

Focali Brief: 2011:07

Avoided Deforestation and Agriculture: Insights from Cambodia into a Complex Relationship

Using the examples of two villages in Cambodia, this brief examines the long-established truth that communities have to be heavily forest-dependent to effectively protect forests.

RECENT POLICY research on avoided deforestation has focused on encouraging policy makers to adopt a landscape perspective. Central in this is the advice to incorporate forest management policy into integrated land use planning including agricultural policy (Scherr, Wallace, Hatcher, & White, 2011). This policy brief reinforces that general message and makes three specific points in relation to it:

1. Communities do not need to be heavily forest-dependent to be effective stewards of forests.
2. Proximity to forest, and crucially, frequency of journeys through forests on non-forest related business may be crucial to effective forest management.
3. People with insecure access to agricultural land present a greater threat to forests than people with secure access to agricultural land.

The brief also reinforces another long-established truth, namely that forest management issues can never be only local or only technical, but must be addressed in their wider political and economic context.

Focali and REDD in Cambodia

Cambodia underwent rapid deforestation during the war years, and this intensified during the 1990s as control of illegal forest revenues became key in securing post-war political power and stability (Le Billon, 2000). Cambodia is a participant in both the Forest Carbon Partnership Facility (completing



Figure 1: Villagers from Prey Chhngai on the three hour journey to their Community Forest.

its R-PIN in March 2009 and with a revised R-PP completed in March 2011) and UN-REDD (becoming one of the 14 UN-REDD pilot countries in March 2011). Although significant REDD financing has yet to be committed to the country, Cambodia is host to a path breaking REDD demonstration activity in Oddar Meanchey province which seeks to link an association of existing community forestry (CF) initiatives to the voluntary carbon market.

Focali interest in northwest Cambodia began with the commissioning of the “Communities and Carbon” report (Bradley, 2009) which documented early lessons learned from the Oddar Meanchey pilot. This brief is based on research which followed up the findings of that initial practitioner report. Four visits by experienced Khmer speaking researchers to two of the villages in the community forestry programme involved overnight stays with community forest members, interviews with members of 36 households and basic census data on 98 adults complemented by semi-structured interviews with state and

civil society actors and commune, district, provincial and national level.

Forest Dependence in Oddar Meanchey

Much policy work relating to local forest management depicts people as forest dependent in the sense of having a long-term stable traditional relationship with forests and a livelihood principally based around sustainable use of non-timber forest products. That such depictions are often inaccurate and risk marginalizing the true interests of communities is well-established in literature on local forestry management in Southeast Asia including Li (2002) in Indonesia, Walker (2004) in Thailand and Biddulph (2010) in Cambodia. The research upon which this brief is based adopted a livelihoods approach in order to guard against such pitfalls.

Oddar Meanchey’s population has trebled during the past decade, largely as a result of people moving in from more densely populated provinces in order to claim agricul-

About this brief

Focali provides knowledge to Swedish ministries, government agencies and other relevant actors for effective forest management to achieve climate and poverty targets. All Focali’s publications can be found at the website www.focali.se

tural land. Proponents of community forestry in Oddar Meanchey acknowledge this, but nevertheless argue that the population has become rapidly “economically dependent upon forest resources” (Poffenberger, 2009, p. 279). The findings of our rapid assessment tended to contradict this: none of the 98 adults surveyed were engaged in forest-related activities as their main activity on the day their household was interviewed (as opposed to 47% engaged in agriculture and 10% in fisheries). Meanwhile, only 8% of households had forest related activities as their main livelihood activity with only 23% reporting any income from NTFPs. Notwithstanding this lack of forest dependence the community forests designated to them are much better protected than those managed directly by the state authorities.

Agriculture and Forest Protection in Two Villages

The two villages selected each had quite different background and circumstances. The first village, Prey Chhngai, was entirely comprised of new migrants and was located several kilometres from the forest it was supposed to protect and manage (see figure 1). Villagers did not routinely travel to or through the community forest. The second village, Prey Chit, was located within the community forest, and therefore all journeys by villagers to their agricultural lands required travel through the forest.

Prey Chhngai Village

Prey Chhngai was established following the

reintegration of areas formerly under Khmer Rouge control at the end of the 1990s. It is one of five villages in the Prey Srong community forest which covers 6 344 hectares. The village is about fourteen kilometres from the boundary of the community forest. While all of the land along the path to the community forest site is officially state owned, villagers explain that it is “owned” by people who have made a claim to it, which is recognized by other villagers.

The difficulty of protecting the forest when villagers do not regularly make journeys to it is reflected in the fact that entering the forest one quickly finds evidence of trees that have been felled and sawn into planks (see figure 2). Nevertheless there is still a notable contrast between the land within the community forest which is still recognisably forest, and the immediately adjacent forest which has been cleared completely (see figure 5). Official recognition of the community forest supplemented by NGO financing of patrolling and boundary marking has, therefore, had some effect.

Prey Chit village

Prey Chit, is one of sixteen villages in the Ratanak Ruka community forest which covers 12 872 hectares. Villagers have riceland in the forest and have to travel through the forest every day in order to reach their agricultural land. When Prey Chit villagers hear or see anything strange in the forests they report this to the community forestry committee, which organizes follow-up patrols (see figure 3). The importance of securing agricultural land for villagers has been well understood by com-



Figure 3: Proud community forestry member in undisturbed forest west of Prey Chit village in the community forest

munity forestry activists in Oddar Meanchey, however it has thus far proven difficult to get anything more than informal and temporary agreements to allow villagers to continue to farm the land they have claimed.

Field research in the forest Prey Chit revealed no evidence of cutting. However, this community forest nearly did not exist at all and is now only 59% of its originally planned area because a business man and senator successfully established a sugar cane plantation which reduced the community forest area by about 10 000 hectares (see figure 4).



Figure 2: Evidence of recent cutting in the Prey Srong community forest protected by Prey Chhngai villagers.

Villagers explained that they are now worried that new concessions might be issued anywhere. Because of this insecurity they now clear land for agriculture in many different places in the forest, far beyond their capacity to farm it. They reason that if a concession takes their land in one place, they will still have other land in other places.

Policy conclusion: Comprehensive Land Use Planning and Tenure Security

The cases of Prey Chhngai and Prey Chit illustrate vividly that first, it is not necessary to be forest dependent to participate effectively in forest protection, and second, that land use planning that recognized villagers dependence on agriculture could strengthen effective local forest management. If villagers were given secure tenure of the land that they clear for agriculture they would no longer have the same incentive to clear so many plots of land inconveniently located away from each other.

Furthermore, if the landscape is planned in such a way that villagers regularly journey through the forest in order to reach their agriculture land, they are better able to contribute towards stewardship of the forest without incurring extra costs beyond their normal work routines.

In short then, community forest management can be strengthened by recognizing the agricultural needs of forest dwelling people, and also by land use planning which situates agricultural land within forests such that villagers can monitor activities in the forest as part of their everyday lives and reduce the depen-

dence on organizing and financing communities to patrol away from the places where they earn their livelihoods.

The political difficulties of technically good policy

At a local level, as the achievements in Oddar Meanchey indicate, interventions in land use planning and tenure security would appear rational and coherent. However, political and economic incentives outside the forest sector and beyond the local scale, create significant obstacles for planned interventions:

1. Forestry authorities may not readily allow agricultural land use. Forestry authorities may lack both the authority and the political will to transfer land from use as forest to agricultural land.
2. Migration benefits stakeholders at every level. Zoning agricultural land and fixing its boundaries, depends implicitly on closing the agricultural frontier. However, migration creates political benefits as it eases social and economic problems in the areas that the migrants leave. It also stimulates rapid growth in the local economy when new migrants informally purchase land and pay various fees to authorities and neighbours in order to secure their presence.
3. Agricultural concessions are a powerful incentive not to commit to land use planning. While local forest conservation and local livelihoods may be legitimate policy goals there are other competing land uses which may make national politicians reluctant to commit to binding land use plans. Senior politicians may want the freedom to respond positively

to investors who come with offers to convert large blocks of forest to large-scale agriculture, as with the senator's sugar cane plantations in Prey Chit.

In Conclusion

Avoiding the trap of assuming that people who live in forests are forest dependent is a key first step to designing appropriate forest management systems. Practitioners and policy-makers have been seduced by the notion of forest dependence but this is counterproductive.

- Firstly, it risks neglecting the livelihood priorities of people who live in forest, and therefore failing to understand that communities' rights to agricultural land may be at least as important as their rights to forest land if they are to have a viable stake in the landscape.
- Secondly, it underplays the other potential motivations that might lead people to protect forest, which may include a desire to earn a fair day's pay, a desire to prevent others from appropriating resources in their local area, a desire to retain a legitimate foothold in a forest landscape in order to be able to conduct agriculture there.

Forest communities that are primarily agricultural can therefore be committed and effective in protecting forest. Policies which acknowledge forest-dwelling communities' agricultural needs and support their rights to agricultural land can enhance local forest management. However, as always, the national institutional and political challenges of achieving even such modest progress should not be underestimated.



Figure 4: The senator's sugar plantation contributed to a 10 000 ha reduction in the planned community forest area.



Figure 5: Two photographs at the same community forestry boundary marker. Left: looking out at the state managed forest. Right: looking in at the community managed forest.

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All photos were taken by the author.

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