

Human Sciences Encounters in Phnom-Penh Past Presentations

Death toll and social consequences of the Pol Pot regime

By HEUVELINE Patrick

Tuesday 2nd July 2013, 7pm

1) The Death Toll of the Pol-Pot Regime

Three former high-ranking officials of the late-70s Pol-Pot regime are only now standing trial in the Extraordinary Chambers in the Courts of Cambodia (ECCC). For the ECCC's considerations, estimates of the death toll of the Pol-Pot regime range from less than one million to over three million. In my current work on this issue, I ask what does such a range mean. This is not a confidence interval in the statistical sense, but rather a range of "point estimates", that is, single "best" estimate by different analysts, each one with a typically unstated uncertainty. I combine the different data sources used by these analysts into a population dynamics model to actually derive a statistical distribution of plausible estimates. This allows me to quantify the range of the most plausible estimates (say, a 2/3rd likelihood that the death toll is between 1.6 and 2.3 million) or a lower limit of plausibility at the conventional 95-% confidence level (1.2 million victims or 13.4% of the population at risk).

2) The Social Consequences of the Pol-Pot Regime

I am also the P.I. of a data collection project on families and households in Cambodia, supported since 2002 by the National Institutes of Health. The current phase of data collection is designed to understand the impact of orphanhood on the transition to adulthood. Studying this issue in Cambodia is obviously facilitated by the fact that a substantial fraction of children lost one or both parents under the Pol-Pot regime. But also the most common problem in assessing the impact of orphanhood is the fact that children that experience it are often relatively disadvantaged relative to their peers even before the loss of a parent. That is, in most settings, mid-adult death is relatively rare and also highly selective, but it wasn't the case in late-70s Cambodia (and if anything, parents of higher status might have been *less* likely to survive the regime). Selection "into" orphanhood is thus less likely to be confounded the effects of orphanhood, and we also manage to match a substantial number of former orphans to the biological children of their foster parents ("social" siblings). This will allow us to compare orphans and non-orphans net of their household-level childhood characteristics and another step closer to understand the "net" impact of orphanhood.