

Mr. Theara Khoun (Policy Specialist, UNDP Cambodia)

Title: Examining the impacts of COVID-19 Cash Transfer Program on Poverty in Cambodia

Abstract:

This research aims to investigate the impacts of the COVID-19 Cash Transfer Program, an unconditional cash transfer (UTC) program in Cambodia, and its contribution to poverty reduction. The study will examine both the monetary aspect, based on aggregate food and non-food consumption expenditures, and the multidimensional aspect of poverty, using a global index of 10 indicators related to education, health, and living standards. The motivation for this study stems from the increasing vulnerability to poverty in Cambodia, which has been further exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. Since June 2020, the Royal Government of Cambodia has implemented the cash transfer program to provide social protection to the poorest and most vulnerable households, representing over 2.7 million people, who have been adversely affected by the pandemic. However, these programs are scheduled to terminate by March 2023, making it necessary to analyze their impacts and identify corrective measures.

Using the method of Difference-in-Difference with Covariates on two rounds of cross-sectional data – the Cambodia Socio-Economic Survey for 2019-2020 and 2021-2022 – the study has found that the program has had a significant impact on reducing multidimensional poverty in Cambodia. Overall, the multidimensional poverty rate among cash recipients decreased by 3.4% compared to non-recipients during the observed periods, and several indicators showed notable improvements. For instance, the deprivation of the year of schooling indicator dropped by 3.1%, food security improved by 3.3%, access to electricity increased by 2.4%, access to improved toilets rose by 3.2%, and the asset indicator improved by 1.7%. Although some other indicators also showed improvement, these changes were not statistically significant. However, the program's impact on monetary poverty yielded a discouraging and counterintuitive result, as it resulted in an increase in the monetary poverty rate by up to 8.8%. Further analyses are currently being conducted to examine this counterintuitive finding. Some preliminary hypotheses suggest that the long-term cash support provided by the program may have encouraged idleness and increased borrowing for non-food expenses, resulting in more restrictive food consumption. Alternatively, the COVID-19 restrictions and lockdowns imposed during the observed periods may have disproportionately affected poor households in terms of access to food and non-food consumption in comparison to non-recipients.

Based on additional analyses, the study intends to propose several policy recommendations for programmatic improvement. These recommendations include enhancing the targeting of poverty, integrating financial literacy into the routine cash transfer program, and transitioning beneficiaries from long-term cash support towards enhanced productivity and resilience through skill training and positive behavioral change, among other strategies.

Mr. Nelson G. Cainghog (Assistant Professor, University of the Philippines Diliman)

Title: The strengthening of the weak state and the increasing significance of welfare policies in the Philippines

Abstract:

Scholars of Philippine politics have a consensus that the Philippine state is weak, either in terms of the capacity, autonomy from vested interests, or both. While there are occasional islands of strength, these were under the backdrop of state weakness making such islands interesting subjects of inquiry. The clientelist nature of Philippine politics is symptomatic of this weakness especially its lack of autonomy. The implementation of two major programs—the free public higher education and the conditional cash transfer—that entailed significant state investments seems counterintuitive viewed in this backdrop as both programs are seen as programmatic instead of clientelist. In the case of free public higher education program, the government increased funding for higher education by around 600 million USD in 2018. Conditional cash transfer was also allocated close to 2 billion USD in the same year. Did the state suddenly acquire capacity and autonomy against more established interests vying for such large chunks of state resources? This chapter aims to contextualize the situation of the Philippine state in the broader international literature of state strength. While recognizing that the Philippines still displays attributes of weakness, there had been changes since scholars of Philippine politics published such indictment. Drawing from the comparative literature on state strength, a typology is proposed to make sense of the change in the Philippines and potentially in other similarly situated countries. This typology is then applied to analyze Philippine welfare policies since the pre-war era until the time of President Rodrigo Duterte where gains in state capacity and autonomy allowed the Philippine state to invest in welfare programs. It also offers possible prospects for state strength and welfare provision post-pandemic.

Dr. Chanrith Ngin (Director, Centre for Natural Resources and Environment, Cambodia Development Resource Institute)

Title: Is Cambodia a model of China's Belt and Road Initiative?

Abstract:

Cambodia is perceived as an 'iron-clad' friend of China, who enjoys a 'shared prosperity' with the latter. Chinese aid and investment have created jobs, spurring economic growth and poverty reduction in Cambodia. The two countries have been hailed by some scholars as a model of the 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI) partnership. In this paper, I use a comprehensive analytical framework to examine the different dimensions of BRI investment in Cambodia to discuss this 'model'. I find that the focus on BRI in Cambodia is mainly on infrastructure-related economic investment, which obscures environmental and socio-cultural tenets of BRI. While economic benefits have been positive, particularly in relation to debt management, a long-term economic cost-benefit analysis of infrastructure projects is lacking. This raises a critical concern about their future viability vis-à-vis the wider economic growth. Plus, technology and human capital, which are integral parts of BRI, are under-studied. To what extent technological transfer and skill development have been done is unknown. Also, 'people-to-people' exchange, which is a crucial cultural aspect of BRI, has received minimal attention. This paper concludes that the ignorance of environmental and socio-cultural elements of BRI could jeopardize economic profits and stain the wider partnership. A model of investment should go beyond economic growth and emphasize environmental well-being and human relations.

Dr. Mario J. Aguja (Professor of Sociology and Director, Institute for Peace and Development in Mindanao, Mindanao State University)

Title: The Mindanao Peace Process: Challenges and Prospects

Abstract:

Negotiating a peace agreement is a challenging endeavor, but implementing such an accord proves to be an even more formidable task. In 2014, after 17 years of protracted peace negotiations, the Government of the Philippines (GPH) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) officially inked the 2014 Comprehensive Peace Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB). This historic agreement aimed to quell the insurgency that had violently plagued Mindanao for decades. This paper delves into an analysis of the progress made in implementing the CAB. Specifically, it highlights the architecture of the agreement, the ongoing advancements in its execution, the encountered challenges, and the potential prospects moving forward.

The study relies on a combination of secondary data and insights gathered through interviews with key informants intimately involved in the current state of the peace process. It argues that the task of implementing a peace agreement, following extensive years of negotiation, within a compressed timeframe is inherently complex.

Findings from the study indicate that while the peace agreement is underpinned by the determination of the involved parties, its implementation is hampered by the ambiguity inherent in some of its provisions. Additionally, unforeseen external factors, often beyond the control of the negotiating parties, further complicate the execution process.

In essence, this paper sheds light on the intricate dynamics of transitioning from a negotiated peace agreement to its practical application, emphasizing the intricate challenges and unforeseen variables that influence the successful realization of the CAB.