

## Complexity, the spice of life

**Part 2: MSc thesis research in Cambodia**  
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I had the opportunity to spend 2 months in Cambodia, working on the DFID Self-Recruiting Species (SRS) project.

It is a beautiful country, although it was incredibly hot, dry and dusty when I was there as it was the end of the dry season. I spent most time in the aquaculture office in the capital, Phnom Penh, sorting through a mass of raw data, putting it in order, identifying errors and trying to track down those sheets that appeared to have gone missing in action.

Working through these data sheets I grasped something of the range of terms for different waterways, of fishing and harvesting gear. The unusual phenomenon of reverse flow between the Mekong River and the Tonle Sap Lake for a few months each year gives rise to highly productive waters in the lake. This, coupled with the flooding that occurs during the rainy season, means that fish and aquatic animals are widely available. They provide around 80% of the protein intake for many people. Fishing and collection of aquatic animals have traditionally been a significant part of their livelihoods, and continue to be so, hence the diversity of terminology. Sometimes the structural differences of the equipment are slight while the names are completely different, and vice versa. Terminology may



Working with Khmer children to ascertain their role in collecting aquatic animals

differ between provinces as well, for waterways as well as fishing gear. Potential for confusion is almost limitless.

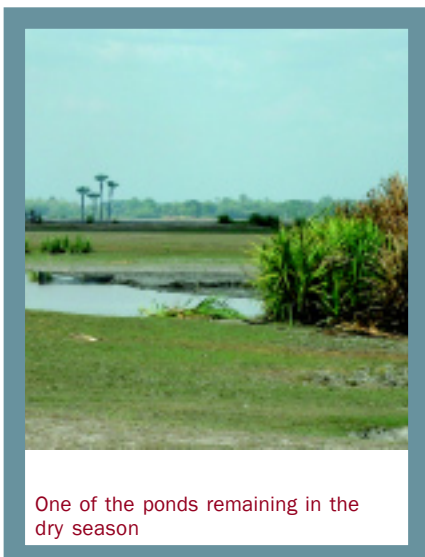
Towards the end of my stay there, I went out to visit the villages that were taking part in the project research, several hours away by shared (and very full- sometimes 7 or 8 people to a normal car) taxi. Here I was very much reliant on the help of a translator, which proved an educational experience for all.

The need for translation introduces a whole new angle on things, and lack of cultural understanding may add further complications. I wanted to find out about conflict over water resources, and about pollution. However, when I asked about "conflict" over water bodies, I didn't get any useful answers. When I asked "do people argue about who uses the water", I learned about who, what and why. The country is coming out of a long period of conflict, so my first wording of the question would have caused confusion, or perhaps even offence. When asking about sewage and its disposal, I was thinking of its potential as fertiliser for crops and ponds as used in some neighbouring countries, or of risks of leakage causing eutrophication, but

culturally it is a taboo subject in Cambodia. It transpired that only on one occasion did the translator actually ask about it, when I pressed him to. It was something that he felt he shouldn't have to mention.

Over the course of visiting different villages, I was able to adapt the questions to get the kind of answers I was looking for, but it wasn't something that I could have planned beforehand. It was a learning process for myself and the translator who had to get used to the way I used language, experimenting with words and wording. In addition to this there was the usual consideration that those we were asking, or the translator, might give us the answers they *thought* we wanted, rather than their actual opinions.

The knowledge I gained from the visit to Cambodia was invaluable. Not simply in terms of data, but also of the processes involved in such research. In light of the diversity in terminology and practice, it is vital to be able to communicate and consult with those who use it. Experience of working with people in such situations cannot be substituted. Amazingly, despite such complexity, it is possible for everyone to learn from the process.



One of the ponds remaining in the dry season