**CAMBODIA MUST TAKE ACTION TO IMPROVE THE LIVES OF THE POOR AND**

 **VULNERABLE IN THIS ELECTION YEAR, 2013**

With the national election looming on 28 July 2013 – less one month away, there are many challenges for 5th mandate Royal Government of Cambodia and civil society to face together to ensure improvements in the lives of Cambodians for the future. The NGO Forum on Cambodia, which represents almost 100 NGOs, works continually with communities to raise the standard of living of the poor and vulnerable of Cambodia. Much of our work is on behalf of NGO members and communities affected by land and environmental policies, areas in which significant improvements are needed and possible.

The 5th mandate Royal Government of Cambodia should continue to recognize that land reform is vital to enhance social stability and to meet the overall goal of poverty reduction. Several efforts have been made by the government through the formulation of the regulations and other legal frameworks. They have introduced some important initiatives in the past year, especially in the allocation of individual and collective land titles in several provinces. We congratulate the current government on this important initiative but more remains to be done. Land issues have become extremely serious in the past 12 months, with increasing violence and arrests as people try to save their homes and land.

Our experience with communities confirms that forced evictions continue in Cambodia both in rural and urban areas. Current statistics show that Cambodian land size is 17.65 million hectares of which the state owns approximately 80% of the area, while private entities own 3.6 million, or 20% of land size. Recent NGO figures have shown that since 2000 there have been recorded disputes involving 150,000 families, some 700,000 people, nationwide.

While land grabbing is a critical issue, it is important that the current position of the granting of Economic Land Concessions is clarified. The transparency and consultation with affected communities, NGOs related to the development projects need also improvement. Progress in these areas will greatly assist the lives of the poor and vulnerable. At present landlessness is estimated between 20-25% of the whole population. In addition, 23% of households are considered to be ‘’land poor”, holding less than 0.5 hectares of land, which is not enough to survive by subsidence farming. In urban areas, where land prices are increasing poor households are especially vulnerable to evictions. To this end, there is a need to ensure that Circular 03, supporting sub-national level initiatives, is supported through openness of authorities in identifying decent housing solutions and clarification of the processes surrounding its implementation.

The position of Indigenous People needs our collective continual support in the process of applying for communal land titles which is require to accelerate to ensure equity in land distribution.

Although efforts have been made to crack down on illegal logging and development of policies and legal frameworks, deforestation and forest degradation has continued in the nation. There should speed up or shorten the processes of Community Forestry (CFs) and Community Protected Area (CPAs) registration by increasing the size of each area, the decentralized forest management help to stabilize the climate, multi-benefits of ecosystem services toward human being and sustainable natural forest tenure and management.

As we work with our communities, a major area of concern is Hydropower schemes. Each proposed dam needs proper environmental assessment, and full consultation with communities so that issues of relocation and compensation can be appropriately addressed (such as the Lower Sesan 2 Dam, currently the subject of Government legislation which is being questioned by CSOs) and the Laos Government’s clear reversal of its mandate to undertake appropriate studies on Xayaburi Dam with its neighbours before any decisions will be made.

It is extremely important that Cambodia tackles seriously, adaptation measures for climate change, as one of the most affected countries in the region. To this end we are very pleased to be working with the Government on its new Climate Change Strategic Plan for Cambodia.

There is much for Cambodians to do in the next month. There will be eight parties contesting the election, of which the three most prominent are the ruling Cambodian Peoples’ Party, Funcinpec and the new Cambodian National Rescue Party. We appeal all parties to make clear the highlighted issues of their policies to ensure the sustainable and equitable development in Cambodia.

As these issues are critical in the month leading up to the election, NGOs have been holding major briefing meetings on a national and provincial basis for people to come and be informed about the issues that have a very important bearing on the lives of Cambodians for the next many years to come. We encourage all Cambodians to become informed and involved in this election. There is plenty of opportunity for government to work together with civil society on the wide range of issues we need to address. We welcome the opportunity to work closely with future government, as well as our communities, as we seek to improve the lives of the poor and vulnerable and achieve the sustainable and equitable development.

Together I am confident we are up to the task

Chhith Sam Ath

Representative of the NGO Forum