**Multi-scalar inequality: Structured Mobility and the Narrative Construction of Scale in Translocal Cambodia**

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Focusing on three neighbouring villages in Cambodia, this paper argues the need for a multi-scalar interpretation of the relationship between mobility and wealth. It analyses migrant livelihoods in both sender and receiving areas to show that single scale measurements of mobility are inappropriate in the context of translocal livelihoods because livelihoods enacted across multiple places may possess multiple values of scale and mobility, each co-existing within the same migrant lifeworld. In seeking an improved conception of these complexities, the paper has combined spatial and qualitative analysis of translocal livelihoods to highlight the linkages between mobility in multiple places. On this basis, it posits that the mobility of translocal livelihoods must be assessed at least three scales: the scale appropriate to the sending environment, the scale appropriate to the receiving environment, and the scale on which potential migrations are judged. Making use of this framework allows clear relationships to be observed between mobility and inequality in both the narratives and structures of the communities under investigation.

1. **Introduction**

Mobility and distance have long been associated with elite status. In historical terms, travel and knowledge of the outside world were accessible to relatively few and therefore imbued with a symbolic value. Indeed, as Helms (1988: 4) argues ‘in traditional societies, horizontal space and distance may be perceived in sacred or supernatural cosmological terms’, imbuing both direct and indirect knowledge of distant places with a significance beyond their immediate value (Helms, 1988).

Nevertheless, this relatively linear relationship between distance and its value tends to be viewed as belonging to a time, or place, apart. As the world becomes more mobile (Castles and Miller, 2009) and interlinked (Castells, 2011), attitudes towards space have shifted, towards a conception of it as ‘relational’ (Jones, 2009: 487), ‘stretched’, (Samuels, 2001: 1) and ‘inextricably inter-mixed with time’ (Massey, 1999: 274). Indeed, some authors (e.g. Rogaly and Thieme, 2012) have demonstrated how multi-local livelihoods may strain the lifeworlds of their inhabitants to the extent that they ‘protest’ against their mobility (Bastia, 2011: 1514) by pursuing stasis. As distance has become compressed by technology, in other words, the value of mobility has been argued to become detached from scale (Rogaly, 2015).

This paper uses the translocal disapora of three neighbouring villages in Cambodia to interrogate this narrative, arguing that mobility remains both valuable and intimately intertwined with inequality, but that this value cannot be assessed at a single scale. Specifically, it argues that in translocal communities, inequality of mobility requires assessment on at least three scales simultaneously: that appropriate to the livelihoods of the sender environment; that which constitutes relative mobility in the destination; and that at which the community mediated hierarchy of migration is judged. Simply put, total distance travelled is a poor indicator of relative wealth, but mobility at source and destination, as well as motility – or flexibility of movement – in relation to migration destination, is a strong one. Those who are relatively deprived in their communities lack mobility in multiple places and at multiple scales, whilst the best off enjoy superior motility not at one scale, but at many.

What constitutes desirable mobility is therefore contextually determined. The ability to farm land spread over a wider area than one’s neighbour constitutes no more or less important a degree of mobility than that required to visit a local market on days off from a factory job; or to choose Phnom Penh over a neighbouring village as a migrant destination. Undesirable mobility, similarly, is assessed and determined in place. Low motility is associated with community level narratives of denigration, which isolate the worst off within and between households (Bylander, 2015; Czymonewiez-klippel, 2013; Elmhirst, 2007). Consequently, the pursuit of positive narratives – dutiful daughters; providers for the family – and the avoidance of negative ones – workshy; weak; uncaring – drives and links translocal mobility.

After outlining the conceptual and empirical context of this study, as well as the methods employed, this paper will proceed in three parts. First, it will combine historical, contemporary and geospatial data on asset distribution to link differential patterns of mobility to wealth stratification in the three rural sites. Secondly, it will examine the role of community discourse and social tensions in shaping rural and rural-urban mobility. Finally, it will explore how rural wealth, expressed in migrant livelihoods via the mechanism of remittances, is a key determinant of urban mobility.

1. **Towards a Translocal Conception of Scale**

References to the current era as an ‘age of migration’ (Castles and Miller, 2009) are intended to signal a world in which mobility has become a key factor in structuring contemporary livelihoods. Migration is increasingly recognised as a process of ‘social transformation’ in which migrants and non-migrants alike experience changes to their social-structural, cultural, and economic environments (Castles, 2010: 1575). Concurrently, translocality frameworks (Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2016; Greiner and Sakdapolrak, 2013; Brickell and Datta, 2011) have emphasized how even poorer members of mobile societies engage in complex, multi-sited patterns of movement over a variety of timeframes. Thus, it is the quality, rather than the quantity, of mobility in the 21st century; the technologically mediated ability to retain ‘groundedness’ in multiple, spatially segregated, locations simultaneously (Brickell and Data, 2011: 3), that distinguishes it from the forms of movement that preceded it (Hilti, 2016).

This recognition has given rise to the ‘mobilities turn’ (Sheller, 2014) in the social sciences, a development that offers ‘a conceptually more agile container’ to study the meaning of movement than previous theoretical frameworks (Rogaly, 2015: 528). In particular, the adjustment of focus engendered by the mobilities literature (Sheller, 2014; Jensen, 2011) has contributed towards a more reflexive interpretation of the relationship between migration and inequality. Previously examined at both macro (e.g. Yeung, 2013; Neumayer, 2006; Jones, 1998; Stark et al., 1988) and micro scales (e.g. Bastia, 2013, McKenzie and Rapoport, 2007; Barham and Boucher, 1998), as well as the Cambodian context itself (Lim and Widyono, 2016; Davis, 2011), the nexus of these fields has invariably been viewed in economic terms. Yet new insights into mobilities have helped to demonstrate that ‘neither mobility nor social inequality are set, static, or given categories’ (Manderscheid, 2012: 27), but ‘complexly interwoven’ (Manderscheid, 2012: 27; Sager, 2006) in a manner central to the exercise of power (Rogaly, 2015; Kesselring and Vogl, 2004; Paquette and Domon, 2003).

Recognising that mobility and immobility ‘always define each other’ (Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013), recent work has considered this relationship in terms of motility, a term first used in this context by Kaufmann et al. (2004) and later underpinning both viscosity (Doherty, 2015; Sheller and Urry, 2006) and mobile viscosity (Parsons and Lawreniuk, 2016a) frameworks. Work centred on the motility concept investigates flexibility of movement, rather than movement itself and builds on recent studies highlighting the downsides of hypermobility (Cohen and Gösling, 2015; Arnado, 2013; Rogaly and Thieme, 2012; Silvey, 2008) by demonstrating that highly mobile livelihoods may be associated with lower motility than relatively sedentary ones, generating strain via ‘stretched lifeworlds’ (Samuels, 2001: 1), without facilitating the ability to change or cease these patterns. Indeed, from this perspective, multi-local living may be associated with ‘severe physical and spatial immobility’ (Hilti, 2009: 152).

In parallel to these reassessments of the value of movement, a related body of literature (Rogaly, 2015; Söderström et al, 2013; Tufts and Savage, 2009; Silvey, 2008, 2004; Dupont, 2004) has begun to reinterpret scale as a factor in this value. Building on Swyngedouw’s (2004, 2000) work on ‘the politics of scale’, these studies have shown how scale is socially constructed (Green, 2016; Stallins, 2012; Marston, 2000) via the ‘abstract social structures’ through which ‘domination takes place’ (Loftus, 2015: 367). Thus, by highlighting ‘the unpredictability of the relationship between intimacy, locality, and geographic proximity’ (Vasantkumar, 2013: 919) they have both demonstrated the need for a multi-scalar perspective on the drivers of mobility (Cripps and Gardner, 2016; Osbahr et al., 2008) and sought to oppose the hierarchy of scale characteristic of migration studies, wherein moves over a greater distance are more important than shorter ones (Rogaly, 2015; Söderström et al, 2013).

From this perspective, not only do ‘mobilities have context’ (Gorman-Murray and Nash, 2014: 628), but this context is multi-scalar, multi-sited, and mobile. Narratives of praise and denigration are active factors in people’s mobility decisions: gender norms of ‘dutiful daughters’ (Derks, 2008: 170) working in the factories to support their families, whilst profligate sons squander their salaries, increasingly structures decisions both to leave and to return; beggars are impelled to cyclical migration by stigma at home and in the city (Parsons and Lawreniuk, 2016a); and stories of nostalgia, both domestic and international, bind paratransit workers into decades long cyclical migrations (Parsons and Lawreniuk, 2016b). What it means to be mobile or immobile – and by extension the meaning of scale itself – is therefore grounded not only in socio-economic structures, but norms and narrative also (Cranston, 2016; Kochan, 2016; [Schröder](http://www.tandfonline.com/author/Schr%C3%B6der%2C+Philipp) and [Stephan-Emmrich](http://www.tandfonline.com/author/Stephan-Emmrich%2C+Manja), 2016; Boersma and Schinkel, 2015), a duality that has only recently begun to be explored.

By demonstrating how narrative and socio-economic inequality structure mobility at multiple scales (and vice versa), this paper aims to contribute to both the mobilities and broader geographic literatures in two ways. First, it furthers Rogaly’s (2015) and Loftus’s (2015) assertions on the subjective hierarchy of scale by highlighting that unequal mobility may be the product of both narratives and structures operating at multiple places and scales simultaneously. Thus, it rejects ‘narrower assumptions’ of economically rational mobility (Shubin et al., 2014) in favour of a complex, discursive and conflict driven interpretation of scale and the value of movement in translocal systems.

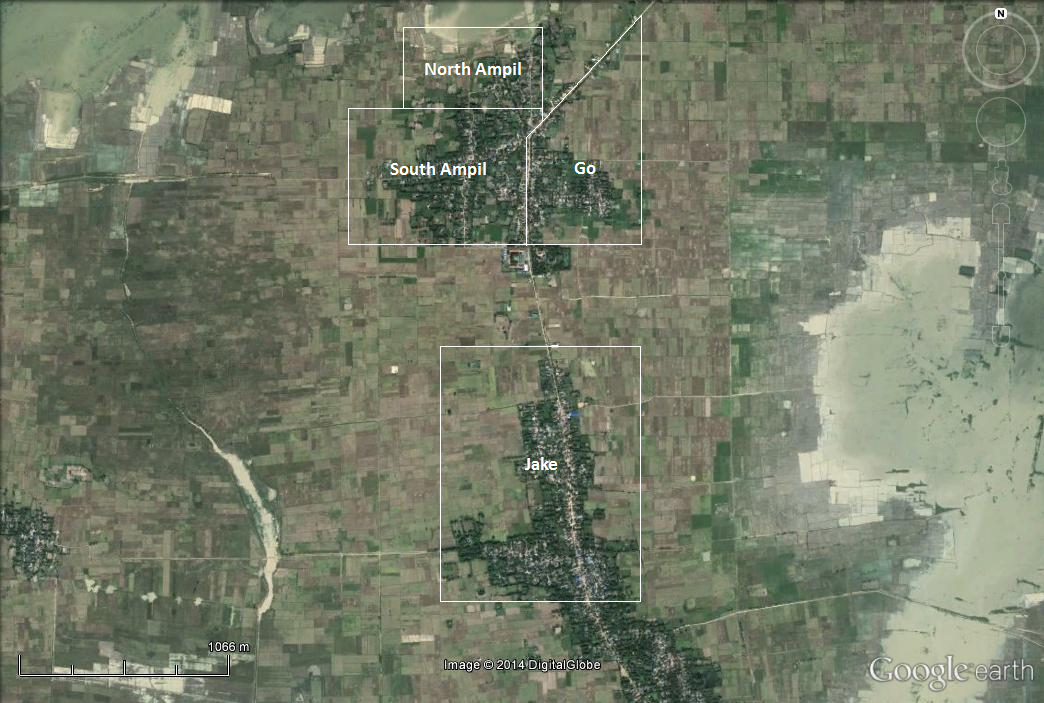
Secondly, the paper responds to Manderscheid’s assertion that the relationship between mobilities and social inequalities is ‘not yet sufficiently explored’ (Manderscheid, 2012: 43) by offering a framework to understand unequal mobility in translocal systems. In doing so, it accords that ‘customary numerical yardsticks of mobility be re-examined for their appropriateness and fairness’ (Pirie, 2009: 22) and offers a bottom-up account of scale, rooted in the discourse of a translocal community. Using a combination of narrative and structural data, it builds on previous work emphasizing the dark side of hypermobility (Cohen and Gösling, 2015; Rogaly and Thieme, 2012), as well as Doherty’s (2015) and Parsons and Lawreniuk’s (2016b) notions of “viscosity” in migrant systems, to elucidate the multi-sited and multi-scalar relationship between mobility and wealth.

1. **Methods**

The research presented in this paper was collected using a mixed methods strategy designed to investigate migration as a multi-scalar system. Methodologically, it builds upon Xiang’s (2013) exposition of multi-scalar ethnography by incorporating this strategy within a broader, mixed methods approach to multi-scalar research. It proceeded from an initial rural field site, Krang Youv commune in Kandal province, selected during a six week period of preliminary fieldwork in June and July 2012. This preceded the main six month research frame, from March to August 2013.

The project was conducted across three rural research sites, one peri-urban site, and one urban one. However, sites themselves were not pre selected, but sourced as part of an adaptive research process designed to effectively capture the social structure and migration diaspora of a rural village-system. As such, whilst a single village site – Ampil – was identified as an entry point to Krang Youv, the second and third rural field sites were identified following qualitative interviews with Ampil villagers and key informants designed to gain an endogenous picture of the better and worse off parts of the local area. Using this method, the multi-village field site shown in figure 1 was selected.

Figure 1. Map of the study site in Krang Youv (Source: Google Earth, 2014)



It should be noted that the indicated boundaries do not accord with administrative delineations. Indeed, preliminary qualitative interviews suggested that whilst Jake presented a relatively well defined socio-economic entity, North and South Ampil were almost completely disconnected. Thus, in order to ensure that the social relations under study were meaningful, North Ampil was designated a separate site. Moreover, initial and subsequent interviews highlighted a high level of socio-economic interconnectivity between the neighbouring villages of South Ampil, and Go, which were consequently designated a single site.

In keeping with the adaptive nature of the methodology, site selection for urban research was delayed until the rural household and migratory survey was completed, at which point Sak te Bo, Andaing, and various locales within Phnom Penh were identified as key urban research sites due to the presence of migrants from households under study. Thus, data collection began initially in the primary rural research site and took place according to three primary methodologies. The first of these was the delivery of a comprehensive socio-economic questionnaire to 151 network sampled villagers originating from three initial nodes. These primary nodes were selected on the basis of their residence within North Ampil, South Ampil and Jake, identified during initial focus group discussions as being, relative to each other, poor, average, and wealthy. Thereafter, subsequent informants were chosen through network sampling, a process intended to produce three socio-economically rooted, endogenously determined groups within the village system, rather than representative samples of each area.

Each of these informants was questioned on their income and assets, as well as historical asset transfers and migratory histories. Additionally, they provided information on the location of their agricultural land. Informants’ answers to questions on the distance and direction of their land from key landmarks such as lakes and roads were spatially recorded using a grid system superimposed over satellite photography of the area and subsequently entered as GPS data to the Gephi spatial network analysis program.

The next phase of field work was the urban side of the research process. All migrant members of the households taking part in the rural side of the study were invited for interview via phone numbers obtained from parents, spouses or migrants themselves, and permission requested for an initial 20 -40 minute interview at a place chosen by the informant. These interviews comprised questions on urban livelihoods and migratory histories, as well as further network sampling.

This relatively short question set was designed to accommodate the busy schedules of urban workers in Phnom Penh, many of whom were constrained by workplace break times or the need to return home. Working around these constraints meant that all but one of the target informants agreed to provide quantitative data, giving a base sample of 50 informants providing data on migratory histories, income, remittances and urban network integration. The last of these was measured using the eigenvector centrality metric described by Bonacich and Lloyd (2001) as an appropriate statistic for the measurement of hierarchy because of its analysis not only of personal popularity (i.e. number of times selected), but of the popularity of those whom a person selects.

The data needed to compute these scores were collected by asking migrants about regular close associates, including family members, in their destination area. All members of the Krang Youv migrants’ social networks were then interviewed, producing a network map at 1 degree of distance from the initial Krang Youv nodes. These data were then compiled using Gephi to produce a network map of Krang Youv’s migrants, whose relationship to each other meant that individual migrants’ networks were often joined to others, thereby generating further network integration.

Thus, in simple terms, the eigenvector score – in which individuals’ scores are adjusted relative to the network to assign each individual a figure between 0 and 1 – is the sum of all connections possessed by a certain individual, after each connection has been weighted by the number of linkages *they* possess. A link to a node with five further connections is therefore worth more than a link to a node with two, making the eigenvector ‘an appropriate measure when one believes that actors’ status is determined by those with whom they are in contact’ (Bonacich and Lloyd, 2001: 199)[[1]](#footnote-1).

After collecting these data, 20 informants agreed to participate in a further 30 minutes of more general qualitative questions regarding their livelihoods and perspectives on the city. Moreover, the practicalities of arranging interviews with urban migrants allowed time for a qualitative phase of rural data collection. From the initial sample, informants were selected for further interview on the basis of location, so that each sub-location of the research site held a more or less equal voice within the qualitative data. Key informants included several villagers holding administrative positions in the village, such as the village head, members of the pagoda committee, district administrator etc. However, in order to avoid elite bias, a selection of key informants not holding executive or ceremonial positions was made from each wealth stratum. Similarly, the four focus groups undertaken included groups of farmers/ fishermen from each village and a mixed group of migrant workers from Krang Youv.

1. **Background to the Research Site**

Almost nowhere are the theoretical concerns of translocality more clearly visible in practice than Cambodia, where the combination of unrelenting agricultural pressures with a rapidly growing modern sector has seen translocal livelihoods embraced on an enormous scale. Up to 700,000 workers are employed within the garment sector alone (ILO, 2015), but even this figure fails to state the case fully. Beyond formally employed migrants, the number of others working in informally supportive or related roles has been estimated to match the size of the garment working population (EIC, 2007); in total, up to a third of the working age population in Cambodia are migrants (NIS, 2010).

However, gross figures say little of the complexities of the Cambodian migration system. The combination of a relatively small national land area, improving public infrastructure, and 20 years of explosive growth in the garment sector, has seen multi-local livelihoods become economically and socially pre-eminent. For instance, amongst the 80% of garment workers who send money to their (primarily rural) home households, average remittances approach 50% of gross wages (CARE International, 2017), indicating flows of over $500,000,000 per year from workers in the domestic sector alone. Other occupations commit scarcely less of their income (Parsons, 2016) and similar figures are visible (Deelan and Pracha, 2010) amongst the hundreds of thousands (Tunon and Rim, 2013) of Cambodians working in Cambodia and Thailand.

Money, moreover, is merely one dimension of ‘the ties that bind’ (Lawreniuk, 2017) migrants to their families. 98.7% of migrants live with at least one family member, 99.5% visit their home household at least once a year, and 65.4% receive at least one visit per year from their rural household (Parsons et al., 2014). Combined with the increasing importance of mobile telephony (Parsons and Lawreniuk, 2017), these figures demonstrate that rural-urban connections are not only strong, but sufficiently familial and close knit in character to lead scholars – even in the relatively early days of Cambodia’s economic transformation – to ask whether the growing importance of such networks would ultimately create ‘a country of insiders and outsiders’ (Hughes, 2001: 19).

Though highly pertinent, though, such concerns were subtly miscalibrated. Fifteen years later, the influence of translocal networks has become so great in Cambodia that very few can be considered “outside” the process of migration. Even those lacking direct connections feel their effects through shifting social structures and cooperative practices, as gender roles (Bylander, 2015; Czymoniewiez-Klippel, 2011; Brickell, 2011), romantic and marriage practices (Parsons and Lawreniuk, 2017; Yagura, 2012; Nishgaya, 2010), demographic norms (Lawreniuk and Parsons, 2017a; The, 2015), and local power structures (Parsons et al., 2014; Springer, 2011) adapt in response to new, translocal, livelihoods.

These new narratives of mobility structure migration patterns, encouraging or discouraging certain types of movement in a manner that interplays with structural economic forces. In particular, the advent of the garment industry – whose workforce is 90% female (CARE International, 2017) – as the Kingdom’s largest employment sector has shifted norms not only of mobility but also gender and demography. Women and older people whose mobilities had traditionally been seen as centred on the home now spend years far away from it in response to new norms of duty and care. The men who do not, or cannot, do the same are derided as lazy and uncaring, encouraging the pursuit of alternative migration strategies in some cases, but also rising levels of gangsterism and delinquency, especially in poorer areas, as immobility becomes less socially acceptable (Czymoniewiez-Klippel, 2013).

Migration, otherwise put, has changed everything; but it is the continuities that stand out. Cambodia is experiencing ‘widening inequality’ (Un, 2011: 558) on a number of fronts, from health (Hong and Them, 2015; Fujii, 2013) to land (Dwyer, 2015; Un and So, 2011; Bulgaski and Pred, 2010), as wealth concentrates increasingly in the hands of a small number of national elites (Global Witness, 2009). Even at the village scale, these divisive processes are visible, engendered and enhanced by translocal systems in which the migrant children of poorer rural villagers must remit higher proportions of their salary than their wealthier counterparts to service debts and farming costs (Parsons, 2016).

The burden of these maximal payments prevents saving, investing, or otherwise building the productive urban linkages that would allow them or their family to progress economically (Parsons, 2016), leaving migrants from the poorer strata of rural society increasingly indentured by family debt to urban work, whilst their wealthier counterparts use urban wages to gain a capital foothold, either in rural or urban areas. Nevertheless, the differentiating impact of this process goes beyond remittances. As this paper will demonstrate, inequality in translocal systems manifests not only in financial terms, but as mobility itself, across multiple scales.

**5**. **Space and Farming in the Rural Sphere**

**5.1 Physical Assets and the Production of Scale**

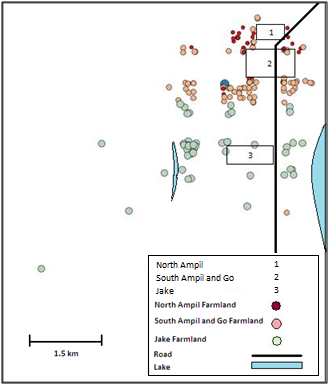
The three sub-sections of the Krang Youv village system – North Ampil; South Ampil and Go; and Jake – exhibit notably different economic profiles. In broad terms, inequality manifests on a north-south axis across all income and asset classes. Inhabitants of more southerly villages earn more, and hold a greater amount of both consumptive assets – such as televisions, radios, speakers and stereos – and productive ones, including land, livestock, and farming machinery.

Table 1. Mean Assets and Income Disaggregated by Location

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| *Mean Assets and Income Disaggregated by Location* | | | | | |
| **Location** | **Bicycles** | **Motorbikes** | **Televisions** | **Total Livestock Value** | **Total Income** |
| North Ampil | 0.23 | 0.08 | 0.38 | $311 | $1368/annum |
| South Ampil and Go | 0.62 | 0.57 | 0.86 | $836 | $2858/annum |
| Jake | 1.2 | 1.27 | 0.93 | $1994 | $10958/annum |

Such correlations are, in one respect, merely different manifestations of capital. However, there is also a spatial dimension. The distribution of farmland at each site differs substantially between the three research sites. As shown in figure 2, landowning residents of North Ampil rarely have more than a kilometre to travel to tend it. Those from South Ampil and Go travel further on average, and residents of Jake village further still, as proportionally more of the inhabitants of more southern villages possess vehicles facilitating access to further, more fertile, and higher land than they could conveniently access on foot.

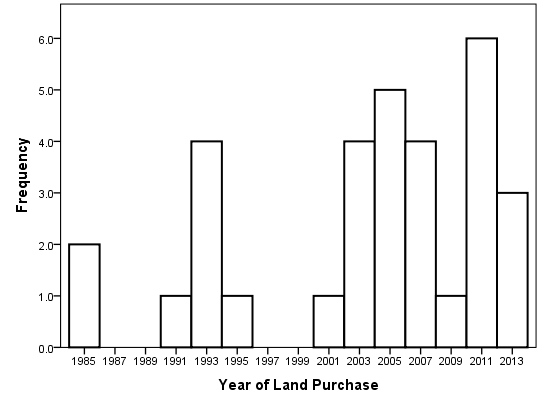
Figure 2. Location of Land Owned by Residents of the Study Site



Thus, the linkages between assets, space and wealth in Krang Youv’s rural areas are attractive in their directness. Those with greater household incomes are able to purchase one or more means of motorised transport – as items such as motorbikes are generally shared as household assets in Krang Youv, the purchase of a second vehicle increases all members’ motility – and are thereby able to traverse longer distances more frequently and with greater ease. Even amongst those for whom motorised transport is unaffordable, bicycles stratify mobility. Just as ‘car drivers parade superiority via their vehicles’ (Kolnberger, 2012: 6), so walking is conversely denigrated as part of ‘a discriminating order of preference – motorised private transport of 4-wheels over 2-wheels, far above non-motorised transport systems and pedestrians’ (Kolnberger, 2012: 5). Each means of mobility is therefore a sign of what a household can – and what it cannot – afford.

In this way, the covariance between the area of farmers’ productive lifeworlds, and their ownership of assets, highlights how the freedom to travel further may retain a symbolic, rather than merely technical significance. The ability to negotiate space, in this context, remains not only a privilege of local elites, but a finely tuned indicator of inequality. Furthermore, this spatial inequality is growing. Recent years have seen an increasing rate of land purchase, as shown in Figure 3. In addition to highlighting a general increase in the volume of land transferred over time, this graphic also displays peaks during some of the worst natural disasters of recent years, 1993, 2005, and 2011, reinforcing the linkage between climate shocks and land sale ‘because of crop failure’ (Soravanna, 18/04/13) which emerge from the qualitative data.

Figure 3. Frequency of Land Purchase between 1985 and 2013 (n=32)



Climate shocks are not, however, the only motivations for land sale in Krang Youv. With alternatives to paddy farming increasingly available, spatial inequalities have become self-reinforcing, as farmers whose land is inconveniently located sell to large scale land owners with the technological and financial means to manage widely dispersed agricultural portfolios. Krang Youv’s largest landowner, Ta Visal (28/05/13), claims to have accumulated the entirety of his 35 hectares in this way, ‘from thirty or forty people whose land was too spread out to be convenient for them’. Similarly, a second farmer purchased 3 hectares in 1995 ‘from two different villagers, who sold their fields because they were too far away from their houses’ (Bou Tier, 09/05/13).

As such, land transfers appear, in recent years, to have been catalysed by extra-village income sources, as the increasing instability of the farming environment (Parsons, 2017) – which induces even the largest farmers to admit that ‘with rice farming, sometimes you win and sometimes you lose these days’ (Ta Visal, 28/05/13) – makes it increasingly unattractive to smallholders in comparison with the external income streams provided by migrant labour. At the same time, external income sources provide the capital for wealthier villagers to both purchase and utilise the plots of those who sell them.

However, there is a reflexive dimension to the abandonment of smallholder plots, as the same modernising forces that facilitate their mass acquisition are reducing the stock of those available to tend them. As the Krang Youv commune head explained, the pioneers of migration were those wealthy enough to afford labour saving devices:

‘People first started to migrate when [landowners] started to get two-wheeled [hand] tractors because it allowed them to replace their labour. It meant they didn’t need people to help with transplanting and planting and harvesting’ (Commune Head, 15/08/13).

Decades later, however, the pressure placed on smallholders and the landless by a lack of rural wage labour has proved a key factor in the volume of migration expanding to the point that even the limited supply required by larger, primarily mechanised, landholders is difficult to source. This has led to rapid rises in agricultural wages – which have almost tripled since 2005 (IBRD and World Bank, 2015) – but the equilibrating effect of such rises, which might be expected even to discourage migration in some cases, is undermined by the changing narrative of rural work. The declining viability of smallholder agriculture has placed a clear line of distinction between those able to acquire and mechanically farm large plots, and those who either have nothing, or struggle to sustain smaller holdings in the face of rising input costs and an unpredictable climate.

This widening cultural divide is rooted partly in assets. However, it is the differentiated perceptions of scale engendered by these assets that lie at the core of this shifting narrative. In Krang Youv, assets undergird mobility, economically determining the scale of a household’s lifeworld so that what to one family is an unmanageably distant portfolio of plots is to another a conveniently located opportunity. This rural dimension, though, is only one element in the stratification of mobility. As outlined below, the social production of scalar narratives means that decisions over rural wage labour are rooted also in a mobility that extends far beyond the village itself.

**5.2 Narrative and the Value of Mobility in Migration Decisions**

In Krang Youv, decisions over how and where to work are about much more than money. Indeed, in defiance of its rising economic value, attitudes towards agricultural wage labour have transcended its rising value, manifesting instead in a burgeoning perception that it is a lowly undertaking. The reasons for this are complex. Certainly, the relative ‘comfort’ and ‘coolness’ (Lin Da, 30/07/13; Srey Dara, 08/05/13) of migrant labour compared with that undertaken in the fields is cited often as a point in its favour, but the superiority of wages that can be earned indoors is underpinned by deeper cultural mores, often intimately interlinked with gender. As noted by Derks (2008), for instance, garment work in particular has a cultural resonance related to the protracted ceremony of “going into the shade”, wherein engaged women spend six months indoors prior to their wedding in order to lighten their skin.

Moreover, this normative dimension of mobility is evident, also, in male dominated occupations. Motorcycle taxi drivers in particular, but also those construction workers undertaking lighter work (such as foremen), commonly grow the nail of their little finger to an ostentatious length of one to two centimetres in order to ‘show that I don’t work in the fields’ (Vishal, 20/07/13). Denigration of agriculture was also reflected in the quantitative data, which discerned only a handful of respondents citing it in their portfolio of incomes. Of these, all were considerably older than the mean migrant age of 24 (Parsons et al., 2014) and the overwhelming majority were female. That this demographic – broadly speaking, women over 40 – has perhaps the least access to the formal migrant labour market suggests that involvement in hired farm work is an option amenable only to those unable take up extra-village alternatives.

Indeed, this reluctance to undertake hired agricultural work is a trend noted by larger landowners, who reported a growing aversion to rural wage labour ‘because people are embarrassed to be seen working for others in the village’ (Ta Visal, 28/05/13). As a result, Ta Visal in particular complains that he has had to raise the wages he pays for wage labour to unprecedented levels and still cannot fill his quota of labourers on a regular basis:

‘I myself need a lot of workers to do a large farm. I pay $7 per day plus three meals per day[[2]](#footnote-2), but still many people don’t want to work for me because they are shy and ashamed to work for someone else in the same village, so they go elsewhere. It is very difficult to find enough workers here. It is difficult even to find workers for mouse catching. Even though the extra ten kg of mice would fetch 25k riel [on top of the daily wage he pays] and requires only that a trap be set, making the [total] over $10 per day, they still don’t want to try’ (Ta Visal, 28/05/13).

This reticence to work for others in the village forms part, more broadly, of a growing tension between rich and poor, expressed through competing and divisive narratives that are driving a wedge through rural communities. With increasing frequency, from the north to the south of the commune, poorer villages are derided for their indolence by richer ones, who argue that ‘there are many things you can do to earn money: collecting firewood, or fish, helping with farming, but people don’t want to because they are lazy’ (Ta Visal, 28/05/13).

In response, the recipients of this denigration express a narrative of widening social distance, mirrored and rooted in the spatial practice of both parties. One such respondent, a migrant worker in Sak te Bo whose small area of rice land means that he struggles to sustain a secure rural livelihood, vented his frustration at the divisions he perceived in village society:

‘Now the relationship between the rich and the poor is getting further and further apart. Now the rich act as if they are bosses, ordering the poor about. Also, there is no negotiating with them. If the rich say 15k [$3.75], then the price is 15k.’ (Sok Tol, 12/08/13)

As he continued:

‘Rich people go outside the village to migrate just the same as poor people, but still there is something different. Rich people always migrate together with other rich people, whereas poor people just go with other poor people. Then, when they come back, they still stay separate.’ (Sok Tol, 12/08/13)

In spatial terms, Sok Tol’s sentiments were echoed by a construction worker in Phnom Penh, who asserted that ‘generally the children of rich people just leave the village to study whereas the poor people go to work. Also, rich people tend to open their own businesses, such as shops selling all kinds of things in the village’ (Construction Worker Interview 14/08/13). This account highlights how differences in rural wealth are perceived not only translocally, but also at multiple scales. Both the type of migration undertaken, the wealth that underpins it, and the rural investment that it facilitates, are viewed as intuitively linked mechanisms by which rural social and economic differentials are entrenched and enhanced.

As a result, the ever present inequalities of assets in Cambodian rural life are being ‘stretched’ (Sok Tol, 12/08/13) by the inequalities of opportunity that emerge from them and Krang Youv’s inhabitants are acutely aware of this. Rural labour is rejected not for its financial dimensions, but for what it represents: subordination, denigration, and both physical and social immobility. In a similar manner, not only migration itself, but the various forms it takes, are closely intertwined with wider hierarchies of wealth and symbolic value. The ability to participate in a more desirable form of migration is therefore much more than a practical consideration, but also a widely intelligible marker of status and distinction.

Indeed, in Krang Youv, the denigration of local work has thwarted even government sponsored efforts to encourage a more rurally based garment industry. Despite the far lower expenditures required of workers in local rural garment factories, lower gross wages compared to those potentially on offer in urban and peri-urban areas are off putting to potential migrants and serve to maintain the allure of larger scale labour movement for those able to take it up. As the Krang Youv commune head explained:

‘[Government policy on labour migration] has not been so effective...If they open a small [factory] here it is generally good only for an old woman who is too weak to go to Phnom Penh. If people have the strength and skills to migrate, then they will go to Phnom Penh for a higher salary as the wages here are comparatively low. A construction foreman can earn $250 per month there!’ (Commune Head, 15/08/13).

Thus, rather than locally retaining migrants who might otherwise have participated in cross-border or rural-urban migration, the arrival of manufacturing opportunities close to home appears to have expanded the demography of garment work to include those too old, sick, or weak to undertake more lengthy migrations. In stark contrast to the narratives of wealth and mobility expounded of Phnom Penh or overseas, local work has therefore become stigmatised as suitable only for older and less mobile people. Consequently, only 2 members of the 72 households surveyed reported working in the local factories, compared with over 50 migrant workers in Phnom Penh or abroad.

From a purely economic perspective, this is difficult to explain. Wages are certainly higher in urban areas and the view persists that rural factories tend to operate only for a part of the year. However, despite substantial recent wage rises, conditions for workers in the garment industry have been in decline for several years. Many urban factories now issue only short term or rolling contracts and dismiss workers with minimal (or no) notice once orders temporarily cease (Parsons and Lawreniuk, 2017; Arnold, 2013). Combined with high and rapidly rising urban prices, many workers therefore have great difficulty in meeting the remittance requirements of their household, making rural work – though characterised by lower gross earnings – potentially preferable due to the greatly reduced outgoings.

Nevertheless, the perception of rural factory work as associated with older and less mobile people contributes towards its lowly position in the hierarchy of migrant choices. Those who can do so exercise their motility in order to find alternatives to village based work, thereby adding a narrative dimension to migration which is key to understanding how mobility dynamics are linked to structured inequality. Rather than being purely economic, mobility decisions are made on the basis of attitudes towards the value of migration, and by extension the value of those that undertake them. Those unable to select a favoured course – including the poorest, but also older people and either men or women depending on the context – are therefore deprived not only in economic, but also normative terms.

**5.3 Space, Wealth and Urban Motility**

In a village context, wealth is readily associable with scale. Not only is land – valued in large part by area – moving increasingly into the possession of the better off (Dwyer, 2015; Un and So, 2011; Bulgaski and Pred, 2009), but mobility is facilitated by vehicles that are valuable as well as useful. Nevertheless, the mobility of migrant workers in an urban context requires an alternative lens. It remains spatially defined, but the geography of that space is non-linear and socially embedded. In particular, it is governed by power relations and narratives of distinction that segregate migrant areas from the “non-migrant” mainstream of the city.

Indeed, in migrant Phnom Penh, land and power are linked. The statement offered by an urban deputy village head, that ‘rented room owners are the most important people in the community’ (Deputy Village Head of Teuk Thla, cited in Parsons et al., 2014: 12) is not merely a sign of deference, but refers to the patriarchal role many rented room owners play for the overwhelming majority of migrants who rent their urban accommodation. Many blocks, generally excluding only a selection of the cheapest available, are gated and locked by the owner each evening, creating both a tangible boundary to the “territory” of the owner and a durable constraint on the mobility of their tenants, who are rarely given a key but must ask permission to enter or exit after a certain time.

Moreover, this protective role is complemented by a pastoral one. As one such owner related: ‘Some of the people in my rooms have been with me for sixteen years now…The parents [of others] ask me to look after them while they work here, so I speak to them and ask them not to spend too much of their salary [on themselves]’ (Rented Room Owner, 21/06/13). For women, in particular, these personal sanctions are further strengthened by norms of familial duty on the one hand and the threat of being labelled a ‘broken woman’ (Derks, 2008: 170) on the other. Many landlords adopt a critical outlook on the behaviour of their residents, accusing them of ‘always bringing boys back to their room in the evening, who then leave in the early morning...eat with them and have to be paid for’ (Rented Room Owner, 21/06/13).

Fear of falling foul of such criticism inhibits mobility for many, but it does not mean that all women are equally immobile. Rather, it leads them to participate in different activities to their male counterparts, such as visits to the local market and trips to the Phnom Penh riverside on days off. These are viewed as acceptable pastimes for those with the time and disposable income to undertake them. However, the need to maximise overtime and remittances limits the number for whom these are possible. Consequently, only wealthier migrants are able to engage with a life outside the confines of their living space and workplace. For the rest, who either ‘stay at home every day’ (Lida, 13/08/13) or, at best, ‘just talk to each other, sometimes in one room, sometimes in another’ (Srey Mom, 06/08/13), urban life rarely extends beyond the confines of a residential block, and place of work.

This spatial segregation feeds into, and emerges from, a strong social distinction between migrants and non-migrants which is notable in a country whose urban population arrived relatively recently. Although the vast majority of Phnom Penh’s “native” urbanites took up residence in the city for the first time in the 1980s and 1990s, they envision and perform complete distinction between themselves and those who have arrived more recently in search of migrant work. Those who retain their rural conservatism run the risk of being labelled a ‘*neak srai*’ [rice person] (Derks, 2008: 163), a term laced with pejorative connotations and even those stallholders who gain up to ‘ninety percent of [their] custom’ from migrants (Shopkeeper and rented room owner, 21/06/13) cast moral aspersions on their customers, complaining that ‘only about one in ten are good’ (Shopkeeper and rented room owner, 21/06/13), or that:

‘The difference between Phnom Penh people and migrants is that migrant people talk a lot…behind each others’ backs. My family and I never speak like this’ (Cham Jao Shopkeeper, 14/08/13).

Nevertheless, this narrative is not universally applied, but nuanced by a cultural discourse linking rural household wealth to culturally disparaged traits such as gossip, greed, and an explicit concern with money:

‘People come here because of very bad conditions in their home villages, especially related to debt. However, they often have to borrow money to come here in the first place, so after sending back [these extra] repayments they often have no money left at the end of the month, even to eat…Already [in the last three months] two people have cheated me by borrowing money and escaping.’ (Cham Jao Shopkeeper, 14/08/13).

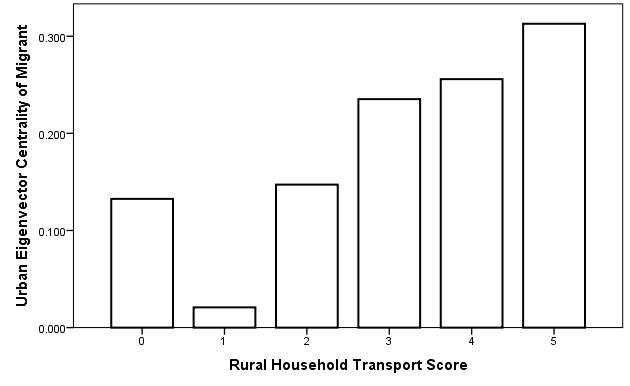
From the reverse perspective, this narrative is reinforced by rural villages, who emphasise the role of remittances and rural household circumstances in creating substantial restrictions on their incomes. For instance, as villagers from Krang Youv related:

‘If a family is badly affected by debt, then they will find a member to migrate and work off the debt. When it is paid off they will come back, as it is very hard work. Nevertheless, if people have a family member in a garment factory, then they will take out a loan and use the remittances to pay it back every month. It is very easy to get a microfinance loan if you have a family member in a factory’ (Focus Group, 03/06/13)

As such, both migrants and non-migrants recognise that urban migrant livelihoods are determined translocally, rather than directly. Moreover, the key role of remittances is explicitly noted. That wealthier households require lower or no remittance payments frees up a greater proportion of urban income to spend on leisure, network building, and investment. Indeed, as shown in the quantitative data, this relationship is a strong one: the social worlds of migrant workers from Krang Youv are directly linked to the endowments of their rural households.

Figure 4 compares the urban social network integration of migrants in the sample, measured according to the eigenvector centrality method described above[[3]](#footnote-3), with a “transport score” assigned to each of these migrants’ rural households as a broad metric of mobility. It assigns each household a score on the basis of three transport assets: bicycles, motorbikes and cars. Each bicycle raises a household’s transport score by 1, each motorbike by 2 and each car by 3. Thus, a household with 1 bicycle, 1, motorbike and 1 car would be assigned a transport score of 6.

Organising the data in this way reveals a significant correlation between rural mobility, reflected in household transport scores, and urban social network integration (Spearmans=0.421, p=0.02). Although those households possessing no transport constitute a slight outlier in this data – potentially denoting the non-usage of bicycles amongst older couples, widows, or widowers, whose children are likely to be older and therefore to have spent more time as migrants – the overall trend is clear. Rural mobility appears to be closely linked to the social network integration of migrant members.

Figure 4. Rural Household Mobility against Urban Social Integration 

With social networks and spatial mobility being so closely intertwined (Boenisch and Schneider, 2010), the scalar delimitations on migrants’ urban livelihoods are therefore rooted in rural mobility and underpinned by the wealth differentials highlighted in section 5.1. Indeed, not only is the relationship between wealth and network building noted elsewhere in the literature (Parsons, 2016; James and Vira, 2012; Simone, 2008), but the inequities in circumstances that engender it, are clearly visible in the qualitative data. As two non-remitting migrants explained, Phnom Penh for the better off is a place ‘to go to the riverside…visit friends and drink and eat something together’ (Soki, 09/08/13) or to hire a motodop for the ‘30km ride to Phnom Sa’ang on holidays’ (Sopi, 25/06/13). They are free to pursue leisure in the city and its surrounds whilst the rest are, to varying degrees, bound by the twin constraints of financial restriction and narrative denigration.

Thus, the young garment worker who ‘always go[es] out every weekend with her friends’ (Lin Da, 30/07/13) in order to shop for the latest trends, is a class apart from the one who, approaching middle age and with no end in sight, works seven days a week to pay medical bills or debt. Whilst the former possesses a degree of motility in the city, the latter lacks almost any, leaving no option but to pass her few hours of leisure ‘staying alone in [her] rented room’ (Win Bun, 02/07/13). In this context, the importance of a locally defined interpretation of scale becomes clear. The extremities of a migrant enclave – and within that, of a block of rented rooms – are therefore a spatial delineation permeable to some and not to others. Traversing this boundary requires a form of motility not rooted in income, but in rural assets, networks, and norms of social value and gender that cross-cut the broader landscape of translocal inequality.

Consequently, the decoupling of wealth, mobility and distance that has underpinned much of the recent work on translocal societies (Rogaly and Thieme, 2012; Bastia, 2011; Rigg et al., 2008; Rigg, 2006) may be challenged through a multi-scalar lens. For the less well off, on both an inter- and intra-household basis, high mobility in one place and at one scale of a translocal livelihood is counterbalanced by low motility at another place and scale. Only the wealthiest and most socially privileged enjoy motility of migration, alongside freedom of movement in both origin and destination. By contrast, the livelihoods of the poorest are translocally static: they are not only a ‘kinetic underclass’ (Pirie, 2009: 22) in one place, but in multiple places and at multiple scales simultaneously.

**6. Conclusion**

Farming is a livelihood in which the value of space has traditionally delineated clearly. Farmers are defined by their control of space; their personal wealth assessed overwhelmingly by the area of land in their possession. However, amidst the complex mobility of translocal Cambodia, this direct relationship between wealth and space has – as elsewhere (Lampietti et al., 2009; Scott, 1985) – become obfuscated by the presence of alternative and extra-village income sources. Indeed, the rising diversity of rural livelihoods has for some time resulted in the assumption the historic linkage between wealth and space in rural areas is loosening (Rigg et al., 2008; Rigg, 2006).

Nevertheless, as recent years have seen geographers turn attention increasingly to the relationship between mobility and inequality, new lenses have emerged through which to envision the relationship between mobility, motility and wealth in translocal livelihoods. In particular, building on recent advances in the mobilities literature, scholars have begun to appreciate the nuanced manner in which people's ability to move is linked to their assets and status in relation to others (Cohen and Gösling, 2015; Rogaly and Thieme, 2012; Silvey, 2008).

The insights of these studies have been used to draw wider inferences about the nature of scale in relation to mobility (Rogaly, 2015). In particular, the need to adopt a more subjective perspective, receptive to the contextual, gendered and narrative dimensions of scale, has been posited (Gorman-Murray and Nash, 2014). However, in seeking to retain meaningful linkages between mobility and inequality, this position is problematic. Inequality is subjective (Amiel, 1999) but also structural (Kalleberg et al., 2004), and it is this more structured dimension of movement that the new mobilities paradigm has been criticised for failing to adequately address (Manderscheid, 2014).

As shown herein, both systematic and narrative perspectives on mobility are necessary to address the relationship between distance, space and value. Translocal livelihoods cannot be interpreted according to a single cultural narrative, but rather comprise several interlocking, mutually influential, community lifeworlds (Rogaly and Thieme, 2012; Silvey, 2008, 2004). Each of these overlapping discourses is rooted in physical and social assets and systems. However, the relational nature of space and scale (Jones, 2009) means that space, and mobility within it, are valued differently.

Thus, space remains a vital indicator, and facilitator, of wealth. What has changed is that translocal livelihoods are lived across multiple places. Since each place values distance according to an endogenously determined scale, this means that the value of space differs in different contexts. Nevertheless, the example of Krang Youv highlights that if the multiple scalar values characteristic of translocal livelihoods are considered in concert, then they emerge as an asset possessed and used in covariance with wealth. Inequality, consequently, is an inherently multi-scalar phenomenon.

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**Appendix A: A Brief Exposition of the Eigenvector Calculation**

Eigenvector centrality is a measure of how central a node (in network parlance, vertex) is to a network. It assigns a relative score to each of the nodes in a given network, based on the principle that connections (edges) to well connected nodes are more “valuable” than connections to poorly connected nodes. As such, it has been posited as a useful means of measuring power and asymmetric relations within social networks (Bonaccich and Lloyd, 2001) given that, under such circumstances:

‘in a communication network being connected to well-connected individuals adds more to one's knowledge pool. Having popular friends adds more to ones own popularity’ (Bonacich and Lloyd, 2004: 1).

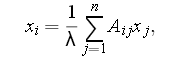
Thus, the eigenvector centrality measure is a variant of the degree score in network analysis. One of the earliest and most basic measures of network integration, it simply adds together the number of connections possessed by each node, in order to assign it a score.

Thus, ‘the degree of a vertex in a network is the number of edges attached to it. In mathematical terms, the degree centrality = the number of degrees possessed by a vertex . The degree score of a vertex may therefore be calculated as follows:



As noted above, however, eigenvector centrality seeks to move beyond raw degree score by assigning a higher value to better connected connections.

Thus, in a network comprising  and , the centrality  of a given vertex  may be described as:



Where is a constant and  is the adjacency matrix (i.e.  =1 if  and  are connected and 0 otherwise.

Equations and explanations adapted from Newman (2008)

1. For further details on eigenvector centrality see Appendix A. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This is a high rate of pay even by the standards of migrant work. For example, $7 per day is somewhat higher than garment workers’ daily salaries, which amounted in 2013 to around $4.50 after overtime. The three free meals on offer are also highly significant. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For more details on eigenvector centrality and its calculation see Appendix A. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)