Som Thom Commune Community Based Natural Resource Management Project: An example of successful mediation between local communities and provincial government

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Gaining recognition for local management agreements is not just about tools and techniques, but often depends on a range of intangible factors such as the willingness and motivation of local people, and leadership both within the village as well as visionaries within the government. This article presents the story of an ethnic community in Ratanakiri, Cambodia which won recognition to manage its community forest by provincial authorities. The article analyzes the enabling factors which contributed to this historic event. It also focuses on the intermediary role of projects and outsiders in facilitating a more holistic development process.

The dynamics of power and decision-making between the state and its citizens is an interesting aspect for examination in the final wash of any event. Is the state's role in an emerging democracy to “know best”, thereby more or less forcing laws upon its citizenry as it sees fit, or is it to create laws in response to the needs and wants of the people? In Cambodia, the state has long been of the former type and has, in various “guises”, ruled and controlled the “passive” citizenry. However, as development has been placed high on the country’s agenda, onlookers are beginning to witness a more people-oriented approach. Furthermore, pushed by various donors and organizations, reforms toward decentralization are being undertaken in many sectors.

This article focuses on Som Thom commune, a cluster of traditional villages that have recently been granted community rights to a forest area at a time when all forests in Cambodia are still deemed central state property. The ambiguous nature of this situation is a small example of the state of flux Cambodia encounters as it seeks changes to its past style of governance. The case of Som Thom demonstrates what can be achieved when development partners take on an intermediary role between government, in this case the provincial level, and local communities. This role may well be the “culture” of government that remains when aid programs are phased out: “top down” or participatory?

Som Thom Commune

Som Thom commune is located in Oyadao district, Ratanakiri province, in the most northeastern part of Cambodia. The commune consists of four villages and the population is approximately 1,839. While most civil servants are of Khmer ethnicity, the majority of the population in this province belongs to various indigenous groups that remain with their traditional livelihood, dependent on a rotational system of swidden cultivation, supplemented by a wide range of non-timber forest products. Without vast areas of land and access to the forests, this way of living will disappear. The people of Som Thom commune are of Jarai ethnicity, their origins being in Vietnam. Traditional kinship, leadership, and spiritual practices remain strong amongst the community.

In September 1995, a land concession was granted by the central government to a commercial company in and around Som Thom for the purposes of an oil palm plantation. This concession was for an area of 20,000 ha. In 1996 the villagers of the commune formed a community forestry association and presented their grievances to district level authorities. The district attempted to mediate between the company and the villagers. From the initial land cleared, the company planted their first crop of oil palm seedlings. The crop proved to be ill suited to the area and was eventually destroyed by animals. Also, the foreign investor withdrew from the venture, leaving the Khmer companies involved with the problems of finding additional capital, and needing to develop the land quickly.

Other events included two workshops focusing on ethnic communities and sustainable development in northeast Cambodia. One workshop took place in Phnom Penh, while the second workshop was held in Ratanakiri in February 1996 and was attended by local NGO/IO representatives, UN and Phnom Penh officials and local villagers, including from Som Thom. This resulted in the provincial governor granting approval for a study on the effects of the oil palm plantation on the people of Som Thom. The study was completed in May 1996 (for further details see Colm 1996).
Between late 1996 and 1998, there was large scale illegal logging in Ratanakiri, including Oyadao district. Most of the logging was exported to Vietnam (Global Witness 2000). While most villagers fiercely opposed the logging, they felt there was very little they could do. Despite this, the villagers in Som Thom resisted these activities and continually sought intervention from district level authorities and local NGO's such as ADHOC and the Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP) Project.

In January 1998 a petition drafted and signed by the people of Som Thom was sent to the provincial level Department of Environment (DoE) asking that the community be allowed to manage an area of forest within the concession. Initially little could be done with regards to establishing dialogue between the villagers and provincial authorities Or implementing activities - the reason for this being the DOE's weakness in comparison to other departments in the province. Lacking funds and under-resourced in terms of personnel, the DoE were in no position to take up the cause of the people of Som Thom. However, in 1998, Som Thom commune was included in the CARERE/IDRC pilot Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) project. With the injection of funding and skilled personnel, activities could now be implemented and concrete outcomes could be produced.

Between 1998 and 2000, the CBNRM project worked closely with the people, helping to define their own rules and regulations for the use of the forest, in addition to undertaking mapping of the area. On the 28 July 2000, the Governor of Ratanakiri signed an agreement with the people of Som Thom granting them rights to manage a 3,684 ha community forest area within the concession area: an historic event to say the least.

Influencing Factors

Five factors can be considered important to the present situation in Som Thom.

1. The motivation of the Som Thom people

"Som Thom commune is the most motivated. As a result they very actively participate, have a very strong solidarity and are very organized. (Nhem: 1999:3).

When tensions between the operators of the concession area and the people of Som Thom reached a climax earlier this year (2000), they were able to draw upon five years of exposure to notions of decentralization, and more importantly, two years of CBNRM activities. Their arrival in the area, clashes and misunderstandings between employees of the company and villagers had been regular, The disputes related to clearing of land and forest, the killing of livestock and the use of fertilizers that were having a negative impact upon fauna in the area. In most cases, the villagers approached district authorities or the company directly with their grievances.

While disputes were regular, they remained mostly non-violent. The workshop in 1996 and the attendance of international and national representatives, and the subsequent study in May 1996, endorsed by the provincial government, ensured Som Thom remained an issue with people outside the affected area. Additionally, with the arrival in 1998 of the CBNRM project and staff, "external" parties could better monitor the activities in Som Thom.

The land study and workshops mentioned earlier can be viewed as positive factors for the people of the commune, and lent support to their sense of direction. One can speculate about the exact influence these interactions may have had upon the people of Som Thom. Wherever it derived, their resistance and strong sense of unity and commitment towards their land, livelihoods and establishing a community forestry and land use planning association was critical. It is difficult to say why the level of social cohesion is so high in Som Thom, but there are a number of interesting factors.

The Jarai originate from the central highlands of Vietnam. They received early education and assistance from French missionaries during the colonial period. As a consequence, the Jarai have been more proactive in their dealings with outsiders than other ethnic groups in the northeast. This trait appears to remain strong amongst the Jarai who now inhabit northeast Cambodia. The villagers of Som Thom say they were forced to move from their original settlement in the upper areas of Oyadao district after conflict with other Jarai people.

The commune was also fortunate to have a strong leader, Mr. Sal Yuch. Until 1995, he was a government employee. When asked, who influenced the decision to seek a community-managed area, he replied the idea came from him alone. His prior government employment and ability to quickly grasp the significance of issues and to guide his people has been critical for this "grassroots motivation". Strong leadership that is unafraid to voice concerns is critical for present and future generations of highlanders. Mr. Sal Yuch is proving to be a
model for other indigenous leaders in Ratanakiri.

The previous workshops, the commune’s independent character and participation in the palm oil study, and the presence of a strong leader, looks in hindsight to have been contributing factors to the level of motivation, cohesiveness and leadership in the commune (Nhèm Sovanna, pers comm., Sept 2000). One thing is for certain: without this cohesion, progress would have been slower.

By contrast, elsewhere in the province a number of villages and their leaders have adopted an increasingly individualistic approach which is perceived to be more "modern" (van den Berg 1999). The success of Som Thom has resonated with other communities, to the extent that more communities are interested in exercising greater community control over their traditional lands (Phat and John, personal comm., August 2000).

2. Role of external facilitator/mediator

CARERE (Cambodian Area Rehabilitation and Regeneration) is a UNDP (United Nations Development Program) funded project concerned with instituting decentralized planning and financing of rural development. It collaborates with the Royal Cambodian Government (RCG) to form the CARERE/SEILAS project. The International Research Development Center (IDRC) is a Canadian government supported corporation that assists developing countries address environmental, social and economic problems. Both organizations were active in Ratanakiri from 1995. In 1997, IDRC closed its offices and merged its project with CARERE to form the CBNRM project.

Working with and not for rural communities is reflective of the overriding CARERE/SEILA strategy. Decentralization of rural development initiatives means communities are active in the decisions affecting their livelihoods. A key component of this approach was a Local Planning Process (LPP). With LPP, plans are developed with the input of communities, while funding is accessible to the communities through the Provincial Rural Development Committee (PRDC). The focus is on short-term projects and activities that must be implemented within 12 months after funding.

Instilling this approach to working with highlanders amongst government staff has been a long process. Traditionally accustomed to imposing activities upon villagers, provincial staff working in cooperation with CARERE have had to learn a new approach in which they function as facilitators, while the villagers are encouraged to propose ideas land accept or reject subsequent plans. The work CARERE has done in this area is ground breaking. The Deputy Prime Minister has recently called the process "nothing less than a revolution in Cambodia's national administrative structure" (O'Connell 2000).

This approach has raised awareness, empowered communities, and exposed both non-local development and government staff to local methods of natural resource management. In short, both parties have learned about and from one another. The progress may be slow, but the results have been enough to persuade the central government to expand the SEILA project nationwide.

In 1998 the CBNRM project, working with the Provincial Department of Environment, aimed at a holistic planning approach, in which the villagers are encouraged to make decisions themselves. The CBNRM project highlighted the crucial role natural resources play in the livelihoods of villagers. The result was a review, then expansion of LPP, adding a long-term perspective, as opposed to a short-term focus which had been employed previously. The inter-departmental CBNRM team envisioned their role as intermediaries between government, department line staff and the people in the target communities. This was made possible by adopting a flexible and collaborative process (Nhèm 1999).

"... the management plans that were designed for Som Thom were done with the participation of the people. I think we succeeded in Som Thom because when we asked people their opinion on ideas, if they did not like it, they rejected the idea ... Som Thom were clear on what they wanted and what they did not want. Villagers in other areas easily accepted the idea's we presented, and they also wanted us to do it for them. Som Thom was both critical in the process, and willing to do the work themselves" Phat Phalit, IDRCNRM research assistant

Another important factor was the adoption of a multi-sectoral approach in the province. An early objective of CARERE was the establishment of a Provincial Rural Development Committee (PRDC). Chaired by the Governor, the PRDC is comprised of the heads of all government departments in the province, and has been critical in the successful implementation of a multi-sectoral approach. Meeting once a month, the purpose of the committee is to create a forum in which departments can discuss the issues they are facing and seek feedback from their peers. From the formation of the PRDC came a collective effort towards visioning development for the province. Provincial development plans are now designed with the input of all departments and resources are allocated according to need, and not to the power certain departments and/or individuals
exert. While CARERE was instrumental in its formation, all departments now understand the value of the PRDC and a multi-sectoral approach.

The result is government now views problems facing communities as being multi-faceted and inter-connected. Coordination and collaboration between the respective departments ensures attempts to problem solving at the village and commune level are fully and uniformly addressed, as opposed to receiving piecemeal remedies. Understandably, the process has not been entirely without problems. Some departments and their staff can still hold rigidly to policies that are self serving. However, the institutionalization of the PRDC and the holistic planning approach of the CBNRM team, are increasing the tendency for sectors to assist each other. Without this, past experience suggests provincial authorities may not have sought a multi-sectoral approach and allowed communities the degree of participation in the planning and implementation of development activities.

The willingness to adopt the new approaches can be attributed in part to the lack of resources in the province. Prior to the arrival of CARERE and IDRC, the line departments of Ratanakiri had been severely under resourced financially, and the knowledge and technical skills of government staff was unsubstantial. The new injection of capital and technical know-how obviously helped. In a sense, the provincial authorities and the departments had little alternative but to incorporate the suggestions being presented by the new donors. However, it would be wrong to suggest the province was in any way forced to adopt the new approaches. Today, the gains that have been achieved over five years can be considered the most effective tool to maintaining the momentum of change.

3. Role of Provincial Government

It was the present Ratanakiri Governor H.E. Kham Khouen who took the decisive steps that resulted in the assigning of control of forestland to the people of Som Thom. His participation in CARERE activities in the province is a continuation of the commitment his predecessor exhibited. H.E. Kep Chuktema was governor during the period CARERE was beginning in the province. Without his involvement, the range of workshops, seminars and studies that were conducted in Ratanakiri during the establishment phase may have lacked any degree of legitimacy. Indeed, both Governors' willingness to listen and cooperate has been beneficial to the situation in Som Thom.

Ratanakiri is a remote province that prior to the arrival of NGO's/IO's, was largely ignored by central level authorities. Its politicians had little, if any influence at a national level. This isolation has in many ways helped to instill a sense of pro-activeness in provincial authorities. Many problems faced in the province can be unique, thus requiring local, direct and immediate attention.

When CARERE/Seila arrived in the province, Kep Chuktema was quick to see the benefits of a large development project to the people of the province. Relatively young and ambitious, and sensing an opportunity to forge stronger links between Ratanakiri and Phnom Penh, he responded positively to the plans CARERE envisioned for the province. He became an active participant in the process of establishing the institutional changes within government.

Governor Kham Khouen has also responded positively to activities in the province. A highlander himself, his motivation can be said to be somewhat different to his predecessor. His decision to sign an agreement with the people of Som Thom is reflective of the sense of pro-activeness that authorities in Ratanakiri have exercised in the past with regard to decision-making at the local level. Despite the rapid changes regarding governance that are occurring throughout Cambodia, Kham Khouen still retains elements of the leadership style that is unique to remote areas such as Ratanakiri. The combined influence of these two governors has contributed towards the province undergoing a process of cross-cultural exchange, leading to awareness raising amongst government staff of indigenous concerns and issues.

4. Role of Provincial Department Staff

The increasing willingness of provincial department staff to consult with highlanders is an extension of the change that has occurred within the higher levels of government. Staff are increasingly aware of the needs of highland people in Ratanakiri. Additionally, staff understand that people at the village level are much more aware of the problems they are facing, so are more likely to devise better solutions to these problems.

Early efforts to involve indigenous people and their concerns in meetings were usually met with laughter by the predominantly Khmer department staff. Today, this level of prejudice is considerably lower.

While always difficult, an optimistic appraisal of overall changes in attitudes amongst department staff would suggest that the presence of indigenous persons in high office and the progressive change that CARERE and
Another key individual within the government was Mr. Hor Hong, the Provincial Department of Environment Director. Mr. Hor raised the issue of Som Thom in a meeting of the PRDC Executive Committee (EXCOM) on 21 July 2000. This resulted with an agreement to convene a special meeting on 25 July in which community representatives and various department staff were to reach a final decision on the issue. On 28 July 2000, the provincial authorities agreed to the proposal for the community to control the area of forest.

“At our [1999] end of year evaluation in February, the CBNRM core team and villagers decided that year 2000 would be the year we pressed for the granting of community forestry rights. We knew our processes were right and the commune was insisting their wish (for rights to manage) be recognized at provincial level... Of the eventual outcome, I was very happy with the final result. I was most surprised that the decision satisfied all the stakeholders involved. All line departments, the provincial authorities and the community. However, I feel that we are only half way. We still need our achievement to be recognized (formally) at the national level” Mr. Hor Hong, Director Provincial Department of Environment, Ratanakiri

5. The non-involvement of development agency staff

Significant also was the non-involvement of CARERE/CBNRM staff in the final stages of the outcome. From the presentation of the petition at the PRDC meeting to the final agreement, the initiatives came from government staff and the people of Som Thom themselves. Before the PRDC meeting, a representative from the commune approached Mr. Hor Hong and requested him to raise the issue in the meeting. Without this clear desire, coupled with an ability to articulate the commune’s aspirations, their efforts may have been in vain.

During the two-year process, the people of Som Thom were often reminded that CBNRM staff were there to facilitate the learning process, not to work on behalf of the commune. By being so forthright, the people of Som Thom had to take matters into their own hands. Not surprisingly, CBNRM staff see this initiative and the final outcome as a major success, and confirmation of two years capacity building work with the commune.

The CBNRM process of progressive empowerment and capacity building would not have worked without the ever-present motivation and spirit of the Som Thom people. (John pers comm, August 2000). Additionally, the skills and knowledge that had been part of the capacity building process such as the development and use of maps and development of user plans for particular forests areas was vital. This display of initiative can be viewed as the accumulative affect of the CBNRM process.

Staff of the project were also aware that approaches to provincial authorities by the people themselves had a far greater chance of success. This intermediary role had been consciously adopted to negate perceptions by government authorities that development agencies were manipulating villagers. Constantly a sensitive issue, it was acknowledged early on that an approach that was not as an intermediary may have a detrimental affect upon the project. Hence, there was a strong emphasis on facilitation and empowering villagers.

Conclusion

The legitimacy and legality of the decision to grant this forest concession is contentious to say the least. The recently redrafted laws concerning land and forests are at the time of writing, not in force. Both laws do however have chapters that deal explicitly with the rights of indigenous persons and their continual occupation and use of traditional lands and forests. So what does this granting of forest area mean for the people of Som Thom, the development agency staff, the provincial government, and the central level leaders?

For a community that has displayed initiative and a high level of motivation in achieving their aim, the granting of rights to traditional forest area can rightly be considered a success. The people of Som Thom have remained united in their felt need to exercise control over their livelihoods. But the unclear legal status of the agreement may result in disillusionment if decisions at the national level go against it.

The government must seek ways to skillfully manage a valuable natural resource that can give income to the nation as a whole, while striving to preserve and respect the cultural diversity of its citizenry. The obligations Cambodia has with regards to the issues of human rights and the environment as a signatory to international agreements, provides a challenge when it comes to finding equitable solutions.

For developing agencies such as CARERE and IDRC, emphasizing the need for cooperation and open
dialogue between stakeholders is a crucial component in their efforts to meet not only sustainability, but also equity. Som Thom highlights the value of an intermediary and holistic approach that development partners can adopt, rather than aligning themselves with one "side" or the other. Also, the need for horizontal integration through a multi-sectoral approach to development, is shown to be much more affective than partial, sectoral interventions. From the outset, the emphasis has been on facilitation and an intermediary approach to development. Bringing parties together to discuss problems has been a key element to the success of the people of Som Thom.

In attempting to document all the critical factors affecting Som Thom commune, CBNRM staff have had to reflect on the significance of contributions, both big and small, to the outcome. The range of personalities involved and their legacy with regards to the final decision, has not received adequate coverage in this article.

In conducting interviews for this article, posing the question of why such an agreement or meeting or decision occurred, generally met with the response of "I can't explain why, it just seemed to happen". More than exposing any weaknesses in understanding the processes, this answer highlights the importance of that indefinable element of personality and the complex chemistry that occurs between individuals. However, there is all round agreement that what has occurred in Ratanakiri has been historic. It also highlights the variables that can influence outcomes. In concluding, we offer a list of pre-requisites that are felt to be critical to achieving similar success in other areas:

- A local government structure open to a participatory approach to development and working with communities.
- A local government structure that stresses horizontal cooperation as opposed to a vertical, top down and sectoral approach to development.
- An intermediary/facilitator agent to bring stakeholders together.
- A process of visioning development with the input of all stakeholders.
- Adequate training and capacity building of implementation staff and target beneficiaries.
- Awareness raising
- Trust building and cooperation
- Dialogue and transparency

Obviously, more questions abound from this situation. Will Som Thom community retain their forest area after the laws are passed? Will government, at various levels throughout the country, be as understanding to all communities that seek to manage their natural resources? Will communities remain unified in their stance towards their traditional forests and lands as modernization creeps more and more into remote areas like that of Ratanakiri? Time will tell.

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Notes

1 This paper was written with the participation and assistance of the Ratanakiri CBNRM Team - Ashish John, Nhem Sovanna, Sous Pinreak, and Phat Phalit.

2 There are eight indigenous ethnic groups in Ratanakiri Province: Jarai, Tampouen, Kavet, Kachock, Krueng, Lun, Phnong and Brou. In this article the terms highlanders, villagers and indigenous people will be used interchangeably to refer generally to these various groups, or the Jarai specifically.

3 While originally an oil palm plantation, the area is now used to grow coffee by a Cambodian company in the venture, after the failure of the original crop to grow and the withdrawal of the major foreign investor.

4 The company cleared an initial 300-400 ha in 1996 and used this area for planting oil palm seedlings. Many of the attempts at expansion between 1996 and 2000 were met with resistance from villagers. A petition sent by the provincial government to the central level to reduce the size of the concession to 5,000 ha, was approved in early 2000.

5 Villagers told CARERE/IDRC staff that on this occasion, employees of the concession company used firearms and threats to intimidate them as a means of getting the villagers to comply with their demands. As the company also sought to expand its concession areas, thus further impinging on the lands of the villagers, this not surprisingly, caused anger amongst the villagers.

6 SEILA is a Cambodian Government experiment in "decentralization" - a process of redistributing authority from a primarily central level to incorporate provincial, district and commune levels.