

Open Borders, Closed Opportunities

Opening up of the Thailand-Cambodia border to allow for 'official' trade has affected small-scale fish traders, mostly women

By **Kyoko Kusakabe** (kyokok@ait.ac.th), Associate Professor, Asian Institute of Technology, Thailand

Research for this article was conducted by the author jointly with U. Suntornratana and N. Sriputinibondh of the Department of Fisheries, Thailand, and P. Sereyvath of CEDAC, Cambodia

Cambodia's inland fisheries sector is one of the most productive in the world. The annual per capita catch is 20 kg, against an estimated 4.5 kg in Bangladesh and 0.5 kg in India. More than one million people in the country depend on fisheries for income and food security. Freshwater fish is exported mainly to Thailand, through the border points of Poipet in Cambodia and Aranyaprathet in Thailand. Thousands of Cambodian traders set up stalls on the border, and over 4,000 of them were estimated to have crossed the border each day in 2003. Between June 2001 and May 2002, 10,523 tonnes of fish, worth 349 mn baht (approx. US\$8 mn), were exported from Cambodia to Thailand.

Freshwater fish, especially from the Tonle Sap region, has long been an important item of trade. The French colonialists recognized the economic potential of Tonle Sap, and in the 1870s, the King of Cambodia started to collect payments for fishing rights. All trade activities were halted during the regime of the Khmer Rouge, between 1975 and 1979, when the borders of Democratic Kampuchea remained closed. In the 1980s, however, small-scale fish trade started to flourish. Almost

all the traders were women, who would accompany troops to the border, and risk walking through minefields to trade fish. As the border opened up, trade became more 'official' on both sides, with the establishment of infrastructure and official procedures. Consequently, the opportunities for women fish traders began to diminish.

In 1990, as the border conflict subsided, the Kampuchea Fisheries Import and Export company (KAMFIMEX), a State monopoly, opened an office in Poipet. All fish traders had to pay KAMFIMEX a fee, which increased their operational costs. Better roads and a cessation of fighting led to an increase in fish trade. Simultaneously, formal and informal checkpoints cropped up, as well as customs and other government offices. One study found that fish traders had to make 27 types of payment to 15 institutions in 16 locations, from the fish landing site on the Cambodian side to the market on the Thai side of the border. Most of the traders' earnings went into meeting these payments.

Between 2001 and 2003, small-scale fish traders and transporters organized protests and petitions. In 2003, traders and transporters won a legal case against fee collection by KAMFIMEX, which led to a decrease in fee collection in other places as well. However, inspections and import restrictions became more stringent on the Thai side of the border. As regulations became stricter, Cambodian small-scale fish traders, dependent on official imports by Thai nationals, had to pay higher fees on the Thai side of the border. Large-scale fish traders, mostly men, were able to take advantage of the volume in trade to negotiate lower fees.

The steep increase in fees, the proliferation of the fish trade, and the entry of large players have made it difficult for small-scale fish traders to procure fish. Most of them buy fish from other merchants, not from fishers directly, since they are unable to extend credit to fishers.

Large fluctuations in fish prices also harm the small fish traders. The price of a kilogramme of fish can drop from 85 baht (US\$2.5) to 45 baht (US\$1.3) in one day. Some of the bigger traders

UBOLRATANA SUNTORNRATANA



Women fish traders transporting fish on carts from Cambodia to Thailand

store fish and choose not to sell when the prices are low. Thai traders too stock fish in cold storage when prices are low. Cambodian small-scale traders, however, have no access to these facilities, including mobile phones to track markets and prices. Cambodian traders often rely on their relationship with their Thai counterparts to get better prices and an assured market.

Over the last three decades, petty trading in fish, which provides a livelihood for many Cambodian women, has undergone drastic changes. Small-scale women traders who lack access to resources and facilities and have little bargaining power lose out when borders open up to allow the entry of large players. It is indeed ironic that for small traders, 'open' borders mean 'closed' opportunities. ❏

“It is indeed ironic that for small traders, ‘open’ borders mean ‘closed’ opportunities.”