

(Mondul Kiri Province, Cambodia) Joy is etched into the faces of indigenous families who have gathered here to celebrate the Royal Government of Cambodia's preparations to formally recognize their community. On the eve of a general assembly of the people of the Orona, Phnong Group in Keo Seima, Mondul Kiri Province, the community's elders – in colourful head dresses – share wine and stories of how their ancestors had appeared in their dreams dancing in celebration of the triumph that is about to unfold.

The following day the community members would approve their organization's by-laws and prepare to register their community with the Government – an important step in the long history of indigenous peoples in Cambodia, who for centuries have had to suffer neglect, discrimination and encroachment on their territories and resources. This event brings within reach the promise of peace and security over the ancestral lands and their resources.

Indigenous peoples in Cambodia quite literally live off the land. Without recognition that the land is indeed theirs to cultivate – they cannot, by their own definition, achieve decent work.

The Ministry of Rural Development estimates that indigenous peoples make up 1.4 per cent of Cambodia's population of 14 million. While these various communities are scattered across 15 of the country's 24 provinces, more than half are found in the provinces of Ratanakiri and Mondul Kiri where the majority of the population is indigenous.

The indigenous peoples have also been the traditional managers of over 4 million hectares of forest lands and ecosystems in the country. Even so, indigenous communities throughout Cambodia have struggled with loss of rights to their lands, limited access to natural resources, suppression of traditional ways of life and livelihood, and a gradual loss of culture, cohesion and traditional governance structures. They also suffer from human rights violations, lack of participation in decision-making and various problems associated with poverty.

In Ratanakiri Province, for instance, the village of La En Kren's proximity to the provincial capital, Baan Lung, has made it a popular destination for migrants from lowland provinces. This has pushed up the price of land. Unclear boundaries with neighbouring villages have also caused territorial and natural resource conflicts. External commercial influences have also weakened community solidarity as some members are tempted to earn quick cash from selling timber to outsiders and clearing forest land for cash crops.

But the move toward recognizing the rights of indigenous peoples is gaining momentum. Cambodia's Land Law in 2001 calls for collective land ownership rights of indigenous peoples and other immovable properties. The long-awaited Policy for Indigenous Peoples' Development was adopted in April 2009 recognizing the rights of the indigenous peoples to their cultures, to universal education standards, to vocational skills, health, environment, land, agriculture and other resources.

In order to support the Land Law of 2001 -- and assist in implementing guidelines and help build institutional capacity and resources -- the DANIDA-supported ILO project "Support to Indigenous Peoples' Project in Cambodia" launched in 2005 is working to strengthen capacities of government agencies in designing and implementing easy-to-follow guidelines for registering communities. At the same time, it collaborates with a host of organizations in preparing communities for registration and undergoing institutional procedures for land protection and ownership.

"We have solved our land boundary conflict with (neighbouring) Kachorn village and outsiders," said the community's elder, Kang Nav. He added that no one in La En Kren wants to sell land to outsiders and that all community members fully comply with the community's by-laws. Since being registered, the community has been able to negotiate with investors.

Kang Nav's community is one of two indigenous communities in Ratanakiri Province that have so far been registered by the Ministry of Interior as a legal entity. Andong Kraleung, in Mondul Kiri Province, has also gained a legal identity and will be the first indigenous community in the country to get a collective title over its ancestral land.

Preparing by-laws, holding general assemblies and registering legal entities may sound totally foreign for indigenous communities which are accustomed to time-honoured ways of keeping their social and communal identity. Nevertheless, community members feel very proud of the processes that they have gone through. Apart from having passed by-laws and registration procedures, the community has set up a committee of traditional leaders and local officials which aid compliance with the internal rules and by-laws. They also arbitrate conflicts related to natural resource management.

There are over one hundred more communities in the province that are still not recognized. In this respect, La En Kren and Andong Krleung serve as inspirations and models for the rest of Cambodia's indigenous peoples. Only communal solidarity, supported by legal recognition, would help these communities preserve their traditions, occupations and ultimately gain collective ownership over indigenous lands. The triumphal dance of the ancestors will continue and take root among the descendants – this time with their rights to land enshrined in national law, their means of living respected and celebrated in both spirit and practice.

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