



Self-sufficiency or surplus: Conflicting local and national rural development goals in Cambodia



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ABSTRACT

Cambodia is currently experiencing profound processes of rural change, driven by an emerging trend of large-scale land deals. This article discusses potential future pathways by analyzing two contrasting visions and realities of land use: the aim of the governmental elites to foster surplus-producing rural areas for overall economic growth, employment creation and ultimately poverty reduction, and the attempts of smallholders to maintain and create livelihoods based on largely self-sufficient rural systems. Based on the MuSIASEM approach, the rural economy of Cambodia and different rural system types are analyzed by looking at their metabolic pattern in terms of land use, human activity, and produced and consumed flows. The analysis shows that the pathways of self-sufficiency and surplus production are largely not compatible in the long term. Cambodia's rural labor force is expected to increase enormously over the next decades, while available land for the smallholder sector has become scarce due to the granting of Economic Land Concessions (ELC). Consequently, acceleration in rural–urban migration may be expected, accompanied by a transition from self-employed smallholders to employment-dependent laborers. If the ELC system achieves to turn the reserved land into viable agribusinesses, it might enable added value creation; however, it does not bring substantial amounts of employment opportunities to rural areas. On the contrary, ELC have high opportunity costs in terms of rural livelihoods based on smallholder land uses and thus drive the marginalization of Cambodian smallholders.

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Introduction

"The government talks about poverty reduction, but what they are really trying to do is to get rid of the poor. They destroy us by taking our forested land, 70% of the population has to disappear, so that 30% can live on" (Villager, affected by an Economic Land Concession in Cambodia (Licadho, 2009)).

Within the recent years, Cambodia has experienced profound processes of rural change, associated to the large granting of land concessions for economic purposes. While rural smallholders have been striving to achieve and maintain livelihoods based on largely self-sufficient smallholder agriculture (cf. Leuprecht, 2004), the governmental elite is seeking the establishment of large-scale industrialized agriculture capable of providing surplus flows for overall economic growth, employment creation and ultimately

poverty reduction (RGC, 2004, 2008). This paper discusses impacts, constraints and potential future consequences of these contrasting land use paths in Cambodia.

A variety of studies have discussed the recent changes in the rural sector of Southeast Asia (SEA) and Cambodia. Hall et al. (2011) identified and discussed four powers of exclusion that have shaped land use and land users in SEA. Borrás and Franco (2011) analyzed the political dynamics of land grabbing in SEA with a particular focus on the role of the European Union. Furthermore, a number of reports from development organizations (Leuprecht, 2004; OHCHR, 2007) and NGOs (e.g., Licadho, 2009), critically discussed the negative impacts of Cambodia's land management strategy on human rights and human development in rural areas. While these studies have addressed important aspects of the political and social dimension of rural change in Cambodia and Southeast Asia, there is further need for a quantitative assessment of the current processes of rural change in order to discuss potential future pathways of land use and rural livelihoods in Cambodia.

Within this context, this article analyzes, based on the MuSIASEM approach (Multi-Scale Integrated Analysis of Societal and Ecosystem Metabolism) applied to rural systems (Giampietro, 2003), patterns of land use and human activity of the rural economy

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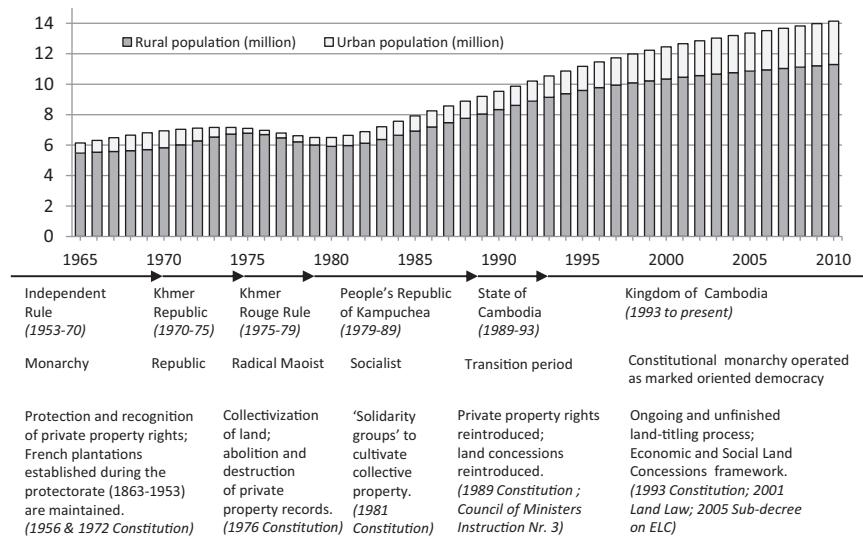


Fig. 1. Population dynamics, key historic periods and land use governance in Cambodia since 1965. Source: adapted from Chandler (2008), FAO (2011), Russel (1997) and Thiel (2010).

of Cambodia and of different rural system types. The constraints, impacts and potential future consequences of the governmental Economic Land Concession (ELC) system are addressed and the incompatibility of different development visions and realities, such as expressed by a villager in the introductory statement, are discussed. Although the geographic focus of this paper is Cambodia, we further contribute to the more general debates on agricultural and rural development that have recently emerged with the global land grab (Borras et al., 2011; Scheidel and Sorman, 2012; von Braun and Meinzen-Dick, 2009; Zoomers, 2010). Hence, we address currently debated issues in land use and rural development studies, i.e., the potential contribution of large-scale land deals to rural employment (Li, 2011; Vermeulen and Cotula, 2010); the perception that the global South inhabits large reserves of 'idle' agricultural land (Borras and Franco, 2010, 2011; Cotula et al., 2009); the role of domestic actors in the land grab phenomenon (Deininger, 2011; Hall, 2011; Siciliano, 2012); and the opportunity costs of large-scale agribusiness in terms of poverty reduction and livelihood opportunities based on smallholder land use (De Schutter, 2011).

The paper proceeds as follows: the next section provides background information on Cambodia, its development policy and the ELC system. The 'Methodological framework and data' section introduces the methods and data, on which basis the 'The rural economy of Cambodia: land use, demography and human activity' section analyzes potential challenges and constraints for ELC in terms of land use, demography and human activity. The 'The employment potential of Economic Land Concessions (ELC)' section discussed rural employment issues related to ELC, and highlights the opportunity costs in terms of livelihood opportunities from smallholder land uses. Finally, the 'Self-sufficiency or surplus: conflicting local and national rural development goals' section illustrates the fundamental differences between self-sufficient and surplus-producing rural systems and the paper concludes in the 'Conclusion' section on the existence of conflicting development visions and realities as drivers of rural change.

Background—land users and land use governance in Cambodia

During the last 50 years, Cambodia experienced an eventful history that drastically affected rural and urban populations as well as their way to make use of their central natural resource: land. Ruled

under six different regimes and constitutions that were accompanied by war, civil war and the devastating Khmer Rouge rule, Cambodia's population saw growth and decline, massive dislocation between cities and rural areas and constantly changing rules under which they were allowed to use the land (Fig. 1). It took until 1993 to establish the current Kingdom of Cambodia as a constitutional monarchy with a democratically elected government, which has pursued the development of the country based on a market oriented economy (Chandler, 2008; Leuprecht, 2004).

Nowadays, Cambodia has slowly recovered from its recent history, however faces current socio-economic challenges. Despite of rapid economic growth of almost 10% Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth during 1998–2008 and 7.1% in 2011, the per-capita GDP remains low at 897 current US \$ (2011) and poverty headcount ratios in terms of income over 2 dollars-a-day (PPP) were at 56% in 2007 (World Bank, 2010a). Rural communities further identified via participatory poverty assessments a variety of other major concerns. Among them are food insecurity, lacking assets to pay health costs, limited access to education, poor physical infrastructure and particularly increased vulnerability due to lacking access to land and community natural resources, driven by growing demographic pressure and increasing competition over natural resources from outside actors (ADB, 2001; Ballard et al., 2007). Although population growth has slowed down from an annual rate of 4.8% in 1984 to 1.2% in 2011 (World Bank, 2010a), the total population more than doubled since 1980, with a growing urban share (Fig. 1), leading to increasing resource needs exerted on the country from both the rural and the urban population. Total external debt outstanding was in 2010 with 27.6% of GDP relatively low and remained constant over the last years in relative terms (IMF, 2012), however, more than doubled in absolute terms since the establishment of the Kingdom of Cambodia in 1993 (World Bank, 2010a), requiring an economy capable of generating surplus flows for external trade.

Cambodia has largely a rural economy, with 80% of the population living in rural areas and around 75% of the active labor force working in agriculture, forestry, hunting and fishing. Despite of this large share, the agricultural GDP accounted in 2007 only for 26.7% of the total GDP (constant 2000 prices), of which the service sector was the largest contributor (38.3%), followed by industry with 28% (NIS, 2008b). In consideration of a potentially higher contribution of the rural sector to economic growth and poverty reduction, the *Rectangular Strategy for Growth, Employment, Equity and Efficiency*

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