

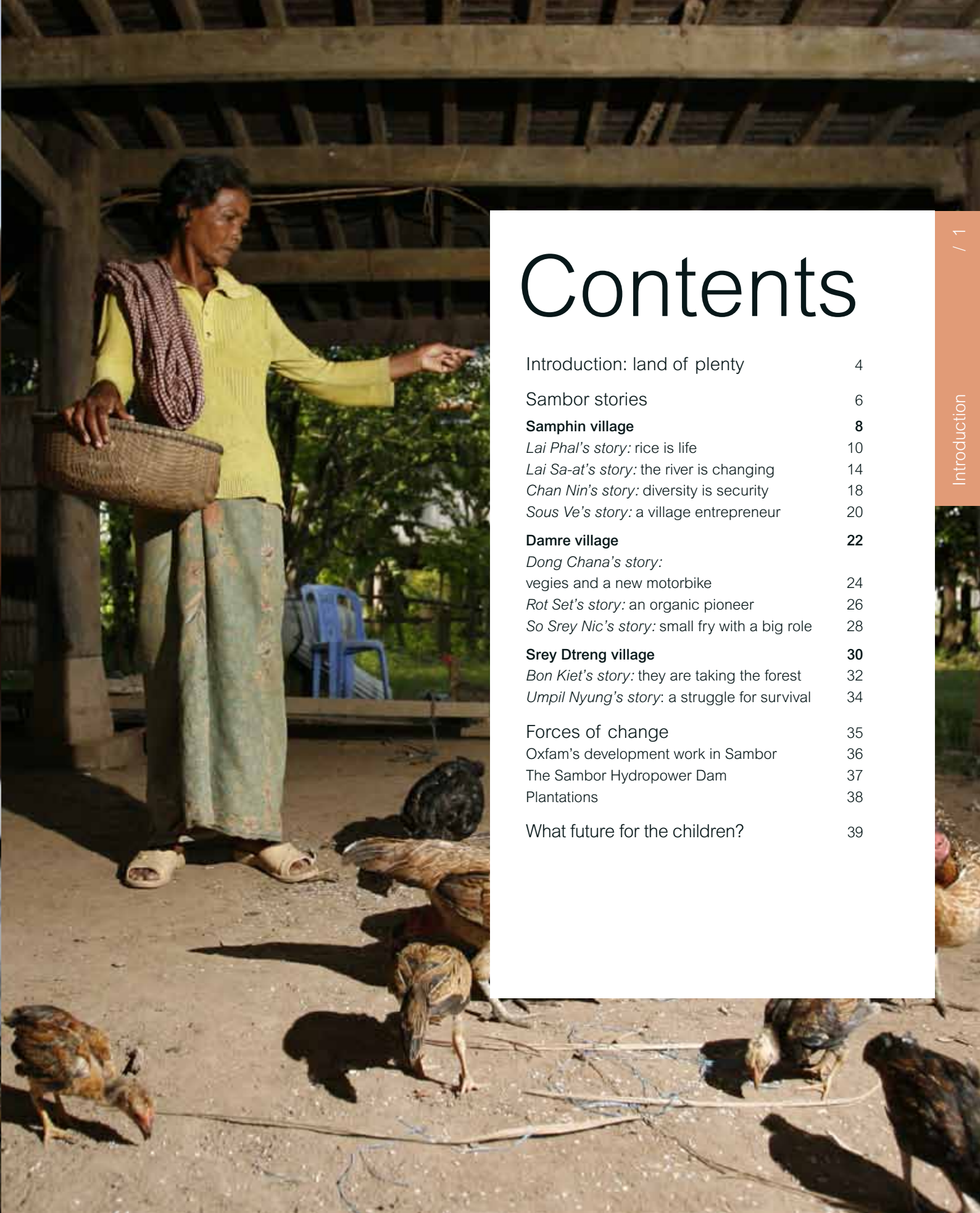
# Preserving plenty

By Jonathan Cornford and Chhuon La  
Photography by Glenn Daniels



The beauty,  
achievements  
and struggle  
of the people  
of Sambor





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# Foreword

The district of Sambor, like much of Cambodia, is at a cross-roads, faced with momentous choices and challenges which will have a significant bearing on the future lives of so many.

The purpose of this book is to provide a picture of the people who live there, how they live, the challenges they face, and their hopes for the future. This is not a research report or technical study. With so much technical and policy debate about poverty and development in Cambodia, and internationally, there is a continual need to put a human face on the often complex choices and dilemmas being considered. It is our hope that this work conveys something of the voice of the people of Sambor themselves, although it cannot claim to represent their voice.

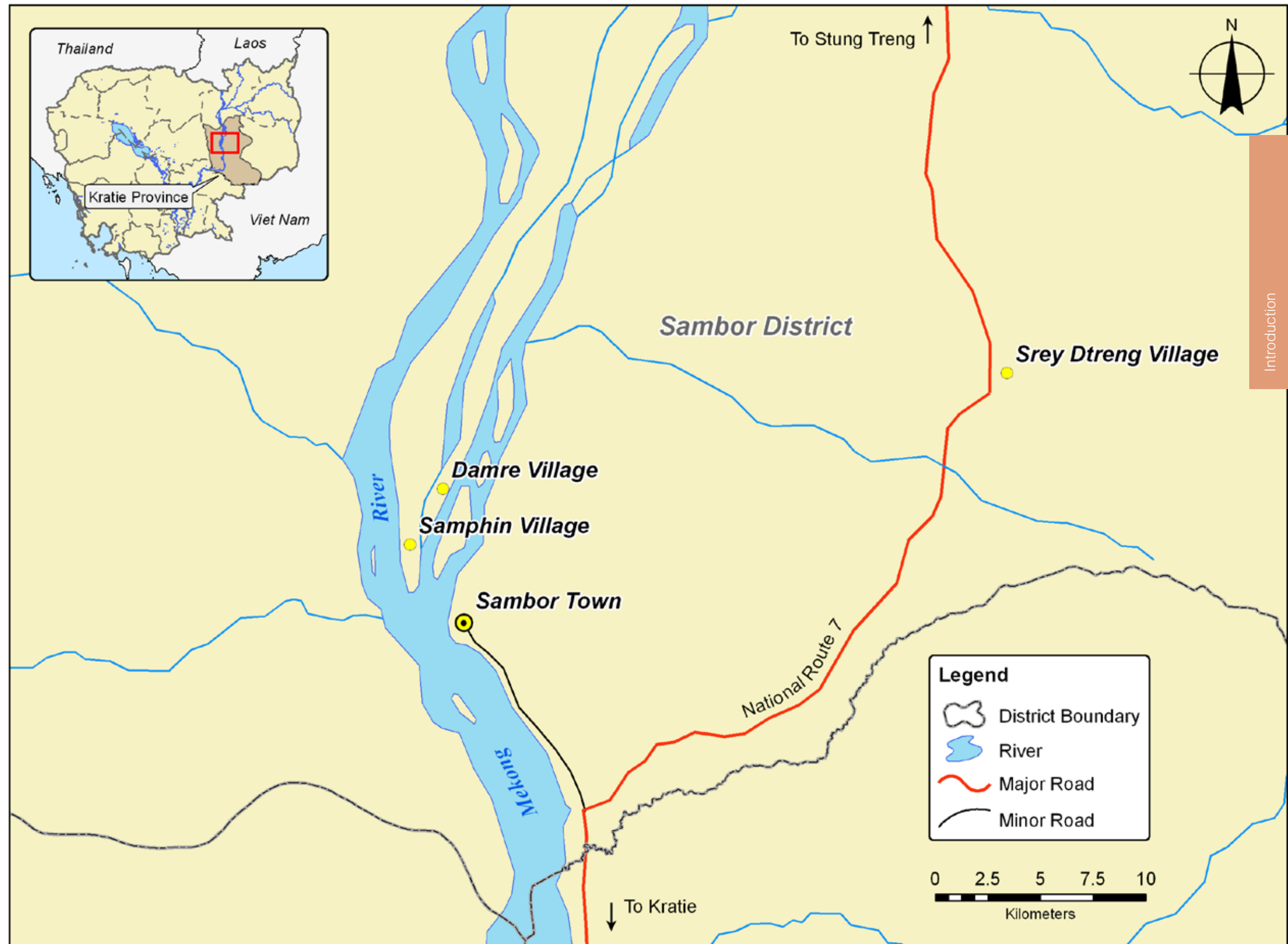
The material here is a snapshot of a number of people's lives in three villages in Sambor district, recorded in interviews and discussions conducted by the authors in July 2009. It is also informed by more than a decade of community development work in the area by Chhuon La, including recent academic research on the development challenges facing Sambor, and multiple previous visits and research by Jonathan Cornford.

The interviews were simple and open-ended, asking people to explain how they live generally and to tell us in detail about an aspect of life important to them; to comment on how and why their lives have changed over the last decade; and to share their hopes and fears for the future.

We hope you enjoy entering into the life of Sambor district, as we have, and that you too may be drawn into an awareness of the human bond that we share.

Jonathan Cornford  
Manna Gum

Chhuon La  
Oxfam Australia





# Introduction: land of plenty

Sambor means “plenty”. It is a name that is an invitation to participate in a generous and convivial way of life. It suggests that there is a background of abundance which can supply the needs of many. It is a name that evokes a vision of people living well, living well together, and living well with the land.

To some extent, this vision is reflected in the reality of Sambor today. Even though the reports of aid donors characterise Sambor as poor — average daily incomes are a little over a dollar a day and health and education levels are still low — this does not adequately describe the experience of many of the people who live there. As many of the stories in this book hint, there is a good, satisfying and full living to be had in Sambor. And for many, life is getting better.

However, there are conditions and limitations to the invitation of plenty, and in Sambor today these limits are starting to be exceeded. For some, the experience of plenty has evaporated into a nightmare of nail-biting scarcity. For many others, this possibility hangs like a spectre in the near future.

## Sambor: the land and its people

Sambor is the largest district of Kratie province in central and eastern Cambodia. It is bounded to the north by Stung Dtreng province, to the west by Kompong Thom province, and to the east by the frontier province of Mondulkiri. The district sits astride the Mekong River which flows through it from north to south. The river is the life force of the district — most of the 50,000 inhabitants of Sambor live along its banks, or on the large permanent islands that characterise this stretch of the Mekong. The largest of these islands — Koh Regniew (*koh* means island) — is 43 kilometres long and supports four separate villages. Most of the farming land in Sambor follows the corridor of the river.

To the east, Highway No.7 runs north–south through the district parallel to the river, connecting Stung Dtreng (and then on to Laos) to Kratie town (and then on to Phnom Penh). Much of this region of Sambor was heavily forested until recent times, when it has been heavily logged and cleared.

The people of Sambor live, by-and-large, according to the old ways, closely dependent on the resources of land, river and forest. More than 80% of people in the district are directly involved in smallholder agriculture, producing food for their own consumption, and to varying degrees, to sell in local markets. Rice-growing, raising livestock (cows, buffalo, pigs and chickens), fishing and collecting from forests form the four pillars of the Sambor economy, and most families in the district would be involved in at least three of these activities.

Sambor has a comparatively large ethnic minority population, with about 30% of the district population formed by non-Khmer groups such as the Phnong, Kuy, Mil and Thoune. Some of these groups, such as the Kuy, have largely integrated into Khmer language, culture and agriculture, characterised by Buddhist beliefs and paddy rice farming. Others, such as the Phnong, still practise their traditional forest-based rotational rice cultivation (often called swidden cultivation), speak their own language and hold on to an animist belief system.

Besides the forest-based cultivation of the Phnong, most of the rice grown in Sambor is paddy rice which is watered solely by the rains. Only a tiny portion of the district's paddy fields is served by irrigation.





### Change and development: a mixed blessing

As the stories in this book attest, the quality of life of many in Sambor has been improving over the last decade, although there are significant exceptions to this trend. The most significant factor behind this change is what we might call “the peace dividend”. Since the mid to late 1990s, Cambodia has had a stable political system, finally putting to rest the decades of civil war that have formed such a tragic chapter in this nation’s history. For the people of Sambor, many of the improvements in quality of life of the last decade are a natural result of what happens when people are able to go about their lives without fear of violence, displacement or disruption.

With peace, there has been much greater opportunity for aid organisations to work throughout Cambodia. In Sambor district there are a number of aid organisations, such as Oxfam Australia (hereafter Oxfam), that have run projects over the last decade. Working in often small and modest ways, their aid projects have attempted to facilitate improvements in a range of areas that affect people’s quality of life, including health, education, agriculture, fisheries, environmental management, women’s empowerment, community organising, small business and micro finance. As is shown in this book, some small developments in village life, such as latrines and

livestock vaccination, can have a huge impact on people’s wellbeing. There is little doubt that for many of those who have been lucky enough to be involved with such projects, life has become a little richer and a little easier.

Another significant change in Sambor is in the physical infrastructure — the roads and telecommunications — that connect it with the rest of the nation, and by extension, the rest of the world. Until recently, Sambor has been a remote district — travel between Phnom Penh and Sambor town was an overnight trip by boat and bus, and phone communications were unreliable. Now, since the upgrade of National Highway No.7, including a bridge across the Mekong, travel from Phnom Penh to Sambor town is a little over half-a-day’s journey by car. Sambor town is now connected to the electricity grid, as are a number of villages along Route 7, however, the villages on the islands of the Mekong, and most of those along the banks of the river, still have no access to grid electricity. Those who can afford to run electric appliances, do so through the use of car batteries which are recharged in Sambor town. The town is now also serviced by a reliable telephone landline which allows internet access, albeit a little slow. Much of the district is serviced by mobile phone coverage.

Such developments have immediate benefits. Improved roads and telecommunications make it cheaper and easier for the government and aid organisations to build schools and health clinics, and it also makes it easier to attract health professionals and teachers to work in these facilities. Easier transport access reduces the cost of transporting goods which has resulted in a wider range of consumer goods — such as pharmaceuticals, food and clothing, and electronic goods — becoming available in the district, and at lower prices.

However, as Sambor has opened up to the benefits of the global economy, it has also become more vulnerable to its darker side. Now the once plentiful resources of Sambor are being sought after by outside interests — its fish are being sought for the growing regional fish market, its land is being sought out by agri-business companies, and the great river itself is being sought as a source of hydropower electricity for regional power trading. While in the standard script of development these sorts of things are generally seen as progress, for the people of Sambor they represent a spectre on the horizon of an otherwise hopeful future.

In many ways, the future of the people of Sambor hangs in the balance. Here are their stories — their achievements, their hopes and their fears. Who will hear them?



# Sambor stories





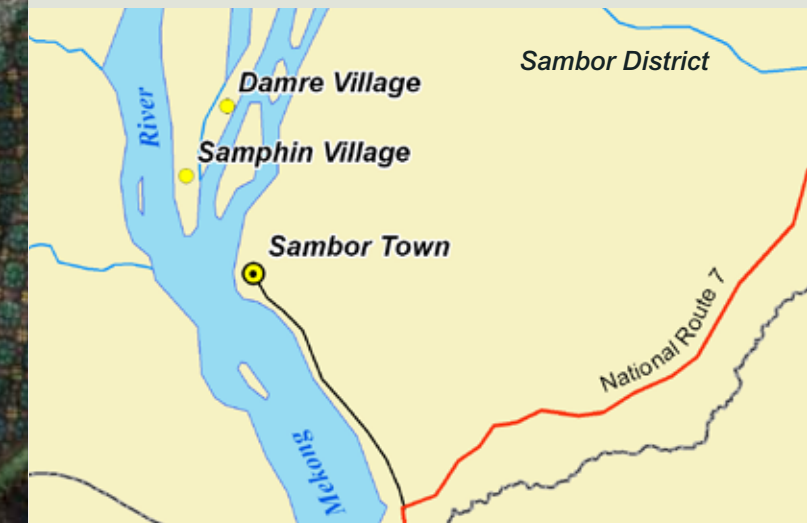
# Samphin village

## SAMBOR STORIES

*Samphin village is on Koh Regniew, the largest of the cluster of islands on this stretch of the Mekong River.*

It is a reasonably large village, with 1,246 members made up of 242 families. The village is stretched out over five kilometres along a single track that follows the river bank on the south-western side of the island.

Samphin shows signs of growing prosperity, with a number of newer houses built of teak with zinc rooves, but also still a number of poorer dwellings. The village has a temple, a primary school and a small secondary school but there are no health facilities. Oxfam began working in Samphin village in 1996.





# Rice is life

## LAI PHAL'S STORY

### An average day

*"I have many jobs to do; there is little time to relax."*

Lai Phal wakes up before the sun rises, around 4.30am–5am each day, and begins immediately preparing food for the family's breakfast. Once she and the family are fed, she feeds their three pigs. Now she is ready for the real labour of the day.

It is rice transplanting time, the busiest time of year. The first of the monsoon rains have come — her paddy fields are ploughed and full of water. The rice seedlings she has planted in the nursery next to her house must be extracted, bundled up and taken out to the fields. Then begins the long, laborious and back-breaking task of planting the seedlings, usually around three in a cluster, spaced out across the paddy field. She is assisted in this by other women from her household and village under a shared labour arrangement. She will help out in her neighbour's fields tomorrow. The heat and humidity are unrelenting, yet they work solidly until lunch time with hardly a break. Children play around the fringes of the work, older children taking care of younger siblings.

Lai Phal must return to the house first to prepare lunch for her family and feed the pigs again. Then, as they each return, they share a meal and discuss the day's labours and happenings. After lunch, Lai Phal has the only real rest of the day that she will get until bed time. For 40 minutes to an hour she can close her eyes and let her body yield to its weariness.

Then it is back to fields, and if needs be, back to the nursery to bundle up more seedlings. The sun in the afternoon is sapping and it is a mercy when clouds give some respite. The labour goes on until 5.30pm, when once again Lai Phal must return home to prepare a meal. After dinner there is cleaning and other household chores to be done before she can at last give herself to blessed sleep.

### The role of rice

Lai Phal's family own about one hectare of paddy field and two buffalo with which to plough their land. In a good year this produces enough rice for her family to eat and to feed her pigs with some left over to sell. In 2008, they were able to earn around 400,000 riel (USD \$100) from the sale of rice within the village. A few years ago they had a bad harvest, so they changed the variety of rice they were growing.

Lai Phal feels that their rice yield is not as good as it was ten years ago, and says this is because she has not been able to apply as much manure to the fields as in past years. She has never used any chemical fertilisers or pesticides — sometimes she feels she would like to try a pesticide because of problems she has with small crabs that eat the rice stalk but she has no idea which one to use or how to use it.

If for some reason Lai Phal could no longer grow rice she says she would have to sell her labour. She has heard of people travelling to Snuol district (also in Kratie province) to work as day labourers on cassava plantations; she imagines that is what she would have to do.

Lai Phal has lived in Samphin village all her life. She is a 49-year-old mother of five, living at home with her husband and three of her children — two have married and moved out. Her husband has been suffering from serious health issues and has been unable to work for several years. When we talked to her it was the beginning of the wet season, an intensely busy time in the rice growing calendar.







Lai Phal's neighbours assist in transplating her field.

### Life now and in the future

Although she does not complain about her husband's incapacitating illness, Lai Phal's family is effectively a woman-headed household with an extra mouth to feed. This places a significant burden of labour and responsibility upon her shoulders.

Despite her difficult circumstances, Lai Phal feels that life is better than it was a decade ago. In particular she feels that assistance from non-government organisations in her village, including the provision of training, poultry and livestock, and latrines, has made things better for the poorer families. She does not regard her family as poor. The only assistance her family has received directly is a latrine from Oxfam and this has made an important difference to her family's quality of life as they now suffer less from diarrhoea.

Lai Phal says she cannot predict the future and seems reluctant to allow herself to be too hopeful. She is worried about plans to build a large dam across the Mekong in Sambor. If it is built it means her house, her fields, everything, will be flooded. She is afraid.

Like most others in the village, Lai Phal first became aware of the proposed Sambor Dam when a boat of Chinese surveyors began surveying the river just downstream from their island in June 2007. She knows little else about the proposed project, or even what a dam looks like, but she does know that it would mean their island would be flooded.

Relocating to new land is not a solution for Lai Phal. "I am worried because now I am old it is not easy to clear new land." Lai Phal is also particularly fearful of being relocated to a malarial zone.

Lai Phal says she is too scared to speak out about the project, "but if someone asked me if it should be built, I would say 'no'".



Women establish the rice nursery and transplant seedlings.

Ploughing the fields is men's work.



## Women's and men's work

In Cambodia, as in most other traditional societies, there are clear divisions of labour between women and men. While such gender divisions give some structure to daily life and in some cases reflect physical attributes, overall women bear a far heavier burden of work than men.

In rice farming, men usually plough the land and mend and maintain the paddy field embankments. Women establish the nursery and transplant the seedlings into the field. Both men and women will take part in the harvest. In Lai Phal's case, her son ploughs her fields for her, but because her husband has been ill, she must take care of field maintenance herself.

Normally women will take the primary role in caring for livestock, often assisted by children, and men will take the primary role in fishing, however, these divisions can be more fluid.

Around the house, it is women and girls who bear almost the entire burden of labour, which is substantial. This usually involves water collection, preparation of food from their raw forms (such as rice and meat), firewood collection, cooking on simple wood and charcoal stoves, and caring for children and sick family members.

Given the importance of women's roles in nurturing the family as a whole, simple solutions which release women from laborious and time-consuming tasks can have a huge impact on family wellbeing. In Samphin village, biogas stoves (introduced by local non-government organisation Cambodia Rural Development Team) and water filter jars (from Oxfam) have made things just that bit easier for women.

Perhaps more importantly, for the 13 years that Oxfam has been working in Samphin village, it has periodically held gender training and workshops that provide a forum for the community to acknowledge and discuss gender inequities. Since then, it has been noticed that women are beginning to play a greater role in community decision-making, with some women being elected as village leaders, and many others playing active roles in village committees. Women have also reported that domestic violence — another serious issue throughout Cambodia — has been decreasing.





Fifty-year old Lai Sa-at is a quietly spoken grandfather who exudes wisdom and dignity. He lives at home with his wife and two of their children — four of their children have married and moved out from home. Lai Sa-at's wife, Chah Sary, plays an active role in the village: she is the vice-chief of the village development committee and she administrates the village buffalo bank (see page 21).

# The river is changing

## LAI SA-AT'S STORY

### An average day

Lai Sa-at wakes at 5am and the first thing he does is to grab his fishing net and head down to the river, 30 metres behind his house. After spending a good hour fishing, either perched precariously upon his boat or casting from the river bank, he returns to the house for a quick breakfast. Then he is off to round up their buffalo, take them to the fields, hitch them up and begin ploughing.

The morning is spent knee-deep in mud, directing the buffalo and keeping them going. He returns home at midday, going first to the river and straight into the water with his mud-laden clothing. After stripping out of his work clothes and having a wash, he returns to the house for lunch with his family. After lunch he spends the heat of the day under the house in light activity — he mends a fish trap or makes a new cage for their chickens.

In the late afternoon, Lai Sa-at returns to ploughing. When this phase of the rice calendar is over, his life will be less strenuous. Evening begins to fall and once again Lai Sa-at returns to the river for a much needed wash. But this time washing is combined with fishing. He checks his traps and nets that he has set, and if he has time, he will take his boat and cast for fish. As he does so, his grandchildren often assist and play around him, mixing playful splashing in the water while unconsciously learning about fish and the arts of catching them.

Finally it is home for dinner. The fish caught that day are eaten, and for Lai Sa-at the day's work is over.

### A fisherman who farms or a farmer who fishes?

Is Lai Sa-at a fisherman or a farmer? For him, this is a pointless question; both are essential to providing for his family's needs.

Lai Sa-at goes fishing every day, usually twice a day. In the wet season he uses a range of methods to maximise his catch: gill nets, fish traps, hook and line and cast netting. In the dry season he abandons fish traps.

Lai Sa-at and his family eat fish with every meal, about 0.3kg to 0.5kg between the four of them, which forms virtually their entire protein intake. When he can, Lai Sa-at will also sell some fish in the village — on average this earns about 50,000 riel (USD \$12.50) per month for the family. Any excess fish that have not been eaten or sold are made into *pra hok*, the fermented fish paste which is a staple in Khmer cooking.

Fish are getting harder to catch. Ten years ago, Lai Sa-at could net 10kg of fish from just an hour's work. Now he might only get 1kg, or at most 2kg, from an hour of fishing. Why? Lai Sa-at blames what he calls "illegal fishing", particularly the use of large, fine-meshed, channel-wide nets along the river downstream and in the Tonle Sap (Cambodia's great lake). Lai Sa-at feels that these have prevented fish from migrating upstream and breeding.





But he notes that the river itself is changing too. There is more erosion along the river banks, new islands are appearing and the deep pools are being filled in. From his own observation he thinks that deforestation along the river banks and the great number of fast boats on the river must be contributing to this. He also knows that dams have been built upstream on the Se San, Sre Pok and Sekong rivers (the largest tributary system of the Mekong) and feels that these must be having an impact also.

### Life now and in the future

Lai Sa-at feels that life is better now than it used to be. The two non-government organisations (Oxfam and Cambodia Rural Development Team) operating in Samphin village have provided multiple benefits to the village — healthcare training, training for birth attendants, latrines, training in new agricultural techniques, schools, rice banks and buffalo banks, vaccinations and biogas stoves.

Lai Sa-at reflects particularly upon the improvements for women — he cites the impact of having trained midwives making childbirth safer and the way in which biogas stoves have drastically reduced the amount of time the women have to spend cooking and collecting firewood. Hygiene in the family is much improved and as a result family health, especially children's health, is better.

Lai Sa-at is optimistic about the future. He reflects that so many things have changed and improved over the last ten years and can see no reason why, with ongoing assistance, they shouldn't continue to do so. Lai Sa-at particularly hopes that education for the children will continue to improve, as this is the future hope of the community.

However, he is worried about the prospect of the Sambor Dam being built. He first learnt about it when he saw Chinese surveyors drilling in the river in 2007. Lai Sa-at does not know what a dam looks like, but he understands that if it blocks the whole river that everything will be destroyed; he has no idea what his family would do if that happened. Lai Sa-at says that if he is asked to join a meeting about the dam he will ask if it can be built without any impacts upon the local people; if it cannot, then he will say that it should not be built. "We do not need electricity, we only need a house to live in and food to eat."

## Who buys fish in a fishing village?

### The lot of women-headed households

Som Djeng has been sole parent of her four children since her husband left her in 1993. Her rice fields can supply their rice needs for nine months of the year, and after that she must borrow rice. She makes cakes to sell in the village to earn some money. She has no sons to fish, and so must buy fish. As fish have been getting harder to catch for Lai Sa-at, it has been getting more expensive for Som Djeng.

Cambodia has a relatively high proportion of women-headed households, women who through either being widowed or abandoned, are left to raise their family alone. They are typically among the poorest and most disadvantaged within any village, suffering from a triple burden: social stigma and isolation, reduced household production, and a heavy labour burden, often contributing to ill-health. Children in such families often suffer nutritionally, and through less opportunity to access healthcare and schooling.

For this reason, women-headed households are typically among the first sought out by Oxfam when it begins working in a village. Beyond the standard interventions to improve health (such as latrines and water jars), women-headed households are supported particularly through two sorts of village developments:

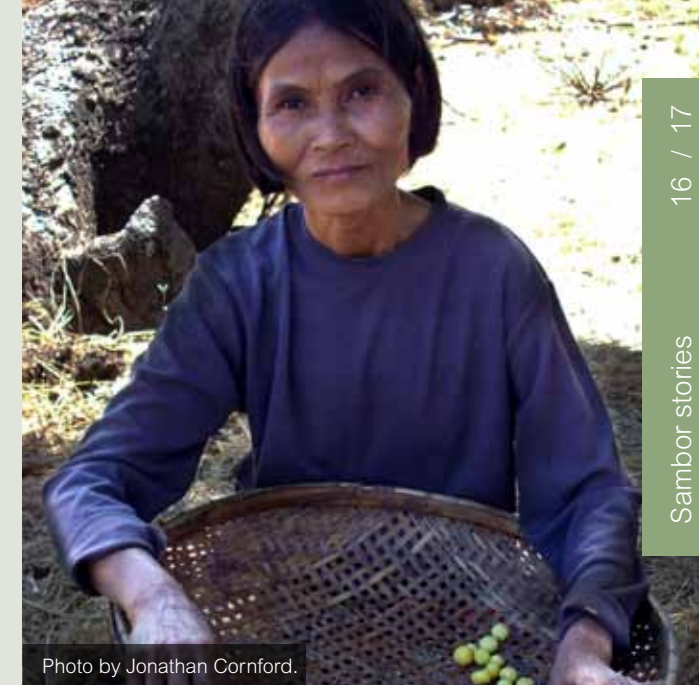


Photo by Jonathan Cornford.

1. Establishing a basic safety net which ensures poor households can have enough food in lean times, without having to enter into spiralling debt. This is often done by establishing a rice bank, which is a self-sustaining community store of rice which is available to be loaned out at low interest rates.
2. Establishing mutual support groups for women within villages (called "savings groups" or "self-help groups") that:
  - a. provide a pool of savings which poorer women can access for small loans, either for investment, such as buying some livestock (often chickens or pigs), or to pay for family needs, such as schooling or health costs;
  - b. provide a forum for women to receive training in new agricultural methods, marketing, small business, and vocational skills (such as the cake making that Som Djeng has learnt); and
  - c. provide a basis for empowering and giving recognition to women who otherwise have little voice in the village.



*Chan Nin is 51 years old and lives with three of her school-age children — four others have married and moved out. Three years ago, Chan Nin's husband died due to liver complications from malaria, leaving her to shoulder the burden of the family economy. Things are tight; however, with some assistance from her children, there is a modest sense of "enough" in her household.*

# Diversity is security

## CHAN NIN'S STORY

### The importance of a mixed livelihood

Like most people in Samphin village (and Sambor generally), Chan Nin does not rely on any one activity to feed her family. Rather, she undertakes a variety of activities that together can be described as her "livelihood". The key components of her livelihood are rice farming, growing fruit and vegetables, and raising livestock (chickens, pigs and buffalo), and her children fish from the river bank.

In good years, Chan Nin's rice fields produce around 5 to 6 tonnes of rice which is enough to feed the family and pigs, and still have a little left over to sell. Last year she did not get a good harvest, and there was not enough rice to last the family for the whole year. However, for several years now she has been carefully raising chickens and pigs, and the sale of these provided enough income for the family to buy what else they needed. Chan Nin estimates that the sale of pigs alone earned her about 500,000 riel (USD \$125) last year. Chan Nin and her family eat very little chicken and pork themselves — it is too valuable.

Not to be ignored, though, is the quiet importance of the fruit and vegetables that Chan Nin grows, and the fish her children bring from their fishing endeavours. While neither of these generate any income to the household, they both supply extra food which then does not need to be bought, and perhaps

more importantly, provide the nutrition supplements that she and her children need to stay healthy. Rice might fill the belly but it cannot meet all of a body's needs.

For a single parent family like Chan Nin's, ill-health can have multiple consequences. When her children have been quite sick, she has to take them to the hospital in Sambor town by boat which she has to pay for (she has no boat of her own). The health treatment itself is dauntingly expensive for people who only live on the edge of the cash economy. If it is too much, she may have to borrow money from private money lenders, which for many Cambodians is the beginning of a downward spiral into poverty. And all this is taking Chan Nin away from work which she can ill-afford to neglect.

For Chan Nin, the importance of a mixed livelihood cannot be stressed enough. When a family lives with a small margin between enough and hunger, it is too risky to put all their eggs in one basket. In Chan Nin's way of life there is always uncertainty — the rains might not come, the livestock might become diseased — so if any one thing fails, she has the others to fall back on.



## Water and hygiene: the great leap forward

Achieving significant health improvements in the developing world can be cheap and technically simple. Diarrhoea is the third biggest cause of death in Cambodia, and is especially dangerous for children under five. Targeting the key causes of diarrhoea — poor quality drinking water and poor sanitation — can make a big difference. In Samphin village, Oxfam has endeavoured to supply every house with water filter jars and latrines; this is not "sexy" aid but it is one of the foundational requirements of improving quality of life.

Just as important is building understanding within the community about the causes of disease and the means of prevention. Conducting health awareness workshops in villages throughout Sambor and training village health volunteers who can continue village education on an ongoing basis have been two more simple but effective ways of improving health. Here's what a villager from Damre village reported about the water and sanitation assistance they had received:

"After being educated and receiving water jars from the Oxam Australia project, many households did not have diarrhoea ... unlike the previous situation when we used water directly from the river. As a result, many households follow this pattern and boiling water is mostly followed. We have observed that the number of people who have diarrhoea has decreased dramatically."

### Life now and in the future

Chan Nin is optimistic about the prospects for herself and her family. In the last five years she has received some assistance through Oxfam and Cambodia Rural Development Team (CRDT) which, although it may seem small, has contributed significantly to undergirding the security of her family. Like everyone else in the village, she received a latrine and water filter jar from Oxfam which has been a significant step in improving the family's health. From CRDT she received the chickens which started her up in poultry raising and which is now adding a valuable extra element to her livelihood mix. Then, through Oxfam, she has been able to have her pigs and buffalo vaccinated, a cheap and simple measure which gives her protection against the loss of critical assets (see Livestock on page 21).

By Chan Nin's reasoning, such assistance has brought steady improvements in the quality of her family's life, and if that can continue, life will continue to get easier. She is scared, though, that life may get harder because of the proposed Sambor Dam development. "If it is built, where will I go?" If she gets a chance, she will say not to build the dam but she does not see how her community can win if "they" really want to build it.

A latrine built by Oxfam.





# A village entrepreneur

## SOUS VE'S STORY

*Sous Ve is 39 years old and is one of the more prosperous members of Samphin village. She lives in a spacious new teak house with zinc roofing that stands out in the village. Sous Ve lives with her three children who are all school age; her husband, who is in the military, lives in Sambor town. But behind her present comfort is a decade of hard toil.*

### Moving into prosperity

Like Chan Nin, Sous Ve undertakes a number of activities to support her household. Unlike Chan Nin, her economic activity has moved beyond establishing security to providing a comfortable income stream. She only has a small amount of paddy field (less than most families in Samphin) and so has invested most of her energy in other areas, particularly livestock. Sous Ve raises chickens, pigs, buffalo and fish (from a fish pond), all in numbers to earn a comfortable income. She supplies her household with fruit and vegetables from her own garden, located on another island.

From this strong base, Sous Ve has moved into a new area for the village. With some help from local non-government organisation Cambodia Rural Development Team, she has set up her house as a village home stay within a broader ecotourism project. So far it has been a modest start, with only one group of guests this year, but with growing tourism in the area she is hopeful about the prospects.

### Life now and in the future

The improvement in Sous Ve's life over the last decade has been dramatic. Although she is well established and comfortable now, it has been a long road to get there. The house she now lives in was built gradually over more than a decade, while she and her children huddled in cramped make-shift conditions.

In building the economic base of her family, Sous Ve has had the advantage of an income stream from her husband's employment in the military. But this has also meant she has had to do without the labour of a male partner and raised young children alone. Sous Ve remembers her life 10 years ago as one of hardship, with always much to do and little time to do it. "But from year to year I have saved, little by little, and I have bought livestock that can be sold for a higher price. Our lives have improved step by step. My children go to school as there is a high school nearby."

Perhaps because her life has changed so much, Sous Ve is one of the most outspoken in the village about the proposed Sambor Dam. Although quietly spoken, she is passionate. Like others in the village, she learnt of the project when the Chinese surveyors came in 2007. She took the bold step of approaching the people working as translators for the Chinese to try and glean more information, but she learned little. In the last couple of years she has actively sought information, and has even travelled to Phnom Penh to take part in a workshop about hydropower in Cambodia.

Sous Ve is scared about the project; if it is built, she says, everything will be lost — houses, fields, schools, temples, fish. Her message is simple and clear: "We do not need the dam, do not build it." If she gets the chance, she intends to ask how the project will compensate her for all the things that will be lost.



## Livestock: savings, investment and insurance, village-style

In rural Cambodia, livestock play a number of critical roles in the household economy. Buffalo are essential to rice cultivation for their work in ploughing the fields before transplanting and manuring the fields during the dry season. A family without buffalo is forced to hire someone else's at the beginning of the wet season which often also involves borrowing at high interest rates. This can be a classic poverty trap for poorer families.

An important component of Oxfam's development work in Sambor has been to establish buffalo banks for those without buffalo. The way it works is a female buffalo is hired at low rates to a family without buffalo, with payment in rice at the end of the season, paid into the village rice store. This allows the family to cultivate their field without incurring a debt burden and potentially to expand their production. Furthermore, the female buffalo will be mated while with the family, and the offspring then becomes their property. Once the offspring is old enough, the mother will be rotated on to another family who needs a buffalo, thus making it a self-sustaining scheme that can be managed within the village.

Investing in livestock, such as buffalo and cows, is also the key form of household savings. Livestock can be mated to produce significant "capital growth", and in times of crop failure, the sale of an adult buffalo can buy enough rice to feed a family for a year. The major drawback is that livestock are susceptible to disease.

A simple and relatively cheap way that Oxfam has been able to strengthen the village economic base in livestock has been to introduce a scheme that makes livestock vaccination affordable and accessible within the village. This is done by training village livestock agents — ordinary farmers — who learn how to vaccinate, organise the supply of vaccines and take a small fee for each animal that is vaccinated. This represents a negligible amount for each family but across the village provides enough income to the village livestock agent to act as an incentive to continue organising regular vaccinations. Oxfam has also assisted the district government in regularising the supply of vaccines.

This simple introduction of livestock vaccines has led to a significant growth in village wealth. Now it has been observed that villagers in Sambor are increasing their livestock production and are regarding livestock as more than savings and insurance, but as a source of income.







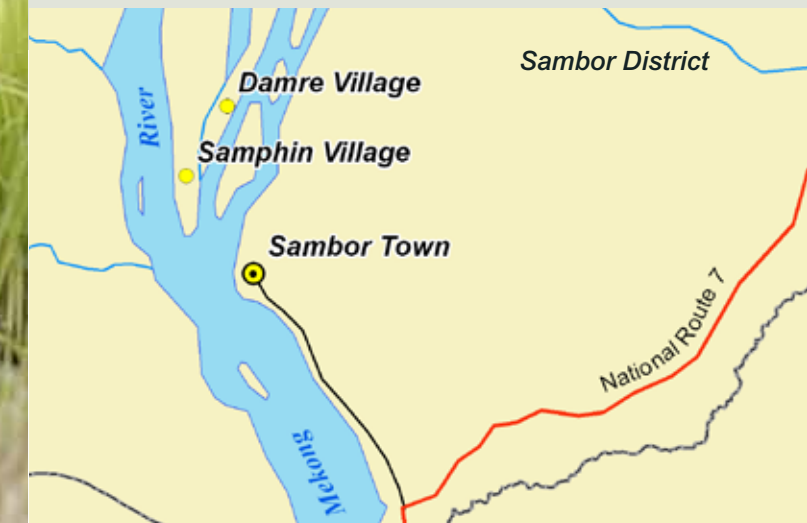
# Damre village

## SAMBOR STORIES

*Damre village is located on Koh Tnot, another large island just to the east of Koh Regniew.*

It has a mix of Khmer and Kuy ethnic backgrounds but those members of the village who regards themselves as Kuy have been fully integrated within Khmer culture for a generation, and many cannot now speak the Kuy language.

Damre is a poorer village than Samphin but it also is showing signs of new prosperity. It is also much smaller, with a population of 378 people, made up of 71 families. Damre has a small primary school classroom but no secondary school or health facilities. Oxfam began working in Damre in 1997.





*Dong Chana lives at home with his wife and six children, five of whom are at school. At 41, he is in the prime of his life: strong, working hard and improving his family's lot. Dong Chana sees the future as full of opportunity.*

## Vegetables and nutrition

Because Cambodia has a rice-based food culture, and because rice is so important for satisfying hunger, food production in Cambodia has often tended to prioritise rice growing to the exclusion of other crops. However, rice does not provide all the body needs, and even when families feel they have enough food to eat, they may still be suffering from under-nutrition. This is especially damaging for children. The World Health Organization reports that 42% of children in Cambodia suffer from some stunting due to inadequate nutrition.

Oxfam's work in Sambor has tackled this through village-based nutrition education, particularly highlighting the importance of vegetables whose nutritional value has not

generally been understood by villagers. Along side of this, Oxfam has provided training and materials to help develop home vegetable gardens for home consumption as well as sale.

As a result, there has been a remarkable increase in vegetable gardening in Sambor since 2006. Most villagers in Oxfam's target villages now cultivate their own vegetables and many also sell them to earn additional income. Villagers are now starting to understand market demand and to grow crops accordingly. People are reporting overall better health, reflecting the combined impact of nutrition, clean water, sanitation and health education.

# Vegies and a new motorbike

## DONG CHANA'S STORY

### Gardening opens a new niche

Like everyone else in Damre village, Dong Chana fishes and grows rice. These things are basic to the family economy. But the activity that has opened up new fields of opportunity for his family is vegetable gardening.

Dong Chana began vegetable gardening when he left the army in 1998. His main crops are long beans, eggplant, gourd, cucumber and pumpkin. In the wet season he cultivates a plot of land behind his house which is about 0.2 hectares. In the dry season he grows vegetables in the rich soil of the exposed river bank which lies about 100 metres behind his land.

Dong Chana ploughs and tills the land, his wife plants the seeds, and they both share in the watering, along with their children. All the watering is done by hand, involving endless trips down to the river to fill watering cans and then returning to the field.

Dong Chana has been learning more about vegetable gardening over the years through Oxfam training opportunities and field trips. These have assisted him with crop selection, growing techniques, pest management, composting and seed storage.

He now grows far more vegetables than when he began 10 years ago. This is partly because his family has grown and he has more mouths to feed, but also because he has

realised that he can earn useful income through the sale of vegetables. In some years he can earn up to 400,000 riel (USD \$100) — not much for some, but something Dong Chana is satisfied with.

### Life now and in the future

When Dong Chana talks about his life now, he gives the strong sense that he and his family are thriving. In his mind, two things testify to this: his children are all healthy and in school, and where once they lived in a cramped bamboo cottage, they now live in a new house which they built with the money earned from selling vegetables and rice. His great hope for the near future is to save enough money to buy a motor bike.

Dong Chana also talks about his greatest worry which is the proposal to build the Sambor Dam. Dong Chana says that if the government has a good plan for compensation and relocation then he can contemplate going, but if they do not then his family will try to do everything they can to stay. "I do not want to change to a new place because here my life is good enough. If I am moved to a new place with a small plot of land, how can we continue to improve our lives? We will become poor again."



*Rot Set is a conscientious family man. He has eight children aged between one and 32, and at 51 he still enjoys time with the baby. His household now lives in modest comfort, although this wasn't always the case. They even boast a TV, although Rot Set hardly watches it because he considers it mostly nonsense. Rot Set is a member of the Kuy ethnic group but is no longer able to speak the Kuy language.*

# An organic pioneer

## ROT SET'S STORY

### New ways of growing an old crop

In 2006, Rot Set took a bold leap: he was the first person in his village to trial a completely new way of growing rice, a crop that has been grown in this area for thousands of years.

The new method, the System of Rice Intensification (SRI), is an organic, no-cost way of improving rice yields that is accessible to any rice farmer. Rot Set learnt about SRI through a demonstration run by Oxfam and initially was sceptical about it, as it is a method which is counter-intuitive to the traditional ways (see SRI). Nevertheless, he trialed the method on a small plot of land and was highly impressed with the results. Still cautious, the next year he expanded his trial to a larger plot while cultivating the bulk of his crop using traditional methods. This time, the comparison between the two crops left Rot Set in little doubt.

Now Rot Set has switched to growing his whole crop using the SRI method, and is able to grow two crops each year using a new rice variety supplied by Oxfam which has a shorter growing duration. Rot Set estimates that his yield each crop is about 25% higher than before, and now with the ability to grow a second crop, his overall rice output is 250% greater. Last year he was able to produce 5 tonnes of rice which was enough to feed his large family for the year, plus 10 pigs, with enough left over to earn about 400,000 riel (USD \$100) through sale.

The improved crop came just at the right time. Last year, Rot Set's family had to pay a lot of money in health bills as they cared for his ageing mother-in-law. A few years ago, they simply would not have been able to do this.

As you would expect, after watching Rot Set's trailblazing success, other farmers in the village are starting to switch to the strange new method of rice growing.

### Life now and in the future

Once, Rot Set's family was one of the poorest in the village. Now, by his own definition, they are no longer poor. How did this happen? Rot Set has no doubts: through his own hard work and through outside assistance.

As well as the SRI training and new varieties of rice seed, Rot Set's family has also received a latrine, water filter jar and mosquito nets through Oxfam's work in the village. Now there is no malaria, much less diarrhoea among the children and the whole family has better nutrition. And the children are going to school.

For Rot Set the equation is simple: if he continues to work hard and there is continued assistance from outside, then life will continue to improve along the same trajectory.

But Rot Set is also worried. If the Sambor Dam is built he says he will lose his rice crop and there will be no more fish. For Rot Set, relocation is not a solution: "If we have to move, we will be poor again."



## SRI: a rice revolution, one seed at a time

The System of Rice Intensification (SRI) is an organic, low-cost, low technology form of rice cultivation. As such it is a method which has been promoted as an environmentally sound and healthy alternative to modern rice agriculture (which uses large amounts of expensive chemical fertilisers and pesticides) as well as a financially safe technology for poor farmers.

SRI first began in Madagascar in the 1980s and since then it has been spreading all over the developing world. In Cambodia, SRI is being enthusiastically embraced with up to 17,000 farmers now using the methodology.

SRI has five main components which can be variably applied, depending on local conditions:

1. Transplanting rice seedlings at a younger age (8–12 days rather than 15–30 days);
2. Planting of only one seedling per hill (Rot Set used to plant 4–10 seedlings per hill);
3. Planting seedlings at larger spacings (between 25cmx25cm–50cmx50cm apart, compared to the traditional 20cmx20cm spacing);
4. Using intermittent water control (saturating then draining the paddy field) as opposed to maintaining a flooded paddy; and
5. Applying organic material to the soil (compost or manure compared to no inputs, or application of chemical fertilisers).

The benefits are three-fold: increased yield per hectare, use of less rice seed in planting (so more is left over for consumption or sale), and stronger and more resilient rice plants.

Although Rot Set is happy with his increased yield, he has not yet realised SRI's full potential. Whereas Rot Set is now achieving a yield of about 2 tonnes per hectare, it has been common for SRI farmers elsewhere in Cambodia to achieve around 4–5 tonnes per hectare. The beauty of SRI is that it is a system that allows great variation to suit local conditions, so no doubt Rot Set will continue to improve his rice yield in years to come.



# Fishing for the future: promoting sustainable fisheries in Sambor

It has often been said that if you give a man a fish you feed him for a day but if you teach a man to fish, you feed him for the rest of his life. In Sambor, people have never needed help fishing, but increasingly they need help protecting their fish.

Over the last decade there has been a rapid rise in the use of destructive, and now illegal, fishing techniques, such as explosives, electric shock methods, poisoning and very fine filament gill nets that can span a whole channel. Illegal fishing has been encouraged in Sambor by middlemen in the rapidly growing regional fish trade, who export mostly to Thailand. This has led to overfishing and often also ecological damage, both of which are seen as major factors in the fish decline being observed all over Cambodia. While many villagers in Sambor have been guilty of this, enforcement of fishing regulations has often been complicated by the fact that many police and soldiers take part in illegal fishing.

For more than a decade, Oxfam has been working hard in Sambor to build awareness and motivation to manage fisheries sustainably. This has meant working intensively at the village level, but also with district and provincial fisheries officials, the police, the military, and other non-government organisations working in the area.

One of the key interventions has been to form “community fisheries” groups in villages such as Damre, which provide a forum for shared fisheries management among the fisher folk. In the community fisheries group, members build awareness about the harmful effects of illegal fishing, set local regulations about where, when and what fishing is okay, and group together to monitor and report illegal fishing activity. Oxfam has supported these groups with signboards, posters and T-shirts that help communicate their message.

Oxfam has also played a key role in getting these same villagers into forums with officials, police and military, to build a common position about the need to stamp out destructive fishing. In 2005, the Cambodian Government passed a new law which provided a legal basis for the operation of community fisheries groups, and Oxfam worked closely with the district administration in Sambor to spread awareness about the law. Now the authorities are working together in taking a more proactive approach to reduce illegal fishing, and there are some signs that the situation is improving.



## Small fry with a big role

### SO SREY NIC'S STORY

#### Fish for the poor

How can two teenage girls, both in school, and their elderly grandmother support themselves in Damre village? So Srey Nic's grandmother has a small amount of paddy land, which with some help they work to produce a crop, but it is not enough, and they don't have enough labour to cultivate more land, even if they had it.

The answer lies in small-scale fishing. Everyday, So Srey Nic goes down to the river upon which her household depends. On school days, she checks and sets her nets in the morning before she takes the boat ride into Sambor town for school, and in the evening when she gets back; or on other days she does the same before and after spending a day in the rice field.

So Srey Nic is mostly catching small fish and other aquatic animals (such as shrimp, snails and frogs) which rarely register as economically important in studies of Cambodian livelihoods. Yet, armed with her small gill net and her basket, and fishing only from the river bank, So Srey Nic is able to supply a significant share of her household's food and income needs.

So Srey Nic estimates that they eat fish she has caught twice per day for about 25 days of each month. She also sells some of her catch in the market at Sambor town, before she goes to school, sometimes earning up to 20,000 riel (USD \$5) per day.

*So Srey Nic is 17 years old and lives with her grandmother and youngest sister. Her father died in 1999 and her family were too poor to be able to support her and her sister. Now the three of them support each other as best they can, but things are tight. Nevertheless, So Srey Nic maintains a positive outlook; she is in her final years of secondary school (which she loves) and hopes to become a teacher so that she can earn income to support her family and return to Damre village to teach the next generation.*

#### Life now and in the future

The early years of living with her grandmother were hard years for them all but So Srey Nic feels that now things have become a bit easier. To give an example, she says that now her household has a water filter jar from Oxfam, she no longer has to go out looking for firewood to boil the water. So Srey Nic is positive about life, but reading between the lines, it is clear that things are tight. So Srey Nic's worries for the future naturally focus on whether she will pass her studies, and whether she can earn enough income to support her family. She has heard about the proposed Sambor Dam, but doesn't know much about it and doesn't discuss it with her friends.





# Srey Dtremg village

## SAMBOR STORIES

*Unlike Samphin and Damre villages, Srey Dtremg is not located on or near the Mekong River.*

It is one of a number of inland villages in Sambor that are scattered along the now upgraded National Highway No.7 that runs between Stung Dtremg and Kratie town. On the whole, villages out here are noticeably poorer. They have poor access to water, the soils are poor and malaria is a serious issue. Many of the district's ethnic minority population live in this region of Sambor, although the upgrading of the highway has brought a number of new Khmer migrants who have set up business and are noticeably better off.

Srey Dtremg has a population of more than 1,500 people, made up of 302 families. The village has a primary school but no health facilities. Oxfam began working in Srey Dtremg in 1996.





Fifty-three-year-old Bon Kiet is living on the edge. She has three children of school age (and two married), but none go to school; she says they are too poor and too sick. A member of the Phnong ethnic minority, she speaks Khmer competently, but is more comfortable in her own language. Bon Kiet's way of life, and that of her family and people, is not the way of the river and paddy field, but the way of the forest. Once, not so long ago, this way of life was characterised by plenty, but now there is scarcely enough.

# They are taking the forest

## BON KIET'S STORY

### The wealth of the forest

Like so many of the ethnic minority groups in South-East Asia, the Phnong culture, agriculture and religion have been defined around the life of forest-based rotational agriculture and forest foraging.

Bon Kiet grows rice, but not in paddy fields such as those found in Samphin or Damre villages; she grows rice in forest clearings called *chamkar*, mixed in with the cultivation of a wide variety of other fruit, vegetables and tubers. Under traditional practice, she would cultivate a *chamkar* for two to three years before moving on to another *chamkar*, and keep moving on until she returns to the original field in 10 to 12 years time. This system allows the regeneration of soils and keeps pest problems to a minimum.

As well as the cultivation of her *chamkar*, a significant portion of Bon Kiet's time is devoted to forest foraging. Depending on the time of year, she will spend two to three days per week in the forest, sometimes not returning home for a full three days. In this time she collects a wide range of forest products, including mushrooms, honey, rattan (palm), small animals, snails, medicinal herbs and most important of all, bamboo shoots.

All of these things are collected for their own consumption, but also increasingly, with increased road traffic along National Highway No.7, for sale. Honey is the most lucrative product, sometimes earning up to 100,000 riel (USD \$25) for two to three days foraging, but it is harder to find and only seasonally available. Mushrooms are a more modest but consistent source of income, earning around 5,000 riel (USD \$1.25) for a day's work.

Bon Kiet explains that their diet consists of only a small amount of rice and mostly forest products, especially bamboo shoots. Although this way of life is more labour intensive and less productive than paddy rice cultivation, it actually provides a nutritionally richer and more balanced diet when it is working well.

But things are no longer working well. For the last few years an increasing number of people have come foraging in the forest, looking for products to sell. This is largely a result of the market that has been created with improved transport access to the area. Bon Kiet has noticed that the availability of forest products has been declining rapidly with this increased harvesting. She explains that five to six years ago, one day of foraging could yield 10 baskets of mushrooms; now she will be lucky to fill one basket.

Then in 2007 the unthinkable happened. One day Bon Kiet was walking along the forest track to her *chamkar* when she encountered a group of soldiers. She was told that she could not pass, that this land now belonged to a private plantation company and that if she was caught trespassing she would be arrested, jailed and fined. Bon Kiet was stunned. This was the first she had heard about her land and forest being granted to a private company. There was no suggestion of compensation.

Since then, two other private plantations have been granted large slices of land and forest which were cultivated and used by the Phnong people of Srey Dtremg. What had been for Bon Kiet a serious reduction in the availability of food had suddenly turned into a crisis.

### Life now and in the future

Although by most people's standards, Bon Kiet and her family have always been poor, in the last few years their lives have taken a significant turn for the worse. Ten years ago, she says, life was "easy". Now it is very difficult — she and her family are eking-out the barest of livings.

For the future, Bon Kiet's only hope is that the few plots of *chamkar* and small area of forest left available to her will be enough. Her fear, which is far greater, is that even this will be taken away from her.



## Holes in the aid net

Although Oxfam has been working in Srey Dtremg for 13 years, Bon Kiet says she has never received any assistance. Many of Oxfam's activities are targeted at those who are considered "the poorest of the poor"; Bon Kiet's example shows that this is easier said than done.

Bon Kiet, like many other Phnong, has two dwelling places: one in the village, and one in the forest. She spends most of her time in her forest dwelling which is close to her *chamkar*. She does not hear of most of the meetings which take place in the village, and much less has a chance to attend. In many ways, the increasing desperation of her situation only further alienates her from participating in the community life of her village.

This demonstrates some important things about the role of aid in rural communities such as we find in Sambor. While aid can make a real and important contribution to people's quality of life, it is no answer to poverty. It is an imperfect tool and can never throw a net wide enough to benefit all those who really could use some assistance.

Far more important is to protect the underlying economy upon which most people, especially the poor, depend. In Sambor, this means protecting access to the natural resources — land, river and forests — which have provided the basis of life here for thousands of years.

That is why Oxfam has committed to ensuring that its work in Sambor is part of a network of aid organisations that can work together for change — actually not just one network, but a series of networks working locally, nationally and internationally. While one agency is powerless in the face of projects such as the proposed Sambor Dam, or the current land conflicts in Sambor, by working in coalitions at multiple levels, there is just a chance that people like Chan Nin and Bon Kiet might one day get a voice.





# A struggle for survival

## UMPIL NYUNG'S STORY

Umpil Nyung is a young Phnong man who is angry about what is happening to his people. He and his wife have three children under five, and he is painfully aware that their future is at stake. Umpil Nyung is respectful of his Phnong elders but he is also aware that it is the younger generation that will have to take the lead against the new forces that threaten them all.

### Voice of the oppressed

Whereas Bon Kiet struggles to grasp how and why her forest and fields can be taken from her, Umpil Nyung has made it his business to understand exactly what has been going on, and to try to find a way to defend the rights of his people.

He explains to us the details of the land conflict that was suddenly thrust on the people of Srey Dtremg. Their first rude awakening to the vulnerability of their way of life was in 2007 when they suddenly found access to some of their forest area blocked by soldiers. Umpil Nyung learned that the provincial government in Kratie had granted their forest to a Chinese company, Tong Min Co., to plant cassava, teak and acacia, and also to operate a saw mill. The company was granted 9,000 hectares and quickly began to bulldoze some of this area.

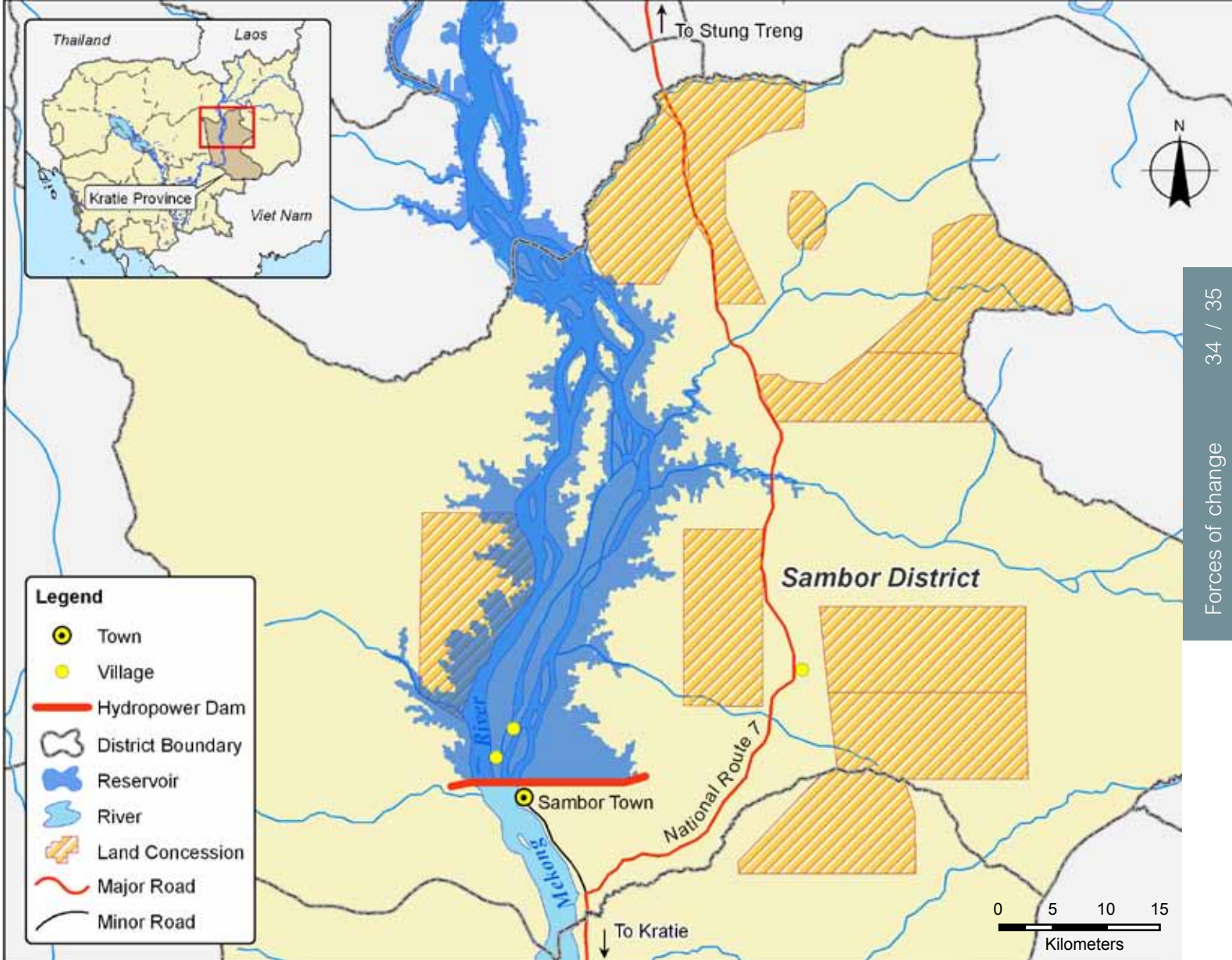
In 2008, another company, this time a Khmer business by the name of Som Kuy Tey, came to claim another swathe of land. Once again, the first the villagers knew of it was when the bulldozers appeared to clear land. This time the villagers were more prepared: 150 of them quickly organised themselves and went down to stop the bulldozers. They demonstrated peacefully, though forcefully, for the drivers to stop, which they did. Umpil Nyung and some others then went and sought the assistance of the Commune Chief who negotiated with the company to withdraw until something could be sorted out. They learned that the company was claiming 1,000 hectares of land but their actions that day had stopped them after only about 100 hectares had been cleared.

After this small success, Umpil Nyung was to discover how bitter land struggles can be. While they waited to hear how

their case would be dealt with, an elder within the village, who had been entrusted to negotiate for them, was quietly enticed by the plantation company to Kratie town for negotiations which lasted a couple of days. They were later to discover that this elder had signed permission on behalf of the village for the company to clear another 600 hectares, with no compensation. He quickly lost his position in the village but the damage was already done.

Now the villagers have a new struggle ahead of them. Umpil Nyung explains that only a month before we talked to him (mid 2009), a number of villagers encountered a group of men camped near a reservoir that provides some irrigation to the small amount of paddy land near Srey Dtremg. They were informed that all the land between the reservoir and the forest stream (about 300 hectares) now belonged to a third plantation company. This is the land where Umpil Nyung's ancestors are buried. What is more, the irrigation reservoir, the only significant water body in the area, was built by Oxfam as an aid project, with money from the Australian Government. Now they are being told that the reservoir will no longer belong to the villagers.

Umpil Nyung is clear about the significance of this latest threat. It means they will no longer have enough land to practice their rotational agriculture which is their way of life. They still don't know any details about this latest plantation, or even if what they have been told is accurate. This time at least they have some advance warning but if the history of the previous two cases is anything to go by, their future is uncertain.



# Forces of change





Oxfam field worker, Som Sovanna, discusses the new latrine with Chay Sary.

# Oxfam's development work in Sambor

Oxfam has been working in Sambor district since 1996. Over that time it has worked in more than 30 villages, reaching more than 30,000 people, and investing around \$1.7 Million. This money has come from the Australian Government's aid program (about 32%) and from Oxfam's own funds.

The approach which Oxfam has used is referred to as integrated community development. This approach recognises that the experience of poverty has multiple dimensions (such as health, education, nutrition, gender) and that these cannot be addressed in isolation. It also recognises that one of the most valuable resources at the disposal of poor people is the communities that they live in, and that assisting communities to develop their cooperative efforts can have broad-reaching impacts.

In practice, this has meant that there has been five main components to Oxfam's work in villages: agriculture; health and sanitation; village credit (including things such as buffalo banks and rice banks); community-based fisheries management; and school building and adult literacy. This has come about in response to the needs being expressed by villagers themselves. In all of these activities, Oxfam makes special effort to make sure that women can participate meaningfully and benefit, and to make sure that the community is developing the organising skills to run and manage activities by itself.

Another key principle of Oxfam's approach has been to ensure that it does not displace the role of local government in providing services to communities but rather that it enhances the

local government's ability to fulfil its role. In practice this means that Oxfam works in a three-way partnership with villagers and district officials, often putting as much emphasis into training officials as villagers. In this way it is hoped the project will have broader impacts beyond the villages in which it works.

In 2008, Oxfam commissioned an external evaluation of its integrated community development program in Sambor which found that the program resulted in improved conditions for poor rural communities. Specifically, the evaluation found that as a result of Oxfam's work, people's basic economic security had improved through increased and diversified farm production; poor people benefited from an improved social safety net and better opportunities to invest in new productive activities; environmental stewardship had improved, particularly with reference to the use of agricultural chemicals and illegal fishing; communities had better primary healthcare, education and agricultural assistance; and women were playing greater decision-making roles in their communities.<sup>1</sup>

It is always hard to quantify the direct impact that an aid project has on people's lives, as there can be so many influencing factors. However, there is little doubt Oxfam's work in Sambor has played a significant role in improving the lives of the people that it has reached. When this is combined with the efforts of the government and other aid organisations working in the area, this amounts to an important investment in human development. The question is whether other investments in the area are working towards the same purpose.

1. Prem Tola, Kem Sothorn and Kheang Sovann, *Community Rural Development Project: Project Evaluation Report*, Oxfam Australia September 2008, p.v.

The site of the proposed Sambor Hydropower Dam on the Mekong River.

# The Sambor Hydropower Dam

In October 2006, the Cambodian Government signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the China Southern Power Grid Company to begin to explore the feasibility of constructing a hydropower dam in Sambor district. The purpose of the dam is not to supply Cambodian energy needs but to export electricity to either Thailand or Vietnam.

Because Sambor is relatively flat land, the construction of a dam here will require building a dam wall that is 18 kilometres long and 56 metres high, creating a reservoir of 620km<sup>2</sup>; this would reportedly have a generating capacity of 2,600 megawatts.

At the time of writing (November 2009), it was unclear as to what stage the project was up to, or even how likely it was to go ahead. No official documents about the feasibility or environmental and social impact on the dam had been released. Nevertheless, there is widespread agreement among academics, development workers and government officials that impacts of the dam will be severe, particularly on Mekong fisheries and those who will have to be relocated from the reservoir area.

## Fisheries impacts

The site of the proposed Sambor Dam is located in the middle of the Mekong Basin's fish migration superhighway, between the Tonle Sap (Cambodia's great lake) and the three-river tributary system of the Se San, Sekong and Sre Pok rivers. This region of the Mekong is the world's most productive inland fishery, with a staggering level of biodiversity (more than 1,300 fish species). As the stories in this book illustrate, these fish play a critical role in feeding and supplying an income to many Cambodians. Many of the most important fish species (for eating purposes) are migratory.

The Mekong River Commission, the peak body for managing the water resources of the Mekong, acknowledges that the proposed Sambor Dam will have a massive impact on migratory fish species and that adequately mitigating these impacts is next to impossible.

In this regard, the proposed Sambor Dam has potential impacts which may affect millions more people than just the people of Sambor district.

2. *Dams & Development*, Report of the World Commission on Dams, 2000, p.xxxi.

## Relocation impacts

The track record of large-scale involuntary resettlement from dam sites in developing countries indicates that it is extremely difficult to accomplish without significant negative impacts on the relocated peoples. The World Commission on Dams has noted that, around the world, dam-related resettlement has led to "the impoverishment and suffering of millions".<sup>2</sup>

In Sambor, it is likely that between 19,000 to 20,000 people will be forced to relocate if the dam is built — the villages of Samphin and Damre would certainly be among those that have to move.

The prospect of such a massive resettlement program raises many serious questions, especially the question of where people are to go. One possible resettlement site that has been mentioned in relation to the Sambor Dam is an area called Pres Mea Mountain which is located about 20 kilometres east-north-east of Sambor town. Pres Mea is a forest area, although it has been heavily logged over the last 20 years. Currently the only access is by logging truck.

It is believed that there is about 1,000 hectares of land that is "available" to be used for resettlement purposes, as Pres Mea is surrounded by existing commercial land concessions. Converting Pres Mea to agricultural uses would require an enormous amount of clearing and levelling work, and even then, the soil is sandy and rocky and poorly suited to agriculture. There is no permanent water source in the area and it is a malarial zone. Any resettlement there would require significant investment in services such as schools and health clinics, as well as good quality roads, as it is remote from any existing services.

Putting aside its unsuitability for agriculture, the Pres Mea area is a fraction of what would be required to resettle 20,000 people. Given that much of Sambor district (and indeed Cambodia) is already beset by land conflict (see page 38), it is difficult to see how those who may be forced to relocate will be treated fairly.





The entrance to the Chinese-owned Tong Min Plantation, the first to appropriate land and forest in the Srey Dtreng area.

# Plantations

Since the late 1990s, the Cambodian Government has placed a high emphasis on encouraging investment (both foreign and local) in agro-industry plantations as a means of generating export income and creating rural employment. The primary means for doing this has been through granting extensive “economic land concessions” to private investors under favourable conditions.

By 2006, approximately 14.5% of Cambodia’s arable land had been granted as major economic land concessions to private investors, not including a multitude of smaller concessions issued at the provincial level. Although Cambodian law demands that environmental and social impacts of land concessions be taken into account, and protects the rights of existing land users (including indigenous rights to forest areas), these laws are rarely enforced, resulting in a high level of land conflict across the country.

Kratie province, and Sambor district in particular, has been one of the hot-spots for such land conflict. The granting of land concessions in the area began in earnest with upgrading of National Highway No. 7 which began in 2004,

making land adjacent to or near the road corridor attractive to investors. Currently there are more than 56,000 hectares of land that have been granted as land concessions in Sambor. These have been granted to six companies, mostly Chinese investors, who are licensed to plant teak, cassava and rubber.

The UN High Commission for Human Rights has reported that:

*In Kratie province, the six concessions ... in Sambor district encroach upon the land of Phnong, Mil and Kuy indigenous communities in O’Krieng, Kbal Damrei and Rolous Meanchey communes. These communities depend upon the cultivation of rice and seasonal crops, and the collection and sale of non-timber forest products. In mid-2006, three concessionaires began clearing land and forested areas to create roads and teak plantations, and digging trenches to prevent villagers and their cattle from accessing areas within the concessions. This destroyed rice fields and farm land belonging to villagers, as well as forested areas. Given the initial impacts of these concessions, which are not yet fully exploited, the villagers fear there will be insufficient land and forest resources for the future survival of their communities.<sup>3</sup>*

3. United Nations Cambodia Office for the High Commission on Human Rights, *Economic Land Concessions in Cambodia: A human rights perspective*, July 2007, p.13.



# What future for the children?





*Viewed from the perspective of a child, prospects in Sambor are in many ways significantly better than they were a decade ago. From birth and in the critical first five years of life, the improved health and sanitation conditions for many mean that children have a much better chance of surviving, while improved all-round nutrition means they have a better chance of thriving.*

Once they reach school age, most children in the district will have access to school facilities, and a good number live in families with an economic position that actually allows them to send their children to school. An increasing number will be able to take their schooling right through to the end of secondary school.

For the 50% of these children who are born girls, life prospects are also improving. They will still be expected to undertake more work than their brothers, but less than their mothers did, and with many of the most demanding chores, such as water collection and fire-wood gathering, made much easier or no longer necessary. They will also grow up into a community that has a growing recognition of the importance of women's roles in both household and village decision-making.







Improvements in agricultural productivity, especially in rice and livestock, have gone a long way to securing the family's annual food needs and improving all-round nutrition. Increased opportunities to sell produce in markets is also providing a stream of income that allows the family to buy new consumer goods, such as cooking utensils or TVs, which contribute to making some aspects of life a bit easier or more interesting.

These benefits are the products of development in Sambor district: the combined dividend of more than a decade of political stability, external assistance from organisations such as Oxfam, and the hard work and ingenuity of the people themselves. Many in Sambor are confident that the lives of their children could see even greater improvements than have been witnessed in the last decade.

However, there are dark clouds on the future horizons of these children, and this too is keenly felt by the parents. Some key pillars of the household economy are becoming less tenable than they once were. For river communities, the ongoing decline of fisheries due to over-fishing and ecological degradation is posing serious challenges. For forest communities, the declining availability of forest products due to over-harvesting threatens to undermine not only their household economy but also their rich cultural traditions.

Both of these challenges, while serious, can probably be accommodated, mitigated and/or compensated in other areas, through intelligent collective action by villagers which is supported by the district government and groups such as Oxfam. Steps towards this are already in process.

The proposed Sambor Dam and the ongoing encroachment of commercial agri-business both pose a much broader and deeper threat to the future of Sambor's children. Both of these work to fundamentally dislocate whole communities. They do not just require an adaptation in people's way of life, they erase a way of life. Both of these are also the product of development in Sambor.

Sambor's future hangs in the balance. This window in time, at the end of the first decade in the new millennium, is when decisions will be made which will determine the prospects for Sambor's children. The district's name, once an invitation to plenty, now begs the question, plenty for whom?



## About the authors

Jonathan Cornford has been tracking the course of development in the Mekong region — particularly Cambodia and Laos — for the last 15 years. He has a doctorate in Political Economy/International Development, and lives in Melbourne, Australia, with his wife and two children. Jonathan is the co-founder of Manna Gum.

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## About Oxfam Australia

Oxfam Australia is part of a global movement of dedicated people working hard to fight poverty and injustice. In the Mekong region, we are working to improve and protect the livelihoods of rural communities, and the natural resources which they depend upon. We directly support local communities and work in partnership with other civil society groups to ensure that the Mekong region's environmental and social diversity is secure and sustainable for future generations. For more information visit [www.oxfam.org.au](http://www.oxfam.org.au)

## About Manna Gum

Manna Gum is an independent Christian not-for-profit organisation which is motivated by a vision of a world in which there is enough for all. We seek to promote critical thinking on issues of aid and development, and to build awareness of our shared responsibility to this planet and its people. Manna Gum undertakes research, advocacy and popular education, working across secular and religious spheres. For more information visit [www.mannagum.org.au](http://www.mannagum.org.au)

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