

Economics, Environment and Local Communities: Speaking out for the Voiceless

Local Communities' Rights

There are few economic analyses of environmental policy options in Cambodia, and still fewer academically rigorous studies. Economic analysis is usually concerned with the welfare of society as a whole rather than that of particular interest groups. In the context of fast economic growth based on unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, the EEPSEA studies have showed that some stakeholder groups will gain from development options (e.g. loggers, powerful business interests etc.) while others would gain more from conservation (e.g. local communities, downstream farmers etc.). Protecting Ream National Park would have benefited local fishers and farmers, but developing it into a luxury golf resort benefits loggers and realtors. In the case of Angkor Wat, there has been a long standing focus on tourism development, with less effort being put into the social and economic development of local communities. A World Heritage Site and international tourist attraction, Siem Reap is still one of the poorest provinces in Cambodia. Both studies focused on local people, and how development and environmental policies could afflict or improve their livelihoods.



Traditional shrimp fishing, difficult but sustainable!

Can we make a difference?

The most powerful and best connected stakeholder groups will have the final say in a decision to protect or develop, and will get the lion's share of the associated benefits of the chosen policy option. We are academics/researchers, we were not elected to office to make the decisions. I am not sure our role is even to recommend Option A over B. I see it more as making sure every stakeholder group is aware of the consequences of each policy option. Gathering data, that has been heretofore missing, critically analysing the evidence, and most importantly presenting and publishing the findings is what we ought to aim for. Donors like to think, or make people think, that they can make a difference. But at the end of the day, the difference can be made only by people in the countries where we live. Thus, by doing rigorous research, we participate, in our little way, in improving the understanding that people may have about environment and development links.

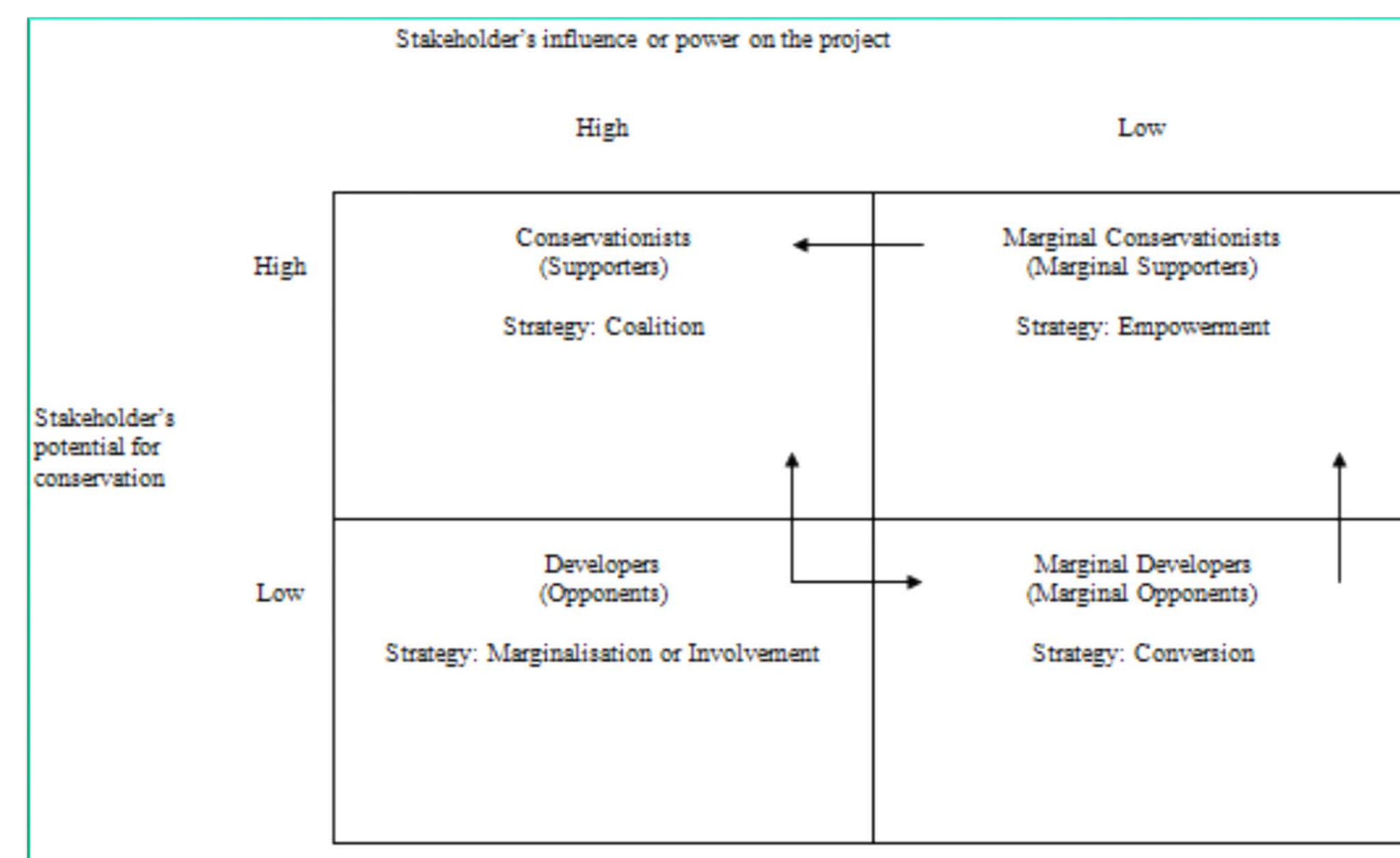
The focus of park management has so far been on accommodating the needs of visitors, complemented by a traditional "fines and fences" approach for local people.

The settlements of Angkor are characterised by high levels of poverty and under development

Only a minority of local households have benefited from tourism (essentially souvenir vending)

There are opportunities for managing Angkor with the participation and support of local people. High levels of social capital facilitate community management.

Opportunities for community management at Angkor



Stakeholder management for conservation projects



Wastepickers at Angkor Wat

Researcher's Burden

It can be easy to forget what we're here for and what our job as development academics and practitioners is or should be. Is it to entertain some donors flights of fancy to endless climate change negotiations, to multitudes of country missions, countless rounds of awareness raising campaigns and capacity building exercises? Or is it simply put to try and help people less fortunate? Our role as applied researchers is not always straightforward nor clear cut. We aim for rigorous impartial studies, yet we hope that we can inform policy makers and donors through our proverbial "policy recommendations". Thus, we take side, we take the side of rationality and fairness, and in our modest capacity, we speak out for the poor, for the voiceless, for those falling victims of pollution, deforestation and environmental degradation.