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## Cambodia. Rubber Plantations, Protected Areas, REDD+ and Other Threats: A Dramatic Loss for Forest Dwellers

Twenty-five years ago, more than 80 percent of Cambodians relied on their land and forests for their sustenance. They were engaged in farming, fishing and animal husbandry or depended on non-timber forest products to survive. Forests gave life and provided diverse sources of income to most forest communities, who knew very well how to preserve them. For an outsider, ordinary life in the forests of Cambodia would have been considered 'poor', but forest communities saw it differently. For them, life could still exist without so many troubles. People were not falling into terrible debts, they had enough food and they did not need to migrate to work in other countries.

But over the past 12 years, many forest areas in Cambodia have been cleared and turned into economic land concessions (ELCs), including rubber and cassava plantations, as well as other private uses, under the argument of 'boosting' the economy. Alongside this is the massive degradation of forests from illegal logging driven by the insatiable demand of luxury timber. Protected Areas and carbon offset programs, especially REDD+ projects, have also severely affected forests and forest dependent communities. A question asked by communities is, after all these years, who has benefited from this so-called 'boost' of the Cambodian economy?

The dramatic loss of forests is a heavy burden for forest-dependent peoples, seriously impacting their livelihoods, local economies, social fabric and cultures, as well as adversely affecting local food systems. A forest dweller from the Bamnak village in the Krakor district, Pursat province, said during a conversation in late 2021: "When the forest was still there, our families were living peacefully, we farmed and there were plenty of vegetables to eat. The women could look after the children, feed the chickens, ducks and pigs, while the men went out to the forests to harvest products for making some money to support the families. Now that the forest is gone, we do not know what to do." (1)

Since 2002, the country's legislation allows community forests to be demarcated for collective use. The Law establishes that communities can request the forest authorities for a community forest to be recognized and, according to a 2003 sub-decree, the area can be managed by a Community Forestry Committee, which should be established voluntarily by the community.

However, most of these Committees, and thus the community forests, remain susceptible to the threat of ELCs, criminalization and other outside influences. Many requests for community forests' recognition have been denied or ignored. Currently, there are even legal restrictions on the demands that established Forest Committees can make, including the prohibition of mobilizing people to protest and other public actions while submitting evidence of forest destruction to the Ministry of Forestry. The police and the provincial courts intimidate community members when they protest or try to stop possible land grabbing activities.

Lorang Yun, head of the Cambodia Indigenous Peoples Alliance (CIPA), said during an interview to news portal Mongabay in 2022: "Since 2005, fewer than 40 communities have acquired a communal land title, despite hundreds applying." He explained that Indigenous Peoples face problems in the courts in part due to the rampant levels of corruption around land ownership and economic

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concessions in the country. He also explained how conservation NGOs also intensify conflicts, since they establish Protected Areas even as communal land titling processes are ongoing. (2)

A member of the Andong Bor Community Forest Committee at Oddar Meanchey province explained: “We don’t have the right to protest or the right to file a complaint. Only they [the forestry administration authorities] have the power to do something. We are not trying to protect the forest just for our own benefit, it is for everyone.”

## **Rubber plantations**

Large-scale monoculture plantations, in particular rubber, have been at the forefront of deforestation in Cambodia, especially in the last two decades. Global Forest Watch exposed how nearly five percent of the land area in Cambodia is reserved for rubber plantations. (3) In addition, industrial monoculture production of oil palm, cassava, sugarcane, corn and jatropha have also expanded under economic land concessions (ELCs).

In May 2012, the government suspended the granting of ELCs in the midst of growing criticism and an inter-ministerial committee was formed to review existing concessions. Consequently, more than 100 concessions have been revoked from concessionaires that did not abide by the law or the concession’s lease.

Nonetheless, fueled by international consumer demand, rubber plantations have recently experienced a surge in expansion. A study showed how the annual forest-to-rubber conversion rates closely correlate with global rubber prices. (4) As of December 2021, 946,926 hectares had been allocated for rubber plantations, spread across 157 economic land concessions. (5)

## **Protected Areas**

As Cambodia emerged from years of conflict, a number of Protected Areas were created by a royal decree in 1993. More detailed guidelines came in the 2008 Protected Areas Law. About 26 percent of land in Cambodia is designated as a Protected Area.

However, most of these Areas have seen large-scale deforestation. The Snuol Wildlife Sanctuary, for example, experienced wholesale clearance for rubber and cashew plantations, as well as illegal logging, so much that its protected status was removed in 2018, on the basis of there being almost nothing left to protect.

On top of this, it is crucial to highlight that the establishment of the country’s Protected Areas has resulted in thousands of forest dependent populations lose their homes as the government and conservation NGOs took control of land that had housed many communities for generations.

Such conservation programmes continue to be a threat to forest communities as the government of Cambodia has joined the ‘High Ambition Coalition’, an intergovernmental group that has the main goal of ‘protecting’ at least 30 percent of the world’s lands and oceans by 2030.

Moreover, the country’s government outlined in October 2022 its commitment to reach ‘carbon neutrality’ by 2050 through forest conservation, mainly by implementing and scaling up REDD+ projects. (6)

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## The REDD+ Disaster

Community elder Srey Khongphoen, from the Andong Bor Community, Oddar Meanchey province, remembered during a conversation in 2020: “When the forest still existed 10-15 years ago, it was easy to find food, such as the Prich leaves. There was a lot of Prich inside this forest. During March, April and May, old leaves would fall down and new leaves would come, so people could go into the forest to pick them up, cook them and sell them. Everyday during that season, a family could collect around 5 to 6 kilos. And the price was around 12,000 to 20,000 riel [around US\$3 to 5 dollars] per kilo. Prich leaves gave a decent source of income to forest peoples.” Srey has 7 children and she used to earn around 40,000 to 60,000 riel (around US\$10 to 15 dollars) per day by picking up Prich leaves.

This situation changed dramatically in the Andong Bor community forest area with the introduction of a REDD+ project. REDD+ stands for ‘Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and forest Degradation.’ The Cambodian government launched a pilot REDD+ project in the Oddar Meanchey community forests in May 2008, covering almost 64 thousand hectares of what used to be forests.

The Community Forest Committees at Oddar Meanchey Province were established in 2005 by joining 678 families from 5 villages: Kantul Choun, Samrong Tahea, Voryiev, Damkor Tapok and Kralor Senchay, located at the Beng commune, Banteay Ampil District.

This REDD+ Project -whose objective was to sell carbon credits of an alleged 8.2 million tons of emission reductions over 30 years,- claimed to work “with local communities to establish Community Forest groups that implement project activities to reduce deforestation, improve livelihoods and protect biodiversity.” (7)

Community Committees involved in the Oddar Meanchey REDD+ project received a training course related to the carbon project led by Children Development Association (CDA), the forestry administration and other local and international NGOs, including TerraGlobal, which had a partnership with WCS and Care. The trainers told them that by taking good care of the forest, they would be able to benefit and the Committees would get some money from the selling of carbon credits by 2020. But if they couldn’t protect the forest, then they would not get any money either. After the training, Committees were responsible for disseminating the information about the REDD+ project to the people in the different villages.

During the first years of the project, Committees were able to patrol the forests to protect them from illegal logging. But the project was filled with conflicts and problems from the beginning. As research from 2016 showed, some villagers were forced to pay bribes to Community Forest Committees or soldiers, just to be able to go into the forests to collect non-timber forest products or small amounts of timber. (8) In 2012, military regiments entered to establish a military base inside the Andong Bor community forest and started growing cassava plantations. Each year, the plantations expanded and the military would sell cassava to the elites in the Banteay Meanchey province.

In response, the Community Committees conducted many actions to bring the destruction of the forests to the authorities: they filed legal complaints, submitted petitions backed by photographs and other evidence collected from the local areas, carried out investigation reports for the relevant authorities, and also mobilized protests by village communities. But none of these achieved positive results because the district and provincial governors themselves supported the military instead of the Community Forest Committees. The military also sold two areas in the mountains of these forests to a Chinese rock grinding company. A member of the Community Forest Committee in Oddar Meanchey reflected during a meeting in 2020: “Maybe selling land is getting them richer faster than

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selling carbon. That's why they have cut all the forest and sell it out to the rich people; in order to get more money quickly."

The REDD+ project failed to stop the deforestation process in Oddar Meanchey.

According to a political map made by the Community Forest Committees themselves, most of the forest areas were sold to rich people for growing mainly cassava plantations. There are also two gasoline stations, one cassava warehouse and other residential land for economic activities. Besides, the military distributed some part of the land for houses. There are around 100 military houses built along the road with a plot of land each for growing cassava and banana trees. There is just a small area that still remains with some forest. But, as a member of the Community Committee said: "No one can stop them. Even if we get our community forests back, we would get back just empty land. We would need a very long time to get the forests to come back again while protecting what is left."

Another member of the Community Forest Committee said during a conversation in 2020: "People want their forests back. The forests are very important, they attract the rainfall, they provide with firewood for people to cook... but nowadays, after so many years without it, some people buy two bags of charcoal per month for cooking. Nonetheless, the majority still believes that we were not aware of how rich we were with the forests we had, with wild animals for cooking, and with Prich leaves to earn extra income. People did not have to worry for food to eat; some just went to pick up fruits, dig crabs, snails, catch fish, frogs, or wild-animals at night. Today, however, around 80 - 90 percent of the children or young people no longer go to school. They have to accompany their parents to work in Thailand in order to ease the family burden. So many, if not all, have to leave the village to earn money."

"The loss of this forest has a lot of impact. If we could have our forest as before, people could build their houses without problems. Now, when our children get married and separate from the parents' house, there is no money to buy wood to build a new house. If we could have our forest as before, we could find non-timber forest products... some people could earn from 100,000 to 150,000 riels [around US 25 to 37.5 dollars] per family. And our community forest was not only useful for our villages here, but for around 20 other villages, some from the other side of the forest. If we could have our forest as before, we would not need to use chemical fertilizers to grow our rice. Now, rice is the worst. The truth is that people do not have much hope of getting back the forestland that was grabbed from us."

## **Forests are a Source of Life**

Despite the serious intimidation, harassment and even imprisonment, some forest dwellers keep fighting back to preserve their forests and life. In the Pursat province near the Aoral Mountain, a community member stated during a conversation in 2020, referring to the loss of their forests due to large-scale cassava plantations: "In the past, people could live together, had time to eat together, and when there was a ceremony or a house warming celebration, people was helping each other with cutting bamboo, chopping firewood, sawing wood and, most importantly, people were not upset as today. Nowadays, everything has to count as money... We need to be united as Community Forest Committees in protecting and enforcing our rights. We need to get our food systems and local economies back. We must also work together to protect the remaining forests and regenerating the rest."

For their part, several community members from Oddar Meanchey and the Pursat provinces explained the importance of people in the villages going back to grow their own crops. They clarified that for this to happen, communities must create and protect large ponds of water for collective use

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and small ponds for families' use, so that crops can be irrigated daily. "Water is as important as forests and land," explained an elder from a community in Oddar Meanchey. Their wisdom remains enormous and they are very clear the importance of a healthy forest, where livelihoods not only come from crops, but also from catching crabs, fish, frogs, snails, mice or other small wild-animals, as well as from collecting non-forest timber products, such as leaves and mushrooms.

Forest communities underline the important connection between protecting and living with their forests and their food sovereignty, meaning their power and autonomy to have enough, diverse and nutritious food. "There will be a lot of things to eat if we go back to have our forests, and the living conditions of forest peoples may not be as difficult as today," explained a community member from the Oddar Meanchey province.

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(1) All testimonies in this article, unless referenced otherwise, are from field visits of Focus on the Global South, carried out during the years 2020, 2021 and 2022. Names that are left anonymous are for security reasons.

(2) Mongabay, [No justice for Indigenous community taking on a Cambodian rubber baron](#), December 2022,

(3) Global Forest Watch, [What's Happening in Cambodia's Forests?](#), 2019.

(4) [Unravelling the link between global rubber price and tropical deforestation in Cambodia](#), 2019.

(5) [Cambodia's concessions](#).

(6) Everland, [Cambodian Government to Scale Forest Conservation While Ensuring Economic Growth and Prosperity Through REDD+](#), 2022.

(7) Terra Global Capital, [Oddar Meanchey Community REDD+ Project](#), Cambodia.

(8) REDD-Monitor, [Oddar Meanchey, Cambodia: "No one seems to be learning any lessons"](#), 2016.