Rural Educational NGOs and Urban Aspirations: Lessons on Skill Planning in Cambodia

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ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates how rural-urban inequality manifests in the decision-making of a migrant. It revisits the structural role of education in facilitating rural-urban migration – ‘the modern sector has also been characterized by an urban, industrial bias and a need for a new set of specialized occupational skills. Educational systems responded quickly to these modern sector needs, focusing curricula on modern-sector educational requirements and strengthening urban schools more quickly than those in rural areas.’ (Edwards & Todaro 1974: 28). In particular, it focuses on whether and how a biased set of ‘specialized occupational skills’ are recognized in individual aspirations, as well as the implications of non-state rural education within. While contemporary education often stress aspiration as an individualized exploration, this thesis re-emphasizes it as a reflection of state preference.

The findings originate from my work in a rural educational NGO in villages of Takeo, Cambodia. While migration has been widely studied in many other disciplines, the action-oriented agenda and the emphasis on positioning rural educational NGOs make this a relevant planning issue. With household interviews as well as ethnographic observation and participation, I build narratives of individual aspirations from three villages in Takeo. Through comparing people’s aspirations and capabilities to migrate, and understanding the local context of these villages, I make recommendations for development actors of an equity-driven mind, state and non-state agencies, and researchers in current Cambodia.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

COUNTRY BACKGROUND
Few would disagree that Cambodia has had more than its fair share of tragedy – civil wars persisted throughout the 1970s and 1980s. The country underwent an internationally rare regime wherein education and urban development were not valued by the state – the Pol Pot regime and the Khmer Rouge genocide from 1975 to 1979 evacuated Phnom Penh and killed 1.7 million people, many of whom were civil servants and the more educated (Short, 2004). In 1993, the UNTAC held the first democratic election in Cambodia, which was the first time that the UN had taken over (instead of monitoring and supervising) the administration of an independent state. Since then, the Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) has been in dominant power and Hun Sen has held the highest position of Prime Minister for almost two decades. Today, Cambodia remains a post-conflict and developing country, as well as a weak and authoritarian state, to many1.

Similar to many Southeast Asian countries, Cambodia has embarked on a period of rapid economic growth – an average rate of GDP increase at 9% annually from 1999 to 2007 (RGC, 2010) – and stable macroeconomic conditions in terms of low inflation and a stable exchange rate. Welfare provision is also considered to be improving for the bottom two quintiles (RGC, 2010). Many development indicators such as the average level of education attainment, rates of enrollment and self-reported health status are all rising2.

At the same time, the notions of spatial inequality and urban bias are visible in Cambodia. Among the 30% of Cambodians who live below the poverty line (2,473 riel or USD $0.61), 92% belong to 80% of the rural population in Cambodia (CSES, 2007 in WB, 2009). Problems of underemployment and wage employment for Cambodian youth are much more serious in rural areas than in urban areas (Guarcello et al, 2012). The most updated National Strategic Development Plan (NSDP 2009 - 2013) (RGC, 2010) also acknowledges that access to education and basic infrastructure are much lower in rural Cambodia. The Gini Coefficient has increased from 0.35 in 1994 to 0.40 in 2004 and 0.43 in 2007, indicating mainly rural-urban inequality but recently also rural-rural3 (CSES, 2007). As a result of these imbalances, the NSDP noted that the rural poor are ‘compelled to move to large cities and populated areas to find jobs...which results in many concerns for urban areas’ (RGC, 2010: 61).

1 In 2011, Cambodia ranked 139 over 198 on the Human Development Index (CFI, 2012)
2 Of course, there have always been disputed regarding the reliability of these government figures at national levels. From this research experience, figures from one government source can contradict another.
2 Of course, there have always been disputed regarding the reliability of these government figures at national levels. From this research experience, figures from one government source can contradict another.
3 Rural inequality rose from 0.27 in 1994 to 0.33 in 2004 and climbed again to 0.36 in 2007.


**Research Overview**

This is a research work that investigates how rural-urban inequality manifests in the decision-making of a migrant. It revisits the concept of Edwards & Todaro (1974) on the structural role of education in facilitating rural-urban migration – *the modern sector has also been characterized by an urban, industrial bias and a need for a new set of specialized occupational skills. Educational systems responded quickly to these modern sector needs, focusing curricula on modern-sector educational requirements and strengthening urban schools more quickly than those in rural areas.* (1974: 28). In particular, this research focuses on whether and how a biased set of ‘specialized occupational skills’ are recognized in individual aspirations. While contemporary education often stress aspiration as an individualized exploration, this research re-emphasizes it as a reflection of state preference.

The significance of these interactions with individual agencies is noted in Todaro (1975) - *yet when one recognizes the principal motivation or ‘demand’ for education in Third World countries arises out of a family or individual student’s desire for economic improvement by means of better ‘access’ to high paying jobs, then it is essential that we understand the economic and non-economic reasons why such aspirations are either realized or frustrated* (1975: 226). This thesis takes the idea further back in the decision-making process of migration – it studies the cultivation of these aspirations in the rural origins of Cambodia.

Using the conceptual framework of de Haas (2010) as well as additional terminologies of Appadurai (2002) and Ray (2004), I investigate propensities to migrate as a function of capabilities and aspirations. As a process of decision-making, aspirations are first required to plan for the capabilities needed. Nathan (2005) captures the essence of aspiration as preferences changes – *Preferences among different ways of living must change and the change in preferences is due to a change in aspirations, a change in what people want to be. Aspiration relates to how people want to be in the future, for which reason people use their existing capabilities differently from a situation where they do not have this aspiration.* (2005: 1) In this investigation on future-oriented planning on a micro-scale, I re-evaluate my work in a rural educational NGO in the urban-biased development of current Cambodia.

With household interviews as well as ethnographic observation and participation, I build narratives of individual and collective aspirations from three villages in Takeo, Cambodia. Through comparing people’s aspirations and capabilities to migrate, and understanding the local context of these villages, I make recommendations for development actors of an equity-driven mind, state and non-state agencies, and researchers in current Cambodia.

The rest of this thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 is a literature review of migration and aspirations. Chapter 3 outlines the research design and method. Chapter 4 gives a background of the case, the organization and the area. Chapter 5 presents the primary data of rural people’s aspirations (narrated as (1) current livelihood strategies; (2) aspirations for the future and (3) planning for aspirations and role of education). Chapter 6 analyzes these individual aspirations as part of a structural recognition. Chapter 7 gives planning
recommendations for different development agencies. Chapter 8 concludes the research potential of rural aspiration studies as an alternate interpretation of the urban society.

PLANNING IN ACTION
The findings of this thesis originate from my work in a rural educational NGO in villages of Takeo, Cambodia. While migration has been widely studied in many other disciplines, the action-oriented agenda and the emphasis on positioning rural educational NGOs make this a relevant planning issue. As Corbridge (2007) argues, development studies should re-politicize its theories and attend to the inescapable ‘dirty worlds of practical policy-making’ (202). This emphasis on practicality and politics is alike to how Friedman & Hudson (1974) sees organizational development as an emerging focus of the planning discipline, which stresses interpersonal interrelationships and change-producing behavior. Given the enormous breadth yet limited precedents of this research topic in Cambodia, this case study aims to search for noteworthy gaps and future research areas for similar institutions.

My role as a critical participant in the research field is therefore virtuous to the findings of this case study research. Quoting Flyvbjerg (2006) on the proximity of case study research to reality - ‘If one assumes research, like other learning processes, can be described by the phenomenology for human learning, it then becomes clear that the most advanced form of understanding is achieved when researchers place themselves within the context being studied. Only in this way can research understand the viewpoints and the behavior, which characterizes social actors’ (2006: 236). While subjective biases are inevitable, my engaged position has enabled my access to information sources of these rural hinterlands.

A TRIGGERING POINT
Four years ago, I co-founded a NGO with fifteen friends from my hometown Hong Kong, China. The original goal was simple and naïve – to build a school in underprivileged areas so that children can gain access to education and be empowered for a better future. The chosen construction site turned out to be a village in Takeo, Cambodia, where existing public infrastructure and civic services were deemed insufficient. Today, our organization has built three village schools to teach English for primary school children and is planning a fourth school for 2013. It envisions an ‘equal opportunity to education’ that ‘provides underprivileged children with skills and knowledge to build their own future’ (PLD, 2013)4.

This study was undertaken because of my informal encounters with some rural children in the villages I work at. As I attempted a conversation and asked ‘what do you want to be in the future?’ – a classic question for young people all over the world, the answers of basic and cluttered English raised my attention. The majority sees their future outside of their village – in Takeo town center, Phnom Penh city or even aboard. They aspire to professional jobs – translators, doctors and engineers – that are in rare supply in the contexts of their villages. I

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wonder what would happen to the villages (or to the cities of Cambodia) if all of these children meet their aspirations of social mobility and subsequently leave their home village.

It is within this backdrop where this research comes into place.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Migration has been an enduring research topic for a very long time. At large, modern migration theories analyze the phenomenon as a function of spatial disequilibria, which was suggested as early as Ravenstein’s (1885) laws of migration. Lee (1966) is a classic example - he states that migration decisions are determined by ‘plus’ and ‘minus’ factors in areas of origin and destination, intervening obstacles (e.g. distance) and other personal factors. Although their other statements about migration flows have been revised (or refuted), the modeling upon push and pull factors are still dominant in contemporary migration studies (de Haas, 2010). While the neo-classical assumptions have no lack of critics, few would disagree that migration is at least a partial outcome of spatial inequality. As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, rural-urban tension is one of such inequalities in Cambodia.

MIGRATION: THE CASE OF CAMBODIA

In terms of rural-urban migration being a result of spatial inequality, Lipton (1977, 1984) poses the powerful and enduring hypothesis of urban bias. The central idea hinges on the continuous capital extraction (human and agricultural) from rural areas that retains and fuels the rural-urban imbalance in a sectoral and a developmental sense. In Cambodia, while the NSDP stresses the urgency to improve agricultural productivity and to build a rural economic base, most industrial development has been taking place in Phnom Penh. The industrial sub-sector of textiles and garments has increased from 1.0% in 1993 to 10.3% in 2008 (RGC, 2010); meanwhile, ‘agriculture, which shares 30% of the GDP and accounts for more than 60% of the total employment, has not reached its full potential’ (ibid: 10). The garment sector represents a key pull factor in Cambodia, providing more than 250,000 jobs from 1994 to 2004 - many takers are young female migrants from villages and towns of provinces (Maltoni, 2006). As Lee (2006) argues, the prevailing perception of abundant job and educational opportunities in Phnom Penh will continue to attract the rural to migrate.

Aggregate data on Cambodian migration is rare, even though the flows are supposedly significant. In 2004, 35% of the total population in Cambodia was internal migrants, whose movements were intra-provincial, very short-range and likely to be voluntary (NIS, 2005). Marriage, search for employment and insecurity were identified as important reasons to move, with family movement being the number one reason (CSES, 2004). Beside this, the magnitude of (unauthorized) international migration from Cambodia to Thailand is noted in an overall Asian review (Asis & Piper, 2008). The same review also remarks that Cambodia is one of the three Asian countries5 with the fewest migration studies. As the national development strategy of Cambodia, the NSDP has only mentioned once how the rural poor are ‘compelled to move to large cities and populated areas to find jobs... which results in many

5 According to the article, Burma, Laos and Cambodia are studied the least in Southeast Asia, while Philippines has been studied the most. In East Asia, Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Korea have attracted much research attention. I’d argue there is a divide between the developed/ developing,
concerns for urban areas’ (RGC, 2010: 61). The element of voluntary migration in Cambodia is often understated, and there is no mentioned linkage with education at all.

As Maltoni (2006) states, ‘the focus of interventions and research related to mobility was concentrated on human trafficking, especially sexual exploitation, and forced migration, diasporas, resettlement of refugees, displacement etc.’ (2006: 9). These popular emphases on forced migration and human right issues are omitting the reality of migration in Cambodia. For those that investigate beyond these realms, migration is studied as an outcome in the urban context (e.g. Derks (2008) wrote a fascinating ethnography of young Cambodian women, who moved from the countryside to Phnom Penh, and their working experiences in Phnom Penh). This thesis aims to fill some of these gaps and highlight the significance of migration as a spatialized outcome of development planning and rural NGO education.

THE DISCOURSE OF ASPIRATIONS

Aspirations – The Making of Migration

Instead of asking the conventional question of ‘why do or did people move?’, this thesis traces back to the fundamental question of ‘why do people aspire to move in the first place?’ Aspiration is a vague consciousness towards something (e.g. migration) before we actually act towards it. Nathan (2005) captures the essence of aspiration as preferences changes – ‘Preferences among different ways of living must change and the change in preferences is due to a change in aspirations, a change in what people want to be. Aspiration relates to how people want to be in the future, for which reason people use their existing capabilities differently from a situation where they do not have this aspiration.’ (2005: 1) As highlighted below, the discourse of aspirations has several interesting features for studying migration.

First, individual aspirations link future-oriented goals and the present investments that are acquired and justified to achieve them. These economic dimensions of time and uncertainty are comparable to that of ‘justifiable’ expectations and ‘planning horizons’ in the classic Harris-Todaro model - ‘as long as the present value of the net stream of expected urban income over the migrant’s planning horizon exceeds that of expected rural income, the decision to migrate is justifiable.’ (Todaro & Smith, 2011: 339). As Sherwood (1989) explains, the focus of inquiry is not from fixed goals to desired ends – instead, aspiration studies serve to reveal the dynamic strategies adopted by individuals to attain their goals.

Second, it emphasizes the structural-agency relationship between individual perception and collective realities, which embeds in a decision to migrate. Although aspiration studies are

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more commonly seen in psychological studies\textsuperscript{7}, Rao & Walton (2003) emphasizes the collective aspects of aspirations that are integrated in the usual Becker-Stigler opportunity approach to preference changes. As a cultural anthropologist, Appadurai (2002) elaborates on individual aspirations being a cultural (alongside economic) capacity that embeds in the future-oriented logic of development. The discourse of aspirations therefore also captures the now-acknowledged fact that decisions to migrate are not based exclusively on economic differentials, but also a myriad of socially embedded perceptions on better qualities of life.

Third, the discourse of aspirations targets the possibly self-reinforcing nature of migration - as Douglas Massey (1990) quotes Myrdal in his review, a ‘circular and cumulative causation’. In de Haas (2010), his conceptual model frames aspiration to migrate to be affected by to what extent people perceive as possible - ‘people’s propensity to migrate is seen as a function of their aspirations and capabilities to do so; and migration may therefore increase as long as aspirations increase faster than local livelihood opportunities’ (2010: 254). While migrant remittances likely play a role in changing the local economy, Piore (1979) challenges the possibility for skilled migrant labor to confer similar development in their origin society; Stark (1984) advocates for the relative deprivation effect, of which the infusion of money outside the village would increase the desire to migrate and possibly worsen inequality. Thus, to study aspiration as a migration-development agent stresses a likely vicious cycle.

As a whole, aspiration studies enable a pinpointed understanding of migration as a dynamic process. This matches with the original experience that sparked this research – i.e. the mysterious aspirations of rural children that are spatially mismatched to the local context and which require relocation from the established social network in the villages – as well as the legitimate scrutiny on rural educational NGOs as an agent in cultivating this process.

**Related Concepts**

This thesis began its data collection and analysis with aspiration-related concepts that coheres with the structural-agency dynamic, future-oriented and possibly self-reinforcing nature of migration. The concepts of ‘capacity to aspire’ (Appadurai, 2002) and ‘aspiration windows’ (Ray, 2004) were chosen, since they tie individual decision-making to the larger context of a local development context that determines people’s capability to ‘lead lives they have reason to value and to enhance the substantive choices they have’ (Sen, 1999).

Ultimately, the decision-making of migration requires both the capacity to aspire as well as a determination to find ways towards it; and the notion of an aspiration window gauge the negotiation process between the push and pull factors before reaching migration outcomes.

**Capacity to Aspire**

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\textsuperscript{7} As a psychologist, Churchman (2012) writes about how aspiration studies are much more prevalent in social/ environmental psychology than in planning. He attributes this mainly of the lack of appreciation to studying individuals as the unit of analysis in connection to planning contributions.
In response to an unequal distribution of cultural capacities, thus differential desires and motivation to act towards a better life, Appadurai (2002) conceived the \textit{‘capacity to aspire’} -

\begin{quote}
‘...a navigational capacity which is nurtured by the possibility of real-world conjectures and refutations – compounds the ambivalent compliance of many subaltern populations with the cultural regimes that surround them. This is because the experimental limitations in subaltern populations, on the capacity to aspire, tend to create a binary relationship to core cultural values, negative and skeptical at one pole, over attached at the other.’ (2002: 69).
\end{quote}

This concept highlights the difficulty to overcome inequality, despite a seemingly free will for individuals to aspire and to desire their own path of livelihood. As he said, the better off \textit{‘are more able to produce justifications, narratives, metaphors, and pathways through which bundles of goods and services are actually tied to wider social scenes and contexts.’} (2002: 68).

\textbf{Aspiration Window}

Elaborating upon the concept of \textit{‘capacity to aspire’}, Ray (2004) develops the parameter of \textit{aspiration windows}, which he defines as an individual’s cognitive world of similar and attainable individuals. As he argues, individual investments for their aspirations are minimal for both high and low \textit{‘aspiration gap’}, indicating the difference between their current and aspired livings. Atop the rationalist calculation of cost-benefit maximization, Ray emphasizes the structural role of information and inequality in migration decision - \textit{‘If economic betterment is an important goal, the aspirations window must be opened, for otherwise there is no drive to self-betterment. ... There must be individuals in our immediate cognitive neighborhood who do better than we do, yet if they do a lot better, there will be no investments made even if the cognitive neighborhood to such individuals is unbroken. In short, the experiences of others may have little effect on us either because they lie outside our aspirations window, or even they do, their living standards (which form our aspirations) are far away from ours.’} (2004: 4) As such, cultivating aspirations can foster a polarized society.

\textbf{THE ROLE OF EDUCATION}

As a future-oriented investment, education plays an important role in cultivating and realizing one’s aspirations for betterment, which might or might not involve migration. This thesis revisits Edwards & Todaro (1974) on the structural role of education in facilitating rural-urban migration - \textit{‘education systems respond quantitatively, structurally and qualitatively to society’s aggregate private demand for education’} even though \textit{‘this demand in turn is influenced mainly by the structure of the economic and social incentive system and the socio-political constraints operative in the society’} (1974: 25). Similar to the discourse of aspirations, there is a dynamic struggle between structural constraints and individual will.

On one hand, this thesis studies how rural-urban inequality manifests in the decision-making of a migrant – \textit{‘the modern sector has also been characterized by an urban, industrial bias and a need for a new set of specialized occupational skills. Educational systems responded quickly to these modern sector needs, focusing curricula on modern-sector educational requirements and strengthening urban schools more quickly than those in rural areas.’} (1974:
As the thesis proceeds, it finds interest in whether and how a biased set of ‘specialized occupational skills’ interacts with individual aspirations and becomes societally recognized.

On the other hand, this thesis has an inherent bias on individual agencies being the ultimate agent of development. As Edwards and Todaro (1974) elaborate, the ‘society’s aggregate private demand for education’ entitles for ‘the sum total of society’s individual demands for educational services, given the prevailing structure of private costs, perceived benefits, and socio-political opportunities of procedure through all or part of the educational system’ (ibid: 25). The significance of these interactions of structural inequality with individual agencies is noted in Todaro (1975) - ‘yet when one recognizes the principal motivation or ‘demand’ for education in Third World countries arises out of a family or individual student’s desire for economic improvement by means of better ‘access’ to high paying jobs, then it is essential that we understand the economic and non-economic reasons why such aspirations are either realized or frustrated’ (1975: 226). The Todaro perspective justifies the research interest of this thesis on individual aspirations – it explores the decision-making process of migration and studies the cultivation of these aspirations via education in rural Cambodia.

**RESEARCH EXPECTATIONS**

This thesis comprises of two main questions.

First, why do rural people in Cambodia aspire to migrate or move? The expected findings are general sayings about push and pull factors of rural-urban migration. These include undesirable livelihood opportunities in the local context, limited education, employment and other economic development opportunities, as well as preferred and aspired opportunities (e.g. non-farm occupations) for only being available outside of the local village economies. The lack of viable livelihood options as a main push factor is mentioned in the dearth of most labor migration studies in Cambodia (Lee, 2006; Maltoni, 2006).

Second, within the context of rural-urban migration in Cambodia, what is the perceived role of education as development, and rural educational NGOs as agents of development? The original expectation was for education to satisfy individual aspirations for betterment, and for rural educational NGOs to be able to work mainly with villagers towards this goal. This is due to the renowned lack of state presence in rural Cambodia for post-independent history (Ojendal & Kim, 2006) and the assumed possibility of individual empowerment. As the research findings for the first question give a more nuanced perspective on people’s aspirations, this thesis increasingly challenges the original guesses for its second question. In revisiting Edwards & Todaro (1974), the thesis argues upon an ‘urban and industrial bias’ in defining the ‘specialized occupational skills’ as aspirations of rural people in Cambodia.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

DESIGN

Given the breadth of this research topic, it is designed with a core case study in mind – the rural education NGO that I am affiliated with and its work in rural villages of Takeo, Cambodia. In essence, it is a nested case study to make recommendations for a single organization, while exploring for broader theoretical implications. As a result, the sampled case studies of villages and organizations are both accidental (based on their accessibility to my organization) and purposive (based on the contextual relevance of villages and the comparability of organizations). The research findings are of limited generalizability.

There are now numerous theories in attempt to explain migration. In a review of migration-development theories, Massey (1990) illustrates the conflicting and incoherent dimensions between migration studies and argues that ‘a complete account of migration requires theories and data that link larger social structures with individual and household decisions, connect micro- and macro-levels of analysis, and relate causes to consequences over space and time.’ (1990: 17) This thesis adopts the conceptual framework in de Haas (2010), which claims the needed integration of structural-agency understandings of migration (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of Analyzing Migration-Development Interactions
Source: de Haas (2010: 254)

The diagram of de Haas (2010) (Figure 1) depicts the reciprocal nature of migration and development interactions. The agents are identified as (i) the development context at the national or macro level; (ii) the development context at the local or regional level; (iii) the

8 These sampling methods are non-probability based and therefore has limited validity as a typical representation of the whole population i.e. rural villages in Cambodia and rural education NGOs. See Lewis-Beck, M.S. et al. (2004) The SAGE Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods (Volume 1) for a comprehensive review of different sampling methods and their pros and cons.

9 These include: (i) whether processes of migration should be explained in cross-sectional or historical approaches; (ii) whether migration is best understood in individual or structural terms; (iii) whether the appropriate level of analysis are individuals or households; (iv) whether the emphasis should be on the determinants or consequences of migration. See Massey (1990) for more.
factors related to migrants and the direct socio-economic agents (e.g. household). De Haas (2010) explicitly mentions aspirations as part of the migration-development interactions. In his systemic equation, aspirations assert a mutual relationship between people’s propensity to migrate and the local development context. While local development context determines people’s capabilities (Sen, 1999) to ‘lead lives they have reason to value and to enhance the substantive choices they have’, de Haas (2010) highlights that the aspiration to migrate is affected by to what extent individual beings perceive the option as possible. The factor of such possibility and its uncertainty coheres with the concept about ‘capacity to aspire’.

Using Figure 1, the primary investigation focuses on the box named ‘Migration’ and its surrounding arrows (b, c and d)\(^\text{10}\). In particular, I study in depth the behavior and perception of future-oriented aspirations at the level of these socio-economic agents, using psychological and anthropological concepts of aspirations [i.e. ‘aspiration windows’ of Ray (2004) and ‘capacity to aspire’ of Appadurai (2002)]. I refer to Edwards & Todaro (1974) in claiming a ‘set of specialized occupational skills’ and the ‘urban industrial bias’ in Cambodia.

**METHODS**

The methods used in this research are a combination of interviews and ethnographic techniques. All interviews were done during my visit to Cambodia from late December 2012 to early January 2013. Many of these interviews were done by volunteers from my organization, as part of its needs assessment and project evaluation\(^\text{11}\). These add to any secondary sources and my accumulated insights from previously working in rural Takeo.

With household interviews, as well as ethnographic observation and participation, I build narratives of individual and collective aspirations from three villages in Takeo, Cambodia.

**Household Interviews**

The choice of households as interview subjects is justified upon both practical and theoretical reasons. From a practical standpoint, individual children as a primary agent between education and aspiration have proven difficult to interview – because of the language barrier and their limited literacy, the rural children cannot really provide rationales or any foreseen obstacles for their aspirations. Theoretically, households are a key agent in migration decisions (Stark & Levhari, 1982). This corresponds with the cultural

\(^{10}\) Quoting de Haas (2010), the remaining two arrows respectively stand for the following – (a) the above-regional whole of political, social and economic structures partly determines the local development context, for instance through public infrastructure, policies, social facilities, legislature, taxation, market access or regional development access; (e) changes in the local development context – for instance as a result of migration – may eventually affect the macro-level development context, albeit to a limited extent, because of the limited magnitude of migration and remittances and the predominantly individual, family and community character of migration. To a certain extent, this research re-emphasizes the significant state presence of (a) on individuals as potential migrants.

\(^{11}\) These findings are approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Columbia University.
anthropological study of Ovesen et al. (1996) in rural Cambodia, which finds institutionalized strategies in rural Cambodia to be most solid at a household scale.

Eighty semi-structured interviews were carried out in rural households of three villages in Takeo, Cambodia. The questions focus on their aspirations and any rationale or specifics they can provide – e.g. why is their aspiration better than their existing livelihood? How do they see their aspirations as possible and/or difficult? What is the perceived role of education? In overall, there are not really any fixed questions, nor are any questions answered in all eighty interviews. Usually, the respondents are (1) the female parent in the house and/or (2) the grandparents (when parents were not at home). Occasionally, children, relatives and neighbours were present and would contribute their points of view.

Some basic questions – such as the household size, number of children and their education attainment, feelings about village school – were always used as starters of conversation. Since my organization is known as a development agency in these villages, households are mostly receptive to our interviews. At the same time, there is a higher likelihood for them to exaggerate their livelihood hardships, in hopes of more projects from my organization.

In relevance to this thesis research, most questions evolve around three major themes that correspond to the push and pull factors of a conventional model in migration studies –

1. **Current Livelihood Strategies** – e.g. How do you currently make a living? Why do you not do (a certain way to make a living such as sell vegetables)? How much do you spend and earn per day? What is your largest item of expenditure/ income per day/ per month/ per year? Who in your family contributes or spends the most? How many pigs/ cows/ other livestock or assets do you have? Do your children help the household in making a living?

This type of questions grant understanding to the village economy, its opportunities and hardships, and most importantly, household perceptions about these contexts. The answers give a recognized source of migration push factors and a foundation of people’s aspirations – to a certain extent, ‘aspiration window’ is measured upon how different people’s aspirations are to their current livelihood, assuming interviewees are mostly discontented.

2. **Aspirations for the Future** – e.g. What do you want your children to grow up to be? What kind of job, level of education and location? What do you want to change about your current living? What do you think is the best occupation, school or place to live? Do you want to migrate from this village or do you want to live here for the rest of your life? What is a feature of this village that you think is distinct from other villages/ you are most proud of as a (village name) resident? What do you think is lacking in this village?

This set of questions dwells into the future-oriented logic of development as either or not involving migration. It sees education and employment as major pillars of a migration decision, and uses them as guidance for answers (given that the notion of aspirations are often difficult to convey for uneducated rural Cambodian households). The focus on parents’ aspirations for children is both because of the longer planning horizons for these younger individuals (thus a higher likelihood for some thoughts on aspirations), and the targeted
research question on the role of education and rural educational NGOs in development – in this case, my organization has a biased interest in education for younger schoolchildren.

3. Planning for Aspirations and Role of Education – e.g. How likely do you think the aspirations are feasible? How do you see the aspirations as possible or feasible? What do you think the household should do to make these aspirations more possible? What do you think your children should do become (occupation/ level of education)? What do you prefer the government/ village school has to teach your children? Do you want to learn anything from schools or elsewhere yourself? Besides going to school, what skills or knowledge are important to learn? What do you teach your children or who best teaches your children?

These questions directly refer to the concepts of ‘capacity to aspire’ (Appadurai, 2002) and ‘aspiration window’ (Ray, 2004), as well as roles of education in Edwards & Todaro (1974). They also provide grounds for discussion of a set of ‘specialized occupational skills’ in the ‘urban and industrial bias’ of Cambodia, as well as how rural-urban inequality manifests as individual aspirations to migrate and possibly becomes a self-reinforcing process.

Interviews were carried out through instantaneous translation by native Khmer speakers. Therefore, interview quotes used in this research are the translators’ choice of words. For an easier read, third-person pronouns in the quotes are converted to first person pronouns.

All referred interviewees and informants are coded – for example, Thon Mon Interviewed Household is coded TM; Thuonh is TH; Prey Run is PR. No transcripts are shared.

Ethnographic Observation and Participation
Much of my research insights are accumulated from my NGO practice over the past four years. This involves periods of stay in the villages, site visits to multiple schools and other villages, and interactions with educational institutions in Takeo town. My position as an NGO worker in Takeo has made many of these engagements possible, but this also implies that the findings are hard to replicated or to be verified by future researchers. This method supplements information and context that would otherwise be missing from just household interviews and organizational analysis. On a village level, conversations with the village chiefs and monks provide a general history of previous education and development engagements. In terms of education, school visits and conversations with teachers around Takeo and Cambodia allow me to situate my findings in the broader rural-urban tensions. In addition, our translators’ dual roles as university graduates and teachers in Cambodia meant that they are valuable sources of information regarding the overall education system.
CHAPTER 4: CASE DESCRIPTION

As mentioned, the research is both inspired and designed with a core case study in mind – the rural educational NGO that I am affiliated with, and our work in the rural villages of Takeo, Cambodia. This chapter gives a background of the organization, the working location Takeo, as well as the cases of Prey Run, Thon Mon and Thuonh, and their village conditions.

THE LOCATION

Takeo Province

![Figure 2: Location of Takeo, Province (Edited)](http://alabamamaps.ua.edu/contemporarymaps/world/asia/vietnam_laos_cambodia_map.jpg)

My organization works in four villages surrounding Takeo town, the capital of Takeo province. Takeo province is directly south of Phnom Penh, the capital city of Cambodia (Figure 2). As the cradle of Cambodian civilization (Chandler, 2008), it is home to several pre-Angkorian sites built between the 5th and 8th centuries, and is a popular site for local tourism. It is also known as the birthplace of Ta Mok, the notorious military leader named ‘Brother Number Five’ during the Khmer Rouge regime (Short, 2004; Chandler, 2008).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment and Labor Force Indicator (Percentage of Total Population or Labour Force)</th>
<th>Takeo Province</th>
<th>National</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Population with literacy above 15 years old</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour force in the primary sector including agriculture</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour force in the secondary sector/industry</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour force in the tertiary sector</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour force who are economically active for less than 10 days a month</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1

Available at [http://www.foodsecurityatlas.org/khm/country/provincial-Profile/Takeo](http://www.foodsecurityatlas.org/khm/country/provincial-Profile/Takeo)

According to the Cambodian hierarchy of political administration units, the province is subdivided into 10 districts, 100 communes and 1117 villages (NIS, 2008). In 2008, Takeo province had the third densest population out of twenty-four provinces in Cambodia (2008.
The total population is 843,931, with 14,440 (1.53%) in urban areas and 829,531 (98.3%) in rural areas (NIS, 2008). The provincial literacy rate is similar to the national average, but labour force participation is performing worse (Table 1). Over several visits to Cambodia in the past few years, the demography and economy have been visibly changing, but official statistics on a provincial, town or village level are rare, mostly dated, and sometimes contradicting.

**Takeo Town**

![Figure 3: Map of Takeo Town](source)

Takeo Town is the densest and only urban settlement in the entire province of Takeo. The town has a walkable radius of approximately 30 minutes (Figure 3). Most locals travel by bike or motorbike. Many government offices at the provincial level are located here, such as the Department of Planning (DoP) and Ministry of Education (MoE). Public services such as the hospital, police station and post office are available there. Besides the Takeo market, where everything from household items to foreign exchange to construction materials can be found, most standalone shops in the town sell stationery and phone cards. The town has a handful of guesthouses, restaurants and petrol stations, of which the numbers are rising.

There are various public and private education institutions for a range of levels – Chea Sim High School is known as the best school in Takeo and has a 98% of university entry rate; as one of its eight branches in Cambodia, Build Bright University attracts many people all around Takeo to enroll for its English diplomas and degrees. Besides, there are many other English classes, which are mostly provided by government schoolteachers as after-class tutorials. Korean and Chinese have also become available in recent years, as provided by recruiting agencies from Korea and Chinese monks in pagodas. Foreign tourists are rare but there are always a handful of volunteer workers from abroad – such as the Peace Corps, World Vision and various local NGOs. Most of them are involved in education or healthcare.

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12 Build Bright University Website. [http://www.bbu.edu.kh/tk/](http://www.bbu.edu.kh/tk/)
Within the vicinity of Takeo town, a number of educational services are provided by NGOs. For instance, Book Bridge has built a library room and learning center in Takeo town center in 2011\(^{13}\). New Futures Organization runs a children’s home for the rural youth from Takeo villages and operates English classes for rural villages, monks and policemen in Takeo\(^{14}\). More than a few are oriented to the rural communities. Pathways To Development operates a community library for local schools in Takeo town and provides free after-school English classes in 12 rural villages\(^{15}\). Neighbor Of Cambodia offers training programs for high school dropouts that are interested in agricultural technologies and hope to contribute to the rural development of Cambodia\(^{16}\). Our Objective Organization targets secondary or college students that are from rural poor households. It is a Cambodian-found and –led organization that offers accommodation and tutorial classes to their students\(^{17}\). Many of the educational NGOs in Takeo town are also non-profits either run or funded by foreigners.

**The Organization**

**Project Little Dream**

Four years ago, I co-founded a NGO with fifteen friends from my hometown Hong Kong, China. The original goal was simple and naïve – to build a school in underprivileged areas so that children can gain access to education and be empowered for a better future. The chosen construction site turned out to be a village in Takeo, Cambodia, where existing public infrastructure and civic services were deemed insufficient. Today, the organization has built three village schools to teach English for primary school children and is planning a fourth school for 2013. It envisions an ‘equal opportunity to education’ that ‘provides underprivileged children with skills and knowledge to build their own future’ (PLD, 2013)\(^{18}\).

The organization, called Project Little Dream, is one of many non-state, foreigner-run education providers in Takeo. It partners with the local NGO New Futures Organization in building and operating English schools at four villages surrounding Takeo town (Figure 4). To date, one school per village has been built in Prey Run, Khna Rong and Thon Mon Village. These schools teach English as a supplementary tutorial for primary school students (Grade 1 to 6). A fourth school is being planned for Thuonh. While the school sites for Thon Mon and Thunon were recommended by the provincial Department of Land and the Department of Welfare, the organization runs its projects without any literal government connections or funding. To my knowledge, similar focuses on rural development and lack of state linkages are commonly found for NGOs in Takeo and in Cambodia.

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\(^{13}\) Book Bridge (Takeo) - [http://www.bookbridge.org/takeo/](http://www.bookbridge.org/takeo/) [Website]


\(^{15}\) Pathways To Development (Education) - [http://www.pathwayscambodia.org/](http://www.pathwayscambodia.org/) [Website]

\(^{16}\) The organization does not have a website. Information is gathered from personal conversations.

\(^{17}\) Our Objective [http://www.ourobjective.org/our-objective-programme.html](http://www.ourobjective.org/our-objective-programme.html) [Website]

Figure 4: Locations of Takeo Town and the Project Locations
Source: Project Little Dream
overall Cambodia. This trend can be seen as a reasonable outcome of the lacking state presence in rural Cambodia, as well as a proliferation of various NGOs that are naturally in search for vacuums of development and power to act – see Box 1 for a brief overview.

The inevitable struggle of a relationship between state and non-state actors in Cambodia is by no means a novel topic. To a significant extent, this thesis has come into place because of a recognized need for the organization to better position itself – see Box 2 for more details.

**Box 1: A Review of State and Non-State Actors in Cambodia**

The Cambodian state has a record for being absent at the village level. On the rare occasions when the Cambodian government was perceived as present in rural villages, the narratives have been negative. A prominent example is, of course, the Khmer Rouge when the capital city Phnom Penh was evacuated and all Cambodians assigned to rural areas for work. Under the supervision of the government, the rural population was exploited and 1.7 million (out of a national total of 7 million) died within the 5 years of Pol Pot’s regime.

The trend continued when the collapsed Cambodian state was rebuilding itself in the post-conflict 1980s. A significant number of villagers were forcibly extracted for collective work and conscripted into the army. Quoting from Ojendal & Kim (2006), ‘they had to cooperate with the increasingly disliked Vietnamese occupation force, while facing subtle resistance and avoidance on the part of the population under their authority’ (2006: 513). For education, Ayres (2000) writes extensively about the adherence of post-independent Cambodia to a strict political hierarchy and a highly authoritarian system, which augments the power struggles within the state and puts the education system in Cambodia into a continual crisis.

This above backdrop in rural Cambodia justifies many ongoing governance reforms in Cambodia, including the proliferating presence and influence of local and international NGOs. As a proclaimed authoritarian yet fragile state, Cambodia in the post 1993 era has implemented many reforms of decentralization and democratic governance. Local governance has become a key agenda – notable efforts include the beginning of Commune Council elections in 2002 and the implementation of Cluster School Councils as local governance units of satellite schools. See Pellini (2007) for a detailed overview of decentralization reforms in Cambodia, and Blunt & Turner (2005) for a discussion on the enforcement of commune council elections and their effectiveness as decentralization.

In 2007, the NGO Education Partnership (NEP) was set up to foster community-level coordination between education institutions and the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (MoEYS). Nonetheless, many NGOs like mine continue to work exclusively with local non-state actors. Rural places as a development vacuum of the Cambodian state and its education as a recognized agent for empowerment are popular focuses of Takeo NGOs.
**Box 2: A Needed Positioning of NGOs in Cambodia**

The inevitable tension between state and non-state actors is by no means a novel topic, and Cambodia is no exception. On one hand, NGOs are known for being particularistic and flexible towards the needs of marginalized groups (Salamon, 1987); on the other hand, as Goonewardena & Rankin (2004) argue, the discourse of civil society itself (comprising largely of NGOs) can be a product and servant of neo-liberalism and has limited the power of state institutions to drive changes. This is especially applicable for the domination of ‘grassroots support organizations’ in Cambodia, which Carroll (1992) defines as professionally based and somehow independent from their client's control. In the case of Takeo, most rural-oriented educational NGOs are not in the control of local people.

Some studies in Cambodia are already criticizing the civic capacity of educational NGOs. In an ethnographic study of two NGO-sponsored education programs (Escamilla, 2011), it finds them tenuous in fostering either civic capacity or government linkages. Another example is Ojendal & Kim (2006) who question the ‘social depth, engagement, and representation’ of NGOs as part of the civic society – they criticize that some NGOs act alike to private enterprises and are run by various groups of local elite rather than mass-based organizations from below. It has been a constant struggle for NGOs to position themselves.

**THE THREE VILLAGES**

Below is a brief overview of the three village case studies, their education provision and general living environment. While all three villages demonstrate little availability to bulk transport to Takeo market, to non-farm employment and to post-primary education, Prey Run and Thon Mon have better access to education and market opportunities (where they can sell their produce such as fish and livestock). Upon first-hand experience in these villages, Thon Mon seems to have a vibrant economy while Thuonh is at the other extreme.

**Box 3: A Review of Social and Communal Life in Rural Cambodia**

Many scholars agree that family is the prototype of social organizations in Cambodia (Ovesen et al, 1996; Pellini, 2005; Sen, 2012). While pre-colonial and pre-Khmer Rouge Cambodia are known for a stronger sense of community spirit (Pellini, 2005), social life in rural villages nowadays is believed to be based primarily on kinship (Grahn, 2006).

Apart from the family as the basic social unit, which serves as a fundamental yet informal social support system in Cambodia, village-wide community events and ritual ceremonies are still prevalent. Weddings and funerals are regular events that draw together family members, relatives, friends and neighbours within or beyond a village.

Buddhist temples or pagodas represent the center of communal life in Cambodia. Yet, religion no longer plays such an important role in daily village life (Sen, 2012). In Takeo, the monastery education system is barely functioning anymore – many monks take classes in Build Bright University and pagoda classes often teach English now.
Prey Run

Villagers commonly express a low level of trust and recognition to state institutions (such as commune councils) and those who hold state authority, which Pellini (2005) associates with a traditional isolation from the central authority and the capital city, and Sen (2012) attributes to the deeply rooted hierarchical structure of the Cambodian culture. In fact, Meas (cited in Pearson 2011) summarizes the decline of non-familial linkages as a “legacy of the past, current levels of violence and impunity, authoritarian types of leadership” etc. (2011: 37), which further distanced citizens from the state.

Prey Run Village (Figure 5) is located about 9 kilometers from Takeo town. It has approximately 225 households. There is a Buddhist monastery complex that consists of a pagoda and a government primary school. Despite the presence of a primary school, there are not enough teachers in the school and classes are held intermittently. The nearest secondary school is in Takeo town. In this village, the organization that I am affiliated with has built a classroom for after-school English tutorials. The teacher is a student at Build Bright University, has been teaching for six years and now has a class size of 200 children. While daytime classes are free, the teacher provides private classes at USD $0.1 per night.

The village is surrounded by water, which means households can fish during the monsoon season. Besides farming, there are a number of groceries and food stalls in the village. One of the interviewees is namely a ‘doctor’ in the village, but whom did not study medicine and...
whose job consists of selling packaged medicine. According to him, there are eight of these doctors in Prey Run. To my knowledge, no services e.g. sewing or repairing are available.

Thon Mon

Figure 6: Satellite Image and Map of Thon Mon Village
Source: Google Map (Left); Project Little Dream (Right)

Thon Mon (Figure 6) has around 250 households and is surrounded by water. It is namely the wealthiest and the most populated among the four villages I work at. As indicated in a mapping survey in 2012, Thon Mon households in general has more water pots, livestock such as cows and chickens, as well as more hectares of rice fields, all of which are wealth assets in rural Cambodia. The richest household in Thon Mon has 18 water pots and 40 chickens, in comparison to some households in Prey Run and Thuonh that have none of the above-mentioned assets at all. More households in Thon Mon have cement houses (another signal of wealth) and several have their own in-house bathroom. In 2012, government water pipes were installed in the village, which is not commonly seen for villages in Takeo.

There is a government-run primary school and a spacious pagoda at the south tip of the village area. There are seven teachers in the village, most of whom are hired by the government school. The nearest secondary school is called Borai, which is about 20 minutes bike ride or 40 minutes walk from the pagoda area. The school is located just at the vicinity of Takeo town. In addition, my organization has been running an English class at the pagoda area for students from Grade 1 to Grade 6, and built 6 public bathrooms in 2012.

Since it is next to the lake, many families fish when their rice fields flood. The main road (running in an L-shape from the pagoda area on Figure 7) has no lack of motorbikes and bikes that transfer good back and forth from Takeo market. Along the road, there are a visible number of home stalls either selling groceries or providing other services. The pagoda area often has a crowd of local villagers and some sell their home-cooked food.
Thuonh (Figure 7\textsuperscript{19}) is more than a one-hour ride from Takeo town. Thuonh does not have their own state school – the nearest school complex is located in Sun Lung village which is 3 kilometers away. As the village chief of Thuonh mentions, Oxfam ran a class for the villagers in 2009 but stopped within a year. It is the only village where households would aspire to migrate permanently as a whole – and there are already a number of vacant lots. The poorest households in this village have to catch insects to feed themselves almost daily.

The village only has two groceries amongst its one hundred households. There is no presence of a market in the village at all – according to one household’s explanation of the lack of attempts to sell food, people are accustomed to a ‘credit system’ of which you return food ‘later’ i.e. ‘never.’ Unlike Thon Mon, Thuonh has minimal economic exchange within the village. Micro-finance loans are used to pay tuition fees elsewhere or settling entrance fees to be able to work aboard. Almost all young and educated population work or study outside.

Similar to Prey Run and Thon Mon, rice buyers would approach the villages and purchase the harvests. If the buyers do not show up, villagers are unable to move the rice to Takeo town. This is a vital constraint for Thuonh households, which is furthest away from Takeo market. Since there is no option to fish, many are economically idle for six months per year.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{fig7.png}
\caption{Map of Thuonh Village}
\end{figure}

\textbf{Source: Project Little Dream}

\textsuperscript{19} Unlike Thon Mon and Prey Run, there are no high-resolution satellite images available for Thuonh.
CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH FINDINGS

Each of the villages has its own distinct characteristics, but the three villages share two common characteristics. **First**, the village economies are farm-based and agriculture-dominated. Non-farm jobs are uncommon, rarely available and mostly limited to selling products imported from outside (instead of being produced or value-added inside the village). Bulk transport is literally non-existent in these villages – most families either walk or bike, and can only sell their harvest when rice buyers approach them (not vice versa).

**Second**, none have immediate access to education facilities beyond the primary school level. English is institutionalized for learning within Prey Run and Thon Mon, but other desired language skills (e.g. Chinese and Korean) or suggested vocational skills (e.g. farming technologies (PR3), hairdressing (TH14) and mechanics (TM18)) are not accessible.

Since these common features of employment and education are central to people's aspirations\(^{20}\), research findings from the eighty household interviews in three villages are presented as an aggregated narrative of (1) current livelihood strategies (2) aspiration profiles and (3) planning for aspirations (as perceived employment and role of education). The last session will discuss variation of responses across and within households, using concepts of 'capacities to aspire' (Appadurai, 2002) and 'aspiration window' (Ray, 2004).

As most migration studies indicate, people's intention to migrate can be summarized as push factors and pull factors. The former includes limited opportunities in the accessible context and an undesirable local livelihood; the latter are their visions of a 'good' or 'better' life. These are expected to include some preference for education of specific skills and employment of particular job types. The push and pull factors also involve a self-evaluation of the varying household capacities to afford and to plan for the intermediary goals, as well as the bounded information and determination to act. The household aspiration profiles are thus divided into visions of 'good futures' and any detailed plans (not necessarily realistic).

CURRENT LIVELIHOOD STRATEGIES

The below summarizes how households in these villages currently make a living. It is structured as items of income and expenditure to give a sense of the local living standards. Most price information is given by one family and should not be expected to be same for all.

Despite the variance between different villages, the possibilities of livelihood strategies are uniformly limited within the villages. While this narrative is by no means an exhaustive list (yet a good alternative given the difficulty in getting comprehensive and comprehensible answers from each household), it reaffirms that rural living is tough and unstable - each family member tends to work multiple jobs in various times of the year or the day. It also

\(^{20}\) Although many basic infrastructures such as bathrooms and pavement roads are absent in these villages, a majority of the households did not mention these deficiencies but primarily complain about the tough nature of farming as a way of living as well as an insufficient and unstable income.
highlights the critical position of a child – while their education fees can be an unbearable burden for the family, the subsequent gains of better employment can tip the balance.

Sources of Income
Almost all interviewed households rely on farming as the only or main way to make a living. Rice is the only crop and also the stable diet for all families. Depending on the monsoon season and the quality of farmland, harvests range from one to three times each year. During the harvest season, families earn around 4 USD per day from 0.5 hectare of land (TH01). For a hectare, a bad harvest season yields about 215 USD of earnings (TH04).

Most families also rear livestock as chickens, cows and pigs. They would sell their eggs (TH15) and occasionally the animals (for special circumstances like famine or weddings) – cows can be sold in Takeo market at 500 USD (PR13). Other sources of savings include water pots, gold (teeth) and bikes (PR20). Rice fields are also a source of wealth, but households would only sell these non-farm assets under extreme circumstances.

For households that have access to the lake, they would fish for mainly their own consumption. This can contribute up to 2.5 USD to 7.5 USD of earnings per day, but it is only possible in wet seasons (PR05). Usually, families fish when the fields are flooded (TM14).

Depending on a family’s access to a bicycle or a motorbike, many households bought vegetables, petrol and other household items from Takeo market. They then sell them in the village in a local stall, which is situated at the ground floor of their house. Some women sell home-cooked food in pagodas and schools (PR25), which is prominent in Thon Mon village.

Many families have one or more of their members working in some form of non-farm jobs. Some men work for house constructions (TH11). These jobs earn 50 to 100 USD per month. Others work part-time as factory workers in other provinces or in Phnom Penh. The younger generation of active working age usually works outside the village. However, during the harvest seasons, everyone would return home to help and halt all other jobs.

Remittances are a main source of income for families with members who work aboard. A person in Thailand sends 200 USD per month (PR03). One in Korea sends 1000 USD per month (PR07) - rumors elsewhere suggest a figure up to 1500 USD to 1800 USD (TH08).

A final source is micro-finance loans, which are options in all three villages. People borrow in a scale hundreds or even thousands. The interest rate is around 3% per month (TH08). These are usually the last resort when families have to pay for occasional hospital bills (TH01), compensate for a bad harvest season (TH03), or come up with impossible tuition fees. None of the interviewed families actually use the micro-loans to start local businesses.

Items of Expenditure
Food is the main and often only daily expense for a family. Farming itself is usually insufficient for the daily living of most households – which, depending on the economic
situation of a family, ranges from 0.125 USD to 1.875 USD per person per day. In average, most families spend around 1 to 1.25 USD per person per day. Besides rice, which is the staple diet, everything else from vegetables to meat to seasoning is typically bought. Fish is a common add-on to the menu, but livestock are rarely for a family’s own consumption.

Another main item of expenditure is water. The available options are pots, wells, bought water and water filters. Pots are one-off investments of around 50 USD per vessel. They rely on rainwater harvesting, but these alone usually cannot sustain the family usage of an entire dry season. Bought drinking water is 0.75 USD for 1 litre (PR04). A well ranges from 75USD to 150 USD. Water filters can usually be bought at 22.5 USD per filter from Takeo market.

For a student, everything from a school uniform, books and shoes can cost up to 100 USD per year. The official tuition fee for a law degree is 300 USD to 400 USD per year (excluding other ‘fees’). To qualify for work in Korea, a 3-month Korean language course costs around 300 USD. If the child were to study in Phnom Penh, renting expenses for an apartment is at least 80 USD per month (TM02). In fact, supporting a university student in Cambodia can imply thousands of dollars in order to maneuver into a school and eventually a ‘good’ job. For instance, one of the families has spent 4000 USD for their son to study law in Takeo university for 4 years. The mother said her graduated son is now unemployed because the law department has asked for another 4000 USD of ‘administration fees’. She cannot come up with the money so her son cannot get a job that relates to his professional degree (TH08).

Nowadays, many parents send their children to attend private, mostly fee-paying classes.

ASPIRATION FOR THE FUTURE
All interviewed households aspire to a ‘good future’, despite different elaborations. Most define a ‘good future’ as getting a university degree and a well-paid job outside the village. As suggested in people’s responses, education and employment are uniformly the key factors. Popular places of aspirations are Takeo town, Phnom Penh, Thailand and Korea – other parts of Takeo province or other provinces in Cambodia are never mentioned.

Definition of a ‘good future’
The visions of a ‘good’ future vary between different households and different villages. While a household in Thon Mon (TM12) said ‘I wish that my kids can have a good future and a good job. I hope they can have a good dress for work and for attending ceremonies’, a household in Prey Run (PR13) said ‘I only want them and the family to have enough food and water’. The materialization of a ‘good’ future also includes visible assets in a Cambodian house – in Prey Run village, as I asked about the virtues of working abroad, many people pointed at the nearby cement house and ten water pots, both of which are signs of wealth (see Figure 10). That household has both of their children working abroad and each sends

\[\text{footnote}{21\text{ Thuonh Household 20 spends 0.5 USD to 0.75 USD per day for a total of 4 people. Prey Run Household 04 spends 7.5 USD per day for the same number of people. Showing the rural-rural gap.}\]
up to USD 200 of remittances per month. Similarly, a number of households in Thuonh village mention the prospects of building a new house if their family members work abroad.

In general, households that are economically better off with parents of higher education are able to give more details on their aspirations and support them with a rationale or plan. In comparison, poor families with a subsistent and unstable income source have a lower ‘capacity to aspire’ (Appadurai, 2002), in the sense that their aspired living for the children are very much similar to their existing livelihood. In a household of Prey Run village, the parents plainly said ‘we have no expectations or aspirations for our children because we are a very low-income family’ (PR06). In another family in which the single mother had to take care of four young children, my question on aspirations as a long-term expectation seemed to intimidate (if not offend) her – ‘I don’t have much planning for the future of my children. I am only concerned about whether my family has enough food to eat every day’ (PR12). Note that these families similarly aspire for their children to finish university and get a ‘good’ job elsewhere, but they simply have little hopes or expectation in achieving those aspirations.

Aspirations in a household are greater for children, especially the youngest. A household in Thon Mon said, ‘my eldest son said he will be responsible for the education expenses of my youngest son – he thinks his future is already gone.’ (TM12). The motivations are also greater for parents – ‘if my children want to study, whatever it takes, I must send them to university, even if it seems impossible, I will do whatever I can’, said a mother in Prey Run village (PR04).

**Desirability of Migration**

Despite the NSDP statement that the rural poor are ‘compelled to move to large cities and populated areas to find jobs’ (RGC 2010: 61), Phnom Penh city is not as desirable a place for work as expected. While a majority of households do aspire for their children to study in Phnom Penh, and a fair number have family members currently working there, several interviews reveal several concerns about security and costs. ‘I don’t prefer my daughter to work as a factory worker in Phnom Penh. The salary is too low which can barely cover their daily expenses on electricity, water and rent. Thus, they would not be able to send money back home’, said a household in Thuo (TH08). This adds to the information given by a Thon Mon household (TM02), whose younger son is studying in a university in Phnom Penh – according to them, apartment rent is 80 USD a month and tuition at the Accountant Institute is 100 USD per year. To assemble this money, that family had to sell their livestock. Some other families also believe the capital city to be very unsafe. Overall, Phnom Penh is still a popular place of aspiration, but people also question whether it is as attractive as it seems.

In coherence with what Asis & Piper (2008) said, many people look to work in Thailand. Yet, even more want to work in Korea. The attraction is mainly salary – as the mother in a Thuonh household (TH08) said, ‘I want to send two of my children to work in Korea because the salary is much higher than that earned in any other parts of Cambodia. I heard from others that working in Korea can gain about 1000 to 2000 USD a month.’ In fact, Thailand is sometimes seen as an insecure place for work – ‘going to Thailand is usually not a good option because people will often be cheated. Many people were sent to work in fishing boats’,
said the father in the same household. People seem to get increasingly comfortable with their family being so far away - the mother of a household in Thon Mon (TM15) describes her feelings about her two sons in Thailand and Korea, ‘the first time, I was worried about them working so far away. Now I think it is okay because I have their contact and I can know about their situation and ask about their health’. She then added, ‘my son can send me money ($1000 out of his $1800 monthly salary). The Thailand one only gets $100 per month.’ After all, it seems that only income can justify the level of insecurity for a migrant household.

‘Good’ future = migration?
In fact, working in Thailand is often seen as a reluctant alternative or intermediary transition to university education, which is the top priority. For instance, the eldest daughter of a household in Thon Mon (TM13) is now working in Thailand to save money for her university studies later. Another household in Thon Mon (TM16) said, ‘the people who work in Thailand or Korea go there because of their poor livelihood. It is not entirely a voluntary choice. If they have enough ability or money, they will not go to another country.’

The findings also show most parents actually prefer their children to be nearer to home, but want them to migrate due to a priority in a ‘good’ future. This rationale is heard in all three villages. ‘I never want to separate with my children, but this is the only way to ensure they have enough food to eat’, said a mother in a Thuonh household that has all seven of her children studying or working outside the village. A Thon Mon household (TM03) explicitly said, ‘if there is a higher level of education available in the village, I prefer my kids to study in the village rather than in Takeo town. I hope my kids can stay close to me, but I have no preference as long as they have a good future.’ Family ties are important – as a household in Prey Run said (PR24), ‘I do not mind if our children stay in Takeo or live in another city. But I prefer them to stay in Cambodia and be near to their family.’ As many scholars have noted, households are a tightly-knitted social unit in Cambodia. In all three villages, it is common to find extended families of seven to eight households living in proximity to each other.

Planning for Aspirations
The interviews also asked for an elaboration of people’s ‘good’ future and perceived plans for it. The expected answers are some intermediary steps or goals of a rural household. In particular, this research is interested in household perceptions on the role of rural education within this plan. While many parents said they will let the children decide, most have a preference for ‘good’ jobs versus bad jobs. Despite the fact that most said they do not have a long-term plan or do not know what plans are necessary, they also think some skills and some form of education are ‘more important’ for their children to learn than others.

‘Good’ Future as Employment
‘Good’ jobs are uniformly included as part of a household’s elaboration of a ‘good’ future. Some households define ‘good’ jobs by location; some are able to define it by occupations. Albeit the ambiguities of ‘good’, farming in the village is always contrasted as not ‘good’. For those who define ‘good’ jobs by location, stable and higher income is reasoned as a contrast to the existing employment in their villages. In elaborating a ‘good’ future outside of the
village, a typical answer is that ‘I want my children to work in Takeo town or in Phnom Penh because salaries there are higher. I do not want them to work in the village.’ (PR25).

Professional jobs such as doctors, engineers and teachers are the most popular ‘good’ jobs, which again is contrasted with farming livelihoods in the village. As a household in Thuonh said, ‘I would like to see my children as teachers or doctors. I do not want my kids to work in the rice field. It is tough and difficult to make a profit’ (TH04). Somehow, joining the police force as an occupation seems to have a bad reputation in Thon Mon – as a household said, ‘our youngest son wants to be a teacher and we support him to do so. Everything is fine as long as he is not going to be a policeman. Nobody likes policemen and the pay is low’ (TM03).

**The Perceived Role of Education**

For households with children who are still studying, all of them said ‘study hard’ is important and hope their children finish university. Education in a school setting is seen as a big step towards a ‘good’ job. Therefore, while some households admit they cannot afford for their children to attend schools instead of helping in their rice fields, all see education as an inevitable element of a ‘good’ future. The majority of parents do not know what their children study in schools, but they often have a preference about ‘good’ things to learn. The question was posed as which recommended skills to teach in the non-state classes run by my organization. Varying from household to household, a hierarchy of skills was mentioned.

All interviewed households in the three villages mention the importance to learn English. It is certainly seen as the most important skill to acquire a ‘good’ job and a ‘good’ future. ‘English makes it easier to find jobs in any department, factories or private companies’, said a household in Prey Run. ‘English is now popular. It is more important than Khmer’ (TH11).

Secondary to English, other languages are strongly desired in many families. Again, the main justification is tied to ‘good’ futures and opportunities outside the village. These languages are seen as abilities to communicate, prospects for jobs and greater possibilities to migrate.

‘We want the children to learn French besides English and Khmer, because (gesture at my translator) they can make money by communicating with foreigners.’ (TH05)

‘Besides English, they should learn Chinese and Japanese. If they know Japanese, maybe they can then get a scholarship and go to Japan.’ (TH11)

‘I hope that the school (of the researcher’s organization) teaches not only English but also Chinese so that children can go to China to work. The school can teach Korean because people want to work in Korea.’ (TM11)

As a lesser priority to other school teachings and usually upon suggested options, some households recommend vocational skills for village livelihoods. ‘I think sewing can be taught. I hope that the school can provide agricultural training and teach children how to help sick animals.’ (TH08). Other answers include motorbike repairing, construction, and hairdressing. Note that these vocational skills do not include farming and fishing.
Only one family mentioned skills other than the previous three categories. ‘I suggest the school (of your organization) to teach morality as part of the class. I want my grandchildren to know about people’s livelihood, how good people live and how to speak politely.’ (TM16) This was a relatively well-off family in Thon Mon, and coincidentally both parents are teachers.

One of the most interesting findings is that parents do not see their role in conferring any skills or education to their children. They think their contribution is to tell their children to study hard and to let them be free from farming commitments. As a household in Thon Mon said, ‘I don’t teach my children. But the school should teach them Korean.’ (TM11). In Prey Run, a household said ‘I hope my children learn life lessons from the teachers. And also English.’ (PR16). Most parents do not think they have any worthy skills or knowledge – only two households provide answers to ‘what is the most important lesson in life?’ Both were from Thon Mon, the relatively prosperous village amongst the three – answers include ‘be hard-working to find good job’, ‘be honest’, ‘no wandering around’, ‘no violence at home’, ‘no giving up on study’, ‘be a good person’ (TM15; TM16). Both interviewees are schoolteachers.
CHAPTER 6: DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

According to the findings, the aspirations and plans of rural households for their children usually consist of one or more of the following components – (i) level of education and/or particular skills; (ii) salary of jobs and/or particular occupations; (iii) place of living. The motivation for university education and English skills are reasoned as crucial steps to acquire ‘good jobs’, which are mainly non-farm, well-paid and located outside of the villages. These findings and the sequential rationale between education and employment fit well into the theoretical framework of human capital development (Box 4), of which investments in education are evaluated upon a higher rate of expected return (in this case, as ‘good’ jobs).

Box 4: A Review of Education as Human Capital Development in Cambodia

Individual and collective investments in education are often justified via human capital theories. Similar to investments in physical capital, education is evaluated upon a higher rate of return (e.g. growth, productivity and innovation) in the future (Becker, 1964). At the same time, human capital is always conceived upon a specific path of societal development (Lewis, 1954) This provides a critical framework to re-evaluate education as a universal social welfare and an engine for development – while access to basic education is seldom challenged, the skills and values conferred through it have political implications.

Manpower planning has long been a relevant issue to education in Cambodia. In Ayres’ (2000) extensive review on post-independent Cambodian education, it argued that Sihanouk’s Buddhist socialism and Lon Nol’s neo-Khmerism are all influenced by modernization and human capital theories. In contemporary Cambodia, the universal movement towards Education for All (EFA) (a Millennium Development Goal) can be seen in light of human capital theories as well – its emphasis on primary education is largely grounded on cross-country evidence on the returns of investment in the 1980s and (early) 1990s. As suggested in Psacharopoulos (1985), since returns are highest for primary education, the general curricula and countries with the lowest per capita income, these areas should be prioritized for ‘efficiency and equity’.

Cambodia is acknowledged for endorsing the EFA agenda and has largely succeeded in broadening access to primary education1 (Chansopheak, 2009). Yet, in 2006, a World Bank report (Neilsen, 2009) rightly notes that the education MDGs and FTIs can only emphasize primary school completion (quantity) and not learning outcomes (quality). In Cambodia, there is increasing awareness towards these concerns. Chealy (2009) argues that the bias for primary education in Cambodia is tied to the continual problems of access, equity, relevance, finance and governance of Cambodia’s higher education. Even for primary education, despite the many reforms and investment in Cambodia, Chansopheak (2009) illustrates the longstanding obstacles for quality improvements in learning outcomes.
ASPIRATIONS FOR MIGRATION

"People’s propensity to migrate is seen as a function of their aspirations and capabilities to do so; and migration may therefore increase as long as aspirations increase faster than local livelihood opportunities." (de Haas: 2010, 254)

A lot of the findings reaffirm general expectations about rural livelihoods and people’s propensity to migrate. As typical ‘push’ factors of migration, these include the unstable and undesirable income from a farm-based livelihood strategy; lack of education and employment opportunities inside the village; and a general preference for non-farm occupations that are only available outside of the village economies. Regarding aspirations to migrate, most interviewed households have the intention to let their children move outside of the village – they envision a ‘good future’ as formal education and well-paid jobs.

It is worth highlighting that many interviewed parents actually prefer their children to live nearer to the family, but they prioritize the education and employment prospects of a ‘good’ future outside. Besides Thuonh where the economy is largely stagnant, most parents are comfortable or even prefer living in the village for the rest of their lives. While Phnom Penh and countries abroad are known for their economic opportunities, they are recognized places of uncertainty and insecurity. Working abroad is even seen as a desperate measure that only poor households would adopt. There is a great likelihood that the immediate environment of rural villages is the most preferred place of living after all. As such, there seems to be a priority for aspirations based on education, employment and their associated places – that of education and employment contradicts with that of living near to one’s own family.

As the aspirations of rural people are revealed, we increasingly see the mismatch between their aspirations and the spatial reality i.e. in de Haas (2010), the local development context. While many people aspire for professional services such as doctors and engineers, such labour markets are non-existent. In Prey Run, the definition of doctor is found to be equivalent to a medicine seller – of which no medical knowledge or certification is needed (PR03). In Thon Mon, adults are aware of the difference between a professional engineer and the village jobs in mechanics and construction, and the former is what people aspire towards (TH18). This suggests that spatial mobility (i.e. migration) is needed to satisfy these aspirations – to a certain extent, spatial mobility has been equated to social mobility.

CAPACITIES TO ASPIRE

‘The capacity to aspire depends on existing capabilities and practices. While these are decided, among other things, by set traditions and modes of group interaction and development, aspirations can be modified through conscious interventions in the shape of education, communication and a greater exposure to the wider world.’

(Nathan 2005:1)

The varying aspirations within and across households reaffirm the collective and social nature of aspirations, which can be easily assumed as an exclusively individualized decision.
If we measure aspirations as a diversion from existing livelihoods, then the household interviews show that a child gets more resources from the support of a collective household – this enables greater capacities to aspire, both imagined and in reality. Ultimately, ones’ ‘capacity to aspire’ is a matter of recognition – this involves how individuals find their aspirations attainable, whether they perceive other people’s achievement as replicable for themselves, and how willing they are to invest into realizing these long-term goals. These individual perceptions, which are largely based on collectivized recognition and realities, help to explain people’s aspirations of education as specific skills and modes of learning.

The great variation of uncertainty in terms of how people perceive their aspirations as attainable can help determine whether people’s aspirations can ultimately be satisfied. For example, most parents do not know how specific language and academic skills from school are relevant to professional jobs as doctors, engineers and teachers. Also, the majority of households do not know their children have to be fluent in French to attend medical school. On this note, Thon Mon households are much more knowledgeable about working abroad – for instance, Thon Mon has the only families that can identify the industry in which their children work in (for instance, furniture factory (TM16)) and know that people have to take an exam at the Ministry of Labour in Korea if they are to work there (TM10). There is reason to believe that the greater availability of such information can determine the likelihood for a household to satisfy their aspirations to migrate for a ‘good’ future.

The distinct aspirations for parents themselves and for their children reflect the preference for resource allocation (to satisfy aspirations) within a household. While parents see themselves working as a farmer in the village for the rest of their lives, they foresee a livelihood that is much different for their children. The longer planning horizons possible for these family members seem to justify a greater aspiration window, both imagined and in reality. Referring to the Harris-Todaro model, the ‘planning horizons’ have shown to be a variable in the equation of migration decisions. Also, the dynamics within a household show the collective aspects of preference formation, which Appadurai (2002) highlights as a main determinant of people’s ‘capacity to aspire’ and Ray (2004) as ‘aspiration windows’.

**EDUCATION AS ASPIRATIONS**

‘The modern sector has also been characterized by an urban, industrial bias and a need for a new set of specialized occupational skills. Educational systems responded quickly to these modern sector needs, focusing curricula on modern-sector educational requirements and strengthening urban schools more quickly than those in rural areas.’ (Edwards and Todaro 1974: 28).

While all interviewees recognize the importance of ‘education’ as a general term, most parents do not know what their children learn at school, but have a preference towards the kind of learning and skills their children should undertake. Interestingly, almost all interviewed parents deny any role in teaching their children. Most agree that farming and fishing are not worth learning as long as the family can afford it. Locally applicable skills such as repairing motorbikes and sewing are seen as less valuable than English and other
languages, which is irrelevant to the context of a village community. One interviewee even said English is now more important than Khmer as the national language of Cambodia.

In reference to Edwards & Todaro (1974), people's perceptions of a skill hierarchy, based on their estimated economic return, seem to suggest a larger structure of urban-biased development in Cambodia (see Box 5). The lack of recognition of their own skills and teaching-learning relationships between parents and children in the rural setting coheres with Chambers (1979), who consistently fought for the weak position of rural people in face of the urban class interests and the state machinery. Inferring from Nathan (2005), these perceptions will likely be feeding into the ongoing prophecy of urban bias in Cambodia.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Box 5: A Review of Skills and Development in contemporary Cambodia</th>
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<tr>
<td>As a rapidly industrializing economy, Cambodia is shifting its demand for productive skills. At the Fourth Cambodia Economic Forum in 2011, Hun Sen highlighted the need for Cambodia to modernize its economy by promoting industrial development to sustain growth and take Cambodia to a higher stage of development. The sectoral composition has changed – this is despite the fact that 80% of Cambodians still reside in rural areas. As indicated in UNDP (2011), ‘primary resources or cheap and unskilled labour are no longer sufficient for Cambodia’ (2011: 49). As studied in Krzesewskiu (2011), for both employers and employees, English language skills are increasingly necessary for achieving social mobility.</td>
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<td>UNDP (2009) summarizes the relationship between skills and development in Cambodia - ‘As other countries move up the value chain, they will increasingly outsource or subcontract components of the value chain to more price-competitive countries such as Cambodia. But, in the medium- to long-term, improving Cambodia’s human capital will determine competitiveness in global, regional and domestic markets.’ (2009: 33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As in many other countries, Cambodia now sees the shortage of skilled workers as a major obstacle to its economic development. As industrial and service sectors continue to expand, they have ‘created jobs and skills training for hundreds of youth’ but ‘ensuring that the skills of the new entrants match with the requirements of the new jobs is a challenge’ (RGC 2010: 74). UNDP (2011) attributes this gap between market demand and skills supply as unresponsiveness of educational institutions and curricula towards employment needs.</td>
</tr>
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<td>While a namely ‘general curriculum’ (compared to technical/ vocational/ specialized) would suffice for primary education in most developed countries, education in Cambodia (where many people, especially rural people, can only afford to complete primary school) seems to face greater urgency in satisfying its associated expectations for social mobility. In face of the emerging industrial sector in Cambodia, Cheng (2010) advocates for more vocational training and criticizes its primary education curriculum for a lack of relevant skills (e.g. core, technical, industry, social) and its failure to meet job requirements for these new industries.</td>
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RECOGNITION OF SKILLS

‘Less well recognized is the weakness of rural people in the face of exogenous organized knowledge. Those with formal education and training believe that their knowledge and skills are superior and the uneducated and untrained rural people must, by definition, be ignorant and unskilled… It is a common assumption that science-based knowledge is sophisticated, advanced and valid and, conversely, that whatever rural people may know will be unsystematic imprecise, superficial and often plain wrong. Development then entails disseminating modern and scientific knowledge to inform and uplift the rural masses. Knowledge flows in one direction only.’
(Chambers 1979: 1)

The weak recognition of rural skills and knowledge is not at all a novel claim. Chambers (1979) reasons the priority of ‘exogenous organized knowledge’ via their scientifically based epistemologies as well as their form of dissemination via formal education and training. The preferences of particular skills, as the household interviews indicate, can then be seen as part of the collective-individual interface of aspirations and the manifested inequality in the distribution of cultural capacities, which Appadurai (2002) coined as ‘capacity to aspire’.

This clarifies the preference for English and other language skills – since the productivity of people’s skills and knowledge is conceived and valued upon cultural preferences (Lewis, 1954). As a premise of this thesis, urban and industrial bias is one of such preferences in Cambodia, which lead to biased aspirations for a set of ‘industrialized occupational skills’. As suggested in the research findings, the privilege of certain skills that are irrelevant to rural livelihoods is justified upon the better economic returns of non-rural occupations. Parents’ denial for teaching their children matches with what Chambers (1979) said – which he then delineates the possible reinforcement of urban bias through disseminating these skills. So, as far as education provision entails a choice of curriculum in conferring certain skills (and omitting others), there is arguably a dilemma between facilitating greater aspirations of rural individuals/households, and exacerbating the urban-bias against rural development.

PLANNING IMPLICATIONS

As rural educational NGOs confer skills and interact with people’s capacity to aspire, there is a need to be conscious of what kind of bias and recognition are being facilitated. If mitigating rural-urban inequality was a goal of rural-educational NGOs, then these development agencies should attend more to the recognition of certain skills over others.

While the demand for education curricula and skills preferences are driven by realistic individual aspirations in rural Cambodia, the satisfaction of these aspirations have broader implications in the urban-biased path of development. Discussed as a hypothesis of this thesis, if aspirations continue to increase based on the lack of local livelihood opportunities, the resultant labour migration flows from rural to urban are likely an inequitable outcome.
CHAPTER 7: RECOMMENDATIONS

Planning as a discipline is intriguing for its emphases on both processes and outcomes, and lies at the intersection of practice and theory. In face of the dilemma of how development actions can in turn exacerbate rural-urban inequality, this thesis on individual aspirations in rural Cambodia is suggesting a need for changes in multiple realms. In this chapter, I present some planning recommendations as (1) an idealized outcome of education, (2) an actor-oriented process of planning as well as (3) research directions for the future.

AN IDEAL OUTCOME OF EDUCATION

"So it is not the condition of poverty alone which is responsible for an aspirations failure. It is poverty in conjunction with a lack of connectedness, the absence of a critical mass of persons who are both better off than the person in question, yet not so much better off that their economic well being is thought to be unattainable. In contrast, inequality isn't really the prime mover at all, though to some extent it may be correlated with polarization. It is perfectly possible for an unequal society to be nevertheless thickly populated at all points of the economic spectrum, creating local, attainable incentives at the lower end of the wealth or income distribution.’

(Ray, 2004: 5)

While education has a strong claim for mitigating inequality across other social divisions (e.g. class, race, gender), also commonly as social mobility, the possibility of a universal equality has been a fanatical ideal at best. Charles Taylor (1997) once wrote about the philosophical paradox between the principles of universal equality and the politics of difference22. Coining the debate on ‘politics of recognition’, he argues that the intertwined formulation of individual identity and societal recognition makes it impossible to entirely collapse social hierarchies and/or inequalities. Similar to many other Asian societies, Cambodian culture is known for a deeply rooted hierarchical structure of all forms of interactions and relations (see Box 3, P. 23). As Ray (2004) frames ‘capacities to aspire’ in economic development terms, he argues that a hierarchical and unequal society is not necessarily detrimental to the cultivation and motivation for aspirations. Instead, a polarized one without sufficient diversity in each cognitive neighbourhood (i.e. wide aspiration gaps and narrow aspiration windows) is more obstructive to a sustainable and equitable path of development. It is thus an ideal yet realistic goal to avoid greater polarity.

This thesis also reaffirms the deficiency of 'Education for All’ (see Box 4, P.34)– entitling educational access without defining the learning outcomes - as an objective of development planning. As the research findings suggest an attention to the kind of skills conferred via

22 Quoting Taylor (1997), “the demand for equal recognition extends beyond an acknowledgment of the equal value of all humans potentially, and comes to include the equal value of what they have made of this potential in fact. This creates a serious problem.’ (1997: 42) As he elaborates the ‘problem’, he argues “the peremptory demand for favorable judgments are paradoxically homogenizing” (ibid: 71)
education, education provision should avoid skill development that only satisfy urban-biased aspirations. It would be ideal to re-recognize the de-recognized epistemologies in the tide of urban-biased development - as Chambers (1979) suggests, the technical knowledge possessed by rural people is worthy of more consideration. Meanwhile, the structural rigidity of the urban-biased aspirations should not be underestimated. The adoption of a life skill curriculum into Cambodia’s education policy is a good demonstration example - Kim (2011) criticizes the curriculum emphasis on local life (i.e. livelihood) skills, mainly of an agricultural nature. By focusing on what is familiar and immediately relevant to their current living, this may in turn hinder the development of children’s wider aspirations for social mobility. Referring to the concept of aspiration windows (Ray, 2004), this is a case of which the content of education does not fulfill people’s aspirations or expectations for a ‘good’ future, so motivation to act is low and rural-urban inequality persists as urban bias.

As agents of development, an ideal outcome is for education provision to enable people’s capacities to aspire, while to effectively negotiate with the urban-biased terms of recognition that embed these aspirations, so rural-urban inequality is not further polarized. Muller (2011) once questions the compatibility of these two main justifications of education - (i) as a human right to enable changes and aspirations; and (ii) for poverty reduction and human capital development. However, as revealed in the findings of this thesis, individual aspirations of rural people are inevitably tied to the collective recognition of human capital development in urban-biased Cambodia. To realize any re-recognition of de-recognized skills, which individuals have to aspire to as valuable investments to their education, rural educational NGOs have to identify themselves within urban, employment and the Cambodian state. Such awareness brings forward my second recommendations.

AN ACTOR-ORIENTED PROCESS AND RELATIONSHIP

“Changing inequalities in agency almost always involve interactions between groups, with the state playing a key role, either responding to pressures from below or initiating changes in the terms of recognition. This message links the culturally informed perspectives of this volume to work in political science that emphasizes the need to conceptualize change in terms of the joint interactions between state

23 In Cambodia, the advocacy for a better recognition of rural abilities is translated as life skills and locally relevant knowledge. The idea of life skills has been adopted into its education policy agendas since 2000. However, according to Kim (2011), such policy has shown a confusion between life skills and livelihood skills – while the former is psycho-social skills that can be learned and practices (e.g. self-awareness, problem-solving, critical thinking and interpersonal skills), the latter refer to the capabilities and opportunities required for the economic goals of individuals and households.

24 The two are contradictory because of their respective clients in mind. While the recipients of education are always individuals, the first justification emphasizes individual development as a personal liberation; the second stress their economic gains as recognized in a collective state. Both see education as an agent for development but the evaluation scales of effectiveness are different.
and society, in contrast to either state-centered or society-centered approaches.”
(Rao & Walton, 2004: 26)

As the findings on individual aspirations reveal a structural presence of the Cambodian state, manifested as urban-biased prospects of non-farm occupations and ‘good’ futures, this thesis re-emphasizes the longstanding debate of a relationship between state and non-state actors (see Box 2, P.23). In this case, the inevitable relationship between state and non-state actors is informed via the collectivized recognitions of skills, which ties education to employment and rural to urban. All these linkages are by no means novel claims - for instance, ‘integrated rural development’ is now a popular phrase for development plans that advocates for the broadening of rural economies and the thinking of ‘cities and their surrounding rural areas as integrated systems’ (Todaro & Smith, 2011: 343); the impact of education is ‘to a large extent determined by the societies they must serve and cannot be expected to reshape those societies in fundamental ways ... (because) education of large numbers of people will not alone create jobs for them’ (Edwards & Todaro, 1974: 25).

Given the historical lack of a state presence in rural Cambodia (see Box 1, P.22), educational NGOs can be the only service provider of its kind in these places and the attention naturally goes only to their relationship with local communities as their targeted beneficiaries. Often, it makes no difference, or is in fact easier, for non-state agencies to operate independently of government connections – the organization that I am affiliated with is only one of many examples in Cambodia. Yet, if migration is seen as an aspiration outcome of education, then the rural-urban, employment-education and state-non-state relationships are not only some theoretical courtesies, but key determinants in realizing equitable development. As conscious development actors, rural educational NGOs in Cambodia should seek better integration; as realistic practitioners, the bounded impact of their work should be defined and recognized.

While there is a tendency for non-state actors to seek political vacuums (so as to maximize their power and freedom to act), there is also an acknowledged reluctance of an urban-biased state in Cambodia to genuinely invest into education and development for its rural majority. However, it cannot be assumed that NGOs, despite their particularistic and resourceful nature, can be left alone on their work. This requires an awareness on the part of the Cambodia state that urban-biased employment-based development strategies is not a sustainable way to its economic growth. Instead, the rural inflows of educated labour are long-term determinants. As inferred from the Harris-Todaro model, expanding education opportunities often results in more urban migration, while creating urban jobs are likely insufficient to solve urban unemployment because more migration is induced. Ultimately, the Cambodian state itself has to address the lack of local livelihood opportunities in rural

25 Even within the scarce number of rural educational NGOs that I know to have state connections, none actually have any support (be it money or other resources) from the Cambodian government. The ‘partnerships’ are more in name and as a courtesy of educational NGOs than of any real value.
villages, of which NGOs have little power to revert such inequality or its associated aspirations to migrate.

**Research Directions for the Future**

In the course of writing this thesis, trends of existing Cambodian researches in migration, education and its developmental state have been revealed. A vast amount of studies focus on the lasting impact of the Khmer Rouge or the transition from the UNTAC campaigns. Most cohere to the paradigm of a post-conflict reconstruction in Cambodia, which might not reflect the rapid pace of changes that are taking place in this growing economy. The future-oriented angle of aspiration studies (as this thesis attempts) notes some gaps to be filled –

(1) Migration studies in Cambodia are currently focused on forced migration, human right violations and, to limited extent, international movements. As the economy of Cambodia picks up its pace and urbanization proceeds in Phnom Penh, voluntary and internal migration as realistic aspirations for betterment deserves more of our attention.

(2) Discussions on Cambodian education have been predominantly on fiscal and political decentralization in parallel to the skills and knowledge conferred via state curriculums, without being fully aware of their economic impacts and institutional linkages. More research is required on education not as an outcome on its own, but a process and tool towards other desired goals e.g. in this case, the outcome would be spatialized mobility.

As an ethnographic case study of three villages and eighty households, this thesis is limited by the generalizations it can make about its empirical findings. Given the lack of precedents and aggregated data in Cambodia, it is difficult to validate how representative my case is. Due to language barriers, a lot of nuanced details from the household interviews are lost in translation. This further constrains the ethnographic interpretations of people's aspirations. At the same time, my four years of experience in these villages and my fieldwork practice as a rural educational NGO shed light on the rural realities of these omitted places in Cambodia, and hopefully have convincingly tied them to the development politics within.

To go forward with the findings of this thesis, the issue of skill recognition should be studied in greater depth and with other methods. If the currently de-recognized skills were to be re-recognized, education providers (with NGOs being a potentially main advocate) need to first clarify these skills and their existing value. A prospective method is to map sites of local traditional crafts and global value chains within the village boundaries – the methodology could be a blend of rural participatory appraisal (Chambers, 1979) and GIS technologies. For the purpose of better organizational positioning, it would also be valuable to compare and to evaluate the curricula of state and non-state education, of academic and vocational orientation, of rural and urban places, of different age groups. Clearly, effective education is never to confer a single skill – one's education entails the conferral of a comprehensive curriculum so that one can reasonably and effectively plan for one's individual aspirations.
CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION

‘Moving elements in a city, and in particular the people and their activities, are as important as the stationary physical parts. ... Not only is the city an object, which is perceived by millions of people of widely diverse class and character, but it is the product of many builders who are constantly modifying the structure for reasons of their own... Only partial control can be exercised over its growth and form.’

(Lynch, 1960: 2)

The study of cities as spatially defined by human interactions and social representations (Milgram, 1982) has been common in the fields of psychology and sociology. Coined as mental mapping in his cases studies of American cities, Lynch (1960) has demonstrated how mobility and actions are tied with individual perceptions of the urban environment. Seeing the inflows and outflows of labour as crucial to the sustaining of an urban economy, this thesis is inspired to study the aspirations to migrate from rural areas as the basis of urban development (and its associated inequality). Instead of studying things that are already in the cities, this paper focuses on perceptions in the rural origins. As institutional planners, it indicates a fundamental interest in urban institutions as socialized norms, such as that for aspirations to migrate in the rural areas. Quoting from North (1987), ‘institutional analysis is at base the study not simply of the rules of the game but of the individual responses will be much more complex and slow to adapt’, which ultimately determine the effectiveness of modern economic growth in contemporary cities. To study aspirations of potential rural migrants is, therefore, an alternate way to read our cities.

While migration studies often define the Harris-Todaro logic of income differentials (Harris & Todaro, 1970) as a rigidly structural matter, this thesis reaffirms that they are inevitably socialized and mutually created with individual aspirations. Given the socially uneven landscapes between rural and urban, the aspirations to migrate and the preferences for skills are as real as they are imagined for the disadvantaged rural. In this case, the biased desires of skills in rural Cambodia are arguably institutionalizing urban bias, while some other skills (e.g. politeness) or learning modes (e.g. parent-children) are de-recognized. Because of the limited power of education provision alone, the ambitions for rural educational NGOs to mitigate rural-urban inequality can become a self-reinforcing prophecy, where aspirations and capabilities of migration feed into each other via a conferral of desirable skills. Thus, providing access to education alone is insufficient – more attention is needed for curricula and skill content. As rural educational NGOs seek to enable individual aspirations, a better integration is needed with urban, employment and the state.
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