Going With the Grain
Reaping the Benefits of Cambodian Rice

Interview
Sung Bonna
CEO of Bonna Real Estate
Taking Concessions

The Tricky Issue of Land Redistribution

By An Sithav
Economics Today

Land and agricultural productivity are obviously linked. A more efficient land allocation system could raise harvests, boosting the economy.

Experts said that the unused and abandoned land, especially big land concessions, are needlessly squandering Cambodia’s potential. The situation is compounded by farmers who lack land to bring them out of poverty.

“More equitable distribution of land will deliver higher agricultural yields and increase the rate of economic growth, with indirect as well as direct gains for the poor,” said the World Bank’s Sharing Growth report. Conversely, any process that concentrates land ownership with de facto redistribution from smallholders to very large plantation-type holdings (as has occurred under the economic land concession program) may slow the rate of growth, said the same report.

Another report from the same institution found that “Levels of inequality in land ownership are high in Cambodia and significantly higher than most other countries in Asia.” The World Bank claimed that, as off-farm employment or self-employment options have dwindled, in the past two years over half a million landless poor have found it increasingly difficult to improve their situation, or even participate in the economy.

Ministry of Agriculture, Forests and Fisheries (MAFF) figures show a rapid growth in the number of validated concessions, increasing from 35 companies in 2007 to the current 65 companies, with a total land area of nearly 1 million ha given out as land concessions.

But a Cambodian Center for Human Rights (CCHR) September press release alleged that a total of over 3.6 million ha have been granted to private companies. “These concession types include, not just land allocations for plantation development, but for Special Economic Zones, mining operations for minerals, oil and gas and hydropower projects.”

Many of these concessions are not yet active, but regularly updated development maps show the extent to which the government has been granting land, forests and other natural resources that people depend on for their livelihoods to companies for industrial development, according to the same press releases.

CCHR President Ou Virak said that it is difficult to keep track of the land issues in Cambodia today. “There are scores of land problems like land alienation, which, though covering large areas, are not possible to map.” The new maps “are only conservative estimates of the problem of land and forest conflict in Cambodia,” he added.

Policy makers from both the government and relevant organizations are trying to propose abandoned concessions be passed to farmers but a major concern is that the recipients will just sell up and be left landless again.

“Land security and a fair, transparent approach to resolving land disputes and resettlement are among the greatest challenges facing Cambodia today. People without land or secure title to land are much more likely to be poor and stay poor,” said World Bank Southeast Asia Director Annette Dixon.

World Bank President Robert Zoellick has previously said that property rights would enable people to invest in their farms, small businesses and houses to improve their financial security and their lives. “Land titling is at the heart of a strategy to overcome...”
poverty and spread the benefits of a growing economy,” he stated.

The World Bank had been working with the government, development partners and other stakeholders since 2002 to put in place a modern and comprehensive land administration system under the Land Management and Administration Program (LAMP). This project has issued more than 1.1 million land titles, mostly to poor people in rural areas. However, the project was recently terminated around four months before its scheduled finish date by the Cambodian government, and, although both parties have remained tight-lipped, there are rumors of disagreements about recent land disputes, compensation issues, violent evictions and resettlement issues.

The World Bank’s Cambodia spokesman, Bou Sarieun, declined to comment on why the LMAP, referring questions to the government.

Prime Minister Hun Sen in a speech in early September said that the LMAP fund was ended “because there are too many conditions.”

“The partnership was difficult because it was complicated,” the premier added.

In any case, Chan Sophal, president of the Cambodia Economic Association (CEA), cautioned that simply dishing out empty land to poor farmers is likely to be unsuccessful. Much of the unused land is former logging concessions located far from population centers. Much is unsuitable for traditional Cambodian farming techniques.

“I do believe distributing big concessions to farmers is the best way to reduce poverty. Land should be provided near their houses to farm [but] to do this, we need more research and to provide land titles to people actually living there.”

He suggested that anyone productively occupying rural plots of land should be provided a land title by the government.

One expert, who requested anonymity, was far more cynical. The anonymous source alleged that many planned social land concessions are very close to economic land concessions. Such tactics have been used in other countries, such as Myanmar, to provide cheap labor to industry and agroindustry, as well as displace local ethnic minorities. Some concessions have been allocated for different projects several times over, the source claimed, making a mockery of attempts to provide legal ownership.

However, most are encouraged by the government’s statement of commitment to continuing reform in the land sector and working towards a legal framework for resettlement in line with international treaties.

“We remain committed to working with the government and other development partners through the Technical Working Group on Land to support Cambodia’s efforts to secure land tenure, reduce poverty, and improve economic opportunity for all of its people,” said the World Bank’s Annette Dixon.