

CAMBODIA: FROM INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS TO COMMUNITY COMMONS



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Cambodia Tonle Sap Lake Fishery: Major source of protein

- Tonle Sap teems with fish that nourishes Cambodia
- Cambodia's the world's largest consumers of inland fish.
- Fish is the major source of protein for the country's population.
- It provides seasonal employment to over a million individuals directly and to many more indirectly.





Fisheries Management History (2)

- Fishing lot owners became a rich and privileged group.
- Former military men also got involved. They protected the lots from ingress by the peasant population who settled around the Lake after Pol Pot.
- Conflict over access to fish became endemic. Many deaths were reported among riparian communities.



Community Commons from Above(1)

- In October 2000 Cambodia's Prime Minister made the unexpected announcement cancelling half of all fishing lot licenses belonging to few hundred powerful individuals.
- He turned over the rights of access to thousands of poor rural families to form Community Fisheries (CFi) to harvest the fish for food and livelihood. These rights were guaranteed by a Sub-Decree.





Community Commons from Above(2)

- The Fisheries Administration (FiA) was asked to start a Community Fisheries Development Office to assist the riparian communities
- Civil society organizations and international development partners were encouraged to help.
- Meanwhile, spurred by the new freedom to access the resources, many communities, sometimes with the help of NGOs, initiated the process of creating new CFi.

Community Commons from Above(3)

- In 2012, noting the small but significant nutritional, economic and social benefits which widely accrued to the communities from his 2000 policy pronouncements, the Prime Minister completed his reforms by taking over the remaining half of the fishing lots.





Community Fisheries Today (1)

- Today (2018) there are over 550 CFi in Cambodia.
- The majority are around and within the riparian districts of the Tonle Sap Lake.
- In the country as a whole, the CFi area covers over 850,000 hectares spread across 19 of the 25 provinces of the country.
- There are 188,000 members of which over 61,000 are women.

Community Fisheries Today (2)

- CFi has the exclusive use and management rights within the mapped jurisdiction of the fishery domain for a period of 3 years. This is renewable.
- Fishing in the CFi is strictly meant for subsistence and only very small-scale nets and traps fishing are legally permitted.
- Consequently, the risk of overfishing is minimal in this salubrious and highly productive eco-system.
- All the commoners of the CFi are duty-bound to protect their commons from harm.
- Formal patrolling groups composed of members are active in all CFi.





Community Fisheries Today (3)

- Each CFi is required to prepare their own management plan which includes:
 - a careful inventory of the different eco-systems in the area
 - listing of the fish species diversity and seasonal patterns
 - the total fishing assets available with the members
 - a rough assessment of the sustainable resource yields which can be harvested.



Impact of CFi management (1)

Sustainable use of the resources

- There have also been tangible improvements in the local ecosystem through the collective efforts of the CFi members
 - They protect the flooded forests;
 - They plant mangroves;
 - They stop destructive fishing and other conservation measures.



Impact of CFi management (2)

Empowerment through Economic viability

- An assessment made in 2012 demonstrated that the tenure reforms resulted in a much wider spreading of the benefits:
 - greater quantities of fish consumed by the rural population – particularly the children.
 - use of the small cash incomes from sale of fish contributed to family expenditures such as children's school books; covering minor health costs; minor repair of homes; purchase of rice in the lean season and such like.
- Knowing that all these economic benefits come from resources over which they have collective control is a great source of empowerment for the communities.

Impact of CFi management (3)

Social and Gender Equality

- The governance of their CFi has thrown up new leaders; reinforced the merits of collective action and made a significant dent in the 'trust deficit' which prevailed due to periods of conflict and war.
- Today the benefits are widely distributed across many hundred thousands in the rural hinterlands of Cambodia in provinces where poverty was very high.
- The structured role of women in the CFi committees provided new avenues to gradually bring in more gender equality in the communities.
- Some of the best functioning CFi are marked by the greater participation of women in them.





Challenges

- Illegal fishing and the conflicts with outsiders continue
- There are dispute settlement procedures and graded sanctions in place, but the will of the community often pales before the might of the powerful.
- Not all the CFI in Cambodia function as 'lively commons'.
- About a fifth of them remain 'empty shells' for lack of leadership and timely support from civil society and development partners.



Threats

- The assault on the eco-system undertaken with the patronage of powerful economic interests, often with political backing continues. These include:
 - The conversion of flood plains to agriculture;
 - The damage to the flooded forests;
 - The destruction of mangrove swamps and mudflats;
 - The reduction of river flow due to erection of barriers and construction of dams;
 - The use of illegal fishing gear and destructive fishing methods.



Future

For Community Fisheries to survive:

- There must be genuine commitment to democracy and concern for the livelihoods of the rural poor on the part of the political establishment;
- The Fisheries Administration must have a strong belief in the viability of Community Fisheries
- The civil society organizations should promote self-reliance of the Community Fisheries;
- There must emerge more committed leaders and enthusiastic young membership within the Community Fisheries.
- The rich experience of thousands of commoners collaborating over the last 18 years is a huge corpus of social capital which can be tapped with the right facilitation and support.





Lessons learned

- One of the most important lessons from this case study is that political will, backed by supportive legislation and bottom-up community participation is the bedrock for radical transitions of tenure from individual rights to community rights.
- Democratic participation and the role of women are important ingredients for sustaining community rights.
- The support of civil society is another crucial element.

THANK YOU

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