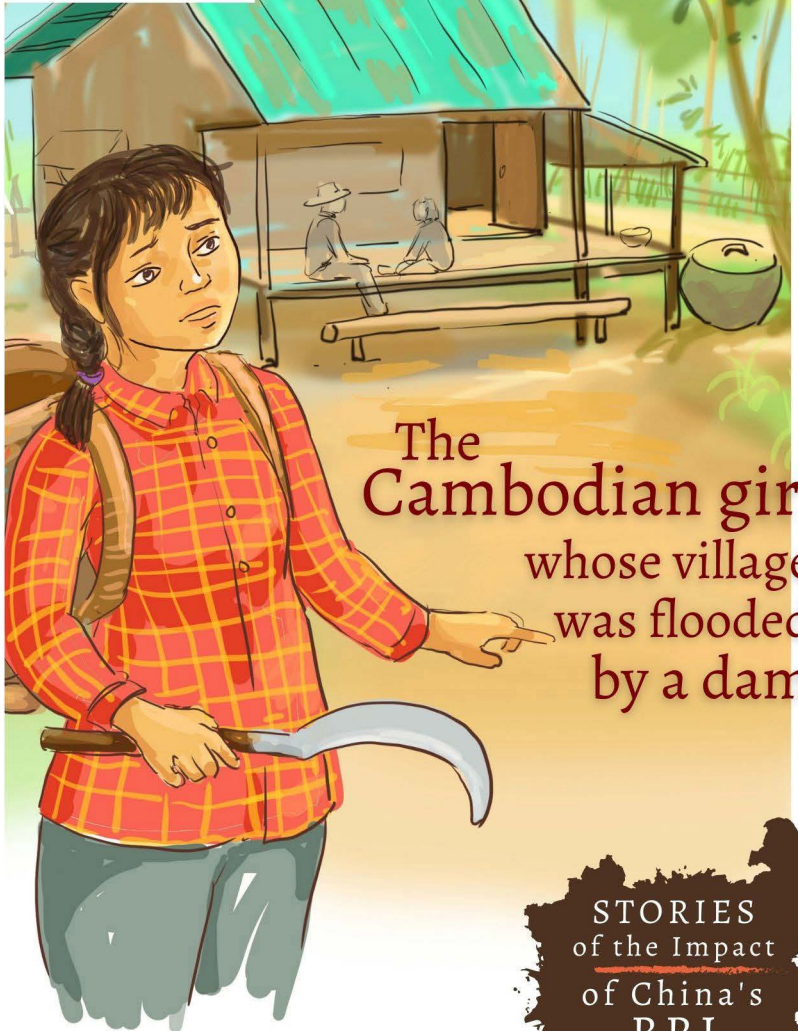




INNOVATION  
FOR CHANGE

EAST ASIA



The  
Cambodian girl  
whose village  
was flooded  
by a dam

STORIES  
of the Impact  
of China's  
BRI

A few days ago, I went into the forest looking for mushrooms and orchids. While I was putting mushrooms into my kapha (woven bamboo basket), one man from our group suddenly screamed because he was bitten by a snake. His leg was swollen, and people tried to help him by applying leaves on the wound (a traditional remedy). His condition got worse, and so he was eventually brought to a hospital. I stayed there for a while as my mind drifted to thoughts of my childhood dream of becoming a doctor.



In my early childhood days, when classes were over, I liked watering and picking vegetables in our farm next to our home. My parents were never tired of planting veggies and fruits because we could grow them well – thanks to the fertile soil from the Sesan Lake (Tonle Sesan).



Pa! I heard people say that fish from this lake is the most delicious and expensive fish in Cambodia. Is this true?

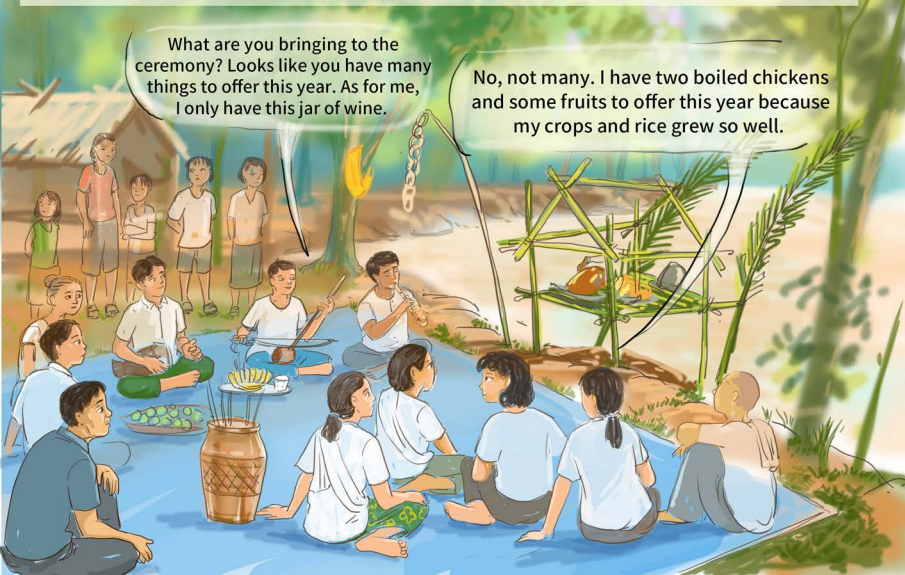
Of course! The money we have that allows us to send you to school every day is from the fish in the lake too. Selling fish is the main source of our family income.

But, Pa, you need to keep some fish for me too!

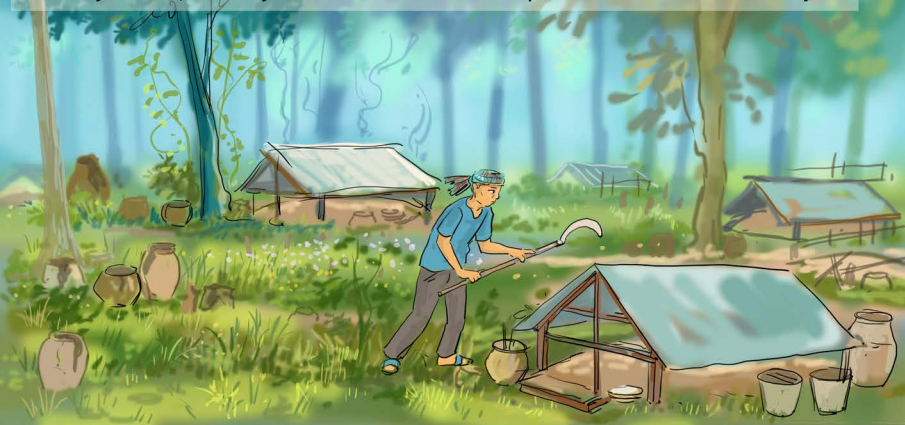
My parents and other families in the Bunong families liked going to the forest for rubber and honeybees too. That has been part of our ethnic tradition. When I insisted on going with them, they used to scare me that there were wild tigers in the forest waiting to eat little kids like me.



Every year, our community would celebrate 'Village Festival' near the Sesan Lake after the harvesting season. The traditional ceremony is held to show our gratitude to animals and nature for allowing us to grow rice and other agricultural products well.



When someone passes away, the elder people would bring them to our ancestral interment site. They would take all the belongings of the deceased and put them inside their graves. We hosted ceremonies for them every year because we believe that they will stay with us, and they are still there in the site to protect us and our community.



In the funeral, I heard the elder people discussed the Chinese hydroelectric dam being constructed. Everyone was so afraid to lose Sre Kor village and our many traditions that we have practiced for many generations. They prayed to our ancestors to stop the development plans.

Dear ancestors and all the spirits who protect this place... please help stop that hydroelectric project. Please save us, our traditions, and our community.

If you're hearing my prayer, please help all of us!



## A few years later

After school, I was so excited to share the good news with my mother that I was the top student in my Grade 8 class. On my way home, I saw a group of policemen and local authorities talking to a group of our Bunong community representatives.

We're here to share good news with you.  
We built houses for all of you already.  
These houses are bigger than your houses  
now, so we can assure you that you will have  
better lives in these new homes.

I walked home fast to ask my mom because  
I could no longer control my curiosity.

Mom! I saw many people in front of  
my schools. What's this about?

Oh, dear! Policemen and our village head came  
to inform us that we should be ready to move to  
another village that they have built for us because  
the Chinese hydroelectric dam has been completed  
and they need to inaugurate it soon.

If we move to this new village,  
what will happen to my studies  
and my dream? I'm so worried, Mom.

No worries, my child. No one wants to  
leave this place because this is everything  
we have from our ancestors.

After our community was told to move to a new village, the people started discussing among themselves trying to come to a decision.

I think we should move there.

No! This is our ancestral land. We won't move anywhere else.

But they warned us that this area will be flooded soon. We better move out quickly.

**No**

No!!!! This land is our lives. We are willing to die here.

The dam is killing

**THE DAM DESTROYS BUNONG IDENTITY!**

A few days before the inauguration, they closed all eight gates of the dam as they had warned us. Floodwaters swallowed our village in the middle of the night.



Kids, get up quickly!  
Our village is flooded!



Quick! Get on the boat!

My siblings and I got on a boat waiting for us in front of our house.



Though it was still dark, I could see many people frantically trying to get on boats. They screamed as if they were losing loved ones. Like many others, I grieved for everything I had lost.





The next morning



I saw a group of women cooking and men helping each other install tents. There was grave concern in their voices as they were talking.

I wasn't able to bring my ten sacks of rice when we hurriedly left. I don't know what else to feed my children now.

Don't worry! We won't let your children starve to death. We are on the same boat, so don't hesitate to eat with us.



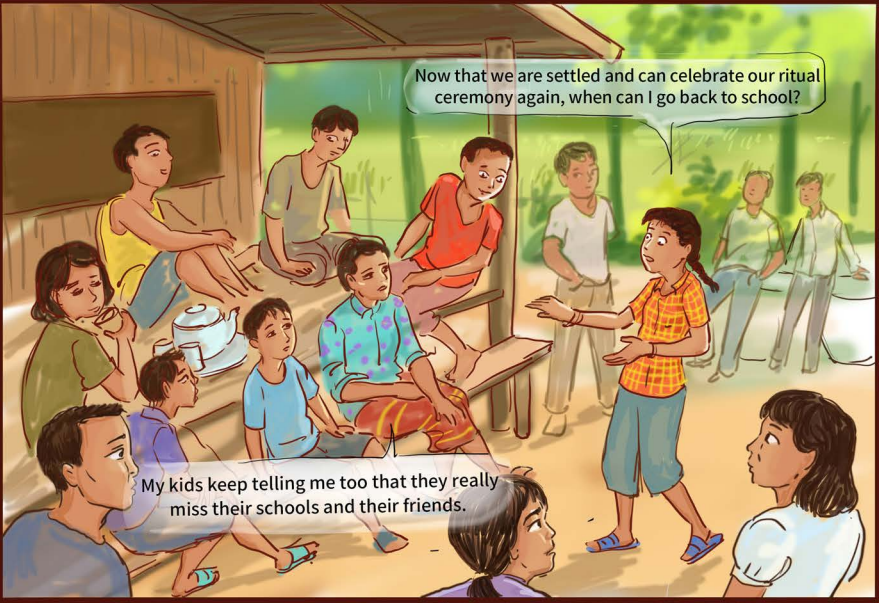
They are afraid to go hungry, but I am more afraid to not be able to study and pursue my dream.

Uncles and aunts, when can we go to school?




It has been two years since we helped each other to build houses trying to settle on this new land. Finally, we have a safer shelter where we can seek refuge.





Now that we are settled and can celebrate our ritual ceremony again, when can I go back to school?

My kids keep telling me too that they really miss their schools and their friends.



We already talked to our local authorities, and we proposed that they build a school here in our new village. They said they will think about it.

My name is Soyeout. I was born to a Bunong family in Sre Kor village of Sesan District. I still dream of becoming a doctor. My friends dream of becoming teachers, and others have many other dreams too. It has been four years since we moved to this new village. We are still waiting for the school to be built, so that we can continue pursuing our dreams.

