



Conflict Factsheet

Forest Conflicts in Cambodia

Type of conflict
Main

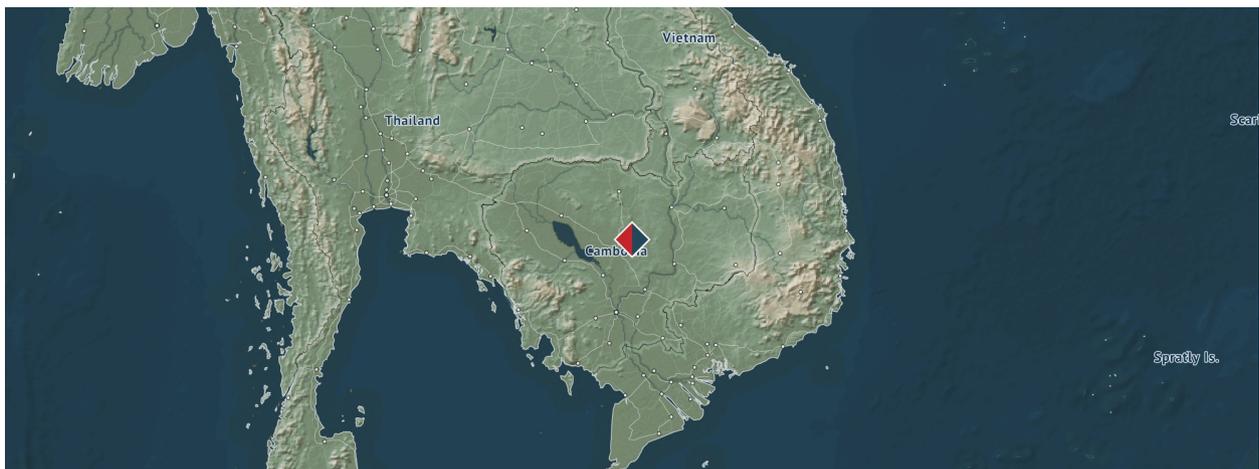
Intensity
4

Conflict Locality
South Eastern Asia

Time
2000 –ongoing

Countries
Cambodia

Resources
Forests

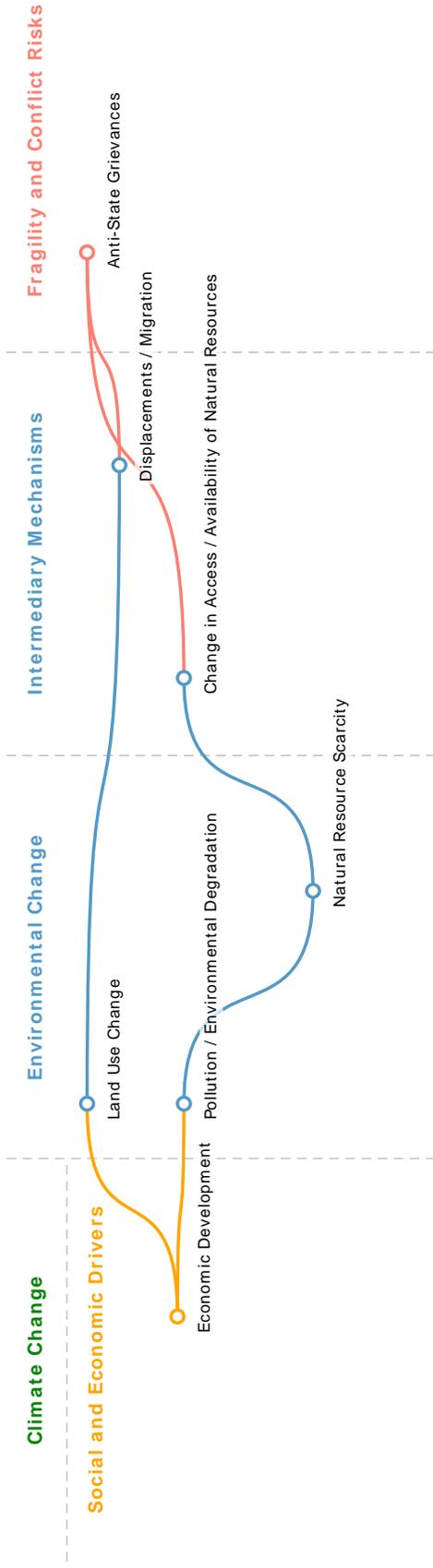


Conflict Summary

The development policy of the Cambodian government might cause deforestation, illegal-logging and land grabbing, which threatens small farmers and indigenous population livelihoods. This brings about an increasing number of land and forest conflicts between public authorities and villagers.



Conceptual Model



Context Factors



Forests





Conflict History

In the years 2000-2012, Cambodia is estimated to have had the fifth highest deforestation rate in the world, ranking third in Asia after Malaysia and Indonesia ([Hansen et al, 2013](#)). This deforestation has resulted in the destruction of the local population's livelihood and induced numerous forest conflicts between villagers and the Cambodian government. Several community representatives and activists have been threatened, arrested or killed in the past ten years ([ADHOC, 2013](#); [Global Witness, 2015](#)).

Economic context and the role of the government

Cambodia's shift to a free market economy in the early 1990s fostered large-scale land concessions and deforestation. Since the beginning of the 2000s, the Cambodian government has been granting Economic Land Concessions (ELCs), long-term leases which authorize the private owner to clear the land to start agricultural-industrial activities. This aimed at fostering agricultural-industrial activities, generating states revenues and boosting the rural economy in a country where 80% of the population live in rural areas and 70% rely on agriculture as a mean of subsistence ([Open Development Cambodia, 2014](#); [World Bank, 2014](#)).

Illegal-logging

These land concessions have, however, had a massive impact on forest areas and indigenous people, with 70% of the concessions recently allocated being protected areas. Illegal-logging is often the owner's main source of revenue, as many ELCs are not developed after being cleared. Illegal-logging is driven by an increasing demand for precious wood, such as Siamese Rosewood, mainly from China ([Global Witness, 2015](#)).

Civil society's mobilisation

Although local populations are increasingly willing to assert their rights, politicized justice and collusion between the government and businesses have, thus far, quashed protests. However, some organizations have emerged, such as the Prey Lang Community Network in 2007, a grassroots movement at preserving the Prey Lang forest through peaceful means. Yet, one of its major supporters, the prominent environmental activist Chut Wutty, was killed in 2012. Increased occurrence of death threats, attempted killings or effective murders of Human Rights Defenders and environmental journalists have been recorded over the 2010-2014 period ([Amnesty International, 2014](#)). This shows how challenging the protection of the Cambodian forest still is.

Environmental repercussions

Illegal-logging and unsustainable forest management has huge environmental repercussions. It entails soil erosion, wildlife extinction and general loss of biodiversity, reduced water tables and thus decreases the country's resilience to extreme weather events and adverse effects of climate change ([Ek, 2013](#)). This is all the more worrying as deforestation is also a well-known driving factor for climate change. About 770 000 persons might have been afflicted by land grabbing which entails land loss and destruction of livelihood. Social and economic marginalization as well as population displacements could even foster further conflicts between the concessionaires, migrants and local population ([Poffenberger, 2009](#)).



The conflict is still unresolved as the Cambodian forest keeps shrinking at a rapid pace, affected by business-oriented policies. This leads to frequent localized conflicts between villagers on the one side and government and businesses on the other.

Resolution Efforts

The Cambodian authorities seem to have an ambivalent attitude towards forest and land protection. However, they did enact a complete set of nature protection laws which established strict limits to the forest's exploitation and harvesting (Land Law, 2001; Forest Law, 2002). This also included the protection of rare tree species, notably by forbidding the collection, storage and processing of the Siamese Rosewood in the year 2013. The government is thus fully aware of the threat facing Cambodian nature capital. However, as illustrated, the implementation of these principles is far from being effective. The same authorities grant ELCs in Protected Forests Areas and turn a blind eye to the misuse of concessions. Moreover, authorities continue to stress the future economic benefits of land clearing, especially through the creation of jobs ([South East Asia Globe, 2014](#)). The lack of political will to enforce the nature protection laws suggests a lenient attitude of the state toward businesses ([Global Witness, 2015](#)).

Inefficient judiciary

Despite the existence of conflict resolution processes and institutions, the court system is flawed and the local population grievances are left unaddressed ([ADHOC, 2013](#)). The state did little to investigate the murder of environmental activist Chut Wutty ([Huffington Post, 2012](#)) and other cases of violent repression towards activists have not been punished or sanctioned by the judiciary.

Lack of environmental awareness

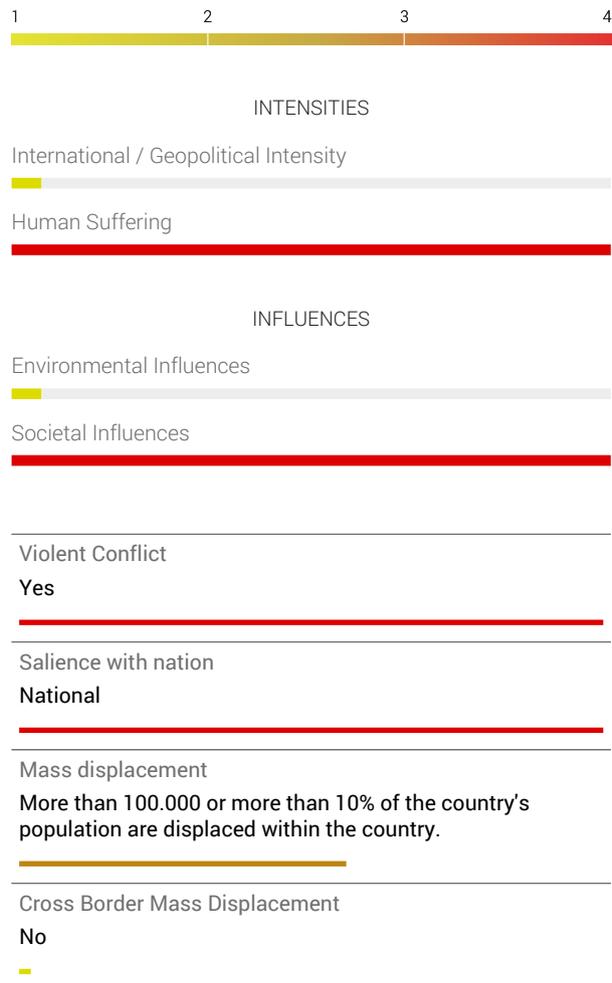
Additionally, it should be emphasised that the local population is by no means united against deforestation and illegal-logging, as large parts of society lack environmental awareness ([Ek, 2013](#)). Cambodia remains a developing country where the population is still relatively poor. Companies, therefore, have the ability to pay local people very well if they show them where rare tree species are located ([South East Asia Globe, 2014](#)). Given this endemic poverty, which is also fed by land-grabbing, forest activism, grassroots movement or any other kind of opposition are not easy to set up and less likely to last.

International judicial action

However, complaints have been filled by Cambodian citizens before the International Criminal Court and the High Court of England and Wales to protest against land grabbing (see: [Land Grabbing Conflicts in Cambodia](#)).



Intensities & Influences



Resolution Success

Resolve of displacement problems
Displacement continues to cause discontent and/or other problems.
-

Reduction in geographical scope
There has been no reduction in geographical scope.
-

Increased capacity to address grievance in the future
There is no increased capacity to address grievances in the future.
-

Grievance Resolution
Grievances have been mostly ignored.
[Progress bar: ~10%]

Causal Attribution of Decrease in Conflict Intensity
There has been no reduction in intensity
-



Entry Points for Resilience and Peace Building

Mediation & arbitration

2

Complaints have been filled by Cambodian citizens before the International Criminal Court and the High Court of England and Wales to protest against land grabbing.

Environmental restoration & protection

1

The Cambodian government enacted a complete set of nature protection laws which established strict limits to the exploitation of forest resources. However, these laws are not enforced due to lack of political will.

Resources and Materials

Conflict References

[Land Grabbing Conflicts in Cambodia](#)

References with URL

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[ADHOC, A Turning Point? Land, Housing and natural resources in Cambodia in 2012, 2012](#)

[Southeast Asia Globe, The wood for the trees, 2014](#)

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[Ek \(2013\), Cambodia Environmental and Climate Change Policy Brief](#)

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[World Bank, Databank Rural Population, 2014](#)

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[Amnesty International, Universal Periodic Review: Address Cambodia's human rights crisis, 2014](#)

Further information

<https://factbook.ecc-platform.org/conflicts/forest-conflicts-cambodia>