



ROLE AND CONTRIBUTION OF INDIGENOUS WOMEN IN WATER MANAGEMENT

Case study of Vietnam and Cambodia

This concept note looks at the role and contribution of indigenous women in water management and is part of a comprehensive research project aimed at strengthening and empowering indigenous women and men to assert their rights in water governance in Cambodia and Vietnam.



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BACKGROUND

The Mekong sub-region in Southeast Asia is among the most ethnically diverse areas in the world, and is homeland to nearly 300 different indigenous groups: 136 in Myanmar, 34 in Thailand, 49 in Laos, 53 in Vietnam and 24 in Cambodia. The term 'indigenous group' has been increasingly recognized internationally to define groups which have distinct language, culture, customary laws and social and political institutions different from the main national ethnic-linguistic groups. However, not all countries in the Mekong sub-region have formally adopted this terminology, which is symptomatic of their refusal to recognize Indigenous Peoples' collective rights as stated by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007. The lack of recognition of these rights among regional governments has important implications on the development and well-being of Indigenous Peoples.

A large majority of Indigenous Peoples in the Mekong sub-region inhabit the uplands where they have developed livelihood and agricultural systems that are reliant on the availability of forestlands. What characterizes Indigenous Peoples in the region is their strong attachment to their ancestral land and their dependence on natural resources, which are the basis of their livelihoods and the foundation of their system of beliefs and cultural identity.² Forests and rivers provide most of the indigenous groups in the sub-region with the key resources needed for their livelihoods. The forest-covered upland territories, left untouched for centuries by mainstream civilizations and which are concentrated on the river plains, are resource-rich areas. During recent decades, these areas have become the target of both state and private forms of exploitation. The rush to extract resources from forests, land, water and soil has impoverished Indigenous Peoples, endangered their livelihoods and their cultural and spiritual lives, harmed their well being and impaired their development. Confronted with commercial farming and large plantations, logging and extractive industries, and large infrastructure projects such as hydropower dams or new transportation axes that are often



accompanied a massive influx of non-indigenous settlers and/or massive community displacement, indigenous groups are struggling to assert their rights across the sub-region.³

This process of development aggression is having a particular impact on indigenous women. The massive shift in access and control over resources that has occurred in indigenous areas, has displaced indigenous women from their various roles; as managers of resources, food producers, repositories of traditional knowledge and practices, and promoters of community cohesion and identity, while at the same time it has charged them with the disproportionate burden of coping with these changes.⁴

TRADITIONAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT BY INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

Indigenous Peoples' religious beliefs conceive the natural environment as the realm of spiritual forces. The animist beliefs that characterize these ethnic groups consider the world that surrounds humans not as an inanimate or inert environment that humans can dominate or exploit at their will, but rather as a world inhabited by powerful presences, to whom people must pay respect and with whom people must come to terms with.⁵ The spiritual forces act as guardians who can dispense their protection and benevolence to humans if they make use of natural resources with moderation and respect, withdrawing their protection or manifesting anger if these principles are not respected. This system of beliefs creates an extremely powerful link between communities and their territory, and ties the whole community to these spiritual forces with a strong sense of obligation and respect. Indigenous Peoples' well-being and survival depends on their compliance with these beliefs.

The dense primary forest, the water sources, mountains, rocks, streams, particular trees and other elements of the environment, are particularly charged with spiritual forces. Human activity in these places is often banned or strictly regulated. This conception of spiritual forces associated with the natural world is common to the indigenous groups in Cambodia and Vietnam.⁶ For the Thai indigenous groups of North-western Vietnam, the Mother Spirits of Forest, Land and Water are at the centre of their spiritual life and system of beliefs, and guarantee community well-being and prosperity. Other spirits, and particularly the ancestor spirits, buried in sacred areas near the villages, provide protection toward the communities and contribute to strengthen the link between the people and their inhabited places.⁷

These principles are enshrined in the customary laws that are in use by indigenous communities, and orient their practices and behaviours. Specific rules, or taboos, define human interactions with the environment, and ensure that human activities do not trespass the limits established by the spiritual forces. The customary laws in use by indigenous communities include specific rules related to water usage and protection. Among indigenous groups practicing shifting cultivation in Southeast Asia, it is taboo to cut and cultivate farms across a stream; stream banks should be left free; and vegetation and trees should not be cut, so that nobody can divert, block or appropriate the water source.⁸ Fishing is strictly regulated by customary laws and taboos concerning seasonality, intensity and fishing methods. Most of the rules help to prevent over exploitation; for example, among many indigenous groups in Cambodia, forest activities, such as hunting and fishing, cannot be practiced during the same expedition to avoid intensive forest tapping that would eventually exhaust resources.

Traditional watershed management, as with natural resource management in general, has been hindered by changes that have occurred during recent decades. Indigenous communities used to operate with autonomy, as self-governing entities, until the restructuring and strengthening of state governance systems over indigenous territories have imposed new legal and representation frameworks. These are often based on new geographical boundaries, which have eroded the role of traditional authority and moved indigenous communities away from community decision-making and governance.





CAMBODIA - The Mekong River and the central Tonle Sap Lake, connected to the Mekong basin by the Tonle Sap River, constitute the Mekong River system which represents an immense fishery and reservoir of fresh water that irrigates the central plains of the whole country. Other rivers systems originate from the mountainous areas that surround the central plains. The three main tributaries of the Mekong River in Cambodia, the Sekong, Sesan and Srepok Rivers, flow along the North-eastern part of the country where the majority of Indigenous Peoples live.

Cambodia's hydropower development plan includes a series of over 20 dams which are either already operational or under construction. The Lower Sesan 2 dam, located at the confluence of the Sesan and Srepok Rivers in Stung Treng province, is the first large dam constructed in Cambodia. The Lower Sesan 2 dam represents a major challenge to all communities in the reservoirs' catchment area who are facing relocation. It will also affect all the communities upstream and downstream who depend on fishing and biodiversity for their livelihoods, and river sediment to enrich the fertility of their land. The riparian communities haven't had opportunities to negotiate or influence the hydropower policy plans. There was no consultation or Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) sought.

VIETNAM - There are three main freshwater systems: the northern watersheds represented by the Red River system, coming from China; the last tract of the Mekong River in the South; and the central area system of rivers and small basins flowing from the mountainous chains toward the sea. Vietnam is facing a fresh water resources shortage, a problem that is further complicated by its high vulnerability to climate change.

An important role in the development of the Vietnamese hydropower sector has been played by international agencies such as the World Bank, the key loan provider for investments in hydropower. As a consequence, resettlements of local residents have been massive: the Hoa Binh dam has displaced 58,000 people. The Yali Falls dam has displaced more than 6,000 people and the Son La dam almost 100,000 people in the Northwest uplands of Vietnam. The resettlement strategies have entailed the displacement of local populations to other areas far from the river, moving populations to other communities in different districts or communes, or to higher lands which restricts access to their traditional forms of livelihoods (Dao N., 2010).



INDIGENOUS WOMEN AND WATER

The relationship between indigenous women and water is built on their roles, responsibilities and activities. Water is a crucial resource for indigenous women's daily tasks of preparing food, washing, caring for children, ensuring household hygiene, and providing safe drinking water to the household. Water is also needed for other activities that are typically the responsibilities of indigenous women, such as gardening and raising animals. Indigenous women's roles in relation to water are multiple, and more important than indigenous men's. Very few of indigenous women's daily tasks can be carried out without water: access to water and water provision are crucial activities, on which the entire family life depends.

Indigenous women's roles extend to fishing, albeit now reduced in many indigenous communities in the sub-

region. Among Cambodian communities, indigenous women and children used to fish in streams not far from their villages or along the rivers, with simple gear and tools. Indigenous women also participated in fishing expeditions to the forest organised during the dry season and attended by most community members. Customary rules concerning fishing with this method imposed seasonal and spatial restrictions as well as frequency in order to avoid resource depletion.

Indigenous women's work is made more time consuming by developments such as dams that have changed the natural flow of rivers, destroyed river banks, caused the disappearance of fish and created unpredictable and dangerous fluctuations in rivers and streams. Land seizures by private or state concessions are endangering water sources and new industrial settlements have increased the risk of pollution.

"Women are more connected with water and water is life. Nobody can survive without water. People can survive few days without food but not without water. Also water cannot be made or created."

(Women's group in Sway village, Ratanakiri Province, Cambodia)



INDIGENOUS WOMEN AS WATER PROVIDERS

The role of indigenous women is more complex and sophisticated than just filling containers with water and carrying them from sources to households. Indigenous women have developed special skills related to water. Indigenous women are the providers of safe, drinkable water, and this requires specific knowledge about not only water availability but also, crucially, water quality.

Safe and good quality water, which can be utilized without processing like boiling or filtering, is recognized by taste, odour, and colour. In some villages drinkable water is obtained by digging holes in clay soil, which acts as a natural filter; similar principles are adopted by digging holes in the sand along the river-banks. This knowledge is shared with the new generations, by educating children to recognize safe water.

"Women are the only ones who can find good drinking water, which is clean and safe to drink. Men only drink water, they know nothing about finding safe water, if left alone they will drink the water from the ponds! We learn from our mothers and grandmothers, and they learn from the ancestors. We decide if the water is good or not."

(Women's group in Seang Say village, Ratanakiri, Cambodia)

WATER AS A SACRED RESOURCES

Beliefs and spirituality are still central to indigenous women's perceptions about water sources and their association with powerful spiritual forces. Disruption of the habitats of these water sources, or behaviours that are not appropriate or respectful, as well as appropriation of water sources for private use, are all considered capable of triggering the spirits' discontent and bringing negative consequences for humans, primarily in the form of diseases. Spirits associated with water are believed to be particularly powerful and dangerous, and the consequences of disrespect may endanger the whole community.

During recent years, severe droughts have increased indigenous women's stresses in relation to their roles as water providers. Those changes have eroded the system of traditional beliefs - water spirits are less respected and their sites left unprotected, a problem highlighted with sorrow by many indigenous women, who are in charge of rituals and ceremonies for the water spirits. In some communities in Vietnam, who have been relocated after the construction of the Son La dam, women have lost access to the river and the new system of water provision is insufficient, leaving many households without water.



During the past, the ancestors practiced a "praying for rain ceremony" where villagers invited a shaman to pray for health and peace for the whole community. It lasted three days. Now we practice only the ceremony for the rice planting, and we pray for good crops, good weather and rivers and streams full of water.

(Community discussion in Then Cho village, Vietnam)

INDIGENOUS WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN WATER RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND PROTECTION



The relevance of the role played by indigenous women in relation to water, their skills and knowledge, is also scarcely noticed. Indigenous women are seen as service providers, supplying the household with drinking water. However, they are not able to guarantee water quality and safety through their skills and experience, by selecting water sources or applying processes to filter and purify water.

Indigenous communities, including elders and male members, recognize the difficulties created by water scarcity and how this increases indigenous women's workload and the time they spend on such tasks. However, indigenous women still report that failing to provide enough water for the household can be a source of conflict and even a cause of domestic violence.

Before, people couldn't touch the bamboo growing on the lake banks, even elephants couldn't approach this place. But now people do not respect this anymore, they cut and destroy the plants so the spirits have abandoned us, they move away.

(Women's group in Plung village, Ratanakiri, Cambodia)

INDIGENOUS COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

Initiatives at community level to manage and protect water sources are focused on water provision, but women and communities are aware of the need to protect watersheds, in a more coordinated and collective way. However, initiatives for coordination between communities are rare and indigenous women's participation in these events remains limited. Indigenous women's existing time limitations are strongly restricting their chances of attending events, and gender biases are limiting their active participation when they can attend. Despite the relevance of water for indigenous women, and the importance of women in water protection and provision, there is scarce recognition and space for their voice and agency in water protection initiatives.

Civil society engagement in support of communities is not as strong and firm as indigenous communities would like. Some organisations have entered into dialogue and negotiations with authorities or accepted mitigation or compensation deals, even after the communities have expressed their refusal of such agreements. This has left some communities disempowered, and women in these villages have expressed fierce discontent and despair.



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