

(Ratanakiri Province, Cambodia): 2012 started well for Moch Ten, Chief of the Tumpoun indigenous people in La L'eun Kraen Village. "We are very happy" he says.

In December 2011, the Tumpoun people he leads in Ratanakiri Province became one of the first three such communities in Cambodia receive land titles for their territory, under a pilot scheme initiated by the Cambodian Government. The 700 hectares of farmland shared amongst 130 Tumpoun families is now secure and one of the country's most marginalized groups is now looking forward to a new era of social justice by being given the means to shape their own future.

"Land certification means that our land can be kept for the future. It means that our natural resources and our livelihoods are secure", explains the Chief. "Many things would happen if we had not received this land title, such as encroachment by Khmer people or by private companies".

For the Tumpoun, and other indigenous peoples, land titles mean more than just the possession of property. Indigenous communities make up around 3 per cent of Cambodia's population and are among the most vulnerable groups in Cambodian society. Land is of a unique importance to their way of life and identity, yet in recent years indigenous people have increasingly come under threat from deforestation, mining and agricultural businesses implemented through (often controversial) government land concessions. Without recognition that the land is theirs to cultivate, it would be impossible for them to lift themselves out of poverty and take an equal stake in society.

The importance of the link between social justice, and economic and social protection has been highlighted by the ILO's Director-General, Juan Somavia. "The plight of so many indigenous and tribal peoples is a reminder of the urgent need for a new era of social justice with patterns of growth that serve all peoples," he said, in a message for International Day of the World's Indigenous Peoples in August 2011.

The Tumpoun are among more than 100 indigenous communities in Cambodia who fought the difficult and lengthy battle to secure the titles to their often resource-rich territory. "The process took a long time," Chief Moch Ten said. "The other challenge is that we are illiterate. But we got help, especially from the ILO and the Land Department and also the Provincial Department. ILO assisted us a lot in building the capacity of our communities and in preparing administration papers, budgeting and just encouraging us and providing solidarity".

The land title issue was just one of the key areas where the [ILO's Support to Indigenous Peoples Project](#) (ILO-ITP) has assisted indigenous groups. Through the project the groups learn about their rights and the procedures for getting land titles. They also received help with translating government documents related to land titling from Khmer into their local languages (verbally due to their illiteracy) and helping the village chiefs submit information.

Funded by the [Danish Agency for International Development \(DANIDA\)](#) and in operation since 2005, the Project's main activities have focused on promoting and facilitating the registration of indigenous communities' land rights within the framework of Cambodia's 2001 land law. Work has focused on three provinces with the highest population of indigenous peoples: Ratanakiri, Mondulakiri and Preah Vihear. It includes training on the rights of the indigenous for communities and capacity building for stakeholders. With the assistance of ILO, NGOs and others, several other communities are taking steps to preserving their ancestral land and resources, and more applications for land titles are expected to be made.

"The Government has been a key partner in this work. However, together we have a great deal more to accomplish" said Sek Sophorn, National Coordinator of the ILO-ITP Project. "Although the Government is a signatory to tools in protecting the rights of indigenous peoples, it has yet to ratify the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, (No. 169, 1989), which recognizes the value of indigenous and tribal peoples' specific knowledge and skills for self-determined development processes".