khmer people who are accustomed to slash-and-burn agriculture and do not require such conditions. This explains why those who join organizations are often young and tend to leave quickly due to their inability to adapt to the company's values and policies. This situation shows that the Khmer people living in Dong Xoai city today are not yet ready to integrate into the modern workforce. Despite having jobs, they still want to return to agriculture, which would help them adapt to a new environment and become skilled workers.

Besides employment, emerging livelihoods for the Khmer people in Dong Xoai include *trade and services*. The number of households living in this area is quite small, with only five households involved in supermarket businesses along the DT753 road. Cashew trees are grown on hillside plots; however, the 2017 and 2018 harvests were unsuccessful due to climatic conditions. Therefore, they sold their agricultural land to expand their income sources, with the husband working as a laborer and the wife pursuing trade as the family's main economic strategy. Only a few households consider trade and services as their primary source of income. However, many Khmer families have chosen this as a supplementary

source of income to diversify their earnings, as market demand for services is increasing and this activity does not negatively impact agricultural productivity. During off-season or rest periods, 13 households purchase small trucks or tricycles to transport goods; 7 households sell drinks and snacks, delivering directly to consumers; and 8 households rent out land or houses to others for business purposes. Women are primarily involved in the exchange of goods, while men handle transportation, clearly illustrating this shift. All of them are under 40 years old and have not completed primary education. This shift towards trade and services brings both advantages and disadvantages. Urbanization facilitates their easy access to various sources of capital, including financial capital, social capital through networks of relatives and friends connecting them with customers, and physical capital through developing infrastructure. Therefore, facilitating the exchange of goods between sellers and buyers is relatively simple. However, they have encountered many obstacles, such as limited financial resources and a lack of necessary skills and expertise in the workforce. Their business scale is small, although people still prefer shopping at markets or larger retailers. Furthermore, as the number of people involved in the business increases, finding customers becomes more difficult. Nevertheless, many households still aspire to transition to commercial and service businesses, indicating that this trend will continue in the future.

Agricultural hired labor force: This demographic group is volatile, reaching its peak in 2014 with 19 households. They work in agriculture as seasonal laborers, participating in activities including rubber tapping, cashew harvesting, pepper harvesting, and weeding. A young person commented:

Jobs in agriculture are increasingly scarce due to shrinking arable land, and the work is precarious and weather-dependent, only providing income on sunny days. Furthermore, we are illiterate, so we cannot work as factory workers. Currently, the restaurant industry has many job opportunities, so during the rainy months, I often apply for cleaning jobs in restaurants (IDV4, female, aged 25, Dong Xoai, 2024).

Their agricultural land is shrinking, and they can't find alternative jobs, so working on farms has become their only solution. By 2024, this number will drop to just 7 households. Those who are no longer employed have moved on to other types of work. These workers have a stable income and are not affected by harsh weather conditions. As laborers selling their work to landowners, they are constantly worried about the weather, fearing rain, which hinders their ability to work and support their families. This profession is not a new way of earning a living, although urbanization has increased job prospects. They have shifted from agriculture to working in restaurants and bars, where they perform loading and unloading tasks. Job opportunities in this field are often precarious and dangerous for young people, as most of them are educated and work in a modern and unfamiliar social context.

Conclusion

Urbanization has created numerous job opportunities, giving people access to the consumer market. The Khmer people in Dong Xoai have diligently sought employment opportunities and transformed their livelihoods. This community has adapted to market demands for agricultural production, shifting from food crops to industrial crops, leading to increased income. They have also moved into non-agricultural occupations, including manual labor, construction workers, or those involved in trade and services. This is how they adapt to the social context and manage risks, with the aspiration to improve their quality of life as agricultural land shrinks or disappears completely. This situation demonstrates the high adaptability of the Khmer community in Dong Xoai; they have proactively adapted to integrate and develop in modern society. However, this transition has led to unforeseen consequences, including the precarious nature of livelihoods for most families engaged in non-agricultural activities, which can be dangerous and lack stable income. Some young people are unemployed due to their incompatibility with the business culture and the decisive, professional work methods in factories. Therefore, to support the Khmer community in building sustainable livelihood strategies, further research and discussions with stakeholders are necessary to develop appropriate solutions and policies.

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