

# Social Capital in an Urban and a Rural Community in Cambodia<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

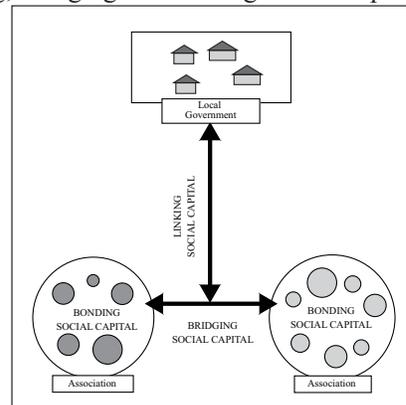
Though more recently popularised by sociologist James Coleman (1988) and political scientist Robert Putnam (1993), social capital was brought into the field of social sciences by several earlier pioneers, including Lyda Judson Hanifan in 1920, Jane Jacobs in 1961, Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron in 1970, and Glenn Loury in 1977 (cited in Sen 2010). Putnam's works on social capital, which he defined as "the features of social organisation, such as networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam 1993: 36), have inspired a burgeoning literature on the concept (e.g., Maloney *et al.* 2000; Lowndes & Wilson 2001; Wallis 2002).

Putnam (1993) states that community civic traditions have historical and cultural roots. Other authors have explored the impact of social capital on the responsiveness and effectiveness of local institutions (Newton 2001), individual members of associations and their civic attitudes and values (Wollebæk & Selle 2003), effects of associational experience (Hooghe 2003), and impacts of associational density (de Hart & Dekker 2003).

The World Bank views social capital as an important factor in the socioeconomic development of a society: "the social capital of a society includes the institutions, the relationships, the attitudes and values that govern interactions among people and contribute to economic and social development" (Krishnamurthy 1999). It is embedded in the institutional, social and cultural structure of a society.

Social capital has three dimensions: bonding, bridging and linking. The first (strong ties) refers to

Figure 1: Bonding, Bridging and Linking Social Capital



Source: Pellini & Ayres, (2005: 8)

"the strength of reciprocal ties between individuals in a community," whereas the second (weak ties) refers to "association across social cleavages" (Halpern & Granovetter cited in Bouka 2008: 11); bonding social capital is inward-looking and useful for "building strong community identities", and bridging social capital is outward-looking and can "build networks of network" (Shopeju & Ojukwu 2008: 6). The third dimension of linking or synergy refers to "relations between strata of society such as state-community relations or relationships between communities or institutions with unequal resources or power" (Bouka 2008: 13). It can be summarised then that bonding and bridging social capital refer to horizontal relationships, while linking social capital emphasises vertical relationships (Figure 1).

This survey was conducted to identify the local realities and potentials for improved social engineering through an examination of societies, economies and actors in rural and urban areas of Cambodia. It focused on four main themes: social trust, livelihood maintenance and improvement, risk and social safety nets, and social rituals. Conducted in a rural village in Prey Veng province and an urban village in Siem Reap province, a total of 400 households (200 in each village) were systematically selected.

## Key Findings

### Social Trust

In Cambodian society, trust is traditionally and primarily based on kinship and limited to a small group of close relatives (Grahn 2006). Cambodian villages are organised around kinship and lack "indigenous, traditional, organized associations, clubs, factions, or other groups that are formed on non-kin principles" (Ebihara 1968: 181). As in

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other Asian societies, the family is “the prototype of all social organisations. A person is not primarily an individual: rather s/he is a member of a family” (Hofstede cited in Pearson 2005: 3). Family is the basic social unit where trust originates and seems to be fenced: trust is limited to just the family which always comes first (UNICEF 1996). This limited trust is consequent of the centralised administration and monetised economy introduced by French colonisation which “have emphasised individualism and have reduced the sense of solidarity among individuals” (Pellini 2005: 8). Cambodian villages in the pre-colonial era were characterised as a society where life was based on “shared cultural symbolism, religious and moral norms and communal activities” (Gyallay-Pap cited in Pellini 2005: 8).

Following independence until 1970, there was a strong sense of *samaki* (solidarity) and community spirit: “People had sufficient resources to live on and could therefore afford to be more generous with less well-off family members and other poor people” (UNICEF 1996: 41). These norms of solidarity and reciprocity were rapidly transformed when the country was plunged into prolonged civil armed conflict, especially the Khmer Rouge genocide. The chronic conflict caused an irreparable dent in the traditional culture of Cambodia. Although some scholars (e.g. Krishnamurthy 1999; Kim 2001; Ledgerwood & Vijghen 2002; Pellini 2005) believe that social capital in Cambodia was only damaged and not destroyed by the civil war and the Khmer Rouge regime, the nature of social capital and social interactions in Cambodian society today are a clear reflection of the impact of the war: “Mistrust, fear and the breakdown of social relationships” are evident in Cambodia today” (O’Leary & Meas 2001: 64).

Trust has been identified as a missing element in post-war Cambodia (UNICEF 1996). Traditional social values such as sense of family and religion have been systematically undermined (Pellini 2005: 9). Today’s Cambodian society is characterised as an aggregate of individuals who believe that “no one can be fully trusted; taking care of oneself is important for survival” (UNICEF 1996: 41). One of the factors for this severe lack of social trust is the “substantial disruption and destruction of old-style communities based primarily on kinship networks” (Pearson 2011: 38).

The survey findings affirm the above observations in that people in both rural and urban areas have a low level of trust in others, largely associated with low volunteerism. In the rural study village, people expressed

a high level of trust only in their family members, relatives, friends and neighbours. In the urban village bonding social capital has contracted further, with higher social trust expressed within the circle of family members and relatives only. This is possibly because economic activities are more dynamic in urban areas. Some scholars argue that the capitalist penetration in Cambodia due to economic liberalisation in the early 1990s has led to declined trust, social solidarity and reciprocity norms (UNICEF 1996; Krishnamurthy 1999; Hughes 2001; Ovesen *et al.* 1996).

Low social trust in Cambodia is associated with a wide range of “emotional, cognitive, and historical factors” (Pearson 2011: 37). Meas Nee, (cited in Pearson 2011: 38), summarises this well, noting that “the legacy of the past, current levels of violence and impunity, authoritarian styles of leadership, and obvious deep and endless mistrust between Cambodia’s various political factions and leaders do nothing to help the general population overcome their own mistrust, either of their leaders or of each other”. Therefore, the hierarchical character of society, with its loose vertical linkages and bonding social capital narrowed to just a small circle of most intimate networks, needs to be taken into account when any equitable and democratic development is initiated (Pellini 2005).

### ***Livelihood Maintenance and Improvement***

A society with high social capital has a strong social support system, i.e., the support people get when they face hardship. The survey findings indicate that the social support system in Cambodia is largely informal. When faced with daily problems, people mainly turn to their bonding networks for support, especially family members and relatives, as well as informal local money-lenders and micro-finance institutions which have an increasing role. In the rural area, however, local money-lenders seem to be more active in providing loans when people encounter difficulties in their daily life. Because informal lenders usually charge a very high interest rate, this support system has become a burden on local people; there is no formal social support system to help them when they fall on hardship.

Given the lack of institutionalised social support and understanding that their close networks face similar hardships, the majority of people in both rural and urban areas believe that they need to be self-reliant in securing their livelihood.

Information is pivotal in helping people gain access to opportunities that may improve their living conditions. However, information exchanges in Cambodia, especially in rural areas, mainly “happen within social networks that remain largely spontaneous, informal and unregulated” (Krishnamurthy 1999: 3). Evidence from the survey in both rural and urban areas suggests that the main sources of information are family members, relatives, friends and neighbours. Although local authorities and the media seem to have an increasing role, this still seems to be limited to a narrow range of certain types of information.

### ***Risk and Social Safety Nets***

Cambodian society is characterised by a strong norm that relatives help one another in times of difficulty, and “this norm fosters trust and dependability within circles of relatives” (Krishnamurthy 1999: 61). Family members and relatives serve as a strong informal safety net, as reflected in the survey findings that most people still regard the family and relatives as an important informal support system, though this seems to be changing. Many of the respondents in the rural area said they could rely on family members, relatives, friends and neighbours in the event of hardship or risk. In the urban area, this informal social safety net is still very strong, though it seems to be reduced to just family members and relatives.

Informal networks in Cambodia play a crucial role in filling the gap not covered by formal agencies and institutions, especially in rural areas (Krishnamurthy 1999). “Informal networks build on the trust and dependability that exist naturally among relatives, neighbours and friends. This trust and dependability provide villagers with a vital safety net when there are problems” (ibid: 63). Informal networks function as a strong social support system in Cambodia where there is no clear formal social support system. These informal networks provide individuals with a valuable support mechanism in their economic and social activities (ibid).

In post-war Cambodia, informal networks and reciprocity norms seem to be influenced by market forces and to have shifted towards wage labour and other market-based forms of exchange (Kim 2001; Fitzgerald *et al.* 2007). Market forces and the cash economy have resulted in the gradual weakening of informal safety nets based on mutual help,

and pressured people to put their own needs and problems first in this highly competitive environment (Krishnamurthy 1999). In contemporary Cambodia, people have become “selfish, greedy and prepared to help only their immediate family; they are less willing to participate in communal activities undertaken for the benefit of the whole community” (UNICEF 1996: 41). This is a worrying trend given the current situation in the country where formal social support system is non-existent and a formal social protection strategy in its incipience.

### ***Social Rituals***

Apart from the family as the basic social unit which serves as a fundamental informal social support system in Cambodia, village-wide community events offer a forum for the people in the community to interact and build and strengthen their networks. As summarised by Krishnamurthy (1999: 3), “Community events can enhance feelings of solidarity and act as the glue that binds people together. These events weave a web of collective consciousness through shared experiences... Community events have the potential of raising civic consciousness and promoting altruistic behaviour”.

The survey results show that participation in community events is still strong, especially in the rural area. This is also reflected in who participates in ritual ceremonies such as weddings and funerals. In both rural and urban areas, family members, relatives, friends and neighbours are the participants in these traditional ceremonies. Importantly, although these kinds of events contribute to promoting community solidarity, participation in such ritual ceremonies may be reciprocal and does not necessarily illustrate the character of social relations in the community.

In the rural village, participation in ritual ceremonies is still very high. Traditional community ceremonies are important in “promoting community identity and solidarity” (Krishnamurthy 1999: 63). In contrast such community events seem to be absent in the urban village, thus impacting on solidarity and community spirit, which are further affected by the dynamics of strong market forces and competitiveness in the urban setting.

There appears to be a change in the role of women as viewed by women themselves and their male counterparts, particularly in the urban area. Cambodian society has become patriarchal in structure as evident in the gender stereotypical

associations with male and female tasks, where males are traditionally assigned the dominant role in the household as well as other tasks involving heavy work or high risk, and females typically undertake household chores. Evidence from the survey in the rural village seems to support this, though change is emerging with some people, especially women, thinking that women should also take the tasks traditionally assigned to men, and women's increasing participation in local community activity groups. The change is even more visible in the urban village. Roughly equal numbers of men and women think that women should undertake the same tasks as men, such as running their own businesses and engaging in service industry. This is possibly because of the robust economic activities and opportunities in the urban area.

Religion plays a vital role in shaping the norms of reciprocity in a society. This is so in Cambodian society where Buddhism, which promotes participation in community activities, is the state religion (Kim 2001; Pellini 2005). All of the survey respondents in both rural and urban areas are Buddhist. Buddhist temples or pagodas represent the centre of communal life in Cambodia. However, religion does not play such an important role in daily life as it used to. In both urban and rural areas, few regard the pagoda as a place they can depend on for support when they face difficulties. This is possibly related to the recent accusation that pagodas are not neutral and that certain monks and religious leaders are affiliated to political parties (Heng 2008; Thon *et al.* 2009). For many, this has destroyed the fundamental role of religion in their life, and Buddhism is no longer as meaningful for them.

### Conclusion

The survey results provide a good insight into the nature and characteristics of bonding, bridging and linking social capital in a rural and an urban setting in Cambodia. Bonding social capital is still strong, though it seems to have contracted in the urban area. The traditional norm of family as the primary social institution that caters to all kinds of needs of its members is still alive and well and widely practised in both rural and urban settings. Close relatives (and, in the rural area, friends and neighbours) form a crucial informal social support system; they are those to whom trust can be extended.

Bridging social capital still seems to be strong in the rural community where traditional village-

wide ceremonies are organised and participated in by the locals. However, it seems to be declining in the urban setting due to the absence of community-wide traditional ceremonies, though participation in ritual ceremonies such as weddings and funerals is still high. The people's changing attitude towards the pagoda as the centre of communal life has also impacted on the nature and level of bridging social capital, particularly in the urban area.

"Today's Cambodian society is characterised by loose vertical linkages between heterogeneous groups and strong links between members at the same social level" (Pellini 2005: 8). This is strongly supported by evidence from the survey. In both rural and urban areas, people expressed a low trust in state institutions and those who hold state authority, such as the commune/*sangkat* council. Further, there is a high level of mistrust in the political parties and politicians, a view shared by respondents in both settings but more so in the urban area. Linking social capital in both communities, therefore, is generally low. This is particularly true in the rural area, which is traditionally isolated from the central authority in the capital city (Pellini 2005); "there is nearly no connection between citizens and state institutions in rural Cambodia" (Grahn 2006: 31). Low linking social capital in Cambodia could also be attributed to the deeply rooted hierarchical structure of all forms of interactions and relations in the Cambodian culture. It seems that the characteristics of the leadership styles and the culture of violence and impunity in Cambodia today have further distanced the citizens from the state (Meas cited in Pearson 2011).

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