
[Cambodia: Report on institutionalized corruption and illegal logging](#)

Corruption has been identified as a major obstacle to real change in the forest sector in Cambodia. Not only the government but also the international donors have refused to confront the issue. The costs of weak forest sector governance, in terms of lost revenues, destruction of rural livelihoods and environmental damage, continue to mount, with the result that Cambodia remains completely dependent on foreign aid.

Global Witness has highlighted the extent of that corruption and made a thorough research into illegal logging in Aural Wildlife Sanctuary in southwestern Cambodia in 2004. The resulting report “Taking a Cut - Institutionalised Corruption and Illegal Logging in Cambodia’s Aural Wildlife Sanctuary” reveals in minute detail, where illegal logging is taking place, how the loggers operate, who they are, and whom they are paying off, illustrating the institutionalized corruption prevalent across the country and the government’s conspicuous failure to address it.

According to the findings of the investigation, in Aural, all the public institutions responsible for protecting the forest are corrupted and some, notably Royal Cambodian Armed Forces (RCAF), form the bedrock of the local timber industry. The absence of rule of law in Cambodia is rooted in its pervasive culture of impunity acting in cohort with the perception of official rank as a licence to extort.

Beyond the loss of biodiversity, the environmental services offered by Aural’s forests, notably their role in watershed management, are also in jeopardy. Experience elsewhere suggests that deforestation of Mount Aural’s slopes will accelerate soil erosion and flash flooding, impacting negatively on the livelihoods of people living in the surrounding areas.

The adverse impacts are not only environmental, but also social. Local people are forced to live in a society dominated by organised crime, where the law offers no protection. In such circumstances, the indigenous Souy minority is among the most vulnerable with the influx of outsiders brought in to work the timber industry threatening them economically and culturally.

Lack of political will is regularly cited by donors as the main obstacle to combating corruption in Cambodia. However, the case of Aural shows that the culpability of senior officials and generals goes far beyond mere dragging of feet. Corruption in the forest sector is an intrinsic part of the patronage systems that sustain the power of Cambodia’s political elite. Many, perhaps the majority of the officials and soldiers involved in forest crime, are simply following a clear chain of command emanating from Phnom Penh. The situation is not anarchic, and the perpetrators are not rogue elements.

The onus here must be on Cambodia’s international donors, who continue to bank-roll the country and wield considerable influence as a result. The donor community is well aware of the need to tackle corruption head-on, if any progress is to be made in establishing sustainable forest management. Most, however, appear more interested in disbursing aid for its own sake, than ensuring that Cambodia’s natural resources are managed for all Cambodians and not just a corrupt minority.

Despite unprecedented opportunities to put in place the conditions for sound natural resource management, to date, Cambodia represents one of the best examples of how not to address the role of natural resources in a post-conflict country.

International donors have responsibilities both to the Cambodian population and their own taxpayers, to ensure that aid is well-spent and has a beneficial and lasting impact.

Article based on edited excerpts from: "Taking a cut - Institutionalised Corruption and Illegal Logging in Cambodia's Aural Wildlife Sanctuary – a Case Study", by Global Witness, November 2004, <http://www.globalwitness.org/reports/show.php/en.00066.html>