Life, Fish and Mangroves

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International mining firms see Cambodia as a new frontier that has yet to be explored. Unlike many other parts of the world, there has been little geological exploration of Cambodia since France ended its almost century-long colonisation in 1953. For this reason, and the fact that Cambodia is the only country in South East Asia that allows 100 per cent foreign ownership, overseas mining companies have been keen to invest.\textsuperscript{18}

As this quote illustrates, Cambodia continues to be promoted as a frontier to be explored for its potential development. Resource extraction has now been happening for over twenty years, leading to the depletion of Cambodia’s forests, serious overfishing, a surge in land prices and, most recently, an interest in oil, gas and mining (Cox 2010). Extraction activities have shifted from one natural resource to another. For example, with the moratorium on logging in the late 1990s, entrepreneurs began to engage in land speculation, spurred on by road access, economic growth and general political stability. Between 2000 and 2007, Cambodia’s economy grew by 9.5 percent per year,

second only to China (Moore 2010). Land prices rose significantly during this same period, as did land concentration. In 2008 the bottom 40 percent of the strata owned 5.4 percent of Cambodia’s arable land, whereas the top 20 percent owned 70 percent of the land (Un and So 2009). Given Cambodia’s history with resource development thus far, it may be that oil, gas and mineral development will follow a similar pattern of extraction with business entrepreneurs benefitting far more than rural dwellers (Cock 2010).

The development of Cambodia’s natural resources can be seen as a blessing, in terms of contributing to the growth in GDP and for potentially lifting the country out of poverty, or as a curse, in terms of depleting Cambodia’s once strong natural resource base and thereby deeply impacting rural livelihoods (Auty 2007; Cock 2010). Regardless of one’s perspective, resource extraction activities do appear to be the norm. In this regard, headlines in the Cambodian English language newspapers are significant: “Mekong Could be in Danger” or “Fishermen Air Fresh Dredge Fears” or “Fishing Community in Kampot Protests” (Hirsch 2010; Sokheng and Strangio 2010; Vong 2009). International headlines are also telling: “Making a Killing in Cambodia; While most Cambodians spend their lives struggling against poverty, a spoilt, young elite enjoy all the privileges of vast wealth—and they aren’t ashamed to flaunt it” (Marshall 2010). A resource bonanza is happening in Cambodia. Considering that over eighty percent of Cambodia’s population remains in the rural areas, this is definitely a cause for concern. After all, landlessness, small land holdings and limited access to natural resources are primary factors that affect rural poverty (Diepart 2010).

It is, therefore, a real paradox that during this same period of extensive resource extraction, government bureaucrats have also been drafting and approving various pieces of resource governance legislation. Moreover, there has been, and continues
to be, a massive donor effort working toward enhancing local involvement in resource governance (Godfrey et al. 2000; Un and So 2009; Cock 2010; Gellman 2010). Cambodia continues to transform itself, meaning that actors may be working on a range of activities that are sometimes at odds with each other. This is a context whereby mineral development can take place in protected areas, in spite of regulations prohibiting this, and agricultural concessions can be granted to foreign businesses while local villagers struggle to get access to enough farmland to feed their families (Diepart 2010). The previous chapters have illustrated how people respond to this situation by often moving from one resource extraction opportunity to the next, until there are few options left by which to earn a livelihood. This is where local resource governance may come in, with the starting point being far from fair or just, or when people consider exiting rural areas altogether. There is, unfortunately, no guarantee of work in urban areas (Chandler 2010). This chapter provides a further reflection upon this resource governance situation by considering if and when resource policies work, and by further probing several resource governance failures discussed in the previous chapters.

**PROBING RESOURCE GOVERNANCE FAILURES**

This research case illustrates how the drafting and passing of new policy has not erased the underlying dynamics of resource competition nor has it shifted the distribution of economic benefits from natural resources to rural communities in any significant manner. Rural livelihoods continue to be affected by ongoing struggles for rights to access, manage and secure benefits from natural resources—principally land, water, fisheries and forests—in the face of intensifying competition (CBNRM LI 2009; Van Acker 2010). A major issue, at this point, is not enshrining local rights into policies and laws, for this has been
actively pursued throughout the past decade, but rather people’s capacity to enact these rights in their particular situation. There is an almost normative assumption that once polices are passed, the particular management of a given issue and governing more generally can emerge. This is not proving to be the case.

Perhaps it is naive even to assume that creating decent policy will lead to policy uptake on the ground. Departmental cultures are not swayed simply because new policies are created, particularly if no one is insisting that these new policies are consistently followed. Moreover, if nepotism and cronyism exists to the degree that is suggested (i.e., Gellman 2010; Un and So 2009; Hughes 2009), it will take serious shifts in worldview, particularly in terms of accountability, before these new policies are consistently taken up. After all, actors have embraced resource governance polices for a plethora of reasons. For instance, conservation organizations may be advocating for local involvement in resource management from a commons management perspective (cf. Ostrom 1990) while donors focusing on interactions between humans and their environment may promote a social welfare perspective (cf. Béné et al. 2010). Others may buy into roll-out neo-liberal policies, having faith that market failures can be addressed by volunteer organizations in civil society (cf. McCarthy 2005). Government bureaucrats may support decentralized resource management initiatives as a way to penetrate rural areas and therefore work toward political consolidation (Hughes 2009). In other words, multiple logics may be used when promoting local resource governance (Mansfield 2007), which helps to explain why such policies are passed and why it then becomes challenging to get such policies to work in practice.

Given that such competing logics exist when legislation is drafted and then passed in support of local resource governance, one can appreciate why it may become a real challenge actually to enact such policies. Local resource governance would not
appear to be an obvious choice for government bureaucrats, until one considers the perspectives of roll-out neo-liberalism and political consolidation that government departments may adhere to. This also helps explain why government bureaucrats may not be particularly interested in actively supporting these mechanisms or in working toward resolving particular resource conflicts. At the same time, not all community members buy into the idea of local governance, and some committee members may be more interested in building their alliances and networks than in carrying out resource governance activities. In the particular part of Cambodia where this field investigation took place, the area is close to the Thai border, is a former Khmer Rouge stronghold and, until relatively recently, was isolated from the Cambodian capital, Phnom Penh. It is no wonder that resource governance is hard to enact in this situation.

Southwestern Cambodia has served as a resource frontier for the past twenty years, which helps to explain the ongoing interest from various local, national and regional actors in the natural resources in this area. Establishing forms of resource governance is nearly impossible in this type of context since it requires certain actors to give up revenue-generating opportunities. For these reasons, the resource governance successes explored must be well celebrated. This is not a context that easily supports this type of initiative: the leadership found within villages and within certain sectors of government are particularly noteworthy. Indeed, it demonstrates how people are not passive actors in challenging situations, and how they do have agency. Moreover, it demonstrates that even in contexts where policies are not enacted as imagined, small gains can be made in terms of resource governance.

Throughout this book the potential for resource governance is highlighted; the success stories exist in stark contrast to the resource governance failures. Failures occur for a multitude of reasons and are not always that easy to tease apart. For example,
some issues that ought to be addressed at a local level are not; other issues that require collaboration between various actors somehow slip through the cracks and other issues can still only be handled by higher levels of government with a visionary outlook for resource governance. More concretely, stolen fishing gear may demonstrate a failure in village governance, the challenge of getting support for community patrols may be a failure of co-management processes, and sand mining may illustrate a failure in national governance. It is noteworthy that resource governance failures are not scale-specific, contrary to what advocates of decentralization or centralization might theorize would happen (i.e., promoting either the state or local involvement as the solution to governance failures). As such, the following section carefully probes the nature of resource governance failures at different scales.

Failures at the Village Level

Chapter 4 demonstrates mixed success in the resource governance efforts carried out in and around Koh Sralao village. Resource governance works to a certain extent: there is an active mangrove replanting campaign, a system for waste management and a committee that has ebbed and flowed in its activities over the past decade. These ongoing activities do demonstrate a sustained interest in resource management, even as funds wax and wane (PMCR 2008). What villagers and resource management committees chose to ignore or not work on may also be instructive.

Aspects of the open-access nature of the fisheries resources in southwestern Cambodia make a lot of sense. For instance, effort reduction is something that committee members see as unfair. They argue that fishers are poor to begin with and prefer to allow outside fishers into their fishing grounds rather than limiting access. It may very well be that there are some
unintended benefits from this approach (sure, fish are declining, but given how things currently work in Cambodia it is not clear to me that focusing on effort reduction or controlling resource access would actually lead to poverty reduction). As Béné et al. (2010: 32) note: “The main contribution of small-scale fisheries to poverty alleviation may lie, paradoxically in their semi-open or common access nature. Resource-poor people often rely more heavily on common resources than their better-off households.” This gives good pause for thought: perhaps the fishers of Koh Sralao are correct in not wanting to limit access, for this does speak to the welfare function of the fishery.

Other issues that are not solved at a local level are more puzzling. The continuation of gear theft, as an example, may be a resource governance failure or there may be other explanations. Many respondents whom I interviewed over the years faced severe debt levels as a result of fishing gear theft. As much as I tried to engage local institutions and donor organizations into a discussion around this issue, I consistently failed to generate serious interest. Gear theft is likely more than a cyclical process of people stealing from each other in response to individual gear being stolen, although this happens too, as someone or a group of people are likely benefitting from this trade. How is it that gear theft remains such a persistent issue, persistent to the point that it has become a norm?

When explaining this situation to others, particularly academics, an immediate reaction has been that Koh Sralao must lack in social capital, for why else would gear theft be occurring? Although pointing to a lack of social capital is in many ways an obvious explanation, it strikes me as somehow too simplistic to be helpful in understanding this situation. Putnam (1995: 67) defines social capital as the “features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.” He further argues that those societies rich in social capital have a sense of “civic
virtue” embedded in a network of reciprocal relations. This differs from societies that have good individuals who are working in isolation (Putnam 2000). As such, it is theorized that in places that are low in social capital it is hard to build trust, collective action and commons governance (Pretty and Ward 2001).

Yet there is another dimension of social capital that is worth thinking about, particularly in the context of Koh Sralao village. Access to social capital in terms of resources depends greatly on the power, position and location of villagers (Bourdieu 1980). Certain members within any village, due to their power and societal position, may sustain privileges that, in turn, underpin and disadvantage other groups. In other words, powerful people can undermine the social capital of less powerful groups. Such insights do help to explain why gear theft may be something no one can tackle, particularly if a powerful subsection in the village or someone with connections outside the village is supporting this practice.

Of course, there are several other possible explanations for this situation. A contributing factor may be that gear theft is a particularly contentious issue that is not easily observable. It may also be that gear theft is seen as part of the risk of doing business as a fisher. In other words, it is the social transaction cost necessary in pursuing this type of livelihood. Although the prevalence of gear theft in Koh Sralao suggests a failure in local resource governance, it may just be that this is not a realistic issue for a resource management committee to address. After all, Koh Sralao committee members are working to instil resource governance in a frontier context within a seriously declining fishery. Many people came to the area to pursue a host of resource extraction opportunities. Now that most local residents no longer have opportunities in other resource sectors, the focus is on the fishery where a certain level of lawlessness continues to pervade. If Cambodia, in general, suffers from corruption and accountability issues (TI 2009), gear theft is
an example of how this is found throughout society to varying degrees. Gear theft serves as a proxy of the challenges of getting resource governance to work on complex issues. It would take a serious effort, over many years, to tackle such an issue, and the incentive structures currently in place for local resource governance do not provide enough support to make such an effort worthwhile.

My own work in other Asian fishing communities suggests to me that stolen fishing gear is not unique to the Cambodian context. This is a resource governance issue that is under-explored, under-reported and under-addressed, not just in Cambodia but elsewhere, too. For example, ten scholarly articles discussing gear theft within the fisheries sector were found in Scholar’s Portal (a main database for social sciences research) between 2000 and 2010. What this scarce literature suggests is that fishermen may travel further distances to avoid traps getting stolen (Daw 2008) and require extensive support in monitoring and surveillance if this problem is to be solved (Al-Masroori et al. 2009). This does not help me better to analyze the situation in Koh Sralao; nothing is written about how local institutions may be involved in solving this type of issue. I somehow sense that the committee in Koh Sralao could tackle this problem, since they themselves suggested a more active monitoring campaign at one point and have tried a series of things over the years. This, therefore, begs the question of whether this is seen as a reality that comes with life working in a sector such as the fishery.

Failed Partnerships

Based on the work in southwestern Cambodia, it would seem that village-government partnerships are not always working very well, particularly on more contentious issues. Village-focused policies were designed to provide a platform for stakeholder collaboration. Although the nature of these arrange
ments varies, their main thrust is to enable dialogue between stakeholders to ensure better resource management outcomes at a local level (Armitage et al. 2009). Accordingly, government bureaucrats are meant to take a role in either supporting or in working with village members to manage local resources. In reality, however, few government departments are able to support local work in an ongoing manner. Technical departments, whether fisheries, forestry or an environment department, do not have significant operating budgets since decentralization reforms have not, yet, resulted in any serious administrative decentralization (Turner 2006). A lack of finances is the first reason that any government official will cite when explaining why co-management approaches are not always working.

But more than this is going on. There is little incentive for a bureaucrat to help a community to patrol or to engage in conflict management. The departmental culture does not encourage this, and it may even be discouraged since a certain amount of illegal activity can benefit departments from the informal collection of fees. This is never easy to “prove,” but the practice of rent-seeking is thought to be rife in Cambodia (Un and So 2009; Global Witness 2009). Although some bureaucrats at a central level may buy into the idea of village-government collaboration on resource management, this practice has not penetrated throughout the governance system. It would take a serious effort at the central level to ensure these practices were adopted in reality. Departments within a ministry hold different perspectives toward local resource governance, such as the Community Fisheries Office whose mandate is to support community fisheries and the Inspection Office whose job is to inspect production and police fishing activities. Thus, bureaucrats who sanction co-management are facing internal struggles to promote the adoption of this type of approach.
Many authors studying local resource governance processes argue that a well-defined resource system, small-scale resource contexts, a clear and identifiable set of social entities with shared interests and reasonably clear property rights are conditions that will enable village-government partnerships to be successful (Ostrom 1990; Berkes 2006; Armitage et al. 2009). If one thinks about this list in the context of the mangrove-estuary villages described in this book, one begins to realize how unlikely such conditions may be in reality. To be frank, I doubt that the villages of southwestern Cambodia are particularly unique. After all, when are social-ecological systems well-defined with only a few users being interested in them? The experience of Koh Sralao villagers, and those surrounding Chrouy Pros Bay, may not be so different from many social-ecological contexts where multiple actors are interested in the same natural resources. In our globalized world, entrepreneurs are continuously searching for opportunities to exploit natural resources, and Cambodia, with its relatively rich natural resources (although there has been a significant depletion of forests and fish stocks, some do remain, and mineral exploitation is only just beginning) and weakly enforced laws, is an attractive place. Against all odds, there have been moments when local resource governance has worked, particularly in and around villages.

Failures in National Leadership

Sand mining is an issue that exhibits how national ministries are not following their own policies. The Ministry of Environment holds jurisdiction over protected areas and sites of ecological significance (i.e., Ramsar sites, biodiversity reserves) and the Fisheries Administration is responsible for the conservation and management of aquatic resources throughout Cambodia. Meanwhile, the Ministry of Industry Mines and Energy is
responsible for mineral exploration, with the Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology focusing on both water resources and minerals. If each ministry were to follow its mandate, the scale of sand mining would be far smaller, the impacts carefully monitored. This is because an environmental impact assessment would be conducted by the Ministry of Environment, the Ministry of Fisheries would undertake an aquatic survey to assess the impact of sand mining on fish stocks and the concessions granted by the Ministry of Industry, Mines and Energy and the Ministry of Water Resources and Meteorology would be small in nature and cause minimum ecological harm.

Yet, in the popular narrative, there has been an emphasis on how mineral, oil and gas exploration may be one way to bring Cambodia’s population out of poverty (Cox 2010), and it appears that existing policies are not applied to sand mining in coastal areas. Why is no one encouraging the Cambodian government to take a longer-term view on sustainability or questioning the justice of a few elite actors making an extraordinary profit from a commons resource to the detriment of the local ecology and population?

Just as frustrating is that village protests do not appear to be taken seriously, official complaints launched through government channels are pending and no international donor has championed this issue. It has been well publicized that there are serious accountability issues with the Cambodian government when it comes to extractive industries (Global Witness 2009). Many organizations have not wanted to touch this issue, since it relates to contracts given out to the highest members of the Cambodian government (i.e., national senators). It is an issue that can only be addressed at the highest levels, such as with the prime minister. Although in May 2009 the Cambodian prime minister did call for a halt to sand mining activities, the focus of this ban was inland sand mining, not coastal activities. As such, mining activities increased in southwestern Cambodia.
throughout 2009 and 2010 (Global Witness 2010). This is a case where no checks and balances are in place, making it impossible to find a solution. Such an activity makes a mockery of the work of villagers, of policy-makers supporting local resource governance and of many in the donor community.

CONCLUSION

Between powerful actors angling to exploit natural resources and resource policy processes that, in many ways, are designed to be counter-intuitive to how things function in practice, it is no wonder that results are mixed. Perhaps the situation in Chrouy Pros Bay is far more the norm than the work of the committee in Koh Sralao, which demonstrates leadership, risk-taking and a willingness to do something for the “greater good” of the area. Not all communities in Cambodia are willing to invest so much effort into this, particularly since people are not paid to be involved in this type of work. What is done in Koh Sralao is arguably more than many North Americans ever do in terms of getting involved in local governance issues. Actors are capable, even within severely restricted social spaces, of formulating decisions, acting upon them and innovating or experimenting (Long and Long 1992), as well as interpreting policies and even resisting them (Scott 1985). Unfortunately, strong leadership at a local level will only go so far if other actors higher in the chain of command are not also supporting resource governance practices. In this current context, it is no surprise that actors will hit stumbling blocks and, in spite of a decent policy environment that suggests otherwise, business interests often win. There is a Khmer saying that “corrupt officials know how to share corruption money” (Un and So 2009: 133), suggesting that enough people are seeing the benefits from resource exploitation activities; as usual, these benefits are not “bottom friendly.”
Decentralized resource governance processes seem “to provide an answer to the rigidity of centralized structures and a response to past failings, but they can also be a smokescreen for things we do when we are not sure what it is we are doing” (Arthur et al. 2011: 15). For both the policy and development communities it can become a justification for further experimentation in contexts that are poorly understood, and where outcomes of practice are uncertain, unpredictable and sometimes undesirable. The resource governance failures of southwestern Cambodia serve as a reality check for understanding how resource governance processes may be implemented. A major stumbling block for local resource governance processes is power relations and policy uptake; this is what needs to be targeted. Moreover, a supportive environment that enables policy to be reflexive and pertinent to ever-changing local contexts needs to be fostered.