
Cambodia: The struggle of rural people for their “community forest”, an essential part of their food sovereignty

Although many of the original forest areas in Cambodia have been destroyed in the past decades, for many communities the remaining forests still play a fundamental role in guaranteeing their food sovereignty. It is in the forest where they collect different types of vegetables, mushrooms, honey, small animals; the forest also provides resin oil from the rattan tree, used for example to protect the wood of their boats used for fishing in the rivers, another pillar of their food sovereignty; also, the forest provides firewood for preparing meals, and offers wild herbs and other elements for traditional medicine. Especially for women and the traditional activities and roles they exercise, the forest areas are extremely important. “ *The forest for us has one thousand utilities,*” one of the women in a community recently visited by WRM .

The Cambodian law guarantees the right of communities to hold land title, and more recently also to have their so-called “community forest” recognized and demarcated. But in practice, communities often face a hard struggle to have their rights guaranteed. One threat to this recognition is the ongoing process by which the central government gives away land concessions that overlap with communities' territories to corporations. These concessions also often include the forest areas the communities depend on. Another problem for communities with forest areas is the ongoing profit-driven logging practice of extracting the very valuable timber inside the forest areas - which is cut for the export market.

The Pheapimex land concession

In Kampong Chhnang Province, since the early 2000s, communities are facing the problem of the Pheapimex land concession. Pheapimex is a Cambodian company that received a concession over 315,628 hectares covering the Kampong Chhnang and other provinces, and that has strong relations with and therefore support from the Cambodian government (see <http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/cambodia-the-curse-of-concessions/>) . Pheapimex is the Cambodian partner of the Chinese Wuzhisan company, active in the concession area, and also subcontracts the area to other companies. Over the years, many families have been expelled by the company activities, but also community members have resisted against this company by, for example, filing complaints with the authorities, blocking the roads and stopping the machinery used for deforestation and cultivation of the monocultures that the concessionaires replace the forests with. Because of protests, the company had to desist from its initial plans of planting huge areas of lemon grass; they also dropped an attempt to introduce large-scale eucalyptus plantations. However, in Pursat province, in forest areas where few people lived and where it therefore was difficult to organize the resistance, most of the community forest area has been destroyed and large-scale cassava monocultures were established by the company. Agrottoxins are being applied by workers without protective equipment (see photo below), exposing them even more intensively to these poisonous substances. Although cassava is a food crop and could benefit the local market, it is being exported to be processed in China, according to community members.

Where community forest areas are overlapping with the concession area, the community needs both to mobilize constantly to protect these areas, as well as it needs to struggle with the authorities to get these areas recognized as community forest. As a result of the resistance struggles against the company, communities in Kampong Chhnang and Pursat provinces received a total of 60,000 ha of land titles that include the areas they are actually using for their living, basically their rice fields and residences. But they complain that while the maximum size on paper for such a land title is limited to 5 hectares, in practice much smaller areas are being demarcated, creating uncertainty for the families of how to take care of the future demand for land by their children. Furthermore, these titles do not include community forest areas, so the struggle to recognize and demarcate these areas continues. And also the resistance against the company continues, because even in those areas where the company has not introduced any monoculture yet because of the opposition by communities, like in Boribo district, new irrigation systems are now under construction.

The struggle for the Pray Long Forest

In another region of Cambodia, an organization called the Pray Long Network is active to defend the Pray Long Forest, with 360,000 ha one of the last best conserved forest areas in Cambodia, and on which about 200,000 people depend directly and indirectly for their livelihood. “Pray Long” in the local language means “Our Forest”.

Some of the Pray long Network members in Kampong Thom province are, together with other community people from Srea Choeng and Kbal Khla villages, patrolling their community forest area on an almost permanent basis. The community forest area that is being patrolled by this group is located on the border of the Prey Long forest, and has a size of about 4,500 hectares but has not been officially demarcated yet by the government. It is being threatened by the activities of a Vietnamese company (CRCK) with a concession in the region to plant rubber trees in monoculture plantations. The community members even face the problem that some community members, influenced by often powerful outsiders who aim to profit from the valuable timber inside the community forest, invade the community forest area and cause deforestation. A small group of community members, concerned to conserve their forest for their and future generations, patrol the forest area day and night and when a group of “invaders” is discovered they mobilize and try to prevent further forest destruction. By doing this, the patrolling group has been able to keep destruction of the forest containing valuable timber to just 100ha over the past few years, a number that without the patrolling probably would be much higher.

An important recognition of the Pray Long Network has recently come from outside the country. The Network gained a Human Rights Award for their work to conserve the Pray Long forest from the Alexander Soros Foundation. But inside Cambodia, the community people from Pray Long Network and also the communities in Kampong Chhnang and Pursat provinces still face a hard struggle with their authorities to defend their livelihoods including their forest areas against the threats of concessions and logging.

To obtain motivation and inspiration and strengthen spiritual common values, community people in the different provinces that were visited have built in several places in and close to their community forest, small and simple temples, asking the spirits to protect the forest and also to protect them in their hard struggle. It shows how forests are important, not only for the physical – food sovereignty – well-being of communities, the spiritual and religious role of forests make them more than crucial for communities.

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