

Title:

“Enhancing indigenous communities’ capacities to respond to externally-driven development by helping them analyze its impacts and recognize traditional sustainable use of natural resources in Laos and Cambodia”

Goals:

The Project will first enable local communities to better recognize values of their traditional ways of managing natural resources. The Project’s aim is by no means anti-development but will help communities examine more critically the dominant discourse, often pressed on them by outsiders such as international development agencies and the national government, that they are categorically poor and thus need to develop.

The Project will also enhance local communities’ capacities to understand and assess risks relating to externally-motivated development, often large-scale infrastructures, helping them make decisions in informed and balanced ways and/or better prepared for what might occur to them.

By focusing on issues that exist in their immediate living contexts, i.e., natural resources and livelihoods, and by using audio-visual aids extensively, the Project can outreach economically poor and socially vulnerable populations, who tend to live in remote rural areas and belong to non-national language speaking, pre-literate, indigenous and minority groups, often women, and help these people acquire the above-mentioned capacities.

The Project will give local communities opportunities to have their views and concerns communicated to those who make decisions, affecting their life and livelihoods, very often negative ways, and help such negative impacts lessened, mitigated, and prevented.

These goals of the Project fit well with the goals of the McKnight Foundation in that first of all the Project aims to strengthen local communities’ capacities by providing them with less-accessible information, critical analysis, concrete means, and more opportunities. Our aim is also to reduce and/or remove external development threats on communities so that they can be more empowered. Second, the main issue that is dealt with in the Project is natural resources which are critical to livelihoods of people living in the Mekong Region, especially in Laos and Cambodia. Third, the Project targets at socially marginalized and vulnerable populations.

Objectives:

O-1. Mekong Watch will help raise indigenous communities’ awareness over importance of traditional sustainable ways of natural resources management in central/southern Laos and northeastern Cambodia;

O-2. We will examine impacts of outsider-driven development, including plantations,

hydro-powers, and REDD+ strategies, which will cause significant changes in communities' use of natural resources. We will help communities build capacities to respond to negative impacts of development; and

O-3. We will support communities' efforts to influence key policies (e.g., domestic land laws and REDD+ strategies) so that mistakes will not be repeated.

Outcomes:

OC-1. Indigenous communities' sustainable use of natural resources will be documented in ways that are accessible and appealing (i.e., video/TV programs) to communities and the civil society;

OC-2. Impacts on communities' use of natural resources caused by large-scale development will be identified and analyzed;

OC-3. Sharing OC-1 and OC-2 with communities will enhance their capacities to recognize values of traditional natural resources management and impacts of externally-driven development. Their abilities to propose alternative development scenarios to policy-makers will also be increased; and

OC-4. Communicating OC-3 to policy-makers in Lao, Cambodia, and Japan can help mitigate problems of specific projects. Safeguard mechanisms can more firmly be based on communities' rights and built into domestic laws and international frameworks, e.g., REDD+ strategies.

Activities:

Laos:

L-1. Mekong Watch will conduct field research with provincial TV stations, and Non-Profit Associations when feasible, on indigenous communities' use of land, rivers, and forests in central/southern Laos and record results in video documentaries. We will focus on communities' management on Non-Timber Forest Products and fishing activities;

L-2. We will have discussions with communities to analyze impacts of plantations on their use of land and forests. Based on such analyses, we will identify anticipated impacts of REDD+ projects, including those designed by Japan's Ohji Paper Company. Since the Japanese government is financing project formation stages, they may also give official development assistance (ODA) to these and similar projects;

L-3. Videos produced in L-1 will be broadcast in Laos through TV networks;

L-4. Outcomes of L-1 and L-2 will be presented at participatory workshops in Laos. Videos will be distributed to participants; and

L-5. Results of L-2 will be used to inform national groups, e.g., Land Issues Working Group, line agencies, e.g., the Department of Forestry and National Land Management Authority, and international institutions, e.g., JICA and GTZ (the German Agency for Technical Cooperation). Advocacy will also be conducted towards Japan's private sector

and government agencies to influence REDD+ strategies.

Cambodia:

C-1. Mekong Watch will conduct research with indigenous communities and supporting NGOs, e.g., the Sesan-Sekong-Srepok (3S) Protection Network, on their use of natural resources in northeastern Cambodia and record results in documentaries. We will focus on communities' management on forests and fishing activities and on their efforts to preserve indigenous cultures in tandem with biological diversities;

C-2. We will have discussions with communities and NGOs to examine impacts of hydro-powers on traditional land and forest use; and

C-3. Outcomes of C-1 and C-2 will be presented at participatory workshops in Cambodia. Videos will be distributed to participants. We will also hold meetings to enhance community leaders' capacities to respond to impacts of externally-motivated development.

Other activities (for which funds have already been secured):

Results obtained through all the activities proposed above will be formed into a set of lessons and recommendations and presented at an international workshop on sustainable natural resources use in Mekong. Community representatives, NGOs, journalists, and academics will be invited from Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, Vietnam, and Japan to attend. Meeting outcomes will be proposed as people's critique of the Green Mekong Initiative, an idea recently advanced by the Japanese government, as well as people's alternatives to preserve Mekong's rich natural resources. Results can also be used as a tool to conduct advocacy to improve overall development and development assistance policies, natural resources management procedures, and key international frameworks, e.g., REDD+ strategies in the Mekong Region.

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