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## Rural Livelihood Strategies, Poverty Alleviation and Sustainable Resource Use in Cambodia: Is Community-Based Ecotourism Applicable?

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### Abstract

Cambodia has been looking for appropriate integrated conservation and development approaches in rural areas, where natural resources are increasingly shrinking from heavy exploitation of resource-dependent communities. Community-based ecotourism (CBET) is promoted as a tool to secure conservation and promote development of rural society, sparking through local communities to the Cambodian state. It has emerged from neo-liberal and neo-populist principles of government and civil society organisations with strong support from international development programs. These stakeholders consider CBET initiative as one of the most ideal driving forces for many projects in national parks, protected areas and biosphere reserves. This initiative is being implemented under two schemes: community-based natural resource management (CBNRM) and integrated conservation and development projects (ICDPs). Yet, there has been no study in Cambodia on how to use it as a sustainable means to stimulate economic activities of local communities whose livelihoods are condemned as destructive and illegal, to reduce poverty, while providing strong incentives for sustainable resource conservation.

Based on theoretical and empirical bases, this study aims to analyse the effectiveness and applicability of developing ecotourism as a tool to address a dual need - integrated conservation and community development - in the core areas of the Tonle Sap Biosphere Reserve (TSBR) in Cambodia. Mixed methods were employed for data collection from a range of all stakeholders and beneficiaries. The analysis involves several methods, namely content analysis, framework matrix, statistical analysis and Ecotourism Opportunity Spectrum (ECOS) model. The findings reveal local livelihood options, environmental governance, the contexts of internality and externality, and the interaction between livelihood security and natural resource management and conservation in TSBR core areas. In addition, the potential, limitation and pitfalls of ecotourism development for contributing to livelihood improvement and diversification as well as to sustainable consumption of natural resources in these areas are critically discussed in this paper. Finally, it recommends six guiding principles for all concerned stakeholders of ecotourism and three major phases of a holistic framework for sustainable conservation and development in these TSBR core areas.

**Keywords:** Community-based ecotourism, integrated conservation and development, livelihood strategies, Tonle Sap Biosphere Reserve