Survey on Commune Capacity and Readiness in Managing Local Development Projects: Preliminary Findings[1]

1. Introduction

A critical aspect of decentralisation reform is to provide a framework for commune/sangkat councils to manage and coordinate development projects and other local initiatives. Analysis of projects funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) from 2009 to 2012 reveals that 77 percent of project implementation is the shared responsibility of sub-national authorities and national government. The ADB Cambodia Country Partnership Strategy 2011–13 mostly focuses on communities in the Tonle Sap Basin (ADB 2009; Tariq 2011).

It follows then that the commune council, a key institution of sub-national government, has been and will continue to be responsible for implementing development projects to improve the livelihoods of local communities within its administrative boundaries. Therefore, a deeper understanding of commune councils' capacity and experience in implementing development projects and initiatives could aid better targeting of grassroots development projects.

This article presents a practical methodology for ranking a commune's capacity to manage and implement local development projects. The term "commune capacity" refers to not only the availability of commune infrastructure and facilities but also to the capacity and performance of commune councillors.

2. Factors for Ranking Commune Capacity

Many studies on decentralisation and deconcentration provide generic knowledge of sub-national government, especially commune councils' administrative procedures, functions, capacities and contributions in relation to democratic governance and development. A number of challenges and strategic responses have also been highlighted in the literature, as outlined below.

Natural resources such as water, fisheries and forests provide critical livelihood and income sources for people in geographical areas like the Tonle Sap Basin. Yet, commune councils' capacity and experience in managing and allocating these natural resources in a sustainable and equitable manner is still limited. Rusten et al. (2004) contend that commune councils lack knowledge and understanding of how natural resources could be managed, while Kim & Henke (2005) report that the protection of natural resources is one of the most critical contemporary challenges that commune councils face. In a more recent study, Vimealea et al. (2009) conclude that commune councils' natural resources management capacity requires strengthening, and that natural resources management at local level should be better linked with central government.

The participatory design of local development projects, including budgeting and planning, is supposed to engender and involve community decision-making. However, planning and budget committees are weak, and it is likely that only a few members are active (Kim & Henke 2005). Limited funding and specific timeframes may push commune councillors to establish priorities before consulting villagers or to impose activities that suit funders' rather than villagers' priorities. Furthermore, the quality of consultation depends not only on the capacity of the committee, but also on the capacity of individual committee members.

Local development projects are financed by the Commune/Sangkat Fund (CSF) and other external

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sources, including individuals and political parties (Vimealea et al. 2009). Thus commune councils often have to respond to the targets agreed with the donors, and this is a challenge.

To summarise, multiple factors determine commune councils' capacity, which in turn conditions their performance of tasks and responsibilities and the quality and quantity of outputs. Capacity is defined as the ability to carry out functions effectively, efficiently and sustainably and to achieve development objectives over time (Blagescu & Young 2006; Em 2008). Hence, commune council capacity involves both commune management systems and resources, including councillors' abilities. Ten determining factors of commune councils' and individual councillors' capacities were identified:

Poverty: The poverty rate indicates the challenges to development, especially in order to achieve the annual 1 percent poverty reduction set in Rectangular Strategy Phase II (RGC 2008). The non-poverty figure is defined as 100 minus the poverty rate; a low non-poverty rate indicates that poverty and vulnerability remain high, indicating that income, livelihood sources and food security, among others, need to be enhanced and diversified.

Geographic Location: Remoteness of the commune from main roads makes transportation of farm products to market and coordination of externally supported activities challenging and expensive.

Commune Office: Commune councils are supposed to be the focus of public services, local initiatives and discussion, the administration of which requires proper office space.

Facilities: Basic office furniture and equipment are necessary to support commune coordinating services and activities. For instance, having enough filing cabinets for proper documentation and record keeping could provide quicker services.

Meetings: Commune councillors make participatory decisions at the council meetings, which are usually held monthly. These and other ad hoc meetings and consultations are organised at the commune office. Meeting records are shared with higher offices. Frequent systematic consultation with active participation and well-recorded minutes provide a strong sense of inclusive decision making.

Financial Systems: Commune councillors have access to a number of funding sources. A commune's financial management system reflects its accountability to funders. At least two financial mechanisms – that of the Department of Local Administration (DoLA) and that of funding agencies – have been adopted at commune level. It should be noted that different funding agencies have different financial and accounting systems.

Project Design and Funding: Participatory project design for local development initiatives evolves through consultation with villagers in order to respond to local needs. The prioritisation of activities in the commune investment plan is the result of local consultation.

Environment and Community: It is important that councillors know about and understand environmental impacts and climate change. This will help them design environmentally-friendly local initiatives and identify priorities. The commune investment plan is also expected to include social factors such as conflict resolution gender equity, and participation of marginalised groups such as ethnic minorities and people affected by HIV.

Support Staff: Although the numbers of elected councillors are assumed to represent the whole commune population, practical service delivery and consultation on development projects varies. Qualified and experienced staff to undertake supporting roles can be recruited through hiring, volunteerism and secondment.

Human Resources and Training: It is expected that the management of service delivery will improve through consultation and participation in knowledge-sharing events and training courses. It is expected that councillors' confidence to exercise their roles and responsibilities will increase through working together.

3. Ranking Method

Scoring Procedure: A sub-set of questions was devised for each factor. Each factor is scored from 0 to 100. The presence of significant factors gets a high score. For example, a brick built commune office is scored higher than a wooden one. The scoring method can be applied for comparing specific aspects of commune capacity, i.e. certain factors, or the Commune Capacity Index (CCI), i.e. all 10 factors, can be used to obtain a broader overview.

Table 1: Scoring System for the 10 Factors

Factor		Actual score (after survey)
A.	Non-poverty rate in the commune (100 - poverty rate)	= 100 – 58.2 = 41.8
B.	Geographic Location	75
C.	Commune Office	95
D.	Commune Facility	35
E.	Meetings	95
F.	Financial System	90
G.	Project Design and Funding	90
H.	Environment and Community	100
I.	Commune Support Staff	47
J.	Human Resources and Training	44
	CCI = 712.8/1000	0.7128

Table 2: Commune Selection Based on Previous Projects

Projects	Total project communes	Selection quota (15%)	Selected project communes	Single project communes	Multiple project communes
TSSLP (concluded)	37	6	10	1	9
TSEMP (concluded)	92	14	19	1	18
TSLRDP (recently begun)	40	6	31	20	11
TSSDHP (about to start)	193	30	36	19	17
TSRWSS (about to start)	40	6	19	3	16
Non-ADB project communes	230	35	20	0	0
Total	632	97			
Maximum sampling error: 9.35 percent					

Index Calculation: The Commune Capacity Index (CCI) is the total score of all 10 factors divided by 1,000, which is the total possible score (100 for each factor). The CCI is therefore between 0 and 1, where 0 represents the lowest capacity and 1 the highest. An example of CCI calculation for a commune is given in Table 1.

Commune Selection: This ranking method can be used to compare communes in terms of the 10 selected factors, but it is worth observing the interaction of related factors. Therefore, communes targeted by five ADB projects in seven provinces were selected for survey. The ADB projects are the Tonle Sap Environment Management Project (TSEMP), Tonle Sap Sustainable Livelihood Project (TSSLP), Tonle Sap Rural Lowland Development Project (TSLRDP), Tonle Sap Rural Water Supply and Sanitation (TSRWSS) and Tonle Sap Smallholder Development Project (TSSHDP). The TSEMP and TSSLP have already been concluded, TSLRDP began recently, while TSSHDP and TSRWSS will begin soon. The provinces are Banteay Meanchey, Battambang, Kompong Cham, Kompong Chhnang, Kompong Thom, Pursat and Siem Reap. Communes in the same provinces but not targeted by these ADB projects were also selected for comparative purposes.

Of the 632 communes in the seven provinces bordering the Tonle Sap Lake and the Mekong River, 402 are targeted by ADB projects and 230 are not. A random selection of 15 percent of the total population provides a good normal distribution with a sampling error of about 10 percent, possibly caused by the purposeful selection of communes that were targeted by ADB projects from 2008 to 2010.[2]

Data Collection: The study garnered information through focus group discussions (FGDs), using a multiple choice questionnaire based on the 10 selected factors, with commune officers. For information quality, it was ensured that at least fifty percent of the councillors in each selected commune

2 Random sampling generator of n = N/(1+Ne2) (Zulueta & Costales 2006)

Table 3: Top 10 Surveyed Communes with Scores on 10 Selected Factors

Province	District	Commune	Factors										
			A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	CCI
Battambang	Sangkae	Kompong Preah	69.2	90	95	69	90	95	95	85	61	56	0.81
Banteay Meanchey	Krong Serei Saophoan	Preah Ponlea	86.9	90	70	49	95	100	100	100	42	64	0.80
Pursat	Bakan	Snam Preah	64.2	90	95	69	100	100	90	100	45	49	0.80
Battambang	Thma Koul	Ou Ta Ki	74.4	90	95	65	100	100	95	95	19	61	0.79
Kompong Cham	Stung Trang	Prek Bak	74.6	90	95	42	100	95	95	100	39	55	0.79
Pursat	Bakan	Trapeang Chong	68.2	90	85	61	95	100	95	80	59	56	0.79
Pursat	Krakor	Chheu Tom	65.5	80	95	59	100	100	95	100	42	55	0.79
Kompong Cham	Batheay	Sambour	74.3	85	95	47	95	95	95	95	41	54	0.78
Banteay Meanchey	Mongkol Borei	Banteay Neang	70.8	90	95	54	95	95	95	85	62	31	0.77
Kompong Thom	Stoung	Pralay	61.6	90	95	32	95	95	95	90	57	63	0.77

A: non-poverty rate, B: Geographic location, C: office, D: Facilities, E: meetings, F: Financial system, G: Project design and funding, H: Environment and community, I: Support staff, J: Human resources and training

Table 4: Factor Comparison of Two Surveyed Communes

Factor		Kompong Preah Kokir*	Kompong Preah**
A	Non-poverty rate	59.7	69.2
B	Geographical location	75	90
C	Commune office	70	95
D	Commune facilities	9	69
E	Meetings	90	90
F	Financial system	90	95
G	Project design and funding	75	95
H	Environment and community	65	85
I	Commune support staff	36	61
J	Human resources and training	35	56
	CCI	0.6	0.81

* Kompong Preah Kokir commune is in Baribour district, Kampong Chhnang province.
** Kompong Preah commune is in Sangkae District, Battambang province.

participated in the FGDs. The information was then recorded and scored for analysis.[3]

4. Key Findings

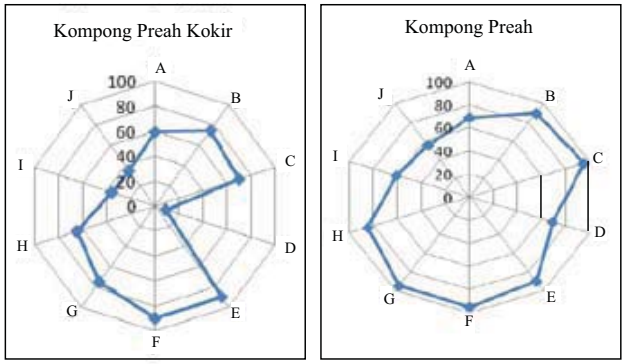
The main output from the survey is the Commune Capacity Index (CCI), a key indicator for general measurement of commune capacity. Another significant output is the set of 10 determining factors for identifying particular aspects of commune capacity. Table 3 shows the results for the 10 communes with the highest scores. The complete CCI is available in Em & Kim (2011).

To illustrate the use of the CCI, the scores of two communes are compared in Table 4. Kompong Preah Kokir has a CCI of 0.6 and Kompong Preah 0.81. Kompong Preah commune has a higher combined score (all 10 factors) than Kompong Preah Kokir, which means that Kompong Preah has higher capacity for managing development projects.

Plotting the 10 factor scores on a radar chart (Figure 1) makes it easier to see and compare the capacity of the two communes.

3 For further information on ranking methods and data collection tools, please contact Em Sorany and Kim Sour at CDRI.

Figure 1: Comparing the Capacity of the Two Surveyed Communes Using the 10 Factors



A: non-poverty rate, B: Geographic location, C: office, D: Facilities, E: meetings, F: Financial system, G: Project design and funding, H: Environment and community, I: Support staff, J: Human resources and training

The CCIs of the 97 surveyed communes were categorised into three levels based on frequency analysis: high, medium and low. High CCI was classed as greater than 0.74, medium in the range of 0.70 to 0.74, and low less than 0.70. Almost 29 percent of the surveyed communes were found to have a high CCI, around 45 percent medium and nearly 26 percent low.

Mapping the communes using the above categories, it can be seen that communes located near main roads (National Roads 5 or 6) are in the mainly high and medium capacity categories. The communes located far from the main roads fall into the low capacity category.

In this case, it can be surmised that communes that are distant or difficult to access are in a disadvantageous position with regards to being selected for projects and thus may tend to be overlooked for funding or support from government or development agencies. As a result, councillors/activists in the more remote communes may be excluded from gaining experience through implementing local projects, which could effectively bar them from the opportunity of strengthening local capacity and building local resources. If the capacity and resources of difficult-to-access communes remain weak, especially when compared to the growing capacity and resources of easier-to-access communes, they could be even less likely to attract small-scale grassroots initiatives let alone externally funded development projects, and hence may be at risk of being increasingly marginalised. It is not surprising then that with the exception of a few communes, geographic location appears to be correlated with poverty: communes that are hard to access tend to have a high poverty rate.

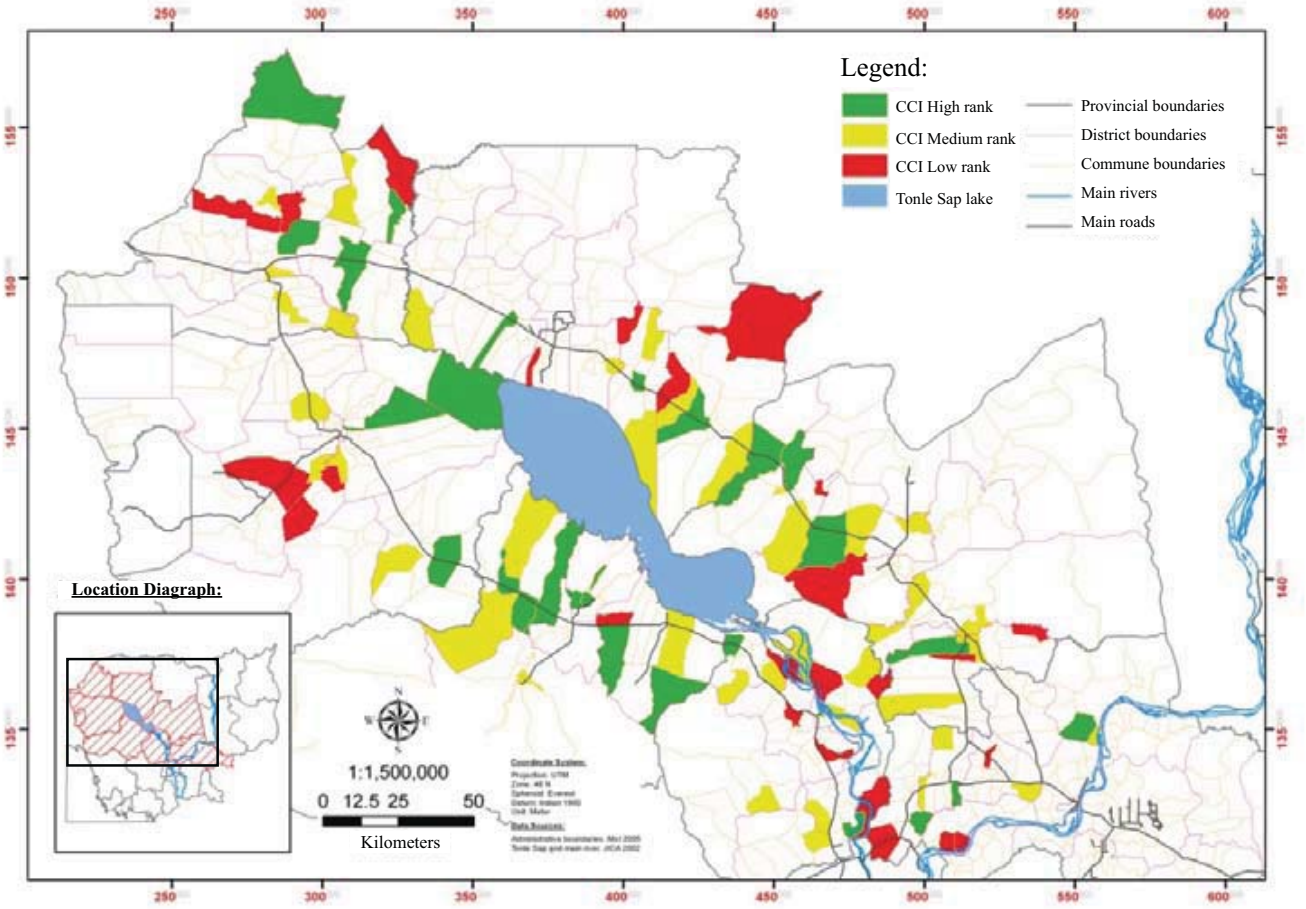
The surveyed communes generally have financial systems in place. Although a commune's total funding from 2008 to 2010 tends to correlate with poverty level, some of the communes that received higher funding during 2008–10 still had high poverty rates. The communes that had ADB support seem to have better capacity than those that had none because most of the 10 factors have been improved through the assistance.

The *Commune/Sangkat* Fund accounted for nearly 50 percent of the total funds available to the surveyed communes from 2008 to 2010. The next largest source was the ADB, providing nearly 39 percent, followed by the Danish International Development Agency (DANIDA), which contributed just over 7 percent. A number of other donors also funded other small projects.

Approximately 60 percent of the surveyed communes' total funding went on local infrastructure projects, such as building and rehabilitating roads, bridges, canals and irrigation schemes, among others. The second largest proportion of funding, around 36 percent, was for livelihood improvement activities and improving natural resource management. The remainder was directed towards social activities, such as basic healthcare education, including care for those affected by HIV, and the protection of children's rights. This suggests that only the two largest project trusts – infrastructure and livelihood improvement – have been implemented by commune councillors. Therefore, commune councillors' experiences have been largely gained through their involvement in coordinating and implementing infrastructure projects under the Commune/Sangkat Fund and coordinating livelihood initiatives implemented by other agencies.

The design of infrastructure development projects is facilitated by higher level local administrators and procurement officers with guidelines, procedures and other technical support. However, commune councillors made significant inputs at some stages. For example, their ideas, knowledge and observations regarding traffic movement, water flow, fish and wild animals are important for infrastructure design. Furthermore, commune councillors have a wealth of local experience, such as gathering information from villagers and resolving property conflicts for

Figure 2: Map of Communes Showing CCI Ranks



households affected by projects, which are also critical inputs for project design. With regards to livelihood improvement projects and other social activities, the councillors help decide on project targets while technical matters and financial aspects are managed by project assistants or facilitators.

Generally, understanding of climate change and environmental impacts was limited among the surveyed communes. Implementation of ongoing natural disaster prevention, natural resource management and environmental protection was found to be uneven, depending on geographic location, funding limitations and different coping strategies.

Work on social issues, mainly promoting the participation of women, indigenous groups and those affected by HIV in social and development activities, was undertaken unevenly. These activities are organised under the Commune/Sangkat Fund and are frequently promoted in communes with extra funding from NGOs. Mediation of conflicts over livelihood activities and domestic violence was well performed, though conflicts still occurred frequently.

5. Conclusion

The CCI is a simple method, based on FGD data collection, of assessing both the capacity of local authorities involved in the implementation of local development projects and the infrastructure and facilities available to them.

Findings of the survey indicate that:

- The communes that received ADB support seem to have better capacity and have performed better than those that did not, yet the communes with higher funding do not necessarily have lower poverty rates.
- Less accessible communes seem to have high poverty rates, and the combined capacity of their commune management systems and human resources may not be adequate for effective project implementation.

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