

Escaping Poverty Traps? Collective Action and Property Rights in Postwar Rural Cambodia

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INTRODUCTION

Property rights and collective action were severely undermined in Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge regime. After democratic consolidation, attempts to recreate a legal framework that secures access to land and natural resources were made by the Cambodian government and strongly supported by donors and civil society. Nevertheless, the new laws were only partly implemented, created new uncertainties among the rural poor, and benefited the more powerful.

This case-study identifies practices and policies that enhance the way collective action and property rights are used to build assets and income streams for the rural poor. To provide policymakers and others with a better understanding of property rights systems in place, the study assesses existing property rights systems in rural Cambodia to identify what benefit streams poor people can rely on. It also identifies forms and mechanisms of economic and social cooperation, how they influence property rights systems, and to what extent the rural poor are part of village networks. Based on this assessment, linkages between property rights, collective action, and poverty are analyzed.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework guiding this case study builds on the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework. This framework separates context and action arenas. Context represents initial socioeconomic and political conditions shaping the opportunities of people for possible actions: the asset base, shocks and risks, and political structures. These factors affect property rights and collective action, which themselves form part of the initial context. The action arena is where individuals, the state, and other actors make use of institutions of property rights and collective action. Poor education, exclusion from social groups, and landlessness are among the many obstacles preventing people from engaging.

While context focuses on initial conditions that affect people's actions, their agency interactions with others shape their future. In their interaction processes, actors reinforce existing institutions or even create new ones. They can have direct effects on wellbeing or change institutions themselves. A number of feedback loops might occur before institutional changes affect the situation of the poor. However, improved social inclusion, income and health, and reduced vulnerability may serve as evaluative criteria to assess outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

A mix of empirical research methods was employed. Interviews and group discussions with NGOs, donor agencies, and ministry staff identified research sites. Sites were selected with regard to different experience with formalized institutions for cooperation, natural resources endowment, and accessibility. Data collection included semi-structured interviews with key informants to gather information on village structure, a survey of 146 households, group discussions, maps to identify changes in resources and to examine property rights of different user groups, and experimental games to assess trust levels. Secondary data analysis helped fill gaps the field research could not address.

RESULTS

The findings indicate that the rural poor have access to natural resources that contribute a large share of their livelihoods, but accelerating resource degradation and conversion of natural resources into arable land leaves them with ever fewer options to derive income from these resources. Furthermore, slow land titling and demarcation in rural areas leave people vulnerable to land grabbing and exclusion from the benefits of common property. Findings also indicate that collective action still suffers from the Khmer Rouge legacy, which destroyed large parts of traditional social networks, including mutual help and religious institutions. Forced resettlement and collectivization also reduced people's willingness to cooperate at a larger extent in agriculture.

The study shows that mutual help groups, religious activities, and small-scale associations are gaining ground. However, the poor lack confidence to take part in those associations and are sometimes unable to use the services offered. In addition, collective action to secure natural resources does not yet address ongoing resource degradation adequately. Formal, legally backed institutions lack local recognition and are unable to enforce rules set to protect the resources. Villages that manage their resources following traditional principles tend to cooperate better across village boundaries and are thus more successful in natural resource management. Nevertheless, they too are unable to protect them against outside interventions. Low degrees of trust also contribute to low degrees of cooperation in natural resource management.



For a country disrupted for decades by war, genocide, and forced collectivization, it is not surprising that neither property rights systems nor collective action yet fulfill the expectations of research institutions, civil society organizations, or donors.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

In rural Cambodia, natural resources such as local forests, fish ponds, lakes, water streams, or harvested fields are usually commonly owned and managed. This makes effective collective action a precondition for sustainable resource management as well as income generation for the rural poor. For a country disrupted for decades by war, genocide, and forced collectivization, and which is still characterized by fragile government institutions, it is not surprising that neither property rights systems nor collective action yet fulfill the expectations of research institutions, civil society organizations, or donors.

Under Cambodia's devolution policies, important monitoring and enforcement mechanisms executed by weak local government authority are removed abruptly after responsibility is handed over to local forest or fishery community organizations. Yet these communities are neither officially acknowledged by the government nor able to execute all the responsibilities assigned to them. The institutional vacuum that emerges does not favor of the poor.

For formal institutions to efficiently manage the local commons, the content, procedures, and sequencing to formulate and enforce laws and statutes integrating both guiding principles of a devolving state and traditional local rules, and enforcement mechanisms should be given more consideration. An important first step will be to reduce uncertainties about village or commune boundaries, and procedures to be taken in case of violation of rules. Enforcement will only work at the interface of established informal and newly developed formal institutions if administrative procedures are transparent and there is final recourse to the judiciary.

For the rural poor, participation in organizations that foster collective action and govern the commons is costly: activities are time consuming, direct compensation cannot be expected, and unbalanced reciprocity often does not work. Although the poor profit most from protecting their local commons, they are not

necessarily able to defend their interests effectively within village organizations. They remain dependent on the more affluent to initiate and continue cooperation. As the poor often have no formal education, a weak human capital base, and very little land, they are less likely to get involved in formalized groups, especially those that have been externally established to support agricultural activities.

The poor do participate in informal village groups and gatherings, though, and this is an entry point for further cooperation. However, empirical results show that they are more likely to comply with rules and mechanisms than to take deliberate action to shape and defend them. Complementary to this, the role of religious festivities and Buddhist values and norms needs further consideration. Jointly exercised religious activities provide an instrument to enhance cooperation in and between villages, and are explicitly used by political entrepreneurs and local leaders as a means to protect natural capital and to contribute to social cohesion and trust.

Building on religious initiatives and the overall imperative of harmony, people start to communicate experiences where collective action had once been successful to protect their interests. They do not actively protest and demonstrate but formulate petitions and memorandums to raise awareness of their problems, address conflicts, and ask for external support. These activities should be regarded as a starting point for collective action to protect property rights and to make use of a reformed property rights system that allows for new forms of collective action to combat poverty.

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