

# EMERGING FROM THE SHADOWS

Improving governance and livelihoods  
in rural Cambodia – Interactive PDF

By Charlie Pye-Smith

[To the contents page](#)





[Back to contents](#)



**Contents:** This is an interactive PDF version of the *Emerging from the Shadows* report. Click on the chapters headings below.

***Introduction: Rebuilding Cambodia*** **5**

Peace at last	6
Power to the communes	8
Making aid more effective	11
Creating a more civil society	12
Map of Cambodia with case study sites	15

***Case Studies*** **16**

<b>Farming for a better future</b>	<b>17</b>
1. Poverty and progress in Prey Veng	18
2. Transforming lives in rural Pursat	22
3. Making water work for the poor	25

<b>Fishing for life and a living</b>	<b>29</b>
4. Sea change in Koh Kong	30
5. A tale of two fisheries	33
6. Funding the fish farmers	35

<b>Forest futures</b>	<b>39</b>
7. Community forestry in Kampong Speu	40
8. Reviving the lost forests of Siem Reap	43
9. Out of the woods?	45

<b>Making a living from conservation</b>	<b>49</b>
10. Banking on birds	50
11. Swamp survivors	53
12. Nature pays her way	56

<b>The right to a better life</b>	<b>59</b>
13. Improving the welfare of women and children	60
14. Liberating the illiterate	63
15. Standing up for their rights	65

***Acknowledgements*** **68**

Front cover: Carrying rice straw back to the homestead. Top left: Some farmers sell bat guano as fertiliser.

Top right: Ox and cart are the main form of transport in many places.

Bottom left: A merchant buying edible leaves gathered from the wild.

Bottom right: Fibrous plants harvested in the wild are used to make baskets and other goods.



# Introduction: Rebuilding Cambodia

**If you'd come to Phnom Penh around 1990, after the Vietnamese forces had left Cambodia and before the United Nations peacekeepers flooded into the country, you would have found a city of crumbling buildings, open sewers and miserable shops. In those days, there was electricity for just two hours a day and the water taps often ran dry. If you wanted to communicate with the outside world, you had to use the city's sole telex office and your message would be sent via Moscow. If you decided to head for the countryside – a risky business, as Khmer Rouge insurgents still controlled many areas – you needed official permission, and that could take a week. This was the legacy of two decades of conflict and isolation.**

But the past is another country. Come to Phnom Penh today and you'll find a city transformed. There are internet cafes and hole-in-the-wall cash machines, glitzy hotels with spas and swimming pools, French bistros serving wines to suit every palate. In 1990, the broad streets carried little traffic; now, your tuk-tuk must weave its way among a noisy stream of lorries, motorbikes and the gas-guzzlers of the *nouveaux riches*. Almost everywhere you look you will see cranes see-sawing over new construction sites. In short, the city's economy is booming.

However, the world beyond Phnom Penh is a very different place. Over 80% of Cambodia's population lives in the countryside, the vast majority depending for their survival on the natural resources which surround them. Around a third of Cambodians – the figure is much higher in remote areas – live below the poverty line and many are perennially hungry. If you look at the statistics for infant mortality, illiteracy and malnutrition, Cambodia fares worse than most of its East Asian neighbours. Yet change, much of it for the better, has come to the countryside too, even if signs of progress are less obvious than in Phnom Penh.

Take, for example, the experiences of Ham Tun, who left the army, bought a boat and began fishing off the coast of Koh Kong in 1996. Soon afterwards, mechanised trawlers invaded the local fishing grounds and Tun's daily yield of crabmeat fell from 15 to 3 kilograms. He couldn't make enough money to feed his family and he fell into debt. But since then his fortunes have changed. In 2003, Tun and his fellow villagers set up a community fishery and expelled the trawlers. Fish and crab stocks have recovered; Tun's income has risen. The small shack

where he used to live now houses his pigs, and his family has moved into a larger dwelling. "We have enough food and I'm no longer in debt," he says proudly.

The road to recovery for many villagers has, quite literally, involved the building of a road. Before the commune council built a laterite road linking the village of Chambak, in Kampong Cham province, to the outside world, the farmers received rock-bottom prices for their crops. It was hard for them to get to market, and merchants seldom ventured down the rough track to the village. Since the new road was built in 2004, farmers have been able to sell fresh cassava for 750 riel a kilogram, instead of dried cassava for 250 riel. "In the past, I was nearly always in debt and I had trouble feeding my family," explains Kong Chhork, a local farmer. "Now, I'm making a better living and I've been able to buy a tractor and some more land." He is no longer in debt and he can even afford to send his children to school.

Two very different projects – their stories are told in full, alongside many others, in the pages which follow – have helped Tun and Chhork to lift themselves out of abject poverty. Yet there is a common factor which links the two. Both projects have benefited from the local government reform programme, and the aid channelled through the administrative systems established by the reforms.

In 1993, when the first multi-party elections were held, 47% of the population lived below the poverty line; by 2004, the figure had fallen to 35%. Local government reforms played a significant role in reducing poverty and improving people's welfare, and indeed the Royal Government of Cambodia has increasingly come to see the reforms as an essential

Left: Life on the Mekong



Left: Poverty levels are especially high in remote rural areas. A casual labourer and his family in Prey Veng province.

Below: Shelling crabs in Koh Kong. The local government reforms have led to greater community participation in fisheries and forestry management, to the benefit of the rural poor.

Right: Sign of the times in the 'killing fields' at Choeung Ek, near Phnom Penh. Two million people are thought to have died when the Khmer Rouge were in power in the 1970s.

Far right: These farmers in Pursat province have benefited from an irrigation scheme financed through their democratically elected commune council.



prerequisite for poverty reduction. They would never have happened – or, at least, they wouldn't have had such a significant impact – had it not been for the support of foreign donors.

*Emerging from the Shadows* describes how two aid programmes supported by the UK Department for International Development (DFID) have helped to transform a shattered and traumatised country into a viable state. The first, in partnership with United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), has focused on local government reform. This has involved building state institutions where previously they did not exist. These are now delivering essential services to the rural poor. Although this is a long-term process, to be achieved over generations, DFID's development assistance is making a real difference.

The second programme described here is the Natural Resource Management and Livelihoods Programme, jointly established in 2006 by DFID and Danish International Development Agency (Danida), who have since been joined by New Zealand Aid. Together they make up the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility. By far the largest programme of its kind in Cambodia, it focuses on improving livelihoods

through sound natural resource management, and it has taken advantage of the administrative and financial systems established under the local government reform programme.

## PEACE AT LAST

Cambodia's considerable achievements during recent years must be seen in the context of its traumatic past. During the four-year period when the Khmer Rouge controlled the country, from 1975 to 1978, an estimated two million people, around one-fifth of the population, were murdered or died of famine and disease. Pol Pot's regime was ousted in 1979 by the Vietnamese, whose army and advisers retained a tight grip on government policy until they withdrew in 1989. Throughout this period Khmer Rouge insurgents remained active in many parts of the country; and throughout this period Cambodia remained isolated from the outside world, almost entirely dependent on support from Vietnam and the USSR. It was only after the peace agreement of 1991 – real peace wasn't to come till the late 1990s – that the UN recognised the legitimacy of the government. Western donors were then able to enter Cambodia.





Their first task was to help rebuild the country's shattered infrastructure, but it soon became clear that it wasn't just clinics, schools and roads that were needed, but the administrative systems required to support development and 'win the peace.' Local government reforms, initially piloted in a relatively small number of communes, helped to create incentives which encouraged the warring factions to work together at the local level. The reforms eventually led to the creation of directly-elected commune councils. It is almost impossible to overstate their importance. The councils are the lowest level of government, delivering services in rural areas where the extreme poor live, and they have proved resoundingly popular.

The Government is now entering the second phase of reform. This will involve a significant devolution of power from the centre to the provincial and district levels to improve the delivery of services and strengthen the state's regulatory functions, particularly over the use of natural resources. In the words of Sar Kheng, the Deputy Prime Minister, this next phase of devolution promises to be "the most profound and complex constitutional development in Cambodia since the adoption of the Constitution."

By using the systems established under the local government reform programme, donors have been able to invest more money on projects and less on administration. Core funding for the reform programme, initially known as *Seila* – a Khmer word meaning 'cornerstone' – was provided by DFID, UNDP and Sida under a partnership led by UNDP. "Every pound we've spent has mobilized

a further £2 of aid," explains Tom Wingfield of DFID. "Between 2001 and 2006, around £100 million of foreign aid, from ten different donors, was channelled through the systems we helped to establish." In 2008, £40 million was targeted at the rural poor, with just under a third coming from the Government's national budget. The programme is now seen as a flagship for donor cooperation in a country recovering from civil war.

"We had three main objectives when we began the local government reforms," explains Sak Setha, a key reformer and Secretary of State at the Ministry of Interior. "The first was to strengthen democracy and defuse the conflict between political parties. The second was to reduce poverty. And the third was to encourage greater participation in local decision-making."



As far as defusing conflict is concerned, Sak Setha believes much has been achieved. He recalls a visit to a community with a large population of refugees, recently returned from the camps in Thailand, soon after the 1993 elections, and finding it riven with conflict. "One family would belong to one political party and another family to a different party, and if their children wanted to marry, that was out of the question," he explains. "They weren't even supposed to be on speaking terms." Such enmities are largely a thing of the past, and Sak Setha notes with satisfaction that representatives of different political parties now work constructively together in the communes, even if the Cambodia People's Party (CPP) remains the dominant power. Peace has been won, thanks in part to the DFID-supported local government reform programme.

## POWER TO THE COMMUNES

Even in the dry season, the houses along the Mekong River in Kratie province lie half-hidden beneath a dense canopy of green. There is fruit on the trees; livestock in the fields; fish in the river. Travel east, away from the Mekong, and the landscape swiftly changes. By the time you get to Kbal Damrey commune, the woodlands are parched and the farmers' dwellings are smaller and scruffier. You sense that survival here is a struggle. However, it is not as much of a struggle as it used to be, according to Ouch Reth, the chief of the commune council. "Before the first commune elections in 2002," he explains, "life was much more difficult. The council had no budget for development activities, and our role was very limited."



It takes Reth and his fellow councilors – they represent over 4,000 villagers – a good half-hour to describe the improvements which have come in recent years. They have used their annual budgetary allocation from central government, the Commune/Sangkat Fund, to build roads, bridges and wells. The commune also receives an annual allocation from the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility, which it spends on projects that tackle poverty through better resource management. In the past, says Reth, it was very difficult for aid agencies to work in the area, for the simple reason that there was no proper administrative structure, and no way of determining precisely what local people needed. Now the commune has its own development plans, and several aid agencies have come to work in the area.

Is there any danger, we ask, of an élite capturing the benefits which now flow to the commune?



Sre Ton, commune chief before the last election in 2007, shakes his head. "There is a long process of consultations to determine exactly what people want," he explains. "So far we haven't had any conflicts." As if to prove their democratic credentials, the council members point to a padlocked box tacked on to a post outside their office, a modest wooden house on stilts. This is the 'accountability box,' which is opened once a month by an official from the provincial government. Here, local people can post their complaints and suggestions. As it happens, the box has led a fairly idle life: there were three complaints in 2005, one the following year and none in 2007 – but at least the box provides proof that the villagers' opinions count for something.

You don't need to go far from the council's offices to see the benefits of recent development activities. A short distance along the road, Seung Oeun is filling a large bucket of water at a new well, one of 20 built in the commune with money from the Commune/Sangkat Fund. "Before we had this well, I used to have to walk 500 metres to get water, and I would go four or five times a day," explains Oeun. "That would take me at least two hours." Now this task takes her just half an hour each day. The well, she adds, has made a big difference to her life.

Every one of the 1,621 communes in Cambodia will have a story to tell about the changes over the past decade. Some have done better than others, but almost all have benefited, in one way or another, from the local government reforms. Kbal Damrey commune still suffers by comparison with the wealthier communes on the more fertile land along the Mekong River. There are high levels of illiteracy



Right: District investment funds are being used for projects which benefit a number of communes. These vegetable farmers in Hanchey commune, Kratie province, are being encouraged to use natural compost and reduce their dependency on agrochemicals.

Left: Roads are a priority for most rural communes. They link farmers to consumers, encourage economic development and provide access to health care and education.

Far left: Seung Oeun is one of many women in Kbal Damrey commune, Kratie province, to benefit from the construction of new wells, paid for by the Commune/Sangkat Fund.



and many families still live below the poverty line. Yet for all that, life has improved for most people.

The commune councils are explicitly pro-poor by design, and people who were powerless for decades, and ignored by the élite, can now articulate their needs and make choices about their future. Council members are elected through popular majority, and the commune's administrative systems are designed to promote social and geographic equity. Each commune is provided with an annual budget, which it can spend as it sees fit, with the poorest communes receiving the largest allocations. The relatively smooth electoral processes – there have been two local elections since 2002 – suggest that commune councils are now a permanent feature of the political landscape.

DFID and its partners have played a key role in promoting local government reforms and financing the commune councils. While UN technical advisers helped to develop the Commune/Sangkat Fund, DFID provided financial support to the governance systems which have enabled the Fund to operate successfully. DFID and its partners have also provided significant investments through the administrative systems set up by the local government reforms. (See box 1)

One of the most exciting innovations introduced by the local government reforms takes place once a year in every district. The district integration workshops, as they are known, amount to a contest for future projects. Having decided what their priorities are, the communes present a list of projects for which they are seeking funds. The workshops, which are attended by provincial and district government departments, donors, non-

governmental organisations (NGOs) and others, have helped to introduce a transparent and rational system for determining how funds should be spent, and on what. They have also led to a dramatic increase in the number of partnerships between communes, donors and service providers. For example, in 2005, the district integration workshops led to over 36,000 agreements, covering a great array of different projects.

Inevitably, some communes will go away empty-handed, having failed to attract the attention of donors, or at any rate, having failed to get backing for all their projects. But this is not the end of the matter: every commune in the country still has its Commune/Sangkat Fund, worth between US\$12,000 and US\$17,000 a year, and over 700 communes, most outside the fertile rice-growing areas, also receive an allocation of US\$4,000 a year from the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility. The value of the Commune/Sangkat Fund may not sound much, considering the immense needs on the ground, but the national allocation has rapidly risen, from US\$1.5 million in 2001 to US\$23 million in 2008, and it is expected to increase further. The level of funding is determined as a percentage of government spending, which means that as revenues rise, and they went up by 40% in 2007, so does the amount of money being channelled into local development.

A brief glance at a list of the projects paid for by the Commune/Sangkat Fund tells you all you need to know about local priorities: classrooms, classroom furniture, bitumen roads, concrete roads, sewage and drainage, boat landing places, bridges, culverts, earth roads, ring wells; in short, basic

infrastructure. In most provinces, the Commune/Sangkat Fund represents a significant portion of money allocated for local development projects and an external evaluation concluded that it was the best targeted and most efficient use of government funding.

Unlike the Commune/Sangkat Fund, the money provided by the Multi-Donor Livelihood Facility – and by several other aid agencies, most notably the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and UNICEF – is non-discretionary: it is allocated on the understanding that it is spent on specified activities. In the case of the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility, this means activities which help to improve the livelihoods of poor people in rural areas and promote sustainable resource management.

Several of the projects described later have been supported by district and provincial authorities. Provincial investment funds channelled through the systems established by the DFID-supported local government reform programme can be spent on a broad range of activities, from education to culture, rural road building to women's affairs. Provincial investment funds coming directly from the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility have a narrower, environmental livelihoods focus. Regardless of their provenance, these funds must be spent in a

way that benefits the entire province, rather than just part of it. Likewise, the money made available to the districts – district investment funds were introduced in a pilot programme in 2006 – must be used for the benefit of the entire district, rather than just one or two communes.

But what about corruption? Cambodia has a reputation, fully deserved according to Transparency International's latest index of corruption, which ranks the country 162nd out of 180, for being somewhat less than transparent when it comes to the way government and donor funding is used. However, the local government reform programme has shown that it is possible to buck the trend, to channel money from central government to the communes in a manner that precludes corruption. "The programme's success has been based on the systems it put in place, and the way in which funds are transparently managed," says Honn Hean, the provincial monitoring and evaluation adviser in Prey Veng province. "It's very difficult to get away with corrupt behaviour." This helps to explain why donors such as the World Bank and IFAD have been prepared to channel their money through the new administrative systems. Put simply, they trust them. Much of this trust derives from the professionalism of the network of Cambodian advisers who are contracted by the UN to support the reforms.

## Box 1: DFID support for local government reform

DFID support for local government reform in Cambodia began in 2001 when, together with UNDP and Sida, it funded the *Seila* programme under the Partnership for Local Governance. Between 2001 and 2006, DFID contributed a total of £16.9 million. In the same period, around £100 million of foreign aid from ten different donors and funds from Cambodia's national budget were channelled through the systems supported by DFID. Support for *Seila*'s successor, the National Committee for the Management of Decentralisation and Deconcentration Reform (NCDD), was approved in 2007. DFID will contribute £9.5 million over three years under the Project to Support Democratic Development through Decentralisation and Deconcentration.

A recent impact study covering the period 2003-07 shows that each of Cambodia's 14 million inhabitants has benefited, on average, from about 1.5 project outputs. With DFID support: 11 million Cambodians benefited from improved health education; 8 million benefited from better management of natural resources; 4.9 million from clean domestic water supply; 5 million from better irrigation; 3 million from improved agricultural productivity; 3 million from gender training; and 1.9 million from improved sanitation.





## MAKING AID MORE EFFECTIVE

Talk to anyone who worked for one of the many aid agencies that poured into Cambodia in the 1990s, and they'll paint a picture of great industry on the one hand, and chaos on the other. Local governments in rural areas had little money and few responsibilities, and the aid agencies were forced to set up their own systems of disbursement and administration. Some tried to work together, but many worked on their own, building clinics here, setting up schools there – providing the whole gamut of things needed after decades of conflict. The lack of co-ordination helped to inspire the pilot programmes for local government reform, one of whose main aims was to encourage donors to work together and align their activities more closely with the host government's priorities.

Harmonisation and alignment, as it is known, is now a major preoccupation for donors like DFID. Unfortunately, there are other donors who pay it little more than lip service. Although 14 donors have taken advantage, to varying degrees, of the administrative systems established by the local government reform programme, others have continued to operate on their own, and on their own terms. All too often, their aid is used to finance separate projects which bypass the Government's administrative systems. Meanwhile, key civil servants are obliged to spend much of their days

meeting a succession of different donors, while the normal business of government must take place in the evening. All of this has a malign influence on the way government works.

"The activities of these donors frequently undermine the whole process of state-building," explains DFID's Tom Wingfield. "They tend to empower small numbers of individuals within the line departments, fail to engage legitimate elected representatives and reinforce the patronage system. Whatever donors do, they shouldn't undermine the fledgling systems of accountability which have been so hard to establish." Yet some donors are doing precisely that.

Two donors which are not are DFID and Danida. The original idea of establishing a programme combining the resources and expertise of the two agencies came from Chris Price of DFID and Mogens Laumand Christensen, who was the head of Danida's Cambodia office when its five-year Natural Resource and Environment Programme came to an end in 2006. Both realised that there could be significant advantages in working together on future natural resource projects and they began to talk about creating a new partnership.

DFID was keen to channel its aid more effectively to Cambodia, as was Danida. Christensen also realised it was time Danida began using the structures created by the local government reforms. Price and

Right: The thirst for knowledge. Outdoor lessons in a village in Kampong Cham province.

Left: Artificial reefs have helped to increase fish yields in the coastal waters of Koh Kong province.



Christensen developed the outline of a joint project which would do three things: channel money to communes, districts and provinces for projects that improve local livelihoods through sustainable resource management; support and strengthen civil society groups; and provide support to three government departments – land, forestry and fisheries – to improve their effectiveness and help them develop coherent policies. (See box 2)

According to Tom Barthel Hansen, Danida's Head of Representation, there are clear advantages to donors teaming up together like this. "The main thing is that it makes aid delivery more effective," he explains. "It makes life a lot easier for government departments, because they only have to deal with one of us, and for the donors, because it reduces administrative costs. DFID also brings to the table experience which complements ours."

Claire Moran, DFID's Country Director when the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility was launched, points to another clear advantage of harmonising aid programmes. "We have become much bigger players in the natural-resource sector by working together, and we have a greater influence on policy," she says. If all goes to plan, DFID hopes to be working entirely through partnership arrangements like this by 2011.

## CREATING A MORE CIVIL SOCIETY

The Irish non-governmental organisation, Concern, was one of the first to work with Cambodians after the Vietnamese invasion of 1979. Unable to operate within the country, it provided emergency relief to tens of thousands of Cambodians who fled across the border into Thailand. When the refugees began to return in the early 1990s, Concern followed.

If you'd visited one of its offices, either in Phnom Penh or the regions, you'd have been struck by the large expatriate presence.

"It was inevitable," explains Mark Munoz, the Assistant Country Director, "because so much local expertise had been wiped out by the Khmer Rouge during the civil war."

The well educated, those who spoke French, even people who wore glasses – all were seen as enemies of the Khmer Rouge, and most of those who weren't executed fled the country. In other words, Cambodia lost a whole generation of precisely the sort of people who possess the skills needed to run NGOs and support a vibrant civil society.

It is a sign of the changing times that Concern is now much less dependent on expatriate staff. Take, for example, its office in Pursat. In 2000, there were

### Box 2: A new way of doing things

Improving co-ordination between donors, and between donors and the government departments responsible for managing natural resources – in particular, fisheries, forestry and land – has been a key objective of the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility. Besides channeling US\$20 million directly to the communes, districts and provinces, the Facility has also allocated around US\$15 million to sector and policy development. This seeks to improve administrative systems, encourage better resource management and reward staff for their dynamism and commitment.

"When we began working in the fisheries and forestry sectors in 2002, the donors were all operating independently of one another," recalls Chris Price, "and this meant that the government departments were obliged to deal with each donor separately." It also meant that the donors, rather than the Government, were dictating policy.

Since the Facility began working with the departments responsible for fisheries and

forestry, the changes have been plain to see. The Fisheries Administration, for example, has established a robust accounting system which donors can trust. It has also begun to provide clear statements, on a yearly basis, of its plans for the future. Potential donors can see what the Fisheries Administration plans to do and pick the projects which attract them most.

"We had been discussing the changes we needed to make for some years," says Thor Sensereyath, the Director of the planning and accounting division, "but the technical and financial support from the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility helped push the process of reform along more swiftly." The reforms within the Fisheries Administration have helped to attract more donor funding and encouraged better co-ordination between donors. "What we and some other donors are now doing is providing funds that support the Fisheries Administration's plans – rather than cooking up our own projects," says Price.



Right: Tell us what you think. The 'accountability box' outside the offices of Kbal Damrey commune, Kratie province.

Below: Better fisheries management means better catches.



around 100 staff here, many of them from abroad. Today, there are just five staff, including a driver. "In 2000, we were doing everything ourselves," explains Sam Savoun. "However, we've helped to build the capacity of seven local NGOs and they are now very capable of working on their own."

Some areas in Cambodia remain poorly served by competent NGOs and community-based organisations, but the picture is swiftly changing over much of the country. "Not long ago, most local NGOs didn't even know what their roles were, or understand the role of government," explains Kim Miratori, Concern's regional facilitator for Kampong Cham and Pursat. "Most didn't have a vision or a proper financial policy. They'd simply become NGOs by getting registered." Now, he says, the local NGOs which Concern works with have proper financial systems and they have greatly improved their ability to work with community groups. In the past, many didn't even know who the commune council chiefs were; now they are working with local government to improve the lives of the poor.

The vast majority of people in Cambodia are dependent on natural resources for their survival. They need land on which to grow their food and rear livestock. They need forests to provide firewood, timber and a range of non-timber forest products (NTFPs), such as mushrooms, game and fruit, to supplement their diet. Many communities depend on fisheries, both for their livelihoods and sustenance. Vital though these resources are to

most rural communities, they are frequently coveted by private interests. Indeed, land-grabbing, as it is known, is a major problem in many areas, and civil society groups have a key role to play in ensuring that communities retain their rights of access to the natural resources on which they depend.

The Multi-Donor Livelihood Facility is currently working with six NGOs – the Asia Foundation, Concern, the Catholic Relief Service, Ockenden, Oxfam UK and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) – to improve the capacity of local NGOs and help local communities to explore new markets, diversify their livelihoods and improve their skills and bargaining power. The Facility wants at least 80% of its funds – US\$13 million over four years – to go to the local NGOs and the community groups.

Getting local community-based organisations to assert themselves, and make their needs known, is far from easy. "Cambodia is not like Latin America," explains Tom Evans of WCS. "There is a lot of deference to authority, and people in the villages are wary about raising their voices, and making their feelings known, even to the commune councils which they've elected." However, this is gradually changing, and Evans has noted a growing confidence among the community-based organisations in the villages where WCS and its local partners are working.

According to Veronique Salze-Lozac'h of the Asia Foundation, which is acting as the national facilitator on behalf of the Multi-Donor Livelihoods



Left: An eye to the future. Basket weavers in Taing Sya commune, Kampong Speu province.

Facility, the private and public sectors are now beginning to work more closely together. Old antipathies have been shed, and NGOs and community organisations now realise that improving the business environment can play a major role in reducing rural poverty. New networks have also sprung up, not just between local NGOs and community-based organisations, but between communities pursuing similar goals, such as those adding value by processing rattan into handicrafts.

Although Mark Munoz is optimistic about this particular programme, he is worried about the growing disparity between rich and poor in Cambodia. “Every year, the gross national product continues to rise, but many of the poor stay poor, and the wealth simply isn’t reaching them. Organisations like Concern have to justify why we are still here, and one of the things we can say is that we’re helping our local partners to advocate for a fairer distribution of resources, and we’re encouraging them to keep challenging the Government to do more for the poor.” The support of the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility is helping Concern to do precisely that.

### Box 3: DFID, Danida and the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility

The Natural Resource Management and Livelihoods Programme is managed by the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility, established by Danida and DFID in 2006. The programme, which is hosted by Danida, will run for four years. New Zealand Aid has subsequently contributed to the Facility. Its aim is to reduce poverty and improve natural resource management in 14 provinces, focusing on areas where there is less scope for intensive rice production and where the vast majority of people depend on natural resources for their survival. In many of these areas, local livelihoods are threatened by the degradation of natural resources and insecure land tenure. Around 20% of Cambodia’s population will benefit from the programme.

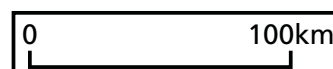
There are three components. The first provides funds to improve livelihoods through better resource management to communes, districts and provinces. This includes an annual grant of over £2,400 to 707 communes. The second component supports and strengthens civil society groups, a vital part of building a post-conflict state. And the third is encouraging greater administrative efficiency and coherent policy development in three of the government institutions – fisheries, forestry and land – with a major role in natural resources management. The total budget is US\$65 million, of which DFID is providing around 38%.





# MAP OF CAMBODIA



The numbered symbols indicate the location of the 15 case studies described in *Emerging from the Shadows*.



-  Case study sites
-  Location of Phnom Penh





# FARMING FOR A BETTER FUTURE



**Cambodia's population is now approaching 14 million, with an annual growth rate of 1.8%. This means that the number of people requiring food and other resources increases by some 250,000 each year.**

The rural sector must absorb a considerable proportion of this increase, largely through raising agricultural productivity. At present, average rice yields in Cambodia are 2.6 tonnes per hectare – a considerable improvement on 1.8 tonnes, the average yield ten years ago, but far below the 3–5 tonnes achieved in neighbouring countries. Low rice yields mean a significant number of rural families are malnourished and poor.

The three stories which follow are very different in nature, but the projects they describe are all helping to improve the lives of the rural poor. In two of Cambodia's most densely populated provinces – Prey Veng and Svay Rieng – 1,008 farmers' groups have been established by the Rural Poverty Reduction Project. Rice yields have more than doubled in many areas. Families have been encouraged to grow a range of other crops and improve their livestock husbandry. All of this has helped to increase farm incomes. A very different project, involving a small loans scheme in Pursat, has meant that families who have been perennially hungry now have sufficient food on the table.

In many parts of the Cambodia, crop yields are constrained by a lack of water, and two of the stories told here involve the rehabilitation of old irrigation schemes. The results are impressive: in one village in Prey Veng, some families are now growing three crops of rice a year instead of one, and the extra food and income are being translated into a better diet, better health care and better education. One of the things you will notice is that many of the beneficiaries in these stories are women. This is particularly important, not least because women now head a quarter of all households in Cambodia, having been either widowed or abandoned.

Left: Bringing home the bacon. Better roads mean better access to markets.



Above: Livelihoods improvement groups have helped farmers like So Tep to grow better crops and rear healthier livestock.

Left: Training provided by the Rural Poverty Reduction Project has encouraged thousands of families to grow vegetables. Chhim Vannet in her garden in Prey Char village.

**Sitting in the shade of a large tree at the heart of his dusty village – the rainy season has yet to begin – So Tep reflects on how life has changed during recent times.**

“The roads are better than they used to be, and there have been other improvements too,” he says. “But for all of us here, the biggest changes have come during the last year.” By “us,” he means the families in Prey Char village who are members of the livelihoods improvement group which was established with support from the Rural

Poverty Reduction Project, a partnership between the Government and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD).

The villagers were introduced to the project by a commune extension worker. “I came here in early 2007 to explain what sort of support we could



provide and how a livelihoods improvement group could be organised,” recalls Se Saph. “The villagers reacted very enthusiastically.” A survey identified 25 households, out of 100, who were poor or extremely poor and they were invited to form a new group. Although all the families owned land, none had the capital to invest in improvements. They used traditional low-yielding varieties of rice and had little knowledge about livestock or horticulture. The livelihoods improvement group set about changing all this.

In the past, many families had experienced severe food shortages during the last two months of the rice-growing season, around October and November. The introduction of a new variety of rice, which is harvested after four rather than six months, meant that in 2007 members of the livelihoods group had sufficient food – many for the first time – during the ‘hungry months.’ The new varieties of seed also increased yields significantly. “Before I joined the group,” explains one young mother, Tam Riem, “I used to harvest about one tonne of rice from my hectare of paddy. Last year I got almost two tonnes.” It wasn’t just the new seeds that made a difference, she explains, but inputs of fertiliser and compost. Each member of the group received two bags of fertiliser and training on how to make and use organic compost.

Members of the group were also encouraged to adopt modern techniques of poultry production.

In the past, they had allowed their chickens to run free and they lost many to disease.

The project provided each family with a chicken house, three chickens, access to a

vaccination programme, and training on how to isolate and treat sick chickens. Just 18 months later, many had 50 or more chickens and a new source of income. The project also supplied vegetable seeds, watering cans and horticultural training. Before the group was established, the only vegetables they grew were morning glory and cabbage. Now they are growing many other vegetables, as well as fruit trees.

### Farming for the future

During a seven-year period, the Rural Poverty Reduction Project seeks to raise the living standards of approximately 120,600 households in Prey Veng and Svey Rieng provinces. The project recognises that tackling poverty – over 20% of the people in

rural Cambodia live below the ‘poverty food line’ – requires a multi-pronged approach. It involves improving people’s welfare, which is precisely what the livelihood improvement groups have done in Prey Char and in over 80 other villages in Prey Veng province. It involves establishing sustainable systems of agriculture, where inputs such as artificial fertiliser are judiciously used and where the least possible damage is done to the environment. It involves rehabilitating infrastructure, such as defunct canals, and building roads so that farmers can get their goods to market. Above all, it means providing farmers with the know-how and the technologies to prosper once the project has come to an end.

You could stop at any number of places – by the end of 2006, over 1,000 farmers’ groups of one sort or another had been established – and meet men and women who will tell you that they are now confident enough to manage on their own, having benefited from support and training during the past few years. Take, for example, the community vegetable group in Khveit village, Baphnom district.

The village looks much like many of the others sprinkled across the flat plains. The stilted wooden houses of the better-off have corrugated iron roofs; those of the poor are thatched. Corpulent pigs wallow at the bottom of deep pools, almost empty now and pea-green with algae, but when the rains

come they will be filled to the brim with water and fish. The paddies outside the village are parched dry, last year’s stubble crackling under foot, but there is one

patch of land – a little over a hectare in size – that is green and productive, even though this is the dry season.

In 2006, Sok Sokha, a commune extension worker from the provincial department of agriculture, came to the village. “At the time, they were hardly growing any vegetables, except on a few small plots around their houses,” he explains. “There was a shortage, but there was no good reason why they couldn’t grow them themselves.” One person who took an immediate interest was Hi Sot, now the elected chief of the community vegetable group. He went round every house in the village and 18 families immediately expressed an interest in joining. The vegetable gardens – each family has its

*“...if we had to go it totally alone, without any help or advice from outside, I’m confident that we’d be absolutely fine.”*



Left: Dy Vanny now has a surplus of vegetables, which she sells on the roadside.

Right (in the box): The restoration of an old canal in Krang Svay commune has meant that many farmers are getting higher crop yields. Kao Chhay with his jackfruit.

own plot – were created on old rice paddy, and the Rural Poverty Reduction Project provided training, seeds and watering equipment.

“We’re now eating many more vegetables than we used to,” says Dy Vanny, who’s in the middle of harvesting her beans, “and I think the improvements in our diet are helping to keep the children healthier.” Just as importantly, she says, most members of the group have a surplus, which they sell along the roadside or in nearby markets, and this has increased their incomes. Instead of using artificial fertilisers and pesticides, they are using organic compost. When there are problems with insects, they spray with a natural pesticide,

such as one made out of the leaves of a tree. As well as the four vegetables they began with – string bean, aubergine, cucumber and cabbage – they are growing tomatoes, maize, bitter gourd, melon and various herbs.

But what would happen if Sok Sokha, who remains a regular visitor, no longer came to provide advice and support? “I think we’ve come a long way since 2006,” says Hi Sot after some reflection, “and if we had to go it totally alone, without any help or advice from outside, I’m confident that we’d be absolutely fine.”

Sok Sokha takes this as a compliment, which indeed it is. In its many manifestations, the Rural



Poverty Reduction Project aims – to use the jargon – to build capacity; in other words, to provide people with the skills and knowledge they need to manage by themselves. This applies not just to growing crops, but to managing savings. For example, members of the livelihoods improvement groups have been encouraged to set up ‘revolving funds.’ The idea is that these will provide loans at a modest interest rate of 2% a month – compared to the 20% charged by local moneylenders. Once the groups have saved a certain amount of money – their own money – and proved themselves competent financial managers, the Rural Poverty Reduction Project contributes a one-off payment. Incentives such as these are encouraging people to stand on their own feet.

**Money matters:** The total cost of the Rural Poverty Reduction Project is US\$19.62 million over seven years. IFAD is providing US\$15.49 million, with the rest coming from the World Food Programme and the Partnership for Local Governance and its successor, the Project to Support Democratic Development through Decentralization and Deconcentration (PSDD), funded by DFID, Sida and UNDP. The Commune Investment Development Programme, funded by IFAD, and the Commune Fund paid for the restoration of the canal in Krang Svay commune. By the end of 2006, the Commune Infrastructure Development Fund had helped to finance and restore 63 irrigation schemes, covering 22,300 hectares, and 643 kilometres of rural roads in Prey Veng and Svay Rieng in Krang Svay commune.

## Water is life

In 2005, Krang Svay commune council drew up a list of projects, based on discussions held with villagers, to take to the district integration workshop, with the intention of seeking funds. High on the list was a plan to restore and enlarge an old canal, built during the Pol Pot era, which had fallen into disrepair. This would deliver water to the heart of the commune, where farmers were suffering from shortages.

“We didn’t find any donors who wanted to support the project at the district integration workshop,” explains Ong Phat, chief of the commune council, “but it was a high priority for us, so we went ahead with it ourselves.” Restoration work on the canal began in 2006; by 2008, around 160 families were benefiting from a year-round supply of irrigation water.

In the past, Kao Ly and her husband used to get just one crop of rice a year on their 1.5-hectare plot of land, not enough to meet the needs of their large family. They grew other things as well, such as cassava and sugar cane, but they were constrained by a lack of water. Since the canal has been enlarged they have been able to grow three crops of rice a year. “We no longer have to buy rice,” says Ly, “and we’re now getting a surplus of vegetables to sell in the market.” The extra income has made a big difference to their lives, she says. They have enough money to send all their children to school; they buy better clothes; and they can pay for medical treatment, and medicines, when anyone in the family falls sick.



Ly is fortunate in that her six children constitute a free labour force. One of her neighbours, Lay Som Phorn – he worked on the construction of the Pol Pot canal as a youth – does most of the work on his small plot of land himself, as his children have left home. Unlike Ly, he is still getting just one crop of rice a year, but even so, better irrigation has been a boon. “My yields have gone up from around 1.5–2 tonnes a hectare to 2.5 tonnes,” he explains, “and I’ve got water all year round for the fruit trees around my house.”

## 2. TRANSFORMING LIVES IN RURAL PURSAT



Left: Thanks to a small loans scheme, Seing Samet has been able to buy hens, ducks and a pig.

Right: Sin Chantho has used the loan scheme to expand his bicycle repair business.

**Anyone who ventured into the flat countryside south of Krakor, in Pursat province, during the years before the 1991 peace settlement did so with trepidation. “With all the minefields, we were taking a risk coming here, but we had to grow food to survive,” recalls Duk Sary.**

During the daytime, Sary and many other farmers would leave their dwellings several miles away, on the main road linking Pursat and Phnom Penh, to work in the rice paddies, but they would be gone before nightfall, when government forces and the Khmer Rouge fought for control of the countryside.

When the Khmer Rouge finally laid down their arms, some 90 families abandoned their roadside homes and founded the village of Kralanh. Since

the first commune council elections in 2002, the village has gradually expanded. There are signs of development, if not exactly prosperity: the Commune/Sangkat Fund helped to pay for the building of a laterite road and a school, and a temple is currently under construction. Yet none of this can mask the fact that many families are still trapped in poverty. But times are changing and the welfare of even the poorest has begun to improve,



thanks largely to a livelihoods programme initiated by a local NGO, the Support Association for Rural Farmers (SARF), and funded by the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility.

“When SARF first came to the village, I was very poor, and so were most of my neighbours,” recalls Seing Samet. Her abusive husband had left some years before and she and her four children lived in a small, isolated shack with a leaking thatch roof, little in the way of land and no livestock. Staff from SARF suggested that if the villagers organised themselves into groups, they might be able to help them. Being well respected locally, Samet was chosen as leader of the Svey Chum livelihoods group, one of five in the village.

By 2005, SARF had raised sufficient money to provide grants to livelihoods groups in two districts in Pursat province. Samet was able to borrow 50,000 riel (US\$12.50) and she bought five hens. These produced some 50 chicks, and she was able to sell them in a nearby market for 96,000 riel (US\$24). “This was the first time I’d made money like this,” she says, smiling at the memory. “I was able to buy some rice and schoolbooks for the children.” Other members of her livelihoods group

did much the same, and all paid back their loans within a six-month period.

Gradually, Samet’s flock of chickens grew in size, and so did her income. In 2007, Samet took out another loan. She bought a piglet, some pig feed and ten egg-laying ducks. By early 2008, the pig was fattening up nicely and there was a cheeriness about Samet, and sufficient material evidence – not just in terms of livestock, but concrete piles

and new thatching, bought to renovate her home – to show that her family’s welfare had significantly improved.

Wander around Kralanh village and you’ll hear a similar story from many others, including those who have recently joined a livelihoods group. Take, for example, Sin Chantho. “Before I joined the group, I was always worrying about how I would feed the family, and my children often went so hungry that the elder one had to skip school,” he recalls. The rice he grew on his small plot of land could only feed his family – he has a wife and two small children – for a month or so each year, and the income he made from repairing bicycles was meagre.

*“With all the minefields, we were taking a risk coming here, but we had to grow food to survive”*





Left: Learning new skills such as rattan weaving can significantly increase rural incomes. This has enabled Krum Thy and Krum Thom to contribute towards the building of a new family home.

In June 2007, he borrowed 100,000 riel (US\$25) from the Samaki livelihoods group and bought chickens, vegetable seeds, a hoe and a watering can. Now, he has a beautifully tended and productive vegetable garden. A little later, he borrowed 300,000 riel (US\$75) to buy modern equipment for his bicycle repair business. "For the first time ever I have a regular income," he says. "We have enough rice and we can even afford to eat fish every week." His elder child is no longer hungry and attends school regularly. In the past, when the children were sick, Chantho and his wife had to rely on medicinal herbs they gathered from the wild. "Now," says Chantho proudly, "we can afford to buy modern medicines."

### Learning new skills

Since 2005, almost 1,600 families in Pursat province have benefited from the grants provided by SARF. They have not only helped to improve family welfare, they have enabled impoverished and mostly illiterate villagers to acquire new skills. Take, for example, the rattan weaving groups which have been established in a cluster of villages to the north-west of Krakor, close to Tonle Sap Lake.

There has been a long tradition of women harvesting rattan in this area. Till recently, the rewards were poor as the women sold raw rattan directly to middlemen. In 2004, SARF suggested that the villagers would do much better if they processed the rattan themselves. SARF paid for training sessions, and provided basic equipment and small loans to help families set up their own businesses. At first, the poorest families were

targeted. In Doung Chour, training was provided to 20 families; in nearby Put Tream, to 22. It wasn't long before others saw what a difference this was making to those who learned to weave. The groups expanded rapidly. SARF has also been working with the villagers to improve their planting and harvesting techniques.

"We are so much better off now than we used to be," explains Hem Suthy, a young woman who acts as team leader of the rattan weaving group in Put Tream. "With the money we've made, we've been able to buy bicycles, corrugated iron for our roofs and even cattle. In the past, few people could afford these things." In fact, most couldn't even afford to buy torches and batteries. Now they can and this means they can hunt for frogs – an important source of protein – in their rice paddies and along the river banks at night.

If you visit these villages now, you will be struck by the confidence of many of the women. Their livelihoods have improved, and so has their self-esteem. They are particularly proud of the fact that NGOs have hired some of the women to share their new-found skills with villagers in other parts of Cambodia.

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**Money matters:** The financial support for the livelihoods and weaving groups has come through Concern, one of five international organisations which have received funding from the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility's civil society and pro-poor markets component.



Right: Proeung Yan says that life in Kok Trabaek village is much better than it used to be. The villagers now have clean water and can get their goods to markets relatively easily.



**People who live in the more remote parts of Angkor Chum district, in Siem Reap province, can tell you two contrasting stories. On one hand, many will say that life has improved over the past decade.**

“The water used to be very dirty,” explains Proeung Yan, a woman from Kok Trabaek village, “but now that we’ve got pump wells, the water is clean. There’s less disease in the village, the children are healthier, and it’s easier for us to get our produce to the markets.” Not long ago, the roads were so

poor that when villagers visited the district capital they would stay overnight, as it was hard to make it there and back in a day. Now, it’s just a matter of an hour or so by motorbike.

But there’s another equally compelling story you’ll be told in Kok Trabaek. This one is about

poverty, whose precise nature was revealed by the Participatory Land Use Planning (PLUP) process which began in 2005: 13 families in the village are classified as 'better off'; 65 families as 'medium'; 47 families as 'poor'; and 31 families as 'extremely poor.' The better off live in a tiled house, have 2 to 3 hectares of rice fields, a motorbike, a cassette player, up to three pairs of draught animals and a black-and-white television. The extremely poor live in a small hut and have less than a third of a hectare of land; the poor have rather more land, and possibly a bicycle and a cow. The extremely poor lack sufficient food throughout the year; the poor also suffer shortages for much of the time.

One of the reasons why poverty remains so widespread – in Kok Trabaek, 50% of families are poor or extremely poor – is because rice yields in the district are so low. "Until recently," explains Chhim Ton, the District Governor, "most farmers were getting just one crop of traditional rice a year, yielding around 600 kilograms a hectare." This is far below the national average of 2.6 tonnes a hectare, which in turn is well below average yields in neighbouring countries. One of the key limiting factors is a lack of water. That is why the district government has devoted a large portion of its district investment fund to irrigation schemes.

### Identifying needs

Although the PLUP process in Cambodia proved cumbersome and time-consuming – the Government has replaced it with a process which focuses on communes, rather than individual villagers – it had many virtues. Among other things, says Khong Nhol, PLUP facilitator for

Angkor Chum, it helped to identify local needs in considerable detail. "It wasn't a question of the PLUP team deciding what needed to be done," he says, "but of us identifying possible options so that the villagers could choose their priorities for natural resource management." By the end of the process in Kok Trabaek, the villagers had identified 12 projects to improve their livelihoods and the environment, seven of which had received funding by 2008.

The most ambitious project involves the rehabilitation of Tram Chhneang dam, an old irrigation scheme that had fallen into disrepair. Once the construction work is completed, the dam will provide irrigation water for some 350 hectares of land in two communes. Approximately 1,100 families will benefit directly. "I've got one hectare of land and I get about one tonne of rice a year from it at present," explains Pock Pol. "When the irrigation scheme is finished, I'll be able to grow two crops and double my rice yield." The irrigation water will also be used for fruit trees and other crops in and around the villages.

Most of the funds are being spent on building the dam wall and a 6-kilometre canal, but the success of the new irrigation scheme will depend, to a considerable degree, on the survival of an area of forest around the dam. "Without this forest, the spring which feeds the dam could easily dry up," explains the chief of the local forest division. To ensure that it survives, he and his staff are helping the villagers to set up a community forest – this being another of the priorities identified during the participatory planning process.



Left: A familiar sight in many parts of Cambodia: the illegal burning and clearance of forests.

Right: The success of the new canal scheme will depend on the health of these forest springs. To protect them, the villagers have set up a community forest.



### A new role for district government?

Until recently, district governments have been relatively powerless. The line agencies – such as those responsible for agriculture, fisheries and land – are represented at the district level, but their budgets cover little more than the meagre salaries of their staff, and they have little money available for investment. Besides, their activities are determined by the central planning process, not by the district governments. In contrast, communes have received an annual budget – the Commune/Sangkat Fund – from central government since 2002, and they have been able to use this to respond to local demands and foster democracy. In many areas, they have also received funding for natural resource management projects from Danida and, more recently, the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility.

Since 2007, both the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility and the DFID-supported local government reform programme have provided some districts with a new source of funding, with the freedom to

choose how they spend the money. In 2007, around two-thirds of the district investment fund in Angkor Chum district was spent on the irrigation project described above and there was a further allocation in 2008.

Were it not for the district investment fund, says the District Governor, the irrigation project might never have got off the ground. It would certainly have been too expensive for the consideration of individual communes. “The other advantage of the district investment funds,” explains Chhim Ton, “is that they can be used for projects which benefit two or more communes, but not the whole province.” In short, the funds are helping to address issues that neither the communes nor the provinces addressed in the past.

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**Money matters:** The PLUP process was funded by Danida and the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility. The rehabilitation of Tram Chhneang dam has been largely financed by the district investment fund. Further financial support had been pledged by an international NGO, the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA).









# FISHING FOR LIFE AND A LIVING



**It is impossible to overstate the importance of fisheries in Cambodia. The Mekong River and Tonle Sap Lake, whose size increases threefold during the rainy season, constitute the fourth largest freshwater fishery in the world, and boast over 500 species. The coastal zone is also rich in fish.**

Some 2 million people are employed in the fisheries sector, and many are among the poorest in the country. Post-harvesting activities, such as processing fish into paste, are particularly important for women. Fish consumption in Cambodia is far above the global average, providing 75% of the country's animal protein, and even more in some rural areas.

In many parts of the country, fish stocks have been declining. Rapid population growth, illegal fishing techniques, conflicts between communities and commercial companies, pollution, the failure to regulate fishing activities – all have taken their toll. Although the fisheries reforms of 2000, which released 56% of commercial fishing lots for the use of communities, have brought many benefits, they also led to a 'free for all' and a decline in fish stocks in some areas.

Two of the three stories which follow provide an insight into how local communities are seeking to improve the sustainability of their local fishing grounds by establishing community fisheries. There are now over 500 in Cambodia, and although the bureaucratic hurdles to establishing them are considerable, they are already yielding real benefits. The other story focuses on aquaculture. Relatively modest injections of cash, combined with good technical advice, have enabled small farmers to increase their incomes, and improve their diets, by establishing fishponds.

Left: Cambodia's rivers and lakes provide food and a living for millions of people.



Left: A community fishery is protecting the livelihoods of fishermen like Ham Tun, seen here shelling crabs with his wife and a neighbour.

Below: A fish caught in one of Ham Tun's crab traps.

**If, by some misfortune, you are ever shipwrecked off the coast of Koh Kong province and washed up in the fishing village of Thmey, you might find yourself clinging to the barnacle-encrusted poles which support Ham Tun's rickety wooden house.**

Catch your breath, wade through the flotsam to dry land, then double back along a precarious wooden gangway, past five young pigs in a wooden sty, suspended, like everything else, above the intertidal mudflats, and you will arrive at Tun's two-room dwelling.

This morning he is shelling crabs with his wife and one of his neighbours. A baby scrabbles around on the floor, periodically toying with bits of crab shell. Although a blue tarpaulin has been hung across the

wide doorway, shading us from the sun, it is still ferociously hot. Yet Tun and his family are happy at their work. When you hear their story you will understand why: they are much better off now than they were a few years ago.

The story which Tun tells could be told by most fishing families living along the crowded shoreline. When Tun, a young soldier, first came to settle in the village in the early 1990s there were few people here. Gradually, more and more people came to





Left: Un Yan, a small trader in Thmey village, has benefited from the saving groups established by the community fishery. Members can take out low-interest loans.

live in Thmey, attracted by the rich fishing grounds. In 1996, Tun gave up soldiering, bought a boat and began fishing. “In those days, there was an abundance of crabs and shrimps,” he recalls. He used to catch around 35 kilograms of big crabs a day, and these would yield 15 kilograms of crabmeat. He was making a living – but only just, as the middlemen who came to buy crabmeat drove a hard bargain.

But worse was to come. During the late 1990s, trawlers with mechanised gear began to invade the coastal waters and they had a devastating impact on fish, shrimp and crab stocks. Tun switched from using nets to crab traps, but to little effect. By 2000, he was lucky if he got 3 kilograms of crabmeat a day, even though he was using over 100 traps. Many others were catching even less. Families abandoned their homes and migrated elsewhere in search of work.

“I was earning so little that we fell into serious difficulty,” recalls Tun. He was forced to borrow from the local moneylenders just to buy enough rice to feed his family. There was no money to buy clothes for the children, nor snacks for them to take to school. Had it not been for the community

fishery, he says, he would probably have been forced to leave the village to chance his luck elsewhere.

### Mobilising the community

Thmey village, like many others along the coast of Koh Kong, has benefited from technical and financial help provided by the Canadian-based International Development Research Centre (IDRC). In 2002, IDRC helped the villagers to establish a coastal resource management committee, which brought together two villages in Chhoy Pras commune. “The main purpose of the committee,” explains Prak Savann, chief of the community fishery, “was to tackle all the destructive activities which were threatening our livelihoods.” Besides harvesting fish and crustaceans at an unsustainable rate, trawlers from other villagers, and sometimes from Thailand, were also destroying coral reef and sea-grass beds, breeding grounds for many species of marine life. The harvesting of mangroves along the coast was also causing serious problems.

The committee identified an area of over 11,000 hectares for community management, including 1,076 hectares of mangrove. The aim was to exclude destructive, large-scale fishing vessels. Over

the coming years, a range of projects enabled the committee, and later the community fishery, to protect and enhance the marine resources in the commune, with the full support of the provincial government. In 2003, concrete posts were used to mark out a 116-hectare sea-grass conservation area. The following year, the first artificial reefs, constructed from concrete and made in the commune, were sunk in the shallow waters off the coast. There are now over 400 of these attracting scores of different species.

"In 2002, many fishermen were harvesting no more than 1 or 2 kilograms of crab a day," says Prak Savann, "but now most are getting 15 to 20 kilograms, which is what they were getting in the past." The artificial reefs deter larger boats from encroaching within the community fishery, and regular patrols, together with the support of the authorities, have also helped to protect the area from destructive fishing activities.

"The fishermen know exactly who to alert if there are any problems," explains the chief of the fisheries cantonment. "They report illegal activities to the local office of the Fisheries Administration, which calls on the help of the police and the army if they're needed." Ham Tun says that when he saw big boats fishing illegally in the past, he felt powerless to do anything. Now, he knows who to report them to.

### Adding up the benefits

Nobody would suggest that Thmey village has become prosperous overnight. Diseases like malaria and dengue fever, and sicknesses related to poor hygiene, are all too common. For those who fall seriously ill, it's a day's choppy boat ride to the nearest hospital in the provincial capital. Nevertheless, the community fishery and its associated savings scheme have helped many to escape poverty. Before the community fishery was established, poverty forced many to leave; nowadays, more families are coming than going. In 2002, the coastal resource management committee had 293 members, of which 175 were actively involved in fishing. Its successor, the community fishery, now has 308 members, including 207 fishermen.

In 2002, Tun and his family lived in a small shack on stilts. Now, his pigs, which he is fattening on commercial feed – something he could never have afforded in the past – are its principal occupants,

## Cutting out the moneylenders

Un Yan doesn't make a living from the sea, but she's a member of the community fishery. "I'm a small trader, selling rice and other goods to the fishermen," she explains, "and if they're not making any money, that affects me. That's why I joined the community fishery." She's also joined one of the seven savings groups established by the community fishery. These have helped many families to escape the clutches of avaricious moneylenders, who charge 20% interest a month.

The saving groups have received financial support from UNDP, but in order to qualify they first had to demonstrate a willingness to save, and an ability to manage their savings. During 2006, the 14 members of Yan's savings group were able to pool and manage 3 million riel (US\$750), thus qualifying for UNDP support. "Members of the group who take out loans are now paying 2% interest a month," explains Yan, "and this has helped families to buy fishing gear and repair their boats."

and the family lives in the more capacious structure beside it. He's got rid of the old thatch roof, which leaked in rainy weather, and replaced it with waterproof sheets. The children are much healthier now, which Tun attributes to a better diet. "And when they go to school, I can give them enough money to buy snacks," he adds proudly.

There are now ten community fisheries in Koh Kong. According to the chief of the fisheries cantonment, half of these, including this one, are working well. They have created strong institutions and the environmental and livelihoods benefits are obvious. The community fisheries have been officially recognised by the provincial governor, but – and this is a familiar story – they have yet to be given legal status by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF). Until this happens, there will always be the fear that private investors and speculators could appropriate the very resources which have helped to restore the fortunes of people like Ham Tun.

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**Money matters:** A range of donors have provided support for the coastal resources management committee and the community fishery in Chhoy Pras commune, including the IDRC, UNDP (using funds provided by the Global Environment Facility), Danida and the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility. The Commune/Sangkat Fund, supported by DFID, Sida and UNDP, and the district investment fund helped to pay for the manufacture of artificial reefs and navigation posts.





Above: You too could get fish like this. Provincial fisheries officer Hing Sophannirith at a community fish refuge meeting in Kampong Cham.

Right: Sa Channy, the chief of the community fishery in Kanchor, with a photograph of illegal fine-mesh nets which were confiscated and burnt. Better management has seen fish stocks steadily increase.



**Stop almost anywhere along the Mekong River in Kratie province and you will hear the same story about declining fish yields. In Kanchor commune the seeds of decline were sown many years ago, when Khmer Rouge insurgents were encamped in the flood forests where fish breed.**

They cut trees and degraded the habitat, and the authorities charged with enforcing fishing laws steered well clear of the area. Not that matters improved after the 1991 peace settlement. "It was still anarchic in 2000, with everyone out to get the best for themselves," reflects Sa Channy, elected chief of the community fishery. The use of illegal fine-mesh nets and electrical stunning equipment, combined with an absence of control, meant that fish stocks continued to plummet.

By 2004, there were so few wild fish that the villagers decided they had to act. With the support and encouragement of the provincial fisheries office they set up Kanchor community fishery, which now has over 90 members. Although the laborious process of getting the community fishery officially recognised by MAFF still had some way to go in early 2008, there had been considerable progress.

One of the first activities involved setting an area aside as a fish sanctuary, in which all fishing is forbidden. A regular patrol now keeps a close eye on the sanctuary and reports any illegal fishing activities, both here and beyond, to the police and the provincial fisheries office. Over 750 metres of illegal fine-mesh nets had been confiscated and burnt by April 2008. “Some people who used to fish in the sanctuary complain,” reflects Channy, “but most accept that this is for the common good.”

Indeed, the benefits are already being felt. “The fish are becoming much more plentiful, especially in and around the sanctuary,” says one member of the community fishery, Muoy Laingchou. A few years ago, this young woman was fortunate if she caught 1 kilogram of fish a day. Now, she regularly gets 2 to 2.5 kilograms, and she sells the fish for around 8,000 riel (US\$2) a kilogram in the market. “I used to have an old bicycle, but I never had enough money to get it fixed,” she says. “Now I can afford the repairs and I’m also able to save a little money for the future.” Many others have also seen their incomes improve.

Kanchor commune is one of many to benefit from the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility’s support to the fisheries sector, with funds in this instance being channelled through the provincial fisheries office, which has provided comprehensive training, covering a range of topics from conflict resolution and record keeping to fisheries management and leadership. The grant has also paid for a certain amount of hardware, including a patrol boat and concrete poles to mark the boundaries of the fish sanctuary.

### Working with local communities

In the neighbouring province of Kampong Cham, staff from the provincial fisheries cantonment have also been working closely with local communities to support community fisheries and aquaculture projects. Hing Sophannirith, the Deputy Chief, spends much of his time in the field and today he is meeting members of a community fish refuge in Trapaing Kok village. Soon after he arrives he shows them a photograph from a local newspaper of a fisherman holding up a deep-bellied silver bass weighing several kilograms. This, he tells them, is

what they will be getting in the near future if they continue to manage their refuge with care.

Support for the fish refuge – all 306 families in Trapaing Kok have joined the refuge committee – has come in various guises. The provincial fishery office has provided technical training, with an emphasis on how to manage the refuge, and supplied 100 kilograms of broodfish, including indigenous silver bass, catfish and snakehead. Sophannirith and his colleagues have also convinced the villages that they need to reduce their use of agricultural pesticides, which contributed to the collapse of fish stocks in the lake. “We’ve been educating people how to use chemical sprays properly, and how to dispose of them safely,” explains Chhorn Chhoeun, the chairman of the fish refuge committee. The villagers have agreed not to fish within the boundaries of the refuge, but they can harvest fish during the rainy season when they migrate into streams and rice paddies.

“Establishing strong community fisheries is difficult,” reflects Sophannirith. “It takes time, and there is a lot of work involved getting legal recognition, but we’re finding that most people appreciate that the fish stocks will increase if they are better managed. That’s to everybody’s advantage in the end.” It takes money, as well as time. That is why the support from the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility has been important in the province. The funds have helped to develop half-a-dozen community fisheries in Kampong Cham, and provided technical support and training for over 200 aquaculture ventures run by individual farmers.

Sophannirith’s colleague, Hour Sun Heap, points out that consumers will benefit too. “When I was a young girl, we ate fish almost every day,” she says, “but scarcity of supply has made fish very expensive, and now I’m lucky if I eat fish three times a week.” As for the poor, they can seldom afford to buy fish at all. But Sun Heap believes this will change, as stocks of both wild and domestic fish become more plentiful.

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**Money matters:** The community fishery in Kanchor Commune and the fish refuge in Trapaing Kok were supported by the Kratie and Kampong Cham provincial fisheries cantonments, using funds provided to the fisheries sector by the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility.



## 6. FUNDING THE FISH FARMERS

Right: Farming families in Tumpormeas commune have benefited from a fish-farming project. Meas Sitha (seated, centre) no longer needs to buy fish in the market.



**“A few years ago, it was easy to catch fish,” says Srey Phoeun, the chief of Tumpormeas commune council, “but there are very few fish left in the wild now.”**

To the visitor, this comes as a surprise, as the flat landscape of rice paddies, in places studded by sugar palms, is criss-crossed by canals and streams, and for much of the year the area is under water. It looks like ideal fish country. However, over-fishing and pollution have taken their toll and the majority of the 1,250-odd families in the commune are now obliged to buy fish, if they can afford it, in the market. These are pejoratively referred to as ‘Chinese fish,’ meaning they’re mostly frozen and, in the view of the villagers, quite possibly tainted with chemicals.

When the council first held meetings in 2007 to discuss how to spend the annual US\$4,000 natural resource management grant provided by the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility, there was talk of establishing a community forest. This, it was thought, could provide benefits for a significant portion of the population. However, the idea was shelved, largely because there was no suitable land available in this densely cultivated part of Kampong Speu province. Instead, the decision was taken to allocate the money to an aquaculture project, and the council hired the services of the Agriculture

Technology Services Association (ATSA). A non-profit organisation which had emerged from an integrated pest management programme funded by Danida, ATSA conducted a field survey of existing ponds – identifying 60 which were suitable for fish farming – and provided training in pond and fish management.

From the pond owners' point of view, the project has been a resounding success. Take, for example, Meas Sitha and Pho Bannak, the parents of eight children. They had dug their pond some time ago to store water for their vegetable garden, but it had never occurred to them to stock it with fish. After the training, they collected their allocation of fingerlings from the local hatchery and put them in their pond. Three months later, in January 2008, the fish were big enough to eat. By the end of March, they had caught and eaten all the silver barb, silver carp, Indian carp and common carp. Only the tilapia remained.

"As a family, we don't have much money," explains Pho Bannak, "and this has helped a lot as it's meant we've spent less buying food in the market. Apart from that, it's also saved time." She no longer needs to traipse to the market to buy fish; now she and her family can catch what they need with hook and line when they return from working in the fields. Bannak also believes that a better diet, based on more fish, has helped to improve the health of her children, and she's already arguing with her husband about what species they should restock the pond with next season. Other families have a similar story to tell. The fishponds have not only provided them with free food; they have enabled them to put aside money to spend on other things, such as building material for their homes.

But has this been a good way of using a grant which is supposed to provide public, as opposed to private, goods? After all, just 60 families in the commune – one in 20 – have benefited. The



Left: Ek Rith (left) supplies fingerlings to local farmers, thus saving them a long and expensive journey to the capital.



commune chief concedes that this has indeed been an issue, but he says there has been no sign of resentment among the many families who haven't benefited directly from the grant. There are two reasons for this. First, it became clear in the village discussions that it would be all but impossible to find a project, with the money available, which would benefit the entire community. Second, it was understood that in the following years the grants would be used to benefit different groups.

### Encouraging the entrepreneurs

The fish farmers in Tumpormeas commune have been fortunate, in that they have been able to get fingerlings from a reliable hatchery nearby. Meas Sitha can even remember exactly how many – 162 – he bought. “I took great care when I transported them from the hatchery to my pond,” he says proudly, “and I didn't lose a single fish.”

However, many fishpond owners in other parts of Cambodia are obliged to travel long distances, often at considerable expense, to buy their fingerlings. This has been one of the factors which have made life difficult for fish farmers in Kratie province. “I've always had to travel by taxi to Phnom Penh to buy fingerlings,” explains Lim Chan, a farmer in O Russey commune, which is half a day's journey from the capital. “The travel is expensive, and only the strongest fingerlings survive the journey back here.” This is why he's so enthusiastic about a new hatchery which is being established with the support of the provincial fisheries cantonment by one of his neighbours, Ek Rith. The fingerlings will cost him less when he buys them directly from Rith, and if the quality is poor, he'll be close enough to demand free replacements.

Rith is a relative newcomer to the business. In 2005, he struck a deal with a company constructing a road near his farm. He provided them with topsoil, in return for which they dug two hectares of fish ponds on his land. He filled one with catfish, but this wasn't a success – catfish require considerable care and large quantities of feed – so he turned to the provincial fisheries cantonment for advice. Keen to encourage aquaculture, they sent him on a training course in Prey Veng. On his return he decided to stock his ponds with silver barb, but they were impossible to source locally; like Lim Chan, he had to go all the way to Phnom Penh to get them. This, and an offer of a loan from the provincial fisheries cantonment, encouraged him to establish his own hatchery. He put up around two-thirds of

the money himself; the rest came in the form of a loan of US\$500.

But why bother taking a loan, when he could afford to put up most of the money himself? “I felt more confident with the loan because it meant that I would get the full technical support of the fisheries cantonment,” he explains. “They're now committed to my hatchery being a success.” They have given him three years to pay back his loan, which he will do in fingerlings, rather than cash.

The provincial fisheries officer, Hap Sinuon, believes these loans are an excellent deal. In the past, she points out, only the wealthier farmers could afford to make the journey to Phnom Penh, and poor farmers who wanted small quantities of fingerlings had trouble getting hold of them. “We're happy to provide loans as we want to encourage farmers to develop the aquaculture industry in the province,” she says. That, after all, will be the best way to increase the availability of fresh fish.

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**Money matters:** The fish pond project in Tumpormeas commune was financed by the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility's natural resource management grant of US\$4,000 to the commune council. The loan provided to Ek Rith by the provincial fisheries cantonment in Kratie came from the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility's policy reform grant to the fisheries sector.







# FOREST FUTURES

**Around 60% of Cambodia is classified as forest land, but the description is misleading. There are still significant areas of good forest – rich in timber and biodiversity – but much has been heavily degraded.**

The actual rate of forest loss is thought to have decreased in recent years, with annual average losses amounting to around 0.5%, although they are much higher in remote, more densely forested provinces such as Oddar Meanchey. Badly managed timber concessions and widespread illegal logging have been largely to blame, but population growth and the clearance of forest to make way for crops have been contributory factors. Forests provide a wealth of different products, from building timber to fuelwood, edible mushrooms to wild game, and they are especially important for the very poor, acting as ‘safety nets’ during times of crop failure or conflict.

The stories in this section describe why and how three communities established community forests. In the case of Kampong Speu, the threat of industrial quarrying, and the enthusiastic support of the provincial forestry department, spurred the local villagers to act, but they also wanted to recreate, on virtually bare land, the sort of forest that existed when the older members of the community were young: forests rich in timber, wildlife and medicinal plants.

As for the other two communities, in Siem Reap and Kampong Cham, they realised that community forests could provide them not only with free timber and fuelwood, but with the means to generate an income. Although the portion of the forest estate which has been set aside for community forestry is relatively small, ventures such as these have the potential to dramatically improve the lives of local communities, and at the same time restore a degraded environment.

Left: Paing Pen community forest, Prey Rumdoul commune, Kampong Speu.



Left: Community forests are helping to restore degraded land in many parts of Cambodia. Chhay Chhorn, chief of a recently established community forest in Prey Rumdoul commune, says that members will soon be able to harvest a range of non-timber forest products, such as medicinal plants and mushrooms.

Right: Forest clearance in the hills to the west of Prey Rumdoul.

**Escalating rice prices and impending food shortages – in May 2008, the World Food Programme announced that it could no longer continue its rice distribution programme to Cambodian schools – have not been enough to keep all the paddy fields in Kampong Speu in production.**

The first rains are beginning to fall, but there is a striking absence of agricultural activity along the road leading from the provincial capital towards Prey Rumdoul commune. Large swathes of land, marked out by concrete posts, have been sold to speculators and developers, in places for as much as US\$60,000 a hectare. Before long, these fields could disappear beneath factories, shops and

housing. In the meantime, the booming demand for raw materials is disturbing the peace, and the landscape, in the hilly country to the west, with whole mountainsides being quarried for their valuable stone.

“Some time ago, businessmen visited the commune with government officials from Phnom Penh,”



explains Um Rin, the chief of Prey Rumdoul commune. “They tried to convince us that we should allow them to open a quarry here.” The threat of a quarry was one of the factors that encouraged the commune to establish Paing Pen community forest, which occupies 191 hectares of rugged hillside. This is precisely where the quarry company was hoping to operate. However, the community forest wasn’t established simply to foil future industrial development. Here, as elsewhere in the province, there are other compelling reasons for creating community forests.

The benefits are both environmental and social, says Kong Kemty, who is responsible for community forestry in two districts. A fervent advocate of community participation in forest management, Kemty and his colleagues from the district office of the Forestry Administration have been providing advice and technical assistance to 11 communities, and these are currently working their way through the eight steps required by law to register a community forest. “I’m convinced that we can reduce poverty by establishing community forests, and at the same time restore degraded landscapes,” he says. He lists the virtues of community forestry, which the villagers confirm as we head up a rocky track that climbs up the hill behind a modest, palm-thatched Buddhist monastery.

The most obvious benefits come in the form of timber and non-timber forest products (NTFPs), which have become increasingly hard to find during recent years. “When I was a child in the 1960s,” recalls Rin, “there was plenty of forest in the commune, but it had all gone by the early 1990s. Since then, much of the wildlife has disappeared, there’s a shortage of timber and many of the plants we collected in the past are hard to find.”

Although the community forest was established just two years ago on a heavily degraded hillside – it wasn’t a forest at all then – the vegetation is rapidly recovering. Rin and Chhay Chhorn, the elected chief of the community forest, keep darting off the track to pluck leaves from saplings and bushes. The large leaves of one tree can be used as a cure for malaria; another leaf, harvested from a vine, is used in sour soup; and the two chiefs stumble across a rare epiphyte which can be used to treat stomach ailments. In ten years’ time, says Chhorn, members of the community forest will be able to harvest a range of NTFPs, as well as timber to build and repair their houses. And all this will be free of charge.

We reach the top of the hill, then head down into a valley which will take us back past the monastery. From here, it is easy to see where the community forest ends, not so much because wooden posts indicate its boundary, but because there is verdant growth on one side and overgrazed and heavily coppiced scrub on the other. Were we to climb up to the jagged ridge away to the left, explains Chhorn, we would be able to gaze down into one of the province’s many quarries – a cavernous and noisy reminder of what could have happened here.



Phnom Srouch district government feels strongly about this issue and has made its views known to the national Government in Phnom Penh. “We believe it’s inappropriate to develop quarrying in areas like this,” explains the Deputy Governor, Han Piseth. “The danger is that quarries take over land which is important for local livelihoods.” In principle, companies intending to invest in quarries should make their intentions known to the provincial and district authorities; and in principle, these authorities have the power to resist developments of which they disapprove. However, in practice government officials in Phnom Penh may ignore local concerns and allocate concessions to quarrying companies.

From a social point of view, suggests Kong Kemty, community forests provide far more benefits than quarries. “If quarrying was allowed here, in Prey Rumdoul,” he argues, “this area would be destroyed and one day there’d be nothing left apart from a pit, a big hole in the ground. The quarry might provide jobs for a small number of local people, but they would be short-term jobs.” In no way would these compensate for what the community would lose, in terms of the goods and services which forests can provide. And besides, says Kemty, the very nature of community forestry

encourages villagers to get involved, to actively participate in decisions which affect the land and their future. Quarries, on the other hand, deny access and repatriate profits to distant cities and bank accounts.

In many parts of rural Cambodia, villagers can blame outsiders – the Khmer Rouge, commercial logging operations, local politicians, corrupt forestry officials – for wrecking their forests. Here, they can't. In Prey Rumdoul commune, it was largely the villagers, whose population has risen rapidly, who were responsible for clearing forests to make way for farmland, for cutting timber to make charcoal and build their homes. The threat of stone quarrying caused considerable anguish; but it also reminded the villages how they had degraded the land beyond their farms.

"When I was young and the forests were in good condition," reflects Um Rin, "the water supply for our rice paddies seemed more regular, and the soils were in better condition." Wildlife was

more plentiful too. The villagers hunted some species, such as deer and wild boar; appreciated others for their ecological usefulness. For example, an insectivorous bird helped to keep pests at bay in the rice paddies. When the forests disappeared, the birds became much rarer. This is the lost world the villagers hope to recreate – a world where you will hear mellifluous birdsong, and the sound of timber being periodically harvested, rather dynamite-blasting and the grinding of rock-moving machinery.

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**Money matters:** Funding for community forestry in Prey Rumdoul commune has come from various sources, including the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility. There are plans afoot to establish a 5,000-hectare community forest spanning three districts. US\$30,000 has been allocated towards this from the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility's sector support to the Forestry Administration. The weavers' training in Taing Sya village, described in the box below, was funded by Danida.

## The Weavers' Tale

One of the most useful plants to be found in the forests of Kampong Speu is a vine, locally known as *thneung*. Its leaves are used to flavour sour soup; its long stems to make basketry. It has become harder to find in recent years, but there is still enough remaining in Taing Sya commune to keep the recently created weaving group in one village moderately busy. Collecting the vines is hard work and not much fun. "Often we have to go deep into the forest," says Tep Moeun, leader of Khaek Pong weaving group, "and we get bruised and cut." The more fortunate members of the group get their husbands to help harvest the vine, but otherwise this is very much a woman's business.

In 2006, Kampong Speu's provincial department of culture provided training and weaving equipment for 18 women in the village. The amount of money they make is modest, but according to Chok Khom, the extra cash is much appreciated – she reckons she makes around 20,000 to 30,000 riel (US\$5-7.50) a year from her baskets – and she can do the work at times when she would otherwise be unoccupied, especially in the evenings. "Farming still remains our main job, and our main source of income," she explains, "but this helps, and I enjoy weaving."

At present, the women sell their colourful baskets to people passing through the village, and this partly explains why their profits have been meagre. Keen to encourage enterprises such as this, the provincial department of culture is currently exploring the possibility of finding new markets. "We're investigating selling their products at tourist



sites," explains Chan Ratha from the provincial department of culture, "but we realise that there needs to be an improvement in quality if these weavers are to compete with weavers in other provinces." She suggests that in future the commune might consider using some of the funds it gets for natural resource management activities on study tours. The commune chief is certainly an enthusiast. "I think the money spent on training has been good value," he says. "It means that women can earn some extra income without having to leave their homes." Needless to say, it all depends on there being a sustainable supply of vines, which is why the local community forestry initiatives are so important.



Right: Since the community forest was established in Tbaeng Lech, there have been two major harvests of small poles. These were sold to a local fishery. The profits helped to pay wages and establish a savings fund.

Below: Like many villagers, Yort Yam (second from right) and Duy Conh (far right) have benefited from the community forest. Yam's wife took advantage of a loans programme; Conh has been able to harvest timber to repair his house.



Left: Women in Taing Sya commune have been able to earn extra cash by weaving baskets and other handicrafts.

**In 2000, staff from the provincial department of agriculture, forestry and fisheries toured Siem Reap to raise awareness about the importance of forests. They talked to villagers about community forestry and what could be done to restore forests which had been lost or degraded. When they arrived in Tbaeng Lech village, their message fell on receptive ears.**

"Before the forests round here were cleared, we were able to collect mushrooms, medicinal plants, rattan, resin, and edible roots and fruit," explains Nok Sai, who is now the deputy chief of the village's community forest. "Once the forests had gone, we found it hard to get these things, and harder to find firewood too." Sai also believes that the loss of forests – most had been cleared to make way for slash-and-burn rice farming – was having an effect on the local climate and leading to more erratic rainfall. Besides, outsiders were beginning to exploit

the area and the villagers felt powerless to do anything about it. The idea of creating a community forest, and determining precisely how it was managed, appealed to everyone in Tbaeng Lech.

The villagers identified 210 hectares of land as a site for their community forest and over the next few years they established a committee, defined the forest boundaries and drew up a management plan. The community forest was duly recognized by the provincial governor. In 2003, the villagers were able

to harvest 10,000 small saplings, which they sold as poles to a commercial fishing lot. The sale yielded 5 million riel (US\$1,250). Four million riel (US\$1,000) paid the wages of those who were involved in the harvest and sale; the rest was put into a community forestry fund. The process was repeated again two years later.

"During the early discussions, before the first timber sales, the community decided to divide the forest into five zones," recalls provincial forestry officer Yim Sok Lam. "The poles sold to the fishing lot were harvested from the largest zone, which covers 140 hectares, and smaller areas were allocated to different types of management." For example, 20 hectares was set aside for the growing of high-value timber trees, which will be harvested in approximately 30 years' time. Another area, covering 23 hectares, provides timber that can be used to build and repair the houses of the 170 community forest members.

In 2006, the Government passed a new Forest Law. Among other things, this established the Forestry Administration and introduced a new set of guidelines for community forestry. The committee at Tbaeng Lech had to work its way through the complex process of registration. Fortunately, its experience since 2000 meant that it was able to complete the process remarkably swiftly, unlike many others who were setting up a community forest from scratch. In November 2007, a ceremony was held in the village to witness the signing of a legally binding agreement.

According to the villagers, the community forest has made a significant difference to their lives. "It's much easier for us to find firewood now," explains one young woman, Mao Heap. "I've also been able to collect rattan and mushrooms." Duy Conh, a member of the committee, nods his agreement before pointing to other virtues of community forestry. He waves one arm expansively towards the wall of greenery behind him. "If you'd come here ten years ago," he explains, "the heat would have been intense on a day like today. Now, with all these trees, it's much cooler." He's been able to harvest timber to repair his house and he says that since the community forest has been legally recognized by central government, the villagers feel much more confident about the future of the area. "Before, we always feared that people from outside

would come and grab the land from us." Now, they can't.

Members of the community forest have also benefited from a revolving fund, initially established with a grant from the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The fund provides members of the community forest with loans of up to 100,000 riel (US\$25), at an interest rate of 2% a month. This compares very favourably with the deals offered by private moneylenders. As a result, many people

have been able to improve their standard of living.

Take, for example, Yort Yam's family. With four

children and two orphans to clothe, feed and care for, life has long been a struggle for Yam and his wife. "In the past, before we had access to the revolving fund, I used to have to borrow money whenever the children were sick so that I could pay for medicines," he recalls. "We also used to run short of rice, and often we didn't have enough food to eat."

In 2004, Yam's wife decided she wanted to set up a business making traditional Cambodian noodles, *nom banhchok*, and she borrowed 100,000 riel (US\$25) from the revolving fund. She made enough money to pay the interest of 2,000 riel a month, and repaid the loan in full after ten months. She took out another loan in 2005 to expand the business, since when she has had no further need of assistance. The family's fortunes have changed dramatically. There is always food on the table now, and when the children are sick there is enough cash to pay for health care. Yam used to get around on a battered old motorbike. Now he is the proud owner of a good second-hand motorbike and the family has bought two bicycles.

Stories such as this can be told by many others in the village. There is a feeling of optimism, and confidence about the future, that was markedly absent not long ago. The establishment of the community forest, and the associated spin-offs, like the revolving and community forest funds, have helped to restore degraded land, improve people's livelihoods and ensure that future generations will inherit an environment worth inheriting.

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**Money matters:** The community forestry programme in Siem Reap province has benefited from support from FAO, IFAD and Danida. Support from the latter, for example, helped pay for a guard post, poles to demarcate the forest boundaries, a meetings shelter, a firebreak and signboards.



## 9. OUT OF THE WOODS?

Right: Yam Veng believes that the community forest in Chambak will provide a sustainable source of forest products for future generations.



**Before Trapaing Pring commune council built an all-weather road linking Chambak village to the outside world, farmers received very low prices for their crops. They found it difficult to get their goods out, and merchants seldom ventured down the rough track that meandered towards the village through minefields – a legacy of past conflicts – and scruffy woodlands.**

In those days, the farmers used to sell dried cassava for around 250 riel (US\$0.06) a kilogram; now, thanks to a new road, constructed in 2004, they can sell fresh cassava for 750 riel (US\$0.18) a kilogram.

Few things in rural Cambodia have the power to improve people's livelihoods as dramatically as a good road. "In the past, I was nearly always in debt and I had trouble finding enough food to

feed my family," explains Kong Chhork, a farmer in Chambak. With his increase in income, following the building of the road, he has been able to invest in a 'cow machine,' a versatile, two-wheel tractor which he uses to plough his fields and take goods to market. He has also been able to buy more land. He is no longer in debt, his family is adequately fed and he can afford to send one of his children to school.



Left: Higher cassava prices have meant that farmers like Kong Chhork have significantly improved their incomes.

Right: Sacks of cassava awaiting collection in Chambak. Since the new road was built by the commune council, it has been much easier to get crops to market.

The benefits of the new road have been felt by most families in Chambak, but this is not to say there isn't room for further improvements. "We can't just live on cassava and rice," explains Yoeung Yeang, one of the older members of the commune council. "We all need fuelwood and timber, and that means we have to improve the way the forests are managed." The forests you see today, he says, are a pale shadow of what they used to be.

In the 1950s, elephants and tigers roamed the forest, and there was still plenty of wildlife when Yeang was a child in the 1960s. "In those days, when the royalists were in power, cutting was very strictly controlled," he recalls. "We would collect products like rattan and honey, and hunt for deer and wild pig. But most of these things have gone now." During the 1970s and 1980s, insurgents of the Khmer Rouge cut all the large trees, and the forest continued to be exploited and degraded by the rapidly growing population after the civil war ended.

In 2002, Kampong Cham forestry cantonment and a local NGO, Kasekor Thmey (KT), began to introduce the notion of community forestry to villages in two districts, Ponhea Krek and Dambe. By enfranchising the villagers in forest management,

it was hoped that both the villagers and the forests would benefit. A number of pilot projects were established and in 2004 KT and staff from the cantonment came to Chambak. "We had seen how some of the neighbouring villages had begun to protect their forests," explains Yam Veng, who was elected as chief of Chambak forest management committee, "and we were keen to do the same."

### Making it legal

Since 2004, KT and the committee have been working their way through the process required to establish a community forest, from electing a committee to preparing by-laws, from defining the forest boundaries to submitting plans to the governor's office. Throughout this period, Veng and his colleagues have been actively managing the community forest, which covers some 225 hectares. Regular patrols are made to ensure that the new regulations, drawn up by the committee, are observed. Certain activities are still allowed. For example, local people can collect dead firewood, small sticks for fencing, mushrooms, bamboo shoots, leaves for animal fodder and medicinal herbs. But the exploitation of larger trees is strictly controlled.





"If someone badly needs timber, they can ask for permission," explains Veng. The five-member committee makes a judgment which is strongly influenced by the circumstances of the person, or people, requesting timber. "If they're reasonably well off, we generally refuse permission," says Veng. "But if they're poor, and they have a real need – say, for four or five long poles to construct a house – then we might grant permission and specify where they can harvest them." The committee has been particularly sympathetic to the needs of families with widows and orphans.

Although the community forest has yet to gain legal recognition, the management committee has been able to introduce by-laws which include penalties for illegally exploiting resources within the forest, such as a fine of 50,000 riel (US\$12.50) for outsiders who collect firewood without permission and a fine of up to 100,000 riel (US\$25) for felling a tree. "So far, nobody has dared to break the rules," says Veng bluntly. The benefits of protection are already evident, and the state of the forest is gradually improving. This means that future generations should be guaranteed a sustainable source of timber and forest products.

Training programmes have proved highly beneficial. They have helped Veng and his colleagues to steer their way through the complicated process of establishing a community forest. Veng also put to good use training in grassroots advocacy provided by Pact Cambodia and arranged by KT. Following a Training of Trainers course in 2006, Veng organised village meetings and a campaign which eventually led to 48 poor families in Chambak village being provided with small plots of land on which to build houses and cultivate crops. Chambak may still be one of most marginalised villages in the commune, but it has seen some significant progress over the past few years.

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**Money matters:** Financial support for KT and the development of community forestry has come largely from Concern, which has benefited from support provided by the civil society component of the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility. Working in collaboration with the Kampong Cham forestry administration cantonment, KT has helped 18 villages in five communes to establish community forests. The new road to the village was paid for by the Commune/Sangkat Fund, which has received support from DFID, Sida and UNDP.









# MAKING A LIVING FROM CONSERVATION

**The richer the wildlife, the poorer the people. This, unfortunately, is the general rule: the very places which are most celebrated by conservationists are all too frequently home to some of the poorest people on the planet.**

In Cambodia, just over a third of the population live below the poverty line. That is the national average. However, in areas which are densely forested – and this includes many of the 23 protected areas in the country – the numbers living below the poverty line are much higher. A study by one of the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility's partners, the Wildlife Conservation Society, found that 86% of the population in a wildlife-rich area in Preah Vihear were living below the poverty line and 59% in a similar area in Mondulkiri. In places such as these, forest products – wild fruit, game, timber, mushrooms, resins – provide more than half of household incomes. All too often, villagers come into conflict with conservation authorities as they do their best to make a living.

However, it is possible for local people to make money out of wildlife without threatening or destroying it. This is what ecotourism seeks to do, and the three stories which follow provide compelling evidence that communities living in or beside wildlife sanctuaries can benefit from nature's riches. Cambodia now receives over 2 million tourists a year, and tourism's contribution to the economy is second only to that of the export-oriented garment industry. However, most of the money ends up in the cities – especially Phnom Penh and Siem Reap – and little gets to the countryside. But ecotourism is helping, in a modest way, to attract tourist dollars to the countryside.

The first story here describes how a remote community in Preah Vihear is profiting from one of the world's rarest birds, the great ibis – and the dozens of foreign birdwatchers who come to see it. The village ecotourism site employs over 30 families on a part-time basis and raises funds which are used for local development activities. In the other two stories it is local, rather than foreign, tourists who make up the bulk of visitors, but the end result is the same: ecotourism is helping to safeguard wildlife and lift people out of poverty.

Ecotourism seeks to generate an income for local people from landscapes such as this.

[Back to contents](#)

## 10. BANKING ON BIRDS



Left: Funds generated by ecotourism have helped to pay for new wells. Seng Ken, with her baby, is one of many women to benefit.

Right: Good for business. Rare birds such as the giant ibis are attracting tourist dollars to Tmatboey.

**The deciduous forests some four hours' drive to the east of the great ruins of Angkor Wat have become a Mecca for adventurous birdwatchers. Here they can see not only giant ibis – there are just 250 left in the world, most confined to Cambodia's Northern and Eastern Plains – but a host of other rare species, including the white-shouldered ibis, the greater adjutant, the Sarus crane, the woolly-necked stork and the rufous-winged buzzard.**

Till recently, these were birds that birders could only dream of seeing. Had any been foolish enough to venture into these forests a decade or more ago, they would have risked being blown up by mines or kidnapped by the Khmer Rouge.

"Up to 1996, this area was a conflict hot spot," explains Debkin Oun, chief of the community protected area near Tmatboey village, in Preah Vihear province. Sometimes soldiers would buy food from the villagers; sometimes they would rob them. For three decades the area remained isolated

from the outside world. There was very little trade, and most families led a subsistence existence, growing enough rice to eat and harvesting wild foods from the forest.

"Since the fighting ended, and the minefields were cleared, we've seen many improvements," continues Oun. The villagers are now able to sell rice, resin, frogs and NTFPs in the markets of nearby towns. There is a health centre and the school is much improved. Peace has also meant that the area is safe not just for teachers, government officials



and health workers, but for foreign birdwatchers, who are happy to pay for the privilege of seeing charismatic species in their natural habitat.

The Tmatboey Ibis Ecotourism Project, established in 2004, has helped to safeguard wildlife, improve villagers' incomes and raise money to finance development activities. The success of the project – it won the WildAsia Responsible Tourism Award in 2007 – owes much to the support provided by the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and the Sam Veasna Center for Wildlife Conservation (SVC), a local NGO. It was scientists from WCS – they were conducting surveys with the Ministry of Environment in Kulen Promtep Wildlife Sanctuary – who recognised that giant ibis could attract tourists and improve local livelihoods. SVC, recently established in memory of one of Cambodia's most enlightened wildlife experts, was ideally placed to work with tourists coming to Siem Reap to promote local ecotourism trips.

### Planning a brighter future

A series of Participatory Land Use Planning (PLUP) meetings, which brought together villagers, commune council members, NGOs and provincial government departments, helped to define a community protected area which covers 1763 hectares. Members of the community protected area – over 180 families have joined – have pledged to manage it in a way which encourages and protects the giant ibis and other species. In return, WCS has helped the committee to develop the ecotourism site and SVC acts as a tour operator for birdwatchers. During the first year, tourists were billeted in villagers' homes. Now they stay at

a purpose-built lodge on the fringe of the village. The accommodation is simple but adequate; solar panels provide light at night; the staff will even serve you a gin and tonic when you return from the forest in the evening.

Many people are better off as a result of ecotourism. Most obviously, the revenues – over US\$12,000 in 2007/08 – have provided part-time employment, and wages, for guides, housekeepers, cooks and handicraft sellers. During 2007/08, 33 families earned an average US\$20 a month from ecotourism. To put this in context, the average annual family income in the village is around US\$350 a year.

Others have benefited too. Birdwatchers pay a standard guide fee – US\$30 if they see giant ibis; US\$15 if they don't – into the community development fund, which has been used for a variety of purposes. The fund contributed US\$2,000 towards the building of a village road; US\$1,000 towards the cost of the ecotourism lodge; and US\$100 for a temporary classroom. The fund has also paid for the digging and construction of six open wells. "Without ecotourism, we wouldn't have got the wells," says Oun bluntly.

After an unsuccessful pre-dawn trip in search of giant ibis – a rare occurrence, according to our guide – we stop on the leafy track which runs through the village. Opposite a small shop there is a well paid for by the community development fund. Seng Ken is sitting in her shop, jiggling her baby and chatting to two of her customers. She says that 20 families now use this well. "Before it was installed, I had to walk a kilometre to get water,





Left: The tourist accommodation in Tmatboey is simple but adequate.

and queue once I got there,” she says. “It used to take me up to two hours for each trip. This has made a big difference to me, even though the well sometimes runs dry, and we occasionally have to go elsewhere to find water.”

The community protected area has also provided other tangible benefits to the community. Before it was established, this area was part of the wildlife sanctuary and it was against the law to cut trees. Now, villagers can apply to the committee for permission to harvest timber for house-building; they can also collect NTFPs, such as the high-value *prich* leaves much favoured in nearby Thailand as a vegetable.

### Spreading their wings

According to Tom Evans of WCS, this is one of the best ecotourism projects his organisation has been involved with. “It hits all the right buttons,” he says. “It keeps the community happy. It protects the birds, whose populations are actually increasing. And it satisfies the birdwatchers.” One of the beauties of the project is that relatively small numbers of visitors are needed to make it viable. The demand for ornithological tourism in Cambodia is rapidly expanding, but instead of encouraging increasing numbers to visit Tmatboey, WCS and its local partner are planning to develop similar projects in two other villages in Preah Vihear. WCS is also keen to spread the benefits more widely among the local community. “It’s important not to overstate the significance of ecotourism,” explains Evans. “It can make a difference in villages like Tmatboey, but it’s not going to change the world for everybody, and that’s why we’re looking at other ways of improving local livelihoods.”

WCS has had some success in promoting wildlife-friendly foods, such as tea grown in tiger reserves in the Far East and chilli harvested in elephant reserves in Africa. Now it is investigating the feasibility of promoting wildlife-friendly rice, grown in the paddy fields where giant ibis and other rare birds feed. “Initially, we’ll begin on a modest scale,” says Evans, “but just imagine how large this niche market could be if farmers began supplying wildlife-friendly foods to a proportion of the million tourists who visit Angkor Wat every year.”

During recent years, much of the financial assistance for the Tmatboey Ibis Ecotourism Project has come from the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility’s civil society and pro-poor market component. These grants are designed, as their name implies, to strengthen and empower community organisations and encourage the rural poor to find new markets for their produce. This can take time, something which is recognised by the long-term nature of the funding, which covers a four-year period.

Asked whether they would feel confident enough to go it alone were the NGOs to pull out, Oun and his fellow committee members shake their heads. They are still learning how to manage both funds and facilities; they know that this is still a work in progress. They also realise that if their land-use plans, and the community protected area, are to be legally recognised by central government, they’ll need organisations like WCS to make their case.

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**Money matters:** The PLUP process and map were funded by Danida. The local government reform programme provided support to establish the community protected area. Since mid-2007, the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility’s civil society and pro-poor market component has provided funds for this and other projects managed by WCS.



## 11. SWAMP SURVIVORS

Right: A concrete walkway guides tourists through the mangrove swamps.



**The vast majority of the 300 families who live in Peam Krasaop commune depend for their survival on the sea and the saline creeks which carve sinuous patterns across the mangrove swamps.**

Till recently, most lived in wooden houses constructed on poles along the water's edge, but in 2004 the whole community moved, en masse, to two new sites inland. The exodus was precipitated by a ferocious storm, but it had been anticipated for some time.

The families were living inside a wildlife sanctuary managed by the Ministry of Environment, and the business of keeping their dwellings in decent repair

was taking its toll on the swamps. "Every year we had to cut wood to repair the damage done by the sea and the weather," recalls the commune chief, Chut Tit. Eager that they should move, the Ministry of Environment and Koh Kong's provincial government allocated small plots of land to each family in an area of scrubland behind the swamps. The old dwellings were dismantled; new ones – many with tin roofs – were constructed, some



Left: Selling tickets to visitors is less taxing and better paid than shelling crabs, says Khou Sokheon.

Right: A new bridge will provide access to a tower overlooking Peam Krasaop ecotourism site.

on poles, some without, along a rutted dirt track which leads, eventually and after a bone-shaking ride, to the provincial capital. The fishing families have continued fishing, especially for crabs, but the move prompted the villages to explore new ways of generating an income.

"The idea of developing the area as an ecotourism site was first suggested by people from the provincial government, especially from the environment and tourist departments," recalls Chut Tit. At the time, he was the chief of the commune's coastal resources management committee, which had been established in 2001 with support from a Canadian research organisation. With the committee in place, the commune already had experience in managing environmental projects, and several areas of mangrove swamp had been restored. Now it turned its attention to a project which would not only help to protect the

environment, but provide, it was hoped, a new source of employment.

For the first-time visitor, the sheer scale of development comes as quite a shock. After you have passed an elegant wooden ticket kiosk, and paid your entry fee, it is a good ten-minute walk along a robust concrete walkway which jags through the mangrove swamps and eventually leads to an open patch of land. Here the villagers have set up stores selling food and cold drinks. Once you have slaked your thirst, another stretch of concrete walkway leads to a suspension bridge and a viewing tower, again built of concrete, which commands fine views across the swamps and out to sea. This is one of the main attractions for tourists. A shelter where visitors can picnic, surrounded by dense thickets of mangroves, is another. The committee which runs the ecotourism site also has high hopes for its new crab-fattening enclosure. The idea is that



tourists will pay to catch the crabs, which they will be able to eat here or take away. Either way, they will pay for the pleasure.

The development has cost considerable money, with support coming from a range of different sources, including the provincial and district investment funds. Unlike the Commune/Sangkat Fund, whose purpose is to benefit individual communes, these are supposed to encourage and support projects which benefit the entire province or district. Yet here these funds have supported a project which is confined to one commune. Didn't this, we ask, go against the spirit, if not the letter of the guidelines governing how funds are spent?

The commune chief has clearly given this matter some thought, as have the district and provincial governments. He points out that with topography like this, where many communes are islands and the coast is fractured by waterways, it is difficult to find infrastructure projects which can cross commune and district boundaries. However, Tit believes that the ecotourism development will benefit other communes, even though all the money has been spent here. "We've sited the viewing tower on the boundary with a neighbouring commune, and the people there will be able to bring tourists to make use of it," he explains. Likewise, people from communes further afield will be able to use Peam Krasaop ecotourism site.

Although the area was still being developed in early 2008, it was already attracting Cambodian and foreign tourists. During February, March and April, over 12,000 people bought tickets, yielding an income of 19 million riel (US\$4,570). Seven million riel had gone towards paying the wages of those employed at the site, for example as cleaners and ticket sellers, and to repairing a tractor and providing a supply of fresh water. The committee was about to debate what it should do with the remaining 12 million riel. "Obviously, we can't just distribute cash to everyone in the village," says Tit. "What we aim to do is to encourage as many people as possible to take advantage of ecotourism, for example by offering boat rides or selling food and handicrafts to tourists."

Already, ecotourism is providing employment to some of the poorest families in the commune. Talk to the two shy and solemn teenagers who run the ticket kiosk and they will leave you in no doubt about how much difference these jobs have made to them. Khou Sokheon has four brothers and



sisters; Hun Chantha has three. "Our families don't make much money from fishing, and our work here has meant that we can help them," explains Sokheon. They used to earn 150,000 riel (US\$37) a month shelling crabs. Now they earn double that. Although they come every day and work long hours, they much prefer this as a way of life. It is, they say, less boring than crab-shelling, as well as being better paid. Besides providing them with sufficient money to buy rice for their families, they have enough left over to spend on themselves.

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**Money matters:** Most of the funds used to develop the infrastructure of the Peam Krasaop ecotourism site have come from the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility's allocation to the provincial and district investment funds. In 2007, the commune used its Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility natural resource management grant of US\$4,000 to construct a crab-fattening area in the mangrove swamps.

## 12. NATURE PAYS HER WAY



Left: Ecotourism can help preserve nature and improve local incomes, says Seng Heng (second left) of Pursat's provincial department of tourism. He is seen here with Heng Socheath (far left) of Danida and members of the Chrak La-eang eco-tourism site.

Right: A micro-hydro scheme provides electricity at Chrak La-eang eco-tourism site.

**It's just 70 kilometres from Pursat, the provincial capital, to Chrak La-eang ecotourism site, but by the time you reach there you feel as though you've covered twice that distance. The dirt track leading into the hills is so heavily potholed that trucks and cars are frequently reduced to a juddering walking pace.**

But the journey is well worth it. With its tumbling waterfalls fringed by verdant woodland, Chrak La-eang is deliciously cool, even at the hottest time of year, and during the peak tourist seasons – the Chinese and Khmer new years – over a 1,000 people a day come up from the lowlands to picnic, paddle and swim.

Just before you arrive at the ticket office, you pass a display of 63 medicinal plants, resins, nuts and other non-timber forest products (NTFPs), each contained in see-through plastic packets. "When I was a child, this was all thick forest, and the only people who would come here were villagers harvesting products like these," explains Sam



Loeun, a member of the ecotourism management committee. Today, it is tourists, rather than NTFPs, that are helping to sustain local livelihoods.

The ecotourism management committee was established in 2002, following discussions between representatives of six villages in Chheutom commune and the provincial department of tourism, which recognised the recreational potential of the area. Since then, the committee has overseen the development of the site, an area of approximately 1.5 square kilometres within Aoral Wildlife Sanctuary. In 2002, there was nothing here in the way of infrastructure. Now visitors are served by a car park, food and souvenir stalls, picnic tables, toilets, changing rooms, and footpaths and bridges which provide upstream access to a series of increasingly spectacular waterfalls. There is even a tiny micro-hydro generator to provide light near the site entrance.

“We have always seen this as a livelihoods scheme with the potential to provide an income for local people,” explains Seng Hong, Deputy Director of the provincial department of tourism. “If they gain an income from tourists, then they are much less likely to exploit or damage the environment.” Since the management committee was set up, the woodlands along the river have been well protected. “If there was no ecotourism,” suggests Hong, “I’m sure some of the bigger trees would have been chopped down.”

A significant number of local people gain direct financial benefits from the management of the site. Take, for example, Man Phiyas. Every year, during the short peak seasons, she works for approximately 11 days. Each day, she is paid 15,000 riel (US\$3.75). She also sells some of the fruit grown on her family smallholding in the stalls near the car park. However, it’s not just committee members like Phiyas who have benefited from ecotourism. “Most of the villagers I talk to are very happy about what we’re doing,” she explains. “They can enjoy the facilities any time they like without having to pay, and many bring produce from their fields and gardens to sell to the visitors.” Such marketing opportunities can make a big difference to household incomes.

In early 2008, there was still some uncertainty – and nervousness, in view of the widespread land-grabbing which plagues Cambodia – about the legal status of the site. It was hoped that the Ministry of Environment would soon provide



official recognition. This would mean that the ecotourism management committee would be able to function as an autonomous entity and receive all the financial benefits which accrue from tourism – which amounted to some 5 million riel (US\$1,250) during 2007.

According to Seng Hong, the various grants which have supported the management committee’s endeavours have been well spent. “There has always been a very transparent bidding process when contracts have gone out to tender,” he says, “and the community, rather the provincial government, has determined precisely how to develop the site.” From the point of view of the provincial government, Chrak La-eang has provided a model, and a portion of the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility’s grant to the provincial investment fund in 2008 was allocated to a similar development elsewhere in the province.

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**Money matters:** During the early years, the DFID-supported provincial investment fund helped to pay for infrastructure and training. Significant contributions have also been made by UNDP, which has channelled funds through the Environmental Protection Development Organisation, and the European Union. During 2008, further financial support was made available by UNEP and the Multi-Donor Livelihoods Facility.






# THE RIGHT TO A BETTER LIFE

**Since the first national elections in 1993, Cambodia has experienced considerable change, much of it for the better.**

In 1993, 47% of the population lived below the poverty line. The figure is now 35%, although population growth has meant the actual number living below the poverty line remains much the same. During recent years, there have been notable improvements in health care. In 2000, infant mortality was 95 per thousand; by 2005, it had declined to 65 per thousand. During the same period, the number of births attended by trained midwives increased from 32% to 44%. Nevertheless, despite these and other improvements, Cambodia remains one of the poorest and least developed countries in Asia, and people in rural areas continue to suffer from relatively poor services, from their remoteness from markets, and from a lack of secure land tenure.

The last three stories in *Emerging from the Shadows* provide more than just a glimmer of hope. The first focuses on UNICEF's Seth Koma programme, which has enhanced the ability of provincial governments and commune councils to deliver better education and health care. The programme has improved school enrolment in the six provinces where it operates and increased the number of children being vaccinated against preventable diseases. Partly as a result of its success, the National Committee for Decentralisation and Deconcentration (NCDD), which oversees local government reforms, has stipulated that every commune council should have a committee promoting the rights of women and children.

The other two stories are very different in nature. By establishing adult literacy classes, the provincial education department in Preah Vihear province is helping villagers to escape from the stigma and inconvenience of illiteracy. The final story deals with the issue of land grabbing. The term itself conjures up images of rich and powerful individuals dispossessing the rural poor of land which provides them with their living. And that is frequently what happens. But government departments have also been guilty of heavy-handed appropriation, and this story tells how a human rights group, ADHOC, is helping hundreds of villagers to resist moves by the Government to deprive them of their land.



The livelihoods groups in Pursat province are helping some of the poorest people in the community to improve their welfare.

## 13. IMPROVING THE WELFARE OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN



Left: The scholarship scheme run by the local commune encourages poor girls like Choun Kunther (centre) to stay at school. She would like to become a doctor.

Above: The scholarship scheme provides Choen Thearith with books and a bicycle, as well as rice and cooking oil.

**Em Sarom always returns to her village, and to her family in Chheu Kach commune, for the rice harvest. Now it's finished she is about to head back to Phnom Penh, some three hours' bus journey away. "For us, life is a continual struggle," she explains. "We have a small plot of land and we can't grow enough food for ourselves, so I'm forced to work as a maid, or on construction sites, in Phnom Penh."**

In the city she earns around 4,000 riel (US\$1) a day. The only way she and her husband can save any money is by limiting themselves to one meal each evening. From time to time, they send small quantities of money back to the village to buy food for their five children, who stay with their grandparents.

"Our situation would be even more difficult if the Commune Committee for Women and Children didn't help us," explains Sarom, who visibly brightens at the thought of what the committee

has done for her eldest daughter, Choeun Thearith. Today, the 16 year-old is stacking great bundles of rice straw behind their palm-thatch home. Quietly spoken yet self-possessed, she explains that without the scholarship from the Commune Committee, she wouldn't even have completed primary school. Now, she is some way through secondary school. "I've learnt many practical things," she says. "I've been taught how to rear healthy chickens and vegetables, and that means I've been able to contribute towards the family income." Her



ambition is to train as a teacher. The scholarship has provided her with books, stationery and a bicycle, as well as a monthly allowance of rice and cooking oil.

The Commune Committee for Women and Children has helped the family in other ways too. It impressed upon Sarom the importance of education, so she now makes sure that all her young children attend primary school. It also encouraged her to get all her children vaccinated against common diseases such as measles, diphtheria and tetanus.

Tens of thousands of others living in Prey Veng, one of poorest provinces in Cambodia, can tell similar stories of hardship, but many – like Sarom and her family – will also tell you that their access to health care and education has significantly improved in recent years. Much of the credit must go to UNICEF's Seth Koma programme – Seth Koma means 'child rights' in Khmer – which has enhanced the ability of commune councils and provincial governments to provide essential social services.

### Focus on the vulnerable

In 2004, UNICEF and the Ministry of Interior set up a joint initiative to establish Commune Committees for Women and Children in six provinces. These were deemed such a success that in 2007 the NCDD issued guidelines to establish similar committees in every commune

in the country. These are chaired by elected commune chiefs and their members include individuals with

expertise on health and education, as well as the Commune Women and Children's Focal Points. A creation of the local government reforms, the focal points play a crucial role in linking communities to local government departments and service providers.

In Chheu Kach, the Commune Committee for Women and Children meets in the commune office – a bright, airy building with sparrows twittering deafeningly from the high-sloped eaves – at least once a month. Chhan Yean, a studious man with spectacles, reflects on issues related to schools and school attendance; another councillor gives an update on health issues; Phim Hoeun, the Women and Children's Focal Point, reports on a range of subjects, from scholarships for poor girls to progress with vaccination, from school enrolment to prenatal care.

"I spend much of my time going from house to house, talking to women about their welfare and about the health and education of their children," explains Hoeun. "Before we had the committee, many children failed to go to school and a lot of mothers were reluctant to get their children vaccinated. Since then, we've seen a big change in attitudes." School attendance has risen and almost all the children are vaccinated now. In the areas where Seth Koma operates, 90% of children are vaccinated against preventable diseases – compared to 40% nationally.

The focal points, and the committees they serve, have also done much to improve school enrolment. When children fail to turn up to school, they visit their families to find out why. In Baphnom District, 90.7% of 6 year-old girls are now enrolled in Grade 1 of primary school, compared to 83.6% in 2004. Phim Hoeun and Chhan Yean are both involved in selecting girls for scholarships, and liaising with various NGOs, including World Education, who fund the scholarships. Priority, explains Yean, tends to be given to girls who come from very poor families, to orphans and to those at greatest risk of dropping out of school altogether.

The focal points also devote considerable time to ensuring that the community pre-schools are functioning well. "I work very closely with the teachers," explains Choun Samy, the focal point in nearby Speu Kao Commune. "I have to make sure that they turn up regularly to run the classes, but I also provide support by making sure that the

children come to school." In Baphnom District, 48 out of 108 villages now have a community pre-school. Five years ago, none had. The schools are proving very popular, both with children and parents.

### Working with the system

If you'd come here in the 1990s, you would have been struck by the number of NGOs working independently in the health and education sectors. Now there is much better co-ordination. By working through the decentralised administrative systems established by the local government reform programme, Seth Koma has helped to improve the service delivery of commune councils, as well as that of provincial and central government departments. "We provide support and training, at

a range of levels, from central government to the village level,” explains Hour Kanarouen, UNICEF’s education officer for Prey Veng, “and by working with different ministries and departments, Seth Koma is helping to improve their performance and accountability.”

The commune chief in Chheu Kach has no doubts about the benefits of Cambodia’s recent reforms. “Without decentralisation, central and provincial government wouldn’t know about the needs of local people,” explains Yim Saphon, “The council knows what’s happening on the ground, and people can make their views known to us.” Besides, he says, the whole process of decentralisation has made it much easier for organisations like UNICEF to work at the village level. All of this has helped to reduce poverty.

A short walk from the Chheu Kach commune office we come across Chinso Pheap, outside a flimsy shack where he lives with his wife and four children. He is uneducated and unskilled and makes a precarious living working on construction sites. His 13 year-old daughter, Choun Kunther, receives a scholarship from the commune council. “If I hadn’t

got a scholarship,” she says shyly, “I probably wouldn’t go to school.” She says she’d like to become a doctor. “When we listen to the radio,” says her father, “we often hear stories about young girls being abused or trafficked for sex. Now that my daughter is staying on at school, I hope she’ll learn to make good decisions and avoid those sort of problems.”

Besides providing the scholarship, the commune council has periodically put the family in touch with NGOs which have given them second-hand clothes and rice. If the children are sick, there is a health centre nearby, explains Pheap, and he’s happy that the Commune/Sangkat Fund has paid for the new road that goes past his small plot of land. “We are still poor,” he reflects, “but our lives have begun to improve.”

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**Money matters:** In 2007, UNICEF’s Seth Koma programme was active in 3,161 villages in 317 communes, covering a population of 1.4 million. The total budget for the year was just over US\$3.6 million. Although UNICEF does not channel its funds through the national treasury, it uses the administrative structures established by the local government reforms supported by DFID, Sida and UNDP.

## Times are changing

For two hours every weekday morning, Try Saley looks after 20 children between the age of 3 and 5 at the community pre-school in Snoul village, Baphnom District. Sometimes she has them on her own; sometimes mothers and grandmothers will come to lend a hand. Each day there will be dancing, singing and some serious learning for the older ones. “It’s good for children of that age to come together,” reflects Saley. “They make new friends and learn how to communicate with each other in a respectful way.” They also learn about the importance of hygiene, and by the time they go to primary school they will know the alphabet.

Under its Seth Koma programme, UNICEF has provided support for 381 primary schools and 161 community pre-schools in six provinces. It contributes approximately US\$500 to the building of each pre-school, as well as wages for the teachers, while the commune councils contribute land, materials and labour. According to one elderly lady who brings her grandchild to attend Saley’s pre-school, the children today have much better opportunities than she had. “When I was young, the only school was very far away, and I spent much of my day walking there and back,” she explains. “Now, my grandchildren live close to schools and they have more knowledge than I had



at their age.” Around a third of children between the age of 3 and 5 in those villages which have pre-schools attend them. In the district overall, some 15% in that age group now attend UNICEF-supported pre-schools.



## 14. LIBERATING THE ILLITERATE

Right: If you can't read, you won't understand posters like this, which warns against child trafficking.

Left (in box): Try Saley runs the community pre-school in Snoul village. She is sometimes helped by the grandmothers of the children she teaches.



**Lan Thin sits on the wooden floor, a few feet away from a car battery which illuminates a single naked bulb, the sole source of light for the adult literacy classes which are held in the teacher's house in Tmatboey village.**

One of 11 women and 14 men who have just begun a new course, you can sense her eagerness to learn. Until a couple of days ago, few of those here could recognize a word or a letter; in six months' time, they will be able to read and write. "When I was young we were always on the move and I never went to school," explains Thin, who is now 25 years old. "I joined the class because I wanted to improve my knowledge, and I'm hoping this will help me to find work in the future."

The provincial government of Preah Vihear has been supporting adult literacy classes since 2003. This year, there are ten classes, targeted at adults between the age of 15 and 45. The department of education pays for the teachers' wages, car batteries, exercise books and monitoring. "We rely on the district education offices to provide us with statistics about levels of illiteracy," explains Men Khorn, who works in the non-formal education department, "and we take various factors into

account – such as accessibility and the availability of teachers – before deciding where to support classes.” The department looks favourably on communes which raise adult illiteracy as an important issue at the district integration workshops.

Approximately 30% of adults in Preah Vihear province are illiterate, with the level being highest in remote villages like Tmatboey. However, the number of adults in the village who are unable to read and write is rapidly falling, thanks to the classes held in the house of Nhem Sophoan, a farmer and part-time teacher. Unlike most natives of the village, Sophoan attended school in a town; he was also a Buddhist monk for a while, which demanded intensive study and a high degree of literacy. When the provincial department of education decided to support a class in Tmatboey, he was the obvious person to approach.

“There were many adults here who couldn’t read or write, or make even simple calculations,” he explains, “so I had no trouble setting up a class.” By April 2008, he had completed two full cycles, each involving 14 hours of teaching a week over six months. Fifty formerly illiterate adults – the total population of Tmatboey stood at 683 the week Lan Thin and her batch of recruits began the course – could now read and write with a degree of competence.

In practical terms, literacy makes a big difference to people’s lives, says Sophoan. He points out that one of the key ways of disseminating information about vaccination programmes, HIV/AIDS, the registration of children’s births, elections and much else is through posters, which you will see displayed in villages throughout Cambodia. A short distance from his house a glossy poster is tacked on to a tree trunk. It warns about the dangers of child trafficking, and the consequences for those who are guilty of it. Although the illustrations are starkly explicit – one depicts a couple being arrested – it is impossible to understand precisely what the poster is saying without being able to read Khmer. “After people have been to my classes,” explains Sophoan, “they will be able to understand the posters they see in the village.” The one outside will no longer be a closed book to them; if they suspect somebody of child trafficking, they will at least be able to decipher and understand the list of organisations they should get in touch with.



They will also be numerate, as well as literate. This is especially important for those involved in any sort of business, which is why one of the women who works at the village ecotourism site (see ‘Banking on Birds’, page 50) has just begun classes here. “I’ve been finding it very difficult, as I haven’t been able to do calculations when tourists have been buying things,” she explains.

Most of the students have been seriously inconvenienced, one way or another, by their failure to read and write, and many talk of their desire to escape the stigma of illiteracy. “I feel inferior because I can’t read,” explains one young man, Kong Kin. When he has learned to read, he says, he will be able to understand job adverts, and perhaps find work on a construction site in a nearby town. In short, the adult literacy classes in Preah Vihear – the cost works out at around US\$30 a student – can open up a world of new opportunities. In doing so, they are helping people to rise out of poverty.

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**Money matters:** Funding for adult literacy classes in Preah Vihear province is provided by DFID, Sida and UNDP through the local government system. In 2008, the allocation to the provincial department of education was US\$7,000, which paid for ten classes in the province.



## 15. STANDING UP FOR THEIR RIGHTS

Right: Under threat. Although the authorities have relinquished their claims to a considerable area, the future remains uncertain for these families in Boeung Nay commune.

Left: The adult literacy class in Tmatboey village. The car battery provides light in the evenings.



**It is easy to see why tourists are attracted to Boeung Nay commune. Situated in Choeng Prey district, some 30 miles from the provincial capital, Kampong Cham, the landscape has a feel of innocent rusticity.**

There is a modern, brightly painted Buddhist temple at one end of a lake, and behind it a crumbling brick temple which is said to predate Angkor Wat. Children dangle their fishing rods from wooden canoes; ox and cart rumble slowly along dirt tracks. If the fancy takes you, you can observe all this while eating a snack, jealously scrutinized by tethered monkeys, in one of the shacks on the lake shore.

However, appearances are deceptive: this area has been steeped in conflict. The most recent traumas date back to 2000, when the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) told

the commune chief that hundreds of farmers who cultivated a large block of land should be evicted to make way for a plantation scheme. There was much anger and resistance. "I refused to give up my fields," recalls Peng Roeun. "I'd cleared a hectare of forest in 1984 and I'd been growing crops there ever since."

Matters came to a head when two farmers prevented forestry officials from planting teak saplings on their land. Aware that this could represent the beginnings of a strong resistance movement – the villagers had begun organising

a petition against the evictions – the authorities decided to act. The farmers' homes were surrounded late one night by armed soldiers. According to the villagers, the soldiers threatened to shoot them.

Both men made a night-time escape to a village nearby, one carrying a baby as cover. From there they made their way to Kampong Cham and the offices of the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC). ADHOC got in touch with the relevant authorities and struck a deal. The farmers would be able to return, provided they agreed not to resist further tree planting activity. The farmers returned, and ADHOC staff visited the site of the land dispute. They told Peng Roeun and his fellow farmers that they had every right to stay on the land.

### Pol Pot's bitter legacy

As it happens, this was familiar territory for ADHOC's provincial coordinator, Neang Sovath. In 1974, he had been dragooned by the Khmer Rouge into the labour force that constructed a dam near the lake. There were thousands of people involved in the dam construction and each was expected to shift three cubic metres of rocky soil each day. "If you fell sick or you were too weak, you would be tortured or killed," recalls Sovath, who was 14 years old when Pol Pot seized power. By the time the Vietnamese army invaded the country in 1978, Sovath had worked on four dams. Unlike many, he survived. In the early 1990s, he began work for ADHOC, an organisation established by a group of former political prisoners to campaign for human rights and democracy.

With the arrival of the Vietnamese, the Khmer Rouge abandoned the cities and fled deep into the countryside. The rebels continued to be active in Kampong Cham, and some took refuge in the dense forests in Boeung Nay commune. The best way to get rid of them, reasoned the new government, was by clearing the forests. "Along with many other farmers, I was mobilised to cut trees," recalls Peng Roeun. Mobilised is a polite way of saying coerced: in those days, if the village chief told you to do something, you did it. By the mid-1980s, the security situation was much improved, the mine fields had been largely cleared, and a swathe of forest land was under the plough and providing food and an income for hundreds of families.

Soon after ADHOC arrived in the commune, Sovath and his colleagues alerted the Council of Ministers in Phnom Penh to the problems here. In July 2000, the Council informed the provincial governor that the status quo should prevail. In other words, the farmers could continue cultivating their plots, but there should be no further land conversion. However, this was not the end of the matter.



"A few months later," recalls Roeun, "the commune chief and officials from the provincial land department invited us to a meeting and showed us a document which they asked us to sign with our thumbprints." This stated that the land – 1,191 hectares – belonged to the Government; by signing the document the farmers would be acknowledging that they were growing crops with its permission. "We'd experienced this sort of trickery before," explains Roeun, "so we refused to sign." Some years earlier, a group of farmers had been tricked into thumb-printing a similar document relating to a small parcel of land acquired when the Vietnamese forces withdrew. Soon afterwards they were evicted.

### Organising the resistance

With the help of ADHOC, the 700-odd families occupying the area established a land dispute committee. Its ultimate aim was to secure land titles for all. A period of relative calm came to an almost violent end in July 2003, when the deputy provincial governor arrived in Thmar Da, a village beside the lake, with a contingent of police. They had come to evict some 40 families. Fortunately, ADHOC had already got wind of the plans and by the time the police arrived over 400 activists from other parts



Right: Calm before the storm? The authorities see this area as a valuable tourist attraction, but for scores of farming families it provides a home and a living.

Left: We would rather die here than be moved, says Kol Sangkum, one of many people in Thmar Da threatened with eviction.



Kampong Cham were camped around the village, ready to resist the evictions.

The mere mention of this event still raises the blood pressure of those involved. “We told them we would rather die here than be moved,” explains Kol Sangkum, shaking with anger. She says that the deputy governor was on the verge of punching her when staff from ADHOC intervened. After a day’s stand-off, the police and the deputy provincial governor retreated.

Since then, the authorities have relinquished claims to approximately four-fifths of the area, and the provincial land department has begun surveys, prior to providing titles to those cultivating the land. But the Government has yet to cede its claims to 200 hectares of land around the lake, which it sees as a valuable tourist attraction. “We will continue to fight for our rights,” says Sangkum, “but until we get legal title to the land, we’ll worry about our future.”

This is understandable, considering the history of land-use conflict in modern Cambodia, and the frequency with which poor communities are evicted from land they consider theirs. However, this is one land dispute which Sovath believes could

have a happy ending. “The Government wants to develop tourism around the lake, but that needn’t be incompatible with the interests of the people living here,” he says. During recent months ADHOC had held meetings with various provincial line departments, and there was a general acceptance that some sort of negotiated settlement could be reached. “I think it should be possible to find a solution that satisfies the policies of the line departments and respects the rights of the local community,” says Sovath. It would, indeed, be a great injustice if people who were ordered to clear the forest in order to rid the countryside of the Khmer Rouge were now to be deprived of the fruits of their labour.

It is almost certain that without ADHOC’s help, the villagers would have lost their land. “It was ADHOC who came here and taught us about our land rights,” explains Peng Roeun. “If they hadn’t come, we’d never have known what our rights were.” And it was the intervention of ADHOC, suggests Kol Sangkum, which prevented bloodshed in 2003.

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### Photograph credits:

Page 28-29	EHB Pollard
Page 48-49	EHB Pollard
Page 51	Wildlife Conservation Society
Page 52	Chris Price
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All other photographs in this report have been taken by the author, Charlie Pye-Smith.

Right: Harvesting morning glory in the swamps near Phnom Penh.





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