

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

This study has sought to empirically examine the transformation of an ethnic minority community in Northeastern Cambodia and the ways these changes have influenced local practices associated with traditions, social structures and livelihood systems. These changes in turn must be considered within broader processes of socio-economic development and local community development. A central focus of this study has been an analysis of how ethnic minorities have contested the development arenas, and how they have employed ethnic practices to obtain community rights accessing to and greater control of local community resources.

This final chapter summarizes the findings of the study, and is divided into four sections. The first section outlines the major findings of this research. The second section places these findings in the context of existing concepts and theories, emphasizing contested development space over issues of access to land and forest resources. The third section outlines recommended local development programs for land use, natural resource management and sustainable livelihoods for ethnic minorities in Northeastern Cambodia. These recommendations focus on the maintenance of ethnic minority cultures, customary rights and ways of life. Finally, this chapter provides suggestion for further research.

7.1 Principal Findings of the Study

My study of the transformation of Northeastern Cambodia explores the ways in which of commercialization and development has led to changing ethnic minority communities including agricultural practice, land ownership, cultural identity, local community rights, and livelihood strategies. The study also reveals the power of the state through the contradicting programs of different governing regimes, and their formation of local communities into the mainstream development programs. In

response to the intervention of state power, ethnic minority communities have developed their own rules and regulations to control and manage their natural resources and also employed the coping strategies with changes are recognized, adopted and strengthened by government development agencies and NGOs to be empowered local people as the owner of development programs.

Changes in the political and socio-economic situation on a national level have influenced all spheres of Cambodian life. More specifically, the variety of development strategies, and approaches employed at various levels have brought about changes in the livelihood strategies of ethnic minorities as well as changes in social behavior in local communities. Under the government development programs, smaller ethnic minority groups, such as, the Brao have sought temporary associations with the larger Kreung group (see Chapter III). Such consolidation of ethnic minority groups, an adaptation to deal with the new development environment, has been one factor leading to changes in perceptions and even transformations of cultural practice. However, my research also reveals that the transformation of cultural practices occurs neither as a result of pressure exerted by various state regimes nor within a short period of time. It is found that a shared understanding, at the community level, of the changing social, political, economic and ecological environments and related collective adaptations are the main force beyond transformations of local practice. Within this study, these changes in local practice including changes in the ways that Kreung people and other ethnic minority people dress, communicate by becoming proficient in to the Khmer language, and by creating new networks, farming their lands with perennial crops, and structuring social interactions.

The study also finds that, historically, development processes within ethnic minority communities in the remote upland areas have always been subject to exploitative programs. The majority of these processes imposed by state authorities showed little evidence of the involvement of local communities in the decisions made on their behalf and often overt exclusion. For example, enforced resettlements included the relocation of ethnic minority communities in upland areas to live in lowland areas along the Sesan River and along national roadway. Additionally, many lowland people have migrated to Ratanakiri province. In the 1990s, the Highland Development Plan initiated by the government promoted the principle of 'active

affected the livelihoods of ethnic minority peoples, in particular generating a move from shifting cultivation to sedentary farming. Sedentary farming has allowed people to diversify their livelihood sources, including the rearing of cattle, pigs, and poultry, employment in off-farm labor, and the running of small-scale businesses. Further, the introduction of modern technology has helped to increase the production levels of sedentary farming, thus making it more attractive to villages than shifting cultivation. However, my research clearly indicates that ethnic minority communities continue to partly rely upon shifting cultivation plots, and forest products like mushrooms, ferns, bamboo, and many other valuable resources.

This study also explored the experiences of the nationally-run local governance program 'Seila Program' in 1995. This program disregarded traditional community institutions and created the VDC, which became defunct within a year of its establishment. As many renowned authors like Ostrom (1992) and Uphoff (1986) have emphasized, the strength of community institutions should not be underestimated and local governance programs like Seila should also be built upon traditional institutions.

Through the process of development, government formed state bureaucracy in different levels in local community. The traditional and newly-founded institutions have aggravated competition among community members for the exploitation of resources. The wider stratification of society in terms of power and wealth is reflected at the community level, and the accumulation of resources by powerful elites within the village has caused conflict among community members over access to and control of natural resources.

This research finds that customary practices built over generations are still used by the Kreung as a mechanism for the utilization and management of land and forest resources. The whole Krola community follows customary laws and taboos that restrict hunting of wild animals, collecting of plants, and shifting cultivation practices. These customary laws have been followed for many centuries and have helped to minimize conflicts over resource utilization and foster social cohesion. These customary practices formed the basis for the establishment of social norms and everyday life practices. However, Kreung and other ethnic minority community customary practices are unwritten and are not formally recognized by state law,

meaning a lack of acknowledgement of legitimacy from outside agencies in terms of resource management capacity for local communities.

This study has also shown many examples of the use of traditional practices as a strategy for resisting state domination. Krola villagers in Yak Kaol community expressed the difficulties of finding food due to the depletion of and the loss of rights to utilize local natural resources. The Kreung have employed 'landscape resistance' by utilizing traditional knowledge systems to classify land use, village boundaries and sacred sites. Throughout various development interventions, villagers have thereby developed their own rules and regulations for land and forest resource utilization, which combine national laws such as the Land Law and the Forest Law with customary law. These rules and regulations developed by few communities in Ratanakiri were recognized by the provincial authorities 2002, but do not have any legal security at the national level. This establishment of new local rules can be seen as the revitalization of local community systems which shape the everyday life of local people and strengthens relationships between community members and development agencies. In this way, these new formation are important in bridging the gap between dominant groups and ethnic minorities in terms of access to decision-making power over land and forest resources.

In addition, it is found that in the process of government-initiated development and modernization in the ethnic minority communities, the Kreung have adjusted local customs to help secure community rights and ownership over local natural resources. The adaptation of local custom is one of the main advantages of local participation in the development process. Krola villagers have gradually changed, adapted and revitalized the aims of development supporting from government and NGOs, so that participation in development projects has become an important part of their lives. Active participation in natural resource management and development planning has contributed to the continuing process of formalizing rights to contest and reshape the development process within local communities and secure local resources and livelihoods.

Finally, the study shows that Kreung people conserve their community landscape by ensuring a close association with ancestral domains. The *Rong* (communal hall) is generally located in the center of the community, and for villagers are representative of their cultural values, a sense of community, and the importance of collective

decision making. The Kreung livelihood systems are associated with their obligations and duties to respect customary laws and taboos. The performance of these obligations and duties also rely on network systems based on patron-client relationships, exchanges of labor, kinship relations, intermarriage, and trade networks. These social relations and interactions guide the community management and utilization of resources, to guarantee both livelihoods and local community rights.

Overall, the transformation of ethnic minority communities in Northeastern Cambodia has excluded or marginalized local people in the access and management of land and forest resources throughout the legislation of provincial authority under the order from government of Phnom Penh. Within the process of development, however, ethnic minorities have revitalized their cultural values, strengthened local structures, and formed social networks within and outside communities to negotiate or participate in development, to resist marginalization, and struggle to secure local community resources both natural and cultural.

7.2 Theoretical Discussion of Findings

This section applies my conceptual framework regarding the process of transformation in ethnic minority communities in Northeastern Cambodia to describe the research findings outlined in the above section. These findings are also linked to the theoretical debates of 'contested development space' within ethnic minority communities and the use of traditional practices strategies for articulating resistance.

The various visions of government development agencies transforming ethnic minority communities in Northeastern Cambodia through the promotion of socio-economic development, democracy and modernization largely misunderstood the practices of local communities (see White 1995, Pigg 1992, Ferguson 1990). This idea of the need to transform segments of ethnic society for development is similar to Ferguson's argument (1990) that the development programs is way of reorganizing or motivating ethnic minority groups to change their belief systems to secular rules. This includes reinforcing and changing social behavior, moving from shifting cultivation to sedentary farming and from local consumption-based to market-oriented production through the power of the state. In contrast to the government's point of view, my research has shown that many ethnic minorities or 'forest and mountain

people' as the Kreung refer to themselves, have maintained close relationships with the land and forest, maintaining cultural values, and adapting livelihood systems.

Further, different regimes have clearly perceived ethnic minority groups as a cheap labor pool, which provided an incentive for governments including the French colonists, the Prince Norodom Sihanouk regime in the 1960s, and the General Lon Nol regime in early the 1970s to establish extensive rubber plantations in Northeastern Cambodia. These initiatives have increasingly moved communities from shifting cultivation to the cultivation of cashews and irrigated wetland rice, and are a typical case of what Ferguson (1990) referred to as the building of the 'peasant society'. These changes have been heavily influenced by the economic development the power of the state, which has driven the maximization of profit through the exploitation of natural resources. With the diversification of cropping systems and objectives, the livelihood strategies of the people with ethnic minority communities have also diversified. The emergence of distinct social strata and networks are the result of changes in livelihood strategies, in which ethnic minorities struggle for their livelihoods and adapt to the new social, political, economic and ecological environments (Scott 1985, 1990).

To reconstruct power relations and encourage participation in development, the Cambodian government recently adopted the concepts of 'active participation approach' and 'local governance system' in local community development. The focus of local governance programs generally ranges from empowerment (Öjendal et al., 2001) to its promotion as an 'anti-politics' machinery (Ferguson 1990). In the range of concepts of local governance in the development context common theme is the idea of changing local structures, with governments creating new local leadership by replacing traditional leaders, and promoting a perception of these new leaders as for the development of the local communities. A significant part of this transformation is the emergence of unequal power relations between government agencies and ethnic minority communities. It is clearly evident that ethnic minority communities dependent on land and forest resources are generally marginalized from the development process, even with these new structures. Ultimately, changes in local structures or traditional institution that do not recognize existing practices and reorganization had damaged the security of local livelihoods and natural resources.

Social transformation includes the processes of power at different levels of society involving state, local government development workers, and farmers (Hart et al., 1989). In Northeastern Cambodia the government's intervention in the development of rural communities in the 1990s effectively differentiated local people into social and economic classes. Within Kreung communities in Yak Kaol, there have been increases in income disparity, as well as in access to the means of production, employment, with powerful actors gaining more social benefits. Competition for local resources in Ratanakiri has often led powerful actors to utilize local institutions to gain legitimacy and maximize resource exploitation and personal profit.

The transformation of ethnic minority community landscapes has included changes in traditional practices and changes in the perceptions of local people held by the government. Land and forest use and management have been restricted by state and private bodies largely without considering the livelihood needs and traditional practices of ethnic minority groups in the area. This process of transformation has also bestowed more benefits on community elites or powerful external actors who have been able to strengthen their access to rural development services and natural resources. As the same time, ethnic minority communities have also strengthened their traditional knowledge systems and local institutions by revitalizing customary laws and taboos to regulate their resources use and social organization.

Government development agencies in Northeastern Cambodia have tended to construct development as the promotion of economic growth and modernization. These contested processes of development create exclusivity in resource access. Scott (1985, 1990) and Peluso (1992) have said that local people often employ traditional practices as strategies for resisting exclusion or restriction from the use and management of local natural resources. This resistance can take different forms, including the encroachment of state property, as was the case with the Kreung in Yak Kaol in the 1990s. In order to cope with exclusion from or restricted access to forests, local people have also resorted to cutting down trees in these areas without informing local authorities. Another strategy followed by the Kreung to strengthen community control over local resource utilization has been to promote local practices, such as, the establishment of spirit forests, and the recognition of mountain spirits and burial forests.

Broadly speaking, contestations of the development process have made development constructions more flexible, with increasing community engagement related to the strategic articulation of local conditions and practices of daily life (Escobar 1995). Ethnic minority communities, including those in Krola, have adapted or revitalized their social organizations and cultural practices to help satisfy local needs. Villagers have developed institutions such as the Land Use Committee with the support of international NGOs, to mobilize human and financial resources, enhancing local control over natural resources. Critically, the new collective management systems created by ethnic minority communities have resulted in challenges to national laws that have disadvantaged them, and helped to formalize recognition of local resources rights.

Development related social transformation in Northeastern Cambodia has been a gradual process with multiple causes that has gradually disenfranchised various groups of people, and differentiated livelihood resources within the Kreung community in Yak Kaol and also the same as other ethnic minority communities. Commercial agriculturalists and other wealthy groups outside the community have been able to expand their access to local resources in recent years. This situation has damaged the forest environment of ethnic communities and threatened the traditional practices and livelihoods of ethnic minority peoples. Ethnic minority communities have also been affected by hydropower and tourism projects, as well as increased migration from dense populated areas of central Cambodia. These development projects have brought new challenges to long-held local values regarding wise resources use, and a growing perception of forest and land as commodities. These changes have all served to marginalize ethnic minority communities, including the Kreung, and threatened cultural practices and the security of local livelihoods.

In response, ethnic minorities have revitalized local institutions and constructed a new paradigm of development. Contestations of development in Northeastern Cambodia have helped to create local institutions that revolve around both national law and customary practices. Local strategies for resistance have included responses to the transformation of local livelihoods. Thus, local strategies for reconstructing cultural spaces have been related to ecological settings, traditional knowledge, and strengthening the cultural values and social networks that are meaningful for the social relations and interactions in ethnic minority society. In this way, the ethnic

minority people have been able to strengthen local community rights towards meaningful participation in the sustainable management and utilization of local resources, to help guarantee both livelihood and social security. This type of natural resource management can enable the sharing of benefits by addressing environmental degradation and community needs.

7.3 Scholarly and Policy Implications of the Findings

Northeastern Cambodia has long been considered an economic development zone, with successive governments employing socio-economic development plans for improving the living conditions of local people and increasing state revenue. This development, however, has tended to exclude the local communities and exploit natural resources, generally allowing ethnic minority peoples few opportunities to participate in development on their own terms. For example, the granting of logging and land concessions in Northeastern Cambodia to both national and international investors did not recognize them as sources of livelihoods and the cultural values of ethnic minorities, and led to an overexploitation of local resources. There is great concern in Krola and many other communities over the depletion of these important land and forest resources. Generally, villagers consider it imperative that development planning is carried out by local communities and allow ethnic minority peoples to participate in the development process. Ethnic minority groups could thus play a more active role in managing and conserving local natural resources, by promoting and integrating customary rights and traditional culture.

This research study finds a strong link between ethnic minority livelihoods and traditional practices, and local natural resources. It also became clear that better understanding the relationship between humans and their environments and the nature of social relations among key stakeholders, especially local community and government could lead to a better understanding of related conflicts and contestations. Therefore, we need to approach development with a general recognition of cultural landscape, allowing for local participation, and emphasizing the role of both traditional and newly-created local institutions in our search for alternative, more equitable frameworks of resource management.

This study contributes to an understanding of the transformation of upland communities in Northeastern Cambodia in many respects. The sources of contestation related to the Kreung way of life, and their adaptation to environmental changes are explored and analyzed. It has been shown that local practices have been revitalized in an attempt to secure livelihoods. In addition, the state and ethnic minority peoples have different perceptions of the scale of development. Government development agencies have promoted an agenda of economic development to improve the living conditions of ethnic minorities. However, ethnic minority people have repeatedly emphasized the importance of their customary practices, livelihood needs, and local community rights to resources. In the process, ethnic minority communities, including the Kreung have interacted with various development actors, and managed to create new perceptions and visions of the transformation of ethnic minority communities in Northeastern Cambodia.

7.4 Recommendations for Development and Further Research

The processes of development in ethnic minority communities have changed local social structures, agricultural practices, land ownerships and perceptions of ethnic minorities. Also as previously mentioned, this has included the state exercising its power to exclude local people from the control and management of local natural resources. This exclusion changed the already complex nature of land and forest regulations, as well as local environment and community landscapes. With local communities, norms and behaviors develop over time to serve collectively-held values that contribute to the development of local institutions (Uphoff 1986). Local rules for resource use and social behavior are determined by local resource management regimes. To carry out more appropriate development interventions, detailed knowledge of existing local institutions and stakeholder interests is a critical. This study therefore recommends that government-initiated development projects in Northeastern Cambodia (i) first conduct an institutional analysis of community-based natural resource management in relevant villages; (ii) gain an understanding of the community's management of resources; and (iii) improve the integration of development activities with local practices.

Currently, there is considerable interest in revitalizing formal institutions at the local level to restore and enhance the management of land and forest resources. Any

such formal institution should be broad-based and allow full and equitable participation in land and forest management. Realistically, institutional change must be concerned not only with creating linkages between local people and local authorities, but also consider the community rights of ethnic minority peoples to manage the resources they rely upon.

Further, in the process of developing upland communities in Northeastern Cambodia, provincial authorities must recognize community land use, land use rights, and local natural resource management as a legitimate tenure system. Despite some progress in this respect, many ethnic minorities in Yak Kaol and across Northeastern Cambodia are unaware of their rights, supported by the current government, to participate in the development process and help to manage communal resources. This is often due to inadequate communication both local and national between government development agencies and ethnic minority groups. Therefore, whenever governments has imposed new rules and regulations on local communities, especially in terms of natural resource management, there have been many obstacles to planning implementation, and much community resistance to change. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that local communities should be better informed, through the use of the mass media, for example, about any new rules and regulations that affect their livelihoods or provide opportunities for participation in development projects.

By virtue of living in remote communities and harsh environments, then, ethnic minority communities in Northeastern Cambodia are often excluded either explicitly or implicitly from the development process, while for lowlanders the experience has been different. The differences in experiences of development are caused by differences in the social, cultural, economic and political contexts. Lowlanders are generally more highly educated, and aware of laws and ownership rights related to land use, particularly land certificates. Moreover, many have successfully petitioned local authorities to access natural resources in the ethnic minority communities. Overall, national programs have not enabled broadly equitable development, and there have been cases of indiscriminate relocation of local communities in the name of development. It may not be appropriate to suggest the protection of ethnic minority communities in ways that would further detach and marginalize them from mainstream development. However, this study presents a strong recommendation that any programs and acts implemented in the communities of the Kreung or other ethnic

minorities should consider and be based upon the cultural, social, political and ecological environments in which they live.

The sustainable development of ethnic minority communities can only be successful with the adoption of a new development paradigm that allows full local participation and the utilization of indigenous knowledge. The failure to provide opportunities for local participation and decision making in the control and management of local resources could further threaten ethnic cultures and communities that have developed cultural values and social structures dynamically suited to management of local resources. Development planning must distribute the benefits of development equitably and recognize existing systems for the conservation of local environments. Therefore decision-makers, development planners, development workers, and social scientists should play more of a supporting and work in partnership with ethnic minority communities to create more sustainable alternatives for the development of ethnic minority communities in Northeastern Cambodia.