

Voices of the forest: building partnerships for community forestry in Cambodia

Prabha Chandran, RECOFTC — The Center for People and Forests

“We’ve depended on the forest for many generations. If we don’t have legal rights, the forest will be lost. Before we signed the [community forest] agreement, we were always afraid that someone would take the trees and destroy the forest. It took us almost three years, but the agreement we have now means nobody can change the area and outsiders cannot invest and take away our forest. We can keep using it as we have traditionally.” (Mr Sorn Yam, Chairperson, Community Forest Management Committee, Kbal O KraNhak, Kampong Thom, Cambodia)

It’s a fight that’s been fought by local communities living in and around forests across the world and it’s becoming more urgent as rapid urbanisation, compounded by food and fuel shortages, puts daily pressure on forests. Yet, as the villagers of Kbal O KraNhak



Sorn Yam, Chairperson of the Community Forest Management Committee, worked for three years through six stages of approval to get legal recognition “otherwise the forest will be lost”

discovered, it is possible to reclaim forests and assert traditional rights — but only after a logging concession had virtually destroyed their habitat. From 1996 their forestlands were controlled by a logging company, whose license was revoked in 2001 following widespread illegal activities. By then, the forest had been largely destroyed and along with it, the livelihoods of those in Kampong Thom — especially their traditional trade of resin collection.

An environmental, social and economic disaster

On a national scale, more than half Cambodia’s forestland, nearly 7 out of 10.8 million hectares, was licensed to 33 companies via logging concessions in the 1990s. The government believed these concessions would generate much-needed revenues of US\$100 million annually. Instead, by 1997, it was estimated that four million cubic metres of illegal timber was pilfered each year — ten times what could be taken sustainably — causing a loss of US\$60 million to the national treasury.¹ One of the poorest countries in the region, Cambodia was recovering from almost three decades of civil war and social upheaval. Poor governance, weak institutions and law enforcement following the Khmer Rouge’s exploitive policies had decimated the country’s primary rainforest cover from 70 per cent in 1969 to 31 per cent, in less than 40 years². The conclusion from a number of reviews³ was that government control of logging operations was ineffectual and may jeopardise long-term economic growth and poverty reduction.

In response, the government of Cambodia declared a logging moratorium in 2002. However, economic growth continues to draw heavily on the country’s natural resources with investment in large-scale agriculture and rubber plantations posing a growing threat. The loss of forest cover has also exacerbated the poverty of millions of rural families like Mr Sorn Yams’, who depend on local forests for food, medicine, shelter and fuel wood.

Research shows that nearly half of Cambodia’s rural households — more than five million people — rely on forests for 20-50 per cent of their livelihood. For another one million people, forests provide over half of their livelihoods⁴. Faced with a critical situation

Image: Alison Rohrs, RECOFTC

Image and interview: Alison Rohrs, RECOFTC



“Once we make the Community Forest Management Plan, we can get more benefits from the forests. We will start doing silviculture. We’ll clear out some of the small plants and trees to get the bigger trees to grow. We’ll also benefit from the small trees. We’re already able to gather more products for traditional medicine and we have a plan to protect the forest. We can use trees for building houses, too. I’ve used skills I learned in the RECOFTC courses doing forest inventory, recording tree and plant species and developing records of the forest.”

Ms Sao Saveun,
Community Forest Management Committee

at the turn of the century, the country reviewed its development policies and drafted a National Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper. Vital for continued international support, this strategy depended on the contribution of all sectors towards the national goal of poverty reduction, including forests. In 2003, the country committed to achieving 60 per cent forest cover by 2015 in order to meet its own Millennium Development Goal targets.

Building partnerships for success

“When I arrived in Cambodia as Chief Technical Advisor to the Capacity Building for Sustainable Forest and Land Management Project at the beginning of April 2007, I was sceptical that community forestry would advance very far or fast in Cambodia,” says James Bampton, Program Coordinator, RECOFTC – The Center for People and Forests. “When I left in July 2009, I held a very different view: 124 potential community forestry areas had been approved by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries in six of Cambodia’s 24 provinces, covering a little over 126,900 hectares.” Today, in partnership with the Forestry Administration, international development agencies, communities and NGOs, RECOFTC has helped put some 237,781 hectares of forest into the hands of more than 60,000 families from 450 villages. The organisation has directly supported more than half the country’s community forestry sites and those with legal agreements. In Kampong Thom alone, RECOFTC has enabled 120 villages to go through the legalisation process between 2008 and 2010. So how did this impressive change come about?

Faced with the huge task of stewarding some 300 community forestry sites under the project through the complex legal recognition process with very few resources and poor government capacity at all levels, it quickly became obvious that only a strong partnership of all major stakeholders – grassroots NGOs, community leaders, administration officials and international organisations – could promote the sustainable development of community forestry in Cambodia. It was a mission that was to consume the project staff from then on. All staff had ‘partnership’ included in their formal job title. Nationally, and in each of its five target cantonments, the project recruited and deployed

Community Forestry Partnership Coordinators. Their task was to initiate, coordinate and manage partnerships as one staff member in each cantonment would never be able to do everything that was necessary.

A beginning had been made in the 1990s with the coming together of various NGO groups who had started working with communities in mostly degraded areas: The Menonite Central Committee established the first community forest in Takeo province, planting *Acacia mangium* on barren land. In Pursat and Kampong Chhnang provinces communities were organised by the South Asia Development Program, and Concern Worldwide supported a range of community-based programmes where villagers developed management plans detailing silvicultural activities. In Kampong Thom, too, the villagers of Tboung Teuk banded together to begin planting trees and protecting the forest once the company was evicted.

Creating a legal framework for community forestry

From these humble beginnings, a national working group of committed individuals from civil society, the Forestry Administration and donors got together to learn from pilot experiences on the ground, and internationally, to formulate a policy and legal framework for a national community forestry programme. The partnership was formed gradually through interactions enabled by a variety of more or less informal and inter-linked networks. Various provincial level community forestry and natural resource management networks, as well as broader environmental, religious and indigenous people’s networks added to the mix. From all of these emerged a group who realised that partnership rather than conflict would more effectively lead to change. Most of them came together through the Community Forestry Working Group that was formed under the Sustainable Management of Resources in the Lower Mekong Basin Project in 1998 to assist the



Image: Alison Rohrs, RECOFTC

Phok Chantra, a Forestry administration official, trained with RECOFTC so the community could learn how to record and manage forest resources



Image: Alison Rohrs, RECOFTC

Chea Tun, mother of seven, no longer worries about feeding her family and is active in patrolling the forest to report illegal logging

government of Cambodia in developing the legal framework necessary for community forestry.

The categorical failure of the concession system and the powerful alliance between international agencies and local civil society led to the passage of the Forestry Law in 2002: “The Minister of Agriculture Forests and Fisheries has the authority to allocate an area of Permanent Forest Reserve to a community or group of people living inside or near a forest area in the form of a community forest.”⁵

Together with its partners, RECOFTC set about implementing the Capacity Building for Sustainable Forest and Land Management Project in 2006. First, a programme was designed for each target cantonment through a 63 day Training of Trainers course. These trainers then ran a series of courses in their cantonments for community forestry development facilitators so each knew the next steps in the formalisation process. Of particular importance was the training of local forest administration staff alongside NGO staff so that, through training together, they had a similar understanding of development needs, built relationships and were able to plan a coordinated course of action together. The lack of understanding about community forestry among government officials and their crucial role in endorsing documents without which community forests could not be formalised, required a particular focus on training local government. Equally critical was the training of forest community leaders, through elected management committees.

The second component of the strategy was the development of ‘Cantonment Community Forest Development Plans’. These were facilitated by the projects’ Partnership Coordinators through an assessment of the requirements to complete the formalisation process, including funding needs as well as an analysis of what each development partner had planned. The third component targeted coordination at the national level among development partners (both donors and international NGOs) and the Forestry Administration.

A National Community Forestry Program Coordination Committee was established in 2007 in response to “the need to chart the direction for the National Community Forestry Program”, which requires “a clear understanding of the current situation on the ground, the strengths and weaknesses of current systems, and the opportunities that exist to further community forestry in Cambodia.”

Legal recognition for community forests

With the main building blocks in place, the partners turned their attention to identifying potential community forest sites and the work of building capacity for legal recognition of these sites through six stages of local, provincial and national requirements. In Kbal O KraNhak, for instance, RECOFTC’s work began in 2008. Working closely with the local community and the Forestry Administration through all the steps of the process, it helped the community gain an official community forest agreement on 11 November 2009 — a day the villagers will never forget.

“RECOFTC had prepared a detailed plan for each step of the legalisation process,” recalls Phok Chantra, the local Forestry Administration official. “Each step had specific activities. I explained the process to the community. We followed this plan through the whole process. After the agreement was reached, I felt proud because I had helped the community. It’s proof I didn’t lie to them!” Chantra subsequently took three more RECOFTC training courses “and then I delivered those courses to the community: record keeping and financial management, resource assessment for Community Forest Management Plans, and a forest inventory. Now,

the local people also report illegal activities to me which is very helpful since I have a large area to patrol.”

Over the course of four years, the Capacity Building for Sustainable Forest and Land Management Project delivered a massive grassroots training program through 70 field-level trainings on community forestry. Beginning with 33 nationals who became community forestry trainers, a further 1,416 individuals were trained to understand the process and benefits of the community forests programme, the most important being secure rights over forestlands.

Once the long procedure for legal recognition was over, the next step was learning to manage the forestlands. Through other livelihood support programs, local administration officials and communities were also taught to develop sustainable forest management plans.

Rebuilding livelihoods

For Ms Chea Tun, a mother of seven, life in Kbal O KraNhak has changed from an uncertain struggle for survival to an assured harvest of rice and soya beans in addition to the Cassava that she grows upland. “I know the agreement was signed, and I feel more secure that I can use forest materials, like firewood, mushrooms, vines to make fences, and resin,” she says. “Some members of the community collect resin. If I want a bit, they give it to me for free. We mix it with bark and use it as fuel to light the stove.”

Having realised the economic value of their forestlands once more, the community is determined to protect it. “We used to talk about how to stop locals and outsiders from cutting down trees,” says Chea Thun, “but there was nothing we could do to stop them. We have more power now that we signed the community forest agreement. This year, an outsider was cutting down trees illegally. We tracked him down and confiscated his materials. Then we reported it to the Forestry Administration.”

In Kampong Thom, as in other areas, the programme is also encouraging women to take an active part in the drawing up of Forest Management Plans. The Manage our Forests project is active in Kampong Thom and Kratié provinces and is helping 21 villages create and implement management plans for 20 community forests. Community forestry training is a key function of these projects. During 2009-2010, the three projects hosted 54 field training events and involved 1,339 participants from the Forestry Administration, government agencies, NGOs and local community forestry groups. Ms. Sao Saveun, for instance, took over her husband’s elected seat on the committee and is actively involved in management, inventory, and patrolling of forest areas.

Mua Amkon, a community forest member from Boengkok village in Kampong Chhnang sums up their common narrative: “When I was young, this whole village was forestland. Only a few families lived here. We used the forest for building a few small houses, cow sheds and for collecting firewood. During the Pol Pot regime, the forest was cleared to make a coconut plantation. Starting from around 1980, more and more people moved in and needed farmland, so they cleared the forest, and it disappeared. I really regretted seeing the forest disappear. We used to have a lot of trees, and then, almost nothing is left. But now, we can protect the forest. We are lucky to have the opportunity.”

In 2010 Beongkok village joined the ranks of legally recognised community forests in Cambodia. In that same year, the National Forest Policy (NFP) for 2010-2030 was approved, paving the way for legal and policy reforms in the forestry sector. In recognition of forests’ essential contribution to national development, the



Image and interview: Alison Rohrs, RECOFTC

Mr Teav Pot collects resin from a *dipterocarp* tree. He can sell the resin for 30 cents a kilo or trade it for rice. Resin is a primary non-timber forest product for the community, used for sealing furniture, making soap, and fuelling lamps and stoves. Although the process looks harmful to the tree, resin can be collected sustainably. A small cut is normally made in the tree, and heat from a small fire causes the resin to flow. Studies in southern Mondulkiri province reported that 86 per cent of families owned resin trees, with an average of 77 trees per family. The income from the sale of resin averaged US\$3.6 per tree per year (with a mean annual income per family ranging from US\$299-377 across four villages). The total annual income from resin sales across the four villages was US\$61,000.⁶ Of the 11,000-18,000 tons of resin collected in Cambodia each year, approximately 3,000-4,000 tons is sold domestically and the remainder is exported to Vietnam, Thailand and Lao PDR.

NFP emphasises the importance of good governance and promotes community forestry specifically under Programme 4 of its six point programme. Indeed the strategic direction for Objective 8 states community forests have “demonstrated considerable potential to protect forests and support rural livelihoods. Recently community forestry has expanded from low value forest to also include more valuable forest.”

RECOFTC continues to engage not only in formalisation of community forests but also in community forest networking, management plans and enhancement of rural livelihoods. Through a “programmatically and partnership” approach, it hopes to contribute significantly to the achievement of the goals and targets of the Community Forestry Program of National Forest Program (2010-2029) endorsed by the Royal Government of Cambodia in October 2010. Together with the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation and Development and the European Union, RECOFTC has also expanded its coverage to some 200 community forests in ten of 24 provinces in the country. And yes, that’s more good news for the villagers of Kampong Thom.