

Rhythms Of Resilience: Fighting For Indigenous Identities

The Cambodian state has failed to put in place concrete legal protections for Indigenous groups in the country and instead wiped out their mention in laws and regulations around environmental governance and land management.

Indigenous groups have long warned about the loss of their traditional lands, a lot of which has been lost to deforestation by large corporations managing economic land concessions. To exacerbate their loss, the loss of Cambodia's woodlands affects their ability to do shifting cultivation and deforestation has hindered their cultural practices of maintaining spirit forests.

This is all true for Klan Sarith. She is Jarai and lives in the northeastern province of Ratanakiri, where her community is facing land loss from a Vietnamese rubber plantation and Chinese- and Indian-run mining operations. At the same time, the community has grown to 50 villages of around 53 families each, giving them less space to live.

Increased interaction with the rest of the country is changing their way of life, she says. "We used to pass knowledge from generation to generation but now it is more difficult. Some people don't go to school, some turn to drugs; the modern ways are changing our traditions."

"I would like for Khmer people to recognize us and respect our Jarai culture. The country should recognize Jarai as an official language," she says.

Sarith is speaking at a celebration of Indigenous identity in Kampong Speu, where most of Cambodia's Indigenous communities had congregated to showcase their unique cultures but also debate and discuss Indigenous peoples' rights and culture, preservation of their tradi-



Rubber trees are the most common agricultural product grown at economic land concessions across the country.

tions and their participation in laws and policies. Rhythmic drumming from the Por community fills the air with music.

Despite the dramatic loss of their land and culture, Cambodia's Indigenous people are rarely given a chance to decide on policy that affects them, let alone create legislation that protects their way of life. For this, the non-government organization Cambodia Indigenous Peoples Organization (CIPO) has been critical in advocating for the communities to ensure their voice is heard in Phnom Penh and the power centers of the country.

CIPO has worked with its allies to create visibility for Indigenous issues and for the government to recognize Indigenous communities, protect their culture and traditions, and ensure their lands are not stolen. The NGO also works to ensure that government data is disaggregated to reflect the demographic and socio-economic status of Indigenous people in Cambodia.

Nearby, Tep Toem is from the Kuy community but speaks fluent Khmer. Toem, who is an elder in her community, only wants rights to their land so that their descendants are not living in uncertainty. She wants the government to listen to groups like CIPO and other allies to ensure they have land tenure security.

“Our dream is for the young generation to have secure land and to maintain the Kuy way of life: that is the preservation of the forest, traditional agriculture and sustainable use of natural resources,” Toem says.



Tep Toem reminisces about her community's peaceful coexistence with the mountains, jungles, wild animals and vegetables they harvested from the forest. Most importantly they had the Prey Ah Rak [forest spirit], which she said was critical to the identity of her ethnic group. As they try to hold on to their culture, Toem says they had to start to speak up and raise their voices to protect their land and way of living.