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Briefing Note

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Overview of Community-Based Ecotourism for Sustainable Development In Cambodia

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Abbreviations

APLC	Agir Pour Le Cambodge
CBET	Community-Based Ecotourism
MoE	Ministry of Environment
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SCW	Save Cambodia's Wildlife
SNV	Stichting Nederlandse Vrijwillgers (Netherlands Development Organization)
SVC	Sam Veasna Center
WCS	Wildlife Conservation Society

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1. Introduction

1.1 Problem

Community-Based Ecotourism (CBET) is a form of community-based development in which local communities are involved in sustainable resource management in their areas through ecotourism activity, and receive benefits from it. The purpose of CBET is to protect natural resources and promote economic development and poverty reduction in communities. CBET provides alternative income for local people by encouraging them to protect rather than destroy their local resources[1]. CBET has contributed to sustainable development because it empowers the community to manage and use their resources through sustainable activities, which provide economic stimulus to the local community through tourism, providing people with jobs and benefits in the sector, as a result of the development of the environment and their livelihoods[2].

CBET in Cambodia has grown rapidly. The first CBET site was established in 1998 at Yeak Laom Lake in Ratanakiri province[3], which has since become a popular location for promoting inclusive growth and creating new sources of income for the community. It has been especially successful in helping to protect nature and in supporting the lives of the local community[4]. According to statistics from the Ministry of Tourism, in 2017 the number of Cambodian tourists to Yeak Laom Lake increased by 11.8 percent compared with 2016[5]. Almost all of the tourists have been interested in experiencing new and authentic natural resources, sites and activities, including forest trekking, cycling, bird watching and visiting bat caves in the area[4, 6].

Now that several CBET sites have been established, studies have shown that some community-based ecotourism initiatives have been performing well, while others have been less successful and have been facing constraints in how they manage their resources[7]. To support the government and stakeholders in promoting CBET in Cambodia, this briefing note aims to document the benefits, challenges and lessons learned from implementing CBET initiatives to date, and thereby to share lessons learned for promoting the effective expansion of this activity. The key research questions are as follow:

1.1. Research Questions

- What is the situation regarding Community-Based Ecotourism in Cambodia?

- What are the benefits, challenges and lessons learned from implementing Community-Based Ecotourism in Cambodia?
- What are the existing legal framework and policies regarding Community-Based Ecotourism in Cambodia?

1.2. Research Methodology

This briefing note reviews secondary data from existing research reports, journal articles, online sources and relevant reports from the Ministry of Tourism, Cambodia Development Resource Institute, Cambodian Rural Development Team, the United Nations Development Program, Netherlands Development Organization (SNV), the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and other related academic articles. Based on the availability of data, eight cases of CBET were reviewed in order to identify benefits, challenges and lessons-learned in implementing CBET in Cambodia.

2. Situation Regarding Community-Based Ecotourism in Cambodia

2.1. Contribution of the Tourism Sector to the Cambodian Economy

Tourism is one of the main sectors contributing to Cambodia's economy. With international arrivals increasing each year, in 2018, Cambodia received over 6 million visitors[8]. Tourism plays an important role in developing the country and in promoting economic growth and livelihoods. The tourism sector generated USD 4.3 billion in revenue in 2018, up by about 20 percent from 2017, according to the latest figures from the Ministry of Tourism. And this sector is considered by the government as "green gold" that can support the country's economy, creating jobs and reducing poverty[9]. Although there is no specific data on exactly how much revenue CBET generates, this sector is believed to have great potential to attract international tourists to extend their visits to Cambodia, particularly from Thailand and Vietnam, hence contributing to the country's economy [10].

2.2. Mapping of Community-Based Ecotourism

The number of Community-Based Ecotourism sites is gradually increasing in Cambodia linked to the natural features of the sites and village life. Currently, Community-Based Ecotourism is booming and is attracting many tourists to visit Cambodia. According to the Ministry of

Tourism, ecotourism in Cambodia is a feature of 266 sites in the 25 provinces, of which CBET accounts for 13 [11].

Among the 13 CBET sites, Yeak Laom in Ratanakiri is the oldest and was established in 1998. It covers an area about 800 meters in diameter and 48 meters deep with 1,855 beneficiaries[12, 13]. The Virachey National Park CBET covers 3,381 km² and is the largest National Park among seven other National Parks in Cambodia[14]. The latest CBET sites were established in 2007, and include Prek Thnout in Kompot, Chi Phat in Koh Kong, Preah Rumkel, O'Ressey Kandal and Osvay in Stung Treng and Koh Pdao in Kratie. The CBET with the highest number of beneficiaries is Prek Thnout in Kompot, which is home to more than 800 families. It is worth noting that almost all CBETs have been supported by NGOs, except for Yeak Laom that has lately become self-supporting, and Virachey National Park, which is supported by the Ministry of Environment (See Table 1, Appendix 1).

All CBET sites have their own unique qualities, but they also share similar leisure activities, depending on the local resources available. For example, most CBET sites offer the opportunity to observe wildlife (e.g. bird reserves or the habitats of endangered birds, crocodile, fish and Irrawaddy dolphins), or to visit sites of great natural beauty (waterfalls, bat caves, rivers, mountains, or forests), or to discover local culture or traditions (e.g. visiting handicraft production sites and witnessing the culture of local communities). Tourists can also enjoy leisure activities such as boat trips, cycling, riding in ox-carts, hiking, trekking, or camping with local guides) [11].

3. The Benefits, Challenges and Lessons Learned from Implementing Community-Based Ecotourism in Cambodia

3.1. Benefits

Studies have shown that Community-Based Ecotourism has contributed to income generation and job creation for local people, community development and the protection of natural resources[15].

- ***Income generation and job creation:*** Four out of eight Community-Based Ecotourism case studies selected for this briefing note reported that the presence of CBET had

helped to generate income and create jobs for community people in their areas[4, 14, 16, 17]. For example, the Chambok CBET had provided some salaries from homestay and other services which had provided income for both CBET member and non-member households. This CBET had also created jobs for its community people to work as tourist guides, restaurant workers or souvenir sellers. About 99 percent of households felt satisfied with it[4]. Similarly, the Chi Phat CBET had provided about 20-30 percent of its total revenues from guesthouses, homestays, motorbike taxi services, restaurants and guides to local people as their salary[18]. In Thmat Boey, 33 families had received regular employment of around USD 20/month from part-time jobs on a permanent basis, and another 60 families had received some minor benefits[7]. In total, each community member had earned a total of USD 200 – 400 per year from ecotourism activities (guiding, cooking, cleaning the lodges, etc.)[17].

- **Community development:** In four cases it was reported that the presence of CBET had also helped to support community development [17, 18, 19, 20]. For instance, Thmat Boey CBET had contributed its service revenues to the village fund to support development activities that were benefiting the entire community. These had included investment in roads, schools, water pumps and ceremonies. The revenue allocated for community development was reported to be about USD 7,000 – 9,000 per year[17]. Chambok CBET had allocated some of its revenues to poor families, and to the maintenance of trails, community buildings, and especially of the water pipeline that gives the villages access to fresh water from the waterfalls[19]. Banteay Chhmar in Banteay Mean Chey Province had donated 19 percent of its revenues (USD 45,000 per year) from tourist visits to waste collection services, opening a library, cleaning a moat, and other community development-related activities[20].
- **Natural resource protection:** Five case studies reported that CBET had helped to protect natural and cultural resources, as well as wildlife[18, 19, 21, 22, 23]. For example, Chi Phat CBET had contributed to biodiversity and the protection of natural resources against illegal logging, wildlife poaching and land encroachment. This comprehensive conservation model had resulted in the reforestation of 733 hectares of degraded areas, the cancellation or reduction of 36 land concessions, the provision of sustainable

livelihood alternatives for 5,000 community members, and the protection of 720,000 hectares of forests from illegal loggers and commercial and industrial encroachment[23]. Through this CBET, 280 households who used to be hunters, wildlife traders or loggers had stopped their activities and become community members[18]. Similarly, Chambok CBET had contributed to a reduction in the extent of forest fires and the cessation of illegal logging and hunting inside the ecotourism site. Most villagers who were previously involved in logging or hunting had become farmers, tour guides or tourism service providers[19].

3.2. Challenges

Implementing CBET in Cambodia still faces challenges. These include:

- **Low direct income from CBET:** A survey conducted in Chambok CBET with 173 households showed that, although CBET had provided income for local people, there had been no significant difference in the total income between member and non-member households; the median income linked to CBET was only USD 1.22 per month (1.65 percent of the total income). Therefore, it cannot be confirmed that CBET has contributed to poverty reduction in the community. Further research on this issue is needed[24].
- **Unequal benefit-sharing:** Benefit-sharing among CBET members has not been equitable in some CBET sites. For example, all residents in Yeak Laom CBET are able to provide services or sell goods to tourists by renting a vending booth from the management committee. But, obviously, only a few better-off residents are likely to be able to join in with these remunerative activities, especially businesses that are particularly lucrative, such as those supplying food and beverages[18]. As was the case in Chambok, CBET members only saw direct benefits from ecotourism if they were able to offer homestays, become a tour guide, to serve as a committee member, or to cook in a restaurant[24]. On the other hand, in Chi Phat and Koh Phdao, members did not need to rent a vending booth, but were allowed to sell goods to tourists who were visiting the community on a rotational basis[18].
- **Limited capacity of community people:** Some CBET initiatives could not function well because their members still lacked the skills and capacity needed to deliver the

associated services. For example, local people in Cham Bok CBET often lacked the necessary skills and knowledge relating to food preparation, hygiene, hospitality, the provision of local guide services (which was related to limited language competence), site maintenance and environmental management[4].

- The unclear demarcation and boundaries of CBET sites, and a lack of supporting infrastructure: Some CBET initiatives still did not have clear boundaries and lacked infrastructure to provide services for tourists. For example, the Cham Bok CBET was still underdeveloped and much needed to be done to overcome the difficulties faced by the local community, especially related to the lack of demarcation around the ecotourism site and insufficient tourism infrastructure such as road access, electricity or power supply, transportation and sanitation[4].
- Sustainability of CBET: Most of the CBET sites had been assisted by non-governmental organizations to set up proper community structures and benefit-sharing mechanisms[25]. The limited capacity of the communities, inadequate access to markets, and reliance on external partners such as NGOs, were posing a number of challenges in ensuring the sustainability of CBET initiatives in Cambodia[25].

3.3. Lessons Learned

Four lessons can be identified from the implementation of existing Community-Based Ecotourism sites in Cambodia:

- Having a clear internal policy or guidelines related to income generation and benefit-sharing for community members is important for the success of a CBET scheme. Benefit-sharing is a particularly sensitive issue that requires appropriate attention from all stakeholders[18].
- Mechanisms to monitor benefit-sharing within the community need to be designed carefully. Experience has shown that support from external partners, such as NGOs, for monitoring the process of benefit-sharing is important to ensure transparency within the community[26].

- Achieving natural resource protection needs to go hand-in-hand with incentives. For example, the Tmat Boey Community Protected Area Committee, in partnership with the Wildlife Conservation Society, has developed a community-based monitoring scheme through which local residents are paid a small fee for reporting and monitoring the nests of endangered species, rather than selling the eggs on the thriving black market operating on the Thailand-Lao PDR border[26].
- Technical support from government or NGOs is required to help CBET initiatives to perform effectively. An example is the support of the Sam Veasna Center for the Tmat Boey CBET project[26]. However, support from the government and NGOs needs to strengthen the community to function on its own in the long run[27].

4. Legal Framework and Policies Regarding Community-Based Ecotourism in Cambodia

4.1. National Legal Instruments

Cambodia has yet to pass proper legislation to govern Community-Based Ecotourism projects so that they protect the community people and their benefits for long-term development. The law on ecotourism is still being drafted by the Ministry of Tourism. However, this draft law could help to set the baseline for the development of CBETs in Cambodia.

Previous legislation such as the Tourism Law of 2009, the Forestry Law of 2002 and the Protected Area Law of 2008 could help to clarify the concept of ecotourism-based development in Cambodia. Article 10 of the Tourism Law states that the Ministry of Tourism has the primary responsibility for the regulation of the tourism industry in Cambodia. Article 11 of the same law further stipulates that “the Ministry of Tourism shall have shared responsibility for the regulation of other important areas affecting or affected by the tourism industry (including ecotourism and community-based tourism activities) in cooperation with other concerned ministries and authorities”[28].

The Forestry Law of 2002 provides no clear description of Community-Based Ecotourism, but describes the roles and rights of community people who rely on forest products. Article 9 of this law states that the Forestry Administration, in compliance with the National Forest Sector Policy, must prepare a National Forest Management Plan with the broad participation of authorities and communities in the management, use and protection of the forests. Article 40

states that, for local communities living within the permanent forest reserves, the State must recognize their traditional user-rights for the purposes of traditional customs. Article 44 further explains that a local community must have the right to harvest forest products within the demarcated forest area stated in the community forest agreement, but that the local community cannot use the community forest in the form of a concession, nor sell, barter or transfer its rights in respect of such a forest to a third party[29].

The Protected Area Law of 2008 prescribes the zoning systems, roles and benefits of community people who live in Protected Areas. Article 11 of this law states that Protected Areas must be divided into four management zoning systems, of which the community zone comprises the management areas for socio-economic development, which the local community can use for residence, paddy fields and field gardens or a swidden zone. According to Article 22, the State is required to recognize and secure the traditional uses and local customs of community people residing within the Protected Areas[30].

4.2. National Policies

The Rectangular Strategy Phase IV of the Royal Government of Cambodia recognizes the importance of the tourism sector in contributing to economic development. Based on this, one of the key priorities for the Royal Government of the Sixth Legislature includes the preparation of a master plan for the tourism sector with a focus on the diversification of tourism products and destinations, attracting high-spending tourists and encouraging tourism-supporting industries; therefore, Community-Based Ecotourism remains a key area of focus[31].

Another policy is the Tourism Development Strategic Plan 2012-2020 of the Ministry of Tourism. According to this policy, Cambodia needs to enhance the tourism sector, and ecotourism is one of the priority areas for sustainable and green economic development in the country. This policy highlights (i) the priority ecotourism sites to be developed such as the southern corridor, northern sites, Great Lake and the Mekong River. It also emphasizes: (ii) the importance of marketing and promotion for tourism growth including CBET; (iii) the importance of improving travel facilities and transportation, along with international connectivity; (iv) tourism safety systems; (v) legal systems; and (vi) human resource development[32].

5. Conclusion

Community-Based Ecotourism in Cambodia has grown rapidly in response to the development of the tourism sector in the country. As a result of this growth, CBET, although not yet addressing poverty reduction and ensuring equitable benefit-sharing, has contributed to income generation, job creation for community members, community development and the protection of natural resources. Along with the benefits, some CBET initiatives still face challenges in their performance, and there are key lessons to be learned from previous CBET sites in support of its further development in the country. As a way forward, to help to promote sustainable CBET development, conservation and the protection of natural resources and the environment in Cambodia, enacting of the law on Community-Based Ecotourism will help address these areas. It is also important for the government and stakeholders to collaborate in addressing existing challenges, to continue their support and to strengthen the capacity of CBET in a way that improves the way it functions in the long run.

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Appendix 1: Table 1: Community-Based Ecotourism in Cambodia

CBET Site	Province	Established	Area	Beneficiaries	Supported by	Activities
Yeak Laom	Ratanakiri	1998	800 meters in diameter and 48 meters deep	1,855 People	Local Communities	-Volcanic lake; hiking; swimming; visiting handicraft production sites and cultural areas
Prek Toal	Battambang	1999	420 km ²	-	Osmose	-Crocodile fish farm; core bird reserve; paddle boats
Cham Bok	Kompong Speu	2002	1,260 ha	761 Families	Mlup Baitong	-Forest; mountains; waterfalls; a bat cave; hiking; watching birds and animals; trekking; bicycle and ox-cart riding
Ang Tropeang Thmor	Banteay Mean Chey	2003	129 km ²	-	SVC and WCS	-Birds (sarus crane); rural Cambodian culture; ancient temples; local silk weaving centers
Virachey National Park	Ratanakiri	2004	3,381 km ²	-	MoE	-Trekking through the forest; village homestays; jungle camping
Thmat Boey	Preah Vihear	2005	25,780 ha	881 people	SVC and WCS	-Endangered birds; trekking in the unique forest; local cultural tours
Banteay Chhmar	Banteay Mean Chey	2006	2 km ²	-	APLC and Global Heritage Fund	-Discovering rural life by ox-cart; bicycle or koyun rides; silk products
Prek Thnout	Kompot	2007	-	800+ Families	SCW	-Waterfalls and mangrove forest; wildlife including birds, monkeys, dolphins, dugongs and fireflies; hiking; swimming
Chi Phat	Koh Kong	2007	-	3,000 People	Wildlife Alliance	-Waterfalls; rivers, mountains, evergreen forests; wildlife and birds; cultural artifacts; boat trips and camping
Preah RumKel	Stung Treng	2007	-	-	Mlup Baitong	-Watching dolphins, birds and other wildlife; waterfalls; bicycling; swimming; tasting local rice wine
O'Russey Kandal	Stung Treng	2007	5,036 ha	446 Families	Mlup Baitong	-Watching wildlife; trekking; tasting local food; CBET products and services
Osvay	Stung Treng	2007	-	-	CEPA	-Watching Irrawaddy dolphins; hiking, trips along the river and lake; visiting the community forest and mangrove forest; seeing plenty of Mekong river fish
Koh Pdao	Kratie	2007	-	405 Families	CDRT	-Enjoying Khmer traditional dances or local Khmer dishes; trekking, bicycling or boat trips around the island

Source: Ministry Tourism of Cambodia, 2019; National Institute of Statistics, 2019; CCBEN, SNV and Asia Invest, 2008.