

Conceptualising Accountability: The Cambodian Case

*Horn Vuthy discusses the concept of public sector accountability according to western models and in the context of Cambodian governance practices.**

Government Reform Efforts and Relationship to Accountability

Public sector accountability has moved to the forefront of both the Cambodian government's and the donor community's concerns in recent years, appearing with increasing frequency in government reports, public speeches and donor agendas around good governance, poverty reduction, decentralisation and democratic development. According to theory, accountability is necessary for achieving sustainable services and reducing poverty, and must be embedded in both policy making and implementation. The formulation and implementation of service delivery policies entail both political processes and technical arrangements. The achievement of accountability and the success of pro-poor service provision therefore necessitate practical understandings of technical as well as political processes. Yet, the lack of contextualised understanding of accountability leads to inconsistencies and dubious ownership by the government in formulating and implementing pro-poor service delivery policies. Across all government levels, one finding is consistent: officials mainly interpret accountability based on their work contexts, with little reference, if any, to any documented, standardised meaning of the term (CDRI forthcoming). The need to institute pro-poor accountability mechanisms is even more pronounced in the kind of governance context that exists in Cambodia, which this article describes as *neo-patrimonial* and Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith (2002: 40) define as "a mixed system of government administration, with a rational-legal veneer overlaying a web of personalistic ties characteristic of patrimonial rule".

Understanding accountability requires a balanced analysis that emphasises (a) the relationship between individual actors and (b) the structures and systems which enable and constrain actors and their accountabilities. Agency-focused accountability considers accountability *of whom, to whom* with specific reference *for what*,

* This article is based on the work of CDRI's Accountability Study Project, carried out since mid-2005. For a more detailed discussion of issues raised in this article, see the forthcoming *Critical Literature Review of Accountability and Neo-patrimonialism: Concepts and the Case of Cambodia*. Horn Vuthy is a research associate at CDRI.

which often entails a one-to-one relationship between an individual of lower rank and an individual of higher rank. Yet this essay argues that accountability is more complicated than just two individual actors holding each other responsible for each others' actions. Accountability is also determined by the ways in which the wider governance system (composed of both political and technical activities) affects the behaviour and beliefs of these actors. For example, the belief that administrative problems can be solved much more effectively through personalised connections tends to replicate itself in practice and create a lack of trust in formal bureaucratic functions. In the case of Cambodia, a country with a tradition of patron-client relationships, understanding the ways in which informal negotiations and political networks influence the formal governance structures and relationships is critical for both policy reformers and implementers. In what ways does the existence of the neo-patrimonial system mix formal and informal governance arrangements to affect accountability? This article focuses on this informality by identifying Cambodia's cultural history of patron-client networks and demonstrating how such networks have recently become entangled within a rational-bureaucratic system.

With this approach, the article's aim is two-fold: (i) to increase understanding of accountability and (ii) to assist Cambodian public administrators to enhance their capacity to conceptualise their own role in accountability relationships in government systems and to understand how politics and formal institutions interact to affect public sector accountability.

Cambodian Conceptualisation of Accountability

Although much attention is paid to accountability, several challenges keep rational accountable relationships and systems from forming in Cambodia today. For one, higher level government officials typically have extensive practical knowledge of the challenges associated with Cambodian public sector management, but lack strong conceptual frameworks for systematically analysing and improving them. Second, civil servants and politicians often lack understanding of the distinction between institutional and individual accountability, particularly at the lower levels of government, which can lead to poor public dialogue and sharing of governance principles with citizens as well as poor policy implementation.

Moreover, the term "accountability" is not well operationalised in English and is even more poorly defined when translated into Khmer, since a direct translation does not exist. Accountability is translated as *kanakney-pheap*, a recently invented term¹ which literally translates from the English root words *account* (*kanakney*) and *ability* (*pheap*) to mean *status* or *being*. Put together, the term is understood as status or being of accounts and is most often associated by Cambodian

civil servants with financial accounting. Typically, notions of institutional or individual accountability are neglected, with different groups of public servants holding different interpretations. Both national and sub-national government officials interpret the term through a predominately financial conceptual filter—"transparency, control and compliance", which might be the result of the direct translation of the term as "status of accounts". It might also be due to interactions with donor-based management systems, such as the Seila programme.

Technical Features of Accountability

The technical features of accountability are based on the rational-legal bureaucratic or institutional arrangements that are visible, predictable and formally mandated by rules and regulations (e.g. public health guidelines to improve maternal and child health, criteria for recruitment and promotion) and heavily influenced by liberal governance frameworks and practices promoted by western values and advocated by international aid agencies. For this article, the frameworks range from theoretically evolved traditional public administration, new public management and new institutional economics to more development-focused, donor-driven approaches, such as capable state, decentralisation, political and social accountability, triangle accountability and the horizontal accountability for shared outcomes.²

Each of these frameworks has had a particular influence on Cambodian ways of governing and consequently contributes to the shaping of accountability in governance arrangements. For example, traditional public administration systems (TPA) introduced the ideas of legal-rational bureaucracy in which administrators can be professionally separated from politics (Weber 1965). In terms of accountability, TPA introduced the concepts of "answerability" and "enforcement" (Schedler 1999). The new public management (NPM) framework, on the other hand, focused on "letting managers manage" (Drucker 1954, 1964) by decentralising decision making, enabling managers to choose inputs (albeit within budget constraints) and proceed by whatever means necessary to achieve their objectives (Clark and Newman 1993). The NPM framework views accountability through the lens of principal-agent relationships and considers that accountability is achieved through managerial discretion. Accountability is also influenced by the new institutional economics (NIE) framework. Building on the fundamental neoclassical assumptions of scarcity of resources and the need for competition, NIE incorporates the importance of information, ideas and relevance of "transaction costs", and connects them to production costs and the wider efficiency of markets that promote growth (North 1990). Central to NIE is its special definition of institutions, which are defined to include everyday rules of the game and regulations (especially information) that actors

bring to economic or market exchanges, or transactions (North 1990; World Bank 2002). Efficient institutions reduce transaction costs and promote growth. NIE-styled accountability is based on institutions, markets, information, contracts and choices.

Since the mid-1990s, multilateral and bilateral development agencies have introduced numerous approaches to improve development results in less developed countries. For instance, decentralisation, operating under the principle of "subsidiarity", reasons that functions and the corresponding power and resources to carry out the functions should be assigned to the lowest level of government capable of performing them (Breton et al. 1998). The decentralisation framework seeks to achieve accountability through "bringing government (service providers) closer to people (the beneficiary)", which enables people to actively demand accountability from both their local elected leaders and administrators (Manor 1999: 67). A more recent framework of "triangle accountability" (WB 2004) identifies three important sets of actors: policy makers, frontline service providers and citizens. The triangle accountability approach increases focus on the need to enhance structural integrity, as well as individual performance, to improve institutional accountability. In particular, it views accountability not simply from an *ex post* perspective (after the event), but also from an *ex ante* (before the event) perspective: accountability issues should be relevant before, during and after events take place. Accountable outcomes, according to this framework, are derived from (a) delegation (meaning clear assignments), (b) finance (adequate funding at all levels), (c) performance (of public servants, ministries and other service providers), (d) information about performance and (e) enforceability (WB 2004: 47).

Informal Factors Affecting Accountability

Patron-Client Foundations

Cambodia is a traditional patron-client society, which means that it features a culture founded on social hierarchies built around "instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher social-economic status (patron) uses his influence and resources to provide protection or benefits, or both, for a person of lower status (client) who, for his part, reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services to [the] patron" (Scott 1977: 92). Some characteristics of patron-client relationships include (a) strong hierarchy and unequal reciprocity, with clients forming an entourage around a powerful patron, (b) wealth accumulation by the patrons through control over major resources, (c) affection-based relationships such as kinship and families, (d) solution seeking based on personalised connection to the patrons and (e) the manifestation of cultural and traditional values as factors influencing the nature of the patron-client relationship itself (Weber 1965, 1978; Scott 1977;

Eisenstadt and Roniger 1984; Neher 1981; Hanks 1975).

The patrimonial features present in Cambodia reflect many of the characteristics described above. The strong hierarchy and unequal reciprocity in Cambodia can be equated to the practice of *ksae* and *khmorng*. *Ksae* literally means “rope” or “string” and refers to the string of clients who rely on the protection and support of their *khmorng*, which means literally “back” or, analogously, “patron”. The traditional social orientation of Cambodians toward seeking a *ksae* and a *khmorng* is similar to an observation that the circumstances that promote patron-client relationships were necessitated by the failure of the state or family networks to provide protection to individuals (Scott 1977). The Cambodian cultural and traditional orientations that reinforce patrimonial allegiance include consensus building and avoidance of direct confrontation with individuals of higher class or power. One striking example is the fact that rural villagers consider favouritism neither unfair nor unjust (Ledgerwood and Vijghen 2002). Cambodian state actors, especially civil servants, are faced with multiple accountabilities to the family as well as to the organisation.

The Modern Neo-patrimonial State

Formal institutions are established to serve the public and follow formally mandated accountability, while informal institutions (e.g. political ideologies, cultural norms and values, traditional patron-client networks) may be biased toward private interests, and so assume a less clearly defined accountability. A neo-patrimonial governance system is a mixed one in which traditional patrimonial rules and practices are overlaid with legal-rational institutions (Brinkerhoff and Goldsmith 2002). The neo-patrimonial attributes (i.e. modified traditional patrimonial characteristics) include (a) highly personalised ways of problem solving, (b) wealth concentration among small numbers of elites, (c) blurred separation of public and private domains and (d) the seeming existence of chronic fiscal crisis (Bratton and van de Walle 1994; van de Walle 2001).

Cambodia’s contemporary governance system features a neo-patrimonial political and institutional environment (Rusten *et al.* 2004) in which informal patronage networks significantly penetrate formal institutions, resulting in complex accountability relationships. One Cambodia-specific neo-patrimonial characteristic concerns the regular use of formal institutions for rent seeking. Hughes (2003: 61) points out that the state “has employed the rationale of economic development to free up resources that could then be used to bolster regime legitimacy through the award of gifts and positions to clients which in turn generate the power and opportunity to extract rent”. The personalisation of solutions to public goods problems is evident when poor rural villagers appeal directly to high-ranking officials for help with land-grabbing issues, rather than go through the formal

bureaucratic institutions of the state. The pervasiveness of neo-patrimonialism extends down to the local level, where bureaucrats are negatively impacted because only very limited (or subsistent) resources trickle down, thanks to unequal reciprocity in the relationship. The resources often are shared only to the extent that they ensure the clients get the most basic resources to maintain their loyalty and basic livelihood.

The above discussion concerning the technical and informal aspects of accountability underscores the complexity of the environment in which public administrators function and reformers must operate. To assist public officials and reformers alike to assess this complex governance system, this article proposes a new definition of accountability that is grounded in both normative assumptions and Cambodian contexts.

Conclusion: Redefining Public Sector Accountability for Cambodia

In order to strengthen public sector accountability in Cambodia, public administrators and reformers need to understand normative technical requirements of accountability and the empirical social and political factors that informally affect accountability. Unbalanced attention to these two factors will likely result in “partial” accountability and limited opportunities for achieving sustainable delivery of essential services. The following proposed contextualised definition of accountability is developed to attain the required balance:

- Accountability is a personal, administrative and political value that is found in all systems of government, in both formal and informal, political and administrative forms.
- It involves both relationships between two actors and the mechanisms, rules, and resources to enable the system to function accountably.
- An accountable system that serves the public interest should be Cambodian owned, and reflect Cambodian values.
- Supported by public participation and political responsiveness, the system should build trust in public institutions by exhibiting administrative neutrality and responsibility, protecting the public good³ and supporting the poor.
- An effective, more accountable system will be structured to provide a clear assignment of roles and responsibilities, adequate and predictable resources, horizontal and vertical coordination, transparency, enforcement of the law and incentives for all to perform well.

To sum up, the success of instituting pro-poor accountability to achieve democratic development in Cambodia depends on identifying relevant models and

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