

Forest destruction for poverty reduction: The Tum Ring rubber plantation

Obsolete concepts of “poverty” and “development”, combined with powerful and unaccountable political and business interests, consistently result in the destruction of forests and the forest-based means of livelihood of local communities. The highly productive forest and secure means of livelihood of the communities of Tum Ring commune in central Cambodia are being replaced by a monoculture rubber plantation and severe hardships. Andrew Cock explains how a plantation for “poverty reduction” has enriched a few and impoverished many.

“ Our people have been transformed from rice and slash-and-burn farmers into workers and owners of the family rubber plantation. A collector of wood resin with unstable income has become a rubber plantation worker in the community who can generate adequate, stable revenue to support his or her own family. These positive changes are of critical importance for their livelihood, reflecting the implementation of the government poverty reduction agenda.”

Prime Minister Hun Sen, Speech in Tum Ring Commune, August 2001.

“ Most of our income comes from non-timber forest products such as resin oil, vines and wild fruits... We want to save them, because without them we cannot survive.”

Chief of Ronteah Village, Tum Ring Commune, March 2002.

Central to the Cambodian government’s policies for the reduction of poverty is the promotion of rural development. Premised on the statistics that around 80 per cent of Cambodians live in rural areas and that more than a third of the population live below the official poverty line of an income equivalent to US\$0.46-0.63 per day, the Cambodian government has emphasised the increase in rural income that could flow from improvements in agricultural productivity and a diversification in the range of crops produced. Among the crops that government officials consider to have been neglected

are rubber, palm oil, cashew nuts, cotton, tobacco and potatoes. Therefore a key aim of government has been to encourage an expansion in the areas planted with these “agro-industrial” crops.

The promotion of a rubber plantation in the heavily forested Tum Ring commune of Kompong Thom illustrates how poverty reduction can be used to justify a development strategy having a very detrimental impact on a community. Poor planning combined with corruption and weak institutional mechanisms to review government decision-making led to the clearing of a highly valuable forest area. Tum Ring is significant because the justification for the rubber plantation development scheme, and by implication the logging and clearing operations, was that it would help to reduce the “poverty” of the residents of the commune. Perversely, many of these people have been deprived of the forest resources and forestlands that formed the basis of their livelihoods.

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Timber cut in the plantation area stacked in preparation for transport, Khaos village, Tum Ring Commune.



Background

Tum Ring commune is located in central Cambodia in Sandan District in the province of Kompong Thom. The commune is made up of eight villages (Tum Ar, Roneam, Ronteah, Samrong, Srar Lao Srong, Khaos, Leng, and Kbal Damrei) and has a population of around 2,600 people divided into about 600 families. According to Ministry of Agriculture data, most of the commune's population are, by origin, ethnic Kuy, but are nowadays Khmer speaking. The commune is located in the middle of one of Cambodia's largest forest area, known locally as prey long. The commercial value of this forest is evident in that all land in the commune was under logging concessions granted to three companies; Colexim, Mien Ly Heng, and GAT.

From an ecological perspective, the forests of Sandan district are predominantly lowland evergreen and semi-evergreen tropical forest of which little remains in Indochina, and were largely undisturbed until recent logging and plantation developments. The forests have traditionally provided a major source of income via the non-timber forest products that are harvested

and traded in combination with lowland rice cultivation and swidden cultivation. The most valuable product village people extract from the forest is the liquid oleoresin (commonly referred to as 'resin') derived from the Dipterocarp tree species prevalent throughout the commune.¹ But logging, and intimidation by soldiers providing "security" for logging companies made life unpleasant for many living in the commune. The situation became much worse when clearance of the forest to make way for the rubber plantation commenced.

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The northern edge of the plantation development.



Promoting rubber and making decisions for Tum Ring

During the 1980s, latex produced from rubber plantations created in the pre and post independence period was one of the few commodities Cambodia had available for export. Partly due to this reliance, and partly due to the nature of the state's murky system of control over the international marketing of latex, rubber cultivation remains an attractive agro-industry from the perspective of the government.

From the early 1990s the government had attempted, with little success, to privatise the country's rubber plantations and in the late 1990s the government restated its intention to expand the area under rubber cultivation. On 30 November 1998, in a speech made during the first session of the National Assembly following the 1998 election, Prime Minister Hun Sen outlined the political platform of the Royal Government and focused part of his speech on rubber. He committed the government to "accelerate the privatisation of the rubber plantations, supporting the private investment in large-scale rubber production and encouraging farmers to take part in small-scale rubber plantation." In August 2000, a government communique, "On the development of family-scale rubber plantations", claimed that Cambodia has 100,000 hectares (ha) of red soil areas and other land with potential for rubber plantations. Despite the high volatility of international rubber prices and a dramatic drop in the price of rubber between 1996 and 1999 (from \$1,400 per metric tonne in 1996 to \$570 per tonne in 1999), it signaled the opinion of Cambodian policy makers that rubber would maintain its role as a major export earner.

Tum Ring was then quickly designated as a suitable area for a rubber plantation. In October 2000, Hun Sen gave permission for the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries (MAFF) to remove 4,000 to 5,000 ha of red soil area from the forest concessions located in Tum Ring commune and give the land to the state-owned Chup Rubber Plantation Company Chup. The process by which the Prime Minister came to this decision, or the information on which it was based is unclear. It seems probable that it was an impromptu decision, as there is no evidence of an examination of the scheme's feasibility or impacts prior its announcement.

In addition, those studies that were undertaken following the decision were little more than superficial endorsements of the merits of the scheme. One such study was undertaken in November 2000 by Aem Phean of the Kompong Thom Provincial Department of Agriculture. He justified the benefits of reassigning the forestland to Chup by claiming that the area was degraded to the point of having "no commercial value trees." Aem therefore encouraged the planting of rubber:

"In order to enhance the people's living conditions by increasing income derived from rubber plantations, to reduce the poverty of remote people and contribute to national economic growth, it is necessary to plant rubber trees for export and to protect the environment and reduce national drought and heat and soil erosion."

In February of the following year, the acting Minister of Agriculture Chan Tong Yves led a follow-up study in conjunction with officials from Chup and the Provincial Departments of Agriculture and Forestry. The report, based on this one-day trip to Tum Ring, notes that the forest is made up of "some areas being mixed evergreen forest, some secondary forest, some low grade forest." It endorses the development of the rubber plantation noting that if the red soil areas were removed from the forest concessions and granted to Chup, then the company would try to plant rubber on 100 to 200 ha in the first year, expanding in following years.

At the same time, the General Directorate of Rubber Plantations would "examine the actual possibility of raising awareness and motivating farmers to plant rubber on a family scale on their own small *chamkar* [shifting cultivation] land". These "family-scale" plantations, supported by long-term loans, were to be promoted around the core industrial plantation. The prime minister, in a hand written annotation to this report, endorsed

the scheme, urging Chan Tong Yves to “please continue this work, cutting the area of red soil out of the logging concession and giving it to Chup Rubber to plant rubber and motivate villagers there to plant family rubber trees.”

The government issued an executive order, or “sub-decree”, dated 17 August 2001, “On the withdrawal of Red Land from the Forest Concessions for Rubber Plantations”, approving the removal of red soil areas from the logging concessions, and allocated around 4,000 ha of land to Chup Rubber Plantation Company for industrial-scale rubber plantation. In addition, it provided around 900 ha for people occupying the land, and another 900 ha “for the distribution to the people to grow rubber in the form of family scale.” Chup was also obligated, according to the sub-decree, to provide technical assistance to those cultivating rubber trees.

Potential opposition to the scheme was to be neutralised through the salesmanship of the Prime Minister, drawing on his considerable skill in communicating with the rural population. Less than two weeks after the signing of the August 2001 sub-decree, Hun Sen attended a ceremony to inaugurate the “Hun Sen-Tum Ring Primary School” and to launch the Tum Ring plantation. The new plantation, the prime minister claimed, would be of benefit to all. Not only was the plantation critical for improving Chup’s future economic efficiency, it was also important in “rehabilitating the ecological balance of the region, which was degraded to some extent by logging.”

In addition, the “project would also create jobs and generate revenue for the poor, thereby complementing the government’s efforts to alleviate poverty of our population.” Rubber would replace the “meager revenue” generated from rice, “slash-and-burn farming” and the collection of forest by-products such as vines, rattan, and wood resin. The Prime Minister claimed that in most cases, “the revenue is not adequate to meet the living costs of our people.”

Hun Sen observed that the existing farms were “segmented, scattered around here and there from half to two hectares, overlapping the Chup Company’s concessions.” Therefore, the company “initiated the idea of swapping their current holdings with the land located near the villages. Each family is entitled to get three hectares of land, allowing the local people in this area to enjoy the fruits of development with equity.” Each family would receive those three hectares “so as to develop rubber plantations or grow other cash crops.” Another objective was that “the public should be educated to know the importance of forests... Renewed efforts should be deployed to eradicate corruption in the forest sector and ensure sustainable forest management.” The final aim was “to promote social development,



Clearing in the vicinity of rubber plantation at Tum Ar village, Tum Ring Commune.

notably education, health and other aspects of the people’s livelihoods.” The company’s budget, the prime minister said, would be used to build “roads, dwellings, hospitals, schools, pagodas, and entertainment centers and to strengthen law and order...”

If this was not sufficient to reassure village people, Hun Sen also made a number of comments related to the cutting of resin trees. These comments, recorded on video, were not included in the official version of the speech, excerpts of which were subsequently posted on the Prime Minister’s Cambodia New Vision website. In these impromptu remarks, Hun Sen noted: “Because we used to draw concession maps including provincial towns, including district towns, communes, villages of the people, included them in the concessions. Therefore I ask you to reduce [the logging concession].” In promising land for now, and for their children and grandchildren, Hun Sen ordered in his speech that land ownership rights be quickly given to the people to prevent violations by the concessionaires. Hun Sen knew his audience well. Clearly aware of the stridency of complaints generated in the commune related to the logging of resin trees and the activities of logging concessions, he reassured the villagers with the promise that a community forest would also be made. This is what village people, logging com-



Illegal transport of logs, south of Tum Ring. The truck had overturned spilling its cargo onto the side of the road. The tarpaulin was an attempt at concealment.

pany representatives, and government officials, heard from the Prime Minister on that day:

“People in Tum Ring go into the forest, they aren’t allowed to collect vines, they aren’t allowed to collect rattan...they don’t let you go collect liquid resin or dry resin. So [logging companies] don’t be too mean. If you are too mean, I will eliminate the forest concession. If we develop this way, it isn’t any different than investment which leads to the loss of village people’s land. I cannot accept this kind of investment. So, go to work. But, friends, don’t go cut trees. And I have ordered – whatever forest people are collecting resin, don’t cut it. Ty Sokhun, right?¹¹ You know? The forest where people collect resin these days, don’t yet give permission to cut. Because they [logging companies] can only cut if you give your seal. So, [Department of] Forestry, if you see forest where people are collecting resin, don’t sign for them to cut. If you don’t sign for them, they won’t cut. And if they dare to cut, they are violating the law. We have to do this very clearly, make this point very clear. And if you stop their investment, no problem. The trees can be kept for 100 years and they won’t go bad, don’t go bad.”

For the residents of the commune, these comments were a watershed in their struggle against the logging companies. Logging companies, through their road building activities, made access to and from the outside world easy. For that, many villagers were grateful. But logging companies also felled the resin trees of village people in disregard of the forest law and the customary systems of forest tenure that have long existed in Cambodia. The logging of resin trees, together with the broader

conduct of the military units stationed to provide the logging companies with “security” had led to high levels of conflict that included the murder of the resident of Ronteah by a Colexim security guard, alleged rapes, the blocking of local roads, and the destruction of property including rice fields and houses. Supported by a small number of NGOs that began working on this issue in 2000, village people attended meetings, and complained to provincial and national government officials.

As a result of the strength and number of complaints generated from these and other forest concession areas, the Department of Forestry and the Ministry of Agriculture issued a temporary ban on the logging of resin trees. However, village people wanted the logging company’s concession boundaries to be redrawn to exclude their resin trees areas, just as had

occurred in relation to the reduction in the size of fishing lots.¹¹¹ They were hoping that their resin tree areas might be protected as community forests. Hun Sen promised an end to their problems with the cutting of resin trees, and in a sense his speech and visit to Tum Ring were viewed as vindication in their struggle with the logging companies.

Logging in the plantation area

Part of the original justification for the plantation was that the forest contained few valuable trees as the Democratic Kampuchea Regime had cleared 500 hectares of forest in a failed attempt to plant cotton, and because villagers had undertaken clearance for swidden farming throughout the commune. As was noted earlier, one government official had claimed of the 5,000 ha earmarked for conversion to a rubber plantation: “During the period of 1999 until present this land has remained untouched and is now degraded semi-evergreen forest with no commercial value trees.” But as village people knew, and as those visiting the plantation site quickly discovered, the forest retained significant ecological and economic value.

Global Witness, as Independent Forest Crimes Monitor, pointed this out when, in February 2002, it wrote to Sum Manit, a senior government official in the Cambodian Cabinet (the “Council of Ministers”) who was also serving as “Focal point coordinator” of the UNDP/FAO/DFID supported Forest Crimes Monitoring Project. Noting that Tum Ring residents had attempted to stop cutting in the area of the plantation because

they had submitted a request to Kompong Thom provincial officials for the area to be recognised as a community forest, Global Witness provided details of stockpiles of logs in both the GAT and Colexim areas. The letter noted: “Global Witness believes that the two logging companies are taking advantage of unforeseen circumstances and is particularly concerned that royalties will not be paid to the RGC as it appears that there is no supervision of the process.” Global Witness was referring to the fact that clearing and associated logging was occurring opportunistically under the guise of the plantation development.

A subsequent investigation by Department of Forestry officials notes that Colexim and some other entity that is not named, were involved in collecting logs from the plantation area “to store in a safe place in order to avoid the clearing and burning by Tum Ring rubber.” The report of the investigation lists 318 logs (100 in GAT and 218 at various locations in Colexim). At a relatively conservative estimate of three cubic metres per log, this amounted to almost 1,000 cubic metres of timber, worth \$150,000 or more.

Department of Forestry officials did request that Chup temporarily cease burning to allow for the collection of valuable timber. Department of Forestry official Oum Markthiery suggested that Chup should stop burning valuable timber temporarily and prepare an annual forest clearing plan “in order to help ... the valuable timber collection from rubber plantation land and cooperation with concessionaires to take action to collect valuable logs from rubber plantation in order to avoid losing national revenue.” A representative of Colexim is noted to have agreed to this suggestion and promised that “If DFW [Department of Forestry and Wildlife] issue permit for next annual plan of clearing forestland of rubber plantation, Colexim will do inventory first and discuss with rubber plantation about commercial big trees that ... will be felled by rubber plantation and then the Colexim will collect in later. For valuable medium size trees, under size trees or small trees will be cut and collected by Colexim before clearance activities of rubber Plantation Company take place.” What was not discussed was that almost all these trees were tapped by village people for resin and therefore protected under Cambodian forestry law.

Cutting was subsequently to continue, and seemed to accelerate as various elements of the elite realised the windfall to be made from gaining control over the timber. In February 2003, Global Witness, after a field inspection of the plantation area, prepared a report on continued illegal logging and transportation. In bulleted points, they summarised their findings: “Continued transportation of log sections despite the suspension of transportation”; “Timber depot selling and transporting un-

marked log sections”; “Credible evidence indicating that saw-mills in the area are receiving large amounts of illegally sourced timber”; “Continued logging outside the boundaries of the rubber plantation area”; “Continued logging of trees tapped for resin by local people”; “Extensive organized felling and log transportation disguised as ‘felling by local people with ox carts’.” The report noted that the timber was being transported to the Kingwood Factory in Kandal district; this factory being linked to Seng Keang, the wife of the Prime Minister’s cousin.



Logs cut by Colexim concession in the northern area of plantation development.

Much of the transport of timber from the commune was enabled through the granting of licenses for the collection of “firewood” and “small trees”. In addition the Colexim concession company prepared, with the assistance of the World Bank Learning and Innovation Loan on Forest Concession Management, a proposal to transport timber it claimed to have been cut in the plantation area. Colexim was proposing to transport 7,650 cubic metres, selling the proposal as contributing royalties and fees of \$337,144 in addition to some \$94,000 that had already been paid. Both the World Bank and Colexim had overlooked the contradictions with earlier government claims as to the de-



Residents in the vicinity of the northern edge of the plantation.

graded nature of the forest in Tum Ring. Now the transportation of the timber was a matter of revenue for the national budget. No investigation was made as to the decision making process by which the area had been declared (by executive decree) as a plantation, and no acknowledgement was given to the fact that most of these trees were resin trees, and therefore illegally cut. Notification of the transport proposal circulated in May 2003 noted: "The transport plan was prepared by COLEXIM based on advice provided from the DFW, including technical advisers under the World Bank-financed Forest Concession Management and Control Pilot Project. Representatives of the World Bank and other agencies have visited the site and have provided comments and suggestions during the course of plan preparation. Pursuit of controlled log transport was one recommendation made in the Forest Concession Management and Control Pilot Project Mid-Term Review."

Just south of the Colexim area, in the southern portion of the plantation, the Seng Keang Company was not bothering to request permission to transport timber. This company simply cut the timber up into small sections and transported it out of the plantation in earth moving trucks at night. Although attempts were made to conceal this transportation – something that suggests its dubious legality – this was endorsed by the director of the Kompong Thom forestry office, who noted: "The Ministry of Agriculture has licensed Mrs Seng Keang to collect cut trees for firewood since late 2002." However, when questioned by journalists, the director of the Department of Forestry and Wildlife claimed to have not heard of Seng Keang, stating emphatically: "There is no log transportation. Some people use wood as firewood." By the end of 2003, Colexim seem to have adopted

this same approach, cutting the wood in the forest and transporting it in trucks concealed under bananas.

Village people's responses to the impacts of the plantation

Chup's most tangible and immediate impact on village people residing in the vicinity of the plantation was on their land holdings and on their access to forest resources. Hun Sen's speech in Tum Ring had emphasised their impoverished lives with their "unstable income" and the benefits that would flow to them through their involvement in the production of an "industrial crop". But he had also promised the protection of resin trees from logging and the creation of

community forest areas. This made it difficult for village people and for interested NGOs to comprehend the implications of this pronouncement of government policy. The subdecree on the excision of the red soil areas was not available to residents or NGOs at the time. Given mixed messages in the Prime Minister's speech, it was not fully understood that the granting of more than 4,000 ha of forestland to Chup would mean the logging of thousands of resin trees and the appropriation of hundreds of hectares of swidden cultivation areas. But this is what occurred.

Prior to the plantation, land had not been a major concern of the village people. Sufficient land was farmed by village people to satisfy their needs with many devoting the bulk of their labour time to the much more lucrative occupation of resin collection. The population of the area was small; few outsiders had entered, and in any case tended to keep away from established villages. But the more the plantation destroyed the commune's forest resources and fueled an influx of outsiders, the more it made land a key issue.

Swidden farming areas were not recognised as the property of village people regardless of how long they had been cultivated. Kompong Thom governor Nou Phoeung explained the rationale for appropriating these areas and giving them to Chup: "They are doing swidden agriculture and have not much skill in improving their crops." Even parcels of agricultural land, over which tenure might normally be recognised under the provisions of the 1992 land law were to be exchanged in order to develop a more ordered pattern of land holdings. No allowance was made for the reality that village people chose agricultural land for a variety of reasons related to the soil productivity and

access to water. The best a family could hope for was three hectares of land near their village, regardless of whether the quality of the land was inferior, or they had previously cultivated a larger quantity of land. Village people pointed this out on a number of occasions noting they wanted to keep their existing land holdings. For instance, a complaint letter prepared by 60 families from Somrong village, and sent to Kompong Thom based NGOs requesting their support noted:

“The rubber company has the intention to use tractors to clear people’s farm and their house, and the company plans to provide 3 ha of land in the vicinity of Somrong village. But the villagers did not want the new land; they need only keep their old land that was left from their grandma and grandpa to farm to feed their families ... we want only to keep our old land.”

The village people of Ronteah also wrote to Kompong Thom based NGOs to express their concerns over the loss of land noting that “some of the people’s lands are more than 3 ha (4 or 5 ha). This land is inherited from their grandma and grandpa and used to plant crops to feed their family from a long time ago.” Villagers also observed that if they were to grow rubber, as the Prime Minister had promoted, they would have to wait seven years for the trees to grow. Their conclusion was: “we don’t want to change these lands to the company we only want to keep our old [land] as normal.”

In addition to the land, the forest both inside and, in many cases outside the plantation was logged and cleared. Inside the plantation, clearing was deemed necessary to create space for rubber trees. Outside the plantation’s (undefined) boundaries, logging occurred because logs could be laundered through the plantation. This meant that residents in all eight villages of Tum Ring commune, and villagers living in neighbouring communes, lost their resin trees. Some families had owned 10 or 20 trees, while others owned hundreds. The acting chief of Ronteah village told the Phnom Penh Post in March 2002 that there were 80 families in his village, each with between 3 and 10 hectares of land. Villagers undertook shifting cultivation, with most of their income derived from tapping resin trees. He complained that since 1995, they had lost resin trees to illegal logging and more recently to logging companies. Average income in Ronteah village had, he claimed, fallen sharply from around 1 million riels (\$250) per year to around 200,000 riels (\$50).

Perhaps because Colexim had murdered one of their kin, the people of Ronteah village were particularly resistant to the plantation. They stood in front of bulldozers in attempts to prevent the clearing of forest areas they utilised, and on one occasion, village people were confronted by security guards who fired AK47 rounds at their feet. For them, the activities of Chup

were a continuation of the abuses of Colexim. On 30 November 2002, village people representing 1,300 people from 21 villages residing in Colexim concession wrote to the Minister of Agriculture requesting him “not [to] allow the [Colexim] company to use weapon/ammunition in the community settlement area and in the forest, because in the past the company’s security guard shot a villager dead in Ronteah village, Tum Ring commune near the house of the former village headman. Moreover, they threatened the villagers in the village and they shoot the wildlife in the forest.”

Apart from these direct impacts, indirect social impacts of the development of the rubber plantation are transforming the commune. Large numbers of people have been encouraged to move into the commune to work on the plantation. In many cases this is because the residents of Tum Ring are not interested in working on the rubber plantation with the loss of freedom and self-reliance that the enforced disciplines of life as a plantation worker would bring. Also with potentially devastating consequences, a brothel has been established at Khaos village near the plantation headquarters.



Firing a resin tree, village people briefly ignite the tapped hole so as to increase the flow of resin.

Poverty reduction and resin tapping

According to Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen, the most important objective of the Cambodian government is the reduction of poverty. As he noted in a speech to a regional conference on “poverty reduction strategies” in October 2003, “poverty reduction strategies go to the heart of the development thrust of our government”. Emphasising this point, he noted, “The biggest challenge faced by the Royal Government in its quest for development is to reduce poverty and improve the quality of life of the Cambodian people.” In order to do this, a key element of the government’s “strategies to enhance rural livelihood” was to “promote the expansion of agro-industrial crops

such as rubber, cashew nuts, coffee, coconuts and palm oil and many others.” For Cambodia, and particularly for the Prime Minister, rubber is undoubtedly viewed as a key commodity, critical to the expansion of Cambodia’s international trade and economic viability. But in the case of Tum Ring, the most important economic activity of many residing in the commune – the collection of resin – was dismissed despite its substantial value as a source of income. Due to resin, the availability of land, and access to other forest products, Sandan district was a relatively well-resourced area of Cambodia.

Once the Prime Minister promoted the idea of a rubber plantation in Tum Ring, government officials eagerly promoted the conversion of the forest to a plantation regardless of the reality of people’s livelihoods in the commune. None of the preliminary reports examining the red soil area, negotiations with the logging companies, assessments of the feasibility of the scheme, or examinations of the livelihoods of Tum Ring’s residents mentions their principal occupation: resin. For those promoting the plantation, resin collection barely existed, despite its visibility in the commune, the claims of villagers, and despite the Department of Forestry’s own observations. In a Department of Forestry and Wildlife study of Non-Timber Forest Products, that included a case study of three villages of Sandan district in Kampong Thom (Sam Ang and Choam Svay villages in Mean Rith commune and Tum Aur village in Tum Ring commune), the study team found that the people in Kampong Thom “mainly depend on forest resource” and that resin was one of the principle products they collected for commercial purposes.

Cambodia’s plantation future

The sequence of decision-making related to Tum Ring suggests that the decision to promote rubber in the commune was made in a rather impromptu manner. The Prime Minister’s speech on the occasion of giving aid to flood victims in Kompong Cham mentions the creation of new rubber plantations on red soil areas in Kompong Thom, and this is rapidly followed by some hastily prepared reports endorsing the scheme. In the context of the Cambodian political system and the strength of the executive, local government officials could not afford to question a Prime Ministerial initiative even if they harboured doubts. Few institutionalised mechanisms exist through which ill-conceived development proposals could be reviewed, and those with knowledge of the impacts or those directly affected could raise their concerns. Rather, senior government officials and well connected business people positioned themselves to benefit from the clearing of Tum Ring’s forest with the tacit sup-

port of donor funded consultants too narrowly focused on their own projects to consider the impact of their activities on wider governance issues. In addition to this, the concerns of the residents of the commune were dismissed by reference to the poverty reducing potential of the plantation development.

Forest clearance for plantation developments remains highly lucrative for the elite. Often little or no royalties are captured on the rents generated from forest conversion because marketable timber can be represented as “firewood”, and because official royalty rates of an average US\$54 per cubic meter are based on those that apply to forest concession operations rather than being appropriate to the higher rents generated through once-off conversion of forest areas. But more problematic is the ease with which plantations created in forest areas can be represented as appropriate for Cambodia’s development. For many in both the government and donor community, plantations are deemed a necessary element of rural development, and hence poverty reduction. The acceptance of these links provides a cover of legitimacy for what, in the current institutional context, amounts to the redistribution of resources including land and forests from villagers upwards to those undertaking forest clearance and marketing the commodities generated from subsequent plantation crops.

In terms of rubber, the Russian Director of Casotim Forest Concession located in Kratie province, claimed at the start of May 2004 that his company had received permission from the Prime Minister to convert parts of the concession into plantations. Red soil areas of around 3,000 hectares are set aside for rubber, and other degraded areas will be cleared for the planting “traditional” fast growing species. In addition, Mean Rith commune, located directly north of Tum Ring commune in Kompong Thom, is now being considered for rubber plantation development. During a meeting between the Minister of Agriculture Chan Sarun and UN Special Representative for Human Rights, reported in Rasmei Kampuchea newspaper on 7 December, 2003, Chan Sarun was asked about the possible expansion of rubber plantation developments in Kompong Thom. His response was that there is another 6,000 hectares that the government plans for rubber tree development, but that the initiation of the expansion depended on the results of an “evaluation” of Tum Ring.

A comment in 2002 by the acting chief of Ronteah village succinctly sums up the nature of this approach: “[Chup] told us that what they are doing is developing our village.... But I don’t understand why they are developing us from better-off to worse-off, from seven hectares of land to only three. We do not agree with this idea.”

A fully referenced version of this article is available upon request from *Watershed*.

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Endnotes:

I Village people collect resin by making a hole in the base of select trees. Resin then accumulates in the bottom of the hole and is periodically scooped out of these holes. Holes are then fired to increase the flow of resin. Associated with this process is a system of customary tenure whereby trees (normally grouped together over a contiguous area) are owned at a family level. Resin is sold for use in making torches, for sealing wooden boats, for making paints and varnishes, and for the essential oil which is used in the manufacture of perfume.

II Director of the Department of Forestry and Wildlife.

III Fishing lots are in many ways similar to logging concessions. Granted on Cambodia's waterbodies (including lakes and rivers) they provide the fishing lot owner with an exclusive right to catch fish (and exclude others) within a fishing season of limited duration. In comparing the fishing lots and forest concessions, Hun Sen noted in his Tum Ring speech: "We cut out from the fishing lots a total of 55%. But with concessions, it is just this one concession here that has been cut. But, this has given us some experience, for us to continue. I'd like to read this, for you to, just read two articles to remind you. The area of red soil cut out is 6200ha from the concessions, of that 2181 ha from GAT, 3577 ha from Colexim, and 442 ha from Mien Ly Heng..."