



# Focusing on Livelihoods

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The Tonle Sap ecosystem is (i) the main source of animal protein for much of the population of Cambodia, owing to the productive fisheries of the Tonle Sap Lake, (ii) a direct and irreplaceable source of livelihoods for more than one million people living on and around the Tonle Sap Lake, (iii) a seasonal breeding and nursery ground and forage area for fish that subsequently migrate to the Mekong River, and (iv) an environmental hotspot of global significance. The Tonle Sap basin is also a reservoir from which water drains, in the dry season, to control salinity intrusion and conserve mangrove in the Mekong delta.

However, high population growth is increasing the number of people to feed and consumptive use of the Tonle Sap basin's resources is intense. Threats to the Tonle Sap Lake include over-exploitation of fisheries and wildlife resources and dry season encroachment and land clearance of the flooded forest. In the watersheds, degradation of natural vegetation is destroying habitats and also results in a deterioration of water and soil quality and increased siltation rates. And so, despite the inherent richness of the lake, most indicators of poverty in the basin are even more negative than those that characterize the national population as a whole.

What is being done? In 1993, a Royal Decree designated the lake as a multiple-use protected area. In 1997, the lake was also nominated as a biosphere reserve. Most notably, in 2000, a Prime Ministerial decree released 56% of the former fishing lot area to communities. In conjunction with local authorities, they are to manage fisheries sustainably. More recently still, in late 2002, ADB approved the Tonle Sap Environmental Management Project. That project aims to enhance systems and develop the capacity for (i) natural resource management coordination and planning, (ii) community-based natural resource management, and (iii) biodiversity conservation in the Tonle Sap biosphere reserve.

The Tonle Sap Environmental Management Project focused ADB's attention on the Tonle Sap basin and led, in 2003, to the formulation of a Tonle Sap basin strategy. The objectives are to foster, promote, and facilitate (i) pro-poor, sustainable economic growth, (ii) access to assets, and (iii) management of natural resources and the environment. The strategy is based on three principles: they are (i) sustainable livelihoods, (ii) social justice, and (iii) a basin-wide approach. It focuses on two core areas, namely, (i) rural development and the environment, and (ii) human development. The strategy is expected to concentrate about 40% of ADB's operations in Cambodia. This concentration could—in fact does—catalyze other bilateral and multilateral assistance in the basin.

This is the context of the technical assistance: it is an integral part of the suite of loan and technical assistance projects, known as the Tonle Sap Initiative, that will execute the Tonle Sap basin strategy. More purposely still, it is intended that its output will be a feasibility study that builds on the community organization component of the Tonle Sap Environmental Management Project, covering the five provinces that adjoin the Tonle Sap.

How so? Admittedly, understanding of what can be done to help the rural poor is still disappointingly low. But, we hope that the livelihoods approach will provide a better way of thinking about the objectives, scope, and priorities for development. Thus, the challenge will be for the proposed ensuing project to really make a difference to poor peoples' lives. If the livelihoods approach serves us well, it may perhaps be used to prepare other ADB-assisted projects in the Tonle Sap basin, e.g., Tonle Sap Lowland Stabilization and Tonle Sap Watershed Management. This opens up quite tantalizing prospects. But let us not overreach ourselves. We will hear, today, how Agrisystems Ltd. and its consortium will rise to the first challenge.