



COMMUNITY FORESTRY INTERNATIONAL

BUDDHISM AND THE ROLE OF THE PAGODA IN COMMUNITY FORESTRY DEVELOPMENT IN CAMBODIA

Amanda Bradley & Robert Oberndorf

A Brief Summary of Activities Prepared by Community Forestry Alliance for Cambodia (CFAC)



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COMMUNITY FORESTRY INTERNATIONAL, INC.
Supporting Sustainable Management & Restoration of the World's Forests

Community Forestry International (CFI) assists rural communities to regenerate forests by helping policy makers, development agencies, NGOs, and professional foresters develop the legal instruments, human resource capacities, and negotiation processes and methods to support resident resource managers. Community forest management contributes to livelihood security and poverty alleviation that, in turn, leads to sustainable development. CFI enables community forest management strategies to become an integral part of stabilizing forest management world-wide. CFI strategies are implemented through four interrelated thematic program areas. These include 1) Regional and National Policy Dialogues, 2) Mediation Processes and Methods for Enhancing Tenure Security, 3) Participatory Research & Field Programs, and 4) Communication. The program components are designed to engage national policy makers, professional practitioners, and communities to facilitate learning, reduce conflicts, and ultimately create management agreements that result in more equitable, sustainable forest

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Front cover: A monk from Samraong Pagoda who is active in patrolling a 14,000 hectare forest in Oddar Meanchey province.

Back cover: Mlup Baitong has encouraged monks to conduct tree ordination ceremonies as a means to raise awareness among the community about the importance of forest protection. Here, Venerable Ty Soy ordains a tree in Chambok commune, Kompong Speu.

Buddhism and the Role of the Pagoda in Community
Forestry Development in Cambodia

by

Amanda Bradley & Robert J. Oberndorf

7. About the Authors

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- The financial management system of pagodas is generally very weak, so accountability could be an issue.
- The pagoda is a male-dominated hierarchical environment with few opportunities for women to involve in decision-making.
- Monks in some pagodas have developed lethargic lifestyles and it may be difficult to motivate them to take action.
- The Ministry of Cults and Religious Affairs which is an overseeing body for pagodas, is very weak; pagodas operate very autonomously.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| 1. Background | 3 |
| 2. Examples of Buddhist/Environment Initiatives and Potential for Collaboration in CF | 3 |
| 2.1 The Association for Buddhism and the Environment/ The Sangha Network | 4 |
| 2.2 Mlup Baitong's Buddhism and Environment Program | 4 |
| 2.3 Buddhism for Development Kompong Thom (BFDK) | 5 |
| 2.4 Sante Sena's Community Forestry Project | 5 |
| 2.5 Ven. Bun Saluth and the Monk's Protected Forest in Oddar Meanchey | 6 |
| 3. Legal Aspects for Pagoda Involvement in Forest Management | 6 |
| 3.1 Status of Religious Forests | 6 |
| 3.2 Monastic Property | 7 |
| 3.3 Role of Monks in Production Forest Community Forestry | 8 |
| 4. Need for Extension Materials | 8 |
| 5. Benefits and Challenges | 9 |
| 6. About the Authors | 11 |

1. Background

Approximately 90% of the Cambodian population is Buddhist, with varying degrees of practice, knowledge and belief. There are about 4000 pagodas located across the country, and they are typically the geographic and spiritual center of Cambodian villages. Cambodian pagodas usually have from 10 to 40 monks, with fewer or no nuns. Monks especially are held in very high esteem, and villagers will frequently consult with monks for solving problems and issues in the community or even for foretelling their future. Some monks may remain with the Sangha for many years; however, the majority of monks stay for shorter 3-4 year terms. For many monks, the pagoda represents a means of receiving a rudimentary education, particularly when families are too poor to send their children to government schools. The structure in the pagoda is hierarchical with a Chief Monk, and two deputy monks referred to as "Left side" and "Right side". There is usually a community pagoda committee composed of village elders, referred to as *achars*. Depending on the influence and autonomy of the Chief Monk, this committee may or may not play a very important role in pagoda affairs and decision-making.

Buddhist philosophy promotes harmony with nature, and there are many stories and fables from the Buddha's life which reflect the importance of respect for nature and living things. The forest, in particular, is a key element in the life of the Buddha, providing his birthplace, the sanctuary for his enlightenment, and his dying place.

The prospect for developing community forestry through the pagoda is a relatively new concept in Cambodia, however, there are some interesting models and initiatives which are already underway in several different provinces. There are a number of challenges as well as benefits to be anticipated.

2. Examples of Buddhist/Environment Initiatives and Potential for Collaboration in CF

The following listing of ongoing activities related to Buddhism and the environment is not comprehensive, but only aims to give several examples of some of the major actors and activities.

The Association for Buddhism and the Environment (ABE) /The Sangha Network

The ABE is a very new association of members of the Sangha, currently in the process of drafting statutes and applying for formal status as an association. The idea for this association grew out

envisioned under the Forestry Law and Community Forestry Sub-Decree. Monks could play important roles in helping to form the communities, be on the committees, negotiate with government officials, etc.

4. Need for Extension Materials

There is a need for extension materials which link community forestry with Buddhism and the role of monks and the pagoda. Possible ideas for such materials are:

- A video or live slideshow on some successful cases where monks are playing leading roles in establishing and supporting community forestry.
- Posters which can be used for the Buddhist holy days and festivals relating Buddhism with forest protection.
- Audio tapes on community forestry which can be played on pagoda speaker systems
- General extension materials on the CF process which can be used by monks

A legal analysis of CF on pagoda lands in simple language.

5. Benefits and Challenges

Some of the anticipated benefits to working with monks and pagodas on community forestry are:

- Monks command respect and may be able to influence the community to respect rules to protect the forest and wildlife by appealing to Buddhist principles. More bold monks may be able to prevent illegal activity by outsiders or successfully negotiate land conflicts.
- Villagers regularly come to the pagoda (approximately every 8th day for the *t'gai sel*, or Buddhist holy day), so there are established communication channels.
- Buddhism promotes the sacred aspect of land and forest, creating a good philosophical basis for community forestry.
- The ABE network may be an effective means for sharing experience on CF among monks. Pagodas have good potential to raise their own funds, contributing to project sustainability.

Some of the possible disadvantages or challenges are:

- Monks are often leaving the Sangha after they receive skills and experience with the project; therefore capacity-building efforts are rarely sustainable.

This is a cumbersome process that needs to go all the way to the Council of Ministers for approval, and there is little chance that an area that has not been traditionally considered religiously significant could hope to be classified strictly as a Religious Protection Forest. In addition, Protection Forests are managed by the Forest Administration, not monks, pagoda associations or community groups.

3.2 Monastic Property

Monastic property under the Land Law is a very specific type of private property under collective ownership. Monastic Property is not considered State Property under the Land Law, therefore it could not be considered as part of the Permanent Forest Reserve, which is State Public Property, and would not be subject to legal provisions related to Community Forestry.

Article 20 of the Land Law states that "land and structures existing within the premises of Buddhist monasteries are patrimony allocated in perpetuity to the Buddhist religion and are available to its followers, under the care of the Pagoda Committee. This property cannot be sold, exchanged or donated.

Monastery property may be rented or sharecropped on condition that the income from such rental or sharecropping shall be used only for religious affairs. "Procedures to select the pagoda committee and its representatives to protect the pagoda's interest shall be determined by Prakas of the Ministry of Cults and Religious Affairs." (Article 21) At the time of writing this article, it does not appear that this Prakas has been enacted.

If there are monastery properties that are large enough to be considered as a forest, then it is presumable that the Pagoda Committee could either lease or operate the area in the form of a rather small community forest, with all monetary benefits going to the monastery itself for religious purposes, such as charitable work. Whatever the case may be, it is up to the pagoda committee to decide how the monastic property is managed.

3.3 Role of Monks in Production Forest Community Forestry

There are certainly no provisions that would limit the role of monks in Community Forestry as

from a regional conference on Buddhism and Environment held in May 2004, and organized by the UK-based Alliance for Religions and Conservation (ARC) and Mlup Baitong, and financially supported by the World Bank. The ABE will play a role as a forum for monks and nuns from around the country to share experience on environmental issues, and to promote more sustainable natural resource management. The membership and workplan are still being formulated, and funding will be necessary to get activities underway.

ABE has the advantage that ARC and Mlup Baitong are working closely with the monks to formulate the structure. Mr. David Mead, the former Director of Conservation International, is also volunteering. The main challenge is that this organization is very new, and it has already experienced difficulty in finding consensus among a diverse group of monks as well as identifying monks who are genuinely committed to ABE's aims.

Mlup Baitong's Buddhism and Environment Program

Mlup Baitong has been working with monks and pagodas in Kompong Thom and Kompong Speu provinces since 1999, originally on environmental education and tree planting. More recently, Mlup Baitong has produced a "Service Manual" with a menu of possible interventions for pagodas, ranging from water management policy support, to bulletin boards, to assistance with accounting systems. All of these interventions are aimed to support the pagoda as a model of environmental sustainability. Monks are responsible to select the services that they would like to obtain from Mlup Baitong, and to dedicate some of their resources towards cooperation on the activities. In addition to this project, Mlup Baitong's Resource Center is providing environment trainings to a number of pagodas around the country, either through its contract with GTZ (Kampot) or to associates of ABE (Kg. Chhnang, Pailin). In 2005, Mlup Baitong will assist a community called "Pum Dong" to implement community forestry in one area in Kompong Speu province. This project will be implemented in close cooperation with the nearby pagoda. Mlup Baitong is experienced in both community forestry and work with pagodas; however, the number of qualified staff and potential for significant expansion is limited.

Buddhism for Development Kompong Thom (BFDK)

BFDK is an NGO based in Kompong Thom province, and run by the Venerable Ly Kom, a local monk. The pagoda where he is based, Wat Voyiew, is a model pagoda with a large well-tended

seedling nursery, vegetable gardens, water filters, improved cookstove, composting, rice bank, and community forestry support to several local communities in the vicinity. The success of the work in this pagoda is largely due to the hard work and commitment of the Chief Monk Venerable Ly Kom, as well as the support of other organizations and donors. Unfortunately, the Venerable Ly Kom will leave the Sangha in the near future, although he will continue to work with BFDK.

Santi Sena's Community Forestry Project

The Venerable Nhem Kim Teng runs an organization in Svay Rieng province called Santi Sena, also based out of a pagoda in the provincial town. The main accomplishment of this organization has been Buddhist environmental education and reforestation projects (acacia, eucalyptus) with local communities. Villages in two communes are supported to develop community forestry.

Venerable Bun Saluth and the Monk's Protected Forest in Oddar Meanchey

The Venerable Bun Saluth is one of the highest ranking monks in Oddar Meanchay province, and with the support of monks from Samraong pagoda and local authorities he has been effectively protecting a 14,000 hectare area of forest in the province. The forest area is currently viewed as a "monk's forest"; however, the Venerable is eager to involve communities in management. Relationships with the local FA officials have been established and some activities for establishing community forestry have started, such as boundary demarcation. The Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) has conducted an initial assessment of wildlife in the area and identified several rare or endangered species of significance. The remoteness of the site along with the current lack of clear management and financial systems are a challenge to providing significant support here.

3. Legal Aspects for Pagoda Involvement in Forest Management

The Forestry Law, the Community Forestry Sub-decree, and the Community Forestry Guidelines Prakas (currently being developed) provide guidance for community forestry implementation, and many of the policies and procedures described therein are applicable to community forests facilitated by pagodas as well. In addition, the Land Law contains some provisions which relate

to pagoda lands and their use, and may also be applicable. It is advisable to conduct a legal analysis on the land use mechanisms by which pagodas can establish community forests on their own lands or facilitate them on lands in the vicinity.

3.1 Status of Religious Forests

Religious Forests can be protected as Protection Forest through mechanisms in the Forestry Law (2001). Under Article 10 of the Forestry Law, Protection Forests are to be maintained primarily for protection of the forest ecosystems and natural resources therein. Protection Forests can consist of the following:

- Reserve for special ecosystem;
- Research forest;
- Forests for watershed protection or regulating water sources;
- Recreation forests;
- Botanical Gardens; and
- Religious Forests

A Protection Forest can be established for more than one of the classifications above. Protection Forests, including those for religious purposes, are created by Sub-Decree as proposed by the Minister of MAFF and enacted by the Council of Ministers. Local communities have customary user rights within Protection Forests, but these rights are limited to activities that will only have minor impacts on the forest and must conform to provisions within a Protection Forest management plan written and enacted by the Forestry Administration (Articles 10 & 23).

Religious Forest is not defined within the Forestry Law, but the intent is probably to protect those areas that have traditionally been identified by a local group or community as having religious or spiritual significance.

Community Forestry, as defined within the Forestry Law and the Community Forestry Sub-Decree, can only occur within Production Forest Areas, not Protection Forest Areas. Community Forestry type activities within a Protection Forest would have to be called something else, would most likely be very limited, and would be incorporated into the management plan that is written and approved by the Forestry Administration and adopted by the Minister of MAFF through Prakas.