

SDC 2019 Annual Meeting Abstracts

Wen, Yunhan; University of Chicago
ywen19@uchicago.edu

Authors: Alan Kolata, University of Chicago

Adam Oppenheimer, University of Chicago

Julio Postigo, NORC

Sabina Shaikh, University of Chicago

Yunhan Wen, University of Chicago



Title: Building Equitable Institutions for Coping With Environmental Change in Rural Cambodia

Institutions play a significant role in countries' ability to meet sustainable development goals, particularly for those experiencing the most challenging impacts of rapid development.

We situate our research in Cambodia, in the rural villages of Mekong River floodplains and the peri-urban areas to which many rural residents have migrated. This migration is driven in part by the dramatic modifications in the Tonle Sap-Mekong River hydrology, caused by extensive dam construction, land use modification, and climate change. Our research considers the related stressors on the rural populations of the region, the adaptive responses, and the socio-cultural outcomes, all of which are influenced by the efficacy of institutional support.

Our mixed-method approach utilizes quantitative and qualitative data, including nearly 2,500 household surveys conducted in 2005-07, and focus groups and interviews with state officials, village leaders, rural villagers and urban migrants from 2017-19. The data shows a doubling of loan rates for rural households over the past decade, and a dramatic shift from interpersonal, informal borrowing to formal loans from microfinance and commercial banks. The qualitative data suggest that increased borrowing is a result of dwindling agricultural incomes and losses sustained during more extreme periods of flood and drought. The lack of institutionalized support leaves rural populations at the mercy of predatory lenders and middlemen offering low prices for agricultural products. Our research reveals extensive migration in response to financial difficulties and our interviews with urban migrants demonstrate losses in security, social capital, and autonomy, as a result.

We focus on the mechanisms through which changes in the natural realm translate into socioeconomic stressors. Through this research, we hope to inform the development of effective and inclusive institutions to help the most vulnerable approach sustainability. In the case of Cambodia, institutional responses such as insurance for agricultural losses, access to markets, minimum price guarantees, and support for transition to alternative livelihoods can effectively help agricultural communities approach sustainability.

Our suggestion is not limited to Cambodia; rapid growth has affected small-holding populations across the Global South. Preemptive and equitable institution building can catch the rural poor before they fall through the cracks.