

Personal Statement

Darapheak Tin

The Road to Hell is Paved with Good Intentions: A Lesson from Home

My interest in economics is deeply rooted in history and personal experience. Like many families in Cambodia, mine has faced economic hardship, and until the early 2000s, poverty was a common reality. To the outside world, Cambodia is often seen as a least-developed country, yet few are aware of its once-thriving past. Cambodia was once a prosperous nation, known for its resources and vitality. The Chinese even had a saying, "As rich as Cambodia." In 1967, during a visit to Cambodia, Singapore's founding Prime Minister, Lee Kwan Yew, turned to the late King Norodom Sihanouk and remarked, "I hope, one day, my city will look like this." Not long after that, Cambodia was plunged into a prolonged civil war. In 1975, the country entered a dark era dubbed Year Zero, as the Khmer Rouge transformed it into a poverty-stricken nation. Today, Cambodia is nowhere near Singapore in terms of development. Growing up with these stories, I feel a deep sadness when reflecting on the current state of my country.¹

For this reason, not understanding the causes behind Cambodia's severe downturn, let alone envisioning a solution, was profoundly frustrating. As a young person, I often attributed the decline solely to war and political turmoil. However, as I studied economics in my undergraduate years, I came to understand that while political turmoil was a factor, economic fallacies embedded within the ideology the regime's leaders upheld were equally significant. Between 1975-1979, they implemented a centrally planned, closed economy, abolished currency, and removed private ownership, stripping people of the incentive to produce, innovate, and grow. All of this was done with good intentions—a desire for equality and growth. Yet, the whole economy was reduced to a strictly agrarian model, with forced labor, destroyed capital, and gravely misallocated resources due to the absence of price coordination, ultimately leading to mass starvation. Over a third of the population perished—including two-thirds of my own family—not only due to the regime's brutal practices but primarily from starvation during a period falsely proclaimed as abundant.

More than four decades later, despite economic liberalization and significant development progress, 16.6 percent of Cambodia's population remains multidimensionally poor, and an additional 20.5 percent classified as vulnerable to such poverty, according to the UNDP. The enduring struggles of my country and the thirst for knowledge to help avoid past mistakes fuel my passion for economics, particularly in studying economic phenomena, public policies, and their far-reaching impacts.

The adage, '*the road to hell is paved with good intentions*,' resonates deeply with me. I am driven to understand how even well-meaning policies can lead to adverse outcomes and motivated to explore the complexities of policy design to ensure that economic policies truly serve the people they aim to serve.

¹Lee Kwan Yew's formal speech is accessible [here](#). For those interested in history, this [documentary](#) by renowned journalist John Pilger offers an insightful perspective.