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Collective action and social learning in integrated resource systems: Evidence from inland fisheries in Cambodia

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Abstract

In rural Cambodia, inland freshwater and rice field fisheries are key sources of income, animal protein, and other important ecosystem services in the area. Community Fish Refuges (CFRs) which are conservation areas in community-owned fish ponds, seem to be a promising path to not only sustain fish stocks, aquatic biodiversity and secure water for agriculture and husbandry but to simultaneously strengthen collective management. However, not all processes that are successful in ecological terms perform equally well in social terms. To explore how CFRs can promote social and ecological change, we investigated two CFRs that were established in 2016 by local and international NGOs, as well as authorities of the Kampong Thom Province. Our aim is to identify the extent to which those CFR projects support the formation of collective management and facilitate social learning processes. To do so, a qualitative case study was conducted from March to May 2023 in two CFR locations in the Kampong Thom Province of Cambodia. The cases show similar ecological features but show different results in management terms according to the local implementing NGO. Semi-structured interviews (n=103) were conducted with different local actors connected to the resource. Noting that CFR management is vested in a few elite actors with very limited active participation and agency of other resource users, we conclude that possibilities for collective action and social learning are limited. Power centralisation, surveillance and remains of historical patron-client relationships contribute to configurations in which village and resource management are marked by strong vertical structures of authority.

Keywords: Cambodia, collective action, qualitative research, social learning