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

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The traditional lands and forests of the indigenous peoples in the Cambodian Highlands are under threat. Most communities rely on agriculture and the collection of forest products for their livelihoods. In the past decade, major land concessions, logging, and in-migration have dramatically increased pressure on the traditional lands and threatened the livelihoods of these indigenous peoples. They are especially vulnerable due to the close proximity to international borders (Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam), coupled with tri-lateral development schemes (Cambodia-Laos-Vietnam), which accelerate land alienation and extraction of raw materials. The case of Cambodia is representative of irreversible changes and impacts on traditional agricultural societies that are happening in many parts of the world. The Highlanders’ Association, launched in Ratanakiri province in the early 2000s by an indigenous woman, gives highlanders a voice to address the issues affecting their land security and natural resources, while strengthening their cultural identity. The Association implements grassroots consultation in local languages, networking, and advocacy efforts involving both all ethnic groups in the province and at the national level. Capacity building and province-wide networking strengthens the highland men and women to address the issues facing them, while strengthening their cultural identity. Highland women receive specialized training in leadership, gender, and skills training. Challenges include lack of a functioning governance structure and political will to ensure legal and policy provisions are adequately implemented, as well as absence of grassroots civil society to claim legal entitlements and hold government accountable.