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## Cambodia: Rubber and palm oil plantations impact on local communities

While not related to the pulp and paper industry, rubber plantations and oil palm plantations have similar impacts on local communities to fast-growing tree plantations. Rubber and oil palm plantations also involve using large areas of land, often land which is crucial to local people's livelihoods.

During the 1960s, especially in the northeast of Cambodia, many highlanders were evicted from their traditional lands to make way for rubber plantations. The plantations, Prince Norodom Sihanouk's assimilation policies in the northeast and the bombing by the US airforce meant that the northeast was a prime recruiting ground during the first years of Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge.

Since the 1960s many of the rubber plantations have been neglected and only in recent years have some of them been rehabilitated. The Cambodian government is currently encouraging the rehabilitation of rubber plantations and the development of new plantations.

In August 2001, Prime Minister Hun Sen gave a speech in Kompong Thom province at the launch of the Chhub Rubber Plantation Company's 6,200 hectare plantation. In his speech, Hun Sen praised the company for "rehabilitating the ecological balance of the region, which was degraded to some extent by logging". Local villagers are to grow cash crops between the rubber trees and will be given three hectares of land "to develop rubber plantations or grow other cash crops". Hun Sen added, "Our people have been transformed from rice and slash-and-burn farmers into workers and owners of the family rubber plantation."

Local people's experiences with plantations and cash crops elsewhere in Cambodia however, indicate serious problems when large tracts of land are taken over by agricultural plantations. An oil palm development in Ratanakiri in north-east Cambodia illustrates these problems.

In 1995, a joint venture company won a 20,000 hectare concession to plant an oil palm plantation in O Yadao district, Ratanakiri province. The company is a joint venture between Globaltech Sdn. Bhd. (Malaysia), Mittapheap-Men Sarun and Rama Khmer International (both Cambodia). The project would displace 4,500 people from their land, while providing employment for a maximum of 400.

The company recruited villagers to clear land for the plantation including villagers' forests and fallow fields. "The company measured the land that people were in the process of farming and said this land belongs to the company already – even if we didn't sell," one villager told Sara Colm, a researcher with the NGO Natural Resources Management Project. However, a trial plantation in 1996 was a complete failure and land the company had already cleared was simply left unused. The company then started to plant coffee, much of which died because of drought the following season. The company then built a dam to provide water to irrigate the coffee. Villagers downstream of the dam have seen their streams and water sources depleted. The company bought the land which was submerged by the reservoir from villagers at a price of US\$52 per hectare. Villagers sold the land unwillingly, reasoning that the company would take the land anyway, if they refused to sell.

A survey by the Ratanakiri-based NGO, NTFP project, compares the potential income to villagers

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from planting fruit trees between 1995 and 1998 and the income to villagers from large scale monoculture. The survey concludes that the income from fruit trees is significantly greater for villagers, and "because it is based on a variety of crops is less risky and more sustainable than large scale monocultures that are being presented as the alternative."

The report also sums up villagers' problems with contract farming on large-scale monoculture plantations:

"While the company may be offering employment opportunities to local people, their sharecropping plan increases village peoples' vulnerability because they will have to give up growing rice for their families in order to tend the coffee. Their income will depend very much on seasonal growing conditions and the company will dictate the price at which villagers must sell their beans to the company. Farming people are really being asked to take risks that they cannot afford to take. Their question to the company was . . . how are they going to look after their children and their old people if they have to give up everything and look after coffee."

Extracted from: "The Pulp Invasion: The international pulp and paper industry in the Mekong Region" by Chris Lang, WRM, 2002