



CICP Commentaries

CICP Commentaries are intended to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy relevant background and analysis of contemporary developments. The views of the authors are their own and do not represent the official position of the Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace (CICP). These commentaries may be reproduced electronically or in print with prior permission

No. 10

Climate Change Movement in Cambodia

By

Chak Sopheap

Migration Platform Program

Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace

Cambodia held its first National Forum on Climate Change in Phnom Penh on Oct. 19, to raise awareness of climate change issues and their effects on socioeconomic development. This is a positive development for Cambodia, where issues related to climate change are likely to be incorporated into its national development plans.

On the final day of the three-day forum, Cambodia issued its draft position ahead of December's Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. It said it would do "its utmost" to reduce greenhouse gases, but developed countries must help in its efforts.

Cambodia's Prime Minister Hun Sen said that developed nations must do more for their poorer cousins as they have more resources. He said Cambodia was not responsible for climate change but is a victim. Although natural disasters ranging from typhoons, earthquakes and tsunamis have hard hit countries like the Philippines, Taiwan and Indonesia, among others, the impact on Cambodia, Vietnam and Laos has been fairly low. But apparently it is believed that they are signs of the impending impact of climate change.

Cambodia's present actions toward combating climate change can help the country achieve sustainable development so the next generation will not have to bear the cost of its current natural resource depletion. The U.N. Human Development Report 2007/2008 said, "Humanity is living beyond its environmental means and running up ecological debts that future generations will be unable to repay."

But the Cambodian government must reexamine its current practices, which often neglect or bypass regulations on environmental protection. For example, no environmental impact assessment report was filed before the government granted a contract to a private company to fill the Boeng Kak Lake in Phnom Penh.

Although the company recently obtained an EIA stating that the said structure is a “dead lake” and the project would have “no major impact on the environment,” the lake is prone to flooding during the rainy season and no estimate on the severity of risk due to flooding has been provided.

There must also be a proper cost-benefit analysis that does not place weight on economic gains alone, but also embraces a sustainable development plan where risk estimations are carefully projected. For example, the government authorized a private company to pursue a development project of palm oil, cassava plantations and livestock farms in the Bokor Mountain region, but the project is expected to affect the natural beauty as well as the quality of land and the environment.

Without risk reduction and protective mechanisms, the state and its citizens will have to bear the risks and costs of future adjustments, which could be higher than the current predicted economic benefits.

Therefore, the government must seek to enhance a resilient environmental risk management plan and invoke existing principles and laws. One is Precautionary Principle 15 of the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, which is one of the guiding principles of the U.N. Framework Convention on Climate Change.

The Cambodian Ministry of Environment ratified this convention on Dec.13, 1993: “In order to protect the environment, the precautionary approach shall be widely applied by States according to their capabilities. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation,” it said.

This places the burden on the state, and not the community that is the victim of environmental damage, to prevent environmental degradation. But in most cases, the state and the companies it tasks to environmental projects are never held responsible for disregarding laws and causing damage to the environment. So the government must take responsibility to implement the convention it has ratified.

All stakeholders, including individuals, groups or organizations that can affect, be affected by, or perceive themselves to be affected by the risk of environmental degradation, must involve themselves in determining and taking decisions on any tolerable risk. Access to information must be ensured as provided by the precautionary principle as well as the 1996 Cambodian Law on Environmental Protection and Natural Resource Management.

Article 11 of the environmental law clearly states, “The Ministry of Environment shall immediately inform concerned ministries whenever the Ministry of Environment finds that natural resources are not being conserved, developed, or managed [or] used in a rational and sustainable manner.” Articles 16, 17, and 18 also elaborate and encourage public participation and access to information.

All this should not be viewed as going against development projects of the Cambodian government, but rather as seeking to emphasize the framework for action by all stakeholders to protect the environment.

Cambodia has a weak social infrastructure, so the poor are more prone to be hard hit by the impact of climate change and environmental damage. Therefore they deserve the right to participate and benefit from the government's so-called development projects.

On the other hand, people must not take the government's action for granted, but must try to preserve the natural resources and environment through action within their power. For example, households can use reusable bags rather than plastic bags while shopping.

There must be greater awareness of the fact that natural resources cannot be easily renewed and the cost of environmental reconstruction is higher than preservation. Every citizen must make environmental protection his or her civic responsibility.