



Strengthening Civic Engagement through Peacebuilding and Conflict Resolution Mechanisms:

The Alliance for Conflict Transformation and Praek Tnoat Commune, Kampot Province

As Cambodia continues its economic growth, the environmental effects of industrial development can often bring negative health and economic impacts on the daily lives of local citizens. In addition, if grievances of local communities are not addressed and are allowed to fester, mistrust and resentments can build and lead to conflict and even social unrest. To prevent this, there is a need to develop peaceful mechanisms of conflict resolution, which encourage dialogue and the building of trust among community members, local authorities, and private companies to solve problems.

Since its founding in 1999, the Alliance for Conflict Transformation (ACT) has been working in Phnom Penh and in several outlying provinces in Cambodia to address conflicts and to employ peacebuilding mechanisms that are essential to effective conflict resolution. ACT recently became involved in an ongoing pollution case in Praek Tnoat and Praek Kraeng villages of Praek Tnoat Commune in Toeuk Chhou District in Kampot province, as part of its USAID-funded project “Building Community Peacebuilding Capacities in Cambodia” with support from the East-West Management Institute (EWMI). The Bokor Rice Flour Company, a joint Thai-Cambodian venture, operates a rice flour processing plant near these communities. Beginning in 2018, community members complained of poor waste management, which has resulted in the emissions of noxious odors that have affected the health of many residents. In addition, factory waste has been dumped into the nearby ocean, which has had negative environmental effects on the fishing that many local residents depend on for their livelihoods. Catches of fish and crabs have been significantly reduced due to the waste dumping, and the village fishermen have also suffered an increase in skin infections and sickness due to their daily fishing in the polluted water.



Members of the ACT Community Peace Network, which is made up of local community leaders and commune authorities, visit one of the Bokor Rice Flour plant waste sites

In recent months, through the efforts of the ACT-supported Community Peace Network, which promotes dialogue and engagement through meetings between stakeholders, including local authorities and community members, some progress has been made in addressing the problem. Upon hearing of the villagers' complaints, a team of representatives from the Community Peace Network, which includes community leaders and commune officials, visited the factory site and the surrounding areas to assess the environmental effects. ACT was pleased that the commune officials were involved right from the start, in contrast to most NGO efforts to seek solutions. Shortly thereafter, the company was informed and efforts began to convince Bokor Rice to address the factory waste issue.

Then in January, 2020 the Community Peace Network organized a public forum in which Praek Tnoat Commune residents aired their concerns regarding the negative health and economic impact that the Bokor Rice Flour plant was having on their communities. Local commune authorities, company representatives, and officials from the fishery administration also attended the forum. After hearing the issues raised by residents, the manager of waste management of Bokor Rice promised to improve the factory's environmental management, and find new methods to eliminate the odors and the pollution of the local waters.



Bokor Rice Flour waste pumping site visited by the ACT Community Peace Network

A follow up public forum, also organized by the Community Peace Network, was held in Praek Tnoat commune in March, 2020. Like with the previous forum, community leaders, residents, commune officials, and Bokor Rice officials attended. District level governmental officials also participated in the forum with the aim of promoting rapid solutions for the problem.

In late April, the local authorities, acting on behalf of the local residents, submitted a formal complaint to Bokor Rice to take specific steps to address the waste management problems. This complaint included the signatures and thumbprints of residents that were collected by the commune's village chiefs at the request of the commune authorities. Upon receiving the complaint, Bokor Rice officials promised prompt action again. Although the Bokor Rice factory has now been temporarily closed between because of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is expected that it will re-open soon, and commune authorities and residents will continue to press the company to respond to the problems.



Praek Tnoat community members attend ACT organized public forum on the environmental problems caused by the Bokor Rice Flour plant.

As part of its project, ACT has been actively working to increase the knowledge of community-based organizations (CBOs), religious communities, and local authorities regarding community conflict resolution, develop their peacebuilding skills, and establish productive dialogue and engagement among relevant stakeholders in order to address community issues and problems. With support from the East-West Management Institute (EWMI), through its continuing work in Praek Tnoat and other localities, the project aims to ensure that community leaders, commune councilors, and other local governmental officials support their communities in addressing conflict, and in particular, those related to land, natural resources, fisheries, and other livelihood-related matters.

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– Ms. Srey Sotheavy, Executive Director, Alliance for Conflict Transformation

Influenced and guided by the theories and teachings of peacebuilding practitioners that have been developed over the past 50 years, ACT takes a holistic approach to conflict resolution,

through its process of “conflict transformation.” Instead of seeing conflict as a problem to be managed and contained, conflict transformation involves transforming the relationships that cause conflict. ACT’s guiding philosophy is that establishing meaningful, continuous dialogue among all parties to a conflict can build durable relationships. This in turn encourages community participation and engagement, which can lead to peaceful and stable community environments. In contrast with approaches taken by other local NGOs, which often employ advocacy techniques learned from international development experts and advisors, ACT’s approach is deeply rooted in the traditional Cambodian cultural practices of reconciliation, which deemphasize adversarial engagement and instead, emphasize cooperative engagement among parties based on social duties to the community. Therefore, as Cambodians would say, “it smells like prahok, not cheese.” In practice, this means that ACT focuses first on relationships, and then on conflicts.

“We integrate the tools of peacebuilding in what we do”, says ACT Executive Director Ms. Srey Sotheavy, “and we follow the ‘do no harm’ approach in our work.” The “do no harm” philosophy is one of the guiding principles used by peacebuilding practitioners in conflict resolution efforts, and two of its core elements are that any intervention must avoid worsening divisions and mistrust between conflicting parties, and must not result in disempowering community members. As part of its “do no harm” approach, ACT encourages engagement and dialogue between the various parties to foster trust and cooperation in solving problems. It also empowers local citizens to learn and reflect on their situations, so they can better communicate their concerns to others, including local governmental authorities. In its trainings and community dialogues, ACT’s “do no harm” approach focuses on avoiding the pitfalls of division and cynicism that often characterize relationships between NGOs, governmental authorities, and communities.

“We also believe it is important for community members to learn about the problems of other communities in different areas of Cambodia,” says Ms. Sotheavy. “We bring residents of communes that we work with to visit other provinces and communes so they can meet with people from the other communities and share experiences with them on the common problems they all face.” Ms. Sotheavy believes that these cross-commune visits help citizens to reflect on their specific situations in their own localities, and in turn, equips them with the knowledge to better explain their situations and develop the skills to better advocate for themselves.

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-- Mr. Pan Vutha, Village Chief, Praek Tnoat Commune

ACT recognizes that persuading local authorities to actively advocate for the concerns of citizens, particularly in sensitive cases involving land concessions and powerful business interests can be difficult. NGOs that work with citizens in local communities are often met with mistrust by the local authorities who regard these organizations as trouble making outside agitators. Instead, ACT actively engages with local authorities to gain their trust, and conducts joint training courses for local officials and citizens on cooperative advocacy approaches. This has resulted in a number of these local officials actively advocating for the rights of their citizens in these disputes, something that is still relatively uncommon in most rural communes around Cambodia.

In Praek Tnoat commune, the joint trainings, the joint field visits to the factory waste sites, and the community forums have resulted in some positive results. Notes Ms. Sotheavy: “In Praek Tnoat, the Deputy Commune Chief, who has been attending the trainings, has now been very active in advocating for the community in trying to solve the problem with the factory and that is a good step. It is difficult, but we hope through our trainings and forums we can encourage more local officials to work together with citizens in their communities in solving disputes.”



Local officials and community leaders listen to and note citizen complaints at an ACT organized public forum on the environmental problems caused by the Bokor Rice Flour plant

Mr. Pan Vutha, a village chief in Praek Tnoat commune, credited the efforts of ACT conflict resolution training in helping him and other local officials build trust and dialogue with local residents, and help them better serve their communities. He also expressed his optimism regarding the long-term positive impacts of the ACT organized trainings for his Praek Tnoat community. “After I attended the trainings with ACT, I gained a lot of knowledge and skills that helped me better able to serve my community, said Mr. Vutha. “The ACT training course has helped me develop good relationships with other members of our peace network of community members. Because of the trainings we are learning to work together, we are beginning to deal with the problems from the factory that are affecting the health of the people. My thanks to ACT for providing this training course in dealing with conflict and I am happy to continue working with our network team to engage more actively with our citizens in conflict solving and bringing good to the community.”