
Effects of Chinese investments in Sihanoukville on the local community

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Abstract: *The coastal city of Sihanoukville in Cambodia is undergoing rapid change caused by massive Chinese industrial and real estate investments. How these recent developments are affecting the local Cambodians has not been studied so far. Therefore, the research closes this gap. Chinese immigration to Sihanoukville has increased massively since many Chinese companies mainly employ Chinese workers, while also the influx of Chinese tourists has risen.*

Locals often do not profit from the investments. Rents and property prices are exploding, leading to evictions, the closing down of local shops, leading to an economic domination by Chinese businesses. Although there are more work opportunities than before, high-skilled jobs are often for Chinese only, while locals mainly get employed in the lower segments. There are cases of human right violations and labor exploitation, especially in the Sihanoukville SEZ. This fosters resentments towards the Chinese, crime rates are increasing, and the urban infrastructure is overburdened, leading to severe environmental problems and related health issues. Especially the poor in the city feel excluded, as they often do not benefit from the investments. Economic interests in Sihanoukville pursued both by the Chinese state and private investors prevail over the interests of the citizens. These issues are currently not adequately addressed by the city government, which often does not implement existing laws.

However, if the Cambodian government will change its current course, ensuring a stricter compliance with the laws and putting the wellbeing of the population above other interests, the long-term effects of the current transformation can be positive and improve the livelihoods especially of the poor.

1. Introduction

Sihanoukville, a coastal city in Cambodia, is one of the country's main tourist destinations. It is situated in the province Preah Sihanouk, with a total population of approximately 286,000.

The cityscape changed a lot during the last three years, mainly through massive investments by large Chinese companies, some of which are state-owned, in real estate and industry. The transformation becomes clear as soon as one enters Sihanoukville. A large number of Chinese signs can be seen everywhere, and construction sites are spread all over the city. Apart from hotels and condos, a large number of casinos have been built in the last three years, targeted to Chinese tourists and Chinese residents of Sihanoukville, which is now even called the 'New Macao' by the media. With 88 registered casinos in January 2019, Sihanoukville has in fact already more than the double number of casinos operating than Macao (41) ("Gambling," 2019; Kimsay, 2019).

But the changes are not only apparent in the sheer number of construction sites and high-rise buildings. Chinese enterprises are active in all parts of the economy in Sihanoukville. Chinese street

food vendors, restaurant chains, scooter rentals, barbers, pawnshops and massage parlors can be seen everywhere in the city, crowding out the local businesses.

This is changing the life for everyone living in the city.

While a few local landowners have made big profits and workers have found at least temporary jobs on the construction sites, others find it harder to survive and have in some cases no other choice but to move out of the city. Some of them must leave because they cannot afford the increasing rents, others are evicted to make room for new construction projects, also before the background of severe land title problems in Cambodia.

The rapid changes not only have economic consequences on the lives of the locals, but they also manifest themselves in environmental and socio-cultural terms. Crime rates are rising, mainly due to Chinese not respecting the rule of law, leading to a feeling of insecurity among the locals. Environmental problems are on the rise, since the existing infrastructure was not designed for the needs of the rapidly growing population.

These effects lead to anti-Chinese sentiments and the feeling of alienation among the Cambodians and cause conflicts between both groups.

The Chinese investments go hand in hand with massive and rapid changes in the landscape of the city, the immigration of a substantial number of Chinese and their growing economic power and influence in Sihanoukville – all with the explicit and often enough with the implicit approval by the Cambodian government. The nature of these effects and their impact on the local community have not yet been analyzed and measured against the situation before the Chinese invested in the city. Therefore, this paper is part of the first research examining the impacts of these investments on the local community in Sihanoukville.

2. Effects of the Chinese investments on the locals

2.1 Employment

The Chinese investments clearly created new job opportunities in Sihanoukville, mainly on the construction sites for the new real estate and infrastructure projects. The Sihanoukville SEZ will also bring new employment opportunities. More than 20,000 jobs were created since 2008. The aim is to generate 80,000-100,000 jobs in total in the second development phase, which is said to start soon (Kha, 2019).

According to a manager of M'Lop Tapang, a local NGO, these job opportunities attract many people from rural areas to the city: "What we're seeing, is (...) a large number of families who come to work at construction sites. And because you might now when you drive around you see, it's entire families. Parents come to work there and bring their children. However, jobs in the construction sector will decline once the building boom is over. But then, at this point in the

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development of the city, it is likely that there will be more well-paid and mid- to high-skilled jobs than today.”

In principle, local Cambodians in tourist areas can find new jobs in restaurants and guesthouses or they can open food stalls or offer other services when tourism is increasing. As a consequence, they could earn a more stable and rising income.

This effect could have been expected in Sihanoukville with the massive rise of Chinese tourists and migrant workers. But this did not happen. Most Chinese people eat in Chinese restaurants, where Chinese people are working. Locals are employed only in a few cases. At the same time, many local restaurants had to close because they could no longer afford the exploding rents: “A lot of small shop owners had closed, like street food sellers. Many were just been taking over by Chinese restaurants, or Chinese companies who just bought the land where people used to sell their food”.

Therefore, locals in the gastronomy are put at a double disadvantage. They do not profit from the new jobs because these go to the Chinese, and they even lose their existing jobs because rents are too high and also because their traditional clients – locals and Western tourists – no longer see Sihanoukville as an attractive holiday destination due to the dominant Chinese influence and now prefer other places in Cambodia.

The same happens in the small shops and at the markets where the buyers are mainly locals, but not Chinese. According to a market seller in an interview, “People at the market who sell vegetables and meat have a hard life now. They don’t earn enough”. The Chinese people in Sihanoukville buy Chinese goods imported from China in shops run by Chinese. Many shops do not stock a single local product.

Many interviewed locals agree that indeed there are new employment opportunities and they expect more in the future (Appendix). However, as will be explained in the following, many new jobs are not available to the local population at all, as they will require new skills, such as at least a basic knowledge of the Chinese language. The interviews with beach vendors showed that they generally earn less money now. Contrary to other interviewees, informal beach vendors had a pessimistic view on future employment opportunities related to the Chinese investments (Appendix). At the same time, Chinese employers pay higher wages to locals who get these jobs and thus profit from the Chinese investments. But a side-effect of the higher wages paid by the Chinese are rising prices in the city for basic products and services.

People who speak Chinese already today can earn higher wages than before (Appendix). Many locals therefore learn Chinese now. However, not everyone can afford a language course. On a billboard in Sihanoukville, Chinese translators are offered between 700 US\$ and 1,200 US\$ per

month, while a garment factory worker earns a minimum monthly wage of 170 US\$ and a civil servant 250US\$ (Faulder & Kawase, 2018).

New employment opportunities are not equal.

In general, Chinese people have better chances to get a job in the upper segment than Cambodians. Some Chinese companies do not employ Cambodians at all, and many hotels employ Cambodians only in menial jobs. For example, a Cambodian working for a Chinese-owned five-star hotel says: “There are many Cambodians working here as well as Chinese. The high-level positions are mostly taken by Chinese people and rarely by Cambodians. They tend to give the privilege to their own race instead of choosing a local for a manager position unless they have to”. In the Sihanoukville SEZ, almost all laborers are Cambodians, while the vast majority of the managers is Chinese (Franceschini, 2019, p. 85).

The same can be seen on the construction sites around the city: “Since most projects in the province are financed and developed by the Chinese, high-skilled jobs are usually given to their nationals,” said Non Thim, a construction analyst in Sihanoukville (Wong, 2019).

The case of a Chinese state-owned company which does not employ locals due its internal rules, a common story for Chinese state-owned companies, according to William Callahan, expert on international relations with a focus on China. This shows a general unwillingness to employ locals. But there are also other reasons: Many Cambodians do not have the necessary skills for the qualified jobs, especially language skills (Wong, 2019). Another reason are differences or perceived differences in culture, so that Chinese tend to stick to their own people.

In general, perspectives are bad especially for low-skilled people who do not work on construction sites or in sewing factories, for instance beach vendors, market sellers, hairdressers or taxi drivers (Appendix). For example, a beach vendor selling sunglasses replies to the question if

he does business with Chinese tourists: “It’s very hard. They don’t speak English. I try to sell but they often don’t want to buy from me”.

In terms of employment, therefore, many poor people do not benefit from the investments, especially those working in informal tourist sectors. On the other hand, new jobs are being created, but mainly for low-skilled workers while higher positions are usually filled by Chinese.

1.2 Rising prices

Prices for all goods and services in the city are rising substantially. Land and rent prices in particular are skyrocketing. This mainly affects the poor in Sihanoukville. They can no longer afford to live in the city and move to other places (Appendix).

This is confirmed by the Minister of Tourism in Sihanoukville: “The inflation grows – the Chinese come and buy everything, and so all prices increase. The people who can get money from Chinese have no problems, but simple people get negative impacts from this Chinese development”.

The poor who still live in Sihanoukville mainly work on construction sites, where they live in a camp. Others live in slums where they do not have to pay rent. Many people moved outside of Sihanoukville, but still work in the city. Most of the poor, however, moved to more affordable places.

But not only the poor are affected. Many people with a middle-class income have to move as rental prices are the highest in Cambodia. According to several Chinese living in the city, they are higher than in Beijing (“A Chinese View on Sihanoukville,” 2019; Tostevin & Thul, 2017). This explains why also many Western expats cannot afford to pay the rent in Sihanoukville anymore (Howard, 2019, p. 21).

There are no official statistics on rental and land prices, but according to several newspaper articles, they have multiplied (Kosal, 2018; Pisei, 2018b, 2019).

A glaring example for this development is the local NGO M’Lop Tapang. The NGO had rented an office space for 500 US\$ a month. Now they are asked to pay 5,000 US\$, which they obviously cannot afford. This is a problem for other NGOs as well: “We are lucky that we own the land of the main office, a lot smaller NGOs that did not own land are not working in Sihanoukville anymore”.

While many of the old inhabitants have moved away from the city, the city continues to expand and to grow because the Chinese immigrants can afford the high prices. Yun Min, the governor of Sihanoukville, estimates that half of the property in the city is rent by Chinese (Tostevin & Thul, 2017).

2.3 Other findings related to economic changes

In general, wage levels have risen, and poverty has declined in Sihanoukville. The latter, however, might also have to do with the fact that many poor people have left the city (Pisei, 2018a).

It can therefore be said that the changes brought about by the Chinese investments in Sihanoukville have shifted at least some poverty to other regions.

The rising wage levels are also related to the general growth of the Cambodian economy. Cambodia's economy has recorded an average annual growth of 7 percent over the last two decades. Due to this successful development, the country is no longer a low-income but a lower-middle income country. On a national basis, the GDP per capita raised from below 500 US\$ in the early 2000s to 1,384 US\$ in 2017 ("World Bank: GDP per capita," n.d.). In Sihanoukville, the GDP per capita in Sihanoukville was over 2,000 US\$ in 2017 – the highest in Cambodia (Cheng, 2019, p. 8). More recent statistics are not available, but it can be assumed that the figures have further increased.

In the local population, the big winners in economic terms are Cambodians who own land or property, due to the exploding real estate market. Many locals do have new jobs, mainly low-skilled ones in the construction sector and in the Sihanoukville SEZ, but the real economic benefits resulting from the Chinese investments are confined to the Chinese community.

2.4 Responsibility of the Chinese businesses towards the workers and the local community

While the new jobs in the Sihanoukville SEZ and in other parts of Sihanoukville are most welcome, they also have aspects on the bad side. These are related to the treatment of local workers and the disregard of laws in the Sihanoukville SEZ. Although Cambodia officially allows labor union pluralism, no labor unions are active in the Sihanoukville SEZ. At the same time, factory workers in the zone are disempowered and exploited and would urgently need organizations protecting their rights. If they make attempts to organize unions or express discontent, they get blacklisted, and their photos and other personal details are circulated among the factories in the SSEZ. Usually, workers get hired on short-term contracts for three to six months only (Franceschini, 2019).

The Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) found out that there were Human Right violations. Workers were forced to work overtime for longer times than allowed by law. Wages were deducted by 20-30 US\$ if workers were absent for a day without a medical certificate or an unauthorized leave of absence. The CCHR cites restrictions on the freedom of expression, of assembly and of association. Workers who established unions and associations, or tried to, got fired (Cambodian Center for Independent Media, 2018).

On the construction sites, the living conditions are often below acceptable standards. Often workers bring their families to live on the construction sites, although sanitation and other utilities are hardly existing there. Their children have no access to education. The fact that many young people seek work on the construction sites has led to the rise of drop-out rates from school.

The construction sites and the constructions themselves are often dangerous places. The World Bank called Sihanoukville in a report of 2018 a city of "uncontrolled real estate development". The construction permits are granted on a case-by-case basis, often known as 'built first, license later', while the granting of permits and control of construction is beyond the authority of individual provincial departments and municipalities (World Bank Group, 2018, pp. 40–41). This lack of

control leads to dangerous and sometimes life-threatening construction sites. In June 2019, a building collapsed, leaving 28 people death, and 26 injured (Narim, 2019).

Dangerous construction sites and low-quality buildings are frequently discussed in the expat community of the city, as even high-rise buildings are often built without a proper foundation. Some buildings are even built on sand.

However, there are also examples of how Chinese companies try to assume responsibility for the local workers and to share some benefits of their investments. As mainly low-skilled and female workers are employed in the Sihanoukville SEZ, this can be seen as a contribution to the goals of social and economic inclusion. Free vocational training for technical skills for workers and students from the area is provided in a vocational training center funded by the Chinese government. The 'Cambodia-China Friendship Polytechnic Institute' has been training more than 700 students since its opening in 2018 in fields like accounting, tourism and computing ("Jiangsu promotes joint venture development in Cambodia," 2019; Kha, 2019).

2.5 Crime

With the new Chinese influence, crime incidents and violence have become more common. From 2017 to 2018, the crime rate increased by 25 percent in Sihanoukville, according to official statistics (Kimmarita, 2019).

Of all foreigners, Chinese nationals are the most criminally active in Cambodia. 241 out of 341 foreigners who were detained in the first quarter of 2019 were Chinese (Nachemson & Meta, 2019).

The Chinese in Sihanoukville often show disrespect for the local culture and the rule of law, knowing that law enforcement is ineffective, and fines can easily be avoided by bribing the officials. Against this background, gun shootings, violent attacks and drunken driving have increased, creating a general atmosphere of insecurity among the locals.

In January 2018, Yun Min, the governor of Sihanoukville, wrote a letter to the interior minister, complaining about the situation: "It provides the chance for Chinese who are part of the mafia to do criminal [activities] and kidnap the Chinese investors and create an insecure environment in the province" (M. Dara, Aless, & Sassoon, 2018).

The Chinese Embassy offered its help to get the situation under control, but also pleads for enhanced law enforcement (Suy, 2018; Vireak, 2019).

Less visible to the locals, but not of a lesser criminal nature are the money laundering activities by the Chinese, which is one of the main issues in Sihanoukville, especially in the real estate and

the unregulated gambling sector. Here again, laws and regulations are either lacking completely or they are not enforced.

2.6 Environmental and health issues

Since the construction boom in Sihanoukville started and the population in Sihanoukville increased in the wake of the substantial immigration of Chinese, several environment and health issues have developed or worsened. The problems concern the inadequacy of urban infrastructure, pollution by industrial and construction activities, and threats to the health of the citizens.

Waste Disposal

Sihanoukville has had a waste disposal problem for many years. This got worse with the rapid growth of the city during the last three years (Meta & Amaro, 2017).

Besides citizens disposing of their waste illegally, also many construction sites get rid of their waste illegally, dumping it on places not prepared for this purpose. Others simply burn it, considering the costs for the waste disposal company as too high. The generally low environmental and sustainability standards on the construction sites also contribute to negligence and carelessness when it comes to waste disposal.

Due to the rapid growth in the city, the sheer amount of waste is increasing, too. The waste management systems are not designed for these volumes. Therefore, the garbage disposal company extends the intervals between the picking up of trash.

This has health-related consequences. David Shoemaker, who works for the NGO M'Lop Tapang says: "We're also seeing a lot of new health problems now. Many kids are coming to us with skin infections. Our doctors and nurses have always worked with diseases caused by living in poverty, like malnutrition. But now we're seeing a lot more things related to pollution, dirt and so on".

This problem could be solved if the government ensured the compliance with the contracts concluded with the garbage disposal company. Construction sites and other places where waste gets disposed illegally should be monitored more closely, and basic rules should be enforced.

Sewage and drainage systems

The World Bank indicated in a report from 2018 that Sihanoukville is highly vulnerable to floods and needs urgent improvements in drainage and flood protection (World Bank Group, 2018, p. 33).

Currently, the existing systems are not effective enough. In addition, wastewater from some hotels and casinos is flowing without treatment into the sea, causing environmental and health problems (Sotheary, 2019). In fact, several big hotels which opened only recently are accused of introducing their sewage water directly into the sea, amongst them Sokha hotel, Xihu hotel and

Sunshine Bay hotel (“Alarming: video shows Sihanoukville’s Independence Beach awash with sewage,” 2019; Sotheary, 2019).

Seawater which was tested at Occheutal beach included *E. coli*, *trichomonas intestinalis*, trophozoite and ammonia, originating from human feces and urine. This can lead to diseases like diarrhea, vomiting and stomachache. Some of these pollutants may even be lethal.

Another environmental issue relates to the drainage systems in Sihanoukville. Rice fields and other natural drainage areas are more and more often replaced by roads and buildings. This makes the city more vulnerable to floods. David Shoemaker from the NGO M’Lop Tapang said that floods increased in 2018 due to the construction activities, and they expect even more severe problems in the city in 2019.

It is likely that most negative impacts regarding sewage and wastewater treatments are temporary, as systems are modernized and expanded. However, the flood problem could become a serious issue, as there is no comprehensive urban plan addressing this problem, and existing urban planning concepts such as the ‘Sihanoukville Master Plan’ are not implemented.

Chinese investments in Sihanoukville therefore come at a cost for the environment and for the health of the citizens. The situation might improve in the future when the construction projects have been finished and higher environmental standards in general have been established. However, the government should take immediate steps to protect the environment and the people.

2.7 Socio-cultural identity

The speed of the development in Sihanoukville is overwhelming for many locals. They observe the changes in their immediate surroundings without being able to influence them. While they may appreciate the advantages of development and growth in theory, the majority of the locals only experience the disadvantages in their everyday life.

At the same time, they see that a small group of their Cambodian countrymen – landowners, wealthy businesspeople and the political elite – is profiting enormously from the new opportunities and maintains excellent contacts to Chinese businesspeople. This further aggravates the feeling of being excluded and put at a disadvantage. It promotes division and hostility and a feeling of alienation in their own society. Grudgingly, they say, who has the money has the power.

And the money comes mainly from the Chinese. The Chinese now stand for approximately 30 percent of the population of Sihanoukville. They have changed the city landscape completely, putting their Chinese stamp everywhere. They are not interested in the Khmer culture and language,

in mingling with the locals or in learning their values and their habits. They keep to their own community and do not initiate contacts with the locals except if there is a business need behind.

They often show disrespect for the rule of law.

A good example of this is the case of the Jinding Hotel and Casino at Koh Rong Samloem in Sihanoukville province which shows how some Chinese immigrants ignore laws and authorities:

The casino was built illegally on a public beach, had no authorization from relevant authorities, used an expired gaming license, promoted illegal online gaming, played music too loud and harassed local residents. On one occasion, the casino's security chief had fired gunshots into the air (Finney, 2019; Mother Nature Cambodia, 2019).

After an activist group drew attention to the grievances, and newspapers reported on the issues, the provincial administration ordered the hotel to close on the 22nd of March, but it continued to operate. Then, the provincial hall sent a letter to the provincial police headquarter on the first of April, asking them to ensure that the hotel closes, but the police ignored the instruction (Savi, 2019).

Not surprisingly, incidents like these create hostility and anti-Chinese sentiments. Many locals fear they could lose their cultural identity – of which they are proud - and be forced to adapt to the way the Chinese dominate their city. This is especially visible in the use of Chinese language and disrespect of the Khmer language. By law, the Chinese are obliged to put up their signboards, business signs and banners both in Chinese and in Khmer. However, they are very careless in doing this – if they do it all. In Sihanoukville, at least 391 banners with mistakes in the Khmer translation were removed by the authorities alone in 2019 so far (V. Dara, 2019).

Where this clash of cultures and divisive tendencies in society will finally lead to cannot be said yet. However, hostility, fear and suspicion towards other ethnical groups and divisions within societies have never in history led to a beneficial co-existence.

3. Conclusion

The rapid transformation of Sihanoukville during the recent years has strong effects on the lives of the locals, both positive and negative.

In economic terms, the biggest changes have occurred and will continue to occur in terms of employment. In general, there are a lot more work opportunities, compared to the time before the large-scale Chinese investments started, and the jobs are better paid than comparable jobs in local companies.

Most of the new jobs for locals are low-skilled positions at construction sites and in the Sihanoukville SEZ, bringing thousands of rural people in search for a better life to Sihanoukville.

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In contrast to Cambodian companies, the Chinese companies very often provide accommodation to their workers.

However, if the economic situation of the local population is seen as a whole, it is only the small group of land and property owners in Sihanoukville who really profited, due to the exploding real estate market. The majority do not benefit to a degree proportionate to the enormous investments in the city.

Still, altogether at least the economic impacts of the investments are rather positive for the locals, creating more jobs, increasing the local GDP and tax collections and reducing poverty. The latter effect, however, might also result from the fact that many poor people no longer can afford the prices in the city and have to leave.

Speaking of the negative effects, two major problems in terms of employment are apparent. First, many Chinese companies refuse to employ Cambodian nationals, either because of a general unwillingness, or because there are political reasons behind it in the case of state-owned companies, or because of cultural differences.

The second problem is education. There are not enough well trained and qualified Cambodians who are fit for higher positions, and – even more important – many Chinese companies require Chinese language skills. While many locals in Sihanoukville are currently learning Chinese, too few have acquired the necessary competencies yet.

Worst affected by the changes are locals working in the informal tourist sector, for example beach vendors or food stall owners. While Chinese tourists do not buy from them because of the language barrier and because they prefer vendors from their own community, the number of Western tourists, who traditionally were good clients, has steadily declined in the past few years. Combined with the rising costs of living in Sihanoukville, they are facing severe problems now, and many of them have already left the city.

Rising prices are the main problem affecting the locals in Sihanoukville. They are directly resulting from the Chinese investments and the presence of the Chinese community. Especially the rents, higher than in Beijing now, are driving locals out of the city. This is even acknowledged by the local Minister of Tourism. A side-effect of the increasing rents is that many NGOs can no longer afford to remain in the city and support the needy population, making the poor even more vulnerable.

Cambodians see how much money is flowing into the city and how wealthy many Chinese are, while they themselves are not much better off than before, or even worse in some cases. Many Cambodians fear that the Chinese will take over the whole domestic economy.

The case of Chinese companies in the Sihanoukville SEZ, where Cambodian laborers are put under great pressure and are not allowed to establish labor unions shows two things: First, the mindset of many Chinese companies who are not interested in good working conditions but only in their profits, and second the unwillingness of the Cambodian government to enforce the law and

protect its citizens. But economic growth at the expense of the rights and the wellbeing of Cambodia's own population is not a sustainable path.

The rising crime rates in Sihanoukville since the arrival of the Chinese also show that the current way of development has problematic aspects. Crimes have increased because of the many new casinos which attract a more criminal-prone clientele, such as Chinese laundering their money. Also, the Chinese in Sihanoukville often simply do not respect the law – knowing it will not be enforced anyway – and they in general show no interest in the local rules and values. This leads to a rising feeling of insecurity among the local Cambodians and resentments against the Chinese community in general.

The majority of environmental problems and associated health risks, both related to construction sites and the general growth of the city, could be of a temporary nature - provided the government really commits itself to implement sustainable solutions serving the interests of the population.

Many problems like these and others could be solved if only the existing laws and standards were enforced. As long as this does not happen, there is a big risk that the gap between the Cambodian and the Chinese communities widens further. The locals see that their culture, their values and their laws are disrespected, and the Chinese influence dominates their city more and more. Combined with the economic inequalities between the two groups, this increases the risk of further deteriorating relations and the rise of conflicts. The alienation between the two communities is already obvious and might pose a threat to the future development of the city.

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