

Suspend Development Projects Destroying the Tompoun/Cheung Ek Wetlands

New report reveals human rights abuses and environmental devastation as private developments threaten to flood Phnom Penh

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Cambodian League for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights (LICADHO), Cambodian Youth Network (CYN), Equitable Cambodia (EC), Sahmakum Teang Tnaut (STT)

More than one million people across Phnom Penh are facing the risk of increased flooding and over one thousand more families are at risk of evictions, loss of income and food insecurity as the ING City project and other unsustainable developments destroy the Tompoun/Cheung Ek wetlands in the capital's south.

The research report, [*Smoke on the Water: A human rights and social impact assessment of the destruction of the Tompoun/Cheung Ek wetlands*](#), has found that millions of Cambodians will likely be affected by the destruction of the Tompoun/Cheung Ek wetlands by ING Holdings and other private corporations including Chip Mong, AEON Mall, Orkide Villa, and Borey Peng Huoth. Human rights and environmental groups surveyed 469 families living in or using the wetlands area and its rivers. The resulting report sheds light on the potentially devastating impacts of destroying 1,500 hectares of wetlands that sustain local communities and play a vital role in Phnom Penh's waste management and flood prevention.

"I think it must affect the poor people who grow vegetables and fish on the lake as we depend on the lake for our daily living." – Community member from wetlands, May, 2020

Without these wetlands, more than a million people in Phnom Penh will endure increased flooding. For communities downstream, the rampant private developments will result in widespread loss of livelihoods and could see more than one thousand families forced out of their homes. Large swathes of the wetlands that were previously public property, or met the criteria to be considered public property, have now been allocated to development groups because of Governmental decrees between 2017 and 2019. As a result, what was once at least 1,500 hectares of wetlands is now slated to be reduced to a mere 107 hectares in size. These wetlands serve two vital public services: alleviating flooding from Phnom Penh by storing all the city's rainwater, and partly treating the city's wastewater before it reaches fish stocks in the Bassac River. The Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA) has planned to provide an expensive wastewater treatment plant that will treat less than 2% of the wastewater currently entering the wetlands on a daily basis.

Human Rights

Fundamental human rights such as the rights to adequate housing, social security, work, food, education, participation in social affairs, water and health are all under threat due to the ING City project and other developments on the wetlands. Flooding and loss of livelihoods are already widely reported across the communities surveyed. Many families reported that their primary income was based on planting crops on the wetlands, or by fishing in the area, which they will not be able to do once the wetlands are destroyed. Additionally, the right to adequate

housing may be compromised as eviction is a very real possibility for the hundreds of households without land titles. Many of these families are suffering from widespread indebtedness, lack of access to the ID Poor program and an almost complete lack of community consultation by the private companies leading the development.

“The Government has the responsibility to ensure that it protects the people from human rights abuses. This report is designed to highlight the risks so that the Government can take action where appropriate now.” – Soeung Saran (STT)

Environmental degradation

Over 90% of the wetlands will be destroyed and the Bassac and Mekong rivers polluted because of these developments. Aquatic crops planted on the lake surface currently treat the capital's wastewater before it exits the wetlands into the Bassac River. Should the wetlands be lost, wastewater will either enter the Bassac River, the Mekong River, or both, untreated, posing serious risks to fish populations and communities that depend on the river for water and food. The wetlands are home to a host of wildlife, including several threatened species. The destruction of these wetlands will put these animals, and the broader biodiversity of this area, at serious risk.

“Fish may die, birds may die, and this will of course affect other animals and humans. It is not clear what mitigations are in place to protect against this unrepairable environmental damage. Gov't needs to ensure the laws are respected and strong environmental and social safeguards are in place. More research and public participation is required for projects like this as it will affect millions of citizen and the future of the Phnom Penh City” - Eang Vuthy (EC)

The report also finds that much of the sand used to infill the wetlands area is being dredged from the Mekong and Bassac rivers. The amount of sand required to fill in the wetlands is estimated conservatively to be 77,000,000m³, or more than 100 million tonnes. Sand dredging from the nearby rivers poses a significant risk to the environment and local populations living nearby.

Please see the websites of LICADHO, CYN, EC and STT for the full research report.

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