

Promoting Cambodia's Environment and Economy

By: Mr. Chanprathna Leng*

Six months ago I read *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* by Jared Diamond. It explains how past civilizations peaked and collapsed. The illustration of the book deeply touched my heart as it clearly showed how past societies collapsed. Societies depend on their natural resources and environment and those that failed to manage their environmental changes collapsed.¹ I learned that sustainable development depends heavily on how humans respond to environmental changes.

Cambodia, one of the least developed countries, is highly in need of economic and environmental management. Even though the number of people living under the poverty line of US\$1 per day was reduced from 47% in 1994 to 35% in 2004, it is still high.² I love and want to help this country. To my understanding, there are a number of challenges to overcome, including problems with a poor education system, law enforcement, political will and democracy, and environmental understanding and protection. I want future generations to not have to suffer from what I have already suffered and so I will take this opportunity to contribute ideas that could help to build Cambodia's economy and environment.

Cambodia's forestry management appears to be the priority problem to be resolved. Cambodia experienced both twenty years of war and the worst genocide in the 20th century between 1970 and 1990.³ The consequences have been tremendous! Reports show that 73% of the country was covered by forest in 1965. Current reports show that less than 60% of the country is now covered by forest and it continues to decline.⁴ The loss of trees was likely caused by fighting parties that cut the trees in exchange for weapons, as well as illegal logging.

Forest is extremely important for our lives and living standards. Forests are home to a variety of wildlife. If forests could be properly managed, there would be abundant wildlife. We could use the surplus of wildlife as a protein supply for humans without affecting the environment. Forests are also watersheds that supply water to agriculture while protecting fertilized soil from erosion. In that regard, forests make our water supply cheaper. Forests also supply wood. Better managed forests bring a surplus of forest for humans to use, which promotes standards of living (footnote 1).

If forests are important for the economy, how can we restore them? There are a number of options. The priority action is to stop illegal logging, which is devastating and has resulted in a loss of a lot of taxation money (footnote 1). Illegal loggers do not care about the next generations that also need and want forests. Another option is to replant trees. This is a relatively expensive option, but since Cambodia's environment is also part of the world environment, I believe there are many developed countries that may be willing to help restore its

* Mr. Chanprathna Leng is a citizen of Cambodia. He is a student of the International University of Japan in Niigata, Japan.

¹ Diamond, Jared. 2005. *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.

² The World Bank. 2005. *Cambodia: Halving poverty by 2015? Poverty Assessment 2006*. Available: <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/EASTASIAPACIFICEXT/CAMBODIAEXTN/0,,contentMDK:20815621~pagePK:141137~piPK:141127~theSitePK:293856,00.html>

³ US Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Fact Book: Cambodia*. Available: <https://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/cb.html>

⁴ US Agency for International Development. Mission to Cambodia. *Good Governance - Community Forestry*. Available: http://www.usaid.gov/kh/democracy_and_governance/community_forestry.htm

forests. While we cannot replant on all the usable land, we can do some part of it. At the least, we can build the spirit to protect the forests. Finally, we could selectively log only matured trees. This way the younger trees would have the chance to breed and protect the fertilized soil. This would resolve tree species' extinction (footnote 1).

Water management is another crucial problem for Cambodia. The economy suffers from flood and drought. My mother's concern today is that too much monsoon rain will destroy not only the crops, but also the properties in the capital city, Phnom Penh. An Asian Development Bank (ADB) report showed that floods in 2000 wiped out up to 20% of crops and that a lot of people lost their entire crop. Floods are also a big threat to infrastructure. The 2000 flood destroyed one-third of the total primary roads, over 3,000 bridges, 1,000 schools, and 170 health centers. The Government put the cost of rehabilitation at over US\$100 million.⁵

What are the benefits to fixing the water problem? We can see that it would protect the infrastructure that cost millions of dollar to rehabilitate. It would protect crops and provide the opportunity to increase crop production. Combined with the benefits of effective forest management, we would have surplus protein from the forest as well as protein from agriculture that people could use to exchange for agricultural knowledge, engine advancement and industrialization. Furthermore, the surplus of food would transform people's concentration from food to society and democracy. With plenty of food, they will be able to make better decisions.

So, how could a poor country like Cambodia achieve this extremely expensive proper water management? The Government has to do all it can to build dams; it even has to borrow the money from other countries or development banks. Based on my understanding, water management is the foundation for other development. So, for the next 10 to 20 years, the Government should focus on managing the water to get this under control.

Another crucial problem is a lack of efficiency. When I arrived in Niigata, Japan for school, I was impressed with the streets, cars and my dormitory room. They are small! I learned that efficiency helped to build Japan's economy. In contrast, I see little efficiency in Cambodia. People do not understand the importance of efficiency, so they do not care. Leftover food at restaurants is likely to be thrown away. Surplus vegetation is not preserved. People like to use their personal car or motorcycle rather than public transportation. Used household goods are likely to be thrown away. There are no classes at school to teach students how to live efficiently.

How can efficiency help promote Cambodia economy? There are a number of benefits we can gain from efficiency. Leftover food should be properly kept, so we can eat it at the next meal. This way, we will avoid taking more natural resources from the environment and can save them for those who need them. In addition, surplus vegetation has not been preserved due to the relatively expensive cost of iron and aluminum to make cans. Cambodia, however, grows rubber trees, which could be an alternative to cans for preserving food. It would be costly for the research and initialization processes, but if we don't start doing it now, when do we start? If we start doing it now, we will have abundant methods for preserving food within three decades. Thus, we will have more food for people to access.

Public transportation would definitely reduce the use of energy sources. We spend a lot of money to buy gasoline and other energy sources. By using public transportation, we could use the money we would spend on gas to buy knowledge and industrialization tools.

⁵ ADB. 2000. *Rebuilding Flood-Damaged Infrastructure in Cambodia*. Manila. 22 December. Available: <http://www.adb.org/Documents/News/2000/nr2000169.asp>.

Household goods could be given to people who need them, especially people living in the countryside. Part of the benefit is that the people who received them would say “thank you” and “you are kind.” The main benefit is that manufacturers would not have to make it for them. Production has negative effects on the environment such as byproducts that are poisonous to marine life, which are a food source (footnote 1). Another negative effect is the spread of carbon dioxide that is warming up the globe (footnote 1). More polar ice will melt and we will have more rain, which means more floods in Cambodia and higher sea levels, which mean another big challenge for below-the-sea-level countries like the Netherlands and Bangladesh. By practicing efficiency, we could avoid all these costly affects.

Is it possible for Cambodia to hasten the adoption of an efficient lifestyle? It is pretty challenging for a poorly-educated country like Cambodia to quickly adopt an efficient lifestyle. It is costly to achieve because the majority of people do not understand it. If the more educated people help, however, I believe we can achieve it with moderate speed. More educated people and powerful leaders should be able to understand the effects of an efficient lifestyle and spread it through their works and living. By showing that they care about efficiency, I believe other people will observe them and also think about it. Once people understand and value it, we could all work together to build an efficient society.

Industrialization is another threat to the environment. Even though Cambodia’s industries are small-sized textile, cement productions, coal refineries, etc., they are careless about industrial pollutants. Certain industries like cement production are a big threat to rivers and lakes (footnote 1). Without proper management, byproducts from cement production flow into the rivers and lakes and develop into acid that kills marine life. Air pollution is another threat for our crops (footnote 1). Heavy air pollution brings acid rain that kills the crops.

Why should we take the time to manage small-size industries? We should not wait until it is too late to fix the problem. Carelessly managed byproducts of certain industries such as cement production heavily affect our rivers and lakes. Every time it rains, the byproducts are transformed into acid that flows into the rivers and lakes. This lasts for decades or hundreds of years (footnote 1). It is a disaster for marine life. So, we should act early to protect it.

How can Cambodia protect itself from industrial pollution? At this point, only the political will can provide a rescue from industrial pollution. The Government should not only promote industrialization, but also take leadership in protecting the environment. Our environment is very valuable for economic development and future growth.

Cambodia also needs to address education on the environment and the economy. The education system in Cambodia is poor. Children and adults who live in cities have the chance for educational success, but only 10% of the population lives in the cities.⁶ The rest of the population lacks education.

Is education truly helpful for our environmental and economic development? Education transfers knowledge to people. Once they understand their environment and the economy, they can take care of themselves. For instance, they could form their own local associations to discuss local environmental issues and impacts. They together could form a big voice that could influence the political leaders to help them solve their problems. When such local associations

⁶ ADB. 2006. *A Fact Sheet: Cambodia and ADB*. Manila. 31 July. Available: http://www.adb.org/Documents/Fact_Sheets/CAM.asp

are formed throughout the country, they can succeed in protecting our environment and sustaining our economic development.

How can we educate the people countrywide? The Ministry of Environment should be able to raise funds from international donors to educate the people. Cambodia's environment is also part of the world's environment, and I believe many developed countries would want to help a developing country like Cambodia. Knowledge can also be spread by popular people and leaders. We should show that we care about the environment. We are living together in the same planet. If any part of our planet's environment is threatened, we all suffer. People have the capacity to observe and think. So, when more people understand the importance of the environment, we are more likely to succeed in protecting it while also building our economy.

In conclusion, there are many priority problems that need to be addressed to develop Cambodia's environment and economy. We need to build effective forestry and water management systems. We need to adopt efficient lifestyles and effectively manage industrialization. Finally, we need to educate our people on sustainable environment and the economy. If we do not start doing it now, then when will we start?