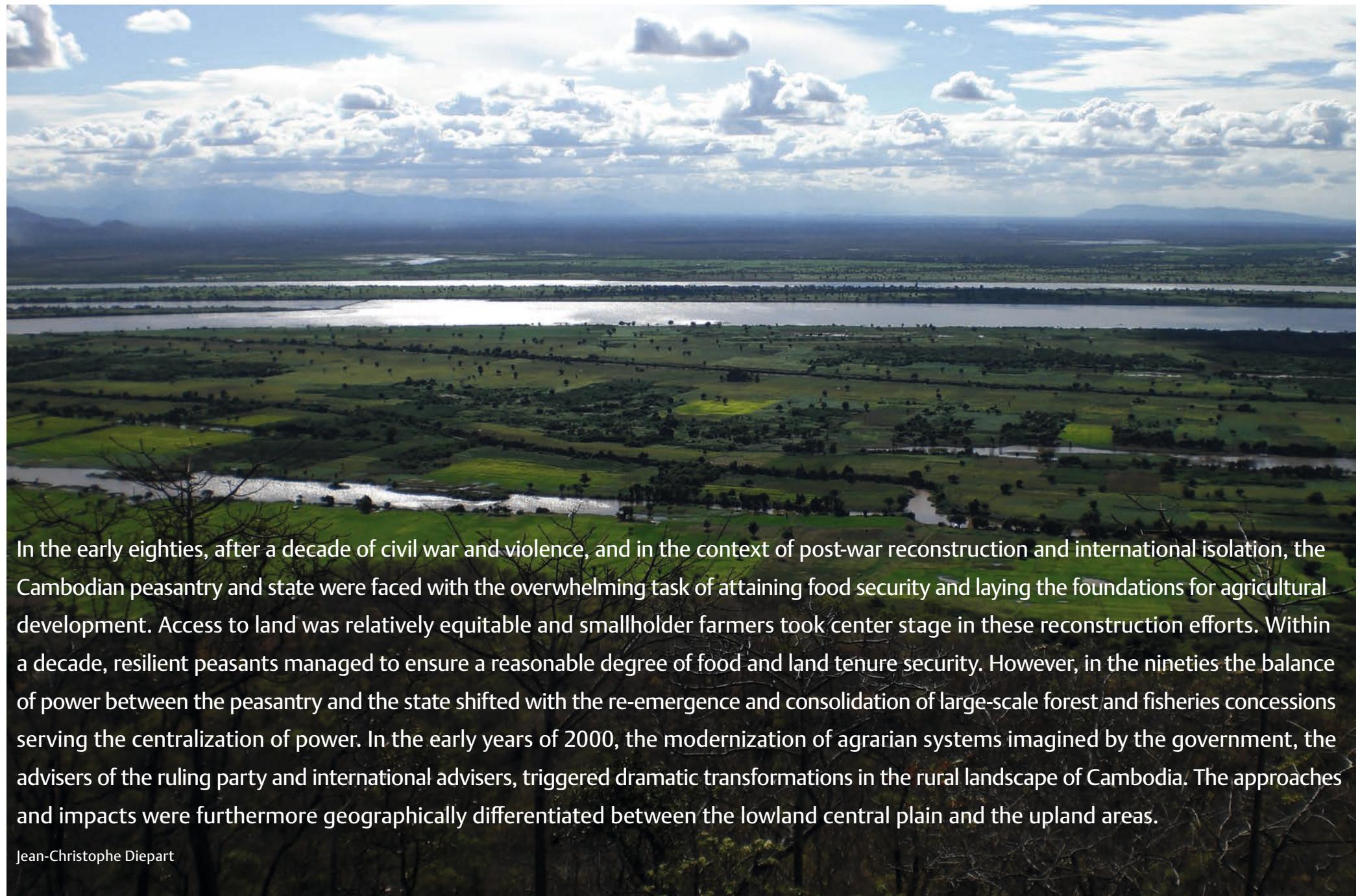


Relations between peasantry and state in contemporary Cambodia



In the early eighties, after a decade of civil war and violence, and in the context of post-war reconstruction and international isolation, the Cambodian peasantry and state were faced with the overwhelming task of attaining food security and laying the foundations for agricultural development. Access to land was relatively equitable and smallholder farmers took center stage in these reconstruction efforts. Within a decade, resilient peasants managed to ensure a reasonable degree of food and land tenure security. However, in the nineties the balance of power between the peasantry and the state shifted with the re-emergence and consolidation of large-scale forest and fisheries concessions serving the centralization of power. In the early years of 2000, the modernization of agrarian systems imagined by the government, the advisers of the ruling party and international advisers, triggered dramatic transformations in the rural landscape of Cambodia. The approaches and impacts were furthermore geographically differentiated between the lowland central plain and the upland areas.

Jean-Christophe Diepart

The lowland squeeze

Since the end of the 1990s the agricultural policies of the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC) have promoted an increase in rice production. The policies are based on the diagnosis that rice yields had consistently been low due to poor farmer skills, improper water management, and low use of fertilizers.¹ It was furthermore recognized that any increases in production made in the past had been due to the introduction of high-yielding rice varieties. As a result, Cambodian agriculture policies encourage the use of modern, high-yielding varieties that were introduced to Cambodia in the 1990s as part of the Cambodian Agricultural Research Development Institute (CARDI), whose role in the selection, testing and reproduction of improved cultivars was key. CARDI is not the only player, however; a number of companies from other countries in the region are involved in selling hybrid varieties, including from Malaysia and China, and there seems to be fierce competition between these companies to control the export rice markets.² Along with encouraging the use of high-yielding varieties, the government and its development partners upgraded and expanded irrigation infrastructures, enhanced the provision of fertilizers and pesticides to farmers, increased support for agro-business to expand agricultural commercialization services, and improved field extension services.

The agro-business nature of these developments, with an emphasis placed on rice export, was further underlined in the national policy document on the promotion of Paddy Rice Production and Export of Milled Rice, which aims to turn the Cambodian central plains into an export-oriented industrial paddy zone. This document – produced under the auspices of Supreme National Economic Council and not by the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) – has become a cornerstone of the RGC's policies for agricultural development. Budgets and extension services are prioritized accordingly. The Public Investment Program (PIP), which indicates the spending target of the government for the period 2014-2016, states that, for the agricultural sector, MAFF requires an investment that primarily focuses on implementing the rice export policy.

Over the last decade the strong alignment between development and policies related to climate change has become obvious. The National Adaptation Programme of Action to Climate Change and the Cambodian Climate

Change Strategic Plan both come to the conclusion that climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts are supportive of the government's development objectives. The emerging policy narrative favours a rebranded green revolution that highlights a climate-smart approach, and indicates that climate resilience efforts by government and donors alike would be best realized through the implementation of the rice intensification and export policy of the government.³ Obviously, this convergence serves the interests of government and development actors in a highly opportunistic way.

In terms of rice production and yield, the success of this neo-green revolution is undeniable. Over the last decade, the increase in total paddy production has been sustained and reached 9 million tonnes in 2012. In this context, however, access to land has become more competitive in the central plains. It has strengthened a process of land commoditization that neo-liberal land reform has exacerbated through the processes of land titling, micro-credit and land markets. The 2001 Land Law adds a legal constraint to agricultural development by limiting legal possession of land to agricultural plots cultivated before 2001. Due to demographic growth and land atomization, the destiny is, inevitably, land concentration. As of 2011, 47 percent of households had less than 1 ha of agricultural land while 12 percent had landholdings larger than 3 ha.⁴ The land squeeze in the central plain is coupled with labour constraints, whereby the secondary and tertiary sectors have a very limited capacity to absorb surplus labour from agriculture.⁵

Population mobility: peasants versus state rationalities

As a result, a large number of people have been leaving their villages to find work elsewhere. Indeed, the increase in the mobility of the rural population has been significant in the recent development of Cambodia. According to the 2008 demographic census, 3,457,228 people were considered to be internal migrants (they had changed their area of residence inside Cambodia) – namely, 29 percent of the total population. In addition to rural-to-urban and cross-border migration – 1 million Cambodians are thought to live and work in Thailand – there is also strong evidence of rural-to-rural migration flows, essentially from the Cambodian central plains (the Tonlé Sap plain and Mekong delta) to the peripheral (forested)

uplands. The phenomenon is not insignificant as it represents nearly twice the rural-to-urban migration rate (representing 51 percent versus 28 percent of the total number of migrants). To a large extent, these migrations can be seen as an expression of the agency of peasant households in responding to rural poverty in the lowland. They are also the expression of an on-going trend on the part of the Cambodian peasant to consider the principle of appropriation 'by the plough' as a legitimate mode of land acquisition, which has been a consistent trend throughout Cambodian agrarian history.⁶

The central state powers have been perfectly aware of this situation and have looked at it favourably. They were probably happy to see spontaneous migration taking place as these movements were helping to solve poverty issues in the central plains that the government was unable or unwilling to tackle. It also seems that migrant smallholder farmers have acted as the territorial spearhead of the state⁷ in helping to stabilize the peripheral margins of the country and consolidate the sovereignty of the state. The state has also relied heavily on smallholders to manage the agrarian expansion across the country and to endorse the responsibility in the production of cash crops that are vulnerable on the global markets (cassava, corn, soybean, etc.).

However, the authorities have not publicized these movements because they have conveyed contradictions. Indeed, insofar as the Land Law forbade the acquisition of forestland (i.e., state public land) after 2001, these lowland-upland migration movements are completely at odds with the legal framework for land that authorities were supposed to implement. This has resulted in a huge population living on land that they appropriated after 2001, meaning they have virtually no land tenure security under the 2001 Land Law institutions.

Tensions in the uplands

In a parallel and uncoordinated process, the government has granted large tracts of land and forest as agro-industrial concessions of up to 10,000 ha, as so-called Economic Land Concessions (ELC). Recent data shows that 280 ELC projects have been granted so far, covering a total area of 2.3 million ha.⁸ This can be compared with the 3.5 million ha of land that is cultivated by smallholder farmers. The large-scale agricultural development model was expected to result in new types of investments in rural Cambodia, to stimulate agro-industrial activities requiring

Above:
Rice cultivation in
lowland Cambodia
(Kampong
Chhnang, 2008).
Photo by Jean-
Christophe Diepart.

A critical journey from lowland to upland regions

a capital investment that the state did not have, and to develop so-called 'underutilized' land. Rooted in a strong assumption that smallholders do not have the financial or technical capacities to engage in small entrepreneurial agricultural development, the leaders and their advisers thought that large-scale investment would increase employment in rural areas, offer new opportunities for labour and employment in the countryside, and encourage local economic diversification through small and large investments up- and downstream of the concession. They would also generate state revenue at national and sub-national levels.

The rhetoric is essentially not very different from what was seen decades earlier in the forest and fisheries concessions model. ELCs represent an opportunity for the government of Cambodia to reinvigorate the very profitable concessions economy after the collapse of the forest and fisheries concessions in the 1990s. The opportunities for foreign investment that ELCs offer have also been seen as a political tool to engage Cambodia in ASEAN integration by allowing neighbouring countries (states and companies) to invest in the Kingdom. In fact, current mechanisms of ELCs are variations of old processes of capitalist penetration associated with the capture of profits by ruling elites.

The political economic context in which concessions are granted and monitored was put in place under French rule to serve the interest of the protectorate administration; it was reinvigorated in the post-war reconstruction period to serve the interests of the emerging political elite.⁹

There is a broad consensus in Cambodia among NGOs and researchers that the process of authorizing and implementing ELCs shows clear deviations from the established legal and policy framework. Public consultations and social and environmental impact assessments that should be carefully undertaken before any agreement is signed are rarely conducted properly, if at all.¹⁰ During the implementation of these large-scale agricultural investments, a number of irregularities are routinely reported. In certain instances, ELC contracts are signed to bypass the 2002 logging ban on timber because ELC implementation pre-supposes the clearing of the land before the establishment of agro-industrial plantations (the sub-decree on ELCs is explicit about this) and is likely tied to new trends in granting ELCs in Protected Areas. Logging operations regularly proceed well beyond the boundaries of the concession area.¹¹

Very often the land granted to concessionaires is already occupied and/or cultivated by people. Basic field visits to these sites would suffice to make this clear. In these cases, logging or land clearing operations have led to land dispossession and forced evictions. Military forces working for the concession companies tend to provide the force to drive people from the land. Human rights violations associated with these evictions have been consistently highlighted in reports and public declarations by successive High Commissioners for Human Rights in Cambodia.¹²

ELCs remake rural contexts in ways that lead to varying degrees of land dispossession of small-scale farmers and exacerbate the recourse to wage labour, which usually does not compensate for the loss of resources that local people depend on.¹³ An even more pernicious effect of the concession system is what some scholars have called neo-patrimonialism. In Cambodia, the elite have used natural resources to serve their private interests and to consolidate their power as part of neo-patrimonialism.¹⁴ It is understood that private investors pay approximately US\$500 in informal fees for each hectare approved in an ELC agreement, an important proportion of which goes as unofficial payments to the ruling party and its officials. This revenue generates resources to fund patronage-based distributive politics via the provision of services and infrastructure in populated rural areas. In return, the people are expected to support the government through the electoral machine, which has secured acceptable levels of domestic and international legitimacy for the Cambodian People's Party (CPP).¹⁵

The decision by the Prime Minister to suspend the granting of ELCs and to issue Order 01 in May 2012 was the result of the convergence of a number of events at play at different scales. There is little doubt that the decision by the Prime Minister to announce Order 01 was motivated politically in a move to lessen social unrest one month before the 2012 commune elections and one year ahead of the legislative election in July 2013. In addition to freezing the granting of ELCs, Order 01 initiated an unprecedented land titling campaign in areas where the land rights of people and companies overlapped with state land, including ELCs, forest concessions, forest land and other types of state land. It also made possible the seizures of ELCs where companies had not complied with the existing legal procedure or with the contract, in particular by engaging in timber logging activities and/or leaving concession land unexploited.

The land titling process has been significant – more than 1 million ha – but has proven to be largely incomplete, and substantial areas claimed by people have been left untitled. This incompleteness of land titling in areas where people live and/or cultivate might give false legitimacy to the efforts of ELCs to evict people from the untitled land. Order 01 conveyed a strong political message to the people of Cambodia in general, and to the smallholder farmers in particular. The campaign was intrinsically associated with the person of the Prime Minister; as if the security of land tenure of smallholder farmers were handled by him personally. Current reforms in the system are responses triggered by political imperatives rather than measures to tackle the exclusionary nature of the system.

Struggles and crisis: concluding remarks

While post-war reconstruction efforts in the agricultural sector were mainly conducted by the strong and resilient peasantry, the balance of power between smallholder farmers, the state and the markets has shifted rapidly. Whereas peasants used to be close allies of the state, they have been abandoned by state policies and a vision that favours a large-scale entrepreneurial and export-market oriented model of development.

In both lowland and upland regions of Cambodia, the modernization of the agrarian system has worked to shackle smallholder farmers to the wheels of domestic regional and global growth through neoliberal technico-legal apparatuses, a political transformation that has turned them into inefficient and backward subjects, under the practices of monopolistic capitalism. The mainstream narrative in the political arenas is that smallholder farmers do not really fit into the vision of modern agrarian landscapes.

The relations between the Cambodian peasantry and the state lie in an institutional crisis. As a matter of fact, most smallholder farmers continue to live and make ends meet, within and without areas impacted by ELCs. They manage to buffer the incomplete and uneven agrarian transition that the leaders want to accelerate. And the inevitable conflicts arising from this race against time are handled in a dynamic process that combines a calculus by authorities to retain social legitimacy to secure votes while reproducing its sovereign power on land. Surely the Cambodian peasantry deserves better than that.

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