

The Impact of Climate Change in The Mekong Delta for The Khmer's Migration

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Abstract

The fasten change of water level in Mekong River has affected the traditional agricultural areas of the inhabitants in the lower region of Vietnam. The Khmer, an ethnic group who have earned the traditional livelihood by wet rice harvesting, has been seriously affected by the intrusion of salt water from the sea. The other ethnic groups in the region have rapidly transformed their occupations to adapt to the climate change. The Khmer is “sensitive” to the issue of conversion, however, which is mainly due to their religious views, beliefs and the capital they are holding. Being unable to harvest anything from their land, the Khmer sold it to the neighboring groups and migrated to urban. This article analyzes in two aspects: non-Khmer people immigrating to the traditional land of the Khmer; the Khmer migrated to the urban. Our data sources, research methods and theories aim to assess the effects of migration waves leading to social, economic, and religious changes of the non-Khmer migrants to rural and the Khmer to the urban.

Keywords: The Khmer, Climate Change, Immigration, Mekong Delta

Introduction

The climate change is a serious ongoing matter happened in the Mekong Delta that has a direct negative impact on the lives of Vietnamese farmers, reducing the economic viability in the traditional agricultural areas. That consequence has led to migrations from rural to urban or the migrated wave from the rural in the North to the South of Vietnam. Since then, it has led to changes in the social organizational structure of ethnic groups in the countryside; change the structure of ethnic groups, cultures and religions-beliefs in rural affected by climate change as well.

Research Purpose

Our article focuses on analyzing the effects of climate change on the migration of the Khmer and the results they have to suffer during their process. The research scope has been taken place in Tra Vinh Province where a large number of Khmer people are living. The reason why we select the Khmer for our research aim that comes from the follows. The Khmer is considered as an ethnic group whose livelihoods associated with the culture of the wet rice farming. More than 90% of people born as Khmer have lived in the rural of South Vietnam. Growing wet rice and raising cows are identified as traditional occupations of the Khmer. Migration to urban is an issue that the Khmer has never thought to during their existed history. Because farming allows them to settle down in peaceful villages, the income is not as high as the commercial work of the Chinese Vietnamese and the Viet, a major group in Vietnam but what the Khmer get back in their life is the assortment of food and security. Land, natural conditions and the tropics are important assets to sustain their life, which have intimated to the material and spiritual civilizations of the Khmer from generation to generation. The countryside is the ideal survival space for the Khmer. In addition to land, water and climate, the Khmer also complements their spiritual asset in to their culture; maintain a rich and diverse spiritual culture in their life as well. The sect of Theravada Buddhism, a major religion of the Khmer, has oriented whole the living aspects. The temple is place to create the symbol of community solidarity and the monks are leaders of the spiritual life in the community. Inside the temples, the monks represent the communal religion to encourage all Khmer people to maintain their spiritual values. The forming for the trinity relationship in the community within thousands of years, including Buddhism, the survival land and the Khmer's occupation, which is inseparable. Currently, the climate change has led to the Khmer migration, so that the triad structure has no longer existed. The Khmer have not yet adapted to the changes of labored and new social space. As a result,

they became a disadvantaged and sensitive ethnic group in the modern Vietnamese society.

The climate change in Tra Vinh Province

Tra Vinh is a coastal province located at the estuary of Mekong River where often heavily affected by the climate change. The hot and dry seasons comes earlier than other localities in the upper and middle areas of Mekong Delta (Vietnam). Especially in coastal districts such as Cau Ngang, Duyen Hai, Tra Cu and Duyen Hai Town. The climate change, increasingly and harshly, has been taking place; Along with the matter, it causes high tides and in some areas arid, the groundwater resources are over-exploited, causing a shortage of aquifers, saltwater intrusion into the inside-land.

The climate change has directly affected people's lives in the rurals of Tra Vinh Province such as the coastal areas of Duyen Hai Town, Duyen Hai, Cau Ngang and Tra Cu Districts. The farmers who have definitely used the underground water source (drilled well) at peak times (from January to May and June yearly) cannot be pumped. In addition, some wells in the locations where people is forced to stop pumping since the ground water arteries is polluted. The fresh water is so rare. More than five recent years, the underground aquifer has dropped, so the people difficulty pumped from the wells at peak time; the reason is that so many people use drilled wells to water crops and aquaculture; the water sources has gradually being polluted due to the changing ecological environment, chemical drugs used by farmers in agricultural production, etc..

The Efforts of State

To support the farmers to maintain their livelihoods and stabilize their lives in rural where has been severely affected by climate change. Central and local governments have coordinated and prioritized to implement the most urgent projects that are the clean water supplied-project and to construct the irrigation works. Currently, in the climate change areas of Tra Vinh Province, the state has built clean water supplied-stations to assist the farmers to own clean water sources and the water is an essential condition for people to rebuild their ecological environment. The efforts of state aims to be able to keep the farmers continuously resettle in the areas of climate change. From the announcement of the People's Committee of Tra Vinh Province, it shows that the total investment for clean water projects and irrigation works in the locality is 4,350 billion VND. The statistics also show that the items that have been completed and being implemented are dike and embankment works

including 16 works, 28 works of sewer system; 09 works of irrigation infrastructure for fisheries and water reservoirs on the banks of Lang The River. All of the above works are located in the areas where the climate change has been happening such as Cau Ngang District, Duyen Hai Town, Chau Thanh and Tra Cu Districts (in Tra Vinh Province).

From the results of clean water projects and irrigation works invested by the state, the farmers have converted 987ha from the land for wet rice to corn, grass and some other short-term crops. 547ha for growing fruit trees in Tra Vinh Province has now converted 282ha to coconut tree farming, combined with aquaculture is 23ha and specialized in aquaculture is 39ha. According to the local government, currently, Long Son Commune, Cau Ngang District is one of the localities that has the strongest agricultural transformation in the province, and rice cultivation in areas affected by climate change is often ineffective. As a result, the state encourages farmers to change the cultivation, as soon as possible, they implements the plan gradually changes from growing rice to other economic forms.

The Challenges for the Khmer in Climate Change

Living in the traditional cultural space, the Khmer believes in the power of nature created by the Devas (gods) in the divine system of Theravada Buddhism. All difficulties in human life are explained by Karma (Karma) which is as a result of bad actions people committed in the past will be affected in their present life. Maintaining religious practices, holding rituals associated with agricultural life that is believed to bring the Khmer to a prosperous life. However, ritual solutions does not seem to be effective in agricultural production of the Khmer nowadays, when they has been facing to the ongoing-climate-change. The Khmer feels hopeless about their life and believe that the land where they are living is no longer suitable for their life. The migration is a solution for them to search of the new opportunities that has been gradually formed in the Khmer's mind.

In the face of the climate change in Tra Vinh Province, the state has made large investment projects to maintain the agricultural life for the farmers. These projects are expected to bring the best benefits to the farmers who have been living in the areas affected by the climate change. With the characteristics of nature-based agricultural techniques, however, the Khmer has faced the difficulties when they have to adapt to modern techniques. Agricultural farming of the Khmer mainly takes place in the rainy season and the water usage initiated from rivers is a basic factor for producing. The technology to bring water to the

fields has to depend on state-owned reservoirs and dams, at the present, leaving them inactive in the productive activities. The state-controlled and supplied fresh water must follow such a schedule that each year dams and reservoirs open only in a certain time to provide water for crops. It requires the farmers must get water on schedule for growing wet rice. It is a big challenge for the Khmer as they used to getting water from the river system during the 6 months of the rainy season. Because they do not reach to the water source scheduled by the government so when they need fresh water for their fields, the water supply has been closed before.

Another matter that taking place in the Khmer villages is the transformation of agricultural structure. In areas affected by saline water, local authorities require the farmers to change their cropping practices. Specifically, as before, rice growing should change in to coconut farming or growing some other agricultural crops. There are areas that used to grow rice, but now convert to vegetables, corn and potatoes or trees for wood... However, this new job requires the Khmer to be able good at agricultural techniques for the new crops. The farmers have been trained about the cropped-techniques and livestock raise in the areas where the agricultural structure has to be transformed. These training sessions are usually held at the Khmer Buddhist temples. The monks are also invited to give a speech to encourage the Khmer to resolve the change of agricultural structure. It is expensive to organize a workshop that is often widely reported in the media. The problem is that the efficiency does not meet famers' need. It comes from reasons as follows: in the training sessions, the experts only lecture on theory; no specific practical methods in the land where they want to convert into the new agriculture. To persuade the Khmer they should carried out an experimental research in the land so that the Khmer can see the economic efficiency for the trees, the crop or the cattle that the experts want them to own. With the language barrier, moreover, the Khmer would not understand what the modern agricultural techniques are. Vietnamese experts teach in Vietnamese, while Khmer peoples do not understand Vietnamese language absolutely. The educational level of the Khmer in the villages is low, while the experts do not have appropriate pedagogical methods for the Khmer so they impossibly grasp all the types of techniques to apply in the conversion.

The necessary issue for transforming the agriculture is capital investment. When moving to another form of farming, the Khmer needs the investment capital. There are two sources that they have to invest, (1) investment in the land such as conversion from paddy field to garden; (2) investment in plant varieties, fertilizers and pesticides... These two sources of investment

require a large capital, while the Bank of State Policy only lends each member who is the Khmer up to 30 million VND. Thus, the Khmer do not have enough investment capital, even they collect the investment capital from their family members, the total lends they keep is 90 million VND, after which they will spend many years of experimenting for a new type of crop. How they can earn economic profit and give the loans back within 18 or 24 months as the bank regularize them.

In areas where the seawater is completely intrusive, the local authorities have encouraged people to convert their fields into ponds for raising snakehead fish, sea crabs or shrimps. These are the places where the Khmer who mostly leave homeland to migrate to urban. Since the conversion from fields to aquaculture ponds requires a large capital investment, the Khmer do not have the mortgaged assets so they are not allowed to borrow big loans. Aquaculture also requires the farmers to own the technical knowledge, to hire laborers and technical consultants. This type of transition is a challenge that the Khmer cannot overcome. In these areas, the Khmer began to sell land as the last source of capital they have owned. With that money, they migrated to urban to earn their living as workers in industrial zones. Moreover, raising hundreds of thousands of creatures such as fish, crabs, and shrimp and selling them in harvested season, for the Khmer, the devout followers of the Theravada Buddhist sect, considered as committed a Karma act. Making a living by growing rice and raising livestock for them are best way to keep the peace in the spirit as teachings of Theravada Buddhism.

Poverty and Labor Migration

The climate change in Tra Vinh Province has increased the Khmer farmers' poverty. The traditional agricultural forms are no longer suitable to transform the agricultural structure in the locations. The Khmer are not ready to accept modern agricultural techniques. In addition, they lack investment capital and human resources who are Khmer agricultural experts. The view of Karma initiated from Theravada Buddhism has a dominant influence on the livelihoods of the Khmer, making them impossibly raise the types of livestock as the state encourages. The amount of 30 million VND loaned from the Bank of State Policy, the Khmer often used for wrong purposes, so the agriculture actually is not invested but the bad debts raised up day by day in the Khmer families.

In the past, land was an important asset to assist the Khmer in survival. Nowadays, it became a burden, because of pressure from government; they expect that the Khmer is able to transform their agricultural system in the new situation. The Khmer have many reasons to wait. This problem easily

reach to social conflicts. Because the Khmer want their life back to the way it was, they wait for a miracle of nature. The behavior possibly causes them to fall into the severed poverty. In addition, the state wants them to change as quickly as possible in order to adapt to the new conditions. The state wants them to settle down and looking for an income source rightly on their homeland. In fact, the new method for production requires the Khmer to find the output markets. The Khmer thinks that they all live in the rural, so how they could find a market for their agricultural products, and whether why they have to cultivate those agricultural products when they could not find the market. The poverty and the social conflict are serious problems in the current Khmer communities in Tra Vinh Province. The issue becomes more sensitive when many Khmer people sell their farms and leave their homeland for urbans. The new residents who buy Khmer people's land become rich on the area rejected by the native Khmer. The land where Khmer people thought that bring disaster for their life but it become a wealthy land for the others. The social conflicts arising from the perception of the Khmer in terms of ethnicity occurred even in the rural dealing to the economic activities, the cultural differences and the ethnic conscious behavior as well.

The Khmer immigrated to the industrial cities in the South of Vietnam just to find new job to survive. Because they think that life in the countryside is unhappy to them. Some people leave their land even though they are not interested in cultivation, but in their mind, the land is the last refuge-abbot for them to return one day. These Khmer leave homeland for seeking a fortune. In case, they cannot find opportunities to build a new life in urbans, they possibly return homeland. Opposite with the living experienced Khmer, the others sell everything they had in their homeland and try to escape by migration. In fact, in the urban they also challenge to the new pressures when the free life in the countryside is gone. Being workers or hired laborers for an economic establishment, the Khmer will be controlled under the strict supervision and managed by their boss. The impolite words sometime come from those who are holding the social power in the factories also begin to fall down the Khmer workers. The frustration and social conflicts start appearing in the Khmer community who immigrated to the urban. Someone have attempted to integrate into urban society. They are able to own knowledge and acumen in the economic activity. They establish business enterprise or study hard at universities for good jobs in urban. Thus, there are some successful Khmers on the urban but these cases are very rare. Most Khmer immigrants have lived quietly into worker's hostels. People from the same villages often come to live together or stay closer for sharing difficulties in

their life. The Khmer's settlement areas in urban are also called Srok, means "village" in the Khmer language that is a way to recognize their rural origins when they are in the urban.

Conclusion

The climate change in Tra Vinh Province has affected the Khmer's agricultural production, as well as their social life and cultural activities. Although the state has efforts to construct the irrigation projects, the effectiveness bring to the community is not comprehensive. It comes from the problem that the perception and actions of the Khmer deeply influenced by the traditional agricultural culture. Their agricultural restructuring process is slow that impossibly catch on the new types of agricultural techniques. Loans from the Bank of State Policy are limitation for the Khmer to invest in the agricultural transformation. Additionally, the Khmer has faced to difficulties for scientific and technical applies in agricultural production dealing to their educational level.

All these problems make the Khmer disappointed with the countryside where their homeland is. The migrant laborers to the urban is a mandatory solution since here they find jobs and have a steady source of income. However, the consequences of migration for the Khmer is non-stop. In the urban, the Khmer is facing to heavy pressure for earning a living. The tendency to seek a capital source and wait for a convenience conditions on which they will return to the countryside that is a major trend for the Khmer migrant workers to approach. It comes from the ethnic psychology that also difference as we compare to the other groups in Mekong Delta such as the Viet, the Chinese Vietnamese when they migrate to the urban in Vietnam.

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