

2014 Global Intern report: Equitable Cambodia

By Chandni Dhingra

Living in Cambodia is an adventure that is almost impossible to describe to those who haven't experienced it. Cambodia is a strangely contradictory place; chaotic yet peaceful, colourful yet black-and-white, slow yet fast, complicated yet simple and misleading yet honest. It is a country that touches all of your senses every time you wake up, and in every way that it is intense, it is also cathartic. Living in Cambodia was a whirlwind experience, and I am continuing to learn from and cherish my time there.

Of all of the places I was lucky enough to visit, my Cambodian home, Phnom Penh, was by far the most intricate and the most chaotic. Phnom Penh is an interesting mixture of cultures that exist almost in parallel; the traditional families, the more westernised youth, and the expat community all coexist quite happily. I spent time bicycling/ motor-biking through this vibrant city surrounded by artists, monks, fish-mongers, passionate community representatives, controversial businessmen, hoards of children and of course the wonderful team at Equitable Cambodia (EC).

Working with the Development Watch team at EC was definitely a highlight of my time in Cambodia. EC is an advocacy-based NGO that is a leading defender of land and housing rights for communities across the country. I was primarily involved in two cases in my time at EC. The first was in relation to the sugar industry in Cambodia. This particular issue began with the European Union's 'Everything But Arms' trade initiative (EBA). With this initiative, all imports from the least developed countries do not incur taxes in the EU, and are further sold at a guaranteed minimum price to ensure a certain profit margin. The aim of the initiative, as I understand it, was to ensure that the economies of the least-developed countries were receiving consistent economic stimulation. Unfortunately this backfired in Cambodia whereupon the government seized this opportunity to exploit one of their major resources... sugar.

Shortly after the EBA initiative was put in to place, the Cambodian government declared large areas as public land, allowing sugar companies access to it. However, this land was inhabited by thousands of villages and communities who then lost their land, crops, homes, schools and more to unannounced bulldozers. These families were offered little or no compensation. Some were relocated to areas with inadequate land to farm or allow livestock to graze, and no access to clean water or schools. Families suffered from loss of livelihoods, education opportunities, and often incurred large amounts of debt at inflated interest rates. Many community members were then forced to work on the unsafe sugar plantations that had replaced their homes in order to earn money to feed the families they previously fed on their own home-grown food.

I was involved in many aspects of this case, including research into the child-labour taking place in the plantation, the worrying work conditions and the specific impact upon women. I was able to gain field experience by accompanying Monsieur Patrice Tirolien, member of the European Parliament from Guadeloupe, in to rural villages. This allowed a first hand insight in to the devastating impacts these land grabs had on the communities.

Of particular excitement was the exposure of ANZ's involvement in supporting the activities of the Phnom Penh Sugar Company.



Chandni on the ground in Cambodia

This scandal surfaced in my first week at EC and I was thrown into meetings with banks, the EU, UN, government representatives, communities, and multitudes of NGOs I participated in, problem-solving think tanks and observed an attempted negotiation with the Phnom Penh Sugar Company to resolve the matter. All of these experiences taught me a great deal about people in general and the way different societies and groups of people tend to react and negotiate in instances of conflict.

The second case I was involved in concerned similar land-grab issues related to the rubber industry, but also concerned the more complex needs of the indigenous communities in north-eastern Cambodia. The rubber case was unrelated to the EBA, but concerned a number of foreign companies and banks in a complex chain of liability for the losses of the communities. I was able to assist in presentations at NGO forums, the compilation of research, innumerable meetings with the banks involved, and a submission to the Compliance Advisor Ombudsman (CAO): a conflict assessment and dispute resolution mechanism of the International Finance Corporation (IFC), a branch of the World Bank.

I was also extremely fortunate to be able to accompany EC's Development Watch team into some rural indigenous villages in the Ratanakiri province to do some field research for this case. After getting lost in forests and along dirt-roads to nowhere, I found myself observing women's discussion groups, family interviews and community mapping activities. I bathed in moonlit rivers and slept on the floor of the village chief's house with his litter of kittens whilst the radio blared propaganda supporting the Cambodian People's Party to the village. It was certainly an unforgettable experience.