ROADS TO
DEVELOPMENT

Insights from
Sre Ambel District,
Southwest Cambodia

MEAS NEE AND WAYNE McCALLUM

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Contents

Acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADHOC	Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association
AFSC	American Friends Service Committee
CBNRM	Community-based Natural Resource Management
CBO	Community-based Organization
DFID	UK Department for International Development
EED	Church Development Service (Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst)
FACT	Fisheries Action Coalition Team
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
ICCO	Interchurch Organisation for Development Co-operation
ISLP	Integrated Sustainable Livelihoods Program
IMF	International Monetary Fund
MoU	Memorandum of Understanding
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NTFP	Non-Timber Forest Products
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNTAC	UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia
US	United States

Acknowledgments

Although it is our names on the cover, the contents of this book reflect the contribution of many. A full list of acknowledgements would take pages, and in the space supplied we can highlight only a few; for those missed we apologize. Among those we would like to recognize here, foremost are the staff of the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), starting with Russell Peterson, who commissioned this work, and Patricia Deboer for her contributions. Mr Oung Tivea and the wider staff of the AFSC's Integrated Sustainable Livelihoods Program in Sre Ambel provided both logistical help and insight as we traveled down our own road of discovery.

Many other authorities and agencies made contributions to this work in terms of their time and support, including staff from different Sre Ambel-based non-governmental organizations, including CARE, Khmer Ahimsa, the Fisheries Action Coalition Team (FACT), the Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC) and Prum Vihear Thor. We were also assisted by commune council members from Sre Ambel district and provincial and district government officials from the Ministries of Environment; Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries; and Land Management. We also wish to give our grateful thanks to the community leaders from the various community-based organizations that we contacted and spoke to.

In the end, however, this book is built on the experiences of the villagers, the people, of Sre Ambel. We wish to offer them our sincerest thanks and the hope that the time they gave to us will be repaid through the measure and consideration of this work. To others not mentioned here, but who gave their time for discussion and interviews, we thank you.

The authors also have family and friends who, at times, have been placed on the sideline as we have sought to complete our research, as we have spent time away and tried to put our ideas into words and images. We are both eternally grateful for your patience. Thank you, also, to Roo Griffiths, who has displayed tolerance and patience in her role of maintaining a standard of shape and form for our words and ideas. Penultimately, without the support of the Interchurch Organisation for Development Co-operation (ICCO) and Evangelischer Entwicklungsdienst (EED), who provided financial support for this work, it would never have evolved beyond a "good idea".

Finally, it is our belief that any research undertaking, this book included, leaves an imprint on those people and things touched by it, from informants to the Earth itself, through the resources it has supplied. This raises a challenge for us and others who come to read and think about the ideas contained herein. The challenge, we contend, is to draw on this book's ideas and to consider how they can be used to sustain the lives and contribute to the resilience of those who are not in a position to speak for themselves. For the authors, this challenge is the greatest acknowledgment of all.

Meas Nee and Wayne McCallum

Phnom Penh (Cambodia) and Little River (New Zealand)
August 2009
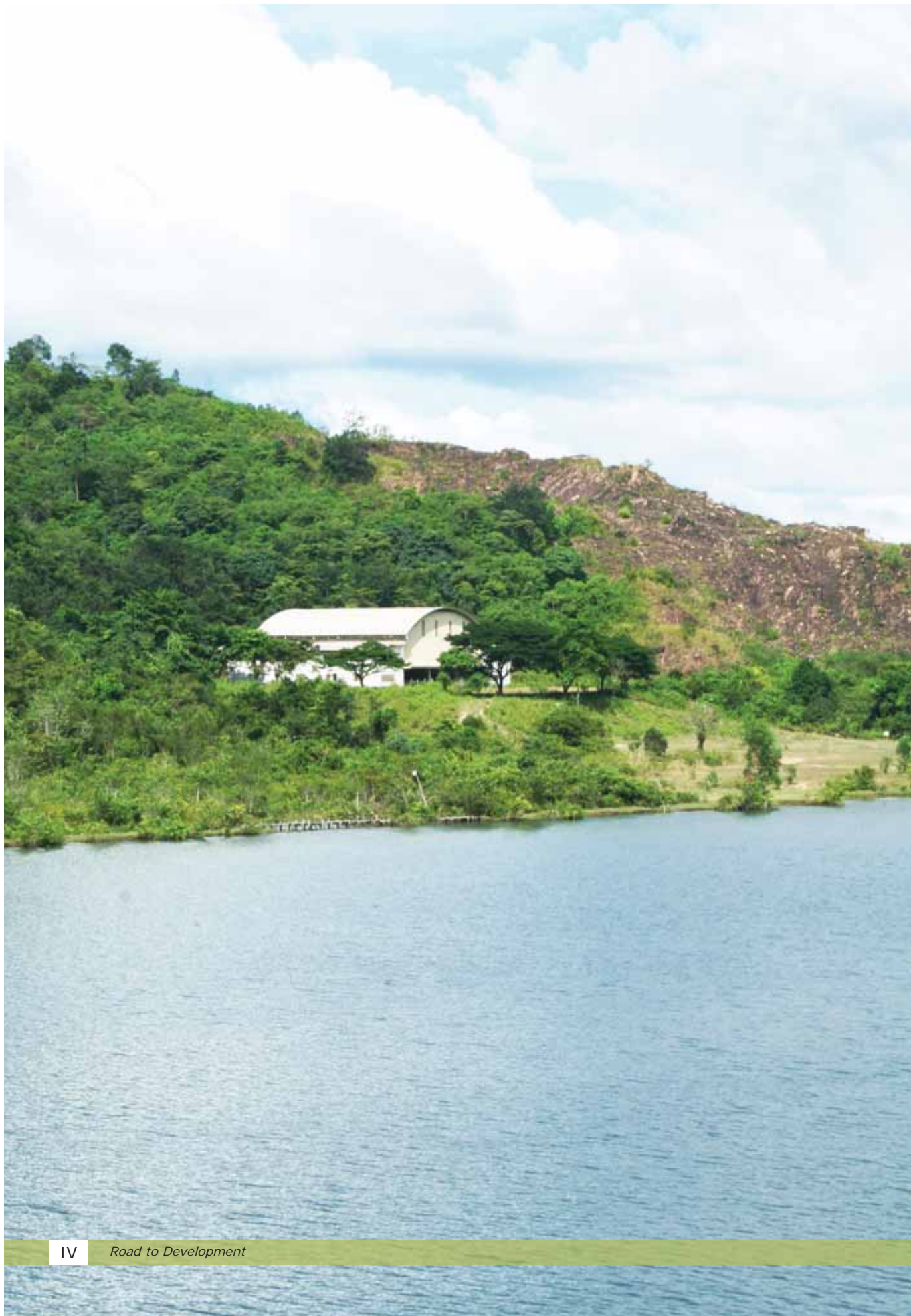
Introduction

Young children, Krang Chek village, Sre Ambel district (2005).

"Development." The word conjures up images of countries, places and people moving from primitiveness, poverty and disadvantage to modernity, wealth and fulfillment. Underpinning this is the assumption that development is "good", something to be encouraged and aspired to.

But go beneath the surface and explore the meaning and global experience of development and things become hazier, with any number of questions coming to mind. What, for example, should be the goals, processes and results of development? How should the costs and benefits of development be distributed? How can we measure development? What constitutes "good" development? Across the globe, people have struggled to answer these questions, at the same time as changing political, socioeconomic and environmental circumstances have conspired to generate a myriad of challenges to existing development doctrines and programs.

Emerging out of years of civil strife, Cambodia appears, on the surface at least, to be on the road to recovery. Institutions, infrastructure and new businesses are springing up across the country, transforming the lives of the citizens. However, Cambodia faces issues over the extent and form of its current development patterns. Experiences such as those in Sre Ambel district, the case study focus of this book, indicate that elements of contemporary development are leading to some unexpected and undesirable effects, which threaten the wellbeing and future of local communities and the nation as a whole.

This book seeks to explore the idea of what constitutes "good development" in the context of Cambodia, focusing particularly on issues of investment, land rights and local communities. Our intention is to draw out an understanding of what different development "roads" mean for people, for places and for the physical environment. Further, we aim to explore whether there are alternative roads to those currently being followed, ones that are more compassionate and inclusive of local communities and grounded within the values and aspirations of Cambodian culture. It is our belief that, when development is framed within this latter context, it is more likely to be fair, equitable and a source of enduring national benefit.

The information in this study has been gathered from observations of development and change in the district of Sre Ambel, Koh Kong province, in southwest Cambodia. Although this is a very small part of the country, we believe that insights garnered from the history and experiences in Sre Ambel can inform understanding and approaches to development in other parts of Cambodia. We hope that those involved in development – government, business, agencies and individuals – will draw on the ideas brought forth in this study to inform and direct their development activities. The route set out by this study is a challenging one, but it is one worth taking for the wellbeing of present and future generations of Cambodians.

Approach

This book is based on a study that evolved from a series of interviews and field studies undertaken in late 2008 and early 2009. Around 70 interviews were conducted with individuals from a variety of organizations, occupations and backgrounds. This included individuals from the world of business, local and national government officials and non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives, as well as rural villagers. Information collected was subsequently studied for insights that contributed to an understanding of development in Cambodia, along the lines of the themes laid out in this book.

We chose to base our study on a case study of one particular locality, the district of Sre Ambel in southwest Cambodia (see map). This area is of particular interest to our sponsors, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), as they have supported its development over the past 12 years. The authors hope that this case study will be able to reach out further, and that readers throughout Cambodia and overseas will find the issues described interesting, pertinent and challenging.

Given current sensitivities in Cambodia, we have avoided naming specific NGOs, companies, government institutions or persons in this publication as much as possible. Nothing in this publication is intended to offend, and our focus is on the broader lessons learned rather than on the individual characters.

case studies can highlight patterns that are applicable to the wider world, provided that an acknowledgement is made of the role of local factors in influencing human behavior and action

The use of case studies has a long history within the field of development research. It is recognized that the in-depth study of a locality can offer opportunities to arrange and develop themes and concepts. Locational specificity does not mean that findings are relevant to one place only. On the contrary, case studies can

Location map, Sre Ambel district, Koh Kong Province, Cambodia.

highlight patterns that are applicable to the wider world, provided that an acknowledgement is made of the role of local factors in influencing human behavior and action. As such, observations in this book have a potential relevance extending beyond Sre Ambel and even Cambodia.

Finally, studies of the type featured here require that researchers be aware of how their values and perspectives affect their findings. We have sought to remain aware of our perspectives and to control for their impacts by means of an ongoing process of discussion and comparison, both between us, the authors, and with others. This discussion has been used to test our thinking, helping us to evaluate and re-evaluate our study in the face of critiques and new ideas. We also feel that, as part of this process, we should "come clean" about our values and history, so that you, the reader, can evaluate how effective we have been. Below are our respective "researcher confessions" as a contribution to this process.

I was born in 1959 in Svay Rieng province, Cambodia, and have lived in the country ever since. I have been involved in development work since the early 1990s. I did my PhD degree, focused on social development in post-conflict situations, at La Trobe University, Melbourne. For the past ten years, I have been involved in various research projects oncommunity development. At the same time, I have been a consultant for various development projects in Cambodia. My particular interest is in rights-based development, and in empowering communities to manage and cope with contextual changes. I can be contacted at measnee@villagefocus.org.

I am originally from New Zealand and have lived and worked in Cambodia since 2004, spending part of the time working as a volunteer in Sre Ambel. I have an academic background in environmental sociology, and the bulk of my professional life has been spent working in community-based environment programs. I have a strong interest in human and environmental rights issues. I am currently based in New Zealand and can be contacted at macwayne9@hotmail.com. I also like birds.

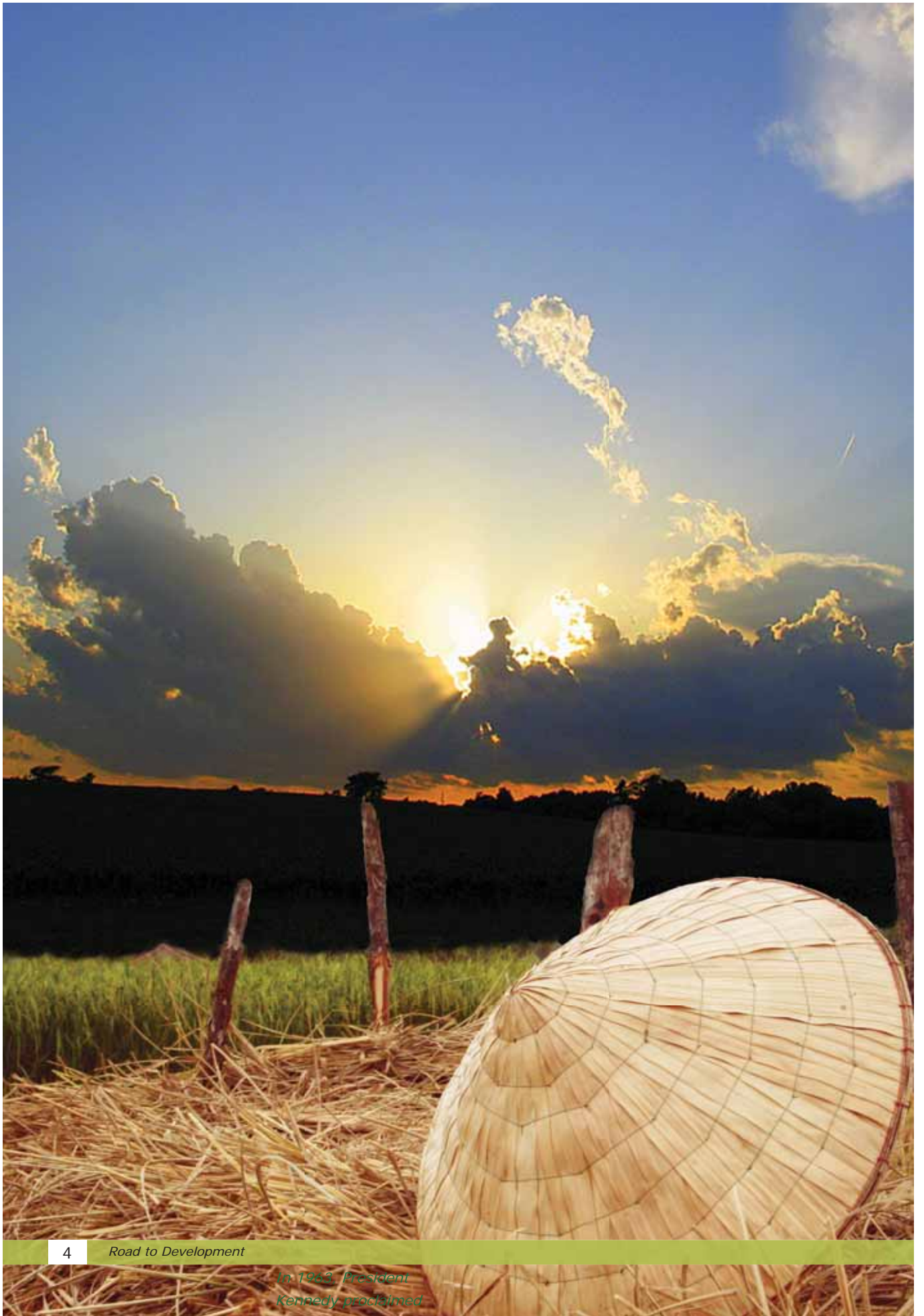**Meas Nee (PhD)**

Lead Researcher and Author

Wayne McCallum (PhD)

Associate Researcher and Author; Photographer

Environment protected areas surrounding Sre Ambel.

*In 1961, President
Kennedy proclaimed*

Introducing
d e v e l o p m e n t
Wayne McCallum

Green rice, buffalo and a pagoda in the background, these have been key contextual constants in the historic patterns of development in Sre Ambel.

THE BIRTH OF A CONCEPT

The period immediately following the end of World War II marked a wholesale change in the landscape and theory of development. The colonial era was coming to a close, with new and wider geopolitical concerns, such as the Cold War, emerging as key influences. What followed became known as the "era of development", a period which many suggest formally commenced with President-elect Harry S. Truman's inauguration speech in 1949:

> *"We must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. The old imperialism – exploitation for foreign profit – has no place in our plans. What we envisage is a program of development based on the concept of democratic fair dealing."*
>
> Truman (1949

Behind this was a range of factors. The success of the Marshall Plan in rebuilding post-war Europe left a feeling that, with the correct approach, resources, technology and state commitment, "good" development could be managed for. Cold War concerns about the spread of communism encouraged a belief that commitment to the development of "less developed countries" was necessary to prevent their drift to the left. An avalanche of new technologies emerging from wartime innovation and research gave the impression that the tools for overcoming most obstacles to development were available and ready for use. Finally, a set of conceptual ideas emerged to offer the theoretical basis for development. This included the modernization theory developed by Walt Rostow, which literally set out the steps a nation needed to pass through to reach a point of economic "takeoff". Other theorists described the links between modernization, democracy and good governance (e.g. David Apter), the psychological necessities for modernization (e.g. David McClelland) and what an active development citizen might look like within the "modernized" world (e.g. Alex Inkeles).

CHANGE AND NEW MODELS: DEVELOPMENT FROM THE MID-1960S

In 1963, President Kennedy proclaimed that a "rising tide", in the form of economic growth, would "raise all ships". By the mid-1960s, this view was being questioned vigorously, and many of the ideas underpinning the era of development were coming under fire as a result of what seemed to be marginal achievements

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on the back of millions of dollars of development assistance. New ideas were emerging about the form and function of development. The door was open for new approaches that looked for inspiration from alternative theories and actions.

NEO-POPULIST DEVELOPMENT

The thinking described above provided a pathway towards a series of new, neo-populist approaches to development, which have become central to the way many western NGOs have organized and managed their programs. Themes expressed in these new concepts have included:

- Respect for local diversity and agendas;

- A belief that "reality" is negotiable and contested by the interpretations of different actors;

- A focus on community-level operations;

- Expression and insertion of local voices into development;

- Recognition of development as a process rather than an outcome.

Anyone working within the human rights, governance or natural resource sectors will recognize many of the themes of the neo-populist mode, which has been pivotal in shaping the methods adopted by the international non-government sector around the world.

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THE NEO-LIBERAL DEVELOPMENT PARADIGM AND THE WASHINGTON CONSENSUS

A concurrent approach, centered on neo-liberal economic ideas, also came to operate in many parts of the developing world. Approaches to development centered on the evolution of neo-liberal economic institutions and themes. With an emphasis on economic notions of effectiveness and efficiency, western multilateral lending agencies, such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), have exported these ideas, termed the Washington Consensus, to the developing world.

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Originally coined by John Williamson, a US economist, the phrase has been used to describe the range of reforms considered necessary to address development issues in crisis-plagued developing countries. Over time, the Consensus has evolved to include support for the development of democratic institutions alongside the more traditional economic aspects of the paradigm.

TENSION AND CHANGE

Unsurprisingly, the difference in approach between the neo-populist view and the neo-liberal paradigm has often led to tension between the two. For example, bilaterally sponsored projects, such as dams and roads, have frequently resulted in communities being displaced and their environments destroyed. In such circumstances, it has often been those from within the NGO sector who have mobilized community-based groups to campaign and advocate for their interests and rights.

Responding to the challenge of declining public and political support caused by such campaigns and by the wider protest movement, demonstrated graphically in Seattle in 1999 (the so-called "Battle of Seattle"), western bilateral agencies have been compelled to introduce conditions in their loans that have factored in environmental and human considerations.

Meanwhile, the emergent balance between neo-populist and neo-liberal development approaches has come under recent pressure from new forces linked to the rise of bilateral financing from countries such as China (McBride, 2008). This new "Beijing Consensus" has been characterized by development investment with limited concern for transparency and human and environmental impacts. This has included a "rolling back" of many of the controls established over the lending practices of western bilateral agencies and an erosion of the role and influence of neo-populist development agencies.

Given this brief overview of trends in development since 1949, the next chapter examines development within Cambodia since Angkorean times, looking in particular at the approaches outlined above and also at some of the themes that have shaped development work in the country.

Road to Development
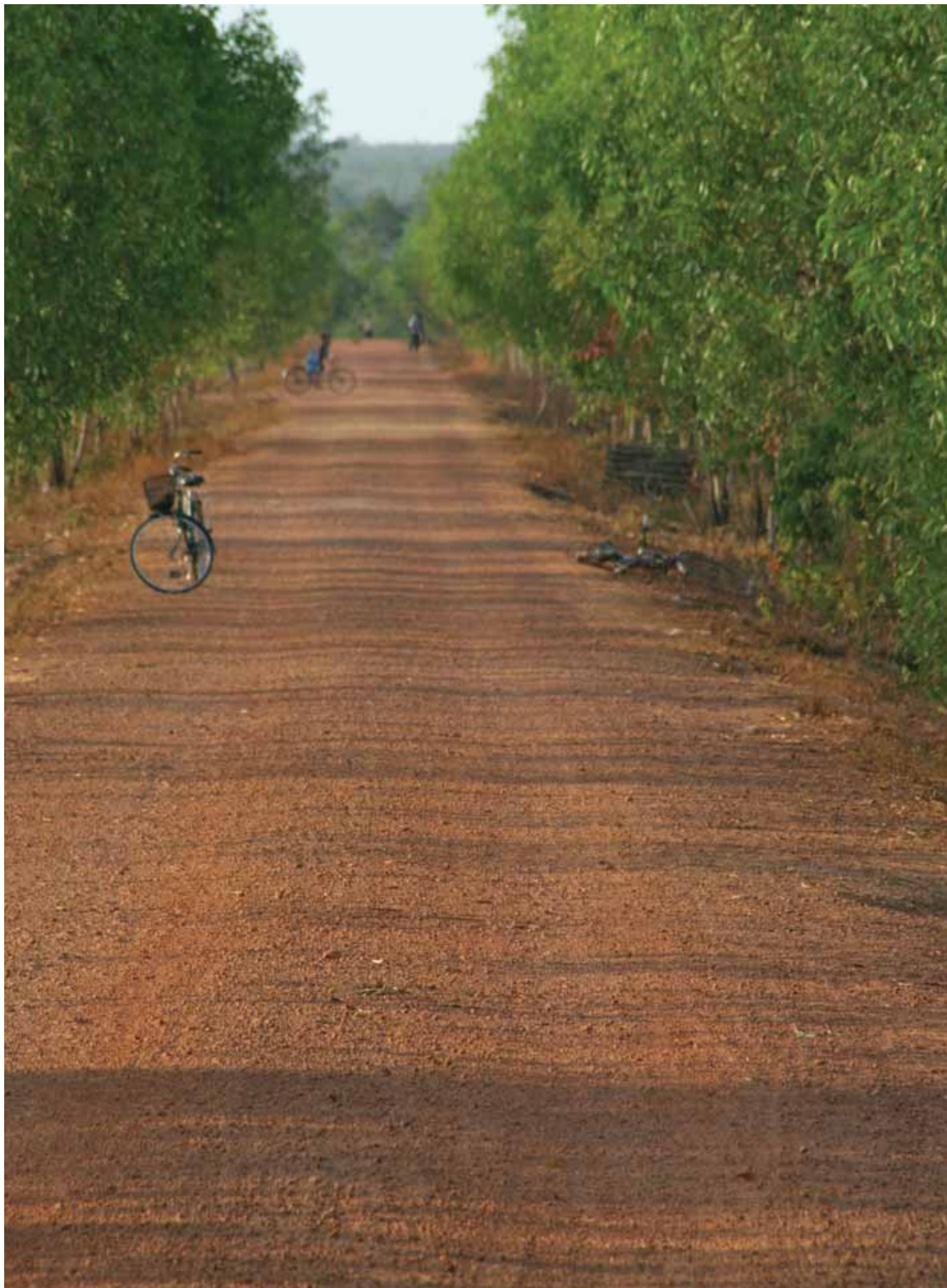
Development
i n   C a m b o d i a
Wayne McCallum

D evelopment has occurred against a backdrop of wider international change and progress, evolving from a process dominated by domestic variables, such as geography and politics, to one increasingly shaped by a combination of national and international variables. Processes such as migration, conquest and growing economic linkages have been instrumental in leading this change.

As a result, we cannot talk about development in Cambodia without considering the way that a variety of internal and external factors have collided and coalesced to create the trends and patterns we observe today. The discussion that follows begins with a historical perspective on this evolution and change, starting with the pre-colonial world of the Angkorean Empire, one of the greatest pre-industrial civilizations.

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THE ANGKOREAN EMPIRE AND PRE-EUROPEAN DEVELOPMENT

Prior to European contact and colonialism, Cambodian history is dominated by the rise and fall of the Angkorean Empire. Historians suggest that the empire was essentially a feudal city state, centered on a power elite led by a king and religious heads, whose authority was based around a combination of custom, belief and coercion (Chandler, 1996). The glue for this system was a set of patronage-based rights and responsibilities by means of which, in return for labor and its outputs, especially rice, inhabitants were granted stability and security. Development under this system was highly centralized and based on a city state sustained materially by a pre-industrial agrarian rice economy, a food staple at the center of economic and cultural life (as it is today) (ibid).

A number of satellite towns were established over the Angkorean period, with an elaborate road network evolving to connect these settlements to the city state. Other communities, including villages in the Cardamom Mountains (southwest Cambodia) also existed at this time. Their linkages to the economy and development of the Angkorean empire were minimal or nonexistent, however, and accounts suggest that these communities remained largely isolated, surviving within a local subsistence economy (Martine, 1997). There are historic accounts of forays into the Cardamoms by parties from Angkor in the search for animals and spices (including the cardamom spice itself), but these were never more than temporary excursions. Given the distances and the complications involved in travel at that time, it is unlikely that there was a significant development relationship between Angkor and Sre Ambel, the focus of this book.

The gradual demise of the Angkorean Empire offers some potential lessons for development, both within Cambodia and beyond. It is now popularly believed

that environment changes, spurred on by the deforestation and subsequent erosion of nearby uplands, contributed to the demise of the Angkor city state (Diamond, 2005). This erosion, it is contended, caused the siltation of the irrigation infrastructure that had powered the rice growing system around Angkor. It is also possible that deforestation changed local weather patterns, reducing the amount of rainfall available for rice growing. Given the centrality of rice to the growth and development of the state, including the support of its power elite, shortages would have had serious consequences – akin to the implications of a sudden oil scarcity in present-day western economies. That the state subsequently went into decline is therefore a matter of little surprise.

COLONIALISM AND DEVELOPMENT IN CAMBODIA

Following the demise of Angkor, from around 1400 onwards, Cambodia entered a long period of flux and change, experiencing periods of peace punctuated by invasion and war, with the national boundaries waxing and waning as time passed. By the mid-1800s, a situation had evolved whereby the country faced an imminent risk of conquest and absorption by Thailand and Vietnam. To avoid extinction, Cambodia ceded to French protectorate authority in 1863, becoming part of the wider colony of French Indochina. For the next 90-odd years, apart from a period of occupation by Japan in the early 1940s, development within the country became linked to the prevailing forces of French colonial economic, social and administrative control.

As an approach to development, colonialism can be understood as the extension of a nation's sovereignty over territory beyond its borders, through the establishment of either settler or exploitation colonies in which indigenous populations are directly ruled, displaced or exterminated. In Cambodia, the approach was basically the former on both accounts, with many French settlers migrating to the country to take up economic opportunities and the colonial administration furnishing a bureaucracy to rule over the indigenous population.

Historically, colonizing nations have tended to dominate the resources, labor and markets of their colonies, while imposing socio-cultural, religious and linguistic structures on the indigenous population. As part of the "second wave" of French colonialism, Cambodia was not subject to the excesses that characterized earlier French colonization attempts in Africa and North America. A hallmark of the French experience in Cambodia was a tendency to view colonialism as a civilizing mission (mission civilisatrice), whose central theme was a perceived duty to bring "civilization" to a benighted people. As such, colonial officials in Cambodia undertook a policy of Franco-Europeanization. Under this process, Khmers who adopted French culture, including the fluent use of the French language, were granted special status. The king was respected as a symbolic head and many Cambodians established close relationships with French individuals and businesses.

The establishment of the protectorate allowed France to extend its global geopolitical reach, to exploit the natural resources and people of the region and to create a market for its economic goods. Within Cambodia, development was characterized by a focus on the creation of infrastructure (roads, bridges, irrigation systems) and a bureaucracy to maintain both the infrastructure and the economic system it sustained. This entailed the establishment of an administrative and legal system that conferred on the colonial administration immense control over people, land and natural resources. The laws developed to facilitate this control reflected western concepts of ownership, which were alien to traditional eastern notions of communalism. The result of this within Cambodia was a progressive undermining of traditional agrarian and authority systems, the result being a steady decline in local capacity to instigate indigenous activities that reflected indigenous conditions and circumstances (Hurst, 1990). This tension between external and internal influences remains a feature of Cambodia's contemporary development environment.

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EMERGING DEVELOPMENT PARADIGMS AND CAMBODIA

Following World War II and the end of colonialism in Cambodia, the new interpretation of modernization as development was filtered through efforts by the US and its allies to achieve victory in Vietnam as well as, later, to halt a communist insurgency in Cambodia itself. In this context, development assistance was provided for infrastructure and other activities; in return, the country was expected to support American efforts in the region. Trying simultaneously to deal with the Americans and to meet the demands of the North Vietnamese to support their camps along the eastern Cambodian border, Prince Norodom Sihanouk faced a difficult balancing act that eventually defeated him (Shawcross, 1996). This and other events paved the way for the takeover by the Khmer Rouge and the regime's subsequent efforts to develop Cambodia through an agrarian "rice revolution" (Maguire, 2005).

Following the Vietnamese invasion and the subsequent years until the arrival of United Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC), considerable constraints were placed on the movement of western aid to Cambodia (including an embargo). Over this period, a number of international NGOs, including AFSC, worked in Cambodia in defiance of the embargo and restrictions. This resulted in many of these organizations performing tasks that would normally have been undertaken by bilateral and multilateral donors, including participating in large-scale infrastructure projects such as roads and hydropower development. On its arrival, UNTAC remained largely separate from the humanitarian assistance realm, out of a concern that aid would strengthen certain domestic power brokers at the expense of others. Nonetheless, the end of the embargo, the presence of UNTAC and the stability it afforded encouraged an increase in aid, although some national governments chose to hold off their assistance programs until after the 1993 elections.

In the period following the 1993 elections, donors converged on Cambodia with sizeable budgets to support the country's transition from a conflict nation into a democratic society. A growth in the number of local and international NGOs ensued, across environmental, developmental, human rights and governance fields.

Those working in development in Cambodia are likely to have either worked or had close involvement with organizations whose practices and focus embrace many of the themes of neo-populism. This is unsurprising, as the rise of neo-populist development coincided with efforts to reconstruct Cambodia in the post-conflict age, in which the role of international NGOs has been significant.

The international pressures on the Washington Consensus around the world beginning in the late 1990s also affected work in Cambodia.

Meanwhile, the Washington Consensus manifested itself in Cambodia in bilateral and multilateral assistance for roads, hospitals and schools. The international pressures on the Washington Consensus around the world beginning in the late 1990s also affected work in Cambodia. An example of this involves the proposal to develop a hydropower dam near Kampot, in southwest Cambodia. The so-called Kamchay Hydropower Project was originally scheduled for financing by a Canadian investment company, but the company subsequently withdrew from the project following protests in Cambodia and abroad over the scheme's anticipated human and environmental impacts.

By the early 2000s, some major bilateral donors had become disillusioned with the lack of systemic political and economic change achieved, and many started to query their support for NGOs:

"In Cambodia … [a]fter more than ten years of substantial funding to NGOs working on human rights, rule of law, and government accountability, the donors began to question the effectiveness of non-government organizations in accelerating reforms."

Blaikie (2000)

A new administration in the White House, with different priorities from the past, and the repercussions of 9/11, including changed funding priorities, placed Cambodia's NGO sector under increasing pressure. The consequences included a re-evaluation of priorities by many donors and a process of ongoing self-evaluation within the NGO sector itself. This hastened a growing emphasis on the empowerment of local authorities and groups through processes of civil society development and the championing of decentralization, backed by the nationalization of many international organization programs, the latter having begun in the mid-1990s.

This pledge could be regarded as a harbinger of a new development era in Cambodia, one where the influence of the neo-liberal and neo-populist approaches will progressively give way to approaches grounded in the new emergent consensus.

Meanwhile, a defining moment in the shift towards new investment in Cambodia came in April 2006, when the Chinese government pledged to support a US$600 million aid package, a figure that almost matched the amount announced by western bilateral agencies a few months later. This pledge could be regarded as a harbinger of a new development era in Cambodia, one where the influence of the neo-liberal and neo-populist approaches will progressively give way to approaches grounded in the new emergent consensus. At least one consequence of this has been a growing effort by western bilateral lenders to reduce the conditions on their own loans. The ADB, for example, recently started a process of formally reassessing its lending criteria, creating what one commentator has described as a "race to the bottom-line" in the consideration of human and environment factors by global bilateral lending agencies (Middleton, 2008).

CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENT IN CAMBODIA: THEMES

Historic accounts and recent experience allow us to identify a series of themes within contemporary development in Cambodia. These themes extend across the gambit of Cambodian life, from the meta levels of culture and history through to the personal attitudes and perceptions of development workers. With guidance from our fieldwork and interviews, we explore the most significant of these in the discussion that follows.

Culture and history

Elements within Cambodia's culture and history conspire to create numerous challenges for present-day development practice. The domestic employment environment of Cambodia, for example, is centered on client–patron relationships, which have pre-colonial origins in Khmer culture but which were reinforced by changes implemented over the colonial period. One of the consequences of this system is that many national staff, especially in government, have come to occupy their jobs on the basis of social connections or through position "purchase", rather than on the basis of qualifications and experience. This complicates their capacity to engage in development activities: sometimes people have limited vocational ability; at other times time and effort are directed towards ways of recouping the cost of acquiring their position.

Looking back at the genocide and conflict of the Khmer Rouge era, the deliberate targeting of the educated and of government employees means that even today there remains a limited base of nationals with practical development experience (Le Billon, 2002) (although this obviously changes each year, as new people enter the workforce). Out of a pre-Khmer Rouge level of 70 forestry engineers, 170 technicians and 507 wardens, for example, only three, seven and ten, respectively, remained alive in the country in 1979 (ibid).

Meanwhile, a number of those who received training following the fall of the Khmer Rouge did so in Soviet bloc countries, where the teaching often focused on topics and techniques of limited relevance to Cambodia's development needs. This led to some interesting outcomes, for example the student who spent four years studying in Bulgaria, required to learn Russian in a country that seasonally goes well below 0°c, all to focus on the potato, a vegetable of marginal importance to Cambodians. A number of students from the Southeast Asian communist bloc also received civil engineering training, specifically on hydro development, in Sweden and Norway. This has created a planning and managerial workforce whose raison d'être is dam building, one factor that has fed into the current popularity of hydropower development across the region.

In a critical review of human rights in Cambodia, one scholar has described what she considers to be a key rift in Cambodian society: the rural and urban divide (Hughes, 2007). The origin of this divide, she argues, is a deep-seated fear on the part of the state and urban Khmers regarding the rural community's capacity to be a cause of domestic instability and unrest. Given that the Khmer Rouge drew its support from rural areas, the persistence of post-traumatic fears and the size of the nation's rural population (around 80 percent of the country's total), such suspicions should not be considered surprising.

The persistence of this divide has complicated efforts to promote alliances between the urban and rural communities of the country, alliances which could put forward an additional balancing force in the face of other national influences. It has also meant that a large portion of the urban community, including national decision makers, has remained detached and insulated from issues linked to the impacts of development in rural Cambodia. As a result, for example, for many urban dwellers, concerns about hydro development, if considered at all, have been rendered down to issues of demand, supply and efficiency, whereas the biophysical and human consequences for rural communities have been overlooked or ignored.

Governance

Issues linked to transparency and accountability among government authorities are recognized as generating challenges for development in Cambodia (Pellini and Ayres, 2007). Lack of transparency and accountability in government planning in Cambodia makes it difficult to assess the impacts of certain activities on local people and the evolution of integrated approaches to development across regions and the country. Several factors contribute to this issue:

- Efforts by senior power elites to maintain control and disguise their activities from the wider population, supported by a latent coercive power;

- A poorly developed judiciary that has proven insufficient as a bulwark against the excesses of the executive branch of government and power elites;

- Lack of integration at the administrative level, which sees ministries and departments not communicating and often competing against each other;

- The rise of bilateral donors (e.g. China) that place minimal human and environmental conditionalities on the loans they make to the Cambodian government;

- The evolving legislative environment: numerous gaps still exist within the legal systems of governance, resulting in spaces where certain authorities can act with legal impunity.

The roots of some of these problems lie in colonial and post-conflict developments in Cambodia. From a colonial perspective, a number of Cambodia's laws, including those governing natural resources, were developed when the population was considerably smaller, resources were more common and knowledge over their management was evolving. Management of forests in Cambodia today, for example, continues to focus on colonial models of exploitation that emphasize harvesting regimes and exclude the recognition of indigenous rights and uses (Hurst, 1990). One only has to look at the emblem of the Forestry Administration, two axes beneath a tree, to see how these sentiments have been carried forward into the present. Similarly, the same authority oversees laws that prohibit the use of fire in forests, despite its importance to indigenous swidden agriculture (MacInnes, 2007).

In terms of post-conflict change and development, a "two-faced" strategy appears to have developed within the state. On the face of it, official policies have purported to conform to views and expressions of international development agencies and donors (the themes of the Washington Consensus). Such policies have championed the consideration of variables such as human rights and ecological considerations in the management of development.

Beneath this, however, a different and unofficial process of "shadow state politics" has evolved. This has worked to strengthen the authority of the ruling elite through the control of markets and the distribution of material rewards. These processes have allowed the Cambodian leadership to translate its *political* position into effective *power*, with the resulting blurring of political and economic life reinforcing the position of a few, often at the expense of the wider population. It has become apparent that, with the rise of the Beijing Consensus and the associated access of the Cambodian state to alternative sources of capital, the need to maintain western donor support, and therefore the official front, has decreased. The consequence has been an increasing willingness of the Cambodian leadership to openly champion development, including hydropower and large-scale plantation projects, that blatantly violates the principles of the "official" line (Pellini and Ayres, 2007).

... with the rise of the Beijing Consensus and the associated access of the Cambodian state to alternative sources of capital, the need to maintain western donor support, and therefore the official front, has decreased.

Lack of integration among authorities is also recognized as a constraint to development in Cambodia. Again drawing on the example of natural resource management, the Forestry Administration, Fisheries Administration, Ministry of Environment and Ministry of Industry, Mines and Energy have traditionally approached the environment in individual pieces and not integrated wholes. As a result, each agency can be working on the same portion of land but with contradictory objectives in mind. In the Prek Kampong Saom catchment, for example, the Forestry Administration has been slowly working with villagers to establish a community forest; since 2004, the Ministry of Industry, Mines and Energy has been in negotiations to oversee the development of a hydropower project that will flood a portion of the same area.

Decentralization: Creating and empowering local institutions

Decentralization has been touted as a key ingredient in promoting effective development within Cambodia (Pellini and Ayres, 2007). In part, this is because it is seen as offering a means for addressing many of the current pitfalls observed in the way development has been organized and managed in the country. Underpinning this perception appears to be the belief that a system that is decentralized will: 1) be more responsive to local needs; 2) facilitate the development of civil society; and 3) provide a balance against centralized institutions of power. Yet, despite wide support, including from sections of the government itself, decentralization has been painfully slow in Cambodia. A number of issues can account for this, including questions over government commitment, slow development of supportive legislation and, at the local level, limited capacity of citizens to participate in decentralization programs.

Development of commune councils has been a key feature of decentralization initiatives in Cambodia. A recently completed commune office, Sre Ambel district 2008.

There is also a valid risk in that decentralization, where it has occurred in Cambodia, has transformed social relations by simply reorganizing and reinforcing existing ones: creating new sets of "winners" and "losers" while re-solidifying many old power relationships under a new guise. Further, given the persistent client–patron social system, there is the capacity in Cambodia for decentralization to reinforce the state's authority through the reassertion of client control over local political networks. The result of this, paradoxically, could be that decentralization has become a vehicle for the insertion of state authority more deeply in people's lives. This interpretation suggests that "imported" ideas such as decentralization, accountability and transparency do not necessarily transform the society in which they are applied, but may themselves be reshaped by it.

NGO- and donor-centered development

NGOs, or "the third sector", have played a central role in the way development has evolved and been practiced in Cambodia and elsewhere in Southeast Asia over the past 15 years (Hilhorst, 2003). In Cambodia, there are estimated to be over 600 NGOs operating, including international NGOs and an increasing number of national-based organizations (Parks, 2008).[1] The ongoing involvement of NGOs within the Cambodia development landscape has been influenced and confounded by several issues.

Donors, power and responsibilities

As elsewhere in the world, the continued integrity of NGO activities in Cambodia has been reliant on ongoing access to donor funds, including those administered by national government agencies and foundations. As noted previously, bilateral assistance flooded into Cambodia after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords in 1991 but after ten years of marginal results and changing donor priorities this support was becoming more difficult to secure.

Donors have helped transform the Sre Ambel landscape. In 2004, the Sovanna Baitong project started to re-house villagers away from sensitive conservation areas around Chipat, moving them down to the coastal plain. Original conditions in 2004 were stark (left); however, by 2007, ongoing assistance with agricultural projects transformed the same scene into a productive agricultural environment (right), mirroring a landscape not dissimilar to that found in other countries, such as Israel

In order to maintain the financial integrity of their programs, therefore, NGOs operating in Cambodia have been compelled to look for innovative ways to ally their activities with the changing priorities of donors. This has created a steady

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[1] *The Ministry of Interior has registered over 2000 local NGOs and associations, though many of these are believed to be inactive.*

process of realignment in many NGOs, with a convergence towards the priorities and strategies of the donors (Parks, 2008). One consequence of this process has been an increase in the demands of upward accountability to donors, at the expense of NGO relationships with their focus communities.

This situation has been compounded by at times arduous reporting requirements, commitment to imported managerial models (e.g. log frames) and time consuming procurement procedures. The combined result has been increased administrative transaction costs, which have drawn staff away from "hands-on" development activities.

Government relations and advocacy

Constraints and redefining of priorities have also arisen for NGOs that have entered into close relationships with the Cambodian government, most commonly expressed by the signing of a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with a particular ministry or department. Many of the conservation-focused international NGOs working in Cambodia, for example, have MoUs with government authorities to cooperate in the co-management of particular wilderness areas. The formal nature of these agreements, which demand that ministerial staff work with the NGOs, has complicated the agencies' ability to question and challenge the government on its decisions and actions. This has been the case even when such actions have been at odds with NGOs' own internal policies and the goals of their conservation programming. In short, the price of being allowed to work within particular conservation landscapes has been an implicit agreement not to embarrass the government by openly challenging or questioning it. This has created an asymmetrical power dynamic, with influence and control moving away from the center and towards the priorities and strategies of the government.

Nature vs. people

In contrast with the conservation-based international NGOs, many of those with explicit human-centered concerns, such as human rights and livelihoods improvement, have maintained less formal government relations. For the advocacy groups this has been important, as impartiality is central to their claims of integrity and neutrality on human rights issues (Parks, 2008). This point of departure from the conservation NGOs has helped reinforce a dichotomy in the country between programs that explicitly prioritize the conservation of nature ("nature first" programs) and those that concentrate on people-centered development ("human first" programs).

This dichotomy has deeper roots, however, going further than just institutional relations. Many of the conservation programs that have evolved in Cambodia adopted traditional approaches to conservation grounded in the exclusion of people from important natural areas (the so-called "fences and fines" approach).

Over time, however, a gradual realignment towards a more human-centered approach has occurred, sparked in part by changing donor priorities, whereby conservation programs have been required to factor human issues into their grant applications. This has facilitated the rise of the integrated conservation and development approach, which is now widespread across Cambodia's conservation management landscape.

Pressure on local natural systems, including land clearance, continues to pose a major challenge to those interested in protecting the district's forests and wetland environments.

The result is that, currently, many conservation programs now work closely with local people and have attached a "community" section to their traditional enforcement and monitoring programs. Nonetheless, a point of departure from "human first" programs remains: whereas programs that start with people at the center of development will look at how natural resources are managed to support local communities, for the "nature first" programs the issue becomes one of how to manage people in order to achieve conservation outcomes.

... the dichotomy has stood in the way of the development of a more collaborative environment surrounding the two sectors.

This dichotomy might be of no more than academic interest if it did not have implications for NGO efficacy in Cambodia. Arguably, the key point here is that the dichotomy has stood in the way of the development of a more collaborative environment surrounding the two sectors. This is not surprising. The "nature first" NGOs, with their government MoUs, are understandably reluctant to align themselves with NGOs whose perspective on the people-to-nature relationship is different from their own and which periodically question the actions of the government.

This has stopped allegiances forming within the NGO community in Cambodia that could provide a counterbalance to other development forces in the country. It has also contributed to periodic conflicts when programs from the two perspectives have undertaken projects in the same location. Since 2003, for example, AFSC has promoted community forestry in the Prek Kampong Saom catchment in Sre Ambel, supporting the development of institutional arrangements that allow local communities to manage certain resources in the nearby forest. At the same time, environmental organizations together with government officials have sought to enforce rules that prevent villagers from having access to forest resources.

Concept-centered development

Community: Reality or metaphor?

The rise of neo-populist development approaches has seen a revival of interest in the linkages between local people and their role in the development process. One form this has taken is a focus on participatory arrangements centered on the concept of "community". This has spawned a diverse nomenclature based on the community motif, with terms such as community forestry, community-based health care, community natural resource management, community fisheries and community development emerging as examples.

This emphasis on the capacity of communities to contribute to the development process has been challenged on numerous levels:

- The notion of community has been accused of having only metaphoric qualities, with no or little reality on the ground. In Cambodia, for example, it has been argued that the term has no direct relevance and that it is the "household" that is the most significant local social unit.

- Community-based processes have been accused of relying on negotiation techniques that omit a range of demographics (e.g. poor, sick, women).

- Negotiation processes between local people, developers and authorities are seldom equal in the way that power is distributed, including the way that knowledge and information are treated.

- Community facilitators often struggle to penetrate local and cultural differences, at the expense of the development process.

- Elements said to adhere within communities and claimed to support development, such as social capital, may not exist or be as beneficial as expected.

The above criticisms and efforts to respond to them suggest that ideas about achieving development through communities, however attractive, face numerous challenges. Further, insights suggest that awareness of such things as "power", "representation" and local "differences" are prerequisites for attempts to match the realities of community-based processes and development expectations.

... ideas about achieving development through communities, however attractive, face numerous challenges.

Dilemma of the reflective development worker

> *"If we just step aside, we will leave Cambodia to what comes along; I don't think that is right."*
>
> *Interview with international development worker (2008)*

A question that many western development staff working in Cambodia eventually come to ask themselves is "how appropriate is it to insert my ideals, values and perspectives into the development process?" Such questions echo wider tensions in debates over what is real and valid in a "post-development" age, including the questions of "who has power over the truth?" and "whose reality counts?" Together, these questions raise very serious issues with regard to how "outsiders" engage and promote "development".

A question that many western development staff working in Cambodia eventually come to ask themselves is "how appropriate is it to insert my ideals, values and perspectives into the development process?"

Such queries also give rise to various other questions, such as:

- If we defend the appropriateness of different (non-western) values, moral standards and notions of acceptable human conduct, are we agreeing to the abandonment of democracy, human rights and environmental justice?

- And, if we go through this, are we guilty of some sort of ethical refusal that condemns people to an uncertain future?

- Moreover, are we then actually bringing anything useful to the development process? It could be, instead, that steps towards nurturing certain western values offer a point of discussion for creating an effective development program!

The issues raised by such questions need not be considered strictly problematic. What they can nurture, in contrast, are ideas about how individuals and agencies can approach and engage in development. Thus, instead of responding by disengaging from the development process, a response could be a pledge to reengage, by drawing on methods and approaches that ensure that the values and perspectives of "others" are drawn into practice.

In Cambodia, initiatives centered on community media projects, including work in the northeast of the country by a local NGO called Live and Learn, have been seeking to achieve this. Using video, the Live and Learn project has worked alongside local indigenous communities to create media stories summarizing their values, perspectives and concerns. In creating these stories, the local people have been given "voices", in the form of short films, that they have been able to enter into different planning fora, in effect giving them a voice in development decision making.

A further step is ensuring that the knowledge and experience of "others" are given comparable consideration in development decision making. Again, in the northeast of Cambodia, a former internationally sponsored project based in Stung Treng sought to promote locally based decision making by empowering communities as "village scientists", drawing on local knowledge, experience and expertise to shape, undertake and report on research undertaken in nearby waterways.

The overall message is that questions over the role and position of external values and perspectives should not stifle participation in development by "outsiders".

The overall message is that questions over the role and position of external values and perspectives should not stifle participation in development by "outsiders". Rather, by alerting us to certain challenges, these questions compel us to find answers that set us on the road to managing them.

This chapter has attempted to draw out some of the themes and issues emerging from the topic of development with a specific focus on their relevance to events and processes in Cambodia. The next chapter will look at Khmer notions of development, and their differences with western such notions.

Development poses questions for all who live in the district, including those who have lived through decades of development and change.

Khmer notions
of development

Meas Nee

KHMER PERCEPTIONS OF DEVELOPMENT

The term development is translated into Khmer as akphiwat. Cambodian people usually define this as a progressive process, towards the improvement of people's lives. However, at a micro level such terminology is often restricted, applying only to economic assets and capacity in terms of skills and knowledge. Attempts to conduct in-depth analysis of these development aspects, linked to other socio-political issues, are often discouraged. The common outcome is that materials and technical support are provided to target groups but there is limited scope to tackle socio-political root causes.

In the meantime, depending on how development is framed, Cambodian people tend to perceive socio-political development as the role of the government, and therefore as not relevant to them. Although some NGOs have succeeded in helping communities improve their analysis of socioeconomic issues, for the most part both NGOs and communities hesitate to adopt solutions that would disturb the current socio-political structure.

Similarly, the government feels that socio-political issues are its responsibility, and that it should not be challenged by ordinary citizens. Some key high-ranking government representatives have been heard to respond to people's demands for socio-political solutions by saying they are interfering in the government's affairs and warning them that ordinary citizens and civil society should not criticize the government or ask the government for change. Demands for "social justice" and other activities to improve the rights of the people are often perceived as "anti-government". In some universities in Cambodia, students and lecturers cannot discuss politics and social issues in their classes.

... for the most part both NGOs and communities hesitate to adopt solutions that would disturb the current socio-political structure.

KEY PRACTICES IN KHMER NOTIONS OF DEVELOPMENT

The notion of the patron leader

In contemporary western notions of "good governance", leaders must be able to demonstrate skills in participatory processes and empowerment and leaders must be elected by members. This modern system is encouraged by the government's reform program, and NGOs have been actively engaged by working with communities to form community-based organizations (CBOs) through democratic election and applying the practice of people's empowerment and participation.

This effort has been hampered in Cambodia by the patron-client culture. In traditional Khmer society, leadership is strongly bounded by the patron-client relationship. The patron here refers to a person who can speak on behalf of community members and has the ability to provide material and financial support to members when

necessary. Often, this leader is from a rich or middle-class family and has a wide range of networks, especially strong links to other upper patrons. Transparency and accountability are far less important than trusting relationships between the patron (as leader) and clients (the followers). Constant checks and balances on the patron's power by the clients are seen as unhealthy. This specific form of power relationship is accepted by both leader and followers.

Given this culture, leaders are often nominated based on the nature of trust between the patron and clients, rather than on the skills and competency of the elected leader. Patron leaders are often elected within CBOs in the name of democracy and participatory approaches adopted by NGOs. It is often the case that such leaders stand up immediately when their interests are severely affected but become quiet again as soon as their needs are met, even at the cost of ordinary members. Such patron leaders usually have strong relationships with other patrons, both in the local community and beyond. In response to community advocacy campaigns, authorities may use the network of patron leaders as a means to break people's solidarity or convince people not to advocate for their rights.

The emergence of modern western notions of governance and democratic leadership amid a patronage society has provoked some critical discussions among development practitioners. For example, modern leadership puts its emphasis on bottom-up empowerment and democracy, in strong contrast with the emphasis in the patronage system. Furthermore, as has been observed, providing CBOs that are strongly embedded within the patronage culture with a democratic system has often resulted in leaders taking all key decisions and members being left passive, as previously. In essence, what has evolved is a type of hybrid system, one which brings together democratic notions with the client–patron forces of traditional Khmer society.

The notion of people's participation in Cambodian culture

The development world views people's participation as being a leader participating with members based on the members' interests and common decisions. The patron-client culture acts completely against this view. In this context, the trusted leader must take the lead. Local NGOs and the government often assess people's active participation by counting the number of people joining in activities or projects. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that, under a patron leader, people wait for instructions from their leader rather than taking their own initiative. Taking commands from a leader is accepted as both more appropriate and easier.

Furthermore, democracy and participatory processes that allow people to voice their differences can lead to conflict. Patron leaders are not used to coping with conflicting interests and, experience shows, can become outraged. Some members become exhausted by and fed up with the whole business, going on to withdraw when conflicts cannot be resolved.

"Problem-based development" vs. "issue-based thinking"

The Cambodian way of analyzing community needs and development is often focused on problems and solutions, rather than on a broader examination of the issues at hand. This has been exacerbated by the notion of "needs identification" or "needs assessment", where "needs" are often limited to a description of the problems and an identification of appropriate solutions. The top-down, or teacher-centered, approach to education that has dominated the country's education system in the recent past could be a contributing factor in this.

In the Cambodian language, there is no difference between the word "problem" and the word "issue". Both are translated as panyaha. A problem-based analysis describes the extent of the existing situation but does not discuss in-depth the social and political root causes. Usually, a focus on problems leads to poor analysis and solutions that do not address the need to promote social and political changes, or address fundamental underlying issues, instead focusing solely on service delivery.

This particular phenomenon has been observed in NGOs working in health, education and welfare support, where staff focus on service delivery but are not conscious of the need to work with the community to demand policy changes and empower people to access better welfare services from the government. For example, in health care, staff see their role as lying in provision of trainings, medical supplies and traveling expenses, but do not pay attention to the poor who have been forced to leave clinics or hospitals because they do not have money to pay. If they do respond, they pay the clinic fee but express a fear of mobilizing people to change the behavior of health center staff. (Donors have introduced a health equity funding scheme to deal with this problem.) A similar practice has been observed among NGOs working in education, which provide an additional salary to motivate teachers to teach but do not really express a high level of consciousness of the importance of empowering the community to act collectively to improve the quality of education. Some have noted that many NGOs tend to work "for" the community rather than "with" the community, based on their unilateral interpretation of what the community needs.

Activity-oriented approach vs. strategic focus

Based on the culture of authoritarian leadership, the Cambodian people have a strong belief in the idea that only leaders can make changes, not the common people. This perception is supported by Cambodian history, where there is no record of any strong social movement made up of the common people.

In an authoritarian culture, the leader is responsible for setting out the strategic direction for their organization, whereas the role of the staff is to implement activities developed for the strategy. Strategic documents are developed by the leadership, leaving little room for the participation of local and field staff in the planning process.

A lack of awareness of strategic directions among field staff can lead to negative impacts on the way in which projects are managed, as can a lack of involvement in the development of a strategy by local staff and locally based people, i.e. those who are charged with implementing and those who experience the strategy. For example, staff often focus only on activities but cannot provide an analytical explanation regarding how these activities can contribute to an overall program strategy. Some NGO staff are capable of managing projects in the community and providing good narrative reports on their activities, but at the same time cannot explain how these activities' outcomes link to program goals and objectives. A reoccurring problem is that groups focus on outputs, e.g. number of vaccinations given, rather than on

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A lack of awareness of strategic directions among field staff can lead to negative impacts on the way in which projects are managed ...

outcomes, e.g. decrease in the rate of a certain sickness. Similar experiences have been observed at the level of community-based leadership and CBOs, where project leaders are often skilled in project management and implementation but shortsighted on community empowerment, gender and other developmental processes.

Bearing in mind these notions, as well as the concepts of western development described earlier, the next chapter will explore in depth the geographic area of the case study for this book, the district of Sre Ambel, and explore the meaning, form and issues arising from efforts to promote and manage development in that location.

Development is changing the face of Sre Ambel, bringing new infrastructure such as this large bridge across the Prek Kompong Saom.
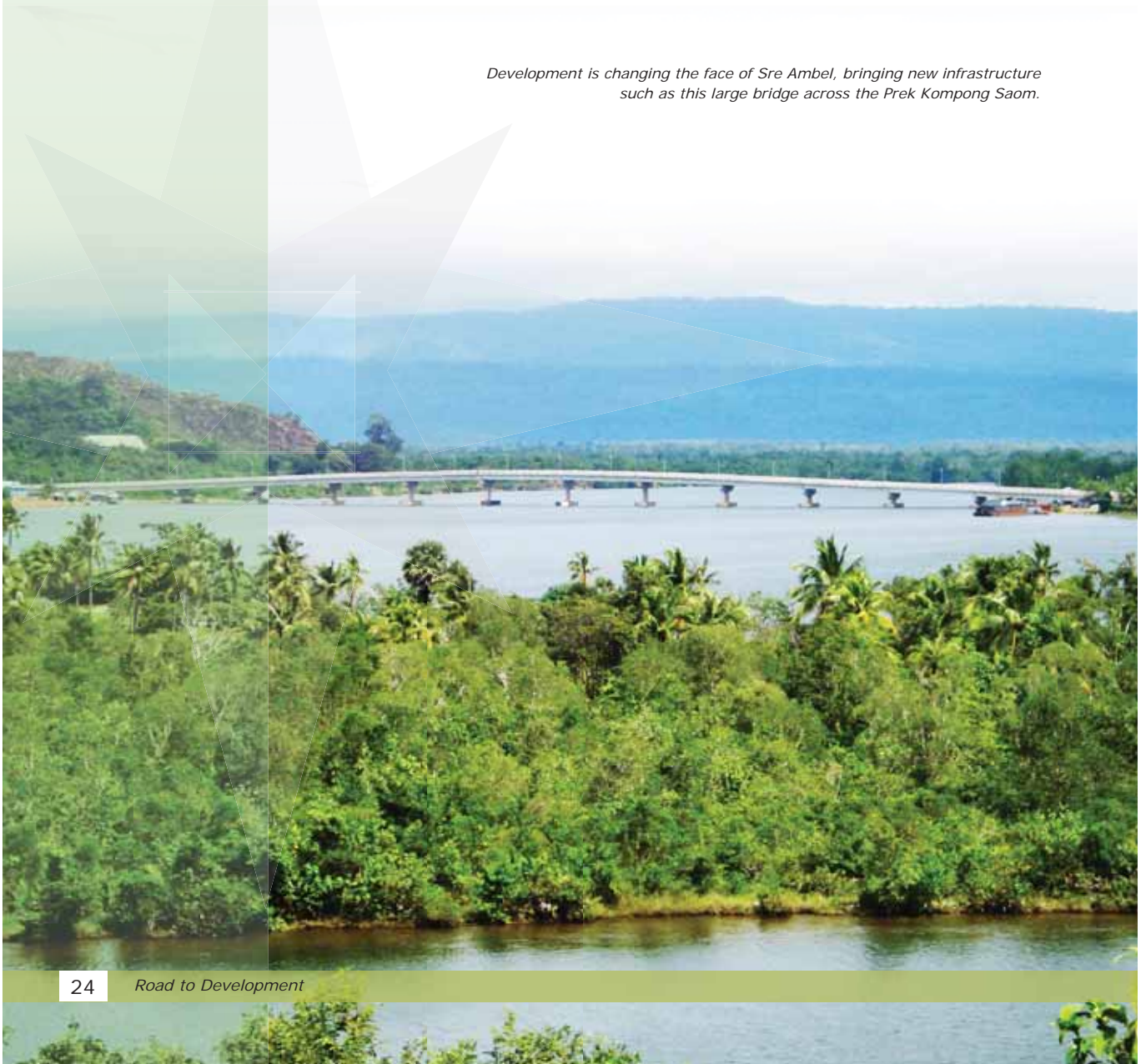
Introducing
S r e   A m b e l
Wayne McCallum

LANDSCAPE AND SETTLEMENTS

S re Ambel is situated in the southwest of Cambodia, in the province of Koh Kong (see map in earlier section). Although the name is usually associated with a specific town, Sre Ambel is also an administrative district that comprises the four communes of Sre Ambel, Chikhor Kraom, Chikhor Leu and Dong Peang. It is this administrative unit and its boundaries that provide the locational focus of this study. The district of Sre Ambel covers 1200 square kilometers and district authorities estimate the population in 2007 at 42,023 people.

Sre Ambel stretches from the coast of the Gulf of Thailand inland towards the Elephant Mountains. Within this area, geographic features can be broken down into coastal margins, a river, a plain and upland areas.

Coastal margins

The western boundary of Sre Ambel is dominated by a coastal shoreline containing some of the largest remaining *melaleuca* (Khmer: *smach*) forest in the lower Mekong region, and a mangrove system along the edges of the sea and rivers. Human settlement in this area is in the form of a series of small villages, whose inhabitants focus their livelihood activities on harvesting marine resources (including crabs, shrimp, fish, shellfish and sea grass) and wet rice agriculture.

The coast supports a vibrant economy grounded in the exploitation of near-shore fisheries. Often these are fished in the evening, with villagers returning in the day to clean and mend their nets with villagers of all ages participating in this activity.

Prek Kampong Saom River

The major river in the district, the Prek Kampong Saom, drains much of the central and southern portion of Sre Ambel, extending with tributaries 40-odd kilometers into the uplands of the Elephant Mountains. The river is also associated with a broad valley system, which is an important site of human settlement: a number of

Sre Ambel is a service town, providing goods for surrounding communities and, with the district's largest market, a place for people to sell their products.

villages are spread along the riverbanks. These settlements include Sre Ambel itself (the largest), as well as smaller villages extending up into the upper catchment area of the river. Sre Ambel is a service town, providing goods for surrounding communities and, with the district's largest market, a place for people to sell their products. The town also contains a small port, located on its western outskirts; cement and other products are unloaded from barges. Sre Ambel town is the administrative center of the district, containing district offices and two large schools, including a secondary school. It also holds the two largest pagodas in the district.

Different views of the Prek Kampong Saom River. Over two kilometers wide at its mouth, the river gradually narrows as one heads towards its source in the Elephant Mountains, 40 kilometers away. Along the journey, the river passes through uplands, a wide river valley and a coastal zone of flat wetlands and rice fields. Many communities live alongside the river, relying on it as a source of food, water and transport, living and moving to the rhythms of the river and the monsoon.

Plain

Stretching from the coast in the west is a low-lying plain that ends at a set of low altitude hills that herald the start of the Elephant Mountains in the east. This plain is narrowest in the south but gradually expands out to a broader flatland in the north of the district. The plain is bisected by two major rivers, the Prek Kampong Saom

in the southern portion of the district and the Prek Chipat in the north, as well as a number of smaller streams and lakes (*trapeang* and *boeng*). This locale holds an extensive wet rice growing area situated on the eastern outskirts of Sre Ambel. As one moves towards the coast, the plain gives way to saline flats and wetlands; to the east, it ascends into the remnants of neo-tropical rainforest and areas cleared by logging and fire. In the area of highest human concentration, rice farming is the predominant activity, although new plantation operations are now starting to transform the landscape around the communes of Chikhor Leu and DongPeang.

The plain portion of the district is the most heavily farmed. Here, water buffalo have traditionally ploughed the fields for the impending rice harvest. Once the rice is in the ground, the water buffalo must be carefully managed to ensure that they do not eat the new season crops. Typically, young "buffalo boys" have performed this task.

Uplands

Moving eastward, Sre Ambel rises slowly into the Elephant Mountains, a mid-altitude range containing mountains and hills between 200 and 500 meters above sea level. Although extensively logged between 1997 and 2001, many of the hills retain extensive stands of moist and mixed evergreen forest (<400 meters above sea level) and evergreen and deciduous forest, with occasional patches of pine trees between 350 and 500 meters above sea level. At these higher elevations, open fields comprising grasses and the occasional deciduous shrubs can also be found. Remarkably, given the pressure on much of Cambodia's indigenous flora and fauna, some elephants remain in this area, with animals moving regularly between the forests of the Elephant Mountains and the nearby Cardamom (north) and Kirirom (south) ranges. The population of elephants probably numbers no more than 30, out of a nationally estimated population of 300 or so animals.

Permanent human settlements are sparse in this area. People mainly choose to develop temporary camps when they come to upland areas, with the primary purpose of exploiting forest resources, including a variety of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) such as rattan, honey, *samrong* (a type of nut), *pniew* (a type of fruit) and various herbs and roots. Some hunting, although illegal, occurs, usually targeting smaller animals such as deer, pigs and pangolin. Despite the lower intensity of use, the uplands provide a range of ecosystem services that are crucial to overall human wellbeing in the Sre Ambel area. These include homes for numerous pollinating species (e.g. bees) and water system services (e.g. maintaining water quality and quantity in local waterways). Various village "common" areas provide open grazing for domestic cows and buffalo.

... the uplands provide a range of ecosystem services that are crucial to overall human wellbeing in the Sre Ambel area.

Beyond the flat river valley of the Prek Kampong Saom, the plains quickly give way to the uplands of the Elephant Mountains, which dwarf the houses below (left). In the hills and mountain themselves, moist tropical forest is, in places, slowly recovering from the impacts of timber harvesting undertaken through the 1990s (right).

In the forest, the variety of life is enormous, making these systems some of the most important for biodiversity on the globe, with species such as strangler vines (left) and numerous palms (right) competing with plants for light and nutrients from the infertile soil.

A HUMAN HISTORY

A concise written human history does not exist for the Sre Ambel region, so we must draw on piecemeal details to provide a sketch of the area's human past. Up until 1975, it is likely that the human population was small and settled in isolated pockets, as a result of the challenges of terrain, forest, access and malaria. The Prek Kampong Saom, with its boat transport capacity, would have provided a location for the majority of settlements, including the town of Sre Ambel itself.

The presence of ancient laterite remains at Wat Angkor in Sre Ambel town indicate that the settlement has a human history going back several hundred years, perhaps prior to the Angkorean period. Local stories and legends suggest that the Sre Ambel area provided a resting point for Thai forces as they traveled from various campaigns to sack the post-Angkor Khmer capital at Oudong between the 16th and 19th centuries.

Laterite remains in the pagoda above the town of Sre Ambel indicate that the area was settled probably well before the time of the Angkorean Empire (<1200).

More details are known about the area's history during the rise and fall of the Khmer Rouge. Accounts of battles at nearby Pic Nil (1971) and a prolonged siege at Kampong Seila (1973-1974) indicate that the Khmer Rouge was active in the area from the early 1970s.

> *"Lol Nol came and the men had to fight for him; Pol Pot came and the children were told to fight against the Lol Nol soldiers; families were fighting each other. It was a bad time, but it became worse once Pol Pot won."*
>
> *Villager memories of the 1970s, Sre Ambel town (2008)*

Accounts from villagers in the nearby Areng Valley, to the north of Sre Ambel, suggest that Khmer Rouge guerrillas first appeared in the region around 1972, a presence that would probably have extended to Sre Ambel. Over this period villagers report being bombed by jet aircraft, presumably American fighters. Villagers believe that this occurred because they wore conical hats, which they feel led pilots to think that they were Vietnamese. A remnant from one of the bombs dropped on the area is retained by a villager who lived in the area at this time.

Interviews undertaken in late 2008 for this book revealed hitherto unreported incidences of bombing by unspecified aircraft (in all likelihood American) in the early 1970s. Villagers living around the town of Sre Ambel reported that several attacks were made on the settlement and bombs dropped. Somehow, a remnant of one of these shells was still in the possession of a village family (left). The right-hand photo is of a villager showing where it was found.

These villagers had lived in Sre Ambel for most of their lives and were able to recount tales of the district's history, including experiences before, during and after the Khmer Rouge. It was these villagers who recounted being bombed by aircraft from above, presumably American. An portion of a bomb allegedly dropped on the town of Sre Ambel in 1973 or 1974. All of this bomb, save for the piece photographed, was sold as scrap, this piece being saved because it "looked pretty".

Records of what occurred over this time are difficult to find, and one must rely on oral stories and what physically remains today from the era. Much of the present-day landscape of Sre Ambel, for example, contains the remains of projects instigated over the Khmer Rouge period. As you enter Sre Ambel town along a three-kilometer causeway, for instance, you can see a number of long irrigation and drainage ditches constructed during the Pol Pot era. Villagers have spoken of how many of the "new people" brought in to work on these projects eventually died of starvation and disease, with a large burial area ("killing field") said to have existed near the present-day settlement of Chroy Svay. Further north, as you head up Route 48 towards the river town of Andong Tuek, you pass a large reservoir area on your right. This was another public works effort undertaken by the Khmer Rouge and was intended to supply irrigation water for wet rice cultivation. Nowadays, the reservoir provides a home for numerous wetland birds as well as a source of water for the irrigation of farms in the resettlement project of Sovanna Baitong.

The woman in the quote and photo had vivid memories of the Khmer Rouge period. As a 21 year old she was forced from her home in Kampot by the Khmer Rouge and made to work on the building of irrigation infrastructure in the Sre Ambel area. She recounts this experience as being "hard work", with many people dying from overwork and malnutrition. She lived in fear of being shot or tortured. Her children do not believe the stories of the Khmer Rouge, especially about the shortage of food.

Vivid memories of Khmer Rouge times remain in the stories of many of the villagers we interviewed, including Mrs Tep (not her real name), who recalls being asked to give rabbit dung to the sick as medicine.

In the decade following the invasion of Vietnamese forces and the fall of the Khmer Rouge's Democratic Kampuchea government, the Khmer Rouge persisted in the area. In the Prek Kampong Saom Valley above Sre Ambel, a former Khmer Rouge regiment made its home, resisting various attempts by government soldiers to force its members into surrender. The control these Khmer Rouge remnants enjoyed was illustrated by the kidnap and murder of three expatriates in 1994 at the settlement of Chamkar Luang. In 1996, a brokered peace agreement saw the remaining Khmer Rouge families transfer their loyalties to the government in return for, among other things, the promise of five hectares of land per family.

Peace in Sre Ambel encouraged the inflow of foreign capital, attracted by the natural resources of the area ... leading to a period that some locals still refer to as "the time of timber anarchy".

Peace in Sre Ambel encouraged the inflow of foreign capital, attracted by the natural resources of the area. In 1996, a Malaysian timber company began extracting timber from the forests in the district under the terms of a concession agreement with the government. A number of small sawmill operators also entered the area at this time, leading to a period that some locals still refer to as "the time of timber anarchy". With the suspension and subsequent demise of concession logging operations in 2001, many migrants who had arrived to work in the timber industry chose to stay and settle. A number of these settlers also encouraged their relatives and friends to move and join them in the district and to establish homes and farms, a process that led to a gradual increase in the local population.

"My husband came here to work for the [timber] company, perhaps in 1998. We did not see him for two years but he would send money home. In 2000, he asked us to come and live here; it is now our home."

Villager discussing how she came to the district (2008)

These families have tended to settle in areas close to those who invited them, creating a settlement landscape where inhabitants can often be distinguished by their past history or certain socio-cultural variables. Thus, for example, the villages of Bak Ang Rut and Dey Krahorm in the Prek Kampong Saom Valley are dominated by the families of ex-Khmer Rouge soldiers; in Krang Chaek, families of those who came to work in the timber industry predominate. A distinct Cham settlement can be found just off Route 48, midway between the Prek Kampong Saom Bridge and Andong Tuek. The town of Sre Ambel, meanwhile, features a distinct "Chinese quarter".
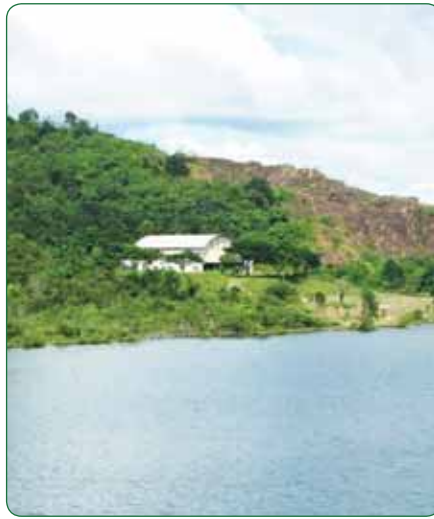
Legacy of the timber harvesting times, the remains of the Samling Depot, near the Route 78 bridge over the Prek Kampong Saom. Trees were collected here and marshaled into barges, which transported them out to the sea nearby, where they were taken to international markets.

A DEVELOPMENT HISTORY

Historically speaking, at least in an economic sense, Sre Ambel has been linked to local and outside markets through the supply of surplus agricultural products and natural resources. Further, there is evidence from historic accounts to suggest that some movement of goods out of the area did occur. The nearby area of Chamkar Luang, for example, is said to have been the site of royal gardens, which supplied fruit and vegetables for the king's household in Phnom Penh. Martine's (1997) record of life in the nearby Areng Valley shows that there was a myriad of trade routes linking the western portion of the province to the markets and population centers of the central Cambodian plain, including markets in Kampong Speu. The water buffalo weaned in the district carried (and still carry) a reputation for being "good animals" among the surrounding population, and it is likely they were a source of domestic trade with outside groups. More substantial economic development in the area was likely restricted by the lack of population and the transport difficulties, which would have denied access to external markets.

"When I was a child it was hard to travel far. Some families had elephants and would use these to go to Boeng Rumhaeh to catch fish and birds. Today I can get there on a moto in 20 minutes; back then it could take two days."

Villager, Sre Ambel town (2008)
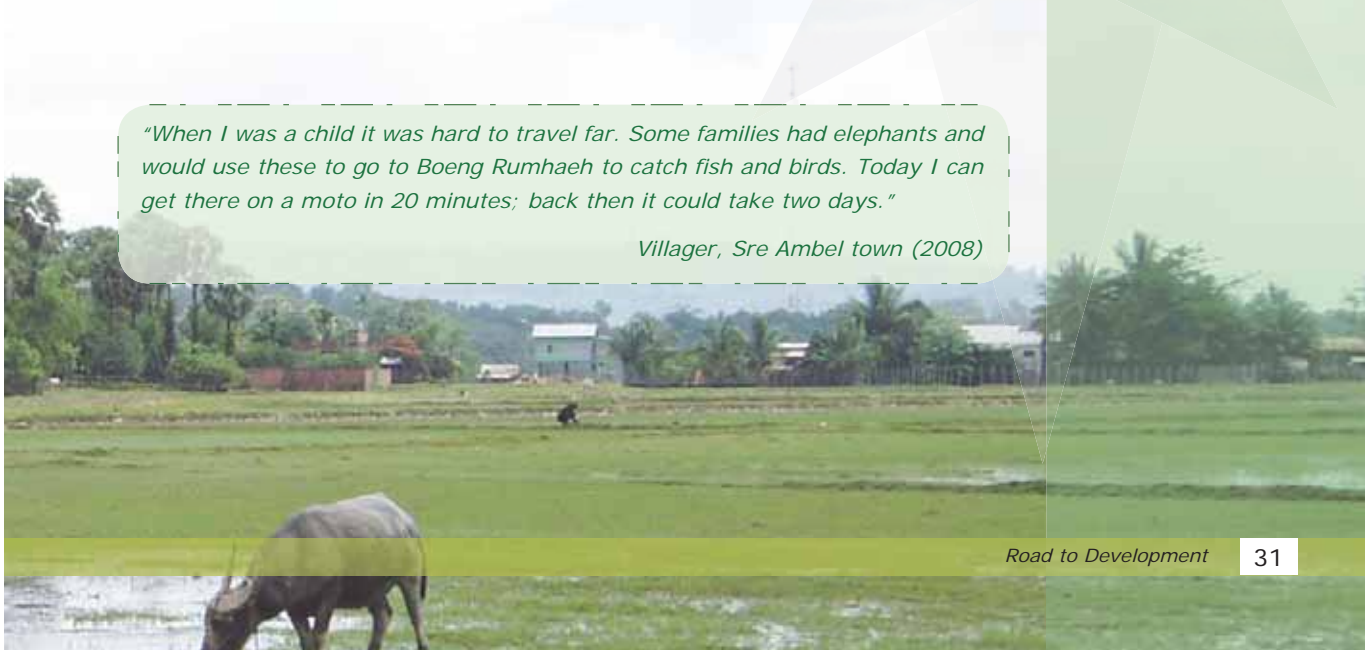
Settlements of Sre Ambel. The district has been settled by numerous groups, which can be differentiated on the basis of religion, ethnicity and the economic opportunities that brought them to the area. This includes families that came here to support the timber harvesting times, such as the settlement of Krang Chaek (top left); those of Vietnamese extraction, as in sections of Sre Ambel town (bottom left); and those who live along the coast and utilize local marine resources (right).

There was one notable exception to this general trend. In the late 1960s, under guidance from Yugoslavian engineers, a small 14 MW hydropower scheme (Kirirom I) was developed just above the town of Kampong Seila, to the east of Sre Ambel. Records show that there were plans to develop another hydro scheme on a tributary of the Prek Kampong Saom (Kirirom III), which was curtailed by the victory of the Khmer Rouge (McCallum, 2008). Other documents (Mekong Secretariat, 1973) identified the Prek Kampong Saom Valley as a site for large-scale hydropower development and irrigation activities although, again, these opportunities were truncated by the rise of the Khmer Rouge.

The period of direct Khmer Rouge control, from the mid-1970s until late 1978, represented a distinct development phase in Sre Ambel's history, different from anything before or after. In his 2008 book, James Tyner describes how Khmer Rouge notions of development, centered on an ultra-Maoist ideological model, resulted in the extensive reshaping of Cambodia's landscape. Large-scale rice irrigation systems were constructed as the Khmer Rouge regime, known to villagers as the *angkar*, or "organization", sought to transform the Cambodian landscape into a rice producing machine. Sre Ambel was not saved from this change, as discussed previously, with canals and reservoirs being constructed at the cost of an unknown number of human lives.

"Angkar told us to build these things [reservoirs and canals]. We were told that if we loved angkar we would work hard and complete many projects. It was hard work and we had little food, but we were afraid to say no; people who did would disappear. I was very unhappy."

A villager, a young girl at the time of the Khmer Rouge, recounts her experiences, Sre Ambel (2008)

"The NGOs came and I was happy. We had food and they dug wells to supply us with water. Before this we had no good water supply. Children would become sick and die from drinking bad water. My baby brother died because of this and I became sick too; everyone was sick."

Villager describes the arrival of NGOs in Sre Ambel, Pongrul, Prek Kampong Saom Valley (2008)

The legacy of the Khmer Rouge period is reflected in a number of old projects, including canals and reservoirs. On this reservoir, the Khmer inscription says "1978", indicating when it was completed.Locals report that many people died during the construction of these works, many from hunger and disease.

Development following the fall of the Khmer Rouge and subsequent Vietnamese occupation was curtailed by the continued presence of the Khmer Rouge, which remained a strong military presence in the Sre Ambel area up until the mid-1990s. This continued even after the Paris Peace Accords (1991) and the arrival of UNTAC. Charged with overseeing the movement towards democratic elections, the arrival of UNTAC marked the start of a change in the way the west interacted with Cambodia and places such as Sre Ambel. Cambodia made a swift transition from isolation to aid dependency. The Sre Ambel area initially received none of this new aid, as it was considered too unstable owing to the continued presence of Khmer Rouge troops. This began to change only after the mass defections of Khmer Rouge troops to the government in 1996.

AFSC began working in Sre Ambel in 1997. At this time, the district was still insecure, with staff on occasion threatened by armed illegal loggers. The AFSC focus was on the provision of very elementary services, including health and safe domestic water supplies.

International development assistance has helped shape the present-day landscape of Sre Ambel. Dotted around the edges of the main town, for example, a number of large, circular, concrete water tanks are visible from the main road (left), in various states of repair (right). These were part of an Australian Red Cross project undertaken in the mid 2000s.

The next phase of AFSC's assistance entailed targeted programs addressing perceived opportunities and needs for long-term and sustainable improvement of livelihoods. In Sre Ambel, the organization developed an integrated livelihoods program aimed at securing the long-term wellbeing of local communities. This was promoted through a combination of natural resource programs and support for livestock raising, crop production and land use planning. Other NGOs began to work

in the district, including CARE International, which focused on improving health services. Governance began to improve, illegal logging was brought under control and the district participated in the nation's first ever commune council elections in 2002.

The most recent development phase has been heralded by changing national circumstances. Today, the availability of capital, including finance from Chinese and national sources, backed by domestic stability, the presence of supportive infrastructure (e.g. roads) and a complicit government, has created an enabling environment for large-scale capital investment (Middleton, 2008). In 2004, for example, a Chinese company announced plans to resurrect the Kirirom III

> *"Men from the company came and told me I had to leave my farm. They told me they would burn down my house and put me in jail if I did not go. I told them I had no place to go to but they did not listen; I had to move."*
>
> *Villager affected by the granting of a sugar plantation concession to a national businessperson, Chikhor Leu commune (2008)*

The present prevailing trend is underlined by the reshaping of Sre Ambel's physical and social environment by large-scale capital projects. This includes the development of industrial plantations for sugar (left) with supporting infrastructure, including a large processing factory (right). These changes are having different effects on the local people, as our discussion on development roads will show.

hydropower project, with the intention of developing a 15 MW station using water from the Prek Kampong Saom (McCallum, 2008). The approval of unhindered passage of water rights to the developer and the granting of permission to flood extensive areas of national forest, both facilitated by the government, are two key factors that have helped to move this proposal forward.

More recently, in 2006, a large economic land concession was granted to a company to develop a sugarcane plantation in Chikhor Leu commune. In 2007, a further land concession was granted to this company in the Prek Kampong Saom Valley, depriving many villagers of agricultural lands and access to community commons areas. Again, the willingness of the government to grant favorable economic land concession arrangements to the developer has been a key ingredient in allowing this project to proceed.

These developments mirror trends in forest exploitation in the Sre Ambel area between 1996 and 2001. At this time, as we have seen, a large forestry concession was granted to a Malaysian multinational company to harvest timber from the Prek Kampong Saom forests and their surrounds. As in more recent times, exclusive rights were granted to the company while local interests were ignored. Donors providing technical assistance to the government's forestry program, particularly the World Bank, came under intensive pressure from international third sector agencies to cease legitimizing such arrangements, a case of neo-populist assertiveness coming to bear on its neo-liberal development cousins. The government placed a moratorium on concession logging after the concession companies failed to produce viable logging plans. The company eventually withdrew voluntarily after the government raised royalties.

Underpinning this new development phase has been the physical and financial connection of Sre Ambel to the outside world. The availability of land, a labor force and investment capital is spurring on this new phase, which has tended towards emphasizing economic considerations over local environment and human concerns. This is said to have been encouraged by linkages to powerful government elites in Phnom Penh, who have facilitated access to large land areas by endorsing the passage of property rights, including land and water, to developers.

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## DEVELOPMENT IN SRE AMBEL: TRENDS AND PATTERNS

Development has passed through numerous phases during the history of Sre Ambel. These phases have not always been harmonized, nor have they necessarily occurred in lineal order. Nevertheless, several key trends emerge:

- Imported notions of development have played a major role in influencing the programs that have directed development, transforming the landscape and people's lives in accordance with Maoist (1975-1978) and later western notions of what constitutes "good" development (1991-2000s). Today, corporate capitalism is playing a new role in defining these changes, transforming hundreds of village plantation fields (*chamkars*) into large-scale single product plantations.

- From the beginning of the post-conflict period, a progression can be observed, from development centered on humanitarian and reconstruction activities to more targeted programs addressing perceived community needs, backed by a process of increasing the role and responsibility of Cambodians in the management process.

- A transition is now underway, whereby development's form and function are increasingly shaped by external business interests, which is resulting in the wholesale reshaping of Sre Ambel's landscape and local people's relationship with it.

- As Sre Ambel has passed through various development phases, the issues and challenges faced by the local communities have changed. Thus, whereas in the past livelihoods and wellbeing were linked to local issues of environment, economics and politics, increasingly they are being determined by national and international economic forces and political decisions. This has meant that, for local people, the ability to meet the challenges in development and to take advantage of its opportunities is rapidly being removed from their control.

• Finally, with each development approach, whether this be bilateral or multilateral financial assistance, capital investment by local businesspersons or neo-populist-based programs, interpretations of the chief development issues, challenges and goals and the view of the people and the landscape are different. For local capitalists, such as the sugar company, development is grounded in the speed and capacity to transform the local physical environment into a sugar growing landscape. Local people in this context are either unwelcome intruders on the land or a potential cheap labor force. For organizations such as AFSC, with roots in neo-populist ideas of human rights and environmental wellbeing, development is about promoting ecological sustainability, human equity and democratic participation in decision making processes (among other things).

As the final point suggests, for each perspective the "road", "road blocks" and "destination" for development can be very distinct, depending on how you come to the development "experience". The next chapter explores the different roads that comprise the present-day development experience in Sre Ambel in more detail. To do this, we draw extensively on the voices and observations of those intimately linked to each of the roads.
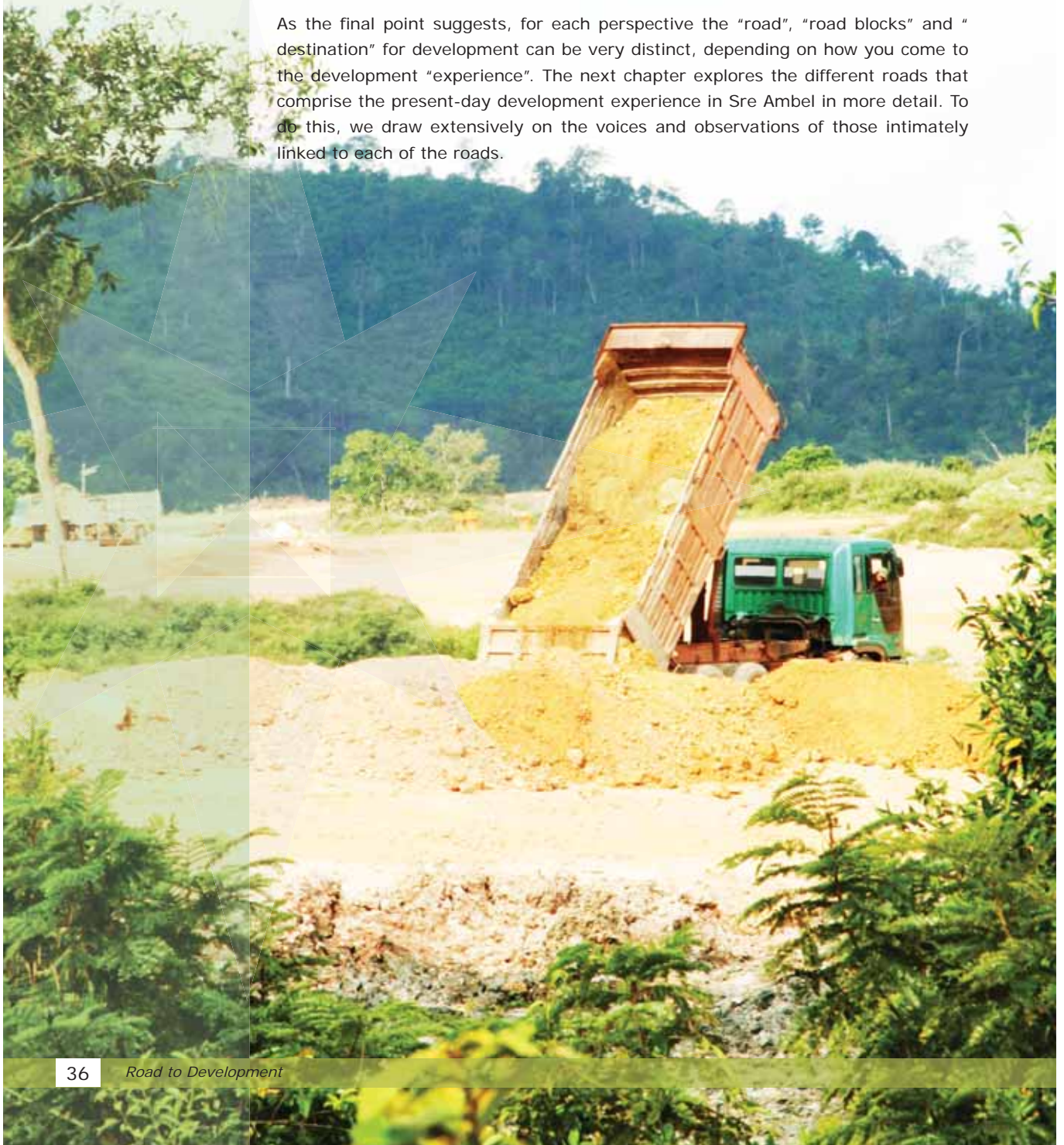
Roads to
Development in Sre Ambel

Meas Nee

Within the small space of Sre Ambel district, different approaches to development are evident in the work of the many organizations, government institutions and businesses active in the district. Our field research uncovered seven different development models, or "roads", as follows: the economic growth road; the human rights road; the local livelihoods road; the community development road; the environmental conservation road; the community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) road; and the Buddhism in development road.

These respective roads reflect aspects of the different development concepts introduced in the previous sections. Most (at least five) follow the neo-populist paradigm, although there are significant differences between these. For example, there is a tension between rights-based and livelihoods-based approaches, although these can be brought together in community development approaches. There is also a tension between conservation and CBNRM approaches, as introduced in the earlier discussion on nature versus people.

Meanwhile, the economic growth road reflects a neo-liberal paradigm, although one which increasingly resembles the emergent Beijing Consensus rather than the formerly dominant Washington Consensus, with an emphasis on economic growth over democratic considerations.

These approaches are all imported models of development. The Buddhism in development road may be seen as an attempt to find a development model based on indigenous approaches, although this is also not without difficulty.

THE ECONOMIC GROWTH ROAD

Cambodia has enjoyed high gross domestic product (GDP) growth in recent years. The export garment industry has played a leading role in this growth, as have the tourism and construction sectors. However, in the current global financial crisis, the World Bank, the ADB and the IMF have forecast an economic downturn in Cambodia. It is estimated that, in the next year, Cambodia's economic growth will decrease to less than 4 percent, or possibly even turn negative. Key factors undermining growth in the Cambodian economy include a dramatic reduction in garment exports, a decrease in the number of international tourists and a fall in investments in the construction industry.

The Royal Government of Cambodia currently sees agricultural land concessions as a way of promoting economic growth, which has led to the granting of millions of hectares of land across the country, including forest and mining sites, to investment companies. This strategy has introduced a new force for which the

The Royal Government of Cambodia currently sees agricultural land concessions as a way of promoting economic growth, which has led to the granting of millions of hectares of land across the country, including forest and mining sites, to investment companies.

Sre Ambel environment is ideal, i.e. with its large amount of seemingly free land available as a potential area for such investment to take place. At the time of writing, in mid-2009, the government had allowed two major investment projects: a sugarcane plantation, owned by a local *oknha*[2] and senator, and construction of a hydro dam by a Chinese company in the upper catchments of the Prek Kampong Saom. There are also, as yet unconfirmed, plans by private companies for other development initiatives in coastal areas, including industrial seaweed plantations, which have encountered strong protest by communities.

From a business perspective, investment in land concessions will provide opportunities for development projects to move away from city centers and into rural areas. Business representatives and companies state a belief that this will lead

"As far as I understand, the land concessions will help to develop land that has not been used, and at the same time, with this development activity, people can have more jobs and are equipped with more skills."

Official working closely with the sugarcane plantation (2008)

to capacity building for skilled workers and employment for local people.

In Sre Ambel, around 20,000 hectares of forest and farmland have been granted as a concession for a sugarcane plantation, which now employs more than 1,000 workers, most of them from nearby villages.[3] People are paid between 10,000 and 20,000 Riel per day (US$2.50-5.00), based on skill levels. Workers typically leave home at 6am and work in the fields until lunchtime, continuing after lunch at 1pm until 5pm. Tasks include clearing grass and removing logs.

A large factory for sugarcane processing is being built by the company at the edge of the plantation site, near Route 48. This plant will employ more skilled workers when construction is completed. The company also owns a newly built port, located next to the Prek Kampong Saom Bridge, which it uses as a gateway for shipping processed materials to international markets. Sand has been dredged from the river connecting the port and the open sea to ensure that the river is deep enough for shipping.

Investment activities as described here appear to provide benefits for the local people. In Sre Ambel, jobs have been created, roads have been built and
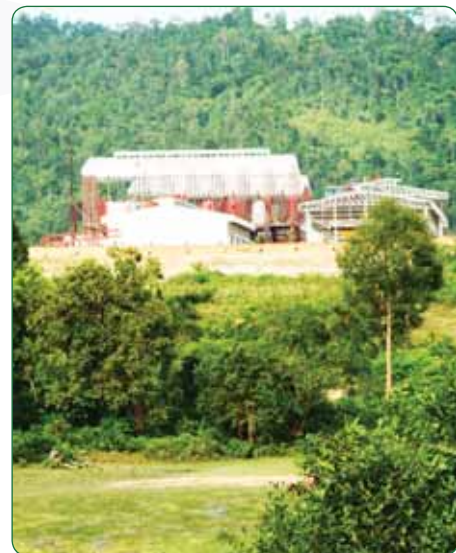
A large processing plant is being built to serve the new sugar plantation in Sre Ambel.

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[2] *A royal title given to powerful business figures who have contributed resources to the government.*

[3] *This figure was provided by a key high-ranking official working for the plantation office, based in Phnom Penh.*

business officials have made promises of schools and other social infrastructure.

As we can see, some feel that the outcomes of economic development in Sre Ambel are helpful for the local community, especially those who live along Route 48. The completed renovation of Route 48, for example, has connected the community to wider national markets, including those in Koh Kong and Phnom Penh. The community finds it easy to sell their products and, with more schools being built, children are able to access education, although there are clearly other factors than infrastructure involved in whether or not children have access to education.

The completion of the bridge across the Prek Kampong Saom on Route 48 has also provided benefits to the people in Sre Ambel. Previously, travel required regular river ferry trips, which were described as expensive in time and money.

A wide new bridge, spanning the Prek Kampong Saom, was completed in late 2007. Replacing a ferry, it has contributed to a significant improvement in vehicle speed and capacity along Route 48.

Economic development has also seen emphasis given to the building and rehabilitation of roads connecting the main road to villages deeper in the forest and communities along the coast, to be used as a means to connect these "periphery" locations and the resources they hold to regional and international markets and processing plants. In some areas, people used to travel to Sre Ambel market by small boat or buffalo cart, or on foot, but now more means of transportation are available, such as motorbikes, cars and taxis. This has opened the community up to the outside world. People can take their products to nearby markets, and alternative income sources are more accessible outside the villages. In times of medical emergency, the sick can be brought to hospitals more rapidly.

For some, then, the building of the sugarcane factory represents an unprecedented development in Sre Ambel. However, this study has also identified some major concerns that are worth sharing. The voices of the local people can highlight these for us.

Voices of local people in Sre Ambel

"Every day we are told that there will be more investment companies wanting to develop this and that or here and there. At the same time, each day we see outside people come to look for land to buy. Government officials have visited land around our villages. This has left us in total confusion. We are fearful and anxious, as we do not know what is going on and are worried that our land will be taken. Some people have sold their land and many have stopped planting fruit trees in their chamkars."

Villagers in Bateal in Andong Tuek commune (2008)

One village leader noted that he had held his position for more than ten years but that nobody, from business or from government, had come and discussed with him any potential investment activities in the nearby area, or asked him about the boundaries of his village, even though he had seen outside people drive past his house most days. Indeed, during our visit to this village, the team saw some brand new and expensive cars approaching and their occupants looking at land.

Photo: Suzanne Hasman

Land cleared for a new private port on the Prek Kampong Saom.

It seems that many local people are not being informed, let alone consulted, about development plans. Furthermore, rumors provoke land speculation among wealthy locals, who hire poor people to clear more land along the coast to sell. When asked how local authorities respond to this, residents replied that they were not sure, that sometimes the poor hired to clear the land were caught by the police but that their employers were never arrested.

We asked relevant local government officials whether anyone had asked them to provide technical support or to be involved in the planning of any new businesses. They all said that they had not received any information and had not been contacted during the planning process, other than a short one-hour briefing with business and government representatives from Phnom Penh. Some officials recalled their experience when they attempted to conduct a joint study at an investment project a few years ago:

> *"We were on an official mission of expert departments from Koh Kong province to conduct a study in areas planned for investment. At the front gate we were ordered to leave the site immediately. This was followed by an order from the company president in Phnom Penh."*
>
> *Local officials in Sre Ambel (2008)*

In all areas visited by the study team, community people and their local authorities expressed their fear regarding the current investment projects in Sre Ambel.

> *"Before we were very excited about development, and our people always welcomed development initiatives. However, based on our experiences, we are all now very scared of development. Each time we have lost our land and our natural resources have been destroyed. This kind of project seems to benefit only a handful of people who own the company, at the cost of our rural communities. There are no more green fields for our cows and buffalo, and every day our buffalo are caught and we pay heavy fines."*
>
> *Villagers around the sugarcane plantation and coastal villages (2008)*

Usually, land allocated for a plantation is marked by ditches dug around the site, with the demarcated land treated as company property thereafter. The marks indicate "no go areas", even for people who live next to the plantation and who previously used the land for herding cows and buffalo. The community's cows and buffalo often enter the no go area and are caught by security guards; the owners are fined, the amount varying from case to case. Villagers in Chouk and Ban Tiet stressed that, if a buffalo that is caught belongs to a community activist who is involved in advocacy campaigning against the company, the fine will be heavy – between US$50 and US$100 per head.

This woman has lived in the Prek Kampong Saom Valley since 1999. In late 2007, her family lost its rice fields to the sugar plantation company. She is now greatly concerned for the future wellbeing of her family.

Villagers in Chikhor Leu explained in a group meeting why clearing the land in the area poses a risk to their livelihoods, and why their buffalo need to be able to feed in the forest zones.

"These natural resources are part of our family assets and income. Every year we collect resin, rattan and bees from the forest nearby and sell them in the markets. Our buffalo are treated as a family bank, as we can sell them to pay for medical treatment, weddings or other emergency needs, such as when people die or we have problems of debt in the family. Our buffalo cannot survive without food that is available from the nearby forests and lakes. Any attempt to clear forest land around our village means the destruction of our sources of family income and security."

Villagers from three villages in Chikhor Leu commune (2008)

There is no doubt that the sugarcane plantation has provided employment for local people, and some families confirm that they have been able to make an additional income in this way. However, this study also reveals some major concerns over working conditions on the plantation and over the way in which this setup has undermined community solidarity with regard to maintaining a sense of dignity and protecting local natural resources. In the meantime, community land for cultivation and grazing becomes less available.

"Before the plantation, we owned our land and we had abundant resources, which could support us in our daily lives. Men and women could go the forest nearby and collect vegetables and other materials that our families could use or sell at the markets. As a community we found it easy to organize ourselves to challenge the company. Now, our identity has changed. We work for the company and must follow their command. We are changing from being owners of our land to becoming laborers on our land. Those of us who are involved in community campaigns against the company sometimes see the company threaten our children, who work on the plantation."

Villagers from Chouk and Chikhor Leu (2008)

The community further elaborated that, while it is helpful to receive an income from the company, it is important to note that not all people can work. Women heads of household, the handicapped and older people are among those who cannot work, and they therefore receive no direct benefits from having the plantation nearby.

Processes set in train by the economic road pose opportunities and challenges for future generations of Sre Ambel's citizens. What it means for this young girl, pictured in April 2008 minding her younger sisters in the family's chamkar house, remains unclear.

Although investment activities of the type described above are often claimed by economists and experts to be the backbone of a country's economic growth, this study, through its interviews with local people in Sre Abel, has brought forward the following questions about this form of development.

• How much have ordinary people in Sre Ambel actually benefited from this development strategy?

• While investment has provided local people with jobs, have these jobs helped enhance people's dignity and power or have they pushed people into poorly paid labor and dependence?

• What are the key consequences of such forms of development, when local people are completely excluded from the development process?

People appear to have lost their existing natural resources and no longer have land for grazing and for access to NTFPs, at one stage treated as core additional income sources. At the same time, community identity has been transformed over time from being one of owner of the land to one of laborer on the land. Lack of proper consultation with the local people means that they are virtually excluded from development planning and processes.

THE HUMAN RIGHTS ROAD

In response to the legacy of prolonged social conflict in Cambodia, which includes domestic violence, power abuse and weak law enforcement, some local and international NGOs and legal aid organizations have taken up another pathway to development: promoting people's rights through human rights education and the provision of legal aid support. In recent years, as well as dealing with cases of injustice and acting as watchdogs in Cambodian elections, for example, these organizations have become actively involved in dealing with issues surrounding the misappropriation of land and natural resources, carried out by corrupt government officials and powerful business people.

The UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights emphasizes the need to respect economic, social, cultural and political rights, interpreted as people's freedom to obtain food, water and shelter; to be involved in organizing and celebrating social events; to access welfare; to express their views and opinions in public; and to ensure their voices are heard. At the same time, people must be provided with the space to engage in political activities, such as elections, and to form political parties or other social groups that serve the needs and purposes of their community members. These declarations are enshrined in the Cambodian Constitution.

In Cambodia, notions of human rights were used by different government regimes in different ways long before the Khmer Rouge era. Even during the Khmer Rouge period, under the name "Democratic Kampuchea", the regime viewed human rights as a means to empower the poor to understand their own struggle and to engage in government apparatuses to control the rich and middle class, although the program of change instigated by the Khmer Rouge led to the loss of more than one million lives. In the early 1990s, the contemporary notion of rights was widely disseminated

Human rights include the right to education and schooling. The young boy pictured here is just one of many in Sre Ambel district who are kept out of school in order to perform important domestic tasks, including herding the family's water buffalo, as is the case for the youngster here. Others, such as this young girl from Bak Ang Rut, photographed in 2004, are more fortunate and are able to fit schooling around their other responsibilities.

under UNTAC's mandate to promote human rights and democracy in Cambodia. All the Cambodian warring parties – under the Peace Accords – committed to treating human rights as a core value in the peace building process, and human rights were included in the new Constitution.

The human rights approach to development was then further enhanced through the emergence of key human rights NGOs in Cambodia, during and after the UNTAC period. The primary role of these NGOS was to deal with various forms of human rights abuse, to enhance people's capacity to understand their rights and to support people to exercise these when necessary. By the late 1990s, the term "people's empowerment" had been introduced into the rights-based approach, arguing that the Cambodian people should be empowered to speak up and express their opinions and to be capable of making their own decisions and choices. This approach is believed to have assisted people in moving towards more active engagement in the development process.

The human rights approach to development has come to dominate Cambodian civil society in a number of ways. First, human rights NGOs have operated as watchdogs with regard to human rights violations and abuses, by keeping records of cases and helping people to voice and file their complaints. To do this, these NGOs have built strong alliances with other rights groups and have worked closely with the Cambodian Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights to monitor overall implementation of human rights in Cambodia. This has been challenged by the emergence of a government mechanism, the National Committee for Human Rights, to oversee the human rights situation in the country. Many NGOs believe that this body was set up to protect the government's credibility rather than to protect the human rights of the people, particularly given that the government uses this mechanism to refute reports on human rights violations made by local human rights groups and activists and even by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights.

Second, through human rights education and campaigning, people are able to exercise their right to express themselves in public and to form social groups, both formal and informal, to serve the purposes of their community members and beyond. This approach has often been implemented through public education and community campaigns, aiming at improving human rights practice, enhancing the functioning of the judiciary system and, particularly, providing space where civil society can engage equally with all state institutions and government. Unfortunately, human rights education has often been perceived by local authorities as a means to build up "people power" against state institutions.

By the late 1990s, the term "people's empowerment" had been introduced into the rights-based approach, arguing that the Cambodian people should be empowered to speak up and express their opinions and to be capable of making their own decisions and choices.

Third, by building alliances with other organizations, human rights NGOs have been actively involved in overseeing and monitoring the election process, and acting as civil society observers during elections.

Community members from the Prek Kampong Saom Valley discuss options for promoting their rights at a village workshop facilitated by NGOs.

To enhance the effectiveness of their work, human rights groups have built coalitions with partners from legal aid organizations, to enable them to provide professional lawyers to work with communities on lawsuits. As a result, interventions from lawyers in cases of human rights abuse have become more common. People in Sre Ambel often described the activities of these NGOs as helpful.

In recent years, these human rights NGOs have extended their links with CBOs and networks to deal with land and natural resource management issues (Burke and Nil Vanna, 2004). For instance, leading human rights groups and legal aid organizations have supported communities to file complaints with the government and at the courts, and in many cases have been involved in major advocacy campaigns to do with land and natural resource management. This new approach is based on a belief that it will help local people engage directly with government and therefore will bring about social change (Civic Driven Change, 2008). At the same time, attempts have been made to improve connectivity between rights NGOs and NGOs involved in supporting community organizing, conservation and economics.

In Sre Ambel, the human rights road has brought people to new ways of life and has become a tool for enhancing people's basic rights, as stated in the Cambodian Constitution. People now understand more about their basic rights. As this study

identified, some community members have been able to challenge their local authorities: this is seen as a major shift for Sre Ambel people, as ten years ago the community remained controlled by its local authorities, developed under the former Vietnamese-backed regime.

> *"Nowadays, people are no longer afraid of the village leaders or even the commune councils. Over the period of our advocacy campaigns against the company, we made efforts to meet our village and commune chiefs and demand an explanation for their involvement in the company's business."*
>
> *Villagers in Chouk and Chikhor Leu (2008)*

Furthermore, in recent years, as a result of human rights inventions, communities have been able to mobilize themselves to protect their natural resources. For example, in early 2000, communities in Chikhor commune organized a mass demonstration against the government's plans to destroy the only community reservoir to support road building activities. The outcome was successful because people worked collectively and mobilized neighboring communities to support their campaign. The government agreed that the reservoir could stay.

In 2006, communities along the coast were able to act collectively to stop a company from planting seaweed in their community water area. Another peaceful community demonstration took place against the sugarcane company in 2007-2008, organized by the village of Chikhor Leu. These demonstrations brought about international and national media attention.

Photos: NGO Archives

In September 2006, villagers marched (left) to protest against the loss of their land to a company intending to plant sugarcane. Despite initial clashes with the military (top right), they were later given the opportunity to hold a dialogue with officials (bottom right).

At the same time, some significant improvements have been observed with regard to people's right to express their opinions and to have their voices heard. As a result of support to community network and alliance building, communities, both upland and along the coast, have been able to establish strong networks and use these to share information and undertake collective action to protect their natural resources when necessary. This has led to improvements in community management and protection of natural resources, especially fisheries and forests.

The human rights road to development has also introduced changes in terms of women's roles, within the move towards gender mainstreaming. Gender mainstreaming education has been supportive of the process towards women in leadership in Sre Ambel. The government is now including more women in leadership positions, especially as commune council chiefs, and more women are being encouraged to take councilor positions.

However, these emerging trends still face some major challenges and constraints. For instance, villagers feel that community achievements on the human rights road cannot take place without complicit support from NGOs, but in Sre Ambel sections of the community have raised concern over the ability and capacity of these rights NGOs to engage with government. In some cases, NGOs have tended to turn to donors and the international community to advocate for social change rather than engaging with government directly. This is done based on the belief that, through international development assistance, donors will be able to assert their influence over the government.

Meanwhile, the rights-based development approach is often criticized by grassroots community activists for being expert- and office-oriented in nature, with human rights and legal aid officials good at providing technical training but lacking skills to work with local people. Often, staff are professionally trained as legal and human rights experts but do not receive training in community facilitation and liaison.

> *"Often, when we need help from human right groups, we report to them, and then they call us to meet them at their office in the provincial town rather than come and meet us in the community. Furthermore, they are afraid to stay overnight in the villages."*
>
> *"In the training sessions, human rights officials come in with a copy of the topics and explain them to us one by one like teachers in a classroom. Often, we find it difficult to understand even the terminology used in the law."*
>
> *Members of community peace building network, based in Bavel district, Battambang province, and in Pronet Preah district, Banteay Meanchey province (2008) in a workshop conducted by the author*

Although efforts have been made to improve the level of collaboration between rights NGOs and NGOs from other sectors, such efforts have been constrained by the fact that some staff from rights NGOs have expressed an interest only in political and legal rights, and are less engaged in activities supporting social and economic rights.

Community workshops, often facilitated by NGOs, are important opportunities for villagers to be educated about and assert their human rights. The villagers pictured, from the communities of the Prek Kampong Saom Valley, have just finished participating in a workshop to discuss options for asserting their rights in the case of a proposed hydro development in their community forest area.

"We often find it difficult to invite rights NGOs to join our meetings, to discuss collaboration regarding the current threats to community natural resources. They often do not show up."

NGO worker at an NGO meeting in Sre Ambel (2008)

Expert-oriented behavior and a lack of interest in working with other development sectors, as well as a lack of skills in community mobilization and consultation, have made it difficult for local-level rights groups to engage alone in community advocacy campaigns. Furthermore, the top-down hierarchical structure that some organizations work under has marginalized their capacity to act responsively to immediate community needs.

"One day, we urgently needed to invite human rights workers to attend our community meeting. We called them, but they said they would have to wait for instructions from the director in Phnom Penh. We therefore had to wait till they received this."

Villager in Chikhor Kraom of Sre Ambel (2008)

The lack of active involvement in community advocacy by rights NGOs has been exacerbated by the draft government "NGO Law", which has led to a fear that the government will strictly control NGO operations, and a feeling among some organizations that a low profile would be better.

While some critical concerns remain to be faced, it is important to highlight the key achievements that have been made using the human rights road to development in Sre Ambel, where the community is beginning to organize itself to protect its land and natural resources and people's voices are being heard more often in the media. Support by some rights-based NGOs to women working as commune council members and public education on human rights have provoked unprecedented changes in terms of women's perspectives and roles in society. It is unlikely that these changes would have evolved without the contribution of rights groups.

In November 2008, leaders from the Phnom Toub Cheang Community Forest presented their concerns about the impacts of the proposed Kirirom III hydro project on their human rights at a press conference held in Phnom Penh.

THE LOCAL LIVELIHOODS ROAD

While aid was formerly directed towards the rehabilitation of the country's most needed social infrastructure, such as roads and schools, since the early 1990s many NGOs have focused their interventions on community livelihoods, particularly addressing households' basic needs. As a result, numerous economic activities have been introduced into the various communities of Sre Ambel, including rice banks, credit/loan schemes, livestock banks (cows, pigs and chickens) and small business activities. This road to development may be compared and contrasted with the economic approach to development, in which the government has stepped up efforts to enhance growth through investments in agriculture and promotion of business investments, especially garment factories and land concessions.

The economic perspective of this road to development focuses on community food security and self-sufficiency. Community food security projects involve local-level initiatives to improve families' food supply, assets and capacity. The local livelihoods road also entails the provision of support to improve people's access to resources and welfare services such as education and health as part of local development initiatives. NGOs and CBOs are actively engaged in this level of development, in contrast with macro-level development initiatives, which are initiated by government and its business partners.

NGOs and CBOs have played an active role in providing outreach services to improve family food security, health and education. This particular approach to development has attracted a high level of popularity and interest, among both communities and NGOs, as it has often generated outcomes that are tangible and visible to both families and donors. The approach is based on the theory of basic needs (see Maslow, 1943).

... since the early 1990s many NGOs have focused their interventions on community livelihoods, particularly address- ing households' basic needs.

As such, the family's food security is of paramount importance, and it is vital to ensure that each family has sufficient food intake. Communities in Sre Ambel refer to this development approach as akphiwat chivapheap krusa, that is, development of the family's living conditions (chivapheap generally refers to the level of food sufficiency of a family).

The cultivation of rice lies at the center of local livelihoods, with the family work and domestic calendars organized around the needs of the family rice paddy.

To improve families' food security, some NGOs support communities to develop projects, including animal banks, credit and loan schemes, small businesses and training on agricultural techniques such as animal raising and home gardening.

The approach often starts with NGOs conducting a community appraisal to identify needs; communities then form groups and select committee members before the NGOs can provide financial support. Project activities often receive strong support from the people in the community in the first instance. Community members describe projects as responsive to their basic needs, and note that they are able to meet and share experiences and information throughout the course of the project.

Community workshop facilitated by NGO staff to identify the uses and needs of villagers relating to the management of the Phnom Toub Cheang Community Forest. Such workshops provide a valuable tool for linking local communities to support initiatives from outside organizations.

In Sre Ambel, the local livelihoods road to development appears to have generated a certain level of progress in terms of family income generation, productivity, health education and community efforts to reinvest resources to protect existing natural resources. Furthermore, through various livelihood development activities, communities have learned how to form village-based organizations, which are able to represent their local constituency while also creating networks for communication with the wider world.

Financial support to self-help groups and loans allow for more alternative income generation activities among people who live along the coast as well as in upland areas. This has promoted significant changes in the lives of the people in Sre Ambel: until the recent past, they were dependent virtually completely on their ability to exploit their natural resources, either through fishing or through collection of NTFPs. Nowadays, when these natural resources come under tremendous threat from other human activities, local livelihood program activities have become a viable means for people to explore alternative forms of income generation, enabling diversification of the resource base and control over the use of existing forms of natural resources. Overall, people's improved skills in agriculture and small business and their knowledge of natural resource management contribute to improved alternative income generation and market opportunities for people in Sre Ambel.

In terms of integrating health education, more efforts have been made to consolidate community awareness raising about the linkages between income flows and health care for family members, especially women and children.

At the same time, the formation of various community groups, such as crab banks, rice banks, loan schemes, agricultural experiment groups, etc, has been recognized as contributing to stronger CBOs, which can help enhance community representation, both within and beyond the village boundary. These community-based groups have formed as local constituencies that can help local people mobilize and manage natural resources that meet the needs of their members. Meanwhile, they are perceived as a vehicle for strengthening solidarity and mobilizing collective action when necessary.

"Since more and more groups have been formed in our village, we have had an opportunity to send our village representatives to attend different workshops and conferences, in the provincial town, in Phnom Penh or even in other countries in the region."

Salabon in Sre Ambel (2008)

Photo: AFSC

Villagers being instructed on livestock vaccinations.

While the contributions of the local livelihoods road to development cannot be ignored, it is crucial to share some observations and lessons learned while conducting this research study.

Leadership

The leaders of projects are commonly selected by project members through democratic elections. However, in many cases, according to our observation, nominees are people who are from middle-class families or are "patrons". This is true even in community-based groups, where project members are mostly from among the "poorest of the poor".

> *"We had to select them because they are always helping us when we need things and, therefore, we must pay them with our respect and deep gratitude by electing them to be our leaders."*
>
> *Group of poor families from the self-help groups in Chamkar Kraom,*
> *Sre Ambel district (2008)*

Furthermore, the poor believe that they will remain safe under a patron's protection if they vote for them. In such cases, are projects being managed in a democratic manner? Furthermore, how participatory are decisions made in this political environment?

> *"I often think more than ten times before I approach them and borrow money from the self-help group, because I feel afraid of them. Sometimes I am told that I cannot obtain a loan because I have no money to repay it. I have observed that only middle-class families are able to receive loans from the self-help group."*
>
> *Project member of self-help group in Chamkar Kraom,*
> *Sre Ambel district (2008)*

Poor villagers who have received pigs and oxen from NGOs pass on the piglets and calves to other poor villagers. Villagers receive start-up capital from an NGO for a credit scheme (right).

Sustainability

Sustainability has been described as one of the objectives that project activities should aim to achieve. However, to enhance sustainability projects must focus more on capacity building of local leadership as well as on the active participation of all project members. Otherwise, as we have seen, leadership will be as strong as the patron, with power increasingly concentrated in the hands of the leader rather than owned by members.

> *"I don't care much about what happens to the committee members after I have elected them. My role in this project is to borrow money and repay the loan, and this is my main responsibility in the whole project."*
>
> *Member of a rice bank project in Ban Tiet village (2008)*

This perception leads to a decrease in the level of people's participation and therefore generates questions as to whether the project can be sustained through the active engagement of the project members or will be left alone to be managed by the leadership. If the latter is the case, where is the space for people's empowerment and democracy?

> *"Since the project started, I have met with other members once, during rice distribution. Otherwise we only meet when we get a new loan, and so far I do not know how much rice we have in the bank."*
>
> *Member of a rice bank project in Ban Tiet village (2008)*

Limitations in the concept and its application

The lives of Cambodian farmers depend substantially on their existing natural resources. Many farmers receive a great deal of training on agricultural techniques, such as animal raising, home gardening and rice planting. However, these are not always relevant to their current circumstances and context. This shows a lack of comprehensive engagement and awareness raising on the connection between families' food security and existing natural resources, as well as limitations in the approach and in the understanding of the organizations doing the training. This points to the need to carry out follow-up to see how effective training has been and to assess how new ideas have been integrated with local social imperatives.

Local forests are of crucial importance to community livelihoods, supplying an array of resources not available elsewhere. This includes medicinal properties of certain barks (left) and roots, both harvested from the moist tropical forests of the Elephant Mountains (right).

"We have received all these trainings, but nowhere can we use this knowledge and these skills, as our land has been taken away by business companies and we no longer have a place to herd our buffalo and cows."

Group of villagers in Ban Tiet village (2008)

Here, it can be concluded that, while progress has been made through activities relating to local livelihood initiatives, this study has identified a need to take a closer look at the quality and capacity of local leadership, in terms of both knowledge and skills, and especially at key cultural barriers that could jeopardize the functioning of CBOs. In the meantime, such local livelihood initiatives cannot alone resolve livelihood issues under the current circumstances, with people's needs for livelihood improvements more complex than they used to be.

THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ROAD

The legacy of war has weakened trust and relationships in Cambodia and therefore reduced the level of community solidarity. The structures imposed by various military regimes were created intentionally to divide and conquer or divide and control.

"During the Khmer Rouge period, I did not trust anybody, even my close family. Every one had to take care of their own hair and head."

Returnee in Battambang province (1994), in Meas Nee (1995)

One returnee in Dak Sasor village in Battambang province in 1994 explained his situation following his repatriation from a refugee camp:

It is believed that this process of looking out only for oneself generates intense fear among communities and discourages trust.

As a result, by the post-war period, communities had experienced wholesale social disintegration. In response to this, community development experts recognized a need to rebuild communities before moving on to support other development (Meas Nee and Healy, 2005). This school of thought believes that when people begin to trust each other solidarity is strengthened, and therefore people will be more able to work collectively and effectively to respond to the issues facing the community. "Community peace building" has often been included in this development process and is used as a tool for healing trust and building confidence among and between people in communities, as well as to link to gender mainstreaming issues.

The terms "community building" and "community development" are used interchangeably, with little attempt to define them separately. In the context of this study, we interpret community building or community development as a way to develop a community's social capital by strengthening the roles and capacity of CBOs and their governance. The term social capital here refers to the capacity of community members to trust each other, and the ability of the community to reinforce social norms, rule and systems of reciprocity and networks of exchange, which all leads to collective action by the community itself.

... when people begin to trust each other solidarity is strengthened, and therefore people will be more able to work collectively and effectively to respond to the issues facing the community.

A community house near Krang Chaek. Built in 2003, the house has provided a hub for a number of community-based programs initiated by AFSC in the upper Prek Kampong Saom Valley (left). The themes of the community forest program, one of these initiatives, are captured on the board that lies in front of the house. Mr Mein, the Community Forest Chair, stands below the sign (right).

In Cambodia, the community building approach came to dominate the development agenda in the early 1990s. Experts believed that the community building process would help reintegrate people from different social and political backgrounds in the community. NGOs have used a multifaceted approach to support the formation of CBOs, which are:

Under the community development road, it is possible to identify four types of CBOs, which can be differentiated on the basis of their shape and the roles they perform (Forum Syd, 2006):

1. A type of indigenous structure resulting from the revival of kinship and community social reciprocity systems (the pagoda committee, school committees, religious committees, pots and pans associations, etc);

2. A community structure associated with development projects set up through NGO support, either independent or working with indigenous structures (rice banks, cow banks, cooperatives, saving and credit groups, peer groups, etc);

3. A community structure formed by foreign-assisted development projects implemented through government extension programs (water users associations, fishery groups and forestry communities, etc);

4. A community action group facilitated by social activists working on issue-based activities such as training or information dissemination, who foster leadership or technical capacity among active community members but do not integrate them as an organization.

CBOs play an important role in mobilizing and channeling resources, such as technical, informational and financial resources, to support the needs of community members. They have numerous activities, ranging from very simple economic development initiatives, such as rice-based development, to extensive involvement in all forms of rights-based development, including advocacy campaigns for the protection of land, natural resources and rights for individual members. The names given to CBOs are based on actual roles and responsibilities (cooking pot association, association for elderly people, rice bank, loan scheme, water point committee, community forestry, fishery association, etc) (Meas Nee, 2008).

In Sre Ambel, almost all forms of CBOs in the above categories have existed, some emerging with NGO support and others formed as part of the traditional community system, on the basis of any remaining community solidarity. AFSC, for example, is working with CBOs on economic development activities such as rice banks, credit, crab banks, etc. Khmer Ahimsa is involved in community peace building and works closely with elder associations, Buddhist committees (salabons), pagoda committees, churches and mosques. Prum Vihear Thor is headed by a monk and works closely with a network of monks. The Fisheries Action Coalition Team (FACT) is dealing with fishery issues, through networks of community activists. CARE International supports CBOs working in health, for example village health committees. In addition, in recent years, more CBOs have been formed to protect community natural resources and deal with land issues. These work closely with district officials from the government's environment, fishery and forestry offices.

NGOs have also supported the initiatives of CBOs to form alliances and networks. In Sre Ambel, there is a network among salabons, monks, community health committees, fishery associations, forestry communities and community environment protected areas. Moreover, CBOs are empowered to achieve ownership, to participate in development processes and to strengthen relationships within the community and with other local institutions.

Ang Chi Eut-Group Discussion: Villagers meet together to discuss their community needs and plans of action.

Community building efforts have resulted in the development of more CBOs, and it is believed that this development perspective will lead to changes in the socio-political environment in Cambodia. Furthermore, the formation of local groups enables community members to learn how to elect their leaders and apply democratic management systems, according to observation.

Capacity building to these local constituencies has also been focusing on developing a system in which organization leadership is accountable to its members. Efforts to strengthen communication between groups in the same village have also been made, in order to make sure that organizations are working cooperatively, rather than creating and accentuating divisions in their local community.

In times of community crisis and threats, some of these CBOs have come together to form networks across communes and districts. Some have even managed to link themselves to other groups at national level. Such alliances and networks provide opportunities for connections to be made between people who share common issues and concerns over the social, political and economic factors that affect the lives of their family and community.

During the period of this research (late 2008 to mid-2009), the communities along the Sre Ambel coast and in upland areas used these evolving alliances and networks to share information, to build up trust and solidarity and, especially, to coordinate and resolve conflicts relating to natural resources. The network of communities along the coast in Chroy Svay commune, for example, brought to an end violent conflicts over fishing between the people of two communities who, at one stage, used weapons to seek resolution.

At the same, the community network that has been built among villagers in Chikhor Leu has provided people with a sense of solidarity, through collective action to protect land and natural resources. It is also of note that, through CBO networks, the voices of local people have been disseminated, through the media and through press conferences, both in Phnom Penh and beyond.

... alliances and networks provide opportunities for connections to be made between people who share common issues and concerns over the social, political and economic factors that affect the lives of their family and community.

The development of CBOs has also been argued as an essential element supporting the current government's efforts in decentralization. At the time of this study, an increasing number of foreign donors were expressing an interest in the potential of CBOs to bring about change, and in using civil society as a tool for development. In Sre Ambel, representatives of CBOs are being invited to join in the commune planning process, enabling community priorities to be integrated into commune investment plans.

Another significant contribution that the community development road in Sre Ambel and elsewhere in Cambodia has achieved is the increased respect that local government now has for the ability and capacity of CBO representatives: more and more CBO members are being elected to be commune council members or members of the village leadership and village development committees. At the same time, while the groups remain community based, the leadership is often perceived by local government as a potential human resource that could help smooth the process of decentralization, the responsibility for which currently rests with local commune councils. Key respected community representatives in Chroy Svay commune are now invited to participate in commune investment planning, for example.

While approaches adopted under the community development road have played an important role in strengthening the capacity and identity of local groups, based on the processes of democratization and people's empowerment, the journey along this road has also been constrained by social, political and cultural barriers. These barriers could undermine the functioning of the CBOs and, in some cases, could cause community fragmentation. Discussions in the following sections focus on the views of different key stakeholders involved in the process of community building and the challenges and opportunities they identify in terms of the community development road.

The nature of conflicts in participation and empowerment

Thanks to training on concepts and capacity building on empowerment, ownership and participation, many CBOs have expressed a strong commitment to their work. People are able to voice their concerns with confidence and women are often actively engaged in community discussions. There has been a big change in the capacity of CBOs to challenge existing structures. As commonly observed by the author during the research, people are encouraged to form their own groups, to select their own committee leaders, to learn how to vote and, in the decentralization process, to participate in commune planning.

> *"People now are different from in the 1980s. They have more right to express their views, even in front of us."*
>
> *Group of five village leaders from Chroy Svay and neighboring villages (2008)*

However, these developmental processes have seen some key constraints regarding the capacity of the leadership to manage unprecedented changes. As empowerment and participation have improved, more conflicts and divisions have come to light in communities.

This was also stressed by community leaders:

Nowadays, the topics CBOs most commonly request for capacity building input are facilitation skills, conflict resolution and teamwork building.

People's participation and empowerment are naturally influenced by individual perceptions and interests. The community, as well as its leadership, experiences difficulty in managing conflicts that have evolved naturally during its own empowerment and participation process. When conflicts cannot be dealt with peacefully, people may react by reducing their level of participation or withdrawing from the process. As participation of members decreases, the sense of representation in leadership is lost.

Project building vs. community building

Community building commonly sees support provided to CBOs for the development of projects. Based on this support, each year the number of CBOs increases and, at the same time, under the empowerment process, CBOs receive money, material support and training skills and knowledge to manage projects. These processes enhance CBO capacity and generate more tangible outcomes.

THE Community Organizer's CREED
go to the people
live with them
learn from them
start with what they know
build with what they have

but with the best leaders
when the work is done
the task accomplished
the people will say we have
done this ourselves

PHOTO: AFSC.

The Community Organizer's Creed.

However, as capacity improves, a lack of communication among various groups in the community is observed. For instance, representatives from each CBO in Sre Ambel were sent to different training courses and on field visits, but on their return there was little opportunity for them to share their learning and experiences with each other. As this study identifies, although CBOs are based in the same village, they are often not well informed about what others are doing:
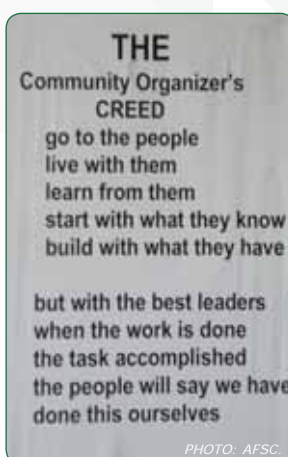
> *"Every day, I can only focus on my project, and I have little information from other projects. I go to meetings only when the NGO wants me to discuss my project."*
>
> *CBO leader, Sre Ambel (2008)*

This suggests that, while the community building approach, by means of CBO support, has often succeeded in strengthening the capacity of individual CBOs, these have not often bridged the communication gap among themselves. The community as a whole often loses direction owing to divisions between CBOs in the same village, and misses out on the advantages of synergies between groups while possibly creating new contradictions between groups' focuses. This provokes a new question: is this process really about building communities, or is it about building projects?

NGO projects vs. community ownership

This section provides some basic arguments regarding the issue of ownership, which is one of the core values in community building for facilitating long-term sustainability, the idea being that local groups should have ownership of their CBOs. Within the study area, but also across the country, community projects are often viewed by local communities as belonging to the relevant NGO, even though they are said to be owned by the community. This perception arises because the NGO has provided all the resources, including financing, materials and technical support; it has been exacerbated by NGOs and donors insisting on their name being used to link projects to them.

> *"The project belongs to the NGO because the NGO has provided us with everything, including money, techniques and a guide as to how the project should be managed."*
>
> *Villagers in Ban Tiet and Chouk villages (2008)*

Furthermore, as frequently noted during this study, community meetings are organized only in the presence of NGO staff; staff come to the villages and suggest meetings. It is not uncommon to hear NGO staff say things such as:

> *"People still need our guidance and advice because they are poor and have low education or are illiterate. They do not have ideas and knowledge so we need to train them more, and give them advice during their meetings."*
>
> *NGO leader who has worked in the community for almost ten years (2008)*

In some cases, NGOs must follow a "log frame",[4] as formulated in the project proposal, which is to be used as guidance and to keep the organization accountable to donors. The log frame concept is generally unknown at community level: it is a

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[4] *"Log frame" or "logical framework", a commonly used planning tool specifying activities, outputs, objectives and indicators of success.*

western concept, often formulated by NGOs without consulting the people in the community. But NGO staff sometimes regard their involvement with communities as something that must fit into the parameters of a log frame.

The level of support NGOs provide, the lack of confidence NGOs have in the capacity of the people and top-down instruction and guidance based on a non-consultative log frame have generated a strong belief that projects belong to NGOs rather than to communities. A sense of ownership can never materialize if people are not able to participate in or understand the CBO process.

Capacity to create vision

The development of a "common vision" is a core value in the community development process. To be able to make changes, people must adopt long-term plans, and such plans must follow a shared vision. Creating a vision is usually quite difficult for Cambodian people, including local NGOs and CBOs. The prolonged war and social conflict encouraged people to develop coping mechanisms based on short timeframes, centered on day-to-day survival. At the same time, successive regimes discouraged visionary thinking, insisting instead on obedience to orders from the top.

In addition to these historic and political reasons, current development processes have also stymied the vision making capacity of local groups. Active participation has been constrained by a lack of ability to deal with the emerging conflicts and differences that arise as part of the empowerment process (as described above). Furthermore, a common community vision is not really possible when a sense of ownership is not clearly articulated.

Vision enables people to visualize changes and to formulate planned strategies to make changes or deal with change as it happens. In the case of Cambodia, local communities tend to be happier when their immediate needs are supported, rather than when they are asked to focus on long-term thinking. There are many examples available from this field study in Sre Ambel of people being interested in discussions about what activities to do but less articulate when asked about what they want to see their community look like as a result of such activities. The author himself has been involved in facilitating workshops on strategic planning for CBOs and NGOs and has seen the great difficulties many participants experience in formulating a future vision for their organization or community.

The community development road has contributed significantly to overall improvements in the capacity of local people to work collectively to meet their needs, as well as being a source of community strengthening through the development of social capital. However, only forming the CBO, without understanding the nature and the socio-political and cultural constraints and contexts as described, can create confusion in a community. In some cases, it can impact negatively on local solidarity and identity, if such constraints are not addressed and managed.

THE ENVIRONMENTAL CONSERVATION ROAD

Cambodia's forests have been severely degraded as a result of unmanaged logging and recent land development activities, including mining, hydro development and the creation of plantations. The development of these industries has affected large areas of the country. Furthermore, more hydropower dams are planned across the country over the next five to ten years. The development of such dams will affect areas of abundant forest, creating concerns over impacts on the environment and natural resources.

Furthermore, more hydropower dams are planned across the country over the next five to ten years. The development of such dams will affect areas of abundant forest, creating concerns over impacts on the environment and natural resources.

The forests in the hills that surround Sre Ambel district provide a home for a variety of unique flora and fauna, but face pressure from local communities and larger developers.

Cambodian warring factions began to carry out wide-scale logging operations in the 1980s. The revenue collected was used mainly to support the war effort. This anarchical logging and mining continued through the 1990s and 2000s, carried out by investment companies and individuals. Concerns over natural resources are widely reported by local media on an almost daily basis, indicating more and more conflicts occurring between local people and companies involved in mining and extraction activities. In Sre Ambel, respondents noted the presence of armed guards and military police protecting company operations, suggesting that companies have the backing of powerful individuals.

"In the surrounding areas controlled by the company, we saw armed guards and military police arresting people and forcing people to leave their land. They sometimes threaten to beat us if we resist.

The exploitation of natural resources through mining and logging, exacerbated by a lack of law enforcement, is creating significant concern among environmentalists as well as villagers. Under pressure from the international community and from aid organizations, between 2003 and 2008 the government formulated a number of sub-decrees, aimed at controlling the exploitation of natural resources, particularly related to land, forests, fisheries and the environment.

Involvement of international environmental NGOs has been significant since the mid-1990s, followed by the arrival of local environmental NGOs in the late 1990s. The conservation approach involves environmental agencies supporting government efforts to provide direct control over areas rich in natural resources. This has included the recruitment of forest rangers, use of aerial mapping and monitoring of illegal activities.

Conservation groups have sought to put an end to the illegal trade in wildlife. In this photo (left), a palm civet, seized from a Sre Ambel trader, is released back into the forest. Military police, supported by international NGOs, perform an important enforcement role in curtailing the wildlife trade (right).

In Sre Ambel, the environment conservation road to development has helped minimize the level of anarchical destruction and illegal logging activities in upland forests as well as along the coastal wetland margins. People in Sre Ambel have also been able to learn about the concepts of environmental protection in relation to natural resources. Furthermore, the environmental conservation road has made significant contributions towards public awareness of the levels of destruction caused by humans and in the name of development, and of how such environmental destruction can jeopardize sources of community livelihoods, now and in the future. That said, a concern with this road regards the strong focus it has given to conservation considerations over and above the needs and aspirations of local people. One example of this is the setting aside of forest reserves that effectively exclude local people, which is a replication of the classic "fences and fines" approach to conservation management, one which experience elsewhere in the world has shown to be detrimental to local communities because of its disruptions to local livelihood and cultural systems (McCallum, 2003).

... a concern with this road regards the strong focus it has given to conservation considerations over and above the needs and aspirations of local people.

It is worth also noting here some key concerns related to this road raised by the Sre Ambel community during the course of this study. People described the situation as a "war" between the community and conservation groups. Many people were arrested and their knives and axes confiscated; some were even sent to prison just because they tried to access NTFPs.

Signboards, such as this one along Route 48, have been a prominent tool used by international conservation groups to educate the Sre Ambel public on environmental laws and the illegality of certain activities.

> *"During this period, while in the forest, we had to hide ourselves under cover when we heard the planes or helicopters flying over us. It was like we were in the war during the 1970s."*
>
> *Community group from Ban Tiet and neighboring villages (2008)*

> *"Every day, we saw forest rangers ride big motorbikes around and near our villages and come to arrest us, even when all we had was a small wild animal caught in the forest."*
>
> *Villagers in Sre Ambel (2008)*

At the same time, these conservation groups provided education campaigns aimed at building the capacity of the community to understand the importance of existing natural resources. This approach to education was perceived by the community as a way to limit their access to NTFPs. The language most commonly used during these campaigns had to do with "forbidding": the community should not enter the forest, catch wild animals, take away the plants, etc. Furthermore, there is evidence of forced relocation: some people who had lived in the forest for most of their lives were forced to move to a new village, Sovanna Baitong, in Andong Tuek commune of Botum Sakor district in Koh Kong. This village was formed with the support of a conservation organization. Villagers claimed that the conservation NGO had told them that relocation was necessary because people would further destroy the forest if they stayed on.

> *"We were forced to leave our homes in the forest two years ago and settled in this village. In compensation, we were given a plot of land (25m x 400m) and 10kg of rice per month per person, based on a condition that we work in our own home garden. Each day, we are followed up on by staff from the organiza-tion, to ensure that we complete the assigned tasks, before the rice ration is provided. If one of us is sick and cannot work, then we are not able to receive the rice ration."*
>
> *Sovanna Baitong villagers (2008)*

As people are prevented from collecting NTFPs, their income has decreased dramatically. This has also created a disconnection from the cultural aspects of resource collection.

> *"Since the forest rangers were stationed near our community, people have lost most of our additional income through NTFPs, and we feel the forest no longer belongs to us."*
>
> *Village leader in a Muslim village in Sre Ambel district (2008)*

Furthermore, the conservation approach has often faced anger from the local population. Many demonstrations have been organized in recent years by communities, demanding fewer restrictions on their access to NTFPs. In the meantime, people see the conservation approach to natural resource management as not only limiting income opportunities and forcing the community to leave their ancestral land, but also giving corrupt and powerful companies the chance to operate their agricultural concessions freely.

> *"Every day the company clears land and all big trees are cut and trucked away during the night, but nobody arrests them. At the same time, as villagers, we are often arrested by rangers and forest officials, even while collecting fire wood."*
>
> *Sovanna Baitong villagers (2008)*

Attempts to protect the environment by means of the conservation road have been said to be an important step in slowing down the environmental destruction caused by humans in the name of development. However, proceeding with this approach alone, without linking it to people's livelihoods, could alienate communities from their existing natural resources. Communities might come to perceive these resources as externally controlled, rather than as their own resources, for which they should hold responsibility. These concerns have led to the community-based natural resource management approach to development, as described below.

Curious school children attend World Environment Day activities, 2004 (left). A small boy returns home from World Environment Day celebrations at his local primary school (right).

THE COMMUNITY-BASED NATURAL RESOURCE MANAGEMENT ROAD

By the late 1990s, there was increasing concern over the way in which Cambodia was managing its natural resources, particularly with regard to land, forests, fisheries and the environment. Although fish is a major source of protein for the Cambodian population, fish stocks have reduced dramatically in recent years. As a result of land clearing for farming and other agricultural purposes, there has

been a sizeable shrinkage of wetlands and forest. This led to a strong interest in environmentalism, and more NGOs began to work collectively with communities to protect the environment and natural resources. The main focus of these environmental groups and NGOs was on protecting natural resources, including forests, fisheries and the environment.

By the early 2000s, the response to natural resource management issues had moved into a new stage, whereby ownership and responsibility were given to the community. There was a change in international thinking with regard to sustainable development in the conservation NGO sector, including a recognition that social, economic and political factors, especially at local level, needed to be managed if conservation was to be effective and lasting. This saw the rise of integrated conservation and development programs as a primary focus among international conservation agencies, as approaches for securing their conservation goals (McCallum et al., 2007). This gave rise to a new range of approaches commonly referred to as community-based natural resource management (CBNRM). The popularity of these approaches coincided with the growth of international NGO involvement in Cambodia.

Villagers and officials work together to demarcate a protected area in Sre Ambel.

The CBNRM approach requires the community to take control over the local forest, to improve the condition of the forest and to use it as a basis for strengthening local institutions. Resulting benefits are two-way: healthy forest management and improved community accountability and democracy, as well as support to community livelihoods (Brokington, 2007). This trend has provoked significant attention from environmental NGOs. As a result, more support has been directed into developing CBOs to manage community forestry, community fisheries and community environment protected areas.

The CBNRM approach involves the formation of CBOs, through either government or NGO support. This initially emerges from collective action by community activists, sometimes in reaction to companies and individuals involved in land misappropriation and illegal exploitation of community natural resources. In early 2008, the Royal Government of Cambodia recognized the importance of CBNRM by adopting new sub-decrees to allow for official recognition of CBNRM projects.

More and more community-based networks are being formed under the CBNRM name, at local, regional and national levels. In Sre Ambel, for instance, there are different forms of networks among community fishery, forestry and environment groups, formed and operated as mechanisms for sharing information and taking collective action when needed.

Although the CBNRM approach has been widely accepted as a means to an end with regard to the improvement of natural resource management, some controversial issues have been raised regarding practicality, especially in terms of identity, representation and capacity.

Sharing of experiences with other groups is a key part of this road. In these two pictures, Mr Mein, Chair of the Phnom Toub Cheang Community Forest, leads visitors from another district through the experiences and lessons learned from his association's work.

Identity and conflicts

CBOs here refer to constituencies formed by community members to serve the needs of the community through their own decision and choices. Two forms of CBOs for natural resource management exist: those supported by the government and those supported by NGOs. In Sre Ambel, forestry and environmental officials involved in interviews revealed that the government has plans to set up more CBOs under government control. However, the government's recent attempts in CBNRM were criticized by NGOs in Sre Ambel during the study as being a way of introducing another community structure that will operate under its apparatus. Identity and unity issues between the former and the latter could arise, which could affect solidarity among civil society groups.

Recently, during a series of community consultation workshops facilitated by the author in Sihanoukville, Pursat and Kratie provinces, CBOs supported by NGOs reported some problems related to their attendance at a number of big government-organized conferences on forestry planning. The government invited CBOs of both types to these conferences but, although they had been invited, the NGO-supported CBOs were only invited at the last moment and were virtually excluded from the consultation process. The documents and program were sent to them less than 48 hours before the meeting, so they had only a limited amount of time to study them: it was hard for community members to understand the words and terms written in the text in such a short amount of time. In addition, their invitation from the government was received only two days before the workshop. Moreover, although they could participate in the workshop, they were not entitled to be listed officially as participants, and therefore no food allowance could be provided.

It was interesting for the author to observe during the conferences that followed the behavioral differences between the former and the latter types of CBOs, regarding the way in which they interacted with government officials. The CBNRM CBOs supported by the government appeared less interested in challenging and providing feedback to the government; the latter attempted to give more input. Nevertheless, it seems that CBOs formed by the government have more confidence and feel

... the government's recent attempts in CBNRM were criticized by NGOs in Sre Ambel during the study as being a way of introducing another community structure that will operate under its apparatus.

more legitimacy, thanks to their government endorsement, whereas CBOs supported by NGOs are often treated as "anti-government" and thus are starting from a weaker position. In addition, CBOs supported by government often experience fewer delays in their start-up.

Local NGOs spend considerable time developing plans for working with local community-based natural resource groups.

This illustrates issues that exist in Cambodia over the identity and ownership of CBNRM. It is clear that the CBNRM network is structurally divided, and such divisions will destabilize social cohesion and, in the worst case, could be seen as a government measure to divide and capture local communities.

Community representation

One of the key strategies adopted in CBNRM is enabling people's voice to be heard through community representatives. Representation here requires community leaders to have capacity to act on behalf of community members and on the basis of community common interests.

The emergence of a community-based network for natural resource management has been treated as an unprecedented change in the life of the people in Sre Ambel.

> *"Usually, when I was young, we never thought about our involvement in protecting our natural resources. We only knew how to exploit them, leaving protection matters to the local government. Indeed, issues of natural resources were not even discussed."*
>
> *Community members in Chroy Svay (2008)*

In this case, networks need substantial external support, in terms of both technical and financial resources. CBNRM networks have received significant support from NGOs, both local and international, and donors, especially over the past few years, including training, workshops, conferences and field visits for network members.

While such support has been recognized as responsive and helpful for members of the networks, it has unconsciously alienated leaders of the networks from community members. As described above, conflicts arising during the empowerment process often undermine the status of community representation, particularly when leaders cannot manage their differences. The analysis above explains why some leaders then go on to implement top-down management rather than bottom-up and democratic representation.

At the same time, lack of proper coordination between agencies supporting networks has led to some concern over the way in which support is channeled to participants. Key network members often spend a great deal of time away attending workshops and trainings offered by NGOs and donors, but have found little time and opportunity to share what they have learned with their community members.

> *"Each time we come to Phnom Penh, we are requested to take part in various trainings and workshops organized by NGOs, and each time we are asked to plan for the activities of the network. Finally, we feel we are running around for meetings with NGOs just to make up plans, but do not have time to take such plans for consultation with the community. Sometimes, I spend almost a whole month in Phnom Penh attending different workshops and trainings which, I believe, serve the purpose of the host NGOs rather than realistically follow the community's agenda."*
>
> *Members of community peace building network in Chroy Svay village (2008)*

This should not undermine the fact that the study identified some significant improvements being made by these community-based groups in terms of skills and knowledge regarding the importance of collective action to protect their natural resources, and their capacity to bring the concerns of their members to local, regional and international attention.

However, it is clear that this process could lead to a disconnection between community representatives and their local members as, step by step, they become part of the NGO mechanism rather than part of the community they are trying to represent.

> *"We select them to be our representatives in the network, but for more than two years I have not heard much from them. We only see them return to our village sometimes to see their families, that's all we know."*
>
> *Salabon in Ban Tiet village (2008)*

Representation can play an important role in terms of strengthening trust and confidence between the authorities and community members. Furthermore, with strong representation, the community can hold its leaders to account. In the cases detailed above, a lack of strong representation has undermined the ability of the network to maintain its mutual relationships with its community members. This will undermine the capacity of the network to mobilize the community in times of emergency.

CBNRM and the development approach to investment

The natural environment of Sre Ambel has provided opportunities for various kinds of investment activities, including logging, hydro development, seaweed collection and plantation agriculture. As noted, although these development initiatives have been perceived as a factor in the country's economic growth, some investments have been carried out at the cost of local communities, creating a number of issues around the role of CBNRM as a development road, both now and in the future.

The government has indicated strong support for investment in Sre Ambel, but many of the subsequent projects have been implemented with little consultation with the community and local government officials.

"Here, we only learn about the investment plan through middlemen who are closely linked to business, but we have never seen any official notification or experienced any consultation between businesses and local authorities. We only know when the bulldozers begin to clear our land."

Village leaders and commune councils (2008)

"In the law, commune councils have the role of participating in and deciding on local planning, or any development plans that affect the community. But in the case of investment in Sre Ambel, there is no such consultation. Even me, as commune council chief: I have watched powerlessly as my land is bulldozed by the company. They continued even as I begged them to wait to see if I could get assistance from the district leader. I think the term decentralization is meaningless in the case of development in Sre Ambel today."

Chief of a commune council, Sre Ambel district (2008)

"Often, we are informed about the business plan only at the last stage, when all the heavy equipment is being brought into the area and they are preparing to clear the land. We have no idea about what has been studied, who carried out the study and what the study report contains. We only know that all of these questions are in the hands of people in Phnom Penh: In the ministry? With the Prime Minister? We don't know."

Officials from Sre Ambel and Botum Sakor districts (2008

"Sometimes, we are asked to participate in studies, but they give us very short notice and restrict the time to do the work (two to three days on a 300,000 hectare forest). We cannot carry out a comprehensive study in these conditions, and can only mark out land boundaries and make sure that the size of the land is measured exactly according to the contract."

Officials from provincial departments (2008)

It is clear that existing investment activities in Sre Ambel have been carried out without consultation with local communities and authorities, or at least that any consultation has been selective and non-inclusive. It may be that it was assumed that local consultation would raise critical issues and incur a great deal of time and cost to the company.

> *"As a business, we work closely with the government and, indeed, the government has often expressed a strong desire to support us and to help our business start up as early as possible. In this process, sometimes there is no need for us to consult the local community: it is a waste of time and we can still implement the project as long as it is approved by the minister or Prime Minister in Phnom Penh."*
>
> *Phnom Penh-based business official, involved in investment projects in Sre Ambel (2008)*

Excluding the local community from the consultation process has made it easier to carry out business and has sped up the implementation of business activities. This fast development approach has challenged CBNRM networks. Community organizing through CBNRM is a slow process. Some areas need up to six months just to go through the processes necessary before a community can be officially formed. In Sre Ambel, progress made has often been seriously challenged by investment activities. An example has been a hydropower project in the upper headwaters of the Prek Kampong Saom. This project involves roads, dam construction and flooding in areas currently used and managed by local rural communities in the Phnom Toub Cheang Community Forest. The project has proceeded with little consultation with community forestry members, despite the work they have put into the sustainable management of nearby forests (McCallum, 2008).

> *"Community organization always takes time, to allow space for community consultation and participation to take place. We have become aware that this process is often too slow to respond to the top-down and commanding approach of businesses that are strongly backed by government."*
>
> *NGO staff member in Sre Ambel (2008)*

Members of the Phnom Toub Cheang Community Forest, one of the major CBNRM programs underway in the district, undertake numerous activities in the forest, including establishing boundaries (left) and undertaking patrols (right).

The CBNRM approach recognizes the critical role of the community in maintaining strong ownership over local natural resources, as well as having the capacity to manage, utilize and protect those resources for the sake of future generations. However, leaving only a small island of trees for the community, while clearing the rest of the forest, means that people own only some trees, not the forest. Moreover, community ownership refers not only to possession of actual items, but also to ability to participate in and contribute to the whole process of development.

THE 'BUDDHISM AND DEVELOPMENT' ROAD

Within the ever-growing number of Cambodian NGOs, some local organizations name themselves "Buddhist organizations", claiming to have adopted Buddhist approaches as a means to achieve their development goals. These organizations are led by monks, employ monk staff members or have offices in Buddhist pagodas. These NGOs are also challenged by issues relating to land, natural resources and environment.

There is a strong Buddhist tradition in Sre Ambel, which contains a number of local pagodas with novice monks in residence.

This section does not provide a theoretical discussion of Buddhist terminology and concepts in development, but examines the work, challenges and constraints of some key NGOs that have termed themselves Buddhist organizations working in development.

Buddhist organizations perform roles similar to those of non-Buddhist organizations, including services for vulnerable children, HIV/AIDS education and care, environmental protection, community peace building and activities relating to the development of community and the family economy.

Some monks working for such NGOs in Sre Ambel explain that Buddhist involvement in development is a means to rebuild mutual respect and relationships between local Buddhist institutions and communities. They feel that this approach is a way to promote the status and credibility of Buddhism and to protect Buddhists from being "brainwashed" by other religious ideas.

Efforts have been made to link Buddhist beliefs and institutions with the protection of the local environment by faith-based conservation groups, such as the Association of Buddhists for the Environment, whose signboard along Route 48 is pictured here.

Nowadays, more monks are engaged in social development activities, but there are questions as to whether development is realistically influenced by the Buddhist worldview, or whether Buddhist NGOs just carry out development activities as non-Buddhist NGOs do. This study will not explore this question in any detail, but interviews with some key monks and leaders of Buddhist organizations indicate that there is no clear framework explaining actual linkages between NGO approaches and Buddhist concepts. One peace building group argued that its approach was based on Buddhist methods of meditation and active non-violence. Buddhist counseling and meditation have also been argued to be effective methods in psycho-social care for people living with HIV (Salvation Center for Cambodia, 2009).

Although Buddhist development methods are argued to be an essential element in Cambodian Buddhist culture, and are widely accepted and respected by community members, some key challenges and constraints have been observed regarding the hierarchical structure in the Buddhist tradition and western concepts of empowerment, democracy and participation. As such, the issue of how these organizations "weave" Buddhism into their programs remains unclear. In Sre Ambel, despite strong efforts by Buddhist organizations to build linkages between Buddhist practices and environmental protection, such practical concepts appear not to be well articulated by lay staff, who instead are more familiar with western terminology and practices, as usually expressed by non-Buddhist organizations.

First, development concepts are challenged by the presence of monks. Monks are highly respected by Cambodian Buddhist believers, which means that a power relationship is built from the outset.

"I have great difficulty building mutual relationships with the people in the community as they always treat me as high as Buddha. In front of me, they tend to be quiet and pay me respect. I find it difficult to encourage them to express their views or give me feedback."

Buddhist monks working as NGO staff based in Phnom Penh (2009)

"While working with lay staff, I find it difficult to maintain mutual and equal relationships with them. They tend not to challenge my authority as a monk, and often they even try not to get close to me when we are working in the office. This somehow creates a lot of difficulties when I want to empower them to participate in team discussions."

Buddhist monks working as NGO staff based in Phnom Penh (2009)

Second, empowerment and democracy are hampered by the nature and power relations of the Buddhist hierarchical structure, which is installed in the development effort through the presence of monks as NGO directors. By working as a director, a monk can double his power and prestige.

It is difficult to imagine how an organization can proceed through the democratic and participatory process when the power gap has already been expressed culturally. Relationships of a similar nature have been observed between monks and community members.

Some monks attempt to apply other Buddhist approaches, using *metta*, *karuna* and *mudita* (loving kindness, compassion and sympathetic joy), which they believe can help minimize the power gaps between monks and lay staff and community members. However, this approach still leads to the same consequences, owing to a lack of awareness and behavior change among Buddhist monks working in organizations.

At this point, there is little information available on discussions or trainings being organized on power relationships within Buddhist organizations. In Sre Ambel, at least two NGOs have Buddhist monks involved in their work, but records of their capacity building processes reveal that most training sessions are carried out using western development concepts, with no attempt to inject Buddhist ways of thinking into such concepts or to sensitize staff to the barriers and constraints that might arise.

Third, some lay staff are not aware of the Buddhist values practiced by their organization, and instead rely totally on the log frame approach, based on development indicators, sometimes in complete contrast with Buddhist worldviews and practices. This cultural issue is often overlooked by organizations that try to adopt a Buddhist approach to development.

While Buddhist approaches to development have now been accepted as an important vehicle for change, it is important to consolidate and clarify these concepts. Perhaps more lessons from this approach should be recorded, and shared with all key stakeholders involved in this road to development, to ensure that key cultural constraints are analyzed and addressed.

Although the majority of the population in Sre Ambel is Buddhist, there are also a number of Cham Muslim villages. The mosque pictured here calls the faithful to prayer using the loudspeaker shown.
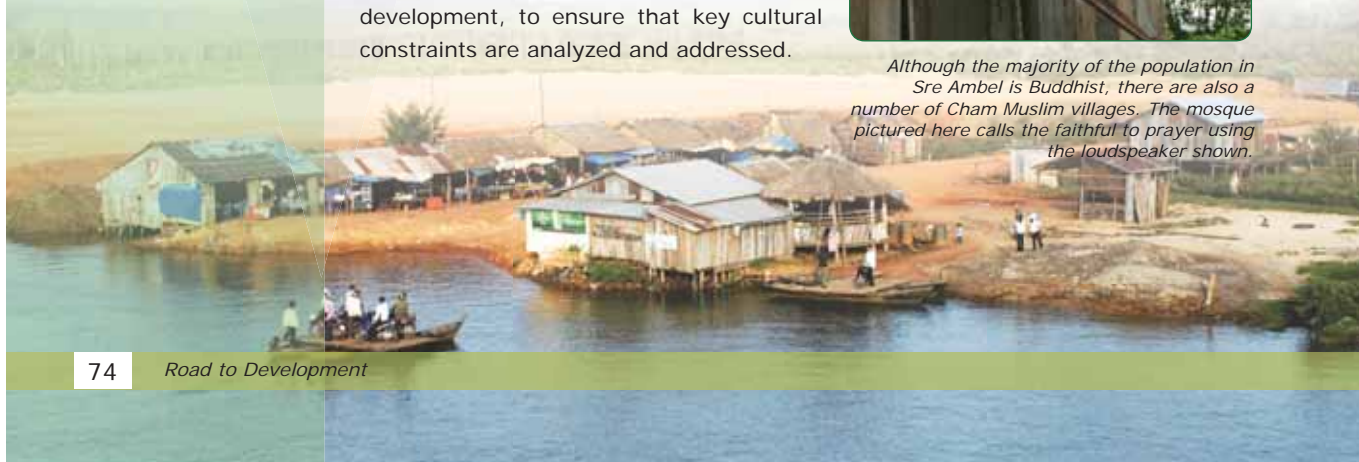
Searching for a road forward:
Revisiting development in Sre Ambel

Meas Nee

This chapter revisits and analyzes the implications of the development perspectives described in previous chapters. The analysis is divided into two parts. The first provides general observations on the implications of the different development perspectives for Sre Ambel (its people and environment). The second looks at the potential themes and implications of a Khmer-centered approach to development.

REFLECTIONS ON DEVELOPMENT IN SRE AMBEL

We do not want to ignore any positive changes already made by the development perspectives described above. Without the invaluable contributions of each of the roads to development, the people in Sre Ambel would be unlikely to have accessed the benefits they are experiencing today, with regard to both community building and natural resources. The observations that follow should not be seen as a one-sided criticism of all current development initiatives in Sre Ambel (and Cambodia), but rather should be used as a tool for learning and improving practices by development institutions and individual actors. Learning to be reflective can help in the evolution of positive responses.

… observations … should be used as a tool for learning and improving practices by development institutions and individual actors.

Current patterns of development offer both opportunities and challenges for local communities. On the one hand, they promise food (top right) and jobs and new infrastructure (left). On the other, they throw up challenges of environmental destruction (center right) and exclusion of communities from lands they have traditionally treated as community commons (bottom right).

The economic perspective, for instance, has helped communities cope with their basic needs as well as improving levels of income and assets at family level. Business investments in the area have resulted in improvements in community infrastructure, such as roads and schools, and have provided employment for some local people, whose livelihoods are threatened by the current deterioration of natural resources, land misappropriation and deforestation.

The community organizing and community peace building perspectives have been recognized as tools enhancing communities' social capital and preventing conflicts and tensions between social groups in the local constituency. These approaches to development help reinstall trust between people and villages, and provide opportunities for communities to form their own social groups to serve the needs of their members. The active non-violence approach to advocacy has often been used in community campaigns in response to forced eviction and land appropriation by companies and powerful individuals.

Furthermore, the presence of NGOs working in conservation has helped inform the public about the current situation of the environment, especially forests, land and fisheries. At the same time, these NGOs provide capacity building support to communities on the importance of the environment, the forests and natural resources, and identify ways in which communities can work collectively to minimize negative impacts and protect natural resources. Moreover, the conservation approach has stemmed practices which could have led to the loss of many natural systems, and the associated ecosystem services that they provide to local communities.

Human rights and legal aid organizations have been essential with regard to monitoring human rights in communities, while at the same time providing protection to both individuals and communities that have been abused as a result of the current political climate. In recent years, they have been actively involved in supporting communities to file complaints in court on issues regarding land and natural resource abuses.

... overall practices have often been criticized, for example for lack of capacity to provide appropriate coordination to support communities in times of crisis and for sometimes creating tensions and divisions between social groups ...

While each perspective has been recognized as an important tool for development, overall practices have often been criticized, for example for lack of capacity to provide appropriate coordination to support communities in times of crisis and for sometimes creating tensions and divisions between social groups rather than building up communities.

Parts of Sre Ambel offer great opportunities for ecotourism, although there is the risk that certain developments, such as hydropower, may remove the natural features that make the area attractive to tourists. Ensuring that one development road does not foreclose on the options of another is one of the challenges for development in the district and elsewhere in Cambodia.

At community level, for example, NGOs came to develop CBOs by encouraging people to form groups and elect committee members. This support was often followed by trainings and capacity building to ensure that each group would be able to manage its own project. In each village in Sre Ambel, more than one CBO was formed, by different organizations. Economics projects are supported by economics-based NGOs; the committee of salabons works under the guidance of an NGO working on community peace building; community fishery associations are supported by an advocacy organization; and forestry associations are working with support from NGOs and district expert departments. Each community group tends to focus on its own project activities and therefore knows only what is going on in its own group. Little information is shared between groups in the same village. Capacity building has also been provided separately.

The following subsections discuss various key issues arising from an analysis of the various roads to development.

Lack of flexibility and coordination in NGO responses

Experts are usually trained to be skilled in their own particular subject. Similarly, institutions involved in delivering expert services often focus their attention only on issues linked to their area of expertise, rather than looking at the general situation and the needs of the community as a whole. In Sre Ambel, for instance, staff working in health care NGOs did not want to accompany the author to their target villages after they learned that the issues under discussion were to be land and natural resources, arguing that these had nothing to do with them.

During the campaign against the sugarcane company, people organized a series of community demonstrations to express their concerns. Community members were very frustrated with the NGOs during this period, claiming that the NGOs did not stay with them when they held their demonstrations. In Chikhor Leu, along Route 48, the community wrote on old rice bags to inform the public about the issues confronting them. It was too difficult for passers-by to read the writing on the old rice bags. NGOs were asked why resources could not be mobilized to help the community access proper banners and better writing implements. The responses varied from NGO to NGO:

- *"We cannot provide them with banners because we want the community to use their own local resources"*, said a community peace building NGO.

- *Another NGO said "We cannot help them because we are not a rights NGO: we are working only on community livelihoods. Indeed, we can give them the banners only if we receive official permission from the commune councils."*

- Staff from rights and legal aid organizations said *"We cannot support the community because we want people to have ownership of the banners and, of course, our organization has no budget available for this kind of request."*

- Staff from an environmental NGO explained *"We cannot help the community with the banners because we are afraid of being spotted by the government, and therefore, our NGO will be in trouble when the NGO Law is passed."*

These responses meant that the community was left with only the old rice bags. Lack of flexibility in NGO response led to negative consequences for community organization.

Meanwhile, there is no record of any meetings organized among these NGOs to coordinate community response. This reveals an important finding: NGO practices are driven strongly by their own expertise, experiences and perceptions, but also by their own mandates and standard operating procedures, as well as an element of fear. This lack of coordination, along with the inflexibility mentioned above, means that individual responses are not effective, and appear to have left communities out in the cold. Furthermore, poor coordination between NGOs can lead to a poor flow of information to communities, leaving them unable to mobilize resources to support their campaigns.

Sectoral focus vs. building community cohesion

NGOs generate social change through capacity building of CBOs to enable them to engage and advocate collectively to protect their common interests. Numerous training courses have been provided. For example, CBOs working on livelihoods are given technical skills to manage their projects; forestry, fishery and community environmental groups are specifically trained on matters relating to natural resource management; rights activists are equipped with knowledge and skills on human rights and law; and CBOs involved in community peace building have received training on active non-violence and meditation, aimed at enhancing peaceful relationships between various social groups and religious faiths and contributing towards the organization of peaceful demonstrations against the government and companies.

The struggle in Chikhor Leu and its neighboring villages continues, but some division has been observed between CBOs in the same village. When community activists were actively engaged in organizing community demonstrations, members of the committee of the rice bank and buffalo banks argued that this was an issue for the committee for land and natural resources and had nothing to do with them, as they were trained only to manage their banks. Peace building groups focused on working to reduce the level of conflict between social and political groups, but expressed little interest in working with other groups to deal with issues they all confronted.

The sectoral approach evolving out of the NGO engagement with local communities has been effective in terms of building the capacity of local institutions but has not led to a strengthening of community social cohesion. In fact, the approach has tended to create compartmentalized knowledge and processes, centered around individual initiatives and groups rather than integrated across the entire community. As such, this process has contributed to divisions between social groups in Chikhor Leu.

"In the past there were not many leaders in our village. We had only a village leader and he had power to mobilize people to do things more effectively, but now we have many leaders, such as those of rice banks, buffalo banks, community forestry associations, etc. These leaders have gone to training many times, but I do not know what they have learned as they never share anything with me. Now we find it even more difficult to coordinate ourselves since we have too many leaders in our village."

Community member (2008)

Conservation vs. a people-centered and livelihoods approach

Although the interest in the conservation approach appears to have been superseded to some extent by CBNRM, the latter approach has found it difficult to change the status quo in Sre Ambel. The government approach towards environmental protection has put a strong emphasis on taking care of the environment in the areas under its control. Ministry of Environment officials interviewed expressed an enthusiasm for protecting the environment, arguing that they had seen significant increases in forest and natural resources, including wild birds and animals. No mention was made of how communities could gain benefits from conservation. Forestry officials expressed their role as working to prevent people from destroying the forest.

Such cases suggest that the main focus of conservation in Sre Ambel is on protecting the forest and other natural resources. Social interaction by the state with the local people is often limited to prohibiting them from entering or destroying the forest, and does not really discuss in depth how a well-protected forest could help improve communities' livelihoods. As a result, community members often perceive conservation as operating at the expense of community livelihoods, and this discourages them from participating in it. This phenomenon has been exacerbated by the discord generated by the enforcement activities of conservationist NGOs and their government counterparts, including arrests and alleged destruction of property.

... community members often perceive conservation as operating at the expense of community livelihoods, and this discourages them from participating in it.

Business approach to labor and employment opportunities

In theory, business is interested mainly in promoting economic growth through investment activities. In the meantime, in its essence, business is about making a profit on capital investment. Businesses also believe that their investments will have tangible results, contribute to the country's GDP through tax revenues, improve labor skills and provide employment opportunities for local people. An official working for the sugarcane concession company explained that the company promoted national economic growth at the same time as providing local people with technical skills and employment opportunities. In rural areas, such investment attracts laborers from local villagers, who expect additional income from such ventures.

However, this practice has been questioned by local people and authorities in Sre Ambel. Lack of local consultation and the failure to conduct thorough impact assessments have provoked community demonstrations and confrontation. Although work opportunities have been generated for a few thousand people on the sugar plantation, it has been realized that such an income cannot compensate for the loss of community land and natural resources. At the same time, this form of employment is possible only for fully able community members: women heads of household, the elderly, the disabled and older children have no new opportunities.

In the meantime, the current movement against the company has alienated the community neighboring the plantation site from any employment opportunities: the company is recruiting people from other provinces rather than employing local people. At the time of study, people reported that more and more laborers were being recruited from distant provinces such as Kampong Cham, Svay Rieng and Prey Veng. This generates concern regarding whether this development approach will help stabilize the livelihoods of local communities or whether it will alienate them, pushing them into migrating for work elsewhere.

... people are slowly being transformed from being landowners to being laborers on the land of the company.

Furthermore, this process appears to have instilled a sense of disempowerment in the local population, as people are slowly being transformed from being landowners to being laborers on the land of the company. Local villagrs in Chouk and authorities in the area feel that business has benefited only a handful of people, while they have lost their land and their natural resources have been destroyed. In the meantime, some laborers who have been involved in organizing community advocacy against the company have been put on the company's blacklist. Some have received verbal threats or been sent to faraway work sites. This undermines community resilience and confidence.

In these circumstances, although business has provided people with employment opportunities, it is not clear whether the approach has really helped support families' economic growth, given that it has been carried out at the expense of local communities' control over their own livelihoods and has totally excluded the disadvantaged population.

How development will impact on the youth of Sre Ambel is an important consideration as "development roads" are contemplated for the district.

KHMER NOTIONS OF DEVELOPMENT REVISITED

In Sre Ambel, the study captured some key development practices that we believe have been influenced by the Khmer notions of development, which were outlined in a previous section. The two major themes arising are covered below.

Patronage leadership vs. democracy and participation

As we have seen, good governance efforts have been hampered by the patron–client culture of Cambodia, whereby leadership is strongly bounded by the patron–client relationship. An earlier section noted that modern western notions of good governance and democratic leadership in a patronage-based society have created a hybrid system, one bringing together democratic notions and the client–patron forces of traditional Khmer society. This can mean that participation is only nominal at best.

In Cambodian culture, the roles of professional leader and patron often overlap. In democratic elections, people often elect their patrons as key leaders, because they help them in their daily lives. People tend to lend more trust to their patrons and believe that they will be able to help them even more if they are elected. This perception has provoked some serious discussions as to whether or not a patron leader will actually work for the interests of the clients, according to the intention of NGO projects.

[There are] some serious discussions as to whether or not a patron leader will actually work for the interests of the clients, according to the intention of NGO projects.

In one village, for instance, the poor have elected a middle-class person to lead their project, based on the fact that this person is a well-known patron in the community. When the community organized advocacy against illegal fishing, this elected leader was not willing to join in because this action would lead to a loss of income.

Although patron leaders tend to be more trusted and can sometimes act as immediate welfare service providers for the poor in their daily lives, it was often observed that these leaders also have stronger networks with other powerful persons and authorities outside the community. In the case of community advocacy, patrons cross over to support businesses, leaving their communities with no leader. This approach is described as "beheading" by community activists, whereby a leader is removed from his/her local constituency, either by threat or by being included in the political system.

In Sre Ambel, a preference was noted for strong leaders to make all the community's decisions for them.

> *"We elected our leader because we believed that this person would have the power and capability to make decisions for us, and fight on our behalf, when we are under threat".*
>
> *Group of community members in Ban Tiet village (2008)*

This situation was also reflected in the issue of an anonymous box for community complaints, located outside a commune council office. Despite its purpose, community members do not use it, as they feel they have no right to criticize or raise issues to their leaders. This is particularly because the box is right next to the commune office, near the commune police office, so it will be obvious who wrote a complaint.

> *"Based on my observation, people rarely use this box. For two months now, nobody has put a letter in this box".*
>
> *Commune council member (2008)*

> *"How can I dare go and put a letter in the box? They will know who wrote this complaint. Furthermore, I think I have no role to disturb them as leaders."*
>
> *Community member (2008)*

"Problem-based development" vs. "issue-based thinking"

As we have seen, Khmer analysis of community needs is often focused on problems and solutions, rather than on a broader examination of relevant issues. A problem-based analysis does not discuss social and political contexts in depth. This leads to solutions that often do not address fundamental underlying issues.

In Sre Ambel, such practices were observed in the work of local NGOs and CBOs. First, development initiatives tend to focus on the problems people face, or start with problem identification as a basis for planning. In interviews, many field staff and community leaders were able confidently to provide stories or describe the contextual situations facing their work, but could not provide a conceptual analysis of the issues in which these problems are embedded.

For example, the fact that the staff of a health care NGO in Sre Ambel would not accompany the authors to the field during this study, because they did not work on land or natural resources, suggests that this NGO is not situating its activities within the broader issues affecting the community. Among NGOs working on livelihoods and peace building in communities where there are problems of schooling for children, especially in remote villages like Chroy Svay, both NGO staff and community leaders in informal discussions seemed to focus mainly on how to raise funds from outside to support teachers' salaries. They did not have a high level of consciousness of the importance of empowering the community to act collectively to improve education quality.

Meanwhile, observation of interactions between participants during a commune investment planning meeting provided some clear evidence that most plans tend to address the need to build community infrastructure, such as roads, schools, latrines and community meeting halls, etc. This perception has been inflated by

media spots, which have encouraged communities to ask their council members to provide them with such infrastructure. In Sre Ambel, people believe that their community will be well developed only if it has such physical infrastructure in place.

> *"Our community will be better off only if we have good roads and schools for our children."*
>
> *Villagers from Chamkar Kraom (2008)*

This perception was expressed at a time when more and more investment companies were moving into the area and exploiting the natural resources. Throughout the conversation with villagers, there was little mention of a vision to engage in changing social structures or addressing changes in the current political climate. This anecdotal evidence also reflected the current government focus on economic development, sometimes at the expense of social needs.

> *"This matter of social issues must be dealt with by the government. Only the government can make the change; we should follow."*
>
> *Villagers from Chamkar Kraom (2008)*

The lack of ability to provide an in-depth analysis of the broader issues has meant that solutions often emerge only in the form of service delivery, with a focus mainly on outputs rather than on outcomes and impacts. Understanding the issues in depth, using critical and strategic thinking, would allow staff to see the whole range of factors involved and to organize a multifaceted response, bringing others to be part of the solution rather than acting alone.

Sre Ambel, like other parts of Cambodia, is dotted by signboards documenting past development initiatives.

Challenges ahead

Meas Nee

This book does not attempt to provide answers to the problems and issues addressed by each chapter, but it is able to pose more questions and informed challenges for development practitioners. It is suggested that practitioners learn to be aware of hidden cultural practices, development trends and contextual changes in social processes as part of their own consciousness. This can be done only by means of learning from communities and people. The following subsections describe some key challenges that development practices in Cambodia are facing, now and for the future.

A positive development in the district has been the increased number of schools, including this one under construction near Dey Krahorm.

Involvement and participation in community-based groups offers a space within local political society for villagers to articulate their concerns and interests. Pictured are members of the Phnom Toub Cheang Community Forest committee and villagers from another district during a study tour undertaken in January 2007.

POLITICAL SPACE FOR SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT

The lack of political space for social engagement by civil society is of increasing concern among civil society groups and local constituencies. In addition, people's voices are often suppressed because of a lack of justice within the justice system itself.

In the view of the author, recent Chinese influence, and a parallel drop in western influence, has led the government to limit political space for social engagement by civil society. This has been further exacerbated by the apparent inability of the government to challenge powerful corporations, which attract large-scale investment projects to support the country's much-needed growth in GDP. Today's common demonstrations and arrests, in both urban and rural areas, are indicators of a lack of collaboration and consultation between the government and the people.

The lack of political space here undermines society's ability to reinforce its laws and destroys trust between the people and their existing social structure. Furthermore, it will convert some key policies into more top-down and inequitable development practice. The government has some very sophisticated policy papers, indicating balanced development intentions, but in practice such development initiatives have often been observed as alienating poor and disadvantaged populations. Sometimes, the papers appear not to reflect the voices of local people.

... lack of political space undermines society's ability to reinforce its laws and destroys trust between the people and their existing social structure.

Convincing the government to provide more political space for social engagement is therefore essential to development processes. Mutual trust and understanding between the government and civil society are vital to development and should be strengthened, and systems must be made to be responsive to local voices.

DEMOCRATIZATION AND PATRONAGE

... a key challenge is how democratization can be implemented within a socio-political structure that is based strongly on the operation of the patron–client system.

Democratization refers to the power of the people to engage, interact and participate in all development processes. It is a process whereby citizens are empowered to be actors in their own development. However, a key challenge identified by this book is how such a concept can be implemented within a socio-political structure that is based strongly on the operation of the patron–client system.

Democratization, including the notion of people's participation, is usually functional only when diversity and differences are treated as acceptable and respected. This is in conflict with the nature of the traditional patron–client system, where challenges and questions are generally prohibited and are treated as inappropriate within the relationship. How is it possible to work with the system and transform the leadership from that of patron to that of democrat? Any push for change in this political environment will create more fear at the leadership level, but also alienate the clients from the patron. As such, supporting a transformational process in this area is the most critical challenge for development work in Cambodia.

PARTICIPATION FROM WITHIN VS. IMPOSED PARTICIPATION

Authoritarian structures and patronage leadership mean that any leadership must be well equipped with skills to call people to participate with them. This strong tradition has become common both in NGOs and in the Cambodian government today. Support from development agencies has often been used to encourage communities to join projects, rather than as a tool supporting the movement of the people from the outset, or to mobilize people for ends defined by the NGOs and government rather than by the people themselves.

... people's participation "from within" is crucial, as this will promote people's sense of ownership right from the beginning of the project.

Understanding the concept of people's participation "from within" is crucial, as this will promote people's sense of ownership right from the beginning of the project. Furthermore, enhancing the process of people's participation from within will help instill a sense of representation in the leadership and community members. This will be further strengthened through more interactions and joint actions.

This can be a slow and time consuming process. It requires spaces that can allow people to mobilize among themselves together, during thinking, planning and acting stages. Unfortunately, outcomes of such processes often take longer to arrive than the project proposal allows. At the same time, development agencies often lack confidence and trust in the capacity of local people to work in this way, as reported by field staff, who state that people must be trained, instructed or told how to do things. This can become a factor of disempowerment in people's initiatives and can pose a disrespect to people's individual wisdoms.

CRITICAL THINKING IN DEVELOPMENT WORK

In the practical concept of critical thinking, people are empowered to think and analyze situations and issues. Critical thinking is not a focus of Cambodian education: people are taught to follow, learn and remember what has been said by a book or an instructor. People expect new knowledge from training or learning from teachers or trainers.

Development agencies often use training and teaching with the expectation that people will be able to apply what they have learned. Tools and methods are often influenced by traditional education: people who have fairly low literacy are forced to do a great deal of writing in workshops and there is little space for them to participate in thinking and analysis. Trainees often spend much time and energy copying writing from a board or flipchart. Meanwhile, if thinking is actually enabled, there is still little training on how to bring ideas developed through critical thinking forward into decision making processes, and there are limited fora in which such processes can effect change.

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In the meantime, in an authoritarian culture, critical thinking is often suppressed because staff must comply with the set of rules and the power of the leader. Using critical thinking to challenge a leader is functionally inappropriate and risky, and is not encouraged.

Limited capacity, skills and history in critical thinking among Cambodians working in development have often been observed, which undermines ability to generate strategic thinking. Anecdotal evidence shows that, in trainings and workshops on strategic planning, staff often struggle to formulate program strategic objectives and goals. Traditionally, such strategic thinking is for leaders, as we have seen. The key question is whether current practices in training and teaching are sufficient, or whether alternative approaches should be explored in an effort to obtain the space and environment needed to improve empowerment towards critical thinking – and whether there should be attempts to develop institutions around communicative democracy, in order to ensure the existence of fora to which people can bring their critical ideas to effect change.

COMMUNITY BUILDING VS. PROJECT BUILDING

Without interference from outside, a community is often able to maintain strong social cohesion. In areas where there are no social services available, community members must depend on support from neighbors and family. This traditional support system operates informally, and only in response to various forms of family and community needs (often mixed up in patron–client relations). After it has been used it disappears, to be formed again when the need arises. In some cases, the community forms itself into community-based groups. Generally, these community support systems are managed loosely, based on mutual trust between members and without formal structures. They continue to function even with no support from outsiders.

NGOs enter villages and set up more community groups in order to manage development projects. This new form of CBO operates with a well-designed organizational structure and receives support, both financial and technical. This social group usually operates independently from existing groups in the village and, in fact, some believe that a lack of communication between social groups has created more divisions among people in communities. Without proper coordination, mutual relationships and trust between social groups in the village are weakened: ironically, establishment of new community groups erodes community social capital while seeking to create it.

WHERE NEXT?

Any attempts to achieve development outcomes without understanding the key socio-political challenges described above will lead to a lack of cooperation and participation from local constituencies and, to a large extent, undermine sustainability and ownership. Again, it is important to stress that the case study of Sre Ambel, the main theme of this book, does not intend to provide answers to all the above constraints and challenges, but it can be used as a basis for further discussions among development practitioners working within the current socio-political context in Cambodia. The next section goes on to make some initial suggestions about how to reinvigorate development in Sre Ambel, and could be used as a starting point for any future discussion on such issues in Cambodia more broadly.

Reinvigorating development:
L e s s o n s   f r o m   S r e   A m b e l

Meas Nee and Wayne McCallum

Observations from our study of development in Sre Ambel district raise a number of questions around the concept and its implications for the environment, natural resources and local people. Foremost, it shows that there is no single "road to development"; instead, processes in Sre Ambel have shown development to be grounded in a range of aspirations, sometimes competing, over a variety of groups and actors, ranging from external investors and national officials to local forest communities. Each of these groups has ascribed a very different meaning to what constitutes "good" development; further, each of these roads has had very different ways of conceiving what constitutes appropriate investment, land rights and the role of local communities in the development process.

Underpinning these differences have been varying interpretations of the development issues confronting Sre Ambel, and the opportunities and challenges represented by the physical environment and local people for development change. For those propelled down the economic investment road, for example, opportunity has been seen in the way certain aspects of the environment, including land, water and a human workforce, can be managed and shaped to serve large-scale plantation agriculture and processing. For those ascribing to the conservation road, the interpretation has been of a landscape holding a range of unique and special ecosystems and species, which must be protected from the local communities. Development in this latter context has thus been defined as activities that secure the protection of these factors from "destructive" human practices. This has effectively created a human–environmental dualism in which the former actor has been cast as a villain and "problem".

When these and the other roads are assessed against each other we can see how, in Sre Ambel, development has evolved as a contest between often contrasting approaches to development. Each of these roads has had different consequences for how local people, their rights and culture and the environment in which they live have been interpreted and re-formed. Our inquiry suggests that the different approaches, especially those based on large-scale investment (economic road) are creating hitherto inexperienced challenges for the environment and people of Sre Ambel district. This is in large part because they are placing demands on the landscape that are more inclusive and extensive than in the past, capturing land, water and human labor in ways that make it unavailable to others and that remove the choice of alternative development options.

... in Sre Ambel, development has evolved as a contest between often contrasting approaches to development.

The development of the sugar plantation, for example, has seen local farmers lose access to traditional commons areas previously used for water buffalo grazing. The draining and destruction of wetland areas, meanwhile, has resulted in the progressive disappearance of a community fishery and a variety of NFTPs, such as aquatic plants used in cooking. These impacts mean that, for people who chose to

opt out of this project – or who are denied inclusion (such as land activists) – the alternative development opportunities are increasingly limited as the foundations for development, such as natural and social capital, have been captured or degraded by this large-scale investment project. Unless something is done to redress this situation, the impacts created by this situation will increase with, as events in Chikhor Leu have illustrated, the capacity for conflict and human right violations increasing rapidly.

Good policies sometimes do not lead to good results in practice, unless such policies are implemented properly. In Cambodia, people have often experienced powerful officials acting in the name of government authority and using their position to exploit their country's most precious resources at the expense of the poor and the poorest.

Unpacking and making bare the development roads at work in Sre Ambel is an important output from this study. However, doing this without offering alternatives means that our task is only half complete. What follows are some suggestions for an alternative route to development, one which is not entirely divorced from those we have described, but which draws on positive aspects from them to provide a reinvigorated notion of development that serves the local people and their environment in a compassionate and inclusive way.

... development needs to be inclusive and reflexive.

First, at a process level, development needs to be inclusive and reflexive. Here is what we mean by this, using examples from Sre Ambel. The first of these words, "inclusive", implies an approach to development that considers not only the values and needs of the range of people living in Sre Ambel, but also the social, cultural, economic, political and physical landscape in which they live, and the impacts and consequences that particular development pathways can have on them. In the context of Sre Ambel, this would be represented by those involved in conservation, for example, considering the traditional needs and uses of local people for forest resources, and how these impact on the plants and animals they are interested in protecting. From this point, identifying how to manage for such use, or thinking of methods for compensating for the end of access to it, would be symptomatic of an inclusive thinking approach.

The practice of such processes implies an approach to development in which people, groups and authorities are more knowledgeable about, and flexible and responsive to, local needs and environmental considerations than we have described in this study. Adjusting to this flexible form poses an undoubted challenge, not only for these actors, but also for the managers, policymakers and donors who have overall control over development operations. Donor limits and timeframes pose a range of controls which, experiences from Sre Ambel show, stymie development along the lines we suggest, by denying people the ability and flexibility to act to real-time events.

This leads, neatly, into the importance of reflexivity in the development endeavor. Reflexivity refers to an ability to reflect on and respond to changes and opportunities as they arise. Experiences from Sre Ambel have shown that this has not often been the case for NGO-led programs, the challenges such groups have faced in responding to land conflicts in Chikhor Leu commune providing an example. Reflexivity implies more than this, however, as it is also linked to notions of being able to reflect critically on one's own actions, whether as an individual or as an organization.

As noted, this critical reflection is not part of the cultural fabric of Khmer society and cannot be expected to arise suddenly. However, increasing exposure to outside ideas and the evolving forms of empowerment associated with the evolution of civil society within Sre Ambel and wider Cambodia suggests that there is some scope for change here.

Being able to think critically is not enough. What are also required are opportunities, including fora that permit people and groups to present their critically grounded ideas. Further, these need to be environments that enable people to instigate actions from the ideas participants bring to these fora. Underpinning all of this is the evolution, within Khmer society, of acceptable ways for articulating, presenting and sharing critical thoughts, ways that are normatively acceptable to those coming to the development process and not automatically considered to be a challenge or a threat.

Underpinning all of this is the evolution, within Khmer society, of acceptable ways for articulating, presenting and sharing critical thoughts, ways that are normatively acceptable to those coming to the development process and not automatically considered to be a challenge or a threat.

Returning to the case of the sugar plantation in Sre Ambel, the incorporation of these themes into this development could see, for example, the instigation of regular meetings with the local CBOs by the plantation's management to discuss issues and concerns for the local people arising from the operation of the plantation, and working collaboratively to address these. Conversely, the company could use such meetings to bring its own concerns to the community, since these communities have become one of the key stakeholders of the future success of this business and plantation.

It is appreciated that such an approach would face numerous hurdles in the context of present-day Sre Ambel, not the least being the ill-will that currently exists between the plantation and a number of local families. However, continual disregard for local people could give rise to problems for the company that are ultimately more time consuming and expensive than if a more inclusive relationship with local people was developed.

Existing alongside these processes, our exploration of development roads traveled in Sre Ambel has highlighted the collisions and repetition that have reoccurred across the district, while opportunities for synergies and integration between projects have not been taken advantage of, even when the potential has seemed self-evident. The example from Sre Ambel of local villagers being asked to go to numerous different workshops linked to the individual roads (livelihoods, CBNRM and human rights) is illustrative of this. More efficient and effective would be an approach that establishes clear strategic goals for Sre Ambel which all development efforts can feed into and out of.

Understandably, how different groups fare and are affected by such a strategy will impact on its acceptance. However, if it is based around the previously suggested framework of inclusivity and reflexivity then it will be more likely to enjoy support from a wide range of people, families and groups in Sre Ambel. Once in place, an accepted and supported district-wide strategy could provide the skeleton around which an integrated route to development, one which harmonizes with the environment, people and their respective needs, evolves. Without it, the situation we have described in Sre Ambel, of repetition and competing demands with inevitable winners and losers, will continue, to the detriment of local people and their rights.

… an accepted and supported district-wide strategy could provide the skeleton around which an integrated route to development, one which harmonizes with the environment, people and their respective needs, evolves.

The development of a strategic approach that is shared and accepted by all represents an obvious challenge in Sre Ambel. Yet, without it the district will remain a place in which different groups seek to play out their development aspirations in ways which, through time, will create reoccurring situations of conflict and contradiction that progressively undermine their respective development efforts. As an alternative, a strategic approach that manages for this must seem attractive, no matter what development road someone aspires to follow.

Finally, we would like to highlight the importance of development that promotes and enhances resilience. Resilience in this context is considered broadly to include the strength and capacity not only of local people to handle and adapt to change, but also of the physical environment and the institutions evolved to manage and direct development. The importance of resilience often goes unrecognized in development until something goes wrong; then its existence or otherwise becomes obvious, often painfully. Global warming, changing economic markets, disease and threats to local resources mean that any development road that cannot handle change will represent a "dead end" for Sre Ambel, its people, the natural resources and the environment. A change in sugar markets or a new disease could bring about the demise of the sugar plantation developed in Sre Ambel, for example; and forest fires brought on by climate change could drastically reduce local resources for CBNRM group members to harvest and use, and hence bring local people further into the trap of poverty and vulnerability.

Development projects that can accommodate these changes without causing widespread disruption (or worse) are invariably more compassionate and inclusive than those that do not. Yet, consideration of resilience is not inherent in many of the roads we have described; further, the lack of any district-wide strategic approach to development, that is, one that is encompassing of the human and physical environment, means that there is no overarching process that ensures its maintenance and building. The implications for an increasingly stressed and overpopulated environment, where the margins for human survival are increasingly narrowed, are alarming.

It would be inappropriate to end this study on this note. What is apparent from the exploration of development in Sre Ambel is that, at the local level at least, people have shown a remarkable capacity to regenerate and go on, particularly after the depravations and abuses of the recent past. At the same time, commitments and contributions made by different development actors in Sre Ambel remain an important part of the people's day-to-day lives. This has to be taken as a symbol of hope as well as a suggestion that the construction materials, however small, already exist for the creation of a development road or roads that offer hope for the people and environment of Sre Ambel.

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"Development." The word conjures up images of countries, places and people moving from primitiveness, poverty and disadvantage to modernity, wealth and fulfillment. Underpinning this is the assumption that development is "good", something to be encouraged and aspired to.

But go beneath the surface and explore the meaning and global experience of development and things become hazier, with any number of questions coming to mind. What, for example, should be the goals, processes and results of development? How should the costs and benefits of development be distributed? How can we measure development? What constitutes "good" development? Across the globe, people have struggled to answer these questions, at the same time as changing political, socioeconomic and environmental circumstances have conspired to generate a myriad of challenges to existing development doctrines and programs.

Emerging out of years of civil strife, Cambodia appears, on the surface at least, to be on the road to recovery. Institutions, infrastructure and new businesses are springing up across the country, transforming the lives of the citizens. However, Cambodia faces issues over the extent and form of its current development patterns. Experiences such as those in Sre Ambel district, the case study focus of this book, indicate that elements of contemporary development are leading to some unexpected and undesirable effects, which threaten the wellbeing and future of local communities and the nation as a whole.

This book seeks to explore the idea of what constitutes "good development" in the context of Cambodia, focusing particularly on issues of investment, land rights and local communities. Our intention is to draw out an understanding of what different development "roads" mean for people, for places and for the physical environment. Further, we aim to explore whether there are alternative roads to those currently being followed, ones that are more compassionate and inclusive of local communities and grounded within the values and aspirations of Cambodian culture. It is our belief that, when development is framed within this latter context, it is more likely to be fair, equitable and a source of enduring national benefit.