



# *Who's Listening?*

Tackling hard issues with empathy

Using Facilitative Listening Design to understand and respond to  
anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodian communities

SUYHEANG KRY AND RAYMOND HYMA

*Edited by* Melissa Martin and Karen Simbulan



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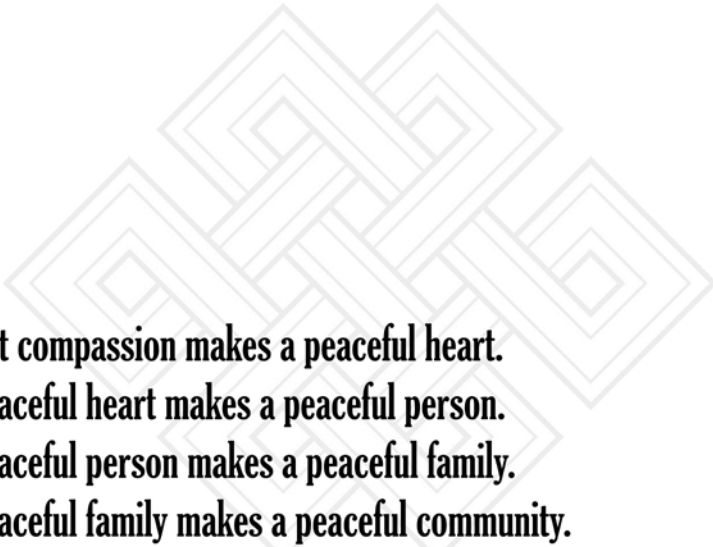
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The views expressed in this book come directly from the voices of community members who shared their perspectives, the research team who reflected on the findings and their experiences, the analysts who reviewed the recorded data, and the authors who translated it all to written form. They do not reflect the position of any particular organisation or partner involved in the implementation or publication of this work.



**Great compassion makes a peaceful heart.  
A peaceful heart makes a peaceful person.  
A peaceful person makes a peaceful family.  
A peaceful family makes a peaceful community.  
A peaceful community makes a peaceful nation.  
A peaceful nation makes a peaceful world.**

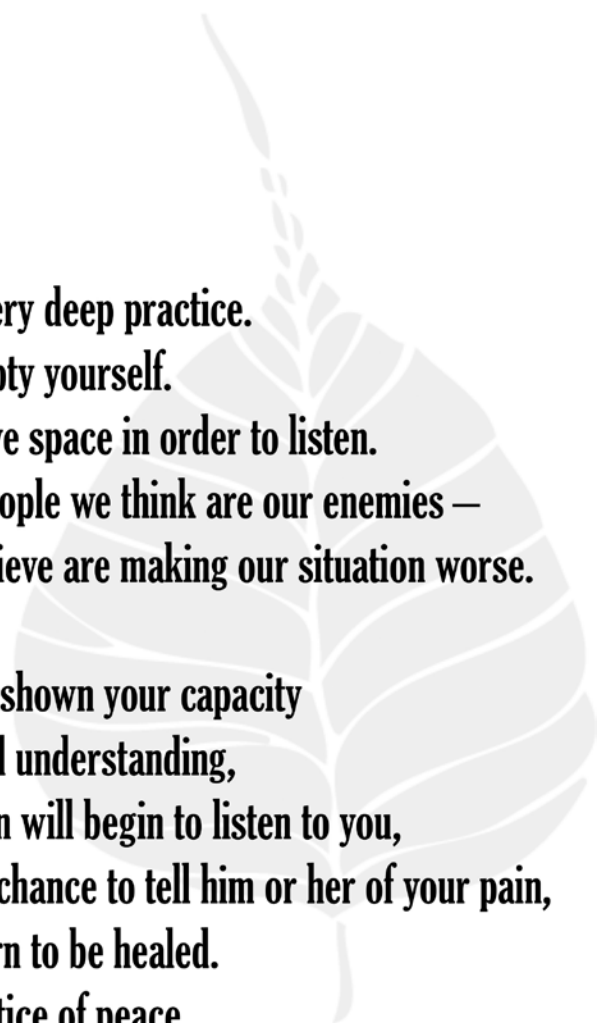
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This work was carried out through the generous support and collaboration among several partners.



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អាស៊ីម៉ង់  
DEUTSCHE ZUSAMMENARBEIT





**Listening is a very deep practice.  
You have to empty yourself.  
You have to leave space in order to listen.  
Especially to people we think are our enemies —  
the ones we believe are making our situation worse.**

**When you have shown your capacity  
for listening and understanding,  
the other person will begin to listen to you,  
and you have a chance to tell him or her of your pain,  
and it's your turn to be healed.  
This is the practice of peace.**

**THÍCH NHẤT HẠNH**  
BUDDHIST MONK AND PEACE ACTIVIST

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**Listening means taking a second  
to consider what they're saying,  
not just hearing words.**

ANONYMOUS



# *Preface*

Listening is partly a natural-born human instinct, partly a long-practised skill. We learn much more by listening than we do by speaking. The two of us have been working with listening approaches to better understand others for a number of years. In fact, we first met for a listening research project in Myanmar where we got to know each other as we listened to the vastly diverse voices of different ethnic and religious communities across the country. At that time, we worked strictly as ‘outsiders’, extending our best efforts to contribute to transforming a conflict that had raged for decades. We worked first and foremost with our ‘Listeners’, those that went out to hear from others who shared their stories and opinions. Over many trips back-and-forth between Cambodia and Myanmar, we explored different methodologies and peacebuilding interventions to bring people together, or at the very least to try and talk to each other. We had successes, we suffered failures, but we learned by listening and by sharing our findings with others.

It was during that period we occasionally found brief moments to compare our work in Myanmar to what we observed living in Cambodia. After long days planning, writing, and listening, we would often finish off with a reflective and intimate chat discussing how we saw conflict in a contemporary “post-conflict” Cambodian society. One of us is a Chinese Cambodian, the other a Canadian having spent some years working in Cambodia. We compared our perceptions noting sometimes the stark differences, and other times the sheer similarities in our views. We more often than not ended up discussing anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia, and linking it to what we were hearing from Burmese, Shan, Karen, Pa’O, Rakhine, and many other ethnic groups in Myanmar, including even the passionate opinions about the Rohingya Muslims. We dreamed about the possibilities of one day applying many of the lessons learned abroad right here in Cambodia.

We are thrilled to share with you the fruits of that dream and those ambitious conversations over the years. Individually, we have both been working on anti-Vietnamese sentiment issues in Cambodia to some extent since then, but this publication really brings together our thinking and experience using an adapted approach that we call Facilitative Listening Design. We genuinely believe that it is an invaluable multi-purpose tool, and agree that everybody should have the opportunity to use it. We think that it has the potential to help anyone or any group to reach deeper

mutual understanding and work towards listening to others that they may not otherwise have the chance to interact with.

This collaboration has been massive. The opportunity to connect and collaborate with so many like-minded organisations and individuals has left us both awestruck. The initiative could not have happened without the support of the Nexus Fund, an innovative and pioneering organisation that is working relentlessly around the world to better understand and counter dangerous speech. Our long-time supporting partners at the Mennonite Central Committee and Pangea Giving enthusiastically backed our ideas and encouraged us to expand our work into a new area where we might be able to make a difference. Likewise, our gratitude goes out to our German friends at GIZ's Civil Peace Service and at Heinrich Böll Stiftung who met us during the process, listened to our ideas, and kept us motivated with their own observations as 'outsiders' in this sensitive and often difficult area of work. We also deeply appreciate our conflict transformation comrades at the Peace Mask Project in Japan who have continued to collaborate with us to develop more artistic approaches to peacebuilding and take these recent learnings further.

We could never have recruited such ideal candidates to carry out the fieldwork without our incredibly helpful colleagues at SARUS, Khmer Community Development, and Green Youth Entrepreneurship. Our cherished editors, who are also long-time colleagues with immense experience in listening methodology and other research and peacebuilding approaches, truly came in and got the job done with countless revisions and final touches. Our media analysts showed real flexibility working through the early months and searching out articles and online postings in an almost infinite world of endless media sources and commentary. Our "Listeners", who went out to actually have conversations across the city of Phnom Penh and brought back what they heard, are the foundation of the work you will read about as you turn the pages. These twelve motivated and brave young peacebuilders chose to step out of their comfort zone and address a sensitive issue through often difficult conversations. And last, but far from least, our profound gratefulness and respect go out to all the Sharers who opened their minds and their hearts to our Listeners, often disclosing deep thoughts and sometimes uncomfortable truths. All the content in this publication focusing on the issue of anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia attempts to reflect, as directly as possible, their

voices, and recognises their full ownership of this work.

This book is written for anyone with a curiosity to learn about another. Whether that be the disavowed family member, the neighbour, the friend, the adversary, or even the villain, let this book inspire and guide you to listen to “the other”, regardless of what you might hear.

Suyheang Kry and Raymond Hyma





**Every person has a story.**





1

## INTRODUCTION TO THE INITIATIVE

Over the months of January to March 2017, twelve “Listeners” embarked on a quest to put aside their own assumptions and listen to people’s views on “the other”. The group of Listeners was diverse. Ethnic Khmer, Vietnamese, Chinese-Cambodian, and biracial or mixed individuals were recruited to engage in difficult conversations, primarily within their own ethnic communities. Some, however, also engaged in discussion with “the other” community to listen to a different perspective. This feat did not go without challenges, nor was it an easy assignment. Talking about ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia is not always a comfortable topic. There are particular historical, cultural, and social dynamics that come into play when bringing up what can be a contentious and divisive issue.

Anti-Vietnamese sentiment is commonly discussed in Cambodian media, and often examined in foreign-language media that tends to come from an outsider perspective. Complex and multiple factors contribute to perceptions about Vietnamese living in Vietnam and ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia. This initiative has sought to better understand anti-Vietnamese sentiment, both from a Khmer perspective and from an ethnic Vietnamese perspective, by engaging directly with the communities that confront and experience it on a day-to-day basis. Such is the belief that those directly involved in conflict, tension, or even more subtle forms of discrimination and negative sentiment, are the key actors that can observe, analyse, and act upon learnings and findings.

Listening Methodology as a research tool has been evolving over time through the contributions of researchers, non-governmental organisations, and civil society around the globe. It has been employed in diverse circumstances, often in order to better understand both longstanding and emerging issues. Listening is powerful. On a human level, we already know that the simple act of listening to somebody else can increase our knowledge and expand the depth of a conversation. Listening is also often the key precursor to solving problems and decreasing any misunderstanding between parties. Above all, listening is one of the cornerstones to building relationships. On a scientific level of inquiry, listening is already recognised as the foundation of any qualitative activity or methodology to contribute to knowledge generation – researchers must listen to their subjects before any analysis is carried out.

The pioneering tailored approach laid out in this publication, which we call

Facilitative Listening Design, was selected and developed for this initiative for a number of reasons. Firstly, talking about anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia is a difficult issue. It can lead to emotionally charged encounters and is a subject that some would rather avoid. Listening offers a less structured way to allow people to process their own thoughts on an issue as they explore how they feel on any given topic. Secondly, no matter how some issues are framed or explored, they will be considered highly political in certain contexts by particular actors. Although this initiative has taken a wholly non-political and neutral approach, anti-Vietnamese sentiment is inevitably seen as a political issue by many, and therefore leads to challenges in raising it as a conversation topic. Listening provides a more nuanced and open-minded framework to allow people to present their own words and thoughts on a topic without the pressure to identify political allegiances or beliefs. Thirdly, to some extent being a political issue, but also due to certain stigmas and social reality, fear is an unquestionable barrier to truthfully sharing feelings and experiences in a negative sentiment context. Many of our Listeners, those who went to talk with people in the communities, personally felt fear, particularly at the beginning when engaging people on this topic. Several Listeners experienced fearful moments in the field once they began collecting data through the process. Their own perceptions of the people whom they spoke with, especially in the case of the ethnic Vietnamese communities, convey that they may have also been fearful of even broadly talking about these issues informally. For all these reasons, a listening approach was chosen as the preferred way forward, to begin to better understand anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia from different perspectives in different communities.

The findings from the conversations are fascinating. Many unexpected thoughts and opinions extracted from the handwritten recorded exchanges challenge our own understanding of the topic, both for insiders and outsiders alike. The presentation of often raw and unfiltered opinions from everyday community members uniquely contributes to filling in important information gaps that have been overwhelmingly left out of academic discourse, media analyses, and prevailing narratives. What is even more striking, however, is the unexpected effect the methodology and process itself had on those involved. As peacebuilders and practitioners working towards resolving and transforming conflicts at multiple levels, our excitement further extends to the outcomes we have observed in

our group of young emerging researchers, NGO practitioners, students, and active community members. Facilitative Listening Design directly contributed to challenging many preconceptions among our very own Listeners. It also provided a unique and positive way forward to fostering more mutual understanding and team-building among groups that often hold negative sentiment towards each other.

With this in mind, the purpose of this publication is two-fold. On one end of the spectrum, it serves to share new and novel insights from real people on a contemporary issue. It explores opinions and perceptions of anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia from very different viewpoints. On the other, it reveals the internal process of this information gathering and transformational activity, and the potential of using Facilitative Listening Design to encourage critical thinking and discussion to move beyond protracted negative sentiment. In this second regard, it has surpassed the expectations of those involved in its delivery. This publication and the additional Facilitative Listening Design Handbook serve to share this design tool for everybody. Any community can take on this design and adapt it to develop its own empathetic listening approach to better understand others and positively transform relationships, and even conflict.



# 2

## **FACILITATIVE LISTENING DESIGN APPROACH, METHODS, AND IMPLEMENTATION**



Listening Methodology has been used in diverse contexts as an action research approach to better understand many topics of inquiry. In particular, it has been seen as an effective way to gather information and better understand people's views and opinions. It has often proven to be a less intrusive alternative to more structured surveys, interviews, or questionnaires. Pioneered by CDA Collaborative Learning Projects through their ground-breaking Listening Project in 2005, it first helped the international community to gain better understanding of those on the receiving-end of humanitarian aid and development assistance.

The methodology has since been adapted by other organisations, researchers, and practitioners for distinct purposes. It has shown potential, for example, in peace research, monitoring, and even serving as a tool for supporting conflict transformation among opposing groups. The Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies in Cambodia, for instance, has successfully adapted listening research to serve as an “outsider” assisted methodology to better understand diverging perspectives on conflict throughout Myanmar, and even monitor changes over time. Outward Bound Peacebuilding, a US-based organisation implementing an approach it calls “Experiential Peacebuilding”, has incorporated listening and related methodologies into its programming to bring together groups in conflict through structured exercises to listen, remember, and reflect. The Berkeley Lab, a national laboratory system at the University of California, has employed constructivist listening research to better understand diversity and inclusion within its own institution and subsequently act on results to improve operations.

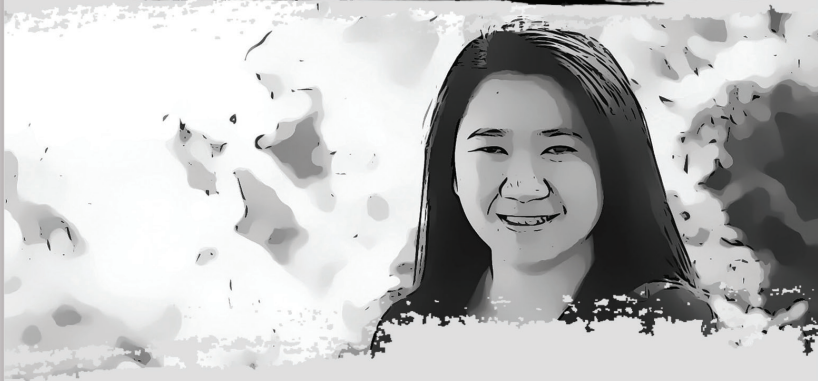
Facilitative Listening Design is an innovative adaptation of Listening Methodology. It is an “insider” human-to-human centred approach to better understand prevailing dynamics and explore sensitive topics that make for difficult conversations. It encourages deeper critical thinking and leverages the process to bring together groups at odds with each other and find solutions to protracted negative attitudes, stereotypes, or sentiment. It maintains the rigorous procedural and information-checking steps in conducting listening research, but puts a stronger emphasis on gaining relatively in-depth insight into a topic as a snapshot at a given moment.

The advantage in this context is that it can be carried out quickly and respond to situations in a timely manner. It is also discrete. Conversations can happen in private or can be informal in nature to provide anonymity to the participants. There is no need to connect any recorded information to the individuals who participated as all documentation happens after and away from where conversations took place. The conversational style of information-gathering can be employed nearly anywhere, even in extremely sensitive environments where conducting more traditional research, using audio recording or questionnaires, may not be feasible. With no need for papers or devices, participants can blend into different environments and engage with people simply as people rather than research participants. It can also be adapted to a range of cultural needs and communication styles depending on the context and the groups involved.

The flexibility of Facilitative Listening Design was of particular benefit to this initiative which began to test the gathering of first-hand thoughts and observations regarding anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia. Facilitative Listening Design can be implemented to engage in difficult discussions and adapt to individual conversations as needed. With a focus on maintaining a level of comfort for all involved, it provides the space and lead-way to engage in difficult or uncomfortable issues. It strives to access real feelings and personal perspectives, but is as much about balancing a comfortable environment to share as it is about providing a direction to steer conversations and collect important information.

## WADING INTO CONFLICT

*A peacebuilder's rationale for wading into something uncomfortable*



Suyheang Kry is a Cambodian peacebuilder and one of the designers of this initiative. As the project leader, she is the first to admit that it took some courage to commit to a topic that is very much a conflict she sees and experiences on a daily basis. Being an insider, she was initially unsure how effective she could be in leading a process to understand different perspectives in a context she was all too familiar with.

Suyheang was inspired to explore the issue of anti-Vietnamese sentiment in her country for both personal and professional reasons. In an independent interview, she talked about her reasons for getting involved in a controversial issue in Cambodia.

"I'm Khmer," she says. "But ethnically I'm Chinese, so technically I might be called Chinese Cambodian. I grew up in a Khmer environment, but I was also exposed to Vietnamese living here through our family business."

Suyheang knows from her own personal upbringing that anti-Vietnamese sentiment exists in the minds of many, if not most, Cambodians. As a contemporary peacebuilding practitioner, she is aware that dynamics leading to such sentiment are not unique or isolated to her country.

She also noticed a lack of women's voices on the issue both in Cambodia and over in Vietnam. Suyheang saw a great need for incorporating more female voices on this issue and bringing in gendered perspectives to the analysis and in the potential solutions to really move forward.

"I am, of course, personally interested in this issue," she reflects. "Though I am firstly committed to transforming conflict wherever it might be, and using creative methods that might work to reach into the hearts and minds of people everywhere. At the very core, we are humans after all, and humans are much stronger together in diversity than we are divided. I believe any conflict can be addressed through non-violent means."

In order to better understand the prevailing dynamics at play in contemporary anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia, this initiative served as a modest pilot to test Facilitative Listening Design in a limited number of communities in the capital city of Phnom Penh. In addition, a second component to explore the grassroots impact of potential dangerous speech pertaining to ethnic Vietnamese in both traditional and social media was incorporated into the design. The communities selected were all well known to have considerable ethnic Vietnamese populations living either side-by-side or nearby mainstream Khmer populations.

### **Facilitative Listening Design – Steps for implementing the project**

The general procedure of a Facilitative Listening Design approach was carried out to better understand thoughts and opinions about the relations between Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese. It incorporated, however, an additional media analysis activity to explore connecting narratives in the media and everyday conversations in the target communities.



**Be the change you wish to see in the world.**

MAHATMA GANDHI



## **Listener recruitment**

The first undertaking was to create a team of multi-functioning data collectors, conversationalists, and community outreach workers who we refer to as “Listeners”. Given that this was the first Facilitative Listening Design project in the context of anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia, a degree of effort was made to select twelve Listeners that had some background in peacebuilding, conflict transformation, or community work experience. Organisations working in related fields were contacted to scope out potential candidates to join the initiative as volunteer Listeners. With an initial goal to reach both Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese communities, Listener recruitment entailed finding members from both groups. Locating ethnic Vietnamese Listeners was particularly difficult. Both due to a lack of network connections and often to an immediate sense of suspicion when approaching this community with a predominately Khmer team.

A diverse group of Listeners was formed a few weeks before the starting date to train and implement Facilitative Listening Design. The group designated to engage with Khmer participants (referred to as “Sharers”) consisted mainly of Khmer and ethnic Chinese Cambodians. The group intending to reach out to ethnic Vietnamese communities comprised of ethnic Vietnamese and bi-racial individuals with fluency in both Vietnamese and Khmer. There was one exception, however, with the inclusion of a Khmer Listener paired with a Vietnamese Listener. Together they formed a distinct mixed team to test the potential of listening to the other side, or in other words, to experience hearing the views of the opposing group (see Listening to the “Other” on page 125). All Listeners were young, ranging from 18 to 29 years-old. There were eight females and four males. Most were students or NGO staff working on peace or development issues.

Once the entire listening team of twelve was established, pairs were made within the two groups to begin working together in the selected communities. Some pairs already knew each other and had an existing personal or professional relationship while others did not meet until the initial Facilitative Listening Design Coaching and Training Lab.

Conversation facilitation and recording tools

Facilitative Listening Design uses fully adaptable and tailorable tools to assist in smooth and effective conversations as well as to discretely record and begin initial analysis on the range of issues and themes heard across the conversations. The following tools were developed and customised for this particular initiative to explore anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia from various perspectives.

<i>Consent check</i>	The consent check was designed to ensure Sharers understood the purpose of this Facilitative Listening Design initiative and to gain permission to use information from their conversations in the analysis and publication of the work. Initially, a readable consent and understanding outline was developed with the intention to convey to the Sharer at the beginning of every conversation. However, due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the concern by Listeners to carry documentation fully explaining the project in potentially hostile environments, this was adapted to be included as part of an oral introduction in the conversation inquiry. Listeners then later noted whether consent had been given once they recorded their conversations.
<i>Conversation inquiry</i>	A conversation inquiry was developed to help guide and frame the conversations as well as steer the direction of the discussion if needed. First drafted by the initiative designers, a range of probing and follow-up questions were considered to facilitate a conversation assisted by active listening and demonstrated interest. During the Facilitative Listening Design Coaching and Training Lab, Listeners worked together to assess, discuss, and modify the conversation inquiries into both local Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese contexts.



Though similar, two versions of the conversation inquiry were designed to be tailored with slight nuances for each target community.

**Khmer Conversation Inquiry** (includes other non-ethnic Vietnamese groups such as Cham Muslims, ethnic Chinese, etc.)

*Perceptions of Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese relations in the community*

1. How do you identify yourself?
2. How do you view Vietnamese communities? Do you think there are differences in the Vietnamese community? Can you share what groups, if any, exist within the Vietnamese community?
3. How do you see general anti-Vietnamese sentiment in your community, in the country?
4. What is your own opinion on ethnic Vietnamese people?

*Experiences and effects*

5. Have you seen any incidents of negative sentiment between Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia? Please share.
6. Do you personally have any interaction with ethnic Vietnamese people? How are those interactions?
7. What is the most serious incident you have seen or heard about in the news? How do you feel about it?

*Future concerns, solutions, moving forward*

8. How do you see anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia in the future? Improving/Deteriorating?
9. What do you think needs to happen to improve the situation?
10. What could you personally do to contribute to improving the situation/relations?

**Ethnic Vietnamese Conversation Inquiry**

*Perceptions of ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer relations in the community*

	<div>1. How do you identify yourself? Are there different kinds of ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia? Can you share what groups, if any, exist within the Vietnamese community?</div> <div>2. How to you see general anti-Vietnamese sentiment in your community, in the country?</div> <div>3. What is your own opinion on Khmer people?</div> <div>Experiences and effects</div> <div>4. Have you seen or experienced any incidents of negative sentiment? Please share.</div> <div>5. Do you personally have any interaction with Khmer? How are those interactions?</div> <div>6. What is the most serious incident you have seen or heard about in the news regarding your community? How do you feel about it?</div> <div>Future concerns, solutions, moving forward</div> <div>7. How do you see anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia in the future? Improving/Deteriorating?</div> <div>8. What do you think needs to happen to improve the situation?</div> <div>9. What could you personally do to contribute to improving the situation/relations?</div>
Notepad and pencil (optional)	A notepad and pencil were the only materials allowed to be brought into the conversation. Some Listeners planned to use notepads to infrequently make note of any particular quotations of significance from the Sharer that were deemed worth recording directly. However, once Listeners went to the field, most decided that having a notepad during the conversation was more of a hindrance than a benefit. Due to the sensitive nature of the conversations and some suspicions on the part of Sharers, many Listeners later conveyed that they decided to leave their notebooks behind and have conversations without anything on the table. Instead they focused on remembering any interesting quotations and recorded them down

	as soon as the conversation was finished.
<i>Conversation log</i>	<p>The conversation log served as one of the key recording tools to capture the details of the Sharers' thoughts, opinions, and perceptions based on their conversation with the Listeners. Since conversations were conducted by listening pairs, each conversation had two separate conversation logs, one recorded by each Listener. Listeners usually completed this individual exercise immediately after the conversation. Each Listener worked alone to fill out the conversation log beginning with demographic information. They then used the space provided to recap the conversation and highlight main themes or points expressed by the Sharer. A concluding section was used for providing up to three quotations that may have been written down on the notepad or that they recorded by memory. In the final section, they included any details, dynamics, or observations that they wished to disclose about the conversation or the Sharer from their own perspectives.</p>
<i>Daily journal</i>	<p>Normally following a day of several conversations, Listeners worked together to reflect and analyse what they heard over all conversations in their daily journal. Most used it to highlight re-occurring themes they heard in several instances, contrasts or differences among the Sharers, and issues they might have disagreed on or have understood differently. Both Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese listening groups engaged in conversations on certain days over the three-week period. For each day they spoke with Sharers, whether it was with one or with many, they made a joint-entry in the daily journal to recap and reflect what they both</p>

	<p>heard. If Listeners did not necessarily agree on what they each heard, they made note of that in the daily journal for later discussion and clarification with the analysts.</p>
<i>Photo chronicle</i>	<p>Listening pairs were encouraged to use photography to later assist in narrating their journey to the communities they went to. They were advised to use discretion and avoid taking recognisable photos of Sharers or any individuals, and instead focus on capturing community infrastructure, views of daily life, and scenes that help to explain something they had heard or experienced while carrying out the fieldwork. A large number of photos were collected from communities across Phnom Penh. The photos gave insight into daily scenes, community life, and sometimes even dynamics between people. Some photos have been selected and shared in this book. Others have been used for sketches and included to share a glimpse of everyday life in communities and also to show how Facilitative Listening Design was implemented.</p>

**Facilitative Listening Design Coaching and Training Lab**

Listeners, project staff, and initiative designers were brought together for a two-and-a-half-day training lab in the heart of Phnom Penh’s ethnic Vietnamese community in the Chbar Ampov neighbourhood. For the Listeners, it was the first time they had stayed in this part of the city. Carrying out the initial training lab in one of the target communities was beneficial to the Listeners, who had opportunities to familiarise with the community’s demographics and surroundings. In addition, having the chance to stay together in the same accommodation over the course of the lab helped to support team and relationship-building among the listening pairs and the group as a whole.

The training lab focused on coaching Listeners how to implement Facilitative Listening Design in the context of better understanding anti-Vietnamese sentiment. Fundamental research skills, active listening techniques, and bias recognition were all incorporated into training and group exercises to reflect and learn first-hand how to leverage everyday listening as an information gathering approach. A Facilitative Listening Design draft conversation inquiry, namely probing and follow-up questions that could be used to foster a richer conversation as it progressed, was shared with the Listeners. They worked together with the initiative designers to adapt it through a cultural and linguistic localisation process in order to carry out smoother conversations with those that would eventually share information with them. Conversation recording tools were shared and studied by the Listeners to get familiar with how to document what they heard after their interactions through a step-by-step process happening both individually and in pairs. Planning sessions also took place to consider where each pair would work as well with whom they intended to speak. This included consideration of appropriate demographics, logistics, and practical ways they would embark upon finding people to participate in the project as Sharers.

Before completing the coaching and training lab, all Listeners were tasked with going out in the hosting community and engaging in a conversation. This included using all the tools available to later record it and reflect with their listening partners. Through the test run, they gained a practical understanding of the process and the challenges that would follow when they eventually went to their designated communities alone in pairs. It also provided an opportunity for project staff and designers to assess the feasibility and appropriateness of the process and tools provided, as well as identify any potential problems with the Listeners themselves. The Listeners were brought back together following their first conversation to assess the process, share any challenges, and refine their techniques in locating Sharers and effectively communicating with them. Overall, the trial run went smoothly with six conversations carried out and general confidence that Listeners were ready to begin listening in their target areas.

## Conversations in the field

Following the Facilitative Listening Design Coaching and Training Lab, listening pairs went to their designated communities to engage in conversations. For most of the pairs, the first day was used to get familiar with the locale, evaluate any security concerns, and assess the potential for meeting people and starting conversations. In some cases, where Listeners did not feel comfortable or conveyed difficulty in approaching community members, project staff connected with established community contacts to serve as initial guides and connectors to local Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese residents.

The schedule of the pairs differed depending on their own availability and co-ordination. They were all able to complete the listening fieldwork within three weeks. This was considered ideal in order to benefit from relatively fresh memory of the conversations and the process when reconvening.

**Speak in such a way that others love to listen to you.  
Listen in such a way that others love to speak to you.**

ANONYMOUS



## HOW CONVERSATIONS GET STARTED AND RECORDED

### *Out in the field*

Despite creating a typically unstructured free-flowing conversational environment between the Listeners and the Sharer, there is in fact a structured process in place. It does not only assist in guiding a natural conversation, but it also considers how to record what is being heard without being intrusive. After locating a potential Sharer, Listeners invite him or her to sit down in an informal setting. The conversation often takes place in a café, at the workplace or home of the Sharer, or even in the back of a motorised tuk tuk if that seems to be the right venue to talk freely. Armed at times with only a notepad and a pencil, or often without any materials at all, one Listener usually leads in the dialogue while the other pays more attention to listening and observing unspoken cues.

After the conversation finishes, the pair generally separates and fills in their individual conversation logs for that particular exchange. This fairly consistent process takes place a number of times over the day until they finish. As a concluding exercise, they reflect on all the conversations they had in their daily journal, recording together, and making note of both similar and differing themes they may have heard across all the conversations. They also discuss any disagreements they have in terms of understanding what they heard, which does happen since we tend to hear and perceive things differently. The process leverages recent memory and places importance on recording as soon as possible. It also serves as a first layer of analysis since the process of listening and remembering what was heard is helpful to identify particularly relevant and impressionable information. Having Listeners contribute to the first stage of analysis of their own data is essential in developing a framework for further analysis if the project is to focus on findings for research or a more comprehensive understanding of a given subject.



## Media analysis

A two-month media analysis over the same time period as the planning and implementation of the conversations was conducted by two team members independent from the Facilitative Listening Design fieldwork. Recognising the power of the media to enter the minds and hearts of those who consume it, the objective of a media analysis was to identify examples of anti-Vietnamese sentiment, and if present, whether those narratives were detected in field conversations occurring in communities. One team member was tasked with monitoring traditional media comprising mainly of printed and online newspapers. The other stayed up-to-date with social media postings and interactive commentary on Facebook. Both analysts focused on media coverage related to Vietnamese or ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. They collected published stories and circulated postings through keyword searches in both general and media-specific search engines.

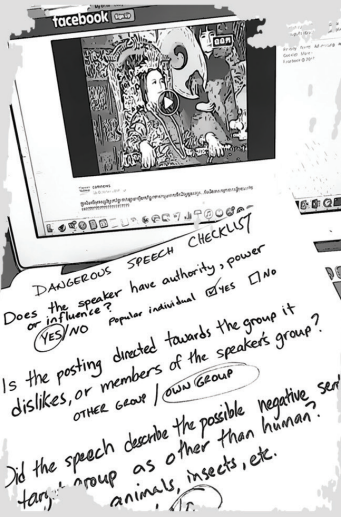
The social media analysis included the application of a tool known as the Dangerous Speech framework in order to determine the extent that any online postings could be considered dangerous or hate speech. Dangerous Speech monitoring involves analysis of the media by answering specific questions related to the source. For the collection of social media sources showing indication of anti-Vietnamese sentiment, the following questions were asked:

- Q1. Does the speaker have authority, power or influence? Popular individual? Y/N
- Q2. Is the posting directed towards the group it dislikes, or members of the speaker's group? Other group/Own group
- Q3. Did the speech describe the possible negative sentiment target group as other than human? ex. animals, insects, etc. Y/N (if Y, please indicate word)
- Q4. Did the speech make it sound like the audience faced serious danger from the "other" group? Y/N
- Q5. Were there underlying or previous conflicts between relevant groups? Y/N
- Q6. Can you see this speech or message repeated similarly in other posts or messages? Y/N



## USING THE DANGEROUS SPEECH FRAMEWORK TO MONITOR FACEBOOK

*How social media reaches the hearts and minds of people*



In the United States, an initiative known as the Dangerous Speech Project tests whether certain types of public speech could lead to violence, and if so, explores possible ways to prevent it. Dangerous Speech is a type of hate speech, but specifically refers to public speech that has a likely chance to incite violence.

The project has developed one of the only existing Dangerous Speech frameworks for monitoring, which can serve to warn people about future violence based on what is being said in public. The framework focuses on five main aspects that help us measure just how critical public Dangerous Speech might be any given moment. It asks straightforward questions about the speaker, the audience, the content of the speech, the socio-historical context, and how the speech was delivered.

As various themes began to emerge from the keyword searches related to the anti-Vietnamese sentiment media analysis, a post from each was chosen for further examination with the Dangerous Speech framework. A member of the media analysis team scrutinised Facebook posts and commentary related to the topic. Through the framework, twenty posts representing different common themes were easily categorised into levels of Dangerous Speech.

The application of this tool in this project shows us that the framework works well to classify social media postings. It is quick to use and adapts to a fast-paced and ever-changing online platform where information and opinions appear at high speeds.

## **Information Processing and Transformative Space Lab (Info-Space Lab)**

After carrying out conversations in the respective communities, a second lab took place. This occurred three weeks following the initial Facilitative Listening Design Coaching and Training Lab. The Information Processing and Transformative Space Lab, informally called the Info-Space Lab, was centred on two primary objectives – Firstly to process information and data that Listeners heard directly from conversations they had with Sharers. Secondly, to provide a safe and encouraging space for Listeners to reflect on and express any impact Facilitative Listening Design may have had on them, their own perceptions of the issues, and any personal or group transformation that may have occurred over the course of the project.

The first goal - to collect and process information from Sharers - was achieved through intensive pair work and presentations to the full group on their findings. After submitting all reporting documentation, including conversation logs, daily journals, and photo chronicles, pairs once again applied their memory to provide an overall breakdown of the ideas, topics, and themes they heard most often in their conversations. Each pair presented to the whole group and answered follow-up questions from a small analysis team comprised of project staff, designers, and external note-takers for further clarification and deeper analysis. Following all presentations, the analysis team held a session to discuss reoccurring themes, identify any patterns, and discuss reliability of the data.

During the session, one of the important realisations emerging from presentations was that the views expressed by Khmer Sharers and ethnic Vietnamese Sharers were vastly different. Though not necessarily a surprise, the designers had originally planned to seek out common themes among all Sharers, regardless of ethnic identity. In light of the emerging findings, the pre-existing plan was modified to divide common themes into two categories reflecting the target communities separately. In essence, two broadly distinct perspectives were separately explored – those of Khmer residents and those of ethnic Vietnamese residents. Other ethnic identities and biracial Sharers were woven into these two overall narratives.

The analysis team went back to the group and presented what they heard from the Listeners providing the two lists of common themes they picked out from the different pairs. Through detailed deliberation, the group provided feedback and further clarified and refined their themes. They then individually voted through a written and recorded point-ranking system on the frequency of hearing each of the themes in relation to others – leaving the analysis team with an overall prioritised list of common themes brought up by the Sharers. Listeners dug deeper into their memories of the data by going over the conversation inquiry questions and elaborating on specific examples they remembered. A full group discussion on intersectionality and different demographic perspectives also contributed to further analysis on sub-groups. In addition, the media analysis team, who had been gathering traditional and social media data over the same period, presented their findings to the group. They also facilitated a discussion on connections between their analysis and the emerging findings from the fieldwork conversations.

The Info-Space Lab provided a more personal opportunity to explore the initiative as a potential transformational intervention in itself. It also paved the way for Listeners to move beyond speaking solely on behalf of the Sharers and reflect more on themselves. This shift in sharing also helped the group to identify their own biases when using Facilitative Listening Design and explore changing perceptions and assumptions, even over the short period from the initial coaching and training lab. Group discussions, dual moderator focus groups for each target community, and an interactive empathy and reflection activity to think from the other perspective, all contributed to facilitating a space for both individual and group contemplation.

The Info-Space Lab concluded by offering an additional space for Listeners and the media analysis team to converse privately and articulate any ideas for future collaboration either together, or individually. The ideas were presented to the design team by a group representative. The information collected from the Info-Space Lab provided the core data and initial analysis for subsequent activities and the findings presented throughout this book.

## Information verification and snapshot analysis

The next stages of analysis occurred over several months following the Info-Space Lab. Referred to as “snapshot analysis”, it was an opportunity to go as quickly as possible through all the recorded data, verify what was said during the Info-Space Lab’s processing components, and collect as clear of a picture as possible of the current situation at that given moment of implementation. Research assistants, who had been already working in the initiative, sorted through all the recorded conversation data. This included all daily journals, conversation logs, and photo chronicles. First, daily journals were closely examined to compare with themes provided by Listeners during the Info-Space Lab. Findings were categorised into themes, and additional topics or issues not mentioned during the Info-Space Lab were also identified. Conversation logs were then read in detail, usually two logs for each conversation written by each Listener. Identified parts of the conversations were broken down into corresponding themes with examples and quotations grouped together to explore the depth and variations among Sharer opinions on each subject. Surprising or more random findings, such as less frequent or unique stories that emerged from particular Sharers, were also highlighted and included to expand emerging and sometimes alternative narratives.

Gaps and opportunities were also identified. For example, upon hearing about Khmer and Vietnamese university students having quite different perceptions, it was decided to further explore the possibility of expanding the target of Sharers to include this unique sub-group of Vietnamese citizens temporarily living in Cambodia. A pair of Listeners went to a university campus neighbourhood and carried out further conversations with Vietnamese international students and local Khmer students studying together. In another neighbourhood, there seemed to be a lack of ethnic Vietnamese voices in the conversation collection. Hence another pair of Listeners went there to connect with more, especially after hearing that most of the Khmer Sharers in the area felt a particular division between them and their ethnic Vietnamese neighbours. Though the additional conversations did not significantly alter the direction or the overall findings, they certainly contributed to the richness of the data and improved understanding of some issues that had been recorded but were not initially clear.

A cross-sectional data analysis was carried out at a later stage in order to gain a snapshot of any particular similarities among sub-groups or any differences from other groups that might help better understand prevailing dynamics. Since designers and Listeners initially planned and set out to reach broad demographic targets through searching for a diverse selection of Listeners, it was possible to separate some sub-groups and demographic factors to seek out any shared or contrasting elements. Essentially, this meant looking at gender, age, and layers of ethnicity or ethnic identity among the Sharers in relation to what they conveyed. The cross-sectional analysis took place as an additional level of analysis. An initial demographic session during the Facilitative Listening Design Training and Coaching Lab encouraged Listeners to plot out their plans to reach certain target numbers. These targets considered women versus men, a range of ages, ethnic identity, and types of professions. A session during the Information Processing and Transformative Space Lab helped Listeners to first elaborate their own cross-sectional observations. Later analysis of the data separated sub-groups for further identification of patterns and distinctive elements among groups where enough Sharers were reached to show any similarities or differences with others.

**We are not makers of history.**

**We are made by history.**

MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

NON-VIOLENCE ACTIVIST AND NOBEL PEACE PRIZE RECIPIENT





# 3

## CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

From an international relations perspective, the relationship between Cambodia and Vietnam has often been described as bitter-sweet by analysts and researchers studying different levels of the border-sharing neighbours. Bitter in the sense of long standing hostility and mistrust between the nations, and even further back as the rival Khmer and Dai Viet empires over the last millennia. Sweet in the sense of relatively positive and strong relations between the Cambodian and Vietnamese governments and a healthy bilateral trade and investment environment, particularly in contemporary times. Beyond diplomacy, however, people-to-people relations between Cambodians and Vietnamese are more complex. In particular, the sometime-delicate relationship between Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese within Cambodia stems from intricate dynamics involving historical, political, and socio-economic factors. Such dynamics have played strongly into how Khmer perceive ethnic Vietnamese residing inside of Cambodia today.

The gradual decline of Cambodia in the 17th Century and its position between the Siam (modern day Thailand) and Vietnamese powers have contributed to contemporary Cambodian perceptions of their neighbours. A union in 1620 between Khmer King Cheastha II and Vietnamese princess **Ngọc Vạn**, known to the Khmer as Ang Choy, was meant to cement an alliance against the Siamese. The resulting agreement to allow Vietnamese to set up a settlement in the south-eastern part of Khmer territory Prey Nokor (present day Ho Chi Minh City), is now seen by many Khmer as the beginning of an aggressive expansionist invasion and loss of Khmer land. The story of the minority Khmer Krom group residing in modern Vietnam is a legacy of this history and continues to be an influential dynamic in Khmer-Vietnamese relations.

Anti-Vietnamese sentiment stemming from nationalism can be traced back to the early 19th Century with a substantial number of Vietnamese immigrants corresponding to large scale anti-Vietnamese rebellions. During this period, stories of mistreatment against the Khmer abounded, with the Master's Tea chronicle of an 1811 incident becoming an anti-Vietnamese account among all levels of Khmer society for generations to come, even up to this day (see Master's Tea page 123). The French colonial period of the Indochina region only stoked resentment as the number of Vietnamese grew in Cambodia, often taking posts in the protectorate's governing leadership over Cambodia.



Geopolitics of the 1960s led the way for a strong mobilisation of anti-Vietnamese sentiment attached to Cambodian nationalism. With a presence of over 450,000 Vietnamese living in the country by 1970, a sense of urgency swept the public leading to targeted attacks. More than 4,000 ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia were massacred and nearly 250,000 'repatriated' to Vietnam following the overthrow of the monarchy and the five-year descent into civil war. By the time Cambodia fell to the Khmer Rouge in 1975, more were deported, and any that remained were subjected to the same fate of any perceived enemy of the state during the three-year period of genocide. An estimated 20,000 ethnic Vietnamese are believed to have been purged by the Khmer Rouge.

The post-Khmer Rouge period in Cambodia brought in a new wave of Vietnamese residents during the era the People's Republic of Kampuchea (PRK). Both returnees and newcomers gave way to concerns of demographic changes (UN Resolution 38/3, 27 October 1983) that reminded some of past "Vietnamisation" over the long history between Cambodia and Vietnam (Pouvatchy, 1986). Such complex domestic politics and social factors in the context of the Cold War added to the rising level of deeply-rooted anti-Vietnamese sentiment in the Cambodian public and even among senior PRK leaders themselves throughout the 1980s (Declassified CIA File, 2011). Given the ongoing struggle between the transitional government and the Khmer Rouge, who still held onto pockets of power in parts of the country, anti-Vietnamese sentiment continued to play into politics. During the peace process between 1992 and 1993, the Khmer Rouge engaged in a targeted attack killing 130 ethnic Vietnamese, injuring 75, and abducting even more in the run up to the national election. Mainstream Cambodian politics in the early 1990s, however, continued to hold onto anti-Vietnamese sentiment and the perceived fear of Vietnamese expansion led to a large-scale repatriation of ethnic Vietnamese out of Cambodia (Berman, 1996).

Over the last few decades in Cambodia, elections have continued to frequently stir up anti-Vietnamese sentiment not only in politics, but among the general Khmer population. In 1998, rumours about Vietnamese poisoning food and water, that some accused coming from political discourse, led to mob attacks that killed four ethnic Vietnamese bystanders on the street. Rhetoric from the 2013 election campaigns blatantly targeted ethnic Vietnamese on border issues and illegal immigration, to name a few.

The term “Yvon” became commonly employed in political campaigning discourse to refer to the Vietnamese. Ethnic Vietnamese businesses were ransacked in the aftermath when anti-government post-election protests took to the streets in neighbourhoods across Phnom Penh and elsewhere. An ethnic Vietnamese man was beaten to death during a traffic accident by a mob who identified him as a *Yvon* during the attack.

Cambodia is on track to hold general elections in mid 2018 to elect members of the sixth National Assembly. From results of the 2013 election showing a growing polarisation between voters, it is likely that political discourse could once again make references to Vietnam and ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia. In such a case, it is possible that exposure to anti-Vietnamese sentiment may reach new heights among those following politics and the potentially divisive narratives circulating in traditional and social media.

Apart from such mainstream historical and political contexts, little has been heard about the dynamics on the ground. Community voices on these issues are crucial in providing a more holistic and deeper understanding of any real grassroots effects of anti-Vietnamese sentiment. Hearing from people on all sides also raises the potential of mitigating any future violence and seeking out creative and innovative solutions by those who are at the forefront of community relations involving Khmer, ethnic Vietnamese and others in Phnom Penh and across Cambodia. This publication contributes to addressing this gap and directly conveys opinions and perspectives of people living in communities who have first-hand knowledge of Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese relations throughout the city.

## **References and further resources to better understand contemporary anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia**

The background and context provided is a very brief overview of different pieces of historical, political, and social analysis on anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia. It is understood that such analysis is framed by differing opinions and understandings, and makes no attempt to provide a complete and concrete understanding of the dynamics leading up to the contemporary situation. The following is a list of references used to synthesise a brief background and context, and also serves as a resource guide for those interested in understanding more on this topic.

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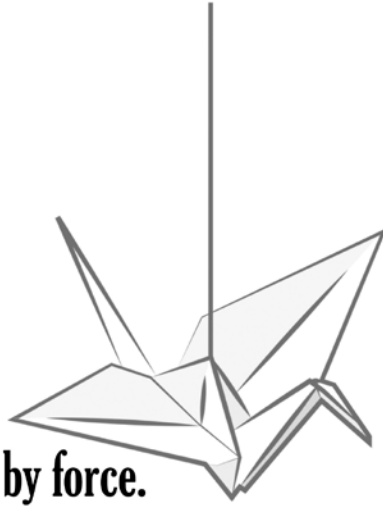
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**Peace cannot be kept by force.  
It can only be achieved by understanding.**

ALBERT EINSTEIN  
THEORETICAL PHYSICIST AND PEACE ACTIVIST



# 4

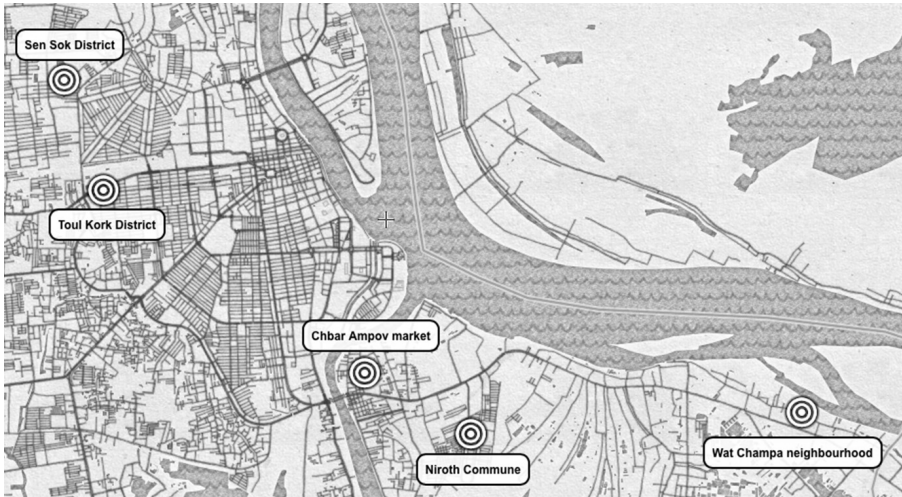
## TARGET COMMUNITIES AND DEMOGRAPHICS



## Community profiles

The Facilitative Listening Design planners decided to focus on a limited number of areas in order to achieve a more in depth community perspective, but still enable comparisons of Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese voices across Phnom Penh. Communities were specifically chosen that had both a recognisable ethnic Vietnamese population and a Khmer population within the vicinity.

City of Phnom Penh



### Sen Sok District

Sen Sok is a very large district in the north of Phnom Penh stretching to the boundary of Kandal province. The district is growing as a suburban option for city dwellers wishing to move to a close-by but less urban area. Activities for this project took place specifically around the Tropang Rang Thmei market area of the district where a relatively large ethnic Vietnamese population is known to reside. Tropang Rang Thmei is a considerably poor and lower income neighbourhood but under intensive development and change as the area grows.

### Toul Kork District

Located near the centre of the city, Toul Kork is an urban metropolis with markets, business, and home to fast growing villa development projects. The district also hosts numerous universities and is a heavily student-populated neighbourhood. Cambodia's largest and oldest university, the Royal University of Phnom Penh, has a sprawling campus within Toul



Kork. The Institute of Technology of Cambodia, Zaman University, Chamroeun University of Poly-Technology, Asia Euro University, and Paññāsāstra University of Cambodia have campuses throughout the district as well. Some of the city's largest and most prestigious private international primary and secondary schools are also located here. With such a large student population in the area, student housing and residences are numerous for both Cambodian and international students. Many international students from Vietnam live and study in the area, sharing classrooms with Khmer teachers and students.

### **Chbar Ampov market**

Just across Phnom Penh's Monivong Bridge over the Bassac River is home to the Chbar Ampov market and the gateway into the district of the same name. The area is known for a large Vietnamese presence in and around the market. Khmer residents also live and shop in the area, making it a very mixed and vibrant community. It is highly urban and business oriented.

### **Niroth commune**

Still within the Chbar Ampov District but south of the market is Niroth commune, a residential area hosting houses and gated communities with a slightly more suburban feel. The Niroth Pagoda near the highway is a notable site within the commune, and a growing number of cafés and shops are popping up in the area typical to an up-and-coming community on the outskirts of the city's centre. Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese populations live throughout the neighbourhood, including within gated communities.

### **Wat Champa neighbourhood**

Further east along Highway Number 1, the Wat Champa neighbourhood sits close to the border of Kandal province at the edge of Chbar Ampov District. It is a relatively rural area of Phnom Penh behind the Champa pagoda on the banks of the Mekong River. The Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese communities live in close proximity to each other and have frequent interaction.

## Demographics

Diversity in population and demographic targets was sought from the beginning of the Facilitative Listening Design planning stage of this initiative. The geographical limitation to stay within the boundaries of the five communities with recognised populations of ethnic Vietnamese residents still required detailed planning. Effort was made to reach an equal number of men and women, a range of ages, different ethnicities including biracial and multiracial individuals, and a diverse scope of professional backgrounds.

Listeners succeeded in their quest for diversity. With 135 Sharers included in this initiative, their voices represent an extensive array of cross-sectional opinions. The breakdown of the demographic information helps to understand some of the collective and individual narratives that are introduced in the next chapters.

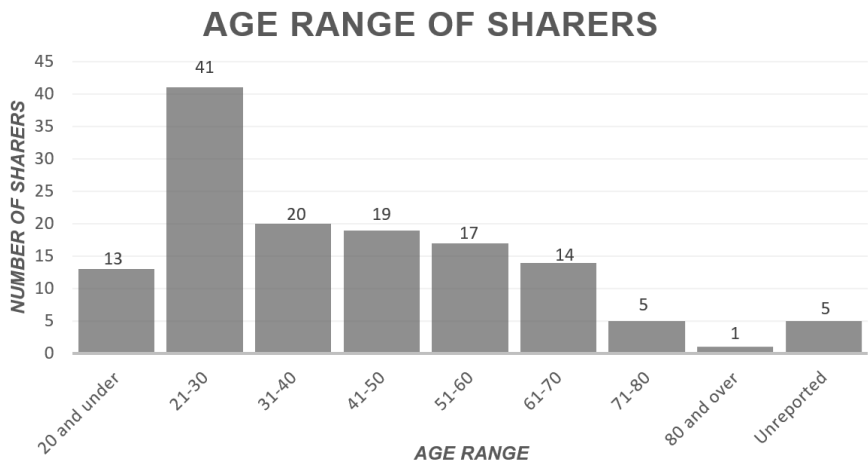
### Gender and Sex



Gender was one of the most important issues discussed early on during planning. With much of the existing analysis, media commentaries, and political dialogue coming from men, capturing a strong female perspective was deemed as essential. The result was successful, with numbers being nearly equal among the 135 shares including 68 women versus 67 men. For a unique perspective coming from the voices of female Sharers, see page 91 for a cross-sectional analysis on women.

### Age

Listeners managed to reach a very diverse range of Sharers throughout all communities. Ages ranged from as young as twelve to as old as 85. Age did in fact play a significant part in perceptions and attitudes. See the brief cross-sectional analysis in regards to age on page 92 to better understand how different generations saw and understood anti-Vietnamese in Cambodia.



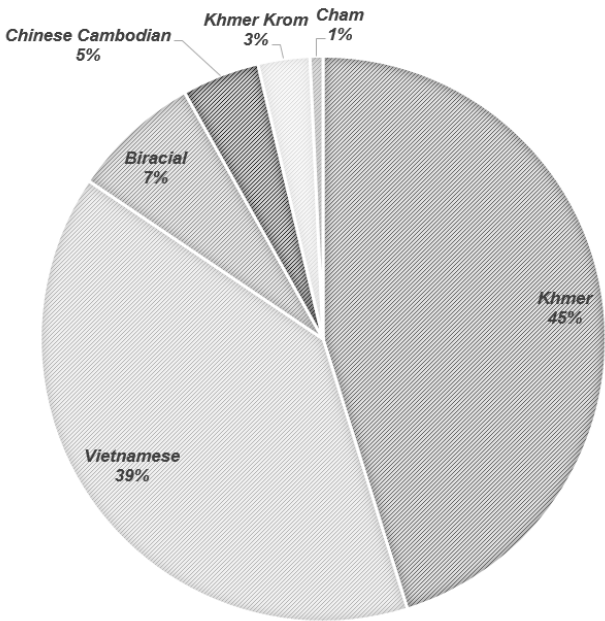
**Ethnicity**

Ethnic background was one of the most important factors in this initiative. Ethnicity is a complex issue in Cambodia given that many ethnic Vietnamese and biracial or mixed individuals often prefer to identify themselves as Khmer for safety reasons or to avoid any discomfort with others. Nevertheless, Listeners were able to reach a wide range of different ethnicities.

The recorded ethnic identity collected from conversations is based on how the Sharer chose to identify himself or herself, which sometimes did not happen until the end of the conversation. The majority of the Sharers were Khmer. Ethnic Vietnamese made up the second largest group, including ethnic Vietnamese born and raised in Cambodia as well as those originally from Vietnam who migrated or are living temporarily in Cambodia. Biracial refers to those with usually one Khmer and one Vietnamese parent. Chinese Cambodians consisted mainly of ethnic Chinese but have been living in Cambodia over generations, and often also identify themselves as Khmer, or “Khmer kat Chen” (half Khmer/Chinese) or “Kon Chao Chen” (Chinese descent). Other groups include ethnic identities that emerged as Listeners sought out Sharers. In particular, this included Sharers who identified themselves as the Khmer Krom, who are generally considered ethnically Khmer but come from southwestern Vietnam where they lived as an ethnic minority. Included in the study was also a Cham Sharer, an ethnic group that live throughout Cambodia and

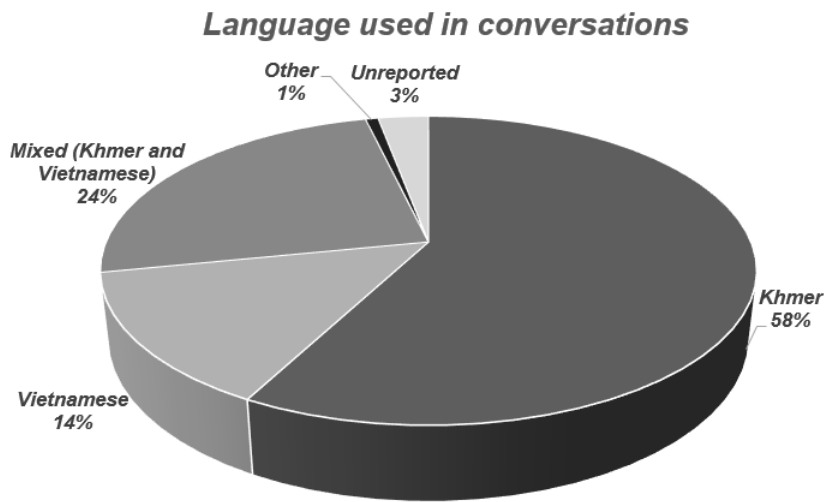
Vietnam and represent the most visible Muslim population in the region. Talking with a diverse ethnic range of Sharers also helped Listeners and designers to better understand perceptions of different identities and layers of identity among groups.

ETHNICITY OF SHARERS



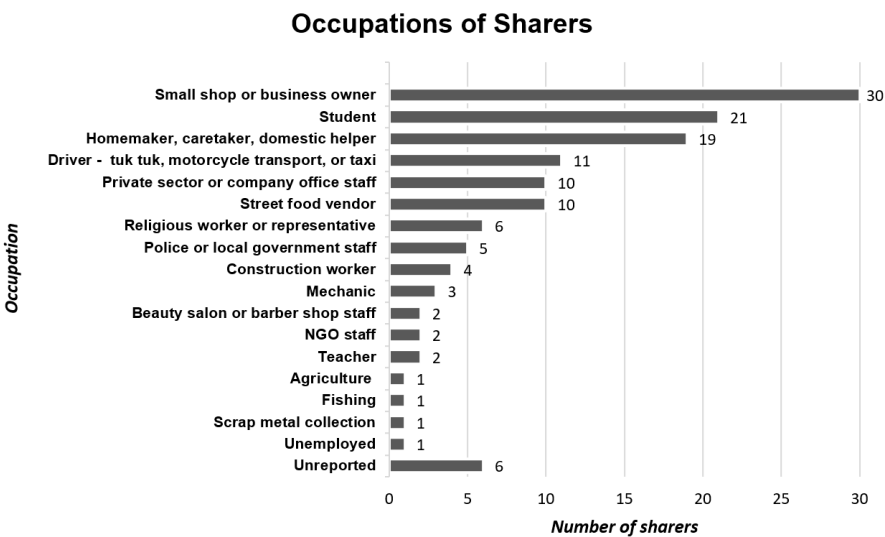
Conversation language

Listeners noted down which language they used during the conversations to provide a better understanding of linguistic preferences in the different groups. Overall, Khmer was the most commonly spoken language, even among some ethnic Vietnamese communities. Vietnamese was also spoken, often in conversations with more recent migrants or those less integrated into mainstream Khmer society. Many ethnic Vietnamese and biracial Sharers comfortably switched between Khmer and Vietnamese with Listeners that were also bilingual. English was also used in one conversation which is represented in the “other” category.



## Occupations

Listeners found Sharers from a wide spectrum of occupations and professions. Small businesses were often the easiest to approach, and provided the main source of income for the majority of the residents in the communities across Phnom Penh. Students, drivers, office staff, and other industry workers also provided in depth insight into anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia.



**The pains you feel are messengers.  
Listen to them.**

RUMI

13<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY PERSIAN POET AND SCHOLAR



ចូលស្ទឹងតាមបត់ ចូលស្រុកតាមប្រទេស។

*Negotiate a river by following its bends,  
enter a country by following its customs.*

A COMMON CAMBODIAN PROVERB

5

**A KHMER PERSPECTIVE**



## Opinions and thoughts shared across conversations with Khmer

The Information Processing and Transformative Space Lab helped to facilitate Listeners to reach into their memories and recall what they heard the most during their conversations with Khmer, ethnic Chinese, and Cham Muslim Sharers. The main themes as described by the Listeners are found below in their raw form from the workshop and are set out in the order that came about as result of a group voting process to reflect the most frequently heard themes across all conversations. Listeners noted that many Khmer Sharers initially felt some level of discomfort when bringing up the issue of ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. Some even refused to directly engage in the topic.

1. On the surface, we have relatively normal relations with Vietnamese, but we acknowledge a subconscious prejudice and discomfort with them.
2. We are concerned about the growing number of Vietnamese in Cambodia.
3. It is difficult to co-exist with each other because of historical grievances and Vietnamese behaviour.
4. The relationship between Khmer and Vietnamese is bad and we feel pessimistic about the future or the likelihood that things will get better.
5. The Vietnamese are good at doing business.
6. Illegal immigration is a top concern – we cannot do anything ourselves and want the government to deal with it.
7. We appreciate that Vietnamese communities help each other and show solidarity.
8. We know there are both good and bad people regardless of which ethnic group they come from.
9. It is upsetting to hear about the borderline moving inward and shrinking Cambodian territory.



10. There seem to be no positive stories about Vietnamese people in Cambodian media -many stories are about conflict and problems.

11. While ethnic Vietnamese often live separately from us, they still interact and work together with us on a daily basis.

This chapter further explores these themes as well as other subjects identified by the Listeners. It also goes into the findings uncovered through deeper analysis of the recording tools and the follow up work carried out by an analysis team.

### Superficial smiles

ខ្ញុំមិនខ្លាចពួកវាសោះ ក៏មិនចូលចិត្តពួកវាដែរ

I don't really hate them, but I don't like them much either.

*50-year-old Khmer woman who sells snacks on the street in Wat Champa*

Keeping in mind that the Khmer Sharers generally lived or worked within or nearby ethnic Vietnamese communities, most of them proved to have some kind of contact with ethnic Vietnamese people, sometimes on a regular basis. That said, many Khmer Sharers did convey that to some extent, the relationship between the two communities was relatively normal. For them, the term “normal” did have some variation. Some said that the relationship was good, that they could talk with each other, make friends, and work together as neighbours. Others said that they did not really see a clear conflict between Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese. However, most were able to give some indication of their understanding of anti-Vietnamese sentiment either directly through their own more reflective opinions or on behalf of others in their community or in Khmer society as a whole.

Even many of those that professed to having no outward feelings of discrimination against Vietnamese often added that it did not mean they liked them. Some openly admitted to even hating them, but often struggled to elaborate on specific reasons for such animosity. Those that could elaborate further expressed anger over Vietnamese stealing jobs or the history they had learned from their parents and grandparents, or even

at school. One Sharer talked about a deep unspoken internal anger against her ethnic Vietnamese neighbours because of the dynamics stemming from their children playing together. She said that when the ethnic Vietnamese children broke her Khmer children's toys, she said nothing. However, when her Khmer child broke one of the ethnic Vietnamese children's toys, the parents would demand money to compensate the family. Another Sharer summed it up through a popular age-old saying that goes something like "Khmer are too gullible, Vietnamese are too tricky." One of the strongest reoccurring themes among Sharers as highlighted by both the Listeners as well as the analysis of the recorded materials was indeed the feeling that even if we smile or don't say it directly, we don't like them or we don't like having them in Cambodia.

### Growing population

ខ្ញុំបារម្ភថាប្រសិនបើចំនួនជនជាតិវៀតណាមនៅក្នុងប្រទេសកម្ពុជា  
កាន់តែច្រើនទៅៗ ថ្ងៃណាមួយគេនឹងធ្វើប្រជាធិបតេយ្យដើម្បីសម្រេច  
ចិត្តបោះឆ្នោតឱ្យខ្មែរ

I'm worried that if the number of Vietnamese keeps growing in our country, one day we'll have a referendum, like the one they had in Turkey, and the Vietnamese people's voice will be heard over the Khmer.

*A 40-year-old Khmer housewife in Niroth commune*

Many Khmer Sharers expressed great concern about a quickly growing Vietnamese population in Cambodia. For some, it was a sensitive topic as a few said that they could not talk about this issue publicly or it would automatically become a political conversation.

For those who did elaborate with Listeners, there were fears about a type of foreign invasion happening in different ways. Some discussed the issue of Vietnamese crossing over the border and settling in Cambodia. A few compared this situation to ancient stories of the 17th Century Vietnamese princess known as Ang Chov (or *Ngọc Vạn* in Vietnamese), who married a Cambodian king. According to some historical narratives that were shared in conversations, it was believed that she lent Cambodian territory

Some people saw the ethnic Vietnamese resident population in Cambodia growing directly as a result of bringing their relatives over from Vietnam, both by legal and illegal means. They viewed this as part of a larger migration movement happening along the border areas with neighbouring Vietnam. Several Sharers also commented on their perceptions of ethnic Vietnamese giving birth to far more children as an alarming contribution to a growing population. They expressed serious concern that an exploding birth rate among Vietnamese would eventually over-take the Khmer population. Some compared Khmer families saying that most Khmer stopped at having one or two children while Vietnamese would have as many as possible. A vegetable seller in Wat Champa was visibly upset discussing her concerns. “I’m worried about how many children Vietnamese are having,” she exclaimed. “Someday there will be more Vietnamese than Khmer in Cambodia!”

[illegible]

I have a *Yuon* neighbour and they are so noisy!

When discussing reasons for feeling uncomfortable with ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia, history was frequently cited as a trigger. Sharers generally said that they learned history from their families or at

school, and this was often expressed through stories. They talked about Vietnamese royals who tricked Cambodians, the plight of captured Khmer servants who were used and killed as bases for boiling tea water (see Master's Tea on page 123), or the years following the genocide in the 1980s with an influx of Vietnamese soldiers that they sometimes framed as a gradual "invasion". Different accounts of history often portrayed the Khmer as victims to their neighbouring power, and stirred up negative feelings.

Some Khmer Sharers felt that ethnic Vietnamese have such different cultural and personal traits that they cannot live in the same community. Individualism or selfishness were often mentioned and bothered many of the Khmer who conveyed this in different ways in their conversations. Some felt that ethnic Vietnamese care only about themselves and not about others around them. An example was given in one predominately Khmer neighbourhood where an ethnic Vietnamese family lived in a house among the Khmer. Due to the lack of streetlights and the prevailing darkness, the Khmer families always left one light on in each house to light up the street. However, the Vietnamese family's house light was always turned off. They felt that this was quite symbolic of selfishness and showed a lack of care for the surrounding community.

"Loud" and "noisy" were words often used to describe Vietnamese neighbours or community members. They associated this with aggressiveness and often violence. Khmer Sharers sometimes complained about hearing their neighbours fighting, or getting into arguments themselves with ethnic Vietnamese. They expressed disapproval of rude language, swear words, and obscenities they heard. A former Khmer Rouge soldier living near the Chbar Ampov market spoke frankly with Listeners. "We can't live with Vietnamese because they are messy and loud," he lamented. "When they argue, they always throw things at each other and break anything in sight!" An elderly man in Niroth commune honestly expressed his fear of Vietnamese based on his past experience. He said that he thought they are all fearsome because he had once lived beside a Vietnamese family that burnt their own house down during an argument. All the Khmer families in the neighbourhood were so worried they sold their houses to Vietnamese, leaving the area for them.

"Messy" was another word frequently heard throughout conversations with

Khmer Sharers when referring to Vietnamese. This sometimes referred to untidy houses or lack of hygiene, but it was also closely connected to an expressed negative sentiment of seeing ethnic Vietnamese not respecting the surrounding environment. One young Khmer monk saw this as one of the main factors dividing them. “The relationship between Khmer and Vietnamese in Cambodia lacks co-operation because they don’t have good hygiene, they’re disorganised, and the way they live their lives is not clean. They don’t respect the environment. Khmer cannot live together with them!” Respecting the environment sometimes meant things like not throwing rubbish in the rivers or keeping public areas clean.

Many Khmer Sharers openly expressed their negative perceptions about Vietnamese, relating them to crime, drugs, drinking, and gambling. Sometimes examples of personal experiences were given to prove a point, such as having lost a motorcycle to a Vietnamese thief or seeing an ethnic Vietnamese neighbour selling illegal drugs. They also often saw ethnic Vietnamese working together in gangs or as a group that sometimes resorted to violence.

Not everyone stereotyped Vietnamese as the same, however. Some Khmer Sharers expressed that as long as Vietnamese living in Cambodia respected the law, there was no problem. Others reinforced that ethnicity was not a sole factor of whether people were good or bad.

Following the law of Cambodia and respecting Cambodian culture and territory often went hand-in-hand. Those that expressed frustration sometimes felt that Vietnamese living in Cambodia did not acknowledge they were in Cambodia. Some discussed what they saw as hypocrisy. Vietnamese could do whatever they wanted in Cambodia, but when Cambodians went to Vietnam, they had to obey all the laws. A young high school student in Chbar Ampov said that “Vietnamese in Cambodia have total freedom. They can run wild. But when we go to their country, we have no freedom at all, we are totally under their control.” For many, this came down to a question of respect. They wanted Vietnamese to respect their culture, respect their laws, and respect the fact that they were living in Cambodia.

## KHMER STUDENTS CHALLENGE CONFORMITY IN CONVERSATIONS

*Not everyone thinks in stereotypes*



It can be easy to focus on negative opinions in research, especially when they begin to add up in the data and start showing emerging themes. The reality is, however, that there are always countering perceptions. Two Khmer male students at a university in the Toul Kork District shared their views with Listeners about how their thinking has changed.

Pagna and Phirun, both third-year students, come from rural areas in different provinces. Each of them say they cannot make simple generalisations about Vietnamese people and instead offer to talk about those that they already know. They study in a programme with more international students from Vietnam than Khmer.

Both admit that they have held onto certain prejudices in the past. Pagna confides that when he was back in the village, he used to dislike Vietnamese because everyone else seemed to hate them.

Phirun says he remembers feeling hatred towards Vietnamese during high school, especially when hearing about history and past invasions.

Pagna affirms that he has stopped thinking in stereotypes after studying with Vietnamese students. He says that getting to know them and getting more education in general opened his eyes. Phirun feels that nationalism can become destructive and cause people to hate others. Like Pagna, he sees education as key, especially learning about different historical narratives.

Pagna and Phirun vividly demonstrate how thinking evolves, and that stereotypes are not unbreakable. Youth and education are important factors that help explain the ability to challenge long held beliefs. Engagement is the other. Being exposed to and fostering relationships with those that you have been influenced to see in a certain way transforms thinking.



### Difficult relationship, doubtful for the future

ប្រសិនបើទំនាក់ទំនងរវាងខ្មែរនិងវៀតណាមមិនប្រសើរឡើយ  
 បើប្រសិនបើទំនាក់ទំនងរវាងខ្មែរនិងវៀតណាមមិនប្រសើរឡើយ

I believe the relationship between Khmer and Vietnamese won't  
 get better in the future because I often hear that Khmer just  
 don't like Vietnamese.

*A 30-year-old Khmer woman selling vegetables in Wat Champa*

Pessimism about the future relationship between Khmer and Vietnamese was rather widespread among Khmer Sharers. Many cited the same issues causing tension as the barriers to improving relationships. Vietnamese behaviour, security, and simply put, the different perspectives and viewpoints dividing the two, tended to paint a relatively negative picture and hampered hope for moving past the adverse relationship. Some Khmer Sharers saw relations getting worse and worse. Others believed that war or violence might break out at some point in the future.

Suspicion of “Vietnamese intentions” was quite prevalent in the conversations where Sharers conveyed negative or hopeless feelings about the future. Some said that Vietnamese continue to arrive with bad intentions. A jewellery seller in Sen Sok shared that he believed a war would happen one day in Cambodia because more Khmer nationalists and educated Cambodians knew the true intentions of Vietnamese in the country and would not allow an invasion. Others who expressed hopelessness believed only the government could do something about this relationship, often seeing controlled immigration as the sole solution. Many continued to see a bleak situation, expressing little faith that the government would do anything in the foreseeable future.

## Successful entrepreneurs and business partners

ខ្ញុំគិតថាមានយុទ្ធសាស្ត្រជាច្រើន៖ គេចាប់ផ្តើមដោយរង់ចាំទីកន្លែង  
 ល្អគេបានរៀបចំឡើង៖ ដំបូងហៅយកប្រាក់ចេញពី ៩ ខែ ដើម្បីទិញកន្លែង  
 ប្រើប្រាស់ជួលយកគេមក ។

Look at the hair salon across the street there. Those Vietnamese just rented a simple Khmer house at first and started up a small hair salon. But three years later they could afford buying that house and expanded it into an even bigger salon. I think Khmer have a hard time to compete with that.

*A 50-year-old Khmer tuk tuk driver working around the Chbar Ampov market*

Khmer Sharers were often more generous with their praise for ethnic Vietnamese neighbours for their business skills and entrepreneurship. Some observed that the Vietnamese in their neighbourhood were very resourceful, creative, and could do anything. Many also confessed that they actually thought Vietnamese were better in certain industries and trades than Khmer. Some said that they were excellent in food preparation and appreciated the taste of Vietnamese dishes and even their preparation of Cambodian food. Several commented on the superior quality of Vietnamese-run hair salons and beauty parlours where Vietnamese staff seemed to excel in haircutting, hair removal, cosmetic application, and nail services such as manicures and pedicures.

Some Khmer Sharers said that they preferred to drink coffee in Vietnamese-run cafés as they felt the coffee quality and preparation were better. Some also talked about the construction industry and mentioned preferring to have ethnic Vietnamese contractors with their own Vietnamese staff who they said could provide higher quality houses and buildings.

Listeners also heard Khmer Sharers convey their belief that ethnic Vietnamese are hard workers, and were willing to work for few benefits. Although they saw most earning a good living standard, they also noted that Vietnamese often accepted low salaries and were able to do anything. A policeman in Niroth commune, for example, said that even if he did not like their manners, “Vietnamese are hard workers. They’re good at



business.”

Embedded within the praise and the positive stereotypes, however, was some criticism and some openly expressed envy. A few Sharers believed that because the Vietnamese were willing to work for lower pay, this meant less jobs for Khmer. A microfinance professional said he felt that the Vietnamese were directly competing with Khmer and taking their jobs. Another young man working as a driver for the monks at a pagoda complained that Vietnamese were competing with them for jobs and that this was becoming a real issue in Cambodia.

## CLASHING VALUES AND COMPETITION CAN CAUSE TENSION

*Coffee rivalry in Chbar Ampov*



Some Listeners overheard an argument at a coffee shop that seemed to represent an ongoing conflict in the community between ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer shop owners. The ethnic Vietnamese owners have been hiring attractive female Vietnamese waitresses to serve and chat with customers. The Khmer owners from nearby feel that the Vietnamese competitors are trying to steal their customers – and it seems to be working. The Vietnamese coffee shop has become very popular and even Khmer men are now having coffee there in the company of the beautiful waitresses. The Khmer coffee shop owners see this as unfair competition and feel helpless as they watch their business failing.

While other Khmer Sharers complimented the ethnic Vietnamese-managed construction businesses, one tuk tuk driver strongly disagreed. He told the Listeners that “Vietnamese in Cambodia are here to compete with us. If they manage construction, they only hire Vietnamese workers and leave the Khmer behind. This means we Khmer get fewer and fewer jobs. So Vietnamese now have good cars and their kids go to good schools.”

An older ethnic Chinese Cambodian selling fried bananas echoed this idea of economic segregation from the point of view of a self-employed businessman. He complained that “Those Vietnamese help each other through business. They only buy from each other, not from us.”

### Illegal immigration

សម្រាប់អត់បញ្ហាទេដំណោះស្រាយបរទេសកម្មខ្មែរ  
ប៉ុន្តែ គ្រូក៏ដឹងថាបរទេសកម្មខ្មែរ មិនច្របូបច្រាប មិនស្របច្របូប ប៉ុន្តែ  
យកអត់បាន ។

For me, it's no problem for Vietnamese who are living legally in Cambodia. But I can't accept it if they're here illegally.

*A 30-year-old ethnic Chinese Cambodian woman working for  
an international company in Chbar Ampov*

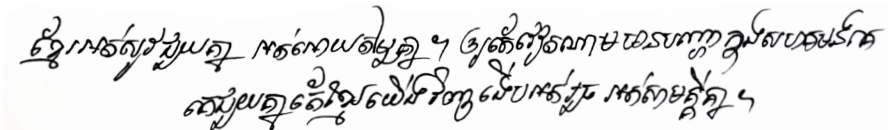
Illegal immigration was a top concern for many Khmer Sharers. As previously highlighted in the discussion about a growing Vietnamese population, illegal immigration was one of the issues that drove fear among Khmer. Some talked about ongoing encroachment or worried about eventually becoming a minority within their own homeland. Many lamented that illegal migrants are able to cross the border so easily by land and can move freely throughout Cambodia without any controls.

Most of the Khmer Sharers wanted to see illegal Vietnamese migrants deported to Vietnam. They could not provide many concrete solutions and saw the government as the only plausible actor that could intervene and solve the illegal immigration problem. On one hand, they saw the government's role to strengthen policy on foreigners and migrants and manage the incoming and outgoing flow across the border. On the other,

they stressed the importance of having the proper authorities enforce the rule of law to prevent illegal entry and to deal with those already in Cambodia without authorisation. A young Khmer Buddhist monk told Listeners that he believed only the government could now solve its own crisis in respect to illegal migration. However, he offered advice to Cambodian citizens that if they could improve education and their own capacity, they might contribute to a wider solution in society.

Many Sharers, however, did not count on policy or enforcement to be improved in the future. Several expressed a feeling of hopelessness with regard to the situation and the possibility of the government intervening. In Niroth commune, a 40-year-old Khmer housewife exclaimed that “The government doesn’t even care about Vietnamese coming into Cambodia, and lets them all come in!” Likewise, in the Chbar Ampov market area, residents were very vocal against illegal immigration. In fact, while Facilitative Listening Design conversations were being conducted in that community, a largescale raid on foreigners occurred and received significant media coverage (see Rounded up in Niroth on page 103). Many residents witnessed the raid and saw over 50 ethnic Vietnamese rounded up, but had no idea where they were taken to.

### Vietnamese solidarity



ខ្ញុំក៏ស្រឡាត់ស្រឡាយ ក្នុងសហគមន៍ ។ ប្រសិនបើមានបញ្ហា ក្នុងសហគមន៍  
គ្រប់គ្នាគ្រូស្នើសុំយើងទៅជួយ ដើម្បីកាត់បន្ថយ កង្វះខាត ។

Khmer people do not always help or value each other. For Vietnamese, whenever there is any problem in their community, they seem to help one another. But Khmer don’t seem to have such solidarity.

*A young Khmer Buddhist monk in his twenties living in Chbar Ampov*

Some Khmer Sharers saw solidarity within the ethnic Vietnamese community as something positive, and sometimes much stronger than what they felt existed in the Khmer community. Khmer university students in classes with Vietnamese international students, in particular, complimented their classmates’ closeness and ability to work together. They often noticed that the Vietnamese students helped each other to get assignments and schoolwork done.

However, as reflected in other sections, Khmer Sharers did not always view strong group cohesion among the ethnic Vietnamese positively. A few Khmer expressed fear of ethnic Vietnamese gangs who they said often resorted to violence. Similarly within the business context, some felt that ethnic Vietnamese had their own economy and did not participate in Khmer or ethnic Chinese Cambodian commerce.

### People are people, good and bad

ខ្ញុំគិតថាពួកវាដូចយើងដែរ ។ មនុស្សម្នាក់ៗ មានល្អ មានអាក្រក់ មិនមែនតាម  
 ជាតិទេ ខ្ញុំសម្រេចចិត្ត គិតតាមការប្រកួតប្រជែង ។

I think they are like us Khmer. It really depends on the people because some are bad and some are good. Personally, I always judge others by how they treat me, not whether they are Khmer or Vietnamese.

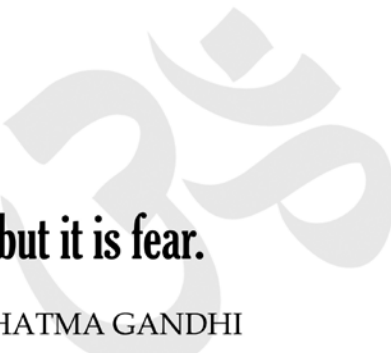
*A 30-year-old woman selling vegetables around Wat Champa*

An interesting pattern that emerged across conversations was the acknowledgement by Khmer Sharers that in the end, there are good and bad people in every community, including among the Khmer and the ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. This assertion was often made as a reflective commentary about society as a whole, or even after the Sharer found him or herself making stereotypes or conveying negative portrayals about the other group.

Many Sharers expressed this sentiment in similar ways. From a negative perspective, some Sharers found themselves talking about crime and portraying Vietnamese as thieves, only to subsequently add that there are many Khmer thieves as well. Many more were able to share positive comparisons that humanised the ethnic Vietnamese as people they had interactions with. One Khmer man found himself questioning his own beliefs during the conversation while he was explaining why he genuinely does not like Vietnamese. He stopped himself and shared that in fact, his neighbours are Vietnamese and he loved to go over to their house and drink beer with them. He emphatically told the Listeners how well they treated him and said that they were very good people.

Business relations often framed the interactions and perceptions of Khmer Sharers in regard to their Vietnamese neighbours. Some food sellers said that they had started to get to know more ethnic Vietnamese who were their customers, and were able to socialise with them as any members of the neighbourhood. Several motorcycle-taxi and tuk tuk drivers mentioned having opportunities to speak with their ethnic Vietnamese passengers and better understand their way of life as individuals. For them, the ethnic Vietnamese in the area were just like Khmer, including both good and bad members.

A Cham Muslim woman selling mosquito nets in Sen Sok bluntly stated that she did not particularly care about what she viewed as a “political issue” involving tension between Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese. She said that she focused on her work and did business with anyone, it did not matter who, reiterating that there are both good and bad Vietnamese in the neighbourhood.



**The enemy is fear.  
We think it is hate, but it is fear.**

MAHATMA GANDHI

## ENGAGEMENT AND NEW UNDERSTANDING

*Pou Sok's tuk tuk takes him into Phnom Penh's Vietnamese world*



Pou Sok is a 55-year-old Khmer tuk tuk driver from Svay Rieng province. He openly admits he had strong resentment against ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia for most of his life.

Ten years ago, Pou Sok was having a hard time to make ends meet in the province so he did what many rural Cambodians do – he moved to Phnom Penh to seek out more opportunities and a better living.

Settling into a residential area near Chbar Ampov, Pou Sok bought a tuk tuk, the notorious Cambodian three-wheeled vehicle that connects a carriage to a motorcycle to transport passengers. Pou Sok took his tuk tuk near the Chbar Ampov market, where he was surprised to see and hear so much Vietnamese. As he started to get more business and began serving a large number of ethnic Vietnamese residents, Pou Sok got to know his clients. In fact, some of them have become regular customers, calling him to drive them home or to pick them up and take them to other places in the city.

Pou Sok has become close to his clients and their families. These days he enjoys visiting them to celebrate Lunar New Year. Remarkably, his perception of Vietnamese people has completely changed.

"I used to really dislike the Vietnamese. I had never been in contact with any and had heard about some problems with them back in my hometown," he said. "But since I have been making money here, I have talked with them a lot, and many are my good customers. I really began liking them as most are easy-going and we talk to each other quite often. We are all human."

Pou Sok teaches us that simple contact with "the other" can dramatically change perceptions that we have held onto for years, and even over generations. He shows us that business relations and openness can transform relationships even when conflict can be found deep within ourselves.





### Relentless negative media

ខ្ញុំឮថា ព័ត៌មាន រឿង កំហុស ច្រើន ពី កម្ពុជា និង វៀតណាម ប្លែក ខ្លាំង  
សម្លាប់ គ្នា ខ្លាំង ណាស់ មែន ឆ្នើម ។ ខ្ញុំ ចង់ រស់ រាន ឱ្យ បាន ។

I hear a lot of news about conflict between Khmer and Vietnamese.  
It makes me feel terrible and scared of war. I want to live in peace.

*A 28-year-old Khmer Buddhist monk in Sen Sok District*

Khmer Sharers who regularly watched or read the news consistently recognised that Cambodian media is fraught with overwhelmingly negative views of Vietnamese. Sharers said they got their news from the radio, newspapers, television, and the Internet.

Many Khmer Sharers frequently mentioned stories about the border as a source of their anxiety or anger. Many cited features about politics and border threats, and the negative impact they had on them. Other news stories mentioned included those about ethnic Vietnamese suspects involved in criminal activities. Several conversations cited one particular case from Monduliri province that occurred in December 2016. The story profiled a Vietnamese man who had crossed the border and tortured a small Khmer child using a homemade electric taser, all caught on video.

Similarly, the case of four ethnic Vietnamese killing a Khmer man in Prey Veng province in August 2016 weighed heavily on one of the Sharers. According to the media, the Khmer man was beaten and killed for not sharing his cigarettes with a group of ethnic Vietnamese men drinking outside of a store.

People from the Chbar Ampov area discussed a widespread story on the rounding up of ethnic Vietnamese there. Despite the media referring to the suspects as illegal immigrants, many Khmer Sharers gave their opinions on the case and many were more concerned that the government would not take any further action against them since no follow up stories were published in the newspapers (see the case on page 103).

Even old stories repurposed and shared online tended to deeply affect Khmer social media users. One Sharer talked about a popular video



posted on Facebook featuring deceased revolutionary leader and former president of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh. According to him, the Vietnamese icon told his people in the last years of his life to not cremate his body after he had died until they had taken over Cambodia. Such a negative portrayal of a Vietnamese leader irked the Khmer and led to heated and emotional exchanges on the social media platform.

Most Khmer Sharers agreed that the regular sharing of negative stories about the Vietnamese in Cambodian media and the resulting conversations became a relentless narrative that put the Vietnamese in a bad light. Some Khmer Sharers offered more critical reflection on media. A pair of university students warned Listeners not to fully trust Facebook or radio stories, especially about events happening on the border. They said that it was important to see media as only one piece of a larger picture, and to digest such information accordingly. For a deeper understanding of traditional and social media and their connection to what listeners heard in their conversations, refer to the Media analysis chapter on page 99.

### Living separately but existing together

ថ្ងៃតែងតែជួបគ្នា តើវាជាការល្អឬអាក្រក់ បើសិនជាយើង  
រស់នៅដាច់ពីគ្នា តើយើងនៅជាមួយគ្នាបានដែរទេ?

I think our relationship is okay as long as Khmer live with Khmer  
and Vietnamese live with Vietnamese.

*A 50-year-old woman who has a breakfast shop set up in front  
of her house in Wat Champa*

Khmer Sharers gave many illustrations of how Vietnamese, despite living separately from them, still interact with Khmer communities on a daily basis. The main message was that even if Khmer and Vietnamese sleep in separate dwellings or in segregated ethnic areas, business and occasional social activities still brought them together. Many suggested that it was this factor of physically living separately that helped to maintain a relatively stable relationship between the two communities.

## A KHMER PERSPECTIVE OF A GATE IN THE COMMUNITY

*Their Gate: a dividing barrier or vibrant gateway?*



In the middle of one of the communities the Listeners visited lies an enigmatic gate attached to the Catholic church. Outside of the gate live Khmer families who have businesses and spend their days making a living. Inside the gate live ethnic Vietnamese who are largely Roman Catholic residing in Cambodia for different lengths of time – some for their entire lives, others more recent newcomers.

The Khmer community members living outside the gate perceive it as a symbol of division. According to some, when the gate is closed, nobody can get in or out. The gate is routinely shut every night after dark. However, it can also be suddenly secured at any time. If there is a sudden problem between the Khmer and the ethnic Vietnamese residents, the gate is usually closed.

Many of the Khmer in the area say that they are scared to end up trapped inside if it closes. They believe that behind the closed gate is a lawless and isolated area where anything can happen.

Some Khmer residents resent the division and say it prevents integration and allows them to live as if they were not even in Cambodia. Others, however, see it more positively and say the gate actually allows Khmer and Vietnamese to co-exist and live together normally by providing separate residential areas.

Despite the perception of the gate as a barrier, it also seems to serve as a vibrant gateway between the two communities. During the day, Khmer residents are free to go inside and interact with the ethnic Vietnamese community. They buy things, sell their products, drink coffee, and talk together. Likewise, the ethnic Vietnamese residents come outside of the gate and buy and sell along the walls and exchange with the local Khmer businesses.

Most Khmer Sharers advised the Listeners to feel free to go past the gate into the Vietnamese community, but to act prudently. "Go in and do your business," said one of the Khmer Sharers. "But act normally, don't get into any fights, and don't take photos."



**Bán an em xa mua láng giềng gần**

*A nearby neighbour is worth more than  
a hundred far-off relatives.*

A POPULAR VIETNAMESE SAYING

6

**AN ETHNIC VIETNAMESE  
PERSPECTIVE**

## **Opinions and thoughts shared across conversations with ethnic Vietnamese**

Listeners engaging with ethnic Vietnamese communities in Phnom Penh heard less confrontational opinions in their conversations. Overall, many were surprised that ethnic Vietnamese Sharers seemed less affected or concerned about the perceived tensions with their Khmer neighbours than they had expected.

However, in a later focus group examining the context and underlying signals in conversations, most Listeners agreed that they felt ethnic Vietnamese Sharers were fearful when talking about certain topics. In particular, when talking about anti-Vietnamese sentiment or their relations with Khmer, many became visibly uneasy or looked around to make sure they were not being overheard. Some refused to talk about it at all, saying they did not wish to get involved in politics. Most Listeners concluded that they felt ethnic Vietnamese Sharers may have been holding back in their answers.

Given that possibility, it is important to keep this context in mind when interpreting the findings. Further implementation of Facilitative Listening Design with tailored techniques could greatly assist in showing a more detailed picture. While the project design team believes the answers are genuine, they caution that the insights collected may not show the full picture if Sharers are worried about negative repercussions or perceived these conversations as engaging in politics.

1. The relationship between ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer in Cambodia is relatively normal.
2. Conflict between ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer is more about drugs, gangs, crime, and drinking.
3. Vietnamese and Khmer communities live both separately and in some cases more intermingled and living together in harmony.
4. Some long term ethnic Vietnamese residents of Cambodia still do not have proper documents for themselves or their families and fear being deported even though many see Cambodia as home and do not have any connection to Vietnam.
5. Appreciate the solidarity in the ethnic Vietnamese community.
6. Being referred to as “youn” is normal for some ethnic Vietnamese, but disliked by others who see it as an insult or as a discriminatory term.
7. Business is the most important issue.
8. Although there seems to be strong anti-Vietnamese sentiment in social media among youth and over the radio targeting older people, it doesn’t seem to reflect the reality of Vietnamese/Khmer relations in the community.
9. Worry about the future election in Cambodia – uncertain about change and scared that the big threat of deportation occurring in 2013 could happen again.
10. Want to strengthen immigration law and ensure that legal ethnic Vietnamese residents have access to proper documents.



### Relative normality

Tôi nghĩ mối quan hệ giữa người Việt và người Khmer tại nơi tôi ở là rất bình thường. Họ thường biết giúp đỡ lẫn nhau và coi nhau như anh em một trong nhà. Không có vấn đề gì cả chúng tôi làm bạn với họ.

I think the relationship between Vietnamese and Khmer is normal in our community. We are like brothers and sisters. There is no problem. We make friends with them and they with us.

*A 72-year-old Vietnamese woman in Niroth commune who resides in both Cambodia and Vietnam and travels frequently between the two*

Ethnic Vietnamese Sharers overwhelmingly conveyed their relationship with Khmer in Cambodia as normal. The idea of a normal relationship varied in degree, with some suggesting that they were like family or friends while others meant more simply that they did not perceive any major issue or problem between the two communities.

Ethnic Vietnamese who viewed their relationship as friendly and cordial frequently mentioned this is the context of doing business together. They said that they communicate and help each other when working together. A Vietnamese construction worker said that plenty of Khmer hire Vietnamese to build houses and buildings in an industry where people from both communities often work together. A biracial Vietnamese Khmer woman in Sen Sok said that she often went to Khmer celebrations in her neighbourhood. A Vietnamese foreign university student of Khmer literature who had been living in Cambodia for over three years said that although she did not have a lot of Khmer friends, her Khmer classmates were all kind and helpful, always explaining things to her and guiding her through the lessons when she could not understand. One 70-year-old woman who had been living in Cambodia for over 30 years also praised her Khmer friends and said that Vietnamese and Khmer are like brothers and sisters. Those that expressed such a positive view of Khmer in their communities often used adjectives such as helpful, honest, and kind, among others to describe their Khmer neighbours.

Not everyone dismissed anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia but they often attributed it to misunderstandings. Some thought that there were Khmer who misunderstood the ethnic Vietnamese community and might think badly about them, but that those Khmer living in areas with large ethnic Vietnamese populations knew that they were not bad people. Others conceded that although there were sometimes disagreements or even harsh words exchanged between ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer, this was not usually something that significantly redefined the relationship for the worse.

### Conflict is social, not ethnic

ខ្ញុំមិនឃើញមានការជំនឿទៅលើសង្គ្រាមជាតិទេ គឺជាបញ្ហាសង្គម ៗ  
 គ្នាប៉ុណ្ណោះ ឯងឃើញក្មេងៗគ្នាបែបនោះទៅលើសង្គ្រាមជាតិ គឺជាការបំប្លែង

I don't really see any arguments between our communities.  
 Only between teenagers who fight when there is a party and  
 they are drinking.

*A 14-year-old ethnic Vietnamese high school student born in Cambodia*

Listeners found that when touching on the topic of conflict or tension between ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer in Cambodia, ethnic Vietnamese Sharers tended to see things differently from Khmer and other groups. They blamed problems in social terms rather than on ethnic backgrounds, specifically citing problems caused by young people involved in drinking or drugs.

They saw both ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer as culprits or trouble-makers. Some complained that young ethnic Vietnamese were hanging out late at night, shouting, making noise, and causing problems. Others said that they found that when Khmer people got drunk, they started to say that all Vietnamese are bad who wanted to kill them or take their land away and take control of Cambodia. An ethnic Vietnamese motorcycle repairman who was married to a Cham Muslim woman said "I have never seen any big problem between our two communities, but whenever they drink or do drugs, they end up fighting and swearing at each other."

Sharers also identified other sources of conflict between the communities. Several said that gambling causes significant friction both among each ethnic group and between each other. A few noted that whoever loses in gambling or playing the lottery usually ends up becoming aggressive with the other. Some also highlighted problems of domestic violence and poverty as driving wedges. There was even mention of young love as sometimes causing problems between the ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer. One example of such conflict was given surmising that when an ethnic Vietnamese falls in love with a Khmer, the Khmer family often prohibits the relationship from continuing. Similarly, many ethnic Vietnamese saw everyday social issues as dividers between the communities rather than attributing tensions to a more serious and protracted ethnic conflict based on race or cultural issues alone.

### Segregation and integration

ខ្មែរនៅជាមួយខ្មែរ វៀតណាមនៅជាមួយវៀតណាម  
 ពេលខ្លះ ខ្មែរនិងវៀតណាមនៅជាមួយគ្នា ហើយស្នាក់នៅ គ្នា ក៏បាន។

Khmer live with Khmer. Vietnamese live with Vietnamese.

Sometimes we mix and hang out with each other.

*A 30-year-old ethnic Vietnamese motorcycle repairman born in Cambodia  
 with Cambodian citizenship in Niroth*

There were divided views among the ethnic Vietnamese Sharers in terms of how segregated or how integrated they lived in relation to Khmer. Some felt that Vietnamese and Khmer lived in the same neighbourhoods and communities, interacted with each other, and led intertwined lives. Others saw different worlds, where Vietnamese occupied one and Khmer the other. This was of course also directly related to which community the Sharer resided in and correlated to community dynamics.

Some ethnic Vietnamese mentioned that they, and others in their community, rented their houses or flats from Khmer owners. They frequently talked about Khmer people who also lived in the same neighbourhood, often in a predominantly Vietnamese area. With Khmer neighbours and those living nearby, many said that they were comfortable



with them. Some said that living in mixed communities was fine and that they communicated a lot together. Older ethnic Vietnamese Sharers sometimes talked about mixing together in cafés and coffee shops in their neighbourhood where they drank coffee and talked with each other. In mixed neighbourhoods, they said that they sometimes attended each other's festivals or celebrations.

Some ethnic Vietnamese Sharers, however, felt there was a clearer distinction between the two communities and that they lived in relative segregation. A 77-year-old retired construction worker who came from Vietnam to Cambodia in 1981 had more recently moved to Chbar Ampov from the Orussey market area to rent land and build a house. Now living in a neighbourhood with a large ethnic Vietnamese population, he observed that Khmer people residing in Chbar Ampov lived separately with their own people. He felt that their ways of living were different, so it was normal that they would live separately in their own communities.

Some ethnic Vietnamese also differentiated between the Khmer living with them in predominately Vietnamese communities and those in other parts of the city, where they often felt unwelcomed or afraid to be recognised as Vietnamese. For example, in their own neighbourhoods they felt free to speak Vietnamese. In other areas, however, they would refrain from speaking their native tongues and some would even go so far as to hide their Vietnamese identity from Khmer for fear that they would be discriminated against or treated badly.

## AN ETHNIC VIETNAMESE PERSPECTIVE OF A GATE IN THE COMMUNITY

*Our Gate: Making us feel safe again and  
bringing peace to the community*



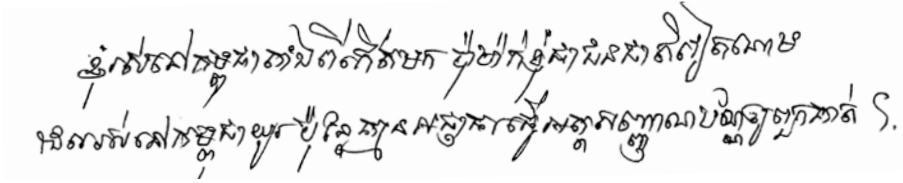
The gate connected to the Catholic church in one of the visited communities physically separates the ethnic Vietnamese neighbourhood from the Khmer neighbourhood (see page 69 for a Khmer perspective from the other side of the gate). Though ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer cross into each other's areas for business and commerce, the two communities live separated on different sides of the gate.

Ethnic Vietnamese, for the most part, see the gate as a safety measure for their community. Some remember it being built around five years ago because of frequent gang activity outside, mostly engaged in illegal drugs and causing violence. They say the gangs are made up of both ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer, and caused a lot of fear in the neighbourhood. They also report that the gate closes each night at ten o'clock, but that along the side there is a walkway where anybody can freely walk in and out at any time. What the gate prevents is any access to vehicles from the outside, that caused distress in the past as they came speeding through at night. They see the gate as protecting them from crime and also bringing peace and quiet in the night.

Ethnic Vietnamese also openly admit that the gate separates them from the Khmer on the other side. But they do not see this as necessarily negative. Some say this helps them to keep their community alive as a minority group in Cambodia, and shows they can be Catholics even in a predominantly Buddhist country. For them, solidarity in the community is beneficial and helps them in their day-to-day lives.

Seeing the different opinions about what the gate represents to the two communities helps highlight how different people can perceive the same thing differently, with views sometimes being in complete opposition to each other. Whether you see the gate as a dividing barrier or a means of safety and peace for the community, listening to views from each side allows us to better understand prevailing dynamics in the community as a whole.

### No documents but no other home



I was born in Cambodia. My parents are Vietnamese living in Cambodia for a long time. But none of us have identity cards. Nobody will issue them to us.

*A 23-year-old ethnic Vietnamese housewife living in Niroth commune*

Many ethnic Vietnamese born in Cambodia and more recent migrants both shared their common concern of being unable to acquire proper documents. Many Sharers, even those born and raised in the country, relayed how documents such as birth certificates, identification cards, family books, or nationality cards are often difficult or impossible to obtain. Several complained about local authorities that refused to help them obtain these documents. Some Sharers even noted cases of applicants who were detained by authorities. Several shared stories of having to bribe officials simply to be freed. Others related that they had to pay between 60,000 to 100,000 Cambodian Riels (US\$ 15-25) to authorities because they did not have any identification documents to show. Some observed that obtaining a marriage certificate was less problematic than other types of identification documents.

Many ethnic Vietnamese worried about the possibility that they would be deported because they do not have proper identification documents. This is a reoccurring concern, particularly around the time of elections, when the situation often becomes tense for ethnic Vietnamese communities. They shared that they regard Cambodia as their home country, with some saying that they did not even have any family or relatives in Vietnam. Others said that they felt absolutely no connection to Vietnam, nor did they ever consider it their homeland. For them, the idea of being deported to Vietnam made no sense.

### Vietnamese solidarity

*Người Việt Nam sống ở Campuchia nói rằng  
nếu có vấn đề gì, chỉ có họ thôi mà giúp đỡ nhau.*

Vietnamese who are living here said if they have any problems,  
they will help each other.

*A Vietnamese international student in Cambodia who volunteered as a Listener in  
Wat Champa neighbourhood*

For some ethnic Vietnamese Sharers, having strong community bonds was important and a positive trait. This solidarity could mean living in the same neighbourhood, doing business together, or helping out one another. In Sen Sok District, ethnic Vietnamese expressed that helping each other by buying and selling from each other was a significant element of their community. Likewise, communities in both Sen Sok and Wat Champa felt that by living close to each other and forming ethnic Vietnamese-majority neighbourhoods, they were safer and more comfortable.

Vietnamese international students at university also shared a sense of solidarity as foreign students at a Cambodian institution. Their Khmer classmates expressed positive appreciation for how the Vietnamese international students helped each other and felt this contributed to an overall positive classroom dynamic.

### On calling us “Yuon”

*Thỉnh thoảng khi tôi thấy họ gọi là Yuon “youn” lúc đó tôi  
rất tức giận và sau khi tôi giận như vậy cũng không có lợi gì  
vì tôi sau nghe cũng quen.*

Sometimes they call us *Yuon* in a harsh way, like ‘oh, those *Yuon*!’  
I used to feel angry, but eventually I realised that becoming angry got  
me nowhere. I’m used to that word now.

*A 35-year-old Vietnamese man living in Cambodia for over 20 years*

*Yuon* is a controversial term used in the Khmer language to refer to the Vietnamese. The argument about whether *Yuon* is a derogatory reference

or simply a neutral term used for centuries is highly debated. The origin and the nuance of its use are fiercely contested by both those who think it should be used and those who think the more literal expressions *protes Vietnam* and *chunchit Vietnam* should be said when referring to Vietnam as a country and Vietnamese nationals respectively. Ethnic Vietnamese and Vietnamese nationals living in Cambodia had less to say about the debate and more to share about how they felt when they heard it being used.

Ethnic Vietnamese who have lived in Cambodia for a long time often hated being called *Yvon* earlier in their lives. They expressed feeling angry or scared when they heard a Khmer using the term. Some said they were confused by the term or thought it was being used as a swearword or an insult. An ethnic Vietnamese man working in scavenging and recycling waste said that the term made him nervous. “Whenever I go outside,” he said, “I never speak my language unless I’m staying with Vietnamese because some Khmer discriminate against me and just say ah *Yvon*. *Yvon* is not a good person. When I hear this word spoken, I just remain silent and walk away.”

Nevertheless, many Sharers said that they eventually became accustomed to the term *Yvon* and learned to accept it. Some believed that Khmer people who said it did not understand the true meaning or knew how it made them feel. Others later began to see it as a synonym for saying Vietnamese or Vietnam and stopped taking offence to it.

More recent Vietnamese residents to Cambodia had different takes on the word *Yvon* and being called by this term. One Vietnamese international university student said that he strongly disliked it when he first arrived in the country. After learning how to speak Khmer more fluently, however, he learned that it was just a way to say “Vietnamese”.

Another classmate, however, had a very strong opposing opinion. “I’ve never been called *Yvon* but I’ve heard people using the word,” he shared. “I don’t feel comfortable with it because I think *Yvon* has a negative meaning. I’ve heard people saying *Yvon* steals Cambodian land, *Yvon* kills Khmer, *Yvon* is a thief. The words *Yvon* and Vietnam are totally different. Vietnam is the name of the country, but *Yvon* is only used when they are angry and want to insult us. I don’t like that word at all!”

### All about business

Tôi chưa thấy người Khmer và người Việt Nam có vấn đề với nhau  
 Cả hai họ chỉ tập chung vào làm ăn và kiếm tiền.

I've never heard or seen any problems between Khmer and  
 Vietnamese communities. I really only care about my business.

*A 22-year-old Vietnamese male hairdresser living in Cambodia for over ten years*

Business as a top priority resonated across conversations with ethnic Vietnamese Sharers. In particular, the more recent economic migrants to Cambodia conveyed that they were not concerned with political issues or anti-Vietnamese sentiment in the country. They were in the country to earn a living and some felt that Cambodia was a good place to do business in and appreciated living there. Others talked more about having found a new life in Cambodia and focused on working towards their own success rather than thinking about social problems. More established Vietnamese business people sometimes said that they did not worry about issues of negative sentiment or tensions even around election time because they had the proper documentation that allowed them to live and work in the country.



## BUSINESS AS A CONNECTOR

*Can business bring together ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer communities?*

Over and over, Listeners in all communities heard people talk about business. They heard ethnic Vietnamese emphasise that business was one of the most important issues in their lives. They listened to Khmer Sharers often positively talk about Vietnamese business skills and creativity in particular industries. Even in communities where they lived in segregated neighbourhoods, it was business that brought communities together (see *Their Gate* on page 69).

This is not the first-time business has been observed as a connector between groups at odds with each other or in conflict contexts. Peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity organisation CDA Collaborative Learning Projects has found evidence in other parts of the world that show businesses can in fact be potentially effective connectors among actors in complex conflict dynamics. In the Cambodian context, Sharers mentioned mostly small-scale business that served in some way to bring ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer together, even amidst sometimes challenging circumstances. Though business also occasionally led to disagreement or local conflict, it more often showed areas where shared values and common ground could be found. Business may indeed be an ideal starting place in working through negative sentiment or conflict between communities.



### Social media shortcomings

Tôi thấy ở trên mạng Facebook có một số người nói người Việt không tốt lúc đó tôi có cảm giác rất là buồn. Tôi nghĩ rằng nhiều vấn đề do đây là gần hơn liên quan tới chính trị. Còn phía Việt Nam khi mà bị xúc phạm như vậy họ cũng chịu lại.

I saw news on Facebook talking about how bad Vietnamese are. It makes me sad and sometimes I see Vietnamese reply and swear back in the comments. I think it's all just political.

*A 16-year-old house cleaner in Chbar Ampov living in Cambodia for five years*

Ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia were not oblivious to negative messaging or anti-Vietnamese sentiment in social media or on the radio. Many were, however, able to see harsh rhetoric or even hate speech as a separate phenomenon that did not necessarily reflect the reality of ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer relations in the community. Some did complain that Khmer often generalised about Vietnamese online when a specific case was presented about them in a negative light.

Sharers specifically mentioned stories that circulated on Facebook about rice found containing pieces of plastic, vegetables with heavy pesticides, and lotions full of harmful chemicals that were blamed on the Vietnamese. Whether the products were coming from Vietnam or being sold by ethnic Vietnamese, they felt that the framing of the stories caused Khmer to hate or blame all Vietnamese for the acts of certain individuals. Some felt that these stories were creating a consumer culture that was becoming accustomed to blaming Vietnam for any bad product, even if it actually came from another country. Others mentioned the usual portrayal of Vietnamese as wicked or criminal, contributing to an impression that all Vietnamese were trouble.



## Election anxiety and memories of 2013

*I think anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia get stronger during election campaigns, like in 2013. My local and foreign colleagues at work have all told me to leave the country before the next election. Even my family in Vietnam is telling me to come back home before then.*

*A 28-year-old Vietnamese expatriate woman working in an NGO in Phnom Penh for over four years*

Some Vietnamese migrants or those with an option to go to Vietnam noted the importance of returning to their home country before the next Cambodian election. Some recalled the national election in 2013 and the struggles they faced as ethnic Vietnamese. One woman who had been going back and forth between Ho Chi Minh and Phnom Penh for work remembered trying to get to the border the day before the election. She found herself trapped at the border at one o'clock in the morning in a chaotic situation with thousands of people also trying to leave the country. She recalled being afraid that there may be repercussions as a Vietnamese if she stayed in Cambodia during such a politically tense time.

Another young Vietnamese girl who had been living in Chbar Ampov since the previous election said that she would make sure she left Cambodia before the next national election in 2018. In Sen Sok District, one man expressed enormous fear and feelings of constant anxiety about the election. He said that he was getting ready for any result, but that he was preparing to leave the country at any time.

Ethnic Vietnamese Sharers were deeply worried about political instability and the effects the election results would have on their lives in Cambodia. For those who had been living for a very long time and even those born in Cambodia, they expressed a sense of urgency about the possibility of having to flee or being deported. They often emphasised that they had no connection to Vietnam, and that if an election result threatened their status or residence in Cambodia, they would not know what to do.

## A LISTENER'S OWN ACCOUNT OF THE ELECTION

### *Remembering a frightful day of exodus along the border*



Pisey, a biracial Vietnamese-Khmer Cambodian Listener, recalls her own memory of the 2013 election day along the border. A resident of a border village in Kandal province, Pisey was an election volunteer in charge of transporting ballot boxes to the voting station.

She remembers riding back home on her bicycle just after delivering a ballot box to the local office. She saw people running away from all directions. She approached a man who was running by her and got off her bicycle. "What are you running from?" she asked. "War is coming!" he screamed.

Rumours were flying in the village where people were talking about election violence and possible political fallout. In the village, where Vietnamese or ethnic Vietnamese Cambodians make up a large part of the population, fear had penetrated the community with talk of persecution of the Vietnamese.

Pisey rode over to the border area where she was shocked to see huge numbers of people trying to cross the river in boats or swimming. The chaos reminded her of the annual Water Festival every November. But this crowd was different. People looked desperate.

People were jumping into the river. On the other side, the Vietnamese authorities were blocking their entry. She describes the whole scene as madness. Sadly, it was later reported that four people drowned while trying to swim across the river.

In the aftermath, despite continued tension and some cases of violence against ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia, things went back to normal. It is difficult, however, for villagers to forget that chaotic day back in 2013. As a result, elections in Cambodia usually cause anxiety among ethnic Vietnamese.

The upcoming elections are on the minds of many Sharers and their conversations reflect that. In Cambodia, past election campaigns have often included ethnic Vietnamese living in the country as a topic of debate or an issue that proves to be contentious among the electorate. As political rhetoric gets stronger and the general population becomes more polarised, people committed to working on peacebuilding at the human level need to be aware and find innovative ways to work beyond politics and discourse of the moment.

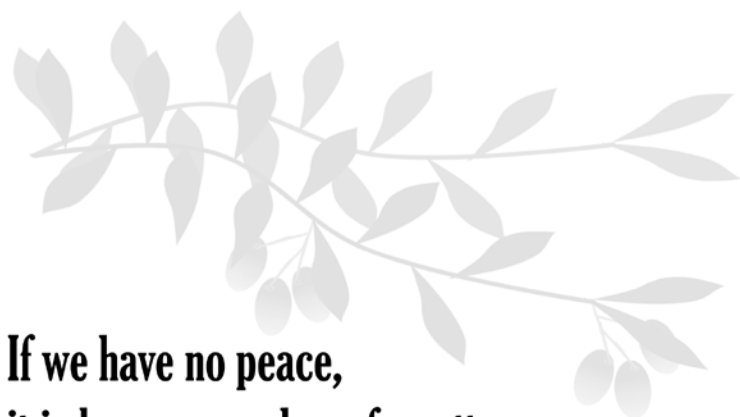
Although the majority of ethnic Vietnamese residents in Cambodia who spoke about the upcoming elections expressed fear or anxiety, a few exceptions stood out. A 35-year-old Vietnamese man who had been living in Cambodia for 20 years running a small business was confident that he would not be in danger. He said that the relationship between Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese had improved over the years. In the past, people always associated political change or election instability with violence against the Vietnamese. However, he saw that at present, the focus was more on positive change and development. He believed that a political dialogue based on a developing and prosperous Cambodia could lead to improved relationships between Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese who are working towards common goals.

### Legal immigration goes both ways

ចង់ឲ្យរដ្ឋឲ្យបានស្របច្បាប់៖ ប្រយោជន៍ដល់ប្រជាជនកម្ពុជា និង  
បញ្ហា សំបុត្រកំណើត អត្តសញ្ញាណប័ណ្ណ និងអាចទាញយកសំណុំឯកសារបាន។

I want the government to help solve the problems we are facing like getting birth certificates and ID cards that prove we are Cambodian.  
*A 25-year-old mixed Vietnamese and Khmer woman born in Cambodia without a birth certificate*

Although many believe that immigration concerns are largely coming from Khmer citizens, some ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia are also frustrated with the immigration situation in the country. The ethnic Vietnamese Sharers reminded Listeners that immigration goes both ways and affects everyone. For many of them, the issue is much larger than illegal immigrants crossing the border from Vietnam and setting up in Cambodia. The question is more about legal status, who has it, how to acquire it, and how to ensure that legal residents are afforded the rights and protections as any citizen. They looked to the government to solve the problem of residency status by clarifying and strengthening existing migration policies. They also mentioned seeking government support to ensure that proper documents, including identification cards, birth certificates, family cards, and whatever is needed to prove citizenship or residence, are provided by authorities when requested.



**If we have no peace,  
it is because we have forgotten  
that we belong to each other.**

MOTHER TERESA

ROMAN CATHOLIC NUN, MISSIONARY, AND NOBEL PEACE PRIZE RECIPIENT



# 7

**COMMUNITY AND  
CROSS-SECTIONAL ANALYSIS—  
EXPLORING DIFFERENT GROUPS**



Although the Facilitative Listening Design structure for this initiative did not directly set out to look at different communities and groups separately, discussions during the Info-Space Lab and further analysis at a later stage provided deeper insight. Some patterns and similar opinions or views emerged from the neighbourhoods and from different groups.

Community vibes

The emergence of similar opinions and perspectives shared across the different areas included in the Facilitative Listening Design did not exclude the occasional appearance of unique sentiments that were more prevalent in some areas or neighbourhoods. In this sense, each community often showed its own dynamics to some extent.

Chbar Ampov

Total Sharers: 37

<i>Khmer</i>	<i>Ethnic Vietnamese</i>	<i>Biracial</i>	<i>Chinese Cambodian</i>	<i>Other</i>
17	17	1	1	1(Khmer Krom)

Around the Chbar Ampov market area, Listeners heard about conflict. Khmer Sharers tended to have a more negative view about ethnic Vietnamese living and working there. They associated them with thieves, for example, and linked them with security problems experienced in the neighbourhood. Drugs were a big issue and mentioned frequently, often in relation to the Vietnamese community.

Nearly all Khmer in the Chbar Ampov market area expressed feeling helpless, with no voice at all regarding the growing ethnic Vietnamese population and the problems associated with it. They often talked about the large number of ethnic Vietnamese and complained about the growing number arriving and being born there. They saw themselves living together, mixed with the ethnic Vietnamese residents, and often shared their disapproval of the situation.

The ethnic Vietnamese Sharers, however, saw themselves as living separately from the Khmer. They generally expressed positive perceptions about Khmer people and said they had uncomplicated and relatively

normal relations with them. Many ethnic Vietnamese residents there felt that Cambodia was their home and often expressed that they would not know what to do or where to go if they had to leave.

Listeners that went to different communities noted that the ethnic Vietnamese residents in the Chbar Ampov market tended to be wealthier than in other areas. Many seemed to have their own businesses selling furniture, managing beauty salons, or running coffee shops.

**Niroth commune**

*Total Sharers: 43*

<i><b>Khmer</b></i>	<i><b>Ethnic Vietnamese</b></i>	<i><b>Biracial</b></i>	<i><b>Chinese Cambodian</b></i>	<i><b>Other</b></i>
20	11	7	2	3(Khmer Krom)

A few different dynamics exist in Niroth. There is a gated community development with a high level of security where most of the well-off ethnic Vietnamese residents live. Many of the Khmer residents saw the Vietnamese living separately from them. They did not mention any issue of drugs, like in other neighbourhoods, but they expressed serious concerns about illegal immigration. Listeners also noticed that Khmer Sharers, particularly the older Khmer residents, seemed to talk more about history and referred to stories about the past, like Tae Ong, for example (see page 123).

The ethnic Vietnamese residents in the neighbourhood were often much more focused on business or their work. Many of them were employed in a factory and did not mingle with the community as they spent most of the day at work. Many of them, however, mentioned occasional interactions with their Khmer neighbours, especially during celebrations. Ethnic Vietnamese residents in Niroth expressed great fears about being deported mentioning this more frequently than in other areas.

Wat Champa neighbourhood

Total Sharers: 8

<i><b>Khmer</b></i>	<i><b>Ethnic Vietnamese</b></i>	<i><b>Biracial</b></i>	<i><b>Chinese Cambodian</b></i>	<i><b>Other</b></i>
6	2	-	-	-

The area around the Champa pagoda is interesting given that although the community hosts separate Khmer and Vietnamese areas, they both mingle and mix in each other’s neighbourhoods. The presence of the Catholic church also provides a unique contrast between the Vietnamese Catholics and the mainly Buddhist Khmer in the area. In many ways, the Khmer in Wat Champa speak more positively about the ethnic Vietnamese than other communities as they go in and out of the Vietnamese neighbourhood for business. Likewise, ethnic Vietnamese held their Khmer neighbours in quite high regard, complimenting them, discussing common interests in business, and emphasising a positive and peaceful relationship in the area.

Sen Sok District

Total Sharers: 40

<i><b>Khmer</b></i>	<i><b>Ethnic Vietnamese</b></i>	<i><b>Biracial</b></i>	<i><b>Chinese Cambodian</b></i>	<i><b>Other</b></i>
16	19	1	3	1( <i>Cham Muslim</i> )

The neighbourhood of Tropang Rang Thmei in Sen Sok District mainly revolves around a local market, reflecting day-to-day lives involving business and commerce. Both Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese in Tropang Rang Thmei appeared to be poorer than other areas, and issues about livelihoods and employment were more prevalent. The Khmer residents seemed to hold more negative perceptions of the ethnic Vietnamese in the neighbourhood. Many of the Khmer Sharers expressed varying degrees of resentment or envy towards the ethnic Vietnamese who they saw as competing for their jobs and business. Ethnic Vietnamese, on the other hand, were relatively positive in their views of their Khmer neighbours. Many did, however, acknowledge feeling uncomfortable as they recognised the Khmer feeling resentful towards them.

Interestingly, both groups extensively discussed the problem of gambling



and drinking, and how that was directly causing conflict between the two communities. They also equally shared a concern about corruption at the local authority level. The Khmer complained that they thought the ethnic Vietnamese were paying off officials to avoid any legal problems while the ethnic Vietnamese complained the corruption was so bad they had to pay bribes just to be left alone.

**Toul Kork District**

*Total Sharers: 7*

<i><b>Khmer</b></i>	<i><b>Ethnic Vietnamese</b></i>	<i><b>Biracial</b></i>	<i><b>Chinese Cambodian</b></i>	<i><b>Other</b></i>
2	4	1	-	-

The Toul Kork area was the most central downtown community included in the initiative. The neighbourhood is urban and Listeners focused on the student population living and studying there. In particular, Khmer students and Vietnamese international students generally shared quite positive perceptions of each other. Unlike in other communities, the Vietnamese population engaged in conversations were temporary residents and had significantly different profiles from ethnic Vietnamese living in more residential areas. In addition to students, one Sharer was an expatriate Vietnamese citizen with temporary residence in Cambodia (for details on university student perceptions of each other, refer to the students’ section in this chapter on page 93).

**Women**

In general, Listeners observed that female Sharers were more afraid to engage in conversation in comparison to men who seemed more “daring” or “open” in their discussions. They also felt that Khmer women were more accommodating overall, often making up the majority of Sharers who did not see all Vietnamese as bad or in a completely negative way. They more frequently spoke of, for instance, the possibility of co-existence. Khmer women also tended to focus on daily living issues like household activities or interactions with neighbours. They were much less likely than Khmer men to raise political issues, discuss historical grievances, or focus on nationalistic narratives. However, like Khmer men, Khmer women also felt that, in general, the relationship with ethnic Vietnamese is not

very positive, and they shared major concerns about illegal immigrants, job security, and border sovereignty.

Like Khmer women, ethnic Vietnamese women also largely focused on daily living and interaction with others in their community rather than talking about politics or history. They often expressed their major concerns involving their families rather than conveying opinions about overarching social issues. Unlike Khmer women, most ethnic Vietnamese women living in Cambodia viewed the relationship with Khmer as quite positive. Many expressed that they have no ill will or negative feelings towards Khmer and that they often had strong business relations with them. In one unique case where an ethnic Vietnamese woman married a Khmer man, she discussed how gender training had significantly helped their relationship, particularly in navigating certain cultural differences and perceptions of women. She felt that her husband and other Khmer men often made generalisations about Vietnamese women, such as being promiscuous or involved in the sex industry. She expressed a strong desire to see more training in her community to deal with stereotyping and cross-cultural misunderstanding.

## **Age matters**

There were evident differences between older and younger Sharers and the perceptions they held. Older Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese, for example, talked more freely about politics and the direction they saw the country going. Khmer seniors, in particular, spoke more about history and how their understanding of the past related to what they thought today. Although older people on both sides often shared strong opinions, they were more likely to compare the situation with how things were before and saw things continuing down a similar path. They were also more influenced by the radio as a main source of media. They talked about what they heard, particularly on Radio Free Asia.

Young Khmer, with the exception of university students studying with Vietnamese classmates, complained more about behaviours and attitudes conflicting with their own. They tended to express more frustration about the situation and less understanding towards ethnic Vietnamese. Both young Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese talked a lot about social media and about how they hated what they saw posted online on Facebook.

## Students

In the Toul Kork District, the focus was on the local Khmer and international Vietnamese students studying at universities. Additional fieldwork was carried out after the main timeframe of conversation and information gathering due to the interesting dynamics that emerged from an initial conversation with a Vietnamese student. Vietnamese and Khmer students in the same classes tended to have very positive relationships. The Vietnamese students shared that they generally saw their Khmer classmates as very helpful and kind. Several mentioned getting help from them when they could not follow the lesson or understand the meaning of something in their second language. Likewise, Khmer students often spoke positively of their Vietnamese classmates and also admitted changing their past perceptions of Vietnamese after they had an opportunity to study together. They showed an openness towards “the other” that went further than many other groups in other locations.

## Biracial Vietnamese-Khmer

Biracial or mixed race ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer may have one parent of each ethnicity or grandparents from different ethnicities. They are sometimes difficult to identify as many in Cambodia choose to hide their Vietnamese ethnicity or heritage. Through deeper conversations, however, Listeners on both the Khmer and the ethnic Vietnamese teams were able to speak with and identify nine biracial Sharers.

Most of these Sharers had a more positive view of the relationship between Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese in the country. They often said that there were good people in both groups. Most were vocal in their praise specifically for Khmer and chose not to share as much about their opinions regarding ethnic Vietnamese. Nevertheless, they did emphasise that the real relationship at the community level was not negative. Where problems did exist, they were often related to issues of drinking and gambling among young people. Several stressed the important business ties between the two groups that often served to normalise relations. Not surprisingly, most tended to identify themselves initially as Khmer, and only disclosed their mixed ethnic Vietnamese heritage to Listeners at a later point in the conversation.

## THE DYNAMICS OF MIXED RACED FAMILIES IN CAMBODIA

*Life as a Khmer with Vietnamese blood through the eyes of a Listener*



Sihoeun sees herself as Khmer like anyone else. She works for an NGO in Phnom Penh and helps people in rural areas. She has a good relationship with her family in the countryside and lives with siblings in the city. But there is a secret within the family. They are mixed Vietnamese. Even though they do not speak the language or practise any different culture from Khmer, there is an unspoken understanding that they do have Vietnamese heritage within their family tree. In fact, when her family found out she would participate in this initiative related to understanding ethnic Vietnamese, they tried to talk her out of it.

Sihoeun admits she holds onto deep anti-Vietnamese sentiment in her heart. Her family expresses strong resentment against Vietnam and she ironically grew up hearing endless criticism about Vietnamese. She has heard some relatives speaking quietly in Vietnamese at times, and although she recognises herself as Khmer, has felt some confusion about her identity.

In order to experiment with the Facilitative Listening Design process and test for transformative elements in its implemen-

tation, Sihoeun was selected as a unique participant to join the ethnic Vietnamese team.

She paired off with a Vietnamese international university student and visited ethnic Vietnamese families. Even though she could not speak the language, many of the Sharers she met with spoke Khmer. She was continually surprised by what she heard. Conversation after conversation, her initial preconceptions started to break down. She began to relate directly with the Sharers, seeing them just like any other family with their own problems.

Sihoeun also became close friends with her Vietnamese listening partner. In fact, they continue to call each other and meet up often. She is also not as uncomfortable to recognise that she is mixed. "I used to feel like Vietnamese were so alien to me and my family," she says. "But now I feel closer. And I know that I am part Vietnamese, and that it does not have to be a bad thing." Sihoeun also says that after the project, she is more confident to challenge her family on their perceptions and share her newfound empathy gained after hearing the struggles and challenges of the communities she visited.

## **Khmer Krom**

The Khmer Krom make up an interesting sub-group of Khmer that emerged as an occasional topic in conversations and also whom specifically participated as Sharers in four cases. The Khmer Krom refer to ethnically Khmer people who live or lived in today's southwestern part of Vietnam. Descendants of the Khmer empire, they generally remain on the territory that eventually came under Vietnamese sovereignty. As a minority ethnic group in Vietnam, a sizeable portion of the population migrated to Cambodia where they are, under law, entitled to rights of citizenship. In reality, however, the process of gaining citizenship can be uncertain, and many struggle to get legal documentation.

The Khmer Krom Sharers most often provided a neutral or balanced perspective in terms of seeing the relationship between Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. Several talked about having friends of both ethnicities. Overall, they saw relations as positive both between the ethnic groups and between the countries of Cambodia and Vietnam. Some saw themselves as connectors between Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese, often understanding both cultures and languages. A few did mention that they felt particularly disadvantaged in comparison to mainstream Khmer in Cambodia, sometimes being identified as Vietnamese or being called “Yvon” in spite of being ethnically Khmer. In general, however, Khmer Krom Sharers provided a more balanced analysis and gave many examples of positive relations between the groups in contemporary Cambodian society.

## **Ethnic Vietnamese and layers of identity**

Understanding perceptions of different layers of ethnic Vietnamese identity was included as a supplementary element in the information-gathering component of this Facilitative Listening Design initiative. Given the limited information available on Vietnamese populations living in Cambodia, Listeners often brought up the question of Vietnamese identity with both ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer Sharers. The result was a better understanding of how members of both groups tend to categorise ethnic Vietnamese, which also appeared to influence their perceptions and provide some variance in how they saw different groups.

*Pre-Khmer Rouge migrants*

Ethnic Vietnamese who migrated before the genocide years of 1975-1979 were recognised as longstanding residents of Cambodia. Though they may have fled the country for some time during the Khmer Rouge era or at other tense times in the past, returned ethnic Vietnamese at later points also made up this group. Pre-Khmer Rouge ethnic Vietnamese migrants were understandably seen as more integrated into Khmer society, most often able to speak fluent Khmer, had children and grandchildren born in Cambodia, and held deep roots in the country. They were also most frequently the ones that saw Cambodia as their home and often noted they had no connection at all to Vietnam today.

*Post-Khmer rouge – Vietnamese occupation migrants*

Khmer Sharers particularly identified ethnic Vietnamese migrants who arrived during the occupation years between 1979 to 1989. This group mostly comprised of male soldiers of the People's Army of Vietnam deployed throughout Cambodia in the aftermath of the genocide. Although the Vietnamese forces officially withdrew and returned to Vietnam, there has been widespread scepticism that all left. Many Khmer that recognise this group of Vietnamese migrants see them today as civilians with connections to the military whom may have married Khmer women and had biracial children.

*Recent economic migrants*

Both Khmer and Vietnamese Sharers saw recent economic migrants as a unique group of ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia. The use of the word "recent" was relative, and could even include those arriving after the end of the occupation in 1989, stretching to include the most recent arrivals. This group mainly entered into Cambodia by crossing the border, sometimes establishing themselves independently, other times arriving to join family already residing in the country. Some specifically mentioned that after 1997, economic migrants grew in number following the end of the civil conflict in Cambodia.

This group is considered to have relatively precarious migration status, frequently assumed to lack proper documentation to legally remain in the country. They are also seen as less integrated, often composed of migrants who know little to no Khmer. This group could be seen running small businesses, often having come to Cambodia to earn a better living

or to improve their livelihoods. Some were seen to be more mobile, with the capacity to move across the border when having to go to Vietnam or leaving the country during politically charged moments, for example.

#### *Expatriate Vietnamese residents*

Vietnamese citizens living in Cambodia as expatriates generally included those residing on a non-permanent basis. International company employees, foreign and exchange students, and non-governmental organisation staff were often seen as temporary. Their legal status was also viewed as less ambiguous than others, with the likelihood that they had temporary resident visas through the proper migration channels. Their level of integration and Khmer language ability varied depending on their specific contexts. In general, their income level was seen as often surpassing other ethnic Vietnamese groups. They were also perceived as the most mobile, able to easily go back and forth from their home country to Cambodia.

#### *Catholic vs Vietnamese folk religion and Buddhists*

Ethnic Vietnamese often differentiated their own group by religious terms. Catholic Vietnamese were quite visible communities in predominately Buddhist areas in Phnom Penh. Church was often at the centre of community life. Sometimes ethnic Vietnamese Sharers spoke about differences between Catholics and those practicing Vietnamese folk religion or Buddhists. Those Vietnamese who practised folk religion, which blends elements of Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism, were believed to blend more easily into Cambodian society. Although Listeners did not specifically record the religion of Sharers after their conversations, they did notice religious contexts in different communities and Sharers themselves sometimes spoke of their own community's layers of identity involving religious association.



## ETHNIC CHINESE

### *Could Chinese Cambodians be connectors?*

Cambodians of Chinese descent are a visible community throughout the country, particularly in Phnom Penh. Though the population of ethnic Chinese Cambodians has drastically declined over the last 50 years due to conflict and emigration, today they are still well represented in the business sector and political scene.

In neighbouring Thailand, a longstanding conflict persists in the deep south between the ethnic Thai Buddhists and the ethnic Malay Muslims. Another ethnic group, the Thai Chinese, have a sizeable presence there. Some have noted that Thai Chinese may play the role of a potential connector between the Thais and Malays at the forefront of the conflict.

They are less attached to one narrative, they have a different historical perspective, and they are often focused on the importance of business and livelihoods. Could Chinese Cambodians play a similar role between the Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese?



The Facilitative Listening Design conversations with Chinese Cambodian Sharers uncovered some unique patterns. Most Chinese Cambodians tended to dually identify themselves as Chinese or Chinese-Khmer, and often echoed the perspectives of the mainstream Khmer.

Though some conveyed strong anti-Vietnamese sentiment, many Chinese Cambodians expressed a strong desire for more harmonious relations. They hoped for stronger solidarity and understanding. They also more often saw ethnicity of little importance in relation to their own perceptions of others, reinforcing the view that people are people, and there are good and bad in any ethnic group. They were less concerned about history but did commonly voice their apprehension about modern day illegal migration.

Chinese Cambodian Sharers were also quite pragmatic in their conversations. They repeatedly focused on the importance of good relations for the benefit of everyone and often provided practical solutions to build friendship. Some suggested that a stronger emphasis on business or cultural exchange could bring Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese communities together in Cambodia.



# 8

## MEDIA ANALYSIS

### Traditional media and one-way communication

Traditional media and one-way communication monitoring was carried out daily from January to March 2017 and centred on three types of mediums in Cambodia. This included printed newspapers, online news without audience comment functions, and the radio. Articles and broadcasts making reference to Vietnamese people were collected. Using keyword searches and daily monitoring practices, the traditional media and one-way communication sources were recorded and analysed separately as well as in relation to the Facilitative Listening Design conversations and Listener analysis. The different kinds of media included in the study are listed in the table below.

<i>Media name</i>	<i>Type of media</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>Koh Santepheap</i>	<i>Printed newspaper</i>	<i>A Khmer-language newspaper printed in Cambodia with headquarters in Phnom Penh. Website: <a href="https://kohsantepheapdaily.com.kh">https://kohsantepheapdaily.com.kh</a></i>
<i>The Khmer Times</i>	<i>Printed newspaper</i>	<i>A printed and digital English language newspaper with a Khmer-language insert based in Phnom Penh. A Youth Today section particularly caters to the young population. Website: <a href="http://www.khmertimeskh.com">http://www.khmertimeskh.com</a></i>
<i>The Phnom Penh Post</i>	<i>Printed newspaper</i>	<i>An English and Khmer-language printed daily newspaper from Phnom Penh, and considered the oldest English-language publication in Cambodia. A digital website also brings news to the Internet. Website: <a href="http://www.phnompenhpost.com">http://www.phnompenhpost.com</a></i>
<i>Cambodian Daily</i>	<i>Printed newspaper</i>	<i>A primarily English-language newspaper printed six days a week with a translated Khmer-language section published in Phnom Penh. The newspaper also publishes its stories online. Website: <a href="https://www.cambodiadaily.com">https://www.cambodiadaily.com</a></i>
<i>Fresh News</i>	<i>Online news</i>	<i>An online Khmer-language publication with one-way news stories published on the Internet as they happen. Website: <a href="http://www.freshnewsasia.com">http://www.freshnewsasia.com</a></i>



Radio Free Asia	Radio	<p><i>A private non-profit corporation that “broadcasts news and information to Listeners in Asian countries where full, accurate, and timely new reports are unavailable.” Radio broadcasts in Cambodia are on shortwave and FM in Khmer.</i></p> <p><i>Website: <a href="http://www.rfa.org">http://www.rfa.org</a></i></p>
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MEDIA CONTENT CONVEYED AS FACTS  
IN CONVERSATIONS

*A media analyst’s insight into connecting media to perception*



Khim is a 22-year-old ethnic Chinese Cambodian who grew up in Phnom Penh. She is a law student who dreams of becoming a lawyer. Khim participated in this initiative as a media analyst focusing on traditional media. She spent three months reviewing printed newspapers and online articles in Khmer and English as well as listening to daily radio news broadcasts.

Joining the Information Processing and Transformative Space Lab with the Listeners, Khim had a chance to hear about the anti-Vietnamese sentiment being expressed in communities around Phnom Penh.

“I was really surprised, to be honest,” she said. “For over three months, I was reading different Khmer newspapers, pulling out any articles related to Vietnamese people.

Suddenly I find myself in the Info-Space Lab and I’m hearing others almost repeating the news stories, but they are speaking on behalf of their Sharers. It really made me think – are newspapers representing their voices, or are people taking up the words of the news?”

Khim’s observation demonstrates how people can consume media stories and then convey what they hear as information, sometimes as “facts” which can convincingly shape their perceptions. How different groups in the media frame information considerably sways how newspaper readers and radio listeners think. Indeed, negative portrayals and hate speech can deeply influence how people perceive “the other”.

*Being Vietnamese equates to being illegal*

Although reporting varied among the news sources, traditional media and one-way communication outlets focused heavily on stories related to citizenship, immigration, and resident status. Stories about immigration raids and deportation largely focused on ethnic Vietnamese targets, with commentary and photos of persons suspected of being illegal immigrants rounded up or awaiting deportation. Many media outlets reporting on immigration stories involving various nationalities often focused only on the number of Vietnamese involved. For example, a story might say “Illegals of 63 nationalities deported, 72% Vietnamese” or “Police detained 10 Vietnamese working in Khan Chamkarmon.”

A major issue related to status included elections and the right to vote. Articles about requests to remove ethnic Vietnamese from voting lists highlighted questions about their citizenship. After official requests were made to the government to review the documents of ethnic Vietnamese for potential irregularities, many stories questioning their citizenship began to circulate.

This media narrative rests largely on the underlying assumption that ethnic Vietnamese residents are illegal migrants. Many Khmer Sharers mentioned this narrative in the conversations conveying their concern that migrants coming across the border were undocumented or illegal.

# SENSATIONAL STORIES CAN DEHUMANISE "THE OTHER"

## Rounded up in Niroth

An article that appeared online and in numerous print newspapers in February, over the same period as Facilitative Listening Design conversations were being carried out, shared details from a migration raid in Niroth commune.

Local authorities and immigration officials worked together to target scavengers and scrap collectors along Highway 1. The article stated that 51 Vietnamese were detained, and 15 among them had no proper documentation. The story included several photos of the ethnic Vietnamese detainees, including face shots, group photos with immigration police, and action shots of the round up.

Listeners heard a lot about the case in their conversations with Sharers, particularly among Khmer. Many talked about reading the news and referred to the 51 Vietnamese as illegals.

A few even discussed watching the raid while it was happening. For some, the news story reinforced their perception that Vietnamese are generally in Cambodia without proper documentation and need to be deported. Others felt frustrated, believing that without any real follow up to the original article, the authorities would just release the 15 Vietnamese who had been taken away, and these people would come back to the community. By framing the story as a successful round up with full photos of people being detained, the newspaper contributed to providing a narrative that those involved were presumed criminals. This further contributed to dehumanising the parties in question by emphasising their status and driving a strong generalised perception of "the other".

កម្លាំងនរណាម្នាក់ប្រើប្រាស់ ឃាត់ខ្លួនជនជាតិវៀតណាមជាង៥០នាក់ នៅខណ្ឌច្បារអំពៅ, រកឃើញ១៥នាក់ រស់នៅខុសច្បាប់

**(សំណួរ៖)** ត្រូវបានដឹងថាមានការប្តូរគោល គោលដៅនយោបាយ និងសេដ្ឋកិច្ច នៃអង្គការដឹកនាំរបស់លោក សាវណា ជាមួយការប្តូរនយោបាយក្នុងរដ្ឋបាល និងគោលនយោបាយនយោបាយក្នុងសង្គម។ តើការប្តូរនយោបាយក្នុងសង្គម ត្រូវបានប្តូរដោយរបៀបណា? សូម ប្រាប់ជាលម្អិតដល់សាវណាដែលបានដឹងថា ត្រូវដឹងថា ត្រូវបានប្តូរដោយរបៀបណា? សូម ប្រាប់ដល់អង្គការដឹកនាំរបស់លោក សាវណា។

[illegible][illegible]

*The border: a hotbed of conflict*

Traditional media frequently featured stories about the border. In both print media and on the radio, one dominant narrative during the analysis period centred on Vietnamese taking over or possessing Cambodian land. There were stories about companies “lending” land to Vietnamese palm sugar producers or about Khmer families no longer able to farm their land due to encroaching Vietnamese farmers. Other prevalent stories were on cross-border taxing and tax-free initiatives that often hinted at disadvantageous prices or regulations for Cambodians that benefited the Vietnamese. Products passing through the borders from Vietnam, such as garlic containing high levels of chemicals, also scared and angered Khmer news readers.

Even in Phnom Penh, the faraway border remained an intense topic of conversation between Listeners and Sharers. Khmer Sharers reflected feelings of desperation and helplessness that they were losing their sovereign land to other countries. Many expressed an overwhelming sense they had little to no power themselves to prevent this or resist an ongoing loss of land. Many of the feelings they shared could often be compared to similar tones found in media stories in newspapers and radio discussions. In fact, when Khmer Sharers discussed issues related to the media, they most frequently brought up features about the border. Many conveyed feeling a great sense of sorrow regarding the stories they read and heard about arising from a belief that they were becoming a minority or a weaker group in their own country.



## ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES AND POSITIVE PORTRAYS DO EXIST

### *Reporting on untold stories*

FEATURES

#### **Cambodia, Catholicism, and Cauliflower**

The ups and downs of life in an ethnically Vietnamese community in Cambodia.

By Peter Ford

10 Feb 2014



**KIEN SVAY DISTRICT, CAMBODIA** — Over a narrow cement bridge spanning ponds of purple-flowering lilies lies the ethnically Vietnamese village of Koh Pos Dac Eth.

With the Mekong River to its back, the village 45 minutes south of Cambodia's capital Phnom Penh, sandwiched on both sides by farmland that floods at the height of the annual rainy season, consists of 40 or so modest two-story houses crowded around a bright turquoise Catholic church.



The sign before the Vietnamese Catholic church, written in Khmer, reads "The Lamb of God Factory Church," in relation to the community's former location next to a nearby brick factory.

Image credit: Peter Ford

Not all stories in the media are doom and gloom. An article in an international online magazine not included in the study happened to be published in March, during the period of the Facilitative Listening Design implementation in Phnom Penh communities. This article explores a town in Kandal province just a few kilometres from where Listeners were speaking with local communities that are home to Catholic Vietnamese and Khmer.

The article mentions both the challenges and the successes of the community. While discussing Vietnamese fears of being deported and issues about their citizenship, it also mentions the relative harmony between Khmer and their ethnic Vietnamese neighbours. Providing a rare insight into a community where both groups are living side-by-side, the story helps to humanise the ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer residents alike. It provides direct quotations from a variety of people in the neighbourhood that give real insight into the genuine daily lives and the dynamics of living together. Connectors in the community, such as celebrations, farming, and stronger relationships among Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese individuals are highlighted just as much as any dividers that might cause tension between them. This portrayal of a real community thriving with its two ethnic groups coexisting in the same area offers an alternative understanding of Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese relations at the grassroots level.

Interestingly, the story very closely reflects many of the findings that Facilitative Listening Design also uncovered through conversations. The article notes the difficulty ethnic Vietnamese encounter when they try to obtain identification documents and how this affects their children who can only attend school until the fifth grade without proper documentation. It also explores the more positive perceptions among the Khmer in the neighbourhood who appreciate the closeness within the Vietnamese community and the interaction that happens between the two groups over food and celebrations.

Presenting narratives that differ from the ones overwhelmingly shown by mainstream media can provide alternative ways of interpreting issues, and may even offer something that more closely represents real experiences. Highlighting positive aspects alongside a contentious relationship or ongoing conflict can go a long way in better understanding a wider range of perceptions and the connectors that exist between different people.

Social media and online interactive two-way communication

Social media monitoring focused on Facebook, the most popular and widely used social network in Cambodia. Most young Cambodians choose Facebook as their news source, in contrast to their elders who prefer traditional sources of media. From January to March 2017, a social media analyst tracked Facebook posts by using keyword searches relating to the words “Vietnam” and “Yvon” in Khmer language. This study includes not just posts originally written during the monitoring period, but also those that were reposted or in circulation during this time. Comments on the posts were also examined. Each post was further analysed using the Dangerous Speech framework to gauge the level of potential impact the post could have in inciting violence.

Several themes emerged from the Facebook posts. Twenty of the most circulated posts were chosen to measure the level of potential violence from the dangerous speech. In applying the Dangerous Speech framework, each post had to be analysed using six guiding questions that gave different weights for answers based on their potential for violence.

On the scale from 0 being the least dangerous to 12 being the most dangerous, posts with ratings of 6 or higher were considered as falling under the category of Dangerous Speech, meaning that they could increase the risk of the audience condoning or participating in violence against another group. Of the twenty, fifteen were considered having relatively high levels of dangerous speech. Interestingly, articles that contained the word *Yvon* in place of Vietnamese or *chunchit Vietnam* were found to be in the category of higher levels of dangerous speech. In essence, the word *Yvon* appeared in posts that were considered more threatening, with potential for violence.

<i>Frequent theme circulating on Facebook</i>	<i>Actual example of a post representing the theme</i>	<i>Dangerous Speech Level</i>
<i>Cambodians as historical victims of Vietnamese occupation</i>	<i>A trailer of an old “fictional” movie alluding to historical events that closely resembles a Cambodian narrative of losing land and being under the dominance of the Vietnamese (see page 110).</i>	12

<i>Violence in the fishing sector</i>	<i>A post condemning Vietnamese fishermen for an incident where they violently beat Cambodian fishermen.</i>	9
<i>Vietnamese domination of the fishing industry inside of Cambodia</i>	<i>A video profiling emotional Cambodian fishermen crying and complaining that the Vietnamese illegally fish in Cambodia while Cambodians have been prohibited to fish by the authorities.</i>	9
<i>Danger of Vietnamese as organ traffickers</i>	<i>A post claiming that some Vietnamese kill Cambodian children and take out their organs to sell to foreign buyers.</i>	9
<i>Deportation of illegal migrants</i>	<i>A post on an individual case of ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia being deported to Vietnam.</i>	9
<i>Vietnamese products are dangerous</i>	<i>A video showing Vietnamese putting chemicals and substances into many products destined for Cambodia with a written warning about importing from Vietnam.</i>	7
<i>Master Tea historical account</i>	<i>A video depicting the Master Tea story (see page 123) showing the malicious nature of Vietnamese over the Khmer slaves in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.</i>	7
<i>Vietnamese taking jobs away from Cambodians</i>	<i>A post of photos of a Vietnamese working as a toilet guard at Bokor Mountain indirectly associated with controversial perceptions of growing numbers of Vietnamese</i>	7
<i>Vietnamese conspiracy to take possession of Cambodian territory</i>	<i>A post arguing that the Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam Developmental Triangle Area is a new scheme for the Vietnamese to take Cambodian land.</i>	7
<i>An ambiguous border</i>	<i>A post about Vietnamese physically moving the border by encroaching on Cambodian territory.</i>	7
<i>Losing ocean sovereignty to Vietnam's fishing sector</i>	<i>A post stating that the Cambodian authorities allow the Vietnamese to fish in Cambodian territorial sea.</i>	7

<i>Vietnamese chemically-ridden fruit and vegetables</i>	<i>A post about the influx of imported Vietnamese vegetables to Cambodia found to be full of chemicals.</i>	7
<i>Vietnamese chemically-ridden fruit and vegetables</i>	<i>A post about the influx of imported Vietnamese vegetables to Cambodia found to be full of chemicals.</i>	7
<i>Ongoing farmland rentals to Vietnamese crop growers</i>	<i>A post sharing that Cambodian farmers still rent out their properties along the borderline to Vietnamese despite being prohibited by the government.</i>	7
<i>Vietnamese infiltration into Cambodian government</i>	<i>A post depicting Cambodian politicians being associated with Vietnam.</i>	7
<i>Historical colonisation</i>	<i>A post about history concerning Vietnamese colonisation of Cambodia.</i>	7
<i>Stereotype of Vietnamese women as sexual objects and dangerous</i>	<i>A post about a Vietnamese woman who killed herself with the poster's comment that Vietnamese women are beautiful but dangerous as they are willing to sacrifice themselves to seduce Cambodian men.</i>	4
<i>Vietnamese corporate intimidation on issues of natural resources and land</i>	<i>A post about a case of Vietnamese intimidating Khmer people who try to protect the forest on Cambodian territory.</i>	4
<i>Justification for using the term "youn" to refer to Vietnamese</i>	<i>A video discussing the definition and description of the word "Youn" from a Khmer perspective of history and language use.</i>	4
<i>Stereotype of Vietnamese as untrustworthy</i>	<i>A video depicting the Vietnamese cheating others to profit in their business endeavours.</i>	4
<i>Stereotype of Vietnamese as drug traffickers</i>	<i>A post reporting Vietnamese as drug traffickers.</i>	4

Over the three-month period, content on these twenty themes, as well as others, led to many discussions on Facebook. Overall, topics in Khmer social media involving the subject of Vietnamese or ethnic Vietnamese largely expressed negative views.

Two overarching themes particularly stood out for triggering a high level of interaction and dialogue among Facebook users.

*We're losing access to our livelihoods*

Numerous Facebook posts related to a familiar narrative of the Vietnamese getting in the way of Khmer accessing their own resources. A frequent example is fishing. A post of a video with a pair of distressed Khmer women talking about Vietnamese entering Cambodia to fish in local waters caused an uproar giving way to expressions of strong sentiment from those who commented in the thread. A similar post claiming that local authorities were allowing Vietnamese fishermen to fish in Kampot and Kep provinces stirred similar negative feelings and online reactions of victimisation. Another widely discussed topic on social media is agriculture. There were numerous complaints about the Vietnamese farming on Cambodian land along the border. A related theme is that of a moving border between Cambodia and Vietnam, with continuous encroachment into Cambodian territory. Posts about Khmer trying to protect the forests from Vietnamese companies were also prevalent, portraying Khmer resistance to loss of access to their natural resources.

*Vietnamese products are dangerous*

A second theme that strongly emerged in social media dialogue concerned the importation of Vietnamese products into Cambodia that were substandard and defective. Various posts about dangerous pork, plastic rice, and chemical-filled vegetables were frequently circulated on Khmer Facebook feeds. This contributed to an ongoing narrative that Vietnamese products are low quality or fake, and cause great risk to the health of Cambodian consumers. Some even insinuated that there was a larger conspiracy at play of Vietnamese exports being brought in to purposely make Khmer people sick and unhealthy.

## VIRAL POST SHOWS SIGNS OF DANGEROUS SPEECH

### *An old movie makes a comeback*

The most popular post circulating on Facebook was actually posted from 2014, though it continues to be frequently reposted today. A well-known online news outlet shared a video clip of a movie from 1991. The movie is a North Korean-Cambodian co-production that depicts a fictional country known as AMNA that is taking over Cambodian territory. Although the film starts off with a disclaimer presenting it as fictional, there are undoubtedly elements of the story that allude to historical narratives involving Cambodia and Vietnam.

The posting title written by the media outlet directly links it to Vietnamese-Cambodian history, asking how audiences would react today if Cambodian TV stations broadcasted such a movie about Vietnam's ambition to swallow up Cambodian land?

The post can be considered viral, having reached 390,000 views. It has been liked by 12,800 Facebook users, shared 55,758 times, and has 529 comments running down its thread. Comments are mostly in Khmer and posted by Khmer Facebook users. Many are related to issues of modern day land and territory, often showing signs of anti-Vietnamese sentiment.



In addition to being the most popular circulating post, an assessment using the Dangerous Speech Framework also shows it is potentially one of the most dangerous kinds of posts. It has been posted by an influential news outlet with a large national audience and is directed towards its own group, the general Khmer public. The post hints that the audience faces danger of being "swallowed up" by the other group.

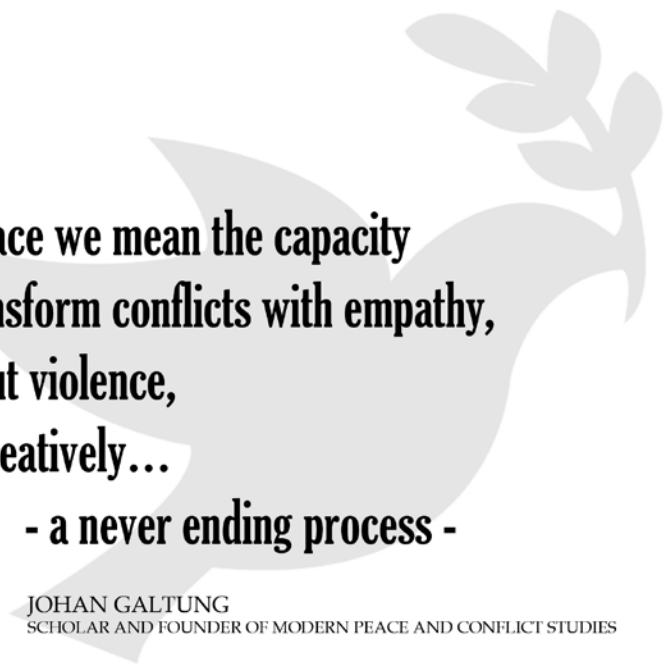
Given underlying tension between the Khmer and Vietnamese, the posted video itself is a clear manifestation of the longstanding conflict going back nearly two hundred years. The retelling of historical incidents from the past fuels contemporary anti-Vietnamese sentiment and reminds audiences that today's problems stem from a long history of mistrust.

The overall message can be seen in numerous posts circulating online that use historical narratives to portray one group against the other. The video post displays all the elements of potential dangerous speech.



The findings from Facilitative Listening Design conversations showed frequent connecting points with prevalent social media narratives, particularly among the Khmer Sharers. Beyond the main themes that emerged in the social media analysis, there were many elements that mirrored the themes expressed by communities. Stereotypical descriptions of Vietnamese people as disorganised and aggressive filled online dialogue in Facebook threads. Facebook posts often featured crime stories taken from traditional or one-way media involving Vietnamese suspects. A particularly common narrative is the involvement of Vietnamese in drug activities. Historical accounts were also visible with stories such as Master's Tea or the narratives of Vietnamese royals who invaded Cambodian territory. These stories remained strongly etched in the minds of Khmer Sharers, likely influenced by popular retellings of the same themes on social media.





**By peace we mean the capacity  
to transform conflicts with empathy,  
without violence,  
and creatively...**

**- a never ending process -**

**JOHAN GALTUNG**

**SCHOLAR AND FOUNDER OF MODERN PEACE AND CONFLICT STUDIES**



9

**FACILITATIVE LISTENING DESIGN  
AS A PEACEBUILDING INTERVENTION**

## CHALLENGES AND TRIUMPHS IN CONDUCTING FACILITATIVE LISTENING DESIGN

### *A day in the field for a pair of Listeners*



Thierry and Pisey are biracial ethnic Vietnamese-Khmer Cambodians living along the eastern border. They speak Vietnamese and Khmer. Joining the project as Listeners, they hoped to get a better sense of what ethnic Vietnamese people living in city think about anti-Vietnamese sentiment.

When they arrived in Niroth, they set out to look for people to have a conversation. Starting out at a sugarcane juice stall on the street, they asked the older woman selling the drink where they might meet some ethnic Vietnamese residents. She pointed them towards a nearby neighbourhood. They went down a dusty street, stopping to ask two security guards how to get there. Worried they would get a flat tyre on the way, they parked their motorcycles and started to walk.

It seemed impossible to find anyone in the supposedly ethnic Vietnamese neighbourhood. All the doors and windows were shut and it was very quiet. They passed by a motorcycle taxi driver who told them they should try visiting the pagoda. As they got back on their motorcycles, they saw a truck carrying scrap metals, a typical activity done by Vietnamese. They followed behind until they noticed a group of policemen watching. They worried that the police might bother them so they turned around and returned to the village.

They waited around talking with a few children and later bought some boiled eggs from a seller who told them about a Vietnamese school nearby. When they got there, they met an ethnic Vietnamese woman who allowed them to have their first conversation. After a whole day, they only got one conversation. But they now knew all the roads and shortcuts in the area. The next few days they were able to move around easily and meet people and begin identifying potential Sharers through their new contacts.

Despite thinking that this was going to be impossible on the first day, they were actually able to have twenty conversations with all kinds of people in Niroth. They also felt a lot more comfortable and were even still visiting the area to relax and enjoy time with their new friends after finishing the project!

As discussed over the previous chapters, shared findings and insights from the conversations as well as the information and data collected from Facilitative Listening Design can be effectively used to gain a better understanding of a given situation or issue. Such information is a direct reflection from the voices of the Sharers. Through the training and processing stages to dissect and filter the information using conversation, recording, and memory, it is possible to uncover deeper understanding of more diverse dynamics and alternative narratives. As a community based research methodology, Facilitative Listening Design has tremendous advantages. The discretion and flexibility it allows is ideal in complex situations involving conflict, anti-sentiment, taboo issues, and overall difficult conversations. Leveraging the memory of the Listeners themselves allows early analysis and gives full ownership to those who conduct conversations and their Sharers, who are likely to be the most affected by the results. The design's adaptability enables planners and implementers to change it at any point, often through trial and error, to adjust it as needed to fit the context and the emerging findings as they come in.


Facilitative Listening Design incorporates Do No Harm learning at every stage, from planning to publishing. Do No Harm is the philosophy, approach, and set of values that all stakeholders can choose to consider and apply when working in conflict, or contexts of potential conflict. The first step is always recognising that interventions, no matter how neutral, become part of the context in which they are taking place. Even a design methodology focused on listening to others will enter the web of dynamics at play, particularly in a conflict or negative sentiment setting.

With that in mind, Facilitative Listening Design strives to positively transform situations through broader understanding as an intervention itself. This can particularly take place among the Listeners themselves as they go out to engage with others and hear potentially contrasting perspectives or opinions. It can also be far-reaching. Sharers can experience changing perceptions or feelings about a topic as they begin to process their own thoughts. Using active listening techniques and continual probing to get deeper into the topic they initiate can provoke further critical thinking and can even cause Sharers to begin to question their own thoughts as they process them with Listeners.



## DO NO HARM

### *A pillar of Facilitative Listening Design*



Do No Harm<sup>1</sup> is the basis of a set of principles to consider and follow when working with people and dynamics in any context. It is also a well-established practice and a continually evolving conflict sensitivity tool when planning and carrying out an intervention with the intention to help or assist.

The six lessons of Do No Harm provide the crux of this initiative to explore negative sentiment and make up the core of the Facilitative Listening Design approach.

1. Whenever an intervention of any sort enters a context it becomes part of the context.
2. All contexts are characterised by Dividers and Connectors.
3. All interventions interact with both, either making them worse or making them better.
4. Actions and Behaviours have Consequences, which create impacts.
5. The details of interventions matter.
6. There are always Options.

Recognising that even though Facilitative Listening Design primarily strives to better understand the perceptions of others, it directly becomes an intervention that adds to the complexity of the context. It also has the unique opportunity to proactively seek out and identify Connectors.

Facilitative Listening Design puts just as much attention on identifying Connectors as it does analysing Dividers. This happens both in the fieldwork component with conversations in the community, as well as in the group dynamics and learning among Listeners and the overall team working together to carry out the activities.

Stories of everyday peacebuilders, community heroes, deeper journalism, and positive interactions often challenge the predominant narratives. They can also make us question our own views of “the truth” and provide us with a new starting point to potentially engage in dialogue, difficult conversations, exploring perceptions, and hopefully to help us solve problems we may have with others.

<sup>1</sup>Anderson, Mary B. Do No Harm: How Aid Can Support Peace – Or War. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1999 and Wallace, Marshall. From Principle to Practice: A User's Guide to Do No Harm, CDA Collaborative Learning Projects, 2014 are two essential readings for any practitioner planning to develop an intervention or approach in a conflict setting or a sensitive situation. For those implementing Facilitative Listening Design initiatives, a deep understanding of the myriad of dynamics that their interventions may contribute to is crucial to gaining prior to implementing the activities.

In the case of this pilot study, with the primary goal to understand various perspectives on anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia, Listeners all went into unfamiliar communities. There were both pros and cons to this. On the one hand, though Listeners arrived with their own preconceptions and perspectives, they were fresh eyes and ears in the community. They went in without the same biases that community members may have had, and could engage a diverse range of people before coming to their own conclusion. On the other hand, being from elsewhere made them outsiders to a certain extent. It was much harder to connect to people, build trust, and know where to go to begin conversations.

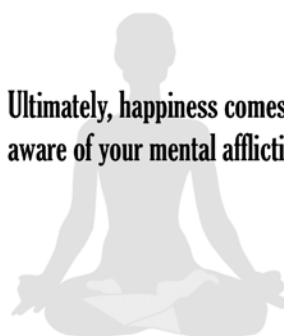
## **Difficult conversations**

Difficult conversations happen on a daily basis. Whether they occur in a family context, at the workplace, or among a group of friends or acquaintances, they can cause tensions to spike, anger, self-doubt, and even insecurity. Sound advice tells us to look at difficult conversations more as an exploration rather than a challenge. If your goal is to explore a perspective fundamentally different or even opposed to your own, listening is the first step. Listening will often lead to a sustained conversation over a longer period of time. Immediately challenging or attempting to change another person's opinion or way of thinking has a much higher chance of ending the conversation abruptly, leaving hard feelings or bitterness between the parties, or even severing a relationship.

Facilitative Listening Design can be strategically set up to engage in difficult conversations that might normally be uncomfortable or cause people to hesitate talking about something. Unlike more traditional qualitative research, the fact that conversations are not formally recorded allows for an open space to potentially disagree or bring up something that might be controversial. The primarily unstructured nature of a conversation, in contrast to an interview, provides opportunity for the Sharer to process her or his own thoughts while discussing an issue with the Listener. The opportunity for reflection, active listening techniques such as affirmation and probing, and the building rapport developed within the space and timeframe of a conversation all contribute to allowing a difficult conversation to take place in a more natural and comfortable way.

When discussing anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia, both Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese Sharers often showed signs of discomfort when engaging with Listeners. Listening pairs described challenges in continuing conversations after introducing the subject. For ethnic Vietnamese groups, some Sharers even became uncomfortable when speaking Vietnamese in public and preferred to keep talking in Khmer. Some Sharers talked without looking at the faces of the Listeners or anxiously looked around to make sure their conversations remained discreet. Others expressed fear in having their identities revealed if they continued to engage in the conversation and were concerned that they may be physically hurt or attacked by others if exposed.

Although some conversations remained rather superficial, many Listeners were nevertheless able to get into deeper discussions and manoeuvre around difficult topics. Issues of identity, for example, were quickly diverted when the Sharer began to appear uncomfortable. Instead of asking how one ethnically identified her or himself, Listeners sometimes asked questions like “what language do you speak at home?” or “where do you think your ancestors came from?” Using such tactics often helped to develop a stronger rapport between Listeners and Sharers, and allowed them to slowly engage in difficult conversations at the pace required.



**Ultimately, happiness comes down to choosing between the discomfort of becoming aware of your mental afflictions and the discomfort of being ruled by them.**

**YONGEY MINGYUR RINPOCHE**  
TEACHER AND MASTER OF MEDITATION



## EMBRACING DISCOMFORT THROUGH FACILITATIVE LISTENING DESIGN

*Conversations can be difficult for the Listeners too*



Soklin, a 23-year-old university student of international relations, was a Khmer Listener who carried out many of her Facilitative Listening Design conversations with her partner around the Chbar Ampov market. Self-described as a relatively shy and quiet person, Soklin admitted that talking with strangers was something far outside of her comfort zone. In particular, discussing issues around Khmer and Vietnamese relations in her country took that discomfort even further.

For one of their first conversations, Soklin and her listening partner were connected to a Khmer man who they met with in a Vietnamese coffee shop near the market. Soklin felt immediately uncomfortable noticing that four ethnic Vietnamese were sitting nearby within earshot. She paid constant attention to the dynamics in the café taking notice of how often others glanced at them, or how close people got to their table. Despite her discomfort and awkwardness, she pushed through the conversation.

Soklin said the most uncomfortable moment she felt was after she asked the Khmer man what he thought about the relationship between Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese in the neighbourhood and what his prediction was for the future.

"After I said that, I immediately feared I had gone too far," she shared. "The Vietnamese were watching us, I was sure the waitress had heard me ask it too." She worried what people would think if he was overly negative. Would he hurt the feelings of those around him? Or what if he got emotional and her conversation would start a disagreement right there in the shop?

To her surprise, the Sharer didn't seem to have the same discomfort. He answered openly, telling her that there were issues, but for Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese living in the neighbourhood, it was very common to interact with each other. The Sharer's confidence actually encouraged Soklin and helped her in subsequent conversations.

She realised her perceptions might differ from the Sharers, and that there were many different ways to begin probing deeper into the harder conversation topics. During later reflection, Soklin shared that through the process she learned how to create a more flexible space to slowly commence difficult conversations and consequently help herself to move past her own fear to talk to people about this issue.

Listeners overwhelmingly expressed that it was precisely the informal environment and conversation style that allowed them to engage deeper into a difficult conversation. They reported that Sharers began to feel more confident with them as the conversation progressed, opening up to reveal true feelings. Most Listeners agreed that they could never have had the same depth of conversation had they come to the table with questions, paper, or recording devices. Difficult conversations are sensitive, and must be handled with care.

## **Challenging perceptions**

The simple act of listening should enable two basic occurrences. First it should provide a space for the person talking to express her or himself and share thoughts, ideas, and opinions. That space can allow for a recapitulation of knowledge based on previous experiences. It can also be a time for deeper reflection and processing for the Sharer while engaged in a contemplative conversation. Second, the Listener is able to hear something from another person which might even be new or a perspective never considered before. The Listener may or may not agree with the information or opinion, but it will undoubtedly provide for a broader understanding of the topic. It is within this natural human-to-human activity that issues can be questioned and explored, ideally in a safe and encouraging environment.

Throughout this initiative, existing perceptions and biases were continually identified and challenged among Listeners. In the field, however, Listeners played a very different role. They were taught to recognise their own biases and limit them as much as possible in their conversations. They avoided expressing any agreement or disagreement with Sharers, and were trained to use empathy and emotional intelligence to show that they understood what was being said and expressed.

## CRITICAL THINKING AND FACILITATIVE LISTENING DESIGN

*Conversations push Listeners and Sharers to reflect  
more deeply about their own views*



Lyhour, a Khmer Listener, is not a first-timer working on issues related to Cambodian-Vietnamese relations. A past participant of an exchange programme bringing together Cambodian and Vietnamese youth across borders, he says his experience living and volunteering beside Vietnamese counterparts deeply transformed his thinking.

"To be completely honest," he confesses, "I used to hate Vietnamese people. I was just brought up like that and heard so many stories in my life. But after the exchange programme, I was upset with myself and my old thoughts. How could I think like that?"

With such a transformational international experience, exploring anti-Vietnamese sentiment in his own country was a continuation of his learning. As a Listener, Lyhour found himself questioning his own thoughts and what he was hearing during the conversations.

Trained to recognise his biases and to avoid trying to change anyone else's opinions, he used probing questions to continue to push Sharers to elaborate further on their negative thoughts or their preconceptions about ethnic Vietnamese people. Sometimes he observed what he thought was an illogical thought process, where people were truly unable to explain reasons for what they felt. For example, some Khmer Sharers might talk about disliking Vietnamese, but when asked why, they were unable to answer. He actually found many Sharers struggling to reflect critically to explain their emotions.

"As I listened to them to try and understand their own negative feelings towards ethnic Vietnamese people in Cambodia, I saw how continually asking probing questions can make all of us begin to question ourselves," he shared in the group. "Our lack of critical thinking might come from culture or education, I don't know, but if we as Listeners or researchers can direct the conversation by asking more, we might just be the ones to help people communicate their ideas and even think more critically about their own thoughts." One of the key learnings from using Facilitative Listening Design in a negative sentiment context is that it does not necessarily need to be limited to a passive research methodology. It can serve as an intervention to promote conversation, deeper reflection, and critical thinking, even on an individual level.

Employing active listening techniques such as acknowledgement, probing questions, and relaying back what was said to ensure clarity, revealed that Facilitative Listening Design also carries the potential to challenge perceptions, even for Sharers during its implementation in the field. Listeners reported observing an acute lack of critical thinking skills among many Sharers they spoke with. For Khmer-focused listening pairs, the retelling of old stories based on historical accounts, such as the “Master’s Tea”, are still alive and vivid in the minds of Khmer Cambodians. Sensational content from social media, such as news about the border or illegal immigration, was sometimes directly quoted, often taken as fact. Some Listeners saw a lack of sufficient critical thinking linked to limited education. In contrast, they noticed that some university students, like those who studied with Vietnamese international students, for example, were often more critical about what they saw on their Facebook feeds. They were also less willing to generalise about a certain group based on media messaging and social media dialogue.

However, Listeners also viewed Facilitative Listening Design as a tool to hone in on basic critical thinking among the Sharers by simply employing the active listening and probing techniques. As they engaged deeper into conversations, they provided frequent opportunities for Sharers to question their own thinking on the topic. Sometimes they witnessed Sharers, particularly among the Khmer group, concluding that they really did not know why they felt a certain way about “the other”. As Listeners facilitated the space for Sharers to explore their own thoughts and feelings, examples of deeper critical thinking on an individual level emerged through the conversations themselves. With all conversations closing on a positive future-oriented note led by the Listener, the opportunity was left with the Sharer to continue thinking about anti-Vietnamese sentiment, her or his own perceptions, and potentially recognising the ability to challenge pre-existing notions and beliefs.

## HISTORICAL REFERENCES CONTINUE TO INFLUENCE OPINIONS

### TAE-ONG – *The Master's Tea*



A common account still often told today dates back to the nineteenth century and was taught in schools up until the 1970s. The story depicts a Vietnamese emperor who captured three Khmer men and made them prisoners. He had them buried up to their necks and used their heads as the pillars for a coal-holding base. As a cauldron of water was set atop and a fire lit underneath, his staff is said to have stood by ordering the burning buried prisoners to not spill the Master's tea. This account is engrained in the minds of Cambodians throughout generations and is highly symbolic in its representation of contemporary resentment towards the Vietnamese.

Challenging perceptions at the level of the Listeners was much easier to explore and identify, particularly through the Info-Space Lab concluding the fieldwork. Although this pilot initiative employing Facilitative Listening Design took particular care in selecting Listeners who showed a minimum level of open-mindedness to be able to manoeuvre within the complex dynamics of anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodia, everyone had their own perceptions from the onset.

In the Khmer-focused group made up of ethnic Khmer and Chinese Cambodian Listeners, several intimately shared their struggles during the process to grapple with their own perceptions about ethnic Vietnamese in Cambodia. Many discussed deep negative feelings towards ethnic Vietnamese, present since as long as they could remember. One of the Listeners gave examples of older people in his life influencing him since



a child with negative portrayals and stereotypes, as well as history lessons propelling a less than positive sentiment. Others differentiated between disliking the Vietnamese politicians in Vietnam and illegal migrants in Cambodia, often discussing how politics was dividing people more than the actual situation in communities where Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese were living side-by-side, usually over generations. Several of the Khmer Listeners talked about their families having longstanding issues and negative perceptions of ethnic Vietnamese, and how that had made it difficult for them to even begin to engage on this issue.

## **Empathy and transformation**

Bringing together a group of people to work on an issue is an intervention itself. Our group of Listeners and media analysts were made up of young Khmer, ethnic Vietnamese, ethnic Chinese, and biracial students and community organisation staff from different parts of Cambodia. We had both women and men with different educational backgrounds. People's identities clearly go beyond gender and ethnicity; we were fortunate to end up with a widely diverse group.

The Listeners and media analysts evolved as a group. From the initial Coaching and Training Lab to the concluding Info-Space Lab, the tools and techniques of Facilitative Listening Design entered into group dynamics as well. Listeners and media analysts listened to each other, probed one another, and came up with shared ideas on how to tackle challenges and progress with the work. In a concluding focus group, some Khmer Listeners shared that they noticed their own feelings towards their ethnic Vietnamese and biracial counterparts changed through the process. One young Khmer female Listener admitted that during the Coaching and Training Lab, she felt afraid to speak out openly with the Vietnamese Listeners present. She also confessed that when she initially overheard them speaking Vietnamese to each other, she remained silent because of her family upbringing. By the Info-Space Lab, however, she shared that her feeling had changed. After working so intensely and spending so much leisure time together during the process, she saw that they were just the same as her and the Khmer Listeners and felt much more comfortable with both their differences and similarities.

## LISTENING TO "THE OTHER" THROUGH PROJECT DESIGN

### *An experimental team mixes things up*

In early conversations during the Facilitative Listening Design team's preparation stage, a wild idea arose. What if we tried pairing an ethnic Vietnamese and Khmer together to engage in the conversations? Preliminary research showed that it was likely we would find some level of anti-Vietnamese sentiment among Khmer Sharers, so how about giving a Khmer Listener the chance to listen to an ethnic Vietnamese perspective? What if allowing one side to hear another could build a bridge, or positively change a perspective?

A young male Vietnamese international student and a Khmer female NGO staff member agreed to try it out. It was a new experience for both of them. For the foreign student, it would be his first time engaging with ethnic Vietnamese born and living in Cambodia. For the NGO staff member, it would be her first time interacting with Vietnamese communities in her country.

The pair talked with ethnic Vietnamese living in Sen Sok District and international students studying at universities in Toul Kork. Most ethnic Vietnamese were happy to speak in Khmer, and for some born and raised in Cambodia, it was their most comfortable language. Others mixed the languages or sometimes preferred to speak in Vietnamese, during which the international student would help the Khmer NGO staff member to understand what was being said. Language was not, for the most part, a major barrier in facilitating communication between the mixed listening pair and the Sharer.

The Khmer NGO staff member later reported that she went through her own personal transformation during the process. She heard about daily struggles in the lives of ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia. She found herself able to relate to them on different levels. In fact, during the Info-Space Lab as other groups shared their findings, she very much became a key person to help frame and understand many of the themes that the ethnic Vietnamese groups presented to the whole group. Her understanding of "the other" was quite strong and she was able to quickly explain certain aspects of the information when her Khmer colleagues were unclear or confused by what they heard.





A simple activity conducted to finish off the Info-Space Lab caused initial discomfort. Listeners and media analysts were asked to put themselves in the perspective of “the other”. In essence, Khmer and ethnic Chinese were coached to think as ethnic Vietnamese. Ethnic Vietnamese and mixed race participants were instructed to think as if they were Khmer. Through this delicate communication exercise, indirect messages were relayed to give each other a glimpse into the mind-sets and attitudes of the group. The messages were exceedingly valuable for the facilitators and designers to hear and chronicle in better understanding how Facilitative Listening Design might hold the potential to look further than merely an information gathering or as a research tool. In this context, as Facilitative Listening Design was flexible enough to capture the thoughts and opinions of the Sharers, some adaptation also allowed it to listen and process the voices of the Listeners.

### IF I WERE VIETNAMESE, I WOULD...

- try to understand why Khmer feel worried about the country being dominated by its neighbour.
- be more open-minded and speak-up without hiding stories in my mind because only through talking we can help each other to solve the issue.
- make more Khmer friends and try to understand why Khmer dislike Vietnamese so much - and then I'd try to tell them all the good things about Vietnamese.
- be kind and friendly to Khmer to prove that not all Vietnamese are bad and that there are many good ones too.
- try to understand the Cambodian position and why they don't like Vietnamese in order to solve the issue.
- try to understand the root causes of why Khmer think like this and show them that we are not the Vietnamese people you hate.
- try to understand the issue of why Khmer hate us, and once I understand, I would try to address the issues that I'm capable of contributing to.
- do my best to show Khmer that not all Vietnamese are bad.
- study Khmer literature and history in order to compare with my own understanding and try to decide for myself what is the truth.
- live legally in Cambodia and study Khmer culture, traditions, and way of life to integrate and co-exist peacefully.

### IF I WERE KHMER, I WOULD...

- wonder why Khmer, Chinese, Cham, and Indigenous are all still called 'Khmer', but Vietnamese are not?
- get a higher education so I could listen more than just react and search for root causes for any problems.
- try to understand more about the Vietnamese who come to live in Cambodia and would be more open-minded and listen to what they have to say.
- study harder and try to find solutions to this problem and educate younger generations to foster thinking outside of discrimination that critically understands the situation, especially when there are problems, try to find solutions rather than simply dividing.
- try to strengthen the law enforcement in Cambodia and educate the people about such laws.
- try to study, explore, and analyse more deeply about what is right, what is wrong, what is legal and illegal, and follow the law.

**To speak well and to listen carefully  
is no easy task at times of high emotions  
and deep conflict.  
People's very identity is under threat.**



**JOHN PAUL LEDERACH**  
SCHOLAR AND AUTHOR ON CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

## FACILITATIVE LISTENING DESIGN AND FORWARD-THINKING

*A key element at every step*



Thinking beyond a project's scope is a challenge for any project team in the midst of busy implementation. Facilitative Listening Design, however, requires a forward-thinking mind-set during all stages. From the Coaching and Training Lab, participants are all required to plan and think about how they will work in their communities to gather information. During field conversations, Listeners are required to always finish off every conversation by framing it in a positive and forward-thinking way with the Sharer. Essentially, finishing off with topics that might allow the Sharer to think what she or he can do to contribute to a brighter future or imagining what might be the ideal situation to strive for.

Nearing the end of the stage where the whole group may be close to finishing their work, it is imperative to have them look to the future as well. What should be done with all this new information on perceptions? Who wants to continue to work on this, even outside of the formal project? Does the group wish to stay in touch and build a network? By putting emphasis on the future and by providing structured facilitation to solicit forward-thinking, the impact of Facilitative Listening Design can go far beyond information and data gathering. It can bring people together and use shared experiences to build relationships and foster positive action.

## Looking forward together

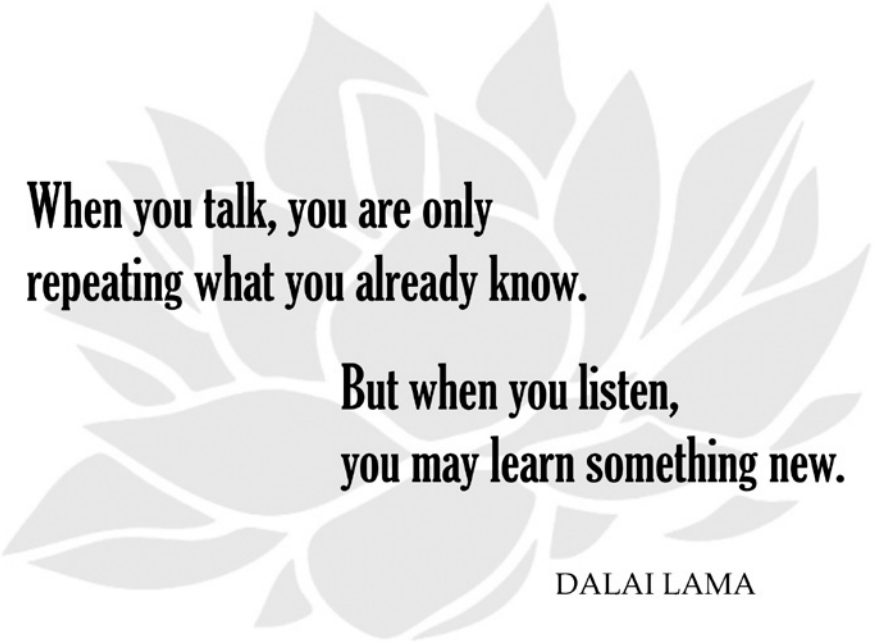
In closing the Facilitative Listening Design process with Listeners and media analysts, the group was asked to reflect together and consider future possibilities and their own potential roles in taking the learnings forward. The group of 14 came back to the designers and project leaders with deep insight and innovative ideas.

Firstly, they stressed that they felt they had become a close-knit group working on similar issues. They hoped to find a way to come back together and discuss this and other topics in the future. They credited their transformation as a group to a shared mission, and found multiple connections to their own work and studies. Listeners and media analysts proposed that future work should take an approach that integrates nature and reflection into the process. For example, bringing two opposing parties of an issue to camp together or discuss in a reflective environment could likely encourage deeper understanding and stronger relationships. In essence, the interaction with Listeners needs to go far beyond information processing. It needs to incorporate team-building, reflection, and a transformative space throughout. That means it must be a core element starting from the Coaching and Training Lab, during the fieldwork, and right through the Info-Space Lab. Even following Facilitative Listening Design activities, the potential for a like-minded network of people from different groups that may be in conflict or disagreement can be one of the most significant outcomes.

The pilot of Facilitative Listening Design brought great excitement to the planners and participants. It succeeded in gathering new information and understanding in addition to providing a transformational space for building a more positive relationship between people. It went beyond history, politics, and media to centre wholeheartedly on the people involved and to carefully encourage everyone to truly question their own perceptions and biases. With overall acknowledgement that Facilitative Listening Design is a uniquely innovative and creative approach to achieve such a range of results, a momentum began among all participants and planners to explore how it could be combined with other approaches to go further. The potential to incorporate visual arts, for example, might help to transcend the act of listening beyond words. With so many vivid stories, experiences, and opinions shared, the prospect of translating real

situations to community theatre, for example, could move from listening and sharing to deeper engagement and dialogue.

Everyone agreed that listening is key to better understand and counter anti-Vietnamese sentiment in Cambodian communities. There were many surprises from the conversations. Opinions and perspectives were not always black and white, and people's stories were far more complex than many originally expected. The positive outcomes for the Listeners, and sometimes among the Sharers who were observed to consider deeper critical thinking, inspired the team. There is great enthusiasm to bring Facilitative Listening Design to other communities in Cambodia. In particular, many see great potential for listening around the border where numerous stories and negative perceptions stem from, and where there may be some confusion and misperceptions between different groups. In other rural areas where Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese are living side-by-side, Listeners and the design team see great potential in employing the approach to start a conversation and learn more about prevailing dynamics. Even in areas where there may be no significant ethnic Vietnamese population, some expressed that Facilitative Listening Design could be helpful to bring people together and encourage more critical thinking about the simple human aspect of "the other" and why we might fear someone primarily due to our differences.



**When you talk, you are only  
repeating what you already know.**

**But when you listen,  
you may learn something new.**

DALAI LAMA

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# *The basis of peace is understanding the pain of others.*

—KATSUJI YOSHIDA, 1945 NAGASAKI ATOMIC BOMB SURVIVOR

Anti-Vietnamese sentiment is a term often used by academics and the media in the Cambodian context. Commonly associated with electoral politics or communal violence cases, anti-Vietnamese sentiment is more than a sociological phenomenon. It is part of a larger dynamic that can enter the hearts and minds of everyday people.

In early 2017, a team of dedicated peacebuilders travelled to communities throughout Cambodia's capital city, Phnom Penh, to hear real views and opinions. Participating Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese residents shared in detail how they perceived each other, including the good, the bad, and the potential for stronger connections.

The findings reveal that not all is negative as the media often portrays. Communities across the city with large Khmer and ethnic Vietnamese populations show kinship and co-operation. Voices from a broad range of community members paint a complex picture. Found along with challenges, are examples of community bonds between different ethnic groups. At the same time, difficult conversations allow each group to express their own particular concerns and worries.

An experimental pilot for Facilitative Listening Design –an evolving peace research methodology and intervention– *Who's Listening? Tackling hard issues with empathy* showcases how the simple act of listening to others with empathy can produce a wide array of results. Success does not simply end with new findings. A documented account of deep transformation among the research team and the people they spoke with demonstrates the potential of this innovative approach.

For those striving to transform conflict or for anyone wishing to better understand others and proactively promote peace, Facilitative Listening Design can be the starting point.

*Begin the journey by listening to "the other".*

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