Empowering Indigenous Peoples:
A Case Study of the Highlanders’ Association of Cambodia

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Bhutan+10: Gender and Sustainable Mountain Development in a Changing World

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1. Highlanders’ Association
Mission Statement

“To ensure that Indigenous communities
in Ratanakiri Province
are actively participating in protecting their rights,
especially rights to protect and use land and natural
resources in a sustainable manner, according to their
culture and traditions.”
2. Context

- Bio-diversity hot-spot/rich national resources
- Long civil war followed by lack of land tenure and rapid exploitation
- Weak civil society
- Tri-lateral development schemes: plantations (esp. Rubber, cassava, cashews, black pepper), mining, timber
- Resource out-flow to China, Vietnam, Thailand
2. What is the Highlanders’ Association?

- A civil society advocacy network of indigenous ethnic minority people
- First network of its kind in the country
- Increasing capacity of indigenous men and women to preserve land, forest, natural resources, water sources on which their livelihood depends
- Giving voice to the people to influence the decisions affecting them
3. Challenges:

- The race to develop/exploit resource-rich Ratanakiri Province
- First advocacy network/ representative council in the country—previously the only model was the hierarchical NGO model
  
- Land, logging, mining concessions
- Tri-lateral Government Development schemes
- Uncontrolled/illegal logging
- Coercion and Corruption
  (e.g. 1999- villages thumbprint documents and find they have exchanged land for bags of salt)

- Lack of Land Tenure
- Lack of Voice
- Lack of Information
- Lack of Process of Law
- Indigenous people have limited knowledge of national language/market economy/illiteracy
4. Launching Highlanders Association

2000-2001:
Consultation process – intra ethnic and Inter ethnic consultation with all ethnic groups to identify key issues

2001: 7 villages, 7 ethnic groups
• Establish Highlanders’ Association Network
• Develop and strengthen network

2012: 94 villages, 8 ethnic groups
• Awareness raising concerning rights
• Women in leadership (1/3 of Council members)
• Land and forest protection
• Strengthen cultural identity
Highlanders’ Association

Support Organization

Board of Directors
5 ps

Coordinator
(Chanthy)

11 field staff +
2 admin

Secretariat
3 ps (1 female)

Community Council
35 ps (12 females)

18 Commune Consultation Groups - (subdistrict level)

CCG Commune Consultation Groups

94 Village Consultation Groups

Village Consultation Group
VCG

VCG

VCG

VCG

VCG

VCT

Community Network

Community Council
35 ps (12 females)

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5. Effective Strategies

- Grassroots network province-wide
- Representation (not hierarchical)
- Female representatives all levels
- Local staff - local languages
- Consultations (women, men, youth, community elders)
- Capacity Building for women and men in leadership
- Intergenerational activities: youth - elders
5. Effective Strategies cont’d

Annual Intra ethnic and Inter ethnic exchanges

• Annual Forums, representatives from all 94 villages, 300 people
• role plays and dance portray land protection, planning, consultation

Representative Elders’ Advisory Board (Community Council)- 35 persons

Representative Commune Consultation Groups (18)

Village Consultation Groups (94)
6. Impact

- Advocacy at Provincial, Regional and National levels
- Sharing the model: in Cambodia, Asia region
- Expanding Network of indigenous ethnic villages province-wide- over half villages province-wide
- Advisory council representing all indigenous ethnic groups
- Villagers have increased knowledge, confidence to raise their voices, protect their land and interests: ‘We are not alone’
7. Lessons Learned

Organizational Development:

- Local staff (not outsiders, even if better educated)
- Advisory ‘Community Counsel’ representatives from all ethnic minority groups provides direction
- Governance Board must have ethnic minority representation

Approach:

Use local languages for consultation, awareness raising, training, planning

Leadership training/capacity building men and women

Focus on strengths: networking, awareness raising, advocacy

Strength is Advocacy Network, not NGO – type activities (Partner with NGOs for practical development activities)
8. The way forward…

‘We are no longer alone,

We are working together to find solutions….’

the indigenous communities of Ratanakiri Province