

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Our people have been living under terrible pressure and have been suffering since the development programs initiated during the French colonial period in Northeastern Cambodia. The French came and took our land, and converted our traditional communities into rubber plantation areas. The regimes that followed after the French tried to assimilate our people into the mainstream society through Khmerization, forbade the practice of traditional cultures. In the 1990s, the big people (powerful people) have taken our fertile land and forced us to live within marginal lands. They told us that they came to develop, to promote cash crop productions and to provide jobs. Instead, they have threatened our environment, lives, livelihood and culture. Our people are struggling for the security of our local communities. So we have learned to communicate with government and non-government development workers as well as to voice our concerns worldwide. We have also learned to listen to the wind, speak with the trees and observe the ancestral spiritual ceremonies for survival.

(A Traditional Leader in Yak Kaol Community, December 29, 2003)

Cambodia is one of the world's poorest countries and has the highest human poverty index in Asia, reflecting the fact that it has just emerged from 30 years of warfare and displacement. It is estimated that 85% of population reliant on agriculture for their livelihoods, suffer the greatest incidence of poverty (Seila Task Force 2000:16). The total population Cambodians is 11.4 million and around 0.95% are ethnic minority people living in Northeastern Cambodia (National Census 1998).

After the Peace Accord in Paris on October 23, 1991, Cambodia took a significant step towards turning country from a socialist state into a market economy and from a single to multi-party political system (Peou 2000). Subsequently, the Cambodian government experienced rapid changes, moving from poverty to prosperity in some sectors in a rush of economic growth. In an ambitious effort to boost the economic development, the First Socio-Economic Development Plan, 1996-2000 (SEDP), was

implemented as part of this new economic orientation. The first SEDP focused on improvement in the formal health and education systems as well as the establishment of a rural water supply and sanitation program (Royal Government of Cambodia 1997). The second SEDP, 2001-2005, required the achievement of four objectives: (i) sustainable economic growth with equity at a rate of 6-7% per year; (ii) social and cultural development; (iii) sustainable management and use of natural resources; and (iv) an improved system of governance (Royal Government of Cambodia 2002).

Specific strategies were also developed to address the poverty and social problems faced by ethnic minority groups living in Northeastern Cambodia. Efforts were made to develop rural infrastructure facilities, and to promote the agricultural sector and off-farm employment in upland areas. In addition, development projects aimed to empower local people to participate in and benefit from access to natural resources, such as, land, forest, as well as health and education services, appropriate technology, and credit.

The promotion of international trade for national economic development has meant that Northeastern Cambodia has come to be considered by the government as an economic zone and a source of state revenue. This has led to an increasing demand for resources in the area, including timber, land, minerals and fish. Due to an absence of effective regulations, however, the forestry sector has remained open to a multiplicity of users including the military, local entrepreneurs, farmers, migrants from the lowland, and foreign investors, giving rise to large-scale exploitation of natural resources. The government has excluded access to local natural resources including the collecting of resins, the cutting of fruit trees and the hunting of wildlife through the legislation of provincial authorities, all of which have threatened the livelihood sources of ethnic minorities. Additionally, the government has also placed restriction on the practice of traditional shifting cultivation in forest areas, which has led to shortage of land for local use, competition among local community members, and also confrontation with land and forest concession holders. At the same time, customary practices have been discouraged, leading to changes in traditional institutions.

In the early 1990s, the state development plan started promoting agro-industry by expanding agricultural land for the growing of coffee, rubber, oil palm and other cash

crops. The intensive cropping system implemented to increase agricultural output exhausted much of the accessible arable land. This in turn exerted pressure on marginal lands and led to increased deforestation. The demand for agricultural land has meant that lowland, national and international investors have increasingly encroached upon local community areas generating conflicts with ethnic minority communities.

While the conversion of forestlands into plantation by private business interests escalated, the government development agencies have generally been unmoved by criticism of development programs. Similar to the experiences of many other countries in both North and South (see Escobar 1996), development plans in Northeastern Cambodia have primarily been oriented towards economic growth, and have seldom recognized the social and environmental problems rooted in the dominant development process. The government development agencies have largely blamed ethnic minority groups for serious forest destruction. It is claimed that ethnic minority people increase their shifting cultivation plots to grow cash crops and fruit trees, and to access to other forest resources.

Various forms of the government pressure have been placed on ethnic minority groups, who have suffered from degraded local natural resources, a more vulnerable status in terms of lack of legal title to land, and misunderstandings between local communities and the government development agencies over issues, such as, community rights and local practices. As a result, ethnic minority groups have gradually lost access not only to their land, but also their rights to local community resources. These factors are a result of the government granting of land and forest concessions to national and international entrepreneurs, and also expanding lowlander settlement in ethnic minority community areas. Migrants and commercial entrepreneurs have often taken advantage of ethnic minority groups by applying for land certificates through local and provincial authorities. Further, development projects, such as, the establishment of protected areas, hydropower projects and rubber plantations have relocated ethnic minority communities from their ancestral domains to areas of concentrated settlement along the Sesan River and the highlands national roadway.

On a daily basis, villagers face many hardships, including food insecurity. The traditional way of sharing hunted animals within families and kinship groups has been declining because of the need to sell wildlife for extra income. A clear example of this change in local practice is the fact that, before the 1990s, ethnic minority people regarded various animals as sacred, such as, certain kinds of cobras, pythons and monkeys. Now many community members catch as much wildlife as possible because these animals mean money for their families (John 2000:10). Further, the pressure to have a cash income means that villagers must find different means of earning an income, such as, increasing rice production, growing cashew nuts or other cash crops, increasing small-scale business ventures, and performing wage labor within communities and on plantations. Even though villagers in the ethnic minority communities have diversified their livelihood strategies, many are still facing an uncertain subsistence base, with an increase in the sale of agricultural products, and increasing expenditures for food requirements and household materials.

In 1995, international organizations working in Cambodia began to pay significant attention to regulate land and forest access as a key means for halting the destruction of natural resources, and putting great pressure on the government legislative change. In the same year, the government initiated the Highland Development Plan in Ratanakiri, with assistance from United Nations Development Program/Cambodian Rehabilitation and Regeneration Project (UNDP/CARERE¹). This marked a shift in the process of development with a focus on decentralization to strengthen local governance system. Accordingly, the Seila Program (Stone Foundation) addressed rural development by improving the capacity for local governance and organizing local community structures. This program aimed to prepare local people for the devolution of power and increasing participation in development processes, such as, local decision making regarding local development investment plans for rural infrastructure. However, in reality the program remained entrenched in the highly-centralized, bureaucratized state machinery and ultimately threatened the social collectiveness of local communities (Öjendal et al. 2001:25-30). The Seila Program created a Village Development Committee (VDC), which consisted of elected members from the local community and replaced traditional political and jural

¹ It have been replaced to Partnership for Local Governance (PLG) in 2000

structures. The VDC serves as the bottom rung in the hierarchy of government development committees for communes, districts and provinces.

It is important, then, to consider the reasons why development in Northeastern Cambodia has failed. In Cambodia, ethnic minority groups have historically been viewed as destroyers of the environment and illegal squatters (White 1995). This view is supported by three main assumptions: (i) their settlement area has a static economy and is cut off from national markets; (ii) its population practice shifting cultivation; and (iii) its agricultural production is subsistence-based. Ethnic minorities are thus seen as backwards, wild, uneducated, and lawless, as groups that do not understand the values of development. In this way, such groups are perceived as obstacle to development programs (Bourdier 1997).

Simultaneously, development processes have constructed ethnic minority communities as a particular kind of object of knowledge, and created structures of knowledge around their object (Ferguson 1990:xiv). Ethnic minorities have thereby been seen as the 'other', constituted through differentiation with lowland migrants. Lowlanders, who are educated people and aware of government acts and policies regarding such things as land ownership, can be considered 'lawlike', using Tsing's (1993:181) terminology, while ethnic minority groups who may be unfamiliar with government development plans and policies, are referred to as 'lawless' (ibid.). On the basis of these perceptions, the Cambodian government assumes the responsibility to develop and assimilate ethnic minority people into mainstream development by relocating groups to live near main roads, by teaching them to dress in Khmer style, to speak the Khmer language, and to farm perennial crops. Therefore, ethnic minority cultures, customs and local structures have been pressured towards universal national standardization and integration into the mainstream society. In many ways, then, the social transformation of ethnic minority communities has threatened the cultural values, lives and livelihoods of ethnic minority people.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that development projects have often been created to legitimize the government development plans for control over natural resources, and have ignored the complexity of ethnic minority cultures, community rights and ownership of land and forest resources. This form of exclusion has led to ethnic minority communities to diversify their livelihood strategies to deal with the

loss of control and access to, and destruction of local natural resources. Ethnic minority groups have thus employed various 'coping strategies' including the use of intensive labor within and outside local communities, and the sale of livestock and handicrafts or agricultural products (see Piseth 2001). Ethnic minority people have also competed with fellow community members and outsiders, such as, logging companies and lowland migrants to maximize the benefits of local natural resources.

Within this context, development processes have included increased commercialization, the resettlement of ethnic minority villages and unofficial encouragement of lowland migrants to ethnic communities, collectively transforming highland community landscapes and often excluding ethnic minority groups from access to natural resources. These processes affect not only the forest, land and livelihood, but also cultural values, indigenous knowledge, customary practices, and traditional life-styles. In this way, the basic human rights of ethnic minority people, the integrity of cultures, and the security of traditional livelihoods are severely threatened (Chayan et al., 1997:5).

The transformation of ethnic minority communities in Northeastern Cambodia can thus be considered in terms of 'development' as a discursive practice, with various participants involved in the development processes holding competing constructions of social reality (see also Komatra 1998:375). In particular, internally-reconstructed and negotiated 'development space' can be seen through describing of local practices, history, conflicts and accomplishments in order to secure their own local community natural resources (see Chayan 2003:20-21, Rodman 2003:214-215). Additionally, ethnic minority people have, for example, revitalized traditional knowledge systems, and formed self-help groups and social networks in the struggle for community rights to control, manage and use local community natural resources.

According to Chayan (2003:21), community is a dynamic and reflexive. A community can be seen a site of resistance, for example, as in the case of ethnic Kreung in Yak Kaol community of Northeastern Cambodia, where they protested against the state's granting logging, land and mineral concessions. At the same time, villagers also have re-invented their local history in order to maintain their cultural values, projecting themselves as 'forest and mountain people' who maintain close relationships to their myth of origin with the land, forest, mountains and water. These

are the places where livelihoods are based and spirits are worshipped. Environmental and social relations are guided by notions of customary law, taboo and spiritual habitat associated with culture, identity and ancestor belief (see Gupta and Ferguson 1999:33-35, Munn 2003:93). Significantly, these are places where their ancestors lived that are important with regards to traditional knowledge and cultural values. Ethnic minority politics, thus reconstructed a 'everyday forms of resistance' for contested development space between the state and ethnic minority community (see Scott 1985:36). In everyday life, different forms of resistance are employed to preserve natural resources, traditional cultures and secure livelihood. In some cases, local people have chosen to use forest products extensively as a response to outside intervention and for their own subsistence and economy. Ethnic minority community then becomes a contested development space between the state and local people.

This study aims to study the process of transformation in Northeastern Cambodia focusing on the way of natural resources have been used and its impacts upon local peoples' livelihood. The study also looks at the changing power relations and social interactions between the government and ethnic minority communities under the context of cultural, social, political and ecological change. Further, this study examines ethnic practices in term of resistance, negotiation and participation with the government development programs. Lastly, the study investigates on how ethnic minority communities maintained or revitalized traditional knowledge and cultural value, and also strengthened the self-help group and social networks for struggling over the community right, to secure local community natural resources.

1.2 Research Questions

This research explores the power relations and effects of the granting of exclusive local natural resource rights, contested perceptions of ethnic minority groups and contestation of local development institutions. The questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. How has development been defined by the Cambodian state and by ethnic minority groups?

2. Why are ethnic minority people excluded from decision making in the development process, particularly resource management?
3. How has development been contested by ethnic minority community?
4. How have ethnic minority people reconstructed and revitalized their traditional cultures and knowledge in response to development processes?
5. How have ethnic minority people negotiated, resisted, and coped with state agencies and other dominant groups in order to control and manage resource utilization?

1.3 Research Objectives

To inquire into the above research questions, this study has set out specifically to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the transformation of Northeastern Cambodia and this transformation has been perceived by ethnic minority groups.
2. To study changing power relations and social interactions in the context of this transformation related to the livelihoods of ethnic minority groups in terms of access to control of and responsibility for natural resources.
3. To understand how ethnic minority people preserve and/or maintain their traditional cultures, customary laws, and rights within the context of social transformations.
4. To investigate how ethnic minority community has redefined and revitalized their traditional practices and social networks in their everyday lives as a response to development processes.

1.4 Research Site and Methodology

1.4.1 Scope of the Study

This study investigates the transformation of Northeastern Cambodia from 1990 to 2003. In this process, the Cambodian government has constructed images and excludes rights of the ethnic minority people, whose livelihood depends upon shifting cultivation and natural resource utilization. This is achieved through the focus on one village where drawing experiences of ethnic minority people, who respond to the development process, especially control, management and utilization of natural resources. Therefore, this study was explored along with social interactions and livelihood strategies of ethnic minorities.

1.4.2 Selection of the Research Site

Krola is the Kreung village in the Yak Kaol community, situated North of Banlung town that I chose as my research site. It is an old village organized in a rounded pattern. However, through various development processes, especially in the 1990s, this village has undergone many changes and protested with the government plans for logging and land concessions. Thus focusing research in this village has allowed me to study some of the processes of transformation that have led to changes in traditional structures, customary practices, agricultural practices and livelihood of ethnic minority community.

Additionally, the government has initiated many development projects, such as, building roads, health centers, schools as well as providing seeds and agricultural materials to members of ethnic minority communities. These development projects have also attracted lowlanders to live in these areas. In 1993, Krola village in Yak Kaol, suffering from land encroachment, land grabs, and other conflicts arising from competition over the use of natural resources. Within this context, and with a focus on Krola, I attempted looking at the capability of local people to organize themselves to resist such threats and to protect their land and property through the formulation of rules and regulations for land use and forest management to secure their communities and livelihoods.

Basing my research in Krola in the Yak Kaol community also allowed me to examine the changing livelihood strategies of ethnic minorities under processes of development, for example, poorer families performed intensive labor within and outside the local community, while some wealthy families now run small-scale trading and karaoke. Some villagers have become motorcycle-taxi drivers or work in construction, while others clear new farmland, or weed cashew farms for wealthy villagers or companies' farms. Beyond this, some local people now work for NGOs and other local associations, which promote the protection and use of their traditional knowledge and local rights to resources and the practice of culture.

Finally, Northeastern Cambodia has attracted many national and international entrepreneurs to operate logging and land concessions in the area. In 1998, the Hero Taiwan Company, authorized by the government, started carrying out logging operations in O'Chum District. The company did not recognize or respect the traditions of the local people and felled many *Arak long* (spirit trees) in the *Arak Bree* (spirit forest). In March 1999, conflicts arose between the company and Kreung people living in Yak Kaol, the sites of where traditional practice and worship had been damaged. Local people opposed the company's logging operations by seizing their tractors and trucks and by prohibiting the employees of the company from entering the forests.

On April 20, 2003, I visited Krola village accompanied by two friends, Miss Leak and Mr. Sam Ourn. At that time, I saw five villagers who were having a meeting in the communal hall, so did not disturb them, and instead visited another group that were working on house construction. One of my friends introduced me to a villager, who told us about the meeting that was underway related to land issues. During a break in the meeting, I went to introduce myself and they, very generously, gave me an opportunity to listen to their discussion about land conflicts within their community.

Mr. Bang Ngan, an employee of the NTFP and an acquaintance of mine, invited me and my friends for lunch at his home after the meeting, where we had lunch with his family. After lunch, he showed us around his cashew nut farm and talked to us about his family life and changes in the community. In the evening, he offered two wine jars to a spirit to bless my visit, and invited other villagers to join in the

traditional ritual. This opportunity allowed me to establish a network of friends, including Mr. Bunsithort, Mr. Katie, Mr. San and Mr. Keurn, who later become my key informants. As a result of my experiences during this day and hearing about their life histories and the changes in their community, I decided to conduct fieldwork in Krola.

1.4.3 Research Methodologies

The study was conducted over a period of four months and divided into two stages. The first stage was the gathering of preliminary data that lasted for two months from mid-March to mid-May 2003. The second stage involved actual implementation of fieldwork for two months that started from December 1, 2003 to February 5, 2004. Significantly, I focused on the community organizations and community changes with emphasis on living conditions, agricultural practices and cultures of ethnic minority community. I also looked on the effects of hydropower projects on ethnic minority community, affected areas of land use and forest resources utilization.

Additionally, I reviewed the highland development programs/projects of governments starting from the colonial period to the current time in Northeastern Cambodia and how the programs/projects affected the lives of ethnic minorities and their community landscape. I also gathered information from NGOs and government development agencies on their perceptions of ethnic minority community, and how government development projects pose challenges for the cultural practices, customs and everyday lives of ethnic minority people. In particular, I aimed to investigate how government projects expand their power through these processes of transformation, excluding local rights from the control and management of natural resources. During my fieldwork stage, I was guided by my research questions (see Appendix A) and used the following methods:

A- Household Survey

I used household survey to gather data from 60 percent of the households in Krola regarding daily activities, socio-economic conditions, and family structure. This method also allowed me to collect information on family size, the labor force, income, seasonal activities of the families, and access to financial resources. During this

process of engagement with respondents, I was able to carry out a critical examination of local perceptions and cultural values regarding forest and land.

B- Key Informant Interview

This method was used to collect information about local history and social relations associated with natural resource management systems, shifting cultivation practices, religious beliefs and customary practices. Interviews focused on villagers's opinions about their increasingly restricted access to resources and the strategies they employed to protect their use of land and harvesting of forest products. I also investigated how local people have negotiated outside intervention or the government to secure their local community and culture, and shared resources among community members while their lives and livelihoods were threatened. Interviews were also used to question members of the Land Use Committee about demarcation and mapping processes between local communities. The informants I selected were knowledgeable about land use and customary law, and included local officials, village head, village committee members, elders, villagers, and NGOs workers based in the area. Overall, these interviews helped me to understand the social history of the community by focusing on different actors with different social, economic and cultural backgrounds.

C- Observation and Informal Interview

I found this method useful in allowing me to understand further the cultural dimensions, social organization, and livelihood strategies of ethnic minority communities. I talked with local community members to help me understand the nature of their society and local institutions. I also investigated their experiences and methods of transferring knowledge to younger generations. Further, I observed daily activities, such as, agricultural practices, the gathering of plants, hunting and fishing, noting how local people exchanged labor or assisted others in the local community. Informal conversations helped me to communicate in a straightforward way and obtain candid answers about life histories and communication within nuclear families. These methods helped me to better understand social relations and interaction among the local communities, as well as the ways they construct social networks and share information and resources.

D- Secondary Data Collection

I made use of the available documentation to describe the historical profiles in development in Northeastern Cambodia. Data was collected from various NGOs in Ratanakiri, such as, NTFP, CIDSE, PLG/Seila, and ADHOC. In addition, I utilized documents from government offices and libraries in Phnom Penh, such as, the Ministry of Rural Development, PLG, IDRC², and the Center for Advanced Studies. I also searched for information through websites and newsletters. These documents helped me to understand the historical background of ethnic minority people.

1.5 Data Analysis

I progressively reviewed and categorized my data from daily activities in the field. Data analysis included both qualitative and quantitative methods; however, the focus is on qualitative data. This focus helped me to understand various social interactions and relationships among ethnic minority communities as well as their life histories and experiences. The results of analysis were reported through descriptive material, tables and figures. Finally, the purpose of this study was not only to understand what people say, but also to study the meanings and ideas represented in the institutions and dimensions of social life of ethnic minority people.

1.6 Limitations of the Study

This study had both time and resource constraints. Challenges for research included a language barrier for communicating with members of the Kreung community and other ethnic groups in Northeastern Cambodia. Elderly respondents in particular were hesitant or unable to talk with me about their experiences, life histories and opinions in my native language, Khmer.

Additionally, my fieldwork was conducted during the harvest season when villagers in Yak Kaol community were busy harvesting cashew nuts and wetland rice. During this time, villagers were also preoccupied with preparations for spiritual ceremonies, attending funerals, or working for government agencies and NGOs and

² International Development Research Center

attending training sessions, workshops or meetings. They were not always available for interview.

This research was conducted primarily within a Kreung community. The findings are therefore specific to the Kreung community, and are not necessarily applicable to all ethnic minority communities in Ratanakiri. In particular, then, examinations of the different ways of life and the diversity of cultures in the ethnic minority communities are an important area further research.

1.7 Organization of the Thesis

This thesis consists of seven chapters. It reviews the general theoretical debates of development paradigms by drawing numerous international case studies. The study then narrows down to the historical profile of development in Northeastern Cambodia, specifically the Kreung community, and reviews development processes that have transformed livelihoods, cultural practices, social structures and ethnic minority communities' environments. Such transformation can also be seen as the response and adaptation of ethnic minority groups with everyday form of resistance, negotiation and participation in the development process in order to gain rights and access to natural resources.

The first chapter outlines the significance of study including the research questions, research objectives, and research methodologies. Together, these form the organizational basis of the study, and support my recommendations for further research studies.

Chapter II reviews development and modernization theories by exploring the numerous studies carried out in developing countries that offer important critiques of development. The concepts of 'technology of power' for modernization of the state, of empowerment and participation in the development process, and of ethnic practices as articulation in contested development space, are reviewed.

Chapter III presents the historical profile of highland development programs initiated since the nineteenth century, examining the root of competition over the use of natural resources in Northeastern Cambodia. This chapter analyzes the ideas

behind the development process, with a focus on the ethnic politics, socio-economic aspects and natural resource management. This chapter details the turbulent history of Cambodia through the changes in ethnic minority communities, especially in the transition to a market economy in the 1990s.

Chapter IV specifies fieldwork data regarding the ecological setting of Ratanakiri and the strategies of ethnic minority communities for dealing with the environments around them. This exploration helps to reveal the reasons behind conflicts over the use of resources in ethnic minority communities. Additionally, I explore the roles and responsibilities of the government and NGOs involved with highland development and their influence on local institutions, cultural practice including in natural resources management.

Chapter V discusses changes and adaptations within the Kreung community in terms of their social structure and livelihood strategies. It explores the context of settlement movement and the cultural values of community, the village's ecological niche and its utilization of local natural resources. There is also an investigation of customary laws and belief systems and their functions, as well as an analysis of the social relations and livelihood strategies of the Kreung people as they adapt to new environments.

Chapter VI discusses the local practices as an articulation in the contested development processes of local communities. It also explores how the Kreung community has promoted their cultural traditions to help obtain the rights to manage and control their own resources. Various experiences of the Kreung community in negotiating, adapting and participating in the development process are considered.

The last chapter presents the major findings of this study, as well as debates related to the findings centered on theories emphasizing on contested development resource management. The recommendations for further research include studies on alternative development that protects ethnic minority peoples' rights to practice their culture, and exercise customary rights to land and forest.