

Understanding Public Perceptions of Climate Change in Cambodia: Research Briefing

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About the study

Experience around the world has shown that raising public awareness of climate change poses urgent challenges. None more urgent than in a country like Cambodia, where more than 80% of the population depends on subsistence agriculture and people are especially vulnerable to changing climatic conditions. With this in mind, the Cambodian Ministry of Environment commissioned the BBC World Service Trust to explore public perceptions of climate change and to provide recommendations to inform future communication and information initiatives.

In 2010, the BBC World Service Trust's Research and Learning Group conducted research in all 24 provinces to explore public perceptions of climate change. The study consisted of a nationally representative survey of 2401 Cambodians, including people from farming and fishing communities, teachers and businesspeople, housewives and government employees. In-depth interviews were undertaken with 101 key informants from media, industry, national and provincial governments, celebrities, and local leaders, including commune council leaders, village chiefs, village elders, and religious leaders.

Despite Cambodia's vulnerability to the impacts of climate change, the research reveals that understanding of its causes and impacts is limited among the Cambodian public. The study makes recommendations that will support a range of stakeholders to provide appropriate information and resources to help people understand and respond effectively to their changing climate.

Key findings

Cambodians say that their weather and environment are changing and that they are feeling the effects. They report that extreme weather events, particularly drought, are more frequent and more intense than they once were, and that temperatures have increased. Almost all respondents experienced at least one extreme weather event in the previous year and yet more than a third did not receive any information about this event. Three-quarters of those who did receive information received it during the event or after it had taken place.

Across Cambodia, most respondents say they have heard of 'climate change' (84%) or 'global warming' (70%). Most say they have heard these terms in broadcast media or through word-of-mouth. They link the

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Commune council leader



Cambodia's largely agrarian economy makes it especially vulnerable to the impact of climate change

UNDP/RANTXA CEDILLO 2010

terms to their own observations of change: most associate the term 'climate change' with disease, farming difficulties, drought, increasing temperatures, decreased yields and water shortages. Almost all say their work is affected by the changing weather, and most lack the water they need for their work. As one provincial governor explains: "Normally, we have more than enough water in July... But now, based on what we have seen...we can tell that very few farms have transplanted their rice. Some of them have transplanted on to dry soil. We do not have enough water. So people cannot do agriculture. We get diseases... It makes us sick. These impacts have brought people to poverty."

Only a few connect the weather changes they have experienced to pollution from industry or vehicle use. Many key informants, particularly those at local levels, are perplexed by the topic of climate change, as illustrated by one village chief: "It gets too hot when the temperature of the earth increases. I think it will cause the earth to become thinner and thinner and then explode. I am not so clear about it."

Instead of connecting climate change to global greenhouse gas emissions, most respondents explain changes in weather with reference to deforestation in Cambodia. Two-thirds (67%) think deforestation

in the country causes the weather patterns to change. Deforestation is also a concern for key informants, for whom trees are understood to play a role in bringing rain, maintaining groundwater supplies, and guarding against storms and flooding.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research employed both qualitative and quantitative methods.

In-depth interviews were conducted in person with 101 representatives from media, industry, national and provincial governments, celebrities, and local leaders, including commune council chiefs, village chiefs, village elders, and religious leaders. Written transcripts of all interviews were produced. Atlas.ti software was used to code these transcripts and to analyse key themes that emerged from the qualitative data.

A quantitative household-based cross-sectional survey questionnaire was used to gather the views of 2401 members of the public from all 24 provinces of Cambodia. Survey respondents were aged 15 – 55 and many were people with livelihoods that are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. A probability proportional to size method was used to select all villages/wards represented in the survey and all respondents were randomly selected.

Quantitative data was analysed using SPSS software. Analytical techniques employed descriptive and bivariate statistics to describe and compare differences between subgroups of the sample across a number of key measures of knowledge, attitudes and practices regarding climate change.

More detail on the methodology is included in the full report:

www.camclimate.org.kh



People are uncertain whether the changes they have experienced will continue to affect them long-term. Among the 84% who know the term 'climate change', there is universal agreement that climate change is affecting their country now. Although three-quarters (75%) also think that climate change will affect Cambodia in the future, more than one-fifth (22%) say that they do not know whether Cambodia will feel the impacts of climate change in the future.

A widespread lack of understanding of the terms used to describe global climate change may go some way to explaining the lack of awareness of its long-term effects. The term 'climate change' is translated in Khmer as 'Kar PreProul Akas Theat'.

The terms 'climate' and 'weather' ('akas theat' and 'theat akas' in Khmer) are very similar. Therefore, the term 'climate change' (Kar PreProul Akas Theat') can be

understood as 'weather changes' (Kar PreProul Theat Akas') This is important, given that 'weather changes' suggests short-term changes in the weather; whereas 'climate change' conveys changes in weather patterns over a longer period of time.

This uncertainty will have implications for the coping strategies that people devise to address the impacts of weather changes on their lives and livelihoods. Many key informants indicate that the most vulnerable rural communities will need support to devise appropriate long-term strategies.

“We do not have enough water. People cannot do agriculture. These impacts have brought people to poverty.”

Provincial governor

A quarter of respondents say they do not know how they can respond to the changing weather. Current and suggested responses tend to be short-term measures. More than half think they are currently unable to respond to weather changes (59%) and say they do not have the information they need to respond (52%). The three most important barriers they identify are a lack of money, lack of tools and a lack of information.

The findings from the qualitative and quantitative research indicate that greater numbers of women, rural Cambodians, poorer people and those with the least education lack the information they need to respond. The comments of village chiefs and commune council leaders are especially illustrative of these findings. For them, information could be the most important resource. As one commune council leader says: "I do not know what resources I need because I do not understand about [climate change]. I think the best [resource] is knowledge."

The dissemination of timely, relevant information will be central to enabling Cambodians to respond to global climate change. Cambodians look to the government, the Prime Minister, and NGOs to lead the response. Yet a current lack of awareness among the public of any individual or organisation working to respond to the problem suggests they do not know of existing national and local programmes to respond to climate change.

Therefore many Cambodians are making decisions about how they respond without receiving information or support from any source outside their immediate communities. The comments of key informants suggest that those best placed to inform their communities about the issue – village chiefs, commune council leaders, and religious figures – are not as well informed about the issue as those in national government.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Recognise that climate change is complex and the terminology used to describe it is little understood. Keep messages simple and consistent to avoid exacerbating confusion among local leaders and the general public.
- Explain that climate change brings long-term effects and centre climate change communication on practical solutions that correspond to the experiences of Cambodian people.
- Design communications on climate change around the information sources that most Cambodians use and trust: TV, radio and word-of-mouth. Use mobile phones to extend the reach of word-of-mouth communication.
- Address gaps in current disaster preparedness and disaster response strategies within a national climate change communications strategy. Decrease the number of people receiving no information on extreme weather events, and increase the number of people receiving information before such events occur.
- Provide practical support to communities as they respond to their changing weather by improving public communication on science. Model the application of basic scientific knowledge to improve agriculture, health, water management and disaster mitigation practices.
- Build public understanding of global climate change upon the experiences of Cambodian people. Use a range of media and outreach formats to encourage Cambodians to apply their experiential and growing scientific knowledge. Develop and showcase innovations and technologies from Cambodia and elsewhere in the world.

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BBC World Service Trust, Bush House, Strand, London WC2B 4PH, UK
Tel +44 (0) 20 7557 2462 Fax +44 (0) 20 7397 1622 Email ws.trust@bbc.co.uk
Web bbcworldservicetrust.org Registered charity number: 1076235



Ministry of Environment,
Climate Change Department