

The National Advocacy Conference Organising Committee

MEDIA RELEASE

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NGOs call for Reforms in Land and Natural Resource Management

Major NGOs today called for more effective and sustainable management of natural resources in Cambodia, in a gathering of more than 250 representatives at the **7th National Advocacy Conference, 'Working Together for Good Governance of Land and Natural Resources in Cambodia'**.

Key civil society organisers and community representatives discussed a wide range of issues, including land dispute resolution; the need for sound social and environmental management of extractive industries; issues of indigenous people and land rights, and resource revenue management.

Chhith Sam Ath, Executive Director of NGO Forum on Cambodia, said that the conference had allowed many points of view to be expressed, but all felt that the management of natural resources needs to be transparent and bring benefits to all Cambodians.

"It is vital that we see progress in these areas in Cambodia. Currently landlessness is estimated at between 20-25% of the total population.

"We call on the Government to enact reforms to ensure that the lives of the poor and vulnerable in Cambodia are protected", he said.

Current statistics show that Cambodian land size is 17.65 million, of which the state owns 14.5 million hectares, approximately 80% of this area, while private entities own 3.6 million hectares, or 20% of land size. While land grabbing is the critical issue, there are concerns over the effects of large scale foreign direct investment in agriculture and agri-business through the granting of Economic Land Concessions. Out of recent land disputes, a substantial proportion were related to ELCs.

The Government's issuing of Directive 01 in May 2012 has been discussed in terms of its results and recommendations were provided by community representatives.

The issue of environmental governance is challenging in Cambodia, and it is vital that CSOs and government work together in future to ensure secured access to land and resources for all Cambodians.

The Royal Government of Cambodia recognizes that land reform is vital to enhance social stability, develop an efficient land market, create environmental sustainability and to increase agricultural productivity to meet the overall goal of poverty reduction. Yet many issues need to be addressed.

A key point of discussion was the management of revenues from Extractive Industries, which should be handled in a transparent manner, benefitting the overall national account.

NGOs are calling on the Government to ensure that land and resource management is undertaken in such a manner that the poor and vulnerable, especially indigenous people, are protected.

Good governance is key to the Rectangular Strategy of RGC. This needs to be equitable and fair by making the public participate in all matters through democratic and peaceful means. It is beneficial to ensure that

the free will and the informed choices of the majority are adopted and implemented while protecting the rights and welfare of the minority.

Conference participants called on the Government to take various measures to safeguard the population in regard to Extractive Industries, Forests and Indigenous People and Land and Housing. They included:

- Ensure that information on upcoming investments is disseminated in advance, and full environmental and social impact studies are undertaken;
- Establish an extractive industries fund, managed by an independent committee, for the benefit of future generations;
- Develop technical capacity on these issues for Cambodians;
- Make publicly available information on contracts and agreements, revenues and spending;
- Do not grant concessions for community lands which are already registered;

Participants called on the private sector take the following measures:

- Consult with affected communities before proceeding with developments
- Follow responsible business operations in respect of human rights
- Make development plans available to the public, especially affected communities
- Provide fair compensation to communities impacted by projects
- Establish community development facilities in affected areas
- Comply with pre-approved and signed terms and conditions in contracts
- Engage community and CSO participation during study and exploration

Participants asked of CSOs and development partners that they engage in the following ways:

- Continue to support the process of land and forest titling
- Provide information and research to communities
- Continue to monitor the Cambodian judicial system
- Engage in processes for evaluation of these changes to the environment and to society

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The conference is co-organized by 18 NGOs comprising: The Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC), Advocacy and Policy Institute (API), Cambodian Human Rights Action Committee (CHRAC), Community Legal Education Center (CLEC), Committee for Free and Fair Election in Cambodia (COMFREL), Cambodians for Resource Revenue Transparency (CRRT), Cambodian Volunteers for Society (CVS), Development and Partnership in Action (DPA), Gender And Development (GAD/C), Housing Rights Task Force (HRTF), Indigenous Community Support Organization (ICSO), Khmer Youth for Social Development (KYSD), Life With Dignity (LWD), STAR Kampuchea, The NGO Forum on Cambodia (NGO Forum), Human Rights of Vigilance in Cambodia (Vigilance), World Vision Cambodia (WVC), and Youth Resource Development Program (YRDP).