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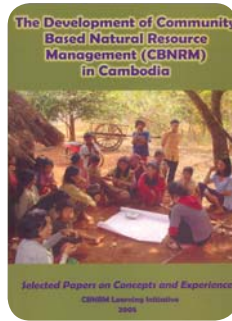
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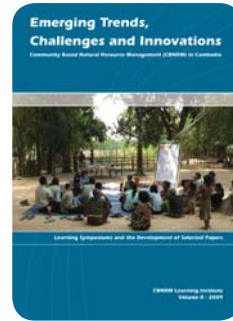
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Chapter 17

Mobilizing Villagers to Stop Illegal Fishing along the Srepok River in Ratanakiri Province

By: Gnuì Nang Noy¹, Oeur II², Hak Sochanny³, and John McAndrew⁴

This chapter is based on research conducted from March to July 2007 by the participants of the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (CCC) Analyzing Development Issues (ADI) community course with the ADI and 3SPN (3 Rivers Protection Network) teams. Upon realizing that the use of illegal fishing techniques was endemic to the area, this paper describes a participatory action research (PAR) method to mobilize community members to take action against the destructive practices. The research focuses on (1) how can villages develop and implement community action plans to reduce destructive practices? And (2) how can villagers effectively coordinate with commune council and government officials to implement their plans? The research results conclude that villagers need to overcome fear, powerlessness, and confusion to act effectively, which requires ongoing support from each other as well as from outside stakeholder. The results also include the possibility of scaling up the approach within core areas of NGO programming.

BACKGROUND

From March to July 2007 the Cooperation Committee for Cambodia's Analyzing Development Issues (ADI) Project conducted a community course in Ratanakiri province in partnership with 3SPN (3 Rivers Protection Network). 3SPN is a small Cambodian NGO which builds awareness about the impact of hydroelectric dams constructed upstream of local communities living along the Sesan, the Sekong and the Srepok rivers in northeast Cambodia. The purpose of the course was to build the capacity of NGO fieldworkers to mobilize

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villagers in response to emerging community issues. Acting as the lead NGO, 3SPN helped to coordinate the course fieldwork and to ensure that the community action plans arising from the PAR undertaken in study villages were supported after the training was completed.

During the initial visit to Ratanakiri in February 2007, the ADI team spent a considerable amount of time with the 3SPN staff to identify the key issues to be addressed in the course research. In line with this, the ADI team visited four villages in Chey Ouddom commune in Lumphat district along the Srepok river to learn first hand about issues related to the protection of the river resources. While the communities had suffered flashfloods attributed to the downstream effects of the hydroelectric dam built in Vietnam, the people had yet to link these effects directly to the construction of the dam or to mobilize themselves effectively against the actions of the Vietnamese officials responsible for these discharges. In the four villages visited, the 3SPN staff were in the process of building community awareness about the potential effects of the dam, monitoring water levels, and strengthening the flow of information throughout their networks from village groups to national and international advocacy associations and back down again.

As the ADI team spoke with village communities along the Srepok river, it became clear that protection of the river resources was a local issue as well as a cross-border one. The team learned that the use of illegal fishing techniques was endemic to the area and that this resulted in the decline of fish. If village communities were to meaningfully demand that Vietnamese and Cambodian authorities conserve the river resource then they would have to do the same themselves. Given the time constraints of the research it was decided to focus on the issue of illegal fishing while disseminating information about the dams and building local involvement in the 3SPN network.

OBJECTIVES

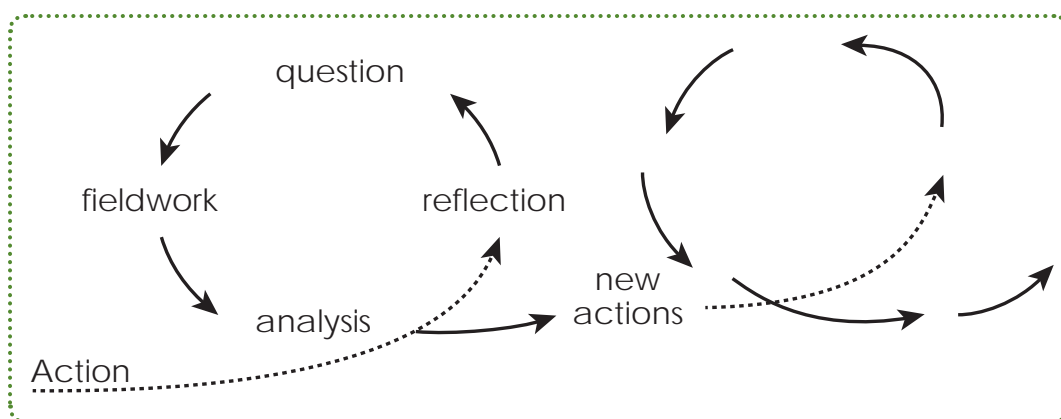
The participatory action research undertaken in this study focuses on two main questions:

1. How can villagers develop and implement community action plans to reduce destructive fishing practices?
2. How can villagers effectively coordinate with the commune council and government officials to implement their plans?

RESEARCH METHODS

The course participants employed PAR to mobilize residents in four villages of Chey Ouddom commune, Lumphat district to take action against destructive fishing practices. PAR is a cyclical method that moves from analysis to planning to action and then to more analysis, planning and action (Figure 1). PAR involves gathering information, identifying and analyzing issues, sharing analysis and ideas with the people, and encouraging the people to develop a community action plan on a specific issue that affects them.

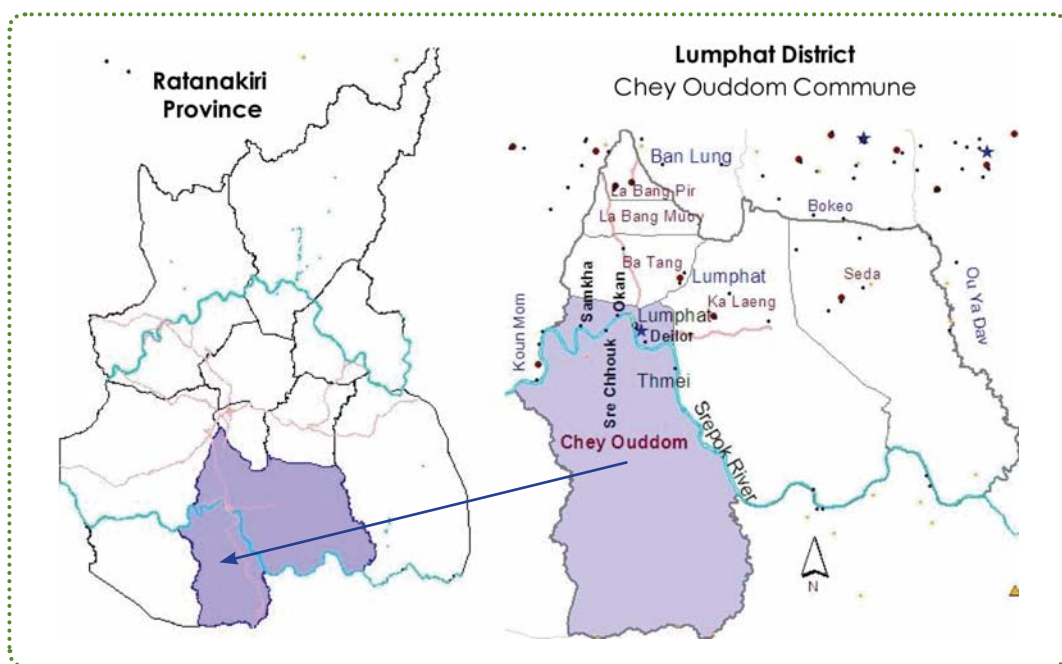
Figure 1. Participatory Action Research Cyclical Process



Source: Yoland Wadsworth, "What is Participatory Action Research?"
Action Research International, November 1998

In March 2007, after completing an initial week of classroom training in Banlung town, the community course participants traveled to Chey Ouddom commune along the Srepok river where 3SPN implements its program on information sharing and advocacy on the downstream effects of the hydropower dam built in Vietnam. The participants were divided into four groups, each led by a 3SPN participant and supervised by an ADI team member, and spent five days in one of the four villages of Deilor, Okan, Samkha or Sre Chhouk (Figure 2). The village of Sre Chhouk is primarily ethnic Lao while the others are mainly ethnic Khmer. During the five day visit in their respective villages the participants applied the PAR skills they had learned in the first week; identifying and analyzing key issues with the villagers leading to the development of community action plans for implementation.

Figure 2. Deilor, Okan, Samkha and Sre Chhouk villages in Chey Ouddom commune. Lumphat district along the Srepok river in Ratanakiri province



Illegal fishing was identified in each of the four villages as an issue that undermined an important livelihood source. Illegal techniques involved the use of electrodes, explosives, poisons, and small mesh fish nets. The villagers were also concerned about floods like the one that had destroyed rice cultivation in the previous year and the possible links of these floods to the hydropower dam built upstream in Vietnam.

As part of the PAR undertaken in Deilor, Okan, Samkha and Sre Chhouk villages, the issue of illegal fishing was discussed and analyzed in individual households and in small informal groups. At the same time, awareness was raised about the number and potential effects of hydropower dams built and planned upstream of the Srepok river in Vietnam. Information fact sheets on the dams were likewise distributed as reference materials for further discussions. Towards the end of the five-day visit the researchers convened separate meetings in the four villages to help the people develop community action plans in response to the issue of illegal fishing.

In the past, fishery committees had been established in some of the villages under the Cambodian government Seila program to protect deep pools in the Srepok river that served as breeding grounds for fish. However since the end of that program the fishery committees had been dormant and the villagers had simply waited for the government authorities to take further action. During the village meetings the fishery committees were reconstituted to implement the action plans.

On the last day of the field research, a four-village level meeting was convened with fishery committee representatives and leaders from each of the four villages. This meeting was attended by the Chey Ouddom commune chief, a representative of the Lumphat District Department of the Environment, and the Executive Director of 3SPN. At the meeting, community action plans were consolidated to address illegal fishing



A village meeting conducted in Deilor village
Photo by: ADI team, March 2007

practices across the four villages. One action was for the commune council to issue a *deika* or commune order serving as an official document that allowed members of the village fishery committees to take action against illegal fishers. The second action was to erect signboards prohibiting illegal fishing in each village. The third action was to complete the formation of the village fishery committees and to strengthen patrols along the Srepok river, village ponds, and streams. The fourth action was for the committees to build awareness on the fisheries law and rights of communities.

After the five days of fieldwork the participants returned to Banlung town and then dispersed for a three month course break. The three month interval allowed the villagers time to implement their actions plans and for the course participants to complete their PAR assignments. In Chey Ouddom commune, 3SPN participants followed up on the activities that had been delineated and consolidated in the action plans at the research sites. Likewise, ADI team members traveled to Ratanakiri to support the 3SPN participants in building the capacity of the villagers to implement their plans.

In early July 2007 all of the participants returned to Ratanakiri province for the final week of the course. Gathering first in Banlung town, the 3SPN participants reported on the progress made in the four study villages. All of the participants then traveled to Chey Ouddom commune and spent three more days in their respective villages with leaders and fishery committee members to reflect on the progress made on the action plans. The participant researchers asked: What was implemented? What was not implemented? And why? Community actions plans were revised on the basis of lessons learned. The follow up visit culminated in a second meeting of representatives from the four villages to review and coordinate the action plans. This meeting was attended by commune and district authorities and the police. The village representatives made reports on the progress of their community action plans to date and renewed their commitment to implement the action plans with 3SPN as the responsible organization in the area.

MAJOR FINDINGS

Pervasiveness of Illegal Fishing

As mentioned above, illegal fishing was endemic in the four study villages and involved the use of electrodes, explosives, poisons, and small mesh fish nets. Villagers were in general agreement that the use of destructive methods had led to a decline of fish stocks. In Okan village residents reported that since 2003 their yields from traditional net fishing were low and that at the time of the research in 2007 they could hardly catch one or two kilos of fish from a full day of fishing. Villagers were particularly concerned about the degradation of the deep pools in the Srepok river near Deilor village which served as a spawning ground for fish. Fishing in this rich habitat had reduced the depth of the deep pools to three or four metres in the dry season. Villagers maintained that the pools could return to their original depth if the areas were reserved and protected from fishing.

In addition to the decline of fish, illegal fishing methods had further consequences. In Samkha village, cows and buffaloes had died or become ill as a result of drinking water from the streams flowing into the river where poison had been used to kill fish.

While villagers acknowledged that illegal fishing was pervasive along their expanse of the Srepok river, many attributed illegal practices to outsiders. However, in Sre Chhouk village researchers ironically observed illegal fishing equipment in the homes of informants who pointed to outsiders as the primary persons culpable. Other residents in Sre Chhouk were more open about their



*Crossing the Srepok river in dry season
Photo by: ADI team, March 2007*

own illegal fishing activities. One villager declared, *'When I saw other people doing illegal fishing, I tried to do the same.'*

In all four villages respondents admitted that by using illegal methods they were able to catch higher volumes of fish in less time than by using traditional methods. Village authorities, for their part, were reluctant to prohibit illegal fishing without a clear mandate from commune officials and the police. Meanwhile representatives from the District Department of Fisheries rarely visited the four villages and did little to enforce compliance with the fishery law. While some villagers reported that they had advised others to stop using illegal techniques, far greater numbers dared not speak out against offenders or report them to local authorities. Although people were generally concerned about the issue, they viewed it as something beyond their means to control.

Previous Attempts to Stop Illegal Fishing

In the late 1990s the District Department of Fisheries with support from the government's Seila program established a fishery committee in Deilor village. The primary purpose of the committee was to protect the deep pools in the Srepok river in close proximity to the village. Constituted with a statute, the committee initially achieved some success in patrolling the area and protecting the deep pools from fishing activity. However, as financial assistance from the Seila program diminished and support from the Department of Fisheries waned, the fishery committee in Deilor village was unable to sustain its activities. Without support from the district fisheries team, the committee became inactive.

In large measure individual actions taken by villagers against illegal fishers in the study sites were ineffective because they lacked the full support of the local authorities. Villagers who challenged or complained against illegal fishers were unable to enact punitive measures and the offenders simply resumed their practices. In some instances local authorities and the police supported individual efforts, intervening to seize the equipment of those identified as illegal fishers. At the same time villagers became dismayed to learn that some officials had turned over the contraband equipment to their relatives for continued use in destructive fishing. To the extent that illegal fishing was linked to the abuse of power, a collective and concerted effort of villagers and authorities was required to stop it.

Community Action Plan Implementation

The four village meeting convened in March 2007 provided not only an opportunity to consolidate the various village action plans, it likewise served to build confidence and excitement among the village representatives that they indeed could take action to deter the practice of illegal fishing. However, when the representatives returned to their respective villages their initial enthusiasm abated. Gradually the villagers became paralyzed with feelings of confusion, fear and powerlessness. The sense of confusion resulted from the seemingly daunting task before them of trying to decipher what to do, when to do it, and who to follow when realizing the community action plans. While the execution of the plans appeared easy when the NGOs were present, implementation became more complicated and difficult once the NGOs were gone. For example, what proscriptions should the villagers write on the signboards now that the wood had been gathered? When faced with such questions they usually decided to wait for 3SPN to come and tell them what to do. Similarly the villagers became fearful as they began to consider the consequences of taking action against illegal fishers connected to the police and other influential people. Finally, the villagers began to question their right as ordinary people to take action against illegal fishing. Without recognition and support from the local authorities, they felt powerless to solve the problem on their own.

For their part, the 3SPN participants were also struggling, not knowing how to mobilize the villagers to implement the community action plans. In the weeks following the four village meeting the 3SPN fieldworkers made several

visits to the four villages of Deilor, Okan, Samkha and Sre Chhouk. However, in these scheduled trips they met almost exclusively with the members of their previously established network involved in documenting and reporting changes in the river water levels. Regrettably, the 3SPN participants did not take the opportunity during these visits to bring the village leaders and fishery committee members together to discuss the progress made against illegal fishing. Had the 3SPN participants come to the villages more prepared to convene the fishery committee members and review the implementation of the action plans then more would have been accomplished. While the 3SPN fieldworkers had the community action plans in their hands they did not have a clear idea of how to mobilize people around these plans. Not surprisingly, the 3SPN participants at the outset did not communicate and coordinate effectively with one another. This led to confusion in the villages about how to move forward and implement the action plans. Without coordinated and sustained support community mobilization efforts lost energy and direction. In retrospect, it was unrealistic to expect that anything meaningful would happen on its own without the dedicated follow up of the 3SPN and ADI teams.



Villager erect signboard against illegal fishing
Photo by: ADI team, June 2007

Review and Revision of Community Action Plans

In early July 2007 during the final week of the course all the participants returned to Ratanakiri and then to the villages of their initial fieldwork to assess the progress made on the action points set down in the community plans. Prior to the course, 3SPN had been more engaged in Deilor than in the other three villages and these previous investments in community organization had translated into more sustained villager involvement against illegal fishing.

The fishery committee in Deilor was successfully reconstituted at an early stage. Under the leadership of the village chief the fishery committee mobilized the people to construct and erect signboards prohibiting illegal fishing at various village locations near the Srepok river. The fishery committee likewise organized Deilor villagers to actively patrol the river against illegal fishers. During the patrols a man from a nearby village was caught fishing in the river using illegal equipment. With assistance from the police the fishery committee seized the illegal fishing gear and effectively curtailed the illegal activity. The offender caught with the illegal equipment vowed not to engage in this destructive practice again. The successful intervention became a source of encouragement to the Deilor fishery committee which believed that knowledge of the incident spreading throughout the village would act as a deterrent to others tempted to use illegal fishing techniques.

In comparison with Deilor not much had happened in Okan, Samkha and Sre Chhouk villages. While fishery committees had been established in Okan and Samkha these committees had been unable to mobilize people in their villages to build and erect signboards against illegal fishing. Similarly the Okan and Samkha fishery committees had not organized patrols against illegal fishers but simply relied on villagers who fished to observe whether others were using illegal techniques or not. Generally, a wait and see attitude prevailed in Okan and Samkha as villagers looked to assess the outcomes in Deilor. Meanwhile, although representatives from Sre Chhouk had attended the four-village meeting in March 2007 the village had never formally established a fishery committee. The absence of an elected fishery committee in Sre Chhouk greatly impeded the implementation of the community action plan in that village.

At the end of the course in July 2007 a second four-village meeting was convened. At that time the commune order or *deika* for empowering village fishing committees to act against illegal fishers had yet to be issued for the entire commune due to the delays in forming the fishery committee in Sre Chhouk. The other three villages had already forwarded their requests for the *deika* and these had been recognized by the commune council. At the second four-village meeting, the village representatives were assured that these signed papers were already a strong basis for implementing their plans even without the formal *deika*. Generally, the villagers were reluctant to act against illegal fishers without the endorsement of the commune authorities.

At the second four-village meeting community action plans were revised and the fishery committees renewed their commitment to implement them. 3SPN promised to provide follow up support.

Follow-up Activities after the Community Course

While the PAR process in the four villages might have ended at the completion of the ADI community course in July 2007, the renewed commitment of the fishery committees and the dedicated support of the 3SPN participants and their Executive Director rekindled the enthusiasm of the villagers and helped them to overcome their feelings of confusion, fear, and powerlessness. Granted the process was slow and somewhat uneven. Still, by March 2008, a full year after the initial meetings had taken place, the major tasks outlined in the community action plans had been implemented in all four villages.

By March 2008 fishery committees were established in Deilor, Okan, Samkha and Sre Chhouk villages and all the committees, including the one in Sre Chhouk, were active. The fishery committees in the four villages successfully solicited money from residents to buy wood, paint and nails for the construction of signboards which broadcast the prohibition on illegal fishing. The signboards were erected at strategic locations in each of the four villages most recently in Sre Chhouk on the far side of the river. Fulfilling a key activity of the action plans the fishery committees received training on the fishery law from Provincial Department of Fisheries staff and were given copies of the law to enable them to build awareness within their communities. In addition 3SPN organized an exposure trip for the committee members to a fish sanctuary in Kratie province to help them learn more about the conservation of fishery resources.

While commune and district authorities were initially slow to respond to villager requests to act against illegal fishing they became more involved as time went on. In Sre Chhouk the fishery committee eventually submitted their request to the commune council for an order or *deika* banning illegal fishing, which was subsequently recognized by the commune authorities. In Samkha village the fishery committee went one step further developing internal regulations in consultation with community inhabitants which allowed them to fine and penalize those who used illegal fishing techniques. The regulations were submitted to the commune council for their information and acknowledgement.

In Okan village the fishery committee working with the police seized illegal fishing equipment from offenders and informed them of the fishing techniques that were prohibited in the river. In Deilor village the fishery committee successfully obtained assistance from district and provincial fishery officials who intervened to stop a company from Mondulkiri province from pumping and trucking sand from the river near the deep pools. In late 2008 the fishery committees from the four villages collectively approached the commune and district chiefs requesting boats to better patrol the river. 3SPN promised to provide engines for the boats. The authorities were receptive to the idea. Through the sustained efforts of the fishery committees, emboldened by the increased cooperation they received from the local authorities and the police and empowered by the support they enjoyed from 3SPN, the villagers were able to witness a dramatic reduction in illegal fishing in the Srepok river along the four villages.

LESSONS LEARNED

The results of the PAR undertaken in four villages of Lumphat district along the Srepok river reveal important lessons learned. While villagers were initially enthusiastic about taking steps to prevent illegal fishing in their areas they subsequently became paralyzed with feelings of confusion, fear and powerlessness. These feelings which inhibit villagers from responding creatively to emerging issues in their communities are deeply rooted in traditional culture and decades of living with conflict. Ironically, these very real though ultimately disempowering emotions are frequently reinforced by development efforts designed to overcome them. Too often development programs treat villagers as beneficiaries rather than as development actors in their own right. The tendency is to do things for villagers by providing goods and services rather than to do things with villagers by building their capacity to deal with change. A transformative approach needs to recognize the underlying feelings which incapacitate people from taking community action while providing them with the support they need to work through their fears and resistance (O'Leary and Meas 2001). The research underscores that development practitioners likewise need to address their inadequacies and insecurities to provide the quality of support that is required.

The study too provides useful insights into how NGOs can productively incorporate PAR into their regular programs. While the Deilor villagers had achieved some success against illegal fishing within the three month duration

of the ADI course, the Okan, Samkha, and Sre Chhouk villagers had accomplished very little in the initial three month period. Had 3SPN not committed itself to a sustained follow-up program after the completion of the course, the outcomes eventually achieved in all four villages would surely have been different. As the 3SPN fieldworkers and their Executive Director became more engaged in the PAR process they came to appreciate more fully the commitment of the fishery communities in the four villages and the important role they played in conserving the river resources. Support for the community actions against illegal fishing was consistent with 3SPN's mandate of augmenting river protection. Moreover, by expanding its community based network to include the fishery committees 3SPN was able to broaden and facilitate its primary work which focused on building awareness and promoting advocacy on the impact of the hydroelectric dams constructed upstream in Vietnam. By incorporating PAR into its regular programming, 3SPN was able to provide continuous support to the fishery committees which enabled them to accomplish a drastic reduction of illegal fishing in their communities in the space of about one year.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings of this study indicate that villagers can indeed develop and implement community action plans to reduce destructive fishing practices. Nonetheless, several factors need to be addressed to make the PAR process work. Initially a consensus has to be built within the village that the issue identified for collective action is a serious one, affecting a large part of the population. Similarly there needs to be a shared analysis within the community about the immediate cause of the problem and the steps required to solve it. In the four study villages of Chey Ouddum commune villagers experienced a decline of fish resources in the Srepok river and linked this to the widespread use of illegal fishing techniques. Public discussions revealed common points of view among the villagers about how to deal with the issue which served to build their confidence that they could do something about it.

While the development of community action plans generates excitement and enthusiasm early on, villagers often become paralyzed by feelings of confusion, fear, and powerlessness after the meetings disperse and the PAR practitioners leave for home. Implementation of community action plans becomes problematic once villagers confront the constraints of their everyday lives. As this research so clearly demonstrates, ongoing follow-up

and support are critical to enable villagers to overcome these debilitating sentiments and derive long-term benefits from the PAR process. By incorporating PAR against illegal fishing into its core program, 3SPN was able to provide sustained support to the fishery committees in the four villages, which over time enabled them to achieve a reduction in destructive fishing practices. Finally, the outcome was successful because the goal was something the fishery committees and villagers could attain on their own with minimal financial support from NGOs and minimal resistance from powerful outsiders.

The findings of the study likewise demonstrate that villagers can effectively coordinate with the commune council and government officials to implement their plans. Prior to the PAR activities in 2007 efforts to prohibit illegal fishing were reportedly ineffective because villagers acted on their own without support from the local authorities. Similarly when village groups first approached the commune authorities for assistance in preventing illegal fishing as part of the PAR process, they were largely ignored. It was through the persistence of the village leaders and fishery committees who continued to interact with the authorities - writing proposals, calling for meetings, coming to visit, and requesting *deika*, - that the commune council ultimately became convinced of their sincerity and commitment and issued documents to support their efforts. In a similar manner, the village groups gradually built up relationships with district and provincial officials.

The interplay between the four study villages and the Chey Ouddum commune council with regard to illegal fishing suggests that commune authorities become responsive to local initiatives when villagers take a proactive stance, relentlessly seek official support, and demonstrate their own commitment to action. It is perhaps unrealistic to expect local authorities to take action against illegal fishing on their own without a demand emanating from the villagers. In the present study support from the commune council provides a strong legal basis for villagers to take action with the police to patrol the river and confiscate illegal equipment from fishers. Collaboration with local authorities and the police, once considered unlikely, now emboldens the villagers to take action on an issue that directly affects their livelihood. Environmental governance which requires coordination between government and local people (see Van Acker 2009) is critical to the livelihoods of the villagers living along the Srepok river. The PAR process shows itself to be an effective method to mobilize communities for natural resource management.

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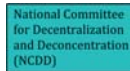
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