

Geographies of Evasion

The Development Industry and Property Rights
Interventions in Early 21st Century Cambodia

by

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Akademisk avhandling som med vederbörligt tillstånd av Handelshögskolans fakultetsnämnd vid Göteborgs Universitet för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen framläggs till offentlig granskning fredagen den 11 juni 2010, kl. 13.15, CG-Salen.
Handelshögskolan, Vasagatan 1, Göteborg,

ABSTRACT

Robin Biddulph: *Geographies of Evasion. The Development Industry and Property Rights Interventions in Early 21st Century Cambodia*. 2010. Publications edited by the Departments of Geography, University of Gothenburg, Series B, no. 117. 288 pages. Department of Human and Economic Geography, University of Gothenburg, Gothenburg. ISBN 91-86472-63-1.

This study is an enquiry into the relationship between development industry interventions in rural areas and the lives and livelihoods of the people they are proposed to benefit.

The study has two main departure points. One is the author's own experiences of the development industry in rural Cambodia, where interventions rarely have more than a marginal impact on people's lives and livelihoods. The other is the way in which landmark studies of rural development projects featured misrepresentation of rural lives and livelihoods as central to their analysis of the failure of those projects.

Early 21st Century development policy tends to focus on institutional change rather than project implementation, and property rights are often to the fore. By focusing on property rights interventions in Cambodia this study enables reflection on whether the patterns of misrepresentation evident three decades ago in project style interventions persist in contemporary institutionally oriented interventions.

The study is framed as a critical geography of development intervention. In that respect it first attends to the spatial distribution of interventions in relation to the spatial distribution of key political economy phenomena they seek to address; it secondly employs contextualised studies of place in order to subject the generalising claims of theory and policy to critical analysis; thirdly, it employs a conceptualisation of development interventions as journeys, opening to scrutiny the interests and discourses that channel and filter them *en route* to implementation.

The thesis includes three cases. A national case study of Cambodia examines the spatial distribution and causes of tenure insecurity and maps onto this the spatial distributions of systematic land titling and community forestry interventions. Two village case studies, one in a rice-field landscape and the other in a forest landscape, examine villagers' livelihoods, the political economies that shape them, and the effects of systematic land titling and community forestry interventions in the villages.

Misrepresentation was still found to be central to development practice: the livelihoods depicted in policy rhetoric and project documentation bore little resemblance to the livelihoods in the case study villages. Interventions were, furthermore, located away from the main problems which they were stated to address. Community forestry was implemented in places where the forest could no longer sustain livelihoods because it had been logged; land titling was implemented in places where tenure was already secure. These findings are explained as a 'geography of evasion' and discussed as a form of development industry overreach. It is concluded that there may be little point in the development industry trying to extend rights to places where national governments are not prepared to enforce those rights. The implications of this finding for future policymaking and research are discussed.

Keywords: Development geography; property rights interventions; land titling; community forestry; development industry; Cambodia

ISSN 0346-6663
ISBN 91-86472-63-1

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Printed by Geson
Göteborg 2010

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