



YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL CAMBODIAN POLITICS

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ABSTRACT

Youth participation in local politics remains understudied in the Cambodian context, in particular the catalysts for and barriers to youth political engagement. This study hence aims to address youth engagement in local politics from the perspective of both young and older leaders. Drawing on in-depth interviews with local leaders across four provinces, along with quantitative evidence from a 2018 survey of political attitudes and participation, migration and lack of incentives are found to be the key factors preventing youth from local involvement. Some key internal and external factors were also identified to be catalysts for them to engage in politics, such as the desire to help communities and the role of local institutions in encouraging political participation. The barriers include challenging work tasks and lack of incentive, lack of support and respect and being afraid of speaking in meetings. Based on these findings, three key recommendations on how to advance youth participation in local politics are addressed including creating a supportive environment to ensure youths' voices are being heard, promoting more youth in local development activities through various channels, and providing more support, incentives and budget to commune councils to attract more youth and citizens to join local development activities.

KEYWORDS

Youth participation, local politics, motivation, barriers

Background

Youth political participation is integral to the development of a robust civil society and political system, both through the effect on the individual participant and on the community. At an individual level, participation in political activities is understood to encourage youth “to develop their identity within a community context, not as a self-enclosed individual achievement, but rather as a social identification that transcends a given moment in time” (Youniss et al. 2002, 132). As a result, active youth often develop a keen sense of social commitment and awareness of inequities that can facilitate future collective action around political goals (Martínez, Peñaloza, and Valenzuela 2012). Furthermore, by exposing young people to a diverse array of actors, opportunities and values, political engagement in youth can catalyse life-long political engagement and serve as a strong predictor of someone who might run for office (Hooghe, Stolle, and Stouthuysen 2004).

Youth, or those who are between 15-30 years of age (National Policy on Youth Development 2011), are particularly important in shaping political, economic and social development in Cambodia, where 20 percent of the total population is between 15-24 years old and nearly 67 percent of the population is under 30 years old (UNFPA 2016). With such a preponderance of young people, Cambodia boasts the highest proportion of youth among ASEAN countries. Nonetheless, political engagement among youth in Cambodia continues to fall short, with young people infrequently represented in formal institutions of power and less inclined than their older counterparts to vote in elections. What factors contribute to youth disengagement from politics, and under what circumstances do youth in Cambodia participate in local political affairs?

This study considers youth engagement in local politics from the perspective of both young and older leaders. Drawing on a nationally representative survey about political engagement, we begin by analysing the extent of youth participation in recent commune elections and in local development activities; we find a clear pattern of depressed engagement in local affairs for youth in comparison to their older counterparts. To better understand the effects of youth disengagement on the ground, we look to the experiences of commune and village leaders with youth participation in their locality, with nearly all reporting difficulty in engaging youth in local issues. Finally, recognising the problem of disengagement, we consider what factors enable youth to improve their involvement and amplify their voices in local affairs. Drawing on in-depth interviews with nine young leaders across four provinces, along with quantitative evidence from a 2018 survey of political attitudes and participation, we identify the primary catalysts for and barriers to youth political engagement in Cambodia. We conclude with brief recommendations on how to advance youth participation in local politics.

Methodology

Youth participation in local politics remains understudied in the Cambodian context. For example, the studies of Bong and Sen (2017) and Yang, So, and Leang (2020) only look at the degree of Cambodian youth political engagement but do not specify the catalysts for and barriers to youth political engagement in Cambodia. Due to the fact that recent studies have not documented much about the above-mentioned topic, this study therefore draws on two different data sources:

- CDRI's 2018 survey "Cambodia's Young and Older Generation: Views on Generational Relations and Key Social and Political Issue"

In this survey, CDRI spoke with 1,600 respondents in six provinces from October 2017 to January 2018. Of the 1,600 total respondents, 24.9 percent are youth between 16-30 and 61.5 percent are female. We reference this survey to understand the extent to which both youth and adults participate in local political and development activities.

- CDRI's "Local Leadership Study in 2021"

Nine key informant interviews with youth and 20 key informant interviews with local leaders were conducted in 2020 and 2021 in four different provinces to understand local leaders' experience with youth engagement and the motivations for and barriers to participation among politically active youth.

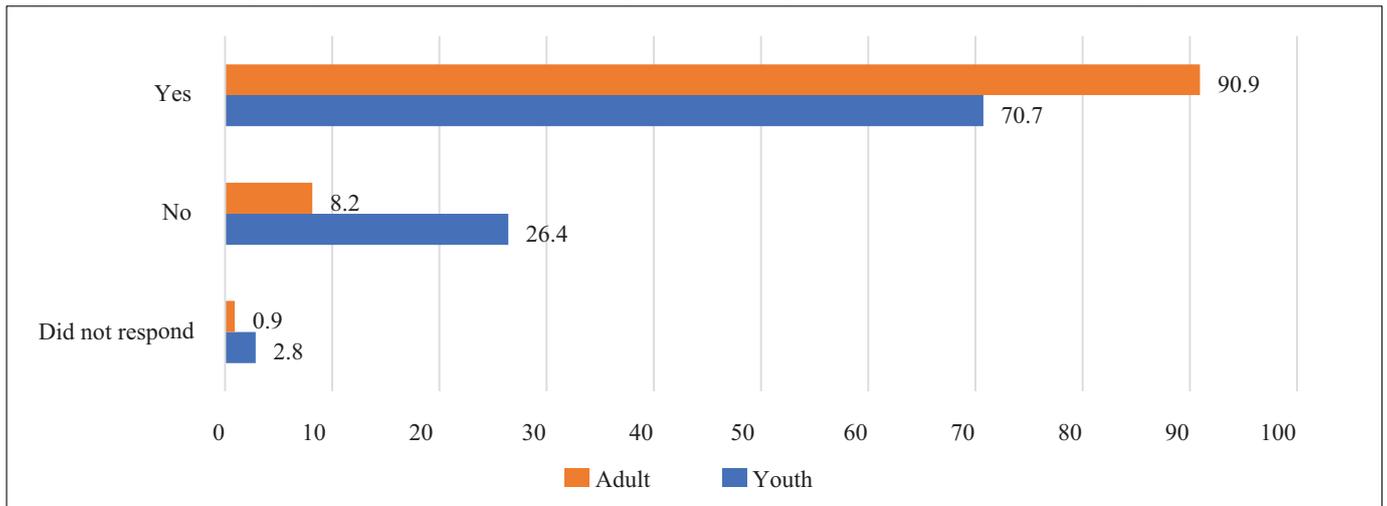
Findings and Discussions

1. Youth political participation in the recent commune election

1.1 Voting

The 2018 survey conducted by CDRI found that youth turnout in the 2017 commune, or sangkat, election was quite high compared to other countries, with over 70 percent of the 352 respondents 18-30 years of age reporting having voted (Netra et al 2019). This finding suggests youth are still thinking about local politics, as many of them went to vote and choose their leaders. However, youth turnout lags significantly behind turnout among adults 31 and older, as shown in Figure 1, with nearly 91 percent of the 1,202 surveyed adults indicating that they voted in the 2017 election. For youth who did not go to vote, 43 percent said that they were too busy to vote, 31 percent reported lacking the necessary identification documents to vote, 12 percent said that they did not have enough information about voting and 13 percent reported being too young to vote at the time of the election. These reasons are consistent with the findings by Bong and Sen (2017), who found lack of registration or identification to be among the major reasons youth decide not to vote, along with being too young. Despite the difference in turnout among adults and youth, Yang, So and Leang (2020) found little difference between youth and older adults in knowledge of their right to vote. More than 95 percent of youth thought their votes could have an impact on the future of Cambodia, as well as believing they have an obligation to vote.

Figure 1: Percentage of youth and adults who reported voting in the 2017 commune/sangkat election



1.2 Youth participation in local development

Respondents were also asked whether they have participated in any local meetings and other development activities. Youth in general tend not to join any meetings at the local level compared to their adult counterparts. About 60 percent of youth and 80 percent of adults have attended at least one meeting at the local level. As seen in Figures 2 and 3, a lower percentage of youth have joined and asked questions in each meeting compared to adults, except in school meetings. In contrast, commune meetings and public forums seem to not be common platforms for youth to join. This reflects that youth are willing to participate in the issues that are more relevant to them. The reported lack of youth presence in local meetings is frequently mentioned by older leaders.

“They never really join the meetings in the village or commune. The meetings are usually only comprised of older people,” said one active male village leader in province C who was interviewed on 16 January 2021.

“There are few numbers of youths joining the village meetings. Most of participants are typically old,” complained a female committee member from another village in province C who was also interviewed on 16 January 2021.

2. Local leaders’ understanding about youth participation in their locality

The findings above suggest that youth are generally less engaged in local politics and development than their older counterparts. To understand why the percentage of youth engagement is so low, we conducted in-depth interviews with local leaders to understand more about the trend of youth participation in their

Figure 2: Percentage of youth and adult engagement in local events

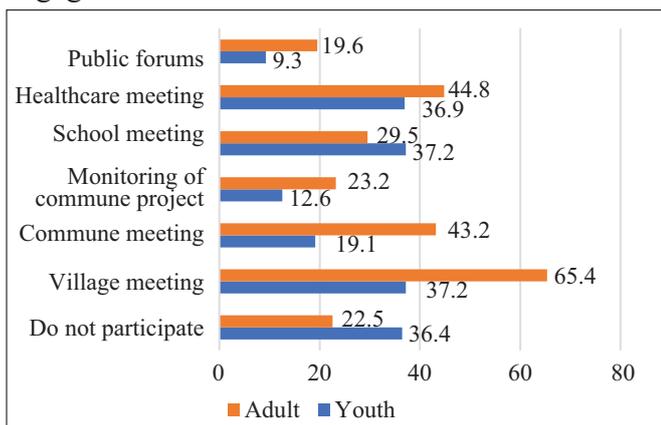
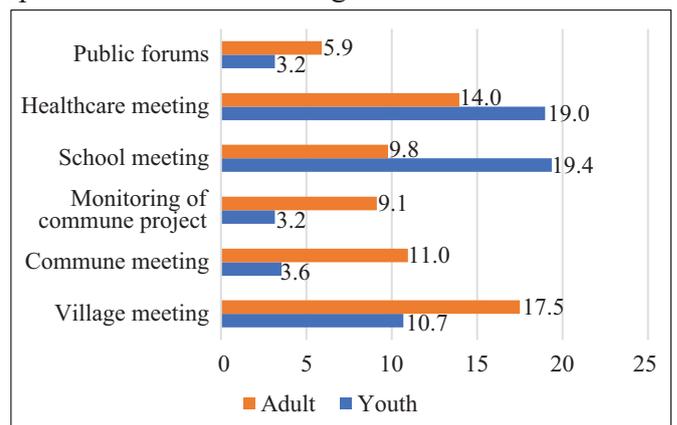


Figure 3: Percentage of youth and adults asking questions in local meetings



locality. In general, the experiences of local leaders confirmed that youth are less likely to engage in local development activities and public events in their villages. Local leaders across four studied provinces feel that youth tend not to join politics because they prioritise financial endeavours. Leaders specifically pointed to two key reasons for low youth participation: migration and lack of incentives. We discuss each of these reasons below:

Youth are simply not around at the local level: It is an emerging trend that young people tend to migrate outside their home villages to seek employment and educational opportunities both in urban areas and in other countries. According to UNESCAP (2016), migrants to Phnom Penh are overwhelmingly young, mainly aged 20-34. When a large number of youths are away from their hometowns, it is very difficult to mobilise them in joining any local development activities. Local leaders throughout study areas commonly attributed low youth engagement to migration, with seven of the surveyed leaders mentioning migration when discussing the situation of their villages' young people.

“In commune or village meetings, there is less participation from youth since most of them are moving to the city or some are occupied with work,” said a male deputy village chief in province C, interviewed on 15 January 2021.

“With fewer youth in the village, the majority migrate to Phnom Penh, Thailand and Korea. Those staying in the village are not interested in social work and do not engage in village or commune activities. They tend to focus on business to generate their income. They look for money first,” said a female deputy village chief in province A, interviewed on 28 January 2021.

“They do not really get involved much with the village activities because many of them migrated to work in other countries, such as Thailand and Japan. In meetings, they also do not really give their opinions. If there are matters that need their involvement, I usually go up to their houses and call them to join,” recalled a female deputy committee member in province C, interviewed on 15 January 2021.

Local leaders revealed their concerns on the trend that more young people are migrating and those who stay are not interested in joining any public activities. They considered this trend an obstacle for them in mobilising youth in their development plans.

Lack of incentives: Most projects at the local level prioritise infrastructure, such as roads, canals and irrigation, with little attention afforded to the social aspects of youth development. Thus, limited funding has been allocated to the issues youth are most likely to care about. Despite the fact that youth are required to be integrated into the commune investment plan, commune councils in many cases did not allocate a budget to address the issue of youth mobilisation (Ang and Young 2021). As a result, recorded opinions of youth in joining the commune council and development activities are limited.

“The salary is limited and working with people is difficult and time-consuming. The work doesn't have a Saturday or Sunday,” said a male commune chief in province B, interviewed on 24 December 2020.

“The opportunity is open for youth to engage in politics, but those who have knowledge don't want to work. Then there are those who want to work, but have no education. Village and /or commune work at least requires some reading and writing skills,” said a male deputy village chief in province A, interviewed on 28 January 2021.

Based on the concerns stated above, local leaders raised their experience with young people, reporting they are typically looking at financial incentives but that there is still limited budget allocation for this at a local level. While there are many activities to work on at a local level, yet incentives remain low; young people are not interested and choose other opportunities instead.

3. Primary catalysts for and barriers to youth political engagement in Cambodia

3.1 Motivation factors

Further interviews were conducted with youth who are actively involved in politics, including commune councillors, party members and those who have experienced working with civil society to understand their motivations for engaging in local politics and the barriers they continue to face as young people trying to take on an active role in their community. Both internal and external factors motivate youth to be engaged in local politics, with the former often stemming from a strong desire to help the community and the latter focusing on the role of local institutions, including NGOs, leaders and community organisations in encouraging youth to join politics.

Desire to help communities: A strong desire to help their communities is frequently cited by the active youth as their primary motivation for political engagement. The finding from in-depth interviews is in line with the CDRI survey (2018) reporting that about 90 percent of youth, notably the same proportion as adults, think about their communities and countries. A young commune councillor from province A similarly cites his desire for improving his community as one of the primary motivations in pursuing a leadership role:

“I want my community to be developed. So, I have started working for NGOs and even in the commune council,” said a young man in province A, interviewed on 28 January 2021.

“My primary motivation is doing this for my own community and village. Since people in this village have less interest and knowledge about it... I can provide the children in the village opportunities to be educated and this will benefit them in the long run and develop the village,” an active youth in province B said. He was interviewed on 23 December 2020. “[I want to] help the village and bring development and attract organisations to the village without aiming for and focusing on the profits and money.”

Local young leaders express having a strong desire to be involved in development work. They are thus able to help their communities, and this factor can be a strong determinant pushing youth to join local politics.

Role of local institutions and leaders in encouraging youth in political participation: Local institutions such as NGOs, leaders and community-based organisations are playing a role as enabling factors in encouraging youth to be engaged in local politics. Young people in province B see NGOs as playing an important role in mobilising youth:

“Young people are mobilised with the support of the local organisation, but difficulties have still been encountered, although personal connection and club member registration are the strategic mobilisation methods,” said a female in province B, interviewed on 23 December 2020.

Local leaders also recognise that organisations play a critical role in youth engagement.

“Before there were associations taking charge of youth and women who were responsible for matters with young people and women. But for now, these associations are usually left with small numbers of members because the members prioritise their other work in order to gain more income than the associations’ work,” said a female village committee member in province C, interviewed on 14 January 2021.

Through the role of local organisations and leaders in motivating youth to get involved in local politics, youth consider political engagement at a local level a stepping stone to achieve greater involvement. A commune councillor from province A in his early 30s discusses how his volunteer work served as a gateway to local politics:

“After dropping out of school, I was a farmer to support my family’s livelihood. In 2012, the village chief called me to work with NGOs, as they normally asked him to find people for them. I have volunteered for NGOs since then. Around 2016, the village chief of [...] village called me to stand as a candidate for the commune election because he saw me being active in the village.”

A young female commune councillor in province B similarly cites volunteer work as one of the ways she began to get involved in local issues:

“I only went to school until grade 10. For my survival, I had to work as a factory worker and after that I worked as an intern at World Vision. I have worked from place to place and saw the development of other places that made me want to do social work for my community.”

Based on these statements, local leaders and youth strongly think local institutions are playing a vital role in creating space for youth to step in various public and development activities. Their interests in politics and community work can thus be built through this process.

3.2 Barriers

Barriers preventing youth from being involved in local politics were also identified through in-depth interviews. Three main barriers were raised, such as challenging work tasks and lack of incentive, lack of support and respect and being afraid of speaking in public.

Challenging work tasks and lack of incentive: Commune-related work is known to be complicated, and sometimes people must work with no respect to weekends and nights. To further complicate these challenging work tasks, commune workers get very limited financial support.

“They all think political work is quite tiring, and the private sector is better, more relaxed,” a young commune assistant in province D responded when asked if her friends support her political ambitions. She was interviewed on 17 November 2020. She went on to say that sometimes she considers switching to the private sector. “It is complicated and working with people and solving their problems is never easy, but since I have come a long way, I do not think I will go back to working in companies. I have to try hard.”

The young councillor in province B also remarked on the poor salary for people working in politics:

“During my time as a factory worker, I earned a large salary, but after I returned to work in the village’s office, my salary was less, so that didn’t make me feel valued or motivate me to continue working. I don’t get discouraged though, I am motivated to improve and get promoted.”

The statements above are in line with local leaders’ concern that community work is quite challenging and provides low incentives. This is considered to be a barrier for many young people to join local politics.

Lack of support and respect: In contrast to the local leaders’ understanding about youth political involvement, youth addressed that commune councils are not supportive and seem not to involve them in any planning process. A youth in province B echoes this sentiment, citing one of the reasons for low youth participation in commune affairs as the lack of interest among local leaders in including the youth.

“Youth are rarely involved in any commune planning meetings since youth are seldom invited, or sometimes youth are busy with their works and projects. However, it is important for youth to know about the process of allocating the budget in community development,” said a young man in province B, interviewed on 23 December 2020.

The young commune council assistant in province D sees her age as being a bigger barrier to her efficacy in the community, rather than her gender.

“In terms of being a woman, I do not have any problems, and I feel like women these days work even harder and can handle a lot more work than some men. But as a youth, I often face this problem, especially with the value or respect received. But I would not let these problems bother me and my work so much.”

Being afraid of public speaking: Being fearful of speaking during local meetings was found in the CDRI survey in 2018. The in-depth interviews also extensively noticed this issue. Some are afraid to speak up in public. Being younger than their counterparts is the main reason they are afraid to speak up.

“In commune meetings, young people have less courage to bring suggestions to the commune leaders only until they [commune leaders] talk about it. Because it would cause negative perception from leaders towards youth, especially if they raise the issues about what leaders are implementing or corruption in public or at meetings,” said a male youth in province B, interviewed on 23 December 2020.

“Youth don’t dare to speak up about political issues because they think that politics is risky and think that no one acknowledges their voice due to their young age. For me, I think youth have to raise up their voice in the communities. I think youth should start to be involved in politics and be role models for the next generation,” said a female youth in province D, interviewed on 19 December 2020.

Young people in many cases are still experiencing fear to speak up in public due to their age and interviewed youth themselves raised this as one of the barriers they have encountered.

Conclusions and Recommendations

This study through the CDRI Youth Survey in 2018 documented youth participation in local politics, focusing on their participation in the recent commune election in 2017 and their involvement in local development activities, such as public meetings, public forums and others. We found that a large proportion of young people went to vote in the recent commune election, providing the reasons that they are obliged to vote and hope their votes would have an impact on the future of the country’s direction. In contrast, there is a low participation rate of youth in local events. The in-depth interviews were further conducted to understand local leaders’ perception of this trend concerning youth political engagement in their locality, as well as motivation factors and barriers for youth to be involved in local politics. The findings revealed that migration and lack of incentives are the key factors preventing youth from local involvement. Furthermore, some key internal and external factors were identified to be catalysts for them to engage in politics, such as the desire to help communities and the role of local institutions in encouraging political participation. The barriers include challenging work tasks and lack of incentive, lack of support and respect and being afraid of speaking in meetings. Based on these findings, recommendations on how to advance youth participation in local politics are addressed as below:

- ***Create a supportive environment to ensure youths’ voices are being heard:*** Youth stated their age is a barrier to their work. During meetings, they frequently raised that their older counterparts did not listen to their voices. Thus, it is essential for everyone to change their attitudes and listen to each other.
- ***Promote more youth in local development activities through various channels:*** The results found that voluntary and community work has promoted youth capacity and experience in community work. This would enable them to step into a higher level of political engagement.
- ***Provide more support, incentives and budget to commune councils to attract more youth and citizens to join local development activities:*** Many leaders and youth report there is less budget dedicated to commune councils to engage youth and citizens in local development work. As such, in order to attract more youth and citizens to join in community work, it is essential to ensure that a larger budget and more incentives are allocated and designated for this purpose.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Sida for the funding support that made this study possible. He also thanks Lucy Right for her comments on the earlier draft of this paper. All the views expressed in the paper and errors remained are entirely those of the author.

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