

# Characterizing local food environments in the Lower Mekong River communities of Cambodia

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## INTRODUCTION

In low-middle-income countries (LMIC), the types of food environments (FE) that people can access vary depending on their location and the country's stage of development. In rural LMIC settings, including the Mekong River region of Cambodia where 80% of communities rely on the river for sustenance and livelihoods and natural FEs (e.g., forests and rivers) as well as cultivated FEs play a crucial role in diets<sup>1,2</sup>. In addition, rural development has led to diversification of the built FE and its vendors types with increasing access to convenience stores, informal vendors, accompanied by a proliferation of processed foods<sup>3</sup>. Despite these changes, the characterization of FEs of riverine communities, resident to these transitioning areas is limited.

## RESEARCH AIMS

This exploratory study seeks to characterize the types of FEs commonly accessed by riverine communities in Cambodia and to characterize dimensions of these FEs using participatory social mapping methods in focus group discussions (FGD) with women and FE assessments of vendors in study areas.



## METHODS

### STUDY SAMPLE

- 4 provinces contiguous to the lower Mekong River and Ton Le Sap were purposively sampled  
**Mekong River:** Prey Veng and Stung Treng  
**Ton Le Sap Lake:** Kampong Chhnang and Siem Reap
- 2 communes/ province  $\leq$  20 km of water body were selected; one nearer and one further away.

### DATA COLLECTION

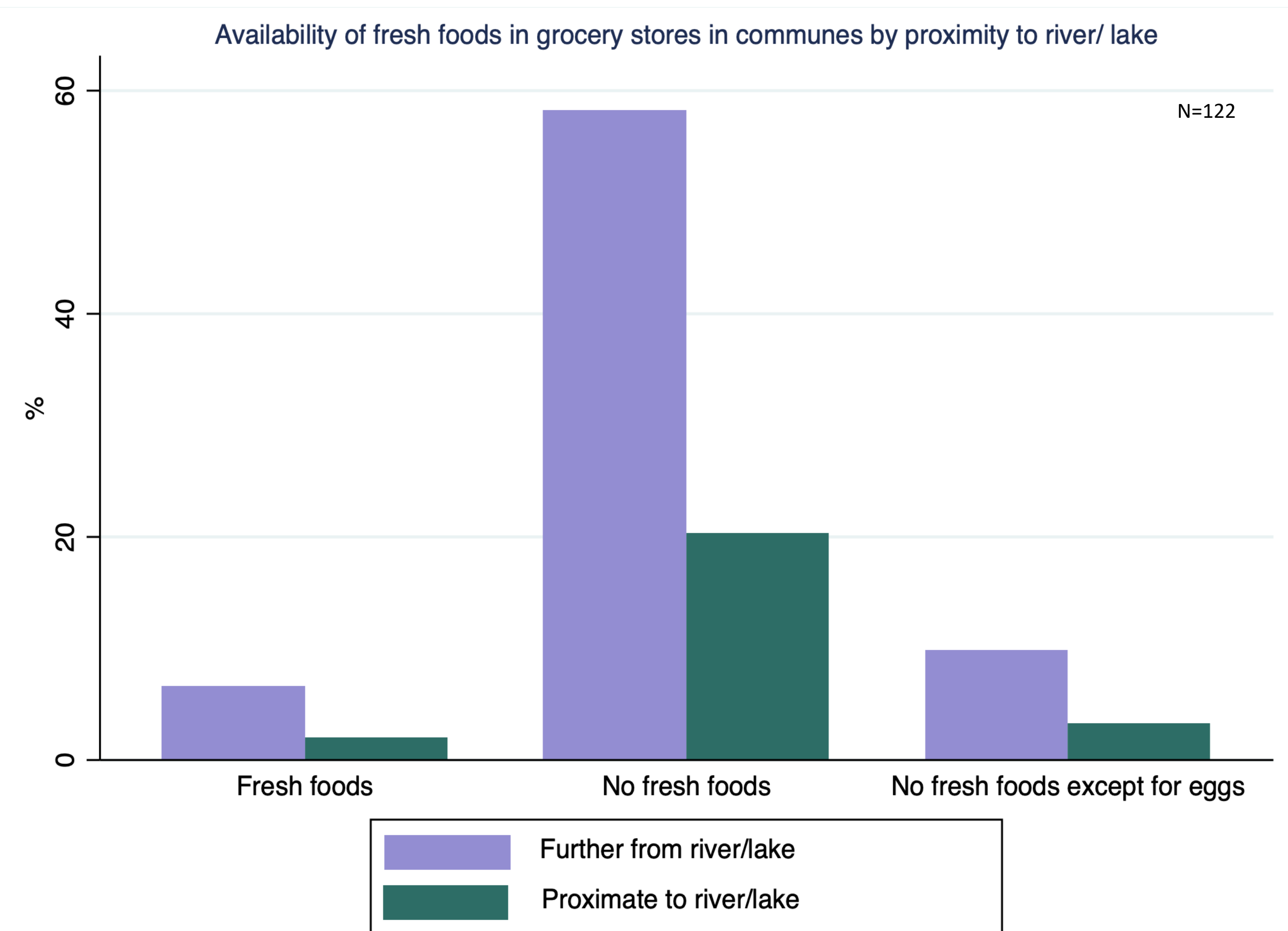
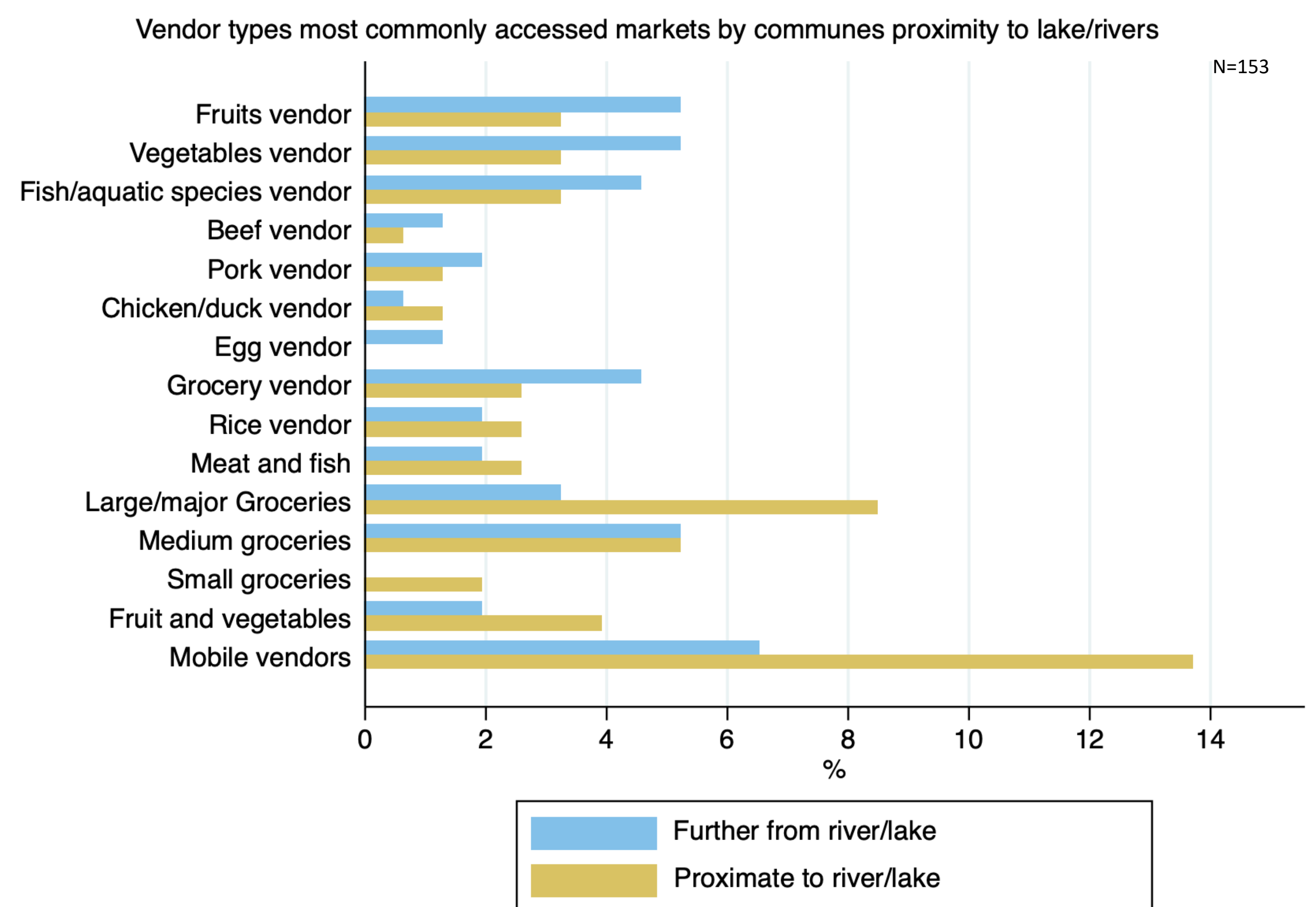
- Conducted **social mapping focus group discussions** (FGD) to characterize frequently accessed FEs to map where food is acquired (including markets, vendors, gardens, the river/lake, and forests)  
**Sample size:** 1 FGD/ commune, n=6-8 women
- Conducted **food environment assessments** including: 1) commune level mapping of vendors along main commune roads & food environment checklist and; 2) in-depth market assessments of frequently accessed markets/ vendors identified by community to assess the following attributes: availability, prices, vendor and product properties, marketing and regulation and, sustainability factors.  
**Sample size:** Census and of all vendors on commune main road for each commune (n=8) and in-depth assessments of 1-2 primary markets/ commune identified community as most frequently accessed.

## PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

- Social mapping FGDs revealed high variation and variability in food access points and food environment types (wild, cultivated, informal and formal) by commune and related context.
- Extent of reliance on different food environment types was dependent on food group, season, household livelihoods (whether engaged in fishing or agricultural livelihoods), access to formal markets vs. informal markets (mobile vendors).
- Reliance on mobile vendors was reported across communes with a heavier reliance in more remote provinces
- Complete reliance on cultivated and wild FE not reported however reliance on them for certain foods (fish, snails, crabs, mussel, vegetables, rice) was reported and the extent of reliance varied by commune.



## PRELIMINARY FINDINGS contd.



## CONCLUSIONS BASED ON PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

- Undertaking participatory mapping exercises with community member is crucial in transitioning areas that are reliant on both their natural and built environment for their diets and, to understand and characterize the high contextual variation across communities.
- There is a high diversity in FE types accessed to meet the health and nutritional needs of riverine communities in Cambodia
- A critical point of intervention within the food environment in Cambodia to improve health and nutrition include mobile vendors.
- Given a grocery stores comprise a quarter of commonly accessed vendors and these vendors offer limited fresh foods especially among communities further from water bodies, they also present an important point of intervention.

## REFERENCES

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