

2025 Environmental Justice Needs Report

Cambodian Human Rights Action Coalition



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Produced by the Cambodian Human Rights Action Coalition.

www.CHRAChumanrights.org

About CHRAC

The Cambodian Human Rights Action Coalition ('CHRAC') is a coalition of 18 non-governmental organization ('NGO') members that actively promotes and protects civil society, advocating for human rights and democratic issues in Cambodia. CHRAC's mission is to promote, uphold, and respect human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in Cambodia.

CHRAC coordinates between 30 to 50 different civil society organizations ('CSOs') and networks, including key independent trade unions, to promote the relevant international mechanisms and agreements pertaining to human rights. CHRAC is a leader in strengthening cross-sector collaboration, delivering high-impact human rights training, conducting research and impact assessments on justice reform, and data-driven policy advocacy at the national level.



CHRAC's Executive Director, Mr Sotha Ros, at the Dhammayietra (7 December 2024)

Authors' Note & Acknowledgements

At CHRAC, we believe legal empowerment is critical to address justice-related issues and accessibility is key to ensuring its effectiveness. The primary aim of this report is to equip the government, decision-makers and related stakeholders with the essential information and recommendations needed to drive meaningful reforms in Cambodia's environmental justice system. The report is not intended to assign blame but to foster constructive dialogue, ensuring both human and land rights are acknowledged and upheld. The overarching goal is to guarantee equal access to justice for all individuals in Cambodia.

CHRAC wishes to recognise this project would not have been possible without the generosity and goodwill of the Cambodian people who participated in this survey. Their bravery in contributing to a better understanding of the justice challenges facing Cambodians across the country, including responding to sometimes politically sensitive questions, is deeply appreciated. CHRAC also extends its gratitude to the civil society leaders who helped distribute the report.

This important work has emerged thanks to the unwavering commitment of the CHRAC team, who worked tirelessly despite resource constraints. CHRAC also would like to express its sincerest gratitude to Kate Flower for her ongoing support and capacity-building efforts. We also wish to acknowledge the vital funding provided by the Legal Empowerment Fund, which has enabled this collaboration. Through this partnership, we have been able to innovate and create meaningful change in improving access to justice throughout Cambodia.

Finally, CHRAC dedicates this report to all the victims and survivors across Cambodia who continue to struggle for justice. The findings from this report will drive our ongoing advocacy to secure the resources necessary to bridge the justice gap in environmental disputes throughout Cambodia's 25 provinces.



Introduction

How can Cambodia ensure that its most vulnerable — particularly rural provinces and indigenous communities — gain meaningful access to justice in environmental disputes?

This report examines the state of environmental justice in Cambodia, focusing on the experiences of marginalized communities — particularly those in rural and remote areas. By identifying systemic barriers to access and their root causes, we aim to propose community-driven solutions that strengthen access to justice and empower those most affected by environmental harm.

For communities to assert their rights and hold authorities accountable, justice systems must be accessible, responsive and rooted in local realities. Beyond legal mechanisms, raising awareness of rights and strengthening community-led advocacy are essential for meaningful justice. Access to justice is not just a legal issue, it is the foundation for inclusive sustainable development.¹

However, justice reform in Cambodia has stagnated. Limited resources, restricted access to information, fear of reprisals, and systemic barriers prevent many from resolving legal issues that impact their daily lives. The formal judicial system faces immense pressure and is widely perceived as slow, inefficient, and lacking independence. As a result, communities often turn to alternate pathways — informal networks, grassroots movements, and traditional dispute resolution — to seek justice on their own terms.



Environmental justice remains a major challenge in Cambodia. Rapid economic development, weak enforcement of environmental regulations and political and economic influences have led to land conflicts, illegal logging, and resource exploitation. Environmental defenders continue to face threats, harassment, and imprisonment, while the lack of judicial independence leaves many vulnerable to displacement, environmental degradation, and loss of traditional livelihoods that are crucial to their cultural and economic survival.²

¹ The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations members in 2015, includes 17 Sustainable Development Goals which call for urgent global action. It recognises that climate action, alleviating poverty, improving health and education, and fostering economic growth are essential to achieve lasting peace and prosperity. See Economic and Social Council of the UN General Assembly, “Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: Report of the Secretary-General” (New York: UN, 2 May 2024), <https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/report/2024/SG-SDG-Progress-Report-2024-advanced-unedited-version.pdf>.

² Land conflicts threaten rural and indigenous Cambodians’ right to a clean, healthy, and sustainable environment, which was declared a human right by virtue of the United Nations General Assembly in Resolution 67/300 on 28 July 2022. The Resolution was



Enhancing data collection and analysis is a crucial step toward ensuring environmental justice. This report presents a comprehensive analysis based on a survey conducted by the CHRAC team between July 2024 and October 2025, gathering **1000 responses from across Cambodia's 25 provinces**.³ Our findings map the scale of justice needs and identify key barriers to accessing justice. By collaborating with local community-based organizations ('CBOs'), we aim to develop targeted interventions that empower affected communities. Ongoing data collection on environmental disputes and justice outcomes will further inform these efforts.

A recurring issue highlighted in the survey is the prevalence of land conflicts which are often arbitrary and **occasionally violent**. Many respondents reported

losing their land to large-scale development projects and agro-industrial concessions, exacerbating existing inequalities in rural communities dependent on fishing and farming. Indigenous communities have been permanently displaced from their traditional ancestral lands that have sustained their culture and spiritual identity. Protested land seizures often triggered further injustices, including verbal threats, physical assault, arrests, or imprisonment by authorities. Households were particularly affected when their primary income earners or caregivers were detained. These findings are reinforced by two case studies from CHRAC field investigations conducted in September 2024.

Environmental justice will remain out of reach until community needs are prioritized, the independence of judicial institutions is improved, and the safety of environmental defenders is ensured. Expanding access to legal aid services, fostering community-led dispute resolution mechanisms, and raising awareness about environmental rights are essential steps towards justice. Addressing these systemic issues will not only advance environmental justice, but also safeguard land, livelihoods, and sustainable development for Cambodia's most vulnerable communities.

supported by all but eight UN member states, including Cambodia, who abstained from voting. See "With 161 Votes in Favour, 8 Abstentions, General Assembly Adopts Landmark Resolution Recognizing Clean, Healthy, Sustainable Environment as Human Right," United Nations Meeting Coverage and Press Releases, posted 28 July 2022, <https://press.un.org/en/2022/ga12437.doc.htm>.

³ This report's findings are based on survey data collected up until 1 November 2025, totalling 1000 responses.

Methodology

CHRAC conducted an Environmental Justice Needs Survey as a preliminary effort to identify and understand environmental justice-related issues that require reform in Cambodia. The survey was particularly concerned with the experiences of rural provinces and indigenous communities. This initiative served as **a low-cost, scalable solution funded by the Legal Empowerment Fund** and was implemented without any additional funding.⁴

SURVEY DESIGN AND DATA COLLECTION

Our survey's conceptual framework was based on the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's ('OECD') Legal Needs Survey methodology, including 27 multiple-choice and short-answer questions. It explored key themes such as access to legal assistance, barriers to justice, and importantly, how people were solving their justice problems.

To ensure broad participation, CHRAC leveraged its extensive community network, prioritizing accessibility for marginalized groups, particularly in rural and indigenous communities. The survey was distributed online via Telegram, Cambodia's most widely used messaging platform, and disseminated through field-based CSOs, community-based organizations (CBOs), and local leaders. This multi-channel approach helped reach individuals who may otherwise lack the means or opportunity to share their experiences.

The data collection period spanned from July 2024 to October 2025, allowing sufficient time to gather diverse perspectives across Cambodia's 25 provinces. Through this survey, CHRAC has compiled one of the most extensive datasets on environmental justice and legal needs in Cambodia, providing valuable insights that will inform targeted interventions and policy recommendations aimed at strengthening access to justice at the community level.



DEMOGRAPHIC OF RESPONDENTS

⁴ See "LEF Awards \$1.052 Million to Grassroots Groups Advancing Climate Justice in Southeast Asia," Legal Empowerment Fund, posted 6 December 2024, <https://legalempowermentfund.org/updates/advancing-climate-justice-in-southeast-asia/>.

Our survey's target audience consisted of rural provinces and indigenous communities who are most likely to face environmental justice-related issues. Those with prior experiences or interactions with the Cambodian justice system were also a key focus, including:

- i. Individuals supported by CSOs, CBOs, and non-profit organizations;
- ii. Human rights defenders; and
- iii. Victims of land and human rights violations.

GENDER. Households were impacted differently when either its primary income earner or caregiver was affected by a justice-related issue. Men in Cambodia are typically the household's primary income earner, and women the primary caregiver. Experiences of justice therefore vary based on gender identification. Among the respondents, **50.5%** were women, **48.6%** were men, and **0.9%** identified as 'other'.

AGE. Survey responses were distributed across all age categories. The largest group of respondents were individuals aged over 50 (**36.6%**), followed by those aged 40 to 49 (**25.5%**), 30 to 39 (**19.3%**), and 20 to 29 (**11.5%**). However, individuals under 20 years represented only **6.4%** of respondents. This is a notable limitation as this age group constitutes a significant portion of Cambodia's population. This report is therefore incomplete in documenting the experiences of all Cambodians in accessing environmental justice.

YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN CAMBODIA

To understand how Cambodian youth uniquely experience justice-related issues, CHRAC interviewed a 19-year-old community leader from Phnom Penh. They identified three key barriers to meaningful participation.

First, Cambodian youth grow up in an environment where public expression is closely monitored. The interviewee recalled how public officials attended a peaceful gathering at their local pagoda — the central gathering space of Cambodian villages — to discuss children's rights. Despite notifying the community chief in advance, authorities photographed and closely monitored the participants. Fearing repercussions, they now confine their advocacy to private and informal settings.

Second, political expression comes at a high price for many. The leader noted that families, particularly from low-income backgrounds, actively discourage youth from engaging in public debate. Parents fear that voicing dissent could jeopardise the sacrifices they've made for their children's education — and by extension, their family's future income.

Third, the widespread use of social media has intensified this climate of fear. Aware that their online activities can be monitored and weaponized against them, many Cambodians now learn from an early age to suppress their opinions. This leader believes that disengagement from political discourse is not therefore a choice but a survival mechanism — silence is the cost of safety.



MINORITY REPRESENTATION. It is important to note that access to justice for minority groups poses an even greater challenge in the face of systemic marginalization. Of the respondents, **13.7%** identified as indigenous, **1.4%** as Muslim Cham, and **1.3%** as members of the LGBTQIA+ community. As noted above, **0.9%** identified their gender as 'other'. **0.6%** also identified as disabled. CHRAC aims to gain deeper insights into these unique

experiences through further data analysis. Particular focus will be given to the many Indigenous respondents affected by land justice issues, such as dispossession and displacement.

EDUCATION. Educational attainment shapes legal awareness, impacting how individuals engage with justice-related issues. Most respondents (**78.3%**) reported having an elementary-level education, while **7%** had started high school, **7.4%** had completed high school, and **7.3%** had attained a university degree.

INCOME. Income plays a crucial role in how individuals navigate justice-related issues and often depends on their level of educational attainment. Households with limited finances often divert resources to address immediate needs such as food and shelter. Nearly two-thirds (**67.1%**) reported a monthly income of less than USD \$100.00, while **31.3%** between USD \$100.00 to \$500.00, **0.7%** between USD \$500.00 to \$1000.00 and **0.7%** above USD \$1000.00. When assessing income, household size is also a crucial factor in determining resource scarcity. Of the respondents, **60%** of households had 4 to 6 members, **24%** had 1 to 3 members, and **16%** who had 7 or more. Our data thus reflects the economic challenges of individuals in balancing professional and domestic obligations.



Key Findings

This report investigates how Cambodia can ensure its most vulnerable, particularly rural and indigenous communities, gain meaningful access to justice in environmental disputes. To effectively address this concern, it is essential to examine the justice-related issues Cambodians face. This summary aims to understand how Cambodians pursue justice, the main obstacles they face, and their overall perceptions of the justice system. By the end of data collection, a **total of 1000 respondents** had completed the survey, representing individuals and communities from all 25 provinces of Cambodia.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

PREVALENCE AND SEVERITY OF JUSTICE-RELATED ISSUES

Results show most respondents (**88.6%**) recently experienced a justice-related issue. Among respondents, **73.1%** reported experiencing a problem within the last five years, **9.6%** within the last two years, **5.4%** within the past year, and **11.9%** within the last six months. This data suggests that most justice-related issues are **ongoing conflicts** rather than newly emerging disputes. Critically, as shown in *Figure 1*, **65.2%** indicated their justice-related issue arose from a **land conflict**, followed by employment (**5.5%**) and housing issues (**1.7%**), business disputes (**3.3%**), and domestic violence (**1.5%**). Land conflicts also represented the predominant issue in 17 provinces. Respondents were subsequently asked to rate the severity of their justice issue on a scale from 1 to 10. While **16.9%** scored their justice-related issue as less severe (1-4), **72.1%** rated it as moderate to severe (5-7), and **11%** as extremely severe (8-10). These statistics demonstrate that land conflicts are a significant issue affecting communities throughout Cambodia.

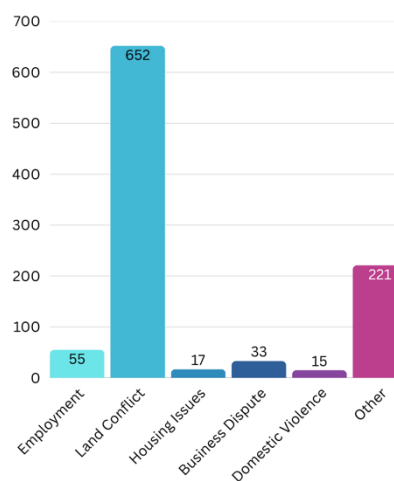


Figure 1. Primary Justice-Related Issues

SOURCES OF LEGAL INFORMATION

Understanding how individuals access information to address their legal issues is essential for designing legal empowerment initiatives that improve access to reliable, independent, and trustworthy resources. Respondents overwhelmingly sought information through **discussion with friends (84.8%)**, radio (**52.8 %**), social media (**21.3%**) and television, books, or newspapers (**11.9%**). While these informal sources provide quick and accessible information, their quality and reliability are a concern. This supports respondents' concerns about their own lack of legal literacy and access to information.

AVAILABILITY OF LEGAL SUPPORT

When asked about who support was sought from, **49.4%** of participants approached **CSOs, CBOs, or NGOs**, **34.7%** sought help from schools or educational institutions, and **15.9%** from village chiefs or religious leaders. Only **10.8%** sought assistance from lawyers, reflecting the barriers faced by low-income households in accessing formal legal support. Although respondents sought assistance, when asked whether support was available within their communities, **64.9%** reported it was **unavailable**, **22.7%** indicated some support was accessible, and only **12.4%** found that adequate support was obtainable. Due to this lack of availability, many respondents raised the need to travel at their own expense to access adequate

justice support, suggesting rural provinces and indigenous communities are affected by land justice-related issues.

BARRIERS TO SEEKING JUSTICE

Enhancing access to justice also involves identifying and dismantling the obstacles that hinder individuals from taking action. When considering means of redress, **62.9%** were **discouraged by the failure of previous attempts** to solve the issue, **25.4%** reported financial barriers, **22.9%** questioned whether taking action would make a difference, while **19.1%** cited the distance required to travel to access appropriate resources. When asked about their justice-related issues, **67%** of respondents stated it was **unresolved**, **14.7%** indicated it was ongoing, and only **16.4%** claim a resolution was reached. Notably, **73.4%** reported they were **relying on the issue resolving itself**, while others sought a resolution through mediation, local leaders, or relocation. This again suggests that a lack of access to necessary resources prevents individuals from effectively resolve disputes. Only **3%** opted for a **formal judicial process**, underscoring the limited confidence in state-led justice mechanisms.

FINANCIAL AND RESOURCE CONSTRAINTS

Respondents reported incurring additional costs when addressing their justice problems: phone or internet fees (**2.2%**), mediation fees (**2.6%**), travel costs (**7%**), legal fees (**4.7%**), fees to police or court officials (**5.8%**), and loss of income (**30.4%**) were identified. Environmental displacement further aggravated these financial strains, forcing families to prioritise relocation expenses over seeking

justice. As can be seen in *Figure 2*, most respondents (**60.1%**) indicated a **lack of resources** constitutes the primary barrier to accessing justice. Lack of knowledge (**16.6%**), money (**13%**) and time (**4%**), as well as fear of retaliation from authorities (**6.3%**) were other notable obstacles.

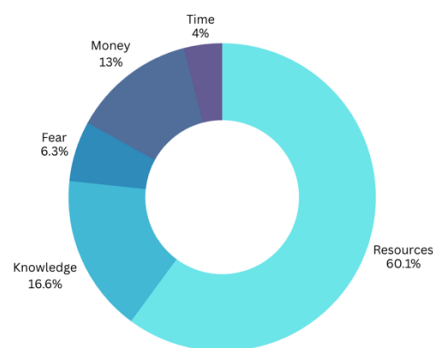


Figure 2. Primary Access to Justice Barriers

PERCEPTIONS OF THE JUSTICE SYSTEM

Respondents' experiences with justice-related barriers shaped their attitudes towards the justice system. **92.2%** of respondents reported that it was difficult to find justice, and **83.7%** felt their community lacked the necessary tools to address justice-related issues. Despite indicating a collective desire for a fair justice system, many respondents expressed **powerlessness** in the face of large-scale development and resource exploitation. This sentiment was especially true for cases where their concerns were dismissed or met with hostility by local authorities. Many also voiced a sense of **disillusionment** with the justice system's failure to hold perpetrators accountable, especially in **land conflict cases**, reinforcing a broader lack of trust in formal legal mechanisms.

Case Studies

PO MEAS VILLAGERS PROTEST METTA FOREST CLEARING

Po Meas Village, Trapeang Chao Commune, Aoral District, Kampong Speu Province (Field Visit, 4 September 2024)



BACKGROUND OF PO MEAS. On 4 September 2024, the CHRAC team visited Po Meas to document local experiences of land justice-related issues. Po Meas is a rural village situated within the Metta Forest, an ecologically significant area encompassing over 2,000 hectares in central Cambodia. Metta has historically sustained local communities by offering an abundance of natural resources, enabling traditional livelihoods sustained by farming, foraging, and grazing. Po Meas was previously home to 359 families who have depended on, cared for, and protected its local forestry for more than 20 years. Metta's governance has largely been overseen by the Community Protected Area Committee, who play an essential role in maintaining its ecological integrity.

The Metta Forest was officially registered with the Ministry of Environment in April 2003. However, since 2008, Po Meas has faced severe challenges due to delays in official land registration and rising economic interest in the region. In 2021, most inward foreign direct investment went to Cambodia's capital, Phnom Penh and Sihanoukville in Preah Sihanouk province, while the Aoral district in Kampong Speu province ranked joint third with Siem Reap.⁵ Land disputes have erupted, extensive deforestation has begun, and forced displacement has

⁵ Cara Lyttle and Deepti Aggarwal, "Cambodia punches above its weight in attracting FDI," *Investor Monitor*, 28 October 2022, <https://www.investmentmonitor.ai/insights/cambodia-punches-above-its-weight-in-attracting-fdi/?cf-view>.

torn the village apart. Widespread deforestation has fractured the social fabric of Po Meas, disrupting long-standing communal practices and cultural traditions.

INDIGINEOUS DISPLACEMENT IN THE METTA FOREST

Beyond its economic value, the Metta Forest holds deep spiritual significance for its inhabitants, serving as the foundation for communal rituals, ceremonies, and sustainable land stewardship practices. Environmental harm therefore disproportionately affects indigenous communities whose customs, culture, and income are derived from their connection to land. Widespread deforestation has led to concerns from more than 300 Sui Indigenous families residing within the Metta Forest for fear of severe loss of income. The Sui people's traditional practice of collecting non-timber forest products, including mushrooms, traditional medicine, firewood, and picking vegetables and fruits, was used to sustain local businesses for generations. Today, water sources have been filled, soil fertility has declined, and displacement has uprooted families to areas with inadequate infrastructure. Within the scarce forestry, local businesses now face extinction.



district to facilitate agro-industry to meet domestic and international supply demands.

The consequences of land conflict have been profound. Deforestation has reached alarming levels, eroding the rich biodiversity that once characterised the Metta Forest. The conversion of forested land into monoculture plantations has devastated local ecosystems, leading to significant losses in flora and fauna. These ecological transformations have compounded the economic hardships of Po Meas villagers, many of whom have lost their primary means of sustenance and income. Many families residing in Po Meas have mobilized for months to protect what remains of their community.⁶ Yet community efforts to resist these encroachments have been met with severe repression. Villagers engaging in peaceful protests have frequently faced arbitrary arrests, physical violence, and other forms of intimidation. Many families have been forcibly displaced, while others continue to face threats of punitive violence and detainment.

LEGAL ACTIVISM. Po Meas villagers have actively sought legal remedies to reclaim their land and hold perpetrators accountable for human rights violations. Key legal strategies include:

⁶ "Land Community Activists Beaten by Brigade 70 Soldiers in Kampong Speu," *LICHADO: Cambodian League for the Promotion of Defence and Human Rights*, 23 February 2022, <https://www.licadho-cambodia.org/flashnews.php?perm=307>.

- Filing formal litigation with the Kampong Speu Provincial Court, specifically targeting military personnel unlawful land conflicts and acts of violence against villagers.
- Securing legal representation through human rights organizations and pro bono legal professionals to strengthen their cases.
- Participating in legal education workshops to empower community members with knowledge about their rights under national and international legal frameworks.
- Partnering with national and transnational advocacy organizations to amplify their demands for justice.
- Submitting comprehensive reports and petitions to human rights bodies in an effort to generate global attention and diplomatic pressure.
- Engaging in policy advocacy to push for legislative reforms aimed at enhancing the legal protections for indigenous and rural landowners in Cambodia.

COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION. Despite formidable legal and political obstacles, Po Meas villagers have employed grassroots mobilization tactics to resist land dispossession. These actions include:

- Establishing 'land guardianship' groups, composed of local volunteers who actively monitor and protect the remaining sections of the forest.
- Organising mass demonstrations against land seizures and unlawful detentions of community members.
- Reconstructing demolished homes, replanting deforested areas, and restoring culturally significant sites such as temples and monasteries as acts of defiance and resilience.
- Utilizing social media platforms, independent journalism, and local and international advocacy networks to document human rights abuses and disseminate their cause to a broader audience.
- Building coalitions with other communities experiencing similar land rights struggles.
- Establishing fundraising initiatives to support displaced families, finance legal battles, and sustain community-led restoration projects.⁷

INVOLVEMENT AND COLLABORATION WITH CSOs. A range of local and international CSOs have played an instrumental role in supporting Po Meas by providing legal, financial, and advocacy assistance. Organizations such as CHRAC, LICADHO, Equitable Cambodia, and CYN have contributed by:

- Offering legal education programs and advocacy training to equip villagers with the knowledge needed to navigate the judicial system.⁸
- Assisting with preparing and submitting legal complaints, petitions, and evidence documentation.⁹
- Conducting human rights monitoring and reporting on state-sanctioned violence and land grabs.¹⁰
- Providing medical aid, psychological support, and emergency relief to victims of military personnel.
- Organizing global awareness campaigns, press conferences, and advocacy events to keep the Po Meas struggle in the international spotlight.
- Supporting long-term community resilience through leadership training, policy lobbying, and sustainable economic initiatives.¹¹



PERSISTENT BARRIERS TO JUSTICE. Despite these efforts, several structural and political barriers continue to hinder justice for Po Meas. Notable barriers include:

- Armed forces remain stationed in the region, enforcing land clearances through violent means and perpetuating an atmosphere of fear and coercion.¹²
- The legal system has demonstrated inefficiency and bias, with numerous cases filed by villagers remaining unresolved. Many themselves have instead been subjected to retaliatory legal actions.¹³
- Shared interests of government entities, military forces, and corporate actors has stifled independent investigations and hindered fair adjudication of land disputes.
- The widespread ecological degradation caused by deforestation has led to declining agricultural yields, the erosion of local food security, and near-total loss of local agricultural business.



¹² In October 2023, two military personnel threatened a villager by pointing a gun to his head for interrupting a private fence construction. The armed troops fled once villagers began filming the confrontation. Though left unharmed, he claims that suppression of photographic evidence has rendered his attempted court challenge unsuccessful.

¹³ In October 2023, seven villagers were sued for vandalism, intimidation, publicly insulting, intentionally causing damage with an aggravating circumstance, violating property rights, and threatening to kill for disrupting prior land conflicts. Villagers request for a dismissal was not granted.

DECADE-LONG LAND DISPUTE CONTINUES IN THE SRAYONG COMMUNE

Srayong Village, Srayong Commune, Kulen District, Preah Vihear Province (Field Visit, 16-17 September 2024)



BACKGROUND OF SRAYONG COMMUNE. On 16 September 2024, CHRAC members travelled to three villages in the Srayong commune to interview community members about their experiences of a recent escalation in what has already been a decade-long land dispute. Located in the Kulen district in the southwest of Preah Vihear province, Srayong commune is comprised of eight villages that have been home to 851 local families for more than a decade. Its rich and fertile soil allows for the cultivation of mangoes, bananas, potatoes, and coconuts, providing a stable income and livelihood for community members. Many residents sold their homes in other provinces and took out loans to buy land in the commune with the hope of making a better life for their families.

HISTORY OF ONGOING LAND DISPUTE. On 1 March 2011, the Ministry of Economics and Finance granted an economic land concession to agri-business company, Seladamex Co. Ltd, for the development of a rubber plantation.¹⁴ The concession covers approximately 9,000 hectares, 600 hectares of which is community land separately owned by more than 300 families in the Srayong Cheung, Srayong Tboung and Mrech villages.¹⁵ Initially, Seladamex promised to use the licensed land to create employment opportunities and develop the local economy. However, the company soon began marking boundaries and cleared approximately 250 hectares of land, all without community consultation or consent. Protests erupted but were promptly and forcefully

¹⁴ "25 People Imprisoned in Preah Vihear Land Dispute," LICADHO, March 12, 2024, <https://www.licadho-cambodia.org/flashnews.php?perm=383>.

¹⁵ Thayvie Sinn, "Save Cambodia," Save Cambodia, April 21, 2024, <https://savecambodia.org/urgent-action-model-letters/land-evictions-arrests-and-beatings-of-evicted-landholders-and-those-assisting-them>.

suppressed by police. Some villagers were told they had legal rights to the land, but official land titles were never issued. Others claimed their occupancy documents were burned or destroyed by authorities.

The land clearing appeared to stagnate for several years until 2022 when military personnel arrived in the villages and cleared 60 houses, amounting to approximately 450 hectares. Villagers were threatened with arrest if they dared to protest or even take photos of the clearing. Families were forced to live in tents or makeshift shelters on the cleared land, whilst those whose homes remained continued to live in fear of further eviction. In December 2023, the Kulen district administration ordered 131 families in the Srayong commune to leave the disputed area by no later than January 10, 2024. The villagers refused, unwilling to surrender their homes. In mid-February 2024, authorities began to erect barricades around each entry to the disputed area, preventing the villagers from accessing the land. Armored guards were also stationed at each post to prevent people from entering.

COMMUNITY MOBILIZATION. Facing an eviction notice, community members of the Srayong commune mobilized to protect their homes. In the early morning of 6 March 2024, more than 100 military personnel, riot and police forces, and forestry administration officials, travelled to the Srayong Cheung, Srayong Tbound and Mrech villages

to forcibly evict residents Seladamex claimed were residing on concession land. According to community reports, this occurred despite the fact that Seladamex had filed for bankruptcy and had not planted crops on the land they control for several months.



More than 130 villagers gathered in an attempt to hold back authorities as they began to encroach upon their communities, resulting in a violent clash with police forces. Shots were fired into the air. Smoke grenades and tear gas were thrown into the crowd to disperse protesters. Military personnel surrounded the houses of Srayong Tbound, shouting at occupants to leave before lighting the structures on fire and using tractors to demolish what remained of their homes. Others that refused to leave were beaten for resisting. Soldiers continued to fire shots and throw smoke grenades at villagers as they fled into the forest out of fear, leaving many injured including one villager who was found bleeding after sustaining severe head injuries.

29 community members were arrested, 25 of whom were eventually charged with illegal encroachment of state-owned forest land. It is noted that additional eyewitnesses believe the number of arrests to be closer to 40. Following their arrest, the 13 men and 12 women were taken to the Preah Vihear provincial court for questioning before being held in pre-trial detention.

After being detained for 36 days, all 25 community members were released on bail on two conditions: (i) admit they were deceived by Cambodian social and political analysts and scholars; and (ii) stop participating in all protest activities and never return to Srayong village. The community members have been threatened with re-arrest if either condition is breached. After being released from detention, some of the community members returned to the village only to find their houses had been destroyed. Many reported that they had no option but to go and live with residents in another village, leaving the land they had resided on and cultivated for more than a decade.

INVOLVEMENT AND COLLABORATION WITH CSOs. There are only a few NGOs that have established offices in the Preah Vihear province to specifically work in the field of legal rights relative to land and environmental disputes. CBOs were also established to form local networks located in the Srayong commune to protect and preserve their community forests, lands and natural resources. However, the Preah Vihear provincial governor has significantly regulated and restricted the operations of human rights activists and NGOs due to concerns that their mission to empower and advocate for the community demonstrates an intention to overthrow the government. The Ministry of Interior also specifically prohibited any individuals or organizations, particularly CSOs or NGOs, from entering the forest to provide aid to the evictees.



Despite these restrictions, CSOs continue to advocate for the villagers by working to secure legal aid and documenting the experiences of those in the Srayong commune. In particular, CHRAC provided supported to the community by assisting to file a legal complaint to the Ministry of Justice regarding the poor treatment of the arrested villagers, and were instrumental in assisting the villagers to be released on bail. Other CSOs also helped to raise awareness of the crisis and continue to collectively monitor the ongoing situation in Srayong commune for any further human rights violations.

However, some of these efforts have been met with hostility. Activists were arrested and sentenced to years in prison for daring to speak out. This notably included environmental activist and president of the Khmer Student Intelligent League Association (KSILA), Koet Saray, who met with community members and relayed their stories to local reporters.¹⁶ In April 2024, Saray was arrested and charged with “committing a misdemeanour and incitement to commit a felony”. He was eventually sentenced to four years in prison and fined two million riel.¹⁷

BARRIERS TO JUSTICE. The people of Srayong commune face a powerful system designed to suppress them. Legal obstacles, violence and intimidation, economic hardships and political suppression significantly impact the ability of community members to access justice. With land titles being withheld or destroyed, community members struggle to find redress through the court system. Arrests and fabricated charges are also used to intimidate protesters. Despite calls for the land dispute to be resolved peacefully, persistent police harassment, intimidation

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

and arrests mean community members still live in significant fear of imprisonment. Villagers declined an invitation to join social activities and events to learn new skills to seek support from the government to address their needs and issues due to significant concerns for their safety and security.

The villagers also face significant economic hardships. Without the land to cultivate crops and sustain their livelihoods, community members no longer have a stable source of income to support their families. As a result, many are also unable to repay their bank loans. After the incident on 6 March 2024, more than 30 community members continued to seek refuge in the surrounding forests. This primarily included the children of detained protesters who were left behind and forced to reside in makeshift shelters with limited access to food or water. Many had no choice but to resort to begging for rice from nearby villagers. Although conditions in the forest were dire and continued to deteriorate, many villagers were too frightened to return to their homes as fears of arrest loomed. Upon release from detention, others found they had been separated from their families, who were forced to flee for fears of further arrests. This put significant strain on community members, particularly if they had previously relied on their families for income. Political suppression also presents a substantial challenge. Activists, like Koet Saray, NGOs, and community leaders are frequently targeted and arrested, with any form of resistance portrayed as an effort to destabilize or overthrow the government.

CONCLUSION. The decade-long land dispute in Srayong commune underscores the ongoing struggle for land rights and the displacement of communities across Cambodia. It is a stark reminder of how legal systems, economic interests, and political power can work against the most vulnerable. Yet, the sustained community mobilization to protect their homes and livelihoods is also a testament to the resilience of these communities fighting for justice. CHRAC's involvement in assisting arrested villagers to be released on bail also highlights the critical role CSOs play in advocating for communities as a bridge between victims of human rights violations and government decision-makers.

Recommendations

The survey data reveals a clear justice-gap. The most vulnerable – particularly rural and indigenous communities – face significant obstacles in accessing justice, including a lack of resources and money, knowledge and time, as well as a fear of retaliation. Given the unreliability of Cambodia's justice system, the courts cannot be counted upon to deliver justice to these communities, especially in matters concerning land disputes. CHRAC has consulted relevant stakeholders as well as international law and human rights experts to devise a list of recommendations to remedy this gap. The following recommendations respond directly to the primary barriers to accessing justice, as indicated by respondents in the survey:

1. Strengthen legal protections for land and environmental rights by closing the gaps and hold perpetrators accountable;
2. Ensure access to free and independent legal aid and informal justice processes;
3. Strengthen community-led environmental protection efforts;
4. Develop and distribute accessible legal education materials in Khmer and indigenous languages to help communities understand their rights and navigate different justice journeys;
5. Create multi-stakeholder dialogue platforms where affected communities, CSOs, and government officials can collaboratively address justice-related issues;
6. Reduce bureaucratic and financial barriers to obtaining land titles, ensuring all communities can legally register and defend their land;
7. Strengthen protections against retaliation for human rights defenders, environmental activists, and affected community members;
8. Develop a national environmental justice monitoring system to track ongoing land disputes, access to legal remedies, and government responsiveness;
9. Regularly publish reports on environmental justice-related issues to promote transparency and accountability; and
10. Strengthen partnerships with CSOs, human rights groups, and international bodies to draw both domestic and international attention.



Conclusion

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of issues of environmental justice in Cambodia, focusing on how the most vulnerable can gain meaningful and equal access to justice in environmental disputes. A key challenge with designing projects targeted at improving access to justice is the availability of relevant data. The extensive responses to CHRAC's survey remedy this gap. In particular, the survey has revealed the systemic barriers preventing vulnerable communities from accessing justice and highlight the underlying causes for these obstacles.

Survey data has shown an overwhelming majority of respondents experienced a justice-related issue within the last 5 years. Land conflicts arising because of large-scale developments or agro-industrial concessions accounted for a majority of these cases, with most being ongoing disputes that have stretched over several years. These disputes have deepened existing inequalities, particularly for rural populations dependent on the land for livelihood and shelter. Some respondents also indicated that protesting land seizures triggered further injustices including verbal threats, physical assault, arrests, or imprisonment by authorities. Whilst most sought assistance from friends and CSOs, many found justice inaccessible due to financial constraints and previous failed attempts at resolution. Case studies from Po Meas village and the Srayong commune reflect the struggles and experiences of displacement and destruction of hundreds of communities across Cambodia.

Cambodians overwhelmingly call for a justice system that is fair, efficient, accessible, and responsive to their environmental and social needs. Survey data underscores the urgent need for legal reform, improved access to justice and more robust mechanisms to safeguard community rights. Unless these challenges are appropriately addressed, environmental justice in Cambodia will remain elusive. CHRAC has proposed practical solutions designed to empower vulnerable communities with the knowledge and tools necessary to effectively address their justice-related issues. CHRAC intends to continue gathering data on community experiences with environmental justice issues to inform future targeted interventions. By implementing the recommended reforms, Cambodia can strive toward a more just, equitable and sustainable society that protects the rights and well-being of all citizens.

