

A meaningful beginning

The following is from a document published by the Inland Fisheries Research and Development Institute (IFReDI), Cambodia

The main objective of this document is to make a modest attempt to highlight the challenges which are emerging with the current phase of Cambodia's aquarian reforms—the most important component of which is the current transition from fishing lots to community fisheries. The challenges include the realms of institutional and policy reform, local action, innovation and research. We contextualize our effort by commencing with an assessment of the importance of the aquatic resources and by providing a brief historical background to the reforms. This is followed by an examination of the changes in the access and property rights and the system changes which have been brought about as a result of the reform.

How some of the transitional changes can be assessed and the manner in which the efforts at community fisheries can be made more economically and socially viable are also addressed. We deal with the complex issue of social identity and the aspirations for creating a new sense of community. The new role of women, the importance of creating networks and closer collaboration with Cambodia's local governance structures and vibrant civil society organizations are also highlighted. The reforms have created new legal realms of local 'micro' ecosystem space and resource governance.

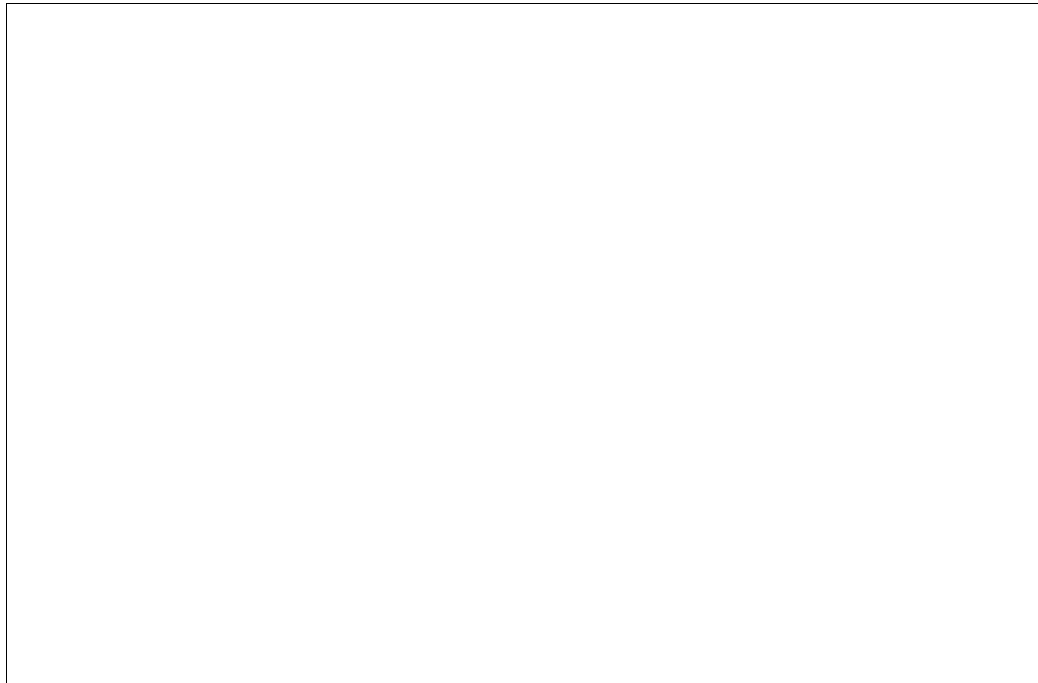
But this should not detract from the need for an understanding of the larger 'global' context—be it in relation to the ecosystem dynamics or governance priorities. We suggest that research and development priorities must be re-oriented to consider ways of dealing with the vast number of new and evolving 'local realities' and yet, link them up contemporaneously to the big 'global picture'. We end with a few

recommendations addressed to different actors involved in the process of aquarian reforms. There is a call for a new mission and greater collaboration by research institutions; new methodologies for data collection; greater participation with local governance structures; an exit strategy for aid agencies and the need for setting up a national institute for co-management applications and training.

Developing countries have been recently challenged by many opportunities and problems pertaining to their efforts to facilitate economic growth and promote human development. Providing a growing population with the entitlements and capabilities needed to meet rising aspirations in a globalized, market-dominated economy is often a daunting task before policymakers and politicians. Tapping into the renewable natural resources in a country—its real wealth—is often the 'fallback option' which both the State and the people adopt when crisis brews in the other sectors of the economy. The market-oriented option of converting natural resources to wealth often ends up in what economist Herman Daly recently referred to as the tragedy of artificial or self-inflicted scarcity. This approach generally leads to private riches for a few and exclusion from the public wealth for the many.

Under pressure

Recognizing the pitfalls of such an approach, but often under pressure from the people and civil society, States have increasingly resorted to measures to open up the terrain of renewable natural resources to communities who depend on them for a livelihood. Doing so without the appropriate institutional arrangements to modulate the use and management of these resources has often led to the tragedy of open access.



Finding the ‘middle-path’—wherein both efficiency and equity considerations can be adequately met within their social, cultural and political frameworks—has been on the agenda of many developing countries.

Cambodia is pictured in international per capita income comparisons to be one of the poorest countries in the world. There is certainly much truth in this statistic. However, viewed from the perspective of availability of per capita natural resource—land, aquatic resources, particularly fish, and forests—it is certainly one of the richest countries in Asia. Converting this latter statistical average into equitable access and well-being for the majority is indeed the greatest challenge before the State and the people of Cambodia. The challenges to achieve this goal with respect to the most valuable aquatic resource of the country—the fish in its inland waters—are the focus of this document.

We term the efforts at aquatic resource management which have been unfolding in Cambodia as ‘aquarian reforms’. We adopt the term ‘aquarian reforms’ rather than ‘fishery reforms’ for a variety of reasons. The reforms have a historical context. In the past, government intervention in the sector was focused on gathering revenue rather than managing fish production or promoting local livelihoods. In the current phase, the

attention of the reforms is focused on the institutional changes which are being made—contemporaneously by the State from above and the communities from below. These reforms are meant to empower people to relate collectively to the country’s rivers, lakes, floodplains and the fishery resources therein. In future, the reforms will play a role in conditioning the technological choices and organizational decisions that people make in order to obtain sustainable gains from their collective action. In brief, we are concerned with a dynamic process of transformation. The focus is not merely on fish but on the whole aquatic terrain and the evolving manner in which people relate and intervene in it. Our contention is that the ecological and socioeconomic initial conditions have a definite bearing on these evolving circumstances. The present course and the future trajectory of the new institutional changes sought to be introduced need to be envisioned with this perspective. Aquarian reforms cover this entire canvass.

Good scholarship

An excellent body of scholarship already exists about these reforms written before the sub-decree of community fisheries management was formally approved. Our efforts build upon that corpus of information and on recent (late 2005) discussions with fishery officials and researchers and field visits to several provinces for firsthand information from

the women and men in the villages most impacted by these reforms. The document primarily addresses the various actors associated with the aquarian reforms in Cambodia. It seeks to provide them with some guideposts on the range of issues that may arise if the reforms are to be taken to their logical conclusions.

The community access to resources, if managed well and strengthened, can yield significant familial and societal changes that sustain resources and foster convivial livelihoods.

More than mere poverty alleviation, it can contribute significantly to enhancement of the capabilities and entitlements of the rural masses in Cambodia. Combined with enlightened advice and support from research and development agencies, local control over resources can lead to greater care and nurture of the unique aquatic ecosystem of Cambodia.

During our visits to community fisheries we were informed about the greater livelihood opportunities available for men and the increased employment and income-earning opportunities for women.

People spoke about the manner in which the availability of greater money income was utilized to keep children healthier and educated. They spoke about reduced domestic violence.

The greater control over local natural resources also leads to reduction in 'push-pull' migration of men in search of work. These factors taken together can yield intergenerational reduction in infant mortality, family size, enhancement of educational levels and greater gender justice.

Such positive ecological, socioeconomic and demographic changes will create different occupational expectations in the next generation. This can yield reduced population pressure on the aquatic resources in the not-too-distant future.

Coupled with changes in the access right to aquatic resources, if there is a general revival of economic growth and employment opportunities in the country, this can result in the new generation opting for other gainful occupations.

These opportunities can arise in small and medium village enterprises dealing with aquatic resource processing, which can be rural-based, urban- or export-market-oriented, and yielding higher incomes.

Greater economic democracy is a necessary condition for raising human dignity and creating stable political democracy and peace. This will have far-reaching implications for the future of the country.

Aquarian reforms in Cambodia have a long history. The earlier phases were measures taken with considerations aimed at efficiency and maximum rent extraction, and tempered in accordance with some sociopolitical considerations.

The current phase is anchored in the context of the country's recent voyage towards greater democratization and integration into the global economy. It is part of the government's Rectangular Strategy which is intended to "firmly and steadily build Cambodian society by strengthening peace, stability and social order, entrenching democracy and promoting respect for human rights and dignity."

These are indeed laudable objectives. The current move towards community fisheries should be seen as an important commitment towards achieving these goals. Being simultaneously a top-down and bottom-up approach, it is only natural that there will be doubts and anxieties about the sense and the viability of the whole enterprise, both on the part of the government and the people.

There is no need to concentrate excessively on the organizational form of the reforms. The debate is not about whether the inland fish of Cambodia are better harvested through large fishing lots or small community fisheries organizations.

Complete reforms

Aquarian reforms are complete only when those who directly relate to the aquatic resource through their labour, to give value and meaning to it, are assured the freedom and given their rightful rewards for doing so on a sustainable basis. On this



count, a meaningful beginning has been made in Cambodia. But there will be many challenges ahead and a long way to go.

This excerpt is from *Cambodia's Aquarian Reforms: The Emerging Challenges for Policy and Research* by John Kurien (kurien.john@gmail.com), Fellow, Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum, India, So Nam, Deputy-Chief, Fisheries Domain and Extension Division, Department of Fisheries, Phnom Penh, Cambodia, and Mao Sam Onn, Deputy-Chief, Administration and Personnel Division and Assistant of the DG, Department of Fisheries, Phnom Penh, Cambodia