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**KHMERS KAMPUCHEA-KROM FEDERATION**

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## Ensuring Inclusive Implementation: Addressing the Needs of the Khmer-Krom in Achieving the SDGs and Leave No One Behind (LNOB)

### Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by the United Nations in 2015 as a transformative agenda to guide global efforts toward sustainable development by 2030. While progress has been made in implementing the SDGs, indigenous peoples and marginalized communities still need to be made aware of these goals and are at risk of being left behind. One such community is the indigenous Khmer-Krom community residing in Kampuchea-Krom, the Khmer name for the Mekong Delta region in Vietnam. The Khmer-Krom face unique challenges in accessing information and participating in SDG implementation, primarily due to restrictions on their political freedoms and limited opportunities to form independent organizations that can monitor progress.

To ensure the meaningful inclusion of the Khmer-Krom community in SDG implementation, it is crucial to adopt an inclusive approach that acknowledges their specific cultural, economic, and environmental circumstances while respecting their fundamental human rights, including the right to self-determination and the preservation of their cultural heritage.

At the forefront of advocating for the rights of the Khmer-Krom community is the Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federations (KKF), an organization dedicated to representing the voiceless Khmer-Krom and promoting their human rights and self-determination. Through their tireless advocacy efforts, the KKF has played a vital and meaningful role in raising awareness of the SDGs among the indigenous Khmer-Krom community and ensuring their active participation in the implementation process.

As the most economically disadvantaged group in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam, the Khmer-Krom community faces multiple challenges in achieving sustainable development, including but not limited to the failure of Vietnam to recognize the Khmer-Krom as Indigenous Peoples. Therefore, the KKF would like to raise the following concerns and provide recommendations for addressing these issues:



## **1. Goal 1 – No Poverty:**

The Khmer-Krom community confronts formidable obstacles in achieving Goal 1 of the SDGs, which focuses on eradicating poverty. Despite playing a crucial role in making Vietnam a leading rice exporter, many Khmer-Krom farmers continue to live in poverty, rendering them among the most impoverished in the region. A contributing factor to this predicament is the government's policy mandating farmers to cultivate rice three times a year. Rather than generating profits, this policy ensnares the Khmer-Krom in a cycle of debt as they borrow money to sustain their farming practices. During the harvest season, the suspicious decline in rice prices further compounds their struggles, compelling them to sell their rice at lower rates, resulting in diminished profits that impede loan repayment. Consequently, many are forced to sell their farmland to settle their debts.

Furthermore, the ongoing implementation of the government's land-grabbing policy exacerbates the challenges the Khmer-Krom community faces. By claiming ownership of their lands, corrupt officials exploit this policy, dispossessing the Khmer-Krom of their farmland and pushing them into a dire situation with no means of sustenance. Consequently, they must abandon their ancestral villages and seek employment in urban areas. This mass migration fragments the Khmer-Krom community and erodes their traditional practices and knowledge, causing a loss of cultural heritage.

The COVID-19 pandemic has inflicted further hardship on the Khmer-Krom community, intensifying their challenges. The post COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated the poverty rates of the Khmer-Krom. Many Khmer-Krom workers have lost their jobs, forcing them to return to their villages, facing heightened poverty levels and limited access to essential services.

These multifaceted challenges underscore the urgent need for comprehensive measures to address the plight of the Khmer-Krom community and ensure their economic well-being and social resilience in the face of adversity.

### **Recommendations:**

- The Vietnam government should cease compelling Khmer-Krom farmers to engage in year-round farming and instead respect their traditional farming methods. Allowing them to utilize their traditional techniques will help reduce the excessive use of chemicals, such as fertilizers and pesticides, in their farmlands.
- Efforts should be made to facilitate market access for the Khmer-Krom, particularly for their agricultural products. By ensuring fair prices for their goods, the Khmer-Krom will be able to generate sustainable income to support their livelihoods.
- In light of recovering from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government of Vietnam should extend support to the Khmer-Krom community, specifically those who



have lost their jobs or have been forced to return to their villages due to the crisis. This support can include provisions such as food assistance, financial aid, or access to employment opportunities and unemployment benefits to help them recover from the impact of the pandemic.

## **2. Goal 2 – Zero Hunger**

The challenges faced by the Khmer-Krom in achieving Goal 2, Zero Hunger, are multi-faceted and require comprehensive solutions. As a predominantly agricultural community, the Khmer-Krom heavily rely on farming for their livelihoods. However, the prevalence of land-grabbing policies has left many landless, severely impacting their food security. Without access to land, they cannot produce their own food, resulting in hunger and malnutrition in the Khmer-Krom community.

Even for those with access to land, additional support is needed to enhance food production. The government's policy of demanding farmers cultivate rice three times a year does not contribute to their profitability. On the contrary, it pushes them into debt traps and perpetuates a cycle of poverty. Furthermore, limited access to high-skilled jobs in urban areas due to a lack of connections and educational opportunities further exacerbates the issue, leading to joblessness and economic hardship.

### **Recommendations:**

- The Vietnamese government should acknowledge and safeguard the land rights of the Khmer-Krom community, preventing land grabbing and ensuring their access to productive land for farming.
- The Khmer-Krom should be provided with affordable credit and financial services to support their farming activities and improve their overall livelihoods.
- Offering education and skills training programs specifically tailored for the Khmer-Krom can empower them with the necessary knowledge and abilities to secure employment opportunities and increase their income levels.
- The government should implement social protection initiatives such as cash transfers and food subsidies to support the most vulnerable Khmer-Krom households, including those with disabilities. These programs ensure their access to food during times of hardship and provide a safety net for their well-being.



### **3. Goal 4 – Quality Education**

The Khmer-Krom community faces significant challenges in achieving quality education.

Firstly, the need for bilingual programs for Khmer-Krom children starting from kindergarten creates significant difficulties in keeping up with their Vietnamese peers. They often need proper language support to understand and participate fully in the educational curriculum.

Secondly, the poverty level prevalent in many Khmer-Krom families forces children to drop out of school prematurely to contribute to their family's income. This early departure from education hinders their educational attainment and limits their future opportunities.

Furthermore, the financial constraints imposed by poverty affect Khmer-Krom students even when they manage to enter university. Many students need help to afford specialized courses such as Computer Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematic, or English, primarily offered in private learning centers. Consequently, upon graduation, they find themselves at a disadvantage compared to Vietnamese students who possess these essential employment skills. This disparity in qualifications often leads to joblessness or employment in low-paying positions unrelated to their fields of study.

Adding to these challenges, Khmer-Krom students face discriminatory policies that result in a lack of scholarships and opportunities for international study, unlike their Vietnamese counterparts. This inequality further limits their access to higher education and the chance to broaden their horizons through international experiences.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Provide bilingual education for Khmer-Krom children to overcome language barriers and facilitate their integration with Vietnamese students.
- Ensure equal access to scholarships for Khmer-Krom students from international governments and organizations to address discrimination and enable them to pursue higher education abroad.
- Offer computer, technology, engineering, mathematics, and English skill training for Khmer-Krom University graduates to enhance their employability and competitiveness in the job market.
- Establish community-based education programs to reach Khmer-Krom children and adults in remote areas or with limited school attendance, increasing access to education and reducing the dropout rate.
- Implement affirmative action policies to increase the representation of Khmer-Krom students and teachers in schools and universities, promoting inclusivity and equal opportunities for success.



#### **4. Goal 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth**

The challenges the Khmer-Krom people face in achieving Goal 8, Decent Work and Economic Growth, are significant. These challenges encompass various aspects, including:

- Discrimination in the labor market due to their ethnicity, which restricts the employment opportunities available to the Khmer-Krom people.
- Limited access to education and insufficient skills to compete effectively in the job market, leading to a higher likelihood of being trapped in low-paying, unskilled jobs.
- Exploitation by employers who take advantage of the vulnerable status of Khmer-Krom workers, resulting in low wages and poor working conditions.
- Restricted access to capital, hindering the Khmer-Krom people from starting their own businesses or investing in existing ones, thereby limiting their potential to create jobs and contribute to economic growth.
- Forced displacement caused by the government's land-grabbing policies, leaving many Khmer-Krom individuals without a source of income and exacerbating economic challenges.
- Inadequate infrastructure in remote areas where the Khmer-Krom people reside, such as limited road networks and lack of internet access, constraining economic opportunities and hindering overall growth.
- The absence of the right to form independent labor unions for Khmer-Krom workers, preventing them from effectively advocating for their labor rights and protections.

#### **Recommendations**

- Ensure equal employment opportunities and combat discrimination based on ethnicity by implementing policies that promote diversity and inclusivity in the workforce.
- Implement comprehensive programs that enhance access to quality education and skills training tailored to the Khmer-Krom people. This will equip them with the knowledge and abilities to compete effectively in the job market.
- Enforce labor laws and regulations to protect Khmer-Krom workers from exploitation by employers, ensuring fair wages, safe working conditions, and respect for their rights.
- Grant the Khmer-Krom people the right to form independent labor unions, enabling them to collectively advocate for their labor rights and strengthen their position in the workforce.



- Facilitate access to capital and financial support for Khmer-Krom individuals to establish their businesses or invest in existing enterprises. This will foster economic empowerment and enable them to contribute to local economic growth.
- Safeguard the land rights of the Khmer-Krom people by implementing policies that prevent land grabbing and ensuring their access to and ownership of their ancestral lands.
- Improve infrastructure development in Khmer-Krom areas, such as building better roads and expanding internet connectivity, to stimulate economic growth, attract investment, and create job opportunities.

## **5. Goal 13 – Climate Action**

The Khmer-Krom community residing in the Mekong Delta is particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of climate change. The region is witnessing increasingly severe floods, droughts, and extreme weather events, directly impacting the livelihoods of the Khmer-Krom people, who depend on agriculture and fishing for sustenance. Alongside natural calamities, they also face human-induced environmental challenges like pollution and the construction of dams along the upper Mekong River.

Several obstacles hinder the Khmer-Krom people in achieving Goal 13, Climate Action:

- Limited awareness among the Khmer-Krom community about the causes and consequences of climate change restricts their ability to take proactive measures to mitigate its impacts.
- The impacts following sea-level rise and temperature rise are “catastrophic.” Rising temperatures and changes in the intensity of rainfall, river flow, floods, and droughts are destroying homes, infrastructures, crops, and fisheries. Additionally, predicted rises in sea levels are set to increase salinity and floods in the Mekong Delta, causing damage to crops in the most productive area of the basin.
- Insufficient resources and access to technology hinder their ability to adapt to climate change effectively. Essential resources such as irrigation systems, drought-resistant crops, and renewable energy sources are lacking.
- The Vietnamese government has faced criticism for not adequately supporting climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts in the Mekong Delta region. This lack of support hampers the adoption of climate-friendly practices and technologies by the Khmer-Krom.
- The construction of dams and other infrastructure projects in the region has resulted in detrimental environmental consequences and adversely affected the livelihoods of the Khmer-Krom people. Dams along the upper Mekong River disrupt the river's natural flow, leading to saltwater intrusion, soil salinization, and reduced crop yields.



- Climate change-induced displacement can compel the Khmer-Krom community to migrate from their ancestral lands, resulting in the loss of cultural identity and social cohesion. Moreover, such removal can lead to resource conflicts and exacerbate poverty and inequality.

### **Recommendations:**

- Increase awareness within the Khmer-Krom community about climate change and its implications for their lives. This includes educating them about sustainable practices such as reducing carbon footprints, conserving natural resources, and adapting to changing weather patterns.
- Encourage and implement sustainable agricultural practices to minimize the impact of climate change. This can involve promoting crop diversification, organic farming techniques, and efficient water use to enhance resilience.
- Promote the adoption of renewable energy sources, including solar, wind, and hydropower, to reduce reliance on fossil fuels and mitigate greenhouse gas emissions.
- Develop improved water management systems to address challenges like saltwater intrusion and flooding risks and ensure access to clean water for the Khmer-Krom community.
- Establish comprehensive disaster preparedness plans to respond to climate change-related events like floods and droughts effectively.
- Provide financial support and accountability to the Khmer-Krom community to facilitate the implementation of climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies. This may include funding for sustainable agriculture practices, renewable energy projects, and disaster preparedness initiatives.

## **6. Goal 16 – Peace Justice and Strong Institutions**

Achieving Goal 16, which promotes peaceful and inclusive societies, access to justice, and effective institutions, poses significant challenges for the Khmer-Krom community. These challenges include:

- Limited access to justice and human rights protection due to the absence of a human rights institution in Vietnam. This hinders the Khmer-Krom's ability to seek legal remedies and uphold their fundamental rights.
- Khmer-Krom activists who courageously advocate for their rights and engage in human rights celebrations have faced severe reprisals, such as arrest, detention, imprisonment, and even torture. In some instances, activists distributing UN documents like UNDRIP have been subjected to harassment and abuse.



- Lack of government accountability for actions such as land grabbing and human rights violations perpetuates a cycle of injustice and impunity, further marginalizing the Khmer-Krom community.
- Various forms of discrimination, including limited access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities, undermine the Khmer-Krom's ability to participate fully in society and have their voices heard.
- Lacking representation of the Khmer-Krom people in decision-making processes restricts their ability to advocate for their rights effectively and address their unique needs.

## **Recommendations**

- Establish an independent and impartial Human Rights institution in Vietnam to monitor and investigate human rights abuses across the country effectively. This institution should have the authority and resources to address the concerns of marginalized groups like the Khmer-Krom.
- Encourage the establishment of NGOs and civil society organizations that can freely operate and advocate for the rights of marginalized communities, including the Khmer-Krom. These organizations play a vital role in raising awareness, providing support, and amplifying the voices of those who are often unheard.
- Uphold and protect the rights of activists, including Khmer-Krom activists, who courageously speak up for their rights. The Vietnamese government should ensure that these individuals are not subjected to repression or reprisals but are supported and valued for their contributions to human rights advocacy.
- Safeguard freedom of expression and access to information for all citizens, including the Khmer-Krom community. Creating an environment that respects diverse opinions and enables open dialogue will empower the Khmer-Krom to share their concerns, participate in decision-making processes, and contribute to building inclusive institutions.
- Provide comprehensive training programs for law enforcement officials to promote a culture of respect and protection for human rights. Particular attention should be given to training that focuses on the rights and needs of indigenous groups like the Khmer-Krom.
- Actively involve the Khmer-Krom community in decision-making processes at all levels of government, mainly when policies and initiatives directly affect their lives and livelihoods. This will ensure their perspectives and interests are represented, enabling them to actively contribute to building inclusive and accountable institutions.
- Establish legal assistance programs and support mechanisms to ensure that victims of human rights abuses, including the Khmer-Krom, have access to justice. By providing





legal aid and support, the Vietnamese government can help victims seek redress, hold perpetrators accountable, and promote a culture of accountability and human rights protection.

- Ensure that measured recommendations of the Joint Allegation Letter (JAL) under Ref AL VNM 5/2022 dated October 22, 2022, of the UN Special Rapporteurs are fully implemented and independently verified. Furthermore, ensure that the alleged abuses and violations of human rights of Khmer-Krom human rights defenders do not recur.

## **7. Goal 17 – Partnerships for the Goals**

The following challenges can hinder the Khmer-Krom community's ability to achieve Goal 17, which aims to promote global partnerships for sustainable development. These challenges include:

- Limited access to resources and information due to their marginalized status. The Khmer-Krom may need help to fully participate in global partnerships and access crucial knowledge and resources related to sustainable development.
- Inadequate representation or misrepresentation in decision-making processes concerning sustainable development. The Khmer-Krom's voices may need to be sufficiently included, making it challenging to address their specific needs and consider their perspectives.
- Financial constraints that limit the Khmer-Krom's capacity to engage in international development partnerships or implement sustainable development projects. The lack of financial resources can hinder their ability to contribute to global sustainability initiatives actively.
- Discrimination and marginalization experienced by the Khmer-Krom can impede their ability to form meaningful partnerships and collaborations with other groups and organizations. Overcoming these barriers is essential for fostering inclusive and effective global partnerships.
- Limited access to technology further exacerbates the challenges faced by the Khmer-Krom in participating in global partnerships and accessing information relevant to sustainable development. Enhancing their technological capabilities and promoting digital inclusion can help bridge this gap and facilitate their engagement in international sustainability efforts.



## **Recommendations:**

- The Vietnamese government should actively and adequately include the genuine representatives of the Khmer-Krom people in decision-making processes, particularly those directly impacting their lives and communities. This can be achieved through meaningful consultations, public hearings, and other forms of engagement that provide opportunities for the Khmer-Krom to express their opinions and contribute to decision-making.
- Collaborations between the government, civil society organizations, and the private sector can address the challenges faced by the Khmer-Krom in achieving Goal 17. These partnerships should focus on capacity building, resource mobilization, and knowledge sharing to empower the Khmer-Krom community and enable their active participation in sustainable development initiatives.
- The Vietnamese government should enhance the legal framework to recognize and protect the rights of indigenous peoples, including the Khmer-Krom. This may involve reviewing and revising existing laws or enacting new legislation that explicitly addresses indigenous communities' unique needs and concerns. Ensuring the participation of the Khmer-Krom in decision-making processes should be a vital component of these legal reforms.
- The Vietnamese government should create an enabling environment for international non-governmental organizations, such as the Khmers Kampuchea-Krom Federation (KKF), to operate freely in Vietnam. These organizations can play a vital role in monitoring and advocating for the rights of vulnerable indigenous groups like the Khmer-Krom, ensuring their voices are heard and their needs are addressed in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

