COVID-19 and Rural Community Resilience in Developing Countries: Evidence from Kratie Province, Cambodia

Hironori Hamasaki[1*], Sae, Eto[2], and Touch Pang[3]

[1]Graduate School of Integrated Science and Technology, Nagasaki University, Bunkyo-machi 1-14, Nagasaki City, Japan
[2]Faculty of Environmental Science, Nagasaki University, Bunkyo-machi 1-14, Nagasaki City, Japan
[3]University of Kratie, Kratie Province, Cambodia
**Corresponding Author E-mail: h-hamasaki@nagasaki-u.ac.jp*

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed deep inequalities in how societies withstand infectious disease. Rural areas in developing countries, where large populations of the poor reside, are considered among the most vulnerable. Yet most research on pandemic resilience has focused on urban areas or high-income countries, and little is known about how poor rural communities coped with the spread of COVID-19 and to what extent they were able to adapt. This study addresses that gap by assessing the resilience of rural communities in Cambodia, a least developed country, focusing on Kratie Province, one of the regions with the highest poverty rates. A face-to-face questionnaire survey was conducted with 600 randomly selected households across the province, yielding 450 valid responses (a valid response rate of 75%). The results revealed that resilience was uneven across three dimensions. First, regarding health, the establishment of medical care and vaccination systems centered on government health centers scattered throughout the region prevented major disruptions. Because there were no obstacles to accessing healthcare services, resident satisfaction was high, indicating strong resilience. Second, regarding community resilience, just under 20% of households faced difficulties because family members working as migrant workers in urban areas had returned to their rural homes. However, relationships within families and local communities deepened amid the pandemic. To overcome reduced income and lockdown restrictions, people often cooperated with their closest and most trusted family members and neighbors, confirming a high level of social resilience. Third, the economic situation remains severe, continuing from the pandemic to the present, indicating a lack of resilience. Eighty percent of residents saw their income decrease by more than half due to the pandemic, and income continues to decline even now. Furthermore, households that have taken out loans face the risk of being forced to repay them in the future. These findings indicate that strong health systems and close social ties, while valuable, are not enough to protect rural households from lasting economic damage. Policy responses should therefore extend beyond emergency health measures to include longer-term livelihood recovery, such as income-generating support and local employment creation. Social protection schemes should be expanded to cushion households against future income shocks, and debt management measures, such as restructuring or relief, are needed to prevent loan repayment from deepening poverty. Community-based support building on existing trust and cooperation can provide a low-cost foundation for delivering assistance and strengthening resilience against future crises.

Keywords: Covid-19/ Socio-economic impact/ Resilience/ Cambodia