Encounters in Borderlands: Social and Economic Transformations in Ratanakiri, Northeastern Cambodia

Affaires frontalières : transformations socio-économiques à Ratanakiri (Cambodge du nord-est)

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INTRODUCTION

What is the connection between remote and sparsely populated regions of the Cambodian highlands and the rapidly growing regional centers of mainland Southeast Asia embracing the 21st century? Lush forests, hydropower potential, and fertile land for cash crop plantations to fulfill the needs of urban populations provide one starting point.¹

Northeastern Cambodia (see Map 1) has always been thought of as a remote place, festered with malaria, beyond the rivers, jungles, and mountain ranges in the borderlands of Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos. From the perspective of the capital, Phnom Penh, the northeastern provinces of Ratanakiri, Stung Treng, and Mondulkiri are indeed far away. The road network is in poor condition and airplanes are the only effective way for most travelers to reach the provincial capitals. The question of remoteness, however, is a matter of perspective.² That Northeastern Cambodia is located in the borderlands does not automatically imply

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Map 1. Map of Cambodia.
that it is devoid of larger significance to Cambodia and the region. Another way of looking at Northeastern Cambodia, particularly Ratanakiri, the province that this article concerns itself with (see Map 2), is to take into account its importance as a hub of trade between Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam, and as a place of historical significance.3

In recent years, the market economy, in the form of cashcrop plantations (rubber, coffee, soya beans, cashew nuts, oil palm) and logging concessions, has made inroads into the area, affecting traditional food production patterns. With spontaneous and organized migrations of lowland populations to the area, it is inevitable that the demography and economics will change. One of the most problematic issues is the ongoing Khmerization4 process, in which the cultural values of the lowlanders are being imposed upon the indigenous highland population. The lowlanders’ Khmer language, Buddhist religion, state bureaucratic structures and practices (dictated by the Khmer cognitive system), and economic production system (i.e., paddy farming and cashcropping) and monetary exchange are being introduced as superior to the highlanders' traditional languages, beliefs, and swidden agriculture. This kind of transformation process is not unique to Cambodia, as it has been affecting highland

Map 2. Ratanakiri Province.
peoples' cultures in Laos and Thailand ('Taization' process; see McKinnon & Bhruksasri 1989) and in Vietnam ('Vietnamization' process; see Evans 1992, Hickey 1993) for quite some time already.

It is clear that Ratanakiri has arrived at a critical juncture in its history. Cambodia could find itself in a unique position to learn from its neighbors' mistakes and avoid the excesses of state policies that either dictate what is perceived as good for the minorities without consideration for their specific needs (as in Vietnam and Laos), or let the market forces rule (as in Thailand; see Ruohomäki 2000). However, it appears that history is repeating itself in Northeastern Cambodia, despite the attempts by international organizations and non-governmental organizations to make the Cambodian policy-makers sensitive to the ideology of sustainable human development, which recognizes the rights of minorities in a nation-state and aims to empower the local population to take their futures into their own hands. The aim of this article is to examine the social and economic transformations taking place in contemporary Ratanakiri and the way in which they affect the lives of the indigenous population and, by doing so, to document history as it unfolds.

It should be noted that this article does not dwell at any length with any particular ethnic group, but draws examples from a variety of groups that I researched in the course of my field trips. While ethnic groups, the Jarai, Brou, Kreung, and Tampuan, display differences, it is their quasi-sedentary swidden agricultural practices and special relationship to Nature and the spirits associated with various natural elements – land, forest, water, sky, and hills – that give rise to a common highlander world, which is quite different from that of the Khmer lowlanders.

Northeastern Cambodia, particularly Ratanakiri, provides an interesting setting for examining the encounters of this highlander world with the forces of modernity. These encounters are linguistic, social, and economic, and appear to have set this corner of Southeast Asia onto a new trajectory of development – one from which there appears to be no turning back.

Before examining the current economic and social transformation in Ratanakiri, it should be stressed that the literature on Ratanakiri and, especially, on the highlanders is relatively scant. To my knowledge, the only ethnographic study of highland communities in Ratanakiri since the 1950s is Matras-Troubetzkoy's 1983 study of swidden agricultural practices in a Brou village. However, since the beginning of the UNTAC's (United-Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia) presence in Ratanakiri in 1991-93, a number of reports about Ratanakiri and highland communities have emerged. Some that have an anthropological focus include Johnsson's (1992, 1996, 1997) and White's (1995) studies on health practices among highlanders. Bourdier's (1995) report on the relationship between local social structures and environmental management practices provides interesting information on the Tampuan in Ratanakiri. Sugiarti's (1995) thesis on development and gender relations in highland communities is the first study on gender issues among the highlanders. Baird's (1995, 1996, 2000) reports on the
Kavet and Kreung provide useful insights into the highlanders' contemporary livelihood practices, particularly fishing practices. Besides these anthropological studies, there are a number of interesting reports on development issues, produced by international organizations and NGOs working in the province (e.g., UNDP/CARERE, Health Unlimited, OXFAM, Non-Timber Forest Products Project, CIDSE, World Concern/ICC). Nonetheless, the literature on the highlanders remains scarce and no ethnographies of contemporary highlanders have to my knowledge been published. Although this article can by no means fill this gap, it also constitutes an attempt to provide a view of the current situation of highlanders with respect to the larger political-economic developments in Cambodia and the region, which influence what happens at the local level.

**Swiddens and Spirits**

The highlanders' food production system is based on swidden agriculture (see Matras-Troubetzkoy 1983 for a detailed study of the agricultural cycle and practices of the Brou; see also Hkum 1995, and Himel & Sovanna 1997: 21-27). The highlanders use the Khmer word *chamkar* to refer to their swidden plots (see Photo 1). In fact, *chamkar* in Khmer usage refers to riverbank cultivation of vegetables and fruit, in contrast with paddy cultivation (*srey*). The forest is cleared by family groups and plots of land (*miir* in Brou) are established once the cleared area has been burnt. On average, a family needs one or two hectares of land under active cultivation, plus another five or six hectares of fallow land to ensure food

![Photo 1. A new swidden field.](image-url)
security. A plot of land is utilized for three to five years depending on soil fertility, after which the plot is left to fallow for three to seven years until the forest cover regenerates and the soil regains its fertility.

The principal crop is upland rice, the highlanders’ staple food. A variety of other plants are mixed with the hill rice such as sesame, cassava, taro, sorghum, okra, pepper, gourds, pumpkins, maize, and various spices. The typical plot mimics nature, as highlanders optimize their use of field space by cultivating crops of different heights adjacent to one another. Besides minimizing the effect of failure of particular crops, this cropping method is also a form of natural pest management.

The agricultural calendar is dictated by the rains, which come around May and last until October. Before the rains, in February through April, there is an intensive period of field preparation, starting with clearing the forest and bush and burning the undergrowth. Just after the first rains, when the soil has softened, planting takes place by poking a long pole into the ground and dropping into each hole seeds of rice and other plants. During the growing period, it rains for weeks on end, and weeding occupies much of people’s time. Most villagers, as their granaries are low on food stocks, resort to forest food products, especially bamboo shoots, mushrooms, and a variety of wild tubers. With the rains relenting, the crops mature and the harvest takes place in October to early December. In January, new field sites are surveyed and the farming cycle begins again. The division of labor among the highlanders is such that the felling of trees and clearing of the forest is men’s work, while planting and harvesting is done by both men and women.

Swidden agriculture as practiced by the highlanders is a sound agricultural practice suitable for the local conditions provided that it does not exceed the carrying capacity of the environment. In recent years, land-use intensification caused by competition by outsiders and access to new land has threatened the viability of this traditional swidden agricultural system. I will return to this question after discussing the land-use patterns of the region.

While the highlanders of Ratanakiri are mainly agriculturists, fishing, raising cattle, pigs, and chicken, gathering forest products, and hunting play an important part in the local food production system. According to Baird (1995), who provides an excellent account of fisheries in the Sesan River basin in Ratanakiri, fish is the major source of protein for highlanders who have access to fishing grounds. Although they still use traditional fishing gear, such as traps made of bamboo and rattan, they have increasingly adopted new fishing practices from the local Lao fishermen, who are keen users of gill-nets and cast-nets. Highlanders also raise cattle and buffaloes, but, as Maclean (1996: 6) points out, these are mainly used in sacrifices to the spirits, rather than as draught animals. Thus, in highland culture, raising cattle and buffaloes is very much an investment in symbolic capital to be disbursed in sacrifices to the spirits, rather than in productive capital per se, as is the case with the lowlanders.

The use of non-timber forest products for food, medicine, and building materials supplements agricultural activities to such an extent that it can be said that forests
are an extremely valuable resource for the highlanders in Ratanakiri. Typical non-
timber forest products in Ratanakiri include honey, edible plants, fruit, firewood,
rattan, bamboo, fibers, medicinal plants, eggs, and other wildlife products. While
most are used or consumed by the highlanders themselves, more valuable products
such as malva nuts are collected and sold to traders who transport them to Vietnam.
In a recent study of non-timber forest products in Northeastern Cambodia, Bann
(1996) points out that their economic value is in fact higher than that of timber in
the long run. For local populations, access to these products is crucial, but the state
and private-sector development enterprises tend to ignore this fact.

In order to understand local food production systems, it is necessary to take into
account the special relationship that highlanders have with their environment.
According to their beliefs, spirits of various kinds dominate the surrounding
environment. Springs, mountains, the forest, sky, and earth are inhabited by
spirits that must be either propitiated or avoided (see Kirsch 1973: 12-16). These
spirits have the power to influence the well-being and prosperity of the people. For
example, the spirit of a particular forest in which a new field is cleared, if angered,
may cause misfortune. The spirits act as guardians of the natural environment and,
therefore, it is of paramount importance to seek their cooperation through ritual
sacrifices to prevent misfortune. Failure to do so may result in crop failure.

Throughout the agricultural cycle, there are occasions when rituals are to be
performed, from the first cutting of the underbrush to be cleared on the land
where a field is established, to the taking in of the first rice ears. The rites range
from short prayers before a tree is cut down to grand feasts in which buffaloes are
sacrificed and wine jars are offered to the spirits to thank them for a bountiful
harvest (see Photo 2). The form of the ritual may vary from one community to the
next, but all share the idea of propitiating the spirits to ensure the well-being of the
individuals and community involved.

Sacrifices also have a bearing on local hierarchy. In his study of religion among
the highlanders of Southeast Asia, Kirsch rightly noted that sacrifices serve to
increase differences in social status (Kirsch 1973:18). Although any individual may
perform sacrifices of different kinds, graded in terms of increasing difficulty of
performance, only the wealthiest can afford to stage lavish feasts for the spirits. A
successful feast increases the prestige of the giver and improves his political status
within the community.

MINORITIES AND MAJORITIES

In pre-modern Southeast Asia, the dense forests and mountainous areas
represented the “Wilderness,” home of dangerous animals, evil spirits, and
uncivilized tribal groups. In contrast, civilization rested in lands cleared for
ceremonial centers and wet-rice cultivation. The Sesan and Srepok rivers and their
tributaries connect the Ratanakiri region with the rest of Cambodia, Laos, and the
Vietnamese highlands. Before the advent of roads, rivers served as channels of
communication and trade. The inhabitants of the mountainous and forested regions
Photo 2. A buffalo sacrifice pole.
that are known today as Ratanakiri and Stung Treng supplied the lowlanders with forest products – ivory, horns, beeswax, resins, hides, bark, and elephants, in exchange for iron, salt, and beads. The following account by Chou Ta-kuan, a Chinese envoy (in 1296-97) of Timur Khan, the grandson and successor of Kublai Khan, to the court of Indravarman III (reigned 1295-1308), represents a typical view that the rulers had of the highlanders:

“There are two categories of aborigines: The first comprises those who understand the language of the country; these are sold in the towns as slaves. In the second category are those who refuse to submit to civilization and are not familiar with its language. They have no houses, but wander carrying clay jars on their heads. Should they meet a wild animal, they kill it with bow or lance, strike fire from flint, cook the animal and eat it communally, afterwards resuming their wanderings. Their nature is savage and their poisons extremely dangerous. Even in their own gatherings murder is common. In regions closer to civilization there are those who devote themselves to growing cardamom and tree cotton and to weaving. Their fabrics are very coarse, however, with fantastic patterns” (Chou 1993: 25).

The account provides evidence of the fact that the hinterland of the Khmer empire was inhabited by indigenous groups that led a nomadic life and were feared by the lowlanders because they represented otherness and a threat to the established social order. Although the highlanders supplied the lowlanders with useful forest products, they were outside the lowlanders’ social order. Their otherness had to be subdued by denying their humanity through reducing them to the status of slaves (see Diffloth 1993: 10). As will be discussed in a later section, the idea of otherness continues to exist in modern Cambodian discourse on the nation’s minorities.

For several centuries, the highlanders suffered from warfare between the Thai, Lao, and Khmer, who exacted tribute from them to finance their own expansion. The eighteenth century and the early part of the nineteenth century, until the arrival of the French to the political scene of Indo-China, were particularly troubled, as slave raiding contributed to instability among local populations. However, it was not only the lowlanders who hunted for slaves among the highlanders, as a number of wars occurred between tribes to supply the markets with slaves. In particular, the Jarai and Sedang organized raids against their neighbors and sold their prisoners to the Thai and Lao (see Matras-Troubetzkoy 1983: 40-53).

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the French began to exert influence over the region, bringing relative stability. The regions of the middle Mekong were first attached to Cochinchina, then to French-governed Laos. Only in 1904 was Stung Treng (of which modern Ratanakiri was part) reverted to Cambodia. As was typical of colonial times, the newly created border did not take into account the distribution of ethnic groups. Thus, the border between Cambodia and Laos cuts through Brou territory, and that between Cambodia and Vietnam through Jarai territory. It should be noted, however, that international frontiers have stopped neither the Brou nor the Jarai from crossing over and visiting their kinsmen on the other side.
In the early part of the twentieth century, the French, who were busy imposing their control over the Vietnamese highlands (see Hickey 1982 on the highlands of Central Vietnam), were not particularly interested in Northeastern Cambodia, and the local populations were left largely to their own devices. Cambodia's independence in 1954 heralded the beginning of the integration of the hinterlands into the Khmer nation-state and the domestication of the "wild" into the "civilized" through modernization. Ratanakiri province was created in 1959 and placed under the control of the Royal Khmer Armed Forces, keen to exploit its rich natural resources.

The process of state penetration to the hinterland has always been about defining and controlling space and property rights over resources within that space. In Ratanakiri, the state started to clear large chunks of forest and upland villages for rubber plantations. In order to better control the population, it favored highland villages to be arranged in parallel lines along the roads, according to the typical lowland pattern. The rubber plantations encroached on the swiddens of the highlanders, who resented it, and a number of incidents broke out in the late 1960s, as villagers, especially the Tampuan, attempted to resist encroachment.

By this time, the war in neighboring Vietnam had spilled over to Cambodia as the Americans were conducting bombing raids on the Ho Chi Minh trail that ran along the Cambodian-Vietnam border. By the late 1960s, the Khmer Rouge had established firm control of large parts of Ratanakiri and neighboring Northeastern provinces (Kiernan 1996: 80-86). Initially, they considered the highlanders, their early supporters, as exemplary “base people.” However, when their regime came fully into power, the Khmer Rouge turned to a policy of converting the highlanders to lowland Khmer way of life. This entailed ending the highlanders' semi-nomadic way of life and forcing them to engage in collectivized wet-rice cultivation, work in irrigation projects, and abandon traditional ceremonies, including the animal sacrifices that are an integral part of the traditional belief system (see Kiernan 1996: 82-83, 306). Many highlanders fled to neighboring Vietnam and Laos. The following statement by an elderly Brou couple from a village in Taveng district describes life under the Khmer Rouge: “Those days, life was difficult. The Khmer Rouge prohibited us to go to the chamkar, instead we had to work the land by the river. We could not go hunting as before. They took away our gongs and wine jars. It was very boring, just work and work. One day we decided, together with our relatives [three households], to try to go to Attapeou [a province in Laos bordering Taveng district], because we had relatives there. We stayed in Attapeou until UNTAC came to Ratanakiri.” According to Kiernan, approximately 9,000 highlanders or 15% of the indigenous population perished during the Khmer Rouge period (Kiernan 1996: 458; see also Colm 1998).

After the Khmer Rouge regime came the Vietnamese-installed State of Cambodia regime, which ruled Cambodia until the 1991 Paris Peace Agreements. White notes that the post-Khmer Rouge period appears to have been relatively calm, with highlanders reverting to their old agricultural patterns (White 1996: 348-349). The state allowed the highlanders to practice their religion and even return to traditional farming practices, most likely because of a lack of any coordinated
policies towards the highlanders. Due to poor transportation links and security problems, Ratanakiri was cut off from lowland Cambodia during the 1980s.

The United-Nations Transitional Authority in Cambodia (1991-93) was also present in remote Northeastern Cambodia, and helped prepare for elections. Diffloth notes that, for many highlanders, the concept of election was alien and, as only a few individuals in highland villages were able to understand Khmer, there were potential problems in ensuring that everyone understood the profound meaning of “fairness” in an election sponsored by the United-Nations (Diffloth 1993: 11-12). Nonetheless, the presence of UNTAC, the elections, and the improvement in air service to the province helped open up Ratanakiri to tourism, business interests, and aid organizations.13

Presently, the indigenous highlanders comprise over 80% of the province’s population. Yet they are referred to by the lowlanders as chon chiet piet tic (which glosses as “minorities” in Khmer). The transformations in the local economy, which I will examine in the next section, are leading to a situation where the highlanders, who are numerically the majority, are in a process of being marginalized as a minority category in their own territory.

**Changes in Land Use Patterns**

With Ratanakiri’s increasing integration into the Cambodian nation-state and the regional economy, the capitalist economy in the form of economic opportunism, consumer ideology, and changes in the structure of the local economy has posed to the lives of highlanders new challenges and threats, of which the issue of land use is perhaps the most problematic, as its consequences are often irrevocable. This section examines the pressures on land-use patterns in Ratanakiri, focusing on logging concessions, commercial plantations, and the threat of displacement due to potential hydropower projects.

**Logging concessions**

The army is in effective control of the Cambodian timber trade, which by its nature is anarchic. Acting on behalf of illegal logging operations, it provides the authority and power to override the country’s Ministries and forestry legislation. In addition, most of the revenue from these operations bypasses the national budget and makes up a parallel budget for the use of the army and private individuals involved in the logging business.

Ratanakiri belongs to Military Region One, which also includes Stung Treng and Mondulkiri. As in other parts of Cambodia, the military not only facilitate logging and provide security to logging companies, but also actively log themselves and enact an exclusion policy to prevent monitoring by appropriate agencies (Global Witness 1997: 11). The major destination of logs from Ratanakiri is Vietnam. All of Ratanakiri province has been leased for fifty years as a logging concession to Macro Cambodia Forestry Ltd. (Macro Panin Indonesia). The Taiwanese Hero Co. has a logging concession of 60,000 hectares. In addition, a number of smaller Cambodian and Vietnamese companies operate in the province. In December 1996, three
logging companies were granted the right to transport 29,000 cubic meters of logs to Vietnam (Colm 1997: 34) and wanted to take them out of Cambodia before the beginning of 1997, when the government’s log ban was supposed to be enforced. Local aid workers argue that far more trees were removed than had been agreed. Part of the revenue from this did go to infrastructure improvements in the province, but a substantial portion went to line the pockets of private officials and the army. However, despite the ban, logging continues in Ratanakiri. According to one organization, “Ratanakiri is considered by the RGC [Royal Government of Cambodia] as a sacrificial area in the context of national development, the province is also the site of the Se San/Se Kong hydropower programmes” (Global Witness 1997: 13).

The problems caused by logging seriously affect the highlanders’ livelihoods. As forests are being logged, villagers lose access to non-timber forest products that are essential to their livelihood. These include products used for food and medicine as well as trade products. Also, if the trend continues, villagers will have to increase duration of cultivation on the same land plots and shorten the fallow period allowing proper reforestation. Once it becomes increasingly difficult to do so, they will have to seek alternative sources of livelihood and abandon traditional farming practices altogether. Furthermore, as discussed before, highlanders have a special relationship to their environment in terms of the spiritual dimension that forests have in local cosmology. Colm reports that sacred sites, revered for generations by the Kreung people, are threatened by Hero Co.’s logging, despite the fact that Hero’s management plan explicitly prohibits logging in culturally significant areas (Colm 2000). Often local communities are not consulted before logging is started, leading to strong resentment against the companies and state representatives. It is a wonder that there have been no violent demonstrations so far against logging companies. One explanation is that the companies are protected by the army and therefore villagers are afraid to act.

**Cashcrop plantations, land speculation, and protected areas**

The soils of Ratanakiri are fertile, compared to other areas of Cambodia (Himel & Sovanna 1997: 11). Lowland farmers and commercial concerns, therefore, have been increasingly moving into the area. This has caused land speculation and the granting of commercial agricultural concessions. According to Colm, the Ratanakiri Land Titles Office has records of more than one dozen pending concession projects in the province, ranging from 100 to 20,000 hectares (Colm 1997: 34).

The largest concession was a 20,000-ha oil-palm plantation planned for O Yadao District, near the Vietnamese border. This was a joint venture between Cambodian and Malaysian companies – Mittapheap-Men Sarun (15,000 ha) and Rama Khmer International (5,000 ha). The plantation would have affected fifteen out of the twenty-nine villages, or 4,500 people in the district. The main problem was that there had been little consultation over land use between villagers and the representatives of the company. The company proceeded to cut fallow *chamkar* areas, claiming that the land has been left idle for some years. After clear-cutting forests along Highway
19 – the road from the provincial capital, Banlung, to the Vietnamese border – palm seedlings were planted. The company and district officials encouraged villagers to resettle to half-hectare (50m x 100m) plots along the highway. The company claimed that it would provide jobs to them, but at most only 400 individuals would have received employment as laborers on the plantation. The rest of the population in the district would have faced severe difficulties in pursuing their traditional livelihoods. Luckily for the local villagers, the project was cancelled in 1997, after political problems. Nevertheless, this case illustrates the conflict between two different systems of land tenure. The investors involved in the planning did not recognize the communal ownership of land as traditionally practiced by the highlanders, and claimed that, since the latter did not possess land title deeds, the land in the district was available to those who could obtain concessions from the government. Only through heavy lobbying by a number of development agencies and human-rights organizations did the government recognize the highlanders' traditional communal ownership of land in the new Land Law (July 2001). This is a remarkable achievement in the development of land legislation. Nonetheless, a challenge remains in the form of implementation of that law in practice, and much remains to be done to strengthen the highlanders' understanding of their rights.

Besides the planned oil-palm plantation in O Yadao District, land speculators from the lowlands obtain title deeds to parcels of land near the other district capitals of Ratanakiri. While some may plant industrial crops such as coffee or cashew nuts, others simply keep the land unplanted and wait for an opportunity to resell it at a higher price. It is worth noting that land ownership problems are not always between highlanders and lowlanders. The following illustrates the potential tension within local communities:

“In areas close to Banlung, highlanders are becoming more accustomed to a cash economy and showing a growing openness to selling village land – a rare occurrence in the past because they completely relied on their chamkars to make their living. A number of villagers near the provincial town have now started to sell small plots, in some cases causing jealousy among other villagers. Some people said they were initially reluctant to sell, but eventually acquiesced to continual pressure from potential buyers, who claimed if villagers did not sell, their land would be confiscated by the government anyway” (Colm 1997: 35).

One of the problems is that the lowlanders are taking advantage of the highlanders' ignorance of Cambodian land laws and threatening them of possible confiscation of the lands by the government (see White 1996: 367). While this is a relatively recent phenomenon, it is highly likely that, as land speculators see the investment potentials in Ratanakiri, the conflicts between highlanders and lowlanders will escalate. In 2001 there were reports of private investors from the lowlands appropriating land in Koun Mom and O Chum districts, where soils are especially attractive for black pepper and cashew nut plantation. In addition, there are reports of continuing “spontaneous-planned” resettlement of people from the South, particularly in Koun Mom District. This clear pattern of agricultural frontier movement in Ratanakiri warrants further investigation.
Beside speculation, there is another dimension of pressures on highlanders' traditional land use. Approximately one-half of the province has been set aside for protected areas and wildlife reserves. In northern Ratanakiri, the Virachey National Park in Voensai and Taveng districts covers 332,500 hectares and, in southern Ratanakiri, a Wildlife Sanctuary in Lumphat District covers 250,000 hectares. According to Sokha, the area covered by and adjacent to the National Park has a total population of over 11,000 people, who live in nine communes comprising forty-one villages. Almost all belong to ethnic minority peoples, including Kreung, Kavet, Preuv, and Lun, who all depend on the park's natural resources (Sokha 1999: 137; see Baird 2000: 8-11). It is highly likely that in the future, as villagers continue to be squeezed by concessions and other land development by private investors, they may have no option but to encroach on protected areas.

The key to solving conflicts related to land-use issues would be to address the ownership questions through legislation, in which the traditional rights of the ethnic peoples in terms of land use are recognized. There are some signs of hope. A historic agreement establishing a 5,000-ha community forest for Kreung villagers in O Chum District was reached in early 2001. The Ya Poey Community Forest Association, composed of six indigenous villages that have lived in and used the forest for generations, was granted the rights to forest land (Phnom Penh Post 2001; see Poffenberger n.d.: 68-75). Although the granting of rights to 5,000 hectares of semi-evergreen forest does not amount to much in terms of scale, the agreement is a significant symbolic act recognizing the rights of indigenous peoples to their traditional lands. It remains to be seen whether the example of the Ya Poey Community Forest Association will create pressure to grant similar rights to other communities.

Threats from dam projects and trans-boundary hydrological problems

There is a serious threat of population displacement by flooding from hydropower projects that are planned, although not yet implemented, in Ratanakiri. The following quote from a fact sheet prepared by a NGO working in the area puts the prospects of building hydropower projects in Northeastern Cambodia into the larger picture: “As political stability increases in the Mekong region and investment opportunities increase, multilateral donors are expanding their plans for economic development assistance to the Mekong countries. A key objective of this financial intervention is the promotion of regional co-operation through trade, in which hydropower is a central theme. At present only 5% of the Mekong catchment area and annual flow are regulated by dams but plans are being formulated and construction begins in order to further develop the Mekong’s hydropower potential” (Non-Timber Forest Products Project 1997: 1).

In this connection, the Mekong River Commission has called for the development of hydropower for the benefit of the riparian countries through a Hydropower Programme under the Basin Development Plan (Mekong News 1997: 7). This Hydropower Programme has repercussions for the Ratanakiri area. Research into hydropower opportunities in the Sesan/Sekong tributary basin has been carried out
and six sites have been identified for detailed feasibility studies (Asian Development Bank 1997). NGOs working in Ratanakiri have expressed concern that, if the hydropower projects are built on the Sesan and Srepok rivers and their tributaries, highlanders will be displaced from their ancestral lands to villages along the river banks (Colm 1997: 35; see Himel & Sovanna 1997: 4-5, 26-27).

The Ratanakiri Provincial Fisheries Office, in cooperation with the Non-Timber Forest Product Project, completed in 2000 a survey of the social, economic, and environmental impacts of the 720-megawatt Yali Falls dam in Gia Lai province of Central Vietnam, some 70 km upriver from the international border with Cambodia. According to the survey, the closing of the dam in 1998 and subsequent irregular releases of large amounts of water from its reservoir have seriously altered the hydrological regime and water quality of the Sesan River downstream. Apparently, in the dry season, massive surges of water, up to two to three meters high, run down the Sesan River from Yali Falls dam, sweeping away people, livestock, fishing gear, food crops, and household items. Reportedly thirty-two people have been drowned by these surges and by rainy-season flooding in Ratanakiri since the hydrological problems in the Sesan River first began. There are also problems with water quality and reports of health problems relating to local people bathing and swimming in the Sesan River, which are attributed to water stored in the Yali Falls reservoir.

Because agriculture along the river has been impacted by flooding, and people are no longer able to harvest as many resources from the Sesan River area, they have had to turn to forests and upland resources, which in turn creates further pressure on terrestrial natural resources and traditional livelihood systems (see Watershed 2000 for details of the problems related to hydropower development on the Sesan River; also, Asian Development Bank 2000a, 2000b: 17-19; Ratner 2000; Ratanakiri 2001). Further research is needed on the hydrological regime of the Sesan River, taking into account the trans-boundary nature of the hydropower development on the river and its impacts on local communities. In addition, a permanent mechanism for consultation is needed between the governments of Cambodia and Vietnam to address watershed management and hydropower development with trans-boundary implications. This would benefit from a neutral facilitator with sufficient economic and political clout to ensure balanced dialogue between the two governments.

**DEVELOPMENT DILEMNAS**

Although highlanders have always been involved in trade networks, trade today, especially in consumer goods, has considerably increased in volume. Since 1993, the government has been promoting cashcrop plantations and attracting agricultural entrepreneurs, settlers from the lowlands, and tourists to the area. Consequently, Ratanakiri is irrevocably and rapidly being integrated into the market economy that Cambodia has been embracing since the opening of the country to the outside world following the UNTAC period.
The highlanders’ economy is increasingly monetized, in the sense that cash is an accepted medium of exchange. Village economy is also increasingly market oriented, though not yet market dependent. Villagers acquire cash through trading goods at the markets (see Photo 3). Typical goods sold by highlanders include various forest products (herbs, bamboo shoots, malva nuts, mushrooms, medicinal produce, and fruits), manufactured goods (baskets and brooms), livestock (pigs, chicken, and cattle), and garden vegetables.16 Ratanakiri is also involved in regional trade. In his report on natural resources along the Sesan River, Baird identified fifty kinds of non-timber forest products that highlanders gather or hunt from the forest for trade (Baird 1995). Out of these, twenty-six were traded to Vietnam and Thailand. The most valuable included tiger bones (16,000 riel/kg), sambar deer antlers (6,000-70,000 riel/trophy), pangolins (10,000-20,000 riel/kg) and live bear cubs (200,000 riel/piece) (Baird 1995: 25-26).

Another source of cash income is through short-term wage labor. For example, people from villages close to rubber plantations sell their labor as rubber tappers. Others work as unskilled laborers in Banlung or other district towns. The typical daily wage is 5,000 riels. However, at present, most of the employment sought by highlanders is for short periods only, in order to acquire a desired consumer item, such as a radio or a motorcycle. During the intensive farming period, when the swiddens are prepared, most highlanders return to their villages to resume their agricultural activities.
Although cash is rapidly becoming the major medium of exchange, many highlanders still continue to barter market goods for the products they grow in their swiddens and gather in the forests. For example, a pair of trousers can be procured for three chickens, a shirt for two chickens, and 50 kg of salt for one *kapha* (48 kg) of paddy.

Highlanders purchase such consumer items as monosodium glutamate, salt, modern medicines, clothes, cigarette lighters, household utensils, plastic ware, mosquito nets, radios, batteries, bicycles, motorcycles, fuel, etc. (see Photo 4). Although many of these goods come from the lowlands, there is a brisk trade in Vietnamese consumer goods coming across the border. Most of the goods that highlanders purchase at the market are not really needed for subsistence purposes. For subsistence, most rely on their swidden fields and the forest. However, increasingly, the goods purchased at the market are meant for the fulfillment of socially defined needs, of what a good standard of living should be. Hence, radios or motorcycles are status markers that distinguish their owner from others who do not own them. Traditionally, bronze gongs used in sacrifices were considered capital investment items. While sacrifices to thank the spirits for a bountiful harvest or to cure sickness continue to be practiced, modern consumer goods have become new capital investment items, competing with bronze gongs as status markers. Of these, the motorcycle is perhaps the most wanted item. Although it
does facilitate travel to the swiddens and the provincial capital, the motorcycle is also a new status marker that distinguishes the better-off households.

Another interesting phenomenon is the expansion of Buddhism to the highlands. Traditionally the highlanders are animists, but in recent years missionary monks have been active in propagating Buddhism in Ratanakiri. The Cambodian state very much supports this, as it perceives that a proper Cambodian citizen must embrace the state religion – Buddhism.

STATE DEVELOPMENT POLICIES

The Cambodian government’s development policies regarding Ratanakiri are somewhat paradoxical. On the one hand, there are good initiatives with considerable input from various international aid organizations working in the province to achieve sustainable and equitable development. Some of these initiatives are described below. On the other hand, the same government is considering the development of hydropower projects that would displace thousands of highlanders. Furthermore, powerful individuals within the government continue to sign deals with logging companies and private land speculators with complete disregard for the needs of the highlanders.

With assistance from different international organizations, the government attempts to take into account the needs of the highlanders in its development policies (see, e.g., CIDSE 1995). For example, the provincial administration of Ratanakiri, with the assistance of the UNDP-funded project CARERE, has begun producing Provincial Development Plans that outline infrastructure and basic services development needs (see, e.g., Ka reap... 1997-2000). The focus of CARERE in Ratanakiri has been on capacity building and institutional strengthening to enable participatory analysis and planning, and to achieve community resource mobilization and participatory management of development (Nooyens 1996; see Sugiarti 1997 for details on the village development planning process). CARERE has been reasonably successful in institutionalizing participatory planning processes, and it is envisaged that by 2002 all communes in Ratanakiri province will have village development committees in place (SEILA 2000).

At the national level, the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Highland Peoples (IMC), also with assistance from the UNDP Regional Programme on Highland Peoples, has been drafting a new policy on Highland Peoples Development (HPD), which incorporates issues of cultural, educational, linguistic, land and natural resource access rights, protection of indigenous practices and traditions, and participation of highlanders in decisions affecting their future. This policy was drafted through a series of workshops using the participatory methodology, i.e., bringing representatives of the highland communities, local government officials, and national policy makers together to discuss, draft, and review policy documents. In addition, national-level government officials are taken on study trips to the highland areas to be exposed to and made aware of highland communities and the problems that they face. It is envisaged that, once the policy on HPD is accepted by the Council of
Ministers, it will be adopted by both national and local government to assist in the implementation of different development projects in areas where highlanders live.\textsuperscript{19}

Yet, despite these commendable efforts, the same government continues to make deals with logging companies, plan hydropower schemes that will displace thousands of people, and squander its meager resources on arms purchases. The main problem is that, despite all the planning and policies, which aim to achieve sustainable and equitable development, the reality on the ground proves otherwise. Although a number of development projects that have aimed to assist highlanders in improving their standards of living have been implemented by the government with assistance from different international aid organizations, the highlanders' long-term prospects in Ratanakiri appear rather bleak. As is often the case in Cambodia, different government ministries have overlapping interests, and powerful individuals within the government can undermine the efforts of others by a single stroke of the pen. Whether these unsustainable development patterns can be counterbalanced by attempts at sustainable development remains to be seen.

\textbf{CONCLUSION}

The continued development of Northeastern Cambodia is inevitable. The future challenge is to balance the needs of the highlanders and the interests of the larger Cambodian society that Ratanakiri is part of. Prior to initiating any development plans, the potential impact on highland livelihood systems must be assessed. This process includes participation from grassroots villagers and others all the way up to the national level, to ensure that the needs of highlanders are fully considered. The key for sustainable development of the highlanders' way of life in Northeastern Cambodia is the government allowing for and enabling land ownership by the highlanders. The alternative option is forced displacement and marginalization of local peoples within their own territory.

Clearly, Ratanakiri is not an isolated area. Rather, it is very much caught in the developments that are taking place in the wider Southeast Asian world, namely, the area's rapid incorporation into the regional economy, resulting in transformations in local economic and social structures. Population growth, migration of lowland Khmers into the area, commercial plantations, and logging, all contribute to increased pressure on the available land.

The changes in local land use are very much evident in the landscape. Vast areas of forest along the roads have been felled and, in places, cash crops such as oil palm, coffee, and cashew nuts have been planted. In part, this ongoing transformation means that, for increasing numbers of highlanders, practicing swidden agriculture will become difficult. Pressure on land will cause them to seek alternative sources of livelihood and abandon traditional farming practices altogether. Furthermore, as forests are being logged, villagers lose access to essential non-timber forest products (used for food and medicine, or traded). There is clearly a strong argument in favor of better land distribution and land-use planning, including broad recognition of the indigenous ethnic peoples' traditional land-use patterns and rights.
Ratanakiri is a good example of a situation in which local people’s livelihoods and environment are shaped by the challenges posed by the changing world economy. A significant facet of the workings of the world economy is that the lives of people in one given area are strongly impacted by important and, sometimes, irreversible ramifications of decisions made far away. In Ratanakiri, history has arrived at a juncture where non-local processes of development and local livelihoods have become irrevocably intertwined.

Notes
1 This article is based on a number of field trips to Ratanakiri between 1996 and 1998, while working as a Programme Officer for the United-Nations Development Programme in Cambodia, and a follow-up visit to the field in 2001. Further information has been procured from unpublished reports by various development agencies and individuals working in the province, and through correspondence with many individual residents in the area who provided regular updates since I left Cambodia. I wish to thank Dr. Jan Ovesen, Dr. Ing-Britt Trankell, Katja Ruohomäki, and Greg Mallow for their comments on a draft version of this article.
2 At the time this article went to press I became aware of a recent publication by Guérin, Hardy et al. (2003), which offers similar analyses on a broader regional scope, but unfortunately I did not have access to it.
3 For around 80%, the population of approximately 75,000 in Ratanakiri consists of indigenous highlanders, including the Brou, Kreung, Jarai, Kachac, Kraol, Kuy, Kravet, Lun, Phnong, Tampuan, and Stieng, while the rest are lowlanders, such as Lao, Khmer, Chinese, and some Vietnamese who migrated to the province in the past two centuries (see Diffloth 1993, Hughes 1993). The 1998 General Population Census of Cambodia notes that 9% of the population reported their previous residence to be in another province. Most of indigenous highlanders live in the forested upland areas, while the lowland populations live alongside the rivers and roads and practice wetland rice cultivation and market activities.
4 The label ‘khmer luey’ (Khmers living in the highlands) has been promoted since the 1960s to refer to the highlanders. This is equivalent to the Laoization of the so-called ‘lao theung’ (Mon-Khmer indigenous groups living in the highland areas of the Lao PDR).
5 It would be, nonetheless, interesting to do a detailed ethnographic study over a prolonged period of the contemporary life of a specific village. This task I leave for others to do.
6 Throughout mainland Southeast Asia, highlanders share a common way of life, including swidden agriculture and beliefs that the natural environment is populated by spiritual entities that have the power to influence the life of humans (see Kirsch 1973, Condominas 1957, Leach 1954, McKinnon & Bhrusasri 1989, Van et al. 1993).
7 A Brou villager whom I visited identified thirty-two varieties of glutinous and non-glutinous rice cultivated in the villagers fields.
8 Baird notes that it is not unusual to find 60 to 100 varieties of plants in a one-hectare Brou, Kavet, or Kreung family field (Baird 1996: 17).
9 See Derleth (1996) for a useful survey of medicinal plants in Ratanakiri province.
10 The term arak, which the Kreung and Brou use to refer to the spirits, is also used by the lowlanders. Arak is Khmer for ‘ancestor spirits.’ It is probable that the highlanders use this term rather than indigenous terms when talking to outsiders – Jan Ovesen and Ing-Britt Trankell have pointed out to me that the Cham do this, too.
11 See Condominas (1957) for an interesting and well-documented account of the various rituals in the Muong Gar's farming cycle in Central Vietnam.
12 In some places, the Ho Chi Minh trail ran literally through villages. The headman of a Jarai village that I visited in 1997 pointed out that the trail had been running right across his front porch. He said that
there was a constant traffic of soldiers and goods in both directions. The village suffered from numerous bombing raids by American B-52s. I saw one bomb, still intact, half buried under a house. Apparently it had fallen there through the roof, but had not exploded and had been left alone by the villagers ever since. (See Kiernan 1996: 16-25 for an account of the American bombing of Cambodia).

13 Most of the tourists visiting the province are backpackers in search of adventure. The famous volcanic crater lake, Yeak Laom, near the provincial capital, and the highland villages are the major attractions (see Herod 1996 for details on the lake, which has been identified as a site for environmental protection and tourism). At the time of writing, there were nine international aid organizations active in the province: AD HOC, CIDSE, COERR, Evangelical Mission to the Unreached, Health Unlimited, IDRC, OXFAM/NOVIB, UNDP/CARERE, and World Concern/ICC.

14 Much of the information regarding the plantation in O Yadao District was culled from an excellent report by Sara Colm (1996). I visited the area in February 1997. Most of the villages in O Yadao District are Jarai.

15 There are many examples from Thailand of minorities who had relied on upland agriculture for their livelihoods and are suddenly declared by the state encroachers on newly-created National Parks. The most notorious is that of the Huew Kha Kaeng National Park in western Thailand, where there is an ongoing conflict between the Karen and the state over land-use issues.

16 During one of my field visits to Ratanakiri, I explored the Banlung market in considerable detail to ascertain the kinds of produce being traded. One fact that captured my attention was some elderly highlander women having difficulty in counting the cash that they received for a particular sale. A Khmer woman had purchased a quantity of baskets and vegetables from one old Kreung woman and paid her a bundle of riel notes. The old woman then passed on the notes to her daughter to count. After the purchase was concluded, I interviewed her about her trading. For the past four years, two to three times a week, she had been carrying baskets and vegetables from her village (about 5 km from Banlung town) for sale at the market, and earning around 15,000 riel per trip. She could not read the numbers on the bank notes, but had learned to tell their value by the different colors.

17 As one foreign observer put it: “...development policies of the Cambodian government regarding Ratanakiri are hypocritical. But it is consistent in the sense that they go where the money is in both cases”.

18 In my capacity as a UNDP Programme Officer, I participated in the various workshops in which the policy was drafted. The whole process lasted two years.

19 NGO representatives expressed their views that adopting the policy on HPD does not necessarily mean that it will be actually implemented, as local officials have little incentive and motivation to do so.

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Abstract: In Ratanakiri, a remote northeastern province of Cambodia, rapid involvement in recent regional Southeast Asian economic developments results in changes in economic and social structures, and broad development processes and local livelihoods have become intertwined. Population growth, lowland Khmer immigration, commercial plantations, and logging increase pressure on land, with changes in land use showing in the landscape. Increasing numbers of highlanders practicing swidden farming and collecting non-timber forest products will soon have to altogether abandon traditional patterns and seek alternative sources of livelihood. This strongly argues for better land distribution and land-use planning, including recognition of indigenous peoples' traditional land-use patterns and rights, lest they be forcibly displaced or marginalized within their own territories.

Affaires frontalières : transformations socio-économiques à Ratanakiri (Cambodge du nord-est)

Résumé : l’incorporation brusque de la lointaine province de Ratanakiri (nord-est du Cambodge) dans l’évolution économique récente de l’Asie du sud-est induit une altération de ses structures économiques et sociales, les grands processus du développement influençant les modes de vie locaux. Croissance démographique, immigration de Khmers des basses terres, grandes plantations et exploitation forestière créent une pression foncière, dont les effets sur l’utilisation du sol sont visibles dans le paysage. En nombre croissant, les montagnards, esser teurs et collecteurs de produits forestiers, devront abandonner leurs pratiques traditionnelles pour chercher d’autres moyens d’existence. Pour éviter leur déplacement forcé ou leur marginalisation sur leurs propres territoires, il paraît crucial de mieux planifier l’utilisation du sol et la répartition des terres et de reconnaître les pratiques traditionnelles et les droits fonciers des peuples indigènes.

Keywords: Cambodia, Ratanakiri, indigenous minorities, development, land rights, land use, livelihood.

Mots-clés : Cambodge, Ratanakiri, minorités indigènes, développement, droits fonciers, utilisation du sol, moyens d’existence.