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Vulnerability and Resilience of the Cambodian Forest-Rural Interface

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Abstract

This paper examines examples of vulnerability and resilience at the Cambodian rural-forest interface. Poor and rural population are often considered as the key factors for land degradation, next to exploitation of timber products, mining, and plantations which increases inherent vulnerability of the fragile ecosystem at the agricultural forest interface. A growing population and increasing consumption of forest resources for timber, fuel wood, and a range of non-timber forest products (NTFP) are placing the remaining resources under significant pressure. Demand on forest resources is growing fast as especially the rural population continues to grow rapidly in Cambodia. Traditionally, forest resources play a significant role in the household economy, as an additional source of food, but also as an important source for tools, and for medicine. As part of the degradation process, forest cover is being lost permanently as it is converted to agricultural land, often in the form of large plantations. This is facilitating a significant in-migration of settlers into former dense forest areas. Many of whom subsequently seek to clear forestland and gain title to newly cleared areas which is often followed soil degradation and inadequate land use.

The direct causes for vulnerability of Cambodian rural forest interface are land grabbing, illegal agricultural encroachment, forest and economic concessions, illegal timber and NTFP harvesting and restrictions of forest use for local communities, due to protection and biodiversity conservation. Furthermore, there are a number of underlying or indirect reasons for increasing conflicts in rural area like improved access to remote and even far remote areas and a fast growing population migration to frontier provinces. As a result, countrywide many communities are in a state of flux due to both temporary and permanent migrations. These changes have further impoverished Cambodia's rural communities. The emergent instability and vulnerability of both forest resources and rural communities points to demographic issues, poverty alleviation measures and to the character and condition of forest vegetation as key factors in determining sustainable land use practices to remain and improve environmental services to rural population in Cambodia.

Keywords: Cambodia, resilience, Rural Forest Interface, South-East Asia, tropical forest, vulnerability

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