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“Women’s leadership in community fisheries: collective actions in fighting for fishing grounds and land resources”

Introduction

Since 2002, Cambodia has been encouraging and developing community fisheries (CF) in order to provide rights to communities for the management and use of fisheries resources. Kurien (2018) hailed this as one of the most progressive resource management paradigms globally. In 2012, the Prime Minister of Cambodia abolished private fishing lots and allowed small scale fishers to fish without any restrictions.

However, even with these rights, small scale fishers have experienced a decrease in catch and are experiencing changes in their livelihood options. This chapter presents two cases of community fisheries (CF) in the coastal region of Cambodia to analyze *(i)* how fishing communities in these areas have fought for their rights for fishing resources, *(ii)* how that has changed with time, and *(iii)* the changes in women’s involvement in the struggle and its impact. Through this, we explore the changing needs of CF and of women and men in fishing communities.

Community fisheries in Cambodia

There are currently 516 CF registered in Cambodia – 477 for inland fisheries and 39 for marine fisheries. Each CF has 5-11 committee members (odd number is specified in CF regulations). Each CF is registered specifically for the area they will manage. According to the sub-decree on community fisheries, CF can register for rights and responsibilities over fishing areas, mangrove forests and inundated forests, where they are to manage fishing resources. The Fisheries Administration organizes meetings to disseminate information about

the roles and responsibilities of CF. CFs also have horizontal networks to learn from each other.

Fishing lots were introduced in 1900 under French colony. Cambodia gained independence in 1953, but fishing lots continued to exist. During the Democratic Kampuchea period from 1975 to 1979, lot system was abolished. After the DK period, many people have moved to start a living around the Tonle Sap Lake by fishing, since the resources were abundant and it was easier to start a living. During the People's Republic of Kampuchea in the 1980s, fishing lots were revived, but were given to groups of fishers to manage. In 1987, private fishing lots were introduced and private owners paid the government for right for fishing lots (Hutson 2006). In the 2000s, violent conflicts between fishing lots owners and small-scale fishers started to rise over fish resources at the Lake. Fishing lot owners did not allow small-scale fishers to enter the lot, and small-scale fishers' fishing grounds were limited. Fisheries officers sided with fishing lot owners and confiscated equipment of small fishers during such conflicts. As the conflict worsened, the Prime Minister in his speech on 24 October 2000 in Siem Reap said: "Government fisheries officials are the blood suckers and the guard dogs of fishing lot owners" (Prak et al. 2002: 36). Subsequently, some of the private fishing lots were cancelled in December 2000. In 2012, fishing lot system was abolished. Some areas were handed over to Community Fisheries (CF) for management, and some remained as conservation lots.

A royal decree on the establishment of community fisheries was issued in 2007 to strengthen local capacity in managing fishing resources. The main role of CF as instituted by the decree was to patrol the area and protect and manage fishing resources. As fishing resources decline (as seen in Chapter 7), violent competition over resources has increased. In addition to competition over fishing resources, there are also competing claims over land around the water bodies for both tourism and manufacturing industries.

The sub-decree on community fisheries has only a vague definition of the geographical area over which the CF has rights. Further, since CF decree is focused on fisheries resources, use of the same area for other purposes such as tourism is not regulated. As one of the respondents in our research said: "CF has rights but no power [to exercise the right]." CF is not able to arrest illegal fishers nor can they automatically claim any control over the use of their area. They need to go through lengthy court cases to claim their rights over the area, and the fuzzy definition of the area where CF has rights over resources makes the struggle even

harder. Additionally, management capacity in most CFs is limited, and given the lack of power, it is difficult to motivate CF members to participate in community-level projects for claiming their rights or fighting court cases. “The right to operate commercial community-based fisheries activities for income generation at the community-level is not granted by current Cambodian law” (Chap et al., 2016:ii).

The sub-decree also does not guarantee exclusionary rights to CF, so even when they make an effort to conserve resources, outsiders can take away the fruit of their efforts. Against this backdrop, we seek to explain why and how women and men in fishing communities in Cambodia participate in CF activities. In the next section, we will review literature about gender-based participation in fishing organizations.

Women in fishing organizations

In many studies, women’s participation in organizations is considered a reflection of women’s empowerment, but as Alonso and Siar (2018) noted, that is not always the case. Jo Rowlands (1996) emphasized the importance of self-confidence as well as sense of agency, and argued that empowerment can be achieved in relations to others:

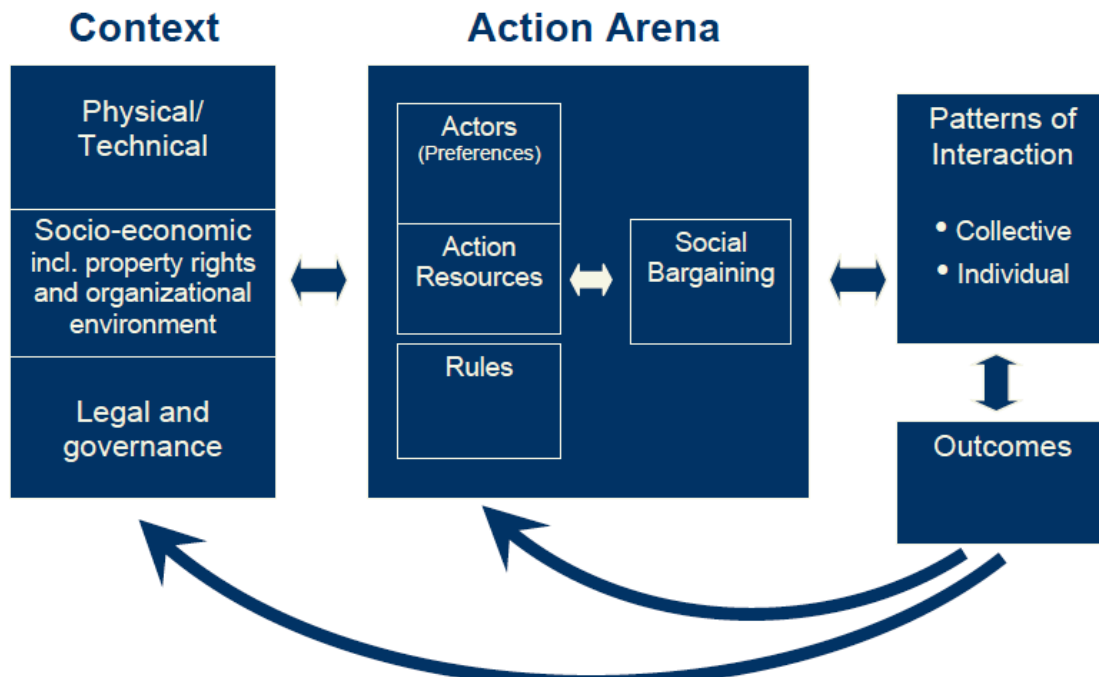
“Empowerment is thus more than simply opening up access to decision making; it must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to occupy that decision making space....” (page 87)

Empowerment is a process (Papart et al. 2002; Kabeer 1999), and it can be fluid depending on the relationship with others in changing contexts (Cornwall and Rivas 2015). In some cases, women’s participation can be an enabling factor for women’s empowerment, but in other cases, it can just be a burden. As Meinzen-Dick et al. (2006) said, sometimes women are overburdened with work and would not like to take up additional tasks. Though it is questionable if participation always leads to women’s empowerment, women’s participation and leadership is critical to reflect and respond to women’s needs or change society’s perception of women in leadership. Hence, although participation is not always empowering for women, women’s participation is required for the improvement of women’s well-being (Alonso and Siar 2018).

Women's low participation in fishing organizations leads to women having lower access to resources and capital, leading to further neglect and lack of recognition of women in fishing organizations (Alonso and Siar 2018). Reviewing existing literature on women's participation and leadership in fishers' organizations, Alonso and Siar (2018) identified catalyzers of women's engagement in collective action as: dwindling resources, modernization, allocation of fishing rights, economic changes, family welfare and women's rights. They also identified enablers for collective actions that include state, social movement, CSOs, etc.

Alonso and Siar (2018) explain why women's participation in leadership is initially low in fisheries organization; as well as identify the enablers and catalysers of participation. However, there is little research on how these three aspects link with each other and work together – women's participation, dwindling resources as catalysers and CSOs as enablers. With dwindling resources and changes in livelihood and opportunities, women's involvement also changes. Hence, it is important to understand the relationship between the various factors that support and discourage women's participation in leadership. Given the recent dwindling of resources, it is quite critical to understand its impact on women's participation in community fisheries.

In addition to external factors, internal factors that play a role in women's leadership initiatives also need to be explored. Uchida et al. (2019) noted that self esteem is essential for individuals to take up challenges, and those with high self esteem tend to participate in collective actions regardless of their class, age, or education levels. Such participation can have a circular effect, as Khan et al. (2015) noted. Participation in collective events have positive effect on social identifications, heightening their person's motivation to participate again. Doss and Meinzen-Dick (2015) also refer to this feedback loop to illustrate how certain contexts are created that will further influence patterns of participation (figure 1).



Source: adapted from di Gregorio et al. (forthcoming)

Figure 1: Analytical Framework to analyze gender and collective action (Meinzen-Dick et al. 2006:7, cited with permission)

If we apply this framework to the case of Cambodia’s community fisheries, the “context” would be the establishment of CF. Establishment of CF has allowed fishers to take part in the management of fishing resources and directly deal with illegal fishers. It has also increased collective action in some places especially with the help of civil society (WorldFish 2013). Such outcome also leads to further support from outside, strengthening the positive feedback loop. However, the decrease in fishing resources changed the context, and the action as well as interaction with others. Through two CF cases in two coastal villages, this chapter explores how the changing context changes the actors and actions as well as interactions of and within CF. The study was conducted in Chhroy Svay Community Fisheries in Koh Kong province, and Tropheang Sangkhe Community Fisheries in Kampot province. Information was gathered through key informant interviews with leaders of these two CFs, focus group discussions with women, men and youths groups, as well as in-depth interviews with 13 fishers in Koh Kong (9 women) and 11 fishers in Kampot (8 women).

Case of Chhroy Svay, Koh Kong

Until early 2000s, infrastructure in Koh Kong was not developed, and the population density was low. People were engaged in upland shifting cultivation as it was possible for villagers to open up fields as much as they needed. They planted upland rice, corn and pumpkins and were relatively self-sufficient. Each household cultivated around 1-3 ha. At that time, fish was not an important livelihood, since they were able to source enough food from farming.

However, in the year 2002, economic land concessions were introduced to the area. Upland farms were taken away by the government as a public good, and converted into economic land concession to be further developed into an industrial area. The land available for upland farming is now limited, leading to decrease in yield. So, the farmers sold their upland farm at a low price, some selling 1.5 ha of their land for just 50 USD. The sale of land has created conflict between villagers, since land documents did not exist, and demarcations were not clear. In many cases, the land sold by one villager was actually being cultivated by another, and both claimed ownership over the land. Further, the government confiscated the land but did not do anything there, and hence no employment was created.

As upland farmers, the villagers of Chhroy Svay were self-sufficient, and there was no need to borrow money. After the loss of land, fishing, which was the secondary livelihood, became their main source of livelihood. In the village where the head of CF lives, 90% of the villagers are full time fishers.

In the early 2000s, as livelihood in Chhroy Svay shifted from farming to fisheries, villagers needed to buy fishing equipment on credit. At the same time, there were also increasingly more boats coming to fish near their shore and there was a lot of conflict. Fishing nets placed by villagers were destroyed by larger fishing ships that came around the coast. Fishers were angry that the large ships come to destroy their nets. Angry fishers went to fight with large ships, which sometimes turned violent involving guns. Some fishers died in conflict. They lost their fishing gears and livelihood, while their loans remained unpaid. This put the villagers deeper into debt. When their debt started to accumulate, families turned to migration as the next source of livelihood, and young people started migrating in search of jobs.

Fishers found that they are unable to fight the large ships individually, so in 2003, they jointly took the case to the provincial authorities. The provincial officers linked them to an NGO that supported them to register as CF and allowed them to be responsible for 24,300 ha

of sea area. By being recognized as CF, they are able to inform authorities on illegal fishing boats, and can arrest the boats with Department of Fisheries officer. They are able to get a certain percentage of fine for arresting illegal fishers. However, since there is only one fisheries office in the whole province, it is difficult to arrest illegal fishers. Fishers also complain that even when they catch illegal fishers, they can get away by bribing the officers.

There are 431 CF members; and all of them are full-time fishers. Among them, 268 households have motor boats that can carry them to the sea to fish, and the others use small traps or glean for shells and snails in and around the mangrove area. Fish resources are abundant, and even without boats, they can earn 20,000-40,000 riels/day throughout the year, which is higher than minimum wage of garment factory workers.

Ms. LH is originally from Kratie province. Her husband is a native of the village, and she married into the village. After marriage, she went fishing with her husband. She worked as a daily wage laborer in fish-processing jobs such as picking crab meat. Life before 2000 was difficult because this area was remote, but now with good access to market, they can sell fresh fish easily, and do not need to work for a daily wage anymore. She quit fishing when her husband died in 2008. But even after she quit fishing, she continued to be active in CF, going out for patrol, etc. In 2017 alone, they were able to arrest illegal fishers 25 times. They have seven patrol groups and take turns patrolling the area in four patrol boats. Each boat can hold seven people.

She has been a CF member from the beginning (since 2003), and was elected as head of patrol group of village-level CF¹. Her husband was an ordinary member, but he was happy that she was elected. Then from 2008 to 2013, she was elected as a vice head of Chhroy Svay CF (8 committee members among them one woman). From 2013, she has become a head of Chhroy Svay CF. Since 2016, she has become the regional representative of four coastal provinces of CF.

Several important incidents were recorded in Chhroy Svay CF.

¹ CF covers several villages around a certain water body where people fish. One CF has some sub-groups at the village level, and each village sends representatives to CF. In most CF, activities are at the CF level, but in Chhroy Svay, the village level CF committee is active as well. At the village level CF, there were 18 committee members, 7 of them women.

(1) Violent conflict with large boats

In 2015, there were some violent clashes between the fishers in the village and large boats. The case went to court, but they needed to go to Sihanouk Ville (which is around 100 km away from Koh Kong) since the large boats were registered there, and there were no court in Koh Kong. This demanded much time and money. Ms. LH put in her time and effort to pursue the court case. Six men members, one fisheries officer and herself went to the court in Sihanouk Ville to fight the case. She thinks that since they have strong evidence, this case has now become silent.

(2) Conflict with sea weed cultivation firm

In 2013, a private company occupied a part of their fishing area to plant sea weed. They enclosed some areas and prohibited fishers from fishing there. People from 6 villages, around 1,000 households protested at the commune office and then at the district office. They also held a demonstration at the location. They also raised the issue at a national workshop. They blocked the road so that the company workers could not come to work. By 2014, the seaweed company closed operations in the area, and fishers could use that portion of the sea again.

(3) Land grab of mangrove forest

While they were still fighting the seaweed case, a shrimp farming company came to occupy the 63 ha of mangrove forest land under CF. She has organized a protest against this as well. People from three villages came – more than 100 women and a bit less than 100 men participated. They are now requesting the Ministry of Environment to allow CF to manage this area.

Women were very active in the second and third cases. It is not that women were encouraged to participate. For women, mangrove and shallow water areas are their “food pots”. Women go to mangrove and shallow areas to glean and to set traps. Women go on boats less frequently, and no woman goes on a boat alone. As Ms. LH noted:

“Men fish, but women are the ones who have to make ends meet by selling fish and managing household finance. If there is no money, women are the ones who have to go to borrow money. Women participate in tree planting, since they depend on these mangrove forest. So they will bring their children to participate in tree planting.”

Mangrove areas are important to feed their family. Men also supported women's participation in these protests, especially after the successful fight against seaweed company, according to Ms. LH, men "entrust" women to take the lead in these protests. However, the support is only for participating in demonstration and protests, since these are only for some days. Women still have difficulty in getting agreement from husbands to work as committee members of CF.

Ms. LH attributes the success in these protests to women's participation and women's leadership. She says that women have a role in softening the conflict.

"Women are more daring. It is also OK for women to make some mistakes. It is more accepted and they don't mind. Women are the mother of the world, so they [the companies] would not do any harm to women."

As she leads these fights, she also ensures that CF members are able to continue their livelihoods. Fishing income has remained constant through a slight increase in catch and better price. Out-migration of youths has reduced and there are more employment opportunities in the area such as factories. So, some youths are returning to the village. Ms. LH believes that villagers need to diversify into other income sources apart from fishing, to supplement their income. She also wants to attract youths to come back to village.

"Parents feel that if children migrate outside, they do not know what they are doing. They might get involved in drugs or other risky activities. It is best if there are jobs to do in the village. So it would be good if eco-tourism can be developed, so that youth have some work to do at home."

The CF built a small restaurant near the mangrove forest to start eco-tourism in 2017, with the income going to individual service providers as well as to CF. They have organized groups for boat trips and providing food. They are preparing for homestay as well. So far, they have already hosted some student groups and government officers at their eco-tourism project.

As the CF's activities have attracted more support and interest, there has also been a move to weaken the CF and to allow private enterprises to develop the coastal area. At end of 2018, Ms. LH was ousted as the head of CF and an all-men CF committee is now in place, who are said to be more supportive of the private enterprise investment. Ms. LH then moved the eco-tourism project to her village, where she is still the head of village CF.

Women play a large role in CF development, especially if they are able to devote their time to CF activities. They are able to mobilize other women better to diversify the activities of CF in addition to patrolling the area. Mangrove forest protection is important for women, especially poor women without boats, since they depend on these resources. One of the problems of CF regulations is that they tend to focus on water bodies, but the rights of CF over coastal areas, including mangrove forests and the adjacent land development, is not guaranteed. These rights are more important for women and for households without boats. Even though women have lead demonstrations, they still do not get the recognition that they deserve, as seen in her case where after she devoted 10 years of hard work to become a head of CF, she was replaced by men when the CF become successful. In her words, "Men do not value women's work".

Case of Tropheang Sangkhe

This CF was created in 2008 with 734 members in three villages. This CF has received a lot of support from various organizations including Action Aid and EU. Their initial activities as CF were to protect fishing area by organizing patrols. They patrolled four times a month, with 20-30 people together. Later, they started to plant mangrove forest. They have 100 ha of mangrove forest, among them 30 ha are newly planted area. As in Chhroy Svay, the sea in this area is shallow, and many fishers do not have boat but fish on foot for crabs and shrimp. This CF has been famous for its eco-tourism, which was started in 2014. Around 70 people are involved in eco-tourism (50 women), and are engaged in providing accommodation services, restaurants, offer boat trips and walkways inside the mangrove forest.

Before starting eco-tourism, this CF also fought for their rights over water and land. In early 2007, a private investor tried to obtain part of the CF land for hotel construction. Of the 5000 ha of land required for hotel, 248 ha was inside the CF area. CF leader requested a meeting

with the provincial governor. It took 1.5 years to get a meeting with him, and the meeting was set at night. The head of CF and another male member went to meet the governor. By negotiating with the governor, they were able to get the land back and around this time, they established themselves as CF.

In 2016, a Thai company came to invest in the same land. CF head asked for information disclosure and went to court to fight against the investment. CF head has been offered bribes in cash and in political power (as commune chief) in return for agreeing to the investment, both of which he declined. He also enjoyed support from some provincial officers in the initial stage. However, later the officer was transferred to different position, and was replaced by a pro-investment officer. The CF head uses SNS as a way to disseminate information about the CF, and protect himself and CF from excess harassment from investors. He has raised the issue of land grab on the CF's facebook page, and he believes that such publicity has protected him and subdued interest in the investment.

He says:

“Community fisheries only has rights but no power.... Rights of CF is guaranteed in the law. But we do not have the power to exercise the rights.”

In 2018, a Chinese investor came to invest. This case is still going on, and CF is having a hard time fighting against this investment.

When the Thai company came to grab the land, villagers came together to collect thumbprints to protest the sale and protect the area where they search for food. They also called the media. Fisheries Administration officials came from Phnom Penh to discuss the case. In the end, CF got the land back with the promise that they will plant mangrove in the area. During this time, both women and men went to commune office to protest, but more women than men protested. Women came with their children.

This CF is a Muslim community, and social cohesion is very high. It is also noted that in this CF, although the leader is a man, women's participation is higher than that of men. Initially, there was more male participation. However, as CF developed and land conflicts increased, there has been higher realization among women that protecting the water body is important

for their livelihoods. Further, men need to fish and cannot spare time to fight against investors and also to develop activities such as mangrove planting and eco-tourism. Therefore, fishermen asked wives to represent them at CF, and thus more women started to be active in CF. During the focus group discussion with women, they said:

“Before, people say that women work around the fireplace. Now others work around women and women are the center of action. Women lead the way.”

“Before, women were cheap. Now they are not. They have value.”

“After Pol Pot, people were scared. Women also did not dare to speak. But now women are the ones who pave the road to lead others.”

“Before, women were afraid of men. Nowadays, men are afraid of women.”

Although women started to be involved with CF as a replacement for their husbands, they are now the main drivers of CF in its eco-tourism project.

Discussion

In both cases, CFs were formed following conflicts over fishing resources. The first priority of the CFs was to protect fishing resources from illegal fishers. Subsequently, CFs started planting mangroves to improve fishing resources. Since fishing on boats is considered men’s activity, initially men were more active in CFs. In these two villages, women’s fishing is largely on shore. They go for gleaning, catching snails, crabs and shrimps without boat. They rely on fish resource along the shore more than the men. When women use boats, it is limited; they do not go for overnight fishing or go alone.

As fishing conflicts started to subside, conflicts over coastal land and shallow water bodies emerged. Coastal land is a much sought-after commodity for both tourism and industry purposes. This has shifted the conflict from fishing resources to land.

The changes in context and the subsequent changes in CF can be explained following Meinzen-Dick et al. (2006)’s institutional analysis and development framework (see figure 1). The conflict over fishing resources initially lead men to lead clashes with large scale fishers to claim control over fishing resources (context). This led to the creation of

community fisheries backed by a favorable political environment with the decree by the Prime Minister (action). However, fishing resources were endangered and fishers had to diversify their income (context). Some opted for labor migration. During that time, the resource competition has shifted from fishing resources to resources on and around the water body – for industrial use and for tourism. The shores are an important resource for women, who mainly fish near the shore or catch crabs and shrimps in mangrove forest. Resource competition away from fishing itself has also made women to feel more obliged to participate, since they have a direct stake in this resource (action). Such changes in the area of contestation increased women's role in community fisheries activities, and also lead to women's leadership (patterns of interaction). Their success in gaining control over the land, as well as leading eco-tourism project has secured the communities' livelihoods along the coast to a certain extent (outcomes). In case of eco-tourism projects, women find opportunities to both participate and benefit.

However, at the same time, fishing remains men's domain, and women leaders are a minority (patterns of interaction and action rules and social bargaining). Since women do not have the traditional power base, it is easier for women to be replaced by men leaders. Without strong institutional support for women's leadership, it would be difficult for women to lead community fisheries.

As Alonso and Siar (2018) argued, diminishing resources did work as a catalyzer for women's participation in CF, but in this case, it wasn't diminishing fish catch that catalyzed women; it was diminishing control over land and mangroves. The change in CFs activities from protecting fish resources to diversifying to other income generating activities such as eco-tourism also opened up new channels for women to participate in CF activities. However, a deep-rooted notion of fishing as men's activities remained. As seen in Chhroy Svay, in the end, women were replaced by men leaders, and for Tropheang Sangkhe, there was no growth of women's leadership as men kept the helm.

Conclusion

Through two cases of community fisheries in coastal communities, this chapter described the rise and fall of women in CF leadership. The changes in focus of contestation from fishing area to coastal land has encouraged the rise of women leaders, but the persistent male

domination in fisheries has not supported women's leadership in CF. The responsibility of CF is defined as management of fishing resources. But as the area of conflict shifted from the seas to coastal land and mangrove forests, women leaders rose within CFs. When the fringe area of CF is threatened by outside capital, it was the women, who are at the periphery of the fisheries industry who came forward. Women were dependent on these mangrove forests, so there was a high incentive for them to come out and protest. The ambivalence in the area of demarcation of CF responsibility has allowed women some space for leadership, but it quickly shut down as men regain power. By analyzing the CF's leadership from a gender perspective, we are able to highlight the unclear definition of CF management and rights. It is important that CF are provided management rights to the land around their fishing ground as well as rights to operate not only fishing but also other income generating activities such as eco-tourism for the benefit of their community. This will help to institutionalize women's activities in the fisheries sector (which are quite widespread), whereas a focus on boat-based fishing in the sea will only highlight men's roles.

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