2013 BHEARD Scholar
Thany Hour

Research Area: Policy Analysis/Impact Evaluation

BHEARD PROGRAM START DATE: August 2013

HOMETOWN: Phnom Penh, Cambodia

UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION: BS Computer Science and Engineering, BA English Language, Royal University of Phnom Penh, Cambodia

GRADUATE EDUCATION: Public Policy and Management, Carnegie Mellon University

RESEARCH INTERESTS: Thany is strongly interested in Agricultural policy analysis/policy impact evaluation that smallholder’s income growth and employment generating activities in the rural Cambodia. Improving food security and nutrition is one of the most important contributors to the real and equitable growth.

PERSONAL STATEMENT: Given the state of Cambodia’s economic development, agriculture will continue to be significant for Cambodia over the next decade because it is the only sector that employs most of the labor force, the majority of whom remains poor. Among them are women, who are engaged in both agricultural production and marketing. Poverty of rural people living of agriculture remains high because of low productivity and diversification and such other issues as rice monoculture practice, limited access to and degradation of natural resources (especially, land, forest, and fisheries) and limited rural employment opportunities. All these issues have to be tackled through agricultural research and development as means to correct the current situation, adopt good practices, adapt and mitigate to rapid changes of ecosystem.
As said, proposed field of study in Community Food and Agricultural Systems would pave ways for development of agricultural research in Cambodia as followings:

First and foremost, the course per se will allow her to grasp well on the impacts of agricultural development which is, undoubtedly, the main gateway to improved standard of living for rural population. Understanding the process of agricultural development is therefore central to most contemporary research and, especially, her proposed topic of advanced study in community food and agricultural systems and in related social science sub-disciplines such as gender, and even in much of the agricultural sciences more broadly. Ideally, the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources at Michigan State University provides well-designed curriculum in agricultural and food system with good emphasis on qualitative and quantitative methods/research methodology skills in addition to several specialized knowledge in areas of agricultural policy, community development and the like. They are identified as rigorous and vibrant disciplines that will help broaden her knowledge base and conduct the proposed research successfully.

Moreover, strengthening capacities and knowledge of agricultural research and innovation is highly crucial for sustained economic growth. Agricultural development is a relatively young field of scholarly inquiry. Serious interest has just begun in Cambodia context, leading to a veritable explosion of research. Following some waning interest,–especially in the wake of the 2007-8 global food price crisis – as scholars and policymakers have increasingly recognized that there remain few firmly established dogmas and many unanswered questions. The realm of the unknown is so large because the reality of agricultural development on the ground is complex, encompassing production and agro-ecological issues, post-harvest processing and distribution questions, and a wide array of economic and political institutional arrangements. Enormous progress has been made in documenting and understanding this complexity, although these issues’ breadth and unsettled state lead to considerable ongoing intellectual activity in agricultural development. To be sure, we know a lot more than we did even five or ten years ago. But it is sobering to read the classics from historical development and realize how relevant many of their insights remain. Much of what was not known then remains unknown today. If Thany is selected into CARRS, this invaluable opportunity not only allow her as young and curious scholar to equip her with the theoretical knowledge and practical skills to bridge the gap between her dream and its realization, but also helps increase the professional satisfactions and commitments of research activities to identify and solve problems facing in the country where the conditions and contexts may differ from the other developed countries.

While working closely with various stakeholders and especially government ministries, she has observed some negative insights and bottlenecks to improve food and agricultural systems. Ensuring security of food and good agricultural systems are a complex topic and difficult for Cambodia because of inadequacy of sound policies; physical, human and financial resources. She has been involved with some responsible institutions in number of regulations/policies just to name a few; seed law, national seed standards, law on management of agricultural quality
and safety standards etc. They are purposefully established to contribute to higher productivity and, potentially, food security and the competitiveness of agricultural systems in the agricultural development sector. Simply put, with a strong food security and effective agricultural policies, Cambodia will be able to increase income levels and household food security. Having said that, she developed my curiosity in such program and policy evaluation in promoting Cambodian economy through better food and agricultural system while ensuring food security, increase income and rural development sustainability.

Throughout her graduate studies at Carnegie Mellon University sequences of classes in the theory of microeconomics, macroeconomics, quantitative methods, and program evaluation, Thany picked up a set of valuable skills and knowledge that enabled her to understand mathematic and economic models better and which will provide a basis for much of my doctoral research. However, the limited focus of the core courses in community food and the inability to obtain the education that she needs in agricultural development has caused her to seek another option that will allow her to examine other critically important aspects of her educational and research plans that she will need professionally when she returns home e.g. agricultural policy makers and researchers. More importantly, the opportunity of conducting research through this interdisciplinary doctoral program is unavailable in Cambodia as well. Therefore, this current situation regarding the limitation of research and educational opportunities in food and agricultural development within a single existing doctoral program at Michigan State University is a crucial factor for her seeking to develop an interdisciplinary doctoral program that meets the appropriate criteria. Not being able to obtain the necessary education in agricultural development and research will jeopardize Thany’s future plans.

Overall, Thany has built a strong interest as agriculturalist out of her development policy career to grow intellectually and operationally from a narrow focus on agriculture and technological research and dissemination to a better understanding of rural societies and their needs. It is also this need that motivates her to seek greater understanding of alternative pathways for rural economic development, placing the role of agriculture in perspective, and redefining the role, mission, and strategy of the agricultural institutes and agents as facilitators of rural economic growth.

In her spare time, Thany enjoys going out for coffee and chatting with friends and making new friends where and when possible.