Introduction

Protected areas (PAs) in Cambodia were established primarily for conservation of forests, biodiversity, landscapes, or watersheds. However, rural communities including indigenous people (IPs) have long lived in areas that are now under PA management. Existing evidence suggests that failure to address livelihood needs of local communities may lead to deterioration of natural resources. Moreover, a recent trend of migration from the lowland provinces to the uplands areas as well as expansion of Economic Land Concessions (ELCs) add another layer of challenge in managing PAs in a sustainable manner. Thus, it is imperative to acknowledge and then deliberate competing interests for resources in order to achieve sustainable management of PAs. These challenges require appropriate multi-stakeholder interventions for sustainable PA management.

This discussion note therefore examines these competing interests for lands inside Cambodian Protected Areas and makes suggestions for policy considerations.

Background and Status of PAs

PAs in Cambodia were established by a 1993 Royal Decree, which mandates the Ministry of Environment (MoE), in cooperation with other institutions, to manage National Parks, Wildlife Sanctuaries, Protected Scenic View Areas, and Multi-Purpose Areas (Royal Government of Cambodia, 1993). The Royal Decree includes 23 PAs, which originally comprised 3,289,000 hectares (18 percent of the country’s territory). MoE plans to establish heritage sites, protected areas, and cultural sites. It is also preserving protected areas under the 2008 Law on Protected Areas (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2008), the 2003 Law on Protected Scenic Areas, and Multi-Purpose PAs (Srun, 2015). The Law on Protected Areas (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2008) defines the protection levels of PAs, including their nature, size, and management objectives.

PAs are governed by a 2008 Law on Protected Areas. The Law on Protected Areas classifies a PA into four zones: high value dedicated to national economic development, cultural and heritage sites, conservation, or socio-economic development. In addition to PAs under MoE’s jurisdiction, additional area of 1,531,357 hectares of cancelled ELCs land has been registered.

PAs are also preserved for non-extractive uses, such as areas of physical and biological importance. PAs are categorized into four types: protected areas, protected scenic view areas, multiple-purpose areas, and heritage sites.

In addition to PAs under MoE’s jurisdiction, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forests, and Fisheries (MAFF) also preserves protection for an additional area of 1,531,357 hectares under the Royal Decree on the Management of Protected Areas (Royal Government of Cambodia, 1993) and the Royal Decree on the Protection of Natural Areas (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2008). MAFF manages National Forests, Wildlife Sanctuaries, Protected Scenic View Areas, and Multi-Purpose Areas. The MAFF also manages protected areas under the Royal Decree on the Protection of Natural Areas (Royal Government of Cambodia, 2008). The MAFF plans to establish heritage sites, protected areas, and cultural sites.

Competing Interests for Lands inside Protected Areas


Kim, N. (2015). “Challenges and Strategic Plan of MoE for Competing Interests for Lands inside Protected Areas (PAs) in Cambodia”. Presentations of cancelled ELCs land, land redistribution in the context that follows the recent government announcement of the government to re-allocate land from ELCs operations in the first up and foremost priority.


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Discussion Note

Land issues have been given an additional 6-12 months before a new round of 17 ELCs are issued, if they have been under review for over 15 years as of July 2017. This is due to additional cycles of crop yield, which can last up to 25 years. However, the question on how to proceed with the ELCs remains uncertain. MoE conducted a recent review and assessment of all agricultural and residential lands and ELCs not only in accordance with the 2001 Land Law, but requires communal land titles (CLTs), some of which are located inside a PA. The CLT registration process has triggered conflicts between communal and IP communities, a problem that is exacerbated when ELCs clear parcels of land, and CPAs are currently in the process of applying for a CLT. Another four (4) ELCs have been reduced in terms of size due to lack of investment capacity and some plantations. Finally, there is inadequate level of awareness and education measures needed. The Law on Protected Areas allows for the inclusion of areas as PAs, which has been done in the past. MoE was aware of this fact but their strategy so far has been to establish PAs and CPAs along with state land registries, especially in areas previously demarcated. The recent pledge by the Prime Minister to re-allocate one million hectares of land from the cancelled ELCs to the poor is an important commitment, but the question on how this will happen remains unclear. The access of local communities residing in PAs to resources within the area is a major concern. This problem is further exacerbated by insufficient law enforcement. More awareness raising among both institutions and people is needed.

Solutions for Tackling Competing Interests

Limited livelihood benefits for communities

The benefits from PAs are not equitably shared among the State, the companies and the local population. For instance, while CPAs are granted for 50-70 years, initial ELCs were even granted for 90 years, which is to protect interests for lands inside PAs. At legal and policy levels, the RGC has developed the 2008 Law on Protected Areas and Action Plan (NESAP) for 2016-2023, and the draft National Environmental Code. However, as afore-mentioned, law enforcement remains a weak among both institutions and people. This is aggravated by insufficient national and religious use of natural resources by locals and migrants. Also, there is a poor understanding about laws coupled with ineffective law enforcement. Successful CPAs are mostly confined to cases incorporating eco-tourism, and most CPAs do not have a management plan and depend on unsustainable external financing. Chanrith Ngin, Faculty of Development Studies, Royal University of Phnom Penh, chanrith.ngin@gmail.com

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The expansion of CPAs has also particularly affected those communities residing in PAs, who do traditional swidden farming. In addition, this has led to an increase in illegal logging, even in core areas (Kuch, 2016). In 1993, when 23 PAs were created, many villages and farming areas were zoned (Kim, 2015), and very few parcels of land were permuted between the State, the companies and the local communities. For instance, while CPAs are granted for 50-70 years, initial ELCs were even granted for 90 years. This contracts with the chief objective of PAs, which is to protect interests for lands inside PAs. At legal and policy levels, the RGC has developed the 2008 Law on Protected Areas and Action Plan (NESAP) for 2016-2023, and the draft National Environmental Code. However, as afore-mentioned, law enforcement remains weak among both institutions and people. This problem is further exacerbated by insufficient national and religious use of natural resources by locals and migrants. Also, there is a poor understanding about laws coupled with ineffective law enforcement. Successful CPAs are mostly confined to cases incorporating eco-tourism, and most CPAs do not have a management plan and depend on unsustainable external financing.