

Thematic Brief

August 2016

They Will Need Land! The Current Land Tenure Situation and Future Land Allocation Needs of Smallholder Farmers in Cambodia

Overview

The objective of this background paper is to provide a succinct description of the land tenure situation in Cambodia and, on that basis, discuss the needs smallholder farmers have for land, projected up to the year 2030. The main problem it examines lies at the intersection between, on one hand, the demographic increase in the rural smallholder population and its associated need for land in the future (the demand side) and, on the other hand, the possibility offered by the different land tenure regimes to meet this demand (the supply side); the central question focuses on how supply can meet demand.

Background information

In Cambodia, the majority of the population is still composed of smallholder family farmers. 54% of the total labour force is employed in agriculture. They have access to 3.6 million ha of land, representing 19% of the country's total land. The rest is divided between large scale economic land concessions (12%), public forests and protected areas, unclassified areas and some infrastructure. The population is still growing, and contrary to what many people think, the farmer population also continues to grow, despite rural-urban migration and the development of the industry and services sector.

As a result, farms are divided, landlessness is growing, and many farmers from the central plains migrate to other parts of the country looking for land.

Land availability

By looking first at how much land is available under different categories (the supply side), the paper presents and maps the different land tenure regimes with updated statistics and discusses their main outcomes and shortcomings. On that basis, a preliminary assessment of land distribution by main land tenure systems in Cambodia is presented (figure 1).

The land under cultivation by smallholders represents 19 percent of the total area of the national territory and is itself sub-divided into agricultural land with land titles (systematic land registration, 6 percent and land covered by the Order 01, 6 percent), under Social Land Concession arrangements (1 percent) and untitled (6 percent). The forest cover includes forest concessions (10 percent), Community Forestry (2 percent), Protected Areas and Protection Forests (20 percent) and an unclassified forest cover area (14 percent). Economic Land Concessions under operation represent 12 percent while cancelled concessions represent 2 percent of the total territory.

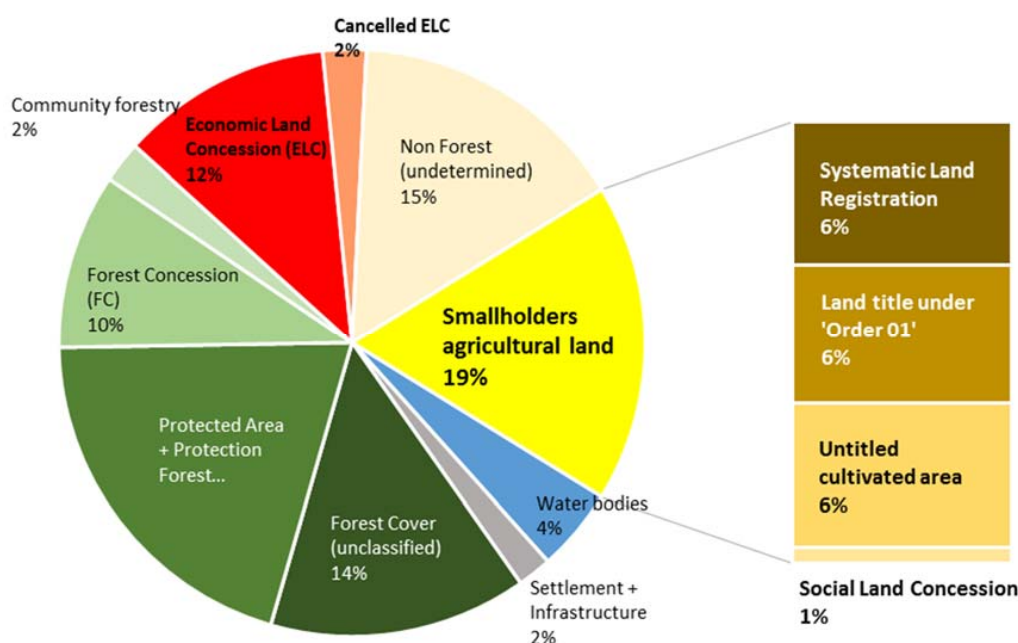


Figure 1. Distribution of land by main land tenure regimes

The actual tenure of a large non-forested area (14 percent) remains undetermined and further updates are needed to shed light on this issue.

The central problem of the current Cambodian land reform is its ineffectiveness in coordinating the processes of land rights security and formalization in lowland and upland areas, although both regions are closely linked through land-driven migration movements that have intensified over the past 20 years. This has been particularly contentious given the fact that in a parallel process, and driven by a strong, state-based political economy, large land deals have been concentrated in the uplands of the entire country along processes that are exclusionary in nature. The overlap of competing land claims has created a widespread conflict situation in all upland regions of the country.

Demand for land

By looking at how much land is needed for family farmers in the future (the demand side), the paper anticipates the land requirements of smallholder farmers by 2030 based on the projected demographic increase in the economically active population in rural Cambodia and on two sets of scenarios i) the transfer of unskilled labour from the agricultural to the secondary and tertiary sectors (industries and services) and ii) the provision of land for smallholder farmers.

The analysis suggests that by the year 2030, the transfer of unskilled labour from agriculture to the secondary and tertiary sectors will lag behind the demographic increase in the active rural population. With 2015 as a baseline, the scenarios suggests that by 2030 smallholder farmers will need an additional land area ranging from 320,600 ha (+10 percent in relation to the actual area at the present time) to 1,962,400 (+64 percent).

An average scenario based on an allocation of 1 ha per active labourer (in accordance with the present social concession policy) and on the continuation of the present transfer rate of unskilled labour from agriculture to the secondary and tertiary sectors (i.e. the transfer of 40,000 workers per year) predicts that 1,622,000 ha will be needed for smallholder farmers by 2030 (figure 2).

		Scenario of labour transfer from agriculture to the non-farm sectors (secondary and industrial sectors) in rural or urban areas (people/year)		
		20,000 jobs / year	40,000 jobs / year	60,000 jobs / year
Scenario of land allocation to smallholder farmers	0.50 ha per active	981,200 ha (+32%)	811,200 ha (+26%)	641,200 ha (+21%)
	0.75 ha per active	1,471,800 (+48%)	1,216,800 (+40%)	961,800 (+31%)
	1 ha per active	1,962,400 (+64%)	1,622,400 (+53%)	1,282,400 (+42%)

Figure 2. Projection of agricultural land requirement by 2030 under different scenarios of unskilled labour transfer to industries/services and pro smallholder farmer land provision

How to make ends meet for smallholder farmers

The question that needs to be formulated is not whether or not the rural population will need land in the future, but rather how much land and how land allocation can occur.

And given the importance of natural resources in rural livelihoods, land allocation should not be at the expense of forest and wetlands. To engage in active, voluntary and positive land allocation, several options that are not mutually exclusive can be envisaged and prioritized:

→ Actively implement the ELC reform policy and reallocate cancelled areas to smallholder farmers. Prioritize allocation of the most appropriate land for swidden agriculture to indigenous people who have claims on those lands, and allocate the rest of the available land to smallholders for permanent agriculture. The Prime Minister's recent pledge to allocate 1 million hectares to poor smallholder farmers is a step in the right direction. But the uncertainties and doubts surrounding this political announcement need to be seriously addressed so that the government promise can materialize into concrete actions for the benefit of Cambodian smallholders;

- In areas inhabited by communities of indigenous people, swidden agriculture should be recognized as a possible land use option inside Protected Area management, including inside conservation zones and CPA;
- If the upland land titling programme continues (a government announcement suggested that this is the case), it is highly advisable to issue titles based on the anticipation of the future expansion of the rural population;
- If the government reconsiders the allocation of land to landless or near-landless households, it needs to engage in a far more ambitious Social Land Concession programme;
- Further reform of the Forest Concession system is also urgently needed with clearer and spatially explicit indications about how to allocate land and resources to provide further support for forest conservation efforts and possible conversion of highly degraded forestland to farmland for smallholder farmers.

This brief is a summary of the original study:

Diepart, J.-C. (2016). *They Will Need Land! The current land tenure situation and future land allocation needs of smallholder farmers in Cambodia*. MRLG Thematic Study Series #1. Vientiane: Mekong Region Land Governance.

The document is available on line at: <http://mrlg.org/resources/they-will-need-land-the-current-land-tenure-situation-and-future-land-allocation-needs-of-smallholder-farmers-in-cambodia/>

This brief is produced by the Mekong Region Land Governance Project, operating in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Viet Nam, with the objective of promoting tenure security of family farmers and ethnic minorities. For more information please visit www.mrlg.org

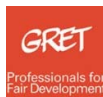
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