Sites of Practice: Negotiating Sustainability and Livelihoods in Rural Cambodia
Sites of Practice: Negotiating Sustainability and Livelihoods in Rural Cambodia

Submitted by Emma Wynne Whittingham
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Abstract

In literature and popular discourse sustainable development debates have a habit of polarizing around conflicting understandings. On the one hand sustainable development is interpreted as an extension of dominant neoliberal agendas, on the other it is constructed as an alternative to the mainstream. This thesis works through these positions, to argue for an understanding of sustainable development in the spaces between; where hegemony and counterhegemony slip and slide, collide, disrupt and confuse. It is a thesis about the entanglements of sustainable development policy; a study in which I contend that sustainable development is best understood through the multiple sites of practice where policy is enacted. Drawing upon notions of messiness and bringing together actor-orientated sociology and livelihoods approaches, I explore sustainable development as it is negotiated through networks of actors and livelihoods in rural Cambodia.

Specifically, I present a study of two projects implementing community fisheries as an instrument of sustainable development policy in two remote provinces of Cambodia. It is a study about the different actors responsible for implementing each project, as well as the life worlds of rural villagers affected by them. Through an in-depth analysis grounded in the diverse realities of people in particular places, I uncover the struggles through which sustainable development is negotiated. I expose a policy interpreted through multiple, overlapping simplifications and assumptions and uncover how these are simultaneously produced, recirculated, contested and transformed in practice. Significantly, I highlight the destabilising consequences of a policy which attempts to legislate away diversity or difference. Thus, I reveal the possibility of alternative realities finding expression through spaces otherwise characterised by domination.
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