
Women's roles, rights and responsibility in natural resources: Some reflections from Mekong Region

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To explain the rights and role in natural resources of women in Southeast Asia can be complex. In Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam and Myanmar – where groups identified as 'Tai' ethnic and also other many ethnics live closely with natural resources in their subsistence agriculture livelihood - we often learn that women are playing key roles in owning land, for example. It is part of a culture where men move in to a woman's family after they married, and help in the rice field of their in-laws, before the woman's family gives some land to them. It remains common until today that the wife will be the one who 'owns' the land of the paddy or upland rice fields, whether the land is with formal land certification or not. The husband or men in the family in many communities accept the fact that the women are the ones who own the property of the family. Women therefore can be the ones fully responsible for maintaining those resources for the next generations.

But there is much more diversity beyond the way women own agriculture land in the role and ownership of the women across Southeast Asia. In the region, natural resources still provide the major sources of people's life. Apart from communities based on agriculture, there are many communities living from hunting and gathering for subsistence, and not relying directly or very much on agriculture. Many communities living along the main river of the region such as the Mekong River can only live by fishing from the river and gather food from natural forests nearby their village. In those communities, people sell fish and non-timber forest products in order to get money to buy rice, which they are not able to cultivate themselves.

Back in 2008, TERRA conduct the research on economic, social and ecological changes resulting from commercial tree plantations in southern Lao PDR. We found interesting data on how much the change in land use and resources used can affect women directly. As the report described "Before the rubber concession arrived, villagers collected wild products for example mushrooms, bamboo, rattan shoots, vegetable leaves and small animals, insects, fish, shrimps, shellfish for sale and for consumption. Areas which were rich sources of wild produce for people in all six villages studied, before the establishment of the rubber estates, the rice fallows and rice field, the streams and their banks, the deciduous dipterocarp forests, the evergreen rainforests and the use forests. Produce from these areas, which were harvested for sale, were useful in supplementing the household economy. Important semi-wild crops include broom grass, which villagers used to reap from the swidden fallows and once a year to make an income. One household in Oudomsouk village was able to make \$588 per year from selling dried grass. Other household can make up to \$235 per year from selling wild produce. This source of income was lost when the rubber company took over the rice fallows and various forest areas within and around the villages". The activities described in the report, including the gathering of food and products from forest and along the bank of creeks and stream nearby, and to gather broom grass, which is then prepared for sale – are all the roles of

women.

Similar scenarios of how women use and lose the resources continue until today. In TERRA's most recent work in six villages along the Mekong and Sesan River in Northern Cambodia during 2013, interviews with the women group in the village reflect clearly on the women losing rights and role in owning, using and getting food and earning income for the family because of the change of river and also natural forest. Women in Koh Hep village, an island within the Mekong River where 106 families live, report that in paddy rice fields, only plowing is mainly done by man and apart from that, women in the family will do everything similar to men. Also because they engage in fishing along the nearby river shore, women can identify clearly which fish they found more often, and which ones have already gone in the past years. Women who spend all day long to gather some food from forests nearby the village, and come back in the evening to put the hooks along the shore to fish found that they are now getting less and less from both forests and river. As women are also responsible for the vegetable plot allocated along the Mekong river bank from fence-making to growing watermelon, cucumber and other crops they sell, they also describe that the unnaturally big flood and drought of the Mekong River in the past decade also destroyed the river bank and income from it. In December 2013, some families who grow watermelon lost 100% of their produce to the flood when river levels rose by 2 meters very quickly in the peak month of the dry season.

Though most women are not quite sure about the reason of the changes they perceive in the flow of the Mekong river, they are very suspicious about the large hydropower dams built upstream by China, and also those built in Vietnam along the Sesan River. In the particular case of Koh Hep Island village on the 8 square kilometres island in the Mekong river, people are also suspect that they might lose all their agriculture land, if all, or even only some of the big hydropower dams in the set of 13 dams planned to be built in Laos, in the frontier of Thailand-Laos and Cambodia actually happen.

Losing land for large scale rubber plantations or losing the river to dams are similar for women, as it means the loss of livelihood and rights to protect themselves and their family. Today, we see more and more faces of women in the meeting on large scale plantations and hydropower dams in the region. This should mean that women's roles, rights and responsibility over their resources and livelihood will have to expand, from household level to community, national and regional – and that women become the power of the ongoing campaign that we are all involved in.

By Premrudee Daoroung, Towards Ecological Recovery and Regional Alliance (TERRA),
e-mail: nangeang@hotmail.com, <http://www.terraper.org/mainpage/index.php>