

From Planning to Action: What Can Resource Management Committees Do 'On the Ground'?

M. Marschke, a Ph.D. candidate, highlights the various grassroots activities of two resource management committees working towards community based management in Koh Kong, Cambodia.*

In part as a response to declining access to natural resources, community-based management (also known as community fisheries, community forestry or co-management) has emerged in Cambodia. Although approaches can vary, communities are actively establishing their own management areas and plans often with support from NGOs or government institutions. In 2002, for instance, there were an estimated 162 community fishery sites and 237 community forestry sites in Cambodia (McKenney & Prom 2002). Moreover, a policy environment, albeit disjointed, is being developed to support some forms of community involvement in resource management. Community forestry and community fisheries sub-decrees have been drafted and are currently under review.

Many of the community forestry and fishery sites in Cambodia have an elected resource management committee (also known as a community fisheries or forestry committee) that is responsible for guiding resource management activities. This article, based on preliminary findings from an on-going study (August 2002 – July 2003) of rural livelihoods and community-based management in Koh Sralao, Koh Kong province and Kompong Phluk, Siem Reap province, seeks to bring to light the various 'on the ground' activities of two such resource management committees. The research has involved both qualitative and quantitative research methods, including participatory research tools, in-depth household discussions, and a survey of 148 households.

I did not really think that resource management would improve our livelihoods. But, we are now able to solve some problems... We feel that our resources are improving a little bit as a result of our work

A resource management committee member and fisher 2003.

Kompong Phluk is a commune on the Tonle Sap lake that has been practicing community-based management since the 1940s, perhaps one of the oldest examples of resource management (forestry and fisheries) known around the Tonle Sap lake; and, Koh Sralao is a coastal community in Koh Kong province that became actively involved in community-based management once their resources began being depleted. Both field sites have had donor support (more technical support than financial support), and are acknowledged as success stories for community-based management: other communities are not necessarily as well organised, interested or as active (Poffenberger 2002; PMMR 2003).

Although much could be gained from an analysis of how donor support and management planning affects community-based management activities, the focus here is on what villagers are doing 'on the ground' once they are organised and have their management plans approved. This article provides an overview of two resource management committees, highlighting how community-based management can unfold at a local level and why villagers are participating in such activities. Also probed are the strategies undertaken by resource management committees, and their ability to address issues and problems at a local level. Lessons learned include that villagers are most willing to engage in community-based management strategies when they believe that they can improve livelihoods within their community.

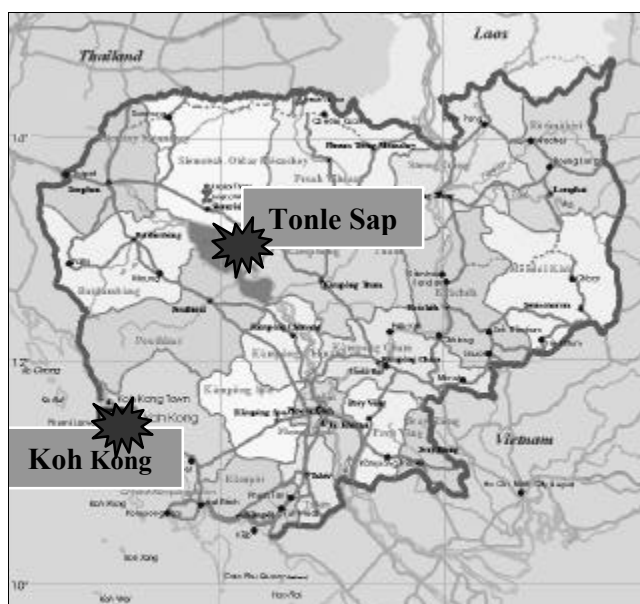
Community-based Management — An Overview of Two Resource Management Committees

Community-based management approaches in Cambodia tend to have some similar characteristics: rules and regulations, formation of resource management committees to guide community-based management initiatives, thumb prints from villagers indicating their support for such work, demarcated areas for management and approval from some government level (i.e., provincial Governors and/or national level). Although these structures may appear similar, according to management plans and approval mechanisms, experience shows that what is happening 'on the ground' may be quite different. For instance, some resource management committees, although recognised by an appropriate government institution, remain inactive while community-based management is active in some villages even in the absence of formal organisations or official recognition/support.

Composition and operations of resource management committees vary, as illustrated by the two resource management committees discussed here. In Koh Sralao, prior to holding a committee election, villagers developed and accepted rules and regulations pertaining to resource management. Villagers then elected a commit-

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Figure 1: Two Field Areas



tee of seven people, including two women, to oversee resource management activities. The committee holds monthly meetings, but additional meetings may be held when problems arise. In contrast, the resource management committee in Kompong Phluk was elected after several meetings, and then worked together to form rules and regulations. This committee consists of nine representatives (including two women) from the three villages that form the commune. The area under management expanded with the release of fishing lot areas to the community in 2001; hence, the committee was expanded and roles and responsibilities were updated. This resource management committee holds meetings whenever something needs to be discussed or when problems arise.

Table 1 highlights key characteristics of the resource management committees in Koh Sralao and Kompong Phluk, including: (a) when resource management com-

mittees were established; (b) legal status; (c) resource management issues addressed; (d) examples of strategies for addressing issues; and (e) reasons for villagers' support of the resource management committee in their village or commune. Although both committees are relatively young, having been established in 1999 and 2000 respectively, they both have been able to experiment with different resource management strategies, thinking about what could work within their context. For example, in Koh Sralao, initial resource management practices emphasised environmental education and patrolling to prevent illegal activities, such as trawling and dynamite fishing, theft of fishing gear and charcoal production. However, over time, the resource management committee decided to enhance this work through facilitating conflict-resolution mechanisms in an attempt to find solutions that more villagers could engage in and could be implemented without donor support. One such mechanism, which will be expanded upon later, addresses conflicts over stolen fishing gear.

Although both resource management committees were initially formed to address community-based resource management issues, they view their mandate more broadly. For example, in Koh Sralao the resource management committee is also finding solutions to other community problems, such as supporting the schoolteacher to stay in the village. In Kompong Phluk the resource management committee helps poor families in times of need such as providing support for funeral ceremonies. Initial analysis suggests that most villagers view their resources holistically (i.e., fishery and forestry issues are linked), and see the resource management committee as an organised body that can address issues beyond resource management. In each village, resource management committee members expressed that villagers support their work because of: (a) trust, (b) a belief that their livelihoods are improving as a result of this work, and (c) good leadership.

Table 1. An Overview of Two Resource Management Committees

	Koh Sralao	Kompong Phluk
Year established	2000	1999
Legal status	Informal – supported by agreements with Provincial Governor and Minister of Environment (is within a protected area).	Informal – supported by agreements with Provincial Governor.
Management issues addressed	Illegal fishing, from within and outside their community; charcoal production; stealing of fishing gear; declining resources; waste management; and other community issues.	Flooded forest cutting; illegal fishing, from within and outside their community; declining resources; farmland encroachment; and other community issues.
Examples of management strategies	Solving theft through innovative solutions (painting crab traps, patrolling); supporting local schoolteachers.	Engaging each village in a system of forest protection; supporting poor villagers in times of need (funerals).
Reasons for villagers' support	Key community members are involved in the committee; people trust that this committee is working for the people and see good results; village leaders openly support the committee, delegating responsibilities to it.	Villagers all believe in / trust the work of the committee; small commune so it is easy to communicate and share information; people are long-term residents, so much local wisdom.

In each area there is appropriate political support for community-based management. For example, in Koh Sralao the resource management committee leader is also a member of the Commune Council; in Kompong Phluk a member from the Commune Council acts in an advisory role to the resource management committee. While having informal or formal policy support (legislation remains pending) is one factor that can support successful community-based management, further analysis suggests that it requires motivation and problem-solving skills from the resource management committees themselves to drive this work. For instance, in both Koh Sralao and in Kompong Phluk, multiple strategies are used for dealing with illegal activities and resource declines, including creating local systems of support, getting police and technical departments to engage in patrolling and enforcement activities together with villagers, disseminating rules and regulations, and networking amongst villagers to support the resource management committee's work.

Why Participate in Community-based Management?

Villagers choose to participate in community-based management initiatives for a vast number of reasons including: (a) spiritual (e.g., to protect the forests near their pagodas); (b) political (e.g., for personal benefit or prestige); (c) historical (i.e., a tradition of resource management in the village); (d) environmental (e.g., to stop rampant resource declines); (e) economic (i.e., a belief that protection can lead to income generation for community development) and (f) relationship building (e.g., the donor can help facilitate/negotiate requests on behalf of the village). In Kompong Phluk, for example, villagers engage in resource protection for traditional reasons and as a response to farmland encroachment and resource decline.

Long before the fisheries community was set up, people loved and took care of the forest. It was not perfectly managed, though, especially in recent times. So, it was good timing to work with [NGO], for them to help us. We wanted to stop the mung bean farming near our commune and needed outside support (an Elder 2003).

For this Elder, having lived in Kompong Phluk all his life, flooded forest protection made sense since there is a history of resource management in Kompong Phluk. Elders recall protesting against watermelon farms encroaching their village area to allow for natural regeneration of the flooded forest near their village in the 1940s (Poffenberger 2002).

The experience in Koh Sralao has been quite different. Most villagers migrated to Koh Sralao after the Khmer Rouge era with the hope of cashing in on lucrative resource extraction opportunities. Resources remained relatively abundant until the 1990s, but more recent rapid resource declines have greatly affected local livelihoods, thereby motivating villagers to "do something" (Marschke 2000).

This is not to suggest that all villagers in the two communities are active in supporting the work of the resource management committees: participation does remain an issue. Multiple factors can affect who is active in a community. For example, women tend to have less opportunity to participate in management activities. In other cases, villagers cannot afford to volunteer their time towards resource management or other community activities. Consider the comment of one former resource management committee member:

Right now my livelihood situation is not very good. I need to focus on my family first. When I find a job with a secure income and finish building a house for my family then I can return to working with the resource management committee. It takes up a lot of time, and I am too worried about my family right now (a fisher 2003).

In both Koh Sralao and in Kompong Phluk multiple strategies are used for dealing with illegal activities and resource declines, including creating local systems of support, getting police and technical departments to engage in patrolling and enforcement activities together with villagers, disseminating rules and regulations, and networking amongst villagers to support the resource management committee's work.

Households do not necessarily have the choice of active participation when their immediate livelihood concerns are quite pressing. For these reasons, resource management committee members tend to be villagers that have a decent livelihood within the village context and are more influential in the village. Often, they have strong networks and relationships that they can call

upon to support their work.

Villagers' Resource Management Strategies

Since our commune is small, we work easily together. Each village is responsible for protecting one part of the forest and we are all responsible for protecting the forest near the village. (a fisher 2003).

The resource management committee in Kompong Phluk knows that the forest near their commune protects them from wind and storms. Issues that the committee addresses include: (a) forest protection; (b) illegal fishing activities; (c) resource decline; (d) farmland encroachment; and (e) other community activities. Multiple strategies are used to tackle these issues, some of which are working better than others. For example, while patrolling activities may seem to be the obvious solution to stopping illegal activities near the commu-

nity, patrolling is expensive (i.e., fuel costs; the community cannot generate enough income to support consistent patrols), risky (i.e., can escalate into conflict) and difficult to organise (i.e., lack of consistent technical support). Although resource management committee members do engage in patrolling activities with police and technical staff, they also focus on networking within the village, and outside, to strengthen their own practices and that of neighbouring communes and districts. As elsewhere in the world, peer pressure can work wonders for compliance to rules and regulations! Table 2 highlights some of the issues and the strategies devised by the resource management committee to solve these issues.

Many small-scale Cambodian fishers face similar problems: declining resources and stolen fishing gear. Moreover, stolen or destroyed gear leads to conflict, both among villagers, and with those using the same fishing grounds. In Koh Sralao, for example, crab traps were constantly being stolen, mostly by outside fishers but sometimes by villagers themselves. After several brainstorming sessions, the resource management committee decided to devise a system to enable villagers to recognise their own crab traps more easily. A resource management committee member further explains:

After many discussions we had an idea. Each group [of the eight that the village is divided into] has to mark their crab traps with the same colour. Individual owners then, using this colour, have a specific sign, for example, slash marks in certain directions indicate whose traps these are. So far, painting the crab traps has been a good solution for cutting down the stealing of crab traps. People that are caught with the wrong colour traps are fined. Or, they are asked to give back new traps. We cannot solve all the problems, but this is helping (2003).

In general, villagers are happy with this solution. One fisher commented:

I have had less traps stolen than last year. I now can sleep in the village at night, and am not afraid to leave my traps.

This solution is providing some security for fishers, and villagers are working together to watch out for boats that they do not recognise. Although crab traps do continue to get stolen, villagers felt that there was a decrease in theft and a better chance of recovery of stolen crab traps. This is one example of the type of local problem-solving initiatives engaged in by resource management committees.

Another management strategy, both in Kompong Phluk and in Koh Sralao, is the creation of fish sanctuaries within community management boundaries. A significant fishing area, such as spawning grounds or seedling area, is demarcated for strict protection. As one fisher noted:

Our fish sanctuary is located near our fishing grounds so it is easier for us to protect this area. Plenty of fish can now be found there, and this makes us realise that we need more areas where we protect fish.

Fishers themselves, along with local authorities, can monitor what is going on. Of course, if large-scale fishers decide to not respect local rules, greater technical/outside support is needed to help fishers solve the problem. The resource management committees recognise that they cannot solve all problems but with creative thinking, some issues can be addressed.

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Table 2. An Example of Village Management Strategies in Kompong Phluk

Management Issue	Management Strategy
Flooded forest cutting	Committee directs villagers to manage specific parts of the forest, reporting any illegal activities to the committee, which then investigates and tries to solve the issue (if possible).
Illegal fishing gear (push nets, electro fishing, long bamboo traps) and theft	Patrolling and fining activities for illegal gear; discussions with other communes about Kompong Phlucs' rules and regulations; community members working closely with committee to stop illegal activities and to monitor their own fishing practices.
Declining resources	Creation of a 1 km ² fish sanctuary; educating people about the rules of the community; villagers encouraged to collect floating wood for firewood and to collect fuel wood outside of mature-forest areas.
Farmland encroachment	Work with provincial authorities and NGO staff to stabilize encroachment.
Other activities	Supporting poor villagers in times of need

Lessons Learned

Research undertaken on resource management committees in Kompong Phluk and Koh Sralao highlights how community-based management can evolve at a local level. Villagers are concerned about their forests and fishing areas, along with other community-level problems. Resource management committees see their work as enhancing community livelihoods, and they are willing to experiment with a range of strategies.

Villagers also perceive tangible results from this work: a few less crab traps stolen per year; denser forests; less farmland encroachment; and increased co-operation amongst villagers.

We know that the resource management committee will help us. They have taught us about mangrove replanting and about protecting our resources. There are more crabs this year near the mangroves, and we now understand the relationship between mangroves and a healthier fishery (a fisher 2003).

Although there is no baseline data to supplement villagers' perceptions of increased resources, what is important, at this point, is that villagers believe in this type of work.

Another important factor for the success of these two resource management committees is support from the Commune Council. Leadership, including the willingness to take risks, is also seen as critical to garnering the support of the local community. Both resource management committee leaders are respected within their village, and tend to be more influential within their community. Without such determination, commitment and support, these resource management committees could not be as successful.

Resource management committees have had the flexibility to address issues as they have arisen in the community. Neither committee is strictly bound by their mandate, recognising that they have the ability to problem solve around different community issues, whether this be environmental or social. For example, villagers recently hauled cement and other materials for the construction of a pagoda hall, used as a meeting place for

different community events, up a steep hill in Koh Sralao upon request of the resource management committee. Resource management, in a way, is a vehicle for committees to address and problem-solve a range of community-level issues!

Legislation is being drafted to support community-level initiatives, however, a critical question remains: how can policy best be implemented to serve the interests of villagers, especially for those who do not separate their resources by sector (e.g., forest, fishery)? Further investigation is required to assess how different community-based policies identified in a range of legislation and programmes (e.g., community fisheries sub-decree, community forestry sub-decree, protected areas law, land law, local governance programmes, etc.) can best support village-level work, rather than lead to fragmentation via the creation of multiple committees doing similar work. As has been shown by experiences in Kompong Phluk and Koh Sralao, community-based management can emerge in many ways. Finding flexible approaches that support creative learning and problem-solving opportunities represents an important challenge for local resource management and development.

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