

## No forest, no NTFPs for rural communities in Cambodia

Glen Mulcahy (CIFOR) and Manuel Boissière (CIFOR and CIRAD)

### Key points

- Eighty percent of Cambodia's rural poor depend on forests and agricultural land for subsistence and livelihoods.
- While the local government in each province is willing to help, it often lacks the capacity and local trust to assist local communities.
- Unsustainable commercial harvesting of Cambodia's forests in the 1990s (for international markets) is believed to have contributed to unprecedented flooding. In January 2002, all logging operations were suspended, however, small-scale illegal logging has continued.
- Conflicting regulations pertaining to royalties for NTFPs have led to informal fees on routes to markets, putting a strain on the trade.

NTFPs are important forest products for rural communities, but gaps exist in market information regarding local communities' access to markets, and between regulations and reality. This info brief draws lessons from a development-oriented research conducted in 16 villages located in Kampong Chhnang, Kampong Thom, Ratanakiri and Mondul Kiri provinces in Cambodia. It identifies actions that government organizations, and research and development projects could take to improve assistance programs for forest dependent people. The main objective of the research was to increase local people's benefits from Non Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) in a sustainable way. There were two steps to the research. First, we identified and selected NTFPs used and traded, and then we proposed ways to further develop NTFP management and trade.



Figure 1. Map of the project sites in Cambodia (adapted from Boissière *et al.* 2013).

## NTFPs, poverty and natural resources in Cambodia

With a large population of rural poor, continued forest degradation, and depletion of natural resources, poverty alleviation was included in the Cambodian National Strategic Development Plan (2006) and the Rectangular Strategy for Growth, Employment, Equity and Efficiency (2004). Various community based programs working towards increasing household income (and ultimately the State's) from natural resources have since been conducted, but with little success.

During the research on which this info brief is based (Boissière *et al.* 2013), bamboo, rattan, resin and one species of edible tarantula (cf *Haplopelma albostriatum*) were the most common and preferred NTFPs commercially utilized. However, communities close to markets lacked the raw materials to produce commercial products as the forests were already severely degraded. While other communities have the raw materials, transport to market is either costly or non-existent. Information on current prices and market trends is also lacking among NTFP collectors.

### Community forests

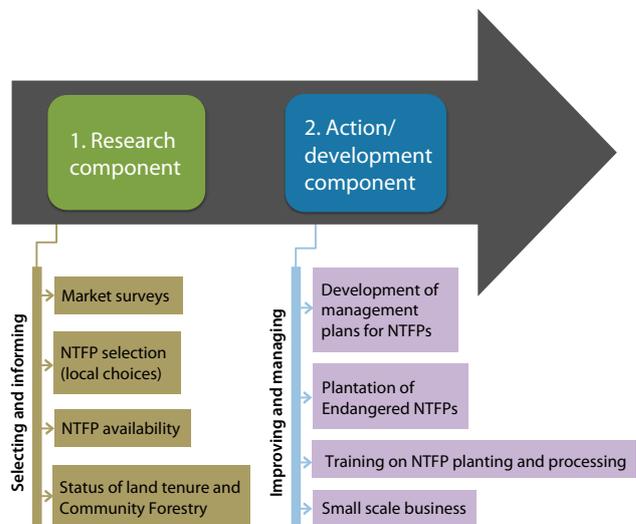
Local communities are being encouraged by NGOs and the Department of Forestry to apply for the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) approval for community forest (Community Forestry Law, Sub-decree No.79 December 2003). The legal framework for local communities to collect and trade NTFPs from community forests (CF) has been recognized in Forestry Law (NS/RKM/0802/016) and in Sub Decree No.79/2003 on Community Forestry Management (CFM). Community Forestry in Cambodia is a way to secure access to land and forest resources for local communities, as long as extraction of forest resources is sustainable. But the process is complicated and time consuming, and can take years to finalize by which time the forest in question is frequently severely degraded, sustainable harvesting impossible and rehabilitation expensive.

According to local people, the CF status does not give the local community the power to exclude outsiders, and so encroachment continues. It only provides legal documentation to prove it is a CF when a commercial company is granted a concession on the same land.

### Rural communities and forests

With a fast growing population, degraded forests, and high commercial demands (agro-industry, mining, encroachment, land grabbing for investment and illegal logging), utilization of forest products may not be sustainable. Deforestation in Cambodia has seen the loss of between 53 – 57% of the country's forests in the last two decades.

When income opportunities are limited, over-exploitation, illegal logging and wildlife poaching may be the only option for rural communities. Technical and financial support (e.g. microcredit) for small local businesses may reduce negative activities and safeguard natural resources. Long-term financial support also needs to be identified. Government and informal regulations pertaining to NTFPs should not be overlooked.



**Figure 2. Main steps in participatory actions in selected villages to improve local management of NTFPs (Boissière *et al.* 2013).**

### Livelihoods and adding value to NTFPs

Rehabilitation of severely degraded forests can only benefit local livelihoods if the process is in collaboration with the local people. The communities in our research project initially identified 15 species for commercial development. This was then reduced to three or four, depending on the village (Boissière *et al.* 2013). Rattan and bamboo were the most popular.

In selecting NTFP species for development, local capacity, optimum growing conditions, potential pests and diseases, seed sources, costs and markets must be taken into consideration. Failure to provide the necessary training and technical support for the community, in the short and long-term, may render any efforts futile.

Processing raw NTFPs into marketable items (value-adding) can help increase economic benefits for local communities, however, new skills, tools and management skills may be required. Concentrating on skills rather than costly tools (for handicrafts) is preferable. The project helped to improve skills for value-adding the raw NTFPs (bamboo and rattan) through processing them into marketable items such as furniture and household objects. Only one tool (an electric hand drill for bamboo) was introduced in the village of Konh Chung where servicing was available in the nearby town of Kampong Chhnang. Study tours to other handicraft producing areas of Cambodia increased the project communities' interest and confidence to try these new ventures. Frequent training programs for capacity building related to markets, market information and marketing are essential.

### Markets and information

Where alternative incomes are developed in collaboration with local communities, it is imperative that a market assessment be conducted. This would include information on market demands and prices, and how that information can be relayed to the collectors.

Many communities, particularly in remote areas, such as in Kampong Thom province, receive little to no information regarding market demands and prices for the NTFPs they collect. The more informed the villagers/collectors are, the more empowered they will be when dealing with traders and middlemen. These middlemen often provide vital services such as loans and live in the same village as the collectors.

We encouraged the communities to develop small working groups to aid communication and transfer skills. The development of fora and networks at the local, district and provincial levels, starting with these small groups with assistance from local NGOs could also help provide collectors with information on markets and market prices making them less vulnerable to exploitation. Both national and International NGO involvement has proven useful in acting as facilitators, mediators, trainers, and as a source of funds. Concern Worldwide (international humanitarian organisation) worked on various projects in Kampong Chhnang, including a 173 ha community forest development, from 1995 until 2005 when it handed over to Phnom Neang Kangrey Association (a Cambodian humanitarian NGO established in 1993). Other international organizations working in Cambodia include GTZ (German Corporation for Technical Cooperation) and WWF. While Cambodian organizations include Seila (working on poverty alleviation) and Community Forestry International Cambodia, which conducts training programs in Kampong Thom Province to develop CF boundaries, ultimately for MAFF recognition. However, such organizations (both international and national) may have their own agendas that do not necessarily match those of the local communities.

## Trade

Local communities who collect and sell NTFPs from State Forests under customary user rights, as per Article 53 of the Forestry Law (2002), are not required to pay royalties or premiums for commercial or subsistence use. However, the Sub-Decree on Community Forestry Management (article 12), passed in 2003, states that the royalties and premiums, in terms of the right to harvest, process, transport and sell NTFPs, are payable as outlined in article 55 of the Forestry Law.

## Forestry Law 31 August 2002

### Article 53

The State shall waive the royalties and/or premium for any timber products or NTFPs and premiums collected by the local community under traditional user rights or from forest community under the forest community agreement.

### Article 55

The Royalties and premiums shall be paid for all timber products and NTFPs recorded in the "Book A."

The rule of payment and receipt of revenues from royalties on timber products and NTFPs and premiums shall be determined by a joint Prakas of MAFF and the Ministry of Economy and Finance.

## Sub-Decree No: 79 Or Nor Krar. Bor Ka

### Article 12

Communities under a Community Forest Agreement may harvest, process, transport and sell forest products and NTFPs in accordance with the following conditions:

- Harvest of forest products for selling or bartering shall not be allowed within the first 5 years of approval of the Community Forest Management Plan.
- If the Community Forestry has been operating with a Community Forest Management Plan prior to the passage of this Sub-Decree, then the moratorium on harvesting forest products shall be considered from the date of approval on that Community Forest Management Plan; and
- Payment of any required royalties or premiums on forest products and NTFPs as prescribed in Article 55 of Forestry Law.

### Article 33

Any provisions that contradict this Sub-decree shall be considered as null and void.

Law enforcement institutions at the numerous checkpoints have used this ambiguity to their advantage. These informal fees, royalties and the cost and difficulty of obtaining transport permits have encouraged many traders and collectors to avoid the regular routes to market, instead they transport their products illegally. There is also limited infrastructure for transport at competitive prices, particularly for those in remote areas. At the end of the day the profit margin for the collectors is minimal.

## Local government

In our research sites, the local government (Forestry Department) is working to improve the local economy through sustainable management and value-adding of NTFPs, and also to empower the local communities. The main issue the research identified was the local communities' lack of trust in the local government, including the foresters. The Department of Forestry and Wildlife in Cambodia has maintained the structure developed during the French administration, including the categories of the offices (inspectorate, cantonment, division, and triage). The division and triage are present at the district and commune levels respectively, where foresters manage large areas of forestland. Among other tasks, they patrol and look for illegal loggers and smugglers. They also facilitate and control the implementation, at the village level, of community forestry. This gives villagers an image of a coercive institution. They see the local government as the one holding the stick, collecting informal fees and royalties and are therefore sceptical of the assistance being offered.

The local government officers' lack of knowledge of the local communities and familiarity with the local people, need immediate attention. Their lack of capacity in management, research, participatory methods, knowledge of NTFPs, agriculture and markets, can be learnt in a relatively short period of time (months, not necessarily years). Trust will take much more than just time to build. It requires a genuine interest in working with the communities.

## Moving Forward

Despite shortcomings, community forests represent not only an opportunity for forest conservation and rehabilitation in Cambodia, but also a step towards more secure tenure. In order to maximize the benefits from NTFPs collected in these community forests, a number of policies and actions are needed:

## Policy Recommendations

- Legal issues:
  - Clarify the Forestry Law and Community Forestry Sub Decree pertaining to the extraction and trade of NTFPs by local community collectors (i.e. the contradictions in royalties and taxes that apply to this trade).
  - Simplify the legal trade and transportation of NTFPs so as not to burden collectors.
  - Empower local communities to exclude outsiders and their livestock no matter what their status is (commercial company or neighbouring villagers).
- Work on access to include:
  - Infrastructure (roads and water sanitation)  
Remote villages were particularly interested in roads, despite the recognized risk of increased encroachment; without roads trade is nearly impossible.
  - Rights (land management).  
Without secure rights for local communities outsiders and their cattle cannot be excluded from community forests.

## Future development oriented projects and actions

We highly recommend that:

- Local communities participate in the project design with discussions during the initial stage, particularly on needs and expectations and what the project can and cannot do or provide. This part should be embedded in early project activities.
- Information is gathered to prioritise NTFPs for nursery propagation in collaboration with each village. This will help insure species with the least negative impact on the forest condition are selected.
- Training is provided for villagers for various aspects of NTFP management, including processing for value-adding.
- Long-term funding from the government and international community is secured for reforestation.
- Community management groups are developed in cooperation with local government and NGOs to include access to markets

and market information, and develop networks and fora for collectors. This may go some way to increasing trust among the stakeholders.

## Endnotes

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