



PREY LANG COMMUNITY NETWORK (PLCN)

Cambodia



Equator Initiative Case Studies

Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities

UNDP EQUATOR INITIATIVE CASE STUDY SERIES

Local and indigenous communities across the world are advancing innovative sustainable development solutions that work for people and for nature. Few publications or case studies tell the full story of how such initiatives evolve, the breadth of their impacts, or how they change over time. Fewer still have undertaken to tell these stories with community practitioners themselves guiding the narrative. The Equator Initiative aims to fill that gap.

The Equator Initiative, supported by generous funding from the Government of Norway, awarded the Equator Prize 2015 to 21 outstanding local community and indigenous peoples initiatives to reduce poverty, protect nature, and strengthen resilience in the face of climate change. Selected from 1,461 nominations from across

126 countries, the winners were recognized for their achievements at a prize ceremony held in conjunction with the United Nations Convention on Climate Change (COP21) in Paris. Special emphasis was placed on the protection, restoration, and sustainable management of forests; securing and protecting rights to communal lands, territories, and natural resources; community-based adaptation to climate change; and activism for environmental justice. The following case study is one in a growing series that describes vetted and peer-reviewed best practices intended to inspire the policy dialogue needed to take local success to scale, to improve the global knowledge base on local environment and development solutions, and to serve as models for replication.





Cambodia is a country blessed with abundant natural riches. Home to the world's largest freshwater fish and extensive tiger habitat, the Greater Mekong's forests and rivers, grasslands and wetlands pulse with life. New species are discovered every year. The country has the largest contiguous block of primary forest remaining on the Asian continent's mainland and is an important constituent of the Indo-Burma Biodiversity Hotspot, which is one of 34 such hotspot designations worldwide. In addition, five of nine high-priority biodiversity conservation corridors in the Greater Mekong Sub-region are found in Cambodia. The country is also a sanctuary to approximately 1.6 percent of globally threatened species on the IUCN's Red List, including mammals, birds, and reptiles.

Prey Lang is the largest lowland evergreen forest complex in Cambodia, and probably in the Indo-Burma biodiversity hotspot. It covers approximately 500,000 hectares west of the Mekong River in the Central Plains of Cambodia and stretches over four provinces: Kratie, Kampong Thom, Stung Treng and Preah Vihear. In the past it also covered part of Kampong Cham province.

Prey Lang is composed of eight forest types, consisting of: Deciduous Dipterocarp Forest, Mixed Deciduous Forest, Mixed Pine Broad Leaf Forest, Semi-Evergreen Forest, Evergreen Forest, Riparian Forest, Open Grassland, and Evergreen Swamp Forest. The latter was described in 2011 as a unique and endemic freshwater swamp forest in Prey Lang. Based on previous studies by ecologists and botanists, this Evergreen Swamp Forest is distinct from the swamp forests of Tonle Sap/Great Lake and Stung Sen in terms of floristic composition and vegetation structure.

In 1997, the Prey Lang forest complex was identified as a potential World Heritage Site by IUCN and several ecological surveys in the 2000s strongly promoted the immediate protection of a 200,000-hectare core zone of forest in its centre.

In addition, Prey Lang Forest is home to more than 200,000 people, mostly indigenous Kuy. While the forest is an integral part of their culture, they also depend on it for their survival. In addition to agriculture, they collect resin from trees -an ancient technique that consists of carving small holes in the trunks and lighting tiny fires inside to encourage the sap to trickle out- and gather products for building materials, medicine and food. Another 700,000 people live within 10 kilometres of the forest's boundaries and many of them depend on it for their livelihoods in the local economy.

However, several highly valuable timber species found in this forest are threatened according to the IUCN's Red List, including *Dalbergia* (rosewood), *Diospyros* (ebonies), and other luxury woods, such as Agar Wood (*Aquilaria crassna*), which is harvested for its fragrant wood and is critically endangered throughout its distribution range. Five dipterocarp species are significant for the local community. These species include the three liquid-resin producing species of *Dipterocarpus costatus*, *D. alatus* and *D. intricatus*, and two solid resin producing species, *Shorea obtuse* and *S. siamensis*.

Numerous species of globally endangered mammals and birds are found in Prey Lang, such as the Asian elephant (*Elephas maximus*), the Gaur (*Bos gaurus*), the Banteng (*Bos javanicus*), the Malayan Sun Bear (*Helarctos malayanus*), the Dhole or wild dog (*Cuon alpinus*), and four species of otters including the critically endangered Hairy-nosed otter (*Lutra sumatrana*). At least five species of tortoise and freshwater turtles are found in this forest, the only known habitat for the Asian Leaf Turtle in Cambodia. There have been reports of Siamese Crocodiles, but these have yet to be confirmed. Prey Lang's wetlands have not been studied but are expected to be important as spawning and breeding grounds for numerous freshwater fish of the Mekong River System. The Asiatic Black Bear used to be present in Prey Lang, making it one of the few places where Asiatic Black Bear and Sun Bear overlapped in distribution. Unfortunately, the Asiatic Black Bear has not been observed for years.

The Prey Lang Forest is a major watershed and regulates water and sediment flow into Tonle Sap Lake. The catch of Tonle Sap Lake is the most important source of protein

in Cambodia. Hence, Prey Lang plays a vital role for Cambodia's food security and for fisheries in the Lower Mekong River and the Mekong Delta in Viet Nam.

Origin and structure

The Prey Lang Community Network (PLCN) was formed in 2000, in response to, timber concessions issued by the government to national and international companies for most of Cambodia's valuable forests in the mid-1990s that included all of the Prey Lang forest. The operators targeted primarily Dipterocarp tree species for plywood and veneer production to supply their factories around the capital Phnom Penh. The large-scale logging that followed put the timber operators in direct conflict with the local resin producers who depended on the same tree species for their livelihood. Several protesters were killed and the user rights to trees tapped for resin became a contentious issue in the forestry reform process in years to come. The suspension of logging operations by the timber concessionaires in 2002 increased security in Prey Lang and the local population became more emboldened by this victory.

Following a first ecological survey of the area in 2004, more structured community-based patrolling was introduced and supported by Southeast Asia Development Program (SADP) and the Natural Resource Protection Group (NRPG) led by the late environmentalist Chut Wutty. Starting in Kampong Thom province's Sandan district, the movement became increasingly organised and successful in addressing organized as well as small-scale logging in the Prey Lang area. The protection of resin trees continued to play a key role in these efforts.

Later on, with the support of East West Management Institute (EWMI), the Prey Lang Community Network (PLCN) was strengthened to facilitate organisation and communication across the four provinces spanning Prey Lang. Since 2007, PLCN has been supported by EWMI-PRAJ's Grassroots Networking and Advocacy component and its partners. Prey Lang is affiliated with a number of networks such as the Community Peace-Building Network (CPN), the Organization for the Promotion of Kuy

Culture (OPKC), the Environmental and Health Education Organization (EHE), the Indigenous Rights Active Members (IRAM), the Independent Democracy of Informal Economy Association (IDEA), the Cambodian Youth Network (CYN) and the Coalition of Cambodian Farmer Communities (CCFC).

In 2014, PLCN entered a formal collaboration with Danmission, the University of Copenhagen (KU), the Community Peace-Building Network (CPN), Web Essentials (WE), and the Peace Bridges Organisation (PBO). The partners joined efforts to halt illegal logging and other illegal activities in the Prey Lang Forest, raise awareness about the present situation in Prey Lang and its consequences, and put pressure on the government and local authorities to protect the Prey Lang forest and respect its people and their way of life.

PLCN is a loosely structured group, developed organically out of various organizing and consultation activities around the Prey Lang forest. As of March 2013, the PLCN counted 83 active villages out of 118 in their organizing area. At the centre of the PLCN is a leadership group with 28 representatives, seven from each of the four provinces. The core group has elected a coordination committee. An Assembly of 100 people –25 representatives per province– meets annually or semi-annually. PLCN is a consensus-based organisation and all villagers may participate. A flat organisation structure maintains grassroots support and avoids elite capture.

The ultimate goal of PLCN is to serve as an encompassing structure to unite communities in forest co-management. PLCN does not intend to be a formal advocacy network per se. Therefore, it remains as an informal network. However, PLCN has not ruled out the option of registering in the future.



Deforestation and illegal logging

The Prey Lang Forest faces illegal logging, forest clearing for agriculture and other purposes, and land grabbing. Being the last lowland evergreen forest of the Indochinese peninsula and one of the last in Southeast Asia, as well as part of a major watershed feeding into the Mekong River, its destruction threatens a substantial part of Cambodia's food production, such as the Mekong River fisheries, which provide a large part of the protein consumed in the country.

The Prey Lang Forest was granted in logging concessions by the Forestry Administration to six mainly foreign logging companies in the late 1990s. Since the national moratorium on logging in 2002, the concessions have been suspended and a system has been established to supply domestic wood demand in which annual coupes are auctioned and monitored by the Forestry Administration.

However, large-scale land grabs continue to play an important role in the deforestation of this area as illegal timber is laundered through the Economic Land Concessions (ELCs). There have been several violent conflicts with villagers who were forcefully removed from their ancestral lands. According to a baseline survey conducted in 2014, 33 private companies with Economic Land Concessions were operating plantations in Prey Lang.

Resin trees are a major part of the indigenous local economy. The practice of resin tapping dates back to pre-Angkorian period (before 802 A.D.), with trees divided between communities using a traditional ownership system. However, resin trees are lost every day. According to the 2014 baseline survey, commissioned by East West Management Institute (EWMI) and conducted by EWMI and Cambodian Youth Network in collaboration with



local informants from the four provinces that stretch the Prey Lang landscape, 17,010 of the 483,756 resin trees customarily tapped in Prey Lang have been lost.

As a result of forest conversion and degradation, all larger mammals and birds have become rarer and all valuable timber species have decreased in numbers. For example, Rosewood is almost gone and now listed in the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Many other timber species are on the IUCN Red List and already extinct in large parts of their former distribution areas.

The Forestry Department developed a conservation plan for Cambodia's most valuable timber species in 2008 and seed sources of each species were established by Royal Decrees and the Forestry Administration, of which 95 percent are found in Prey Lang. Today, ELCs have destroyed most of the seed stands. Without Prey Lang, seed collection and replanting of Cambodia's precious timbers is considered impossible.

Poaching and illegal hunting

Poaching with snares and traps and illegal fishing pose ongoing threats to the ecosystem and the livelihoods of the indigenous people. Monkeys are among the most threatened animals in the area.

A report issued by the NGO Forum on Cambodia in 2013 states that the Long-tailed Macaques used to be relatively common and found in large numbers in Prey Lang. However, according to the local communities, large-scale poaching removed several thousand individuals from the

central and eastern sections of the forest in 2006, allegedly to be laundered into the international market for scientific research and testing, with most being sold to laboratories in China and the United States. Today, it is extremely difficult to see this species anywhere in Prey Lang and it is suspected they may be locally extinct.

The Pileated Gibbon (*Hylobates pileatus*) can occasionally be heard among the trees of the Prey Lang Forest, but all other species of primates seem to be absent.

Climate change

It is estimated that the net release of carbon to the atmosphere by deforestation amounts to approximately 20-30 percent of global carbon emissions. The people of Prey Lang have reported perceptions of a changing climate. Some of the specific threats mentioned by local communities include: higher temperatures throughout

the year; lower water levels in the Mekong River and its tributaries; lower groundwater levels; increased vulnerability to diseases among animals due to warmer temperatures; less resin from the resin trees; and delayed harvesting of rice, as communities have witnessed a shift of the harvesting season from April to June.





LOCAL RESPONSES

Forest patrols and smartphone technology

Protection of the Prey Lang Forest is seen as critical by the PLCN to maintain livelihoods, including cash income from resin trees and fisheries. Villagers partake in community forest patrols and call for landscape-level management that acknowledges their rights to land and forest resources. Both men and women, as well as youth, participate in the forest patrols, the core group, and coordination committee. They are encouraged to engage and become active members of PLCN, all of which are volunteers and are not paid wages.

During their forest patrols, PLCN members record and report illegal activities, seize logging machinery and tools (tractors, chainsaws) used for illegal activities, and hand confiscated goods to the authorities. Through their patrols they also provide the only real on-the-ground information about what's going on inside Prey Lang.

An innovative partnership between faith-based organisations (Danmission and the Peace Bridges Organisation - PBO), a local environmental and rights-based NGO (Community Peace-Building Network - CPN), the University of Copenhagen (KU) and a local IT company (Web Essentials - WE), has

allowed the PLCN to use a specially developed smartphone app to systematically collect information on both the illegal activities and the state of natural resource and biodiversity. The network began collecting data with the app in February 2015, with funding from the Alexander Soros Foundation and DANIDA.

The app enables members of the PLCN to document observations using text, photos and sound recordings with the smartphone. GPS coordinates are automatically stored, and all data is uploaded to a central database as soon as mobile coverage is available. University of Copenhagen staff and students facilitate quality control and analyses of the incoming data. The information is then published in regular monitoring reports, which are released through press conferences held in Phnom Penh and attract wide interest from local media.

In 2017, PLCN and the project were awarded the International Society of Tropical Foresters Innovation Prize for "outstanding projects that apply a multidisciplinary approach to address sustainable resource use in the tropics."



KEY IMPACTS

Forest patrols and smartphone technology



- As a result of the PLCN partnership, six Monitoring Reports have been produced so far, providing the most extensive source of data on illegal logging activities in Prey Lang.
- PLCN has shown that community monitoring can:
 - Provide data of the same accuracy as data collected by professionals.
 - Increase the feeling of ownership and responsibility among the local population.
 - Promote local involvement in decision-making.
 - Shorten the time to put new regulations in place.
 - Shorten the response time from the moment illegal activity is observed until enforcement happens.
- PLCN's example is being followed by researchers from the University of Copenhagen and will provide new insight into successfully involving local communities in forest monitoring and management, which potentially has huge benefits for the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) programme's carbon monitoring and monitoring of REDD+ safeguards.
- This information is used by a range of Cambodian and international NGOs to advocate for the protection of the Prey Lang forest.

Dissemination and awareness campaigns

[PLCN on Facebook \(It's Our Forest Too\)](#) is the slogan of the campaign launched in 2007 by the Prey Lang Communities to raise awareness of the destruction of the forests upon which their livelihoods depend. Dissemination of information about the situation in Prey Lang has been a key activity of the communities since their inception.

For example, in 2011, more than 100 villagers, wearing blue and green face paint and calling themselves Cambodia's "Avatars", staged protests in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap to highlight the destruction of the Prey Lang Forest. They were joined by monks and environmental activists, who wore garments and make-up inspired by the blockbuster movie "Avatar."

In March 2013, assisted by allied civil society organisations, the communities organized a Prey Lang Forest Celebration in which they re-dedicated themselves to the protection of Prey Lang. The celebration and a subsequent General Assembly engaged about 400 people, mostly from around the forest.

PLCN has experienced a rapid increase in national and international media, informing the local people and the broader public in Cambodia and abroad through newspapers, television, radio stations, websites, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc. Each day, general audiences learn more and more about the PLCN's work.

KEY IMPACTS

Dissemination and awareness campaigns



- One of the primary achievements of PLCN has been to bring the issue of Prey Lang to national prominence, even gaining some international exposure and following.
- [PLCN on Facebook \(It's Our Forest Too\)](#) has more than 29,000 followers.

Non-violent approach to conflict mitigation

PLCN members' personal safety is frequently at risk in their work. Despite numerous instances of threats and violence against activists by illegal loggers and others involved in the exploitation of Prey Lang, PLCN continues to maintain a non-violent approach.

All PLCN patrol members have been trained in conflict resolution and peaceful dialogue to mitigate conflicts between communities, landowners, economic land concessions and authorities.

KEY IMPACTS

Non-violent approach to conflict mitigation



- On 26 May 2015, a Joint Statement was presented to the Kingdom of Cambodia by a group of monks, Prey Lang Community Network, students, youth networks, Indigenous Peoples and Forestry Network (IPFN), and civil society organisations (CSOs), expressing their concern over the status of intense destruction of the Prey Lang Forest. At the time, they submitted the following requests to the Government, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), and the Forestry Administration (FA):
 1. Take measures and intervene immediately to prevent forestry offenses in the Prey Lang forestry areas.
 2. Intervene to have the draft Sub-Decree on Prey Lang Forestry Protected and Biodiversity Areas be disclosed for public consultations with the Prey Lang communities and other stakeholders.
 3. Include Prey Lang Community Network in the four provinces as co-managers of the Prey Lang Landscape through inserting the rights and roles of Prey Lang Community Network in the Sub-Decree on Establishment of "Prey Lang" Forestry Protected and Biodiversity Conservation Areas.
 4. The intervention of government officials at all levels to carry out investigation at the Prey Lang areas and ensure effective enforcement of laws related to the forestry sector, environmental impact assessment, granting of social land concessions, and illegal land grabbing by migrants.
 5. Take legal actions against those officials and local authorities involved in timber business and illegal logging in Prey Lang areas.
 6. Stop all forms of intimidation from the court and armed forces against Prey Lang forestry activists.
 7. Preserve the Prey Lang areas as an academic and research zone for training of human resources in enhancing the environment, natural resources and eco-tourism.
 8. Review the use of saw machines to ensure compliance with legal requirements as stipulated under Article 70, Chapter 13, Forestry Law, on Measures Governing Forestry Activities. If the governing is not effective, please suspend or stop imports of saw machines into Cambodia.



National policy impacts

A key challenge in the protection of Prey Lang has been the lack of cooperation between relevant stakeholders. Although it is not part of the project, project partners have chosen to invest considerable time and resources on addressing this shortcoming as it is seen as essential for its success and the future of Prey Lang. Hence, project partners and other CSO actors in Prey Lang have initiated the Prey Lang Working Group (PLWG) to foster a constructive dialogue on the future of Prey Lang. The working group has participants from a number of key stakeholders including PLCN and other local and international NGOs. The working group is hosted by the NGO Forum.

Thanks to establishment of PLWG, consultation and dialogue with government and policy-makers improved in 2015. Moreover, the working group was invited to a meeting with the Forestry Administration in April 2015 and held two informal dinner meetings with representatives of the third commission of the National Assembly.

In addition, partners have contributed to the development of a new Environmental Code for Cambodia, which is still being drafted, with special emphasis on participatory approaches and a new model for co-management of natural resources involving the state and civil society. For this purpose, Danmission commissioned a local NGO to develop a briefing paper on co-management in close consultation with PLCN.

One major policy impact was the declaration of the core of Prey Lang as a Protected Forest, in April 2016, by the Prime Minister of Cambodia, Hun Sen. The authority over the newly declared Protected Forest was transferred from the Forestry Administration to Ministry of Environment. The data collected by PLCN and the University of Copenhagen was used as background data to justify the Protected Area's boundaries. The initially proposed boundaries were re-defined based on data from PLCN and the University.

Contributions to global agenda

PLCN's work directly contributes to the achievement of several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), such as no poverty (SDG 1), zero hunger (SDG 2), sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12), climate action (SDG 13), life on land (SDG 15), and partnerships for the goals (SDG 17). In addition to recognition as an Equator Prize winner, PLCN has received international awards for their innovative ideas on how to tackle the challenges related to the SDGs: the Yale International Society for Tropical Foresters (ISTF) Innovation Prize in 2017; and the Alexander Soros Foundation Annual Award in 2013, in honour of environmental activist Chut Wutty, who was assassinated in 2012.





REPLICABILITY, SCALABILITY, AND SUSTAINABILITY

Replicability

PLCN's use of smartphones and an app (Prey Lang app) to monitor forests and the environment has received international attention and has the potential to be extended to other areas within Cambodia and elsewhere. Groups in the Congo Basin and Latin America have expressed interest in the technology. The network and its partners have shared their experience through participation in meetings, conferences and personal contacts.

A recent improvement of the app has made uploading of data much more efficient. The app is ready to be replicated in other places. There are a number of interested parties who are eager to start as soon as funding is secured. Unfortunately, obtaining funding for this kind of initiative continues to be challenging.

PLCN has identified the following pieces of advice to other groups wishing to replicate the PLCN experience or engage in knowledge exchange:

- Keep it simple.
- Listen to the needs of the communities when using Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) and follow their ideas.
- Be clear on ownership and use of data: It belongs to the communities collecting the data.
- Partner with a local IT company for development and bug fixes.
- Be strategic and have clear goals.
- Combine forest protection with conflict resolution and peaceful approaches.
- Communicate well.

Scalability

With the aim of scaling up this initiative, the Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) is looking for ways to better integrate and utilize local indigenous knowledge as demonstrated by PLCN. Additionally, the network has been contacted

by many organisations working on similar solutions, such as the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), the Global Observation of Forest and Land Cover Dynamics (GOFD-GOLD) Sourcebook on local monitoring, and the Rainforest Connection.

Sustainability

PLCN is self-sustainable in many ways, as the work is done by self-organised volunteers. However, the challenges are massive and local communities do need support to tackle economic interests and power plays like the ones involved in this area.

PLCN is focussing on mobilizing communities in the Prey Lang area, building social and organisational capacities. Whilst all PLCN members are volunteers, there are expenses for larger patrols, local transport to meetings, strategic support, and to make local voices heard at the national and international levels. Small grants are necessary to continue the work of PLCN and to make the project more sustainable.

"It's Our Forest Too" seeks to train PLCN members to be able to continue tasks with as little outside support as possible. However, as a globalized world infringes on Prey Lang forest, the local communities will need science and knowledge from the outside world to deal with the challenges. The campaign also gives PLCN a voice. PLCN aims to attract relevant and skilful collaborating organisations and build its own necessary strategic alliances to secure a place for Prey Lang and its people in modern Cambodia.

FUTURE PLANS

- **Livelihoods:** PLCN has several ideas on how to improve the livelihoods of the locals. In the future, the organisation wants to focus on educating people about the production of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP). Within this field, PLCN wants to improve the locals' knowledge about resin trees, animal raising and home gardening. They plan to carry out an exchange visit to a successful agricultural community, to inspire and educate villagers on how to use home gardening to produce food and NTFPs for their own consumption or sale on the market.
- **Schooling:** PLCN plans to provide scholarships to the children of forest activists, but they are aware that this would require a certain amount of commitment from both the children and their parents.
- **Healthcare:** PLCN wants to raise awareness on primary healthcare issues in the local communities, and to improve people's knowledge about diseases and treatments. The aim is to provide training to key members within the local communities, with the idea that they can spread the word and serve as multipliers with other villagers.
- **Micro-Loans:** The network wants to create a savings group or a community contribution fund to enable villagers to carry out small-scale entrepreneurial activities. This would include awareness-raising about potential pitfalls of micro-loans, to avoid that community members are tricked or cheated.
- **Advocacy:** PLCN wants to continue advocating against the current issues of land grabbing and deforestation of local areas, working in close cooperation with the local authorities and the Ministry of Environment. If necessary, the network plans to continue filing complaints to the relevant authorities and courts. Finally, PLCN would like to work on a geographical study using the collected land grab data.

PARTNERS

- **DANIDA:** Provided initial funding through a grant for innovative partnerships.
- **Danmission:** Supports project formulation, coordination, implementation, budgets and accounts.
- **CPN:** The Community Peace-Building Network provides technical advice
- **PBO:** The Peace Bridges Organisation provides training on conflict resolution, peaceful dialogue and non-violent methods.
- **University of Copenhagen (KU):** Supports project formulation, technical advice, training on the app and forest rights, data-analyses and report writing.
- **Web Essentials (WE):** Is in charge of developing the app, programming of smartphones, maintenance and fixes of smartphones.
- **Alexander Soros Foundation:** Provides funding for forest monitoring and data collection

SOURCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

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