Comanagement of Natural Resources
LOCAL LEARNING FOR POVERTY REDUCTION



# Maps, not guns, resolve resource conflicts in Cambodia

## Researchers and villagers create a new model for resource policy in defending traditional land rights

*Uncontrolled development was threatening to destroy the forest environment and the traditional way of life of the hill people of Ratanakiri. Researchers worked with the villagers to produce unique maps and resource use plans that convinced the government of the people's traditional resource use and management rights, and eventually set an example for inclusion in new land tenure legislation for the nation.*

To the hill people of Ratanakiri in northeast Cambodia, the forest is not just home, it is a source of food, medicine, fuel, and building materials; a place to cultivate a little upland rice and allow their cattle to roam. The forest also contains spiritual places and burial grounds, and protects watersheds from degradation and erosion. But recently, outsiders have moved into the forest intent on exploiting the resource for profit, threatening the livelihoods — and even the lives — of the people who live there.

Belonging to nine different ethnic minority groups, the hill people make up over two-thirds of the area's population. They practice shifting cultivation and, for the most part, share neither language nor religious beliefs with the dominant lowland Khmer people, who are wetland rice growers and regard the hill people as "backward." The years of civil war in Cambodia left the hill people largely untouched. Ironically, once peace brought Cambodian society a large measure of stability and even prosperity, it also disrupted the lives of the hill people. Investors and migrant workers moved into the province in search of resource wealth — and many of them saw the forest as a prime source of riches.

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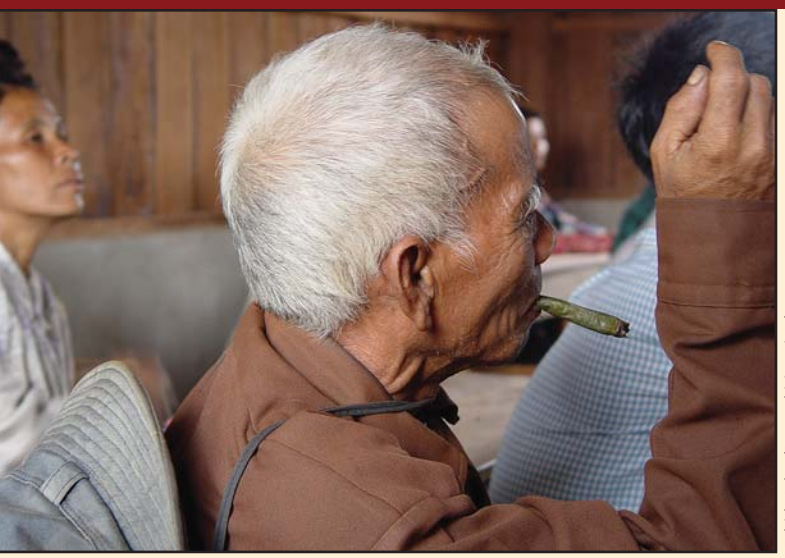

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In the 1990s, the national government readily awarded concessions for logging and for palm oil and rubber plantations in a bid to boost investment. These actions were taken without any consultation with the local people, who were suddenly faced with the alarming reality of armed men hired by concession holders cutting the forests they had used for generations.

In 1995, for example, the national government granted a concession to a large company to clear 20 000 ha of forest to make way for a palm oil plantation. The concession area included several small forest communities, but the company moved in and began clearing the forest without consulting the villagers. And they came prepared to put down any challenges to their claim.

Villagers described groups of company staff, wearing military uniforms and armed with AK-47 rifles and rocket launchers, arriving unannounced. "The company had no relations with people in the villages," explained one villager. "They just came here to look for workers to clear the land. Some of the supervisors were good but some were fierce and carried guns. They use guns to intimidate the people." Another said they were told their cows, traditionally allowed to roam freely in search of forage, would be shot if they wandered into concession areas.

## Government had no control

Not surprisingly, there were conflicts between the palm oil company and the villagers over land and resources, and the situation was not unique. The Ratanakiri provincial government was concerned about the resource conflicts that were breaking out as a result of similar situations in many parts of the province. But it had neither control over the awarding of concessions by the national government in distant Phnom Penh, nor over the influx of migrants arriving every day from other parts of the country.

It didn't help that the government actually knew very little about the ethnic minority communities. Authorities were accustomed to telling Indigenous communities what to do. They were not in the habit of listening to the voices of the local people, an attitude that was reinforced by the language barrier. There was also the issue of corruption. It was common at that time for companies to offer payments to government officials in return for favourable decisions.

Yet the plight of the Ratanakiri hill people did not go unnoticed. International and local NGOs began to question the fairness of the government's actions and the outcomes of the changes that the exploitation of the forests in Ratanakiri might bring. Unsure how to deal with a situation that was threatening to get out of control, the provincial government gave its blessing to a research project funded by IDRC. The mandate of the research team was to explore how the problems of poverty and resource conflicts could be addressed at the local level.

One of the first decisions the team made was to align their operations with the work being done by a large United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) service-delivery project. This not only provided for shared logistics and administration, it also tied the research work to the implementation efforts of the UNDP project and gave the researchers a strong practical focus and shared sense of urgency. In the words of the UNDP project manager at that time: "The situation in Ratanakiri is at the brink of fundamental and irreversible change in its natural and demographic environment. Commercial logging and clearing of forests by a growing population is changing the ecological balance, triggering a process of degeneration and erosion."

The researchers began by meeting with local villagers to learn about the realities of the situation they faced. That situation was summed up simply but eloquently by a woman farmer who told them: "We are highlanders. Our lives depend on the forests and the land. Without forests and land we cannot live. We need firewood, vegetables, fruits, mushrooms, and bamboo shoots from the forests. We see the forests as our market."

## Education and awareness

The research team realized early on that if they were to help these people preserve their way of life — and preserve the forest watersheds — education and awareness building were urgently needed to enable them to establish their legal rights. It was also clear that local people needed to provide evidence of their long history of using and managing the forest resources to legitimize their claims. This was new territory both for the researchers and the villagers.

The tool they chose for this task was participatory appraisal and mapping. For this, the researchers relied on the knowledge and authority of elders as they helped villagers to prepare detailed maps of their traditional territory and its uses. These remarkable maps identified

customary boundaries and the natural resources within them. They included information on the location of fallow forests, spirit forests, burial forests, agricultural lands, streams and lakes, forest areas protected for drinking water supply, forests for nontimber products such as mushrooms and medicinal herbs, and village forests for firewood and timber, as well as windbreaks to protect against strong winds.

The next step was to develop rules for resource allocation within these territories. These would be based on customary practices such as the conservation of spirit forests and the allocation of different areas for various kinds of uses. The maps and proposed rules were then discussed with the commune (municipal) government, and neighbouring villages were invited to review them and to speak out if they saw any issues.

Finally, the maps and rules were incorporated into a community plan, which proved to be vital to building a convincing case against the concession holders. They clearly showed outsiders and government officials the existing boundaries and user areas as well as the traditional resource management practices of the community. District officials were impressed, and once they had given their endorsement, the plans were submitted to provincial authorities. Finally, the governor of Ratanakiri was asked to approve the first of these community plans in 2000.

## Powerful precedent

In the absence of any formal policy from the central government, the governor exercised his discretionary powers and approved the plan. As a direct result, the concessionaire in conflict with the community was obliged to withdraw its claim to most of the community's forest area. This provided a powerful precedent that established the legitimacy of well-documented traditional resource rights, making such rights a valid subject of government attention. Equally important, it gave government departments and local development NGOs a model for how these rights could be secured.

This new process of participatory land use planning emerged through experimentation and fieldwork involving local communities and government agencies, not from any formal policy prescriptions. The maps and documentary evidence were instrumental in changing the assumptions of all the participants. Government officials, who were not familiar with local languages and cultures, were surprised to learn that forest resources were extensively used and managed by local communities. And the villagers came to recognize that there were limits to their use of the land in the face of external claims.

This local planning process proved to be effective in resolving conflicts and in building the capacity of new local and provincial government structures. However, government staff had as much to learn as local people. Their traditional role had been simply to enforce the administrative regulations of the central government. The research project now provided a mechanism for provincial staff in Ratanakiri to experiment with new approaches in their dealings with the communities — approaches that included consultation, respect for the rights of citizens, facilitation of local initiatives, and responsiveness to local problems.

The early successes attracted the attention of many other communities, and the research team sponsored several measures to disseminate research results and to build local capacity. These included informal classes to build the Khmer language and numeracy skills of the villagers. They also encouraged farmer-to-farmer and village-to-village exchange visits, and helped with transportation when village leaders could not afford the cost of travel to district government offices to meet directly with officials.

## A model for the nation

Soon, the newly empowered communities began to form natural resource management committees to help map and negotiate resource use and to implement local management plans. They also ensured that natural resource issues were included in official commune development plans. Provincial government departments retained responsibility for training, oversight, and coordination, as well as for managing any conflict and supporting enforcement of the local plans.

The research team identified the need to improve agricultural production systems in ethnic minority communities. But they were unable to devote as much attention to this part of their work as they hoped because the question of security of tenure still had not been adequately resolved. This remained the most pressing issue for the communities themselves.

Despite all this progress, community tenure and planning processes were still not enshrined in national legislation. Things were changing, however. As part of the reforms

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spearheaded by the international community following the end of two decades of civil war, the national government had agreed to decentralize and provide more opportunities for planning and decision-making at the local level. The vehicle chosen to bring about this process of reform was the Seila Program (*seila* is a Khmer word meaning "foundation stone"). It adopted the participatory local planning process developed by the researchers and the villagers in Ratanakiri as a new model for the nation.

Researchers recognized that the drafting of a new Land Law provided an opportunity to address the legal issue of community land tenure. By networking extensively with provincial and national governments, NGOs, and other development actors, the research team was able to demonstrate the importance of the issue and ensure that provisions for community land tenure were included in the final legislation.

A senior member of the research team was hired by the UNDP/Seila program to lead the adaptation of the land use planning tool in local governance reforms throughout the country. The process was also adopted by the Ministry of Land as the mechanism for extending land titling and registry throughout Cambodia.

Resource management in Ratanakiri continues to present challenges. It is still very much a learning process for all those involved. Continuing policy reforms sometimes lead to disputes over which level of government should be responsible for the new management processes. As well, improved access to the province is increasing market-related pressure on resources and continuing to attract outsiders to the region. However, the change in power relations between the local people, government, and developers has been nothing short of dramatic.

The hill people will have to continue to adapt to the changes that all this brings to their lives and their forests. But they are now armed with the knowledge that there is a process through which they can defend their rights and their lands. The success of the research team in creating effective models for intervention means that local resource users, local governments, and provincial agencies all have better tools to take on the political and practical issues that development inevitably will bring.

*This case study was written by Bob Stanley, an Ottawa-based writer.*

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## For more information


Mr Touch Tonet
UNDP Partnership for Local Governance
CDC Building "E", Government Palace
Sisowath Quay
PO Box 877
Phnom Penh, Cambodia

PHONE: +855-23-362175
FAX: +855-75-974058
EMAIL: tonet@camintel.com



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IDRC CRDI


Rural Poverty and Environment Program
International Development Research Centre
PO Box 8500, Ottawa, ON
Canada K1G 3H9

PHONE: +1-613-236-6163
FAX: +1-613-567-7749
EMAIL: rpe@idrc.ca
WEB: www.idrc.ca/rpe


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