

# Building resilient community fisheries in Cambodia

## Key fact

By bringing together diverse stakeholders in a collaborative process, a WorldFish initiative has strengthened the collective capacity of an emerging grassroots network of fishing communities to: identify and articulate threats; negotiate with authorities to represent the common interests of fishing communities; and collaborate with the Government and private actors to resolve resource conflicts in Cambodia's Tonle Sap Lake.

## Summary

In 2009, WorldFish initiated a 15-month project aimed at improving the capacity of a network of fishing communities to engage in collective action at local and provincial levels, in support of equitable governance arrangements to better anticipate and manage competing uses of aquatic resources.

Outcomes included important shifts in fishery access rights (transfer of a large commercial fishing concession to

community access) and resource management authority (resolution of disputes over fishing access between neighbouring provinces). Motivated by such successes, the main national grassroots network representing fishing communities has worked to replicate and adapt stakeholder facilitation in other areas, strengthen and formalise links with NGOs, and improve its capacity to collaborate with and influence the Government. Project lessons are being incorporated in initiatives elsewhere in the Mekong basin and in Africa (Lake Victoria and Lake Kariba basins), Bangladesh and the Solomon Islands.



**Tonle Sap is the largest lake in Southeast Asia**  
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## Facts & figures

- Tonle Sap is the largest lake in Southeast Asia and one of the most productive freshwater fisheries in the world.
- Fishing Lot Number 1 in Kompong Thom Province was terminated in October 2010, in response to community mobilisation, granting access rights to local fishers. This gave families access to an additional 2,500 hectares of the lake, with an annual production estimated at over 500 tonnes.
- Governance has been improved through increased capacity of the Government and grassroots networks to collaborate. Following a national consultation, the Fisheries Administration (FiA) and the Coalition of Cambodian Fishers (CCF) worked together to organise negotiations on site over a disputed fishery area, resulting in an agreement to designate the area a jointly managed fishing ground and establish a joint management committee.
- The gross annual income from direct consumptive uses for all fisheries-dependent households is estimated at US\$233 million.

## European funding

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## Project milestones

- September 2009: WorldFish and local partners launch an action research project to strengthen the capacity of fishing communities of Tonle Sap Lake to identify and articulate threats, negotiate with authorities to represent their common interests and collaborate with stakeholders to resolve resource conflicts.
- September 2009-April 2010: A series of local and provincial consultations is convened.
- April 2010: A national consultation is held in Phnom Penh.
- May 2010: FiA and CCF address overlapping resource claims in the boundary region between Siem Reap and Battambang provinces.
- October 2010: Fishing Lot 1 (a fishing concession in Kompong Thom Province) is terminated and access granted to local fishers.
- August 2011: Prime Minister suspends all commercial lots on the Tonle Sap Lake.

## Costs and benefits

### Costs:

- US\$150,000 investment to convene participatory analysis and dialogue at three levels (community, province, national), to provide capacity support to the three domestic partner organisations (CCF, FiA, and CDRI), and to evaluate, document and share lessons learned.

### Benefits:

- Assistance to civil society groups in successfully advocating for the release of Fishing Lot 1 in Kompong Thom province for community access, which served as a precedent for the broader policy reform that phased out all freshwater commercial fisheries (over 200,000 hectares).
- Resolution of disputes over fishing access between neighbouring provinces.
- Increased capacity on the part of civil society and government to collaborate and seek joint resolution of resource disputes, contributing to improved governance. This is important because Cambodia relies on freshwater fisheries for food security and livelihoods more than any other country in the world. The Tonle Sap is the heart of this highly productive natural fishery. Fish products provide the leading source of animal protein in the Cambodian diet, along with micronutrients essential in reducing childhood malnutrition and mortality.
- Reducing resource conflict and sustaining equitable access to fisheries production is an important contribution to social stability and national economic development, as the lake basin is home to over 4 million people, nearly a third of Cambodia's population, most of whom rely directly on the natural resource base. The gross annual income from direct consumptive uses for all fisheries-dependent households is estimated at US\$233 million.

## Multimedia material

[Building Resilience of Community Fisheries in the Tonle Sap Lake, Cambodia](#)

## **Building resilient community fisheries in Cambodia**

Tonle Sap is the largest lake in Southeast Asia and one of the most productive freshwater fisheries in the world. Fish from Tonle Sap provide an essential source of protein and micronutrients, critical to the health of families in Cambodia, a country still plagued by high rates of childhood malnutrition. Managing water resources for food and income also means harnessing the full value of these fisheries for local communities.

However, intense competition for resources around the lake has limited the benefits available to such communities. Local leaders had long campaigned for improved community rights to access and manage local fishing grounds, and complained of unfair treatment by operators of large-scale commercial fishing lots on the lake. Proposed hydropower dams on the Mekong also threatened to alter the flood cycle and jeopardise migratory fish species, which constitute about 70 per cent of the commercial catch.

In 2009, WorldFish initiated a 15-month project aimed at strengthening collective action to address natural resource conflict in the area. Specifically, it focused on the collective capacity of an emerging grassroots network of fishing communities to: identify and articulate threats; negotiate with authorities to represent the common interests of fishing communities; and collaborate with government and private actors to resolve resource conflicts.

The initiative began by organising local and provincial consultations in five communities, involving local fishers, traders, village leaders, fisheries officers, environment officers, police and district officials. Issues of destructive and illegal fishing practices, clearing of flooded forests, competing land and water use, and overlapping resource claims and boundary disputes were detailed. The local consultations were directly followed by provincial consultations in order for participants to present outcomes and explore solutions with provincial agencies, NGOs, sector department heads and other senior government staff. A national consultation held in 2010 included senior management from the Fisheries Administration (FiA), the Tonle Sap Basin Authority, the Cambodian National Committee, and participants from provincial consultations.



**Local leaders had long campaigned for improved community rights**  
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**Tonle Sap is one of the most productive freshwater fisheries in the world**  
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In October 2010, local advocacy efforts achieved an unexpected success when Fishing Lot 1 (a fishing concession in Kompong Thom Province) was terminated and access granted to local fishers - the first instance in a decade of a lot being released to community control, making it an important outcome at both local and national levels. Emboldened by the encouragement they had received at the provincial level, local village leaders organised a petition which was delivered to the National Assembly and debated at the highest levels of government. The decision gave families access to an additional 2,500 hectares of the lake, with an annual





**The Prime Minister suspended all fishing lots on the lake**  
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production estimated at over 500 tonnes, on the condition that no large-scale commercial fishing gear be used.

The achievement boosted civil society networks around the lake, helping launch a broader campaign for reform of fisheries management. Within ten months, the Prime Minister announced the suspension of all remaining fishing lots on the lake. This represented a dramatic policy change that resulted in expanded access for communities and more extensive zones designated for protection, to ensure the long-term sustainability of the fisheries industry. While

too soon to measure the impact of this reform, local fishing families are expected to benefit from gains in income, food security and nutrition, as well as the associated opportunities in processing and trade.

Organisers of the civil society campaign for reform credit partnership with WorldFish for helping strengthen dialogue between local civil society actors and the Government. In particular, this dialogue has improved awareness of the factors that lead to resource competition and the potential roles of different actors in addressing them. In 2009-2010, the Coalition of Cambodian Fishers (CCF) grassroots network, FiA (the key national authority) and the Cambodian Development Resource Institute (a leading policy research institute) jointly implemented the series of dialogue workshops around Tonle Sap at village, provincial and national levels.

“We had failed several times before [to secure additional fishing grounds for local communities], and many people thought it wasn’t worth trying more, but we decided we had to. Our livelihoods depend on having a place to fish.”

**Oum Meng, community fishery leader, Phat Sanday commune, Kompong Thom Province**

This action research process prompted follow-on actions to resolve one of the most challenging conflicts over resource access identified through the consultation process. Because the dispute crossed provincial boundaries, it could not be adequately addressed at local or provincial levels. Following the national consultation, CCF and FiA agreed to work together to organise direct negotiations between community fishery organisations in the neighbouring provinces (Siem Reap and Battambang). The negotiations resulted in an agreement between the two parties to jointly manage and use the disputed area. By exploring the implications of various management options on all parties involved, the stakeholders were able to arrive at a solution perceived by all sides as legitimate, which would likely not have occurred in the case of a solution imposed from above.

For other communities around Tonle Sap, this experience demonstrated the possibilities for effective advocacy. The process also helped civil society groups create new linkages and access support from national level agencies, for example to respond to reports of illegal fishing operations. Cooperation between neighbouring community fisheries, with assistance from CCF, has also improved,



**Fish from Tonle Sap provide an essential source of protein**  
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promoting better representation and accountability. Perhaps most importantly, the dialogue led to a fundamental shift in strategy by CCF, which represents fishing communities, emphasising constructive links with the Government and the formal NGO sector.

Motivated by such successes in collaborative problem-analysis and advocacy, CCF has worked to replicate and adapt stakeholder facilitation in other areas, especially where communities face disputes over access to and management of fisheries resources. CCF is also strengthening and formalising links with NGOs, and improving its capacity to collaborate with and influence government. The network has established a permanent board of representatives from national and local NGOs in order to coordinate action, share information and advise CCF on its strategy.

CCF has deepened its commitment to supporting small scale efforts of community based organisations, including micro-credit, fish processing and marketing. Drawing on its improved NGO links, the network hopes to identify partners to assist with local livelihood development, build connections to markets, and increase financial support for these small initiatives.

“We have learned from this experience, realising how important it is to bring people together at the village level, at the commune level, and then to take these issues to discuss at the provincial level. We’ve seen how this can help those above understand the problems that local people face.”

**Long Sochet, national coordinator, CCF**

The experience demonstrates the potential of action research to improve natural resource governance, even amidst ongoing resource conflict. The outcomes are all the more encouraging given the legacy of war in Cambodia, which other research has identified as a significant barrier to re-establishing trust and fostering collective action. By joining competing stakeholders in a collaborative process, the initiative has strengthened local livelihoods, while reducing the risk of broader social conflict. And it has done so at remarkably low cost, relying on the energy of local communities and the power of social accountability rather than conventional - and costly - structures of project management.

In February 2012 Cambodia’s Prime Minister announced the permanent removal of all freshwater commercial fishing lots in the country. To complete the reform process, WorldFish supports a range of measures, including the involvement of local communities in the design of new community-managed fishing areas, repositioning of fish sanctuaries to cover the richest ecological habitats, and improvement in the capacities and incentives of enforcement agencies. Despite the progress made so far, risks to fishery livelihoods remain, as competition increases and household catches decrease. Water resource infrastructure and land use changes also threaten to undermine fisheries productivity within the lake, signalling the need for public deliberation over the likely impacts of alternative development pathways.



**The initiative has strengthened local livelihoods**  
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Questions also remain about whether increasing community access will lead to improved conservation, more equitable distribution of resources and more sustainable livelihoods for the most vulnerable. There are also concerns as to whether the agreements for joint management will endure. But while the long-term outcomes in terms of ecosystem functions, productivity, livelihoods, incomes and nutrition are not yet clear, WorldFish believes that the impact achieved by fishing communities surrounding Tonle Sap makes a

strong case for adapting and implementing the approach to collaborative governance assessment and multi-stakeholder dialogue elsewhere. Project lessons are already being incorporated into initiatives in Africa (Lake Victoria and Lake Kariba basins) as well as Bangladesh and the Solomon Islands.

## More information

WorldFish - [www.worldfishcenter.org](http://www.worldfishcenter.org)

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