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Food security and food sovereignty in Cambodia 1979-1989.

Jenny Leigh Smith

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Abstract

In 1979 Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea (modern day Cambodia) was overthrown by its neighboring communist rival, the Republic of Vietnam, who established the People's Republic of Kampuchea of One of Vietnam's first acts of occupation was to appeal to the international community for food aid to alleviate acute hunger and malnutrition, the result of years of devastating agricultural policies at the hands of the Khmer Rouge. The international response to the famine was tentative, but ultimately one charity, Oxfam, stepped forward to provide hunger assistance to the country. Oxfam left a significant and mixed legacy on the country in terms of both reliance on international aid and the relationship between the Cambodian government and aid agencies.

This paper makes three interrelated arguments. First, the aid that arrived in Cambodia in 1979 and 1980 was distributed in ways that were impossible to track, upsetting donors, and making Oxfam reluctant to expand its in-country operations. Secondly, the PRK government consistently privileged institutions, urban residents, and settled, productive farmers above other social groups, These choices affected agricultural production, and food markets, encouraging black market trade and a continued reliance on charitable donations. It frustrated or delayed a return to normalcy for the estimated 1 million Cambodians who were internally displaced or who became international refugees between 1979-1985 and it had long-term negative implications for food security and food sovereignty in the PRK. Finally, while Cambodia exists at the very fringes of Middle-Income classification, its experiences balancing food security, food sovereignty and fostering a developing economy provide valuable lessons in the complexities and uncertainties that surround humanitarian assistance in rapidly developing countries, and the virtues and pitfalls of accountability in such situations.

1. Introduction

Contemporary Cambodia has had an eventful and traumatic recent history. This history casts a long shadow over the challenges the country faces today, especially in the realm of government and civil society. This chapter focuses on the history of Cambodia during some of its most difficult and formative years, 1975-1985. During this time two very different regimes ruled the country; first, between 1975-1979 as Democratic Kampuchea, a deadly and isolationist communist state led by the Khmer Rouge, and second, between 1979-1985, the Vietnamese and Soviet supported People's Republic of Kampuchea, led by Heng Samrin, in close consultation with the Vietnamese government and a cabinet of powerful ministers. Both governments experienced—and at times manufactured—large-scale social and political crises. The most serious of these crises in 1979, in the first months of Heng Samrin's leadership, were those facing the nation's food supply.

Most of this chapter focuses on the events of 1979 and 1980, when Samrin's government was fighting for international legitimacy as well as domestic stability. Preventing famine and alleviating the devastating chronic malnutrition that had become widespread during the DK years was the first and most crucial challenge Samrin's government faced. In order to understand how most Cambodians came to be underweight, malnourished and suffering from potentially deadly infectious diseases in 1979, I first provide an overview of the state of food, agriculture, and governmental health policies during the Khmer Rouge years. I then discuss the evolving policies of the early PRK government, specifically their policies related to the largest Western charity they dealt with in this year; Oxfam. By 1981, the acute crisis of hunger and malnutrition had passed; and government officials as well as outside observers assumed that, in spite of the continued Vietnamese occupation, the PRK was on a path to independence, development, and stability. Yet there remained significant and telling indications that all was not well in the PRK, and that food insecurity might continue to plague the country. Indeed, just one year before Vietnam ended its decade-long occupation of the country, the PRK experienced another near-famine when harvests failed during the winter of 1988, and a massive influx of outside aid was necessary to prevent deaths from starvation. These vulnerabilities in the food supply that were exposed so sharply in the 1980s remain to the present day.

Indeed, it is not just the resource of food that is vulnerable because of the present administration's insistence on centralized control; almost every aspect of governance that might fall under the heading of resource management, from fisheries management to land redistribution to the creation of hydroelectric dams along the Mekong River falls under this threat. In their 1992 book *Hunger and Public Action*, the economists Amrtya Sen and Jean Dreze claim that ensuring food security for a population and preventing famine are a crucial test case of effective governance. Dreze and Sen focus on the ability of a government to expand the *capability* of its population. Here the term capability is used to mean the ability of the population to remain alive, healthy and productive. Although Sen and Dreze are both experts in famine prevention and anti-hunger policy, *Hunger and Public Action* makes a broader argument about human well-being, focused not just on access to food and clean water, but also medical care, sanitation, and a safe, healthy environment (Sen and Dreze 1992). They argue that governments have the responsibility to foster both public and private initiatives that expand citizen *capability*. Their arguments about the responsibilities of the state versus private organizations are nuanced, but they can be summarized as following: if the state cannot provide for basic entitlements that citizens need in order to shore up and expand their own capabilities, the state then has the obligation to allow charities, international organizations and and for-profit institutions the opportunity to provide for these basic rights.

Since colonial independence, Cambodia's access to resources that will expand human capability have been in doubt. This is true in spite of the fact Cambodia has survived several brutal forms of governance during these years. It is also true in spite of the fact modern-day Cambodia has had a relatively stable communist authoritarian leader in place since 1989. The Khmer Rouge regime, in power from 1975-1979 was certainly the most deadly time, but this does not exonerate the present regime for failing to provide for the populations' capabilities. Many of the challenges and uncertainties present-day Cambodia faces are part of a much longer legacy of rule that began in 1979,

with the founding of the People's Republic of Kampuchea. The ministers and other officials (almost all of them former Khmer Rouge fighters) who found themselves in power in 1979 did not initially set out to create a governance model that diminished and threatened the capabilities of their population, yet over a fairly brief amount f time this is exactly what happened. This paper explores the first years of governance in the PRK, and shows that many of the challenges the country deals with today had their roots in the rapid-fire and reactive pattern of decision making that was common during this period.

2. The Khmer Rouge Years

The lethal violence of the Khmer Rouge has been accounted for elsewhere; here I provide a very brief overview of the disastrous results their four years in power yielded, as they relate to food access and the nutrition levels of the population (Chandler 1998, Kiernan, Kiernan 1996, Short 2007, Pran 1999, Mertha 2014, Widyono 2008). After a bloody five-year civil war in postcolonial Cambodia, one faction of soldiers, the Khmer Rouge, won the support of Cambodia's crown prince Sihanouk, and after months of fighting managed to capture the tactically crucial capital city of Phnom Penh in April of 1975. With the capture of Phnom Penh, the Khmer Republic ended, and the country was renamed Democratic Kampuchea, or DK. The Khmer Rouge proclaimed a collective, anonymous group of military leaders, known simply as 'the brothers' as the DK's new government. By 1976 Pol Pot would emerge as their infamous and brutal leader, but for most of the time the DK existed, the outside world understood the country to be ruled by an anonymous brotherhood. As a ragged group of poorly trained soldiers, many of them still teenagers, the Khmer Rouge seemed like an unlikely group of victors and leaders. Yet within days it became clear appearances were deceiving. The Khmer Rouge's first orders were to evacuate all urban areas, Phnom Penh being the most significant. During the Civil War the capital city had become a collecting place for displaced persons. Built to support half a million residents, by 1975 the population had swelled to between 2-3 million residents. The majority of these people lived with relatives or in makeshift tent cities, and by 1975 food and medical supplies in the city had been critically low for months.

Phnom Penh at capture provides an opportunity to examine how the Khmer Rouge leadership addressed a major food crisis. In what would become a characteristic response, the Khmer Rouge used the humanitarian crisis to shore up its own power and weaken Cambodian civil society rather than as an opportunity to ease suffering and improve living conditions. If employing Sen and Dreze's metric of ensuring and expanding human capability, the Khmer Rouge failed at its first test. The 2-3 million residents of Phnom Penh represented over ¼ of the total population of the country in 1975; resettling so many impoverished people so rapidly had a significant negative impact on almost every community to which urban residents were sent, reducing access to food, disrupting work opportunities and creating housing shortages. The Khmer Rouge attempted to resolve some of these crises administratively, by abolishing private property and setting up communal dwellings based on labor brigades, but this did not alter the popular perception that quality of life and opportunity had suffered terribly as a result of the Khmer Rouge coming to power. While food supplies in the cities had been critically low during the Civil War period, evacuating the cities did nothing to alleviate food shortages, they simply created less visible and more complicated food shortages that the DK's primitive road and transport system were incapable of addressing.

Urban residents were resettled to different parts of the countryside, and upon resettlement were almost always classified as 'new people' a vague category the Khmer Rouge invented to denote urban, minority and/ or middle class citizens whose political loyalty to the new regime was suspect. While small corners of the countryside maintained a tentative normalcy, especially in the first years of the DKs existence, the majority of Cambodian citizens became more rather than less food insecure after Phnom Penh was vacated. Relocation was just the first act of community destabilization: in their first year in power the Khmer Rouge banned money, private property, commercial fishing, and gathering wild or roadside foods for personal consumption. All of these measures were intended to decrease independence and self-determination of citizens and increase their dependence on state institutions like

feeding kitchens for survival. In 1976 the regime further limited cooking by individual households by confiscating cooking pots, pans and utensils, and by opening feeding kitchens that were attached to collective work sites. These policies contributed to a dramatic increase in food insecurity, and created a permanent sense of emergency and crisis in the country, eliminating even the potential for Democratic Kampuchea to returns to a sense of normalcy. There are no accurate statistics on the rate of increase of malnutrition in these years, but memoirs and informal accounts estimate that malnutrition increased dramatically in 1975-1976, and a bad harvest in late 1976 further intensified shortages, with tens of thousands of citizens dying from outright starvation in both of these years in multiple locations around the country. The majority of the population that survived the Khmer Rouge's lethal regime spent at least one, and more commonly 2-3 years malnourished and suffering from concomitant diseases including

The Khmer Rouge spent nearly four years in power. Their most famous historical legacy remains the mass terror and violent deaths they inflicted on hundreds of thousands of Cambodian citizens, many of whom died violently in the infamous Tuol Sleng prison and the mass-grave killing fields at Choeung Ek and other sites. Yet up to half of Cambodians who lost their lives during these years were not killed by bullets or bayonets, but by chronic malnourishment and opportunistic diseases that accompanied malnutrition. The food shortages that affected Democratic Kampuchea during the rule of the Khmer Rouge are not associated with a particular site or date. In DK, the starvation deaths of the late 1970s are more accurately interpreted as a slowly unfolding act of mass slaughter and civil war.

3. 1979

The bloody rule of the Khmer Rouge ended with the invasion of Cambodia by Vietnamese troops in January, 1979. Occupying Vietnamese forces encountered a country in crisis; one they were ill equipped to aid. Within the first month of occupation the Vietnamese army documented through reports and photographs Cambodians who exhibited classic signs of acute malnourishment: marasmus and kwashiorkor (marasmus is extreme underweight, kwashiorkor is a protein deficiency associated with edema). Vietnamese forces also documented a growing and impoverished refugee population along Cambodia's border with Thailand. Although Vietnam had couched its invasion of Kampuchea in terms of a humanitarian intervention, it was not immediately prepared to supply the Cambodian population with the large-scale supplies of food, medical supplies the country so desperately needed.

Vietnam responded to critical food shortages it discovered in Cambodia (now renamed the People's Republic of Kampuchea, or PRK) in two ways, both of which were effective first steps, especially considering Vietnam's limited financial and material resources. The first was by rationing its own army's food and medical supplies so that some foods and supplies earmarked for the Vietnamese military, particularly rice, could be diverted to the Cambodian civilian population. Coming as it did during a time of relative domestic food scarcity, the Vietnamese military rationing program represented a significant sacrifice for the country, and indicates Vietnam's commitment to defeating the Khmer Rouge and safeguarding the Cambodian civilian population. The second form of aid Vietnam sought in the name of Cambodia was donations from its most powerful ally, the Soviet Union. Although it took a few months to be approved and arrive, by the summer of 1979 food aid forthcoming in the form of shipments of grain (corn grits, corn meal and rice, purchased by the Soviet Union from India and African suppliers). Donations from the USSR continued through mid-1980.

Late in the spring of 1979, Vietnam and the new government of the People's Republic of Kampuchea also made a wider international appeal. Due to a complicated web of Cold War alliances, the PRK was not recognized as a country by many nations, and many countries, including the United States and most of the Western Bloc, suspected Vietnam of exaggerating the crisis in the country in order to secure scarcely-needed humanitarian donations that would actually support Vietnam's occupation of the country. This widespread mistrust politicized and delayed donations from governments and large international bodies like the Red Cross. The United Nations was the most vital of these reluctant international bodies. Its UNHCR branch pledged to help Cambodian refugees who crossed the border

into Thailand. For much of the spring and summer of 1979, the small food allowance this group was given from UNHCR stores was the only food aid arriving in northern Cambodia, which was cut off from the shipping port in the South that the Soviet Union was using. THe UNHCR's policy directly contributed to a dramatic increase in the refugee population just over the Cambodian border in Thailand, which remained a humanitarian hotspot for years after the Khmer Rouge left power and served as a lifeline for some Khmer Rouge holdout groups.

One international charity, Oxfam, ultimately decided to ignore Cold War politics and commit to a Cambodian humanitarian campaign. This decision to engage with the PRK ultimately inspired the Cambodian government to evolve its own policies governing outside assistance. Oxfam's commitment to the People's Republic of Kampuchea was largely due to the work of Oxfam's Technical Officer for Asia, Jim Howard, who made a ten-day visit to the country in late August of 1979. His trip to Phnom Penh and the countryside surrounding the capital convinced him a nationwide famine was imminent and even likely. In his trip report he stated the situation in hospitals and orphanages in Phnom Penh was "as bad as anything I ever saw (in India)...Hospitals with little food, no medicines, no linen or dressings or soap, children with kwashiorkor so severe…for them and indeed for everyone, the first need is for food." (Howard, 1979 a) Howard's solicitous hosts were newly appointed ministry officials, in particular the Minister of Health, one of the few medical doctors to have survived the Khmer Rouge, and the Vice Minister of Foreign Affairs, Keo Preseth. Howard liked both of these officials and felt confident Oxfam and other charities would be welcome to collaborate with the government to meet the pressing needs of the people. In his report to Oxfam, Howard wrote " (I) felt we had become very close friends over the ten days in PP... they need our friendship badly and we must give it, sensitively, generously and humbly and it will be a most valuable aspect of our aid." (Howard 1979 a). Howard left convinced that in spite of ideological differences, the PRK was eager to work with Oxfam to bring food, medicine and other humanitarian supplies into the country.

While he was in Phnom Penh, Jim Howard stayed at a hotel called the Samrika, one of the only establishments in the country to offer both air conditioning and regular meal service (albeit only "rice, rice, rice and more rice") (Howard, 1979 a). At the Samrika, Howard became friendly with the journalist John Pilger, who was in the PRK to film a television documentary, *Year Zero*, about the experience of Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge. Based on his experience in the PRK, Pilger decided to shift his documentary to focus on the current plight of Cambodians, focusing on the food shortages and malnutrition he had witnessed throughout the country. Like Jim Howard, Pilger was convinced that food was the country's most pressing need, and that without outside aid, 1-2 million Cambodians would be facing starvation by early 1980, a statistic with little foundation but one that was repeated by Howard, Pilger, and many others throughout the fall of 1979 (Howard, 1979 b). Pilger and Howard agreed to stay in touch, and in late October, when the *Year Zero* documentary aired, its last frame gave the address of an Oxfam-monitored postal box where people could send donations for food aid (Black, 1992).

October of 1979 also marked a shift in the rapport between Oxfam and the Cambodian government. Oxfam gained more power and authority among other international charities and NGOS in an in-country meeting in early October when it agreed to coordinate and direct a consortium of eight separate charities who were interested in doing work in the RPK. However, after the consortium agreement was finalized, Oxfam's influence with the government of the PRK, specifically the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, headed by Hun Sen, and the Ministry of Commerce, under the direction of Taing Sarim, was sharply curtailed. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs moved to limit the influence and recognition Oxfam had throughout the country and limited the number of staff the consortium was allowed to have in the country to seven (four from Oxfam, three from other organizations), requiring them to remain in their rooms at the Samrika if they were not traveling under government escort. The Ministry of Commerce took charge of distributing and allocating donated food and other goods, tasks that had initially been delegated to the Ministry of Health. Perhaps not surprisingly after this change in oversight, some of the most valuable donations Oxfam brought in to the country: Land Rovers, Leyland cargo trucks and commercial-grade sewing machines, were retained by the Ministry of Commerce for its own enterprises rather than being distributed to the Ministry of Health and to

occupational training programs, as Oxfam had planned (Thompson, 1979 a). Simply the fact that, at the start of what was perceived to be a famine-relief operation, Oxfam had been encouraged by the government of the PRK to fund infrastructure development programs such as occupational training schools, textile workshops and light goods factories is evidence of the government's focus on economic development above humanitarian basic support.

At the end of 1979, Oxfam officials and other participants in the consortium were surprised and alarmed to discover that the donations of food and equipment they delivered to the country were largely untraceable. Oxfam-sponsored goods had been arriving in the by sea and air since August of 1979, and upon arrival they were subjected to a thorough documentation system before they entered the Ministry of Commerce's extensive warehouses. However, once they arrived at the warehouses, their fate was less certain. Marcus Thompson, Oxfam's in-country director for 19791-980, nicknamed these warehouses 'black holes' because it was nearly impossible to trace the movement of goods back out once they had entered (Thompson, 1979 b). In many cases, goods simply never left the warehouses; Thompson and other Oxfam employees noted that the Ministry of Commerce hoarded rice, medicine, soap, spare tires and other supplies. In other cases, goods were distributed in ways that were the most convenient and least effort for the Ministry of Commerce; the relatively prosperous port town of Kompong Son received sewing machines, clothing and slightly damaged food supplies that had been earmarked for other locations, because the logistics of delivery surpassed the abilities of the Ministry of Commerce. On the other hand, villages, clinics and settlements far from main roads received fewer supplies, even though food, seed grain and other supplies were scarce in these areas as well.

4. 1980

What about the famine that threatened the country so starkly in 1979, in the eyes of Jim Howard, John Pilger and others? Careful review of where donations went in 1980 and a larger, retrospective review in 1983 showed most donations were untraceable (Stack 1983). In all probability Oxfam's donations, and those of the other consortium members in 1979 and 1980 had little to no impact on Cambodians outside the capital who needed them most. In 1979 the newly formed Ministry of Commerce was simply not skilled or powerful enough at the logistics of distribution to effectively distribute or keep track of the thousands of tons of rice, seed grain and other donated goods and tools coming into the country. Oxfam leaders documented the Ministry's poor distribution techniques as well as its tendency to hoard goods for personal use or resale.

In spite of this, when Oxfam's medical specialist, Dr. Henny Brown was allowed to travel to several smaller villages in Takeo, one of the poorest regions of the PRK in late January 1980 she and other officials expected to discover evidence of mass death due to malnutrition. However, happily, this was not the case. Dr. Brown and other representatives from Oxfam did not discover evidence famine, Instead, just as they had already observed in hospitals and orphanages across Phnom Penh in November and December of 1979, in Takeo and elsewhere they encountered a weak and sickly population that was clearly recovering from the effects of several years of malnutrition and disease. Rates of tuberculosis, hookworm, and malaria were still alarmingly high across the country, and hospitals in Phnom Penh as well as rural medical outposts desperately needed supplies to help treat and cure these diseases, as well as staples like gauze, antibiotics, bedding, mosquito nets, needles and soap. However, the anticipated and much publicized potential deaths from starvation never materialized (Annual Meeting Report 1980).

While Oxfam had hoped to provide a lifeline in PRK, other inputs of food were probably more important, especially for rural populations. Foremost, early Vietnamese and Soviet shipments of grain, which were distributed by the Vietnamese military and the Soviet embassy respectively throughout the late summer and early fall of 1979 were likely to have made a big impact on improving nutrition, especially near the Vietnamese border and near the port of Kompong Son. One of Oxfam's medical officers, Tim Lusty, perceived as much when he visited the country in 1980; "it is reasonable...to presume that (Oxfam's) relief food has only had a marginal effect on the overall improvement in rural

areas…the source of all staples which we saw being distributed must be Russia or Vietnam" (Lusty, 1980). More unexpectedly, the famous 'bicycle highway' between Thailand and Cambodia was likely to have made a real difference in these months and beyond. Oxfam workers and other visitors to the country remarked on the incredible volume of goods (food, clothing, and cigarettes were the items most often mentioned) moving through the country along a dirt track that stretched from the Thai border, along Cambodia's massive inland water body; Tonle Sap.

While these two styles of distribution were very different, they were notable in that they completely bypassed the new PRK government in order to get food and supplies out on the ground, relying instead on field-tested techniques of centralized distribution (in the case of Soviet and Vietnamese donations) and informal economic networks (in the instance of the bicycle highway). By May of 1980 Jim Howard noted in a second visit to the PRK that the threat of starvation had passed, and throughout Phnom Penh, in spite of the continued absence of currency, he noted "Several large markets have come into being selling rice, fish, vegetables, cloth, baskets, piles of fruit, pots and tools and great quantities of materials coming in from Thailand." (Howard, 1980 a). Consumers used cans of rice and Thai cigarettes as currency in the markets (Harper 1979)

While the Ministry of Commerce had moved rapidly to try to prevent Oxfam and other aid agencies from establishing effective distribution networks within the country, none of the Ministries were able to offer competent leadership directed at averting the catastrophe of famine. These were skills that they would learn on-the-job, "they appear to be making it up as they go along," one Oxfam official noted in mid-1980 (Thompson, 1980). The Consortium of aid agencies that Oxfam led dissolved at the end of 1980. While Oxfam moved on to focus on "development work" in the region, most significantly building and staffing community health centers in rural regions, the Kampuchea Team remained frustrated by the lack of cooperation and support they received from the PRK government (Warr, 1981). By 1983, Oxfam had decided to phase out operations in Cambodia, focusing instead on its more productive regional partnerships with neighboring Vietnam and Thailand.

Oxfam may have left, but during the 1980s the International Committee of the Red Cross, UNICEF and the United Nations FAO all participated in hunger alleviation schemes to help improve nutrition levels and ensure famine conditions did not recur. In these years, the PRK needed between 900,000 and 1,500,000 tons of (milled) rice to meet basic subsistence needs. In most of the years of the 1980s, harvests fell short of these goals. In no year did the harvest exceed 1 million tons. In 1982, spring floods destroyed much of the young paddy rice, and the United Nations Relief Fund launched a massive campaign to purchase rice and seed for the country. Ultimately, they raised 27 million dollars. There were modest improvements in rice production in 1984, but droughts in 1985 meant that the PRK was once again asking for food aid to help cover harvest shortfalls. Although Cambodia received significant aid, agencies remained reluctant to provide it and each assistance contract was a painful negotiation between multiple parties, all of whom disliked Cambodia's client regime, but none of whom were eager to see the country lapse back into genocide.

5. The Longer Term

What can the relationship between the government of the People's Republic of Kampuchea and food security in 1979-1980 tell us about larger patterns of governance and a state's responsibility to its citizens in terms of finite resources? I am especially interested in analyzing this relationship in light of the concept of citizen *capabilities*, and the state's responsibilities vis a vis this category, as explored by Sen and Dreze.

Three impacts stand out. First, while the Khmer Rouge years were marked by an extreme level of terror and violence, there have been some continuities in governance, especially with respect to the government's ability to capitalize on uncertainty. The opportunistic moves the Ministry of Commerce and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs made immediately after Oxfam signed on to a consortium agreement with the PRK shows a level of cynical calculation on the part of the government. The Ministry of Commerce's willingness to leave its storage sheds full in the face of countrywide food and

goods shortages, and their takeover of vehicles intended for humanitarian purposes are further signs of this. It is interesting to note that these actions happened during a period when these ministries were not yet able to effectively distribute goods and services to the larger population. In place of this skill, their first actions were focused on consolidating power.

The second impact was that, even after the harvest and supply crises of 1979-1980 had passed, the PRK was forced to depend on outside aid for food, other consumer goods, and a variety of heavy industry, especially trucks and construction equipment. This was a situation Heng Samrin's government did not create, but also took few steps to reduce or eradicate. In part, this is surely a classic client-state mentality. Vietnam's occupation of the PRK did not include comprehensive support to rebuild or improve the country's infrastructure, yet it was in the best interest of both Vietnam and the PRK for this infrastructure to be improved as quickly as possible. The most expedient way to do this was to invite charities and international agencies to aid the new country with as much material assistance as possible. In fact, by August of 1981 Oxfam's in-country agricultural specialist was under the impression this was precisely what Oxfam was doing in the country. In is words, "there (was) no observable sign that the government regards Oxfam as more than a valued donor of expensive and otherwise difficult to obtain materials." (Anonymous, 1981) This cynical relationship between charitable organizations and the PRK government continued steadily throughout the decade of the 1980s.

Finally, and perhaps most germane to a broader consideration of resources under regimes within Cambodia, one of the more unusual things this case study of famine prevention in the early days of the PRK demonstrates is the mismatch between what Heng Samrin's government defined as the most valuable resources its population required and those that a seasoned outside aid agency such as Oxfam judged necessary. This misreading cut both ways; Oxfam provided goods it believed to be essential that were clearly not highly valued by the Samrin government, such as soap (for hygiene) , western pharmaceuticals (for medical triage) and dry skimmed milk powder (to feed babies and young children). These were the three items that Oxfam officials were most likely to discover months later, languishing in a storehouse or locked cupboard. On the other hand, the Samrin government urgently requested materials that seemed superfluous if not irresponsible to Oxfam and other aid agencies, including cheap plastic bags and baskets (to facilitate trade and distribution of all goods), vast amounts of sugar (to make the milk palatable), and cigarettes (to serve as a substitute currency). While neither group's list was "the wrong" set of essential requests, they reveal different definitions of "essential" and gesture at some of the fundamentally different priorities that public and private actors have when they identify and promote goods and other resources that are essential to life and well-being.

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About the Author(s)

Jenny Leigh Smith is a Historian of science, technology & the environment whose work focuses on farmers and agricultural change over the course of the 20th Century. She earned her PhD from MIT in 2006. Her first book, Works in Progress, Plans and Realities on Soviet Farms, 1930-1963, was published by Yale University Press in 2014. She is a 2016 Carnegie Fellow and is currently writing a book about famine and food security around the world over the course of the 20th Century. She is Associate Professor of history at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology.

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