
Cambodia: Forest policy against rural communities

Of the more than 10 million Cambodians currently living in rural areas, over 8.5 million depend on natural resources to support their livelihoods. Although most rely on rice farming, they have just one crop of rice per year which they complement with a range of forest products that also play a critical role in supporting livelihoods.

As common property resources (publicly held resources to which access is open to all), forests provide households a means for diversifying their subsistence and income-generating activities, optimising their labour resources during different seasons, and "insuring" against the risks of agricultural failures. Moreover, people with no land, little money for capital investments, and few alternative livelihood opportunities can still often collect forest products for subsistence. In this manner, Cambodia's natural resources not only provide a foundation for food security, income, and employment for most of the population, but also an essential "safety net" for the rural poor.

However, over the past decade, rural livelihoods have faced increasing challenges due to a rapid decline in resources. Illegal and unsustainable logging by commercial enterprises, military, local authorities, and a growing rural population have resulted in high rates of forest loss and degradation. Forest cover data suggest that deforestation rates increased sharply between 1993 and 1997 (the last year in which data are available). Although government estimates from 1997 indicate 10.6 million ha of forest cover remaining in Cambodia, these estimates are based on interpretations of satellite images, without the "below-the-canopy" inventories of forest resources that could reveal much about the quality/degradation of remaining forests.

Case studies note that diminishing forest resources in close proximity to villages is forcing villagers to meet needs from areas farther away. The causes of the decline in available resources are reportedly illegal/unsustainable logging practices and restrictions on access to forest concession areas. As scarcity increases the costs of obtaining forest resources (in terms of time, labour, money, and risk), rural households must bear these costs because, for many forest products, there are no readily available substitutes.

Furthermore, greater restrictions have been imposed on the rural population's access to resources. From 1975 until 1989 there was no private ownership of property. In 1989 the government first permitted citizens to privately own buildings and the land that they occupied. However, ownership of non-residential land was still not permitted. The 1992 State of Cambodia Land Law extended private property rights to include rights of temporary possession, usufruct, use and easements. That enabled the government to lease out large tracts of Cambodia's most productive resources to private interests. Of Cambodia's 18.1 million hectares (ha) of territory, about 5.5 million ha are presently under concession management --including 4.24 million ha for forestry-- leading to an increase in the landless population and conflicts between commercial loggers on the one hand and subcontractors and local forest users on the other hand. Conflicts typically occur as a result of denied access to forest resources, the loss of forest resources due to logging damage, and/or the climate of intimidation associated with concession security operations.

The "public consultation" process --with deadline on November 30-- set up by the government allegedly to examine the "sustainable forest management plans" presented by 13 of the 14 concessionaires active in Cambodia and to allow discussions between different "partners", is under challenge. Some NGOs are denouncing the "mockery" of transparency they suspect is largely destined to legitimise commercial exploitation which will violate the rights of affected communities in a process that implies a forest reform which the World Bank supports --not surprisingly-- with a 5 million dollar loan.

Article based on information from: "Forest Policy: The 'public consultation' on concession management plans ends in a climate of defiance", *Cambodge Soir*, N° 1653, November 29, 2002; "Natural Resources and Rural Livelihoods in Cambodia: A Baseline Assessment", Bruce McKenney and Prom Tola, RECOFTC E-letter No. 2002.20, November 21, 2002, e-mail: info@recoftc.org , <http://www.cdri.org.kh/> ; "Closing address of Samdech Hun Sen, Primer Minister of the Royal government of Cambodia, At the Government-Donor monitoring Meeting, 29 January 2001, <http://www.camnet.com.kh/ocm/government64.htm>