

LEARNING FOR RESILIENCE

INSIGHTS FROM CAMBODIA'S RURAL COMMUNITIES

The Learning Institute

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Chapter 10 - Learning towards resilience

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CHAPTER 10

LEARNING TOWARDS RESILIENCE

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This book has outlined eight case studies that show the diversity of profound changes as well as continuities occurring in Cambodian social-ecological systems (SES). These cases encompass different social and ecological processes and have illustrated the influence and consequences of the power-wielding instruments of governance and economics within contexts of dynamic and unpredictable system change.

These transformations are the result of both developments within contemporary Cambodian society and politics, and of external pressures occurring across multiple scales such as regional Mekong development, the progression of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and changes in the nature of global-local links. These interacting dynamics have resulted in the relative success or failure of local communities to make more effective decisions at different levels of governance. At the same time, this context of change has affected their ability to move the wider SES itself towards a more sustainable livelihood-climate-food nexus or state (Baird et al. 2014).

An underlying cross-cutting question in this project has related to how resilience has been manifested and built within the people themselves, and in the contexts on which the case studies have focused. We have interpreted resilience as a capacity that includes knowledge, skills and assets, and that allows systems to persist and change simultaneously. One key mechanism that supports resilience is an engagement in diverse forums of social learning to ultimately influence pathways of system self-organization (Rodela 2013, Rodela 2014). Indeed, a key function of this project focused on learning; for the communities and their supporting multi-level institutions and, just as importantly, for the Learning Institute itself.

TRANSFORMATIONS AND CHANGES

The cases reveal the flexibility and capacity of resource-dependent communities to integrate and manage the multiple changes that affect them. Our studies show that they have also increasingly been able to voice their concerns and demand rights to foster processes of self-organization. This has been evident in the different pathways of development and change that have come to light in our studies. These have suggested that a primary form of food security adaptation - in response to social-ecological changes - has taken place through increased mobility and a move away from the natural resources-base systems: this has included mobility of labor as people have sought wage-earning opportunities; mobility of people through job-related and permanent migrations; mobility of capital and investment away from land and natural resources management to urban-based options; and mobility

of land ownership indicated by a higher degree of land transactions and land concentration among the wealthy and powerful.

The institutional analysis from this project shows that government policies for rural development are purposely promoting this rural mobility and are pushing for the shift of labor from working the land and natural resources to secondary and tertiary employment sectors. But these sectors and the necessary urban social facilities and services are not yet at the point where they can absorb the surplus migrant labor force in a just and decent fashion. In addition, this increased focus on mobility and the associated adaptation for the people involved, has reinforced the social differentiation between households and has exacerbated the polarization between labor and capital in the countryside. An increasing proportion of the rural population has consequently been marginalized. Our cases suggest that the de-agrarianization policies that are currently being promoted in Cambodia do not help to build rural resilience. Indeed, the high incidence of rural poverty, seasonal food insecurity and strong cultural and economic dependence on natural resources require labor to remain embedded and productive in the countryside. These policies fail to take this into account.

CONTINUITIES AND UNRESOLVED CHALLENGES

Despite profound transformations in the social-ecological systems and related adaptation measures taken by the people, these studies emphasize the continuity in some economic and political forces acting across both biophysical scales and levels of governance. In the current context of rural Cambodia, our studies highlighted the difficulties faced by resource-dependent communities in fostering resilience when they are embedded in a powerful neo-liberal development agenda.

Discussions of resilience to change in Cambodia tend to focus on 'natural disasters' or 'climate change' and suggest that adaptation is needed to maintain the *status quo* or to prevent further economic loss. Continual local community participation in programs dealing with adaptation to climate change and greater food security, as advocated by the government and international organizations, can have the opposite result: following options promoted by the state and external donors can eliminate the incorporation of the communities' own local or traditional knowledge. These externally-imposed mechanisms can thus fail to take into account resilience measures that have been locally developed, are locally appropriate and that take local concerns, culture and social norms into account. The resulting social-ecological systems can be less, rather than more, resilient as a result.

The case studies show that shortcomings in natural resource management in Cambodia are primarily failures of governance. There are significant misfits between state policies and management interventions, and the governance interactions among very diverse sets of local actors need substantial attention if they are to be effective (Kooiman and Bavinck 2005). This institutional misfit creates the power-political space for elite capture of resources and processes and thus can result in decision-making processes that are ineffective, or that play to vested interests, while the social, economic and political isolation of marginalized groups in rural Cambodia is exacerbated.

THE WAY FORWARD

“To embed practice of adaptive governance, a research and policy development challenge is to develop principles and procedures of collaborative management, policy, and program delivery that are consistent with theory and available practice, but suitable for incorporation into agency operating procedures. This would enhance the justification of and capacity for what are often novel policy styles within the culture and operations of the state: formalizing the informal (Wyborn and Dovers 2014).”

These eight case studies clearly show that addressing the challenges faced by Cambodian policy makers, resource managers and communities will require the understanding and adoption of analytical tools and processes which explicitly recognize the unpredictable nature of working within social-ecological systems that are diverse and complex. The rapid pace and profound extent of alterations and degradation within the natural systems in the Mekong region will require all organizations to take a fundamental look at how and why they apply social and natural science tools. They need a better understanding of the key norms, rules and values that drive resource management, and, ultimately, the condition of those resources (Ostrom and Basurto 2011).

This project confirms the need to create collaborative institutional space in order to develop much more effective co-management regimes with a higher capacity or willingness to experiment. An over-reliance on top-down command and control methods for regulatory compliance requires reconsideration and ‘hard science’ is needed to inform management decisions. The design and implementation of co-management systems and the accompanying shifts towards adaptive co-management - with its emphasis on social learning and proactive policy experiments – is a further step. The progression then towards some form of adaptive governance requires much more equal relationships between the state, as organized under the government, and the diverse people and the roles they play within natural resource systems found across Cambodia. All stakeholders have the right and responsibility to engage collaboratively in taking action (Wyborn 2015).

Resilient food systems are diverse and should be strongly rooted in place and in an ‘agri’ culture (Barthel et al. 2013) with secure land rights (Diepart and Sem 2015) and access to locally developed and managed markets.

The contemporary dilemmas in natural resources management are characterized as ‘wicked problems’ in that they have no one definitive solution, and no end point: the need is to constantly learn about, and adapt to them. This requires creative thinking and adaptive decision-making and management. In many cases the focal point for adaptation is the household, its assets and capacities, and their interactions within wider communities of livelihoods and authority. Institutional innovations and approaches to create adaptive governance are deliberative actions of debate and knowledge co-production. Actors need to pursue innovative

expressions of principles, inclusion and adaptation within broader social contexts of coping with multiple stressors. Here, multiple actors, including representatives from the state, engage in knowledge co-production to supplement science and thereby to foster a more inclusive and relevant policy process.

THE LEARNING INSTITUTE ROLE

If this project was about social learning at the community level, it was also about learning at the organizational level. For the Learning Institute, the question now is how to be part of this process. The Learning Institute can help to bridge the gap between science/knowledge and policy for decision makers. It can act as an organization that helps to increase understanding about how both social and transformative learning processes can be applied in order to identify, understand and guide solutions to key natural resource issues. The Learning Institute is well-placed within a growing network of NGOs working in Cambodia and in the Lower Mekong Basin to build civil society awareness, along with links between knowledge and action.

Learning for resilience is learning from the experience of change and it often involves hands-on, learning-by-doing activity. This supports the development of new skills and innovative approaches. This will require the Learning Institute to work across bio-physical scales and governance levels and to acknowledge the impact power and politics have on research and the use of its products. The Learning Institute can serve as a place where young Cambodian researchers gain valuable first-hand experience and develop skills such as critical thinking and the ability to conduct institutional analysis for the entire research process. This could prepare them for future careers in research.

The following proposals are put forward for consideration by the Learning Institute in enabling it to move forward in engaging in innovative research activities in the field of environmental change.

Identify and analyze issues, adaptations and innovations

Building on the projects featured in this book, and on a body of knowledge accumulated over more than 10 years, the Learning Institute could now further study the underlying causes of vulnerability that affect resource-dependent communities across Cambodia. The studies included in this book outline the diversity of cross-scale drivers that affect individuals and households, up to larger communities. These key forces are shown to have a significant impact on economic assets and decision-making processes.

Many of the resource governance problems outlined in this book pertain to institutional or legal pluralism in natural resource management or to related social-ecological contexts that require people to adapt to different forms and rates of environmental change. There are multiple rule-sets in play. They stem from different state and/or non-state actors vying for political or economic influence over resource extraction, or simply from the state's desire to retain control of rural populations via their access to crucial resources. This often results in

institutional discrepancies and thus confusion and inaction, and sometimes conflict. There is a hierarchy of different levels of power and influences relating to decision-making as it pertains to natural resource management in Cambodia, with most vested within cross-level government authority and a related tendency for the leading party to wield the most influence. The Learning Institute must become an active player in helping not only to build research capacity but also to use the information generated to affect change. The Learning Institute can identify existing capacities in groups or communities and meld those within a process or forum that promotes knowledge co-production (Wyborn 2015). This relates not only to technical but also to institutional innovation that allows multiple actors to deliberate then form legitimate rules for managing resources and also to advocate for change.

Create a collaborative forum

As its name suggests, the Learning Institute must work to create a forum for learning to navigate change through the complexity of SES change and its associated consequences. This must start with comprehensive and critical reviews of relevant resource management theories such as those related to adaptive management, interactive governance, and resilience. From the very beginning, research design must be inclusive, involving people at grassroots level as collective actors of rural development. The resource-users themselves must be involved as it is only through a comprehensive and inclusive process that the diverse sets of tacit or experiential local knowledge can be included in the design and implementation of salient research, and in the ultimate production of legitimate results that can be used for further learning or for guidance in the policy arena.

Facilitate effective social learning to foster adaptation/transformation

Forums or platforms for social learning comprise a key component in the development of effective adaptive co-management approaches. That is, learning by a relevant group of stakeholders or individuals within a social or collective process. The Learning Institute should continue to build social learning platforms or adapt their current research and information dissemination processes to include the ideas and challenges stemming from local cultures. It should also focus on how the use of power throughout Cambodian history has shaped the current power structures and hierarchies. History matters. It has shaped the current actors, agendas and interests that currently have the greatest impact on Cambodian natural resources and food systems.

It is essential to allow local people (as resource-users and stewards) to have some control over the choices they make relating to both the production and consumption of food. This starts with actively bringing small-scale agro-ecological landholdings into the wider discussion relating to the move from productionist-oriented food security towards one based on rights and responsibilities and the notion of 'food sovereignty' (Altieri et al. 2012). Food sovereignty is a rights-based approach in which the local producers and distributors have direct input and influence on how their food systems are designed and run, and how benefits are distributed through linked communities (Patel 2009).

The lessons from this study also underline the importance for the Learning Institute, its partners and participating actors to be aware of, and to create, feedback loops in terms of important information and resources. The long-term adaptive co-management of Cambodian natural resources depends on engaging these critical feedback systems. These could support management, as well as facilitating interaction between wider social-political governance organizations and individuals. All relevant actors are encouraged to engage in trial-and-error learning, and, where possible, to implement experimental policies and strategies at an early stage. In this way lessons can be learned at a relatively low cost and with limited consequences while providing participants with vital and practical learning, and opportunities for critical reflection.

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