



Collective action on forest governance: An institutional analysis of the Cambodian community forest system



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ABSTRACT

Decentralisation in Cambodia has long been propagated as a means to enhance local engagement with governance structures. But in the forestry sector, even limited devolution of powers often constrains local user groups with excessive bureaucratic burdens. In addition, entrenched political economy interests tend to inhibit effective governance. To investigate the apparent institutional malaise that seems to characterise community forestry sites in Cambodia, this study employed a mixed methods approach to evaluate capacities to engage in collective action on forest governance. In our two case studies, community forestry is characterised by the exclusion of younger and poorer households from formal meetings, high costs and limited benefits for members, informal information channels where women and poorer households are excluded, low levels of formalisation, high enforcement costs and massive external pressures. The article calls for community forest entities to develop locally-adapted graduated sanction mechanisms through the receipt of greater support for internal monitoring and enforcement.

1. Introduction

As a backlash against the dominant centralised model for natural resource management that co-evolved with European state formation (Larson and Pulhin, 2012), a ‘decentralisation euphoria’ emerged in the 1990s as part of a normative agenda of political empowerment (Andersson and Ostrom, 2008, p. 72; Ribot, 2002; Tucker and Ostrom, 2005). By the end of the 1990s, nearly all developing countries claimed to be pursuing some form of decentralisation policy (Agrawal, 2001b). Decentralisation, nominally understood as the transfer of formal decision-making powers from central to sub-national political bodies, is characterised by a highly complex, nuanced and gradual process of substantiating formal powers through the construction, reformation and consolidation of institutions at different levels of the rule-making and enforcement hierarchy. Larson & Soto (2008, p. 216) define democratic decentralisation as the transfer of powers to lower-level government bodies which “involves representative and downwardly accountable local actors who have autonomous, discretionary decision-making spheres,” while deconcentration involves the “transfer of powers by central ministries to their branch offices located outside the capital.” Devolution, on the other hand, refers to the transfer of specific powers and includes a broader set of options including powers granted to community entities in a co-management regime. In a co-management

regime, therefore, property rights are shared between state and community entities (Berkes, 2010; Cronkleton et al., 2012).

Decentralisation and deconcentration frame the Government of Cambodia's (RGC) agenda for democratisation and inclusionary development by devolving powers to locally elected Commune Councils (CC) (RGC, 2010). In theory, these political bodies have autonomous decision-making rights, including for natural resource management (RGC, 2008, article 39). However, despite being a primary recommendation of the Independent Forest Sector Review of 2004 (IFSR, 2004; Nathan et al., 2006), forest stewardship functions are completely excluded from Commune Council jurisdictions (Higginson et al., 2013). Instead, a corollary system of Community Forest modalities, based on a complex regulatory framework that was finalised in 2006 (Forestry Administration, 2006), provides the channels for institutionalising democratic decision-making and devolving rights over forest governance to local communities. Local efforts at establishing Community Forests often meet considerable resistance. This is partly a result of rapid deforestation taking place across the country, which has had profound implications for rural populations who rely heavily on forest resources for livelihoods (Chan and Sasaki, 2014; Ehara et al., 2016; GERES, 2015). Driven by a complex set of factors rooted in the political economy of the forestry sector (FAO, 2010; Hor et al., 2014; Forests Trends, 2015), deforestation has been enabled through the gradual

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construction of a state “built on patronage, corruption and coercion” (Miranda and Kool, 2007, p. 10) through which the political and economic elite “consolidated its power by reorganising productive networks outside formal governance” (Billon, 1999, p. ii). Today, these patronage networks exert substantial influence over the allocation of illicitly appropriated benefits arising from the forestry sector (Milne, 2015; Un and So, 2009).

Although sophisticated legal frameworks for safeguarding citizens' rights exist, implementation and substantiation of rights remains weak (Davis et al., 2015), and formalisation processes tend to legitimise dispossession and disenfranchisement of rural populations (Park, 2015; Work, 2015). Conditions for collective action in Cambodia are thus heavily constrained (Weingart and Kirk, 2008; IHRCRC, 2015). In the past, pressure for reforms at the political level has been met with a tendency to structure feedback, accountability, and participation to benefit higher levels of decision-making (McCarthy, 2014; Nathan and Boon, 2012). The creation of local democratic institutions has been argued to mask inequitable power relations while legitimating rent-seeking by public officials (Milne and Adams, 2012).

Given this rather bleak depiction of the political situation in rural Cambodia, it is remarkable that Community Forests now exist at nearly 500 sites across the country. By November 2016, however, only 50 of these had completed the full formalisation process, with 48 finalising this process in the preceding 18 months (Ratanakoma, 2016). In many respects, then, Cambodia's Community Forestry System (CFS) is in the early stages of development, despite more than a decade of policy commitment to CF devolution programmes (Forestry Administration, 2006) and a central role given to CF in local forest governance initiatives (FAO, 2010), for instance the national REDD+ programme (Forestry Administration, 2010).

From an historical perspective the evolution of the CFS appears to be far from straightforward. Indeed, several authors argue that the CF programme is simply an example of the RGC's strategy to maintain a façade of policy commitment while endorsing illicit activities in the forestry sector (Gritten et al., 2015; Milne and Adams, 2012; Swift and Cock, 2015). Lenient macroeconomic policies for agro-industrial development in the early 2000s co-evolved with the dissolution of the forest concession system, giving rise to land conflicts across Cambodia (Chandet et al., 2010; Dhiaulhaq et al., 2014) and the acceptance and streamlining of the CF framework by international development agencies. In this context CF formalisation provided a means to achieve some minimal sense of tenure security, given the frequency of land-related conflicts and limited mechanisms for community empowerment at the time (Kurachi et al., 2006), despite containing “rigid, complex and high-cost plans and regulations” (Kurashima et al., 2015, p. 3092).

As Cambodia's CFS matures, CF sites will be expected to exhibit the institutional characteristics of effective forest governance by deterring powerful drivers of deforestation and overcoming pervasive governance constraints. CF formalisation seems to create a politically legitimate structure for stakeholders to support local forest users. It also ensures a degree of tenure security and legitimacy over customary use of forest resources, and devolves some decision-making powers to local user groups. So far, however, evidence on the performance of CF is inconclusive (Blomley et al., 2010; Loehr, 2012; Sunderlin, 2006), and the extent to which CF formalisation enables the emergence of durable institutions for collective action on forestry governance remains contested in the literature (Poffenberger, 2009; Pasgaard and Chea, 2013; Nathan and Boon, 2012). There is thus considerable variation across sites in their ability to successfully formalise CF and organise collective action activities, and the extent to which CF establishments enables the emergence of institutions capable of overcoming the above constraints remains highly uncertain.

A closer examination of CF creation and development would enable a more nuanced understanding of the institutional malaise that seems to characterise many CF sites. This article employs a mixed methods approach to evaluate capacities to engage in collective action on forest

governance. It focuses on two questions. First, it assesses the extent to which CF creation and development leads to high rates of participation and awareness by local users through quantitative analysis. Through qualitative analysis, it examines the extent to which CF formalisation facilitates the emergence of durable institutions for collective action on forest governance.

The article has five further parts. The second section summarises the theories the article applies to both primary and secondary data. The third section offers an overview of the methods conducted. Fourth, the article offers information on the fieldwork sites and qualitative findings. The fifth section presents findings from a household survey. The sixth section discusses the relevance of the findings for theory. The seventh section concludes and draws out implications for policy.

2. Theoretical approach

The theory used in this article draws on concepts from decentralisation, collective action and common pool resource governance as well as the institutional forms and incentives therein. Our starting point is that formal institutional arrangements do not guarantee representativeness and accountability as actors with incomplete information and decision-making rights must negotiate a complex field of accountability to produce public and private goods (Vuthy, 2006). At the local level, the co-existence of multiple institutions means that citizens and organisations face complex incentive structures for forest governance and use. Interventions will not necessarily favour effective forest governance, despite the existence of a formal mandate and body. Devolution programmes seeking to establish some form of co-management regime may conceal broader authoritative tendencies or be fundamentally incompatible with de facto institutions for Natural Resource Management (NRM) in the local context, and there is a danger that user groups created via devolution programmes simply serve as a technocratic measure to increase efficiency and transparency rather than institutional democratic governance (Larson and Soto, 2008). Formal devolution of rights must therefore be distinguished from the transfer of meaningful and substantive discretionary powers to accountable and representative decision-making bodies (Ribot et al., 2006). In most experiences with co-management arrangements, property rights are only partially devolved to local community entities which, coupled with overbearing regulations and conditions imposed externally, present barriers to instituting an effective governance regime (Cronkleton et al., 2012; Larson and Pulhin, 2012). This is particularly the case for commercial harvesting of forest resources.

A related theoretical strand focuses specifically on collective action in local Common Pool Resource (CPR) institutions. Although the incentives embedded in the prevailing institutional arrangements for CPR governance are often inadequate to overcome collective action problems (Bruns and Chalad, 2004), the capacity to self-organise and govern a resource area exists (Ostrom, 1990). However, there are no blueprints for creating effective CPR institutions (Ostrom, 2004; Ostrom et al., 2007; Ostrom and Nagendra, 2006), and policies to support local-level institutions have been largely disappointing (Cronkleton et al., 2012; Larson and Soto, 2008). Various models and frameworks have been developed to help explain the complex causal interactions between local CPR institutions and outcomes (Agrawal, 2001a), an example of which is the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework (Ostrom, 2005). The aim of the IAD framework is to identify and analyse the ‘action arena’ where participants make governance-related decisions, taking into account various exogenous and endogenous factors that influence governance effectiveness. The framework developed here is adapted from the IAD framework.

Building on the theoretical insights from the literature on CPR, researchers have identified a number of variables associated with effective CPR governance (Adhikari and Di Falco, 2009; Barnes and van Laerhoven, 2015; Poteete and Ostrom, 2004; Tucker and Ostrom, 2005; Van Laerhoven and Andersson, 2013; Van Laerhoven, 2010; see also

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