

2022 STATUS OF ETHNIC VIETNAMESE RESIDENTS IN KAMPONG CHHNANG



A report by Women Peace Makers (WPM), Cambodia



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2022, Women Peace Makers (WPM) conducted community-based and participatory research using the Facilitative Listening Design (FLD) method with the ethnic Vietnamese community living both on the water and on the shore of the Tonle Sap River in Cambodia's Kampong Chhnang province. Due to the sensitivity and the complex dynamics in the communities at the time, this report was embargoed for two years to assess risk and ensure that participants could be properly anonymised.

Now published, it provides a snapshot analysis from January 2022 when fieldwork was conducted. The situation and context regarding this community and that of ethnic Vietnamese across Cambodia is constantly changing. These changes stem largely from the legal and social context that impact many community members, some of those whose stories are shared in this report. The precarious status of these residents remains one of the most defining issues in understanding the findings of this report and how they are navigating their lives under extreme pressures. Without the ability to prove holding citizenship of any state, this community, and many others like them, continue to live on the margins without the benefits and privileges that citizenship affords.

The findings in this report are stark. They show the profound struggle of community members during a tumultuous time of negative public sentiment, changing policies, and local enforcement. They also show a human side of the impact of forced relocation, particularly from the perspective of those without clear legal status.

We invite you to reflect on the findings gathered by our local researchers through in-depth conversations with the community members who shared their personal stories and experiences. This particular population has largely fell through the cracks of social and development programming targeting marginalised groups. It has long been the target of public-wide negative sentiment and hostility. At the same time however, these residents continue showing resilience and express their deep connection to the area that they consider their home. We believe they deserve to be heard and considered in broader policy and programming that seek to address populations most often left behind.

Women Peace Makers



BACKGROUND

The Vietnamese are one of Cambodia's largest minority groups. Whilst some ethnic Vietnamese have Cambodian identification documents and have integrated into society, many others continue to live at the margins of society and face difficulties substantiating their legal status.¹ 'The Vietnamese' in Cambodia are not one single group but comprise diverse sub-groups, including Cambodian citizens of Vietnamese origin, individuals in mixed marriages and more recent immigrants seeking economic opportunities. One of the groups with precarious status is Cambodia's long-term resident Vietnamese minority. Despite their long generational ties to the country – for many reaching back at least into French colonial times – numerous individuals in this group are not recognised as citizens of Cambodia and may be stateless or at risk of statelessness.² This report focuses on such long-term resident communities in areas around the Tonle Sap River in Kampong Chhnang province.

As in many protracted situations of statelessness, the predicaments of Cambodia's Vietnamese community have deep roots in the country's colonial and post-colonial history. Historians have shown how the French colonial period produced the idea of a 'Khmer' nation by amalgamating notions of ethnicity, race, culture and nation.³ Many Vietnamese communities in Cambodia were not considered to be part of this nation after the country's independence in 1953.⁴ Social exclusion and the politicisation of ethnicity in domestic politics eventually led to violence and persecution during the 1970s. Following attacks and mass deportations under the Lon Nol regime, the situation further deteriorated under the Democratic Kampuchea (1975–1979). Shortly after taking power, the Khmer Rouge implemented policy measures aimed at expelling the ethnic Vietnamese minority from Cambodia.⁵ This led to the deportation of an estimated 150,000 to 170,000 other members of the Vietnamese minority across the border to Vietnam.⁶ A demographic expert report commissioned by the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC) concluded that 100 per cent of a

¹ This background note draws on Christoph Sperfeldt, 'Minorities and Statelessness: Social Exclusion and Citizenship in Cambodia' (2020) 27(1) *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 94-120; and Christoph Sperfeldt, 'Legal Identity and Minority Statelessness in Cambodia' (2021) 3(2) *Statelessness & Citizenship Review* 347-353.

² See Stefan Ehrentraut, 'Perpetually Temporary: Citizenship and Ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia' (2011) 34(5) *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 779-798.

³ Penny Edwards, *Cambodge: The Cultivation of a Nation, 1860–1945* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007)

⁴ Stefan Ehrentraut, 'Perpetually Temporary: Citizenship and Ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia' (2011) 34(5) *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 779-798; and Lucrezia Canzutti (2019) 'Precarious (non-)citizens: a historical analysis of ethnic Vietnamese' access to citizenship in Cambodia', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 48(7): 1764-1784.

⁵ See also the work of Cambodian historian Keo Duong in K. Duong, *Khmer Rouge Nationalism and Mass Killing: Perception of the Vietnamese* (Bangkok: Institute of Asian Studies, 2018).

⁶ Ben Kiern, *The Pol Pot Regime: Race, Power, and Genocide in Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, 1975–1979* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006) p. 296.

remaining 20,000 ethnic Vietnamese were systematically killed during the Khmer Rouge regime.⁷ In Case 002/02 before the ECCC, in 2018, the defendants were convicted of committing genocide against the ethnic Vietnamese and Cham Muslim minority in Cambodia.⁸ Participating Vietnamese civil parties had also raised their non-citizen status at trial.⁹

After the Khmer Rouge were ousted from power through a Vietnamese military invasion, in 1979, many of these survivors returned to their homes in Cambodia. Since their return, the Cambodian authorities have treated these returnees as ‘immigrants’ or ‘foreign residents’.¹⁰ Most are not recognised as citizens by either Cambodia or Vietnam. In its most recent reporting, the UNHCR lists for Cambodia a figure of 75,000 individuals falling under its statelessness mandate.¹¹

More than 75 per cent of the world’s known stateless belong to minority groups similar to these long-term resident Vietnamese populations in Cambodia.¹² Often belonging to disadvantaged and marginalised communities, they are more prone to a risk of statelessness – whether due to a lack of access to state registration systems, a higher prevalence of poverty, or simply because of discrimination and social exclusion. Without nationality or another more robust legal identity, many Vietnamese communities do not have access to basic economic, political, and social rights and face an array of disadvantages, including limited freedom of movement, being unable to own land, and difficulty accessing employment, education, health care and legal protection.¹³ Often these impacts also show a gendered dimension.¹⁴

Due to lack of knowledge as well as widespread prejudices, few government, civil society or development actors have engaged with the group. Working with the Vietnamese minority can also be at times seen as sensitive.¹⁵ Moreover, considering the history of past persecutions under previous

⁷ Ewa Tableau, *Khmer Rouge Victims in Cambodia, April 1975–January 1979: A Critical Assessment of Major Estimates* (Democratic Expert Report for the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia, D140/1/1 Public Redacted Version, 30 September 2009) pp. 47–48.

⁸ See Case File No. 002/19-09-2007/ECCC/TC, Summary of Judgment, Trial Chamber, 16 November 2018, <https://www.eccc.gov.kh/en/document/court/summary-judgement-case-00202-against-nuon-chea-and-khieu-samphan>.

⁹ Christoph Sperfeldt, ‘Nationality as Reparation? The Case 002/02 Trial Judgment at the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia’ (2023) 5(1) *Statelessness & Citizenship Review* 118–126.

¹⁰ Ramses Amer, ‘Cambodia’s Ethnic Vietnamese: Minority Rights and Domestic Politics’ (2006) 34(3) *Asian Journal of Social Science*, pp388–409.

¹¹ UNHCR, ‘Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2022’, June 2023, Table 5. <https://www.unhcr.org/statistics/2022GTannextableSTA.xlsx>.

¹² UNHCR, *Stateless Minorities and their Search for Citizenship* (United Nations, Geneva, 2017).

¹³ Joint Submission to the Human Rights Council, UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW, 46th Session Fourth Cycle, April – May 2024 (Cambodia).

¹⁴ Sen, L., Kry, S., & Hyma, R. (2022). *Making the space: Voices from the girls of Cambodian minority communities* (pp.100–113). Phnom Penh: Women Peace Makers.

¹⁵ Suyheang Kry and Raymond Hyma, *Who’s Listening? Tackling Hard Issues with Empathy*, eds Melissa Martin and Karen Simbulan (Women Peace Makers 2017).

regimes, affected Vietnamese populations may be hesitant to speak out publicly mainly because of fear and safety concerns.

Nevertheless, recent years have seen renewed interest in the situation of this group. In 2012, the report *A Boat Without Anchors* explored the legal status of long-term resident populations of Vietnamese origin living on floating villages on the Tonle Sap in Kampong Chhnang province, highlighting their risk of statelessness.¹⁶ Over the following years, the NGO Minority Rights Organization (MIRO) monitored the situation and issued reports highlighting the adverse effects of a lack of citizenship on the lives of these communities.¹⁷ Renewed attention from the media¹⁸ and scholars¹⁹ also contributed to raising the issue among national and international audiences. Since 2017, Women Peace Makers has been engaging with ethnic Vietnamese communities conducting participatory research to understand the impact of these policy changes as well as to find ways in confronting negative sentiment towards these groups among the mainstream Cambodian population.²⁰

In the aftermath of the 2013 national elections, Cambodian authorities adopted new policies regarding the legal status of certain ethnic Vietnamese populations. Following a nation-wide registration process, long-term resident Vietnamese populations were issued with new permanent resident cards. The new cards were issued for a fee of 250,000 Riel per person (more than US\$60), requiring renewal after two years for the same price. Almost 90,000 Vietnamese were found eligible to apply for the new

¹⁶ Lyma Nguyen and Christoph Sperfeldt, *Boat Without Anchors: A Report on the Legal Status of Ethnic Vietnamese Minority Populations in Cambodia under Domestic and International Laws Governing Nationality and Statelessness* (Phnom Penh: Jesuit Refugee Service, 2012)

¹⁷ Ang Chanrith, Sourn Butmao and Judith Kunze, 'Limbo on Earth: An Investigative Report on the Current Living Conditions and Legal Status of Ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia' (Minority Rights Organization, 2014)

¹⁸ See Ben Mauk, 'A People in Limbo, Many Living Entirely on the Water' *New York Times Magazine* (28 March 2018) <https://nyti.ms/2usiXnn>.

¹⁹ See Laurie Parsons and Sabina Lawreniuk, 'Seeing Like the Stateless: Documentation and the Mobilities of Liminal Citizenship in Cambodia' (2018) 62 *Political Geography* 1-11; Lucrezia Canzutti, '(Co-)Producing Liminality: Cambodia and Vietnam's "Shared Custody" of the Vietnamese Diaspora in Cambodia' (2019) 71 *Political Geography* 26-35; and Charlie Rumsby, 'The God School: Informal Christian Education and Emerging Aspirations among De Facto Stateless Children Living in Cambodia' (2021) 33 *European Journal of Development Research* 89-108.

²⁰ See Kry and Hyma, *Tackling Hard Issues*; Suyheang Kry and Raymond Hyma, *Who's Listening? From Centre to Periphery* (Women Peace Makers, Phnom Penh, 2019); Lyhour Heang and Raymond Hyma, 'Listening to Ethnic Vietnamese Living along the Tonle Sap: A Community at a Crossroads' (Phnom Penh: Women Peace Makers, 2022), <https://wpmcambodia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/a-communityatacrossroads.pdf>; Raymond Hyma et al., *Who's Listening? Understanding 'Us' to Know 'Them': Transcending Borders to Explore Identity and Connection* (Phnom Penh: Women Peace Makers, 2022); Sen, Kry, and Hyma, *Making the Space*; Le Sen and Raymond Hyma, *The Diverse Cambodian Woman: An Exploration of Minority Women Outside the Mainstream* (Phnom Penh: Women Peace Makers, 2023).

permanent resident cards.²¹ Yet, the rights and entitlements under the new resident cards remain unclear.

Around the Tonle Sap Lake, authorities have also taken measures to relocate floating villages onto the land, citing environmental and other regulatory reasons.²² Kampong Chhnang province was the first to implement relocations for more than 10,000 people, affecting Vietnamese and other communities alike. The housing and sanitation conditions at the relocation sites were often-times difficult.²³ Apart from affecting the livelihood of traditional fishing communities, the relocations have highlighted again the precarious legal status of relocated Vietnamese residents, as these have no right to own the land and instead are required to rent the sites they were moved to. The combined effects of the registration and the revocation of documents, as well as the forced relocations have increased a feeling of insecurity among many of these communities. Decreasing fishstock in the Tonle Sap is only adding to the problems.²⁴

This is the overall context in which this study was carried out. This report shares the findings by community members in Cambodia who engaged in local inquiry using the Facilitative Listening Design (FLD) method. Choosing a participatory approach, the goal for Women Peace Makers has been to better understand the situation on the ground during a very tumultuous moment as relocation efforts were underway in a specific community of Vietnamese residents on the Tonle Sap. By engaging directly with community members, it provides a more insider lens into how residents have been impacted by the changes and more broadly as they navigate their precarious status. It attempts to bring more voices into the ongoing conversation on this situation by those who are directly affected and who are most often being talked about rather than engaged with in this rapidly changing context.

²¹ Ministry of Interior, Management of Foreign Immigrants in Cambodia (2020) Notification No 1990.

²² Rina Chandran, 'No Room on Water, No Home on Land for Cambodia's Ethnic Vietnamese' Reuters (27 June 2019) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cambodia-landrights-refugees/no-room-on-water-no-home-on-land-for-cambodias-ethnic-vietnamese-idUSKCN1TS03L>.

²³ Rhona Smith, 'Relocating Floating Communities in Cambodia: Kampong Chhnang' (2021) 43(2) Human Rights Quarterly 290.

²⁴ Chann, Sopheak, Alice Beban, Amanda Flaim, Timothy Gorman, Long Ly Vouch (2024) 'Disorientations: The Political Ecology of "Displacing" Floating Communities from Cambodia's Tonle Sap Lake', Antipode, 1-25.

METHODOLOGY

The study has employed a participatory action research approach leveraging Facilitative Listening Design (FLD) to engage community members in a process of inquiry. FLD is a community-centred information gathering and transformational process to mobilise those who are impacted directly to generate knowledge and take action.²⁵ It has been deployed in various contexts with a range of objectives such as generating knowledge on issues of conflict where traditional research methods may not be an option. It has also been used for having difficult conversations, raising sensitive issues, challenging prevailing perceptions, and fostering more empathy and understanding through a conflict transformation lens. It has even proven to provide the space to foster relationships that can contribute to mutual understanding and collective action through collaboration among those who might even find themselves at odds with each other.²⁶

FLD has been used to specifically explore issues of ethnic Vietnamese minority communities in Cambodia in several contexts. It was first piloted in 2017 to better understand and respond to anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia's capital city of Phnom Penh.²⁷ The outcome from that work was a participant-led push to again use FLD to subsequently explore dynamics in the border area between Cambodia and Thailand through the relationships between diverse ethnic minority groups and ethnic Vietnamese living on the border.²⁸ Results from that work encouraged participants to advocate for a more regional approach to explore minority groups in Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam.²⁹ In Cambodia, the ethnic Vietnamese community living along the Tonle Sap was chosen within the regional context and was the introductory work with these residents, some of who are included in this more recent study through a lens on statelessness and risk of statelessness. Another important FLD study with this same community was carried out through another initiative that focused on minority girls and specific issues in four minority groups, including that of the ethnic Vietnamese girls living in floating villages or along the shore of the Tonle Sap in Kampong Chhnang.³⁰ Each of these FLD community-led initiatives have not only gathered new information and fostered relationships in specific contexts, but have contributed to further developing FLD methodology and providing insight into its

²⁵ Suyheang Kry and Raymond Hyma, *The FLD Handbook: Using Facilitative Listening Design For Your Project*, ed. Melissa Martin (Phnom Penh: Women Peace Makers, 2017).

²⁶ Raymond Hyma and Le Sen, "Inquiry as Practice: Building Relationships through Listening in Participatory Action Peace Research," *Peace Review* 34, no. 3 (2022): pp. 343-351, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10402659.2022.2092396>.

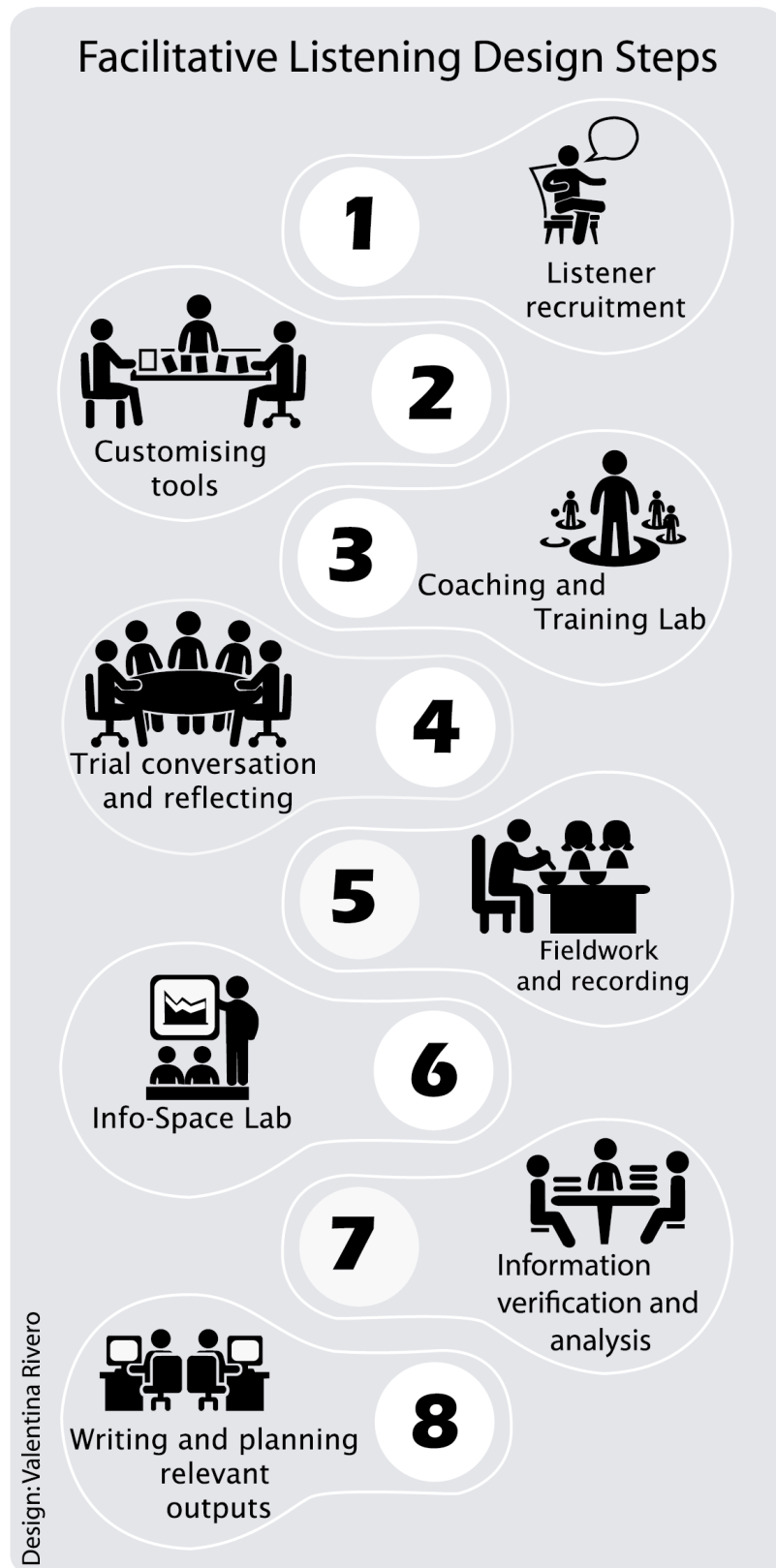
²⁷ Suyheang Kry and Raymond Hyma, *Who's Listening? Tackling Hard Issues with Empathy*, ed. Melissa Martin and Karen Simbulan (Phnom Penh: Women Peace Makers, 2017).

²⁸ Suyheang Kry and Raymond Hyma, *Who's Listening? From Centre to Periphery*, ed. Melissa Martin and Karen Simbulan (Phnom Penh: Women Peace Makers, 2019).

²⁹ Raymond Hyma et al., *Who's Listening? Understanding 'Us' to Know 'Them.'* (Phnom Penh: Women Peace Makers, 2022).

³⁰ Le Sen et al., *Making the Space: Voices from the girls of Cambodian minority communities* (Phnom Penh: Women Peace Makers, 2022).

application to opinions, and perceptions with the Listeners) is fundamental. The deployment of FLD in this context followed standard steps of the methodology and was customised to the specific situation.



Listener recruitment

Six Listeners (community researchers) were recruited to deploy FLD into communities along the Tonle Sap. Four of the six Listeners identified as ethnic Vietnamese Cambodians or mixed-race Vietnamese-Khmer Cambodians. The other two Listeners included an ethnic Khmer Cambodian and a mixed-race Thai-Lao Cambodian. The inclusion of non-ethnic Vietnamese in the Listening team provided the opportunity for other groups to listen and learn from the community that they were less familiar with.

Conversation facilitation and recording tools

FLD incorporates fully adaptable and versatile tools that the Listeners can use to have smooth and effective conversations. Tools are also provided to guide Listeners to be able to discreetly record and begin analysis of the collected data by helping them identify the range of issues and themes heard across the conversations. The following tools were developed and customised to meet the particular objectives of this initiative:

Conversation inquiry

Conversation inquiries were developed to help guide and frame the conversations. During the FLD Coaching and Training Lab, Listeners developed their own guide questions to help them navigate conversations with Listeners. They chose questions that were culturally appropriate and clear in Vietnamese and Khmer to communicate with those they were planning to have the conversations with.

Conversation Inquiry (guide questions): Count Us In

Questions	Key Words
Status / Challenges/Needs	
1. Do you or your family have any identity documents? Please share your life story briefly.	Nationality, citizenship, risk of statelessness, family background
2. Compared to others (mainstream Khmer living on land), what do you think your unique challenges might be?	Comparison, awareness of status, daily struggle/challenge
3. How do these challenges impact you and your family?	Imapcts
4. In terms of your status, what do you think could make things better or what are your needs?	Special needs
Issues	
5. What kind of issues exist for your children (or children in your community) to go to school?	School, education, children
6. Do you have any difficulties in your livelihood? If yes, describe.	Livelihood, daily subsistence
7. Do you feel that your home/location/community is stable? If no, please share why.	Sense of place, stability
8. Are there any other issues you would like to share?	Access to health care, clean water, etc.
Community-driven solutions	
9. After discussing some of your challenges, how do you think you can (or plan to) overcome them?	Solutions
10. Who do you think could help you in any struggles you may have?	Duty-bearers, support, perception of influence
Hopes and dreams	
Thinking about the future, what would be a dream yo have for yourself? Your family? How about your community?	Dreams, hopes, desires
How could you make those dreams come true?	Way forward, possibilities

Conversation logs

A conversation log is a tool for Listeners to record what they heard during the conversation after it takes place. Each Listener separately records in their own conversation log to capture key themes, highlights, and even quotes they can recall from the conversation with the Sharer. In addition, Listeners are required to gain consent from the Sharer so this is additionally recorded in the log.

Given that all Listeners were fluent in Khmer, Conversation logs were completed in Khmer language, even if conversations took place in Vietnamese or mixed Vietnamese and Khmer.

FLD CONVERSATION LOG

Count Us In!

Code:

Listener name:

Date:

Sharer's (Nick) Name: _____ (Optional)

Sharer provided consent to use information

☐ YES

☐ NO

Gender:

☐ Female

☐ Male

☐ Other

Time Start:

Legal Identity Status:

Time End:

☐ Cambodian ID Card

☐ Birth Certificate

☐ Immigration Card

☐ Other Nationality Doc: _____

☐ No legal documents

☐ Other legal identity documents

Please specify: _____

Language spoken in conversation:

Demography

Place of Birth: _____ Date of Birth _____

Age: _____ Years _____

Ancestor's Year of Arriving in Cambodia: _____

Relatives in VN: ☐ YES ☐ NO

Connection to Relatives in VN: ☐ Never ☐ Rarely

☐ Sometimes ☐ Often ☐ Always

Ancestors Return to VN during Khmer Rough Period:

If yes, year of return to Cambodia _____

Occupation: _____

Religion: _____

Location / Address (movement background):

--

Any direct quotations noted from your conversation (based on your

Listener: Please share any other information from your perspective and observation.

When you are finished with the two conversation logs from each Listener, please staple them together and attach to your "PRAM Journal" entry.

“PRAM” Journal

After completing five conversations, the Listeners work together to reflect and analyse what they heard from all conversations in their “PRAM” journal (*pram* means “five” in Khmer language). Most Listeners used the PRAM journal to identify recurring themes they heard, contrasts or differences they observed among the Sharers, and issues they might have disagreed about or have understood differently. If Listeners do not necessarily agree on what they each heard, they make a note of this in the PRAM journal for later discussion and clarification with the analysts.

“PRAM JOURNAL” FOR LISTENING PAIRS

Count Us In!

This journal is used to record your pair’s overall reflection each time after 5 (pram) conversations have been carried out. During pair reflection, you and your partner will record common themes that you heard throughout all conversations that day in this journal and discuss anything about the conversation from each of your perspectives. You may complete only one journal per team.

You fill out this first page after you have completed all 20 conversations. The following pages may be filled out each time after you complete 5 conversations.

Listening team members:

Total number of conversations

Location covered (please specify the details)

Conversations period

from ____/____/2022 to ____/____/2022

SET 1: 5 CONVERSATIONS

Date ____/____/ 2022

Location_____

Designated numbers of conversations _____

What kind of topics or themes did you hear across the conversations you had with the five Sharers?
What did you hear the most? Did any people say the same thing? Did you both hear it the same or did you hear different things after talking about it?

FLD Coaching and Training Lab

An FLD coaching and Training was delivered over two days from 26 to 27 January 2022 in Phnom Penh.

The six Listeners were trained in FLD methodology and learnt fundamental research skills, active listening techniques, and bias recognition. Listeners studied the conversation recording tools so they could familiarise themselves with the documentation process of what they heard in their fieldwork and held trial conversations. Planning sessions also took place to consider where each pair would work as well as with whom they intended to speak. This included consideration of appropriate demographics, logistics, and practical ways they would find people to participate in the project as Sharers in the three countries.

Conversations in the field

Listeners reached out to communities along the Tonle Sap in Kampong Chhnang. They sought out both residents living in boats on the water and those that had moved to land along the shore. The two teams of four Listeners that spoke Vietnamese had 40 conversations while the one team that spoke Khmer only engaged with 10 Sharers that could speak Khmer.

Information Processing and Transformative Space Lab (Info-Space Lab)

Listeners convened on 25 and 26 March 2022 in Kandal province to begin the group analysis phase of FLD. The Information Processing and Transformative Space Lab, informally called the Info-Space Lab,

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

15

The second goal - to provide a safe space for Listeners to express any impact the work had on them - was carried out through group reflection, storytelling, and small break-out groups. For most of the Listeners, it was the personal stories of the Sharers that stayed with them. Each Listener eventually shared one story from a specific Sharer with the group and put a very human face on the data they had collected.

Information verification and thematic analysis

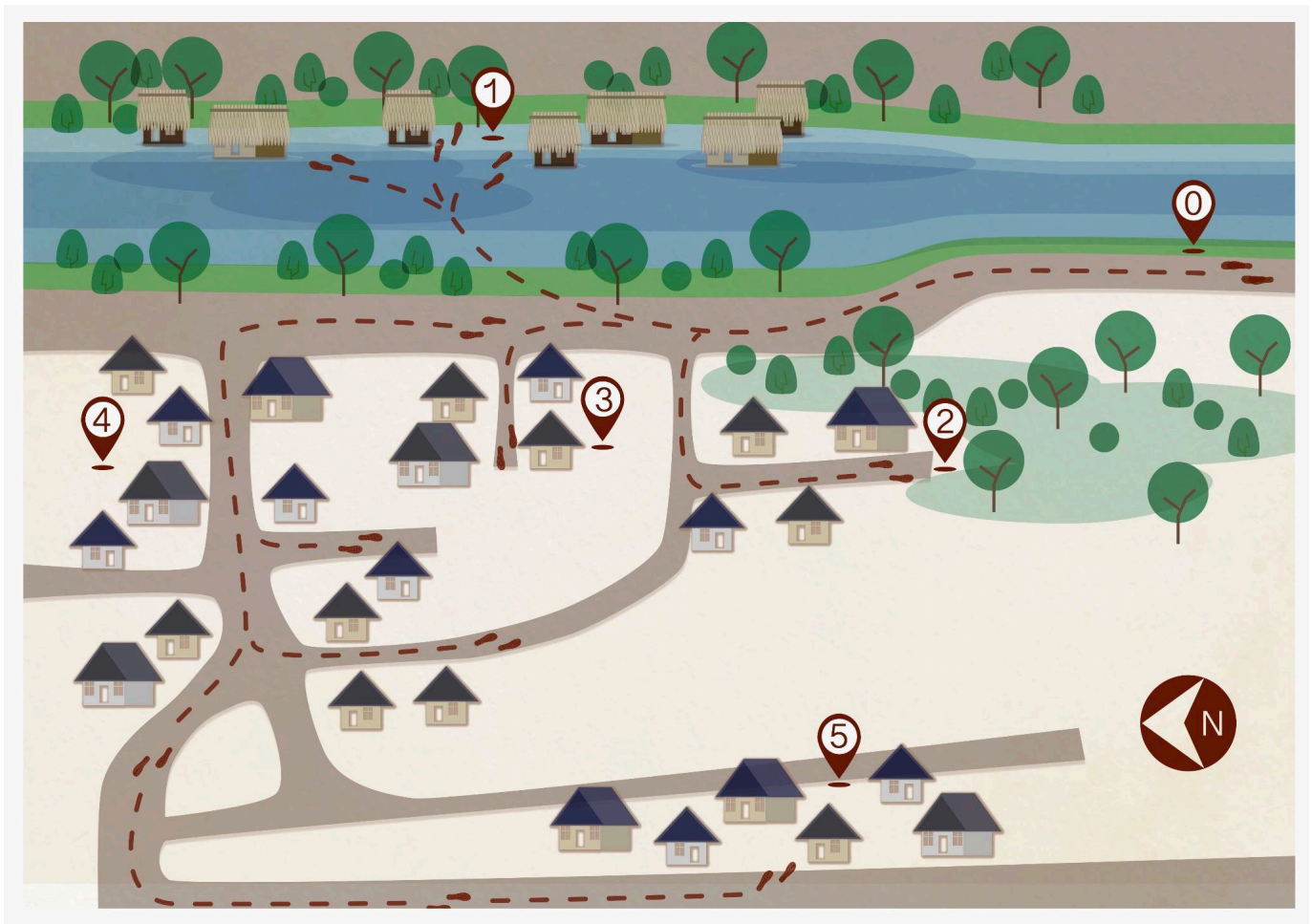
The next stages of analysis took place independently after Info-Space Lab. Data was entered into a database by an analysis team. They went through the conversation logs and journals and extracted data that matched with the themes that had been developed by Listeners during the Info-Space Lab. First, quad journals were closely examined to compare with the themes that Listeners identified during the Info-Space Lab. Conversations were broken down and classified under corresponding themes together with examples and quotations to explore the depth and variations among Sharer opinions on each subject. The analysts also classified surprising or unique stories that emerged from particular Sharers to expand on the emerging alternative narratives. Together with a writer, the analysts wrote the report focusing mainly on direct quotations from the data tools.

Writing and planning relevant outputs

Given the sensitive public nature of this issue, the FLD team made the decision to write a private report on the findings to share with a limited audience. They also decided to do less internal analysis and more direct citation sharing from FLD tools to allow for Sharers to “speak for themselves” in their lives at this more recent time where many changes are taking place in their communities. In addition, there are plans for more creative ways to share findings with the public including thinking and spoken theatre and animation.

LOCATION AND DEMOGRAPHICS

The FLD work focused on communities along the Tonle Sap river in Kampong Chhnang. Listeners reached out to Sharers specifically in the areas of Chong Koh village and Dey Thmey village in Phsar Chhnang commune, Kampong town, Kampong Chhnang province.



Map of the FLD fieldwork locations in February 2022

- (0) This the entrypoint and direction Sharers entered to get to the location, approximately 1km from the communities.
- (1) Most Sharers included were living here on the river in houseboats. The floating village is called Dey Thmey ("New Land") village. It extends approximately 2km across the river (to the East).
- (2) This is an area that poor residents are provided space by the local Catholic church between 200-300 metres from the river. A few Sharers were reached from this area.
- (3) This area is about 500 metres from 2 and 100 metres from the river. It consists of 8-10 houses where a few Sharers were reached.
- (4) This area is also called Dey Thmey (new land) village. Around 3 hundred houses in the area. The second most shares from this area. The area extends around 500 metres
- (5) This is the land managed by the chief of the Vietnamese Association in Kampong Chhnang. The area is about 5 kilometres from the river with 300-400 houses. Only one Sharer was reached here given the sensitive situation with the authorities.

50 Sharers in ethnic Vietnamese communities engaged in FLD conversations.

Gender

- 62% were female, 38% male

	Male	Female
Gender	19	31

Age

(approximate based on date of birth)

2% 72-75 years old
14% 63-72 years old
30% 53-62 years old
12% 43-52 years old
32% 33-42 years old
6% 23-32 years old
4% Unknown

	1940-1949	1950-1959	1960-1969	1970-1979	1980-1989	1990-1999	Unknown
Year of birth	1	7	15	6	16	3	2

Place of Birth

44 sharers or equals to 88% of the sharers were born in Cambodia. While the remaining 4.8% were born in Vietnam and 2.4% didn't share the information.

House location status

- 64% of the Sharers included were still living on the water in house boats while 36% of them had relocated to dwellings on land.

Living on the water	32
Living on land	18

Occupation

- In terms of work, 4% worked in a factory, 2% were farmers, 56% were fishers, 4% cut or processed fish, 4% sold fish, 22% were sellers or small business people, 2% were teachers, 2% worked in transportation, and 2% were retired or unemployed.

	Factory	Farmer	Fisher	Fish cutter	Fish seller	Seller	Teacher	Transport	No job
Occupation	2	1	28	2	2	11	1	1	1

Religion

- 92% identified as Buddhists, 4% as Christians, 2% practising Vietnamese folk religion, while 2% did not answer.

	Buddhism	Christianity	Folk religion	Unknown
Religion	46	2	1	1

Legal Status/Identification

- 98% had no Cambodian ID card, 2% did.

	No	Yes
Possess Cambodian "Khmer" ID Card	49	1

- 98% had no birth certificate, 2% did.

	No	Yes
Possess birth certificate	49	1

- 94% had either an immigration card or a permanent resident card, 2% had neither, and 4% were unsure or did not answer.

	No	Yes	Unknown
Immigration Card/Permanent Resident Card	1	47	2

Connections to Vietnam

- 90% said they had relatives in Vietnam while 10% said they did not.

	No	Yes
Have relatives in Vietnam	5	45

- In terms of frequency of visiting relatives in Vietnam, 8% said never, 26% said rarely, 32% said sometimes, 14% said often, and 10% said always while 10% did not answer or would not provide that information.

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always	Unknown
Frequency of visiting relatives in Vietnam	4	13	16	7	5	5

- In terms of frequency of communication with relatives in Vietnam, 10% said always, 14% said often, 32% said sometimes, 26% said rarely, and 12% said never while 6% did not answer or would not provide that information.

	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never	Unknown
Frequency of communication with relatives in Vietnam	5	7	16	13	6	3

Historical Ties to Cambodia

- 84% said that they or their relatives/ancestors had been forced to leave Cambodia for Vietnam during the Khmer Rouge years of genocide (1975-1979), 12% said they did not while 4% did not know or did not answer.

	No	Yes	Unknown
Expulsion of relatives, ancestors (such as grandparents) to Vietnam during Khmer Rouge Regime	6	42	2

- 50% said that they or their families had returned to Cambodia after the genocide years sometime between 1975 to 1995, 30% were unsure when they returned while 20% did not answer.

	1979	1979/ 1980	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1988	1989	1993	1995	Not sure	No answer
Years returning to Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge Regime	1	3	3	9	1	2	1	1	1	2	1	15	10



FINDINGS

1. We are targeted by different levels of authority and have no recourse to respond.
2. We want to have a safe home and live our lives, but we no longer know how.
3. It is impossible to have a home either on the water or land.
4. Life without legal identity or documentation is challenging.
5. Our life in relation to fish is being drastically changed.
6. We were born in Cambodia and we belong here in our home.
7. Life might be better in Vietnam because things are becoming so difficult here.
8. Our lack of access to education impedes our opportunities and impedes our future.

1. We are targeted by different levels of authority and have no recourse to respond.

They destroyed my house. If I want to protect my house, I have to give them some money. I hide inside my boat when they come. While having a meal, I have to look around the boat in case they come to destroy the house. They took everything, even a bottle of fish sauce. I live like a mouse in a cat-and-mouse game...

-A 44-year-old woman who fished for a living

There is widespread fear of authorities among the ethnic Vietnamese living both on the river and on land around the Tonle Sap. Authorities referred to in this context were mentioned as the local police, the water police, the environmental police, and also include the Vietnamese Association in the area. According to the Listeners, this theme came up in a number of ways during conversations. Sharers expressed that they had no rights to oppose anything, they felt helpless, they resented the Chief of the Vietnamese Association, and they had no way to respond to the destruction of their boat houses by authorities.

Sharers talked in detail about feeling pressured, harassed, and bullied by local authorities. For many, this began with demands by authorities for money. Many brought up trying to obtain documents by paying high costs. Some paid money up front, but complained they never received any documents, such as family record books. They also discussed paying fines to authorities for everyday activities.

"The police ask us for money when we transport our fish to sell at the market. If they do not ask for money, they will ask for a gallon of diesel which is equal to 100 000 KHR [\$25 USD]. Even if we sell all of our fish, we still don't have enough money to pay them. Everyday I'm worried when they come to ask for money. If I don't give them any, they will cut the rope of the nets under my floating house and if that happens, it's the end. I have three floating houses and two of them had the nets cut."

-A 63-year-old fisherman

Several Sharers talked about being charged or fined for fishing in the river.

"The fisheries authority fines us 20,000 to 30,000 KHR [\$5-\$7.50 USD] when they see me fishing."

-A 34-year-old fisherman

"When we catch fish, they require us to pay a tax. You must pay more if you use bigger fishing supplies [fishing nets] or less if you use smaller ones."

-A 49-year-old fisherman

For many, having money equated to having rights. Money played an important indicator of power and ability to overcome actions of the local authorities.

"If we are poor, wherever we go, we are still poor. If we are rich, even though we live in the forest, we are still rich." [Listener explanation: the Sharer was referring to how money divides people into rich and poor, and the power associated with it.]

-A 45-year-old fisherman who spoke Khmer with Listeners

One of the most widely discussed complaints of the Sharers in regard to the local authorities was the destruction of their homes. This was specific to those still living on the water in houseboats across the floating villages. New policies had been explained to them that only one person could reside in each boat and that they could only remain to continue raising fish in the nets below their structures.

"The Khmer authorities came down and hounded us viciously and tried to demolish our home. Because a house can only shelter one person, my wife and children fled into the forest to hide. We are living in fear and worry all the time, even when we're eating. It's impossible to even eat. They don't just destroy the house, they also steal stuff from it. If you see fish sauce, take it, if you see a plate, take it. And if you see something that can't be used, it's just cut down and thrown into the water. They tell us to live on land but how can we live without water, pay our monthly rent, and move into complete uncertainty?"

-A 39-year-old fisherman

Every Sharer still remaining on the water talked about struggling to avoid authorities. Their fear of having their homes destroyed was based on several encounters.

"Every day I cannot go anywhere because I am afraid that the police will come to destroy my house. They already destroyed my house, pulled off the roof, and cut the ropes. My floating house floated far away, and they told me that I needed to relocate my house to a place where the public can't see me."

**-A 60-year-old woman who lives under plastic bags
on her roofless houseboat**

Beyond the different Cambodian police departments mentioned as authorities that have confronted the communities living on the water, the "Vietnamese Association" referenced by Sharers was one of the major players involved. Referring to what is now called the Khmer-Vietnamese Association in Cambodia (formerly the Khmer-Vietnamese Union in Cambodia), it is an organisation legally recognised by the Cambodian government since 2018 and has 25 branches across the country. For the communities where Sharers were living, the association was involved in much of the harassment they experienced. Rather than working on behalf of the Vietnamese minority in Cambodia, most Sharers felt that the association was working hand in hand with Cambodian authorities to evict them through different means.

"I'm desperate for someone to come and assist me. Not to mention the Cambodians who were persecuted, but the Vietnamese were far more brutal. They come to pay us a visit. I try to be hopeful, but in the end, it is the Khmer people's internal politics that abuse more. They [members of the Khmer-Vietnamese Association in Cambodia] arrived in 30 or 40 Khmer boats, sat on the bow to point to choose a house and how to destroy it, and then the Khmer go on to destroy it as directed. I'm in excruciating pain and have nothing to say no longer believe and hope that someone will come to help."

-A 39-year-old fisherman

For many Sharers, the Vietnamese representation in Cambodia was working deliberately to dismantle their community.

"The association's president, however, is not fulfilling his obligations. Rather, he collaborated with the Cambodians to cut down our roofs. He has lived here for a long time, is now comfortable, and no longer cares about the residents, no matter how miserable they may be. For us, life is meaningless in this world. They came and ordered us to live on the land and said we can only set up a three metre roof, but later came to cut it off and wouldn't allow us anything in the house."

-A 49-year-old fisherman

2. We want to have a safe home and live our lives, but we no longer know how.

Life is like water hyacinth that floats without any destination... I used to dream that someone would come to help me, but since I have no hope anymore, I do not dare to dream and accept my hard life.

A 34-year-old fisherman whose parents were born in Phnom Penh

Given that FLD fieldwork was carried out during the process of relocation, the desire for security and a stable home was a very common theme among conversations. Unfortunately, most Sharers felt hopeless or were unsure of what to do in the face of eviction and forced relocation. As the initial quote provides a visual example of despair, several Sharers compared their lives to water hyacinth, which was so present through the floating villages. Like a weed that drifts from one spot of the river to another, so too felt so many residents who were moving their communities to different areas without any certainty of what would happen to them. Sharers also metaphorically compared their lives to other things.

"The situation now is getting worse, I have no hope. I cannot move to live in Vietnam, and it is hard to live in Cambodia. My life is like a floating animal. Life is hard here both on land and on water."

"The situation now is getting worse, I have no hope. I cannot move to live in Vietnam, and it is hard to live in Cambodia. My life is like a floating animal. Life is hard here both on land and on water."

-A 37-year-old woman who works in a factory on land

"Our life is worse than birds. At least birds have their own nests, but we are struggling to have a house. Birds want a nest; we also want a house. Therefore, please do not destroy the nests. We also do not want to be evicted as well."

-A 40-year-old fisherman

"We're like a fish on a chopping board, whenever they want to cut us up, they'll just start cutting."

-A 40-year-old mother of four children who lives by fishing

In one houseboat, Listeners even saw a family that refused to remove a nest from the ceiling where a family of birds was residing. According to the Listeners, the family compared their life on the houseboat to that of the birds and felt that they had to have more compassion and empathy for the birds than others had for them after multiple interactions with authorities who vandalised their home.

By far, the biggest threat and fear among the ethnic Vietnamese residents still living on the water was their eviction by authorities. Most Sharers associated security and safety with housing stability, sharing great worries about being evicted.

"Every day my life is getting harder because my floating house is damaged by the police almost every month. I heard that they would continue to evict us... I hope that I can live in a better situation than now, that no more houses are destroyed, and that we can live peacefully. I do not think about my future, I do not know what will happen..."

-A 40-year-old fisherman who spoke Khmer with Listeners

The fear of being relocated was not solely focused on having to move, but also the interaction with authorities and the actions taken when they arrived. Many residents shared stories of visits by authorities where they felt intimidated and without any control of their situation.

"They come to demolish my house, clear it, cut the roof, and use a saw. They also detain me, my wife, my children, and my neighbours. We hid ashore for three or four hours before seeing them come down to take our belongings, but when we returned to our boat, we lost several items, including dishes, pots, and knives. Even the fish sauce was taken, the roof of the home was thrown into the water, and the toilet was removed. For me as a man, it's okay, but our women can't even lower their pants without having to use the toilet. They arrived by boat, ten to twenty people at a time, to relocate the villagers' homes. When they saw us seated and eating, we were not allowed to eat. Every day, we live in difficulty, in their hands, and they force us to move back and forth. They intend to demolish the house, and we have no idea what to do. They abuse us in every way, and paying money isn't even enough to stop them."

-A 39-year-old fisherman

There were some responses and acts of resistance or forms of adaptation heard from community members who had interacted with authorities in regards to their housing. Several Sharers talked about moving from one place to another, relocating their houseboats to areas to avoid visiting authorities. Given that most damage done to the residents' houseboats was the destruction of their roofs, some decided to rebuild them as temporary structures in order to lessen the loss in the next visits by authorities when they expected similar actions.

"They did not allow us to rebuild the roof because they don't want us to live on the water. So we didn't repair it with a strong roof. We just put some light wood up and covered it with a plastic bag."

-A 42-year-old fisherman

"...the police destroyed my house into pieces. So now I use plastic bags to cover the roof. I live on a small boat. It's so difficult when there is heavy rain."

-A 60-year-old woman who fishes for a living

3. It is impossible to have a home either on the water or land.

Our life is worse than that of a bird or a fish. At least they can go wherever they want. For us, we must stay in one place and have no freedom. We have to run when they come to evict us.

-A 34-year-old fisherman

Most residents in the floating village communities expressed a great deal of hopelessness and despair in their lives. In discussing both life living on boats in the water as well as relocating to land, the reflections were generally stark.

The largest focus on challenges was again centred on the ongoing evictions of houseboat dwellers and the destruction of their homes. Much of the angst was the need to move from one place to the next.

"Life is so hard, they evict us from place to place and we are not stable."

-A 38-year-old woman who raises fish under her boat

"They evict us from one place to the next, which has become normal for me. I think that they will evict us soon again. I live with fear every day and I don't know when I will be evicted next. I will not settle in a permanent place to live... I just built my floating house for temporary conditions."

-A 64-year-old fisherman whose parents were born in Cambodia

This sense of security was one of the most pressing issues in the lives of those still remaining on the water as the pressure to relocate and leave their houseboats grew. Many Sharers saw their boats and items on them as the only possessions they had.

"My house will get robbed if nobody stays here. I've already lost all my belongings in the house."

-A 55-year-old woman living under plastic bags on what remains of her boat

Even for those that were no longer to continue their lives on the water, moving on land brought a whole new set of problems to them.

"Being evicted many times, my family and I finally made the decision to move to live on land. Our life on land is difficult because it's not as cool as living on water, it's not easy to use water, and we had been fishing for a long time. Living on the water and on land both have problems but at least we used to feel at ease when living on the water. Now it's hard to even get water on land."

-A 64-year-old woman who sells porridge on the river bank

This sense of resistance to adapt to life on land was found across themes and manifested in different forms of fears and frustrations.

"We are forced to move to live on land. We can't live there because we don't have enough money. We need to pay 100 000 riel [\$60 USD] per month for renting a plot of land. We can't catch fish anymore on land so where can we get money to pay for that rented land?"

-A 63-year-old mother of six who was living on a borrowed boat because her own was destroyed

For those trying to leave Cambodia and go to Vietnam, being unable to cross the border led to a sense of helplessness. This was a result of both losing their homes and finding themselves in a precarious situation of legal status.

"The last time they evicted us, I decided I wanted to move as well but I heard that the Vietnamese government wouldn't allow us into Vietnam, which happened to those people who were stopped at the border in K'orm Somnor near Long Seang.

They wouldn't let us cross the border. About 300 families went there, but the Vietnamese government wouldn't allow us to go across the border even though we are Vietnamese. Wherever we go, both Cambodia and Vietnam won't accept us."

-A 34-year-old fisherman and father of four

4. Life without legal identity or documentation is challenging.

Every day is so difficult because we are illegal immigrants, we do not have the right to do what we want... We live illegally, we are always blamed. Trying to go to Vietnam, they do not allow us in, living in Cambodia, we are not legal.

-A 54-year-old man who fled Cambodia in 1975 and returned in 1979

Ethnic Vietnamese living along the Tonle Sap are often unaware of their legal status or identity within the Kingdom of Cambodia. Most lack basic identity, even though many were born in Cambodia. It is likely that the vast majority of these residents are at risk of statelessness, having no particular claim to citizenship either in Cambodia or Vietnam.

The majority of the Sharers told Listeners that they had no birth certificate. Of the 50, only one claimed such documentation. 47 of the 50, however, said they did hold either an immigration card or a permanent resident card. Those with such identification, however, said that there was little they could do with it.

"I do not have an identity card, birth certificate or family record book. I only have an immigration card, I cannot do anything."

-A 38-year-old mother of three who was born in Cambodia

Several compared themselves to Khmer in Cambodia, noting that they were unable to receive the same kind of identification.

"We are not Khmer; we do not have legal documents such as identity cards or family record books."

-A 34-year-old fisherman and father of three whose parents were born in Cambodia

This lack of identity documentation generally leads to ethnic Vietnamese residents identifying themselves as immigrants or illegal aliens in Cambodia, despite most of them being born and raised fully in the country.

"The life of immigrants in Cambodia is like this, we live a very difficult life."

-A 34-year-old man born in Cambodia who just learnt how to drive a motorcycle and became a moto-taxi driver on land

Although many community members had been told of a pathway towards gaining legal status and the corresponding documentation to prove it, many were frustrated after years of trying.

"The Vietnamese community used to give us money and advise us to apply for a three-year immigration card so we could become Cambodian citizens, but it has been six years and still nothing. We make a card three times that costs 250,000 riel [\$60 USD] each time."

-A 49-year-old fisherman

Several Sharers discussed trying to get identity documents at different points in their lives, but most often were unable to acquire birth certificates or other forms of identification other than an immigration card.

"When our girls are pregnant, they go to give birth at a hospital on land but they don't get any documents like the Khmer mothers do."

-A 55-year-old grandmother

-A 51-year-old fisherman whose grandparents also lived in the area and whose family fled from Cambodia in 1975, returning in 1981

"My children were born here but the authorities wouldn't give them birth certificates. They got only some yellow letters for their vaccinations."

-A 40-year-old woman who was born in Vietnam in 1980 where her Cambodian-born parents had fled from the Khmer Rouge

This (lack of) status leads to numerous impacts that deeply affect many aspects of the lives of ethnic Vietnamese living in Kampong Chhnang, both those remaining on water as much as those who have relocated to land.

One of the major repercussions of having unclear legal status or claim to citizenship in Cambodia is the inability to own land. Although some Sharers revealed that in practice, there were times when they were offered to buy land, in reality, the risk was too high that their purchase would be deemed illegal and would consequently lose any rights of ownership.

"We cannot buy property like land because we don't have any legal documents and have no money. Even if we buy it, it's not legal because we don't have an identity card, birth certificate or family record book. When we buy a plot of land, they give us a letter that states that we bought the land, but when the land authority checks the land title, we are not actually the landowner but are just the land renters."

-A 45-year-old man who holds no identity documents from Cambodia or Vietnam other than an immigrant card

Some Sharers explained how they tried circumventing their status issues to purchase land through Khmer intermediaries, but also put them at risk of conflict or contestation.

"If we want to buy a plot of land or even a mobile phone or motorbike, we need the Khmer to help us because they have legal documents. When buying those things, we have to put the name of the Khmer citizen who agrees to help us. Then we have to issue another document that states that the Vietnamese are only the renters, and the Khmer is the owner. We usually need to pay about 100 000 Cambodian riel [\$40 USD] to this person who puts their name on the document as the owner. Sometimes conflicts arise between the parties as well."

-A 64-year-old man born in Cambodia to parents also born in Cambodia

Another major challenge of living without clear status or documentation to prove citizenship is the lack of access to public services, particularly education and healthcare. Many parents in the ethnic Vietnamese communities along the river mentioned the inability of their children to attend school.

"If we want to send them to a public school, we need to have a birth certificate to get them enrolled. I only have a yellow card [immigration card] and I cannot do anything."

-A 44-year-old mother of five who says three previous generations of her family were all born in Cambodia

Several Sharers mentioned only having the "yellow card" that did not entitle them to send their children to school.

"My little grandchildren have not yet started school, but if they do, they won't be able to study with a higher class because my family does not have any legal papers, only the yellow card."

-A 64-year-old grandmother who traces her connection to Cambodia back to her grandparents who were born there

Likewise, access to public healthcare was also hindered by only holding the immigration card.

"...I'd like to have an identity card that gives me the same rights as everyone else, not like the agony now. When we get sick, we go to the hospital for treatment or call the doctor to come to treat us at our home, but it's so much more expensive."

-A 39-year-old fisherman who identifies himself as a Vietnamese born in Cambodia

This was because those with citizenship could apply for social assistance cards that would significantly reduce costs for general healthcare that was subsidised by the government.

"I spend a lot more than others who have identity cards when I go to a hospital because they can get a Poor ID card and get a discount. For example, if the hospital bill is 100 000 riel [\$40 USD], they need to pay only 50 000 riel [\$20 USD]."

-A 54-year-old fisherman

The cost of maintaining an immigration card was also commonly cited as a challenge in the lives of the ethnic Vietnamese residents who often held no other forms of immigration. As one of the only sources of identification that most Sharers had, obtaining and renewing it was a significant hardship. Beyond the financial strain, they also expressed frustration of being unable to obtain residency with it as they had been told they could by different information sources.

"I had to pay to get an immigration card three times and they told me that they would give me Khmer citizenship, but nothing ever happened. For each renewal, it costs 250 000 riel for every person."

-A 53-year-old fisherman who traces his family roots in Cambodia to over 100 years

This was a common theme among those who had gone through the paperwork and followed directions given to them by contacts, authorities, and those engaging with the ethnic Vietnamese population living in the area.

"Three yellow cards have been issued to us. They promised that after doing it three times we would gain nationality, but we did it three times and still haven't got it."

-A 59-year-old ethnic Vietnamese fisherman who identifies as Cambodian

Livelihoods were also greatly affected by not having identification or holding clear legal status in Cambodia. Access to jobs and employment was very limited and expressed in numerous conversations with those who had looked for other options and opportunities.

"I work to support my family, but it's never enough because I don't have the requisite right papers like an identity card or a birth certificate so I don't have the same rights as other Cambodians. There is no assurance of getting a job..."

-A 39-year-old fisherman born in Cambodia

Residents often felt they had no choice but to stay where they were and survive on the jobs they could. They sometimes felt trapped and expressed they were only able to sustain their lives through fishing or other local jobs on the river.

*"There are no other jobs besides fishing because
they all require ID cards and literacy."*

A 66-year-old widow with nine children who continues to fish

Not having any identification also restricted freedom of movement, particularly across borders. Some Sharers mentioned not wanting to even travel within Cambodia for fear of being asked for ID. Without any clear citizenship in Cambodia or elsewhere, the lack of having a passport was one of the major barriers in going abroad.

"Because I do not have a passport, travelling is difficult."

**-A 54-year-old woman whose family including her grandparents were
born in Cambodia**

5. Our life in relation to fish is being drastically changed.

There are no more fish here and now I have no idea where to look for a job.

-A 59-year-old fisherman who said he wants to move to Vietnam

Ethnic Vietnamese residents living the communities along the Tonle Sap spoke profusely about fish, their importance, and how much of their lives revolved around them. Whether they travelled along the river to catch them or raised them under their houseboats in fish pens, fish have been vital to their lives for generations. In this context, Sharers discussed how their connection to fish was being drastically changed in two senses; the decreasing amount in the river and the impact of their relocation off the water and onto land.

In terms of the notable decrease of fish stocks in the Tonle Sap, it was very frequently mentioned that catches were far lower than in the past. This was resulting in people fishing less.

"Every day it is getting difficult because we catch fewer fish than before."

-A 54-year-old fisherman

*"Go fishing for only one day, then you have to rest for two or three days because
now if you go fishing every day, you won't catch any fish."*

-A 66-year-old widow who fishes for a living

Particularly when river levels were lower, those relying on the wild fish shared more about their hardships.

*"During the low water period, I cannot get fish every day.
I just sell whatever fish I can get."*

-A 34-year-old fisherman who used to have a fish pen that got destroyed

With the reduction of fish stocks in the river, several Sharers expressed their desperation in terms of livelihood.

"People on the water used to enjoy a better life because there were so many fish but the fish population has plummeted over the last three years and we now have a major shortage with some people unable to afford fishing equipment."

-A 49-year-old fisherman whose wife and children relocated to land while he remains on his boat

In the other sense, the ongoing relocation of families from the river to land along with the increasing interactions with authorities on the water were cited as greatly affecting the community members' ability to fish or raise fish. In fact, one of the most frequently mentioned challenges of those who had already been relocated to land was the lack of access to the riverway and ultimately the inability to fish as they had always done before.

"It was easy for us to raise fish and catch fish then. But since we moved to live on land, our fish was stolen, and we decided to just sell our fish pens because no one could take care of them anymore."

-A 55-year-old woman who has relocated to land

Having to eventually abandon the houseboats and fish pens was also commonly brought up by those who had to give up their possessions on the water when they moved.

"I abandoned my floating house. I did not sell my floating house because no one would buy it. Living here is so difficult because I do not have a good job. I sell soft drinks but I don't not have many customers. I depend on my husband who is a construction worker. We have to pay 100 000 riel (\$40 USD) for rented land per month. I at least want to live along the riverbank if it's possible. If they allowed me to go back, I would go now. Living on the river is easy to access water and earn money by fishing."

-A 40-year-old woman who moved to the land one year prior

Some Sharers also expressed the lack of access to fish contributing to challenges with their everyday food supply and even hunger.

"And we no longer have access to fish to eat."

-A 39-year-old fisherman

"I could catch some fish to eat while living on the water, but since moving here I sometimes do not have any food to eat."

-A 65-year-old man who relocated to land

6. We were born in Cambodia and we belong here in our home.

My family has lived in Cambodia for three generations. We were born here. I was born during the Pol Pot regime. I don't have any siblings in Vietnam. My family has lived here for a long time.

-A 40-year-old woman who sells soft drinks after being relocated to land

Although ethnic Vietnamese residents on the Tonle Sap saw themselves as different from Cambodians, nearly all of them felt they belonged in Cambodia, viewing the area as their home. A strong sense of place defined the communities that Listeners engaged in with many Sharers expressing their attachment and even their right to live there. They talked about their long history in the country, the generations of their families before them, and some of the legal issues they navigated in their current lives.

"I was born and grew up here."

-A 34-year-old man who also talked about his parent's experience living during the Khmer Rouge Regime

"I was born and grew up here, my family has lived here for several generations, where can I go?"

-A 53-year-old man who traces back 100 years of his family in Cambodia

The majority of Sharers commented that they had been born in Cambodia. In fact, beyond discussing their birth place, many talked about the previous generations of their families who had also been born in the area.

"I am 60 years old. My parents and grandparents were born in Cambodia. I have lived here for over 50 years."

-A fisherman who spent six years in Vietnam during the Cambodian genocide period

"My grandparents' ancestors were born in Cambodia."

**-A women in her sixties who moves her houseboat in
different spots along the river**

While discussing their past and their connection to the area over generations, many Sharers brought up the time of the Cambodian genocide years, which they referred to as the Pol Pot regime or the Khmer Rouge era. During the nearly four years, most Sharers or their previous generation at that time had escaped, with the majority fleeing to Vietnam. For many, this break in living in the area was temporary with the majority returning to Cambodia in later years.

"I was born here, grew up here, my family here for three generations. During the Pol Pot era in 1975, I was evacuated to the mountains with my children for a short time. They beat me, but fortunately one night my family tried to run away from the Khmer Rouge while they were sleeping. We met a Vietnamese soldier and moved to Vietnam, where we lived for six years. I was also living in abject poverty there. We decided to return to my birthplace because we used to live here and earned a living by fishing, in order to save money to buy a boat with my husband and children."

-A 66-year-old widow

"I was born in Cambodia and raised here since I was a child. My father was a Vietnamese language teacher for the children in the village. My mother is a housewife. My parents came to live in Cambodia a long time ago. During the Pol Pot era, my family was evacuated to Vietnam. Because they did not know how to live there, they decided to return to live in Cambodia."

-A 40-year-old woman with four children

Connections to the area were further elaborated on by Sharers who saw it as their home for many reasons and had no desire to leave.

"My family in Vietnam are also regular visitors, but due to illness, we were unable to continue seeing each other. I can't move to Vietnam to live because my parents are buried here. I can only stay here in this place."

**-A 49-year-old man who spoke about many generations
of his family before him living in the area**

Although some residents had connections to Vietnam, many did not or had no desire to go to Vietnam. For some, it was a foreign place.

"Frankly speaking, my siblings in Vietnam had invited me to move to Vietnam but I did not want to go."

-A 51-year-old man who had been relocated to land and was running a coffee shop

7. Life might be better in Vietnam because things are becoming so difficult here.

When they chased me down, I tried to go to Vietnam but they wouldn't let me in. I had to return to live here. No one comes to save us so we must do with what we have.

-A 57-year-old widow who has lost three of her children to disease and accidents

In spite of many Sharers wishing to stay in the area, the increasing pressures of life in Kampong Chhnang had made many residents begin to question their futures. The challenges and the uncertainty in their lives led to several questions about leaving. Interestingly, contrasting previous FLD studies carried out in the years prior when residents frequently conveyed wishing to stay and often having little to no connection to Vietnam, many were now pondering moving across the border. During the time of this FLD fieldwork, Covid-19 restrictions meant that the border between Cambodia and Vietnam was fully closed. For those that wished to leave the area, there were few options at the time.

"I was born in Cambodia but have always been rejected when trying to get a Cambodian identity card and forced me to live in a life where I have no right to buy land or build a house and depend on fishing to survive. My Vietnamese family asked me to return to Vietnam but the border is closed. Some people have tried to go back to Vietnam due to the disease and epidemic, and they are willing to wait for Vietnam to open the border on the water along the river."

-A 28-year-old mother of two children who fishes for a living

This reflection of life in Cambodia caused several Sharers to really question their lives as perpetual immigrants in a land in which they were born. Some no longer had the will to persevere in staying, sometimes due to how they felt they had been treated by others.

"My spouse became blind in one eye after being shot by Cambodians a few years ago because he did not speak Khmer fluently, and they accused him of complaining about them. Last February in 2021, Khmer people came to cut down my house on the water as well as my boat. I have no right to protest, all I can do is stand there and watch. Then I demolished my own house on the water to build one on a piece of land leased to me by the Vietnamese Association's leader. I didn't have enough money to pay for water, power, or garbage and couldn't afford to live there. I also left the house to my brother to come and rent. Then I returned to live on the boat using a tent for the temporary roof. I didn't expect life to become how it is now. If I knew, I'd have gone to live in Vietnam. I pity my child, it was so hard to raise him and he is sick. He tried to ride a bicycle to support me but his hands and feet mysteriously had problems and he fell to the ground. I am only thinking about life day-to-day now. If they open the border and I don't have to live in pain here... I can't begin to tell you about the Khmer people's acts against us. They threw my parent's incense sticks into the water... they just cut down our house if we try to hold onto it. We are Vietnamese, not Khmer, that's why they treat us so badly."

-A woman still living on the water

The desperation due to living conditions in Cambodia encouraged them to find hope in Vietnam and the life they might be able to have there. Some Sharers had relatives living in Vietnam and had more references to life on the other side of the border, hoping one day to join them.

"My three daughters are now living in Vietnam, fishing and all living on water. They have total freedom to go up and down the river and can work in factories to supplement their income even if they do not have Vietnamese ID. I don't want anything... All I want is for the border to be opened so that I can live in Vietnam and never return to Cambodia. And the others here will most likely go as well because it is so difficult here. I really want to visit Vietnam, where youngsters can work in industries, earn more money, and have a better life. Right now I don't know where to go because I'm living like a water hyacinth. Life is harder than a cow's. It doesn't even matter if you live or die, life is just so difficult. Without any rights or freedoms we aren't valued. Even if we did have money we couldn't buy land. They called us 'Youn.' Let's go back to Vietnam and never come to Khmer land."

-A widow and mother to nine children, though one has passed away

This desire to leave for Vietnam was relatively common among Sharers, even amongst those who might never have been there or had previously never considered going. This could be connected to residents having more contact with communities outside of theirs given that many had relocated to

land. It was also likely that more contact with authorities who were coming to their houseboats and dismantling them during the relocation efforts had made them feel like foreigners in their own home. Several had already tried to leave, but had been prevented.

"I had three siblings who lived in Vietnam and had a decent standard of living. They invited me to move there with them. I decided to go but when I got to the border it was still closed so I decided to return and stay here leaving all the boats behind. I desperately want to go to Vietnam. Take my husband to work for a company, earn money for our children, and stop living here. They discriminate against Vietnamese here and in some Khmer villages they treat us horribly."

-A 29-year-old mother of four who farms and fishes

8. Our lack of access to education impedes our opportunities and impedes our future.

My grandchildren are all ignorant... none of them go to school.

-A sixty year-old grandmother

Beyond mentioning that the lack of legal identity in Cambodia proved to be a barrier to send children to school along with access to other social services, Sharers went into more detail about how life without formal education affected them and their children. Since most Sharers and their children could not study in public schools, they often only learnt the basics and had little to no opportunity to study after becoming teenagers.

"My children never pursued higher education. They studied just to know how to read and calculate numbers but then dropped out of school because they have no legal documents and we don't have any money to support them."

-A 63-year-old man and father of two sons

For most of the ethnic Vietnamese children in the floating communities, they could only attend private schools, which were often make-shift gathering places on other houseboats with community members who provided tutoring or were funded by charity organisations.

"Moreover, the majority of the children attend school, but it isn't a standard school, rather, it's a small school run by literate Vietnamese people that continue to teach the youngsters. They must pay 1,000 riel (\$0.25 USD) per day. They only learn to read a little and then have to stop to support their families."

A 39-year-old father

The lack of education of the young people in floating communities was seen impacting the lives and futures of the residents. Several Sharers elaborated on what a life without formal education looked like as their children grew up.

"Among the children in the village, there are not many people pursuing higher education. They study just to learn how to read and then they quit school to find a job or go out fishing. For teenage girls, like 17 to 18 years old, they have to get married and go fishing with their husbands."

-A 60-year-old grandfather

Despite the hardships, some Sharers discussed how at least in the current generation, their children could have some access to the most basic education but the end result was still a highly uneducated community that struggled to find jobs and improve their livelihoods.

"Hardly any children attend school, instead, they could speak but are illiterate. There are no other options for employment outside fishing because they require people to have ID cards and be literate. The current generation is a bit luckier than before since there are some teachers who come to teach them Khmer, Vietnamese, and English, and the children go to school when they start speaking. However, because they can't attend high school, they only learn how to read and understand, and as a result, they stop studying. There is no higher class for them to continue learning. There isn't any hope, live one day, think one day, nothing to think about, 30-40 years as before. The next generation, as well as the future, they are still the same, nothing better."

-A 66-year-old mother of eight and a grandmother of many

POST-FLD SITUATION

During the FLD fieldwork, most ethnic Vietnamese communities living on or along the Tonle Sap were in a state of flux. Some were trying to hold out on the river, others were in the process of relocating to land. Many also were trying to cross into Vietnam but were mostly held at the border and unable to go.

Nearly four months after the FLD fieldwork, two of the Listeners returned to Kampong Chhnang in June 2022 and reconnected with several of the Sharers they had engaged with during FLD. Below is a summary of that visit in the words of the Listeners.

From our revisit to the communities, we heard from some people we met that hundreds of families have gone to Vietnam since the opening of the Cambodia-Vietnam border. We observed the communities were much more quiet than during the time we did our FLD field trips in February 2022. This state reflects what we heard from many of Sharers in our initial work about their desire and intention to move to Vietnam to escape from the local authorities, even though such a move was full of uncertainty. This last time we were there, community members told us that just one month before the local police came around again to remove their roofs and even urged many families to leave for Vietnam. Even our main contact family who had connected us with so many Sharers in our initial fieldwork had left, causing us to seek out new contacts to continue engaging with residents who were still in Kampong Chhnang. In addition, although we couldn't get a specific number, we heard that from the people who had left the water to live on land in the area, some had returned to the water after being unable to afford monthly rental fees and other utility expenses.

